

Memory, montage, and counter-narratives

A digital media installation

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Abstract

This work presents the multimedia installation *[Des]montagem*, which articulates memory, history, and aesthetics through the appropriation and recontextualisation of archival materials related to repression during the Brazilian civil-military dictatorship (1964–1985). Rooted in concepts of memory and montage, the installation challenges the unequal formation of memory and the influence of dominant narratives in official history, while aiming to validate silenced voices. Drawing from the works of Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg, *[Des]montagem* utilizes visual, auditory, and interactive components to establish a realm for confronting and contemplating the past and the present. The installation also includes a virtual version that broadens public access, enabling new forms of engagement. The project highlights the potential of digital art to politicise memory and foster critical thinking, showing that we are active agents in the construction of our own history.

CCS Concepts

• ; • **Applied computing** → Arts and humanities; Media arts;

Keywords

Archive, Interface, Montage, Digital Media Art

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Memory

Memory is constructed unevenly, just as history is shaped by selectively chosen and interpreted information, driven by dominant interests that determine which voices are amplified and which are silenced. Forgetting remains a constant threat to memory. Didi-Huberman emphasises that the easiest fate for an image is destruction. The obstacles to the survival of an image or text are so numerous that their preservation often appears miraculous. Countless books and libraries have been burned. Each time we look at an

image, we should ask what prevented it from being destroyed and consigned to oblivion [1]. Within the framework of a hegemonic, linear, Eurocentric, and ostensibly universal art history, we are confined to a culture of repetition and imitation, that continually reproduces dominant aesthetic paradigms, thereby foreclosing the possibility for the emergence or affirmation of singular, counter-hegemonic expressions [2]. The aesthetics of memory have long been subordinated to the State, shaped by its imperatives. Many objects could represent collective memory, but only a limited number are selected to reside in museums. Even when the goal is neutrality, subjectivity inevitably influences the selection process. Through the integration of archival materials, art holds the transformative potential to politicise memory. By recovering testimonies and records concerning the dead and the disappeared, art contributes to a more profound and critical understanding of history.

1.2 Montage

Benjamin suggests that the meaning of ideas is inherently tied to their positions within a given montage, rendering the association between montage and dialectics inescapable [3]. Challenging the notion of historical linearity, he argues that history is not continuous. It is punctuated by deviations, discontinuities, and accidents. He proposes that historians deconstruct and then reconstruct the fragments. It is like taking apart a watch to understand its mechanics or dissecting a corpse to study human anatomy. This only becomes possible when the elements are separated from their usual contexts. Within this structure, montage serves to unite what was previously perceived as separate and to fragment what was previously understood as connected. Montage makes it possible to bring together distinct temporalities, revealing relationships between them and adding new layers of meaning [4]. Didi-Huberman proposes that:

“Il n’y a donc de «remontée» historique que par «remontage» d’éléments préalablement dissociés de leur place habituelle. Façon de dire qu’on ne construira un savoir historique philosophiquement digne de ce nom qu’à exposer, outre les récits et les flux, outre les singularités événementielles, les hétérochronies (employons ce mot si nous voulons souligner leur effet d’hétérogénéité) ou les anachronies (employons ce mot si nous voulons souligner leur effet d’anamnèse) des éléments qui composent chaque moment de l’histoire.”¹ [5]



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¹“There is therefore no historical “return” except by “remontage” elements previously dissociated from their usual place. A way of saying that we will only construct historical knowledge philosophically worthy of the name by exposing, in addition to

Aby Warburg argued that the discipline of art history should be replaced by a science of culture. He postulated that the power of images could be activated through relational methods, promoting the knowledge generated from associations between them [6]. This approach culminated in the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, an unfinished project interrupted by his death in 1929. As Didi-Huberman observes, unlike a history book or a novel, an atlas has no beginning, middle or end, but rather panels of images to be consulted for specific purposes or simply visited at random, driven by curiosity. The ideals of unity, purity, and specificity are deconstructed, allowing connections to emerge between elements that might not have appeared related. Reading the world thus becomes the act of reconnecting its elements through their intimate and often hidden relationships, correspondences, and analogies [7].

