

On the Precipice of Forgetting

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Abstract

This presentation examines the recent artwork *On the Precipice of Forgetting*. It captures the sensation of teetering on the brink of forgetting and is sited at a dam wall renowned for its unique acoustic properties. The artwork navigates memory lapses and fragmented conversational paths, while the immersive VR experience contemplates memory fluidity and virtual environments' perceptual effects.

Keywords

Mixed reality, conversations, memory, spatial cognition, place, forgetting, precipice, acoustic architecture

Introduction

How hard is it to remember and simultaneously communicate what is in our memory bank? How long can we keep adding more information to that bank before its access code is revised? What happens when direct access is no longer directly available or is decoded?

In this artist talk, I will introduce my recent MR/VR artwork, *On the Precipice of Forgetting*. This work brings together two bodies of work. First is my long-term research project into acoustic architecture, specifically whispering architecture, alongside a concern about why we forget and how the balance between episodic and procedural memory teeters on the edge. Navigating the instability, distortion, and gaps in our recollections and memory structures challenges understanding memory and cognition. This artwork delves into the intricacies of human thought processes and broken communications. This virtual encounter hinges on a digital imagination to create simultaneously a visual and auditory experience for the viewer.

After many years of touring Whispering architecture worldwide, I have returned to a magnificent site, the Whispering Wall, at the Barossa Valley, Reservoir Dam, South Australia. In 2022, with Drone in hand, Ian Hobbs and I travelled to SA to document the magnificent wall built in the 1920s. Along with extensive video footage, I recorded incidental conversations at the wondrous parabolic wall. The specific site of this MR artwork is at both the top of the dam wall and within the small hut at the base of the giant concrete parabola, which holds back the voluminous water.

The water ebbs and flows, flooding the small hut through an imaginary break in the wall. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. *On the Precipice of Forgetting* 2024. © Robyn Backen

Within the hut is a discrete video work with the voices of three women in conversation. One gently directs, offering a pathway for the fading episodic memories of the other two, who drift in and out of broken, fanciful remembering. The upper edge of the dam wall echoes the voices of two boys, calling in softened tones to the female on the other side of the wall. (Figure 2) This embodied experience within a digital imagination shapes our perception—afloat upon the precipice of remembering and forgetting.



Figure 2. *On the Precipice of Forgetting* 2024. © Robyn Backen

This art-making process has been an opportunity to explore the immersive/interactive nature of MR/VR, how it might influence individuals' perceptions of place and memory, and what implications this holds for both artists and viewers. (Figure 3) How can an augmented or virtual

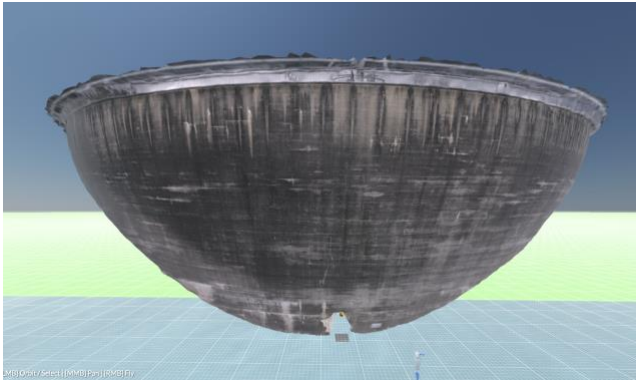


Figure 3. On the Precipice of Forgetting 2024. © Robyn Backen

space generate an experience of being on the precipice of forgetting? The artwork explores the interplay between episodic and procedural memory hovering on an edge. Paths of thought or broken communications take us to a place of understanding the circularity or stopping and starting moments in a conversation. When we speak to another, we often experience broken thoughts that exist in a place of conversation—a kind of game-playing. Conversations may be played out as an even or balanced volley, while others are exhausted by the one-sided control or guidance. In the state of forgetting, broken fragments subside into a new zone of understanding.

This work touches upon patterns of communication and interrupted thought processes. *On the Precipice of Forgetting* highlights spoken conversations that capture the fragmentary nature of forgetting, which can result in broken haiku-like poetics.

This talk will briefly introduce several artworks that have evolved for my acoustic architecture research, including *Thought Train*, *Whisper Pitch* and *Night Watch*.

Author Biography

Robyn Backen is a Senior Lecturer at Sydney College of the Arts and an artist whose work makes connections between art, science and philosophy. Her work is not bound by medium or scale, with large public commissions contrasting against smaller sound and light works. Her constructions and computer-generated systems often examine the cultural context of the spaces they inhabit. Drawing upon research into technology and materials, investigating patterns and systems within her practice, like language, nature, and remembering.