



Review of:

*Unforgotten Archive: Memory and Merchandise of 9/11* by the Foundation for Metamemory. Material Room, Richmond, Virginia, September 11- September 19, 2025

For as long as art has been made, philosophers and aestheticians have sought to categorize it as a sphere of human activity based on its relationship to truth. For Plato, the capacity of an artist to create a photorealistic painting of say, a chair, without knowing carpentry or how chair legs fit into their base, was at once a skill, and on the other hand, a liability for truth. As such, we engage and judge art with different standards than we would utilitarian objects.

But when it comes to understanding historical truth, creating narratives of our lives, our geological history, and our political history, a paradox emerges. Unlike a chair, whose sturdiness depends on the construction, the structure of history is not so sturdy. Its truth is in constant metamorphosis, constantly being recast through a constellation of easily falsifiable and changing artifacts, images, and stories. As such, history itself is just as prone to deception as the work of art.

While some might have hoped that the advent of scientific indexical image-capturing, the standardization of historical methodologies and evidential forensics would have forced images and narratives to *certify* and testify to truth, the ease with which these systems can be replicated have only complicated the matter more, a paradox that artists have been exploring ever since the 1960s: playing with the conventions of truth in order to point to their porosity.

In today's post-truth era of deep fakes and AI, for artists, this strategy accelerates. Artists can skip past the painstaking work of imitating (or falsifying). Whereas mimetic objects have always held evidentiary power, in an age where artists can very quickly establish scaffolds of narrative or imagery using AI, the time-consuming craftsmanship once needed to falsify has been bypassed, leaving artists more time to work directly on truth itself. In the same way that a reality TV producer intentionally stirs drama in the villa, today, truth itself is a medium for artists, allowing them to play directly on the fabric of reality.

In *Unforgotten Archive*, a series of artifacts –mass consumption t shirts, kitsch parody goods, rubble memorabilia, and handicrafts tell a broader story about how vernacular keepsakes and memorabilia provided an outlet for grief while and exploited a damaged national ego, one that would eventually lead to creation of the department of homeland security and pave the way for the normalization of civilian surveillance. 25 years later artists Will Mullany and Rob Yohe of the Foundation for Metamemory show that there is little difference between memory and merchandise, that the veracity of these artifacts matter far less than the paranoid political reality they constructed, one we are living through today.

