Tabula (Rasa)

In spring 2016, archaeological excavation around London’s Temple of Mithras brought to light a cache of ancient writing tablets bearing still-legible text. Immediately dubbed ‘ancient ipads’, eighty-seven of these wooden tablets, once covered with dark beeswax for ease of inscription, reveal clear traces of the letters etched on them at the time of their deposit. These included evidence of a scholastic exercise of learning the alphabet, and the first-known handwritten document in Britain, a financial record dated 8 January 57 CE, and a very early London address line – In London, to Mogontius (plate 1). Collectively, they bear witness to an ancient community of authors and readers, and the many cultural uses of notation as a tool of remembering. They are also today, as museum pieces, objects that form and inform our recollection of the past.

The wax tablet has served since antiquity as an enduring emblem of written memory, and indeed of the mind’s recollective processes (plate 2). This figuration of memory as a writing tablet was made especially urgent by Jacques Derrida’s critique of writing, in which Sigmund Freud’s earlier comparison of memory with written notation, ‘A Note Upon the “Mystic Writing Pad”’ (1925), played a significant role. As a cultural sign, the tablet allegorizes the mental function of memory as writing, while representing the capacity of notation to carry meaning. The reverse state, tabula rasa, or a slate scraped clean to allow for the application of a new layer of wax, conversely configures loss or clearance of memory. Uses of the writing tablet across antiquity were varied – for accounts and financial transactions, as instruments of pedagogy, for correspondence, and as clusters of tablets laced together by leather thongs to form ‘books’. It has often been argued that ancient cultures, without the ease of recording methods brought by the advent of paper and the printing press, far less our own electronic information storage and retrieval systems, placed greater value on the cultivation and capacity for oral memory in ways that vastly exceed those of print cultures. In comparison, scholars of memory have argued, modernity’s surfeit of documentary means has produced a culture of amnesia. By contrast the ancient art of training the memory, which comprised an aspect of rhetoric, was devoted to the development of oratorical recall without the written word. Instead ancient orators used a system of mnemonics based on a visual conceptualization of memory ‘places’, or loci, as a mental system of information storage and retrieval. Thus the ancient poet Simonides of Ceos, mythically credited with the invention of these spatial
mnemonic techniques, could describe his system as a series of mentally imagined loci in which to store images from memory:

Persons desiring to train the faculty [of memory] should imagine places in which to store memory … like a wax writing tablet and the letters written on it. For the loci are very much like wax tablets, or papyrus, the images like the letters, and the arrangement and disposition of the images like the script.5

The system of memory that Simonides apparently envisioned was constructed as a succession of recollective loci configured visually, as forms of space or place, but also like writing as a sequence of letters marked on the ‘wax tablets’ of the mind. The image of the wax imprint of script on tablet, even within memory systems developed precisely to obviate the need for the written word, was understood from early antiquity as the paradigmatic sign of the mind’s recollective capacity.

By the fifth century BCE, the age of Simonides, the wax tablet was already a commonplace, the acknowledged method of annotated information storage and the figure of speech used to denote memory. The tablet remained a pre-eminent technology of memory across antiquity, with continued use into the Middle Ages and beyond. Its occasional recurrence as a method of documentation extends as late as the nineteenth century in places with particularly humid conditions unsuitable for paper, for example, by sellers at the fish market in Rouen, or for the account books from the salt mine towns of central and southern Germany. A bundle of seventeenth-century tablets from the archives of Halle, now restored, but originally preserved like a sheaf of ‘papers’ within a loose book cover, exemplifies a conception of the archive as a space of materialized historical recollection.6 The question of cultural memory’s material traces raised by the tablet has preoccupied scholars of the archive and of the museum alike.7 In particular, the wax tablet calls to mind descriptions of the great libraries of antiquity – the lost papyrus scrolls of Alexandria to be sure, but also the very early collections of inscribed bricks that constituted the libraries of Mesopotamia.

