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Step by Step Guide to:

The Digital Archive of Forgotten Memories

A participatory space to talk about forgetting

by Anne Chahine and Inge Zwart

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This Guide

This guide is a step by step explanation of how to organise a *Digital Archive of Forgotten Memories* (DAFM). The DAFM represents a series of activities in which people are invited to talk about and reflect on the process of forgetting, resulting in an impromptu physical and/or digital archive.

You can use the guide as you like: organise all of the activities, make your own version, or take up only one idea.

We will first explain the main idea and purpose of the activities, followed by a list of items you need, after which we describe the three core activities of engagement. We also provide ideas to elicit discussion in different settings and end with a reading list.

You can find the templates referenced in this guide in a separate PDF provided on the POEM platform.

Background: How it All Started

Guiding Question

How can academic work be presented and communicated in ways that go beyond traditional outputs such as the written format? We have been looking for alternative forms of engagement with publics as part of our PhD projects, and the *Digital Archive of Forgotten Memories* (DAFM) represents one of these results. Envisioned for academics and other publics, the DAFM is an installation that facilitates conversations about remembering and forgetting in our own lives and in society as a whole.

Forgetting as Theme

Deciding on a theme, we wished to make POEM's overall research topic tangible and create an alternative entry point for the subject of memory. Recent discourse in memory and heritage studies acknowledges that 'forgetting' is as much part of memory practices as 'remembering' (Connerton 1989; Harrison 2012; Harrison 2013; Zehfuss 2006). In order to remember, we need to forget. Forgetting is a rich theoretical and academic theme, as well as a topic people can relate to personally. The DAFM builds on academic debates and aims to engage people with the topic of 'participatory memory practices'.

Participation as Key

We were inspired by innovative audience engagement methods that memory institutions apply, following theories such as Paul Vergo's New Museology, Elisabeth Crooke's Active Museum and Nina Simon's Participatory Museum (Vergo 1989; Crooke 2015; Simon 2010). As educational, active and engaging audience relationships have become increasingly expected in memory institutions, the POEM project critically examined these methods for their ability to equalise power relations in processes of decision making, and their commitment to political struggle (Carpentier 2011, 354). We were excited about the possibilities of participatory projects offering new dynamics for the relationship between institution and audience by referring to people's personal experience and allowing multiple interpretations.

Purpose

The *Digital Archive of Forgotten Memories* combines the theme of forgetting with a participatory approach to facilitate discussions. The purpose is to think together about the processes of forgetting, both on an individual and collective level. By offering a physical activity through which people can forget a memory, we imitate a simplified version of processes of 'forgetting' in which our societies are involved – archival storing and the destruction of documents. In that way, the tool brings together the personal and the institutional. It can serve as a **conversation starter for museums** to talk about everyday practices with their visitors, as an ideal way to **warm up for a discussion or workshop** about a memory-related topic, or as an **intervention in other spaces or institutions** that think about or **work with memory** on a regular basis.

In our first installation at a museum conference in Berlin this approach resulted in a continuous stream of conversation with visitors of the museum and the conference, varying in topics from remembering to forgetting, digital participation and institutional structures of memory practices (Boersma et al. 2021). Visitors-turned-participants shared that they experienced a type of cathartic release through the 'forgetting-method'.

Pictures show the first version of the installation as presented at the Museum Europäischer Kulturen in Berlin's conference 'What's Missing?' 26.6.2019
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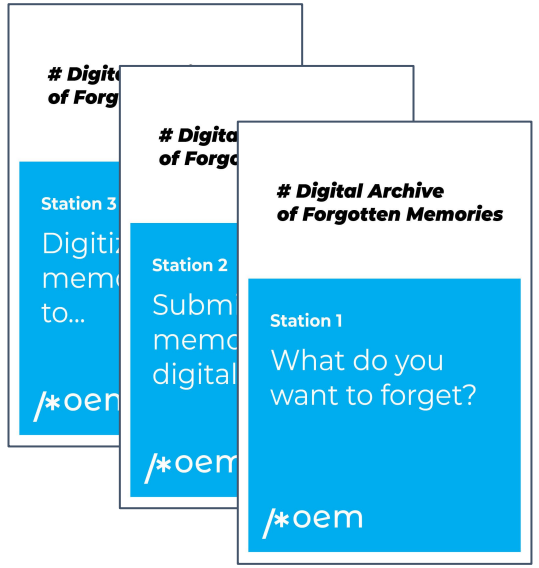
DIY: Things You Need

- paper, preferably in different colours (e.g., 10x10cm)
- a variety of pens
- manual paper shredder
- a display/place to exhibit the submitted “forgotten memories” (see activity 3)
- printouts of the provided templates for the separate activities, cards etc.
- optional: Instagram channel for this specific event, where to display/exhibit the submitted “forgotten memories”



Activity 1: Forgetting a Memory

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In the first activity, visitors are invited to 'hand-in' something they want to forget.

