

A Retrospection of Ilocano Cuisine through Narrative Photography

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the dynamic relationship between photograph, text and memories through a conceptual art in an exhibition. While in search for a new form of expression, I asked, what is the role of memory in its interaction with my art practice. With the use of smart phone, this paper aimed to chart and document my meals, print it on vinyl tiles and ceramic plates and use the image in an attempt to recall and communicate those memories. Scholars suggested that photography interrupts memories, yet this paper focused on memory and experiences of food to support the argument that, photography enables moment of self-encounter. I explored the role of memory as a narrative filter that can be reflected and relived in my art production. This study used a narrative qualitative research design that discusses the dynamic relationship between photograph of food text and memories. Visual ethnography and photo-elicitation were used as methods in gathering data. The computer was also used. Ethical considerations were followed. Result showed an art practice that poses challenges on preconceived ideas of how the past and our experiences with it, can be expressed. This study created a link between visual and autobiography. The theories and the art project revealed the evocative power which resulted when text and photographs are combined in reviving memories of the past. A similar study may be conducted to look into the effect of smartphone photography on one's memory and share photos in social media and look into the effect on people's memory.

Keywords: *affective memory, conceptual art, ethnography, image, text*

INTRODUCTION

This study explored the dynamic relationship between photograph and memory through the reception theory. How can photograph trigger emotions, rekindle memories and generate ideas or expectations? How do we choose to remember and how do we reinforce memories? In search for new forms of expression, what is the role of memory in its interaction with an art practice? This paper aims to challenge the function of memory that is based on experiences and explore for new forms of expression. It also aims at developing an art practice that discusses memory or experience of the past.

In reception theory, meaning it happens through reading. The reader/viewer has to make connections, fill in gaps, draw inferences, and make hypotheses as he or she proceeds through the text. Text is still regarded as an image,

sound, gesture, or any other phenomenon capable of interpretation. In any work of art, there are three worlds: the author/artist, text/image, and reader/viewer (D'Alleva, 2005).

The reader who is familiar with the strategies and ways employed in the text have a fuller, richer reading experience, although there is a possibility that there is a mismatch between the text's codes and readers codes. However, this is not a bad thing: the mismatches give us new ways to think and see and understand. In presenting these ideas of photographs on vinyl tiles and plates with narratives, the researcher used conceptual art. Theories presented by Proust (2010), John (2016) and Barthes (1993) are central to the presentation of these ideas. John Berger and Roland Barthes discuss the communicative power of text, especially when combined with the image. Proust discusses the importance of involuntary memory, deeply associated with powerful and emotional memories.

Since the commercialization of photography in 1839 up to the development of smart phone cameras in 2002, photographs make us remember family, friends, trips and other events, speaking across time and space, creating an emotional bond between subject and viewer. We take photos of every aspect of our lives and we do this to document and remember those experiences. These technologies make it possible to create a digital diary of our daily activities and have made us all into archivists. Undoubtedly, thru photography, people are empowered to capture many aspects of their daily activities and social interactions.

Photographs provide a link among individuals between the past and the present, a visual aid to the memories that are sentimental to us. The photograph captures a frozen moment from a continuous stream of the event. The photograph is a message without a code. Using photography to explore memories, the researcher shows how photograph conveys meaning. There is no need to set up a means of interpreting the image. Moerman (2012), a multidisciplinary artist, working with photography, film, text, sculpture, and installation claims that, photograph and memory are the nearest things we have to a brief and comprehensive depiction of events that happened in the past. For many years they have been contested as representations of reality. Despite all evidence to the contrary, we still depend on what we see and what we remember.

Some would argue that photographs and memories do not mix and even suggested that photography interrupts the creation of authentic and natural memory and overwrite it with artificial and false narratives. However, the researcher argues that the images in a photograph provide a basis to the present tense of past things. Photograph does not replace an original memory, but instead advances acts of self-construction. These acts are therefore effective rather than destructive to a person's memory. Photography, therefore, enables moments of

self-encounter that allow for constructive identity-creation rather than destroying memory.

