



Sally Schluter Tardella **MEMORY PALACE**

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MEMORY PALACE 2014



ON THE COVER:

Faucet. Detail of pages 25-27. 2014

Ink, white-out, color pencil, and photographs of faucets, on paper.
Artist Book (continuous codex) 28 pages: 8 x 5 inches closed,
approximately 8 x 135 inches open.

A note from the curator...

We are the evidence of our accumulate memories, our physical appearance little more than a protective husk encapsulating an ambiguous, selective, complex anthology of ideas.

The seemingly infinite taxonomy of one's memories is an unregulated, undulating amorphous database. Where do these memorized impulses begin and end? Are they circular, elliptical or linear?

As inherently archival organisms, humans invariably anchor memories in the physical. *Memory Palace*, on paper and on canvas, is a case in point. As such, it is an aide-memoire, a sequential, physical, architectonically-inflected manifestation of Sally Schluter Tardella's rendered recollections.

If the paintings resemble floor plans of something like an archeological dig, it is an appropriate analogy. Excavations possess infinite layers and embodiments until the final layer cures. How memories are actually pinned down requires a system and process. Schluter Tardella's paintings and codices formalize and concretize the conceptual practice of recording a collection of memories.

With these new bodies of work, Schluter Tardella offers two versions of memory. The paintings are declarative. They present a one-time version of events – an ossuary of recollections rendered down into a primary painterly structure. Her books, on the other hand, are more open-ended; their catacomb-like progress being labyrinthine, serpentine and sequential.

The rooms, antechambers and passageways of *Memory Palace* map the territory of memory in subtle configurations of earth tones, grays and ochers with occasional flourishes of color. These taut surfaces, these metaphorical accumulations, are formalistically rendered in a language that is idiosyncratic, universal and interactive.

– Dick Goody



Making Room:The Artful Tactics of Sally Schluter Tardella

Essay by John Corso, Ph.D.

Returning from her fall 2013 sabbatical, artist and professor Sally Schluter Tardella greets a large lecture hall full of Oakland University undergraduates, colleagues, and community members. She tells the audience about Simonides of Ceos, a Greek lyric poet who lived around 500 BCE and invented a mnemonic memory device known as the “memory palace.” Tardella explains that Simonides attended a dinner party, but while he was out of the room, the roof caved in, killing the remaining guests. Simonides was able to identify the dead by remembering where each was seated.¹ Today, memory enthusiasts apply this technique by “situating” memories in an envisioned architecture. Introducing her latest body of work, collectively entitled *Memory Palace*, Tardella reveals that her paintings and drawings, which depict domestic floor plans and architectural features, work mnemonically for her. By remembering the places of her childhood, Tardella paints into these “rooms” visual symbols, private memories. Engaging the social theory of Michel de Certeau, however, I hope to move my discussion away from one about the visual representation of memory and instead refocus on what I believe constitutes Tardella’s most skillful tactic as an artist: her “everyday practice” of drawing and painting.

Tardella grew up in Pennington, New Jersey, in a converted schoolhouse built in 1838. Her childhood home figures prominently in her current work, offering a rich motif from which she considers her own psychological development, as well as the ways that her upbringing shaped her views of gender and the body. In her fascination with houses, domesticity, and constructions of gender and the body, Tardella benefits from previous generations of feminist artists. Among the earliest of these was French-American artist Louise Bourgeois, who produced a highly influential group of drawings called “Femmes-Maisons.” These proto-feminist works from the 1940s feature drawings of houses merged with female body parts. The psychoanalytically inflected drawings explore, as historian Julie Nicoletta describes, “sexual difference, in terms of woman’s role in society, and problems of communication.”² Though similar in content, Tardella’s architecture is less anthropomorphic and works in a post-expressionistic idiom rather than in Bourgeois’ Surrealist one. But close looking reveals that Tardella’s floor plans bear scars, wounds, and other traces that strongly reference the healing body’s innards and orifices.

