

A paper folder “doll house” — A childhood narrative

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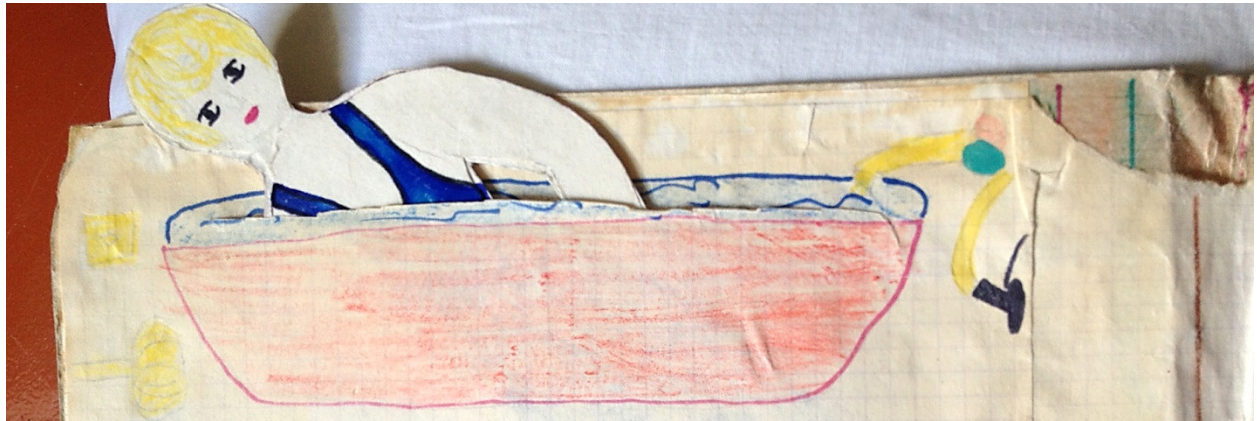


Figure 1: *A bathtub luxury* © Vita Yakovlyeva (Edition Memória Imaterial)

As an investigation of memory, this visual essay seeks to create a connection between an individual experience of childhood and its social setting through engaging a narrative as a form of representation. The autoethnographic narrative constructed here revolves around a paper doll house created in the interior space of a common file-folder by the author in her own childhood. Looking thirty years back, the author attempts to decipher the meaning of her paper doll house within a larger context of childhood as a social construct, available to her largely through her recollections, claiming that an embodied narrative is as much a reflection of self as it is of its context, and vice versa.

Keywords: childhood, memory, narrative, temporality, Ukraine, autoethnography.

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A Moment of Childhood in Space and Time

This visual essay is a narrative, constructed by my engagement with a dear-to-me object, which in itself is a representation of discourse, a discourse of experience created by remembering, a special kind of remembering we experience while reminiscing about our childhoods. The paper folder “doll house” reflected upon in this essay is a picture of a material creation, a “doll house” in a paper folder made by two girls of approximately 7-8 years old, in Ukraine circa 1993. One girl is me, and the other one is my little sister. What follows is a brief autoethnographic exercise in looking for pathways that connect the individual within the social (Ellis, 2010).

For children across Ukraine, 1993 was two years after the Soviet Union had finally collapsed following years of Perestroika’s failed or incomplete socio-economic reforms, and the deep and widespread social ramifications of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986 (Marples, 1991). In 1991, Ukraine became an independent sovereign state, and the elite were to establish its statehood and institutionalize its policies, laws, services, and relations. Simultaneously, Ukraine needed to address its security and membership in the global order and market economy. Ukraine’s economy at this time is completely devastated, and marked by hyperinflation, deficit, severe unemployment and poverty (Havrylyshyn et al., 1994). Since the late 1980s, environment, food supply, housing and public education were among the society’s “urgent priorities for political action” (White, 1993: 242).

In the crisis of reforming the planned economy, one of the responses of the enterprises, was to reduce or discontinue the production of cheaper and less profitable items and to concentrate on other products, which led to severe shortages of goods. Children’s goods were one of the first items to be sacrificed to the deficit (White, 1993: 136-137).

The deficit of toys does not mean a deficit of play. Often left to their own devices, unsupervised by adults, children still persevered through their childhood. “Humanity’s little scrap dealers” as Giorgio Agamben calls children in his essay “In Playland” (Agamben, 1993: 79-80) have always managed to engage in play pretty much anything at hand. If nothing is at hand, there is still imagination, stories, jokes, trees, puddles, bodies, and even garbage (Yakovlyeva, 2015). The paper folder “doll house” my sister and I made was also an attempt at making something to play with, to occupy ourselves, and spend some time constructing narratives in an alternate reality of an imagined dwelling.