This paper explored the reception theory through conceptual art. In particular, this study looked into the following: 1) relationship between photograph, text and memory; 2) power of food in remembrance; and 3) role of food memory in conceptual art.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research that discusses the dynamic relationship between photograph of food text and memories. Visual ethnography and photo-elicitation are used in this study as methods in gathering data. Using the smartphone, the researcher took a picture of his food in a span of more than two months. The resulting photographs were transferred to the computer for compilation.

Daily Meals (see appendix A) consists of pictures of foods printed on decal paper. Each image was transferred to a pre-cut 3"x3" vinyl tile". The titles were arranged side by side in rows and lines. The arrangement of pictures totalling 220 pieces is laid on a table measuring 5'6", equivalent to the researcher's/artist's height.

Plated Memories (see appendix B) started by searching for photographs that fit the researchers' memories associated with a food. Next, he scanned the photograph and printed it on a decal paper, transferred the printed image onto a ceramic plate and then wrote his thoughts on the plate to give it a new life. Specific memories or stories (such as daily activities, interactions with friends, playtime with his sons and discussions with his wife) associated with the meal are the focus of his writing in each photograph. This diaristic candor breaks down personal boundaries and presents a series of surrogate selves for the viewer. Together, the photographs depict universal experience.

The use of Ilocano texts in his narratives is used to preserve and convey culture and cultural ties. This native language links the researcher with the culture that shaped his identity. It is through this process that he connects to his family, relatives, culture, history, identity, and religion.

By presenting ethnographic photographs around food and supplementing it with texts of the researcher's personal experience, he tried to elicit verbal discussion on memories and gain access to meanings shared by viewers.

With the aim of developing a practice anchored on food and memory that can be encountered in space, conceptual art was used in presenting the artworks. In conceptual art, the essence of art is an idea/concept and may exist distinct from

and in the absence of an object as its representation. All pictures of food are photographed with available light, with the smartphone aiming down at the food. The images seem to catch random moments. The simplicity of using the smartphone undermines fine art photography, at the same time belying the complexity of meaning the photographs hold as a group.

Ethical Considerations

In the presentation of pictures that were attached to the plates for exhibit, the researcher asked permission from the involved subjects and/or from the head of the family who kept all the photographs presented. The photographs were scanned and were later returned to the owner. The photographs were printed on decal paper without editing or digital manipulation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Relationship between photograph, text, and memory

The combination of texts with images has long been part of history in art. Manuscripts and pictures exist in a “rhetorical relationship” with text to create meaning. Magazines used captions to interpret the photographs. With these practices, the inclusion of text is supplementary to a photograph. “Yet, the text is as an important part of the medium, giving reason to many images that would avoid sensitivity” (Westgate, 2012). Many would often disregard the text accompanying the photograph. People would always see a picture as a mere image. So, what is the relationship between the text and the photograph?

An art critic and author John Berger (2016) noted that, photographs are weak in narrative meaning: therefore, words fill in this gap. The caption can place the photograph within a specific time and space. Moreover, words gain specificity from the photograph. The caption supplies the missing information since all photographs are ambiguous. Together, the photo and caption work together to produce a powerful art form.

Shihari, as quoted by Jessica Louise Bell (2015) wrote that, a text could change the way a person interprets an image. For example, “[with] the caption accompanying a picture, we can extract information useful in (i) retrieving the picture and (ii) directing an image interpretation system to identify relevant objects in the picture.” Despite the way in which language is structured, words can be particularly evocative and connotative. They can make the reader dream, allowing them the freedom to interpret each word. Words can shift a sentence from a mere description to reflection. It can arouse beautiful images in the viewer’s mind, stimulating the viewer’s imagination. This quality, when added to a photograph, can raise the quality of a photograph.