They receive a coloured piece of paper, on which they can draw, write or visualize in any preferred way a memory that they don't want to remember.

We then invite them to destroy it by putting it through our paper shredder, which, in our case, works manually.

Activity 1: Forgetting a Memory

1

Start the process by saying something like:

“Hello! Do you want to submit a memory to the Archive of Forgotten Memories? We collect things people want to forget”

or

“What would you like to forget?”

2

Explain the process and highlight that it is anonymous:

The opportunity to shred memories, helps visualise the ways we deal with memory in our everyday lives.

Only remnants will be collected in the online archive. The location is tagged and the “forgotten memory” gets a number.

3

The visitor writes down a memory.

They grab a 10x10 cm colored piece of paper and a sharpie. They are free to visualise it in any way: they can draw or write down a story or just a word in any language.

They do not have to show us their memory or tell the story, that is up to them.

4

The visitor shreds their memory.

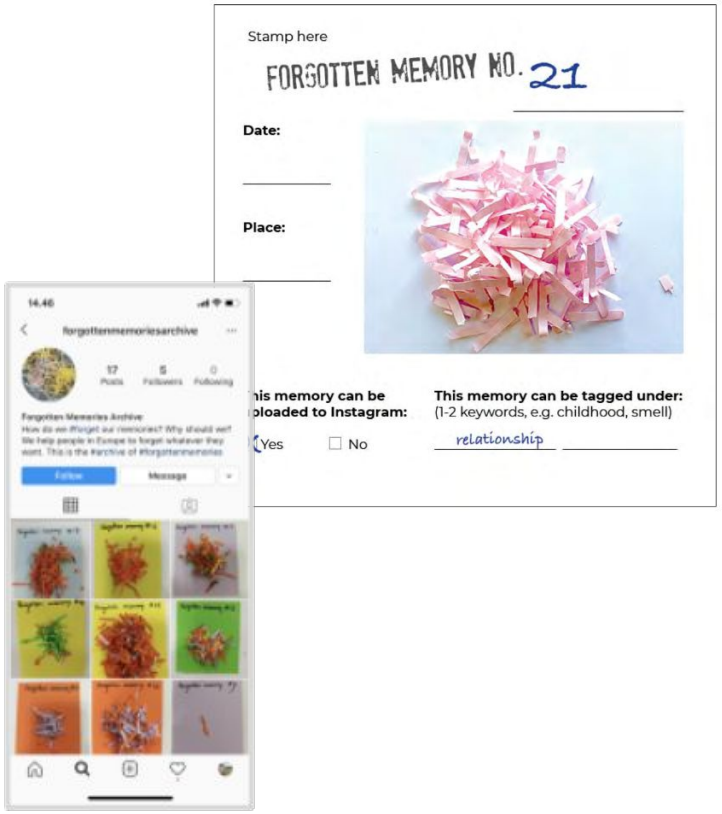
While the visitor shreds the physical representation of their memory, you can engage in a conversation about the process of forgetting, here imitated through an embodied action on site, and how it is tied to remembering in the first place.

Activity 2: Documenting the Forgotten Memory

1

The "forgotten memory" can now be uploaded to the digital archive.*

On a differently coloured paper (or the template provided) you write the object number (e.g. Forgotten Memory #18) and the visitor places the shredded memory on top. This is photographed and added to the archive.



2

Use the opportunity to talk about how we remember and how we forget, personally, collectively and institutionally.

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*In our first installations, we used an Instagram channel to document and make visible the "forgotten memories" to an outside audience. Alternatively the "forgotten memories" can also simply be collected on site, such as laying them out on a table or pinning them to a display nearby.