Interior (2013) offers an excellent entry into a problematic with which Tardella wrestles in all of her work. Though her images seem deeply invested in past memories, in actuality, Tardella uses the space of the present to *re-member*. That is, in *re-membering*,

Tardella brings forth past memories into the present not as an act of faithful recall, but more as an act of “putting together” the disparate members of memories into new configurations. In doing so, the artist works in the present—not the past—through a daily art practice to interrogate structures like the home and their roles in the socialization and discipline of the body. It is the everyday practice of *re-membering*, reflecting and reorganizing personal stories, that constitutes the work’s most critical edge. As an everyday practice, her tactical drawings and paintings actively challenge and resist the patriarchal social expectations placed upon women.

Works like *Interior* reveal a complex interchange between surface layer markings and profound color interactions. This is further heightened by the polyptych format that most of *Memory Palace* paintings take, in which two or more stretched canvases are attached. The five-paneled painting of *Interior* resembles a floor plan; four squares fit together like regular rooms, and a small fifth panel adjoins the group like a closet off of a bedroom. On the surface, recognizable outlines seem to reference a highly stylized notation, perhaps for furniture layouts. The figures are not readily legible, however, but suggest instead a deeply personalized code. These lines, dots and dashes, far from mapping a static layout within the architecture, indicate passages and movements of objects or agents over time, as if diagramming their time-lapsed positions.

Underneath the line schema lies an organic world of painterly layers: scumbled, sometimes wet-in-wet paint references the thick plasmas and delicate tissues of a body in a state of injury or recovery. These underlayers transform the depicted domestic space into an organism, which by extension, suffers the same vulnerabilities as does the human body. In the case of this painting, the title *Interior* itself leaves ambiguous the subject it describes. Does it refer to the remembrance of the interior of a home, of the body, or both? The sanguine palate, too, recalls the body’s inner fluids. The surface and heavy layers of paint reflect a depth that is not only formal, but psychological, as well.

Another painting, *Doll House* (2014), suggests both in its execution and in its representation the possibility of the house serving to illustrate the psychoanalytic depth originally hypothesized by Freud. It was Melanie Klein, however, who first suggested that by observing children at play, the analyst might gain insights into their unconscious conflicts. Whereas children do not have the fortitude to free associate verbally for an hour’s session, in play they provide similar psychic material for analysis. When playing with a

dollhouse, for example, children position dolls within the house, projecting onto the dolls and their surrounds their own libidinal anxieties and desires. Tardella’s painting hints at the psychological performance of play. What appears to be a floor plan (or perhaps an elevation) of the dollhouse contains Tardella’s characteristic notation-like marks. These cryptic diagrams (icons of toy furniture alongside dotted lines, spirals, and dashes) act like a psychologist’s shorthand. They appear to record a child’s play sequence or, likely, an adult’s remembrance thereof. Below these marks, the pronounced yellow and brown staining suggests urination and defecation, excretion processes that invoke Freud’s psychosexual development stages.

While works like *Doll House* seem to sketch out a personal psycho-biography, these works must be understood not as truthful records of real past events or traumas, but rather as accounts of the everyday challenge to rework issues in the present. *Memory Palace* and its accompanying artist’s books should not necessarily be considered a mnemonic record of accurate memories of childhood.³ Instead, they should be seen as part of an ongoing artistic practice that Tardella exercises daily to explore the traditional roles created by the domestic scene. Moreover, by invoking the contentions of Michel de Certeau that everyday practices can form a space of resistance through which people can protest the socio-economic conditions in which they exist, I wish to reframe Tardella’s practice as itself a tactic of resistance.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau launches a highly complex assessment of “everyday practices,” that is, everyday “‘ways of operating’ or doing things.”⁴ He responds to other thinkers like Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, who focus on the ways that institutional apparatuses coerce ordinary people to follow the rules that maintain the status quo and prolong an unequal distribution of power. De Certeau insists that these accounts wrongfully dismiss any agency on the part of people considered to be “the dominated element in society.” Rather than regard them as subjugated, powerless people, de Certeau insists that such people manage to operate within the system to produce generative, creative modes of expression that simultaneously repurpose or “poach” from the dominant powers. De Certeau

sees this happening in everyday practices like “reading, talking, dwelling, cooking, etc.”⁵ This everyday zone is precisely where I see Tardella’s art as gaining its powerful edge—an edge, I argue, of daily struggle against dominant patriarchal social structures.