Tables, bricks, scrolls, papyrus and parchment, manuscripts and printed books, PDFs and open access links, all these material and virtual things are both cultural artefacts and touchstones of memory. They may be collected and stored, but also retrieved and read, in archives, libraries, museums, studies, and on the internet (plate 3). Within these physical and virtual spaces, texts are the loci of reading and viewing communities. They represent social groups often completely unknown to each other, yet sharing common sets of interest, knowledge, and memory.8 And so it is with journals.

The collected essays of this special issue mark just such a reading community. Together, they commemorate Art History’s fortieth anniversary, as a celebration of the journal’s past, present and future. Founded in 1978 with John Onians as its inaugural editor, Art History’s publication since then, and the ongoing changes of which it is a

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testament, chart not only the history of a journal but of the discipline whose name it bears. New intellectual developments, innovations in editorial vision, shifts in publishing methods and technologies, have and continue to shape its content and design. Above all, the journal embodies a community of readers.

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In the spirit of reading, writing, and remembering, the collected essays of this special issue are those of the journal’s history of editors, 1978–2017, gathered together for the first time. Dedicated to a shared engagement with the image and the problem of memory, as arguably key to defining the conceptual practices, history and current trajectory of the discipline, these papers celebrate forty years of publication. Their enquiry stems from the recent transition of journal publishing from print into digital
format and the complications that this has posed in a subject quintessentially founded upon photographic reproduction of the objects that it studies, as the lodestones, or loci, of our collective memory and understanding.9 The question of image and memory is indelibly tied to an art-historical analysis of visual ‘survivals’, or the migration of forms across time and place. Such processes of visual memory, in their network of affinities, connections, but also cultural oblivions, were the primary focus of one of the discipline’s leading early intellects, Aby Warburg, whose research institute and graduate training would later constitute Onians’s intellectual formation. Warburg’s great collection of photographs organized as a pictorial atlas, which he titled Mnemosyne, was, like the organization of his book library, material testament to
Genevieve Warwick and Gavin Parkinson

his conceptualization of image and memory. Consisting of some seventy panels and approximately 2,000 photographs, Warburg’s ‘Image-Memory Atlas’ was the tool of his theory of the typological functions of human pictorial memory (plate 4). Similarly, he ordered his library as a ‘conversation’ of books and subjects, mirroring the collage/montage form of the image atlas. ‘Like an early neural network model of the growth of connectivity’, the library’s arrangement links together otherwise hidden resemblances and connections between different fields of enquiry.10 It is surely in this intellectual light that Onians introduced Art History as a forum in which to practise art history ‘according to a wider definition’.11

While their temporal spread, geographical reach, and methodological scope have been here determined by the individual specialisms of the journal’s editors (a range of expertise that has characterized their editorships, and is worthy of future discussion given the current orientation of art history toward global art, as featured strongly in our special issue programme from 2014 to 2015),12 this special issue’s essays nevertheless study key questions of art-historical or visual memory across a broad spectrum of interdisciplinary concerns, viewed through a wide range of images and objects. They pursue issues of recollection and reminiscence, such as the cultivation of nostalgia, the play of temporalities, echoes and reflections, obliterations and forgettings, or conversely the afterlives of forms, whether ephemeral or archival, in their survivals and half-lives, absences and presence. Monuments, anti-monuments and memorials form the matter for examination, alongside mnemonic objects or displays, mementoes, replicas and reproductions, fragments and ruins.