2 INSTALLATION

[Des]montagem is a multimedia installation composed of a combination of visual and sonic elements that evoke the memory of women's bodies victimised during the Brazilian civil-military dictatorship. The artwork uses archival materials from that dark period in the country's history and contrasts them with more recent ones. It is an interactive piece activated by presence sensors (Figure 1). Upon entering the exhibition space, the viewer is faced with a plinth on which a copy of a document rests, supported by a wooden structure illuminated from below. Below this structure, a presence sensor is installed, and, above the pedestal, a webcam detects human presence. The latter functions as a lure, the element that draws the participant into the spatial field of the installation. It is a facsimile of a handwritten document authored by Inês Etienne Romeu, a militant in two organisations opposing the dictatorship in Brazil. She was abducted and detained for 96 days in what was known as the *House of Death*, a centre dedicated to systematic torture. Released on the condition that she would cooperate with the Army as an informant, she refused to comply. While still in hospitalised and weighing only 32 kilograms, she wrote this letter, describing the humiliation, torture, and violations which she was subjected to. Subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment, she was released in 1979 under the terms of *Amnesty Law*. She handed the letter over to the *Brazilian Bar Association* (OAB) in 1979. The document was selected for the installation precisely because it is a denunciation authored by a woman, a singular voice that speaks for many. Inês Etienne Romeu, who died in 2015, was also responsible for bringing the first court case concerning the rape of a political prisoner in Brazil [8].

As the participant approaches, the sensors activate a sequence of audios and images, including the release of smoke through a perforated tube. The vapour rises vertically, forming a projection screen on which photographs of twelve women, all tortured, murdered or forcibly disappeared during the dictatorship, emerge in random succession (Figure 2).

The photographs were collected from the internet and from the archives of the Memorial da Resistência, which records images and medical records of political prisoners, and from the archives of the

narratives and flows, in addition to event-based singularities, the heterochronies (let us use this word if we want to emphasize their heterogeneity effect) or the anachronies (let us use this word if we want to emphasize their anamnesis effect) of the elements that make up each moment of history." [5]

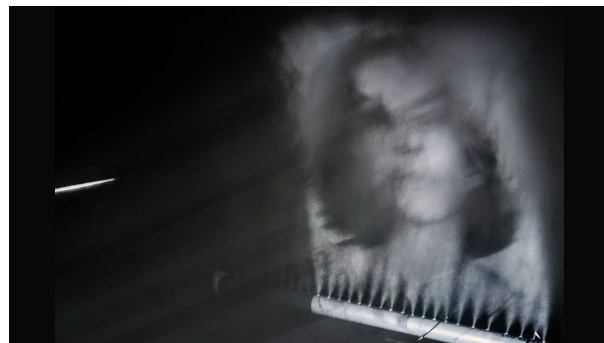


Figure 1: *[Des]montagem* photographed by Rodrigo Menck

DEOPS - Departamento Estadual de Ordem Política e Social de São Paulo², which are located in the Arquivo Público do Estado de São Paulo³ [9]. The women in the portraits are: Gastone Lúcia Carvalho Beltrão; Ana Maria Nacinovic; Inês Etienne Romeu; Criméia Alice Schmidt de Almeida; Iara Iavelberg; Maria Auxiliadora Lara Barcellos, known as Dora; Dilma Rousseff; Ana Kucinski; Ísis Dias de Oliveira; Ana Maria Aratangy; Maria Amélia Teles and Maria Augusta Thomaz. The images are randomised, which makes each experience different.

The audio consists of voices of military officials and torturers denying their knowledge of or involvement in crimes committed during the dictatorship. These recordings, also randomised, include materials obtained by lawyer Fernando Fernandes, organised by historian Carlos Fico, and published by journalist Miriam Leitão [10]. They contain recordings from sessions of the *Superior Military Court* (*Superior Tribunal Militar* -STM) during the military regime, in addition to excerpts from interviews. When the visitor leaves, the smoke dissipates, the images disappear, and silence sets in, leaving only the illuminated manuscript. A diagram of the installation system is shown in Figure 3.

The artwork was developed in collaboration with a transdisciplinary team. Rui D'Orey programmed the data logic and sensor triggers that enable the randomisation of images and audio, as well as the activation of devices through sensor input. Rodrigo Menck edited the audio recordings, contributed to the construction of the smoke apparatus, and oversaw the lighting design of the space. Maria Júlia Andrade, a researcher and filmmaker, worked as a research assistant in Brazil and was responsible for guaranteeing the image rights of the victims and their families.

3 VIRTUAL EXHIBITION

A simulation was created to enable virtual exhibitions. In this format, the aforementioned document is available on the screen, and with a click, a video is triggered displaying the smoke screen along with the images and audio from the installation. This virtual representation allows broader access to the work and provides an alternative mode of engagement, complementing physical experience.

