Smallfinds: remembrance, memory and mortality; the tension of representing personal loss through the medium of digital collage.

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ABSTRACT

Does a tension exists between the technical realities of a digital image and the artistic purpose of those contemporary fine art practitioners who create them? Before engaging in the wider discursive issues of digitality, cultural theorists keenly postulate that all digital images exists in the form of binary data. Furthermore, Digital collage, whilst clearly an established medium of artistic expression is often described using simile; this can leave the artist feeling that his or her work is overshadowed by the medium itself. The author, an advanced digital image-maker, senses this tension in his own professional participation with digital art, and after examining the existing discourse surrounding the areas of the digital image, collage and photography, discovers that Digital collage, is a medium that lends itself to the creation of highly personal artistic outcomes. The project concludes with a theoretically driven online presentation of 10 highly personal digital images that deal with memory, remembrance and mortality following the recent death of the author’s father. They are published on the website www.smallfinds.co.uk.
1. INTRODUCTION

Another stance in art practice would be for the artist, while remaining aware of the dangers implied by the uses of technology, to enter into the heart of the inventive process itself, making themselves available at the core of activity to help elaborate, humanise and develop the new cultural forms (Lovejoy, 2004: 280)

This report explores the author's view that a tension exists between the technical realities of what digital images are, and the emotional, creative and artistic drive of the contemporary art and design practitioners who create them. It is specifically aimed towards mixed media digital collage artists, who, by working exclusively with digital production and output feel they may sacrificing artistic vision at the expense of acquiring and deploying digital skills and technique. Today's digital art appears to be heavily characterised by pastiche, retro-style, fashion and a general desire to create an aesthetic of nostalgia; moreover, it looks set to continue. Fredric Jameson observed the same phenomenon through what he called ‘nostalgia film’ and wrote extensively on the subject in his book Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991) . Invariably, a time arrives when the contemporary digital artist is driven to produce work of a highly personal and emotional nature, and this raises the question: Is digital collage an appropriate medium in which to represent highly personal artistic projects?

The methodological research approach is qualitative; characterised by methods of literature review, observation and case study. It is an opportunity to interpret a range of contemporary and historical theoretical voices, and respond through practical and individual artistic interpretation resulting in the production of a number of digitally produced and displayed collages under the title: Smallfinds. Images and text are included to illustrate and support the theoretical discourse; they will typically consist of selected existing works of art. Also included are snapshots of the digital process which demonstrates progression towards artistic output, and importantly, how theory informs practice in the realisation of visual outcomes. Secondary sources of rich data: magazines and online content will be included from non academic sources.

Theoretical discourse is located around the subject of memory, nostalgia and mortality, experienced through the recent loss of the author’s father. Key critical discourse in this area can be found in the major rhetorical writings of Roland Barthes: Camera Lucida (2002) and Susan Sontag’s: On Photography (2002). Both authors provide compelling statements concerning photography's role in the process of alerting memory and emotion; however it is the visually aesthetic and artistic representation of these emotions through the seemingly sterile, technical reality of the digital
image that is of concern. Most practitioners would support the notion that digital imaging, is a medium heavily characterised by manipulation and enhancement. Adobe Photoshop® for example, seems to tempt the artist into reaching for and applying preset artistic filters that automatically shape the original image in ways that are only limited by human imagination. In some genres of digital art: cyberart for example, this is undeniably evident and undisguised, yet in others genres: digital photography and graphic design, the end result (on screen at least) appears to be visually strikingly similar to that created in traditional analogue medium. It is this re-mixing, re-using and appropriation of content to form new digital artworks that provides a backdrop for the project; particularly when the content is highly personal and the mind is understandably resistant to the deliberate digital manipulation of personal possessions carrying heavy emotional burden.

The report proceeds by examining the theoretical discourse encompassing the technical and physical makeup of the digital image. It primarily compares and contrasts the leading postmodernist voices of (William Mitchell, 1994; Martin Lister; 1995: and Lev Manovich, 1995, 2001) Secondly, the established arguments of the modernist theorists; (John Berger, 1982; Roland Barthes, 2000 and Susan Sontag, 2002) will assist the enquiry because their powerful views concerning the photographic image will help assess the appropriateness of digital collage to represent memory, nostalgia and mortality. Barthes (2000) will be of particular interest to the project on account of how he investigated the seemingly powerful connection of mortality and photography by undertaking emotional readings of personal photographs following the death of his mother. Finally, the results of how theoretical research has affected and driven practical outcome will be revealed through evidence of reflective practice, synthesised interpretation of secondary data and the presentation of findings together with recommendations for progression.

