

**NANYANG  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
UNIVERSITY**  

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**SINGAPORE**

‘I’ IN NARRATIVE:

A STUDY ON CONTEMPORARY VISUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY  
USING PHOTOGRAPHY AS A SIGNIFICANT MEDIUM  
IN MULTIMEDIA INSTALLATION

LEE SOO JIN

SCHOOL OF ART, DESIGN AND MEDIA

2022

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A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in partial  
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2022

## Statement of Originality

I certify that all work submitted for this thesis is my original work. I declare that no other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement. Except where it is clearly stated that I have used some of this material elsewhere, this work has not been presented by me for assessment in any other institution or University. I certify that the data collected for this project are authentic and the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

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## Summary

This dissertation investigates autobiographical artistic practice in contemporary visual arts, which is closely related to, but distinct from, the self-portrait. The thesis proposes the genre of *visual autobiography* to capture the distinct field of autobiographical artistic practice and aims to clarify its terms. To examine the practice of visual autobiography more closely, the thesis conducts case studies on three artists who use photography as a significant medium in multimedia installation: Christian Boltanski, Felix González-Torres, and Barbara Proschak.

In this thesis, I consider ‘narrative of self’ as an essential feature of visual autobiography, as the significance of autobiography lies in the act of finding one’s self and weaving it into the narrative. A significant research hypothesis regarding this is that mortality functions as an underlying driver of autobiographical acts.

Among various visual media, the thesis pays particular attention to photography, since its realistic representation paradoxically contributed to the diversification of artist’s self-representation. Furthermore, the ontological referentiality of photography relates to the discourse of autobiography and the hypothesis of mortality in unique and significant ways.

The thesis combines phenomenology and case studies as research methodology and follows the tradition of *Bildwissenschaft*<sup>i</sup>. By applying phenomenology and *Bildwissenschaft*, the thesis will be able to reveal various layers and meanings of images and elucidate a complex relationship between the visual autobiographer and the recipient that revolves around images.

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<sup>i</sup> *Bildwissenschaft* is an academic discipline dealing with images that emerged in German-speaking regions in the 1980s/90s. *Bildwissenschaften* is similar to visual studies but not completely the same—its literal translation is ‘image sciences’ or ‘image studies.’

The dissertation consists of two parts: the theoretical framework and case studies. It first examines essential notions for understanding the autobiographical phenomenon, such as self, identity, and narrative. Next, it investigates the domain of visual autobiography based on the contextualization of the developments of two relevant fields of self-portrait and autobiography. In addition to this, it elucidates the significant role of photography in the development of the self-referential artistic field. Based on these analyses, the thesis proposes the following four traits as the hallmark of visual autobiography: (1) negotiation of self; (2) complexity of themes; (3) multimodality and multimediality; (4) holistic artistic practice throughout life.

Following this, the thesis presents case studies on three visual autobiographers, Boltanski, González-Torres, and Proschak. Proschak contemplates her being and the connection and disconnection to others and the world by working on her skin and body. Boltanski's artistic practice revolves around time, remembrance, and death. González-Torres's works are strongly linked to his sexual identity and loss of being. The three artists vary in gender, nationality, generation, and in their themes. These artists have been selected by considering the established philosophical positioning associated with the self, narrative, and mortality, as well as the use of photography in installation-oriented execution. As their themes and negotiation of self vary, the three case studies complement each other and illustrate the multifaceted practice of visual autobiography.

Visual autobiography serves as a mirror to reflect ourselves. The three artists' autobiographical narratives create empathetic spaces for viewers, leading them to contemplate the self. The aesthetics of their visual autobiographies are distinctive. They derive from death and mortality; however, they paradoxically affirm life.

## 1. Introduction

Self-referential artistic practice has become more complex on both thematic and formal levels, and this tendency has accelerated in the last few decades within the context of rapid transitions in society. Ostensibly, it seems like an expansion of the genre of self-portrait. However, looking into it more closely, we can observe that a fundamentally different phenomenon has been evolving—the autobiographical.

The distinction between self-portraits and what might be broadly termed as ‘autobiographical artistic practice’ is unresolved, enticing, and evolving. This causes problems in misunderstanding, misreading, and misrepresentation of autobiographical artworks. At present, if an autobiographical artwork includes the image of the artist’s face or body, it is often referred to as a self-portrait, while an artwork that deals with the artist’s personal experience and life stories is often described as ‘autobiographical.’ However, the concept of self-portrait—the depiction of the artist<sup>1</sup>—is insufficient to fully capture autobiographical artworks, which, as I observe, are characterized by the narrative of the artist’s self. The use of a complementary adjective may also illustrate the autobiographical trait of an artwork, but it cannot immediately and effectively convey the genre of the work. Instead, it ceases at the level of explaining an attribute of the work. Given these considerations, it seems necessary to distinguish more clearly between the self-portrait and the autobiographical artistic field and to devise a new term that reflects the autobiographical attributes.

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<sup>1</sup> I do not intend to mean that the self-portrait is only or stops at describing the artist’s appearance. Self-portrait can and does go beyond that—this will be discussed in 2.2. *Self-Portrait*. Nonetheless, its practice is oftentimes performed through the depiction of the artist’s appearance. Furthermore, it forms a common understanding of the usage of the term. In this context, to refer to the conventional connotation of the genre, I use phrases like ‘the notion of self-portrait’ and ‘the depiction of the artist’s appearance.’

In this dissertation, I propose *Visual Autobiography* to capture emerging autobiographical artistic practice, which is related to, yet distinct from, the self-portrait, and suggest the theoretical framework for the genre. This will contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of self-referential artistic practice, enabling the accurate categorization and proper placement of different types of self-referential artworks in the appropriate genre, facilitating a comprehensive comprehension of those works. It will also enable new readings of artworks that can and should be better understood as visual autobiographies.

### 1.1. Background and Context

The artist's self-representation appears in more conceptual and complex ways, both on thematic and formal levels, in contemporary visual arts. Contemporary artists working with their selves weave various sub-themes into their works, and their artistic executions are interdisciplinary, multi-modal, and multimedia. Some self-referential artworks in contemporary art go beyond self-portrayal and are considered autobiographical. These works have a more complex body of work that extends beyond the concept of self-portrait, a picture depicting the artist's appearance.

In my preliminary review of the development of the self-referential artistic field, facing autobiographical artistic works, I realized that this phenomenon cannot simply be explained as an 'expansion' of the genre of self-portrait. At first glance, it seemed as if self-portrait expanded its boundaries to/through various media and that became autobiographical. However, autobiographical artistic practice is no natural consequence of the expansion of self-portrait. If we observe more closely, we can see that the autobiographical is a fundamentally different phenomenon—as will be seen later, there is an autobiographical urge in humans. Therefore, it is more suitable to

consider that the desire for autobiography has begun to be expressed through visual media, leading the self-referential artistic field to a new level of complexity and depth.<sup>2</sup>

What we perceive from autobiographical artworks is the artist's profound negotiation of the *self*. The artistic negotiation is a process that the artist finds a way (medium, form) to convey what he/she wants to convey (theme). For autobiographical works, the theme is the artist's self and life. Thus, autobiographical artistic negotiation includes the artist's contemplation of themselves, digestion of identity, and reflection on life. It takes place both ways, from inside to outside the self and from outside to inside. It means that the artist negotiates the self toward others, the potential public, when making autobiographical artwork.

There could be a view that both self-portrait and autobiographical artworks are equally complex. The artist's negotiation of the self could be observed in self-portraits too. I do not mean that the self-portraitist's negotiation of the self is not there. However, we should consider two aspects: time and medium. First, the concept of self itself has developed throughout time. And second, the complexity of the negotiation of the artist's self is transferable and traceable through the implementation of various media in contemporary art. Accordingly, contemporary autobiographical artworks show a way more multifold negotiation of the artist's self, compared to that of the self-portraitists, and the viewer perceives and unravels those multiple layers from the autobiographical artworks. Such complex autobiographical artistic practice in contemporary visual arts cannot be fully captured under the scope of self-portrait. I

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<sup>2</sup> Autobiography is often associated with a literary genre. However, autobiography is observed in various fields and media such as film, graphic novels, historical accounts, etc. Likewise, it can appear in visual media, and it has been distinctively increasing in contemporary practice. Therefore, I will use the term 'the autobiographical' to refer to the characteristics and qualities. 'Autobiography' will be also used in the same context.

believe it is necessary to establish a separate genre that encompasses this type of artistic practice and create a term that accurately captures the autobiographical elements in the visual arts.

Terminology should be consistent with the actual practice and meaning. I have diagnosed that the terminology warrants further investigation and refinement. In other words, finding the right term is of uttermost importance; clarification of the domains and characteristics should follow. *Visual Autobiography* seems appropriate to capture autobiographical practice in the visual arts. The term itself is not new. It has been used by numerous scholars in recent decades, but its precise meaning has not been settled.<sup>3</sup> I will suggest a systematic analysis and approach to visual autobiography in this dissertation, and through this, I will reinforce its notion.

This dissertation specifically explores the interface between autobiography, narrative, and photography (see figure 1.1.). I figure photography crucially influenced the development of the self-referential artistic field. Photography has a realistic reference that is distinct from other visual media. I observe that this mediality of photography paradoxically contributed to the artist's self-representation to be diversified, to go beyond the depiction of the appearance. Photography has the ability to capture the artist's appearance in a realistic and immediate manner, making it an effective medium for creating a self-portrait. However, photography is not only a representational medium but also a narrative one. This aspect of photography provides a new avenue for artists to negotiate their self-expression. Furthermore, photography

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<sup>3</sup> The results of searching the keyword 'visual autobiography' show numerous publications using the term. For example, Sarah Brophy and Janice Hladki, Marjorie Lynn Devereux, Cigdem Esin and Corinne Squire, Alma-Elisa Kittner, Marilyn F. Motz, Otto Neurath, Vaughan Dai Rees, and Nieves Limón Serrano used the term. However, their implications vary. Some awarded the term to the self-portrait or photo album; some utilized the term to describe one's own practice/attempt/experiment/project; and some used the term to grasp the autobiographical artistic field—Kittner and Brophy and Hladki belong to this end. Kittner's view and use of the term are similar to mine, and this will be discussed in Chapter 2.

relates to reality in a unique and ontological way. The referentiality of photography essentially and naturally engages with the autobiographical urge of artists. In my observation, there is a significant relationship between the inherent characteristics of photography and the shift of self-referential artistic practice from the self-portrayal to the autobiographical. Therefore, I will focus on establishing a theoretical framework and conducting case studies based on the relationship and intersection between autobiography, narrative, and photography.

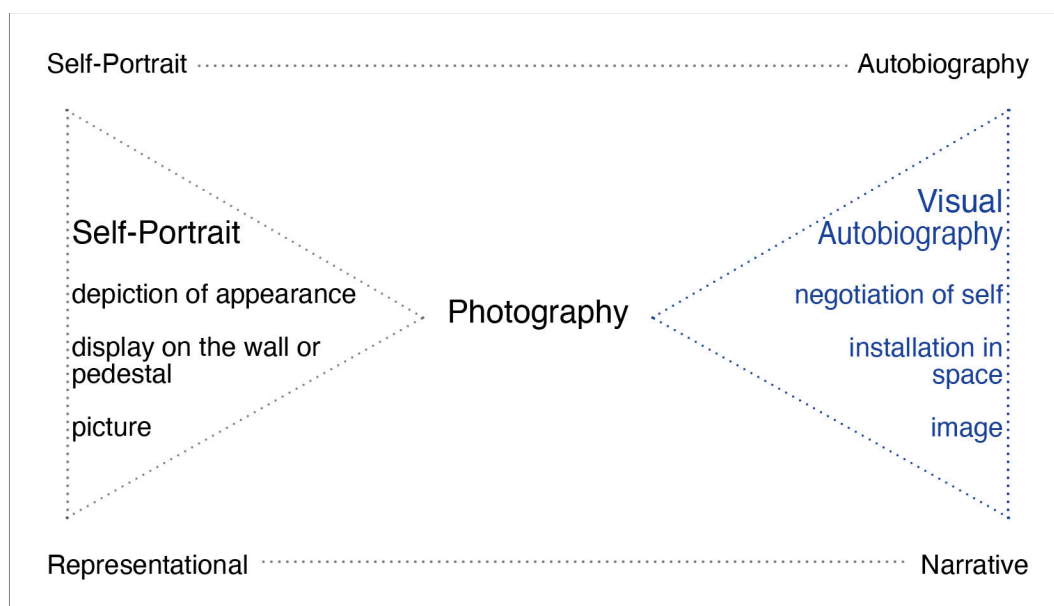


Figure 1.1. Interface between Autobiography – Photography – Narrative.

The dissertation sets up a few hypotheses in advance. The first hypothesis is that there is an urge of self-narrating in human beings, by nature, which constitutes the basis of various forms of self-referential creation. I further consider mortality, the fact that *I will die*, is underlying autobiographical urge: *I want to leave myself as I will be disappearing*. There are invisible dynamics between: I wish to know who I am—I will die—I narrate myself; “and wherever it is auto-biographical, that is to say,

everywhere, and everywhere autobio-thanatographical.”<sup>4</sup> Mortality and death serve paradoxically as a driver for the autobiographical creation. This hypothesis will form the unique fingerprint of my research.

Another important hypothesis is that autobiographical artworks do not cease to exist only at a personal level—this is a common critique for of autobiographical artworks and literary autobiography.<sup>5</sup> However, autobiography extends to the public, as the personal. It becomes evident when we consider the simple fact that the gesture of making autobiography already assumes the potential public. In fact, a continuous negotiation takes place in the practice of making autobiography between the self and others, the public, and the world. Likewise, autobiography does not only matter to the autobiographer, but also to the recipient. The viewer’s reception and the relationship between the creator and the recipient revolving around visual autobiography will be also considered in this thesis.

Lastly, I consider ‘narrative’ a significant feature of visual autobiography. Alfred Kazin already saw the significance of narrative in 1964: “Still, autobiography as narrative is usually of intense interest—intensity is indeed its mode, for nothing is more intense to a person than his own experience. . . . it fixes the relation between the artist and the world, and so fixes our idea of the world instead of representing it to

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Demeure: Fiction and Testimony,” in *The Instant of My Death / Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, ed. Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 72.

<sup>5</sup> Sidone Smith and Julia Watson also pointed out and disputed the verdict in *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance*. They focused on women artists; however, the condemnation does not target only women artists—it falls onto the genre of autobiography in general. “We will address two suspicions that have informed traditional histories of art: on the one hand, that women’s autobiographical representation in self-portrait, diary, and performance is ‘merely personal’; and, on the other hand, that is ‘merely narcissistic.’” Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith, “Introduction: Mapping Women’s Self-Representation at Visual/Textual Interfaces,” in *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 4.

us[.]”<sup>6</sup> Taking Kazin into consideration, I will discuss the significance of the autobiographical—narrative—in relation to the symptoms of our time and illuminate the potential of visual autobiography to overcome various issues in our time. The potential of visual autobiography resonates with Ralph Rugoff’s introductory words to the 58th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia entitled *May You Live in Interesting Times*: “Art cannot stem the rise of nationalist movements and authoritarian governments in different parts of the world . . . But in an indirect fashion, perhaps art can be a kind of guide for how to live and think in ‘interesting times.’”<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, visual autobiography can create a dialogue between different individuals and cultures through narrative; it can guide us ‘living in interesting times’ in how we shall live.

The structure of this research can be divided into two: the theoretical framework (Chapter 2) and case studies based on that framework (Chapters 3, 4, and 5). To establish the theoretical framework of the research, the key notions essential to comprehending the autobiographical aspects of visual autobiography will be studied first. These notions include self, identity, and narrative. Following that, each field of self-portrait in visual arts and autobiography in literature will be examined. The influence of photography on self-portrayal practice will also be discussed in terms of technological, social, and artistic relations. Based on the review of both fields of self-portrait and autobiography, the necessity of establishing a distinct genre of visual autobiography will be elucidated, and the theoretical framework for the genre of visual autobiography will be laid out.

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<sup>6</sup> Alfred Kazin, “Autobiography as Narrative,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 3, no. 4 (1964): 216, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0003.004:02>.

<sup>7</sup> Ralph Rugoff, “Biennale Arte 2019 | Introduction by Ralph Rugoff,” La Biennale di Venezia, accessed November 6, 2019, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2019/introduction-ralph-rugoff>.

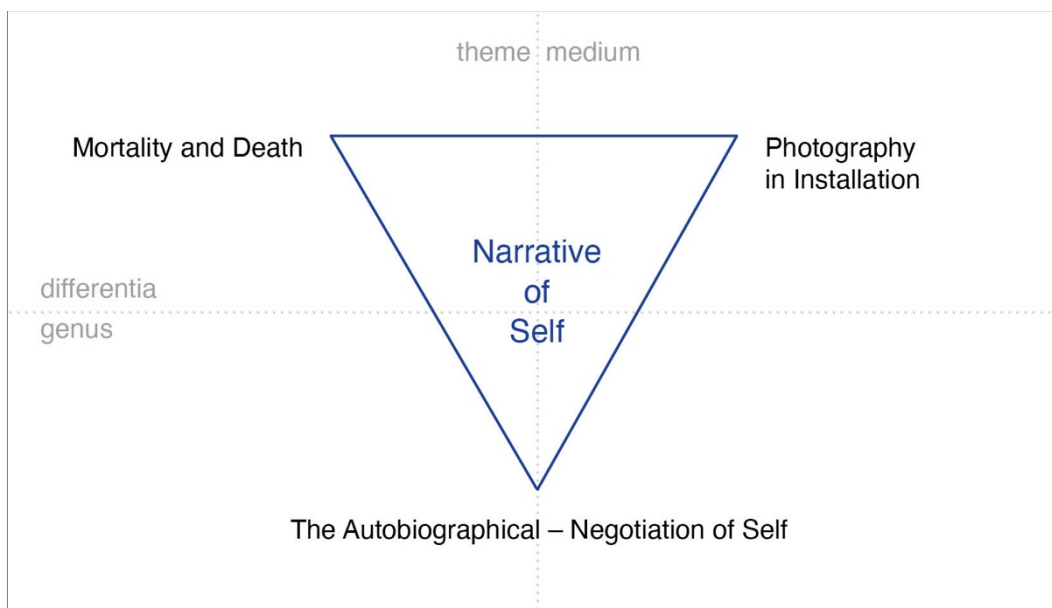


Figure 1.2. The criteria of selection of the case studies which form the common ground between the three chosen artists of the case studies.

Following this, the thesis presents case studies on three artists: Christian Boltanski, Felix González-Torres, and Barbara Proschak. The three artists were chosen based on themes, medium, and compatibility with theoretical framework and hypotheses. Particularly crucial criteria of the selection were thematic relevance to mortality, the use of photography, and the modalities of negotiation of self (see figure 1.2.). These artists did not label themselves as visual autobiographers, but I regard them as visual autobiographers. They could not apply or reject the term and its connotation regardless of their awareness/recognition of autobiographical characteristics of their artistic practices. Each artist will constitute a chapter, and selected artworks will be examined. For the case studies, visual and contextual analyses will be conducted, following in the tradition of *Bildwissenschaft*<sup>8</sup>, and a

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<sup>8</sup> *Bildwissenschaft* emerged in the 1980s/90s in the context of images becoming more diverse. It is a flexible method to interpret various types of images, and its efficacy is especially effective for new media such as photography and moving images. Since this research explores complex and multimedia self-referential artistic practice in contemporary visual arts, it will be an appropriate and useful tool for research.

phenomenological attitude will be maintained throughout. After that, the thesis will illuminate the significance of visual autobiography in our time (Chapter 6) and conclude with a summary of the findings and the significance of the research (Chapter 7).

This research covers both the theory and practice of visual autobiography, and the theoretical framework and case studies are organically connected. Once the meaning of visual autobiography is firmly established, it can be applied to offer new readings for artists of considerable merit. This is what I wish to contribute to both scholarship and practicing artists.

## 1.2. Current State of Research

This subchapter will review the current state of the research field. It will briefly investigate the change in the tendency of criticism and theory in relevant fields and diagnose the current state. Normally, at this stage, a literature review is conducted. Considering the complexity and vastness of the field, however, I decided to conduct an in-depth literature review in Chapter 2, where theoretical frameworks will be established on that basis. I would like to keep this subchapter general and concise—otherwise, a lot of overlaps will occur. This approach will be more effective. This subchapter will conduct initial tasks to elucidate genus/universality and differentia/specificity of visual autobiography. Here, genus is the universal phenomenon of the autobiographical and differentia is that in the field of visual arts.

Autobiography gained notable attention in the bloom of post-criticism. In the 1970s and 1980s, numerous scholars from the field of literature such as Elizabeth Bruss, Paul John Eakin, Philippe Lejeune, Paul de Man, James Olney, etc. took the lead in scholarship in autobiography and contributed to the establishment of the field

of autobiography studies. Various issues regarding autobiography were discussed during this period. Indeed, current research owes much to the pioneering research of that time.

The trend of current research shows that the scholarship has moved from strict positions, such as the disciplinary definition of autobiography, to more open and meaning-oriented discussions. Considering the nature of autobiography, the disciplinary approach could be a limitation and/or impediment to meaningful discussion. Accordingly, the scholarship has shifted to illuminating the significance of narrative. Autobiography is now understood as a life narrative and is no longer limited to linear chronology.

The scholarship on autobiography is firmly grounded in the field of literature. However, autobiography is not exclusive to that field. The autobiographical is the very nature of human beings—autobiography appears indeed in various media and fields. Since the autobiographical is a universal phenomenon, it can be studied without difficulty in various areas that engage with human life—living—such as philosophy, pedagogy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, the arts, and so forth. Indeed, interdisciplinary research has been increasing. The interdisciplinary research regarding autobiography takes place in two ways. First, in the field of literature, scholars broaden their scopes to other relevant areas. Second, other fields pay attention to autobiography from the perspective of their own disciplines. Of course, there are also academic attempts spanning two or more disciplines or collaborative works.

The interest in the self can also be observed in the field of visual arts, although the media are different. In the visual arts, the self-portrait is a classical genre often compared to autobiography in literature because both involve self-representation. However, the artistic practice of self-representation has been and is ever-evolving in

the context of society, culture, technology, etc., and contemporary self-referential artistic practice has become far more complex, going beyond the notion of self-portrait. Some contemporary self-referential artworks are autobiographical rather than self-portrayal. The borderline between the two is not very clear. Yet some works can be better featured under the adjective ‘autobiographical’ rather than ‘self-portrayal,’ for example, those by Sophie Calle, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Tracey Emin.

In a phenomenological sense, autobiographical artistic practice *exists*. This is not just my observation. Delving into recent studies on autobiographical artistic practice, I observed that interest in the field has increased in the last decade. Prior to this research, there have been attempts to feature and understand the autobiographical artistic field. However, the framework and terminology for the field have not been established yet. I believe that the emerging autobiographical artistic field in contemporary visual arts requires a separate genre and theoretical framework.

Based on the brief review of scholarship in the fields of literature and visual arts, this subchapter has clarified the genus and differentia of the research: the universality of the autobiographical across various fields and the autobiographical artistic practice in the visual arts. For this emerging field, a theoretical framework is required, and it should be performed within its own discipline, the visual arts.

### 1.3. Research Objectives

This research aims at elucidating the phenomenon of the autobiographical in contemporary visual arts, providing a theoretical framework for establishing the distinct genre of visual autobiography and reinforcing its notion, and illuminating the significance of the genre. In order to achieve this goal, the thesis will focus on the following seven points that form an organic relationship.

## **The Phenomenon of the Autobiographical**

To establish the theoretical framework of visual autobiography, it is essential to first clarify the autobiographical phenomenon. This task is crucial because it is linked to the rationale for distinguishing visual autobiography from the self-portrait. The structure of the autobiographical act could be reduced to ‘I narrate myself.’ As the sentence reveals itself, self, identity, and narrative are the key notions for understanding the autobiographical act. These notions are closely related to each other and build on certain relations.<sup>9</sup> I will consider each notion and its relationship in Chapter 2.

Since this research considers the artist’s negotiation of the self as one of the significant features of visual autobiography distinguishing it from the self-portrait, understanding the notion of self can determine the entire research direction and its findings. Hence, I will start with the concept of self. There could be numerous definitions of the self. I understand the self as the boundary of a being that distinguishes one from others. To clarify the inside and outside of the boundary, I will analyze the concept of self in relation to ontological and social aspects. Identity is a constant process in which one perceives and constructs one’s self. Similar to the self, identity is constructed on existential and sociocultural levels. Narrative is often understood as a storyline, but it is not a mere storyline. It is far bigger and more copious than that. Similar to identity, narrative engages with autobiographical practice as a process and an outcome at the same time.

Through studying the notions of self, identity, and narrative and their interconnections, I will explore the mechanism of the visual autobiographer’s

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<sup>9</sup> Self, identity, and narrative are closely related and interconnected notions. The reason why the blended and doubled explanation in elucidating each notion is inevitable rests on this.

negotiation of the self toward others. This analysis will allow me to clarify the relationship between the visual autobiographer, the autobiographical artwork, and the recipient and strengthen my argument.

### **The Relationship between Mortality and the Autobiographical Narrative**

Autobiographical art seems to be in the unique purview of humanity. We want to know who ‘I’ am in profound ways. Those quests for the self are often connected to the expression of the self. Undoubtedly, there is an urge in us to narrate the self. The autobiographical act is one step further from mere self-expression because it derives from and is related to wishing to remain the self. What underlies such an autobiographical urge? I consider mortality to be the underlying reason and driver of the autobiographical act of humans. The impasse of mortality enables the life narrative: The fact that ‘I will die’ leads us to narrate ourselves—to leave a trace of ourselves. This relationship between mortality and autobiographical narratives will be explored in more depth in Chapter 2. Mortality will form one of the essential features of the research as well as a significant selection criterion for case studies.

### **The Emergence of Visual Autobiography**

This thesis proposes visual autobiography as a distinct genre. Before/for a contextualization of the emergence of visual autobiography, other relevant fields should/will be investigated. I identify self-portrait in the field of visual arts and autobiography in the field of literature as the most relevant and beneficial genres for establishing the framework of visual autobiography because; the self-portrait is the closest pre-existing genre in the same field of visual arts, which also often causes a problem of misaddressing autobiographical artworks as self-portraits; and the

autobiographical appeared in textual media earlier than in visual media and autobiography is firmly established as a genre in the field of literature. Literary autobiographical practice existed for a long time, but was acknowledged as a genre in the 1980s. The discussions in the 1980s in the field of autobiography studies whether autobiography is a proper genre will be a useful guide for establishing the genre of visual autobiography. These contents will be discussed in Chapter 2.

### **The Interface between (Visual) Autobiography—Photography—Narrative**

As explained in *1.1. Background and Context*, this research stands on the triangulation of autobiography, narrative, and photography. This relationship will be further expounded in Chapter 2. Photography is an intriguing medium. It is a medium of modernity, invented in the nineteenth century; however, it also engages closely with postmodernity. I figure that this trait is not irrelevant to the up-rise of photography in the contemporary visual arts. I will analyze the influence of photography on the expansion of the self-referential artistic field and the role of photography in visual autobiography. Various medialities of photography relating to visual autobiography will be discussed.

### **The Theoretical Framework of Visual Autobiography**

The self-referential artistic field is ever-evolving. Many self-referential artworks are no longer centered around the representation of the artist's appearance, rather, they are far more complex, multimedia, and, most of all, narrative. Yet they are still regarded under the scope of self-portrait. However, the connotation of self-portrait is insufficient to represent autobiographical artworks. The reason for such misidentification is that the theoretical guideline for visual autobiography is lacking.

Now is the time to establish a theoretical framework. I will lay out the theoretical framework for visual autobiography in Chapter 2.

### **The Practice of Visual Autobiography and Case Studies**

The actual practice of visual autobiography is as important as—maybe even more important than—the theoretical discussion of it. Thus, this thesis conducts case studies on three artists—Boltanski, González-Torres, Proschak. The case studies serve to exemplify the practical application of the theoretical framework of visual autobiography and demonstrate the validity of the research.

Among many fascinating artists who work with their selves, I selected these three artists based on the compatibility with the essential features that construct the backbone of my research, such as the artist's negotiation of the self, autobiographical narrative derived from mortality, and significant use of photography in their visual autobiographies, etc. There are many artists who meet the theoretical framework of visual autobiography, and there could be other artists who fit the above criteria to some extent. Boltanski, González-Torres, and Proschak have addressed all of the above points in very different but outstanding ways. Therefore, I have chosen them above others who might be only partially fitting.

The three artists' works vary in themes and styles, however, that, in turn, will illustrate the diversity of visual autobiography. Furthermore, their ways of negotiating self reveal different aspects of the self and complement each other. Proschak's works show the ontological aspect of self very well, Boltanski's practice the social, and the both aspects subtly co-exist in González-Torres's works. I regard that the three artists will benefit from the criticism of visual autobiography as their works clearly show the hallmark of visual autobiography—the artist's negotiation of the self and narrative of

self—and require a new reading other than the scope of self-portrait.

### **Significance of Visual Autobiography**

The thesis aims at illuminating the significance of visual autobiography. Its significance could be found from the autobiographical act itself. The autobiographical is not only related to the genre or works of autobiography, but also about life and our attitude toward it. Marking the self and mapping the identity across time is not retrospective and past-oriented but leaning toward the future, as Eakin rightly pointed out that “making autobiography turns out to be part of the fabric of our experience as we live it . . . it is an art of the future, and it is always an act of self-determination[.]”<sup>10</sup> In/through the autobiographical act, “the past is not merely recovered but to be redeemed as a key to immortality.”<sup>11</sup> The act of weaving an autobiographical narrative enables us to live our lives thoroughly and positively and overcome mortality to some extent. This resonates with Nietzschean aesthetics. This will be contemplated further in Chapter 6.

The discussions regarding the significance of visual autobiography are crucial given that they echo essential research hypotheses, such as narrative and mortality. Additionally, it is related to the significance of the research, reinforcing the aptness of the research.

#### 1.4. Research Methodology

The subject of this research, visual autobiography could be investigated in

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<sup>10</sup> Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*, (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 148.

<sup>11</sup> Kazin, “Autobiography as Narrative,” 216.

various fields such as visual arts, art history, visual culture, literature, autobiography studies, philosophy, phenomenology, aesthetics, anthropology, culture studies, media studies, etc. Among these fields, this dissertation centers on the echo chamber of visual arts, literature, and philosophy. Visual arts will be the main discipline, and literature/autobiography studies and philosophy/phenomenology/aesthetics will constitute together the backbone of the research. These fields will be examined throughout the research in the pursuit of the location of the correct and relevant academic context for the study of visual autobiography.

This is qualitative and descriptive research.<sup>12</sup> It will combine phenomenology and case studies as the main research methods, following the tradition of Bildwissenschaft. Bildwissenschaft is an academic discipline that deals with images. It emerged in the 1980s/1990s in German-speaking countries in line with the shift in images becoming more diversified due to the increase of new media, and it was firmly established in the past two to three decades. To comprehend the essence of the discipline properly, understanding the connotation of the word 'Bild' in German would be helpful. Bild refers to both picture and image, and it also comprises both material and non-material/mental/virtual images. The dimension does not matter. Three-dimensional objects like sculpture and architecture can be also understood as Bild. In one phrase, Bild refers to any sorts of images in any forms. As its term expresses, image is the subject of the study of Bildwissenschaft.

Its emergence coincided with an explosion of images in society, especially

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<sup>12</sup> My idea and interest in the research topic originated from my own practice as an artist and independent curator. After long consideration, I decided not to include the practical component of my own visual autobiography. I already had experience of practice-led research during my master's degree. The proportion was 60 (theory):40 (practice). My work at that time was autobiographical, based on my personal stories. And the thesis dealt with other artists who thematize their own experiences and memories. It was a meaningful time, but for the PhD programme, I decided to focus on theory. I am convinced that this journey would in turn contribute to my artistic and curatorial practice in the future.

those of photography and new media. A lot of images were produced, used, broadcast, and consumed. Image infiltrated our daily lives deeply.<sup>13</sup> A more crucial context for the advent of Bildwissenschaft can be found in the field of art history. When photography and film emerged as artistic media, classical art history could not cover these new areas. The problem was even more complicated for interdisciplinary artworks based on highly conceptual approaches. In response to the evolving modes of engaging with images, and to overcome the challenges faced in the field of art history, there was a growing need to develop alternative methods and approaches to analyze and interpret images. An interdisciplinary approach was the answer, which forms the shared characteristics among various Bildwissenschaft scholars. ‘An interdisciplinary approach’ refers to the use of multiple disciplines, beyond art history, to study and understand certain images. Through the application of theories in other disciplines, Bildwissenschaft elucidates the significance of images within various theoretical and sociocultural contexts.

Hans Belting, Gottfried Böhm, Horst Bredekamp, Klaus Sachs-Hombach, W. J. T. Mitchell, etc. are the pioneers of Bildwissenschaft. Their views vary.<sup>14</sup> Sachs-Hombach suggested a non-hierarchical inter-/multidisciplinary approach, whereas Bredekamp asserted an art history-centered approach, absorbing other disciplines into art history supplementarily. Belting understood image as a cultural medium from an anthropological view. Their detailed approaches are different, but the commonalities among them seem more significant to me than the differences in methods: First, the

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<sup>13</sup> The periods of the advent of Bildwissenschaft and the expansion of the self-referential artistic field overlap in large part as well.

<sup>14</sup> Jason Gaiger’s following article offers a great overview of various positions of prominent Bildwissenschaft scholars. Jason Gaiger, “The Idea of a Universal *Bildwissenschaft*,” *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 51, no.2 (2014), 208–229, <http://doi.org/10.33134/eja.124>.

object of the study was image itself; second, they all tried to liberate image from conventional art history to some extent—at least from establishing a direct association between image and art or locating an image on the chronology of art history; third, they applied various disciplines to understand image.

Bildwissenschaft understands an image as an image. Depending on the image, it pulls together the most suitable method/theory/discipline for that image—it often combines several disciplines. It is a flexible and pragmatic tool that is particularly effective in analyzing contemporary artworks produced by contemporary media such as photography and new media.<sup>15</sup> Since this dissertation explores visual autobiography, which is characterized by complex thematic and multimedia execution, Bildwissenschaft will be beneficial for this research. Interdisciplinary approaches of Bildwissenschaft will allow me to construct more flexible theoretical frameworks for reading three visual autobiographers of case studies, who use photography in/for their artistic practices.

I take phenomenology as a research method, since this thesis illuminates the phenomenon of the autobiographical in contemporary visual arts. Phenomenology approaches from a phenomenon to the essence. It mostly starts with following one's eye and describing the phenomenon. This approach is excellent for explaining a novel subject or an emerging phenomenon. Similarly, it is effective at illuminating individual experiences and/or everyday experiences, and artwork reception can also be understood as an experience. Thus, the phenomenological approach can be beneficial for illustrating both the emerging phenomenon of visual autobiography and the reading of visual autobiographies of the case studies.

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<sup>15</sup> Although Bildwissenschaft is mainly used for analyzing artworks, it can also be applied to non-artistic images such as medical images (x-ray film, MRI scan, etc.), images meant to convey information (graphic, icon, diagram, etc.), and low-quality images.

Phenomenology also aligns with the meaning and importance of the recipient in visual autobiography very well. The channel of autobiography does not work in one way from the autobiographer to the public, but rather, it is relational and dialogical; the viewer actively engages with the reception of visual autobiography. I will demonstrate this through phenomenological analysis, following my eyes as one of the recipients of visual autobiography.

Alongside phenomenology, this dissertation will conduct case studies. Case studies are often misunderstood as less valuable than theoretical knowledge as they are viewed as a method to generate hypotheses prior to theorization.<sup>16</sup> Case studies in this research are an application and verification of research hypotheses and theoretical frameworks. The case studies will generate theoretical values, and they will serve as supporting evidence for the theoretical framework. I decided to conduct case studies in this research, most of all, because the actual practice of visual autobiography should be the subject of the research, not only the theory about it. The method of case study will allow closer examination of the visual autobiographies of the selected artists. Other types of understanding and knowledge can/will be obtained through the examination of the actual field. In fact, case studies are considered one of the most appropriate research designs for widening and deepening analyses.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Bent Flyvbjerg pointed out five misunderstandings about case studies as follows: “(a) theoretical knowledge is more valuable than practical knowledge; (b) one cannot generalize from a single case, therefore, the single-case study cannot contribute to scientific development; (c) the case study is most useful for generating hypotheses, whereas other methods are more suitable for hypotheses testing and theory building; (d) the case study contains a bias toward verification; and (e) it is often difficult to summarize specific case studies.” Bent Flyvbjerg, “Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (April 2006): 219, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>.

<sup>17</sup> “As a research design, the case study claims to recommend a wealth and depth of information which is not usually offered by other methods.” Prashant Kumar Astalin, “Qualitative Research Designs: A Conceptual Framework,” *International Journal of Social Science & Interdisciplinary Research (IJSSIR)* 2 (2013): 122, accessed November 17, 2019, [indianresearchjournals.com/pdf/IJSSIR/2013/January/13.pdf](http://indianresearchjournals.com/pdf/IJSSIR/2013/January/13.pdf).

In the case studies, visual analysis and contextual analysis will be conducted. I will conduct the visual analysis phenomenologically, and the contextual analysis according to the discipline of Bildwissenschaft. To find the most essential traits of each artwork and artist, I will take the phenomenological approach—I will follow my eyes—then, find suitable theories for each artist and artwork—this could be reduced to the level of a single image—and apply them. This approach will allow me to clarify a complex relationship between the autobiographer, the viewer, the viewed, and the viewing, which revolves around the image. As I wish to represent the works of visual autobiography as they are, not as examples of the theory, I will do visual analysis first, then move on to contextual analysis. This structure will be kept throughout unless other ways are necessary.

One may automatically think of interviews as a research method since visual autobiography is the topic. After long consideration, I decided not to include interviews in the research methodology. Although the association of the research subject of autobiography with the biographical approach sounds plausible, interviews are not the default for research on autobiography. To be clear, the subject of the research is the three artists' visual autobiographies, neither them nor their lives/biographies.

In general, through interviews, researchers could speed up the process and get more information. But we should also be aware that interviews can produce confirmation bias toward the researcher's own view and position by creating certain narratives through questionnaires. I would take the priority to keep the objectivity and critical distance from my research objectives—the artists in this case. Additionally, I consider the researcher's perspective to be crucial for the research, regardless of the responses given by the interviewees. If an artist claims their work to be

autobiographical, it does not necessarily classify their work as a visual autobiography. Conversely, great visual autobiographers may deny that their works fall under this category.

The relationship between mortality and autobiographical narratives is a significant theme that runs throughout this dissertation. The three visual autobiographers selected for the case studies negotiate the themes of death and mortality through their autobiographical narratives. It is important to note that the reception and interpretation of visual autobiography is not dependent on the artist's current state of being. Therefore, I will analyze the works of visual autobiography as objects of analysis and regard the artists of the case studies as deceased. As the artists negotiate their selves and inscribe it in their visual autobiographies, it should be discernible by the viewers.

Considering all of this, I concluded that I should let the work speak for itself and not via the artists' words. Through the phenomenological approach, not depending on the artists' words, I will show that the meanings of visual autobiography can be inferred by the recipient. This will, in turn, emphasize the significance of the genre, and also clear the stigma that autobiographical works are merely personal.

However, the published materials/texts such as artists' statements and interviews will be used since they are already in the world. Among the three artists of the case studies, I will need to limitedly contact Barbara Proschak for two reasons: First, her explanations and clarifications are required regarding the process and technique of some of her works—this will be kept to a factual level without her interpretation; second, I need to request the artist for high-resolution images. Regarding contacting the artist, I have clarified with the Institutional Review Board of NTU the sample questions to Proschak and obtained permission to proceed with it on

the factual level; the researcher can ask questions about ‘what,’ but is not allowed to ask questions about ‘why.’ I will limit my questions to Proschak to factual matters.

### **Selection Criteria for Case Studies**

The visual autobiographers chosen for the case studies are Christian Boltanski, Felix González-Torres, and Barbara Proschak. Proschak works on, and with her own skin and body. In her early artistic practice, she visualized her skin through the photographic medium. Her interest broadened, moving on to the body whereby she explores her being in relation to the world in her recent practice. Her main themes can be summarized with the following keywords: skin, body, being, and relationship. Proschak has not been academically featured yet, thus, this dissertation will be the first academic study on her. Boltanski is well-known for his Holocaust-related works. However, at the early stage of his artistic career, he would work on the quest for the self, and he came back to the theme repeatedly throughout his artistic practice. Both types of works seem very different and unrelated at first glance, but his self is deeply embedded in both. I will connect Boltanski’s various works that revolve around time, memory, and death and illuminate his diverse artistic practice as a visual autobiography. González-Torres is well-known for his billboard series and pile of candies. Relational Aesthetics / Participatory Art / Public Art and Minimalism form the mainstream of criticisms of González-Torres. These criticisms focus on formal aspects. However, the essence of his artistic practice is the autobiographical characteristic. What he continuously brought to the public were images of the self and his personal stories. His works convey the loss of one's own self and loved ones due to the HIV crisis. This simultaneously thematizes the problems of the queer that are closely related to his identity. In this research, I will re-address González-Torres’s

artistic practice as a visual autobiography.

I have selected the three artists based on the following factors: themes (i.e., life and death); medium (i.e., multimedia execution and the significant role of photography in the artistic practice); and compliance with the theoretical framework of visual autobiography of this research and degree of conformity with the important research hypotheses (i.e., inside and outside of the self, negotiation of self toward the world and the public, clear distinction from the classical self-portrait, influence of mortality on the autobiographical narrative, etc.). Mortality relates to layers of theme and the research hypothesis. It could be said that it was the most important criterion.

I will elaborate a little bit more about mortality. One of the research hypotheses is that mortality is an underlying driving force for autobiographical creation. I incorporated the theme of mortality into the research model and applied it as a selection criterion for the artists. While these themes may not always be immediately apparent in the three artists' works, they are present throughout, both as explicit and implicit themes. For instance, Proschak's skin disease and its potential criticality served as a motivation for her early practice, and skin remains the heart of her work to this day. Boltanski's works consistently revolve around the themes of death and remembrance of the deceased. González-Torres's works are about the loss of his loved ones and his awareness of his own death. For all three artists, death and mortality are central themes as well as the drivers of narrating their selves and making artworks. In their works, the aspect of mortality and death is prominent.

I limited the selection of artists to those who create 'visual' narratives, excluding those who utilize audio or text—textuality—to construct the narrative. Examples can often be observed in contemporary visual arts that the text leads the main narrative of the works or that is an essential component of the works. Those

works could be better understood by subdivision into another category within visual autobiography. Research on those types of works has already been done by other scholars from both the fields of visual arts and literature. On the contrary, Boltanski, González-Torres, and Proschak create 'visual' narratives through diverse visual mediums and strategies.

Photography plays a crucial role in their practices. Proschak and Boltanski often use photography as their main medium. González-Torres uses far more multimedia, and the frequency of use of photography could be lower than the other two, but he created some crucial works with photography. The three artists do not work in the conventional workflow of the 'print-frame-hanging' procedure. Their executions are multimedia and installation-oriented. In their works, a shift in the questions and ideas on self-representation is indicated by the diversification of the formal aspects.

Despite some similarities in their themes, their modes and ways of negotiating self are quite different. Proschak works from the inside to the outside of the self, while Boltanski internalizes the external matters first, then unfolds those outwardly. González-Torres displays the ontology of the self in the public sphere. As a result, Proschak's works emphasize the ontological layer, while Boltanski's works highlight the social layer. González-Torres's works, on the other hand, show a permeation of the ontological layer within the social layer.

Their different modalities of negotiation of self are distinctively reflected in their use of different media to visualize the boundary of the self. Proschak uses skin, while Boltanski uses clothes. Both skin and clothes serve as surfaces that distinguish the self from others and the surrounding world. However, they are neither entirely outside nor inside, but instead are the surfaces in-between. The different mediums

used by both artists correspond to the different layers of the self. Skin aligns with the ontological layer of self and the clothes with the sociocultural layer. In González-Torres's works, the ontological and social aspects of the self co-exist subtly. González-Torres brought the ontological layer of self to the social sphere. Candy wrappers can be viewed as a similar metaphor to skin and clothes. But they are ephemeral and will eventually be taken by others, indicating the boundary of the self to dissolve into the public installation. It is worth noting that their works are not purely ontological or social in nature, but rather a combination of both.

At first glance, the three artists may appear to be disparate samples, varying in age, gender, nationality, themes, and styles in their works. However, I intentionally avoided selecting similar subjects for the case studies to avoid limiting the scope and validity of the research. The diversity of the samples of case studies is also meant to prevent verification bias. The case studies were not chosen for direct comparison. Their differences will allow for a more expansive discussion of visual autobiography from various perspectives. By exploring these differences, the theoretical framework can be more broadly applied and the discussion can be enriched.

These case studies will offer insights into the practice of visual autobiography, demonstrating how artists use photography and other visual media to create complex life narratives from personal stories and experiences. The case studies not only exemplify the theory but also effectively and implicitly convey and elucidate the phenomenon of visual autobiography: *narrative of self*. By reflecting on the visual autobiographies of the three artists, we are provided with a mirror through which we can examine our own lives.

Visual autobiography is a symptom of our times. Visual autobiography, which is an outcome of the visual autobiographer's negotiation of the self, on the one hand

reminds us of the crisis of the loss of the self in a rapidly changing society at acceleration and on the other hand indicates the profound quest for the self. Visual autobiography resonates with us: *Self* turns visible in the holistic *narrative* of visual autobiography—the title of the dissertation, *'I' in Narrative*, alludes to this as well.

I wish that this dissertation will contribute to the ever-evolving and complex self-referential artistic field, to both scholarship and art practice, and most of all, that the text could bring readers to the contemplation of the meanings of life—further, an affirmation of life—as visual autobiography does.

## 2. Toward a Theory of Visual Autobiography

As elucidated in the *Introduction*, this research investigates autobiographical artistic practice in contemporary visual arts. This chapter will establish the theoretical framework of the research. It will lay the cornerstones of theories, in various relevant aspects, to illustrate visual autobiography.

First, I will examine essential notions for the discussion of visual autobiography in subchapter 2.1.: self, identity, and narrative. The research hypothesis of the relationship between mortality and autobiographical narratives will also be considered in subchapter 2.1. Following this, I will investigate the genres of self-portrait and autobiography, since surveys in pre-existing relevant fields are necessary for the correct understanding and location of visual autobiography. I will briefly review the history of the self-portrait in subchapter 2.2. and examine a few significant periods regarding its development and expansion. Since photography constitutes a pivotal part of the research, the influence of photography on the self-portrayal field will be dealt with in a separate subchapter 2.3. Next, the thesis will discuss the practice and criticisms of autobiography in the field of literature in subchapter 2.4. Based on these analyses, I will clarify the necessity of establishing a separate genre of visual autobiography and propose a theoretical framework for visual autobiography. The discussion of visual autobiography will be elaborated on in subchapter 2.5.

### 2.1. Self, Identity, and Narrative

Visual autobiography is characterized by *narrative of self*. Visual autobiographers negotiate the self in(to) their works, and it often takes place throughout their lives. To comprehend this phenomenon, the essential notions of self,

identity, and narrative should be studied first. These three notions are interlinked. Understanding one concept requires understanding other concepts. Among the three notions, the self forms relations to the other two at the core; it is seemingly that the self constitutes an underlying layer. According to this understanding, I will examine them, divided into two, centered around the self, as ‘self and identity’ and ‘self and narrative.’ I will examine the existential structure of the self by analyzing its ontological and social layers from an existential perspective. For this part, I will review various philosophical views as the self has been studied in philosophy for a long time. Among many disciplines that deal with the self such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, neurosciences, etc., I consider philosophy most apt for the study of the self, as it is an *underlying* discipline. Eakin also pointed out that “we must turn to philosophy . . . although discussions of the self and the subject are prominent features in the landscape of many fields today[.]”<sup>18</sup>

Narrative can be studied from various angles. I will examine it in relation to the self and autobiography. Narrative is a crucial feature of visual autobiography that is closely related to the significance of visual autobiography. I will also discuss the relationship between mortality and autobiographical narratives. The relationship can be inferred from the ontological fate of the self. This is an important hypothesis of the research, as well as a unique fingerprint. The discussion in this subchapter will serve as a basis for the discussion of the significance of visual autobiography in Chapter 6.

In this subchapter, two books will be used as key material: *Being and Time* by Martin Heidegger and *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* by Eakin. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger examined what *Being* is, and he

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<sup>18</sup> Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 5.

executed his task through the examination of *Dasein*—he thought that was the only way to access *Being*. I refer to Heidegger since his theories of ‘Being-in-the-world’ and, in turn, ‘Being-with’ and ‘Being-towards-death,’ correspond to my own understanding of the self to a great degree. In *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*, Eakin elucidated the concept of narrative identity in a sophisticated way and expounded that it constitutes the center of human perception of the self. His analysis will provide insight into the act and significance of creating autobiographical narratives of visual autobiographers.

### **Self and Identity**

What is *Self*? Defining the self is not an easy task because the self is quite a wide subject.<sup>19</sup> This often leads us to skepticism that the self cannot even be studied.<sup>20</sup> However, we sense ourselves: There *is* the self although it is difficult to grasp. The self is not a matter of whether to exist, but how to approach and render.

As there are various aspects of the self, there are diverse perspectives and approaches to understanding, and further, defining the self. Oxford English Dictionary shows a long list of different definitions of the self from various perspectives. One of the definitions reads as follows: “The ego (often identified with the soul or mind as distinct from the body); the subject of all that one does and experiences during one's existence; a true or enduring personal identity. Also: a person as the object of

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<sup>19</sup> See Richard Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Sorabji also wrote as follows: “The many denials in the current English-speaking tradition that there is any such thing as self seemed wrong to me.” Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights*, 2.

introspection; that to which a person refers by singular first-person pronouns[.]”<sup>21</sup>

This definition offers a few good starting points for our task of understanding the self—apart from the fact that this definition itself is an understanding. I would like to highlight three points in this definition. First, the notion of self is immediately related to the notion of *existence*. Second, to define the self, the notion of *identity* is required. Third, the definition includes a dualistic distinction between the soul or mind and the body. The last point is understandable but not fully agreeable; as will be discussed later, I will propose a (counter)argument of the self as the body—*embodied self*.

I posit the definition of the self as one’s own essential being which distinguishes one from other beings.<sup>22</sup> Here, being means “[e]xistence, the fact of belonging to the universe of things material or immaterial.”<sup>23</sup> Being is the fact of existence, but for us, it exists as a sort of sense; a sense of being. Thus, the self is also perceived as a sense of being. In a simpler and more intuitive word, ‘I’ is the self. However, the ‘I’ is sensible, yet not fully graspable. This may be one of the reasons why there have been so many attempts to understand the self across time in human history—this fact itself is noteworthy.

The earliest known record of scholarly interest in the idea of the self in human history traces back to Ancient Greece. The view of self at that time was quite different

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<sup>21</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “self,” accessed May 04, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/175090?rskey=F50Zup&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

<sup>22</sup> “A person's essential being that distinguishes them from others, especially considered as the object of introspection or reflexive action.” from *Lexico*, s. v. “Self,” accessed July 27, 2022, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/self>.

<sup>23</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “being,” accessed May 04, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/17268?rskey=wUD92u&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

from now. But this period is worth considering, and intriguing, because similar thoughts and theories of the self in modern times appeared already in this period.<sup>24</sup> In this section, I will briefly review discussions of the self in the Ancient Greek period. I have selected some relevant theories that are beneficial for our understanding of the relationship between the self and visual autobiography. Following this, I will analyze the structure of the self on the ontological and social levels and clarify the notion of embodied self.

### The self in Ancient Greek philosophy

Discussions on the self began and flourished early in Ancient Greece. The self was one of the subjects that formed and led the basis and development of metaphysics in Ancient Greece. Ancient Greek thinkers such as Homer, Plato, and Aristotle dealt with the concept of self from different angles. Homer, for example, refrained from separating body and soul. He considered a person as a “psychosomatic whole”<sup>25</sup> that is unable to survive death. Plato’s view of the self, on the other hand, was dualistic. According to him, the soul can be separated from the body. He regarded the soul as the *true* self, because it possessed reason. Regarding this, Richard Sorabji wrote that “Plato sowed the seeds of a problem when he made reason the true self.”<sup>26</sup> Heidegger’s critique that “Greek ontology became a fixed body of doctrine”<sup>27</sup> targeted Plato’s view

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<sup>24</sup> Sorabji also wrote: “I could not believe all of these ancient conceptions, but some of them seemed to me to contain truth, and I felt something had been lost in neglecting them.” Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Woodruff, “Greek Models of Mind and Self // Reviews // Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews // University of Notre Dame,” University of Notre Dame, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/greek-models-of-mind-and-self>.

<sup>26</sup> Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Eastford: Martino Fine Books, 2019), 43.

to a great degree as well.

René Descartes is located on the same line as Plato. His famous statement of *Cogito, ergo sum* was drawn from his thought experiments based on the reason and thinking ability of humans. The agency of thinking was the premise of the experiment and the result at the same time. Reason and thinking replaced being. As a result, his statement reinforced soul-body-dualism. Heidegger stated that “the question of Being has been neglected. . . . the categorial content of the traditional ontology has been carried over to these entities with corresponding formalizations[.]”<sup>28</sup>

The dualistic views of Plato and Descartes are opposed to the autobiographical ‘I’ that narrates the self and its being. Referring to Vincent Descombes’s analysis, Eakin also wrote that “autobiography’s ‘I’ refers to a person, to ‘a body living a human life,’ it is by definition conceptually opposed to the *bodiless* ‘thinking substance’ of the Cartesian subject.”<sup>29</sup>

Aristotle’s view was similar to yet different from preceding philosophers, Homer and Plato. Similar to Plato, he spoke about soul and body; but different from Plato, he did not consider that the soul could be separated from the body. His point was not positioning the soul in opposition to the body, but instead, comprehending individual and universal human nature through the soul: Each human’s soul is individual, but it reveals the universal aspect of human nature.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, he described a friend as “another self.”<sup>31</sup> It implies his understanding of the relationship

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<sup>28</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 44.

<sup>29</sup> Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, 8. Regarding Descombes’s analysis see pages 5–7 of the same book.

<sup>30</sup> See Pauliina Remes and Juha Sihvola, “Introduction,” in *Ancient Philosophy of the Self*, ed. Pauliina Remes and Juha Sihvola (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 8.

<sup>31</sup> Remes and Sihvola, “Introduction,” 5.

between the self and others.

Since the Ancient Greek philosophers used imagination to illustrate the concept of self and fill in the gaps, some of their theories are not persuasive for us who live now. For example, Homer assigned the various functions of the human mind to different organs. He thought that after death, only the psyche survives without the body, which is a ghost and no longer a person. This sounds like science fiction, although the surviving psyche/soul after death is one of the common concepts for many religions. Nevertheless, Homer's idea implies a fundamental point. A person is a body with mental aspects and cannot survive death.

Aristotle also discussed the bodily and mental aspects of human beings, but he did not regard body and soul as separable. Many modern philosophers share the same context with them. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche's *Leib*, Jean-Luc Nancy's *Corpus*, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Corporeity* avoid and reject soul-body-dualism. I also hold the same position. There are bodily and mental aspects to the self; however, they are not separable. Sorabji stated: "Meanwhile, what I am postulating is not an undetectable soul or immaterial ego, but an embodied individual whose existence is plain to see. The individual is something that *has* or *owns* psychological states as well as *having* or *owning* a body and bodily states. It is not to be thought of either as an essence."<sup>32</sup>

One more thing to note from Homer's perspective is that he drew the line that the psyche without the body is not a person anymore, although he mentioned the possibility of the psyche living on after death. It awakens us to the important premise that the discussion of the self matters in the domain of life. I will also carry the

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<sup>32</sup> Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights*, 4.

discussion on the self within the context of life; anything related to after-death will be excluded. Likewise, I rule out further discussion of topics such as soul-body-dualism, soul/reason as the true self, psyche/spirit/soul, the self after death, etc.

### Embodied self and identity

Are bodies and selves something we “have” or something we “are”?<sup>33</sup>

—Paul John Eakin, “How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves”

How do we perceive and recognize ourselves? In other words, how do we know that I am I, and the others are the others, not me? This question can be divided again into two questions. What distinguishes ourselves from others at one time; and what enables us to recognize ourselves at different times?

To answer these questions, let us look at the definition again. Since the self is one’s own essential being which distinguishes one from other beings, it can be characterized as a sort of boundary. The boundary and the sense of the boundary stem first and foremost from the body. And life, the state of being alive, is a precondition for the body—for the self. The physical substance and foundation of the body award us concrete certainty of the sense of the self. I know my body is my body and the other’s body is the other’s body. From this, I know I am I and others are not I. One may think those distinctions come from cognition, but the abilities of cognition, perception, consciousness, etc. belong to the body as well and presuppose the subsistence of the body.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the body constitutes the self in the first place.

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<sup>33</sup> Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, 29.

<sup>34</sup> One may argue that reason which includes cognition, perception, and consciousness does not belong to the body, but to the soul, and it is separable from the body. However, I have already ruled out

Each body constitutes each self. The boundaries between the bodies—selves—cannot be removed. The degree of closeness of the relationship does not matter. As soon as a baby is born, it becomes another self for its mother. From the moment of birth, no one can substitute for the life of the baby—no one can substitute for our lives. The self is the body, and life dwells in the body. The self, the body, and life are in a tripartite relationship. The body is the center and premise for the other two, and the tripartite relationship exists until one’s death: “we are first and last embodied selves.”<sup>35</sup>

The same principle can be applied to identity as well. Identity is defined as “[t]he quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration; absolute or essential sameness; oneness.”<sup>36</sup> When we think about the term ‘identity,’ we tend to associate it with one’s own distinctive features that distinguish it from others. However, what first constitutes identity is the sameness of being that can be identified and (re)affirmed regardless of the time—at different times. Its etymology attests to this. Identity stems from the Latin word *idem* which means ‘the same.’<sup>37</sup> And the body is the ground for affirming one’s sameness. As Eakin stated, “identity and identity’s story are derived from the body in the first place[.]”<sup>38</sup> Similarly, “subjectivity and selfhood are deeply

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soul-body-dualism.

<sup>35</sup> Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 59.

<sup>36</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “identity,” accessed May 08, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/91004?redirectedFrom=identity#eid>.

<sup>37</sup> Identity stems from *identitas* (Latin) and *identitas* stems from *idem* (Latin). See *Lexico*, s.v. “identity,” accessed July 27, 2022, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/identity>. See also *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “identity,” accessed May 09, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/91004?redirectedFrom=identity#eid>.

<sup>38</sup> Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 59.

rooted in the body, that psychology and physiology are intimately linked.”<sup>39</sup>

Identity and consciousness of the self are seemingly directly connected to linguistic ability. However, Eakin wrote that self-knowledge and self-experience are prelinguistic. Referring to psychologists Ulric Neisser and Daniel N. Stern and neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, he corrected his previous position: “I was convinced that ‘knowledge of the self is inseparable from the practice of language’ (Fictions in *Autobiography* 278). . . . however, I now see . . . that self is plural, and that some modes of self-experience are prelinguistic.”<sup>40</sup> It is so because the self originates first from the sense of being, which stems from the body. Self, body, and identity form a tripartite relationship.

