

have ever experienced is stored. We may no longer associate memorable experiences with brain wrinkles, having adopted more scientific terms like neuron and synaptic connection, but we still hold onto the notion that all the sensory input from the world around us—the sights, sounds, and smells, and the more complex experiences that make up our lives—is stored in our brains. Forever.

Although many people believe the universal storage theory of memory, current scientific opinion does not support it. If, for example, we review the process by which our eyes record sight sensations and send them to the brain as perceptions, after which the brain interprets the perceptions, reacts to them, and finally files the whole experience in the appropriate part of our gray matter, we can see how impossible universal brain storage would be—and how wasteful.

Consider the number of visual sensations I experience during the twenty minutes it takes me to drive from my house to my office. Along the way, my eyes see all kinds of things: cars, drivers, trees, houses, bicycles, mailboxes, shops, bushes, and so on. I am aware that I see these things because I am conscious of them. In other words, sight perceptions have actually made it to my brain. During this same drive, however, my field of vision is open to dozens of other similar sights, which my eyes see but my brain does not register. Why does this happen? Why does my brain choose to see certain sight sensations and ignore others? What would it be like if all the objects within my field of vision were impressing their visual presences upon me while I was attempting to drive my car down the road? In the process of seeing everything, I would undoubtedly lose the ability to focus on anything, including the road, the lines marking the lanes, and the car ahead of me. I would more than likely end up crashing into a clearly visualized bush somewhere off to my right or left. In short, humans have the ability to negotiate their way through forests, over mountains, around traffic jams, and up and down hallways, shopping malls, and grocery store aisles, because our brains are programmed to ignore, or forget in advance, most of what we see. The result is focus, direction, and clarity of vision.

Each of us sees what his or her brain, in effect, chooses to see. It also appears that each brain chooses an ever so slightly different version of what there is to see. Therefore, when we speak of a visual artist as having a personal vision, we may well be referring to the biomechanics of a particular brain, rather than to the presence of a singular spiritual, or aesthetic, sensibility.