Whilst acknowledging that all images are created and viewed within specific cultural contexts, the project does not deal with the wider discourse concerning digital culture, nor does it speculate about the future of artistic representation by digital means. It examines contemporary artistic process from a practitioners viewpoint — the here and now of artistic production, and the manner in which digital images might be considered appropriate for serious artistic work. We could be forgiven for assuming that digital art has now been subsumed into general art practice, but Lovejoy notes that there are still many cultural critics who are averse to recognising the work created by new technologies and refuse to accept these new forms of art as a valid means of representation (2004: 273).

It is suggested that digital collages are invariably viewed and interpret in much the same way
as digital photographs, this is because the technologies used to capture the materials for digital collage are largely photographic; generally involving the use lens based equipment such as digital cameras and scanners. Lister tends to support this by saying that ‘digital imaging technology has been ever more widely assimilated into photographic practice and many other areas of art, design (1995: 297). A project website has been designed and set up as a container for a gallery of images; this report and snippets of the authors reflexivity: It can be found at www.smallfinds.co.uk.

2. COLLAGE DEFINED

In Collage: The Making of Modern Art, Brandon Taylor tells us that the term collage is the noun from the French coller, which literally means to glue or stick (2004: 8). Lisa Phillips explains that collage is a simple act which generally involves pasting down torn and cut paper; an activity that can be practiced by anyone (Quoted in Collage: The Unmonumental Picture, 2008: 1). Richard Flood suggests that collage has been ‘kicking around’ for centuries, and has somehow fallen into the category of anecdotal, perhaps modest remembrance (Quoted in Collage: The Unmonumental Picture, 2008: 8). From these observations it would be reasonable to assume that the ubiquitous ownership of computers will further facilitate the practice of collage in a digital age, and Phillips notes that collage is often a ‘clandestine’ gesture which violates private property and copyright and it should come as no surprise that in the age of file sharing and digital replica, collage has gained a ‘new centrality in contemporary art’ (2008: 13). Legally or otherwise, it is now easier than ever to obtain images for use in collage. From the comfort of our own homes (or offices) we can click and download from the worlds largest photo album: the internet.

2.1.1 DIGITAL CUT AND PASTE

Digital collage is not a recently discovered art form. Taylor explains that the cut and paste methodologies of traditional collage were transferred from the studio to the computer screen as long ago as the late 1960s and early 1970s when researchers firstly found ways of dividing the computer screen into pixels and subsequently discovered how to transfer a group of defined pixels from one location in data space to another (2004: 210). Digital collage is therefore a firmly established medium of artistic output, and according to Taylor there is evidence that digital collage will ‘proliferate’ as long as cut and paste remain virtual instructions on virtual desktops (2004: 210). This proliferation is clearly evident and can be witnessed by visiting the internet. Websites, particularly socially based art and photo sharing communities such as Flickr and deviantART [sic] have thousands of examples of digital collage from artists of all abilities (Fig.1), but it is suggested that the more serious artists who assemble collage using computer hardware and software can
find themselves feeling uneasy that the work they creates looks like traditional collage, but is somehow cheating — it’s simply not the real thing. This tension is further compounded in as much as it often the artists intent to mimic the look and feel of traditionally constructed collage, and yet the process of digital collage and the artistic emotions surrounding these constructions are seemingly at odds with each other.

2.1.2 BEYOND TRADITIONAL COLLAGE

Taylor says that by the 1990s it was apparent that for many artists digitalization would be just another resource to be used alongside other techniques for manipulating and combining images (2004: 211). Massimiliano Giona claims that ‘cutting and pasting, cloning and scanning: both the technology and the terminology of collage have been incredibly expanded by the digital revolution, which in turn seems to operate on the same bases and juxtaposition that collage has familiarised us with’ (Giona, in The Unmonumental Picture, 2007: 14). Both Taylor and Giona’s observations appear to have come to fruition, and now that we are entering the final phase of the first decade of the new millenium it is clear to see how collage has been advanced. We might however add flesh to their statements by explaining that digital collage has now progressed even further on account of easy to use advanced computational techniques such as transparency layering, mode blending and channel masking. These digital effects are deeply inherent to the additive medium of computer and screen based art, and offer unprecedented opportunities for creative exploration. Importantly, they yield results that appear visually similar to traditional collage. It therefore appears that core similarities exist between digitally constructed and traditionally constructed methods of collage, and this assists in positioning digital collage, its progression as a medium and it’s presentation on screen within a context that may be better understood by the artists who create them. Lovejoy provides a point of entry into the following discourse by suggesting that images are ‘always reordered, refashioned, styled and coded according to the different conventions which develop out of each medium and its tools’ (2004: 13).