Tardella’s own studio practice follows this daily course. Since her graduate studies in fine art, Tardella has always maintained her studio within her living quarters. Tardella’s regimented studio routine follows less the romanticized model of the (traditionally male) artist who waits for his muse to spirit him into a frenzied mania of artistic production. Instead, Tardella practices more of a quotidian yet prolific habit of art making that resembles what de Certeau calls “the procedures of everyday creativity.”⁶ Such a tactic allows domestic life and studio practice to intermingle seamlessly. While painting occurs regularly in the home studio, Tardella is free to bring her sketchbooks with her virtually anywhere, allowing an even more complete integration of her drawing practice within her everyday life. Tardella’s practice thus differs greatly from the Warholian-like studio artist, whose legions of studio assistants produce works of art like mass-produced luxury goods. Instead, Tardella’s drawings offer a model of everyday art making at odds with the capitalism of the most commercially driven New York studios. In this way, Tardella uses the practice of the everyday to critique the culture industry’s obsession with the bottom line.

Memory Palace is not a collection of rendered places. Instead, it evidences an artful practice of creating spaces of resistance—making room(s) for questions about how the institution of the home establishes power dynamics and subject positions that often follow rigid gender roles and strict prohibitions which discipline and control the body. Executed with superb artistic and tactical skills, Tardella thus makes rooms, spaces, and landscapes not as elegies for past experiences, but as an everyday practice that questions the conditions of our daily domestic environments that so thoroughly structure our lives.

1. Frances A. Yates offers an account of this story in *The Art of Memory* (New York: Random House eBooks, 2011).

2. “Louise Bourgeois’s Femmes-Maisons: Confronting Lacan,” *Woman’s Art Journal* (13:2, 1992-1993): 22.

3. Neurologist Oliver Sachs writes a compelling argument against the veracity of childhood memories, which are subject to suggestion and revision. See “Speak, Memory,” *The New York Review of Books*, February 21, 2013, accessed July 11, 2014, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/feb/21/speak-memory>.

4. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984): xi.

5. Though de Certeau seems to consider artists among the powerful class of cultural producers, he does not discount the possibility that I present here, which posits that certain types of artistic practice may work at the tactical, everyday level.