Self and identity are interconnected. It becomes evident from the fact that the concept of self already implies the self-recurring process of understanding oneself; “to feel oneself to be”<sup>41</sup> includes ‘to identify.’ This explains why the process of the cognition of the self is inevitably self-referential and often tautological. Unfortunately, the self cannot be explained otherwise. This may be the nature of the subject—and the limitation of the language as well. “Circular reasoning”<sup>42</sup> is often criticized; however: “Otherwise there could have been no ontological knowledge heretofore.”<sup>43</sup>

To sum up, the self is the sense of one’s essential being, based on one’s sameness throughout time. The self, identity, and life derive from “in and as

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<sup>39</sup> Eakin, *How Our Lives Become*, 20.

<sup>40</sup> Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 66.

<sup>41</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “identify,” accessed May 09, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/90999?redirectedFrom=identify#eid>.

<sup>42</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 27.

<sup>43</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 27.

bodies[.]”<sup>44</sup> The body is an ontological foundation for being. It is also highly relevant to the perception of mortality, which I feature as a driver of autobiographical narratives.

### Ontological and social self

The self is ‘I’; the self is the essential being and boundary; the self and the sense of being derive from and converge to the body. Therefore, the self is embodied self, in and as body. This means: Each person is each self; each body is each self.

There are as many selves as the number of beings. Each self is isolated. However, the selves live together in invisible nets of relationships within specific time and space—the world. Going back to the example of the just born baby, the baby became another self from the mother at the moment of birth. From the time of birth onward, the baby lives with other selves together and has relationships with them—this is inevitable—for example, mother, father, siblings, relatives, care givers, teachers, friends, colleagues, etc. The self and the identity are established and affected by these relationships. It is especially crucial during the growing-up period—we call it socialization. The social aspect constitutes a significant layer of the self not only in terms of establishing one’s identity, but rather, in terms of living as a social being.

It seems intriguing to me that Aristotle described a friend as another self. The term ‘another self’ shows that he recognized and awarded the same value as the self—his self—to others. It implies his awareness of the social connotation of the self.

While the sense of the self is ontological and individual, the modality of the self is social and universal. Heidegger analyzed this in a more structured and

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<sup>44</sup> Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 59.

sophisticated way. In *Being and Time*, he featured the concept of *Dasein*<sup>45</sup> and characterized the existential/temporal/spatial mode of *Dasein* as ‘Being-in-the-world.’ His ultimate aim was to expound “the meaning of *Being*[.]”<sup>46</sup> however, “‘Being’ cannot indeed be conceived as an entity[.]”<sup>47</sup> Thus, he reduced his work to the level of an entity, *Dasein*, and approached the question of Being through the clarification of *Dasein*: “Thus to work out the question of Being adequately, we must make an entity—the inquirer—transparent in his own Being. . . . This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term ‘*Dasein*’.”<sup>48</sup> This approach was available because “a pre-ontological understanding of Being”<sup>49</sup> is already contained in *Dasein*’s ontology.

According to Heidegger, *Dasein* is foremost ontological and existential: “*Dasein* is an entity which, in its very Being, comports itself understandingly towards that Being. In saying this, we are calling attention to the formal concept of existence. *Dasein* exists. Furthermore, *Dasein* is an entity which in each case I myself am.”<sup>50</sup> However, the mode of *Dasein* is inevitably social, and the ontology of *Dasein* already implies it. Being-in-the-world is “a way in which *Dasein*’s character is defined existentially.”<sup>51</sup> Heidegger’s *Dasein* aligns with my understanding of the self. His sentences read very well also when ‘*Dasein*’ is replaced with ‘self.’ The self has an

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<sup>45</sup> In this chapter, *Dasein*, *Being*, *Others*, *Self*, etc. are written in capital to follow the original notation of Heidegger. For the first mention, they were italicized, and the italicization is removed from the second mention onward. In other chapters, too, capitalized notations refer to Heideggerian notions.

<sup>46</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 19.

<sup>47</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 23.

<sup>48</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 27.

<sup>49</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 33.

<sup>50</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 78.

<sup>51</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 92.

ontological aspect as well as a social aspect.

In the *world*<sup>52</sup>, Dasein exists with *Others* together, and relationships simultaneously occur. In fact, Dasein *is* a relationship: “Not only is Being towards Others an autonomous, irreducible relationship of Being: this relationship, as Being-with, is one which, with Dasein’s Being, already is.”<sup>53</sup> That is to say, “this relationship is already constitutive for one’s own Dasein . . . The relationship-of-Being which one has towards Others would then become a Projection of one’s own Being-towards-oneself ‘into something else’. The Other would be a duplicate of the Self.”<sup>54</sup> This understanding is similar to that of Aristotle.

The relationship with Others is something generic, autonomous, and vital for Dasein. From the modes of co-existence of Dasein with Others, two important social qualities are derived: *care* and *empathy*. Heidegger wrote about care as follows: “Because Being-in-the-world is essentially care, Being-alongside the ready-to-hand could be taken in our previous analyses as *concern*, and Being with the Dasein-with of Others as we encounter it within-the-world could be taken as *solicitude*.”<sup>55</sup> *Care* is a mode of Dasein that projects not only toward the *Self*, but also toward *Others*. And similar to care, *empathy* is derived from the relationship of the Self to Others, yet

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<sup>52</sup> Heidegger described the world as a phenomenon, and the world is a very significant notion in Heidegger’s philosophy. Because: “Being-in-the-world shall first be made visible with regard to that item of its structure which is the ‘world’ itself. . . . What can be meant by describing ‘the world’ as a phenomenon? It means to let us see what shows itself in ‘entities’ within the world. . . . And we have formally defined ‘phenomenon’ in the phenomenological sense as that which shows itself as Being and as a structure of Being.” Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 91. The world has a significant meaning in terms of Dasein as follows: “Ontologically, ‘world’ is not a way of characterizing those entities which Dasein essentially is *not*; it is rather a characteristic of Dasein itself.” Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 92.

<sup>53</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 162.

<sup>54</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 162.

<sup>55</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 237. The original term for ‘concern’ is ‘*Besorgen*,’ ‘care’ is ‘*Sorge*,’ and ‘solicitude’ is ‘*Fürsorge*.’ However, in English translation, they were mostly translated as ‘care.’

“‘empathy’ is not a primordial existential phenomenon”<sup>56</sup> like care. Heidegger made clear the order between empathy and Being-with: “‘Empathy’ does not first constitute Being-with; only on the basis of Being-with does ‘empathy’ become possible[.]”<sup>57</sup> His position on empathy is noteworthy. According to him, empathy is not primordial, but it is “the first ontological bridge from one’s own subject, which is given proximally as alone, to the other subject which is proximally quite closed off.”<sup>58</sup> This means empathy can be an ontological bridge between isolated selves in the world, but it does not occur automatically and requires conscious effort.

In autobiography, empathy is especially crucial since it connects the creator (autobiographer, writer, artist) and the recipient (reader, viewer, spectator). For example, Boltanski makes his works with/based on empathy, and it evokes empathy from the viewers. González-Torres, too, narrated others’ stories together in his works. He embraced ‘duplicate of the self’—‘another self.’ Their works resonate with us strongly because of the autobiographical empathy. And its fundamental ground is that we are all humans. Each of us is also the universal self, not only the individual self.

#### The structure of the self and visual autobiography

The discussion about the self so far can be summarized as follows. The self is the sense of one’s essential being. Since that sense stems from the body and the body is the foundation of the self, the self should be understood as embodied self—in and as body. The self is existential; it exists in the world. The boundary of the self encloses and encapsulates one inwardly, but at the same time, it borders upon the world, and it

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<sup>56</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 163.

<sup>57</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 162.

<sup>58</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 162.

is open and connected to the outside—to others and to the world. I will call these two features *inside* and *outside* of the self. However, this should not be interpreted as if the self is—or can be—split into two opposites. The distinction is meant for easier explanation and understanding. These two features organically constitute the self. The self converges inwardly and diverges outwardly at the same time. We should not forget that the social mode of the self is no extra quality of the self, but it is already implied in the ontology of the self. And the self possesses the potential for empathy.

In the world, self has relationships to others. One may understand the relationship of the self and to others as a subject and object relationship. The dogma of the self as a plenipotentary subject arises from those understandings of the self as an encapsulated subject and putting others in the opposite as an object. The dualism of subject and object that emerged in occidental culture was criticized after the Second World War, as the world had gone through imperialism, nationalism, colonialism, and finally two World Wars. These events derived from the view that one group of cultures posited themselves over others.

In the post-modern era, scholars and intellectuals reflected and reconsidered the Western notion of subjectivity. In this period, skepticism of the self as such also emerged from a radical critical perspective. Postmodernists such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean François Lyotard, to name a few, were hostile to the idea of subjectivity. Such radical deconstructive views on subjectivity were again criticized by modernist thinkers.<sup>59</sup> However, I observe the significance of post-criticism in reflection on humanity.

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<sup>59</sup> Jürgen Habermas pointed out the contradiction of self-reference/self-referentiality of/in postmodernist theories in his book *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1990).

The key to recovering humanity is empathy. Based on empathy, we can understand that others are also selves. With such understanding, conflicts between one party and another can be minimized. Visual autobiography implicitly comprises empathy between the self and others. The autobiographical act, the negotiation of the autobiographer, is based on empathy. Empathy is also valid for the viewer of visual autobiography. This would be the biggest potential and significance of visual autobiography.

The works of Christian Boltanski, Barbara Proschak, and Felix González-Torres are very convincing examples to comprehend the coexistence of ontological and sociocultural layers of the self which becomes a base of empathy. Proschak's works seem internal/personal, whereas Boltanski's works seem outer/social. And González-Torres's works appear to be neither—or both. However, their works are not limited to either side. Proschak works from inside to outside the self, and Boltanski in the reversed direction. The themes of Boltanski's works were internalized in him and brought out. González-Torres merged his ontological boundary into the social realm; both aspects co-exist subtly.

It is important to know that the three visual autobiographers' negotiation channels entail the opposite direction, although one side can be more accentuated than the other. This is a crucial feature that distinguishes their visual autobiographies from selfies. The narcissistic projection of selfie-makers forecloses the outside of the self. In contrast to narcissistic selfie-makers, the three visual autobiographers of the case studies negotiate the inside and outside of the self based on empathy. As a result, their autobiographical narratives create empathetic spaces for us. In the next chapter, I will look at the relationship between narrative and autobiography more closely.

## Self and Narrative

We tell stories about ourselves every day. Sometimes we can get other people to listen to them, but even when we can't at any given moment this process of self-narration is constantly unfolding in our heads, in however loose and disorderly a fashion. In a certain sense we are always talking about ourselves to ourselves if to no one else, making plans about what we're going to do, reviewing what we have done and thought and felt. This talking in our heads is the primary content of what the psychologist William James taught us more than a hundred years ago to call the stream of consciousness. More recently, the neurologist Oliver Sacks has made as bold a claim for the function of this self-narration in our lives as any I have ever encountered: "It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a 'narrative,' and that this narrative *is* us, our identities" (*The Man Who Mistook 110*, emphasis in original).<sup>60</sup>

—Paul John Eakin, "Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative"

The above epigraph is the opening paragraph of Eakin's *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*. It implicitly explains the inherent nature of self-narration of human beings. As Eakin stated citing Oliver Sacks, narrative is essential for humans. It is also a significant feature in/for autobiography. Narrative is often considered a storyline, but it is far more complex than that.

In this subchapter, I will examine the relationship between self and narrative within the discourse of autobiography. First, I will look at the complexity and richness of the narrative. After that, I will examine the relationship between autobiography and narrative. The significance of narrative for autobiography, and for our lives, will also be discussed. This section will serve as the basis for discussions in Chapter 6.

### Narrative identity and autobiographical self

Narrative is defined as "[a]n account of a series of events, facts, etc., given in

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<sup>60</sup> Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 1.

order and with the establishing of connections between them; a narration, a story, an account.”<sup>61</sup> As the definition suggests, narrative is often associated with a storyline. However, the narrative is neither a mere storyline nor the result of narration. It does not cease at the level of constructing facts or information, because it weaves significance and meaning regarding a certain matter, which directly reflects the narrator’s perspective.

Rosalind Krauss wrote that “[h]istory was understood to be a kind of narrative, involving the progression of a set of significances that mutually reinforce and explicate each other[.]”<sup>62</sup> History and story are translated into the same word in German, *Geschichte*, and *schicht* means layer. The word *Ge-schicht-e* refers to our way of thinking about and comprising the past. Time is accumulated, and we live in layers of time. When we want to understand those layers of time, we do not look at only the events and facts, but we look for the meaning between/in/of the layers of time. Narrative weaves significance and meaning. Narrative should be better understood as a set of woven significances.

Narrative is vital for our identity in terms of the weave of time. It closely engages with the process of the construction of the same self across different times—this we call identity. For constructing identity, self-narration plays a crucial role. One may think that we narrate already constructed identity, but the order is the other way around—more precisely, they affect mutually; “there is a mutually enhancing interplay between what we are and what we say we are.”<sup>63</sup> In this sense, narrative is an essential

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<sup>61</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “narrative,” accessed May 13, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/125146?rskey=JoFoq0&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

<sup>62</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1981), 10.

<sup>63</sup> Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 2.

part of self and identity. It “is not merely *about* self, but is rather in some profound way a constituent part *of* self.”<sup>64</sup> It is important to know that identity is inevitably formed through and in narrative. One comprehends one's experiences and stories across time, and that comprises identity—narrative identity.

In cognitive science, there have also been attempts to elucidate the self and the mechanism of the construction of identity. Cognitive science is an interdisciplinary discipline based on cognitive neuroscience that emerged in the 1990s. Cognitive psychology is another crucial discipline in cognitive science. One of the most prominent theories on the self in cognitive neuroscience is that of Antonio Damasio. Damasio understood the self as a living organism interplayed with consciousness. He developed a theory of the three layers of self: proto-self, core self, and autobiographical self. The three tiers form a hierarchical structure. Each level is built on top of the previous one.

I have come to conclude that the organism, as represented inside its own brain, is a likely biological forerunner for what eventually becomes the elusive sense of self. The deep roots for the self, including the elaborate self which encompasses identity and personhood, are to be found in the ensemble of brain devices which continuously and *nonconsciously* maintain the body state within the narrow range and relative stability required for survival. These devices continually represent, *nonconsciously*, the state of the living body, along its many dimensions. I call the state of activity within the ensemble of such devices the *proto-self*, the nonconscious forerunner for the levels of self which appear in our minds as the conscious protagonists of consciousness: core self and autobiographical self.<sup>65</sup>

For Damasio, consciousness and the self are somewhat equivalent notions—this reflects his profession as a neuroscientist—because whether to know and be aware, the feeling of knowing and awareness, is crucial for what we call the self. In his

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<sup>64</sup> Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 2.

<sup>65</sup> Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), 22.

theory, core self corresponds to core consciousness and autobiographical self to extended consciousness. Proto-self, which automatically maintains the homeostasis of the body, is underlying these two types of consciousness. The core self exists prior to language and memory. It also relates to non-verbal information such as images and sounds. The autobiographical self is the highest layer of the three. It engages with identity, memory, life stories, etc.

Damasio's theory is intriguing in three aspects. First, he featured the self as embodied self from a neuroscientific point of view stating that "the organism in the relationship play of consciousness is the entire unit of our living being, our body as it were[.]"<sup>66</sup> Second, his theory demonstrates that the autobiographical self presides over narrative identity, and the self and identity are on a dimension of narrative. Lastly, his scientific research has the same conclusion as the philosophical reflection on identity, narrative, and self.

To sum up, narrative is a set of significances, not a mere storyline. Self, identity, and narrative are closely related, and they mutually affect. The act of self-narration constructs the self, and narrative identity and autobiographical self enable this self-narration. The self is constructed in and through narrative. 'I' exists in a dimension of narrative—the title of this dissertation alludes to it as well.

### Negotiating One's Self

Narrating one's self is a unique human trait. It happens in a generic and automatic manner, just as the self exists toward being. There is an undeniable urge for narrating one's self in humans. The ability of self-narration is developed in early

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<sup>66</sup> Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*, 22.

childhood through communication and engagement with parents and caregivers. We learn from them *how* to narrate ourselves, as part of socialization.<sup>67</sup> This includes the rules of society. In society, where we belong without choice, there are social rules and regulations. Some of them are written in the law, others are unspoken rules. The details can vary, yet there are customs in every society and culture.

Our self-narration is rule-governed. Even casual and habitual conversations follow social conventions and constraints.<sup>68</sup> It means that we automatically take other members of society into consideration when we narrate ourselves. This is also valid when we include the private and intimate stories of close persons in our narratives, such as family members and friends. In this sense, self-narration involves ethical questions. Autobiography also follows the rules of self-narration. Autobiographical narratives involve more conscious negotiations.

Autobiography is almost always a narrative from the I: I-narrative. Many autobiographies are written from the first-person perspective. It is not a matter of pronouns, but rather a matter of agency and perspective. Regardless of the pronoun, the agent of autobiography is the autobiographer, and its subjects are the autobiographer's personal experiences and life. In this sense, "whatever else autobiography is, it is almost always an I-narrative of some kind."<sup>69</sup>

This fact has often caused a misunderstanding that autobiography is a narcissistic and merely personal genre. However, as explained above, the autobiographical narrative is based on the autobiographer's negotiation toward others

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<sup>67</sup> "We introduce our children to the practice of making identity narrative during [early childhood] . . . to lay the foundations of autobiographical memory." Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 25.

<sup>68</sup> See Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 23.

<sup>69</sup> Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 61.

and society. The autobiographer considers the recipient of his works, the potential public. This is a crucial difference between diary and autobiography. The modes and attitudes are different when you narrate only for yourself compared to when you narrate with consideration of potential publication and audience. A continuous negotiation of the self toward others takes place throughout the process of making autobiographical works. What we encounter in visual autobiography is the outcome of the negotiation of the artist's self toward others and the world.

I would like to highlight that autobiographers negotiate the self, not the persona. Persona is “[t]he aspect of a person's character that is displayed to or perceived by others.”<sup>70</sup> In psychology, it means “the outer or assumed aspect of character; a set of attitudes adopted by an individual to fit his or her perceived social role.”<sup>71</sup> In the fields of literature and theater play, it refers to “[a]n assumed character or role, esp. one adopted by an author in his or her writing, or by a performer.”<sup>72</sup> Considering these definitions, persona is an outer or assumed character created for others. Persona is like a mask—or masks. We put a mask on our face when we meet someone in a certain situation, and we change the mask according to the person or the situation. For example, in front of a teacher, we put on the mask of a student, not the mask of a child. The mask of a politician is different from the masks of a police officer, doctor, bus driver, etc. These are all personas, but never the self.

It could be misunderstood that taking a persona is the same as negotiating the self. There are some similarities between the two. However, the persona is not

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<sup>70</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “persona,” accessed May 16, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/141478?redirectedFrom=persona#eid>.

<sup>71</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “persona.”

<sup>72</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “persona.”

necessarily true—it can be faked or staged—whereas the negotiation of the self entails truth.<sup>73</sup> In autobiography, the self is (re)presented through diverse anecdotes and motifs. It may be fragmented, yet autobiographers devote themselves to conveying their authentic self through autobiographical narratives. The self may not be fully displayed, yet it is represented holistically and truly.

I suggest classifying self-referential artworks into two categories based on the difference between the persona and the self: self-modeled works and self-negotiated works. Applying this standard, Cindy Sherman's works belong to the former, and those of Calle, Cha, Emin, and Nan Goldin to the latter. Depending on the degree of representation and narrative, the latter can be divided into two categories: self-portrait and visual autobiography. If the work is based on the representation of the artist's appearance, it can be classified as a self-portrait (Goldin). And if the work conveys a narrative beyond the depiction of the artist, that can be better understood as a visual autobiography (Calle, Cha, Emin). Sherman's works can be viewed as self-portraits, but they cannot be considered visual autobiography, since she displays numerous personas in her works. In fact, this is another way of distinguishing self-portrait and visual autobiography. With this distinction, we can comprehend the self-referential field in a more sophisticated way.

#### Narrative and visual autobiography

When we tell a story, we weave events, facts, and information together that float like islands in the ocean. And we look for meaning and significance beyond facts

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<sup>73</sup> I do not mean to argue that autobiography is/should be true. What I mean is that the negotiation of the self proceeds toward the truth of the self and that entails the truth. Furthermore, applying the criterion of trustworthiness to autobiography limits meaningful discussions. Similar issues will be discussed in subchapter 2.4.

and information. It reflects the perspective of the narrator: There is no narrative without a point of view. Furthermore, something not predicated, something not said, something not expressed is also part of the narrative, for example, un-/understated emotions, feelings, and thoughts. Narrative is always bigger, more copious, and more holistic than what was expressed and what is immediately visible.

‘Narrative’ is a noun and an adjective. The adjective describes quality and trait, and the noun refers to both the process and the result. Creating an autobiographical work is a continuous process of weaving narrative. The viewer, the public, perceives the narrative as a noun and an adjective. In autobiography, there is room for the viewer to engage itself to find meanings—not only that of the autobiographer’s, but also one’s own—because narrative is bigger than what is expressed.

Narrative is the key feature of autobiography. It makes autobiography a genre of significances. Given that autobiography is the narrative of the self and narrative is a weaving of significance, autobiography is the weaving of the significance of the self. And narrative connects the autobiographer and the recipient.

The above points are also valid for visual autobiography. The difference between textual and visual autobiography is the medium, but the principles are the same. Boltanski, González-Torres, and Proschak also narrate their selves through visual media. We encounter their stories and selves in their visual autobiographies. Their self appears in the visual narrative.

### **Mortality, Self, and Autobiography**

I have so far investigated the concepts of self, identity, and narrative, and their close relationship. The urge for self-narration has also been discussed. However, the reason for the urge for self-narration, especially the autobiographical narrative has not

been clarified yet. I understand mortality is underlying the autobiographical urge. It functions as a driver of making autobiographies. This subchapter considers this relation. For this task, we need to go back to the ontology of the self, summoning back Heidegger.

Since the self is the sense of one's own essential being, "in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it."<sup>74</sup> The biggest—most ultimate—issue for Being would be the end of the being—death. Death is a predetermined fact for us from birth: We are *Being-towards-death* as Heidegger termed it.<sup>75</sup>

Each of us knows that *I* will die at some point. However, what we know is only the fact of death and mortality. We do not know what the actual death is. The way we learn death is indirect—through the world. In the world, we encounter the death of others, and that makes us understand our own death. Death can be perceived as a possibility only, not as itself. It exists outside of our experience, outside of our life.

Each self exists. And the selves have relationships with others. Nonetheless, we cannot be others no matter how close the relationship is. Eventually, the self is encapsulated in his own being. Where this existential-social-ontology of the self becomes most distinct is probably death. We can only attend and observe others' deaths, and we all die alone like other selves. In this sense, death may be the most authentic moment and being of the self.

Although we forget in daily life our potential death that will inevitably happen at some point in time—or that can happen at any time—the, from time to time reminded, the fact of mortality shakes the existential anxiety in us. However, people become dull to the stimuli of death. We forget death and bury fear. Because death

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<sup>74</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 32.

<sup>75</sup> See section 51 of *Being and Time*. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 296–299.

comes as negativity toward us. However, paradoxically, the vague sense of potential death reinforces the sense of being, since Being is an ultimate issue for the self, as Heidegger asserted. *I keep living forward until I face my death.* And mortality makes us narrate ourselves, leaving our traces and marking our time and memory.

My experience could be an example. The first time I remember that I felt an abstract feeling of the possible loss of my *self* was when I was five years old. Lying down in bed, before falling asleep, I thought: *What if I cannot wake up tomorrow morning? Do I die if I cannot get up? Where do I go when I die? Will I disappear?* This experience was the first incident in which I sensed myself so strongly. It ironical transpired through death. Probably, the experience led me to this topic.<sup>76</sup>

The self goes toward life—this principle keeps us alive. In this mechanism, death serves as a reminder of life and the future. Mortality operates as a fundamental driver for various forms of self-narration, especially autobiographical creation. Autobiography is an art of the self, and also an art of life. Although it seems past-oriented, it is inevitably toward the future. In and through autobiography, we mark the self in the time that we have been/are/will be living: “[W]e mark it consciously and deliberately ourselves; and sometimes, more formally, we cast it into autobiography.”<sup>77</sup>

The relationship between mortality and autobiographical narratives is more directly negotiated and articulated by some artists. Since my research is premised on the hypothesis that mortality is an underlying driver of autobiographical creation, I have selected artists who work on the themes of death and mortality as case studies.

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<sup>76</sup> Although this dissertation is not my autobiography per se, I weave here my self and my experience of my potential death.

<sup>77</sup> Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 170.

Boltanski, González-Torres, and Proschak negotiate life toward death, the present toward the future—in fact, all autobiographers do so, however, the degree varies.

In Proschak’s visual autobiography, skin is a central motif. Her mother died of skin cancer, and she has been taking regular examinations of her skin. Boltanski is well-known for his Shoah-related works, and his childhood memories of the invasion of the Nazis and the deaths of Jews are inscribed in his works. González-Torres recorded his own blood cell count while suffering from AIDS, and he memorialized the death of his lover who died of the same disease. In their visual autobiographies, the negativity of death reinforces the positivity of life.<sup>78</sup> This is the aesthetics of their visual autobiographies—eventually the aesthetics of the genre of visual autobiography. Their visual autobiographies will be closely examined in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

## 2.2. Self-Portrait

The self-portrait occupies a unique domain in the visual arts, as James Hall named it “the magical Fifth Element, first among equals with the four traditional genres (histories, portraits, landscapes and still lifes).”<sup>79</sup> While following the trajectory of the development of self-portrait in art history, we can see that many artists have expressed their selves through various media. Rembrandt left numerous sketches and paintings of his self-portraits throughout his life. Marc Quinn has made five self-portrayal sculptures every five years since 1991; he cast his head with silicone, filled it with his own blood, and froze it. Calle and Emin unfold their life stories through

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<sup>78</sup> Byung-Chul Han mentioned in his publications “the negativity of death” (see, for example, footnote 196). However, ‘the negativity of death’ in this sentence does not particularly refer to Han. It was meant to echo ‘the positivity of life.’ The phrase ‘the negativity of death’ without quotation marks elsewhere in this thesis should be understood in the same way.

<sup>79</sup> James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 8.

various mediums such as drawing, painting, installation (Emin), and the combination of text and photography (Calle). Depicting oneself, and further, narrating oneself, is a common phenomenon that can be observed across time, although the medium, mode, and strategy can vary.

Although the term ‘self-portrait’ gives us a personal impression, its development and expansion are closely related to society and the change in the notion of self. Reversely, self-portrait, too, has been “in the vanguard of cultural developments, influencing their own society’s sense of identity and selfhood.”<sup>80</sup> Therefore, I will survey the development of the genre of self-portrait in terms of social and cultural changes. Three periods seem particularly important and intriguing for elucidating the sociocultural connotation of self-portrait: the Renaissance era, the modern era in the nineteenth century after the invention of photography, and the contemporary time after the two World Wars.<sup>81</sup> This subchapter will examine the emergence of the self-portrait in the Renaissance era and its significance. The influence of photography on the self-portrayal field will be separately dealt with in subchapter 2.3. Contemporary practice will be comprised within the discourse of visual autobiography in subchapter 2.5.

### **Emergence of Self-Portrait in the Renaissance Era**

Albrecht Dürer and Jan van Eyck are considered the first pioneers who painted themselves. The painting of Jan van Eyck titled *Portrait of a Man* is often seen as the first self-depiction in art history. It is generally agreed in the scholarship that the self-

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<sup>80</sup> Hall, *The Self-Portrait*, 11.

<sup>81</sup> It is noteworthy that these three periods are regarded as cultural and social watersheds in human history.

portrait emerged as a genre in the Renaissance era. There are also scholarly views opposed to considering the Renaissance period as the start of the genre. For example, Hall claimed the Middle Ages as the first mark of self-portrait.<sup>82</sup> However, as Claus-Christian Carbon stated, “at some point of art history, around 1400, painters started to depict themselves . . . the 15<sup>th</sup> century seems to be a rough estimation of the point at which self-portraits became a general *sujet* of art history.”<sup>83</sup> There could have been singular earlier or undocumented self-portrayal works, but the self-portrait emerged *as a genre*, as a cultural phenomenon, in the Renaissance.

The emergence of the self-portrait is crucially related to the sociocultural background at that time.<sup>84</sup> In the Middle Ages, religion was the first and foremost matter. People and society were subordinated to it. Art was used as one of many means to widen and enhance Christianity. Against this backdrop, the Renaissance movement started in the fourteenth century.

The Renaissance was the time of the rebirth of culture, art, literature, and philosophy. The changes in the field of visual arts were also prominent. Artists started to deal with various subject matters, beyond Christian themes, and representation

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<sup>82</sup> See Hall, *The Self-Portrait*, 8.

<sup>83</sup> Claus-Christian Carbon, “Universal Principles of Depicting Oneself across the Centuries: From Renaissance Self-Portraits to Selfie-Photographs,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 8: 245 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00245>. The article was included in the e-publication *Understanding Selfies* by the same journal on pages 9–17. See Piotr Sorokowski et al., eds., *Understanding Selfies* (Lausanne: Frontiers Media SA, 2018), <https://www.frontiersin.org/research-topics/4557/understanding-selfies>.

<sup>84</sup> The explanation about the Renaissance in this section is my own contextualization in terms of the change in the perception of the self. There are many in-depth studies of the Renaissance from diverse perspectives. Alfred von Martin analyzed the Renaissance civilization in line with the rise of early capitalism. See Alfred von Martin, *Sociology of the Renaissance* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2015). Erwin Panofsky explained the connections and differences between two ‘renascences’ in the medieval era—Carolingian revival and proto-Renaissance—and the Italian/main Renaissance. According to Panofsky, the former two were limited to a revival/recovery of Antiquity, whereas the latter was a more innovative and wider cultural mutation. See Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (New York: Routledge, 1972).

techniques and styles also evolved. Exceeding the illustration of the contents of the Bible, humanist subjects were handled. Techniques for scientific representations, such as perspective with a vanishing point, were widely used. Hall observed the 1490s as an especially important decade in which “interest in distinguishing the personality and style of individual artists”<sup>85</sup> increased.

The shift in conceptions of the relationship between God and humans—to be more precise, the relationship of humans toward God—brought about significant changes in the view of self. It does not seem coincidental that the self-portrait grew as a genre in the middle of the Renaissance period as the artists expressed their interest in the self, a human being, and depicted *themselves*.

In this period, not only the artist’s awareness of the self, but also the artist’s awareness in terms of the profession started to grow up. The notion of artist at that time was different from now, because the distinction between artist and craftsman had not been made yet.<sup>86</sup> Artists started to distinguish their status as artists from craftsmen in the Renaissance era. Several artists left their faces in their paintings, which indicates the change in the recognition of the artist’s status on a collective level. For example, Raphael and Michelangelo included their faces in the corner of large-scale paintings, and Jan van Eyck painted himself as the painter painting the piece in the reflection in the mirror in his work *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434). The change in the artist’s awareness of one’s own professional status positively influenced the emergence of the self-portrait.

Technological developments were also one of the influential factors in the

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<sup>85</sup> Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History*, 8.

<sup>86</sup> “Until the Renaissance era, painters—artists in general—did not have a specific prestige, because the separation of craftsman and artist had not been solidly established yet.” Carbon, “Universal Principles of Depicting Oneself.”

emergence of the self-portrayal field.<sup>87</sup> For example, the invention of the mirror with a clear-glass surface contributed to the emergence of the self-portrait. Some scholars dispute this view. Hall raised an objection that “‘mirror myth’ has clouded discussions of the genre.”<sup>88</sup> However, the mirror is a medium that is closely related to the recognition of the self and the construction of the self. In terms of the reflected image, one of the oldest examples is Narcissus in Greek mythology. Carbon wrote: “Even before these sophisticated mirrors became available, art history refers to some single exemplars of self-portraits, but the generic genre of ‘self-portraits’ had not yet been developed at this point.”<sup>89</sup> From Carbon’s words, the influence of the invention of the mirror and its wide usage on the establishment of the genre of self-portrait can be inferred. I suspect that there could be a connection between the medium enabling the image of self-reflection and the emergence of the self-portrait.

To sum up, there were numerous factors that influenced the emergence of the genre of self-portrait, and those factors are distinctively observed in the Renaissance period. The changes of the social atmosphere of emancipating humans from the Christianity and God, the recognition of the profession as an artist, not as a technician, and the invention of the high-quality mirror, etc. enabled artists to face themselves. They became interested in the human, aware of self and professional status, and they could clearly see themselves. These changes led artists to depict their own images on canvas.

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<sup>87</sup> Claus-Christian Carbon also pointed out: “The emergence of self-portraits is closely related to the (re-)introduction of linear perspective in the arts and to technical inventions and advances[.]” Carbon, “Universal Principles of Depicting Oneself.”

<sup>88</sup> Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History*, 8.

<sup>89</sup> Carbon, “Universal Principles of Depicting Oneself.”

### Desire for Eternity in Albrecht Dürer's Self-portrait

The sociocultural context in the Renaissance had a substantial influence on the genre of self-portrait, and this is reflected in self-portrayal works. Albrecht Dürer's self-portraits show the social changes in the Renaissance era mentioned above. His works imply the artist's consciousness of the self and his occupation, and the shift of social hegemony rooted in religion to humanity.



Figure 2.1.<sup>90</sup> *Self-Portrait with Fur-Trimmed Robe*.

Dürer drew his first self-portrait at the age of thirteen and left multiple self-portraits. The most well-known and significant piece would be *Self-Portrait with Fur-Trimmed Robe* also known as *Self-Portrait at 28 Years Old Wearing a Coat with Fur*

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<sup>90</sup> Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait with Fur-Trimmed Robe*, 1500, Oil on panel, 67.1 x 48.9 cm, located in Alte Pinakothek, Munich, accessed May 7, 2022, <https://www.sammlung.pinakothek.de/en/artwork/XR4MOBgLQ1/albrecht-duerer/selbstbildnis-im-pelzrock>.

*Collar* (figure 2.1.). The painting depicts a man staring forward without any particular facial expression. He has shoulder-length light brown curly hair, and gently holds the fur collars of the robe with his right hand. The viewpoint is frontal, and the composition of the painting follows the traditional torso format. The background is black, on which texts are written on the left and right sides of model's eye-level; on the left: a monogram referring to AD 1500; on the right: *Albertus Durerus Noricus / ipsum me propriis sic effin / gebam coloribus aetatis / anno XXVIII* ("I, Albrecht Dürer of Nuremberg, portrayed myself in everlasting colors aged 28 years"<sup>91</sup>).

An interesting term appears on the canvas which was written by the artist himself—*everlasting*.<sup>92</sup> It signifies his awareness of mortality. I set the research hypothesis that mortality operates as a fundamental driver of narrating oneself. Dürer's act of inscribing the word 'everlasting' on his self-portrait confirms the validity of the research hypothesis. It is noteworthy that the relationship between mortality and self-representation is observable already at the very early stages of the genre.

The text on the canvas, an authentic signature of the artist, affirms that the piece is a self-portrait. In the case of the literary autobiography, the self-referentiality can be normally confirmed through the textual information; the identical relationship between the subject of the text—the protagonist—and the author can be easily found

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<sup>91</sup> This translation followed Carbon. Carbon, "Universal Principles of Depicting Oneself."

<sup>92</sup> The term 'everlasting color' is translated from *propriis* and *coloribus*. The translations vary by many art historians. A direct translation of *propriis* is 'own,' however, it has been translated as: indelible, eternal, characteristic, eigen [own, distinctive], unvergänglich [immortal, imperishable, undying], dauerhaft [durable, permanent], zeitgemäß [timely], etc. (regarding German translations, I referred to: Horst H. Figge, "Albertus Durerus Noricus - Dürers Selbstbildnis als Glaubensbekenntnis und Votiv," *FreiDok plus* (2016): 22–24, <https://doi.org/10.6094/UNIFR/10867>). The acquirer of the painting, Alte Pinakothek, marks it with 'charakteristisch' [characteristic] (see "Self-Portrait with Fur-Trimmed Robe," Alte Pinakothek, accessed October 16, 2022, <https://www.pinakothek.de/en/modules/module-image-text-marginal/1052>). Regardless of the translation, it implies Dürer's recognition of time and temporality. I took over Carbon's translation 'everlasting,' because it makes more sense than 'own color,' 'characteristic color,' or 'timely color,' when considering other elements of the painting.

within the work. Facing self-portraits, the viewer cannot immediately distinguish a self-portrait from a portrait unless the artist has left a clear remark or a statement on it. Suppose there is a situation in which a portrait depicting a person, which is actually a self-portrait, is found without any information, such as a signature, note, supplementary document, etc. In this case, there is no way to immediately identify this piece as a self-portrait. For example, *Portrait of a Man (Self Portrait?)*, also known as *Portrait of a Man in a Red Turban*, by Jan van Eyck, is generally assumed to be his self-portrait, but it is still arguable whether it is his self-portrait, because there is no clear evidence.<sup>93</sup> Lejeune's following question is well understandable; "how does it happen that there is no *internal* sign that allows us to distinguish a self-portrait from a portrait?"<sup>94</sup> With regard to this aspect, Dürer's painting is remarkable, as he clearly stated in the painting that this was his self-portrait.

The text describes also when and why he painted this masterpiece, which testifies to the artist's evident intention in making a self-portrait. Not only Dürer but also other painters in the Renaissance period used to inscribe information on the painting or the frame such as the background of the painting, motivation, intention, etc.: "The use of a personal motto is a trait normally associated with the aristocratic and ruling classes, and further implies the artist's elevated status."<sup>95</sup> Dürer's text, too, shows the exaltation of his awareness of his status as an artist.

Dürer was aware of his profession as a painter as well as a self-portraitist.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> See "Jan van Eyck Artworks & Famous Paintings," The Art Story, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/van-eyck-jan>.

<sup>94</sup> Philippe Lejeune, "Looking at the Self-Portrait," in *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 110.

<sup>95</sup> "Jan van Eyck Artworks & Famous Paintings."

<sup>96</sup> Alistair Smith compared the different attitudes and approaches of Dürer as a portraitist to him as a self-portraitist. Alistair Smith, "Dürer as a Portraitist," in *Essays on Dürer*, ed. C.R. Dodwell

Most of all, he weaved mortality into his work. Especially, *Self-Portrait with Fur-Trimmed Robe* entails a significant gesture. It could be understood as a variation of a memento mori and clear evidence of the artist's view of his own mortality. He "used self-portraiture to immortalize himself[.]"<sup>97</sup> And his *image* lives until today, transcending time.

### **Self-Representation through Depicting Oneself**

The first thing we can affirm by observing portraits is the appearance and the likeness of the model—unless artists or authors intend to make it not representational. This statement is also valid for self-portraits, since the artist depicts himself and aims at the resemblance. However, when depicting appearance, the artist also tries to "transport the essence of the inner states of a person."<sup>98</sup>

Rembrandt's self-portraits are good examples. Rembrandt is well known for his enthusiasm for self-portraits throughout his life. According to Abraham Bredius, who is an art collector and an art historian, Rembrandt left 62 self-portraits.<sup>99</sup> Looking through his self-portraits in chronological order we can see the changes in his appearance. But more importantly, they show the different ways he expressed himself. In one portrait of himself, at age 22, he seems shy, naïve, and careful. In another, at age 63, he seems more determined, firmer, and even pessimistic (see and compare figures 2.2.a. and 2.2.b). These paintings show his different modes of negotiation with

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(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1973), 65–81.

<sup>97</sup> Hall, *The Self-Portrait*, 81.

<sup>98</sup> Carbon referred to Erika Billeter and Ernst Gombrich. See Carbon, "Universal Principles of Depicting Oneself."

<sup>99</sup> See Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 35.

*how to represent* himself, more specifically speaking, *how to reflect* his inner state.



Figure 2.2.a.<sup>100</sup> (left) and 2.2.b.<sup>101</sup> (right). Rembrandt's self-portraits, each from 1628 and 1669.

Indeed, making a self-portrait is a very conscious act. Considering Rembrandt's medium was oil painting, especially long-term efforts and consciousness were required. The negotiation took place throughout the painting process, until he finished the last stroke; until he was satisfied with the depicted self: "beyond all the

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<sup>100</sup> Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-portrait*, ca. 1628, Oil on panel, 22.6 x 18.7 cm, Rijksmuseum, accessed October 25, 2019, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/search?q=Rembrandt&ii=0&p=1>. The original painting feels brighter than figure 2.2.a., the viewer can see the model's eyes more clearly. The difference could lie in that human vision calibrates the exposure automatically while skimming through different parts/tones of the painting, while the exposure of photography is fixed to one scale. The researcher decided to use the image from the acquirer/collector of the piece, Rijksmuseum, although it feels darker. However, see also "401 My ten favorite Rembrandt self-portraits—Gary Schwartz Art Historian," Gary Schwartz Art Historian, accessed July 27, 2022, <http://www.garyschwartzarthistorian.nl/401-my-ten-favorite-rembrandt-self-portraits>.

<sup>101</sup> Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self Portrait at the Age of 63*, 1669, Oil on canvas, 86 x 70.5 cm, The National Gallery, NG221, not on display, accessed October 25, 2019, [https://www.nationalgallery.co.uk/products/self-portrait-at-the-age-of-63-print/p\\_NG221](https://www.nationalgallery.co.uk/products/self-portrait-at-the-age-of-63-print/p_NG221).

images, he follows unceasingly the call of his own being.”<sup>102</sup>

It is intriguing that not only Rembrandt but also many other artists left multiple self-portraits; Albrecht Dürer, Vincent Van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Frida Kahlo, Lucian Freud, etc. They are all well-known for drawing numerous self-portraits in their lifetimes. Serial self-portraits allow artists to convey different characteristics of themselves. Self-portraits can convey the artist’s inner state, mood, feelings, emotions, and further aura, but they remain still partial; it can cover only the partial aspect of the self. Making serial self-portraits can be understood as an artistic strategy to overcome this limitation. A series of self-portraits at different times can comprise the different stages of the sitter’s life.

The degree of the artist’s awareness of making serial self-portraits seems quite different at different times. In the case of Rembrandt, it is not certain whether he had a clear intention and concept of serial self-portraits at the time when he executed his first self-portrait, whereas artists after the Modern era seem to have a clearer intention and awareness. Kahlo and Freud’s self-portraits seem designed with the plan of making series from the beginning. Kahlo’s self-portraits especially attest to a strong statement as a woman artist, and the sequence accentuates this even further.

The aspect of time and the representational depiction of the sitter in self-portraits appear in contemporary artistic practice quite differently since the invention of new media such as photography and film. The mediality and technique of photography allowed artists to think and express themselves differently. The changes and shifts in the self-portrayal field triggered by photography will be discussed in more detail in subchapter 2.3.

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<sup>102</sup> Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” 33.

## Significance of Self-Portrait

The self-portrait is a *visual* depiction—image. Compared to a linguistic description, a visual expression conveys the aura and vibe of the person in a more direct manner. Image is more universal than text. Indeed, image is a tool to understand the world for humans. The emergence of the self-portrait indicates that humans started to understand and articulate themselves as and through images. The genre implies the relationship of humans toward images and understanding of the self. It aligns with the very function and value of art as well. Lejeune’s following statement also elucidates this: “the self-representation of humans (and not the representation of the world), the self-portrait becoming the allegory of art itself.”<sup>103</sup>

In considering the significance of self-portrait, the fact that it emerged as a genre in the Renaissance era cannot be overlooked. The significance of the genre can be inferred from that fact. In the Renaissance, the center of subjectivity shifted from God to humans; humans re-found humans. The Renaissance is considered a philosophical momentum in human history. The self-portrait shares the same significance as that of the Renaissance—humanity and humanness. The emergence of the self-portrait could be named a humanist momentum in art history.

Since its emergence, self-portrayal has been continuously evolving. It reflects the changes in the conceptions of the self across time. The medieval, Renaissance, modernist, and postmodernist self is different, and it is reflected in the self-portrayal works of each era. The self-portraits of each time and each culture can be characterized as a mirror of the view of self of that time and culture.

The self-reflective gaze is an essential mark of the self-portrait. Max Cavitch

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<sup>103</sup> Lejeune, “Looking at the Self-Portrait,” 114.

wrote that “[t]he look, that is, beckoned by the outward stare of the subject is not exclusively, or even primarily, that of the viewer, but also that of the painter beholding himself in a mirror. . . . Thus, the ‘look’ of a self-portrait is both reflexive and entreating.”<sup>104</sup> The reflexive gaze is directly described in the self-portrayal works. We encounter the artist’s own gaze that looked into himself: It looks at the viewer, but before that, it looked at the artist. This negotiation of the self diversifies and intensifies far more in visual autobiography. The self-portrait shows the early stage of the artist’s negotiation of the self—self-reflective but not yet as public-oriented as visual autobiography. In the self-portrait, the negotiation takes place first of all for the artist himself. However, it is clearly distinguished from the selfie. Selfies include neither the self-reflective gaze nor the projection toward others.

### 2.3. Photography

The invention of photography influenced human life in various ways, and it changed our ways of perception. It brought about vast changes in diverse fields, especially portraiture. Due to its realistic representation, from its beginning, photography rapidly replaced the previous domain of painting. When it came to ‘face,’ photography obtained much more attention, as faces are significant for humans. The fact that photography was widely used for portraits was no coincidence. Furthermore, photography closely engages with various events at different life stages. The photographic medium also plays a crucial role in human culture regarding death, for example funeral photos, records of the deceased, etc. Especially, the photographic portrait replaces the deceased—this is highly relevant to the significance of

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<sup>104</sup> Max Cavitch, “Interiority and Artifact: Death and Self-Inscription in Thomas Smith's Self-Portrait,” *Early American Literature* 37, no. 1 (2002): 109, <https://doi.org/10.1353/eal.2002.0003>.

photography in relation to face as well.

This subchapter will draw a relationship between photography, face, and death. First, I will briefly survey the period of the invention of photography and its influence on the portrayal field from the technological and sociostructural perspectives. Following this, I will examine the significance of photography in relation to *face* and *death*.

### **The Beginning of History of Photography**

Photography was invented on the nineteenth of August 1839 by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre. This is the ‘official’ record history remembers. However, photography is a product of its time. In the modern age, a new social class of citizens emerged, and technology and economics developed rapidly. The first Industrial Revolution started in Great Britain and spread throughout Europe. Many people, who belonged to the social class of citizens, were devoted to ‘invention’ as it could bring them a fortune—invention was connected to a patent.

Regarding the invention of photography, too, there were numerous attempts by several pioneers in similar periods. Although the official credit of the invention of photography was given to Daguerre’s ‘Daguerreotype’ by the French Government—mainly by Dominique François Jean Arago—the first successful photographic image in human history was made in 1826 (or 1827) by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce in France. He called the technique ‘Heliography.’ In 1833, Hércules Florence produced photographic images in Brazil and called the technique ‘Photographia.’ However, his achievement was not internationally published because he was geographically isolated from the boom of invention and patenting. Shortly after Daguerre’s invention was announced, William Henry Fox Talbot from England claimed that he succeeded in

making multiple photographs in 1835. However, his claim was not accepted in 1839.

His 'Calotype' was authorized in 1841.

Hippolyte Bayard was also one of the pioneers of the invention of photography whose invention was not officially recognized. In 1840, Bayard made a self-portrait titled *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man* (figures 2.3.a. and 2.3.b.) with his own photographic technique. In this photo, he staged himself as a drowned man in a suicidal act and he left a text on the back of the image that stated his chagrin of his patent being refused.

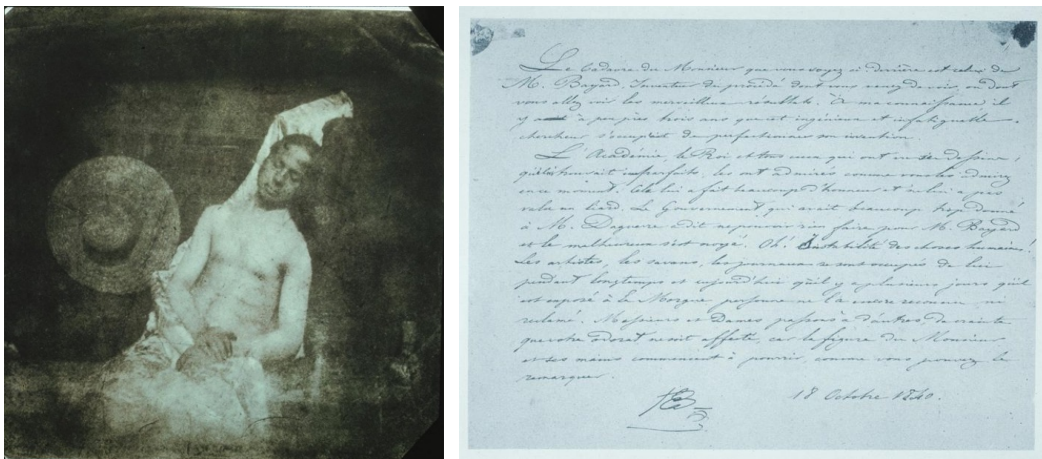


Figure 2.3.a. (left) and 2.3.b. (right).<sup>105</sup> *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man* by Hippolyte Bayard and the statement on the back.

The corpse which you see here is that of M. Bayard, inventor of the process that has just been shown to you, or the wonderful results of which you will soon see. As far as I know, this inventive and indefatigable experimenter has been occupied for about three years with the perfection of his discovery. The Academy, the King, and all those who have seen his pictures admired them as you do at this very moment, although he himself considers them still imperfect. This has brought him much honor but not a single *sou*. The government, which has supported M. Daguerre more than is necessary, declared itself unable to do anything for M. Bayard, and the unhappy man threw himself into the water in despair. Oh, human fickleness! For a long time, artists, scientists, and the press

<sup>105</sup> Hippolyte Bayard, *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man*, 1840, Direct positive print, 18.8 x 19.2 cm, accessed October 26, 2019, <https://www.artstor.org/2018/09/12/fake-news-the-drowning-of-hippolyte-bayard>.

took interest in him, but now that he has been lying in the morgue for days, no-one has recognized him or claimed him! Ladies and gentlemen, let's talk of something else so that your sense of smell is not upset, for as you have probably noticed, the face and hands have already started to decompose.<sup>106</sup>

—Hippolyte Bayard

His self-portrait was his protest. The juxtaposition of photograph and text clearly delivers his statement. This conceptual approach is very artistic compared to that of other photographers in his time focused on the basic function of photography, the representation. Furthermore, the gist of his act, making an artwork out of unfair situations is also identifiable in contemporary art. However, most importantly, “it plays on the tension between the notion of death and visualization as means of authentication, and the inauthenticity inherent in the act of making death visible.”<sup>107</sup> The staged death in Bayard's self-portrait contains the truth.

Behind all those efforts of multiple pioneers, the desire of humans of the time for new ways of seeing and making images was underlying. Belting rightly observed the mutual impact between media technology and human perception: “A technological innovation does not necessarily trigger a new mode of perception. Sometimes it was the other way around, and new ways of seeing result in the creation of new pictorial medium.”<sup>108</sup> Seeing, perception and understanding, and image form a tripartite relationship and mutually influence. Belting mentioned Peter Galassi as an example: “in his exhibit ‘Before Photography,’ the photographic gaze was anticipated in painting when, in the later eighteenth century, painters began to portray impromptu

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<sup>106</sup> The text on the back of Bayard's *Self-portrait as a Drowned Man*, accessed October 26, 2019, <https://www.artstor.org/2018/09/12/fake-news-the-drowning-of-hippolyte-bayard>.

<sup>107</sup> Michal Sapir, “The Impossible Photograph: Hippolyte Bayard's Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 40, no. 3 (1994): 620, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.1994.0007>.

<sup>108</sup> Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 30.

moments akin to arbitrary ‘snapshots.’”<sup>109</sup> Such a glimpse-like gaze appeared more frequently in paintings in the later nineteenth century after the invention of photography. *L’Absinthe* by Edgar Degas and *Gare Saint-Lazare* [The Railway] by Edouard Manet are such examples.

Photography is an invented medium and technology. But its essence lies not in the technology but in its own mediality—the photographic or photographness<sup>110</sup> Of course, the technology of the fixation of the light-drawn image enables the photographness. However, the desire of humans for a new way of seeing and representing the world—to make realistic images—triggered the advent of photographic technology. Human intellectuality and media technology mutually affect each other and dialectically evolve.

### **Photography and Portrait**

This section will investigate the relationship between photography and portraiture. Particularly, it will examine the influence of photography on the portrayal field and the significance of photography in relation to ‘face’ and ‘death.’

#### Invention of photography and its influence on portrait

Prior to the invention of photography, the portrait was an exclusive domain of power. The royal family commissioned court painters to capture their likeness. These images represented them, and they were passed down from generation to generation. On the wall of the royal palace, the portraits of kings and queens were hung in a line.

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<sup>109</sup> Belting, *An Anthropology of Images*, 30.

<sup>110</sup> VR (virtual reality) would be the next step in image evolution. In fact, it has been widely applied to artworks in recent years. However, what the virtual image represents is *photographic* reality. Also, it paradoxically reinforces the value of real and substance because virtual can never be real.

Through producing *images*, they affirmed and validated their power, and the collection enhanced the symbolism. The emerging bourgeois class also produced their portraits. They wanted to obtain social power. They were not royalty, but they had capital. The bourgeoisie imitated the customs of the royal class, and commissioning a portraitist was one of them. Until the advent of photography, portraits were of and for the privileged class, who had power—either political or economic.

After photography was invented, the field of portrait hit a significant turning point. Among many aspects, I would like to highlight three crucial factors. First, photography disassembled the privilege of image. Walter Benjamin observed that photography could emancipate image from the privileged through politicization based on its technological reproducibility. Prior to the invention of photography, art and works of art had aura; however, aura no longer exists in photography. Benjamin viewed “a decay of the aura”<sup>111</sup> in photography as a positive factor for “*politicizing art*.”<sup>112</sup> Indeed, since the invention of photography, it has become more accessible, cheaper, and easier to have one’s own image.

Second, the time required to produce an image was significantly reduced. The daguerreotype—the first officially acknowledged and widely used type of photography—took over ten minutes to get a clear image. Thus, in the case of the portrait, sitters were often fixed at head rest during the exposure time. The exposure time is considered quite long by today’s standards, but it was revolutionarily short compared to the production time for painted or sculpted portraits.

Third, and most important, photographic images had an ultimate referentiality

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<sup>111</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 23.

<sup>112</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 42.

distinguished from other previous representational media; “there is something undeniably different about a photographic representation of a person as opposed to a painting of that same person.”<sup>113</sup> Photographic images are technical images. They are produced through a mechanical apparatus. They are drawn by light, not by human hands. Photographs are exact copies of the referent. The representation and likeness of the sitter reached an ultimate level in photography. And photography was an ontological index beyond representation.

#### Portrait, photography, and face

For portraiture, the face has a particularly significant meaning, as the genre itself focuses on the depiction of the sitter’s appearance. The sitter of the portrait is identified through the resemblance of the face, and his character, too, is conveyed through the depiction of the face. It is noteworthy that the face constitutes the core of the portrayal genre. Then, what meaning does the face have in a portrait? Further, what does the face mean to humans?

The biggest significance could be inferred from its function of identification. We identify others by their faces. There are also other factors by which one person can be identified, such as body parts like hands and feet, voice, scent, walking habits, language habits, etc., but none of these are as effective and immediate as the face.

The face is also related to the character. In Ancient Greece, actors wore masks for theater plays, and the mask was a *dispositif* to become a different *persona*. Belting examined, in his book *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, the relationship and interaction between image, medium, and body. There, he offered a

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<sup>113</sup> Timothy Dow Adams, “Introduction: Life Writing and Light Writing; Autobiography and Photography,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 40, no. 3 (October 1994): 467, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.1994.0011>.

fascinating analysis of portrait as mask.

For Belting, the picture and the image are not the same. A picture is a physical image transformed into a medium, whereas an image can be purely mental, having no physical substance. In fact, the image comprises both mental and physical aspects.<sup>114</sup> And our body plays a unique role in that it operates not only as a carrier—medium—of images but also as a producer of images. The “dual existence as both medium and image”<sup>115</sup> is especially distinct in the face which is “in its own right an image residing on the body[.]”<sup>116</sup> The face wearing a mask turns into another image. However, unlike the face fixed to the body, the mask can be easily separated from the body. In relation to this, Belting’s following sentences are especially intriguing: “A mask in this sense is related to a portrait, . . . the portrait is in essence a mask that has lost its dependence on the body and moved on to a different carrier medium.”<sup>117</sup>

Belting interestingly featured the portrait as a mask, as a taken-off face. The portrait as a mask is an artificial body (face) that can substitute the absence of the real body. Belting’s analysis aligns with my research hypothesis that self-narration by humans derives from the desire for eternity. The face plays an especially crucial role as a compression of the being. The portrait is an extraction of it.

Ontologically, the face has special meaning for humans.<sup>118</sup> This explains the painter’s endeavor toward the likeness of the model, especially the depiction of the face. And with the invention of photography, the face could now be exactly copied.

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<sup>114</sup> See Belting, *An Anthropology of Images*, 10.

<sup>115</sup> Belting, *An Anthropology of Images*, 22.

<sup>116</sup> Belting, *An Anthropology of Images*, 24.

<sup>117</sup> Belting, *An Anthropology of Images*, 24.

<sup>118</sup> Most selfie-makers take photos of their faces. However, making a selfie is more of a self-centered act, different from the artist’s self-reflection.

Not only the look but also the instant feelings and emotions on the face at the time of photographing could be captured in a moment. The essential reason for the shift of hegemony in the genre of portrait from painting to photography was, however, not convenience but its ontological referentiality. Now, human faces are on photographs: Photography has become a new mask for mankind.

#### Portrait, photography, and death

Since its invention, photography has engaged with death in multiple ways in human culture. It is used for the documentation of the funeral, and obituary portraits announce the death to the community. However, its most symbolic and powerful usage regarding death could be said to the portrait. Photography enables the face to be exactly copied, and that can remain eternally. Combined with the human desire for preserving life and overcoming death through its ontological representation, one can remain as an everlasting image through photography, as Dürer wished earlier.

Benjamin asserted in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* that there is no aura in photography due to its reproducibility.

However, he saw the portrait as the last place where aura is revived in photography:

It falls back to a last entrenchment: the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait is central to early photography. In the cult of remembrance of dead or absent loved ones, the cult value of the image finds its last refuge. In the fleeting expression of a human face, the aura beckons from early photographs for the last time. This is what gives them their melancholy and incomparable beauty.<sup>119</sup>

He pointed out “technological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain.”<sup>120</sup> The photographic portrait

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<sup>119</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 27.

<sup>120</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 21–22.

substitutes the person when he does not exist anymore—after his death.