Figure 2: *Doll house* © Vita Yakovlyeva

My sister and I made this doll house by using a paper file-folder, a couple of sheets of paper torn out of a regular school notebook, and layered them to attempt a 3D reality, colouring them with ink markers, which were used sparingly by combining them with crayons, and leaving a fair bit of negative space. When I look at it now, I keep wondering why we made it exactly the way we did. I mean, we clearly had enough skills and imagination (given all of the princess dresses) and even resources, such as paper and markers. We could have made it into any kind of a place we wanted, like an exotic palace with many rooms and storeys, but our imaginary house was modest and even somewhat austere, if we consider a small row of wooden sitting chairs along the wall in the TV room (Fig. 5).



Figure 3: *Princess dresses* © Vita Yakovlyeva

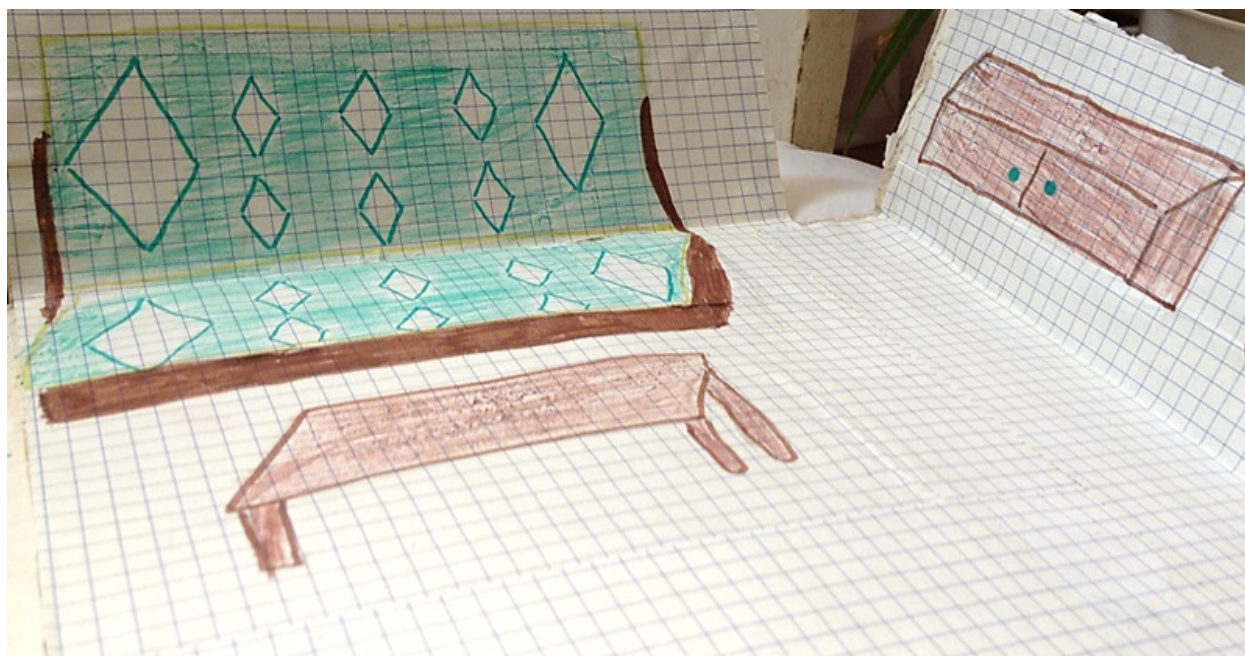


Figure 4: *Living room* © Vita Yakovlyeva

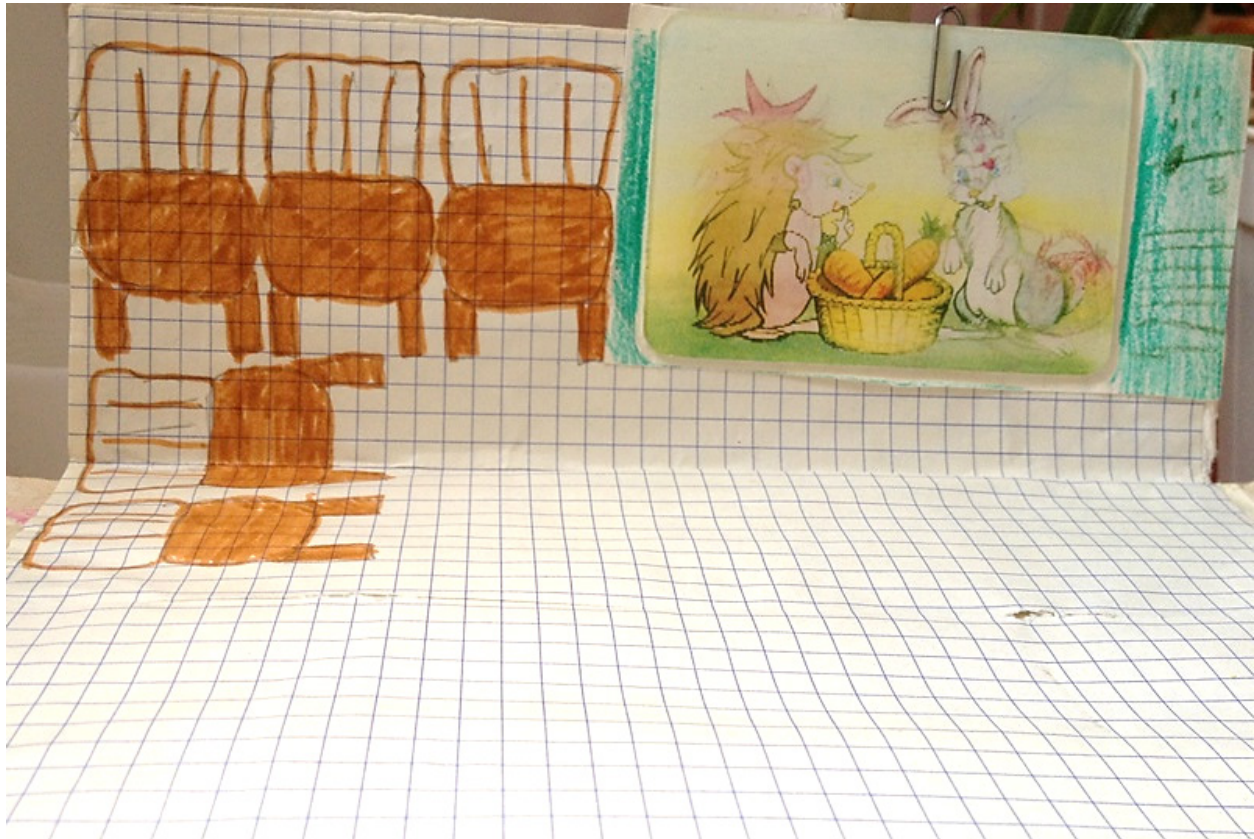


Figure 5: A TV room © Vita Yakovlyeva

The answer must be searched for in the social fabric of our childhood(s). The separate living quarters were a very prestigious and almost unattainable dream at this time, let alone a luxury dwelling. At the beginning of 1990, some 2.4 million families (14% of population of Ukraine) were “in ‘extreme’ need of housing. As part of the overall plan known as “Housing 2000,” according to which every Soviet family was supposed to be provided with an apartment by the end of the century, a total of 105.1 million square meters of housing was scheduled to be built in 1990” (Marple, 1991:12). This and many other utopian projects were never completed. Rather, in such conditions a dystopian mode of reproduction of the social becomes omnipresent, even to children. My little sister and I, along with my elder sister and our parents shared a one-bedroom (two-room) flat at the time. Thus, I certainly understand the appeal to dream and attempt to materialize a “house.” Yet, I am still humbled by our depiction of its representation. The simple luxury of a bathtub, a double bed, and a TV room was all it included. Out of a small disjuncture of our actual childhood dreams and what this doll house project represents, I suggest that this doll house is as much a representation of the social conditions of our childhood as it is a representation of us as children. From