As inaugural editor, Onians opens the special issue with a reflection on the founding era of the journal during the intellectual tide of the ‘new art history’, and beyond to current exchange between art history and the sciences. His concern is the issue of neural linkages within the circuits of visual memory, arguing for a scientific analysis of the nodes of recollection, while understanding the processes of artistic memory as governed by the social construction of cultures and the affects of experience. His successor at Art History, Neil McWilliam, turns to the early history of the discipline in the late nineteenth century, and to the concomitant history of nation-building. McWilliam links together the question of collective identity with the cultural roles that artistic cultures, particularly those constructed as ‘classical’, might play in such debates. Marcia Pointon takes the example of the drapery fold in male dress in late nineteenth-century portraiture, both painted and photographic, as an imprint of time past. Attending to the representation of creases and folds as markers of the presence of the body and the passage of time, she suggests the ways in which portraiture simultaneously ‘immortalizes’ or confounds, yet also bears witness to, the degradations of time wrought in memory. Dana Arnold studies the semantic work of the ruin or fragment within the architecture of early nineteenth-century London, notably in the practice of Sir John Soane. She argues that the ‘modernity’ of the metropolis was configured in relation to the ruin, as the allegory of its future historicity, and of the timeless of an urban monument, to rival the cultural imaginary of Rome. London as a site of dislocation is also central to Deborah Cherry’s analysis of Zarina Bhimji’s work, at the cultural interface between location, immigration, and relocation in 1980s Britain. Like the muslin folds of Bhimji’s floating panels with photographs and mnemonic objects caught between sheets of perspex, Cherry writes of the disruption and reinvention of memory within South Asian diasporic communities of women as ‘strapped and squeezed into suitcases’, here captured through an aesthetics of migration. Samuel Bibby turns to the example of Art History itself, using its archives to expose the ways in which the
history of a journal is shaped by productive tensions between its past and its future, and by the historical conditions of production, both intellectual and technological. He examines the changing place of the visual image within this history, now thrown into newly sharpened relief by the advent of online publishing. In a study of George Bellows’ representations of urban development in early twentieth-century New York, David Peters Corbett describes the ‘gaping wounds’ of urban excavation as a painted aetiology of destruction, an obliteration of memory within the construction of modernity. He uses the example of Bellows to repose the question of ‘decreation’ earlier posed by Giorgio Agamben, to draw a parallel between the processes of excavation and those of artistic memory in the act of artistic creation. Gavin Parkinson considers the critical revival of Paul Gauguin in the mid-twentieth century as tied to rising interest in the history and myth of the Celts, and so to the landscapes of Gauguin’s beloved Brittany. He brings to bear the cultural interest in an
ancestral past as the powerful myth or stereotype that constructed Gauguin’s vision of the landscape are still today modified by this artistic and literary legacy. Genevieve Warwick studies the figure of the sleeping cupid in ancient and early modern sculpture, painting and poetry as an example of the ‘afterlife’ of a gestural form. Focusing on Caravaggio’s depiction of the subject for Florence, freighted by the legacy of Michelangelo’s earlier example, she considers how this painting vexes and ruptures the very notion of art-historical memory by an artist who claimed not to have one. Finally, in an analysis of the paradox of historical narratives of the avant-garde from the mid-twentieth century, Natalie Adamson studies Herbert Read’s writings on Edouard Pignon as troubling the history and future of painting in a post-war era. ‘Tradition cut to pieces’ made the questions of memory and its destruction pressing ones across avant-garde cultural forms.

Herbert Read further posed these questions about the history of the future of art in a series of journal articles. His thoughts inflected, challenged, and in turn responded to, the writings of other critics such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. Their points of difference and consonance in a discussion of historic rupture and synthesis, the cultural fragmentation of memory and tradition, and the burdened future of new art, were played out across the pages of journals such as The Arts, New Age, Art and Letters, and Cahiers d’Art. The history of art journals is greatly variegated, in a cultural field configured by those titles closely tied to particular historical moments and concerns, while others take up the intellectual paradox of longer historical futures. That is the case for Art History, too, on its fortieth anniversary. This special issue is a collective celebration of a journal’s distinctive past, its present worldwide community of authors and readers, and its continuing future as leader of the field.

Notes
We dedicate this volume to the readers of Art History. We are grateful to the Courtauld Institute Research Forum and the Association of Art Historians for hosting a day of papers that formed the basis of this volume, http://courtauld.ac.uk/event/art-history-40-image-and-memory-40-years-of-art-historical-writing. Our warm thanks to our anonymous reader, and to Sam Bibby, for their valuable comments on an earlier version of this essay.

1 https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jun/01/tablets-unearted-city-glimpse-roman-london-bloomberg. The tablets are now preserved at the Museum of London.