Similarly to Benjamin, in his note on photography as an ersatz of the deceased person, Belting also underlined that death affects the meaning and value of images:

“But whereas the picture represented presence when the person was alive, at the moment of death its meaning changes and it represents absence.”<sup>121</sup> The image of the deceased fills the void derived from absence and replaces one’s original presence.

Although it cannot be fully satisfactory, it replaces one’s presence halfway.

Photography does this most powerfully among all visual media. An even bolder statement could be made that only photography can manage this task. Also, it was a noema of photography that Roland Barthes found in his mother’s portrait from her childhood taken in the winter garden: “the Winter Garden Photograph was indeed essential, it achieved for me, utopically, *the impossible science of the unique being*.”<sup>122</sup>

Photography has a fateful relationship with death. In fact, death is already deeply inscribed in the medium of photography. Photography is like taxidermy. Life and time are frozen in photography. Time is captured and stuffed at the immediate moment of pressing the shutter. And there are parallel features between such mediality of photography and the human experience of time. We live in the present, however, as soon as we perceive the presence, right immediately, it becomes the past. We cannot capture the present because we are always slower than time—we may even recognize the present right immediately after it became the past. In this sense, we live in the present perfect tense. This present perfect tense is also the tense of photography. It summons the referent to the present. The unnoticeable gap between the present and the past, that of the present perfect tense, contributes to photographs being perceived

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<sup>121</sup> Belting, *An Anthropology of Images*, 4.

<sup>122</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photograph* (London: Vintage Classics, 2020), 84.

as real. Sometimes, it causes deception as the physical time gap between the times of being photographed and being viewed collapses.

The deception of photography happens even greater when we see an old portrait of an unknown person. If we do not know about the backstory of the person or the photo—when it was made, who the sitter was, whether he/she is now dead—we perceive the sitter just as a living person. And when we experience the backstory that a photographic portrait was made centuries ago and the sitter already passed away, it amazes us. Because death was annihilated in photography. For example, some portraits by Julia Margaret Cameron could be viewed as modern fashion editorial images. However, we are shocked to learn the fact that those were taken three centuries ago. Such experiences oftentimes change our perception of a photograph. This phenomenon is in fact not logical at all. But it happens so often, especially when we face *faces* in photographs.

Of its own mediality, photography always signifies “the *absence* of the real object. In this lies the paradox of images—in the fact that they *are* or *mean* the presence of an absence[.]”<sup>123</sup> In this regard, photography is the medium of and for death. It substitutes for the absolute absence of being.

Portrait for funeral in Korea: my portrait for my funeral

There is a unique and interesting culture in Korea regarding death and photographic portraits.<sup>124</sup> In Korea, people make their photographic portraits before they die that should be used for their funeral. It is called 영정사진 [Young Jeong

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<sup>123</sup> Belting, *An Anthropology of Images*, 6.

<sup>124</sup> There could be other countries or cultures making funeral portraits in similar ways. However, I could not find any other examples. This custom is widespread in Korea.

Sajin], and the direct translation reads as ‘spirit and soul photography’ (Korean funeral photography or Korean funeral portrait hereafter). The term indicates a belief in the existence of spirit and soul, and further, the afterlife. It implies that Koreans thought that spirit and soul could be imprinted on photographs. Nowadays, people also call it as 장수사진 [Jang Su Sajin], a ‘long-life photography.’ Both terms reflect the awareness of mortality.

It is not unusual to use a portrait at a funeral, but the Korean funeral portrait is distinguished by its subjective nature. In other countries, funeral portraits are mostly chosen by family members or close friends of the deceased. This is also the case for Koreans when they have an unexpected death. But most Koreans go to a photo studio or invite a photographer to make their own funeral portraits. It means that people prepare their images to be used after their death while they are alive. It is a self-reflective and conscious gesture.

The Korean funeral portrait also differs from the ancestor’s portrait. Having and worshipping ancestors’ portraits is widespread in Chinese cultural regions. Its meaning can be found in the inheritance of the family and filial piety and respect based on Confucianism. Korean funeral portraits are also kept by descendants, but the meaning is different. They are for remembrance.

Nowadays, there are projects by photographers or artists to make funeral portraits for elderlies that have a similar concept to the Korean funeral portrait. But the agent who first started the process is the photographer/artist. Similarly, younger generations do near-death experience, and making a funeral portrait is part of it. Those experiences change the attitude toward life. In front of the camera, you feel your being, you face the fact that you will die; you are reminded that your being will end at some point.

The crucial difference and significance of Korean funeral portraits from other similar forms and cultures are that the Korean funeral portrait implies people's will for their own images. People decide how they are represented, and how they will be remembered. Furthermore, it is an act with death in mind. Usually, Koreans prepare their funeral portraits when they grow old, when they start to think that they could die at any time. They want to get their lives in order and enshrine themselves in photography. It is self-deterministic and autobiographical—the choice of a funeral portrait by family members or friends could be said biographical. Death is still a taboo theme in many cultures, considered negative, and people avoid talking about it. The funeral portrait, which possesses autobiographical characteristics, could be one of the ways to incorporate death into our lives.

#### Death and life narrative, and photography

The coexistence of life and death is fateful. Apparently, death comes after life ends. In this sense, life and death are not reversible. Yet they are not opposite of each other. The dichotomy originates from the fear of death, and people want to eliminate death from life because death is the strongest negativity for humans. But death is everywhere in our lives. In fact, life and death are intertwined and they contain inevitably the characteristics of each other in them. Life and death coexist next to each other, not on the opposite side of each other.

Photography is a perfect medium to engage with such a relationship between life and death; an exact copy, a real-like representation, a unique and ontological referentiality, a capture and freezing of a moment, taxidermy of life and time, a substitute for a person after his death—all these are medialities of photography. The present perfect tense of photography (can) naturally work(s) for life narrative and life

logging, as it captures the present moment and preserves it. Most of all, photography serves as an apt medium for existential desire of humans wanting to transcend beyond mortality—the photographic image carries one’s being.

The potential of photography for self-narration lies in the first place in its ontological mediality. However, its greater potential lies in its narrative beyond representation. As examined, photography rapidly replaced the previous role of painting in the portrayal field due to realistic representation. However, paradoxically, the real-like representation of photography contributed to the (self-)portrayal field being widened in terms of both theme and form—it could be called a positive side effect. Photography triggered shifts and changes in the artist’s self-representation. It led artists and photographers to explore the border and limitations of the medium, extending beyond mere representation. For this reason, I regard photography as having played a crucial role in opening a new era in the self-referential artistic field—visual autobiography.

Self and life and death can be naturally melded in the medium of photography. And photography creates a copious life narrative, engaging with almost every aspect of life, going beyond representation. Regarding the relationship between photography and narrative, I will continue the discussion in subchapter 2.5. within the discourse of visual autobiography. Before exploring visual autobiography, I would like to briefly review another relevant field, autobiography in literature.

#### 2.4. Autobiography Studies

Autobiography can be defined as “[a]n account of a person's life given by himself or herself, *esp.* one published in book form. Also: the process of writing such

an account; these considered as a literary genre. Also in extended use.”<sup>125</sup> As the definition suggests, autobiography primarily refers to literary works. However, its extended use can be observed across various fields and media in modern times. In the visual arts, it appears in film, photography, graphic novels, etc. Accordingly, autobiography has been recently studied in various academic disciplines. However, research on autobiography is most advanced in the field of literature, as it was first studied in this field. Hence, this subchapter will review how criticism and theories of autobiography have developed in the field of literature.

### **Auto-Bio-Graphy**

The term ‘autobiography’ contains ‘biography.’ We tend to associate biography with the ones about famous people written by a third party, which feature the achievement story of the figure—this is a common understanding of the subgenre ‘biography.’ However, in a wider sense, all literary works that handle our life and experience can be considered biography—life writing. In fact, *biography* is another name for *life writing*.

Autobiography belongs to the umbrella term of life writing together with other subgenres such as biography, diary, memoir, self-portrait, etc. The disciplinary details of these subgenres may vary, but all subgenres of life writing engage with the author’s—in the case of biography, the protagonist’s—life and experiences.

The specificity of autobiography lies in its self-referential characteristics. Etymologically, the word *autobiography* stems from “the Greek terms

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<sup>125</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “autobiography,” accessed June 18, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/13379?redirectedFrom=autobiography#eid>.

*autos* (self), *bios* (life), and *graphe* (writing)[.]”<sup>126</sup> The origin of the word ‘autobiography’ neatly shows its characteristics: self-written life writing.

The history of autobiography is not that long when we consider the history of humans and written history. The first known autobiography in human history is *Confessions* by Saint Augustine of Hippo, written in the fourth century. The work consists of thirteen books, written in Latin between 397 and 400, when Augustine was in his early 40s. The core of the story is his confession about his past, from his sinful youth to becoming a Christian.<sup>127</sup> His confessional accounts reveal the development of his character and thoughts, especially his thoughts on morality in relation to God and Christianity.

Since Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*, numerous autobiographical works appeared; however, it took a long time until autobiography was studied as a genre. The first theoretical attempts at studying autobiography were only made in the eighteenth century. And it was in the late 1970s that autobiography started to be researched more systematically.

Autobiography gained notable attention with the rise of postmodernism. After two World Wars, critical reflections on humanity emerged on a collective level. The Western notion of subjectivity was criticized, since that resulted in two World Wars. Intellectuals looked back at the past and reconsidered humanity. Interest in autobiography grew up in this background. Considering that post-criticisms were

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<sup>126</sup> *Encyclopedia.com*, s.v. “autobiography,” accessed July 24, 2019, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/language-linguistics-and-literary-terms/literature-general/autobiography>.

<sup>127</sup> Saint Augustine’s self in *Confessions* exists in relation to God. The self in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*, which was intentionally named after Saint Augustine’s work, is the *modern* self that appeared after Descartes’ *cogito* argument. In contrast, Saint Augustine’s self is defined within his relation to God. I would like to emphasize again that the view of the self and its negotiation have changed over time. Linda Anderson also discussed this matter in her book *Autobiography*. See Linda R. Anderson, *Autobiography* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011).

attempts to recall humanity—humanness—reflectively, after two world wars, the increasing attention to autobiography seems no coincidence, since the genre itself is reflective.

The emergence of postmodernism is comparable to the emergence of the Renaissance movement. Facing the crisis and downfall caused by sovereign subjectivity, mankind (re)turned to humanness repeatedly. In the watersheds of human history, the self-reflectiveness of humans arose. These changes can be observed in the field of visual arts as well. Self-portrait emerged in the Renaissance era, and the Modern and the post-war period were also pivot points for the development and expansion of the self-portrayal field. We can see that self-referential human creation is closely related to social changes and crises that recall reflection on humanity.

### **The Autobiographical Pact and Other Issues on Autobiography**

In the 1970s and 1980s, numerous scholars, such as Bruss, Eakin, Lejeune, de Man, and Olney, contributed to the scholarship of autobiography studies.<sup>128</sup> Various issues regarding autobiography were addressed in this period, for example: the guidelines and discipline to establish the genre; the unique relationship between the author, narrator, and protagonist; the usage of pronouns and other linguistic issues; the trustworthiness of memory; the trustworthiness of autobiographical texts; thorny ethical issues such as revealing others' personal lives and violating privacy; the accountability of the autobiographer; the meaning of the autobiographical act; the value of autobiography. These questions all merged toward one agenda of establishing

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<sup>128</sup> *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* edited by James Olney comprises major texts by prominent scholars in this period. It offers an excellent overview of key issues in autobiography studies and developments of theory and criticism. James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

autobiography as a proper genre. Autobiography had been underestimated until then. In autobiography, the author, the narrator, and the protagonist are the same person. *I* narrate about *myself* and *my life*—this is the basic structure of autobiography. Due to this structure, the objectivity and trustworthiness of autobiographical accounts were criticized, and this raised accusations against the credibility of autobiography as a genre. Both specific texts and the genre were criticized.

Lejeune's well-known article, *The Autobiographical Pact*<sup>129</sup>, was an attempt to justify the genre of autobiography, to save it from the critique of its inauthenticity. The article was written, in particular, to differentiate autobiography from autobiographical fiction and novels, as the authenticity of autobiography was often criticized and compared with them. Lejeune analyzed the crucial conditions of autobiography that distinguish autobiography from other similar genres of life writing, such as diary, self-portrait, biography, and autobiographical fiction. He suggested a modified definition of autobiography as follows: "*Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is in his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.*"<sup>130</sup> In addition to this, to resolve the claim against inauthenticity, he suggested that autobiography is "a *contractual* genre"<sup>131</sup> between author and reader. The 'contract' is authorized by the use of the same name of the author for the publication and the narrator and protagonist in the text. This was what Lejeune termed 'the autobiographical pact.'

Considering the denial of poststructuralists of the notion of self and criticism of

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<sup>129</sup> Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," in *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 3–30.

<sup>130</sup> Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," 4.

<sup>131</sup> Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," 29.

other relevant issues including autobiography, Lejeune's critical analysis was an achievement. However, his text left some points to be criticized. First, his definition strictly limits the form and notion of autobiography. Second, his solution ostensibly resolves the issue of the truthfulness of the autobiographical text; however, it remains unresolved because he bypassed it. This was because he did not approach autobiography from its essence and meaning. Instead, he created a disciplinary formula, because he was fixated on the idea of making it a genre. I do not mean that truthfulness should be a criterion for autobiography. But it was the initial reason for his text. In this sense, Lejeune's article reveals its own limitations. It is comparable with the Cartesian ego; the essence of being was not considered but only the form. It reminds me that a disciplinary and formal approach can result in a circular discussion and obstruct productive discussions.

In contrast to Lejeune, de Man's position was far more deconstructive. He argued for the difficulty—even absurdity—of making autobiography a stable genre. He stated: "Attempts at generic definition seem to founder in questions that are both pointless and unanswerable."<sup>132</sup> Especially, on Lejeune's approach, he criticized as follows:

Philippe Lejeune, for example, whose works deploy all approaches to autobiography with such thoroughness that it becomes exemplary, stubbornly insists . . . that the identity of autobiography is not only representational and cognitive but contractual, . . . Lejeune's way of reading, as well as his theoretical elaborations, show that the reader's attitude toward this contractual 'subject' (which is in fact no longer a subject at all) is again one of transcendental authority that allows him to pass judgment. The specular structure has been displaced but not overcome, and we reenter a system of tropes at the very moment we claim to escape from it.<sup>133</sup>

De Man's words sound harsh. However, his point about the pointlessness of

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<sup>132</sup> Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," *MLN* 94, no. 5 (1979): 919.

<sup>133</sup> De Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," 922–923.

the obsession with the disciplinary approach to autobiography is agreeable. Furthermore, his deconstructive view rested upon the postmodernist reflection on absolute subjectivity, which was a reaction to the two World Wars that revealed the irrationality of the human mind. The irrationality and madness stemmed from the totalitarian ego that permeated the mainstream of scholarship in the Occidental cultures around the World Wars. De Man sounded the alarm that transcendental authority had brought human history into turmoil.

The postmodernist view of self was reflected in literary works and artworks around the same period as well. For example, Boltanski's early works thematize the problematics of constructing one's own life and identity by showing the attempts and failures within the structure of the work. Poststructuralist theories, including de Man's, are beneficial to understanding those works.

My point of view is similar to, but not as deconstructive as, de Man's position. The disciplinary approach to autobiography is not productive, but only restrictive, in a tautological manner. What was treated as a problem is actually no problem at all, it is the nature of autobiography. Eakin once wrote about the difficulty—or pointlessness—of defining autobiography as a literary genre as follows: “Definitions of autobiography have never proved to be definitive, but they are instructive, reflecting characteristic assumptions about what may well be the slipperiest of literary genre—if indeed autobiography can be said to be a genre in the first place.”<sup>134</sup> Defining the genre and setting the universal discipline of autobiography cannot succeed—and is not needed.

Eakin would engage with the generic issues of autobiography as well, but his legacy lies in his later research on the relationship and value of autobiographical

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<sup>134</sup> Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, 1–2.

narratives and our lives. He emphasized that the act of constructing autobiographical narratives is closely connected to and interwoven with living our lives.

Many scholars' efforts in the 1970s and 1980s contributed to the establishment of autobiography studies. Their scholarly focuses and views varied, but they had shared concerns about autobiography, and their diverse research enlarged the scope of autobiography studies. The 1990s could be summed up as a period in which the raised issues in the 1970s and 1980s were re-phrased, re-questioned, re-diagnosed, and re-worked from either more deepened or slightly different perspectives. However, in this period, too, some issues were not resolved. It was not because of the lack of academic effort, but the nature of autobiography. It means that the research questions had been misdirected previously.

### **Shift of Scholarship**

The scholarship of autobiography studies between the 1970s and the 1990s was strict and disciplinary, and it was mainly discussed in the field of literature. However, autobiography has expanded/appeared in other media and fields, and scholarship has also changed according to that. Now, autobiography is discussed in various fields. As Lejeune said, “[t]here are no other fields that do not have autobiography as a subdiscipline.”<sup>135</sup>

In recent years, scholarship has moved toward more open and meaning-oriented discussions. Since the middle/late 2010s, many scholars have focused on the value of life narrative, illuminating the meaning of the autobiographical narrative and autobiographical act. Eminent scholars such as Eakin and Lejeune, too, now discuss

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<sup>135</sup> Philippe Lejeune, “A New Genre in the Making?” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 32, no. 2 (2017): 160, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2017.1288004>.

the changed/changing landscape of autobiography and the necessity to broaden the scope accordingly.

In 2017, the academic journal *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* explored the future direction of autobiography studies in the issue *What's Next? The Futures of Auto/Biography Studies*.<sup>136</sup> It looked back on the trajectory of autobiography studies, re-framed the discourses, and sought future directions. Various positions/articles by prominent scholars and young scholars were included, which intersected with each other—the issue feels like a venue for generation change to some extent. In this issue, Eakin wrote: “Like Lejeune and Bruss, I struggled to define the texts I studied; like them, I assumed that autobiography was a literary genre—which of course it is—but it turned out to be much more.”<sup>137</sup> Lejeune also stated that “[a]utobiography was being moved from the category of old-fashioned to the avant-garde. . . . Who, in 1960, could have predicted the formidable expansion of autobiography in the visual arts?”<sup>138</sup>

As both scholars pointed out, autobiography has expanded its boundaries to other fields while holding the characteristics of the autobiographical. The key is not the discipline, but its trait. I consider that the autobiographical is a universal phenomenon that can appear in various media. As Eakin said, it is doubtless a literary genre, but it is not only a literary genre. It is a human nature before a genre. Narrative lies at the heart of the autobiographical. Eakin also paid attention to the importance of narrative, “I now believe that narrative is the key to understanding autobiography’s cultural work and value[.]”<sup>139</sup> Indeed, narrative stands at the center of the current

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<sup>136</sup> It was the second issue of the year: *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 32, no. 2 (2017).

<sup>137</sup> Paul John Eakin, “Does Autobiography Have a Future?” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 32, no. 2 (2017): 271–272, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2017.1288894>.

<sup>138</sup> Philippe Lejeune, “A New Genre in the Making?” 160.

<sup>139</sup> Eakin, “Does Autobiography Have a Future?” 271.

research field.

In line with the expansion of autobiography, it has recently been studied across numerous academic disciplines, and interdisciplinary research is on the rise. Philosophy is one of the disciplines that has a particular interest in autobiography, and interest has increased in the last decade. For example, the anthology *The Philosophy of Autobiography*<sup>140</sup> edited by Christopher Cowley drew attention to similar (long-standing) issues to autobiography studies and approached them through philosophical and conceptual analysis. In fact, philosophy dealt with critical issues in autobiography studies, in its own ways, far earlier than literature. Especially, the ontological question of the self and being stands at the core of metaphysics and the development of humanity. Cowley also wrote that “philosophers have long been interested in the nature of the self, in the problems of interpreting and understanding, in the paradoxes of self-deception, and in the meaning and narrative structure of human lives.”<sup>141</sup> As he stated, “autobiographical and philosophical inquiry are in many respects very similar, and many of philosophers in question would consider their autobiographies to be adding to and consistent with their purely philosophical oeuvre.”<sup>142</sup>

Another intriguing publication is *Autobiography as Philosophy: The Philosophical Uses of Self-Presentation*.<sup>143</sup> It explores the selected autobiographical works by philosophers such as Augustine, Descartes, Rousseau, Nietzsche, etc. in light

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<sup>140</sup> Christopher Cowley, ed. *The Philosophy of Autobiography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>141</sup> Christopher Cowley, “Introduction: What Is a Philosophy of Autobiography?” in *The Philosophy of Autobiography*, ed. Christopher Cowley (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>142</sup> Cowley, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>143</sup> Thomas Mathien and D. G. Wright, ed., *Autobiography as Philosophy: The Philosophical Uses of Self-Presentation* (London: Routledge, 2006).

of their own philosophy. It echoes the last part of the above quotation by Cowley. Both publications are examples of inter- and cross-disciplinary research on autobiography.

### **Significance of Autobiography**

Considering the current shift of the scholarship of autobiography studies from the discipline to meaning, it is remarkable that scholars such as George Gusdorf and Alfred Kazin paid attention to the significance of autobiography in the 1950s and 1960s. Their earlier works are more insightful than the heated discussion on the discipline of the genre between the 1970s and 1990s.

Gusdorf examined in his marvelous article *Conditions and Limits of Autobiography* the meaning of the emergence of autobiography in light of the development of consciousness on the self in human history. He explained that the genre of autobiography stands on inaccuracy by its nature. Regarding autobiography, the problems of morals and memory have been criticized, but “[e]xternal and objective criticism might well pick out an error in detail here and there or a bit of cheating, but it does not reach to the heart of the matter.”<sup>144</sup> Also, he stated that its significance should be searched “beyond truth and falsity[.]”<sup>145</sup> He highlighted the importance of experience and emphasized that “autobiography is a second reading of experience, and it is truer than the first because it adds to experience itself consciousness of it.”<sup>146</sup> Consequently, “the narrative of a life cannot be simply the image-double of that life.”<sup>147</sup> As Gusdorf said, the significance of the autobiography lies in its act of

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<sup>144</sup> Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” 37.

<sup>145</sup> Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” 43.

<sup>146</sup> Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” 38.

<sup>147</sup> Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” 40.

weaving experiences. Since autobiography is not a mere record of raw experiences, but the negotiation of those, it is inimical to judge autobiography only based on its truthfulness.

Although it was published in 1956, it still means a lot today. One more remarkable point is that he illustrated the relationship between the autobiographical act and mortality, which aligns with my research hypothesis: “Each of us tends to think of himself as the center of a living space: I count, my existence is significant to the world, and my death will leave the world incomplete. In narrating my life, I give this precious capital that ought not disappear.”<sup>148</sup> As Gusdorf observed, the significance of autobiography should be found in the act of making an autobiographical narrative in light of life and death.

Kazin, who is a literary critic and autobiographer, also denoted narrative as the key to autobiography in his short but very powerful article *Autobiography as Narrative* published in 1964. He saw the potential of autobiography in narrative to contribute to the resolution of various conflicts. His diagnosis of society and culture was very sharp and advanced, and it is still relevant today. Kazin will be discussed in Chapter 6.

As Gusdorf and Kazin recognized, the very meaning of autobiography should be sought in narrative in relation to life. Narrative is different from a mere record or documentation of events. It is a set of significances, and it reflects the perspective of the narrator. If the perspective is holistic, the narrative becomes rich, if not, it becomes simple—this is valid for both collective history and personal stories. Inevitably, narrative is almost always bigger than what was expressed. And it entails void and

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<sup>148</sup> Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” 29.

vacancy. Paradoxically, void and vacancy function as a room for interpretation and empathy for the recipient.<sup>149</sup> These traits of narrative form the basis of the significance of autobiography.

I comprehend the significance of autobiography as follows. The autobiographical is a universal human phenomenon derived from the urge for self-narration. However, making an autobiography is a conscious act of weaving experience. It is also an attitude toward life and death. Autobiography, a physical imprint of the existential self, enables the autobiographer to preserve the self beyond mortality. Autobiography is narrative. It appears in forms of narratives, and the whole process—making, publishing, and reading autobiography—is narrative. Based on this feature of narrative, the channel of autobiography between the autobiographer and the recipient works in mutual directions. The potential of autobiography in the twenty-first century lies in this. Various conflicts all over the world are the symptom of our times, we face a crisis of humanity again. Autobiography holds the key to it. And narrative is the kernel of autobiography.

If we understand narrative as the center of autobiographical creation, the medium and genre become the second matter. This understanding opens a new forum to comprehend the autobiographical as a universal human act and a cultural phenomenon. Based on this understanding, now, I will move on visual autobiography.

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<sup>149</sup> “In the works of Roman Ingarden and Wolfgang Iser, respectively, this concept is referred to as ‘place of indeterminacy’ and ‘blank’ or ‘gap.’ In film aesthetics a related notion has had currency for some years; it is called, in both French and English, ‘suture,’ meaning ‘seam,’ the line of junction between the viewer and the work; here one could perhaps also speak of a tying of the viewer into the work.” Wolfgang Kemp and Raymond Meyer, “Death at Work: A Case Study on Constitutive Blanks in Nineteenth-Century Painting,” *Representations*, no. 10 (1985): 107, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3043801>.

## 2.5. Visual Autobiography

I have reviewed so far the notions of self, identity, and narrative, and the self-referential practices in the fields of visual arts and literature—self-portrait and autobiography. Based on this, this subchapter will establish a theoretical framework of visual autobiography, which will serve as the analytical framework and theoretical background for the case studies.

First, I will diagnose the state of self-referential artistic practice in contemporary visual arts, especially the autobiographical phenomenon. While reviewing different scholarly positions regarding the shift in the self-referential artistic field, I will clarify my own view of establishing a separate genre of visual autobiography. Following this, I will suggest a theoretical framework for visual autobiography.

In addition to this, I will illuminate photography in terms of narrative, continuing from discussions in subchapter 2.3. Photography is a medium located at the juncture—or at both—of modernism and postmodernism, and it crucially contributed to the self-referential artistic field to be broadened. I will analyze various narrative strategies of photography going beyond its medial limitations, representation.

### **The Autobiographical, Beyond Self-Portrait**

Humans have the urge for self-narration, and it can be expressed through diverse media. Some people have this urge to a stronger degree than others, and that aspiration transforms into works of literature and visual arts, paired with their urge for creation. In the field of literature, there are various subgenres of life writing, and self-portrait is an equivalent example in the field of visual arts.

Since its emergence in the Renaissance era, the artist's self-referential artistic

practice has been ever-evolving, corresponding to the changes in society and view of self. In contemporary art, the artist's articulation of the self appears in various and complex ways, and the mediums of expression are also diverse. It could be regarded as an expansion of the self-portrait. However, to be more precise, what is observed is the autobiographical characteristic, which is a fundamentally different phenomenon from the depiction of the artist's appearance. Whichever way we view it, it is clear that autobiographical artistic practice exists in contemporary visual arts. And it is located beyond the connotation of self-portrait.

The contemporary autobiographical artistic practice is characterized by a richer narrative, in which the artist negotiates and narrates 'self' thoroughly, which is far more complex than the classical self-portrait. Considering self-portrait is defined as "[a] painting, photograph, piece of writing, etc., depicting the person who created or produced it[,]"<sup>150</sup> the notion of self-portrait does not fit well with understanding autobiographical artworks, for example, those of Calle and Emin. This is not only because the term 'portrait' refers to "[a] drawing or painting of a person, often mounted and framed for display, esp. one of the face or head and shoulders; (also) an engraving, photograph, etc., in a similar style[,]"<sup>151</sup> but also because their works convey something more. Their works possess narratives beyond the representation. The concept of self-portrait can cover certain aspects of their works, but it does not pierce the essence of their works—the autobiographical.

The term 'self-portrait' can deceive us, since there is 'self' in the term.

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<sup>150</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "self-portrait," accessed March 24, 2019, <http://www.oed.com.ezlibproxy1.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/175392?redirectedFrom=self-portrait#eid>.

<sup>151</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "portrait," accessed March 24, 2019, <http://www.oed.com.ezlibproxy1.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/148230?rskey=xCpF4m&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

However, ‘self’ in the self-portrait does not refer to the being and narrating/narrated subject, but to the identical relationship between subject and object. Self-portrait does not necessarily negotiate the artist’s ‘self.’ In contrast, the artist’s negotiation of the self is distinctively observed in contemporary autobiographical artworks. Furthermore, autobiographical narratives are woven from life experiences. I regard ‘the artist’s negotiation of the self’ and ‘narrative’ as essential marks of autobiographical artistic practice. To encompass this, the notion of self-portrait is insufficient. Therefore, establishing a suitable scope and framework seems necessary to me. In so doing, diverse autobiographical artworks can be discovered and properly studied.

### **Current State of Scholarship on Visual Autobiography**

Prior to my research, there have been attempts to pinpoint the autobiographical artistic field as different from the self-portrait. The increasing scholarly interest in the autobiographical artistic practice could be regarded as evidence of the existence of the autobiographical phenomenon in the field of visual arts. However, the term and framework for the field have not been established yet. Interpretations of autobiographical practice and terminology are quite diverse. The adoption of the term ‘autobiography’ into the field of visual arts—one may frame it in this way—seems particularly controversial.

There could be many reasons for that, and establishing a new field requires time. However, an issue inherent in the field of visual arts cannot be ignored. The solidity and firmness of the preexisting category of the self-portrait make it difficult to grasp the autobiographical practice otherwise, particularly because of the similarity. Indeed, many autobiographical visual artworks are still regarded as self-portraits and studied under that scope. However, as seen above, the notion of self-portrait cannot

fully capture autobiographical artworks.

Another reason that the field of visual arts is hesitant to adopt the term ‘autobiography’ is because it is a predominant term in the field of literature. However, the self-portrait also constitutes a subgenre of life writing. The literary self-portrait refers to literary works focusing on capturing and illustrating the character and personality of the person, and it distinguishes itself from autobiography by “[t]he *absence* of a continuous narrative[.]”<sup>152</sup> Since the term ‘self-portrait,’ which is most apparent in the field of visual arts, is used in the field of literature, why cannot the term ‘autobiography’ be adopted? What corresponds to, and is needed, for the universality of autobiography is open-mindedness.

In fact, the arts and literature have had influences on each other. This is also valid for self-referential works. Hall’s following sentences also indicate similar matters: “There is a tendency for some scholars to assume that the history of self-portraiture follows in the wake of literature, . . . Yet the influence works the other way: Montaigne and Descartes continually had recourse to metaphors taken from the visual arts to express ideas of the self and the development of consciousness.”<sup>153</sup>

Visual arts and literature are two different modes of human creation that are in close relation. When it comes to autobiographical works, this fact becomes far more relevant, as the autobiographical is a universal human phenomenon. Thus, there is no reason why the field of visual arts maintains a defensive and reluctant stance. If necessary, terms and definitions should be modified and edited accordingly. The point is to synchronize the term and its connotation with the subject : ‘Visual autobiography’

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<sup>152</sup> Michel Beaujour, *Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 2.

<sup>153</sup> Hall, *The Self-Portrait*, 11.

definitely coincides with contemporary autobiographical artistic practice better than ‘self-portrait.’

There are two opposite positions that applied terminology from the field of literature: Sarah Demelo and Alma-Elisa Kittner. Intriguingly, both dissertations appeared in a similar period. However, their approaches and arguments were disparate, as they comprehended the autobiographical phenomenon in the field of visual arts differently.

Demelo claimed, in her Ph.D. thesis, *Autobiography and Self-Portraiture in the works of Christian Boltanski and Sophie Calle* (2011), that applying the term ‘autobiography’ cannot be a solution to capturing autobiographical practice in contemporary visual arts. Instead, she upheld using the term ‘self-portrait.’<sup>154</sup> She followed the postmodernist view of the deconstructive self—which is no harm by itself—but based on that, she denied the validity of the visual representation of the *true* self. In addition to this, she applied the *trustfulness* of the account and a linear narrative as the standards of autobiography. Putting these together, she concluded that Boltanski’s and Calle’s works are not autobiographies, since their works convey only fragmented self without linear narratives and entail fictive elements. Based on these understandings, she defined their works as self-portrait. However, very ironically, Demelo asserted applying the theory of ‘literary’ self-portrait instead of that of the field of visual arts.<sup>155</sup> As a result, her ‘solution’ does not solve the problem of asynchronization and inconsistency between the connotation of the term and the actual practice. Rather, this enhances the confusion.

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<sup>154</sup> See Sarah Demelo, “*Autobiography and Self-Portraiture in the works of Christian Boltanski and Sophie Calle*,” (PhD diss., University of Essex, 2011), 11. The capitalization follows her original version.

<sup>155</sup> See Demelo, “*Autobiography and Self-Portraiture*,” 13.

Different from Demelo, Kittner used the term ‘visual autobiography.’ She examined the autobiographical artworks of three female artists in her book *Visuelle Autobiographien: Sammeln als Selbstentwurf bei Hannah Höch, Sophie Calle und Annette Messager*<sup>156</sup> and used the term ‘visual autobiography’ [visuelle Autobiographie] to distinguish the autobiographical works from the conventional notion of the self-portrait.<sup>157</sup> As Kittner correctly pointed out, there have been significant changes in the field, and a new term is required to observe and re-address it.

Monique Yaari also seized on the new realm of self-representation in the visual arts that shows the articulation of the artist’s *self*, which is far more complex than the self-portrait. She used the term ‘autoportrait’ to comprehend this new field.<sup>158</sup> What she captured as ‘autoportrait’ corresponds to my sense of ‘visual autobiography’ in terms of concepts. However, in my view, ‘visual autobiography’ can better and more effectively convey the characteristics of the field.

Another alternative term would be ‘visual memoir.’ In the field of literature, ‘autobiography’ and ‘memoir’ are categorized under ‘life writing.’ Autobiography and memoir have in common that they are records of one’s own life. However, they are

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<sup>156</sup> English translation (own translation from German into English) reads as follows: *Visual Autobiographies: Collection as Self-Projection by Hannah Höch, Sophie Calle and Annette Messager*. The book first appeared as a PhD thesis in a similar period to Demelo’s.

<sup>157</sup> “Ihre Selbstdarstellungen sprengen das Genre des Selbstporträts und sind deshalb mit dem herkömmlichen Begriffsinstrumentarium der Kunstgeschichte nicht zu fassen: Es sind visuelle Autobiographien. Dieser Begriff, so werde ich zeigen, fasst die narrativen Strukturen dieser Arbeiten genauer als es der Begriff des Selbstporträts zu leisten vermag.” [Their self-portrayals go beyond the genre of self-portrait, and therefore cannot be comprehended with the conventional conceptual set of tools of art history: They are visual autobiographies. This concept, I will show, grasps the narrative structures of these works more precisely than the concept of self-portrait can achieve.] Own translation from German into English. Alma-Elisa Kittner, *Visuelle Autobiographien: Sammeln als Selbstentwurf bei Hannah Höch, Sophie Calle und Annette Messager* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2009), 10.

<sup>158</sup> See Monique Yaari, “Who/what Is the Subject? Representations of Self in Late Twentieth-Century French Art,” *Word & image* 16, no. 4 (2000): 363–377, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02666286.2000.10435692>.

differentiated in the coverage of the timeline and the mode of writing. Autobiography covers one's entire life, whereas memoir focuses on a specific time period based on one's own memory. Considering this, 'visual memoir' could also work for some artworks if the artist's own memory on specific theme constitutes the center point of the work. However, a strict distinction between visual autobiography and visual memoir seems not as effective and not necessary like in the field of literature. Besides, in the field of literature, too, autobiography and memoir are used often interchangeably. Subdividing visual autobiography and visual memoir can only cause confusion since the term 'visual autobiography' has not been firmly settled yet. The attribute of 'memoir' can be supplemented in texts of criticism.

Considering all of this, 'visual autobiography' seems like the most suitable term and scope to capture autobiographical artistic practice in contemporary visual arts. The proposed term immediately and effectively delivers autobiographical characteristics. Besides, similar modified terms from 'autobiography/autobiographical' have already been used by other scholars (Leah Anderst, Alma-Elisa Kittner, Matthew Ryan Smith, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, etc.) in the field of visual arts. Thus, my use of it will contribute to reinforcing the notion and deepening discussions.

### **Visual Autobiography**

Now, I will establish the framework for visual autobiography. I comprehend four essential traits of visual autobiography as follows: (1) complexity of themes (2) multimodality and multimediality, (3) negotiation of self, (4) holistic artistic practice throughout life. I will elaborate on each of these.

## Complexity of themes

Visual autobiography is characterized by complex artistic themes interwoven from various aspects of life. Just as personal lives and cultural backgrounds vary, the themes of visual autobiography also vary for each artist. Visual autobiographers weave narratives based on their personal stories, experiences, thoughts, and life. Also, they often include social and cultural matters related to themselves. Self stands always at the center point—this is well observable in the three artists of the case studies.

Artists who can be considered visual autobiographers do not focus on the depiction of their appearance anymore, instead, they work on/with life and experiences. As a result, visual autobiography conveys complex subject matter through narrative. This shift aligns with changes in the visual arts in the contemporary era as well. Art no longer needs to be representational. It has become far more complex and conceptual in contemporary art—I do not mean Conceptual Art, but Art in general—and art resembles philosophy to a certain extent nowadays.

One may think that self-portrait also conveys more than appearance, but it is to a limited degree. In the classical self-portrait, the technique and the artist's intention or background would be revealed at best. In visual autobiography, themes are constituted in(to) the narrative, and the viewer should decipher *what* is interwoven in visual autobiography. It is also valid when the theme is banal.

Calle's *True Stories* (figure 2.4.) is a good example. The work consists of multiple combinations of a photo and a short text about her personal story. One *true* story has a photo of the side of her face, and it is juxtaposed with a short story about her childhood experience regarding her ugly—according to her description—nose. In this work, she plays a double game with the spectator. Although she designated 'true' in the title, we cannot know whether it is a true story or not. The verity does not

matter. In this work, there is truth to some extent and non-truth to some extent, and those create together a narrative. Since the photo captures her side face, the picture itself is her self-portrait in a sense. However, it is part of the bigger body of work. The photo was deliberately made for the text describing her ugly nose, and it obtains its function and meaning when juxtaposed with the text. Multiple such combinations constitute her autobiographical *True Stories*.

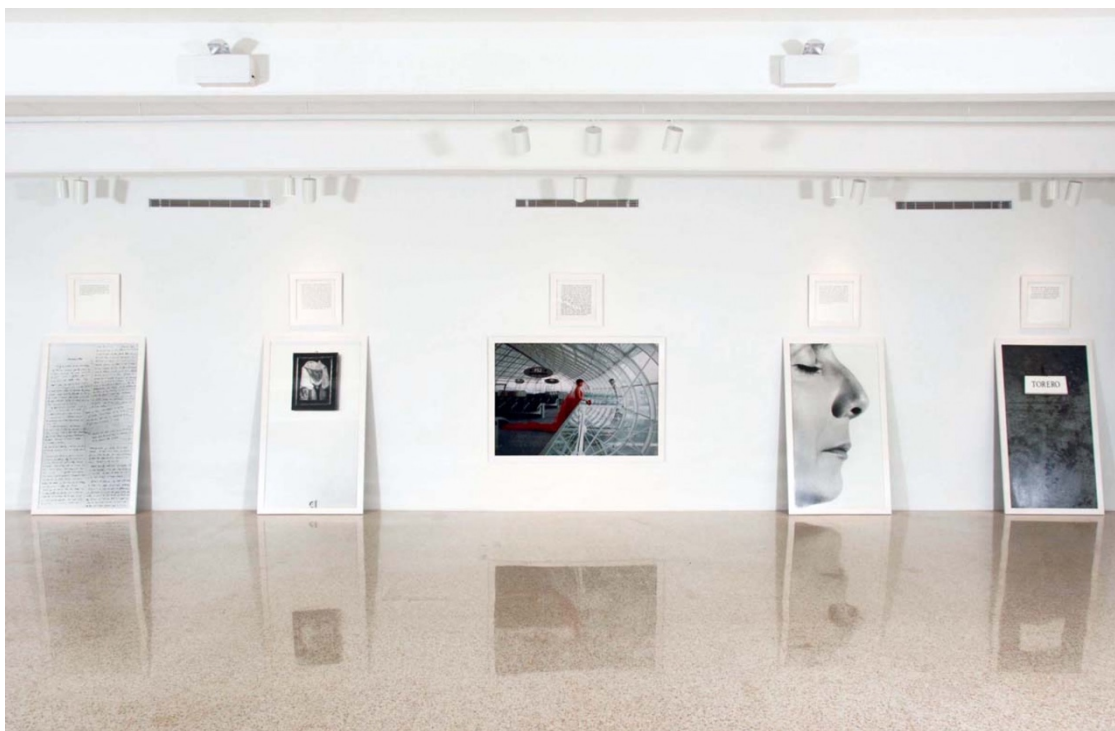


Figure 2.4.<sup>159</sup> Exhibition view, *True Stories*, Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin Miami, Miami, USA, 2006. © Sophie Calle.

Most of Calle's works thematize her daily life and surroundings. It gives a banal impression at first glance, but this is the charm and the essence of her practice. Her works make the viewer think about his/her daily life from a different angle. Another important feature is that her works often engage with strangers. It resonates

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<sup>159</sup> "Sophie Calle - Contemporary Art Exhibition," Perrotin, accessed June 29, 2022, [https://www.perrotin.com/exhibitions/sophie\\_calle-true-stories/62](https://www.perrotin.com/exhibitions/sophie_calle-true-stories/62).

with us living in an anonymous era. Not only Calle's but also other visual autobiographies thematizing everyday subjects also have multiple layers of themes piercing our life.

### Multimodality and multimediality

Contemporary self-referential artworks are often created through multimedia approaches. There could be both cases that multiple mediums compose a single piece of work of art, or several components/pieces, which can be separate alone-standing works as well, constitute a work of art. In the latter case, each component becomes part of a bigger body of work—part of a complex narrative. Proschak's and Boltanski's works belong to the latter.

Similar to the change in the orientation of art from representation to concept, the form of art has also changed in contemporary art. Art has become a *body* of work, it is no longer an *oeuvre*. The expansion of the boundaries of mediums is widely observed in contemporary art. In fact, concept and form mutually influence each other and develop together. The multimodality and multimediality is rather a natural course of complex themes. When the subject matter is big, it cannot be captured in one medium. Furthermore, each artistic medium has its own traits—it also has limitations. For example, sculpture can represent the appearance or exterior of the sitter in three dimensions, but it cannot implement the element of time.

Certain things cannot be mediated through the representational approach. For example, things involving time, such as experiences and stories, and thoughts attached or entangled to those, cannot be effectively conveyed through the pictorial medium. Photography and time-based media have changed the understanding and application of time in the visual arts. By employing those media, artists can add another dimension to

his/her work. It enables a fuller and more complex narrative. I do not mean that one medium is better than the other. I mean that each medium has its own mediality, and different media can do different things.

The archive is often used as an artistic strategy for visual autobiography—it has been widely used in contemporary visual arts. Through archives, visual autobiographers can work with critical elements such as historicity, record, and time effectively. And photography plays a significant role in archival-artistic practice in an apt way. The artists of the case studies also apply the archive as an artistic strategy.



Figures 2.5.a. (left) and 2.5.b. (right).<sup>160</sup> Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, 1998, box frame, mattress, linens, pillows and various objects, dimensions variable, The Duerckheim Collection, lent by The Duerckheim Collection 2015 on long term loan and displayed as part of permanent collection at Tate, London, UK. © Tracey Emin.

<sup>160</sup> “‘My Bed’, Tracey Emin, 1998 | Tate,” Tate, accessed June 29, 2022, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/emin-my-bed-103662>.

Self is a subject, which is far more complex than time since it includes time in it. Self cannot be captured in one medium. Emin's *My Bed* (figures 2.5.) is a highly intriguing example regarding the representation of the self. Emin brought her room into the exhibition space. There is no single portrait in this work. Instead, the work itself functions as a vivid portrait of her. *My Bed* hovers somewhere between installation and documentation, if its medium has to be defined. However, ultimately, this work resists the medium with the whole body.

It should not be misinterpreted that multimodality and multimediality are a necessary condition of visual autobiography. There are still many autobiographical artworks made of a single medium. If the theme is closely related to the artist's own life experience, the works with a single medium could also be considered a visual autobiography. For instance, Cornelia Schleime's paintings can be viewed as part of her visual autobiography, together with other works. Having said that, contemporary visual autobiography shows multimedia approaches, and they are often implemented through installation. González-Torres's billboard series is a good example. Although it seems like a single medium of photography, it was installed in the public realm.

#### Negotiation of self

Self is complex. This fact itself is one of the reasons for the expansion of the self-portrayal field. Visual autobiographers negotiate their selves through diverse artistic strategies and try to convey their selves in the weave of life narrative. This is a crucial benchmark of distinction between self-portrait and visual autobiography.

One of the most significant attributes of the negotiation of the self by the visual autobiographer is its outward projection. Autobiographical works are often stigmatized as too personal. However, 'personal' is not 'private.' Visual autobiography does not

cease to exist on a private level, but it extends to the public as the personal—also when it handles intimate themes. In the process of making a visual autobiography, a continuous negotiation takes place between the self and others, between the artist and the potential public. This aligns with the ontological structure of the self that is simultaneously Being and Being-with. Also, it can be understood as another way of engaging with society even if it does not directly deal with social matters.

Self is no persona. Based on the understanding of the benchmark—negotiation of self—and the distinction between the self and persona, we can more sophisticatedly classify self-referential artworks. For example, Sherman's series of *Untitled Film Stills* is understood as a self-portrait. Although she was the model of the works and it is related to the discourse of self in a certain way, the works are not about her self. What the serial portraits transfer is her persona. Those self-modeled works like Sherman's would be featured as self-portraits at best, but not as visual autobiographies. I posit that Sherman's work should be elaborately distinguished even from the self-portrait because her intention was not to represent her self but to become others, and she performed as the model for it.

#### Holistic artistic practice throughout life

Visual autobiography does not mean a life reconstruction in chronological order. A chronology is not a vital condition for visual autobiography. A crucial element is rather a holistic narrative—very ironically, chronology often does not entail 'holistic' 'narrative.' The viewpoints and narratives of visual autobiography are far more holistic. This is particularly distinctive in the aspect of time. Time appears in more voluminous and copious ways—it is circular rather than linear—in visual autobiography compared to that in self-portraits.

Visual autobiography is a site where one's different times meet. In visual autobiography, there are invisible nets and grids of the past, present, and future. In those nets, various aspects of the artist's life are intertwined. The key aspects vary for each artist. Significant experience in the artist's life constructs his/her artistic themes as a metaphor: "The term *metaphor* comes from the Latin *metaphora*, which in turn derives from the Greek *metapherein*, meaning 'to transfer,' and, indeed, a metaphor transfers the connotations or elements of one thing (or idea) to another."<sup>161</sup> The metaphor is not passively decided, but actively constituted by the artist. It is a phenomenological process; our mind has intentionality. Phenomenological concentration and "intensification [are] one reason certain words persist at the center of our lives"<sup>162</sup> as a metaphor. For Proschak, skin is the metaphor; it is the *memento mori* for Boltanski; and the disappearance of being and love is the core of González-Torres's practice.

It is noteworthy that visual autobiographers mainly or only deal with their life-long themes throughout their artistic practices. This is different from artists who dedicated themselves to self-portraits in previous eras, such as Dürer, Rembrandt, and van Gogh. Self-portrait was not their only practice, but it constituted part of their practices. On the other hand, visual autobiographers narrate their selves throughout their artistic practices. Most decisively, self constitutes a life-long theme for them. The three artists of the case studies also belong to this end.

For many visual autobiographers, their lives and artistic practices are not separate. Various elements of their lives are ingrained in their artistic practices. Daily

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<sup>161</sup> Edward Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem: And Fall in Love with Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999), 13.

<sup>162</sup> Jane Hirshfield, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998), 6.

life, routine, and banality can also become insightful materials for them. For example, Calle weaves anecdotes and epiphanies from her life into her artworks. Even a coincidental event can be a fascinating subject for her. In this regard, Proschak is especially intriguing and remarkable because art—making or doing or practicing art—is habitual for her. Her life is melded in her works and art is melded in her life—they are one.

The practice of visual autobiographers can be summed up as holistic, circular, and close to life. It is so because self and life are holistic. The above mentioned three traits of visual autobiography—complexity of themes, multimedia executions, and negotiation of self—are also closely linked to this as well, because visual autobiography originates from a holistic understanding of one's own life within one's surroundings—the world and society.

#### Summary and meaningful application of the framework

*Narrative of self* is the hallmark of visual autobiography. Visual autobiographers weave complex themes of diverse aspects of life through the negotiation of the self. They create comprehensive life narratives through multiple mediums and installation. Also, it is often a life-long process; a visual autobiographer has a life-long theme and works on it lifelong. In fact, every self has its own life-long theme, although not everyone narrates it.

These traits are significant markers of visual autobiography. This should be understood as a framework, not a definition of the genre. They are not necessary conditions for visual autobiography.

By applying this framework, we can distinguish different types of self-referential artworks and examine them appropriately. Let us look at the following

names who work(ed) self-referentially: Sophie Calle, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Tracey Emin, Nan Goldin, Marc Quinn, and Andy Warhol. Applying the suggested framework of visual autobiography, Calle, Cha, and Emin can be understood as visual autobiographers without difficulty. Goldin's self-portraits can be located somewhere between self-portrait and visual autobiography, but they ultimately keep a closer relation to the classic idea of the self-portrait, although her other works contain quite autobiographical aspects. Yet in those autobiographical works too, the characteristics of a documentary tradition stand out far more, as the works are more about her LGBTQ friends and her relationship to them, not so much about herself. As we can see from Goldin's example, there are indeed blended areas. These types of works and artists should be appropriately classified through examination of significant aspects of the works. Quinn's and Warhol's works are self-portraits although their works belong to contemporary art. Contemporaneity is not a sufficient condition for visual autobiography, although visual autobiography is observed only in contemporary art. Not all contemporary self-referential artworks are automatically visual autobiographies.

Lastly, this framework can be more meaningfully applied to artists who work on self and life-long themes throughout their artistic practices rather than single oeuvres. The three artists of the case studies have been chosen considering this.

### **Photography and Narrative**

This section will explore the relationship between photography, narrative, and visual autobiography. The potential of visual autobiography lies in the efficacy of visual communication. I will first examine textuality and visuality as two modes of human communication and investigate the cruciality and aptness of image in relation

to self-narration. Following this, I will look at the mediality of photography. Visual narratives created by photography are different from those by any other visual media due to its own mediality. That contributed to the artist's self-expression being diversified. I will analyze various narrative strategies using the photographic medium. Last, I will diagnose the phenomenon of the selfie in contrast to visual autobiography.

### Textuality and visuality

Images are mediations between the world and human beings. Human beings 'ex-ist', i.e. the world is not immediately accessible to them and therefore images are needed to make it comprehensible.<sup>163</sup>

—Vilém Flusser, “Towards a Philosophy of Photography”

The Chinese character for humans ‘人’ shapes two human beings leaning on each other. It implies the social characteristics of humans that they do not live alone. On a physical level, they may be able to survive alone. But humans are social beings. They build small societies such as villages and bigger societies like cities and states. We even perceive and count other parts of the world as our potential society even though we do not directly live and belong there. We, humans, are beings living together with other beings in a given time and space.

For humans, who live together with other beings, communication is vital. In terms of communication, we tend to associate it with text and language. However, image, too, comprises a fundamental part of communication. In fact, humans communicated through images prior to the invention of writing. The film *Quest for*

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<sup>163</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books Limited, 2000), 9.

*Fire* (original French title: *La Guerre du feu*) by Jean-Jacques Annaud sketches the struggle of humans in the prehistoric era to find, handle, and control fire. The film shows early humans communicating using signs and gestures made by body parts. They indicate things and directions with fingers and hands, they shape certain forms, and they also produce sounds. What they create with these non-verbal languages is eventually an image—they embody images.

Since the invention of writing, human communication has moved on from image to text. Both in West and East, text was a power and a warrant in sovereign society. Especially in Occidental culture, religion exercised the power in the Medieval era, and the text—Bible—and language—Latin—played a crucial role. However, images are a significant part of human communication. Text and image work differently. Text delivers information in a linear way, whereas image represents subjects in a circular way. Text is conceptual and image is intuitive. As Wolfgang Kemp comprehended, “photography manages the extremely difficult task of providing commentary and object in one concentrated image, whereas the author is able to elucidate the object and his relation to it in consecutive order.”<sup>164</sup>

We tend to consider textual communication more factual and objective, and visual communication arbitrary and subjective. However, information transmitted in/through text is extracted, chopped, compressed from the subjects and the issues themselves, and encoded as characters and text. In contrast, the representation of image is not extraction, although it may be a reduction from reality. Depending on the perspectives, one can regard that image conveys the subjects and the issues more directly.

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<sup>164</sup> Wolfgang Kemp and Rheuban Joyce, “Images of Decay: Photography in the Picturesque Tradition,” *October* 54 (1990): 129, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778671>.

My intention is neither to put text and image on the opposite poles nor to build a hierarchy between them. My point is that textual and visual communications are different, and we use both as means of communication. Furthermore, they mutually affect and complement each other. Vilém Flusser wrote as follows:

Texts admittedly explain images in order to explain them away, but images also illustrate texts in order to make them comprehensible. Conceptual thinking admittedly analyzes magical thought in order to clear it out of the way, but magical thought creeps into conceptual thought so as to bestow significance on it. In the course of this dialectical process, conceptual and imaginative thought mutually reinforce one another. In other words, images become more and more conceptual, texts more and more imaginative.<sup>165</sup>

Flusser alludes to the inventions of writing and photography as two important turning points in human history.<sup>166</sup> According to him, with writing, humankind obtained the ability of “conceptual thinking”<sup>167</sup>, whereas “imagination”<sup>168</sup> to encode and decode phenomena and the world through images faded out. The invention of photography brought humans back to their original way of communication—from text back to image, from conceptual thinking back to magical thinking. Photography completes the dialectic of text and image.

Image is something inherent in us. For example, we carry our childhood memory visually. Image, as a mode of human communication, mediates between humans and the world. Image constructs human understanding and reason and operates directly and intuitively. These traits can be also applied to human perception of the self. Humans recognize and confirm themselves in/from/through images of themselves. By looking at the images of the self, we conceive the self. This means that

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<sup>165</sup> Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 11–12.

<sup>166</sup> See Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 7.

<sup>167</sup> Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 11.

<sup>168</sup> Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 8.

the image of the self constructs our understanding of the self.

The desire for knowing the self, seeing the self, and leaving the trace of the self mutually reinforce, and image engages with these. The evidence of leaving one's self in the form of an image can be found already in the prehistoric era—the Lascaux cave painting, which is well-known for its depiction of large animals. The estimated time of the creation of the Lascaux cave painting is dated back to 17,000 years ago. It is considered one of the oldest (art)historical records of the early stage of human culture. Based on the depicted motifs, we guess that they established a small society and tribes and they hunted animals. The painting probably had a ritual meaning for them. The interesting thing is that there are multiple handprints on the cave walls. Whose handprints are those? We do not know exactly. However, we know that they are the imprints of people who existed in that time: It is an *existential* index of *being*.

Not only the handprints, but also one's own shadow, the reflected image in the mirror, and photographs, are all images that human beings confirm themselves. The shadow is particularly interesting. The shadow shows a rough volume and shape, but it has no details. Yet it entails something real. The shadow is the instant and immediate trace of the substance by its nature—the shadow is nondetachable from the being.

Regarding shadow, Plato discussed the relationship between idea (idea), mimesis (world), and mimesis of the mimesis (art) in his allegory of the cave. The theory is arguable since he assumed the existence of *idea*. However, very ironically, it indicates the significance of images for human beings. Humans have aspirations and longings for images, especially the image of the self. With the invention of the crystal mirror, humans could see their clear image, which influenced the development of the genre of self-portrait. Yet the image in the mirror is not capturable. It ceases at an instant affirmation of the being. The photographic image shares the same trait with

shadow and mirror. It is drawn by light. But its fundamental difference is that it is a fixed image. Photography engages with the processes of knowing, seeing, and leaving the image of the self significantly—ontologically.

### Photography and narrative

The word ‘photography’ stems from Ancient Greek ‘photos (*φωτος*)’ and ‘graphos (*γραφος*),’ each meaning ‘light’ and ‘writing.’<sup>169</sup> The etymology of photography implicitly shows the essential mediality of photography: drawing by light. The mechanism of photography is similar to the visual perception of humans—seeing. Seeing requires light. Without light, we cannot see. In a dark room, we cannot see anything even if things are there. Photography is the imprint of light. And it is inevitably the imprint of seeing. This is the reason why photographic images are, for the most part, the same as our vision.

Due to this basic principle, the reference of photography is real and representational. Furthermore, it directly indicates the referent. The fact of having been photographed indicates the existence of the referent in front of the camera at the time of photographing—it is ontological. Yet photography does not guarantee the truth. A mundane but helpful example is crime scene photography. A photograph of a crime scene shows how the crime scene looks, but it does not confirm whether that was the actual scene. The crime scene could have been manipulated. Photography does not and cannot contain any statements of true or false.

We should be aware that human intention can be involved at any stages of the pre-, and post-production of photography. Nevertheless, we often regard the

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<sup>169</sup> See *Oxford Reference*, s.v. “Photography,” accessed October 20, 2020, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100324562>.

photographic reference as the referent. The reason is that it is difficult to detach photography—the medium and frame—from the photograph. As Barthes said, “[t]he Photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape[.]”<sup>170</sup> It is so *real* that it is not easy to distinguish from the *real*. Realness is, however, a deception because photography, the most realistic representation, is never real.

This unique and ontological mediality of photography enabled photography to be widely used for the artist’s self-representation.<sup>171</sup> Since it attests to the existence of the referent, it became a powerful tool for artists who narrate self—being. However, paradoxically, the mediality of photography developed in various ways in reaction to this. Its deception opened up an avenue for the artist to use that trait ironically. Photography is crucially related to the momentum of the advent of visual autobiography in the contemporary era.

The referentiality of photography was the seed of the transformation of photography into a narrative medium, and diverse narrative strategies were developed. In fact, photography is also a narrative medium, not only a representational medium. However, when photography is considered in relation to narrative, it tends to be associated with a strategy of making a sequence or series of photos, for example, Duane Michals’s photo-sequences. Making sequences is one of the ways to create a storyline, but the narrative is not a synonym for a storyline. The narrative strategies of photography are more complex. I would like to examine four strategies more closely: straightforward documentation, abstract image, double game with referentiality, and archive.

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<sup>170</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 6.

<sup>171</sup> The ontological mediality of photography is closely related to death as well. Time dies in photography.

The first strategy is to use photography to represent the referent—the sitter. This would be the most basic and straightforward way, using photography as photography. Photography can capture the appearance of the subject realistically and instantly. However, it sometimes creates an uncontrolled narrative. Unlike painters, photographers cannot omit anything. The main subject, the scenery, the weather, etc. are recorded as it is at the time of pressing the shutter. And these inevitable elements contribute to narratives being created.

