

Notes on the [Memory of the Future Conference](#), Gent (B), June 25, 2010

I just got back from a long day Amsterdam-Gent-Amsterdam on the train (the 'very fast' Thalys (TGV) train had a delay of 55 minutes—such a joke!) where I attended an excellent one day conference curated by Stoffel Debuysere. The event examined the role of memory within a digital culture. Even though it was organized by the Belgian [Archipel research project](#) was not an academic event in the narrow sense. The wider agenda was to create a critical agenda for an ambitious new media start-ups/city library/audio-visual archive area situated next to the socialist-heroic Vooruit hall where the conference took place. Early June 2010 Gent city officials announced [the winner](#) of the architecture for the so-called Waalse Krook area.

I closed the event with an on-stage dialogue with the Australian/US STS theorist [Geoffrey Bowker](#). I was very excited about this because I have long been reading his work and looked forward meeting him. In his opening speech Geoffrey emphasized the role of visual language and material in the way we organize our collective memory. What we need to do is not just create databases but try to capture the aura of a place or a situation (à la Benjamin). The conclusion of his intense work on protocols and standards was that we should understand our responsibility for the very architectures of technology. This are the founding years and we are configuring the future of memory—and it better be experimental! We both urged to work in multi-disciplinary teams in which artists and designers should play a pivotal role. As Geoffrey Bowker says: this the epoch of potential memory. Digitizing cultural heritage alone will be meaningless unless develop new ways to explore them, visualize and navigate these datasets—and new vocabularies to talk about them (Geoffrey showed the multimedia scholarly online journal [Vectors](#) to illustrate this). The difference of storage and memory is crucial here. Memory gets activated by thinking, when we actively utilize information in a our own life.

I am not a fan of the 'forgetting' approach. I am interested in the politics and aesthetics of remembering. I recently read [Delete-The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age](#) by [Victor Mayer-Schönberger](#). He was the next presenter after Bowker. The problem of discussing 'Google' in the context of archives and remembering, as Mayer-Schönberger was doing is that the short-term technological data organization Google-style is not done in the name of the public benefit. What is not being taken into account here is why search queries produce certain links, and why this service is for free. Never forget

that Google collects data for a commercial purpose. It is not a public archive. Besides this, the Google search engine is getting more and more 'polluted', coming up with useless and predictable search outcomes. It is very unlikely that most Web 2.0 application that we now so frantically use, will not be around anymore in the next decade. Nothing is as fragile and temporary as large commercial databases.

We do not need to remember to forget. Regulatory regimes, market forces and History will all too soon wipe out the world's data centres. We do not need digital abstinence to get there. It's a banal observation that we not delete enough. An expiration date for information could be useful. It is indeed interesting to design information decay, or rusting, as Mayer-Schönberger proposes. But let's not get attracted to the romantic politics of 'let us remember to forget'. How we shape and organize our memory is determined by cultural politics and education. Instead of focusing on forgetting it's much better to practice (and study) new shapes of memory.