2.1.3 MODERN DIGITAL COLLAGE

We have noted that the basic idea of collage is the gluing or pasting of objects and it is reasonably easy to comprehend how this concept translates into the language of the digital equivalent: paste. In looking for further areas of similarity between digital and traditional collage, William Mitchell author of, The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post Photographic Era (1994) provides us with the following text that succinctly sums up modern digital collage — he says that digital images:
Mitchell’s term *electrobricollage* does not correctly describe the more established term collage because bricollage generally refers to the production of art using whatever is to hand; moreover, whilst collage may appear share the same stable it is a discipline that generally involves planning and preparation. However, Mitchell’s suggestion that it is the ‘digital imagers’ who ‘give meaning and value’ to the resulting image (1994: 7) provides some evidence that the apparently sterile medium of digital imagery is still subject to the same artistic emotional and creative endeavours of the human beings who create collage traditionally.

### 2.1.4 THE NEW MEDIA OBJECT

In contrast to Mitchell, Lev Manovich, author of *The Language of New Media* (2001) rather clinically refers to digital images as ‘new media objects’, and tells us that ‘all new media objects, whether created from scratch on computers or converted from analogue media sources, are composed of digital code; they are numerical representations’ (2001: 27). Manovich is not alone in placing a reasonable amount of theoretical weight concerning the mathematical reality of the digital image. Bruce Wand supports Manovich by explaining that ‘digital art most often takes on the form of data — that is, a computer file that exists as a collection of ones and zeros on digital storage media. Whether or not this data is transformed into something more concrete depends on the image’ (2006: 14). Although many artists might find the previous statements to be rather dull — even off-putting, similar references to complex data algorithms, grid matrixes and other seemingly uninspiring technical details can be found in the key texts of culture and media theorists (Lister, 1995; Mitchell, 1995; Lovejoy, 2004; Tribe and Jana, 2007) who each allude to the idea that a digital image in its most basic state consists of pure mathematical data. They place emphasis on this aspect of the digital image on account of the status of the pixel which it seems can be directly related to the complex semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (1983) and Roland Barthes (1977) who amongst others sought to break down how meaning is formed within language and images through a complex array of ‘signs’. After sampling a continuous tone image (e.g. Scanning a document) a digital image is formed on a grid of pixels (Fig.2) which consists of discreet units of data (pixels), and this is analogous to the smallest component of language (phoneme). Manovich reasons that the key supposition of contemporary semiotics is that communication requires discreet units, and without discreet units, there is no language’ (2001: 28). The notion of how even the smallest component of a digital image relates language and communication is a fairly easy — even exciting concept to grasp, but the mathematical aspect of such discourse is invariably
of little interest to artists. It might be reasonable to suggest that an overemphasis of this aspect leads to a situation whereby artists feel distinctly *unartistic* and in turn look towards the more philosophical debates, not only for ideas generation, but in order to remind themselves that they are in fact artists and not computer technicians. Whilst Manovich and Wand’s statements appear to offer little or no inspiration for the mathematically challenged artist, we perhaps shouldn’t be too hasty in accusing them of promoting the production of *digital painting by numbers*, because when Manovich further explains his reasons for using the word *object* it becomes abundantly clear that parallels can be drawn with the spirit of collage, if not art in general. Firstly, and rather mundanely, Manovich states that an ‘object’ is in essence the basic term used in computer programming’ (2001: 14), but in his own words he further posits that:

> I use the word object to reactivate the concept of laboratory experimentation practiced by the avant-garde of the 1920’s. Today as more artists are turning to new media, few are willing to undertake systematic, laboratory like research into its elements and basic compositional, expressive, and generative strategies. (2001:15)

So Manovich, despite seemingly placing great emphasis on the hard unemotional facts of the digital image, expresses a desire to ‘reactivate’ a sense of artistic playfulness (Fig.3). Experimentation and manipulation are characteristic of collage in general; therefore, Manovich’s concept of the ‘new media object’ lends itself perfectly to the artist whose desire is to continue the tradition of collage, albeit by employing the medium of the computer.