²State Department of Political and Social Order of São Paulo, Brazil

³Public Archives of the State of São Paulo, Brazil

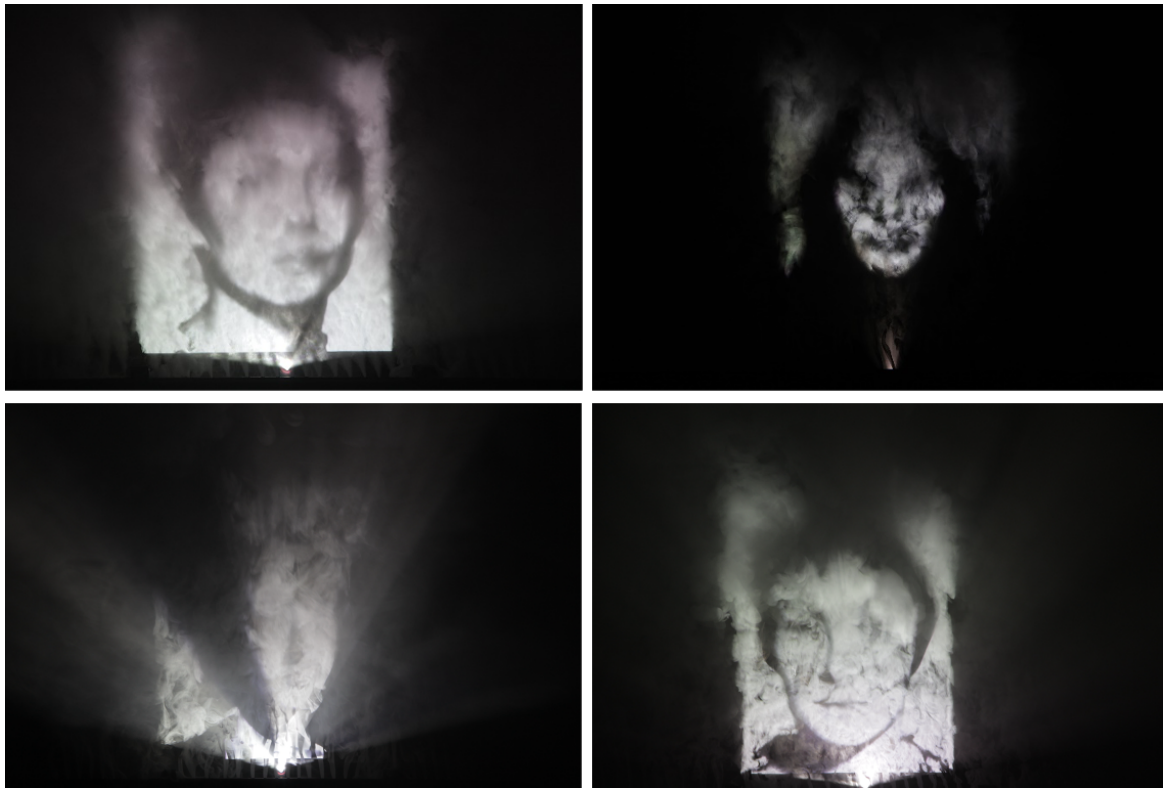


Figure 2: *[Des]montagem*, Cristina Cavalcanti. 2023. Photographed by Rodrigo Menck

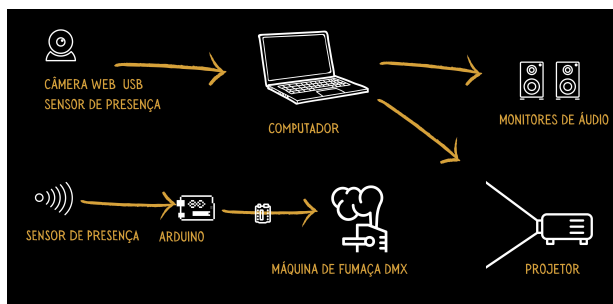


Figure 3: System diagram of the *[Des]montagem* installation. (Author)

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

By bringing together a physical document, image files, and audio recordings within a multimedia installation, *[Des]montagem* seeks to engage with the potential of digital media art to contest official histories and disrupt the hegemony of dominant narratives using archival materials. By appropriating institutional archives, exposing deliberately hidden documents and recontextualising them, it is possible to activate new perceptions and reinterpretations of the past, thus provoking reflection on the present. Investigating how these changes and associations unfold through various digital media and how the public responds to and interacts with such stimuli

contributes to integrating technology into the cultivation of critical thinking and to fostering awareness that we are active agents in the construction of our own history.

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The paper is written in British English and the *DeepL Translate* tool was used to assist in its use.

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