Goldin's self-portraits are excellent examples of this category. She is mostly known for her documentary works on her queer friends, but interestingly, she has taken numerous self-portraits throughout her practice. The trajectory of her self-portraits offers us another critical viewpoint to approach her artistic practice. *Nan one month after being battered* (1984) says more than what the photograph represents—a bruised woman. There is more to it than just a description of abuse; something that cannot be articulated through words. This something becomes much clearer when we look at her other pictures such as *Heart-Shaped Bruise* (1980) and *Nan and Brian in Bed* (1983). She had been exposed to violence for a long time, and the relationship was not satisfactory. This, in turn, explains why she photographed other couples so closely, yet distantly. Her photos make us think of potential backstories, and the trajectory of her self-portraits and other photos gives us clues. Goldin's self-portraits are not planned series. The self-portraits are documentary for her in the first place. But Goldin gathered those and made a slide installation *All by Myself* (1994). Each photo possesses its own narrative, but when they come together, they correlate, explode, become specific, and create another narrative.

Although photography is representational and narrative, the vividness of photography could still be considered a limitation. Artists started to find alternative

ways within and outside photography to express the self beyond representation. Abstract images are one of those strategies. By transferring concrete into abstract, artists dismantle representation. For example, in the dermatoscope picture of Proschak's *Felmen*, there are no concrete objects to be seen. They seem like abstract surfaces. Yet the fact of the existence of the referent—her skin—at the time of being photographed does not change. In other words, although she reduced the concrete referent to abstract photographic images, the ontological relationship remains the same. The abstract image becomes a space of imagination for the viewer.

Double game using the referentiality of photography—it seems real but not real—is a strategy by which artists create ironical narratives. Calle's *True Stories* is a representative example of an artist's double game. She juxtaposed a photo and a text about her personal stories and titled the series of those multiple combinations *True Stories*. The judgment of what is true—or not true—falls on the viewers. Lorna Simpson's self-portraits can be understood in a similar context. Simpson often displays conceptual words with photos, through which she addresses the issue of black women. It is no double game per se, but she touches on preconceptions and discriminations against black people by applying the indexicality of photography and text. One thing to note is that Simpson uses both her own portraits and those of others. Wig also appears often in her works which is a shared element between her and other black women. In this way, her works talk about social issues of gender, race, slavery history, etc., and these themes are strongly rooted in her identity. This is a powerful example of how visual autobiography can be extended to the public.

Not only Calle and Simpson, but many other artists work using photography and text combinations. This strategy is suitable for the conceptual delivery of the idea. The usage of photography in relation to textual narratives has obtained attention in the

field of autobiography studies as well. Timothy Dow Adams observed that “the history of referentiality in photography has run almost a parallel course to autobiography’s.”<sup>172</sup> Smith and Watson also wrote that “the regime of visuality, particularly photography, has come to play an ever-larger role in written autobiographical narratives, incorporated as another mode of telling within the text or described and thematized within the narrative.”<sup>173</sup> Although I have deliberately ruled out artists who work with photography and text combinations from the case studies to illuminate ‘visual’ more intensively, this strategy takes up a large portion of visual autobiography.

The last narrative strategy of photography is the archive. Many contemporary artists implement the archive as an artistic strategy because it allows artists to create dense nets of diverse perspectives, times, and records. Various materials such as photographs—taken by the artist himself and others—documents, objects, etc. can constitute an archive. Archive serves first as a working method and material for the artist, but it can also be the work itself. Gerhard Richter’s *Atlas* is a brilliant example, although this is not a self-referential work. Archival works are often executed as multimedia installations. Artists “elaborate on the found image, object, and text, and favor the installation format as they do so”<sup>174</sup> and they arrange “these materials according to a quasi-archival logic[.]”<sup>175</sup> By its nature, photography naturally plays a grand role in archival artistic practice as it “is simultaneously the documentary evidence and the archival record of such transactions. Because the camera is literally

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<sup>172</sup> Adams, “Introduction: Life Writing and Light Writing,” 465.

<sup>173</sup> Watson and Smith, “Introduction: Mapping Women’s Self-Representation,” 18.

<sup>174</sup> Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 (2004): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379847>.

<sup>175</sup> Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” 5.

an archiving machine, every photograph, every film is *a priori* an archival object.”<sup>176</sup>

The strategy of the archive is crucial for Proschak and Boltanski, and it will be analyzed in-depth in the case studies.

The above-explained four strategies are exemplary ways of photography functioning as a narrative medium going beyond representation. The narrativity of photography becomes diversified and complicated when combined with other media. One thing to note is that ontological referentiality stands at the pivotal point of the photographic medium, and it does not completely disappear even when the artist tries to destruct it; because the alternative ways are worked out from the very mediality of photography. This is the reason why many visual autobiographers narrate their selves through multimedia executions centered around photography. Photography imprints being.

#### Digital turn and selfie

Self-love means taking an explicit stand vis-à-vis the Other. Narcissism, in contrast, blurs the border. If one suffers from a narcissistic disorder, one sinks into oneself. When reference to the Other goes missing, no stable self-image can form.<sup>177</sup>

—Byung-Chul Han, “The Burnout Society”

The invention of digital technology and the internet has changed our lives in many ways. It changed how we save knowledge, information, and data; how we share them; how we communicate with others, etc. Digitization has also influenced to the

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<sup>176</sup> Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2008), 12.

<sup>177</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 39.

habits and tactics of humans engaging with images including self-representation.

In the time of analogue photography, photography was an exclusive field. But after the advent of digital photography, especially since smartphones were widely used, everyone can take photos. After shooting, they drag the vast array of photos from the digital camera or smartphone into another electronic device or virtual space, the cloud. It also affected human perception of the self and the mode of self-representation. It raised a new phenomenon of selfie—the phenomenon created a new term. Indeed, smartphone technology is developing for easier selfie making, for example, face recognition and selfie mode. However, can the selfie be regarded as the same as self-portrait or visual autobiography?

Traditionally, painters put a mirror in front of themselves to paint their self-portraits. To depict themselves, they should have first seen themselves and kept seeing their appearance reflected in the mirror during the entire process of making their portraits. This gaze was maintained in analogue photography. Regardless of the medium, self-portraits have self-reflective gaze. However, in the digital era, the selfie lacks this gaze. The screen of the smartphone is the camera and the mirror at the same time. What is increasingly disappearing through the digital technology in the selfie is the reflective eye of the selfie-maker. The camera replaced the eye.

Narrative and reflective self is essential in autobiography and self-portrait, whereas reflection on the self cannot be found in the selfie. Instead, 'like' from others takes over the role of affirmation, which is neither self-referential, nor self-reflective, "consequently, it fails to achieve *gestalt*, stable self-image, or character."<sup>178</sup> Roberto Simanowski wrote: "The identity value of the autobiographical act lies less in its

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<sup>178</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 39.

documentary than in its performative effect. As the I speaks about itself, it creates itself[.]”<sup>179</sup> The selfie does not speak about the self, but only documents it.

The gesture of the selfie is narcissistic. It projects toward himself, not others. Although people post selfies on social media, it is no outward projection since they are tempted by likes. Selfie and the eagerness for likes concern “the *too-much-of-the-Same*, surplus positivity. Here negativity plays no role. Not does such exclusion presume interior space.”<sup>180</sup> And “[a]ccording to Hegel, negativity is precisely what keeps existence [*Dasein*] alive.”<sup>181</sup> The self dies in the selfie.

The narcissistic ego becomes even more narcissistic in the virtual space. Byung-Chul Han wrote: “In all the imaginary spaces of virtuality, the narcissistic ego encounters itself first and foremost. Increasingly, virtualization and digitalization are making the real disappear, which makes itself known above all through its resistance. The real is a *stay* in the double meaning of the word.”<sup>182</sup> The self and narrative identity cannot be constructed on the internet, since it does not stay, but disappears. On the internet and social media, “the expression of an *antinarrative turn* dressed up as narrativity[.]”<sup>183</sup>

The selfie and visual autobiography are phenomena of our times. The gesture of making the selfie could ostensibly seem similar to that of visual autobiography. However, they are exactly the opposite. Both the selfie and the visual autobiography are forms of self-representation, but the mechanisms are completely different. They

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<sup>179</sup> Roberto Simanowski, *Facebook Society: Losing Ourselves in Sharing Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 62.

<sup>180</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 5.

<sup>181</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 24.

<sup>182</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 43.

<sup>183</sup> Simanowski, *Facebook Society*, 66.

are two extreme poles derived from the same underlying driver—mortality. Selfie makers try to fix on one's appearance in an instant moment, while visual autobiographers construct the self through weaving time and experience. The former volatilizes, whereas the latter stays. The selfie is narcissistic and projects toward the self, while visual autobiography is reflective and projects toward others. In the flood of selfies, visual autobiography suggests new ways of seeing and thinking about ourselves.

## 2.6. Summary

Contemporary self-referential artistic practice has become more complex both on thematic and formal levels. Many artworks develop going beyond the notion of self-portrait, the depiction of the artist, and some of them possess autobiographical characteristics. It has not been systematically established yet, but the phenomenon of autobiographical exists in the field of visual arts. I designated this field and phenomenon as 'visual autobiography.'

What is distinctively observed in visual autobiography is the artist's negotiation of the 'self.' The self is one's essential being and boundary that distinguishes one from others and the outer world. The mode of the self is essentially Being and Being-with at the same time. The self as a Being lives together with other Beings. Also, the self is inevitably Being-towards-death. The fact of mortality functions as an underlying driver of self-narration. Death, paradoxically, makes the self narrate its being and life.

Among various types of self-narration, (visual) autobiography is the act of weaving experiences and time into a (visual) narrative. Narrative has a perspective, and it spans one's different times. The autobiographical act (process) and the

autobiographical narrative (result) mutually influence. Narrative identity is constructed through the narrative act. One understands one's self through narrating the self.

Indeed, many visual autobiographers work on their life-long themes centered around the self throughout their artistic practice. Visual autobiography is a ceaseless process for them, and life and art are often not distinguishable in their practices. Visual autobiographers weave narratives of diverse aspects of life. The subject matter varies from personal stories, experiences, thoughts, and feelings, to social and cultural matters. Those complex subject matters are transferred onto multiple media, and they compose dense nets of narrative. And the self stands at the center of those nets. Since visual autobiographers negotiate the self toward others, the nets of narrative becomes a site where the artist and the viewer meet.

Photography plays a significant role in visual autobiography. Realistic representation of photography paradoxically contributed to the artist's self-representation being diversified, going beyond mere representation. Most of all, photography is an apt medium to capture one's being since it engages with reality in an ontological way. It is also a narrative medium.

The structure of the self—inside and outside of the self—and different modes of the artistic negotiation of the self, autobiographical narratives constructed through photography and multimedia and installation-oriented executions, the aspects of death and mortality can be well observed in Proschak's, Boltanski's, and González-Torres's works. Applying the findings of this chapter, I will now proceed with case studies. The case studies will deepen and refine our theoretical understanding of visual autobiography.

### 3. Barbara Proschak

As the first case study, this chapter will investigate the visual autobiography of Barbara Proschak. Proschak's autobiographical artistic practice revolves around skin and body. She narrates her being and relationships with other beings and to the world by means of her own skin and body through the medium of 'photography.' Skin is especially a significant metaphor for her. It has constituted the pivotal point of her artistic practice since her early work *Felmen*. Starting with *Felmen*, she has expanded her practice to wider themes and mediums such as body—corpus—and connection to Others.

Proschak's visual autobiography is ontological, strongly rooted in Being, and mortality operates as a driver for continuous narration of her self. It is akin to Nietzsche's *eternal recurrence*.<sup>184</sup> I consider visual autobiographers' continuous self-narration similar to eternal recurrence. Mortality functions as a driver for this will to self-narration. This is valid for other visual autobiographers too. However, this paradoxical phenomenon particularly stands out in Proschak's artistic practice.

Proschak's main artistic medium is photography, however, her working method is installation-oriented. Her works do not end at the surface of *flat* photography. Making photographs is a starting point for making artwork for her, and her idea is completed in space. Each photograph is a completed work, but, at the same time, the numerous photographs become materials composing smaller parts of the whole. Her unique working method will be analyzed in this chapter.

In Proschak's works, the aspect of the embodied self can be well observed, and

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<sup>184</sup> The original German term is '*Ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*' which means 'eternal recurrence of the same.'

we can see how she expands the inside of the self to the outside. To examine the evolution of her practice more systematically, I have selected four significant works: *Felmen*, *In Toto*, *dazwischenkommend*, and *SO LANG UND ETWAS LÄNGER*. These works will be examined in chronological order, as the trajectory of her works reveals how themes have expanded and how her artistic negotiation of self has evolved according to that.

### 3.1. *Felmen*

If I emphasize skin, that is, the difference between myself and the world, I am defining world and self, and that means I am standing above and at a distance from both.<sup>185</sup>

—Vilém Flusser, “*Gestures*”

Skin, body, existence, life and death, and connection to and disconnection from the world; these are the keywords that constitute the center of Proschak’s life and artistic practice. Skin has especially an ontological meaning for her since her mother died of skin cancer. Proschak’s visual autobiography pivots on skin throughout her artistic practice. The above-mentioned keywords of her practice and the ontological significance of skin can be first observed in *Felmen*. For this reason, I consider *Felmen* as her first autobiographical work which became a seed of variation for her other autobiographical works created later. This is also the reason that I start the exploration of Proschak’s visual autobiography with this work.

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<sup>185</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Gestures* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 109.

## *Felmen*

*Felmen* is about her skin. It represents her own skin through the photographic medium. However, on the surface of photographs, her self and life stories are deeply inscribed.

Proschak describes *Felmen* as “1. A collection, 2. Separation between me and the world, 3. Connection between me and the world[.]”<sup>186</sup> The first point is about the form and the artistic method of the work, and the second and third are about her understanding of skin. The ‘collection’ consists of three parts: an archive book of dermatoscope pictures, the photographs illustrating birthmarks using her own body parts and fabrics, and landscape-skin-photos.



Figure 3.1.<sup>187</sup> Dermatoscope pictures, n 248, n 264, n 273 (from left to right).  
© Barbara Proschak.

Dermatoscope pictures (figure 3.1.)

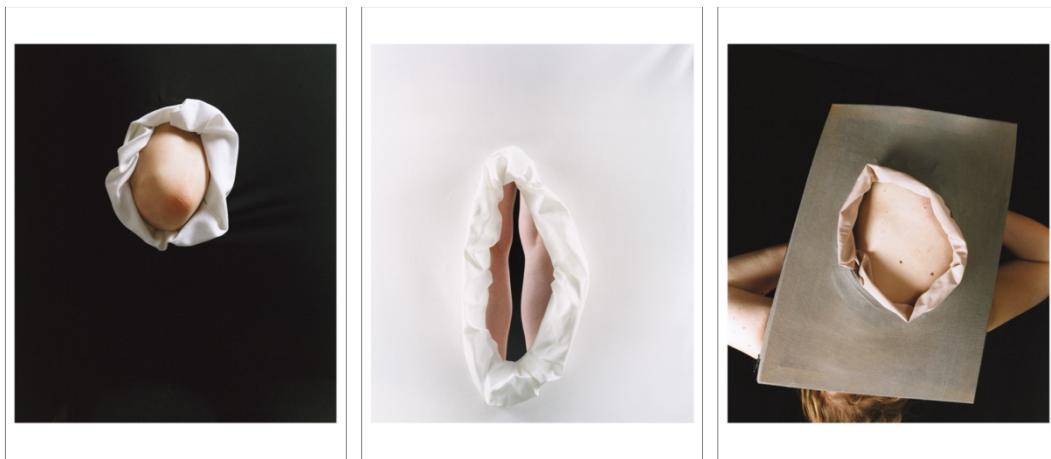
Proschak has been undergoing regular medical examinations of her skin by a dermatologist. During the examinations, Proschak’s dermatologist records every single birthmark on her entire body with dermatoscopy to observe the changes and

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<sup>186</sup> Own translation from German into English. Barbara Proschak, “Felmen : Barbara Proschak,” accessed March 27, 2019, <http://www.barbaraproschak.com/projects/felmen>.

<sup>187</sup> Image courtesy of the artist. All photos in Chapter 3 are provided by the artist, Barbara Proschak. The copyright of the photos belongs to Proschak unless otherwise marked. © refers to both the copyright of the works and the copyright of the documentation/photo unless otherwise marked. I, the researcher, have obtained permission to edit the photos from the artist. For example, the pictures in figure 3.1. are selected by me, and the layout was decided by me.

developments of the birthmarks. If significant changes occur in the skin lesions, those will be cut through razor procedure in order to prevent them from developing into malignant cells. At the time of making *Felmen*, there were 285 birthmarks on her body. Proschak asked her doctor for those dermatoscope pictures of her birthmarks and indexed them from ‘n 001’ to ‘n 285’ and made an archive book of them. Due to the enlargement through microscopy, the images are vague and abstract. Yet they are the most ontological evidence of her.



Figures 3.2. Photographs of her body parts and fabrics illustrating birthmarks.

© Barbara Proschak.

Left: Figure 3.2.a. *Felmen* #5, 2010, analog photography, size variable.

Middle: Figure 3.2.b. *Felmen* #3, 2010, analog photography, size variable.

Right: Figure 3.2.c. *Felmen* #2, 2010, analog photography, size variable.

Photographs with her body parts and fabrics (figure 3.2.)

Birthmarks vary in color, shape, size, level of elevation, etc. Proschak visualized different types of birthmarks using her own body parts and fabrics. The series consists of six photographs. First, there are three photos using black fabric. Each of them depicts her elbow, wrist, and arms coming out of the fabric. They refer to the birthmarks raised above the surface of the skin. Opposed to these photos, a photo with her legs behind the white fabric illustrates the birthmarks hidden under the surface of

the skin. Another two photographs represent her birthmarks directly. Her body is covered by perforated and/or torn fabrics and her birthmarks are seen through holes and tears. The birthmarks in these two photos refer to both her birthmarks and the flat type of birthmarks. In this series, her body parts and birthmarks metaphorically function to illustrate the birthmarks, and the fabrics wrap her body, as if skin does.



Figure 3.3. Landscape-skin-photos. Exhibition view, *Felmen*, Fachhochschule Bielefeld, Bielefeld, Germany, 2009. © Barbara Proschak.

Landscape-skin-photos (figure 3.3.)

In Proschak's description of *Felmen*, skin separates and connects us from and to the world. Skin is the most outer surface of our body with direct contact with the world. Landscape-skin-photos visualize the 'contact.' She took photos of the surface of the water with black and white negative film. After developing the film, she pressed it onto her arm—or she pressed her arm onto the film—then scanned the film and converted these images into positive. As a result, the traces of her skin cells are imprinted on the surface of the water. What now became a negative is her skin cells. The inversion of perspective shows the relative relationship between humans and the world. Most of all, these images look like common landscapes.<sup>188</sup> Indeed, the

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<sup>188</sup> The concept of landscape-skin-photos mutates into a new form of folding map in her later practice. It will be dealt with in the next subchapter *In Toto*. Aside this image, other

landscape-skin-photos became new landscapes, and the ‘contact’ is visible, but not distinguishable anymore.



Figure 3.4. *Felmen*, book box set, 26.5x19.7 cm, 2011. Content in the book box set: book n001–n285 (18x24 cm), 6 C-type prints (18x24 cm), 8 gelatin silver prints on Baryta paper (18x24 cm). © Barbara Proschak.

Each of the three parts making up *Felmen* can be considered a complete work by itself. However, Proschak brought them together into a book-set, named it *Felmen* (figure 3.4.), and defined it as a collection. Making a serial work by applying a coherent technique to a certain theme has become a fashion of contemporary photography; photographers apply the same technical elements and forms to one topic to produce a series. Each part of *Felmen* follows this rule, however, the whole of *Felmen* does not belong to that fashion. Proschak’s approach is far more voluminous

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images/motifs/concepts appear in her various works in different forms and ways. This is one of the distinctive characteristics of Proschak’s style.

and copious, and her strategy of collection created a richer narrative. The book-set is a complete work. Each series represents different traits of skin, and the three combined parts constitute the holistic narrative of *Felmen*.

### **Skin, Illness, and Autobiography**

Could *Felmen* be considered a self-portrait? The discussion about the distinction between self-portrait and visual autobiography in Chapter 2 is highly relevant to *Felmen*. Since Proschak photographed her own skin, *Felmen* could be understood in a very narrow sense as a self-portrait. However, the notion of self-portrait is insufficient to capture *Felmen*. It can be better understood as a visual autobiography because *Felmen* conveys something more than what it represents—*Felmen* possesses narrative. Especially, the narrative of self is a crucial benchmark to classify the work under visual autobiography.

Skin constitutes the center of the narrative of *Felmen*. *Felmen* refers to skin, which is a separation and a connection between her and the world, as Proschak denoted. Skin is defined as “[t]he external covering of the body of a person or animal[.]”<sup>189</sup> It also refers to “[t]he outer covering of certain fruits and vegetables[.]”<sup>190</sup> Moreover, “[t]he natural external covering or integument of an animal removed from the body”<sup>191</sup> is also skin. It is intriguing that skin is used for both

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<sup>189</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “skin,” accessed December 29, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/180922?rskey=jIYCSs&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

<sup>190</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “skin,” accessed December 29, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/180922?rskey=jIYCSs&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

<sup>191</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “skin,” accessed December 29, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/180922?rskey=jIYCSs&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

living and dead—skin is located somewhere between life and death. While one is alive, skin constitutes the *outer* surface and layer covering the body of a human and non-human being. It is the furthest of a being, and it directly meets the external world. Skin as the outer surface of a being abuts the outer world. Skin separates a being from and connects it to the world.<sup>192</sup>

Skin strongly bestows on one the senses of boundary and being—self: “The metaphor of skin makes of the subject something that is defined by its boundary rather than by an inner kernel, and something that has its origin in the intersubjective and social space: I feel my skin when being touched, and my skin is a cloth for social inscriptions.”<sup>193</sup>

The aspect of boundary is evident in Marsyas’s famous phrase ‘Why are you stripping me from myself?’ Marsyas is a satyr in Greek mythology who challenged the deity Apollo, who is well known as a god of music, in a music battle. Apollo agreed to the battle on the condition that the winner could execute any punishment on the loser. Marsyas lost the battle, and the punishment Apollo chose was to flay Marsyas alive. Marsyas was skinned, his internal organs and body parts were revealed, and he became uncovered, without protection.

The story is from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The translations of Marsyas’s phrase are slightly different from one another in the uses of tense and verb; however, the same structure is maintained in various translations, namely, the double usage of the

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<sup>192</sup> “Skin also separates us from and connects us to others and to objects in the world. We feel our skins as intimately our own, and yet they are continually shared by encounter and exchange.” Sheila L. Cavanagh, Angela Failler, and Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst, “Introduction Enfolded: Skin, Culture and Psychoanalysis,” in *Skin, Culture and Psychoanalysis*, eds. Sheila L. Cavanagh, Angela Failler, and Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), 2.

<sup>193</sup> Lilian Munk Rösing, “Skin and the Non-Human Human: Transformation and Reversal in Titian’s the Flaying of Marsyas,” *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 29 (2013): 101, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0118.2012.01326.x>.

first-person pronoun.<sup>194</sup> The first pronoun indicates the skin, and the second reflexive pronoun the body, but both allude to the self.<sup>195</sup> The structure of Marsyas's words entails a significant and ontological aspect of skin as boundary that is strongly connected to one's sense of being and self: He watched his boundary be torn off.

As we see from Marsyas's example, skin is not just a part of the body, but the body and the self. This is especially obvious for Proschak. If we have a small injury to the skin that will be healed soon, we do not feel a threat to our lives, because the lesion is partial and localized. While skin cancer signifies total and whole, as it can put one's being at stake. In the case of other illnesses too, depending on the severity of the disease, one senses that one's being and self can be shaken through the illnesses. Paradoxically, one's sensing and longing for life derive from mortality when the possibility of death becomes more feasible. The desire for life derives from the absence, not from the presence.

In a similar context, Han wrote about the paradoxical relationship between the healthy, death, and beauty in his book *Saving Beauty*:

The *healthy* is a form of expression of the smooth. Paradoxically, it radiates something morbid, something lifeless. Without the negativity of death, life solidifies into something dead. It is smoothened out into the undead. Negativity is the invigorating force of life. It also forms the essence of beauty. Inherent to beauty is a *weakness*, a *fragility*, and a *brokenness* [*Gebrochenheit*]. To this negativity, beauty owes its power to seduce. The healthy, by contrast, does not seduce. It has something pornographic about it. Beauty is *illness*[.]<sup>196</sup>

He considered injury the drivers of creativity that “[w]ithout injury, neither

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<sup>194</sup> For examples: Why do you tear me from myself; Why do you strip me from myself, etc. See also footnote 195.

<sup>195</sup> Andrew Feldherr and Paula James translated as follows: “Why do you strip me from myself?” Andrew Feldherr and Paula James, “Making the Most of Marsyas,” *Arethusa* 37, no. 1 (2004): 76, <https://doi.org/10.1353/are.2004.0004>. And Feldherr and James rephrased it as: “we might be tempted to reinterpret his initial words as: ‘Why do you strip the ‘me’ from me?’” Feldherr and James, “Making the Most of Marsyas,” 79.

<sup>196</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Saving beauty* (Cambridge; Maldan: Polity Press, 2018), 45.

poetry nor art is possible.”<sup>197</sup> As Han expressed, pain and injury may be tragic gift for creators. This is also the case for Proschak. Potential illness and the fear of absence served as a strong driver for Proschak making *Felmen*, and it reflects her craving for existence. Photography is an apt medium for her task because it fixes the presence of the referent. However, the paradox of photography lies also in the same trait. A photograph eventually indicates the absence of existence. The referent does not exist anymore in the same way.

*Felmen* initially started from Proschak’s agony on skin, potential illness, and death. It led her to contemplate meanings of being in the world and life and death. She confronted it and created artwork out of it. In *Felmen*, we can observe Proschak’s autobiographical gesture—constructing the present through the past toward the future. And through her autobiographical approach, a narrative of illness became a narrative of life.

*Felmen* awards us with a unique aesthetic experience: the beautiful and the sublime at the same time. Regarding the dualism of the beautiful and the sublime, Han pointed out that “[b]eauty and the sublime have the same origin. Instead of opposing the sublime to the beautiful, one should return to beauty a sublimity that cannot be subjected to inwardness, a *de-subjectivizing* sublimity, and thus undo the separation of beauty and the sublime.”<sup>198</sup>

The dualism of the beautiful and the sublime may also be caused by language. Language cannot comprehend phenomena as a whole. It can only slice the phenomena and classify the pieces into categories. However, the coexistence of paradoxical elements is the nature of the world. Regarding this, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche

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<sup>197</sup> Han, *Saving beauty*, 35.

<sup>198</sup> Han, *Saving beauty*, 22.

emphasized that “existence and the world seem justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon.”<sup>199</sup> Art is the metaphysical activity of humans to understand life and the world. The beautiful and the sublime exist together like life and death coexist and adhere to each other in the world. *Felmen* reveals it to us.

### **Felmen of *Felmen*: Photography and Surface**

Among various media in the visual arts, photography engages with the autobiographical narrative in a unique and significant way due to its ontological referentiality. It requires objects to be present in the moment of being photographed. Unlike painting or sculpture, the photographic subject cannot be expressed without being present. This can be a limitation of the medium, but it awards photography its own signature—the realistic reference and ontological index. Due to its referentiality, photography has become the most powerful medium to capture the present. The present perfect tense of photography engages very well with the gist of the autobiographical act, constructing the present through the past toward the future. Compared to literary autobiography, autobiography through photography has a stronger connotation of constructing the present.

Photography is Proschak’s prime medium. She narrates herself through photography. In *Felmen*, she captured her present skin and body, which reflect the accumulation of her time and being, through photography. There is no direct account to identify her in the photographs, yet the photographs are her ontological index, and they can only be her.

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<sup>199</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 141. Nietzsche considered Attic Tragedy an exemplary form of art, in which the Apollonian and the Dionysian coexist. Nietzschean aesthetics and *The Birth of Tragedy* will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

She engraved her stories revolving around skin on the surface of photographs—an ontology onto another ontology. The title *Felmen* implies these phenomena very aptly: “The word ‘film’ means ‘skin’ and derives from the Anglo-Saxon word ‘felmen’, that is skin of boiled milk.”<sup>200</sup> The word ‘felmen’ refers to the skin and the surface. Proschak transferred her skin to the surface of the film. Her *self* is inscribed on the felmen of the film.

*Felmen* carries her self, and *Felmen* becomes a surface where Proschak and viewers meet. The collection unfolds the narrative to the spectators in a serene way. They stimulate our imagination as Proschak’s approach is metaphorical—and metaphor always include intimate touch<sup>201</sup>—and the images are abstract and vague. Even the clear images of photographs with her body parts and fabrics are obscure.

*Felmen* is enigmatic. The whole cannot be perceived. Filling the gaps falls on the recipient. Han wrote that “[b]eauty neither conveys itself to direct empathy nor to naïve contemplation. Both are approaches that try to lift the veil, or to look through the veil. The only way to view beauty as a secret is through *knowledge of the veil as such*. One needs first of all to turn towards the veil in order to recognize what is veiled.”<sup>202</sup> In *Felmen*, Proschak revealed and hid her skin at the same time. Photography functions as a veil. Skin is also a veil. When we succeed in lifting the veil, it will tell us various stories—the stories will vary by individual. One of the stories I have found is that life and death are actually very close to each other and naturally attached to

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<sup>200</sup> Own translation from German into English. The original text reads as follows: “Das Wort ‘Film’ bedeutet ‘Haut’ und wird von dem angelsächsischen Wort ‘Felmen’, das ist Huat auf abgekochter Milch, abgeleitet.” Bernd Stiegler, *Bilder der Photographie: Ein Album photographischer Metaphern* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2006), 121.

<sup>201</sup> “The philosopher Ted Cohen suggests that one of the main points of metaphor is ‘the achievement of intimacy.’” Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem*, 15.

<sup>202</sup> Han, *Saving beauty*, 29.

each other, like our skin to the world. This fact is often forgotten in our daily lives. The medium of photography enhances this finding as it reveals the presence and absence at the same time.

*Felmen* metaphorically transfers to the viewers Proschak's *self* through *narrative*. The condition of her skin was the initial motivation for creating *Felmen*, and the negativity of potential illness and mortality functions as an underlying driver. However, more importantly, she possessed the courage to face life as it is. Starting with *Felmen*, Proschak has been delving into understanding herself in the world through art, and her practice has been expanding and mutating. The next subchapter will examine her other work, *In Toto*, which is a step up from *Felmen* in terms of both subject matter and form.

### 3.2. *In Toto*

Proschak dealt with her own skin in *Felmen*, and the subject matter was limited to skin. However, the theme, the medium, and the way of execution changed and expanded considerably in *In Toto*. In *In Toto*, skin is now dealt with in the context of corpus, and execution becomes installation-oriented.

One of the interesting characteristics of Proschak's artistic practice is that she brings different components of various subjects, forms, and materials together and creates a body of work. For Proschak, the exhibition is not an event presenting her works, it completes the work as the final stage of her art-making process. Hence, each exhibition can and should be understood as one work.<sup>203</sup> Proschak's signature style was started by *In Toto. Felmen* and her other earlier works such as *Glanz um Form*

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<sup>203</sup> The structure of the artist's homepage and the list of works reflect these characteristics very well. Each one shows selected key motifs of the work *and* the exhibition view which allows viewers to understand how/what the work constitutes. See <http://barbaraproschak.com>.



*In-Toto* is an excellent example of Proschak's style. She begins with the concept and themes and explores various forms in the process instead of fitting a concept into a style or form. In other words, the concept and the subject matter find suitable forms through the process, and they become an image in the exhibition—the whole exhibition is indeed an image. For example, there are two exhibitions titled *In Toto*; *In Toto – Leipzig 2013* and *In Toto – Essen 2014*. They are two different shows which can eventually be understood as one work. The list of works shown in the two exhibitions and the aesthetics of each are quite different. Yet they revolve around the same idea and concept, hence, they have the same title, *In Toto* (see and compare figures 3.5., 3.6., and 3.10.).

Proschak's artistic practice is like a seed that sprouts, grows up, becomes a tree, and flowers. What we see is only a tree blooming with plenty of flowers, but the growing-up process is implied in it. Proschak's works—exhibitions—are like an enigma that contains hints and clues. We can and should trace back to the seed by deciphering different components and the connections between them.

As we shall see, Proschak develops her visual autobiography centered around concepts and ideas. The conceptual approach can often be observed across contemporary artistic practice; however, Proschak's working method is quite unique because each exhibition is considered one work that processes a concept. Therefore, from *In Toto* onwards, I will focus on the significant concepts and ideas of the work and elucidate these by analyzing selected motifs; or, sometimes in reverse, I will introduce key motifs and extract significance from them. The key elements of *In Toto* I pay particular attention to are corpus and nude, movement and fixation, and the hermeneutic approach of the medium of photography on a meta-medial level.

### Corpus: Skin, Body, and Nude

Among many attributes of skin, *Felmen* featured it as ‘surface.’ Skin as the most outer surface of being is still a valid proposition in *In Toto* as well, however, the focal point moved on from flatness of the surface to ‘covering’ of the body. Skin is understood as flat surface, but it is neither fixed nor immovable. It covers the chunk of the body and moves according to the movement of the body flexibly and organically. It cannot be separated from the body. Skin constitutes corpus, being. This feature can be well observed in *In Toto*.



Figure 3.6. Exhibition view, *In Toto*, Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst Leipzig, Leipzig, Germany, 2013. © Barbara Proschak.

One of the distinct differences between *Felmen* and *In Toto* is whether viewers can see the whole of the body. It was not possible to capture the whole in *Felmen* at all, as the artist covered and hid, and partially revealed her skin and body parts. On the

contrary, in *In Toto*, we can see the body. It may be arguable whether to call it ‘whole,’ since photography is a flat medium, which shows only one side of the body. Nevertheless, we can see the clear line and boundary of the body.

In both exhibitions of *In Toto*, images of the artist’s body appear alongside abstract and ambiguous images that indicate birthmarks (see figure 3.6.). The body images are nude. When we look at the exhibition views, those images catch our eye first, before abstract and ambiguous images. This may partly be because the body images are more concrete, but also because we tend to be attracted to nude images. However, the nudes in *In Toto* are not erotic. Rather, they are corporeal and bare. Since the artist is female, the body is obviously a female body. Nonetheless, it is not a female body but a human body. It is the body of a being.

The nudes in Proschak’s practices are nudes, not nudity.<sup>204</sup> Her nude images put forward *corpus* and *skin*—skin as corpus. They show “[s]omething true right at the skin, skin as truth . . . The truth right at the skin is only true in being exposed . . . After all, what the nude reveals is that there is nothing to be revealed, or that there is nothing other than revelation itself, the revealing and what can be revealed, both at once.”<sup>205</sup> It seems no coincidence that nude images appear in *In Toto*. In fact, it is inevitable, as the skin of the body and the body of the skin can best show one’s essential and bare being: “The nudes of painters and photographers expose this bareness and suspense on the edge of a sense that is always nascent, always fleeting, on the surface of the skin,

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<sup>204</sup> “If a nude is not relentlessly its own stripping bare, if it is not each time its appearance and the simultaneous fragility, modesty, and flash of this appearing that makes nothing appear other than appearing itself, then it is not ‘nude’ but ‘nudity,’ a spectacle for the science of observation or lascivious manipulation.” Jean-Luc Nancy and Federico Ferrari, *Being Nude: The Skin of Images* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>205</sup> Nancy and Ferrari, *Being Nude*, 2.

and on the surface of the image.”<sup>206</sup> Proschak’s body images, which are nude, attest to her bare being; they are an index of her self in and as body.

### **Becoming Sculpture**

We are faced with a back. A back, rather than a face, is facing us. It’s not that someone has turned his or her back, since he or she hasn’t turned around. He hasn’t turned away from us, and we also don’t anticipate him turning toward us. He approaches us with his back. He presents himself from the back, and it is as a back that he is present. Nudity here is the nudity of the back.<sup>207</sup>

—Jean-Luc Nancy and Federico Ferrari, “Being Nude: The Skin of Images”

Proschak’s approach developed as form-oriented in *In Toto* which is different from the focus on the flatness of surface of skin in *Felmen*. A few motifs in *In Toto* represent her body. Some of them are sculpture-like. They show the skin covering the body and organic unity. In these photos, she engraved her body onto photographs as if sculptors sculpted and shaped the material. Such an approach entails more significance than merely capturing her figure. It is about objectifying herself. And it is about fixing time, which in turn implies a desire for eternity of being.

Humans are not able to see their bodies as a whole although they can sense their bodily boundaries through their senses. You know your back is there, but you cannot see it. You can see it with the help of mirrors, but the vision is different from the other seeing your back or you seeing the other’s back. Furthermore, “the presence

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<sup>206</sup> Nancy and Ferrari, *Being Nude*, 4.

<sup>207</sup> Nancy and Ferrari, *Being Nude*, 59. The quotation originally describes the following artwork: Cornelisz van Haarlem, *Study of a Man Undressing, Seen from the Back* (1597), Hessisches Landsmuseum Darmstadt, Photo: Wolfgang Fuhrmannek. The artwork caption is from page 124 of the same book.

of a body is also always *fleeing* the gaze that makes an image of it. . . . A body is never given as definitively present to itself or to others, even though it is also not pure absence.”<sup>208</sup>

The photographic medium helps one to see one’s body objectively. Photography has an objective characteristic in its medium. Making an object as a photograph means making the object as an objective object. The medium of photography and its process allowed Proschak to see her skin and body—her self as body.

She posed in front of the camera as if a sculpture, imprinted her body onto negatives, looked at images, and chose one or some out of the attempted shots. This process is equivalent to the process of objectifying one’s self; detaching one’s self from the self; making oneself another. But she finally returned to the self through objectifying and othering. And photography is an appropriate medium for that. As Barthes said, “[f]or the Photograph is the advent of myself as other[.]”<sup>209</sup>

One significant feature of the self-portrait is that the subject and the object are the same. Proschak made herself an object, but she performed the entire process as a subject, too. The self-portrayal process does not only indicate the identical relationship between subject and object, but also the entanglement of both. In fact, subject and object are not entirely separable. Self-consciousness is formed by moving between both. Likewise, throughout the process of making the image of the self, a continuous negotiation between two positions—subject and object—takes place.

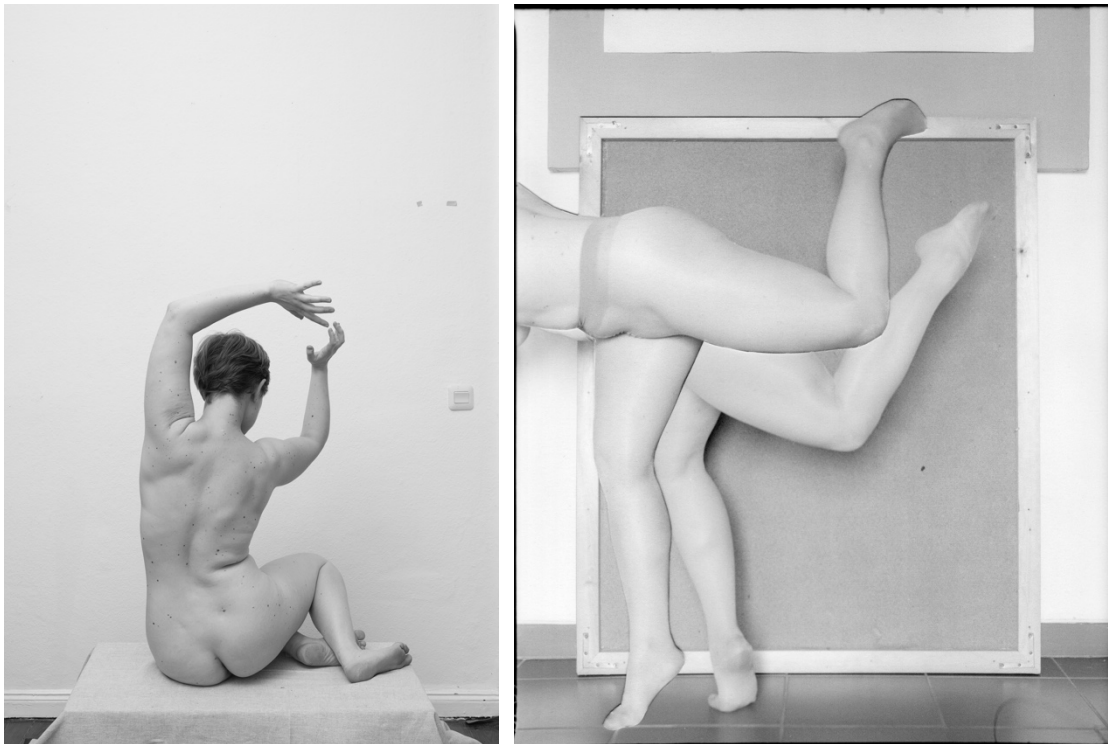
Since the process of photographing herself is conducted on her own, and because she often uses analog cameras, she cannot see the images until the film is

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<sup>208</sup> Nancy and Ferrari, *Being Nude*, 75.

<sup>209</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 15.

developed. Furthermore, there is always room for contingency, although photographers can anticipate the result of the images to some extent. The occurrence and influence of contingency increases when it comes to self-portrayal photos and/or when it involves the movements of the photographic subject.



Left: Figure 3.7. *Studie 4122 – Rückenansicht*, 2011, black and white photography, size variable. © Barbara Proschak.

Right: Figure 3.8. *Beine* (from the series *movement*), 2014, black and white photography, collage, 24x18 cm. © Barbara Proschak.

In *In Toto*, there are two different types of sculpture-like motifs. One image is a standstill (see figure 3.7.), and the other shows movements (see figure 3.8.).

Contingency takes a more prominent part in the latter. Proschak's later work *habitus 5 plus 8* engages more contingency,<sup>210</sup> but it does not constitute the dominant narrative

<sup>210</sup> See Barbara Proschak, "habitus 5 plus 8 : Barbara Proschak," accessed January 27, 2021, <http://www.barbaraproschak.com/projects/habitus-5-8>.

of *In Toto* yet. However, contingency engages with the aspect of bodily movement in *In Toto*. The latter image, *Beine* [Legs], captures the movement of the legs. It represents the body as a corporeal chunk, as well as a living and steadily moving substance. Skin is related to both traits. It covers the body as an external surface, and it moves organically, according to the movements of the bones and muscles of the body. The stocking visualizes and emphasizes the covering that changes flexibly according to the movement of the body.

In *Studie 4122 – Rückenansicht* [Study 4122 – Back View] (figure 3.7.), Proschak posed herself *still* on a pedestal, showing her back to us. Considering that one cannot see one's own back, her pose is pregnant—the back has a significant meaning in terms of human perception of the self. This motif, especially the pose, reminds us of Atlas, a titan in Ancient Greek mythology, who was sentenced to hold up the celestial sky, so that heaven and earth could be kept apart. The icon of Atlas has often been depicted as supporting an orb on his shoulders or lifting it above his head with his arms.

The difference between Proschak's image and the icon of Atlas is that the former shows the back whereas the latter shows the front, especially the face distorted by pain. The face of Atlas is distorted not only because the orb is heavy, but also because the punishment lasts forever. It entails the eternal time of the cosmos. Since Proschak is sitting showing her back to us, we cannot know her facial expression. However, she must have been serious and focused when she was posing for the photo.

Time is significant in Proschak's standstill image, too. In this image, the birthmarks on her back are the marker of time. Her birthmarks juxtapose the marks on the wall in front of her. She could have covered or removed the birthmarks on her back and the traces on the wall, however, she did not do so. Both types of marks indicate

the accumulation of time, and she imprinted these onto the negative of the photograph without altering anything.

The sculpture-like photos imply Proschak's desire for fixing her time. She fixed it by becoming a sculpture. It is akin to taxidermy. André Bazin regarded making mummies in ancient Egypt as the origin of representational plastic arts: "The process might reveal that at the origin of painting and sculpture there lies a mummy complex."<sup>211</sup> Through the embalming of the body as a mummy, life is held: "To preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life."<sup>212</sup> Proschak snatched her time and fastened it by means of photography. Through this, she awarded herself "a different vitality."<sup>213</sup>

### **Hermeneutics of Photography I**<sup>214</sup>

There is another important and intriguing sculpture-like image *Statue\_rot* [Statue\_red] (figure 3.9.). It also captures the artist's body, but Proschak's approach in this image is hermeneutic. The hermeneutic characteristics are a significant feature of Proschak's visual autobiography. It had not appeared in *Felmen* yet, but starting with this image, it became an important part in her artistic practice.

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<sup>211</sup> André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," *Film quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1960): 4. Following this, he wrote: "The religion of ancient Egypt, aimed against death, saw survival as depending on the continued existence of the corporeal body."

<sup>212</sup> Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," 4–5.

<sup>213</sup> Nancy and Ferrari, *Being Nude*, 32.

<sup>214</sup> Hermeneutics of Photography II continues in the next subchapter 3.3. *dazwischenkommend*. Some images that will be discussed in subchapter 3.3. also appear in *In Toto*, but they play a more crucial role in *dazwischenkommend*, hence, those will be dealt with in the next subchapter.

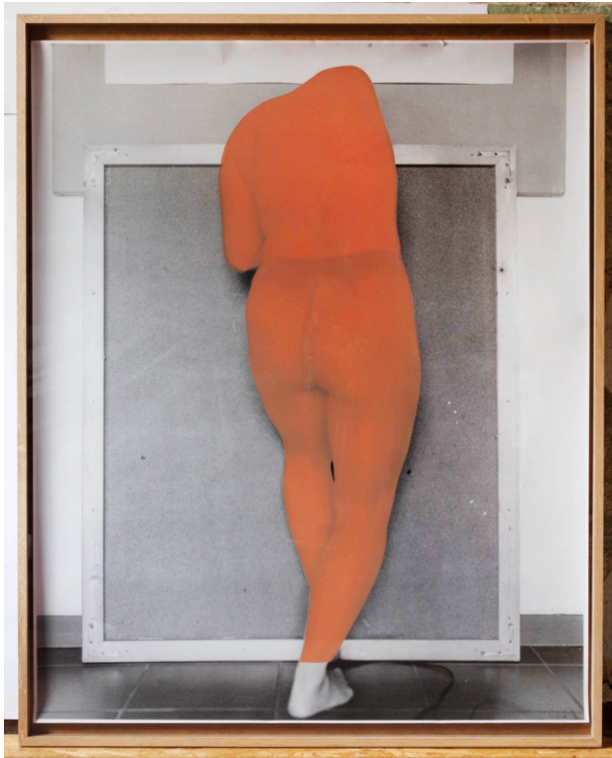


Figure 3.9. *Statue\_rot*, 2012/13, black and white photography, silkscreen on the black and white print, and framed, 115x89 cm. © Barbara Proschak.

Since this image is a photographic image, it is flat. But it has multiple layers on one surface. There are actually two physical layers, but they seem like one flat surface from the frontal view. And the image has three layers of mediums: painting, sculpture, and photography.

The background of this image is the wall. On the wall, a canvas—or a board—and a paper are hung. Right in front of that, a canvas stands vertically. It leans against the wall, and it shows us its back. In front of the canvas back, the artist's body is there, she, too, also shows her back to us. The body seems like a sculpture; it does not seem natural; it poses awkwardly. The sculpture-like body is the photographing body, it is taking this photograph. A shutter release cable hints at the contemporaneity of the photograph. The image contains three visual mediums. And finally, it wears the medium of photography.

Painting, sculpture, and photography are visual media that have closely

engaged with the nude in art history. Among the three, photography is Proschak's medium. This image can be understood as the hermeneutic pursuit of her medium. She tracked, navigated, and connected photography with other significant media used for the nude in art history.

Together with the hermeneutics of the medium, the image deals with the artist's main concern, the body. The orange-red color emphasizes the artist's body on the black and white background. The orange-red part is not on the same layer as the photograph. It was silkscreened onto it. Photography and silkscreen constitute two physical layers of this image. However, they seem to be one flat surface. The structure of this image aligns with the fact that skin and body contact with the world and the boundary are not clearly separable.

The image is full of double effects. On the one hand, the red-colored body appears to have cut out the contour of the body from the background, but on the other hand, it seems to have sewn the chunk of the body into the image. It is both. Additionally, the deliberately drawn straight line along the edge of the canvas at the bottom and protruding shoulder and upper body part above the canvas fulfill the dual function of both belonging and not belonging simultaneously. She follows tradition, yet resists.

It is intriguing that Proschak applied silkscreen as a medium to convey this. She literally screened her body; it also implies that she skinned herself. Screening functions inevitably as covering; at the same time, it functions as revealing. The double function of screening created various double meanings and metaphors for this image. It was a "[n]egotiation between the functions of concealment and display"<sup>215</sup> of

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<sup>215</sup> Stella North, "The Surfacing of the Self: The Clothing-Ego," in *Skin, Culture and Psychoanalysis*, eds. Sheila L. Cavanagh, Angela Failler, and Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), 78.

herself. The silkscreen paradoxically accentuates the viewer's gaze at it: "The nude is *presence* above all, a presence exposed to the gaze of others. A nude, any nude, always finds itself being looked at, even when I am the only one looking. The gaze, when it encounters the nudity of the body, attests to its presence."<sup>216</sup> Thus, the silkscreened nude image reveals the viewer's—my— gaze, which attests to the viewer's—my— presence.

### **Photography and Installation**

Proschak's practice has expanded in both the thematic and formal aspects in *In Toto* compared to *Felmen*. In terms of themes, skin is now dealt with within the context of corpus, portraying beyond the surface. As a natural course, the artist's body appears in the series. Another critical element has also been added, namely 'time.' Meaning of life and death is now considered in terms of time alongside the fact of mortality—to transcend time. Furthermore, Proschak started to hermeneutically connect herself with other beings and subjects including non-human beings. One of those approaches is thematizing the medium and historicity of photography and relating it to painting and sculpture.

In many aspects, *In Toto* demonstrates a significant leap forward in terms of her ideas and execution. The narrative of her visual autobiography has been distinctively enlarged and intensified. Media execution aligns with this as well. Her main medium is still photography, but she has also applied installation (see figures 3.10.a., 3.10.b., and 3.11.). The process of exhibition making has now become incredibly crucial in her artistic practice.

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<sup>216</sup> Nancy and Ferrari, *Being Nude*, 75.



Figures 3.10.a. (top) and 3.10.b. (bottom). Exhibition view, *In Toto*, Galerie Lindner, Essen, Germany, 2014. © Barbara Proschak.



Figure 3.11. Exhibition view, *In Toto*, Galerie Lindner, Essen, Germany, 2014.  
© Barbara Proschak.

Many photo series in contemporary art consist of multiple pictures having the same formal aspects on one topic, and they are usually printed (in the same size), framed, and hung on the wall. However, Proschak does not follow the conventional rhetoric of the presentation of photographic series. Proschak produces different types of individual images. The images have different formats and materials. For example, the technique, material, and size vary, and some of them are framed, but others are not.

Most importantly, she completes her series on site, at the exhibition space. Each individual image is raw material for her. She locates—installs—images in the exhibition space directly. This is different from many artists who prepare the end-products in advance and place them on the exhibition wall. For Proschak, creating an exhibition goes beyond simply displaying finished artworks on the wall. It involves constructing a narrative through the arrangement of various elements on site, forming a cohesive body of artwork within the exhibition space. During the installation

process, she weaves connections between images—she weaves *narrative*.

In the exhibition view of figure 3.11., we can see various motives are located on the wall. The sizes, numbers of the same type of images that are juxtaposed next to each other, and distances between the sets of the images all vary. There may or may not be a logic for this display, which is not that important for the viewer. The images resonate with each other on the contentual, figurative, formal, and visual levels. They create small and big narratives. What matters to the viewer are those narratives.

For instance, in the top left corner, there is an image depicting partially open white curtains revealing a sky-blue surface in the background. This image resonates with another sky-blue motif on the right side of the wall. This also connects to the image of Proschak's protruding elbow depicting the birthmark on the bottom-left side. It is intriguing that the elbow image now obtains a different meaning than that in *Felmen*. Multiple, flat, abstract images above the elbow image are put together to create a certain visual effect. This is my readings, but what and how to read and decipher the narrative falls onto each viewer.

In fact, installation is not only Proschak's method. In contemporary art, many artists execute their ideas through installation. Wolfgang Tillmans is an exemplary artist who pioneered the installation of photographic images. However, it is also true that installation and inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches in the visual arts have become a sort of fashion. In the case of Proschak, this is no fashion. It is a natural consequence of the expansion of themes and narrative.

In *In Toto*, Proschak explored diverse appropriate forms for her concept and idea, and she found a way to unfold the narrative of her works in the exhibition space. She executed it through installation, actively relating herself to the space. As a result, the whole exhibition became one image—*In Toto*.

### 3.3. *dazwischenkommend*

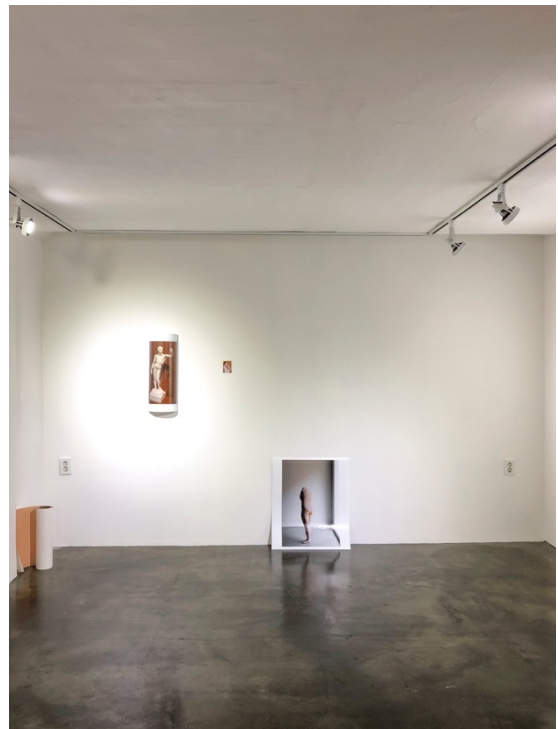
This subchapter examines *dazwischenkommend* [getting-in-between].<sup>217</sup> The work continues from her previous works, yet differentiates itself on a few points. As the theme has become even more expansive, so has the importance of installation increased. The hermeneutic approach has evolved further. Most of all, the gesture of negotiation of the self toward the public can be distinctively observed in this work. I will pay particular attention to these points in this subchapter.

#### **Crescendo**

Proschak's practice has become vastly broader in terms of themes in *dazwischenkommend*. The key topic can be summed up as encountering the outer world and connecting oneself to it—which aligns with the structure of the self, Being-with. In line with this, the autobiographical gesture, the negotiation of the self is more clearly observed. The negotiation takes place toward both the public and other beings. Beings here refer to both human and non-human beings. For example, there are images of non-human objects such as plants, fruits, cellophane papers, etc. These are not directly associated with her body or birthmarks anymore. In her previous works, the images mostly captured or indicated her birthmarks or body. However, in *dazwischenkommend*, images of the third object which are not directly associated with herself appear. The functions of images have also changed, from inwardly converging to herself to connecting, opening up, and expanding outwardly. Yet the core ideas of 'skin' and 'layer' which were shown in *Felmen* and *In Toto*—and other works that are not dealt with in this paper—have been preserved.

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<sup>217</sup> The literal translation of 'dazwischenkommend' is 'getting-in-between,' and the semantic translation is 'intervening.' The original German term connotes a nuance of sudden appearance or intervention.



Figures 3.12.a. (top), 3.12.b. (bottom left), and 3.12.c. (bottom right). Exhibition view, *dazwischenkommend*, part of the group show *body that is at once body-subject and body-object*, Studio 148, Seoul, Korea, 2018. © Photo: Lee Soo Jin (the researcher) © Barbara Proschak.

In the exhibition view of figure 3.12.a., there are photos of cellophane papers on the left and right sides of the wall at the same height. The pictures on the right side look like one flat black surface because the different colors of cellophane papers are layered onto each other. The pictures on the left show the gaps and spaces between the different colors of cellophane papers. The former was taken from a frontal view and the latter from the side. These can be interpreted as intricately existing layers of the self, layers of the world, and finally, layers of different beings living at the same time and place. The same papers and layers are perceived differently depending on the point of view.

Not only the cellophane paper images, but also other images on this wall allude to layers of beings—which includes the artist herself—and the world. There are various metaphors for skin on the wall. The change in photographic subjects shows the artist's active gesture to relate herself to other human and non-human beings. She expands herself outwardly from inside to outside of her 'self' in *dazwischenkommend*.

The hermeneutic approach continues in this series. There are old images and new images. However, the images that were used in her earlier works obtain different meanings in this work. Some of the old images finally found their right functions in *dazwischenkommend*. For example, the reflector and the easel motif and the landscape-skin-photos—these will be examined soon.

The installation on site has become even more important in this work. To understand the significance of the installation for Proschak's artistic practice better, I would like to briefly review her other work from a similar period for comparison.

In 2017, one year earlier than *dazwischenkommend*, Proschak had a solo show *In\_let* in Berlin. One of the key works of the exhibition was *In\_let#1* (figure 3.13.a.), a big wooden-box-like frame in a manner of a showcase. She brought various motifs

into the showcase, placed them next to each other, layered them onto each other, and *fixed* them. 151 motifs in total were pinned with insect pins as if butterflies were taxidermied in a case. Indeed, similar objects to this work can be found in natural history museums.



Top: Figure 3.13.a. *In\_let#1*, 2009–2017, 151 images of different sizes and materials, found footages, framed, 160x200 cm. © Barbara Proschak.

Bottom: Figure 3.13.b. Exhibition view, *In\_let*, Galerie Jochen Hempel, Berlin, Germany, 2017. © Barbara Proschak.

Archive and accumulation are critical of Proschak's artistic practice. She does not puncture a full stop to a certain period or work, but continues and accumulates her artistic practice. The images produced earlier—for example, photographs of her body parts and fabrics in *Felmen*—keep appearing in her later works in different contexts.

*In\_let#1* was an attempt to *fixate* her archive, to fixate the significant images and materials for her. A gesture of musealization is observed in *In\_let#1*. This is somewhat relevant to the urge for fixing herself as a sculpture in the passing time. The *display* of the exhibition, too, aligns with the aesthetics of the showcase (see figure 3.13.b.). It is less installative, but rather, museal and conventional. The images were hung on the walls. The dynamics between the images and space were distinctively reduced compared to those of *In Toto*. However, the museal approach and display are less suitable for Proschak's hermeneutic visual autobiography. Indeed, within less than a year, her working method headed back to the installation.

Proschak's visual autobiography develops dialectically. Her installation-oriented approach has developed from her early practice onwards. For *Felmen*, she made up the work with different materials and components—yet that was not very installative. In *In toto*, the execution became installative, and the usage of space was observed—the installation created an image. The aspect of the installation, however, retreated in *In\_let*. The installation appeared again in *dazwischenkommend*, and the importance grew much bigger. In *dazwischenkommend*, Proschak found her own artistic language of installation.