### 2.1.5 THE DIGITAL DATABASE

Collage artists tend to operate like Magpies. They steal and scavenge from the debris of human life and form nests of treasures consisting of found material. It is within the process of storing objects that digital collage and traditional collage appear to rupture. Unlike the digital image with its inherent ability to exist as endless versions of itself, a traditional collage would be near on impossible to duplicate; therefore adherents to artistic strategies of ‘authenticity’, ‘originality’ and ‘aura’, the focus of Benjamin (1936) would perhaps under no circumstances create work in a digital environment. In a digital workflow, found or collected items have to be converted into ‘new media objects’ which are then compiled into albums or sorted into galleries. In essence these ‘new media objects’ become part and parcel of a computer database: they reside on a hard disk and are accessed through browser based software (Fig.4). Manovich explains that ‘new media objects’ do not tell stories in themselves; they simply don’t have a beginning or end. When ‘new media objects’ are stored electronically they are a collection of individual items and each item has the same significance as any other (2001: 218). Additionally, Manovich tells us that as a
cultural form, the database simply represents the world as a list, and that the database refuses to order that list (2001: 224). Of course, the main difference between stored analogue and digital objects lies in the reproductive and mutability capabilities of the objects when stored as electronic artefacts. Manovich, in raising these issues is simply providing a reminder that without human and artistic intervention: the desire to ‘order the list’, an image can not be formed no matter how or where it exists, and is further evidence that the apparent difference between digital and traditional representation is not so great.

2.1.6 THE USE OF SIMILE TO DESCRIBE DIGITAL ART

It can be rather frustrating when viewing a digital collage remarks such as; *It looks like an old collage or it reminds me of an old photograph* are made. The use of simile to describe digital images is arguably the cause of much tension amongst those digital artists who go to great lengths to maintain an analogue visual aesthetic. Digital artists working within traditional genres such as collage or photography clearly have a problem: they generally do not want their images overshadowed by the medium itself. This problem may never go away because in the words of Marshall McLuhan, ‘we tend always to attach ourselves to the objects, to the flavour of the most recent past. We look at the present through a rear view mirror. We march backwards into the future’ (1967: 74). McLuhan’s entertaining statement is widely acknowledged as being correct, and preceded the ideas which were formed Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) who coined the term *Remediation* to theoretically argue how media is refashioned and re-ordered as time progresses. They explain *Remediation* through two channels: *Immediacy* and *Hypermedia*, the former describing how some media attempts to disguise itself by being transparent and the latter whereby the medium itself is central to the visual message. In an ideal world digital collages that visually resemble traditional collage would not be described by simile: its process would be transparent, but in reality, its very nature and the context of how digital collage is usually viewed makes it a hypermediated activity. In addition to the use of simile (which appears to be highly prevalent in digital photography) digital image makers invariably find themselves launching Adobe Photoshop® in order to replicate age old analogue photographic techniques and manipulations. They are further aided by step by step tutorial guidance provided through magazines and literally hundreds of hobbyist tutorial web sites. Enthusiasts photography (and now digital painting) magazines are littered with articles courting the application of techniques such as ‘make your images look like a Polaroid’ or ‘create amazing darkroom effects’ (Fig. 5). Don Slater (in Lister, 1995) claims that this fascination with process, style and technical detail is seemingly associated with amateur and domestic photography. In general this appears to be the case; one has to look elsewhere in order to be stimulated by meaningful artistic debate. Lister posits that software titles
such as Adobe Photoshop™ are hands on tools that allow individuals to understand and rehearse the codes and qualities of photographs, and that within a few hours of use such programs allow users to explore many of photography’s conventions and manipulations (Quoted in Wells, Liz The Photography Reader: 2003: 316). Lister is of course locating his reasoning within the semiotic ideas of the ‘sign’ (Saussure, 1983; Barthes, 1977; et al.), and whilst it is beyond the scope of this report to deeply express those theories it is reasonable to assume that photography has over the last hundred or so years developed its own powerful, global, linguistic and instantly recognisable visual language system which remain alive and kicking regardless of the emergence of new technologies. Manovich, explains the latter by telling us that:

> The logic of the digital photograph is one of historical continuity and discontinuity. The digital image tears apart the net of semiotic codes, modes of display, and patterns of spectatorship in modern visual culture — and, at the same time, weaves this net even stronger. The digital image annihilates photography while solidifying, glorifying and immortalizing the photographic. In short, this logic is that of photography after photography. (Manovich: 1995)