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Activity 3:
Reflecting on Remembering and Forgetting

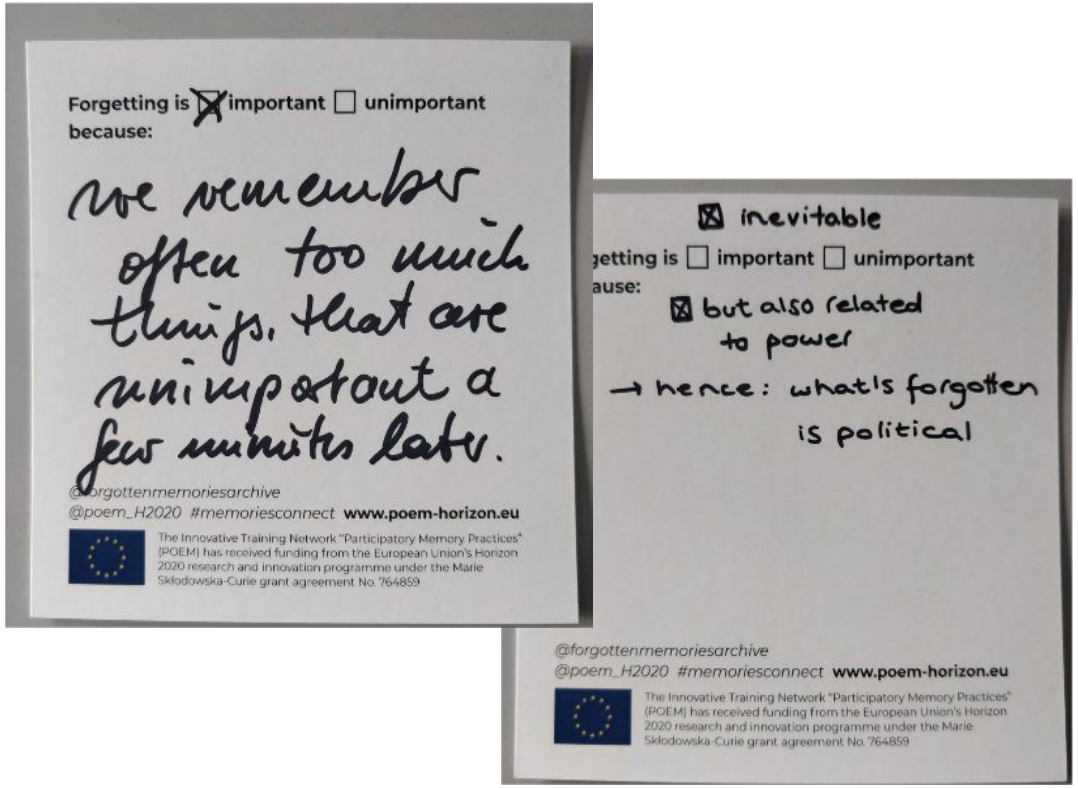
This part invites people to reflect more abstractly on forgetting and remembering.

You can pose a poignant question that invites multiple answers e.g.:

"I think forgetting is
important /unimportant, because…"

“Digitization of our memory will lead to…”

We created postcards for this activity, so that people could individually reflect on the suggested topics. The templates of these postcards are available on the [POEM website](#).



Settings and Variations

1

Fieldtrip to a museum or archive

The DAFM activities can introduce a discussion about the role of memory institutions in our society. Questions to discuss might be:

- How does the institution decide what to keep or collect?
- When are records considered to be forgotten?
- What does the institution do with personal memory accounts?

2

In the classroom

The activities can introduce topics related to history and cultural heritage. Questions to discuss might be:

- How happens when a society 'forgets'?
- Are there certain historical topics that our society has forgotten?
- What is the role of records and the function of an archive in the retelling of the past?

3

At a social event

In groups that know each other very well, the activities might be a way to talk about things that are difficult to address. It can be a cathartic experience to share amongst friends to 'forget' certain things. Levels of familiarity and trust amongst all participants might make it possible to share parts of the content of the forgotten memory in a later discussion.

4

As part of an evaluation in a group

The activities can be part of an evaluation of a group project. Questions to be discussed might be:

- What do you want to 'forget' from this project?
- What can we learn from that?

References and reading-list

References

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Further Inspirations

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Erll, Astrid and Ansgar Nünning. Editors. *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*. Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2010.

Harrison, Rodney, Caitlin Desilvey, Cornelius Holtorf, and Sharon MacDonald. *Heritage Futures: Comparative Approaches to Natural and Cultural Heritage Practices*. London: UCL Press, 2020.

Rare Book School Reading List: Community Archives and Digital Cultural Memory - Advance Reading List

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1995.

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Let's connect.

Please get in touch when you put this tool into action.
We consider the *Digital Archive of Forgotten Memories* a work in progress and want to learn from your experiences.

We look forward to hearing from you!

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