Her installation language is like mapping: mapping the ideas, mapping the motifs, and mapping the images and/with/in space. It is mapping herself. By locating images in the space, she creates a narrative space of her visual autobiography. And the installation is an essential element to keep her visual autobiography alive.

One thing to remark is that *dazwischenkommend* was presented in a group show *body that is at once body-subject and body-object*. In general, Proschak's works function far better in solo shows. It is so because her works are intimate, and the aesthetics is tender and subtle. Furthermore, her works are quite voluminous, as one work consists of various components. It requires more space—and void too. For example, in *In Toto* 2013 and 2014, the 2013 version was presented in a group exhibition, whereas the 2014 version was her solo exhibition. Although she worked with the same concept and similar materials, the outcomes were quite different. *In Toto* 2014 was more comprehensive. There are various reasons for this, but space and theme seem to be the main reasons. Due to the limitation of the exhibition space, 2013 version was less installative. Furthermore, inward and intimate themes could have been an obstacle to mingling with other works having different themes or styles.

Due to these characteristics, when her works are shown in group shows together with the other artists' works, her works either encroach on others' works or lose power. However, *dazwischenkommend* worked out excellently and harmoniously in the group show setting. This was in part because the curatorial narrative was well aligned with her practices in general, but, most of all, because the themes became wider. Her developed working methods of connecting herself to other beings, objects, and the world enabled her work to harmonize with others' works. In this sense, *dazwischenkommend* opened up a new possibility of presenting her visual autobiography in group shows.

This observation brings us back to the hallmark of visual autobiography—the negotiation of one's self toward others, the public, and the world. Depending on the modes and openness of the artist's negotiation, artworks based on the artist's personal stories and experiences can either obtain or forfeit empathy. Failure in an appropriate

negotiation would generate criticism that they are ‘merely personal.’ The narrative based on profound negotiation serves as a foundation of empathy. In the case of Proschak, the installation plays an essential role in creating an empathetic narrative space. The dialectical evolution of Proschak’s artistic practice shows us that visual autobiography as the personal can extend to the public.

### **Hermeneutics of Photography II**

Proschak’s visual autobiography is hermeneutic. There are two motifs showing the characteristics very well: *Kreis\_silber* [Circle\_silver] (figure 3.14.) and *Corps* (figure 3.15.). Both images appear on the exhibition wall as central motifs; they are the only framed images (see figure 3.12.a).

*Kreis\_silber* shows a reflector and an easel (see figure 3.14.). The visual of the image seems quite different from her other images examined so far. There are no clues indicating birthmarks or her body. What we can see in the photo is a silver reflector, that is used for photo shooting, behind an easel. Both elements face forward, parallel to the camera. Above the reflector and the easel, a frame of two butterflies is hung. The diameter of the reflector fits exactly at the edge of the structural parts of the easel. Is it a coincidence? No. The easel must have been deliberately calibrated to fit into the diameter of the reflector. The image, especially the deliberate fitting into the circle, reminds us of da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man*. The drawing depicts a frontally standing man circling his four limbs. The diameter drawn by the limbs indicates his space and boundary. Proschak produced this image referring to *Vitruvian Man* with objects that represent the mediums of painting and photography. The image demonstrates hermeneutic understanding of her boundary and medium.



Figure 3.14. *Kreis\_silber*, C-print, 40x30 cm, 2015. © Barbara Proschak.

The butterflies in the frame, too, are associated with the same iconographical reference, *Vitruvian Man*. The butterflies were frontally positioned and pinned—these are real butterflies, not images. Their wings were never this wide open when they were alive. After death, when they were taxidermized, their spaces and boundaries were revealed. A butterfly's boundary can only be shown, after its death, by another being. Proschak aspires to understand her boundary while alive. She carries it out through art.

Connection and amplification are crucial for/in this work. The following anecdote illustrates this well. The real-dead-butterflies-objects were found at Proschak's parents' house. The butterfly frame was a present from her uncle for her parents' engagement. Proschak placed this object along with the reflector and the easel when photographing the image. The butterfly frame is not only related to *Vitruvian Man*, but also linked to her family. In *Kreis\_silber*, Proschak connected herself with the stories of her parents and relatives. She connected her time with their times which

were before she was born.

*Kreis\_silber* entails an iconographical approach. She dismantled *Vitruvian Man*, reinterpreted it, and produced *Kreis\_silber*. Proschak's gesture alludes to hermeneutics. In a very narrow sense, hermeneutics refers to the interpretation of the Bible, texts, literature, historical and archival materials, etc. Interpretation is, however, an act of understanding, by which the agent actively engages pre-existing knowledge for new understanding. This means that understanding proposes a premise that knowledge pre-exists based on which understanding and interpretation can be performed. Since the Enlightenment, hermeneutics has been applied in terms of human understanding of humans.<sup>218</sup> Philosophers such as Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and so forth, understood hermeneutics beyond mere understanding and interpretation of texts. Their theories varied, but they commonly comprehended the human act of understanding as the underlying dynamic of human culture.

Indeed, human culture is based on accumulation. Furthermore, understanding itself is one of the modes of Being. One senses first one's being on the physical level—embodied self—and expands understanding by locating oneself within the world and among others, and finally, connecting oneself to them. In contemporary philosophy, hermeneutics refers to the understanding of the agent—both on the individual and collective levels—in a broader sense. It is also closely related to existentialism and phenomenology, as understanding preliminarily arises from senses and experiences.

Hermeneutics is about human understanding. And understanding, which is the

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<sup>218</sup> These shift and expansion of hermeneutics align with the core of Enlightenment.

basic mode of being, itself is characterized as hermeneutic. Many scholars drew their attention to the intrinsic relationship between hermeneutics and understanding. Dilthey is noteworthy in this regard as he considered autobiography the highest form of human understanding:

In autobiography<sup>219</sup> we encounter the highest and most instructive form of the understanding of life. Here a life-course stands as an external phenomenon from which understanding seeks to discover what produced it within a particular environment. The person who understands it is the same as the one who created it. This results in a special intimacy of understanding.<sup>220</sup>

In this context, *Kreis\_silber*, the image of the reflector, easel, and the taxidermied butterflies is truly hermeneutic. It indicates Proschak's extensive understanding of/within her environment. She grasped her medium—photography—within the context of art history and natural history; she connected herself to non-human-others; she connected her stories with her family's stories; Proschak created a new dimension of time and space where her time and her parents' time meet. We can observe dense layers of connections between various elements and aspects in this single image. There are personal layers and less personal layers. Various layers were created through her negotiation. The whole process corresponds to hermeneutic understanding and widening of her *self*.

*Corps* (figure 3.15.) also shows a hermeneutic characteristic. There are three layers in this image, staggered onto each other: a dark grey surface, a book, and a photo of the artist herself. The top layer of the image is a photo of Proschak bending her back forward from a standing position on a pedestal and stretching her arms

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<sup>219</sup> The original term in German used by Dilthey is 'Selbstbiographie,' and the direct translation reads as 'self-biography' which comprises 'self' in it. Intriguingly, the term grasps and shows the relationship of the self to biography more intuitively than 'autobiography.'

<sup>220</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, Selected Works, Volume III: *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 221.

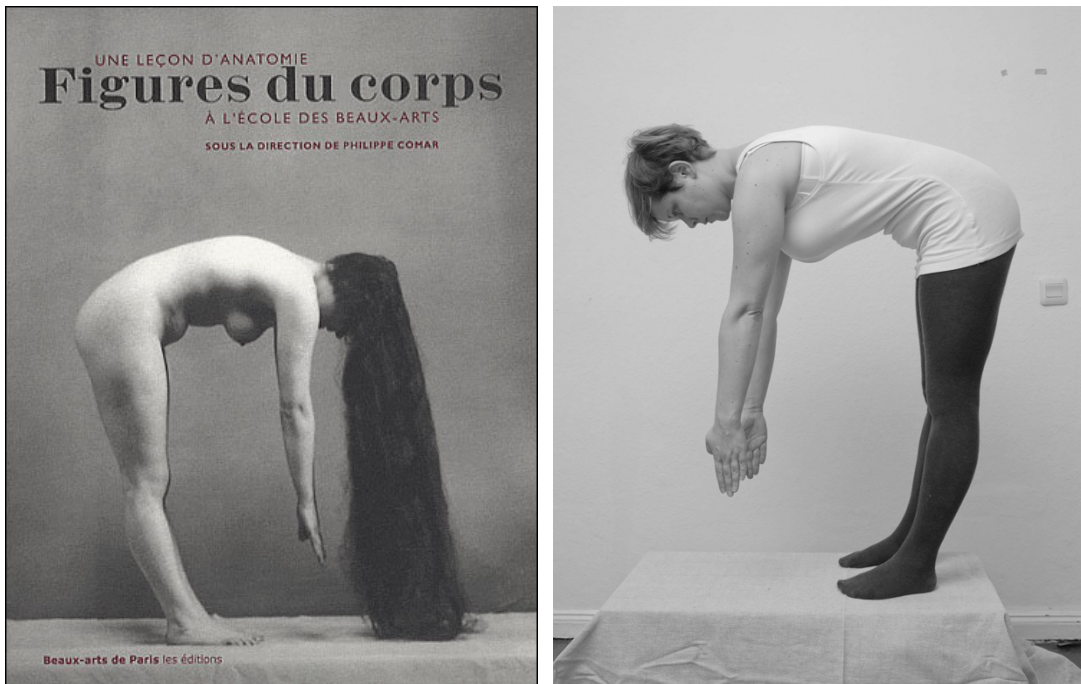
parallel to her legs. The position is similar to Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend) in yoga. The second layer of the image is the book. Since the photo is located on top of the book cover, we cannot fully see the original image of the book cover. The photo must have been deliberately put in that position. It hides important information and details about the book. However, presumably, a woman with long hair would have the same pose as the artist. The difference would be the horizontally flipped directions.



Figure 3.15. Corps, C-print, 30x24 cm, 2018. © Barbara Proschak.

The title of the book in *Corps* is *Figures du corps: Une leçon d'anatomie à l'école des Beaux-Arts* (figure 3.16.a.). The title of the image stems from the book. The book used to serve as reference material for the artist when she delved into the body, figure, and its form. The different colors of Post-it notes in the book are a trace of her studies. That was mainly in the period when she expanded her themes from skin-as-surface to skin-as-body which corresponds to the period of *In Toto*. During this period,

she actively engaged her body to learn body forms. She learned human anatomy and body forms not only by observing the images in the book but also by practicing them with her own body.



Left: Figure 3.16.a.<sup>221</sup> The book cover of *Figures du corps: Une leçon d'anatomie à l'école des Beaux-Arts*.

Right: Figure 3.16.b. The photo of the top layer of *Corps*, produced referring to the book cover image. *In let 25: Körperfigur*, 2011, black and white photography, 14x11 cm. © Barbara Proschak.

Proschak produced the photo on the top layer (see figure 3.16.b.), referring to the image of the book cover, and had already presented it in a small exhibition *Fehler inbegriffen* [Error included] in 2013.<sup>222</sup> Also, she included a similar color photo in *In*

<sup>221</sup> Image downloaded from: <https://livre.fnac.com/a2743716/Comar-philippe-sous-la-direction-de-Figures-du-corps-une-lecon-d-anatomie-a-l-ecole-des-beaux-arts-petit-format>, accessed April 25, 2021.

<sup>222</sup> *Fehler inbegriffen* is Proschak's other work not discussed in this thesis. It was presented in a group exhibition *Copy and Repeat* held in 2013 at BKS Garage in Copenhagen, Denmark. The main subject of *Fehler inbegriffen* was body and form. See Barbara Proschak, "Fehler inbegriffen : Barbara Proschak," accessed 26 April, 2021, <http://www.barbaraproschak.com/projects/fehler-inbegriffen>.

*Toto*, held in 2014 in Essen (see figure 3.11., the photo is located on the right top of the wall, and it is in color). The whole process was to *understand* herself from a different perspective than that of *Felmen*. She connected her thoughts on the topic of skin-as-body to pre-existing knowledge, the book. She digested it on a physical and sensory level, and she produced photos.

Years after the production of *In\_let\_25: Körperfigur* [In\_let\_25: Body figure] (figure 3.16.b.), Proschak produced *Corps*. *In\_let\_25: Körperfigur* had a different function and meaning until then. In *Fehler inbegriffen* and *In Toto*, the photo was juxtaposed with other images to create an association through formal aspects. However, years later, she layered *In\_let\_25: Körperfigur* onto the book, the original reference material, and placed them on another surface.

The dark grey background seems banal and meaningless at first glance. But the layering was elaborately constructed. Due to the top-down perspective and high sharpness, the image seems flat and graphical, as if it is one flat layer. But decreasing darkness from the dark grey background to the photo on the top layer accentuates the boundaries between the different layers and materials.

*Corps* implicitly shows the hermeneutic characteristics of Proschak's practice. The fact that she set and revealed boundaries between layers by differentiating tones indicates her conscious execution to distinguish the different dimensions and materials, and their meanings. Most of all, it implies connectivity—the connectivity between her and other people and their knowledge, and the connectivity between her works. Proschak's visual autobiography, based on the continuous accumulation of connectivity, is indeed hermeneutics.

The image *Corps* and the implied gesture in its production both show key traits of Proschak's artistic practice. She works on herself and expands her themes from

skin-surface to skin-body, and then to being as embodied self in the world. She diversifies her sub-subjects and approaches according to the themes; by which she often goes back to her past works and uses previous images and materials for her current/ongoing practice. The circulatory approach will continue in the future—*the Eternal Return of the same*, and ‘the same’ is her *self*. The process and approach of Proschak’s visual autobiography are akin to that our identity and self are built on our past experiences and memories.

### **Photographing Self**

In the exhibition *body that is at once body-subject and body-object*, Proschak’s works were exhibited at three spots: one landscape-skin-map at the main entrance, another related work at the other entrance, and the rest on the wall. The wall was wide, divided into two by the crossbeam and the pillar, and the left side was protruding whereas the right side was dented. The wall made could be regarded as one wall and two walls depending on perspective. Proschak used this structure in an adequate and brilliant way, maximizing the effect through installation (see figure 3.17.).

While the left wall was full of various elements and components including *Kreis\_silber* and *Corps*, the display on the right wall was subdued. Both walls seemed harmonious and not separated because the installation and display shared the same rhetoric. Nonetheless, the right wall had its own theme and articulation, and the installation was conducted accordingly. The key features of the motifs and display of the right wall can be summed up as performativity and placement. The dynamics between the motifs and the abundance of white space/blank accentuated the placeness.



Figure 3.17. Different, yet co-relating displays of two walls. Exhibition view, *dazwischenkommend*, part of the group show *body that is at once body-subject and body-object*, Studio 148, Seoul, Korea, 2018. © Barbara Proschak.

On the right side and bottom of the right wall, there is an image of the artist, in which she wore a nude<sup>223</sup>-colored leotard and posed like a sculpture. This motif can be also viewed as ‘becoming sculpture’ (see figure 3.18.). Compared to her previous motifs, this image appears even more like a sculpture due to the deliberate and unnatural posing. She deliberately hid her arms and head. The omission of details, especially the head, made her body look even more sculpture-like. It seems unnatural. It feels somewhat tense as well. The tension comes from the posture, particularly from the straightly stretched legs that stood upright on the floor and the firm back. The push, power, and tension expose her naked being lucidly. And the nude color leotard functions transparently as skin. Although she is not naked—the unitard covers her

<sup>223</sup> Since ‘skin’ color can have a polemic political connotation, I used ‘nude’ color in the first sentence, however, skin color will be also used. Skin does not indicate to a certain race, but to the surface of the flesh of someone—or anyone. Thus, both ‘skin’ color and ‘nude’ color will be used.

body—it solely reveals her structure and naked being. Paradoxically, it seems more naked than the naked body.



Figure 3.18. Self-portrait in a nude color leotard. *3281*, 2018, color photography, size variable. © Barbara Proschak.

Furthermore, space and spatiality are visible in this motif. The image shows more background than previous sculpture-like motifs. The background does not have much detail, but the vacancy reveals the space. The structure of the corner of the room also deepens the perspective and spatiality.



Figures 3.19.a. (top) and 3.19.b. (bottom). Proschak's sketch material shows her multiple attempts to become a sculpture and her development of ideas from making an image to the plan for display. Her research-like methodology is well observable in her sketch materials.

In this motif, a new dimension 'space' has been added. Proschak *placed* herself in the space (see figures. 3.19.). She did not just place herself in the space, but she performatively created the space with her own body. Although the image is not a performance per se, but it is a performative image. Markus Hallensleben denoted that

“any body image, including the physical body, *is* and *has* a performative quality.”<sup>224</sup>

Proschak created, performatively with her body, a space within the space:

There is an immediate relationship between the body and its space, between the body’s deployment in space and its occupation of space. Before *producing* effects in the material realm (tools and objects), before *producing* itself by generating other bodies, each living body *is* space and *has* its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space. This is a truly remarkable relationship: the body with the energies at its disposal, the living body, creates or produces its own space.<sup>225</sup>

She used photography for her exploration. In her previous sculpture-like motifs, the element of time was fused in the mode of taxidermy into the flat and two-dimensional medium of photography. Now, another dimension of space has been added. She pinpointed herself in a specific time and space, denoted her coordinates, and imprinted it on the skin of photography. We follow her, her placing herself, through our gaze.

Unlike most painterly self-portraits that stare straight ahead, Proschak’s self-referential images do not face the front. They mostly show her back. This motif does not even show her face or head at all. Yet we can trace the artist’s gaze that looked through the camera lens and imagined her located in front of it in a few tens of seconds from that time of looking through the lens. Her photographic self-portraits showing her back are far more ontological than the painterly self-portrait, although they do not reveal the face, as photographic portraits require the physical presence of the model—the artist herself in the case of self-portraits.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Markus Hallenleben, “Introduction: Performative Body Spaces,” in *Performative Body Spaces: Corporeal Topographies in Literature, Theatre, Dance, and the visual Arts*, ed. Markus Hallenleben (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2010), 10.

<sup>225</sup> Quoted in: Hallenleben, “Introduction: Performative Body Spaces,” 16. The original source stated in the bibliography: Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 170.

<sup>226</sup> Regarding making portraits of one’s self by means of photography, see Chapter 5 of *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* by Barthes. He phenomenologically elucidated the

The elements of space and spatiality were also considered in the installation. The strategy of placing in the space continues in the installation. In the exhibition view of figure 3.17., the photograph—the photo paper—is literally ‘placed’ on the floor, leaning against the wall. It seems like the picture stands directly on the floor, and the floor in the image is seemingly extended from the epoxy floor of the exhibition space. It creates an effect that the artist stands on the actual floor of the gallery. However, she deliberately distinguished two different spaces—the space of the exhibition space and the space of the photograph—through the white margin of the photograph.

At the corner of the other side of the wall, a pinkish object is located. It is a roll of photo paper. When photo paper is exposed to light without the process of development and fixation in a dark room, the color of the surface changes over time. Kodak photo paper becomes pinkish, and Fuji photo paper bluish. Proschak installed a roll of Kodak photo paper, which was changed to a pinkish skin color, in the exhibition. The photo paper roll resonates with the image of her in a nude color leotard. The colors and curls echo with each other. The interesting thing is that the surface is rolled inwards. It leads the viewer to (re)consider the perspective of the inside and outside of the skin, as well as the inside and outside of oneself.

The other two photos displayed on the same wall also create an intriguing dynamic. They are located in the center of the wall. In the left image, the human bone anatomy model seems to hold something in its hand and look into it (see figure 3.20.). It might be a mirror—or a smartphone in the modern era. The artist must have associated it with a smartphone since she titled the photo *Selfie*. It is juxtaposed with the image next to it, which depicts a hand grabbing fruit (see figure 3.21.).

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significance of posing in front of the camera, the failure to coincide with the image and the self, and the death drawn in photographs, etc.



Left: Figure 3.20. *Selfie*, 2015, color photography, size variable. © Barbara Proschak. Right: Figure 3.21. *Magnolienfrucht* [Magnolia fruit], 2016/2018, color photography, 8x6 cm. © Barbara Proschak.

Proschak created visual and conceptual dynamics between the four motifs through installation which reflects the perspectives of human vision and the viewpoints of the camera of each motif. Images of the selfie and the hand look forward, while her self-portrait looks back. The former two are located at eye level, whereas the latter is located on the floor. In addition to this, *Selfie* is half-roundly protruding. It corresponds to our view when we observe a three-dimensional object located against the wall in the exhibition space. On the contrary, the photo of the hand holding the poppy is flat, reflecting the photographed viewpoint. The photograph of herself like a sculpture standing on the floor has an angle that is similar to a cyclorama curve in the photo studio. And the photo paper roll is just there at the corner of the wall, as if it were found in the artist's atelier.

Due to her uniquely tailored installation, spaces and gaps between the

exhibition space and the exhibits occurred. Those function as reflective spaces where viewers can intervene and engage themselves. This brings us back to the title of the work: *dazwischenkommend* [getting-in-between, intervening]. Proschak intervened in the space, and we, the spectators, intervene in that autobiographical space created by her.

### Map of Self

Making a connection.

Leaving an index in the world.

Landscapes may be explored and traveled.

Clouds float over the ground,

stick and linger on the carrier.

The skin of the world meets the skin of I

and thus forms a cartographic surface.

The horizon disappears and reveals itself at the same time.<sup>227</sup>

—Barbara Proschak, “Dermatografien”

The last work I will explore in this subchapter is *54°19'31", N 10°8'26", O – Truncus T4, dexter* (figure 3.23.), *Dermatografien*<sup>228</sup> [Dermatography] in the form of a folding map on which Proschak’s skin was conversely imprinted. I consider this work one of the most crucial works in her artistic practice. It possesses multiple significant features of her visual autobiography: skin as the epicenter of self and its merging with

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<sup>227</sup> Own translation from German into English. The original text reads as follows: “Eine Verbindung eingehen. // Einen Index in der Welt hinterlassen. // Landschaften dürfen erforscht und bereist werden. / Wolken schweben über den Grund, / bleiben haften und verweilen auf dem Träger. / Die Haut der Welt trifft auf die Haut des Ichs / und formt damit eine kartografische Fläche. / Der Horizont verschwindet und offenbart sich zugleich.” Barbara Proschak, “Dermatografien : Barbara Proschak,” accessed May 9, 2021, <http://www.barbaraproschak.com/projects/dermatografien>.

<sup>228</sup> ‘Deamatografien’ refers to the method of making landscape-skin-photos and/or the images produced by that method. It was also the title of Proschak’s exhibition held in 2012 in Berlin, Germany.

the world, metamorphoses and variations of concepts and forms, and exploration and discovery of different meanings of the same work in different contexts over time.

The work  $54^{\circ}19'31''$ ,  $N 10^{\circ}8'26''$ , *O – Truncus T4, dexter* is not completely new, because it is a variation of the same concept as landscape-skin-photos in *Felmen* in that she imprinted her skin onto the negative of the film of the landscape. She transformed two motifs of landscape-skin-photos into the form of a folding map and named them as follows:  $54^{\circ}19'31''$ ,  $N 10^{\circ}8'26''$ , *O – Truncus T4, dexter* and  $52^{\circ}19'31''$ ,  $N 10^{\circ}8'25''$ , *O – Truncus T1 sinister*. The title consists of two parts that show the concept and methodology of the work: latitude, longitude – body part. It indicates where the landscape was taken, and which body part was pressed onto the negative.<sup>229</sup>

In *Felmen*, the images of landscape-skin-photos seemed like natural landscapes. She bestowed on the landscape-like images the form of a map, especially the folding map (see figure 3.22.). This conversion is insightful: It is not a mere borrowing of the aesthetics or form of the map, but it fits also contents-wise. The landscape-skin-photos/Dermatografien are the artist's attempt and exploration to understand herself within the world. By means of her medium—photography—and her own body, she visualized her being in and toward the world. Skin plays here a key role as the most outer surface of the body that first encounters the outer world, and she let her skin meet the world through the process of making images. Her skin is displayed as negative since she converted the image so that the landscape becomes positive—the image is positive from the point of view of the world and negative from that of herself. Through converting viewpoints, she reconsidered the perspective of observation of self

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<sup>229</sup> In Proschak's works, various motifs mutate into different forms and materials while maintaining the same concept. For example, there are other images having the same concept as landscape-skin-photos such as satellite photos, crystal structures, etc. There are also color images.

and subject-object relationships.



Figure 3.22. Transformation of Dermatografien in different forms. Landscape-skin-photos in *Felmen* (top left), landscape-skin-photos in a book box set *Felmen* (top right), and the folding map (bottom). © Barbara Proschak.

Her exploration is comparable to cartography. Cartography is an art of exploration of the world that characteristically represents the urge and act of humans to understand the world on a geographical level. Cartography grasps reality and surroundings by systemizing space. It brings humans back to the understanding of themselves, as well as broadening the horizon of their knowledge and themselves. Proschak's Dermatografien and cartography share a very similar—almost identical—attitude. Thus, the transformation of the landscape-skin-photos into a form of the map obtains a methodological justification, and a more profound and advanced meaning emerges from that: Self on the map.

The folding map first appeared in the exhibition *Dermatografien* held in

January 2012 in Berlin, together with other *Dermatografien*.<sup>230</sup> Ever since then, the folding map appears in her almost every exhibition in different contexts; it varies with the exhibition narrative. In *Dermatografien*, it was portrayed as a new landscape. In *In Toto*, it formed part of the archive together with many other various components. In contrast with the motifs featuring her body, the flat paper of the map created an intriguing balance. In *dazwischenkommend*, the folding map played a significant role, and the meaning was reinforced through her mapping-like installation.

In *dazwischenkommend*, the folding map  $54^{\circ}19'31''$ ,  $N 10^{\circ}8'26''$ ,  $O - Truncus T4$ , *dexter* (figure 3.23) was displayed on the wall at the main entrance; and at the other entrance, another work *Tafel I* (figure 3.24.) was exhibited, which was also a variation of *Dermatografien*. Both images were not juxtaposed directly with each other, but they interacted in the space (see the ground plan, figure 3.25.).

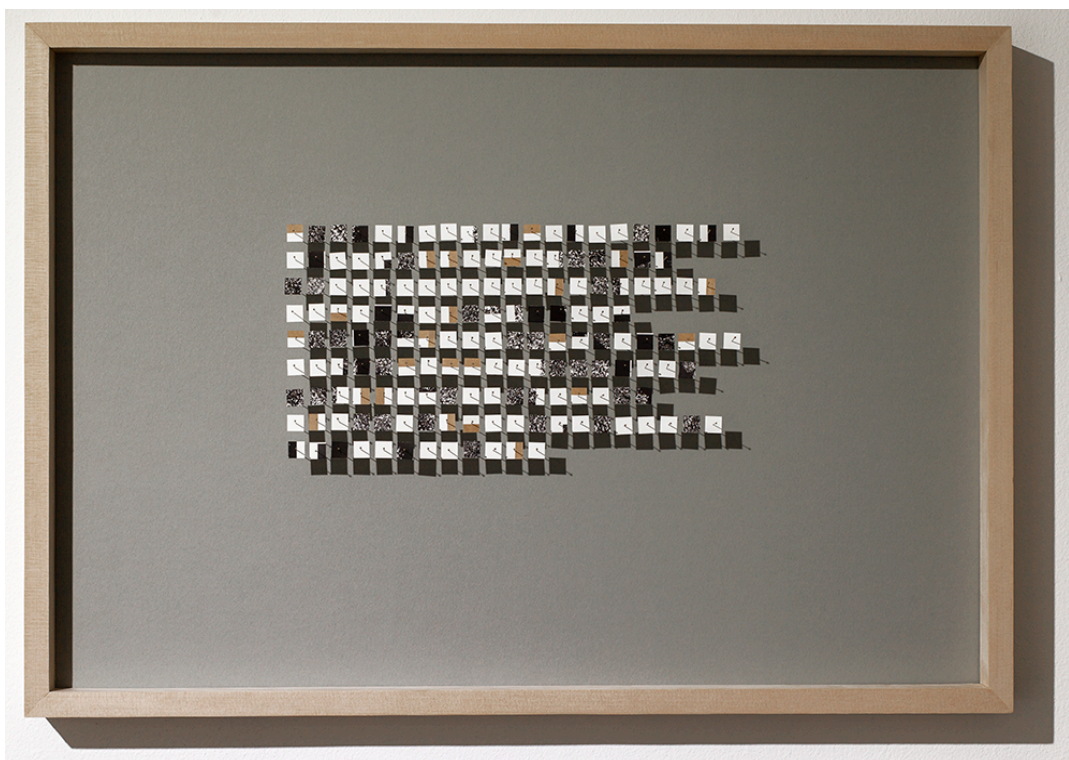
*Tafel I* is an object and an image at the same time. Proschak dissected a few photos of *Dermatografien* in 1x1 cm size and pinned those on the foam board.<sup>231</sup> For pinning, the same type of needle used in taxidermy of insects was used—this approach already appeared in *In\_let#1*. *Tafel I* is very abstract. It does not convey anything. Viewers cannot decipher anything from the surface of the image. However, through juxtaposition with the map, the viewer gets the idea that the cut and pinned pieces could be fragments of some landscape images.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Proschak, “*Dermatografien*,” accessed May 9, 2021, <http://www.barbaraproschak.com/projects/dermatografien>.

<sup>231</sup> The original images for *Tafel I* was produced in a dark room. The tan color structure on the pieces is the masking tape that was fastened to the photo papers when drying them in order to spread them out.

<sup>232</sup> It also resonates with the *Kreis\_silber* and the photo of the empty insect boxes with tons of small holes. The photos of the empty insect boxes were displayed at the symmetrical position of *Kreis\_silber* on the same wall (see figure 3.17.).



Figures 3.23. and 3.24. Part and whole. © Barbara Proschak.

Top: Figure 3.23. The folding map, unfolded and spread.  $54^{\circ}19'31''$ ,  $N 10^{\circ}8'26''$ , *O – Truncus T4, dexter*, 2011, black and white print, folded and cut, 103x123 cm (without the DIN A4 part of the index of the map).

Bottom: Figure 3.24. Dissected and pinned Dermatografien. *Tafel 1*, 2011/2018, cut and pinned black and white Baryta prints, 40x60 cm.

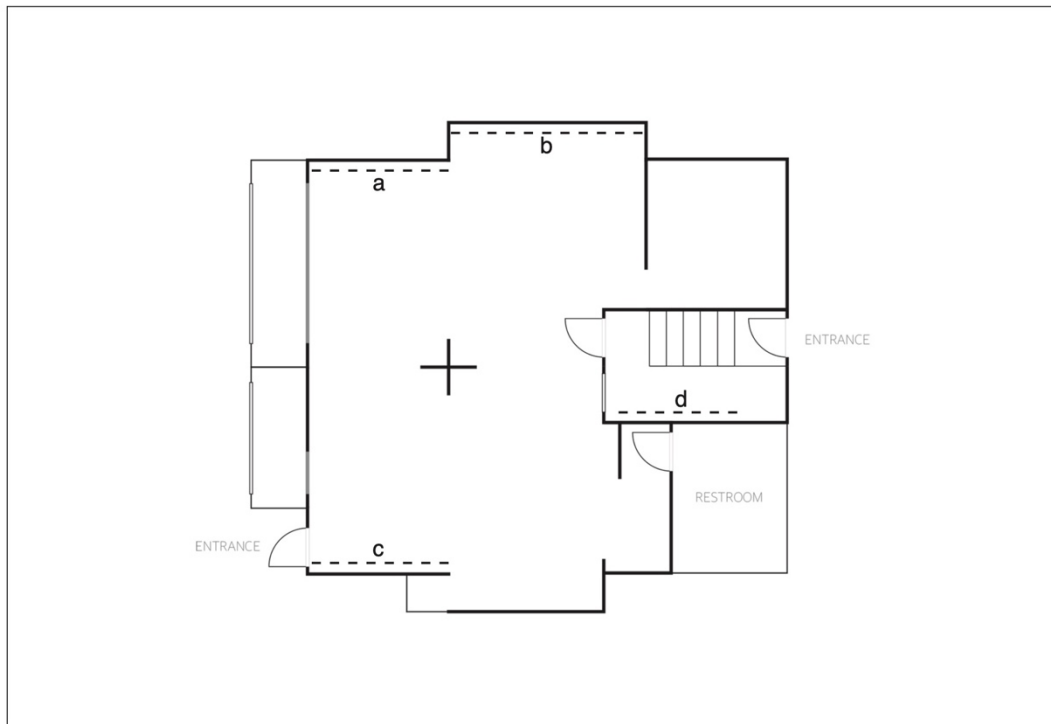


Figure 3.25. Ground plan of 148 Studio where the exhibition *body that is at once body-subject and body-object* was held. Proschak's works were exhibited at a, b, c, and d. She mapped the space through installation.

- a) The wall filled up with various components including *Kreis\_silber* and *Corps*
- b) The installation with the sculpture-like photo and Kodak photo paper roll
- c) Dissected and pinned *Dermatografien Tafel 1*
- d) The folding map  $54^{\circ}19'31''$ ,  $N 10^{\circ}8'26''$ ,  $O - Truncus T4$ , *dexter*

The juxtaposition reflects the relationship between part and whole: There are parts that constitute the whole, however, it is difficult—almost impossible—to perceive both at the same time. It is also similar to close-up and long shots of camera works—zoom in and zoom out. A similar action takes place when navigating a certain spot on a folding map. One opens the index of the map, finds the vertical and horizontal axes of where the spot belongs, opens—unfolds—the corresponding part of the map, and digs into the area.

Dermatografien has been practiced from Proschak's early practice until today in different forms and contexts. Starting with the landscape-skin-photos in *Felmen*, after transforming into the folding map, Dermatografien continues its journey and

explores new meanings in different places. It represents the essence of Proschak's visual autobiography: She explores and navigates her *self* and expands her boundaries and understanding. The varied usage and contextualization of Dermatografien attest that Proschak's negotiation of her self toward others has become more obvious—I would rather call it conscious. And it is hermeneutic as before.

### 3.4. *SO LANG UND ETWAS LÄNGER*

The last work I will examine is Proschak's current—ongoing—work. In this series, she has been imprinting her traces with permanent marker pens on photographs since 2018. She also works on other works, but this series constitutes the main part of her current practice.

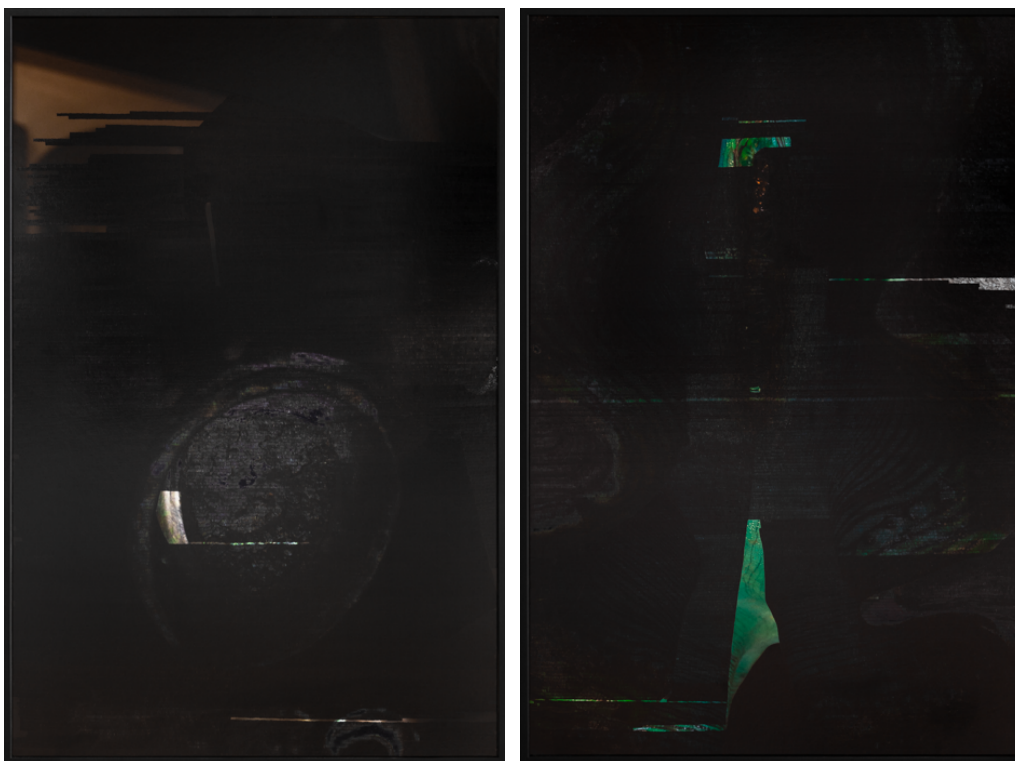
The series shows a big difference from her previous works in style. It is abstract and obscure. The change seems big and sudden. What would have brought about this substantial change? Her three months in Korea in 2018 seem like a turning point in her artistic practice. In 2018, Proschak took an Artist-In-Residency program at Gachang Art Studio in Daegu in Korea for three months—*dazwischenkommend* was produced during this time as well.

In the text interview on the Meisterschüler presentation *SO LANG UND ETWAS LÄNGER* [SO LONG AND SOMEWHAT LONGER], answering her supervisor Tina Bara's question about the change in her reduced style and method, Proschak said as follows:

At this point, I would like to talk about my often withdrawn way of working. The scholarship (April to June 2018) in South Korea was a very decisive moment in recent years. There, I was in a foreign culture, with a foreign language and writing. Each character was less information than a pattern. I was in a small suburb of Daegu, a city of millions, staying with 8 Korean artists and one Austrian artist. We worked and lived in a converted elementary school. Around the area, there were farms, nature, and a village. The exchange with the other artists was there, but a strong concentration on one's own doing

crystallized.<sup>233</sup>

Indeed, her style and approach have changed on multiple levels after her time in Korea. After coming back to Germany, she has been focusing on producing one completed image/series, rather than taking numerous photos, and she has been working on the series with the permanent pen on the print of photographs (see figures 3.26. and 3.27.).



Figures 3.26. Imprints of her traces with permanent pens on photographs. © Barbara Proschak.

Left: Figure 3.26.a. 7153, 2019, permanent pen on fine art print, 97x65.5 cm.

Right: Figure 3.26.b. 9242, 2019, permanent pen on fine art print, 97x65.5 cm.

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<sup>233</sup> Own translation from German into English. The original text reads as follows: “An dieser Stelle möchte ich auf meine oft zurückgezogene Arbeitsweise sprechen. Das Stipendium (April bis Juni 2018) in Südkorea war ein sehr entscheidender Moment in den letzten Jahren. Dort war ich in einer fremden Kultur, mit fremder Sprache und Schrift. Jedes Zeichen war weniger Information als Muster. Ich war in einem kleinen Vorort der Millionenstadt Daegu und hielt mich dort mit 8 koreanischen und einer österreichischen Künstlerin auf. Wir arbeiteten und wohnten in einer umgebauten Grundschule. Um das Gelände herum gab es Bauern, Natur, ein Dorf. Der Austausch mit den anderen Künstlerinnen war da, aber es kristallisierte sich eine starke Konzentration auf das eigene Tun heraus.” From Meisterschüler presentation material, artist’s courtesy.

The images are far more abstract, both aesthetically and methodologically. The biggest difference from her previous works is that her body does not appear as an object—it is no longer visible. However, significant threads of her artistic practice continue to run through: Her body still plays a crucial role; the work is related to archives; her interest in the preservation of being and time continues as well. In sum, she still works on her self, but in a different way, in an abstract and reduced way.

The process of creating this series is laborious. First, she prints the photos of shells in color on Hahnemühle paper which has an embossed surface. Onto the printed photograph, she covers the image by filling up innumerable lines with a permanent marker pen. It takes 3–4 months to finish one image in this way, because the image is quite big, 97x65.5 cm and the pen is only 0.4 mm. She draws the lines repeatedly, day by day—it is almost painful cultivation. As a result of this laborious process, a new image looms—a textile in which two images are interwoven.<sup>234</sup> There are blank spaces that she did not fill up with the lines. However, these are not blank since there is an image of the shell.

In the image, her body is not directly visible, however, it is inscribed in *touch*. She is there: “I am in the process, of moving and deciding from moment to moment. In doing. I stretch open and fold in, approach and distance myself, dissolve and bring together, cover and expose, hoard and distill.”<sup>235</sup> As the artist says, she is there in dual

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<sup>234</sup> The etymology of text is ‘to weave’ and textile ‘woven fabric.’ See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “text,” accessed May 22, 2021, <https://www.oed.com/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/200002#eid18738443>. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “textile,” accessed May 22, 2021, <https://www.oed.com/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/200011?redirectedFrom=textile#eid>.

<sup>235</sup> Own translation from German into English. The original text reads as follows: “Ich bin im Prozess, bewege mich dabei und entscheide von Moment zu Moment. Im Tun. Ich spanne auf und falte ein, nähere mich an und distanziere mich, löse auf und führe zusammen, überdecke und entblöße, horte und destilliere.” From Meisterschüler presentation material, artist’s courtesy. The same content can also be found on the artist’s website.

modes, in the process and in the result.

The work is full of double connotations. On the one hand, she covered the image; on the other hand, she revealed it. It drags the viewer's gaze *into* the image behind her touch. Thus, it paradoxically works as an expose: The image of a shell rises to the surface.

She covered the image, yet she did not alter it. It is like rust and patina cover the surface of an object but the object remains. The image also resembles patina as black pigment was added to the color photograph. Conceptually, too, time was layered on the images of the shells through her touch: "Time inscribes the body in the lines that become bodies—and patina."<sup>236</sup>

Proschak's current practice differs from her previous works, yet it is no disconnection but a further expansion. She still works on herself, connects herself to other beings, and creates surfaces—images—through touch, in which her self is inscribed. As the artist has said, experiences in an unfamiliar culture made her concentrate on herself. At the same time, it opened up the perception and sensation of the external world—a new way of seeing. The inward concentration on herself and her doing and expansion to the outer world and others are intricately reflected in the series. The subtitle of the Meisterschüler presentation also complements this: *Anhaften von Fremdmaterial*. It means 'inheritance of external material.'<sup>237</sup>

Indeed, she engages with external material in this series. The basic material of the series is photos of snails and shells. The story of her first interaction with shells

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<sup>236</sup> Own translation from German into English. The original text reads as follows: "Die Zeit schreibt den Körper in die Striche ein, die Körper werden—und Patina." From Meisterschüler presentation material, artist's courtesy.

<sup>237</sup> 'Anhaften von Fremdmaterial' has a double meaning. It can be translated as 'inheritance of external material' and 'adherence of foreign material.' Both translations make sense for this series. The former implies her connection to the world and other beings, the latter is linked to her working process of adding lines to the original image. I took 'inheritance of external material' as it fits the concept and motivation.

traces back to 2015 when she visited the Museum of Natural History in Vienna. She was inspired by a shell, so she “took the object with me [her] in the form of a photo note.”<sup>238</sup> The photo became part of her working materials—archives. In 2018, she visited the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin [Museum of Natural History Berlin]. She spent time in the snail and shell department for her research and took numerous photos. These photos form the basic material of this series. These anecdotes of her encounter with the shell reveal the essential mode of her artistic practice. Proschak’s works and practice in different times are connected, accumulated, and continuously flowing, and they constitute her visual autobiography.

The fact that she chose shell as the basic material is remarkable. The shell is an intriguing object in terms of its skin and mode of being. The hard integument is one’s outer surface; it functions as protection and a house for a being; it keeps the being alive, but it is less associated with life. Nonetheless, it is essential for each being because it cannot be replaced like houses and clothes: It holds life. What remains after a shellfish’s or snail’s death is the hard skin. Proschak’s laborious process and engagement with the *image* of the hard skin of non-human beings subtly imply death and mortality. She negotiated the matter through the death and time of others—shells: She inscribed her being onto the image of the other beings that died long ago.

In 2020, she presented six images of the series in the Meisterschüler presentation exhibition *SO LANG UND ETWAS LÄNGER*—SO LONG AND SOMEWHAT LONGER. The title of the exhibition indicates her attitude toward art; she has dedicated herself to art for so long, and she will do so somewhat longer. This series, too, will be conducted for somewhat longer.

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<sup>238</sup> Own translation from German into English. The original text reads as follows: “Ich nahm mir das Objekt in Form einer Fotonotiz mit.” From Meisterschüler presentation material, artist’s courtesy.

Indeed, Proschak did not stop drawing lines after the show. She continued to work on the series. The images have become more colorful, but other than that, the same concept is maintained (see figures 3.27.). In her latest solo exhibition, *on print*, held in Leipzig in 2021, she presented the new motifs of this series along with her previous works—both older works from the same series, as well as other elements, such as cellophane paper images—through installation. Various layers of various elements were exhibited. Proschak’s visual autobiography continues.



Figures 3.27. Imprint of her trace with permanent pens on photographs. © Barbara Proschak.

Left: Figure 3.27.a. *9242\_Farbe\_02*, 2021, permanent pen on fine art print, 31x21 cm (framed).

Right: Figure 3.27.b. *Aquarium\_02*, 2021, permanent pen on fine art print, 31x21 cm (framed).

### 3.5. Summary

Proschak’s autobiographical practice is ever evolving. Her *self* stands at the center of her artistic practice, and skin is the central metaphor. Proschak has focused

on different aspects of skin over time. *Felmen* featured skin as the surface and boundary. In *In Toto*, this was expanded as the bodily organism within the context of corpus. The contact and connection to the outer world of skin and being were emphasized in *dazwischenkommend*. In her recent series, she imprints herself through touch on the images of the hard skin of other beings. Her practice has expanded its boundaries to the outer world and other beings as the skin—we as being—does. For Proschak, skin is a means to understand her self and visualize the mode of being.

In her works, the body appears sometimes as an object, other times as a subject, and often as both at the same time—the body is sometimes visible as an object, other times invisible. She creates autobiographical narratives through photography and installation. Her “gesture of photographing does not show the photographer to be a passive object (as in the anthropological sciences). It mirrors an active subject (the goal of some philosophies).”<sup>239</sup> Proschak “translates the philosophical attitude into a new context.”<sup>240</sup> She philosophies as body—embodied self—and brings it onto the skin of photographic images, and she weaves and maps those together in her archives and in the exhibition spaces.

Another philosophical attitude observable in Proschak’s visual autobiography is *eternal recurrence*. The themes and concepts repeat. It is hermeneutic and dialectical. This is evident, for example, when we follow the trajectory of the mutations of her artistic strategy of ‘covering’ in her artistic practice. In *Felmen*, she covered her body with fabrics to illustrate birthmarks; here, she used a third object to cover her actual body and photographed it. In *In Toto*, she presented the work of a silkscreened body; here, the silkscreen was overlaid on the photograph. Finally, in

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<sup>239</sup> Flusser, *Gestures*, 84.

<sup>240</sup> Flusser, *Gestures*, 78.

her recent series, she covered the image of other beings with her touch; here, the covering was manually conducted by her hand, not by other mediums such as fabrics, photography, or silkscreen.

The concept and form/strategy of covering have dialectically evolved throughout her practice. Although the meaning and strategy vary in each work, covering plays a significant role. It has almost always double functions. It veils and unveils at the same time. It veils her birthmarks, skin, and body; however, it reveals boundaries and modes of being. What it ultimately (un)veils is Being, and mortality beyond that. She consistently negotiates it.

Flusser wrote that “the ‘artistic life’ is not about changing the world, or about being in the world with others, but about finding itself in the world.”<sup>241</sup> Proschak’s visual autobiography is a continuous process of finding herself in the world. Through art, she understands herself, negotiates herself, and lives her life out thoroughly. She negotiates life and death, being and mortality, which complements and affirms life. It can also be understood as “the unique formula of behavior toward others, Nature, time, and death; that is, a certain manner of articulating the world[.]”<sup>242</sup>

Since Proschak works with/from her personal stories, her works entail intimate touch that creates “the most immense intimacy, of intimate immensity[.]”<sup>243</sup> However, personal and intimate themes become something generally valid through the autobiographical narrative she creates. As a result, it extends toward others, the world, and the public. Her visual autobiography resonates with us and eventually leads us to

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<sup>241</sup> Flusser, *Gestures*, 128.

<sup>242</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Abingdon; Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 19.

<sup>243</sup> Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem*, 8.

finding ourselves. In fact, we understand ourselves through the “taking up [la reprise] of my past experiences into my present experiences, or of the other person’s experience into my own.”<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 21.

#### 4. Christian Boltanski

While Proschak's artistic practice leads us to comprehend the ontological aspect of self, Christian Boltanski's works let us think about the social aspect—how individuals exist in society, how they are eliminated from society, and how we are connected to each other.

Boltanski was born in 1944 in Paris. His father was Jewish Ukrainian, and his mother was Christian Corsican. His grandparents and parents experienced the National Socialist era. He heard of it often from them in his childhood, and that greatly influenced his artistic practice. Boltanski declined formal education. In an interview with Ralf Beil, he claimed that he was not crazy but odd. After withdrawing from school, he started to play with stuff and draw and paint. He said: "Art has protected me from insanity."<sup>245</sup> His first medium was painting. However, from the end of 1960s, he gradually moved to other media such as film, photography, text, sculpture, object, installation, etc.

Boltanski's works are strongly rooted in his self and identity. His earlier works demonstrate his interest in self and identity. In *La Vie impossible de C.B.*, he tried to reconstruct his past—the work reveals the (im)possibility of constructing one's self in its structure. Boltanski's autobiographical works have received various criticisms, but we can consider different perspectives on the genre of autobiography.

Boltanski is well-known for his works on grieving for the victims of the Shoah. Compared to his early practice, which is easy to correlate with 'autobiography,' his

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<sup>245</sup> Ralf Beil, "'Life is just a short black line': A Conversation with Christian Boltanski," in *Christian Boltanski: Time*, ed. Ralf Beil (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006), 52. The interview (pages 47–80 of the book) is helpful to understand how Boltanski himself understands key themes, especially the relationship between time and death.

works on the Shoah may not seem to be directly associated with it. But these works, too, are closely related to his identity. His childhood experience and sociocultural identity/background substantially influenced his artistic practice. Cultural and social themes were once internalized in him and brought out and articulated through him again: His self is imprinted in those works.

In fact, Boltanski's works have always revolved around his *self*, spanning personal and social themes. Death connects these two realms—death runs through his entire artistic practice as a significant thread. He thematized death of different subjects, from personal—his own—and individual to social and cultural. I consider his works on two different themes not separate but holistically connected, constituting his visual autobiography.

In this chapter, I will illustrate Boltanski's entire artistic practice as a visual autobiography. I will analyze his works in two categories and investigate selected key works in each. The two categories are: (im)possible autobiography and remembering and grieving for Holocaust victims. The latter will be further divided into two subcategories by artistic mediums: photographic portraits and clothes. In addition to this, I will examine criticisms—or claims—regarding the trustworthiness, historicity, and ethics of Boltanski's works and approaches in a separate subchapter. There, I will analyze *The Missing House* and demonstrate that Boltanski's subtle approach reveals multiple visages of a historical event and its historicization. His approach enables the viewer to conceive different perspectives.

The structure and categories of this chapter, set out by themes and artistic strategies, align with the chronology of Boltanski's artistic practice. Therefore, it will naturally show the development of his artistic practice. The holistic examination of his different types of works will reveal a kernel that runs across his entire artistic

practice—self—and it will demonstrate how/why his entire artistic practice can—and should—be grasped as a visual autobiography.

#### 4.1. *La Vie Impossible de C.B.*<sup>246</sup>

His life stories and concerns about death constitute the locus of Boltanski's artistic practice. Especially in his early artistic practice, he produced works related to childhood and the quest for it. This subchapter will examine significant works in his early artistic practice. *La Vie impossible de C.B., Recherche et Présentation de tout ce qui reste de mon enfance, 1944–1950, Vitrine de Référence, and 10 Portraits Photographiques de Christian Boltanski 1946–1964* will be studied in-depth. These works show that his autobiographical passion existed early.

#### **Becoming an Artist**

Boltanski was not professionally trained in art. He withdrew from school in his youth and taught himself art. He spent his time drawing and painting at home. Painting was his medium for nearly ten years. During this period, he often painted a human in loneliness—or darkness—in an expressionist manner. These paintings convey Boltanski's emotions directly.

In *La Chambre ovale* [Oval Room]<sup>247</sup> (figure 4.1.), a human figure is sitting on the floor in a room surrounded by loud colors of a red door and purple wall(s). The edges of the floor and walls are rounded, and so is the figure's back. The exact emotion of the figure cannot be captured because the face is crushed. However, it

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<sup>246</sup> *La Vie impossible de C.B.* is the title of Boltanski's work which will be studied in this subchapter. I chose it as the title of this subchapter because it implicitly shows the gist of his autobiographical reconstruction and Boltanski's make-believe strategies.

<sup>247</sup> Own translation from French into English.

conveys emptiness. It is fearful too.



Figure 4.1.<sup>248</sup> *La Chambre ovale*, acryl on panel, 115x146.5 cm, 1967. © Photo: Adam Rzepka – Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI / Dist. RMN-GP © Adagp, Paris.

Some of his paintings during this period depict a human holding a puppet. *LE REPAS REFUSE* (1974) describes him feeding a puppet on his lap.<sup>249</sup> The painted text on the image suggests that the puppet is a little Christian. The text reads as ‘LE REPAS REFUSE / CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI ET LE PETIT CHRISTIAN’ [THE

<sup>248</sup> “La Chambre ovale,” Centre Pompidou, accessed June 13, 2021, <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/ressources/oeuvre/czyyGG4>.

<sup>249</sup> See “LE REPAS REFUSE,” artnet, accessed June 13, 2021, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/christian-boltanski/le-repas-refuse-acrylic-and-colored-crayons-on-Vo6D8pE12IRK9sbirfZtEA2>.

MEAL REFUSES / CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI AND THE LITTLE CHRISTIAN]<sup>250</sup>.

The puppet figures in Boltanski's works seem to symbolize his other self, that of his childhood.<sup>251</sup> The puppet and similar motifs continue to appear in his later works after he changed his mediums to film, photography, and installation. In the colored photograph, *La Voiture en tili* (1974), Boltanski holds a puppet and giggles grotesquely.<sup>252</sup>

We do not know what the motifs and scenes in his paintings exactly represent, yet feelings and emotions are clearly conveyed. They feel lonely, empty, sad, dark, fearful, and abandoned—alone. They represent his childhood experiences and memories—and feelings attached to them he would have had in certain situations. He recalled that he grew up in an atmosphere of “a fear of life.”<sup>253</sup> For Boltanski, “our childhoods are not idealized passages into adulthood, but instead, the first part of us to die.”<sup>254</sup>

To comprehend Boltanski's association of childhood with death, understanding the background of his growing up would be helpful. When Boltanski was born in 1944 in Paris to a Jewish father and a Christian mother, much of Europe was under Nazi oppression. The war ended soon after his birth. However, anti-

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<sup>250</sup> Own translation from French into English.

<sup>251</sup> “Despite of everything, the image I have of myself—and it's one that I regret, that I despise—is the image of good little Christian. That's the image I subconsciously want to put out.” Christian Boltanski and Catherine Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, trans. Marc Lowenthal (Boston: MFA Publications, 2009), 167.

<sup>252</sup> See “La Voiture en métal,” Centre Pompidou, accessed June 13, 2021, <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/ressources/oeuvre/c9ngeqe>.

<sup>253</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 17. Boltanski shared his stories in numerous interviews, but some of them do not match each other. I will regard this book as Boltanski's first account because he was involved in the publication more directly. The book will be used for the contextualization of his life and art.

<sup>254</sup> Lynn Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, trans. Francis Cowper (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), 12.

Semitism was still prevalent when he grew up. In his autobiographical publication *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, he shared his memory of being called ‘little rabbi’ at school and said: “I also definitely remember always feeling ashamed of being Jewish. Of wanting to be French, . . . It was something to hide, something dangerous[.]”<sup>255</sup>

His parents did not particularly bring him up in a Jewish way.<sup>256</sup> Nonetheless, the fact of being Jewish seems to have crucially influenced his withdrawal from school:

I remember the years just after the war, when anti-Semitism was still strong in France, ‘feeling...different from the others.’ I fell into such a state of withdrawal that at age eleven I not only had no friends and felt useless, but I quit school too. One day, my brother congratulated me on one of my drawing and that was enough to convince me that I, too, was good for something; then I started painting without respite[.]<sup>257</sup>

Boltanski quit school,<sup>258</sup> and, thanks to his brother’s encouragement, decided to become an artist. According to him, he started to paint in 1958. Years later,

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<sup>255</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 12.

<sup>256</sup> Not only regarding his Jewish origin and anti-Semitism but also regarding his family environment, he had quite a unique childhood. The home atmosphere was free and liberal, but a little bit odd. It was strongly family-bound. For example, his family went out together wherever they went, and Boltanski did not go out on his own until eighteen. He recalled: “I always had a sense of being different, which I think is tied to being an artist, actually. . . . And what I really wanted, like many stupid children, was to have regular parents, not unusual ones—to not be Jewish, to be normal.” Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 13.

<sup>257</sup> Cited after: Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, 18. In the book *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, Boltanski said Luc complimented “a little object out of modeling clay” he made, not drawing. Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 24.

<sup>258</sup> Anti-Semitism at school affected not only Boltanski but many other students of Jewish descent. In an article about German-Jewish artist Charlotte Salomon’s autobiography, Leah White wrote: “[Salomon] was subjected to intense discrimination at school, which eventually led to her refusal to return to classes. . . . The Salomons’ experience during the early 1930s was not unique. Other students reported feeling marginalized in the public school system.” Leah White, “Autobiography, Visual Representations, and the Preservation of Self,” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 37, no. 2 (June 2004): 108, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44030383>. The spelling error was kept as in the original. In her autobiography *Life? or Theatre?*, Salomon delivered the narrative by combining text written in the form of drama/play and self-painted images which conveyed her feelings and emotions. She described her painful experience at school. Regarding this, see page 119 of the same article by White.

Boltanski's mother opened a small gallery, *The Sunflowers*, for his son, which he ran. Starting with this experience, he came out of his cocoon. Gradually, he became familiar with the art scene. He spent his time in galleries and met many influential people for his artistic practice and life during this time. These people included artists, curators, and gallery owners such as Jean Le Gac, Yvon Lambert, Claude Givaudan, Ileana Sonnabend, Harald Szeemann, Sarkis, Annette Messenger, etc. Those encounters happened a lot around 1968—the period was also when French society was changing—and that “stretche[d] from 1969 to 1973, [that] was completely made up of encounters, friendships, projects in common.”<sup>259</sup> Exchanges with other people in the art world strongly and positively influenced his artistic development.<sup>260</sup>

From 1967, he broadened the horizon of his mediums. Soon, painting became no longer his main medium. One of the most influential mediums at the beginning of his media exploration was film. He filmed mostly in surreal settings, and *Mies-en-scène*, too, was quite grotesque. The dolls, which resembled the figures in his early paintings, sparked a bizarre atmosphere.

His debut exhibition (the first solo show) was held in Paris in 1968. The exhibition showed the above-mentioned transition of mediums. Intriguingly, the venue, Le Ranelagh, was not a gallery but a cinema. He made several huge crates, like chambers, in the lobby. On the balcony, he displayed some paintings. Visitors could enter one of the crates, which was filled with numerous life-size dolls. Surrounded by the dolls, they could watch a 12-minute film projected on a dark wall. The title of the film was *La Vie impossible de Christian Boltanski* [The impossible life of Christian

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<sup>259</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 53.