Photography is a powerful medium especially if it is combined with other medium because it can create a thought-provoking art. Interestingly, textual context will lead the viewer to understand its message on their own or be open to different interpretations by its audience. What becomes crucial is the impact of text and image when combined. Here, both the image and text are equally important and how they interact with another to create an impact (Singh, 2018).

Barthes (1993) stresses the relationship between photographs and words, and the power it has when the two are combined. He argues that: The information is carried by two different structures that are co-operative: in the text the substance of the message is made up of words; and in the photograph, the image is made up of lines, surfaces, and shades. Moreover, the two structures of the message each occupy their own defined spaces, these being contiguous but not 'homogenized,' as they are for example in the rebus which fuses words and images in a single line of reading (p. 16).

Berger (1982) explains the ambiguity of photographs and their lack of narrative meaning. He asserts that all photographs are ambiguous because they break some kind of continuity. Yet, if we use photographs with words, they produce together an effect of certainty. There is no meaning to a photograph if there is no story to narrate. Therefore, when a photographer takes a photo, he is documenting an event that gives meaning. Can a photograph depict the truth? Berger further argues that, all photographs have been reduced of continuity and that all photographs have difficulty expressing what is specific. Therefore, adding words can either add an expressive ambiguity to a photograph that only has denotative meaning to increase the photograph's expressive power. Alternatively, the writing can be specific to reduce the ambiguity of a photograph. The inclusion of text is used to express an artistic narrative or ideology that the photograph needs to portray.

The use of text is a clarifying tool. It is used to add extra elements. It reanimates the story presented and to inform the intent the artist wishes to place upon the photograph.

All of these views about the combination of image and text are true, depending on the particular photograph and caption. For instance, whether the words or the image is more expressive – or whether the two are balanced or not – depends on the particular photograph and caption, and – above all – on the intention of the communicator. Does the communicator want to add meaning or specificity to a photograph to ensure that a particular interpretation by the observer results? Or is the goal to increase the photograph's ambiguity to challenge the observer to participate in interpreting the photograph?

2. Power of food and remembrance

Proust (2010) believed that, only the power of memory can help him reconstruct his personality. He developed a theory called affective memory or involuntary memory that is triggered by the memory of the senses— smell, taste, and touch (2010). He proved the connection between food and memory in his novel, *The Swans Way*. For Proust, memory might have been a taste of a bit of madeleine dunked in a linden-flower tea which his aunt used to give him. After the beings have died, the smell and taste of things remain a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting for their moment, amid the ruins of everything else. Proust has often referenced his experiences of involuntary memory from the taste of a tea-saturated petite madeleine; here, the experience is overpoweringly nostalgic and sensual.

This passage is telling us that not all memories are created equal, some are more vivid than others, and that smell and taste play a significant role in memory. We may have lost account of an incident, and then the memory can come back, triggered by coincidence – the cup of linden-flower tea. The vision, taste, smell, and texture of food can be evocative, bringing back memories not just of the food itself but also of place and setting. However, why is this so?

In a podcast published conversation with Allen (2012), he revealed the powerful role food plays in human memory:

Evolution has seen to it that food may be a privileged target of memory in the brain. There is a part of the brain in each hemisphere called the hippocampus. The hippocampus is critical for creating long-term, declarative memories—those that can be consciously recalled and which contribute to the autobiographies that we all carry around in our minds.

Though feelings and smell contribute to the power of food memories, many hormones that regulate eating behavior, appetite and digestion also have receptors in the hippocampus that has a direct link to our digestive system. Looking for food is so essential to our survival that the hippocampus is primed to form memories around food.