6. Ibid., xiv.



PAINTINGS/ROOMS

Boudoir. 2013
Diptych, oil on canvas, 36 x 72 inches



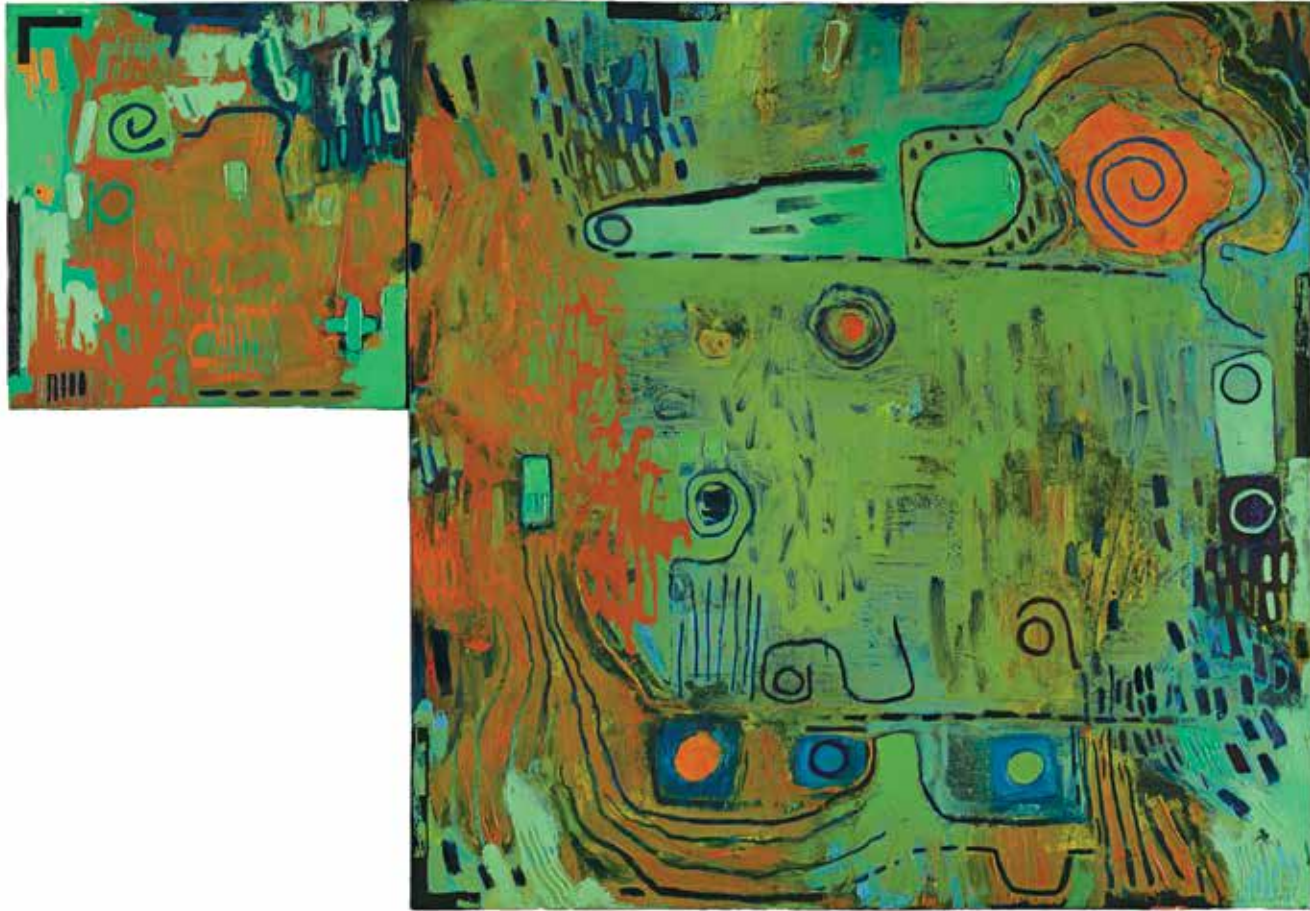
Interior. 2013
Polyptych, oil on canvas, 72 x 88 inches



Dollhouse. 2014
 Diptych, oil on canvas, 48 x 54 inches



Suite. 2014
 Diptych, oil on canvas, 62 x 72 inches



Dining. 2013
 Diptych, oil on canvas, 36 x 52 inches



Root Cellar. 2014
 Diptych, oil on canvas, 48 x 88 inches



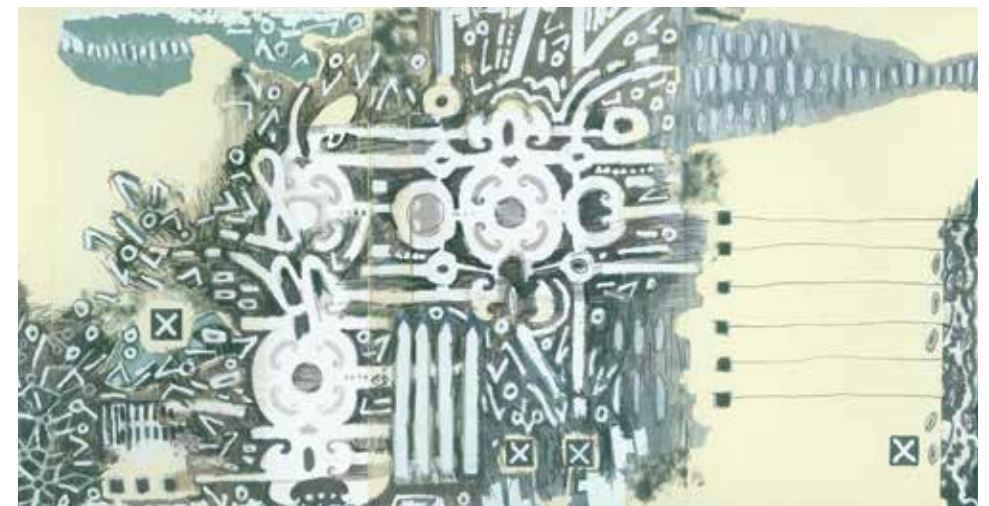
BOOKS / STOP POINTS

Bannister. 2014

Ink, white-out, color pencil, and photographs of bannisters, on paper. Artist Book (continuous codex)

28 pages: 8 x 5 inches closed, approximately 8 x 135 inches open.