<sup>260</sup> One of the most fruitful outcomes would be his participation in documenta 5 curated by Harald Szeemann in 1972. It was a decisive moment for Boltanski as his work entered the international stage. See Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 62.

Boltanski]<sup>261</sup> (*The Impossible Life* or *La Vie impossible de Christian Boltanski* hereafter), which was also the title of the show.

His first show was coarse, but notable for a few points. First, the installation was already implemented, and it created an atmosphere and emotional effects. His installation develops later in far more elaborate ways and spatial installation becomes one of his signatures.<sup>262</sup> Second, it demonstrates the shift in media. Last, the theme of self was maintained from, and more clearly articulated than, his earlier paintings. *La Vie impossible de Christian Boltanski* is crucial evidence that he has been searching after his self from his early artistic practice onwards in different mediums.

After the solo exhibition, alongside film, he further explored other mediums. It included photography, text, archives, mail-art, artist's books, etc. By applying various mediums, he produced numerous works related to his self. For example, he (re)constructed his childhood memories with the aid of photography; he thematized his own death both by accident and suicide through staged photography; he recorded and gathered pieces of his life in diverse materials such as photographs, texts, objects, etc., and cast those in vitrines; he wrote texts about himself and his thoughts and struggles as an artist and a human being. Furthermore, he explored other ways of publishing his works beyond the exhibition. He produced artists' books, and he sent out some of his artworks in the form of mail-art between 1969 and 1974.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> The translation of the title followed Lynn Gumpert. Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, 19. All translations of the titles of Boltanski's works in this subchapter follow the same book unless otherwise marked. From the second mention onwards, English titles will be used unless original titles are necessary and/or more effective. The English titles will be capitalized, and shortened titles will be applied.

<sup>262</sup> Small figures and cinematic effects appear in his later work *Théâtre d'ombres* [Theatre of Shadows or Shadow Theater (own translation)] (1984–1997). This thesis does not discuss this work.

<sup>263</sup> "The transition years for me were the ones that went from creating my first book, in May 1969, to 1973." Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 43.

I consider this period crucial to his artistic practice because his artistic language and signature style was shaped in this period through various attempts—this is the reason why I contextualized his early stage of life and the passage of becoming an artist relatively thoroughly. Photography and the archive were established as significant means for Boltanski during this period.

### **Archive of Self: Study and Collection of Life**

*Recherche et Présentation de tout ce qui reste de mon enfance, 1944–1950*

[Research and Presentation of All that Remains of My Childhood, 1944–1950]<sup>264</sup>

(*Research and Presentation* hereafter) (figures 4.2.) was Boltanski’s first attempt to reconstruct and represent his childhood. He produced a nine-page artist’s book in 1969 that included photographs of him with friends, playing with toys, a class photo, a family outing, his family members, and photographic documentation of childhood belongings such as toys, bed, shirt, and memo in the textbook, etc. 150 copies of the artist’s book were sent out as mail-art.<sup>265</sup>

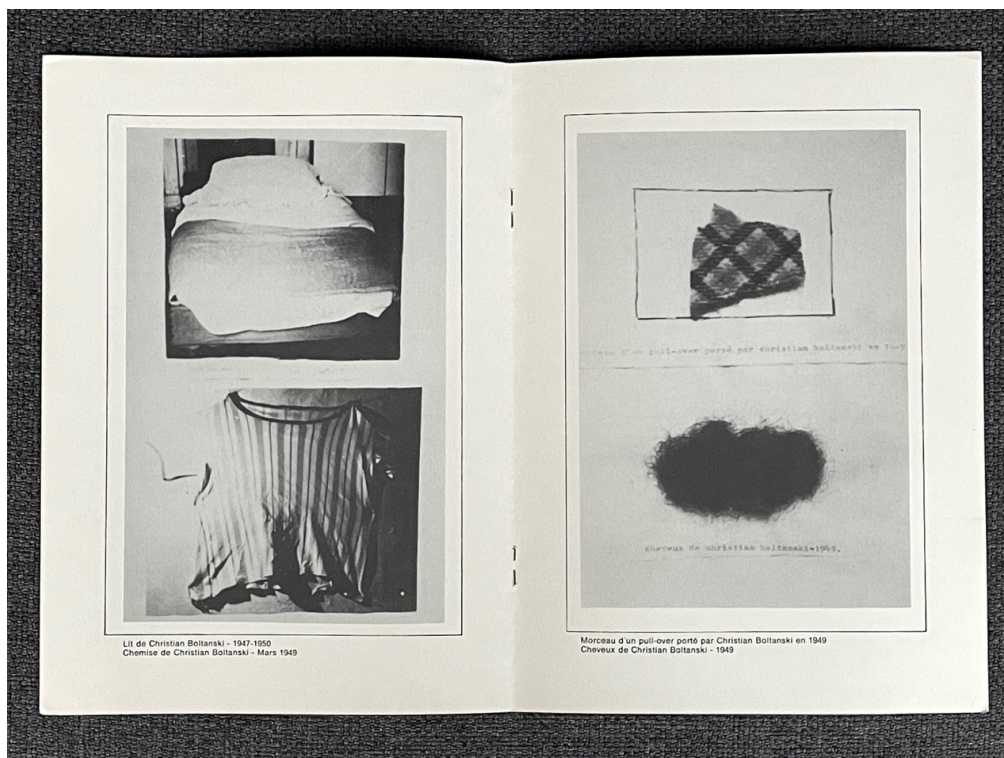
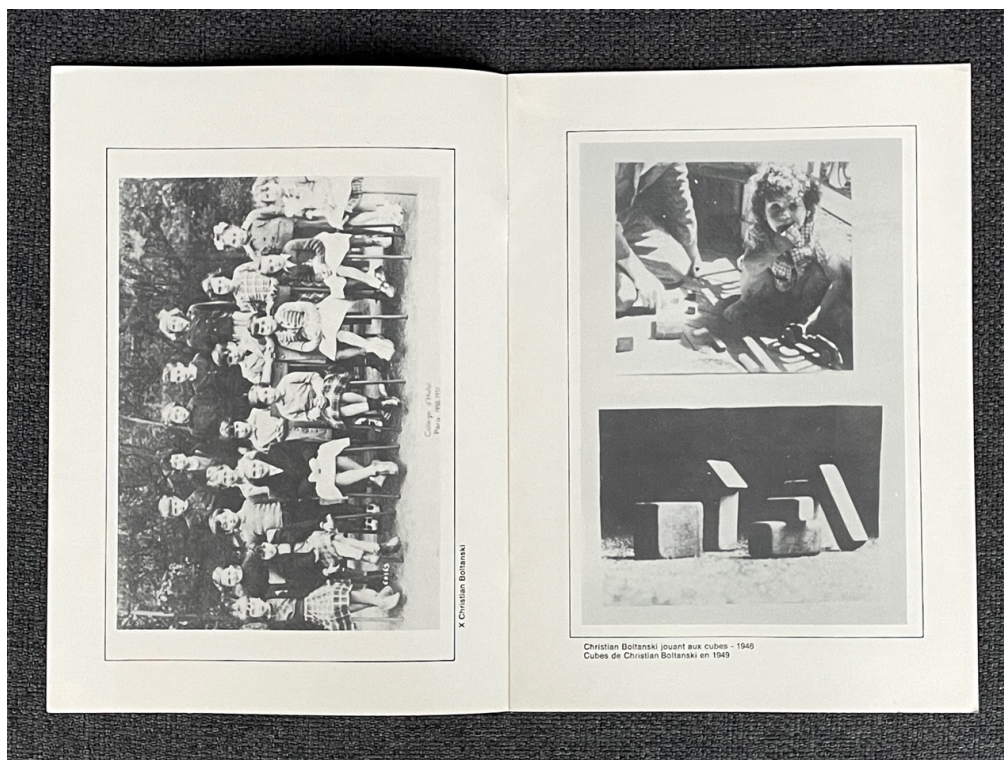
Boltanski himself considers this work his first real work that aligns with his later practice: “My real work, what I’m still doing now, started in 1969 with the small book *Research and Presentation of All that Remains of My Childhood, 1944–1950*. . . . And practically nothing has changed since that little book—there’s been no change since 1969.”<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> This translation followed Boltanski and Grenier’s book. Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 35.

<sup>265</sup> Mail-art was often conducted among conceptual artists between the late 1960s and early 1970s when Conceptual Art emerged. It was an active gesture to search for the audience beyond the exhibition. On Kawara is a representative example. Kawara’s mail-art practice can be viewed alongside his date painting series, *Today*, as survival records—signs of being alive. The implication and significance of mail-art works between Kawara and Boltanski are different, but both were their shout toward the outer world.

<sup>266</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 35.



Figures 4.2.a. (top) and 4.2.b. (bottom). *Recherche et Présentation de tout ce qui reste de mon enfance, 1944–1950*, 1969, book with staple bound, 26.5x17.5 cm. © Photo: Lee Soo Jin © Christian Boltanski.

Boltanski's aspiration for the archive and his affiliation with photography can

already be observed in this work. Book, the format he used, is also a medium he often applied to.<sup>267</sup> Its mediality links adequately to the archive. Furthermore, it readily interacts with photography. Lynn Gumpert remarked that “it also initiated what would become an enduring fascination with another medium: photography.”<sup>268</sup>

The work has an interesting structure. Facts and fakes are mixed. The viewer accepts the gathered materials by Boltanski as Boltanski’s own stuff, but most of them were not his own. Ostensibly Boltanski’s childhood belongings were in fact his nephew’s. The fact that Boltanski used not his own but his nephew’s objects to reconstruct his own childhood has been often criticized, since it means that he used fictional elements for autobiographical reconstruction which is against the definition of autobiography. For example, consider the autobiographical pact by Lejeune.<sup>269</sup> However, is this the right approach to understanding Boltanski’s self-referential works?

Boltanski’s strategy of mixing fact and fiction reflects the complexity of the self. Olga Smith also remarked that “[t]he most successful of the attempts to ‘reconstruct’ Christian Boltanski proceed from the awareness of complexity, if not impossibility, of this task[.]”<sup>270</sup> His self-referential works were his ‘quest’ for the reconstruction of the self. He approached it through the ambivalence of fact and fake

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<sup>267</sup> Boltanski published numerous books throughout his artistic practice. I found a website that indexes artists’ books including Boltanski’s. It offers an excellent overview. See: “Artists’ books by Boltanski Christian,” Artists’ Books, accessed June 25, 2021, [http://artistsbooks.info/AB\\_Boltanski%20Christian.html](http://artistsbooks.info/AB_Boltanski%20Christian.html).

<sup>268</sup> Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, 23.

<sup>269</sup> Many scholars understand his works in light of theories that appeared in a similar period, for example, Lejeune and Barthes. Boltanski’s works are located in opposition to Lejeune’s *The Autobiographical Pact* whereas they align with Barthes’s *The Death of the Author*. I understand those approaches as his works share some context with those theories, but it feels like a simple application of theory over practice.

<sup>270</sup> Olga Smith, “Authorless Pictures: Uses of Photography in Christian Boltanski’s Early Work (1969–75),” *Art History* 40, no. 3 (2017): 654, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12248>.

and emphasized the complexity of the self. This becomes a problem only when one applies the truthfulness of the account as a necessary condition for autobiography. However, as explained in Chapter 2, the scholarly positions on the authenticity of autobiography vary, and more importantly, autobiography is now no longer understood as a truthful account having a chronological narrative structure. Boltanski's pioneering attempts received thorny criticisms, but in many contemporary (visual) autobiographical works, "the search for authenticity in narratives of the self is no longer the first consideration."<sup>271</sup> Autobiography is "unquestionably a document about a life . . . But it is also a work of art[.]"<sup>272</sup> And the key to (visual) autobiography is narrative, a set of significances.

Regarding the usage of fictional elements by Boltanski, Richard Hobbs laid out various rationales in his article *Boltanski's Visual Archives* that the ambivalence in Boltanski's works is teleological. He wrote that "unreliability is inevitable in the narratives that memory constructs, deconstructs, and reconstructs, however precious memory is as an archive apparently encapsulating identity."<sup>273</sup> In addition to this, he pointed out that Boltanski's attitude was more serious toward public themes differing from his approach to personal themes.<sup>274</sup>

One more intriguing analysis by Hobbs is the comparison between Luc Boltanski and Christian Boltanski. Luc is Christian Boltanski's elder brother, who is a

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<sup>271</sup> Véronique Montémont, "Beyond Autobiography," in *Textual and Visual Selves: Photography, Film, and Comic Art in French Autobiography*, ed. Edwards Natalie, Hubbell Amy L., and Miller Ann (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1df4qgm.6>.

<sup>272</sup> Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," 43.

<sup>273</sup> Richard Hobbs, "Boltanski's Visual Archives," *History of the Human Sciences* 11, no. 4 (1998): 126, <https://doi.org/10.1177/095269519801100408>.

<sup>274</sup> See Hobbs, "Boltanski's Visual Archives," 126.

prominent sociologist. Luc published *Poème*, in which religious, sociohistorical, cultural, and personal matters were intertwined. The two brothers approached a similar theme quite differently, although they grew up in the same family and they would have intellectually exchanged.<sup>275</sup> While Luc was dedicated to “a constraint of honesty or sincerity[,]”<sup>276</sup> Boltanski worked “through a discourse of ambivalence, and plays upon unreliability.”<sup>277</sup>

Like Hobbs’ analysis, the coexistence of fact and fake and playful humor should be better understood as Boltanski’s artistic apparatus. Humor can further be understood as sublimating dark childhood memories and concerns about death. The essence of *Research and Presentation* is that he ‘searched’ for his self and tried to ‘re’construct the past, not whether the outcome is ‘true.’ Apart from the truthfulness of accounts, there is something truthful in his gesture of attempting numerous and continuous self-reconstructions: He searched for his *self*, constantly, through art.

What catches my attention is rather his motivation. In this regard, Boltanski’s statement for the *Research and Presentation* is highly intriguing and noteworthy. His statement offers us a few points to gain a better understanding of his work and intention from a different perspective.

We will never realize quite clearly enough what a shameful thing death is. In the end, we never try to fight it head on, doctors and scientists merely establish a pact with it, they fight on points of detail, they slow it down by a few months, a few years, but it all amounts to nothing. What we need to do is attack the roots of the problem in a big collective effort in which each of us will work towards his own survival and everyone else’s.

That’s why – because each one of us has to give an example – I decided to

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<sup>275</sup> In Boltanski brothers’ works, “[t]here is a nice irony that the sociologist turned away from positivist or archival discourse to poetic artistry in order to establish personal truths, whereas the visual artist has appropriated documentary and archival material in order to destabilize truthfulness through unreliability.” Hobbs, “Boltanski’s Visual Archives,” 133.

<sup>276</sup> Hobbs, “Boltanski’s Visual Archives,” 130.

<sup>277</sup> Hobbs, “Boltanski’s Visual Archives,” 133.

harness myself to the project that's been close to my heart for a long time: preserving oneself whole, keeping a trace of all the moments of our lives, all the objects that have surrounded us, everything we've said and what's been said around us, that's my goal. The task is vast, and my means are frail. Why didn't I start before? Almost everything dealing with the period that I first set about saving (6 September 1944–1924 July 1950) has been lost, thrown away, through culpable negligence. It was only with infinite difficulty that I was able to find the few elements that I am presenting here. To prove their authenticity, to situate them precisely, all this has been possible only as the result of ceaseless questioning and minutely detailed research.

But the effort still to be made is great, and so many years will be spent searching, studying, classifying, before my life is secured, carefully arranged and labelled in a safe place, secure against theft, fire and nuclear war, from whence it will be possible to take it out and assemble it at any point, and that, being thus assured of never dying, I may, finally rest.<sup>278</sup>

In this statement, Boltanski stated 'death' as the motivation and reason for pursuing this work.<sup>279</sup> The shadow of death led him to work on this project, and its ultimate purpose was 'preserving oneself whole.' He also confessed difficulty in the task due to the lack of materials and his agony of how to authentically (re)present them. To me, the fact that he used his nephew's belongings, not those of his neighbor or a random child, seems as though that was his solution to fill up the gap as authentically as possible. The text also explains his methodology of 'searching, studying, classifying'—this is the basic tactic of the archive—which evolves into a key strategy of his artistic practice.

Boltanski's statement testifies that he *researched* traces of his self and explored archival methods to *(re)present* them—to preserve the self from death.<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> Boltanski's statement on the flyleaf of *Research and Presentation* (1969.) Cited after: Didier Semin, Tamar Garb, and Donald B. Kuspit, *Christian Boltanski* (London: Phaidon, 1997), 126. '1924 July 1950' seems like a typing error. It was kept as in the original.

<sup>279</sup> Regarding Boltanski's statement, David Houston Jones also focused on "the ambition to unseat the dominion of death through self-archiving process[.]" David Houston Jones, "All the Moments of Our Lives: Self-Archiving from Christian Boltanski to Lifelogging," *Archives and Records* 36, no. 1 (2015): 30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2015.1010149>.

<sup>280</sup> Hobbs, too, seized on the critical relationship between Boltanski's archival approach and the theme/motivation of death: "Dominating Boltanski's various investigations of archival relationships

Understanding his works better would be achieved by looking at his motivation rather than scrutinizing their fictional elements. Not only in this work but also in his other works, his desire for ‘the preservation of the self from death’ is inherent. It was already there in *Research and Presentation*.

It is remarkable that alongside the thematic relevance to death, an archival approach was established in this early work. The archive is a core artistic strategy for Boltanski. He engages the archive with his life and artistic practices (see figure 4.3.). The intersection of the archive, life (and death), and art is where his artworks emerge and where he invites viewers.

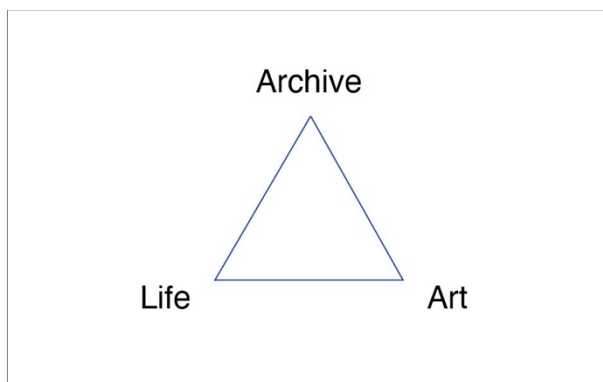


Figure 4.3. Archive engages with each and both life and art in Boltanski’s artistic practice. Life and art, too, interact with each other.

In figure 4.3., ‘archive’ could be replaced by other artistic mediums such as ‘photography’ or ‘installation,’ since he uses these mediums to create autobiographical narratives. But photography and installation derive from or are closely connected to the archive. The archive constitutes the most fundamental layer of Boltanski’s artistic approach. It is his attitude. Similarly, ‘life’ can be understood as ‘life and death’ by

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with the past and within the present, and giving us an initial grasp of his most basic concerns, is his preoccupation—arguably his obsession—with death.” Hobbs, “Boltanski’s Visual Archives,” 123.



each. Black and white photographs, his portraits, scraps of clothes, samples of writings, small objects such as balls of dirt and traps made of fabric, wires, and pins were fixed in the showcase. Intriguingly, he included some items already presented in *Research and Presentation*. His quest for the self and reconstruction of his childhood continued in the vitrine series in a different format and manner.

The traps and dirt balls were not his actual belongings. Boltanski reconstructed them from his memory. Around the same period, but slightly earlier than *Vitrine de référence*, he used to make many of these objects and *can* them in biscuit tins. Biscuit tins served him as excellent archives. Its structure with the lid reinforced the meaning of storage and safekeeping. With biscuit tins, Boltanski “was trying to can my life in order to preserve it. . . . The object in itself wasn’t so important; my plan was more to can a given amount of time.”<sup>282</sup> He tried “to save things from the past that can’t be saved.”<sup>283</sup> The biscuit tin transforms into a drawer and reservoir in his later artistic practice.

In the attempts at canning objects or preserving them in vitrines, too, fact and fake were blended. Nevertheless, it does not become a problem. What the artist intended to present was not the truth, but his quest and search for it. He did/could not re-find his past as it is. In this case, no one can succeed. And viewers can capture even less than what he found, only a fraction of his findings. However, his search is meaningful regardless of whether the exhibits were true and whether his search was successful. *Vitrine de référence* awakens something in us—the ‘something’ would vary for each individual.

One of the striking features of *Vitrine de référence* is archaeological

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<sup>282</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 41.

<sup>283</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 43.

aesthetics.<sup>284</sup> He applied the museal display to his work. Vitrines and showcases are often found in natural history museums and archaeological museums. Moreover, archaeology itself is an art of tracing the past and uncovering buried time and truth. Therefore, archaeological aesthetics suited well to Boltanski's search for his trajectory. As he said, the "search for a part of myself that had died away, an archeological inquiry into the deepest reaches of my memory"<sup>285</sup> enabled him to summon his past to the present.

This is a similar attitude to Proschak's. The differences between the two are that Proschak captures her present moment and the past existing in the present moment whereas Boltanski finds—makes, if it is physically not available anymore—the past and configures his past within the present. Although their approaches are different, they both cast time. And both use photography as a medium for this task. The archive is also a commonality among them. In their works, time was taxidermized twice: first in photographs, then in archives. The casted time creates autobiographical spaces.

### **Photography and Reconstruction: Truth of Untruth**

In 1972, Boltanski extended the use of photography as the main medium for the reconstruction of his life. He made *10 portraits photographiques de Christian Boltanski 1946–1964* [10 photographic portraits of Christian Boltanski 1946–1964]<sup>286</sup>

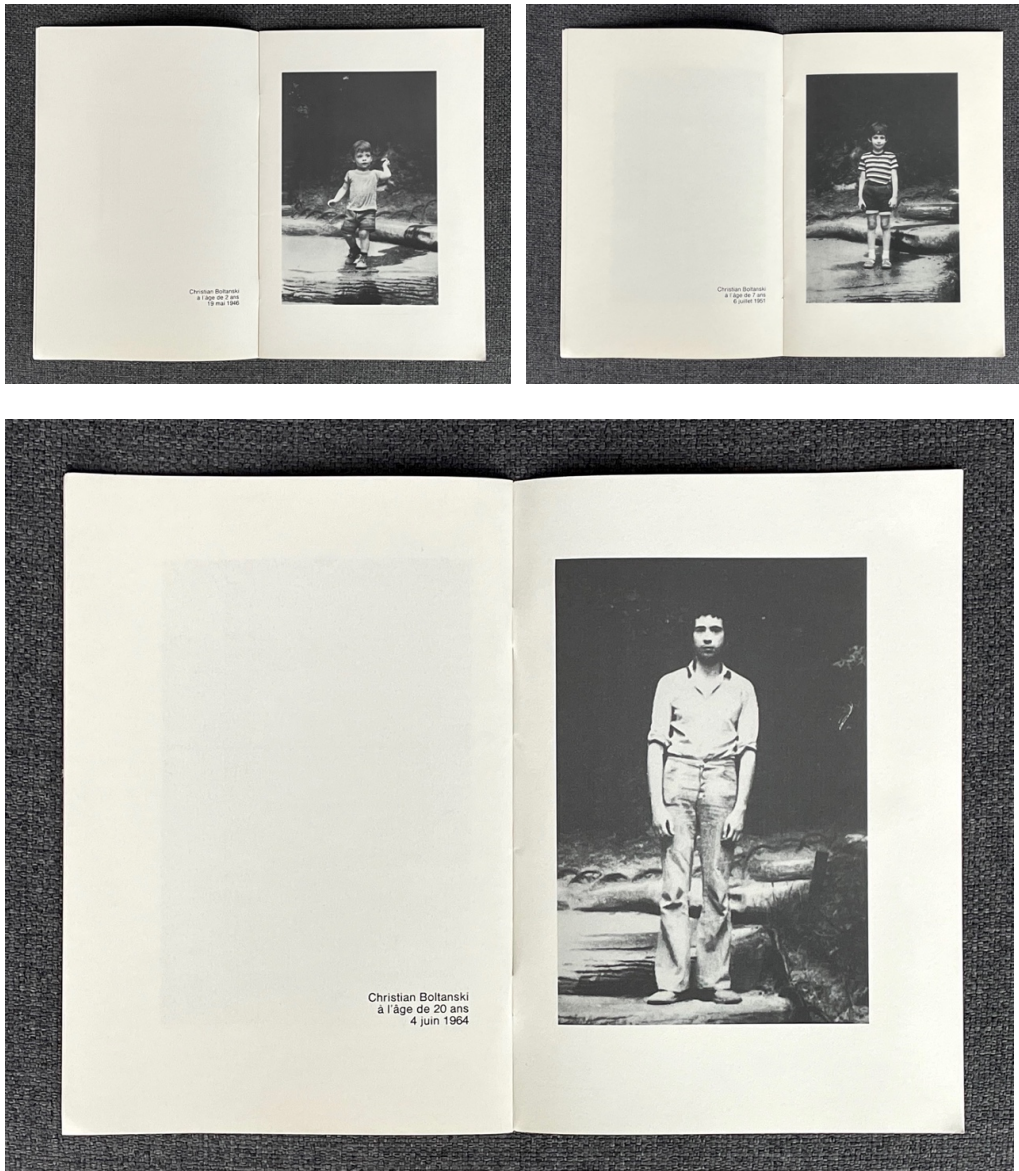
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<sup>284</sup> Rebecca J. DeRoo described *Vitrine de référence* 'ethnographic.' Her analysis within social and institutional contexts is different from the focus of this research, however, it offers another way of understanding Boltanski's practice. Rebecca J. DeRoo, "Christian Boltanski's Memory Images: Remaking French Museums in the Aftermath of '68," *Oxford Art Journal* 27, no. 2 (2004): 219–238, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oaj/27.2.219>. Regarding her ethnographic analysis of Boltanski's works, see 225–231, especially 226.

<sup>285</sup> Cited after: Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, 23.

<sup>286</sup> Boltanski and Grenier's book uses the title *All My Photographic Portraits*. Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 77.

(10 *Photographic Portraits* hereafter) (figures 4.5.). Similarly to *Research and Presentation*, he produced the work in a book format and published 500 signed copies.



Figures 4.5.a. (top left), 4.5.b. (top right), and 4.5.c. (bottom). *10 portraits photographiques de Christian Boltanski 1946–1964*, 1972, book with staple bound, octavo/21x13.5 cm. The models in the top two photos were unknown children in the park Only the last photo was Boltanski himself. © Photo: Lee Soo Jin © Christian Boltanski.

Boltanski laid out black and white photographs along with captions describing his age and the date the photo was taken. According to the captions, the photos were

taken at the ages of 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 14, 17, and 20. However, the information presented was incorrect—and ultimately the photos, too. Different from the claim in the title and the captions, his own portrait was only one photo, the last one. And that was taken when he was 28 years old, not 20. All other photos were taken on one day in the Parc Montsouris in Paris. The models were irrelevant to him, and the pictures were photographed by Annette Messager, one of the most prominent artists in French contemporary art who became his wife later.

The coexistence of fact and fake was not new, but the degree of the fake was more severe and obvious. Boltanski more deliberately created a narrative through photography this time. Instead of depending on finding and collecting remaining evidence of his past, he actively constituted his chronology by photographing others, who were totally unrelated to him. For this work, he whimsically applied the mediality of photography. He used ‘the medium of evidence’ for a make-believe narrative. However, in this work, photography reveals itself as not real within the structure of the work, as the models look different from him and from each other.

It is noteworthy that Boltanski did not erase or retouch the faces as he used portraits of unfamiliar people. He displayed his strategy of mixing up fact and fake as it is. This approach bestowed universal validity on the work. The viewers can identify themselves in Boltanski’s (auto)biography reconstructed through others: *I was once that child playing in the water, and I was once that smiling teenage boy*. The work reflects the fact that each individual lives a unique life, but there are common life stages: We are born, grow up, get old, and die. In this work, the later stages of life are not articulated, but the viewers can imagine that the chronology of life will go on. Death was contemplated in this work in two ways: Boltanski of the ages of 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 14, 17, and 20 died; and he kept silent about his future death.

Boltanski said in the book *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski* that he tried to make this work generic, to refer to all children and childhood, not just his own. Regarding this, an interesting statement followed: “It really annoyed me when they claimed I was Proustian, so I was reacting against the fact that my work had been labeled autobiographical.”<sup>287</sup> He said that he rejected his work being labeled autobiographical—which I am doing throughout this thesis—and he made this work more generic and common as a backlash to that. However, I interpret his sentence somewhat differently. ‘Proustian’ and/or ‘autobiographical’ would have implied rather a negative connotation of being sentimental and/or too private at that time. It was far apart from being politically and socially engaged which was still a norm and social demand in French society after the 1968 revolution. Therefore, I take his statement as rejecting those criticisms and negative connotations of ‘autobiography’ or ‘autobiographical.’

I grasp this work as autobiographical, although he refused it being called ‘autobiographical.’ Contrary to his plea, this work is a great example of visual autobiography extending from the personal to the public. His works point to something universal, not just his personal memory or life. They convey personal/particular and common/universal at the same time. In this work, by reconstructing the chronology of life through portraits of himself and others, he demonstrated both his quest for the self and the past and the commonality of childhood. Childhood is one of the central themes of his visual autobiography.

The work provides a clue to understanding Boltanski’s entire practice as connected, not separated into two (his personal stories and his works on the Shoah).

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<sup>287</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 77.

His works on social and public themes are based on his empathy as he identifies himself with others. This leads the spectator in the same direction. The identification of others as the self can already be observed in this work.

Overall, the early 1970s were a watershed for Boltanski. He explored and expanded subject matter outside of himself. He started to include others in his works through photography. *10 Photographic Portraits* connects his previous works on childhood memories with his later works on himself and others—whether or not he already knew it at this point. I do not claim that this work was a direct bridge between his works on personal subjects and his works on social and public subjects—the significant shift happened sometime later. But we can find the seeds of the change in this work: We see him with others in *10 Photographic Portraits*.<sup>288</sup>

Boltanski employed photography not only for reconstructing the past but also for representing the possible future. Using photographs and documents, he reconstituted his likely death in the form of a traffic accident in *Reconstitution d'un accident qui ne m'est pas encore tiliz et où j'ai trouvé la mort* [Reconstruction of an accident that hasn't happened to me yet and in which I met my death] (1969). In *Morts pour rire* [Pretend deaths or Deaths for fun] (1974), he took suicide as his subject. These works show that he agonized over his death and worked through it through art, with the help of photography.

Similar to the criticism of mixing fact and fiction, Boltanski's use of photos that appear to be factual but are not factual drew various critiques. Some of them are productive and agreeable, but others are inimical. In my view, he used photography

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<sup>288</sup> In a similar period, there are also examples that he handled only others' images, for example, *Les 62 membres du Club Mickey en 1955* [The 62 members of the Mickey Mouse Club in 1955] (1972) and *Album de photos de la famille D., 1939–1964* [Photo album of the family D., 1939–1964] (1971). In these works, a similar concept of identifying ourselves and our lives from others' photos was maintained, but Boltanski did not appear.

when and where he cannot reach anymore; when and where he cannot go back; when and where evidence is lacking. Also, he visualized the imagination of his future death by means of photography. Boltanski filled up the gaps of vacancies and represented the irrepresentable with photography, not through other mediums—photography abuts reality. Photography “is the final chance to win back what has been lost”<sup>289</sup> for him. This would be the retained truth in his untruthful photography.

### *La Vie Impossible de C.B.*

From around 1975, Boltanski worked on less personal themes such as *Les Images modèles* [Model Images]<sup>290</sup> (1975) and *Les Compositions* [Compositions]<sup>291</sup> (begun 1976).<sup>292</sup> In these works, he investigated habitual modes of usage of photography in relation to social and cultural codes. Around this time, he took photos on his own and produced color photographs as well—before that, he assigned taking photos to other people.

Boltanski’s artistic practice shows another leap forward in the mid-1980s. In 1984, he presented *Ombres* (begun 1984), one of his most famous works, which borrowed the form of shadow play in theatre. In 1985, he showed *Monuments*, his first work on the theme of death, evoking the Holocaust. From this point on, he worked on *others*, not his immediate self, and his subject matter extended to be social and public rather than personal. However, Boltanski would return to his personal themes and

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<sup>289</sup> The original sentence is: “autobiography is the final chance . . .” Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” 39. Autobiography and photography complement well.

<sup>290</sup> Own translation from French into English.

<sup>291</sup> Own translation from French into English.

<sup>292</sup> These works will not be dealt with in this research. Regarding the works, see: Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, 54–75.

quest for self from time to time throughout his life.

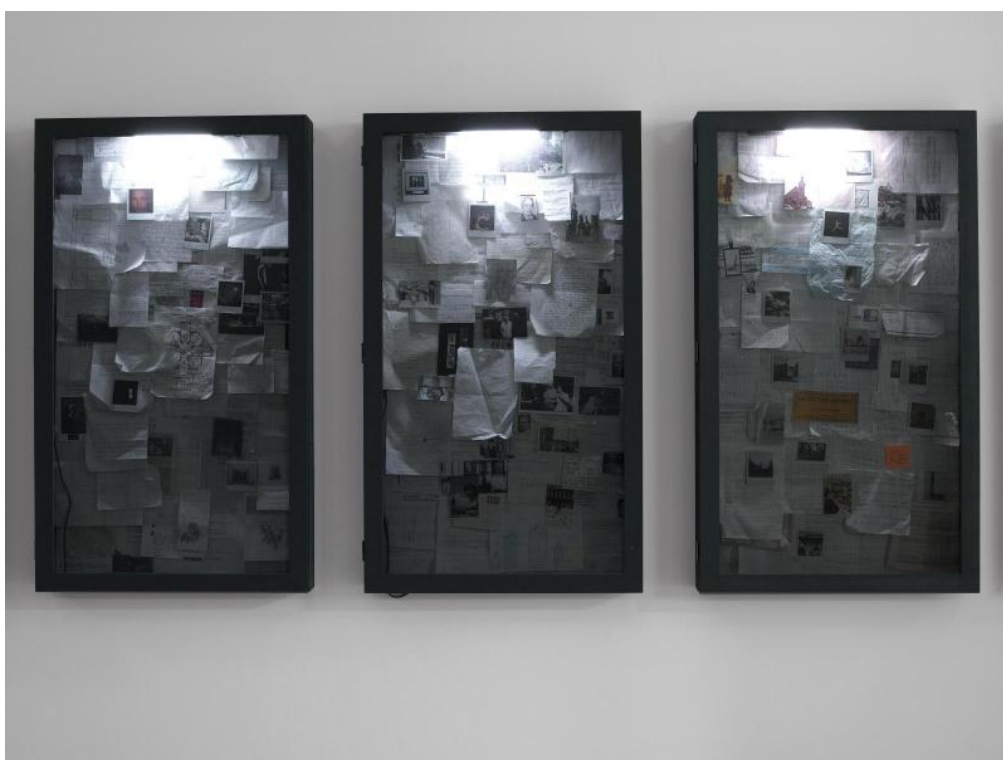
In 1990, he presented a textual work *Ce I ils se souviennent* [What they remember] (1990). The work consisted of 100 numerical points containing (auto)biographical statements about Boltanski. The text was written in the third person. The pronoun ‘he’ declared some information about Boltanski—which included what people used to say about him—and a few backstories about his works. However, after the publication of the text, the suspicion—or accusation—questioning his (or his works’) accountability and credibility did not disappear. In this work, too, fact and un-fact were blended contrary to the reader’s expectations. And the structure of ‘he’ talking about what ‘they’ remember added the impression of deception.

Boltanski’s quest for self continued in various forms. In 2001, he had an exhibition *La Vie Impossible de Christian Boltanski* (figures 4.6.) at Anhaltische Gemäldegalerie Dessau in Germany. He displayed 20 vitrines on the wall, and the vitrines were filled up with various archival materials such as photographs, documents, texts, testimonies about life, etc.. On the occasion of the exhibition, a book with the almost same title *Christian Boltanski: La Vie Impossible* was published. The book juxtaposed 100 statements about him and 100 photos/documents.

This exhibition had a more direct autobiographical manner. In the previous section, I argued that his artistic practice has always been autobiographical, even though he used to deny it. However, for this work, he also admitted the autobiographical characteristics: “Before, the works were about the disappearance of childhood, or disappearance in general, but now, there’s a more autobiographical side to it.”<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 197.



Figures 4.6.a. (top) and 4.6.b. (bottom).<sup>294</sup> Exhibition view, *Extra Large*, Grimaldi Forum, Monaco, 2012. © Photo: Philippe Migeat – Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI / Dist. RMN-GP © Adagp, Paris.

<sup>294</sup> The work was acquired by Centre Pompidou in 2004. The images are from the website Centre Pompidou. “La vie impossible de C.B.,” Centre Pompidou, accessed June 27, 2021, <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/ressources/oeuvre/cKxkMBA>.

Regardless of the generality and peculiarity of the subject matter, his self and autobiographical negotiation has always constituted the heart of Boltanski's artistic practice. The fact that he titled this show the same as his first solo exhibition and film in 1968 also reveals his conscious act of chronicle. The change in his stance from denying to admitting autobiographical nature of his works was probably closely related to his advancing age and proximity to death: "I used to think about the death of other people. Now it's increasingly about my own death."<sup>295</sup>

*La Vie possible de Christian Boltanski* published in 2007 can also be understood in a similar context; the English translation *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski* followed in 2009. This book is an oral autobiography in the form of an interview that he had with an art historian Catherine Grenier—or a biography, depending on perspective. Grenier stated it as Boltanski's autobiography. It presents his life as *possible* through piercing fragments of his life in textual form. Boltanski chronicled the relationships between his life and art, and he shared his thoughts about art, life, and death. Some of his statements are quite confessional. In addition, he discussed his own work. He located his artistic practice within movements in the art scene and compared it to other artists.

According to Boltanski, this book was "also part of this wish to gather everything up before dying."<sup>296</sup> The term 'possible' reads as 'a' possibility. It contrasts with 'impossible' in his other works, implying his wish for making it possible. Thus, the publication can be understood as part of his impossible autobiographical task to make his life and self possible before death.

*What They Remember* and *The Impossible Life*—and his other attempts with

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<sup>295</sup> Beil, "A Conversation with Christian Boltanski," 58.

<sup>296</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 197.

similar titles and approaches—reveal his ongoing interest in his *self*. Some are more factual than others, but he was not hesitant to blend fact and fiction. Some autobiographical works during this period also shared similar approaches. Barthes's *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* [Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, 1977] and Georges Perec's *Je me souviens* [I remember, 1978] deliberately and strategically used the inaccuracy of memory and complexity of the self. Barthes claimed that the work was a text, not an autobiography, yet it is undeniable that he produced the text about himself. Similarly, Boltanski used to deny that his works were autobiographical. Their statements can/should be better comprehended and accepted as part of their deliberate double-game. They refuted head-on the obsession with objectivity and truth through their works.

Diane D. McGurren wrote as follows: “Boltanski simultaneously reveals and conceals evidence of his existence to present a lost self that can never truly be found, neither by himself nor his audience.”<sup>297</sup> As McGurren stated, Boltanski ambivalently *(re)presented* his self. He was aware that it was an impossible task. Boltanski indicated the impossibility of reconstructing his life—one's life—in the titles of his works. However, he did not give up on the impossible task.

As reviewed in this subchapter, Boltanski created numerous works related to his self.<sup>298</sup> Due to the undeniable coexistence of fictional elements alongside factual elements, Boltanski's works—even Boltanski as a person and as an artist—faced criticism on the grounds of untrustworthiness. However, we should comprehend

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<sup>297</sup> Diane D. McGurren, “Becoming Mythical: Existence and Representation in the Work of Christian Boltanski,” *Afterimage* 38, no. 1 (2010): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1525/aft.2010.38.1.9>.

<sup>298</sup> “According to a statistical study of Boltanski's works made between 1968 and 1975, carried out by Camille Paulhan, the name Christian Boltanski or the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘my’ appear in the titles of thirty-three works.” Smith, “Authorless Pictures,” 637.

Boltanski's works beyond the true and false. His visual autobiography whimsically shows not only the (im)possibility of (re)constructing his own self and life but also the (im)possibility of understanding others. It naturally links to the question of our perception of others. He had already included others in his earlier works, but the question of self and selves—others—came further into the front line in his Shoah-related works which will be examined in the next subchapter. Archive continuously plays a significant role. While he used the archive in an ambivalent way for the works with personal themes, for the later works related to social and cultural subjects, he applied it in a more serious manner to give a testimony of grief and remembrance for Holocaust victims.

#### 4.2. Others as Selves

This subchapter will investigate Boltanski's works with social and cultural themes. Boltanski is best known for his works mourning the Holocaust victims. In many works and projects, he mourned and grieved the deceased and death on social and cultural levels. Similar to the childhood-related works, when he first began, his intention was to thematize death in general. But those works were mostly interpreted in association with the Holocaust, bringing social and cultural repercussions. In this subchapter, I will examine his works divided into two significant mediums that Boltanski often used: photographic portraits and clothes. I will focus on *Monuments*, *Altar to Chases High School*, and *Personnes*.

#### **Bridge from the Personal to the Social**

As mentioned earlier, Boltanski's artistic practice changed significantly around the mid-1980s. Before this change, between 1975 and 1984, he focused on the social

usage and connotation of photography (*Model Images*) and produced large-size color photos (*Compositions*). However, this period was isolated from the rest of his artistic practice.<sup>299</sup> His works before and after this period connect to each other far better.

The works between 1974 and 1985 were not well accepted. At this juncture, Boltanski looked back at his previous practice: “When things go badly, I dip back into the past. After the failure of the *Compositions*, I dipped back into my first pieces[.]”<sup>300</sup> From his previous works, children’s photographs fascinated him. He created a monument with those photographs—and with *Monuments*, he became *famous*—and (re)found his artistic language. *Monuments* was first shown in 1985/86.

Boltanski recalled that the period between 1984 and 1986 was a turning point for him:

Everything happened at the same time, in the space of a month, even two weeks. Everything I’m doing today I realized around then. The direct relationship with religion, with Judaism, with death: all of that came together there. I think that the moment everything came together for me, the moment I understood space, was somewhere between 1984 and 1986.<sup>301</sup>

The change in his style was also related to his parents’ deaths in 1984 and 1988. His father died in 1984 and his mother in 1988. After these experiences, he began to gradually negotiate the subject matter that constitutes the heart of his life: Jewish roots, Judeo-Christian culture/religion, and death. In works such as *Monuments* and *Personnes*, which I will examine soon, he is not visible but strongly present. Yaari also rightly observed as follows: “While in these works the self-portrait genre does not appear as such, connotatively the self is inscribed abundantly and in an increasingly

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<sup>299</sup> Similarly, the work between 1975 and 1984 is difficult to regard as a visual autobiography. However, I explained in Chapter 2 that visual autobiography can be better applied to the artist’s entire practice than particular to particular artworks. In this sense, this period can be understood as the trial and error of developing his artistic practice.

<sup>300</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 113.

<sup>301</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 117.

overt fashion[.]”<sup>302</sup>

Furthermore, two important features appeared that became Boltanski’s signature during this period. First, *space* became a crucial element—perhaps one of the most crucial elements—in his artistic practice. His execution changed from the display of finished ‘works’ on the wall to installation in space. Second, *humans*—other selves—came to the forefront. ‘Humans’ were considered on two levels—as images and as audiences: Boltanski started talking about ‘we.’

### Photographic Portraits: *Monuments*



Figure 4.7.<sup>303</sup> Class photo of Christian Boltanski at the Hulst School in Paris, 1951.

From his past materials, he found his class photo at the Hulst school in Paris (see figure 4.7.), which had appeared in his other works, such as *Research and Presentation* and *Vitrine de reference*. Boltanski cropped out his classmates’ faces by

<sup>302</sup> Yaari, “Who/what Is the Subject?” 373.

<sup>303</sup> “Monuments, 1986, Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris,” Galerie Chantal Crousel, accessed July 20, 2021, <https://www.crousel.com/en/exhibition/christian-boltanski-monuments-1986>.

rephotographing and framed these reproduced photographs with thin tin frames. He also produced numerous frames of Christmas wrapping papers, which were in metallic red, gold, blue, and gray/silver colors, in the same manner. Boltanski stacked these materials geometrically, located his former classmates' portraits on top, and illuminated their faces individually with the light bulbs. In this way, Boltanski built his monuments.

*Monuments* was closely related to his previous works about childhood and its death. Boltanski recalled:

Of all these children, among whom I found myself, one of whom was probably the girl I loved, I don't remember any of their names, I don't remember anything more than the faces on the photograph. It could be said that they disappeared from my memory, that this period of time was dead. Because not these children must be adults, about whom I know nothing. This is why I felt the need to pay homage to these 'dead,' who, in this image, all look more or less the same, like cadavers.<sup>304</sup>

As Boltanski stated, the work dealt with the disappearance—death—of childhood memories. However, the work was interpreted as referring to the Holocaust. Indeed, the photo indicates the possibility of Jewish children dying, who would not be able to become adults. However, according to him, that was not his intention until the point when he began making *Monuments*. His conscious negotiation of Shoah appeared a few years later, but not yet in this work.

*Monuments* reflects his longing for his childhood. As mentioned earlier, his childhood was quite unique. Considering the fact that he withdrew from school, his choice of the class photo seems quite pregnant and significant to me. Perhaps something in him died when he left school. That time is no longer reachable—dead. What died was not only that time, but also relationships with friends and his being and

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<sup>304</sup> Cited after: Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, 82–83.

experience in the community—school. Boltanski often spoke about his feelings of being different from other French students in his school days. This photo testifies in silence his experience of being there without belonging there. His presence, lack of belonging, being different from others, all these are condensed in this photograph. The reason why he came back to this material again and again is perhaps that it was the very evidence of his last struggle for belonging in his childhood.<sup>305</sup>

I consider that he reconstructed his childhood relationships and sense of belonging by building monuments. Friendships and relationships in childhood are quite peculiar. Certainly, there are links—those links are imprinted in our memories and photos—but most of the links are discontinuous. The discontinuity of childhood relationships is something normal and general. They are—will be—naturally disconnected by the time when adolescence is over. In this sense, the links are very weak and volatile. Nevertheless, they are links.

Boltanski's strategy for the installation illustrates these characteristics. Since each child's face is lit by individual light, at first glance, they seem unlinked to each other. The effect of disconnection increases because the exhibition space is kept dark. Faces lit by light bulbs in the darkness seem like floating islands. However, the wires of the light bulbs are entangled. Such artistic apparatus visualizes the nature of childhood relationships, and it illuminates both his personal and universal longings for childhood. For Boltanski, the work served as a recovery of dead links and a sense of belonging. In this sense, *Monuments* was somewhat ritual and truly monumental.

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<sup>305</sup> I hold quite a critical position in approaching artwork from a psychoanalytic perspective. However, the fact that Boltanski returned to this class photo multiple times and created monuments with the class photo to articulate the death of childhood led me to this conclusion.



Figures 4.8. *Monuments*.

Top: Figure 4.8.a. *Monument (M002TER)*, 1986, steel frames, light bulbs, 127x300 cm, artist's courtesy. Exhibition view, *Christian Boltanski: 4.4*, Busan Museum of Art, Busan, 2021–2022. © Photo: Lee Soo Jin © Christian Boltanski.

Bottom: Figure 4.8.b.<sup>306</sup> Exhibition view, *Christian Boltanski – Almas*, National Museum of Fine Arts in San Tiago, Chile, 2014. © Photo: Jorge Brantmayer © Adagp, Paris.

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<sup>306</sup> “Almas, Christian Boltanski : National Museum of Fine Arts in Santiago, Chili - Eva Albarran & Co,” Eva Albarran & Co, accessed July 20, 2021, <http://eva-albarran.com/en/production/almas-christian-boltanski-musee-national-des-beaux-arts-de-santiago-chili>.

The title, *Monuments*, refers to the series of installations of children's portraits lit by light bulbs (see figures 4.8.). Ever since the first *Monuments* was presented in 1985, numerous *Monuments* were shown in different variations in numerous places. However, none of them were the same. The details and materials used varied. Boltanski executed the work differently for each space: "the pieces were never totally finished and that I'd redesign them each time, depending on the space."<sup>307</sup>

This trait came to the forefront in his artistic practice when he started to take "the space into account and [think] of the entire exhibit as a single work."<sup>308</sup> Similarly to Proschak, the entire exhibition/installation functions as one work—whole—and the individual elements—part—constitute the whole. There is no oeuvre in the conventional sense: "The difference between [the previous works such as *Compositions*] and what I do now is that then there was still the notion of a work, whereas now that notion is less and less present."<sup>309</sup> As Stephen Barker observed: "Like the *récit* for Derrida and Blanchot, these works have no boundary, no border, but extend out in space and time."<sup>310</sup> *Monuments* extends out while maintaining the same concepts: Children's photographic portraits are framed, stacked—monumented—and individually lit by light bulbs.

There are two sources of photographs used for *Monuments*: Boltanski's class photo and photos from *Portrait des élèves du C.E.S. des Lentillères en 1973* [Portraits of the students of the Lentillères College of Secondary Education in 1973]. The latter was Boltanski's public project in 1973 with the students of Lentillères College of

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<sup>307</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 116.

<sup>308</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 118.

<sup>309</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 116.

<sup>310</sup> Stephen Barker, "Derrida/Blanchot/Boltanski: Borderdiscourse," *The Comparatist* 28, no. 1 (2004): 103, <https://doi.org/10.1353/com.2004.0011>.

Secondary Education in Dijon. For this project, he received their favorite photographs from the students, rephotographed the collected materials, and filled up the walls in the corridor of the school entrance with those photos. About a decade later, in 1985, when he was invited by Le Consortium, a centre for contemporary art in Dijon, he created *Monuments* with the photos of Lentillères students and named it *Monument: Les Enfants de Dijon* [Children of Dijon].

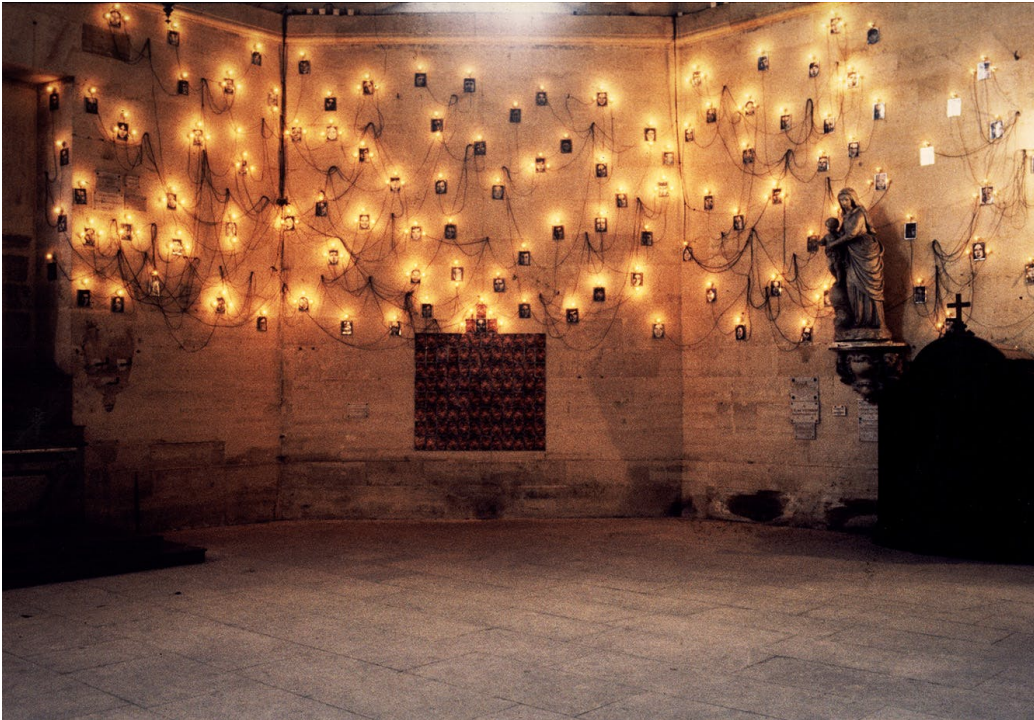
One of the most important exhibitions, in which he used Lentillères students' portraits is *Leçons des ténèbres* [Lessons of Darkness] (figures 4.9.) held in Paris in 1986. He incorporated *Monuments* of children of Dijon and *Ombres*. This time, candles were applied instead of light bulbs. Boltanski called the combination of these elements *Lessons of Darkness*.

The most notable feature of this exhibition was its venue. He installed *Lessons of Darkness* in a chapel called La Chapelle Saint-Louis de la Salpêtrière which is located next to the hospital of the same name.<sup>311</sup> Naturally blended with the religious ambiance of the church, *Monuments* created a far more solemn atmosphere. This experience of the installation at Salpêtrière greatly influenced Boltanski. He began to think about space more deeply.<sup>312</sup> Starting with this installation, he held exhibitions more at non-conventional venues such as churches and libraries which were not built for the purpose of art exhibitions like galleries or museums.

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<sup>311</sup> “The Salpêtrière was hugely significant for me. First off, my father died in that hospital a year or two before, so at first I refused to work there because of that.” Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 117.

<sup>312</sup> See Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 118.



Figures 4.9.a. (top) and 4.9.b. (bottom).<sup>313</sup> Exhibition view, *Leçons de ténèbres*, Salpêtrière Chapel, Paris, 1986. © Photo: Ernt Jank © Christian Boltanski, courtesy Festival d'Automne, Paris.

<sup>313</sup> "Viewing Room - Christian Boltanski - KEWENIG," KEWENIG, accessed July 22, 2021, [https://kewenig.com/viewing\\_room/christian-boltanski-portraits](https://kewenig.com/viewing_room/christian-boltanski-portraits).

The significance of the venue, the chapel, enhanced the meaning of death. Besides, Lentillères students' photographs were not personally related to Boltanski. The chapel and the non-personal photographs mutually reinforced their own effects on death and created a more generally valid testimony for death. They “commemorated a fundamental precept of Catholicism: the principle that anyone can be saved, anyone can become a saint.”<sup>314</sup> Another feature accentuating death was the quality of the photographs. Because the photographs were reproduced several times until then, the quality of the photographs has changed from the original. The faces in low-quality photographs still possessed some photographic realness. However, they appeared distant and dim—dead.

Similarly to his previous *Monuments*, but this time far more, *Lessons of Darkness* at Salpêtrière was interpreted as indicating Judaism—although it was held in a Catholic church. Regarding this, Boltanski remarked that the forms of the work indicate nothing Jewish, they refer to Christian, if not, rather Muslim. In addition to this, *Lessons of Darkness* was interpreted in association with the Shoah. The portraits of anonymous people reminded the viewer of the countless victims of the Holocaust. Gumpert also noted: “But perhaps the most powerful resonance of all is their evocation of the millions of Jews who died in the concentration camps during the Holocaust.”<sup>315</sup>

Shoah-related interpretations increased especially among American Jews. When *Monuments* was first presented in the United States, the work gained notable attention, especially in relation to the Holocaust.<sup>316</sup> Regarding this, Boltanski said:

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<sup>314</sup> Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, 83.

<sup>315</sup> Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, 97.

<sup>316</sup> In general, Boltanski's works were better received and more welcomed outside of France, especially in the USA and Germany.

“Why Jews saw something in them, I really don’t know. I think the memorial aspect possibly played a role.”<sup>317</sup> I suspect carefully that the influences of his Jewish origin and anti-Semitism while growing up could have been indirectly and subconsciously reflected in the works and the spectators sensed them, especially when they shared similar experiences with Boltanski. Perhaps knowing the external factor that the artist was Jewish could have contributed to those interpretations as well. When it comes to the reception of the works, this external factor is not completely dissociable, since it is part of his identity.

Although he stated that his main intention in making *Monuments* was to commemorate and reconstruct childhood through the application of portraits of anonymous children, his works imply Jewish. The class photo—which is the original motif of *Monuments*—alludes to the period of not-yet-reconciled with the fact of himself being Jewish. Furthermore, the timeline of *Monuments* corresponds with that he began to talk about his Jewish origin, after his father’s death in 1984. It could have been that he had not yet realized these links and the autobiographical implications of his works.

Boltanski’s works have multiple layers. He allows the viewer to interpret them in different ways. He does not limit or guide the viewer’s reception. *Monuments*, too, implies multiple meanings and allows viewers their own interpretations—childhood, memory, death, Shoah, and more. My analysis and contextualization are just one of many possible ways. Barker wrote that “Boltanski presents a monument to *the idea of the memory of death*; not to the commemoration of a specific or particular death or life, but to the very idea of memory, of (not) bringing-to-light.”<sup>318</sup> His observation is

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<sup>317</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 119.

<sup>318</sup> Barker, “Derrida/Blanchot/Boltanski: Borderdiscourse,” 102.

also valid. The reception of his works would vary by each recipient as Boltanski's works interact with one's own memory and engender meanings.

### **Photographic Portraits: *Les Archives***

Boltanski articulated Shoah as subject matter more consciously—probably accepting the spectator's interpretation and reconciling with his Jewish origin—for his following series *Les Archives* [Archives] (figure 4.10.). In 1987, he exhibited *Archives* in documenta 8 in Kassel. The venue was Fridericianum, the oldest public museum in Europe built in 1779, which has served as the main venue for documenta since its first exhibition in 1955. Fridericianum carries the wounds and memories of World War II as it was damaged by bombing during the war. The symbolic meaning of space (Fridericianum) and place (Germany) enhanced the meaning of Boltanski's work.

Among many rooms, Boltanski chose a small room and placed there three grid partitions made of metal wires from the ceiling to the floor. He filled up the room with human faces. He hung more than 350<sup>319</sup> photographic portraits in different sizes on the walls and partitions. Since the small room was divided by partitions, it appeared even more packed. Furthermore, the grid structure of the partitions seemed like a prison—or a concentration camp: “For me, it was like the gas chamber, and this time in a really obvious way.”<sup>320</sup> The clamp lamps, that are mostly used for office desks, lit the faces from the top of the partition. They added an ominous atmosphere, and this accentuated the association with Holocaust victims.

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<sup>319</sup> Gumpert stated it as “over 350[,]” while MoMA denoted “402.” See Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, 12. See also “MoMA.org | Interactives | Exhibitions | 1999 | Museum as Muse | Boltanski,” MoMA, accessed July 25, 2021, [https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/1999/muse/artist\\_pages/boltanski\\_archives.html](https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/1999/muse/artist_pages/boltanski_archives.html).

<sup>320</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 140.



Figure 4.10.<sup>321</sup> Exhibition view, *Les Archives*, documenta 8, Kassel, Germany, 1987. Collection Ydessa Hendeles. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery.

There are a few distinctive features in Boltanski's artistic strategies for *Archives* that are differentiated from *Monuments*. The first feature is the photographs he used. For this work, he did not use photos from a single source but mixed various sources/series. Therefore, the styles of portraits were not unified but varied. Some faces were smiling, while some others were expressionless. Some photos seemed like mug shots. Ironically, different/ununified styles of portraits were associated far more strongly with anonymous people who became victims for no reason. Boltanski applied different sizes to the photographs. Some images were enlarged much more than in his previous works. Due to this enlargement, the photos became blurred and out of focus.