There is something mysterious and ephemeral about food. We prepare it, cook it, and ingest it. What remains are memories. The foods that we love during our childhood remain with us forever. Going back as far as the researcher's memory can lead him, he remembers their kitchen with his lola, mama, and aunt, and he visualizes a specific dish associated with them. Also, special childhood occasions tend to make events more memorable, and those tied with food may even make for more powerful memories. This is supported by Hoffner (n.d.) when he states that, "Mom's comfort food elicited more memories of childhood than photos of favorite

toys.” Like many who know Swann’s Way, the researcher had thought that the taste of the madeleine instantly brought ‘Proustian memories’ to life.

We all have our memories associated with food, some good and some bad. While taking a photograph of the food we eat right before every meal, memories of the past come back. These pictures of food right in front of us serve as a form of rehearsal. Food is an effective trigger of deeper memories of emotions and internal states of the mind and body. These foods perform as a springboard that facilitates conversations of the past with our love ones. In this way, pictures help us strengthen memory, relationships and identity.

Photographs of food are a delicious combination of science and art and involve preparation and study. The researcher’s memory of events is greatly enhanced by his photographic endeavors because of the intensity of the experiences. The resulting products-- digital imagery rekindles memories over and over deep into the future for him and others. The image of food may be declared common and meaningless to other people. However, no matter how simple or undistinguishable the image is, the image is infused with so many memories and emotions that people do not even feel ashamed to have taken a photograph of the food. Food has become a vehicle for memory enhancement. Narrating about memories is a process that transforms over time. This is not saying that those memories are not authentic. Sometimes, memory becomes more vivid after some time. A photograph can be a reminder of incredible parents we have who usually give us pieces of advice to conquer the difficulties in life. A photograph can be a reminder of our bonding with our children. A photograph can be a reminder to stay healthy. A photograph can be a reminder of the laughter, and conversations that led us to tears that would not stop.

3. Role of food-memory in conceptual arts

Photographs of food and memories anchored on food with the right combination of text in this project have been created to show the theoretical points made and translate into practical applications in the ways image and text are combined to form narratives of the researcher’s experience.

A. Daily Meal



Figure 1. Detail of Daily Meal. Each food is printed on 3"x3" decal paper on precut vinyl tile

The series of photographs of Daily Meal is evocative in the combination with other photographs. Individually, each of these photographs is not particularly expressive and cannot be narrative, although the picture of each food has its own story to tell. However, as a whole, they gain their ability to communicate. As Berger (2016) points out, "no words redeem the ambiguity of the images...the reader is free to make his way through these images" (284). The researcher (and artist at this time) fills in the gaps between each photograph, allowing him to read across the appearance and see another reality that is hidden by the passing of time. As he becomes more involved in viewing the photographs, there is a heightened aesthetic response. The combined pictures of foods arranged alongside of each other is reminiscent of his childhood days when they cover their dining table with plastic adorned with checkered designs.

B. Food

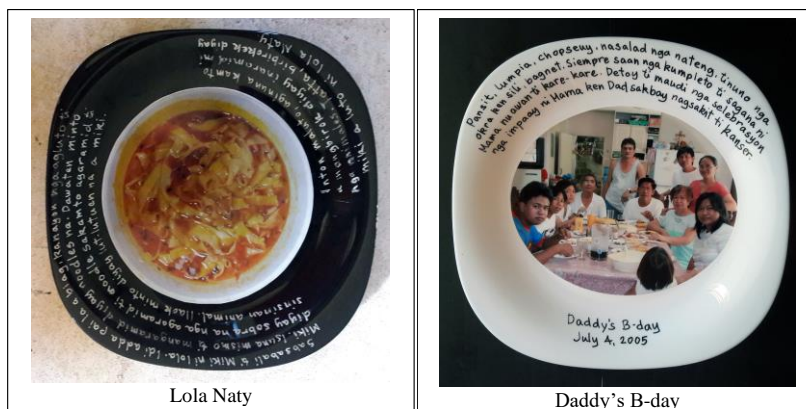


Figure 2. Detail of Plated Memories printed on decal paper on ceramic plate. “Lola Naty” is a metaphoric representation of Lola Naty’s specialty food. Daddy’s B-day narratives tells about daddy’s favorite dishes.