We could suggest that Manovich is the bearer of good news for the digital practitioner wishing to maintain a traditional visual aesthetic. He explains that not only can our images continue to look like and be viewed as analogue media, they can be advanced by using techniques that are inherently digital: blending, layering and repeated as an example (Fig.6). It therefore appears that because the aesthetic of analogue media is so deeply ingrained in our visual vocabulary, our desire to challenge or introduce a new aesthetic will always be in a state of tension and this has been exemplified by Bolter and Grusin in their postmodern theories of remediation: immediacy and hypermediacy (1999). Bolter and Grusin tend to support Manovich and claim that photographers who capture images digitally and add computer graphic elements to conventional photographic images, or combines two or more photographs digitally, still wants us to regard the result as part of the tradition of photography (2000: 105).

3. CONTENT AND MEANING
This section deals with the artistic aspect of creating images: The author, who recently lost his father explores existing theory in order to draw inspiration for practical work.

Artistic creation always manifests a play between the imagination of the digital artist and the constraints of technique. Technique is not determining but it is obstinate. Every technique links to an aesthetic proper which exercises more or less influence on the artist, whether she is conscious of it or not (Couchot 2008: 3)
When a loved one dies the human sense of memory can become highly active. Even minor details of the past seem to be spontaneously wired to the present as we enter a process of acute remembrance and mourning. Marita Sturken (1997) posits that ‘All memories are created in tandem with forgetting: to remember everything would amount to being overwhelmed by memory’. In essence she claims that ‘forgetting’ is a necessary component in the construction of memory’. Following a family bereavement, we tend to aid our memory by viewing treasured collections of family photographs. Sontag claims that ‘any collection of photographs is an exercise in surrealist montage’ (2002: 68), and few would disagree that photographs have the inherent ability to deceive the eye through the juxtapositions of two-dimensional forms into new spatial arrangements. For many, the images suddenly become shrines or mementos of human existence. We juxtapose photographs that may have been taken years apart, a natural but rather sobering act, which seems to accelerate the awareness of our own mortality. Sontag claims that all photographs of people are *memento mori* and that to take a photograph is to participate in another person’s mortality (2002: 15). Of course, we don’t always recognise this status of the photograph until confronted with the death of a loved one, but when our gaze lingers over reproductions of our loved ones we might agree with Barthes who says that photography produces death whilst preserving life (2000: 92). But beyond the family albums lie the debris of human existence: documents that bear testament to human existence and identity: driving licences, passports, certificates, diaries, personal notes and more. These items seem to hold the same status of the photograph and whilst often not representing the human form — they similarly remind us of our own mortality (Fig.7). Of course, many of these personal items date from a time when death was something that only seemed to happen to other people, but being close to someone who has died quickly changes that notion. In returning to the subject of digital collage and the exploration of using the medium to produce meaningful outcomes, we should consider how the use of family photographs and personal documents within the understood conventions of collage might affect their individual status. Hoptman claims that:

> Although collage is the strategy in which coherence is pressed upon objects through composition, choice and the creation of parameters, its peculiarity is that in the best examples individual elements do not in the words of collage maker John Stezarker “disappear into their own use” but rather retain their identity as they contribution to a larger narrative. (Hoptman, 2004: 10)