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<sup>321</sup> "Christian Boltanski, *Les Archives*, 1987," Artribune, accessed July 25, 2021, [https://www.artribune.com/attualita/2014/12/dove-va-la-fotografia-colloquio-a-tre-con-walter-guadagnini/attachment/christian-boltanski-les-archives-1987-installazione-per-documenta-8-kassel-1987-toronto-collezione-ydessa-hendeles-art-foundation-courtesy-lartista-e-marian-goodman-gallery-paris-\\_.](https://www.artribune.com/attualita/2014/12/dove-va-la-fotografia-colloquio-a-tre-con-walter-guadagnini/attachment/christian-boltanski-les-archives-1987-installazione-per-documenta-8-kassel-1987-toronto-collezione-ydessa-hendeles-art-foundation-courtesy-lartista-e-marian-goodman-gallery-paris-_.)

These photos barely attested to existence; but forfeited the function of identification. Another distinctive feature was the way of lighting. In *Monuments*, light bulbs were installed around children's portraits. They illuminated the children's faces around them, and that evoked fond feelings. Conversely, emotions were removed in *Archives*, as he applied clamp lamps. It took on a far more relentless effect.

I would like to note that he did not utilize actual documentation/photos from concentration camps for *Archives*. Similarly, he did not use photos of Jews for this work. Boltanski said that "I've never in my life used a photograph directly tied to the Shoah; that's something I'd never be able to do."<sup>322</sup> The Shoah was tremendous for him. Regarding Shoah-related works, Boltanski's attitude is far more serious and sophisticated than his works on the reconstruction of his childhood and identity. This can be understood as a strategy to refrain from a direct statement that could be interpreted as an ethical condemnation. Indeed, he deliberately avoided concrete and/or ethical statements in his works.

Boltanski first used Jewish children's photographs in *Le Lycée Chases* [Chases high school] (figures 4.11.) and *La Fête de Pourim* [The Purim holiday]. For both works, photographs were used, which were 'found objects.' One photograph was a class photo of a Jewish high school in Vienna in 1931; the other was a group photo of Jewish children on the occasion of the Purim holiday taken in Paris in 1939. Boltanski rephotographed the faces in the photographs, enlarged them, and placed them on the top of stacked tin biscuit cases which he used in his earlier practice. In this manner, he created series such as *Autel Chases* [Altar to the Chases high school] (figure 4.11.a) and *Réserves: La Fête de Pourim* [Reserves: The Purim holiday].

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<sup>322</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 221.



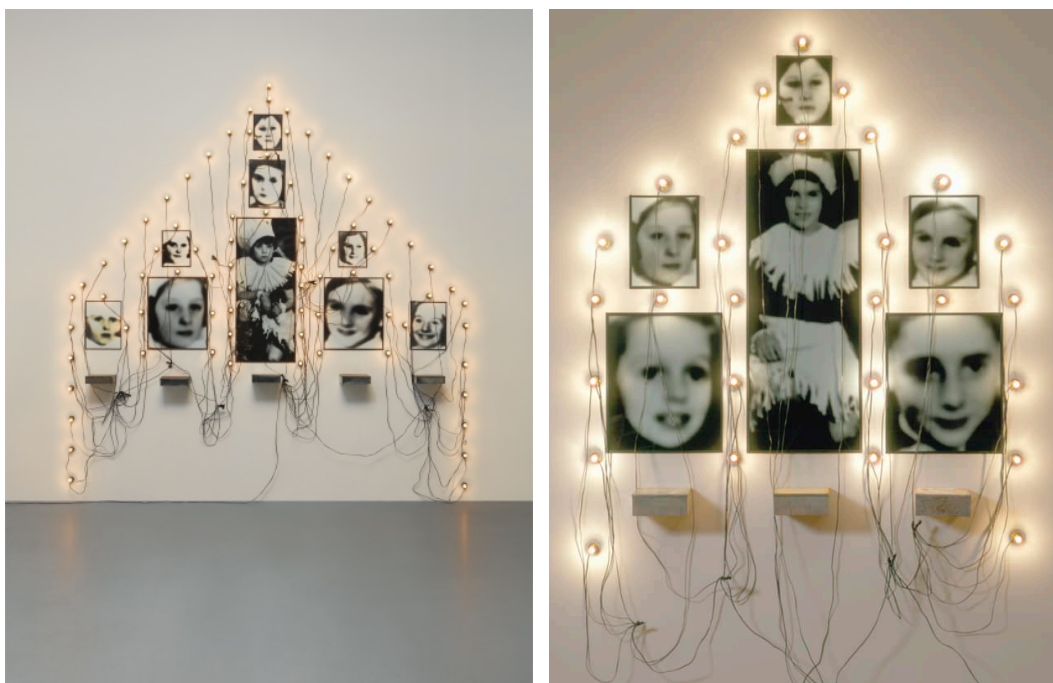
Figures 4.11. *Lycée Chases*.

Top: Figure 4.11.a.<sup>323</sup> Exhibition view, *Autel Chases*, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel, 2005. © Photo: Israel Museum, Jerusalem, by Meidad Suchowolski © 2005 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

Bottom: Figure 4.11.b. *Lycée Chases*, steel boxes, framed photos, lamps, 325x280x21.5 cm, artist's courtesy. Exhibition view, *Christian Boltanski: 4.4*, Busan Museum of Art, Busan, 2021–2022. © Photo: Lee Soo Jin © Christian Boltanski.

<sup>323</sup> "Altar to the Chases High School (Autel Chases)," The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, accessed July 26, 2021, <https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/202245>.

Around the same time, with the Jewish children's photo of the Purim holiday, Boltanski made *Monument Odessa* (figures 4.12). For this series, he applied a similar concept to his previous *Monuments*. As a result, the aesthetics of *Monument Odessa* was very different from *Altar* or *Reserves*, although the same photos were used. *Monument* created a warm and fond ambience, whereas *Altar* and *Reserves* had a cold and dark atmosphere. *Monument Odessa* could have been more personal for him since Odessa indicates his roots; where his paternal grandfather came from.



Figures 4.12. *Monument Odessa*.

Left: Figure 4.12.a.<sup>324</sup> *Monument Odessa*, gelatin silver prints, metal biscuit tins, electric lightbulbs, sockets and electric wires, 264.2 x 299.7 x 21.9 cm (dimension variable), executed in 1989. © Christian Boltanski, Phillips.

Right: Figure 4.12.b.<sup>325</sup> *Monument Odessa*, gelatin silver prints, tin biscuit boxes, lights, and wire, 203.2 x 182.9 cm (dimension variable), 1989–2003. © Christian Boltanski / Courtesy of the Marian Goodman Gallery, New York. Collection of The Jewish Museum.

<sup>324</sup> Caption according to the website's description. "Christian Boltanski - Untitled from the Monument Odessa," Phillips, accessed August 17, 2021, <https://www.phillips.com/detail/christian-boltanski/NY010218/374>.

<sup>325</sup> Caption according to the website's description. "The Jewish Museum - Collection - Monument (Odessa)," The Jewish Museum, accessed August 17, 2021, <https://thejewishmuseum.org/collection/28216-monument-odessa>.

One common element between *Monument Odessa* and *Altar and Reserves* is biscuit tins. However, biscuit tins were also applied differently. For *Altar and Reserves*, numerous biscuit tins were stacked, while only very few tins were installed for *Monument Odessa*. Biscuit tins can often be found in Boltanski's works. They have served as archives since his early practice. In fact, the biscuit tin in itself has the meaning of an archive. In juxtaposition with the Jewish children's photos, biscuit tins allude to the record of historicity and collectivity of a certain group. With the use of biscuit tins, the meaning of the archive became reinforced.

But exactly what was archived? Answers to this question would vary by each spectator. However, Boltanski's installations lead viewers to similar findings. By entering the exhibition space, viewers first feel a solemn atmosphere with their whole body. Then, their gazes capture exhibits, search for images in their memories, and match them with each other. The rusted biscuit tins seem like coffins. They convey sinister feelings of death. Stacks of tins are associated with multiple deceased people. Finally, the Jewish children's portraits complete the nuance of the Shoah. In Boltanski's works, "a wound is exposed as the sign of a shocking collective trauma[,]"<sup>326</sup> and it is up to each viewer how to—whether to—face the truth of the traumatic event in the history of humanity.

There have been wars and conflicts across human history—there still are wars and conflicts somewhere in the world—and genocides or other war crimes are almost part of wars. However, the Holocaust was not a mere result or misery of the war. The Nuremberg Laws were already established in 1935, before World War II, and the plan for eliminating Jews was systematically executed. The reason was not religion or

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<sup>326</sup> Enwezor, *Archive Fever*, 28. The sentence originally refers to Felix González-Torres's *Untitled (Death by Gun)*.

culture, but race. This was the cruelest part, because race is an inalterable factor determined by birth, attached to being. There was no reason why Jews had to be killed except for the fact that they were Jews. The hatred of race massacred six million Jews, two-thirds of European Jews at that time. Six million is a big figure, but sometimes numbers feel only abstract. It is a figure more than the entire population of current Singapore; equivalent to the population of Berlin including the metro area; and two-thirds of the population of Seoul. If it happened today, all of us, or someone living next door could have been killed: They, the Jews, were our neighbors. The mute faces in Boltanski's works powerfully convey this: "the life of the other, the life that is not our own, is also our life[.]"<sup>327</sup>

Emmanuel Levinas viewed that the face of the Other reminds us of responsibility for others—for Levinas, the face of the Other is the visage of God. *Face* functions as a subtle and appropriate apparatus in Boltanski's works. It powerfully conveys something not describable in silence. Photographic portraits in his works are reminiscent of the fact that real people died—and we all will eventually die: "even if it's fictitious, [it] appears to come directly from reality . . . and the emotion derives from the fact that these are real people."<sup>328</sup> The faces in Boltanski's works remind us of others and our attitudes toward them. Even though Boltanski did not make any concrete or ethical statements at all, especially regarding the Holocaust, his work immediately awakens the ethics in us. Judith Butler stated: "This ethical relation is not a virtue that I have or exercise; it is prior to any individual sense of self."<sup>329</sup> And 'face'

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<sup>327</sup> Judith Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2012): 140, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.26.2.0134>.

<sup>328</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 138.

<sup>329</sup> Butler, "Precarious Life," 141.

is a powerful medium to evoke *a priori* ethics, as “we are to some extent affected and claimed by that ‘face[.]’”<sup>330</sup>

However, very ironically, the faces in his works are not easy to capture as Boltanski hinders viewers from immediate recognition of those faces—another extraordinary apparatus. First of all, because the photos were enlarged, the faces are blurred, so they are difficult to identify.<sup>331</sup> More decisively, Boltanski often located clamp lamps in front of the faces. The lamps directly lit the faces and illuminated their absence and presence at the same time. However, the lamps are delicately placed between the faces and the spectator, blocking the direct gaze of the viewer—one’s gaze on the other can be violent and judgmental. The reflection of the glass also obstructed vision. In this way, Boltanski carefully spoke about being—not identity—and most importantly, protected their being from the spectator’s gaze.

In contrast to *Monuments*, Boltanski’s approach is cold, sober, and sophisticated on multiple levels when negotiating the Shoah. And he even more deeply marked his self in works related to the Holocaust. The anonymous children’s faces from various sources allude to Boltanski’s desk neighbors. He and many other children were victims of anti-Semitism after World War II, but before that, innumerable children became victims of the Holocaust. He was neither a victim nor a survivor—but eventually both: “The war, the fact that I’m Jewish—these are the most important things to have happened to me in my life. . . . I was a child of the Shoah more than a child of Judaism. . . . the Shoah is without question the main event that totally

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<sup>330</sup> Butler, “Precarious Life,” 139.

<sup>331</sup> “[The photos] weren’t blurry in the Monuments. [... For *Archives* in 1987,] I used much larger photographs, which because of enlargement became out of focus. . . . while the original photograph was relatively merry . . . by taking photos of them and blowing up their faces, they all looked like death masks.” Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 140.

conditioned my life. . . . In a way, I never got over the Shoah.”<sup>332</sup> Boltanski remembered the Shoah and the victims and turned the exhibition space into a memorial site through his powerful installation: “This collective history resituates an autobiographical ‘I’ within a ‘we’ that is indispensable for configuring her [his] identity. That is, the ‘I’'s meaning is entwined with, read through, the ‘we’ of collective memory and authorized by it.”<sup>333</sup> And photographic portraits serve as a strong apparatus for *Archives and Reserves* to remind us of cruel history and *the face of the other*.<sup>334</sup>

### **Clothes: From the Shoah to *Personnes***

While we were waiting for the shower, our nakedness was brought home to us: we really had nothing now except our bare bodies—even minus hair; all we possessed, literally, was our naked existence.<sup>335</sup>

—Viktor E. Frankl, “Man’s Search for Meaning”

Boltanski often uses clothes as a medium to reveal the absence of presence. His first installation with clothes was held in Toronto, Canada, in 1988. Boltanski filled up four rooms with high ceilings with used clothes. He literally covered the walls with clothes from top to bottom (see figure 4.13.). Over six thousand second-hand clothes were used for this project. The title *Canada* contained dual meanings. First, it referred to the country where the exhibition was held. Second, ‘Canada’ was the name used to

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<sup>332</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 22.

<sup>333</sup> Watson and Smith, “Mapping Women’s Self-Representation,” 26.

<sup>334</sup> ‘The face of the other’ refers to Levinas.

<sup>335</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (London: Rider, 2008), 28.

refer to the storehouses in the concentration camps where the Nazis kept valuable belongings stolen from Jewish prisoners.



Figure 4.13.<sup>336</sup> Exhibition view, *Réserve Canada*, Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, Toronto, Canada, 1988. © Photo: Robert Keziere © Christian Boltanski / ADAGP, Paris, 2019, Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation.

Upon arrival at the concentration camps, the Jews had to turn in everything they brought with them, including their clothes. They were stripped, brought to shower, and made naked beings, as Viktor E. Frankl described his own experience. The confiscation of clothes reveals how the Nazis treated the Jews. What was taken off was the human dignity of a social being.

Clothes are closely related to the social aspect of self. In the article *The Surfacing of the Self: The Clothing-Ego*, Stella North remarked that clothing, as a

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<sup>336</sup> “ART CITIES:Tokyo-Christian Boltanski,” dreamideamachine ART VIEW, accessed August 14, 2021, [http://www.dreamideamachine.com/en/?page\\_id=621](http://www.dreamideamachine.com/en/?page_id=621).

‘second skin,’ directly constitutes one’s ego. Taking Didier Anzieu’s skin-ego into account, and further developing from it, North derived a notion of the clothing-ego: “Clothing performs a similar ego-function: it both socializes *us* and preserves *us* from being subsumed into sociality.”<sup>337</sup> She observed clothing as an integral part of ego since our body is always clothed.

As North argued, clothing constructs a social boundary between self and the world—whereas skin builds an ontological boundary. Furthermore, clothing belongs to the realm of one’s own subjectivity and ownership. The subjectivity of clothing was taken from Jews by the Nazis. Further, in the concentration camps, the subjectivity of their own bodies was oppressed; even suicide was strictly prohibited. This means that their being as subjects was entirely denied.

The Jews were made naked again when they were brought to the gas chamber—this time, permanently. The concentration camp uniforms given to the prisoners, which temporarily and vulnerably protected them, were taken off again before ‘showers.’ The clothes in Boltanski’s installations are strongly reminiscent of the remaining uniforms after the extermination in the gas chamber. They indicate lives *taken* for no reason. Compared to the face, clothes portrayed the passiveness of Jews’ deaths more strongly. They connote the irresistibility of vulnerable individuals in front of the insanity of reason and system. Sadly, clothes serve as a poignant apparatus as they reveal disastrous Jews’ deaths on both social and ontological levels.

Starting with covering the walls with clothes in *Réserve Canada*, Boltanski installed clothes in various ways. The following year, at the Museum für Gegenwartkunst in Basel (now called ‘Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart’), he laid

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<sup>337</sup> North, “The Surfacing of the Self,” 79.

clothes on the floor. This was designed for the visitor to walk over the clothes; as if they walk on dead bodies. At The Musée d'Art Moderne, he stacked children's clothes onto each other on the metal shelves, which can be seen at the warehouse, and built *Réserve du Musée des Enfants* [Storage Area of the Children's Museum] (figure 4.14.). The work consisted of two parts, black and white photographs of children and stacked clothes. *Storage Area* is one of Boltanski's 'Tombs'<sup>338</sup>—the permanent installations he called—which will remain after his death.



Figure 4.14.<sup>339</sup> Exhibition view, *Réserve du Musée des Enfants I et II*, Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris, permanent installation since 1989. © Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris © Christophe Fouin © ADAGP, Paris.

Boltanski worked on the sensitive subject matter of the Shoah in subtle ways, and he created the space of the memorial by means of photographic portraits and

<sup>338</sup> See Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 203.

<sup>339</sup> "Réserve du Musée des Enfants I et II," Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, accessed August 18, 2021, <https://www.mam.paris.fr/en/oeuvre/reserve-du-musee-des-enfants-i-et-ii>.

clothes: “The referent thus extends in his case from the autobiographical to social and historical realms, in which, at the same time, the autobiographical self is also, at least implicitly, embedded.”<sup>340</sup> The creative period enunciating absence and presence through photography and clothes continued until 1993/94.<sup>341</sup> Photography became gradually less prominent in his practice from 1996/97 onwards.<sup>342</sup> He moved on to other mediums such as clothes, beds, heartbeats, etc.

*Personnes* (figures 4.15.) is an impressive exhibition in which he encompassed his previous works thematizing death. The works spanned various media. On the occasion of *monumenta* 2010, Boltanski turned the Grand Palais in Paris into a place of people, and a place of death at the same time. The title conveys this dual implication very well because *personne* in French means ‘person’ and ‘nobody/anybody’ at the same time.

For *Personnes*, Boltanski designed the space to be a place for experience. Viewers were brought into the space he created. Passing through the biscuit tin walls, the viewer arrived in a huge room and faced tons of clothes. At the end of the space in the middle, a pile of clothes was stacked like a mountain—or tomb—and in front of the clothes-mountain, innumerable clothes were laid on the floor. The clothes on the floor were sorted into multiple rectangular sections. Each section was marked by four metal poles, and the division of the sections formed a grid. The entire installation seemed like an archaeological site. Along with the installed pieces, invisible elements such as sound, temperature, smell, etc. constituted the effect of the *whole*. Heartbeat sound echoing in the exhibition space and the chill air in the huge place contributed to

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<sup>340</sup> Yaari, “Who/what Is the Subject?,” 374.

<sup>341</sup> See Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 177.

<sup>342</sup> See Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 182.

the solemn atmosphere. The soggy smell of used clothes constantly reminded the visitor of the presence—in turn, the absence—of somebody.



Figures 4.15. *Personnes*.

Top: 4.15.a.<sup>343</sup> Exhibition view, *Personnes*, monumenta 2010, Grand Palais, Paris, 2010. © Photo: Didier Plowy © ADAGP, Paris.

Bottom: 4.15.b.<sup>344</sup> Exhibition view, *No Man's Land*<sup>345</sup>, Park Avenue Armory, New York, 2010. © Photo: James Ewing, Courtesy Park Avenue Armory.

Since we are acquainted with the implication of the Holocaust in Boltanski's works, one can also interpret *Personnes* in relation to the Shoah. However, this exhibition was less associated with the Holocaust. It felt general. Boltanski enunciated presence and absence in a more abstract way. Moreover, he implied/negotiated his own death in the exhibition. It was negotiated along with various works from his previous artistic practice.

At the last stage of his artistic practice, he presented his exhibitions in a similar manner to *Personnes*; comprising various elements of his past works and negotiating his own possible death, which could happen at any time. He created autobio-  
thanatographical space in a Derridean sense. Those works encountered viewers and reminded them of their own death, transcending tense/time: It could be me; it will be me.

Boltanski's works since the mid-1980s are quite different from his earlier works in both subject matter and style. One may regard the two types of works as separate and disconnected, because his earlier works were more personal, whereas his later works connote social and cultural implications. However, his interest in time,

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<sup>343</sup> "Personnes, Christian Boltanski : Monumenta, Grand Palais," Eva Albarran & Co, accessed August 19, 2021, <http://eva-albarran.com/en/production/personnes-christian-boltanski-monumenta-grand-palais>.

<sup>344</sup> "Christian Boltanski Creates Monumental New Installation Filling Park Avenue Armory," FAD Magazine, accessed August 19, 2021, <https://fadmagazine.com/2010/05/16/christian-boltanski-creates-monumental-new-installation-filling-park-avenue-armory>.

<sup>345</sup> Boltanski had a recapitulated show of *Personnes* at Park Avenue Armory in 2010. Biscuit tins on the wall can be seen beyond the clothes on the floor. The installation with clothes, metal poles dividing sections in a grid, lamps, and biscuit tins make the space look like an archival site.

memory, and death continued, and the artistic strategy of the archive was also maintained. Photographic portraits and clothes are his signature mediums to convey the absence of presence—death. With those materials, he created empathetic spaces through spatial installations. In those works, too, his self—beyond his identity—is deeply inscribed. Furthermore, he considered others as his other selves in his visual autobiography. This worked in two ways: He included others, and he spoke to us. And his last works indicate his own death—an elegy to himself.

### 4.3. Beyond the Absolute

So far, I have examined Boltanski's significant works regarding both personal and sociocultural themes and demonstrated that the essence of his artistic practice is visual autobiography. This would be enough to conclude the investigation of his artistic practice. However, I would like to examine one more work that may seem a little bit different from his other works: *The Missing House*. This work shows Boltanski's view and attitude toward history and the significance of the archive in his artistic practice. He refuses an absolute viewpoint, especially in ethics; accordingly, he uses the archive in a subtle manner.

#### **Beyond Good and Evil**<sup>346</sup>

There is a vacant spot between two buildings on Große Hamburger Straße in Mitte in Berlin, and multiple plaques are mounted on the walls of the buildings facing the empty yard. It is difficult to read the text on the plaques from distance, since the yard is not accessible. However, it seems to mean something significant: The site does

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<sup>346</sup> I borrowed the title of this section from Nietzsche.

not seem abandoned but sleeping while holding something to say but keeping silent.

The above-described scene is *The Missing House* (figure 4.16.), which was a site-specific project Boltanski carried out in Berlin in 1990. Throughout his artistic practice, Boltanski deliberately refrained from making direct statements about the Shoah. He neither directly thematized the Holocaust, nor used materials from firsthand sources. *The Missing House* is an exceptional work, in which he engaged with actual historical evidence. For this work, too, his execution was subtle and careful.



Figure 4.16.<sup>347</sup> *The Missing House*, 24 plaques on the building walls, site-specific installation, 15/16 Große Hamburger Straße, Berlin, 1990.

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<sup>347</sup> “Artist - Christian Boltanski - CB\_I-29 - KEWENIG,” KEWENIG, accessed August 24, 2021, [https://kewenig.com/artists/christian-boltanski/artwork/CB\\_I-29](https://kewenig.com/artists/christian-boltanski/artwork/CB_I-29).

At 15/16 Große Hamburger Straße in Mitte, one of the Berliner administrative divisions, there is a vacant spot where the row of buildings is disconnected. The project *The Missing House* was conducted there. The house number has existed since 1911. The front houses are still there, but there is an empty space in the back yard as the house was destroyed by Allied strategic bombing on the 3rd of February, 1945. The bomb hit the middle of the house, where the central stairways were located, and that part was burned down. The outer walls of the remaining buildings were reconstructed. As a result, two separate buildings stand there now. However, the destroyed part was not rebuilt and still remains empty.

To remember the former residents of the destroyed building, Boltanski installed twelve plaques each on the two reconstructed building walls—24 in total—that face each other now. The material of the panel was metal, and the design was similar to an obituary. Boltanski mounted the plaques at the height of the stories where the residents lived. He marked their traces in this way.

Each panel contains information about the duration of residence, name, and occupation of the resident.<sup>348</sup> The residents' move-in dates vary, but most of their residency ended in 1945. Six people's residency ended around 1941–1943, and three in the 1930s. Those who lived there until 1945 are highly likely to have been victims of the bombing. Three who lived until the 1930s would have either moved to other places or died—the exact reasons we cannot know. Regarding the six people who left the house between 1941 and 1943, we can infer their possible backstories from history.

Mitte used to be one of two administrative divisions that belonged to both East Germany and West Germany. Große Hamburger Straße was part of East Germany.

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<sup>348</sup> The text on the plaques can be found on the following website: “Gedenktafeln in Berlin - Gedenktafel Anzeige,” Gedenktafeln in Berlin, accessed June 20, 2022, <https://www.gedenktafeln-in-berlin.de/gedenktafeln/detail/the-missing-house/216>.

The period of 1941–1943 corresponds to the intensification of Nazi oppression of Jewish people. A careful deduction could be made that the six people would probably have been either exiled, deported, or brought to the concentration camp. D. Poznanski, who was a hairdresser, moved in in 1938 and left the house in 1943; a public servant J. Schnapp lived in the building between 1930 and 1942; and four more people moved in at some point but did not live in the house after 1943. Those six people designate the six million Jews whose lives were taken for no reason. Boltanski's mourning through the project *The Missing House* reveals both the history of the house and the history of the twentieth century.

The project consisted of two parts, and it was held at two different venues. The other venue was the grounds of the former Berliner Gewerbeausstellung—an exhibition space, also destroyed—in Alt-Moabit which belonged to West Berlin. Christiane Büchner and Andreas Fischer, who were art students and Boltanski's assistants for the project, installed ten vitrines on the ground and displayed their research materials related to the residents of the missing house such as photos, postcards, interview transcripts, documents, etc.—this was a research-based art project. While *The Missing House* provided only minimal information about the residents, the materials in the vitrines contained more detailed information. The second part of the project was dismantled, but *The Missing House* at 15/16 Große Hamburger Straße will remain as a permanent installation. The names of the residents will be remembered, and so will the dead Jews.

Mourning and grieving are common themes in contemporary art.<sup>349</sup> The Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei, also had an art project related to remembering names. In

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<sup>349</sup> “It reminds us that the reception history of the mourning arts is, crucially, a history of delight in identity and anachronism, as well as a history of terror at time's wounds.” Cavitch, “Interiority and Artifact,” 91.

2008, the Great Sichuan earthquake hit China and nearly 70,000 people died. The numbers increase when including missing persons. People were buried, unfound, including school children. The announcement of the Chinese government regarding school casualties raised suspicions because the information was not transparently offered due to censorship. Ai Weiwei undertook an investigation with volunteers to find the *names* of the missing school children. He knocked on every door in the village and gathered information about the missing children such as their names and dates of birth. He found 5,219 names and made a blog with the names of the missing children—it was soon shut down by the Chinese government. The title of this project is *Remembering*.

A similar action could also be found in the public realm. On Saturday, May 23, 2020, The New York Times tweeted an image of their front page of the newspaper next day, and it struck a chord with many people. Unlike the usual front page of newspapers that consists of three to four major issues, the New York Times published a long list of names of people who died during the pandemic period in the USA (see figure 4.17.). The names and short descriptions were excerpted from obituaries. Up to that day, the number of deaths had hit over 97,000, nearly 100,000. Under the headline “U.S. Deaths near 100,000, An Incalculable Loss”<sup>350</sup>, a subheadline followed: “They were not simply names on a list. They were us.”<sup>351</sup> The names recorded on the front page are unknown to most of us. Yet we deeply feel tied and bonded to them: They could be us and we could be them. The front page of the New York Times was an act of mourning.

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<sup>350</sup> The New York Times, “U.S. Deaths Near 100,000, An Incalculable Loss,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/05/24/us/us-coronavirus-deaths-100000.html>.

<sup>351</sup> The New York Times, “U.S. Deaths Near 100,000.”



Across time and culture, we remember in order to mourn the deceased—or we mourn to remember. This could be carried out on an individual level, but also on a collective level. Boltanski's works mourn and remember the deceased. His works are based on the collective memory as well as evoke it. However, Boltanski's approach is subtle. For example, for *The Missing House*, he marked the names of all residents who lived in the building, not only the Jews. He remembered the Jews who would probably have been deported and the Germans who became the victims of the Allied bombing. Indeed, everyone living in the house was a victim. He also marked the names of those who lived there until the 1930s, whose stories we cannot know, but who are highly likely dead by now. Eventually, everyone died. They all died for different reasons, but they were *neighbors*. *The Missing House* reminds us of this.

Boltanski does not make any clear statements and deliberately restrains ethical judgments in his works. His works, including *The Missing House*, reveal rather the way good and evil play out in complex ways. He lets viewers think on their own. I consider his approach quite Nietzschean—Nietzsche refused an absolute view of good and evil.

Boltanski's approaches are, however, not always well received. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, for example, argued that *The Missing House* is inadequate as a work of mourning, but melancholia at best: "the art of generic elegy, the melancholy acknowledgment of fatality, destiny, or mortality, is wholly inadequate to the historical, indeed to the ethical requirements of historical commemoration."<sup>353</sup> What she problematized was the 'ethical' aspects. However, her view of ethics was far apart from that of Boltanski's. While contextualizing *The Missing House* together with other

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<sup>353</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Mourning or Melancholia: Christian Boltanski's Missing House," *Oxford Art Journal* 21, no. 2 (1998): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oaj/21.2.1>.

works, she criticized also the “blurring of the artist’s identity”<sup>354</sup> in his earlier autobiographical works and the absence of ‘ethical distinctions’ in the works using photographic portraits; “it should be distinguished from the brute and universal fact of human mortality. To elide these different deaths, these different fates, implies a bottom line equivalency from which ethical distinctions are banished.”<sup>355</sup> Here, too, she problematized his ethical aspects.

This is similar to criticism of the authenticity of Boltanski’s autobiographical works. Those opinions suppose the absoluteness of the disciplines of history, autobiography, and most of all, ethics. Regarding this, Janis Bergman-Carton pointed out as follows: “Though Newman and Solomon-Godeau offer two of the most textured readings of the artist’s work, their arguments rest upon a strangely untroubled notion of history and its recuperative powers[.]”<sup>356</sup> Unlike Solomon-Godeau, she comprehended that Boltanski “discloses the contingencies of historical evidence and the liabilities of the kind of narrative closure it permits.”<sup>357</sup> Boltanski’s works reveal another aspect of history and historicization on a meta-level. Hence, as Kate Palmer Albers wrote: “The uncertainty is not a dead end, but a generative space for the viewer’s own productive engagement with the construction of history.”<sup>358</sup> Facing Boltanski’s works, one can prioritize the ethical responsibility of ‘the history of violence’ and criticize him; or one can decipher ‘the violence of history’ and find

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<sup>354</sup> Solomon-Godeau, “Mourning or Melancholia,” 15.

<sup>355</sup> Solomon-Godeau, “Mourning or Melancholia,” 17.

<sup>356</sup> Janis Bergman-Carton, “Christian Boltanski’s *Dernières Années*: The History of Violence and the Violence of History,” *History and Memory* 13, no. 1 (2001): 3–4, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ham.2001.0003>.

<sup>357</sup> Bergman-Carton, “Christian Boltanski’s *Dernières Années*,” 17.

<sup>358</sup> Kate Palmer Albers, *Uncertain Histories: Accumulation, Inaccessibility, and Doubt in Contemporary Photography* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015), 3.

one's own meaning, as the title of Bergman-Carton's article suggests.

### **Beyond Archive**

Yet, against the tendency of contemporary forms of amnesia whereby the archive becomes a site of lost origins and memory is dispossessed, it is also within the archive that acts of remembering and regeneration occur, where a suture between the past and present is performed, in the indeterminate zone between event and image, document and monument.<sup>359</sup>

—Okwui Enwezor, “Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art”

Vagueness of reference, lack of strictness and discipline, and unreliability and untrustworthiness are common criticisms that fall on Boltanski and his works. Similar mechanisms/criticisms are found across his autobiographical, historical, and Shoah-related and/or mourning works. The way Boltanski incorporated archives into his works has also been criticized. The archive forms a core of his artistic strategy that penetrates both his personal/autobiographical and collective/historical works.

The archive has been adopted as an artistic strategy by many artists. Marcel Duchamp's traveling bag was a synthesis of his artistic practice, and Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* is working material, an ongoing process, and an artwork at once. Artists apply archives in different ways. Some artists rigorously and sincerely use archives to construct a system of truth, but other artists apply archives in sarcastic ways to criticize the absoluteness of history and to dispute historicization as such. The archival artistic practice in contemporary art testifies to, and questions, the essence of the archive in itself on a meta-level.

By its nature, the archive and archival act sway between fact and fiction, and

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<sup>359</sup> Enwezor, *Archive Fever*, 47.

public and personal. This trait becomes even more distinctive in archival *artworks* since they are no archives per se. Hal Foster described the paradoxical characteristics of archival artworks as “found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private.”<sup>360</sup> Boltanski’s works also share these characteristics. Factual and fictive, and public and personal coexist in his works. Hobbs also wrote: “For him, the two are the same: the Archive is subjective and the personal is historical.”<sup>361</sup>

For many artists, the purpose of applying the archive to artworks is not literal historicization or archiving, even when they directly deal with historical matters. Contemporary artists illuminate various critical issues by applying the archive because it enables them to create multiple readings and subtle narratives. It contributes to diversifying and broadening the discourse. Thus, treating archival artworks as equivalent to historical archives, or the archive per se, can result in misunderstanding or inimical criticism—which was the case for many criticisms of Boltanski.

The essence of Boltanski’s archival strategy is that his works remind us of history and its memory—also our memories—rather than historical fact. Okwui Enwezor also wrote as follows: “In Boltanski’s mediation on mourning and loss, the powers of the archive as a fundamental site through which we remember remain undiminished, even if the images he deploys and the narratives that he constitutes are more allusive and evocative of an archive than that they represent an actual existing archive.”<sup>362</sup> Rather, Boltanski’s deconstructive approaches allow us to look at the issues from different angles—autobiography, history, archive, remembrance, and so forth.

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<sup>360</sup> Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” 5.

<sup>361</sup> Hobbs, “Boltanski’s Visual Archives,” 133.

<sup>362</sup> Enwezor, *Archive Fever*, 30.

Boltanski's use of archival materials is similar to that of W. G. Sebald. Sebald did not use photographs as evidence or witnesses of historical moments but as a metaphor to reconstruct and remember history. In Sebald's works, photographs resonate with memories, and they carry out a significant function of the restoration and construction of narratives. One may view that his literature rests upon unreliable memory and false photography; however, it is exactly what Sebald thematized. The impossibility of restoration of memory does not necessarily mean that attempts to restore memories and their results are pointless.

In fact, no (re)constructions can be the same as the actual events: "any sense of story is at once larger *and* smaller than itself."<sup>363</sup> History and stories are basically *récit* by nature. Boltanski's works *narrate* to us something larger and smaller as *récit*.<sup>364</sup>

#### 4.4. Summary

Boltanski devoted himself to art throughout his life. His visual autobiography started when he began to make works on the reconstruction of childhood. Those works reflected his longing for childhood which had been lost and dead. Childhood had significant meaning for him. His decision to leave school is linked to various themes that are found throughout his artistic practice; this is evident from the fact that his class photo appears in his numerous works in different contexts. These themes include his quest for self, reconstruction of childhood and memories, longing for relationships, anti-Semitism and the Shoah, disappearance and remembrance, death, etc.

Self constitutes the heart of Boltanski's artistic practice. The variations of *La Vie Impossible de Christian Boltanski* prove it. He returned to the (im)possible task of

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<sup>363</sup> Barker, "Derrida/Blanchot/Boltanski: Borderdiscourse," 99.

<sup>364</sup> See footnote 310.

searching for his self again and again throughout his life. His works on the Shoah, which are to be described as public rather than personal in terms of subject matter also reflect his self. His *Self* is deeply inscribed in his different works, and his entire artistic practice builds his visual autobiography.

Regarding his negotiation of the self, one intriguing phenomenon is observed: Boltanski did not involve intimate parts of himself, such as his Jewish identity, when he (re)constructed his past and chronology; while he negotiated those when he made works with social and cultural implications. He has negotiated his self and identity between the personal and the social. As a result, the personal and the social play a tug-of-war in Boltanski's visual autobiography. Boltanski balanced this out through the negotiation of his self.

Photographic portraits and clothes are the mediums that he often used to create subtle narratives about the Shoah and history. With faces and clothes, and also by marking the names in *The Missing House*, he remembered the deceased and reminded us of cruel history. As Leah White said: "Perhaps one of the most powerful political statements that an autobiography can make is that such texts ultimately preserve lives. Although an autobiography may not be literally 'save' one's life, autobiographies do provide some sense of assurance that a life will not be forgotten."<sup>365</sup>

He created empathetic *spaces* through installation. Boltanski described himself as a painter even when he did not practice painting anymore. This explains his attitude: He drew, colored, and filled the space. By painting the space, he created empathy between himself and his viewers. He wove narratives of life and death, and the past, present, and future through the negotiation of his self. Those narratives ultimately

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<sup>365</sup> White, "Autobiography, Visual Representations, and the Preservation of Self," 123.

reveal life and its value—his, your, my, and our life.

Boltanski once said: “If you become an artist you have a problem to solve, a real problem. You try to comprehend this problem your whole life long, and find different ways to ask yourself the same question over and over again.”<sup>366</sup> ‘Self’ and ‘death’ were the ‘problems’ that constituted the heart of Boltanski’s life. In resistance to death, he sought ways to preserve himself. The archive, in particular, enabled him to negotiate the negativity of death and volatile memories of the past.<sup>367</sup> He created autobio-thanatographical narratives that move between the past, the present, and the future.

Boltanski became more conscious of his autobiographical act in his later practice. He encompassed a variety of his previous works in one exhibition, and he included works alluding to his own death, which could happen soon. *Personnes*, *Danach*, *Christian Boltanski: 4.4*<sup>368</sup> are examples (see figures 4.18. and 4.19). However, his artistic practice has always been autobiographical, regardless of his awareness. The trajectory of his works in the search for his self substantiates this.

On July 14, 2021, Boltanski died during the exhibition *Danach*<sup>369</sup> [after that]. The exhibition consisted of various components, such as tangled light bulbs on the floor, children’s faces floating like islands projected on the walls, LED strips that came down from the ceiling and hung between those faces, LED lettering of

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<sup>366</sup> Beil, “A Conversation with Christian Boltanski,” 53.

<sup>367</sup> See also: “For Christian Boltanski, it is in an unceasing process of deferred ironic or emotive meaning that the Archive can confront the absurdity of death, at least provisionally.” Hobbs, “Boltanski’s Visual Archives,” 138.

<sup>368</sup> *Christian Boltanski: 4.4* was an exhibition held at the Busan Museum of Art shortly after Boltanski’s death. According to the museum, this was the last show he organized himself. Boltanski died while preparing for the exhibition.

<sup>369</sup> See “Exhibition - Christian Boltanski Danach - KEWENIG,” KEWENIG, accessed August 28, 2021, <https://kewenig.com/exhibitions/christian-boltanski-danach-2021>.

‘DANACH,’ and flickering light bulbs according to his heartbeat sounds, etc. The heartbeat was indeed a sinister sign of death.



Figures 4.18. and 4.19. Boltanski’s last works allude to death, probably his death.  
 Left: Figure 4.18. *Pays de Neige*, 2021, cotton cloth, flexible neon LED, dimension variable, artist’s courtesy. Exhibition view, *Christian Boltanski: 4.4*, Busan Museum of Art, Busan, 2021–2022. © Photo: Lee Soo Jin © Christian Boltanski.  
 Right: Figure 4.19. *Terril*, 2015; reproduction in 2021, dark clothes, steel structure, dimension variable, artist’s courtesy, Exhibition view, *Christian Boltanski: 4.4*, Busan Museum of Art, Busan, 2021–2022. © Photo: Lee Soo Jin © Christian Boltanski.

## 5. Felix González-Torres

The final case study is Felix González-Torres. A black and white photograph of a seagull flying across the blue sky, stacked papers, and piles of candies; these are images of the Cuban American artist González-Torres (1957–1996)—allegorical images of his *self*.

His works have been mostly understood in terms of Minimalism and/or Relational Aesthetics / Participatory Art / Public Art depending on the salient elements of the work. I do not contest those interpretations; however, they focus on the formal aspects rather than the content—essence—of his works. I consider autobiographical negotiation in the public realm the essence of his artistic practice. Therefore, I believe his artistic practice should be readdressed under visual autobiography.

I analyzed Proschak and Boltanski chronologically by and large, but I would like to take a slightly different approach to González-Torres. I will examine his works by themes, and touch on the connection points and clues of his artistic practice to visual autobiography. The reason for this is that different types of works appeared quite simultaneously in a relatively short time<sup>370</sup>; the chronicle of his artistic practice was as intensive as his life.

In this chapter, I will investigate his bloodwork series, candy series, dateline series, and works with elements of doubles. I will analyze these works centered around content and theme. It will reveal that his self and life are lit at the heart of his artistic practice.

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<sup>370</sup> For contextualization of his works, I referred to the archive of *The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation*. All images in this chapter are from the same source. The copyright belongs to The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, and the caption followed the notation of The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation as much as possible.

### 5.1. Bloodwork

There is a linear graph that one might have seen in mathematics class during the school day. As one gets closer to the graph, one notices that it is not a straight line but a gentle curve with slight tremors. The title of the work is *Untitled*, and it is complemented by *Bloodworks* in parentheses. When one gets this information, one's brain quickly starts to think that the line must have been related to blood. Perhaps it is the result of a blood test. Taking it a step further, if one knew the background of the artist, one would associate it with HIV. For AIDS patients, including the artist himself, the results of clinical blood tests indicate not only the physical state but also the possibility of survival.

The work conveys the fragile. It feels weak. Due to its fragile and reduced aesthetics, González-Torres's works have been often understood in terms of Minimalism. However, Minimalism cannot fully grasp the essence of his work. Minimalism is primarily and ultimately about form. It can handle the content aspect of the series only as secondary. But form is not the main point of the bloodwork series. Content is far more critical to understanding his work. The *formal* focus of Minimalism hinders a meaningful understanding of his work. Form cannot come to the forefront of content unless the form itself is the main point and purpose of the work.

In the bloodwork series (figures 5.1.), González-Torres recorded and imprinted his self—the state of his contemporary being—by transferring blood test results onto grid paper. The graph conveys a weak being and a strong desire for imprinting his being and remaining his self which was derived from his mortality. We should focus on this, not on the formal aspects.



Figures 5.1.<sup>371</sup> *Untitled (Bloodworks)*. © Photo: Lance Brewer, image courtesy of a private collector © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

Top: Figure 5.1.a. *Untitled (Bloodworks)*, 1989, graphite and tempera on paper, framed, overall dimensions vary with installation, 16 1/2 x 15 inches each.

Bottom: Figure 5.1.b. Detail view.

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<sup>371</sup> “‘Untitled’ (Bloodworks) - Works - Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation,” Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, accessed November 8, 2021, <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled-bloodworks2>.

Indeed, González-Torres's works and artistic practice distinguish themselves from those of minimalist artists such as Sol LeWitt, Bruce Nauman, Dan Flavin, Olafur Eliasson, etc., who aim at minimal form and minimalist aesthetics. González-Torres's minimalist aesthetic is the result of his compression of ideas and metaphors: He uttered without uttering. And what he wished to compress and utter by not uttering was ultimately his self.

Considering his approach, González-Torres's artistic practice can better be understood as Conceptual Art rather than Minimalism; although they share some common denominators. In the article *Within and Beyond: Felix Gonzalez-Torres's "Crowd,"* Christopher Ho grasped González-Torres's works as Conceptual Art and Feminist Art and contextualized them in light of the development of Conceptual Art.<sup>372</sup> However, Ho also remarked that González-Torres differs from other conceptual artists and feminist artists. Indeed, González-Torres's artistic practice is unique.

Untitling is one of the tactics of Conceptual Art. It used to be fashionable to title artworks 'Untitled,' and many artists still do so. However, González-Torres's work is perhaps one of the most powerful and compelling works titled 'Untitled.' His untitled titles are often supplemented by subtitles in parentheses. Similar to Proschak and Boltanski, González-Torres repeatedly presented works of the same concept. In those variations, the subtitles changed while maintaining the concept. Following the subtitles of the same series, one can understand his idea and intention. The subtitle of a work is only a few words, but with the chronology of the subtitles, we can conceive the artist's time.

According to the information provided on the website of the archive of *The*

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<sup>372</sup> Christopher Ho, "Within and Beyond: Felix Gonzalez-Torres's 'Crowd,'" *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 23, no. 1 (2001): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3246486>. Regarding Ho's point on the difference between González-Torres and other conceptual artists and feminist artists see page 8.

*Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation*<sup>373</sup>, the bloodwork series started in 1988, and the subtitles were *7 Days of Bloodworks* in 1988 and *Bloodworks* in 1989. In 1990, the subtitle was *t-cell count* which more directly indicates immunity which is crucial for HIV patients. In 1992, a subtitle *False Hope – Bloodwork* appeared; and in 1993, *Bloodwork – Steady Decline*. A series of graphs in 1993 had the subtitle comprising all the above-mentioned fragments: *9 Days of Bloodwork – Steady Decline and False Hope*. After that, *Bloodwork – Steady Decline* is observed as a common component in the subtitles of different series.

What could we extract from the variations of the subtitles of González-Torres's bloodwork series? My response is that he and/or his closest friends underwent a clinical trial, which turned out to offer him/them false hope, and his/their T-cell count steadily declined. I took this interpretation in juxtaposition with *Placebo*, the subtitle of a candy pile work, which will be discussed in the next subchapter. My interpretation could be wrong—there is no way to confirm it with the artist since he died. Still, the change in subtitles over several years indicates the change in his state and mind, what and how he would have gone through. Regardless of a clinical trial, he might have had hope for a miraculous cure. It is common to hold (false) hope in desperate situations. A glimmer of hope for a miracle can be observed not only in AIDS patients but also in other diseases and in other hopeless (non-medical) circumstances.

Despite 'false hope' and 'steady decline,' González-Torres looked in the face of his physical and mental state of the present and marked it—this is a similar attitude to Proschak's. As the graphs accumulate, they become a record of his survival. And a few letters in the subtitles, the reduced phrases, completely change the viewer's

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<sup>373</sup> For the variations and chronology of the bloodwork series, see "Works - Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation," Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, accessed November 8, 2021, <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/c/graphs>.

reception. The construction of meaning is up to viewers. The openness and multifacetedness of his untitled titles engage the viewer in the active process of constructing the meaning of the work. Mónica Amor also observed that “more than a spectator, the visitor to a show by the artist becomes an interlocutor in a dialogical relation with the work. The majority of his works are untitled, while a word in parenthesis suggests a meaning related to experiences of the artist’s life, but always open and multivalent.”<sup>374</sup>

González-Torres’s bloodwork series is not the test result papers themselves, but the artist’s reproduction of them. He drew the lines by hand. While Proschak directly applied the images of dermatoscopy in *Felmen*—reproducibility is the mediality of photography as well—González-Torres consciously drew the line of his life. He transferred the most essential part onto the grid paper with his hands, omitting unnecessary information such as numbers and letters. The lines signify his life and being. Another intriguing parallel feature between Proschak and González-Torres is the inscription of the self by hand; in her current series, Proschak fills up lines to cover images.

It is noteworthy that both artists transformed their own medical data into artworks.<sup>375</sup> Boltanski, too, used the sound of his heartbeat for his installation. The three artists fixed their ontological states that were translated into scientific data.

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<sup>374</sup> Mónica Amor, “Félix González-Torres: Towards a Postmodern Sublimity,” *Third Text* 9, no. 30 (1995): 72–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528829508576530>. Amor’s article is very insightful. She acknowledged the significance of the public installation and the public/participatory characteristics of González-Torres’s artistic practice, but she did not view it from a sociopolitical/power-related perspective. She paid attention to the multivalence of González-Torres’s work that allows viewers’ multiple readings.

<sup>375</sup> Similar approaches to transferring the medical record into an image can be observed in other artists. For example, Brian O’Doherty created an image of Duchamp with his heartbeat recorded on an electrocardiogram. See Astrid Mania, “Brian O’Doherty,” *Artforum*, June, 2012, <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201206/brian-o-doherty-38966>.

Fixing records of their physical states and marking their selves seems like an irresistible strategy for visual autobiographers.

## 5.2. Pile of Candy

The candy series is one of the most well-known works by González-Torres. The installation differs in the sort of sweets<sup>376</sup>, the colors of the candy wrappers, the weight of the candy pieces, etc. The form of the installation also varies according to the space. The candies are usually either spread out on the floor like a carpet or stacked like a pile. However, if one encounters an installation of innumerable candy pieces within the context of art—if one is affiliated with art—one will highly likely be reminded of the name *Felix González-Torres*.

Like the bloodwork series, the candy series are also titled *Untitled* and supplemented by subtitles. There are various sub-series/sub-versions.<sup>377</sup> Each sub-version was implemented with the different color(s) of the candy wrappers and the different weights. These elements were/are maintained as the key concept when the sub-version was/is later installed elsewhere. But the form of the installation can be changed differently from the artist's first execution. For example, *Untitled (Placebo)* was first installed like a carpet, spread out on the floor, but its later installations had different forms like a pile or wave (figures 5.2.).

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<sup>376</sup> Various types of confectionary sweets such as fortune cookies, chocolates, bubble gum, candies, etc. were used. One sort was used for each work. However, since the series is mostly described as candy works, I use 'candy' in this text to represent them.

<sup>377</sup> For the variations and chronology of the candy series, see "Works - Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation," Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, accessed November 9, 2021, <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/c/candy-works>.



Figures 5.2.<sup>378</sup> The ways of the installation vary while maintaining the key concept of the artist's first execution (figure 5.2.a.). *Untitled (Placebo)*, 1991, candies in silver wrappers, endless supply, overall dimensions vary with installation, ideal weight: 1,000–1,200 lb. © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

Top: Figure 5.2.a. Installation view, *Every Week There is Something Different*, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, 1991. © Image courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

Middle: 5.2.b. Installation view, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Specific Objects without Specific Form*, Wiels Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, Belgium, 2010. ©

Photo: Sven Laurent, image courtesy of Wiels Contemporary Art Centre.

Bottom: 5.2.c. Installation view, installed in Terminal 5, John F. Kennedy International Airport, Queens, New York, 2004–2005.

What maintains this work—also after the artist's death—is the concept. The weight is especially significant as it is connected to the conceptual structure of the work. The institution receives initial instructions on the ideal weight of the candy pieces at the time of installation. There is a small but significant statement in the artwork caption: 'endless supply.' Although there is no specific guideline for the visitor, the work is intended to be taken with them—this is the most essential and whimsical aspect of the work. Whether and how often candies are filled is up to the curator or institution. However, it is *ideally* supposed to be an *endless supply*.

The participatory aspect is critical to this work. However, how many visitors would actually take candy with them? Most of them would not take candy with them. There could be different reasons. First, visitors may not even be aware that they can collect candy because there is no instruction about this. Second, even if they know it, they might become hesitant in an exhibition as the exhibition space has an aura. This is similarly yet slightly differently valid for installations in public spaces because 'public' can mean strictness and discretion, keeping distance. Third, the installation is neat and minimalist. In front of the vulnerably laid down and movable candies,

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<sup>378</sup> "'Untitled' (Placebo) - Works - Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation," Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, accessed November 9, 2021, <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled-placebo>.

viewers confront their agony that sways between temptation and hesitation. The work speaks: *Take me, yes, please, take me*. However, they think: *Shall I? Well, I don't know. Better not*.

And what would happen to the candy taken by the visitors? Some people will store it because it is part of the 'artwork'; some will peel off the candy wrapper and swallow the lining, and then throw away the wrapper; some might lose the small piece of candy on their way home. Or some people will remember the candy piece at the exhibition even though they did not take it home. It is similar to the ways that we remember or forget others. Most of us recall the deceased from time to time, but not all the time. Applying weight and touch, González-Torres inscribed his wish to be remembered into the candy series. It is the same wish as ours that we want to be remembered by others after death. This is the kernel of this series.

Therefore, I would like to suggest reconsidering—at least paying critical attention to—the conventional criticism of this work. Candy series and stack of paper series are commonly evaluated in terms of Relational Aesthetics and/or Participatory Art. These criticisms put a greater emphasis on the viewer's participation/action than on the artist's intention/creation. The rationale for those criticisms is the importance of social connection and connectivity among members of society. Furthermore, the discussion often revolves around the issues of power relationships, ownership, subjectivity, etc. The wordings may vary, but critics, such as Nicolas Bourriaud, expressed similar views; the artist/the work encourages (or should encourage) the beholder's participation, which elevates the beholder's subjectivity and overturns the solid power structure and aura, and so forth. Miwon Kwon, who is well known for criticism of site-specific art, also focused on the relationship between the work, the viewer, and the space in González-Torres's works. Her interpretation is more

sophisticated, but broadly speaking, it shares some common features with Relational Aesthetics / Participatory Art.<sup>379</sup> However, what they talk about are social and political dimensions, outside of the artwork itself.

However, is the candy series about power relations? Is the sociopolitical aspect the key to understanding his work? One may interpret it like that, but I think those readings derive from the critic's own worldview and obsession with social and power relations. Unfortunately, those readings became a doctrine of criticism of González-Torres, as if they were the correct answer. Young scholars produce the text on the basis of the opinions of prominent scholars, accepting and developing from their theories rather than critically disputing them.<sup>380</sup> The names of established scholars, especially those of Relational Aesthetics / Participatory Art—so-called 'social practice' or 'socially engaged art'—are majestic.

The self-contradiction of Relational Aesthetics / Participatory Art is that they themselves have constructed a center and acted like/as *the* power of the art world, which was precisely what they criticized in the first place. The artworks they highlighted might have deconstructed power relations, but the critics constructed their own league with those works. Brian Sholis captured that "'relational aesthetics' became a label applied to nearly any artistic gesture, however unsubtle, that actively engaged viewer-participants - as if relational art was something to be subcontracted by

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<sup>379</sup> For example, see Miwon Kwon, "The Becoming of a Work of Art: FGT and a Possibility of Renewal, a Chance to Share, a Fragile Truce," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006), 281–314.

<sup>380</sup> For example, Theo Gordon's following article accepted and built on criticism of Relational Aesthetics and Participatory Art. It looked at a niche of orality, which was not addressed by other scholars, from a psychoanalytic perspective. His argument for 'oral participation' is not very convincing. Theo Gordon, "Spit or Swallow? Orality in the Art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Art History* 43, no. 4 (2020): 774–801, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12516>.

museum education and programming departments.”<sup>381</sup> Ironically, Relational Aesthetics has become the most solid doctrine of institutional theories.

Without a doubt, González-Torres’s works have participatory aspects. However, constructing participatory/power-relational/sociopolitical aspects as the key to criticism of González-Torres’s practice can mislead our understanding of the essence of his work in a similar way to the misapplication of Minimalism. The candy series engages with audiences—others—from an empathy standpoint not from an action or power perspective. In essence, the candy series is González-Torres’s visual autobiography before participatory art. This becomes evident when we look at the concept of the series.

In this work, the candy is equivalent to the body. To be more precise, the weight of candy equals the weight of the body. The candy series *Untitled (Ross)* and *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* are about Ross, González-Torres’s lover, and both works denote 175 lbs (about 80 kg) as the ideal weight. 175 lbs could have referred to the ideal weight for a healthy adult man; it might have been Ross’s usual weight before HIV. Another candy work *Untitled (Lover Boys)* is supposed to weigh 355 lbs. It is approximately the ideal weight for two adult men. Probably the weight of Felix and Ross. González-Torres often included Ross in his work. There are many elements of double in González-Torres’s work. In the artwork, they are together—I will discuss it soon. *Untitled (Placebo)* has a different weight, 1000–1200 lbs. It is the weight of plural people. It signifies many AIDS patients.

The participatory act of taking candy *away/with* is allegorically related to AIDS in two ways. First, it is associated with the loss of weight of AIDS patients,

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<sup>381</sup> Brian Sholis, “theanyspacewhatever' at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum,” *Afterall*, February 5, 2009, <https://afterall.org/article/theanyspacewhatever.at.the.solomon.r.guggenheim.museum>.

especially at the last stage of life. When the viewer takes a piece of candy with them, the weight decreases from 175 lbs. It reduces bit by bit, and at the end of the exhibition, it will be completely removed—gone. Second, it implies the aspect of touch. AIDS is an epidemic. It has been recognized as something fearful due to it being contagious and deadly. However, the fundamental reason for being conceived as fearful may be that we do not fully know about the disease, especially how it spreads. Nowadays, the perception has changed a lot, but when González-Torres made this work, HIV patients were not touched. And still, until now, many people are afraid of, and even reluctant to touch them. However, candy is sweet, so no one has a mental barrier to it. Children—who have no prejudice yet—love candy. The conceptual structure of the work and the viewer's agony over whether to take candy with them symbolically implies the hesitance to touch AIDS patients. Using this subtle way, González-Torres moves against the stigma that AIDS patients including himself, his lover, and his friends face on a daily basis.

The candy series is sad and bitter, not sweet. It means one person, two persons, and plural people—who have gone and will fade away. González-Torres inscribed and remembered them in his visual autobiography. He, too, is remembered in his work.

### 5.3. Dateline Series: Photostat, Billboard, and Portrait

Among González-Torres's works, the most politically executed work is probably the black image on the billboard. At a cursory glance, it looks like a blank black surface. However, looking at it closely, one can find white text at the bottom of the black rectangular image. The text consists of combinations of a few words and four digits of the numbers—year—and the words describe certain—political, cultural, historical, personal—events. This principle forms the concept of González-Torres's

‘dateline’ series, and it is applied to his various works in different ways.

The dateline series was first presented in 1987 at his master’s degree exhibition. The text of the first dateline work (figure 5.3.a.) reads as: *Bitburg Cemetery 1985 Walkman 1979 Cape Town 1985 Water-proof mascara 1971 Personal computer 1981 TLC*. The combination of keyword and year piques the viewer’s curiosity like the white text rises to the black surface. One’s brain moves quickly and thinks: *Was Walkman launched in 1979? What happened in 1985 at Bitburg Cemetery and Cape Town? Did he mean the same event I am thinking about now?* Since only a few letters are given to describe the event, the association of events and the weaving of a narrative falls on the viewer. It applies both to one set of the text-number combination and to all the combinations. The few words function as the *key* to deciphering this work, yet there is no designated answer.

The association process works randomly and quickly like a representative photograph of a significant event pops up in our minds when we think of the event. Although the core medium of the work is *text*, the work is eventually *image*. The artwork caption, more specifically, the medium of the production, attests to this. The works are untitled as he usually did, but another alias of the series is ‘photostat.’ González-Torres applied photostat to make this work. What would this mean? Since the final product was a few lines of text on a black surface, it could have been produced with a printing machine or printer alike. However, he deliberately used a photostat. In this fact, it becomes evident that he created an image.