The photographs are mainly informative. These photographs serve to establish a character or cultural identity of the Ilocanos. However, the texts added gave greater impact to the photograph. The narrative tells a story in the preparation of food or the association of food with a person. The addition of text fills in for the absence of narrative in the photograph. Therefore, the experience of the viewer to the image is heightened if he experienced the passage of time in the photograph. The viewer not only learns the person in the photograph, but also the personality and the passage of time too. In both photographs, the viewer is allowed to become more involved in image and text. Since the viewer reacts to the photographs differently, he or she gathers information and makes conclusion.

C. Family Picture



Figure 3. Detail of Plated Memories. The narratives in the plate tell about the persons in the photograph

The photograph (C) serves to introduce the personas. Together, they form the social context of an immediate family. They are the people in the family that have contributed to the researcher’s growth. They are the people that have helped preserve the ritual, habits, and culture of the Ilocano which define a particular way

The above photographs represent the researcher's childhood years. They serve to deepen the sense of belonging to the family and affirm the importance of the elders. Through the narrative writings, life and ritual in the province come to life. The use of diaristic - narrative writing increases the authenticity of the cultural context in the photograph. Without the text, the photographs would be ambiguous. The inclusion of text in these photographs resolves the ambiguity of the image and allows an equal importance between the image and text. The text allowed the viewer to discover for himself or herself the connection between the image and text, thereby increasing the viewer's involvement. The viewer is discovering the photographs and driven more deeply into them by curiosity. The text, therefore adds another dimension to the viewer's experience.

The photograph and the text do not say the same thing, although a connection between the information in the photograph and the narrative text exists. In this way, the image and narrative text are equal, both creating a third level of communication in the viewer's eye. The communicative strength of the image and text produces a complete communication than that created by either photograph or text alone.

CONCLUSIONS

While delving into the researcher's memories, he explored narratives and story within the photographic image. Memories of experiences are uncovered that were imagined in the past. Memory is the main point in the creation of visual imagery, where we explore a series of ambiguous meanings. The works in this project reference the duality of photography. We view photographs as a visual record of events as well as a poetic statement, in this case a statement about life, struggle, loss, and longing. It explores the natural desire to pull away from the external world – creating specific and personal reflections of family, mortality, individuality, and times of uncertainty. The photographs printed on vinyl tiles and ceramic plates in this project describe life as a menu, how things appear and also act as signifiers of experiences and events. The attempt to mark our lives with our daily meals makes us human. It speaks of our attempt to validate ourselves, to maintain our health, to connect with the past and to perhaps control our fate.

Taking a picture is one thing, but understanding why we take them, what they mean, and how they affect us are also significant issues in photography. In making photographs of foods and memories for this endeavor, the researcher undertook to record a culture. It is not the image that is all important. It is what is inside it and its analysis. In these works, story is an integral part of the image. The inclusion of text to the image helps the reader relate to the person writing the story. The body of works will create an environment where the image can live and transcend photography. By directly writing down on the image, the researcher also rewrites his feelings which help restore his experiences. His writing reveals the details of his personal relationship to food, and the details surrounding his daily

experiences. He uses his handwriting into the print because the narratives make it more personal as no one can ever reproduce his handwriting but anybody can always make a new print. The words are 'etched' on the photographs like tattoos and are something that no one can remove. Plated Memories are narratives of personal experiences, which reinforce the idea of remembrance and the power that photographs pose. The researcher has always wondered why food is so potent in the creation of memories, but he had not realized that they were significant images for his personal ontology.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is highly recommended that future researchers would look into the effect of smartphone photography on one's memory and share photos in social media and look into the effect on people's memory.

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Appendix A



Daily Meals - 220 pieces of 3" x 3"
decal prints on precut vinyl tiles

Appendix B



Plated memories

Appendix C



Daily Meals on table