Firstly, Hoptman’s words ‘individual elements’ relate to all kinds of objects other than photographs: scribbled text; impromptu drawings; perhaps faded magazines (Fig.8), and secondly, if we subscribe to the claim that they ‘retain their identity’ we can revisit Sontag’s ideas to explore
how photographs and text might fit within digital collage and the representation of remembrance and mortality. Sontag says that photographs are invitations to sentimentality — they turn the past into objects of ‘tender regard’ (2002: 71). Additionally, she claims that in a world littered with photographs they simply obtain the status of found objects (2002: 69). Sontag’s ideas are surely reinforced by the overwhelming volume of images that confront us daily; moreover, we can transpose her ideas into the medium of digital collage, not least because the use of ‘found objects’ in any form of collage is ubiquitous. Additionally, digital collage frequently contains text in order to reinforce or direct viewers to interpret otherwise ambiguous or complex narratives. Berger claims that as soon as words are used with photographs the inherent ambiguity of photographs is fixed with an ‘effect of certainty, even of dogmatic assertion’ (1982: 91). Sontag’s ideas tend to support Berger because she claims that photographs can also be described as quotations, and that a common method of presenting photographs is in book form where the photographs are matched with quotes (2002: 71). We could conclude then that digital collage might just be the perfect medium in which the artist can express their feelings about remembrance and mortality, particularly as Sontag firmly proclaims that ‘photography is the inventor of mortality. A touch of the finger now suffices to invest in a moment with posthumous irony’ [sic] (2002: 71). What kind of text could be added to a collage to help support and glue a composition together? Sontag suggests that the only prose apparently credible to more and more readers is not the writing of someone like Agee, but the raw records - fragments or the internal texts of sub-literary documents such as letters, diaries and personal notes. (2002: 74) (Fig.7). This powerful statement arguably completes the picture, adding weight to the argument that digital collage is the perfect medium for artistic interpretation of mortality, because photographs and scanned elements constitute the main elements of digital collage. Furthermore, the inclusion of texts drawn from the raw fabric of human existence should certainly yield a powerful artistic artefact. Finally, Berger explains that In the relationship between a photograph and words, the photograph begs for an interpretation and the words usually supply it’ (1982: 92).

3.1.1 BARTHES AND THE SUBJECT OF DEATH
Perhaps a more emotionally moving account of how photographs affect our feelings towards mortality can be found in the texts of the cultural theorist Roland Barthes, author of Camera Lucida (2000). Barthes talks frankly about the subject of death, and is surely driven to do so following the passing of his mother. He provides an example of viewing a photograph of two little girls observing a primitive aeroplane flying above their village and notes just how alive they are, with their whole lives ahead of them; ‘but also they are dead (today), they are then already dead (yesterday) [sic] (2000: 96) (Fig.10). In another example Barthes talks of viewing a photograph of
a young criminal sat in a prison cell waiting to be hanged, and that his thoughts were that he was going to die: ‘This will be and this has been’ (2000: 96). It could be argued that Barthes’ views might only be understood following the actual experience of personal loss. Nonetheless, surely we have all looked at historical photographs of human life and had our senses alerted to the passage of time; especially in those images that depicted people who were certainly no longer alive. Barthes also describes how in viewing photographs of his mother he felt the urge to get closer, so much so that he attempted to enlarge the photographs in the darkroom only to find that the image grew soft, he poignantly stated, ‘Alas, however hard I look, I discover nothing: if I enlarge, I see nothing but the grain of paper’ (2000:100) (Fig.9).

4 HOW THEORY INFORMS PRACTICE

The practical outcomes that accompany this report at www.smallfinds.co.uk have been produced as a direct result of engaging with the theoretical discourse surrounding the subjects discussed in this report. The research could have proceeded by adopting many other methods; however, the decision to concentrate on the analysis and interpretation of established secondary data facilitated a personal objective: the desire to improve academic writing. Carole Gray and Julian Malins, authors of Visualizing Research: A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design (2004) support this approach by reminding us that it is entirely feasible that an independent and original contribution to knowledge can be made by the reinterpretation of existing data (2004: 98).

The decision to form findings by interpreting existing data has been of real benefit; however, the main issue encountered was one of focus or specificity: the sheer amount of potential sources on which ideas could be drawn is vast. In the excellent book How to Research (2006), Lorraine Blaxter, et al, tells us that it is normal to be overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of the existing literature available and that you should set targets as well as remembering that you cannot be expected to do everything (2006: 126).

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the project was discovering how after taking theoretical positions into account many of artistic processes we seem to take for granted can force a re-think of how work might proceed. As an example: Lev Manovich’s ideas concerning the ‘ordering’ of ‘new media objects’ in a computer database influenced the manner in which the captured digital image files relating to this project were stored and located within the computers file structure (2002). In addition, his argument that we should experiment with ‘new media objects’ in the same manner as the Avant Garde artists of the 1920s provided a reminder that there is still much to be discovered by human interaction with the digital medium and therefore provided the confidence to experiment away from established comfort zones. The polemical work of Sontag (1977), and
Barthes (2000) proved to be highly influential in arriving at the practical outcomes. Their powerful and emotive texts were produced prior to the availability of digital technology and on reflection and therefore could have been overlooked. In reality, it was abundantly clear that Barthes and Sontag’s ideas were highly relevant to the process of collage due to the fact they were concerned with the photograph’s meaning and not particularly the technical aspects of the medium. Throughout the project there have been personal concerns that the discourse included in this report would not adequately reflect the actual amount learned. There is however an awareness that the scope of the project only allows for a limited, but focused engagement with the theoretical discourse, and perhaps of more importance is the fact outcomes have been produced as a result of engaging with aspects of theory which in turn render those outcomes invariably more relevant. The project as a whole has revealed that digital media is a valid medium for artistic expression. It has been a personal discovery that technique plays only a small part in the bigger picture of practitioner output, hence the apparent lack of discourse surrounding the area of process; moreover, that by engaging with the theoretical discourse surrounding areas of personal interest one is presented with fantastic opportunities for creative response. The overall goal of this project was to arrive at a situation whereby confidence in professional output was matched with academic understanding. It is suggested that those aims have been met, but there is a sense that the journey has only just begun.