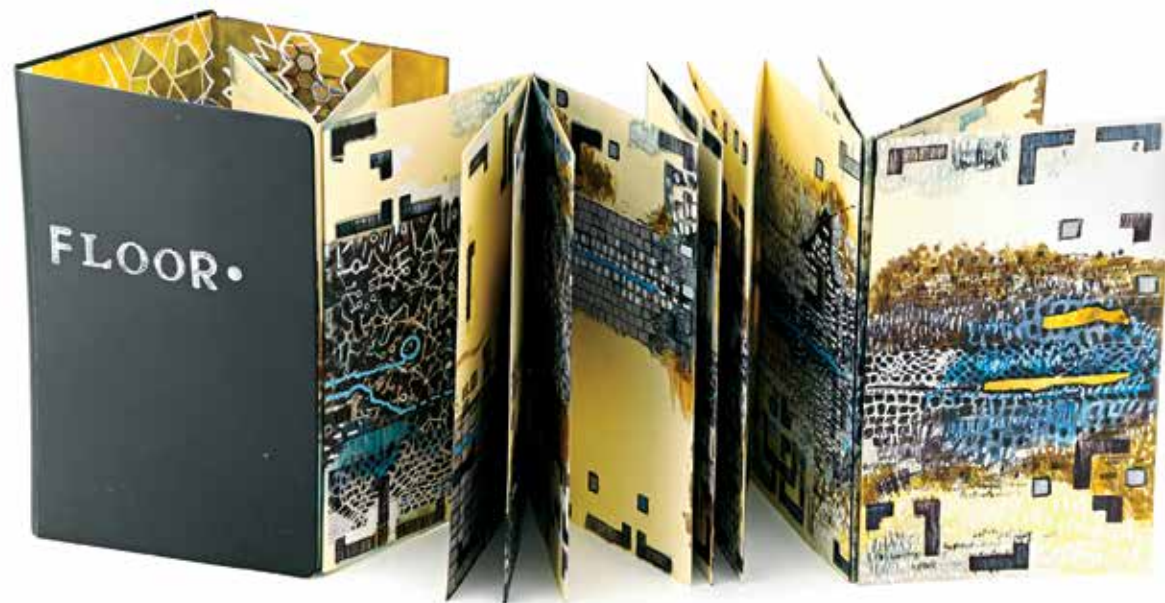
details: (right side) pages 3-5, 8-10, 10-22



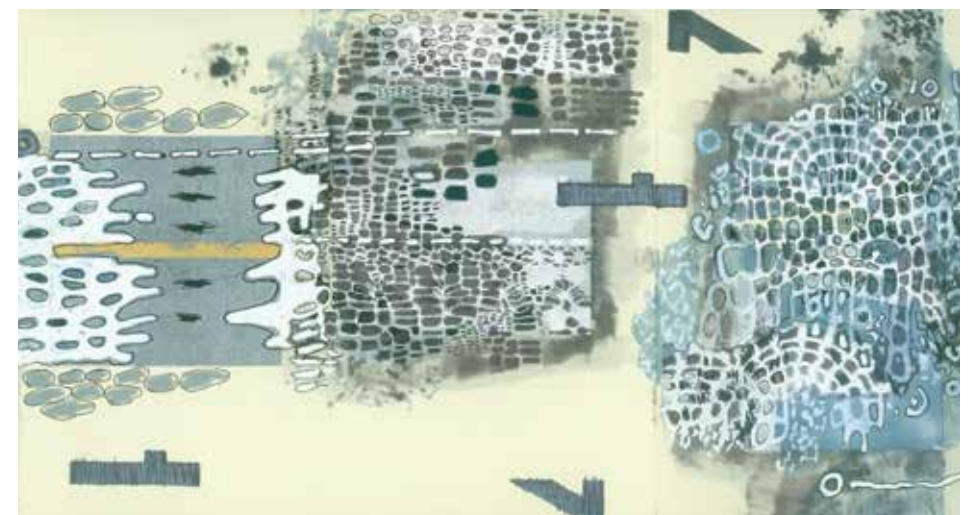
Fence. 2013
 Ink, white-out, color pencil, and photographs of picket fences, on paper. Artist Book (continuous codex)
 27 pages: 8 x 5 inches closed, approximately 8 x 135 inches fully open.
 details: (right side) pages 5-7, 16-18, 22-24