the perspective of the time since passed, I see this doll house as an illustration to the space and time of growing up in an early independent, post-Soviet Ukraine, even more than an artifact of my own childhood.

This doll house is a product of relationships. It was an attempt for us as children to engage with social and material circumstances of our childhood. Belonging could have been the objective of this paper folder project as much as play. The object we constructed is a materialization of discourse, a reflection of both realities and relations that we might have had, as well as those absent. Our interpretation of gender, class roles, and aesthetics in this doll house creation is as apparent as our creativity, and the doll house is as much a part of us as we were part of it.



Figure 6: *A bathtub luxury* © Vita Yakovlyeva

Childhood Remembered

“Childhood” is not merely a biological period, the years and process of development between infancy and adulthood. The childhood that I study here and elsewhere includes or involves aspects of this developmentally crucial biological period, but it also involves, or is a construct of, the broader social network of activities and exchanges creative of childhood as a cultural phenomenon (James, 1993; 2004; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). To arrive at the construct of childhood as an object of inquiry, I look for social memory about childhood in a given community—memories that, through patient processes of discovery, reconstruct childhoods that are otherwise unavailable for investigation. Childhood is a narrative, a representation of reality, which does not involve any obligation to the past’s truthful portrayal, and neither does autoethnographic narrative more generally, which always involves elements of censorship, forgetting, and silence (Passerini, 2014).