4.1.1 THE NATURE OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH

It has been discovered that practitioner based artistic research has to be a fluid, adaptive and hybrid process. Gray and Malins (2004) highlight the need for all practitioners to contribute to the formulation or adaptation of existing research methodologies, reminding us of the widely acknowledged belief that social science based paradigms of enquiry do not always neatly fit within the practice based issues that artists like to undertake. During this project it was a constant source of frustration that many of the publications on how to conduct research skimped over the apparent need to identify a deeper understanding of social science research paradigms of enquiry. In essence, it was suggested that a researcher should bring a personal world view to the process of research, see (Blaxter, et al. 2006: 60) for an example. In order to achieve this one has to wrestle with some rather deep epistemological and philosophical concepts, and in many senses this hampered the project for a short period. It is therefore entirely possible that the fledgling researcher to become caught up in the process of research to the point that the research itself is hampered. Experience gained through reflective practice has now indicated that the best way to proceed is to set a plan — commence, and accept that changes can be made and adjusted accordingly. In respect of this particular project the initial learning agreement
has changed to reflect the manner in which the project unfolded. Background reading can help focus the research, but in projects that are of a highly personal nature it is to be expected that directions will change.

4.1.2 BALANCING THEORY AND PRACTICE
Liz Wells rather bluntly asks us to consider — why we should study theory? She claims that we have two choices. We can either disregard theoretical debates altogether and take no account of the ways in which images become meaningful, or alternatively we can engage knowingly with the debates concerning photographic meaning in order to influence not only the historical position of photography but on your own individual practice (2004: 3) This position can be applied to all art and design practice, and in this particular project digital collage was the genre. The balancing of academic theory together with the realisation that you are creating digital images from the debris of a loved ones live has been challenging. Equating highly personal belongings to the status of ‘new media objects’ somehow seemed disrespectful and yet the process of re-assembling those objects into meaningful images based on what was learned through research resulted in artistic outcomes that were greater than the sum of the parts.

5. RESEARCH FINDINGS
Digital collage is fundamentally different to traditional collage and yet retains many of its traits. It should be accepted as simply another medium of artistic expression, not least because the concept of pasting is retained. Whilst we must acknowledge that digital essentially images exist as complex mathematical computations, contemporary artists should confidently engage with the medium in order to express their personal artistic vision. Collage has traditionally always been a medium of image manipulation; therefore, digital collage maintains and expands that tradition through exciting contemporary techniques: transparency, layering, and channel blending to name but a few. Digital collage is an appropriate medium in which to artistically express highly personal subjects such as death, remembrance and mortality because meaningful connections can be made by juxtaposing images that would otherwise have remained untouched, unconnected or even disposed of, and yet at the same time the individual components retain much of their individual meaning. The theoretical arguments formed prior to the availability of digital technology should be visited; they provide artists with valuable insights that help progress ideas to fruition.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND PROFESSIONAL ENGAGEMENT
This personal project was completed within a 12 week timescale. During this period it became apparent that the opportunities to progress the work are substantial, both in terms of physical
artistic output and further engagement in deeper theoretical written output. There is now in existence a comprehensive and well organised database of ‘new media objects’ that could potentially fuel a substantial project; moreover, there is the opportunity to add new ‘objects’ to the database as time progresses.

