The Multiplicity of Memory: Visual Echoes, Temporal Drift, and the Slippery Substance of “Last Seen”

I’ve been noticing something that keeps showing up in my daily routines—subtle, but persistent. A pattern. A behavior loop that doesn’t feel like an error, exactly, but something deeper. It presents most often in the quiet moments of habit: coming home, setting something down, or trying to recover an item that I—or just as often, someone else—has misplaced.

Now, on the surface, this sounds like typical forgetfulness. Misplacing keys. Retracing steps. The sort of thing we’re all taught to do: “Just picture the last place you saw it.” That advice, however, doesn’t help me. Not because I can’t do it, but because I do it too well.

When I try to recall where I last saw the object, the moment I begin to visualize, I don’t get one clean image. I get many. A bombardment. A superposition of visual memories. I see the object clearly—in vivid, near-photographic detail—resting in several plausible locations at once. Some of these locations are definite memories of where I’ve seen it before. Others may be mere hypotheticals that have now become visually indistinguishable from lived experience because I entertained them while holding the image in mind. The moment I “try on” a location, the simulation becomes so immersive that it’s encoded right beside the real ones. At that point, memory ceases to be a sequence. It becomes a slideshow—or worse, a hologram—of uncertain origin.

This is not just about objects. It’s about trust in my cognitive apparatus. It's about knowing that my software is writing and rewriting itself during the read operation. I know that memory is plastic—that recall mutates the file—but it doesn’t feel like mild distortion. It feels like full contamination.

There’s no time gradient either. Older images are just as crisp as more recent ones. There’s no degradation or blurring with age. This makes it impossible to sort the memories chronologically, because none of them degrade with time. I lack that erosion that most people seem to rely on to tell what was recent and what was old. The resolution is uniformly high.

Worse yet, the moment I think about where an object could be—just entertain a location, frame it mentally—it renders the object there so vividly that now that becomes one more candidate in the memory set. It has the same texture, the same realism as the original. It's as if thinking about the object in a new location causes the system to simulate that memory, and the simulation is indistinguishable from the real one. These false insertions compound the ambiguity. Soon, it’s not just about where I saw the object. It’s about whether I saw it at all—and when.

In these moments, it’s as though time collapses into a stack of overlapping layers, and I’m looking through all of them at once. The act of trying to resolve one temporal instance triggers a fractal bloom of related visual data points—similar scenes, angles, object classes—and now I’m completely adrift in a fog of possibilities that all feel equally real. The only thing left to do is shut the system off and physically wander. Let the analog world become my memory audit trail.

Now, the metacognitive hook: Is this just me?

Turns out… no. This is something that is being observed, in pieces, across disciplines. And the more I dig, the more I realize: this too traces back to the same neurodiverse architecture I’ve come to know I inhabit. I’m honestly still stunned—though I probably shouldn’t be—that yet another deep, complex, frustratingly integral aspect of how I function is tied to my ASD wiring. I used to think autism was just about sensory overload, awkward social timing, rigid routines. But no—it’s in everything. In the way I track time. In how I filter memory. In the very structure of how I know I know something.

**The Science: What Might Be Happening**

*Let’s pull on some of the relevant threads.*

**1. Autistic Episodic Memory Style**

Research shows that autistic individuals often possess scene-based memory, not story-based memory. This means:

* Strong, vivid memories of what was present.
* Weaker ability to order those memories by when they occurred.
* Tendency to store data based on sensory or spatial fidelity—not chronology.

This describes my experience precisely. My memories are like high-resolution screenshots from multiple save points, not a coherent film reel.

**2. Temporal Processing and the TPJ**

The temporo-parietal junction (TPJ) plays a role in sequencing events, self-location in space and time, and distinguishing self-generated imagery from external input. It’s also implicated in theory of mind, perspective-taking, and body schema.

In ASD, the TPJ is often wired atypically. The results?

* We may fail to assign a reliable temporal stamp to memories.
* We may simultaneously simulate multiple perspectives (first-person, third-person, aerial), which confuses ordering.
* We may blur boundaries between thoughts and memories—between what we imagined and what we saw.

**3. Source Monitoring Errors**

This is a fancy term in cognitive psychology. It means you don’t always know the source of a memory—did you see it? Think it? Hear about it? Dream it?

People with ASD, high introspection, or trauma often experience elevated source confusion. Why? Because our internal simulations are so rich, we encode imagined events the same way we encode lived ones. Add fast processing speed, and you’ve got a memory system that outpaces its own reality checks.

4. **Hyperphantasia**

This is the ability to visualize extremely vividly. It sounds like a gift—until your brain becomes a simulation engine that keeps overwriting the original files. People with hyperphantasia report:

* Super-detailed mental images.
* Trouble distinguishing real from imagined.
* Mental noise when trying to locate past experiences.

This adds up to what I’ve called visual echo: the lingering, immersive mental residue of past object sightings, with too little differentiation to discern the “last” from the “recent.”

**5. Object Tracking in ASD**

Autistic cognition is often highly object-oriented rather than action-sequence-oriented. We index scenes by the things in them, not the timeline of what happened to those things.

This may explain why I remember the object’s appearance and context so well—but not the most recent interaction with it.

**The Bigger Picture**

What I'm realizing is that this isn’t a glitch—it’s a consequence of the architecture. It’s the same architecture that makes me a pattern recognizer, a system builder, a visual thinker. But it also means I have a memory system that doesn't prioritize "relevance" the way a neurotypical brain might. It’s democratic. Egalitarian. Everything gets remembered equally—whether it was from two minutes ago or two months ago.

Now I see that what I once thought was simply forgetfulness, or carelessness, or mental noise… is in fact structure. A kind of fidelity that comes at the cost of ordering. A system that remembers too much, too vividly, without enough metadata.

**Final Thought: Yet Another Puzzle Piece**

It’s a strange, humbling thing. To keep finding new hallways in a house I thought I’d already mapped. Just a few years ago, I started entertaining the idea that I might be autistic. Since then, I’ve had to watch a long string of “quirks,” struggles, and cognitive idiosyncrasies quietly step forward and say: Yes, I belong to this too.

This memory phenomenon—the superposition, the collapse of time, the vivid layering of plausible but indistinct object locations—is just the latest to be claimed.

Somehow, that’s both frustrating and relieving. Because it means I’m not broken. I’m just running an OS with a different file system.