It is the power of memory to reclaim what once belonged to the realm of a child. Memory, is the essential element of the methodology and the bones of this archeological study of childhood, governed by the focus on the individual within the social, a defining feature of narrative, as Paul Schempp underlined it in response to Hatch and Wisniewski in an interview about narrative:

“In so much as life histories are stories of people’s lives, they are narratives; it is the connection of one’s life events to social events that distinguishes life history from other forms of narrative. The life is seen as being lived in a time, space, and under particular social circumstances rather than a simple collection of events” (Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995: 115).

Accordingly, a paper doll house from my childhood can be understood only in its social context, in a connection forged by situating individual life stories and memories inside the historical events and social processes in which they unfolded, a connection we are only ever partially capable of making until our stories are recollected.

Narratology (the theory of narrative) is another aspect of theorizing childhood central to the work of studying lived experiences. Narratology understands narrative as a verbalized experience of selfhood. Consequently, narrative identity is the identity we perform in the process of self-narration, self-representation. Rooted in the body and one’s personal experience, narrative is the way the self is both performed and remembered, whether or not it is depicted in accordance to accurately remembered historical events. Yet, narrative always consists of individual stories that are contextually situated. Autobiographical accounts are the core of these approaches aimed not to prove the “truth” of history but to demonstrate its fluidity and, combined with concerns over social mobility, its dispersed nature in the exploration of the creation of meaning within the social structure. Studied primarily in the field of literature and film studies, narrative has been commonly defined as “the representation of events, consisting of story and narrative discourse, story is an event or sequence of events (the action), and

narrative discourse is those events as represented” (Abbott, 2007, 20-21). Accordingly, the representation of events as envisioned by an embodied subjectivity always entails entanglement with material reality.

Childhood and its experience are derived from memory, a narrative created by engagement with a material object, in this case a paper folder doll house. While recognizing the complexity of narrative and its dual relationship to the actual events (being their re-presentation), I rely on narrative as a particular system of relationship with time. In this case, it is the time of my childhood. Ricoeur defined narrative as a language structure that “has temporality as its ultimate reference” (Abbott, 2007:165). Temporality here means “lived time,” “time perceived and experienced,” as opposed to absolute or universal. In narrative, temporality relates to the sphere of experience of a sequence of events and is crucial to the structure of narrative, which means that anything I have to say about the doll house is shaped by the experience of my actual childhood whether I remember it or not.

Memory, as a narrative created by engagement with a childhood object gives the childhood its agency. By describing the sphere of engagement that children had and have with the adult world of social action, preserved in various activities from inventing a peculiar practice of play in the circumstances of a severe economic crisis to participation in governance of an emerging state of the early-independent Ukraine, my sister and I re-created a moment of understanding the role of children in the reproduction of social order.

As the medium through which childhood is accessed here, memory arises as a productive force capable of confronting childhood experience and speaking into the regions that were unavailable to us as children. The narrative created, like the toy and child’s play that animates it, enters into the differential margin of the “once upon a time” and “no longer” and plays with our sense of time, distorting our past but also making it available to each other and ourselves in a new way. In a narrative construction that relies on memory, what comes to life is not only the remanence of the past present, but also the absent of the past. Upon recollection, I act as a subjectivity formed by not only what I remember but also by what I do not. The doll house thus stands not necessarily as a depiction of aspirations to create something material out of what was available, but to manifest between us, in our play between the pages of a paper folder, a place of modest dignity that remained otherwise unattainable.

Conclusions

In *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton (2009 [1989]) addresses the always already socially informed nature of experience, suggesting that even before its representation in personal narrative, experience is shaped and conditioned by social recollection:

“[I]n all modes of experience we always base our particular experiences on a prior context in order to ensure that they are intelligible at all; ... prior to any single experience, our mind is already predisposed with a framework of outlines, of typical shapes of experienced objects. To perceive an object or act upon it is to locate it within this system of expectations. The world of the percipient, defined in terms of temporal experience, is an organized body of expectations based on recollection” (2009:6).

What Connerton establishes here drawing on Halbwachs, Hobsbaum and Ranger, Bauman, and others is the co-dependency of individual memory, which is always situated interactively between the store-house of collective memory and the material conditions in space and time in which the individual and group exist. This preconditioning of the “organized body of expectations” is no doubt at work in the world of children’s experience; however, for the observing and acting child, “the framework of outlines” through which his or her activity emerges is often outside the available interpretive frame of reference (2009:6). Confronted with a system of expectations, children are propelled into the activity of play, which engages with expectations as a means of resisting them. What this means for the study of children and childhood is that the collectivizing force of children’s experience tends toward the overthrow of the received system of organization and the establishment of new systems of meaning. This meaning is in turn a function of recollection, however one that emerges spontaneously from seeing and doing and not simply as an expression of the pre-existent framework. As such, it is in the narratives of children’s experience that the collective framework of childhood becomes available for analysis. Childhood is in this way a concept that offers a counter-recollection, an indispensable resource for the construction of history.

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