Negotiations are currently taking place with Mr David Nightingale, Director of Chromasia Ltd, a North West photographic training company specialising in providing bespoke digital skills to advanced amateur and professionals who wish to update their skills. Chromasia is seeking to expand its provision to meet the increasing demand from artists who are interested in expanding their theoretical knowledge but are unable to invest in long term education. It has been proposed that short lectures could be introduced into workshops in order to stimulate further personal enquiry. Additionally, the successful completion of this period of study has been essential in the recently acquired appointment of full time Senior Lecturer in Graphic Design at the University of Bolton. The website www.smallfinds.co.uk will be re-developed in order to pursue the sale of prints. Enquiries are currently being made in relation to adding ecommerce functionality to future image postings.
Flickr is perhaps the most widely used art and photography website for sharing images. A search for the term ‘digital collage’ returns 13,133 results. Flickr is now used by artists of all abilities; this figure reveals the popularity of digital collage as a medium of artistic expression.

Fig. 1 Screenshot Flickr: Digital collage Search Results 2008
The smallest component of a digital image is the pixel which is square in form (picture element). Fig.2 shows an electronically scanned continuous tone image enlarged to reveal individual pixels.

**Fig. 2** Screenshot *Pixels* (2008)
Höch’s collage above reveals a highly experimental approach by placing seemingly unrelated ‘objects’ into new visual compositional relationships. Manovich claims that as more artists are turning to new media, few are willing to undertake systematic, laboratory like research into its elements and basic compositional, expressive, and generative strategies. (2001:15).
Images stored on a computer reside in a database. In the example above, Adobe Bridge (an image browser) provides visual reference to a range of scanned or photographically captured or computer generated data. The images all share the same significance until they are ordered into artistic compositions — the possibilities for combining images into narratives are endless.
Photoshop Creative is an enthusiasts magazine together with an accompanying website, and it is typical of many other similar publications. It specifically targets digital artists seeking to acquire technique and skills. There is no evidence of artistic debate and theoretical engagement within the pages of this publication. In the above example, the magazine promotes pastiche, simulation and style by using a persuasive simile on the cover: ‘Paint landscapes like Edward Hopper’. This approach can be found in most amateur digital art or photography magazines.
Kareem Rizk's digital collages clearly emulate the look and feel of traditional cut and paste collage. The use of nostalgic images, distressed and faded backgrounds and muted colours aids this process, but evident in this picture is the use of subtle techniques that can only be produced with digital technology.
When a person dies it is often the debris of our existence: in this example a passport alerts our memory and reminds us of our own mortality. The text contained within this passport can be used as an element in the compositional strategies applied to digital collage.
According to the acclaimed collage artist John Stezarker, individual objects do not disappear into their own use, but rather, they retain their identity and contribute to a larger narrative. (Hoptman, 2004: 10). This suggests that Digital collage is the perfect medium in which to juxtapose individual personal images into emotional narratives.

Fig. 8 Christian Holstad Solo Guy in Blue Bathroom (Series 1) (2002)
When viewing old photographs, particularly of young people who are known to have died thoughts can be that he has all his life ahead of him — and yet he is dead. Pictured above is the author’s father who died on 8th January 2008 aged 72.
It is tempting to try enlarging a photograph in an attempt to get closer to a loved one after death, but it reveals very little. Barthes said ‘alas, however hard I look, I discover nothing: if I enlarge [a picture of my mother], I see nothing but the grain of paper’ (2000:100).
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Fig. 1 Screenshot Flickr: Digital collage Search Results (2008) Available: http://www.flickr.com/search/?q=Digital%20Collage [July 2008].

Fig. 2 Screenshot Pixels (2008) Generated by the author from a personal collection of images [July 2008] Reproduced with kind permission of Mrs Monica Washington.

Fig. 3 Hannah Hoch Untitled (1921) Taylor, Brandon (2006: 49) Collage: The Making of Modern Art: London: Thames & Hudson.

Fig. 4 Screenshot Adobe Bridge Database of Images (2008) Adobe Bridge Software.

Fig. 5 Screenshot Photoshop Creative Website (2008) Available: http://www.pshopcreative.co.uk/back_issues.php [July 2008].

Fig. 6 Kareem Rizk Typo 3 (2006) Available: http://www.flickr.com/photos/10286231@N04/2490698479/sizes/o/ [July 2008].

Fig. 7 John Washington United Kingdom Passport (2006) One of many personal items retrieved from the personal possessions of the author's father. Reproduced with kind permission of Mrs Monica Washington.


Fig. 9 John Washington Portrait (1948) One of many personal items retrieved from the personal possessions of the author's father. Reproduced with kind permission of Mrs Monica Washington.
Bibliography