Faucet. 2014
 Ink, white-out, color pencil, and photographs of faucets, on paper. Artist Book (continuous codex)
 27 pages: 8 x 5 inches closed, approximately 8 x 135 inches fully open.
 details: (right side) pages 23-25, 27-endpapers, closed; 27-endpapers open



Floor. 2013
 Ink, white-out, color pencil, and photographs of floors, on paper. Artist Book (continuous codex)
 27 pages: 8 x 5 inches closed, approximately 8 x 135 inches fully open.
 details: (right side) pages 6-8; 9-11; 24-26



Road. 2013
 Ink, white-out, color pencil, and photographs of my road, on paper. Artist Book (continuous codex)
 27 pages: 8 x 5 inches closed, approximately 8 x 135 inches fully open.
 details: (right side) pages 6-8, 19-21, 22-24

Sally Schluter Tardella ARTIST STATEMENT

The memory palace is a visualization system used to organize and recall information. The system originates with the story of the Ancient Greek poet Simonides of Ceos, who was able to identify bodies of the dead at a banquet when a building collapsed by visually recalling the banquet's seating arrangement. In this mnemonic method, data is stored in particular locations in a building — known as stop points — and retrieved when they are visualized. Taking liberties with this model, I am building my own memory palace — an evolving architectural space defined by stop-points that take the form of paintings and books. Each painting in this series functions as a floor plan of a single room in which I place multiple memories associated with that space in the house. The titles deliberately suggest ideal or nostalgic spaces. *Boudoir* invokes a bygone era of private dressing rooms with their trappings of sensuality and intimacy. *Dollhouse*, a trope of girl childhood, suggests idealized domestic bliss. *Root Cellar*, an obsolete room once

used to store food supplies underground, implies a desire for a historical past. To counteract the idealized and universal connotations of these spaces, the paintings include stains of my personal memories. They are layered with people, events, and emotions — a condensed record of my past. On the other hand, the books — *Floor*, *Bannister*, *Fence*, *Road*, *Vent* and *Faucet* — represent the unfurling of these memories. Whether a fixed point (faucet) or an extended plane (floor), each book expands to a linear panoramic exploration of a single mnemonic stop-point. The back pages of the books are covered with writing — notations that constitute another layer of captured memories. While the building of my palace has enabled me to revisit memories, it has also allowed new interpretations of the data. Since a memory is altered each time it is retrieved, it is always recalled through a new filter. The fabricated stop-point itself becomes a new memory to be stored elsewhere.

BIO

Schluter Tardella's art practice is based in Detroit, Michigan. She is an associate professor of art at Oakland University. She received an MFA in painting from Cranbrook Academy of Art. Her main research interests lie in the area of memory — the psychology of memory, the historical training and use of memory in Western culture, and the function of memory within the language of emotion and imagination. Her works have been presented in solo and national group shows and conferences including Phoenix Gallery, NYC, Brooklyn Art Space, Brooklyn, New York; Manifest Gallery, Cincinnati, Ohio; Foundry Art Centre, St. Charles, Missouri; and the School of Visual Arts, National Conference on Liberal Arts and the Education of Artists. Additionally, her work has been included in many exhibitions at university galleries, including Wheaton College, Colorado State University, University of North Carolina Wilmington, Salisbury University, and University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh. In Michigan, her work has been widely exhibited at university galleries including Wayne State University, Eastern Michigan University, University of Michigan School of Art & Design, College for Creative Studies, Marygrove College, and Oakland Community College. This year her work will be included in exhibitions at the University of Texas at San Antonio Art Gallery, San Antonio, Texas and the Vita Art Center in Ventura, California.

Sally Schluter Tardella MEMORY PALACE

September 6 – October 5, 2014 | *Curated by Dick Goody*

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To see more work by Sally Schluter Tardella, visit schlutertardella.com.

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