The German word ‘Bild’ means picture and image at the same time. Bild can refer to a material image—picture—like a painting or photograph as well as a mental image. Bildwissenschaft understands various forms of representation as *images* and elucidates their meanings within the context of human culture. It studies not only

artworks having a flat surface like photographs and paintings as its objectives but also a three-dimensional solid body such as architecture and sculpture. It further examines diagrams and graphs delivering information as images. Similarly, text can also be understood as an image.

The concept and strategy of the dateline series are based on the transmediality between text and image. The way the text in the photostat series works is like that of an image. By deciphering the series of events, the spectator naturally recalls or imagines an image of the event, not only mere factual/historical information. Considering this and applying the framework of Bildwissenschaft, González-Torres's dateline series can be understood as an image: The dateline series are indeed images.

In 1989, González-Torres published a dateline work on the billboard in Greenwich Village, in the middle of New York City (see figure 5.3.b.). The text this time was: *People With AIDS Coalition 1985 Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1895 Supreme Court 1986 Harvey Milk 1977 March on Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969*. The text changed, but the same concept was maintained; each set described an event and its year, and only a few words were given. However, the impact was magnified due to the installation on the billboard in a public space. It created a visual effect like a movie screen, and it gave the work a public characteristic.

Because the order of the events is not chronological and shuffled, it seems random. The few keywords are also somewhat enigmatic. But they are not randomly picked. This image—text—describes historical and political events revolving around AIDS which was significant for González-Torres who was diagnosed as HIV positive. Indeed, the work is truly autobiographical. And it was personal and public at the same time for him.



Figures 5.3. Dateline series. © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

Top: Figure 5.3.a.<sup>382</sup> *Untitled*, 1987, framed photostat, 8 1/4 x 10 1/4 inches. © Photo: Wolfgang Guenzel, image courtesy of MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt. Bottom: Figure 5.3.b.<sup>383</sup> *Untitled*, 1989, billboard, dimensions vary with installation. Installation view, installed on the corner of Christopher Street and Seventh Avenue, Sheridan Square, New York, NY, 1989. © Image courtesy of the Public Art Fund.

<sup>382</sup> “‘Untitled’ - Works - Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation,” Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, accessed November 12, 2021, <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled4>.

<sup>383</sup> “‘Untitled’ - Works - Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation,” Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, accessed November 12, 2021, <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled>.

Compared to the other series such as bloodwork and candy pile, his self is less directly graspable in this work. His selection of keywords regarding historical/political events gives an official and public impression instead of a personal impression. I believe he consciously erased his traces in the billboard series. This must have been his way of negotiating the issue of AIDS—which was personal and social/political at the same time for him—and bringing it into the public realm.

In this way, González-Torres managed to speak to different audiences: anonymous people walking the streets, homosexuals like himself, different political groups, etc. The most whimsical part of this work is that it speaks to each individual differently. I interpret that the black screen implies numerous or innumerable events that could not be captured in one picture as they were too tremendous. Further, the black surface signifies the layers of people's opinions. If colors are mixed up, they become black. Layers of loads of events and loads of opinions become black.

The work recalls the spectator's own image, and it further reminds the viewer of his/her ethical view of AIDS. Amor observed: "González-Torres invites the spectator to create his own history in relation to the events presented, a history determined and modelled by the particularities of the interlocutor who provides a personal reading of the public and collective event that the artist presents."<sup>384</sup> Like the title of the book by Kemp, *Der Betrachter ist im Bild* [The Spectator is in the Image], we find ourselves on the black screen.

Not only this work but also other images such as a seagull and an empty double bed that he published on the billboard after this work are allegories of his self. These images were printed and installed in different forms like billboards and/or stacks of

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<sup>384</sup> Amor, "Towards a Postmodern Sublimity," 73.

paper. His chronology, published in the book *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* gives a clue to understanding those images.<sup>385</sup> The concept of his chronology is similar to the dateline series. It is filled with combinations of the year and keywords that form his (auto)biography. The keywords included the names of his people and their death, his artistic career including his education, his experience of sickness and hospitalization, his experiences of hatred against AIDS patients, etc. Following the datelines, one can understand that travels to nature saved him when he went through difficult periods: “I’m lost—Claudio and Miami beach saved me”<sup>386</sup>; after reading this line, the images of seagull, bed, hand, etc. come to us in a different meaning now. He shared his experience and the images of the precious moments that held him in the difficult time—salvation—with the others.<sup>387</sup>

Another variation of the dateline series is the portrait series.<sup>388</sup> The same principle was applied, but the subject was different. As the structure of the subtitle ‘Portrait of First name Last name’ suggests, the dateline in this work describes a person. The portrait series was mostly painted at the top of the wall where people could only see it when they look up. While the dateline billboard on AIDS was like a bold stamp in a public space, the portrait series was like a seal preventing important content from being exposed. This careful implementation reflects love. It reminds us how *others* exist in the world along with me—*self*—and how we treat them. While Boltanski’s embrace of others was social, González-Torres’s careful gesture had more

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<sup>385</sup> See Tim Rollins, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, (Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1993), 89.

<sup>386</sup> The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, “Chronology.”

<sup>387</sup> This is my interpretation; I cannot confirm the fact with the artist. However, the reception of the viewer is as important as the intention of the artist in visual autobiography. It also reflects that one’s visual autobiography remains beyond mortality and corresponds with others.

<sup>388</sup> See: “Works - Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation,” The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, accessed Nov 12, 2021, <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/c/portraits>.

personal implications. However, they both included others in their visual autobiographies. It is noteworthy that visual autobiographers reflect on others in their visual autobiographies.

Considering various examples of works implementing the concept, González-Torres's dateline series can be better comprehended as an expansion of his visual autobiography: a *published* visual autobiography. However, the criticism of Public Art, community art, or political art has formed the mainstream of the criticism of his dateline series and other billboard works. But González-Torres's works do not fit into such criticism. Looking at the significance of his public execution in terms of the relationship between the private (space) and the public (space) could be a valid point since he brought the private/intimate into the public realm. However, that does/should not mean the work is public art.

Such naïve and unsophisticated interpretation is likely caused by a lack of distinction between the different connotations of 'public.' It is true that the dateline series, particularly the billboard works, were executed in public space. The work has a public characteristic in this sense. And the criticism of Public Art may uncover a facet of the work in a meaningful way. However, González-Torres is differentiated from other artists who do public art. It becomes evident when we consider different modes of the relationship between the artist and the public. Most public artists make artworks for the public and community, for the public interest. In contrast, González-Torres's works do not aim for the same effect. Most importantly, what he ultimately published is the personal and the autobiographical.

Throughout this Chapter, I have disputed and reexamined conventional criticisms of González-Torres's works. There is one common feature among those misapplications. They were focused more on form than content, and on matters outside

of the artwork. They did not see what/why González-Torres devoted himself to making—leaving—artworks. Understanding the dateline series in terms of Public Art is also a misalignment in a similar way; it is less misapplied than the other criticisms reviewed previously, but still misaligned.

Ostensibly, the dateline series is neither autobiographical nor visual. However, the series implicitly shows González-Torres's distinctive way of negotiating his self which can also be observed in his other works. González-Torres dissolved the boundary of his self; toward others and the public; into the air. Since he further distilled his traces in the dateline series, his self exists in a vaporized state in the dateline series—just like the image was transferred to the other medium, text. Although he strategically removed the personal, the work entails the most personal. Furthermore, the principle piercing different dateline series connects his chronology, his closest people, social matters, etc. In this sense, González-Torres's dateline series can be best understood as his visual autobiography and allegory of his self.

#### 5.4. Doubles: *Perfect Lovers*

The image of an empty double bed on the billboard (see figure 5.4.) and two clocks juxtaposed next to each other (see figures 5.5.) are iconic images of González-Torres. They have an element of 'double.' The double is an intriguing and crucial element in González-Torres's visual autobiography.<sup>389</sup> It appears through/in various mediums such as mirrors, chairs, stacks of papers, light bulbs, water reflections, etc. This subchapter examines the unique gesture of doubling by González-Torres.

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<sup>389</sup> The website of The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation also has a category 'Doubles.' The category comprises works that consist of the juxtaposition of two identical elements. "Works - Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation," The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, accessed Nov 15, 2021, <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/c/doubles2>.



Figure 5.4.<sup>390</sup> *Untitled*, 1991, billboard, dimensions vary with installation. Installation view, as part of the exhibition *Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres* by The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), installed at Third Avenue and East 137th Street, Bronx, NY, 1992. © Photo: Peter Muscato and Aleessandra Mannoni, image courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

In May 1992, a black and white photographic image of an empty bed (*Untitled*, 1991, figure 5.4.) appeared on billboards across New York City. The installation was part of *Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres* that González-Torres held in conjunction with the Museum of Modern Art. The show included an indoor exhibition at the museum space (one location) and an outdoor billboard installation at twenty-four locations in Manhattan.<sup>391</sup> The image is simple. It shows an unmade bed with crumpled white bedsheets and two pillows. And there is no explanation at all.

Viewers of this image, pedestrians and drivers, might have been reminded of

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<sup>390</sup> “‘Untitled’ - Works - Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation,” Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, accessed November 15, 2021, <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled57>.

<sup>391</sup> See: “Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres | MoMA,” MoMA, accessed November 15, 2021, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/368>. See also the exhibition catalogue: “Projects 34 : Felix Gonzalez-Torres : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 16–June 30, 1992,” MoMA, accessed November 15, 2021, [https://www.moma.org/documents/moma\\_catalogue\\_368\\_300063058.pdf](https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_368_300063058.pdf).

different things. One might have thought of his own bed that morning, the other a hotel bed. The banality of the image strikes each viewer differently. However, it would have left an afterimage.

I also experienced a vague afterimage. I saw a photo of the installation view of this project somewhere. I do not remember it in detail anymore, not even when and where I saw it. However, the vague image of the empty bed was imprinted in my brain. The vague image is still there, entailing inexplicable dense feelings and emotions. Those feelings derive from an absence that indicates someone's presence.

It was after a while that I learned the backstory of the image, and that filled the gap in my reception. The image was photographed in 1991. 1991 was a significant year for González-Torres: Ross Laycock, González-Torres's lover, died of AIDS in 1991.

González-Torres's love for Ross can be seen and felt in his various works, not only in this image. The candy works *Untitled (Ross)* and *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* discussed earlier are examples. His love and loss are also graspable in his chronology published in 1993: “1983 Ross at the Boybar – 1985 first trip to Europe, first summer with Ross – 1986 blue kitchen, blue flowers in Toronto—a real home for the first time in so long, so long, Ross is here – 1990 moved to L.A. with Ross (already very sick) . . . – 1991 Ross died of AIDS, Dad died three weeks later, a hundred small yellow envelopes of my lover's ashes—his last will – 1991 the world I knew is gone, moved the four cats, books, and a few things to a new apartment[.]”<sup>392</sup> The difference and uniqueness of the image of the double bed, however, is that it captures the absence of two persons, not one.

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<sup>392</sup> Rollins, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 89. I extracted the year and keyword combinations from this source and edited them chronologically. ‘—’ is my connector between the datelines; and ‘—’ is part of his original text.

The empty double bed signifies not only the loss of Ross but also the loss of the world González-Torres knew. Ultimately, Ross's death has become the loss of himself: With the death of Ross, Felix has also gone. Two persons' vanishing is contained as one in this photograph. It also reflects on two perspectives on death: witnessing another person's death and foreseeing one's own death. Adair Rounthwaite also recognized the double elements in González-Torres's works that signify Ross and Felix. Referring to *Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting* by Ross Chambers, she comprehended it as "a dual autobiography[.]"<sup>393</sup>

This image is truly ontological and autobiographical. However, this image and its public installation have often been understood as public art and interpreted in relation to AIDS. But is this work about AIDS as a social issue? Similarly, is Public Art a suitable lens? For me, this work is highly autobiographical. And it is about love which is universal for everyone, regardless of gender, sexuality, age, race, social class, etc. A lot of layers, especially social and political layers regarding homosexuality and AIDS are overlaid on the criticism of González-Torres's works. With this work, González-Torres remembered and mourned Ross, his lover. He did not talk about AIDS and homosexuality—which may be a juicy topic for critics. Such readings could become another stigma for him.

The image of the empty double bed published on the 24 billboards in New York City was an elegy on Ross and an obituary at the same time. González-Torres aired the elegy-obituary to the public. The public tribute would reach Ross too: "When people ask me, 'Who is your public?' I say honestly, without skipping a beat, 'Ross.'

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<sup>393</sup> Adair Rounthwaite, "Split Witness: Metaphorical Extensions of Life in the Art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Representations* 109, no. 1 (2010): 40, <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2010.109.1.35>. Regarding the analysis, see pages 40–41.

The public was Ross.”<sup>394</sup> This work is thus truly personal and autobiographical. And it constructs an important—perhaps the most important—chapter of Felix González-Torres’s visual autobiography. Ho also observed as follows: “Obliquely referring to the recent death of Ross Laycock, . . . it derives in part from the autobiographical.”<sup>395</sup>



Figure 5.5.a.<sup>396</sup> *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1987–1990, wall clocks, 13 1/2 inches diameter each, ideally installed above head height; there are two versions of *Perfect Lovers*, 1987–1990 and 1991, and this one is the former version. Installation view, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Michael Jenkins, and Tim Rollins + K.O.S.*, Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York, NY, 1990. © Image courtesy of Jay Gorney Modern Art.

<sup>394</sup> Robert Storr, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Être Un Espion,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (Göttingen: steidl, 2006), 233. Originally published: Robert Storr, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Être un espion,” *Art Press*, January 1995, 24–32.

<sup>395</sup> Ho, “Within and Beyond,” 67.

<sup>396</sup> “‘Untitled’ (Perfect Lovers) - Works - Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation,” Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, accessed November 17, 2021, <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled-perfect-lovers>.

*Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (figure 5.5.a.) is even more ontological and metaphysical than the image of the empty double bed. The work has a very simple structure but brings viewers to profound contemplation. The work consists of two clocks installed in juxtaposition on the wall above head height. The two clocks are identical, and the time is set the same. The viewer sees the time of the two clocks running together. The operation of the clocks is regular and diligent; it looks like it will go on and on. But the battery-operated clocks will eventually stop working. Theoretically, the batteries of the two clocks should run out at the same time; but we know they will not. One will stop earlier than the other. Likewise, we do not know when it will stop; but we know it will stop sometime.

The work reflects our sense of time as mortal beings. It also indicates different lengths of lives. Most significantly, it implicitly shows that one's time is encapsulated and isolated within one's own being. One is alone in one's ontologically most decisive moment—death. The juxtaposition of two round clocks forms an infinite sign which implies the impossible longing for being together with the other, especially the lover: *I want to be with you forever*. However, one cannot become one with the other no matter how much they love each other. The subtitle entails this impossible longing to be perfect lovers.

There are two versions of *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* from 1987–1990 and 1991, respectively. The work is almost the same, except for the color of the frame of the clocks; the size is also slightly different by 0.5 inches, but this does not seem to be crucial. In the earlier version, the clocks had black frames (see figure 5.5.a.), but they changed to white in 1991 (see figure 5.5.b.). Compared to the black one, the white frame blends better with the background (see figure 5.5.c.). The boundaries of the clocks melt into the air, like our body and being.



Top: Figure 5.5.b.<sup>397</sup> *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1991, wall clocks and paint on wall, 14 inches diameter each, ideally installed above head height, overall dimensions vary with installation. © Photo: Peter Muscato, image courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

Bottom: Figure 5.5.c.<sup>398</sup> *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1991. Installation view, *The Museum of Natural History*, Galerie Barbara Farber, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1991. © Image courtesy of Galerie Barbara Farber.

All images of Figures 5.5. © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

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<sup>397</sup> “‘Untitled’ (Perfect Lovers) [2] - Works - Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation,” Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, accessed November 17, 2021, <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled-perfect-lovers2>.

<sup>398</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, “‘Untitled’ (Perfect Lovers) [2].”

There *is* still a boundary formed by the frame, but it expands *beyond* its limits. Considering the fact of Ross's death in January 1991, this change does not seem random. The work incorporates the idea of eternity beyond mortality. It presents time in a circulatory way, not linearly. The concept of eternity may not be fully captured through human cognition, but this *image* conveys the idea even though it may be abstract. The abstraction allows viewers to comprehend the concept.

There are other double elements in González-Torres's works besides the bed image and the clocks. He juxtaposed two identical elements next to each other such as mirrors, light bulbs, chairs, T-cell count graphs, photos, paper stacks, etc. The double imply Ross and González-Torres's love and loss. It is a unique feature of González-Torres's autobiographical narrative as the other—Ross—is narrated together with his own self.

González-Torres and Boltanski included others in their visual autobiographies. Their works show that visual autobiographers negotiate beyond the capsule of the self. The difference between them is that Boltanski included others in the Heideggerian sense which are unspecific and connote the social, while González-Torres's others are personal. It is intriguing that Boltanski mentioned González-Torres as his favorite artist. "I always say the same thing: the art that interests me is human art. My favorite artist is Felix González-Torres because his art is totally Christian. And what's important is always to look upon people and things with love, not mockery."<sup>399</sup> As Boltanski said, the 'human' aspect is one of the most significant attitudes of visual autobiographers. This is closely related to the significance of the genre of visual autobiography which will be discussed in the next chapter.

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<sup>399</sup> Boltanski and Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, 201.

### 5.5. Summary

González-Torres's various works such as the candy series, the dateline series, billboard works, etc. have been mostly understood in terms of Minimalism, Relational Aesthetics, Participatory Art, and Public Art. These criticisms can reveal a facet of his works, but they cannot fully capture the essence of his artistic practice. González-Torres's works are allegorical images of his self. Therefore, his work can be better understood as his visual autobiography. The framework of visual autobiography can grasp the essence and content of his work while embracing pre-existing predominant criticisms; Minimalism, Relational Aesthetics, Participatory Art, and Public Art can be used to analyze the formal aspects of his works.

González-Torres shares some common features with Proschak and Boltanski yet differs from them. The ontological aspect related to death is common among the three artists. Mortality and death as well as their self and being are deeply ingrained in their visual autobiographies. González-Torres's artistic practice is distinctive in that he brought the most ontological aspect of the self into the public realm: He published his ontology—his vanishing and disappearing—in the public. The three artists' negotiation of the boundary of the self can also be analyzed in a similar way. While the boundary of the self is visible in Proschak's and Boltanski's works, it is dissolved in González-Torres's work. González-Torres vaporized the boundary of his self into the air. His self is melded in the air but did not completely disappear. This is the signature of González-Torres's visual autobiography.

González-Torres encompassed others, especially his lover in his visual autobiography. By publishing his ontology, he narrated self, love, and life. Social issues such as AIDS, homosexuality, discrimination, etc. were naturally included in his negotiation of the self. His work speaks to various audiences; anonymous people,

homosexuals like him, minorities in society who fight against stigma and injustice, and also different social and/or political groups who are the agents of discrimination, and so on. And his visual autobiography speaks to each individual differently.

González-Torres narrated his self toward the world until he died of AIDS at the age of 39 in 1996.

## 6. Significance of Visual Autobiography

17. One time he came to give a lecture at the Beaux-Arts in Tourcoing, instead of showing slides of his work he talked in a somber voice about “memory” and “death,” one thing that struck me was when he said that the artist holds up a mirror to the public and that each person who looks in it has to be able to recognize himself in it.<sup>400</sup>

—Christian Boltanski, “What They Remember”

So far, I have investigated visual autobiography in contemporary art. I established the theoretical framework for it based on the review of relevant fields and examined the actual practice of visual autobiography through the case studies on three artists. This chapter will discuss the significance of visual autobiography, focused on narrative of self, profound self-reflection, the negotiation of the self toward others, autobiographical narratives as the public, the potential of visual autobiography, etc.

Autobiography<sup>401</sup> is a genre of significances. This fact is fundamentally linked to the significance of visual autobiography. ‘Self’ and ‘narrative’ are the key attributes of autobiography that lead us to understand this. Self is the subject and object of autobiography at the same time, and every autobiographical account is in the form of narrative. Narrative is not a storyline but a set of significances. Autobiographers do not cease at rendering a storyline or sequence of events, but they weave the significance of life. The autobiographical act equals finding and constituting one’s self in and as a set of significances of life. It sounds banal and basic, but it is the most fundamental feature of autobiography.

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<sup>400</sup> The text is from *What They Remember*, Boltanski’s (auto)biographical statements written in the third person. It is the seventeenth text out of 100. Cited after: Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, 165.

<sup>401</sup> ‘Autobiography’ and ‘autobiographer’ in this chapter can be understood as ‘visual autobiography’ and ‘visual autobiographer.’

A unique and essential feature of autobiographical narratives is that they are woven based on self-reflection. The narrative of the autobiographer lets us recognize her profound self-reflection, and it leads us to look into ourselves. Gusdorf explained as follows: “The narrative offers us the testimony of a man about himself, the contest of a being in dialogue with itself, seeking its innermost fidelity.”<sup>402</sup> Autobiography is a reflection of the autobiographer’s self, and it becomes a mirror for the viewer.

Butler described in her article *Giving an Account of Oneself* how an account of the self begins: “If I try to give an account of myself, . . . I will, to some degree, have to make myself substitutable in order to make myself recognizable. The narrative authority of the ‘I’ must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story.”<sup>403</sup> As Butler explained, to be able to give an account of the self, first of all, one should construct one’s *self* in a way that is understandable, recognizable, and sustainable. It aligns with the concept of ‘narrative identity’ Eakin outlined.

Similarly, Gusdorf also said, it “requires a man to take a distance with regard to himself in order to reconstitute himself in the focus of his special unity and identity across time.”<sup>404</sup> Having a distance is essential for self-reflection. The act of an autobiographer appears close to the self, but in fact, it is the opposite. Without distance, one cannot grasp one’s self, and no autobiography is possible. Autobiographical narratives require profound self-reflection, and it arises only at a distance.

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<sup>402</sup> Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” 43.

<sup>403</sup> Judith Butler, “Giving an Account of Oneself,” *Diacritics* 31, no. 4 (2001): 26, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2004.0002>.

<sup>404</sup> Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” 35.

The above quote by Butler describes not only one's relationship with the self but also the relationship between the self and others. The subject is inevitably interrelated to others, and within those relationships, it finds its own perspective. Perspective is vital for the sustainability of the self and the construction of narratives. Hence, the interrelation of the self with others plays an essential role in the construction of the autobiographical narrative.

The interrelation becomes a ground for the autobiographical act becoming a negotiation of the self toward others rather than a narcissistic behavior. Self-narration seems personal and self-oriented. It is personal. Yet it does not remain at the self/personal. It extends to the public as the personal. This becomes evident when we observe the basic structure of autobiography. 'I narrate myself' is its basic structure. However, it is not an empty echo within the self but a radiation toward others, since it presupposes the listener—others.

In the same article, referring to Adriana Cavarero, Butler summed up the importance of others for the account of the self as follows: "If I have lost the conditions of address, if I have no 'you' to address, then I have lost 'myself.' In her view, one can only tell an autobiography, one can only reference an 'I' in relation to a 'you': without the 'you,' my own story becomes impossible."<sup>405</sup> The listener, You, Others are essential for/in autobiography. In fact, others are essential for the self, Being. As Butler said, without others, the autobiographical account is impossible. The autobiographical act already implies others in it. By referencing 'I' toward you/others, one can create an autobiography, and it transcends toward the public, instead of remaining confined within one's own interiority.

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<sup>405</sup> Butler, "Giving an Account of Oneself," 24.

The implications of self-reflection and others in autobiography break inimical criticisms that autobiography is narcissistic and only personal. In fact, it is the opposite: Autobiography is dialogical and relational. The dialogical characteristic of autobiography is one of the significant meanings of the genre. It should be reconsidered specifically in the contemporary era in which society becomes more and more individualized and conflicts arise everywhere.

Within the last few years that this thesis has been written, there have been uncountable conflicts, big and small civil wars, and far more severe wars all over the world. Some events such as the conflict in Myanmar and the attack on Ukraine by Russian forces will remain in human history as major world-historical disasters. Such cruelty lacks humanity. Empathy lies at the heart of humanity.

Empathy can become one of the most effective and powerful weapons to resolve conflicts between individuals, cultures, religions, and nations. Empathy cannot solve problems pragmatically, but fundamentally. It is a quiet but strong weapon. Autobiography possesses great potential of empathy. Kazin, too, saw in autobiography the potential for overcoming cultural conflicts:

Autobiography as narrative can serve to create the effect of a world that in the city jungle, in the concentration camps, in the barracks, is the form that we must learn to express even when we have no hope of mastering it. . . . In a society where so many values have been overturned without our admitting it, where there is an obvious gap between the culture we profess and the dangers among which we really live, the autobiographical mode can be an authentic way of establishing the truth of our experience. The individual is real even when the culture around him is not.<sup>406</sup>

I strongly agree with Kazin that an authentic, almost testimonial<sup>407</sup> individual voice has strong virtues.

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<sup>406</sup> Kazin, "Autobiography as Narrative," 216.

<sup>407</sup> It is well-connected to Derrida's point in *Demeure*. According to him, autobiography is a testimony.

The dialogical characteristics of autobiography are based on empathy, which is in turn connected to the potential of autobiography. The autobiographical narrative created by the autobiographer becomes and functions as an empathetic space. In the autobiographical space, the recipient not only reads and views the work but also engages himself, recognizes himself, and finally understands the coexistence of his self and other beings: “To find that one’s life is also the life of others, even as this life is distinct and must be distinct, means that one’s boundary is at once a limit and a site of adjacency, a mode of spatial and temporal nearness and even boundedness.”<sup>408</sup> Autobiography evokes empathy in us. The key is *narrative*. It can bridge between/among individuals and cultures.

Sun Yuhl Yi compared two similar yet different principles of treating others in western and eastern cultures.<sup>409</sup> According to him, in Western culture, ‘tolerance’ has been considered a virtue in how we treat other people and different cultures. Tolerance acknowledges the difference between different subjects/parties and respects that difference. This means, however, we ‘tolerate’ at best—the word ‘tolerance’ implies indifferent bearing. Hence, tolerance is not based on empathy. While, in Eastern culture, there is a notion of ‘Shu (恕).’ Shu is “the Confucian principle of refraining from actions toward others that would be disagreeable if done to oneself[.]”<sup>410</sup> The direct translation of Shu is to forgive.<sup>411</sup> One can forgive another when one truly

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<sup>408</sup> Butler, “Precarious Life,” 141.

<sup>409</sup> Regarding the analysis of tolerance and Shu, I referred to: Sun Yuhl Yi, “Two Principles of Treating Others: Tolerance and Shu(恕),” *Journal of Yulgok-Studies* 24 (2012): 73–106, <https://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/ci/sereArticleSearch/ciSereArtiView.kci?sereArticleSearchBean.artiId=ART001671596>.

<sup>410</sup> *Collins Dictionary*, s.v. “shu,” accessed March 02, 2022, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/ko/dictionary/english/shu>.

<sup>411</sup> One may think that the ‘Golden Rule’ and Immanuel Kant’s ‘Categorical Imperative’ share similar ideas with ‘Shu.’ The Golden Rule and Categorical Imperative emphasize the equal value of

understands the other. Shu is a principle of treating others as oneself, not as others. Autobiographical empathy aligns with Shu rather than tolerance. If we understood others, we could forgive them, not tolerate them; we would not invade them.

Autobiography holds the essence of humanity—empathy. It is an art of, about, and for humans. Its significance links to the significance of humanities. Humanities requires (self-)critical and (self-)reflective attitude, which is the core of autobiography. Moreover, humanities is about the human mind and human life. Autobiography encompasses these aspects very well. Autobiographers do not only express their selves but contemplate life and weave their self and the significance of life. The reception of an autobiographical work naturally leads the recipient to a question of who I/we am/are and what life/our lives is/are. The visual autobiographies of the three artists studied in this research—Barbara Proschak, Christian Boltanski, and Felix González-Torres—particularly highlight the meaning of life in profound ways because their works contemplate death. Their visual autobiographies derived from death paradoxically affirm life.

One may think visual autobiography is different from literary autobiography. My research led me to realize that this research is about ‘the autobiographical.’ Visual autobiography shares all the significance of autobiography laid out above. The autobiographical urge, act, negotiation, narrative, etc. are identical regardless the media. Yet there are differences as well since the media are different. The uniqueness and the strengths of visual autobiography compared to textual autobiography are closely related to the traits and power of visual narrative. It crosses the barrier of the language; it immediately stimulates empathy at the bottom of the heart through the

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oneself and others, which is not the same as empathy, but they do not go as far as empathy and ‘forgive’ as demonstrated by Shu. In this sense, the Golden Rule and Categorical Imperative are more self-centered rather than others-oriented.

emotional effect. This effect can be particularly well observed in Boltanski's visual autobiography. Visual narratives could be regarded as vague and abstract, yet those traits enable a richer and more copious narrative. Visual autobiography holds significant potential because communication engages visual media more and more in the contemporary era. Visual media are "capable of transforming the unspeakable into vivid images that communicate emotions on a much stronger level than words."<sup>412</sup> This effectively evokes the viewer's introspective experiences.

Having said the difference between literary and visual autobiography, all autobiographers share one feature in common. Autobiographers have something to solve in their lives, which becomes a life-long question for them, and that forms the center of their autobiographical narratives. They take a life-long journey of autobiography to find the answer—the question is namely life—as they weave the autobiographical narrative through the negotiation of the self. In other words, to find the answer to life, the self becomes the means, the subject, and the purpose at the same time.

This aligns with Nietzsche. In fact, autobiography corresponds to the Nietzschean aesthetics very well. Barker also captured this commonality. His dissertation<sup>413</sup> *Articulation, 'Etrangete,' and Power: Aspects of Nietzsche in Theory and Practice* published in 1987 analyzed Nietzsche's trinity<sup>414</sup>—which constitutes the core of his philosophy—and Nietzsche's works—which are philosophical and literary at the same time—and he further applied his analysis to other writers and literary

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<sup>412</sup> White, "Autobiography, Visual Representations, and the Preservation of Self," 112.

<sup>413</sup> Most contents of the dissertation were included in his later publication *Autoaesthetics: Strategies of the Self after Nietzsche* in 1992. The monograph dealt with the self in a deeper manner. I referred to both materials.

<sup>414</sup> 'Trinity' is Barker's wording.

works. Barker considered Nietzsche as a model of “the highest attainable by man”<sup>415</sup> whose life, philosophy, and works coincided.

The key notions of Nietzsche’s philosophy are *die Wille zur Macht* [the will to power], *die ewige Wiederkehr* [the eternal recurrence], and *Übermensch*, which form the basis and center of his philosophy. The three notions are interrelated/intertwined in a circulatory—*recurring*—way. It is not sequential, as one condition leads to the other(s). The paradoxical dynamic of the three aspects describes the mode of the world and every being that exists in the world; it is a logic and principle of the world. Each being possesses the will to power<sup>416</sup> which has the characteristic of eternal recurrence. *Übermensch* is the transcendental human who understands those basics and lives accordingly. However, not every man<sup>417</sup> is automatically *Übermensch*. This was what Nietzsche ultimately illustrated for humankind.

The artistic and literary creation can be also comprehended by this dynamic. Barker modified Nietzsche’s terms to apply to literature, and his terms are as follows<sup>418</sup>: *Articulation*, *Etrangete*, and *Self/Power*.<sup>419</sup> Each corresponds to *die ewige Wiederkehr*, *Übermensch*, and *die Wille zur Macht* by Nietzsche (see figure 6.1.). According to Barker, Nietzsche himself was an *Übermensch/Etrangete* who articulated his self in his works by placing and displacing his self within a dynamic between his

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<sup>415</sup> Stephen Frederic Barker, “Articulation, ‘Etrangete,’ and Power: Aspects of Nietzsche in Theory and Practice,” (PhD diss., The University of Arizona, 1987), vi.

<sup>416</sup> ‘Power’ should not be misunderstood as political or material power. Nietzsche understood power as the original source of existence. Therefore, its first meaning should be interpreted as power toward existence/being/life.

<sup>417</sup> This aligns with Heidegger’s ‘das Man.’

<sup>418</sup> See Barker, “Articulation, ‘Etrangete,’ and Power,” 12.

<sup>419</sup> Barker used *Power* in his dissertation but modified it to *Self/Power* in his monograph. I quoted *Self/Power* because he developed the aesthetics of self as ‘Autoaesthetics’ in more depth in the book.

self, thought, and language.<sup>420</sup> In this process, keeping a distance from one's self is essential to narrate one's self. This unique gesture of negotiation of the self can also be observed in other writers, and Barker exemplified a few writers and analyzed them. In his later publication in 1992 *Autoaesthetics: Strategies of the Self after Nietzsche*, he further developed the idea of *Autoaesthetics*. In the book, he intriguingly and rightly illustrated the self as the fundamental power of artistic creation.

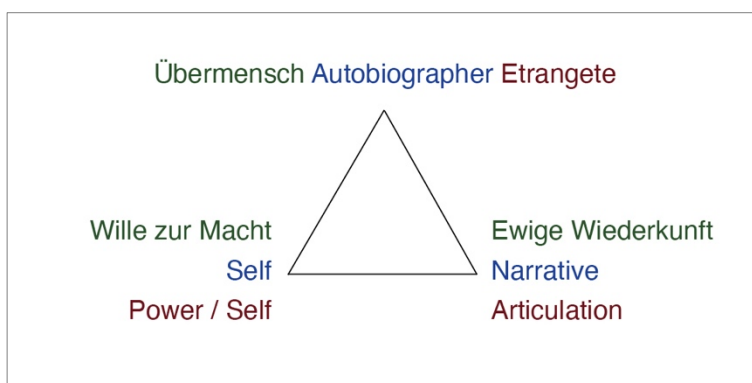


Figure 6.1. Nietzsche's original terms (green) and Barker's modifications (brown) align with my framework (blue).

Barker's point is remarkable and very similar to the principle of the genre of autobiography that I paid attention to. At the beginning of this chapter, I laid out 'self' and 'narrative' as the key features for understanding the significance of autobiography; the analysis of these two notions also constituted the core of the theoretical framework of this thesis. Taking Barker into account, it becomes clear once more time that *self* per se can—and should in the Nietzschean sense—be the source of artistic creation. Self is the subject, the means, and the motivation and purpose of autobiographical narratives and our lives. In this sense, autobiography is teleologically consistent with

<sup>420</sup> See Barker, "Articulation, 'Etrangete,' and Power," vi.

human nature.

There is another resemblance between visual autobiography and Nietzschean aesthetics. Proschak, Boltanski, and González-Torres do not aestheticize their selves and lives but negotiate those as they are. This aligns with the principle Nietzsche appreciated in the Greek tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche characterized two different arts as *Dionysian* and *Apollonian*. The Dionysian is associated with music, which is ‘nonimagistic,’ and the Apollonian with sculpture. In Nietzsche’s philosophy, the Dionysian affirms the coexistence of good and evil, life and death, comedy and tragedy, and chaos. In contrast, the Apollonian eliminates negativity and chaos and restores order in the world. And one example—perhaps the only example that Nietzsche truly appreciated—in which Dionysian and Apollonian were equally coupled together was The Attic Tragedy.<sup>421</sup>

Greek tragedy did not aestheticize the world, rather, it affirmed life through acknowledging the tragedy of life. In Greek tragedy, humans could see and comprehend life, and they could overcome negativity by facing it, not by eliminating it. And there was a balance between negativity and positivity, chaos and order. It was one of the most pivotal functions of art Nietzsche observed:

That life is really so tragic would least of all explain the origin of an art form—assuming that art is not merely imitation of the reality of nature but rather a metaphysical supplement of the reality of nature, placed beside it for its overcoming. The tragic myth, too, insofar as it belongs to art at all, participates fully in this metaphysical intention of art to transfigure. But what does it transfigure when it presents the world of appearance in the image of the suffering hero? Least of all the “reality” of this world of appearance, for it says to us: “Look there! Look closely! This is your life, this is the hand on the clock of your existence.”<sup>422</sup>

Art is a metaphysical activity by which humans (try to) understand themselves

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<sup>421</sup> See Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 33.

<sup>422</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 140.

and the world. Visual autobiography has significant potential to recover the aesthetics and function of art Nietzsche considered important. The balance between positivity and negativity can be sought very well through multimedia approaches. Particularly, the unique mediality of photography that engages with reality in ontological and metaphysical ways can resolve it adequately. Proschak's, Boltanski's, and González-Torres's visual autobiographies are examples of it. Their works are arts of understanding self, life, and the world. Most of all, their works affirm life through the negotiation of death and mortality. This is the significance of their visual autobiographies.

Visual autobiography has significant implications for contemporary society. Ostensibly, modernization seems like a gift to humankind, but there are also many problems that came with it. Human life has become more individualized yet more standardized—this is a huge irony. As Han pointed out in *The Burnout Society* and many other books, people exploit themselves by their own positive imperative in the ocean of Neoliberalism. We consistently compete with others, even without knowing why we do so. We compare ourselves with others and become unhappy and feel lost in that chain.

Han wrote that modern life has become *vita activa* and we have lost *vita contemplativa* in *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingerin*g. According to Han, humans have lost the ability to weave themselves in time—to synchronize themselves with time and make time one's own. One's time—including death—is supposed to be entirely one's own and fully belong to one's self. But time lost its gravity, direction, and purpose due to the principles of Modernism and Neoliberalism. Instead, time has changed into a time of work [Arbeit], and people identify themselves and affirm their value in the time of work and by self-exploitation.

In this work-time-prison, people only suffer. It appears as various symptoms. On the personal level, it appears as psychological/psychiatric problems such as depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, insomnia, etc.; on the relational/social level, as othering and discrimination; and on the sociopolitical level, wars and conflicts.<sup>423</sup>

The root cause of all these problems converges to the loss of self: “We are subject to a radical loss of space and time, even of world, of being-with.”<sup>424</sup> Ironically, the crisis of the self symptomizes as the interest in images of self-representation. The overflowing selfies on social media are a manifestation of the empty self. However, a selfie is an attempt to capture one’s volatility. On the opposite pole of it, visual autobiography is located, which is a far more profound negotiation. Selfie and visual autobiography are two opposite phenomena derived from the same cause.

In history, humans have paid attention to self-referential genres such as self-portrait and autobiography when facing human crises. To re-find the self and overcome the crisis of humankind, visual autobiography can be a valuable prescription. Autobiography, a genre of significances, has great potential. Visual autobiography is especially suitable for contemporary times due to its power of visual narrative. Humans can regain *vita contemplativa* through visual autobiography.

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<sup>423</sup> Regarding this paragraph, see Chapter 1 *Non-Time* and Chapter 12 *Vita Contemplativa of The Scent of Time*. Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2017), 1–11, 85–114.

<sup>424</sup> Han, *The Scent of Time*, vii.

## 7. Conclusion

This dissertation examined autobiographical artistic practice in contemporary art focusing on artworks using photography as the main medium in multimedia installation. It suggested ‘narrative of self’ as the essential feature of visual autobiography and demonstrated why photography has become the crucial medium for the artist’s negotiation of self. Furthermore, I focused on mortality as the driver of autobiographical narration. To comprehend this phenomenon better, I conducted case studies on three artists, Barbara Proschak, Christian Boltanski, and Felix González-Torres. In the case studies, I explored how photography significantly engages with their autobiographical narratives and contributes to going beyond mortality.

In this chapter, concluding the dissertation, I will summarize my findings focusing on key notions of the research and the case studies. Following that, I will discuss the significance of the research. I will conclude this chapter and research with my self-reflection on the research.

### 7.1. Summary of Research

I investigated the realm of visual autobiography and examined how the artist negotiates the self and weaves autobiographical narratives through visual media. The key concepts that formed the research on visual autobiography were self, identity, and narrative. And I focused on the medium of photography, which is related to autobiography in a unique and appropriate way. These were studied in Chapter 2 to establish the analytical framework for the research. This subchapter will summarize the research by recapitulating key notions following the structure of the dissertation and showing the connection points to the case studies.

## Self

It is almost impossible to define self in one sentence because it is a very complex notion. However, self has been discussed by numerous philosophers throughout human history since the Ancient Greek period. The trajectory of the subject matter of self aligns with the history of human beings and the development of human intellectuality. It is natural that we want to know about ourselves, as there is an undeniable sense of one's self.

I understand the self as one's sense of being and a boundary that distinguishes one from others; and the boundary abuts the external world. I took this understanding as the working definition of my research. To clarify the intricate traits and modes of the boundary, which holds inside and outside together, I focused on the existential structure of the self and analyzed the ontological and social aspects of self.

The self is the undeniable sense of one's being, and this ontological aspect of self constructs Being. This sense exists as long as one is alive. And it is derived from the body; one cannot live outside the body. Self is primarily and always body—embodied self. This was especially well observable in Proschak's visual autobiography.

Having said that the self is a boundary, it should not be misunderstood as a meaning of isolation. Humans are social beings: The self lives with other selves. The border of the boundary of self is open to the world and others. This social aspect of self constructs a common ground amongst individuals who live in the same time, place, and culture—society. It also enables empathy between humans which is a dynamic and potential of autobiography. Boltanski's later works on the Shoah reveal the social aspect of self; how individuals exist within society, and how they understand, remember, and mourn others. The reason why his work strongly resonates

with us is empathy: his empathy toward others and empathy between his visual autobiography and us.

The ontological aspect and the social aspect of self I also called ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of self. González-Torres’s work shows the boundary between inside and outside of the self in a subtle way. In his works, the boundary of self smudges into the air, into the public sphere.

In sum, self is one’s sense of being that is bound to the body. Indeed, one cannot exist outside of one’s body—self. By extension, self can be understood as a boundary. However, that boundary—body, self—abuts the external world and exchanges with other Beings. The ontological (inside, inwardness) and social (outside, outwardness) aspects intrinsically constitute self together. The three artists’ visual autobiographies show their negotiation of the boundary—the self.

### **Urge for Narration of Self, Autobiography, Narrative**

Narrating one’s experience, life story, thoughts and emotions, etc. is a natural phenomenon. Humans start to express themselves and communicate with others naturally by learning language; infants, too, do so to some extent through non-verbal language, even before obtaining language ability. It is part of human nature. Undoubtedly, there is an urge for narration of self. The autobiographical act is strongly rooted in it. And I considered mortality an underlying driver of the autobiographical act: One wants to leave traces of his/her life *because* one will die. As Jacques Derrida termed it, autobiography is autobio-thanatography by its nature; although the degree of influence of mortality could vary for each autobiographer. Nonetheless, it works as an underlying mechanism of autobiographical creation. And I examined the visual autobiographers who directly negotiate mortality and death on a thematic level.

Autobiography is a subgenre of the umbrella notion of life writing, and it has self-referentiality as a marker distinguishing it from other forms of life writing. *I narrate myself*; this is the basic structure of autobiography. To make an account of oneself, one should first know about oneself. We call this identity. Identity is always a narrative identity, as Eakin explained. Identity is constructed within narrative, and it spans time. Autobiography, too, is inevitably narrative. Autobiography is often understood as a retrospective chronology of one's life. But it is a very narrow and strict condition and thus hinders productive discussions of autobiography. In making an autobiography, one does not construct a chronology of life but finds oneself in the meaning of life: One constructs *narrative*.

Narrative is not a mere storyline, but a set of significances. The structure of narration provides the narrative with temporal and chronological characteristics, but the essence and value of narrative lies in its significance. The narrative inevitably reflects and includes the narrator's perspective on the narrated subject matter: He/she extracts significance and meaning from events—life in the case of autobiography—and weaves those together. The autobiographical narrative is especially a reflection on how one views and understands one's own life.

Autobiographers focus on various issues and aspects of life, and certain matters become/constitute the center of the questions they look for in/through autobiography. Life-long themes vary for each autobiographer. Yet self stands at the center of the autobiographical narrative, like a navel. In fact, the self can only be revealed only through narrative.

Visual autobiographies of Proschak, Boltanski, and González-Torres demonstrate their ceaseless interest in self and quests for it. Their life-long themes are distilled into metaphors. Proschak explored the meaning of being and her connection

and disconnection to the world and others, and skin and body are her metaphors.

Boltanski worked on time, remembrance, and death throughout his life. Photographic portraits, clothes, heartbeats, etc. are means to visualize these themes. González-Torres dealt with his own and close people's death. Piles of candy and images published on billboards such as a seagull and an empty double bed are his allegories.

One paradoxical trait of narrative is that it includes vacancies and gaps. Sometimes, silence is louder than voice; it is one way of uttering. The void and gap constitute a narrative together with the uttered, spoken, expressed, displayed, and represented. This becomes a space where viewers can step into the work and interact with it. Proschak's, Boltanski's, and González-Torres's visual autobiographies allow multiple interpretations and receptions by the viewer. They invite viewers through installation to interact with their works.

### **Visual Autobiography**

Narrating self and weaving narratives can be performed through various media such as text, song, movement of the body, etc. One medium does not surpass the others. Each has its own traits and strengths. However, compared to text, images work universally, moving beyond the limitations of language. This is one of the potentials of visual autobiography.

At first glance, visual autobiography seems like an expanded field of self-portraiture; I also thought so before I started this research. However, visual autobiography is not a mere expansion of the self-portrayal field. They are closely related, but the fundamental difference is whether and to what degree the artist's self is narrated.

Self is complex and multifaceted, so it cannot be delivered only through the

depiction of one's appearance. At most, it can be revealed in the narrative. It was perhaps inevitable that autobiographical artistic practice has evolved into multi-modal and multimedia approaches to constructing complex themes within rich narratives. Indeed, autobiographical artistic practice in contemporary art hallmarks complex and holistic narrative as its key feature, and the self is at the heart of it.

Based on the above observation, I comprehended the autobiographical artistic practice under the term of *visual autobiography* and proposed the following four traits as indicators: (1) negotiation of self, (2) complexity of themes, (3) multimodality and multimediality, (4) holistic artistic practice throughout life.

The four traits are interrelated, and they mutually reinforce. The complex and holistic practice utilizing various mediums is not an exclusive trait of visual autobiography but is also observable across contemporary art. Among the four traits, the most significant feature of visual autobiography is negotiation of self—narrative of self. This criterion offers us the foundation to classify different types of self-referential artworks; to distinguish autobiographical works from self-modelled works such as Sherman's. While Sherman's self-portrayal works are meaningful in their own way, it is far from the autobiographical.

I would like to remark that the above theorization was not meant to define the genre. A strict and limited view focusing on the discipline of the genre can hinder discovering the true meaning of visual autobiography. My suggestion can serve as a guideline and theoretical framework for visual autobiography.

Another remark is that the notion of visual autobiography can also be applied to a single work, but it can more meaningfully be applied to artists who narrate the self throughout their artistic practices. Copious meaning arises when we look at the entire practices of visual autobiographers. I looked at Proschak, Boltanski, and González-

Torres through the lens of visual autobiography.

### **Photography and Installation**

The realistic representation of the photographic medium paradoxically contributed to the artist's self-representation to be diversified. So I focused especially on the significant use of photography in the practice of visual autobiography.

Photography engages with constructing the narrative of self and life in its unique and ontological way. Its ontological referentiality to the real enables artists to utilize the medium in various ways; in a straightforward fashion as a realistic representation as well as in a deconstructive way to create an ironical context.

Photography is often combined with other mediums such as text, drawing, objects, audio, video, etc. for making visual autobiography, and the three artists in the case studies employ installation. Installation-oriented multimedia approaches enable artists to create narratives effectively. Through installation, the three visual autobiographers build narrative spaces beyond the surface of images. In the case studies, I analyzed various artistic strategies to weave narratives through photography and installation in detail.

In fact, not only in the field of visual arts but in our lives in general, photography has become the center of visual communication. It is a powerful medium that carries out the complex tasks of representing the subject, conveying information and context, and delivering emotions and feelings all at once. And in visual autobiography, photography carries self and life.

### **Case Studies**

Based on the above summarized theoretical framework, I selected three artists

for the case studies among many visual autobiographers to understand and elucidate the phenomenon of visual autobiography more deeply: Barbara Proschak, Christian Boltanski, and Felix González-Torres. The important criteria for the selection were: narrative of self, usage of photography in installation-oriented multimedia approaches, and mortality and death as the theme and driver. For the investigation of the case studies, a phenomenological approach was applied, and the research was conducted following the tradition of Bildwissenschaft. Based on this methodology, I offered vivid visual analysis and contextual analysis, which included conceptual analysis and philosophizing the aesthetics of the works.

The artistic practices of Proschak, Boltanski, and González-Torres are based on their personal stories and experiences. They work(ed) on their life-long themes, and they dedicate(d) themselves to those themes throughout their life. Skin, body, connection and disconnection to the world and others are the key themes of Proschak. Boltanski's works revolve around time, memory, and death. González-Torres negotiate the most intimate part of his life—his sexual identity and love—and mortality. In their works, their *self* is deeply inscribed.

The three visual autobiographers *narrate* their stories and self using diverse mediums, but they have in common the use of photography as a significant medium. And they implement their ideas through installation. Although there are some textual works by Boltanski and González-Torres, both artists do not create works in which the textual narrative intervenes in the visual narrative or the juxtaposition of photography and text creates a narrative together, like Calle or Simpson. I deliberately excluded those examples to fully demonstrate *Visual Autobiography*.

Proschak's visual autobiography has evolved continuously. Starting with her early work on her birthmarks, she contemplates her being and relationship with other

beings and the world. In/through installation, she links diverse elements with each other. These elements include images of herself, images of parts of others—human and non-human beings—images and surfaces of something/someone, and archival materials of/for her artistic practice, etc. The links can be created within one image, but they are more elaborated in her installation which denotes the connection and disconnection of beings including herself. Her recent practice, covering the surface of images of shell through filling innumerable fine lines with a marker pen by her own touch creates a new *skin* where her being and the trace of other beings merged. Proschak's artistic practice is hermeneutic. Her visual autobiography is equal to the process of understanding herself by means of her own skin and body. And following her vestige leads us to understanding ourselves.

Boltanski's works show a far wider spectrum in terms of themes and strategies, since they have developed for a longer time. Different criteria could be applied to classifying his works, but I divided his practice into two themes, the personal and the social, investigated each area, and illustrated the (inter)connection of both themes. Through this approach, I demonstrated that his personal and social themes constitute his visual autobiography together. In his earlier artistic practice, he worked with personal subject matter such as his longing for childhood and (re)constructing his identity and past. He argued that the works were generic, dealing with disappearance of childhood in general, not with himself; however, it was conducted through the (re)construction of his childhood. Furthermore, he acknowledged the autobiographical implications of his works in his later years. Boltanski's installations of portraits of anonymous children and clothes have social and cultural implications. These works are associated with the Shoah. The mediums of photography and clothes disclose the absence of beings, which testify to someone's presence. The effect of absence drawn

by photographs and clothes is strong. At the last stage of his life, Boltanski displayed pieces indicating his own death along with his various previous works in one exhibition. The autobio-thanatographical space he created is crucial evidence of the autobiographical characteristic of his artistic practice and his awareness of it. Indeed, he did not stop the impossible task of making his self possible to others, as the title of his first solo show already indicated: *La Vie impossible de Christian Boltanski*. Boltanski's visual autobiography mourns not only Holocaust victims, but all of us, including himself: We are all beings-towards-death. Boltanski philosophized this absolute truth throughout his artistic practice until he recently died.

González-Torres brought his ontology to the public sphere. He negotiated his self, sexual identity, loss of being, and love and loss of love in abstract and subtle ways. The aesthetics of his work is calm and reduced, but it is powerful. Due to his homosexuality, the minimalist aesthetic, and participatory aspects, Relational Aesthetics / Participatory Art / Public Art and/or Minimalism predominate the criticism of his work. However, those scopes cannot capture the essence of González-Torres's artistic practice, which is visual autobiography. The images he presented in the public sphere are the images of his self. He strongly wished to leave his self in the world; his life declined due to HIV. He marked t-cell count, which is evidence of his physical state, by his hand. In his works, his inner states, like false hope and a wish for cure, are also reflected. The allegorical images he published on the billboard such as a seagull crossing the blue sky and an empty double bed convey condensed feelings as they indicate presence and absence. And he often included his lover, Ross, and his loss of Ross in his works. His works have often been interpreted on a social level, especially in relation to homosexuality, but are highly personal. He negotiated the most personal matters and executed those in the public realm. His work can best be

understood as a visual autobiography.

The three artists have many similarities and differences. The three artists' works show the intrinsic coexistence of the ontological and social aspects of the self. In terms of themes, Proschak and González-Torres focus more on the ontological aspect of self—life and death of being, and decay of the body due to illness. In contrast, the executions of ideas by Boltanski and González-Torres are related to the social aspect of self. The difference between Boltanski and González-Torres is that Boltanski worked on themes with more direct societal implications while González-Torres negotiated the ontological aspect in a social way.

The three artists' negotiations of *boundary* of self reflect the characteristics of their works. Proschak's works associate more strongly with the inside—the ontological aspect of self—accordingly, she works from the inside to the outside of the self. Boltanski dealt with sociocultural themes—outside—and these themes had once been internalized and brought to the outside by him—the social aspect of self. González-Torres brought his ontology to the public sphere; he blurred the boundary of the self by vaporizing his self into the public sphere. In Proschak's and Boltanski's works, skin and clothes function as brilliant mediums to visualize the boundary “as a membrane between inner and outer space[.]”<sup>425</sup> and each is related to the ontological aspect and social aspect of being. González-Torres's candy wrapper is also an equivalent medium. The structure of the work, taking candy with, taking off the wrapper, and swallowing the candy is abstract, but the aspect of the boundary of being is reflected in it. The three artists' negotiations of boundary are not isolated, but empathetic and opening. Their autobiographical narratives create spaces of empathy

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<sup>425</sup> Rösing, “Skin and the Non-Human Human, 102.

for viewers.

Death and mortality constitute common subject matter for the three artists, but they focus on different aspects of death. In Proschak's works, death is featured as the fate of all beings, and it has objective and reduced aesthetics, like a medical and archaeological report. Boltanski thematized social death in his Shoah-related works and made it to be received as something general—*their, my, your, thus our* death. In his works, our death is reflected in others' deaths. And González-Torres spoke about *his* and *others'* deaths to the public. It comes to me/us like a delivered mail.

The three visual autobiographers deal with different aspects of life. However, in common, they conceal and reveal the universal value of life and death through the negotiation of their self and personal subject matter. Their visual autobiographies, which are derived from death, ultimately affirm life. Their visual autobiographies lead us to a deeper understanding of ourselves and life. This is the aesthetics of visual autobiographies by Proschak, Boltanski, and González-Torres.

### **Significance of Visual Autobiography**

Various forms of self-representation such as selfies, self-archiving, self-portraits, visual autobiography, etc. are the symptoms of our times. Ironically, the high interest in self-image reveals a crisis of the self—loss of self. The crisis of the self appears as psychological problems on a personal level and various conflicts and wars on a social level. Visual autobiography holds significant potential to overcome these problems, as it contains empathy created based on the artist's negotiation of the self and personal experiences.

Since visual autobiographers negotiate their self and stories toward the public, visual autobiography does not cease at a private level, but it extends to the public as

the personal. It invites viewers to the empathetic space. Furthermore, personal narratives entail not only personal experiences and stories but also cultural and social backgrounds. Therefore, visual autobiography can bridge between different individuals and cultures in serene but powerful ways.

The significance of visual autobiography lies in narrative of self. It can lead humankind back to contemplating the self and understanding each other. Visual autobiography functions as a mirror to reflect on ourselves.

## 7.2. Significance of Research

Finalizing the thesis, I would like to ponder the significance of the research and perform a short self-reflective review. The previous subchapter explained some significance. Thus, to minimize overlaps, I will not repeat the whole discussion again.

I examined the realm of visual autobiography in contemporary visual arts. The term 'visual autobiography' itself is not new. It has been used by other scholars. However, the term has not been established yet, and autobiographical artistic practice is still understood as an analog of the self-portrait. My diagnosis for such misalignment was that there was a lack of theoretical guidelines for establishing its own field. Thus, I examined the practice and various works of visual autobiography and conceived significant commonalities to form a genre, and based on that, I developed a theoretical framework for visual autobiography.

Visual autobiography has the following features as its hallmarks: negotiation of self, complexity of themes, multimodality and multimediality, and holistic artistic practice throughout life. It may feel not strict enough, or rough. However, I intentionally avoided strictness, because strict discipline for a genre can limit the discourse of visual autobiography.

Through the above-mentioned approach and analysis, I successfully suggested the essential mark to distinguish visual autobiography from self-portrait: negotiation of 'self' and holistic 'narrative.' In order for a self-referential artwork to be comprehended as a visual autobiography, the work should convey a holistic narrative, which is based on the negotiation of the artist's self.

There are different degrees and intensities of self-reflective work in the visual arts. The analytical framework of this research could serve as a helpful guide for finding the right category for different types of self-referential artworks. Applying the findings of this research, visual autobiography, self-portrait, artworks with autobiographical elements or characteristics, artworks related to or based on the artist's self-expression, self-modelled works, etc. could be distinguished and analyzed in more sophisticated ways. It will be especially useful to identify works located somewhere between self-portrait and visual autobiography.

I underlined life-long practice as an important condition for visual autobiography. A life-long artistic practice that revolves around the self could be one of the criteria used to distinguish visual autobiographers from those who make artworks involving self-expression or self-representation once or twice in a fashionable way. Indeed, the framework of visual autobiography can more meaningfully be applied to artists who negotiate the self and work on life-long themes throughout their artistic practice like the three artists in the case studies of the research. Likewise, it can more appropriately be applied to comprehend the entire artistic practice rather than a single work/oeuvre.

One may argue that every artwork reflects the artist's self, thus, all artworks are autobiographical. This is another research question that requires a long discussion; hence, I will not go into detail. But I would like to point out, regardless of the validity

of the above assertion, that the reflection of the artist's self in the work does not necessarily mean the work is autobiography. Self-reflection is a necessary condition of autobiography but not a sufficient condition. For example, many literary works reflect the writer's self and inwardness, but not all those works automatically become autobiographies. The crucial difference between 'all' artistic creations reflecting the artist's self to some degree and visual autobiography lies in the artist's conscious negotiation of the self as a theme and the continuity of that throughout life.

To demonstrate the distinct field of visual autobiography, I clarified its attributes and reinforced the term/genre of visual autobiography. The research model could be modified and applied by other scholars in the future—it is what I wish as well. For example, for this dissertation, mortality as the underlying dynamic of the autobiographical act and the use of photography for autobiographical narratives were applied as critical filters. These elements could be substituted, or different criteria such as theme, medium, era, geography, etc., could be added/applied to examine other types of visual autobiography. I would emphasize once again that a more appropriate application of my research model is to apply it to the artist's entire artistic practice, rather than a single work or series.

Although I proposed the theoretical framework for the genre, I stressed the value and significance of 'the autobiographical' far more than its formality. To me, the idea of the autobiographical creation is much more important. The autobiographical aligns with the ontology of human beings, thus, it can be found in various forms and media across time. This dissertation elucidated the phenomenon of the autobiographical in the field of visual arts. For this task, the previous research in the field of literature was beneficial. However, my research was not conducted through a one-to-one comparison between the fields of literature and visual arts. Instead, it

articulated the unique features of ‘visual’ autobiography within its own realm.

Among various visual media, I focused on photography. One of the reasons for focusing on photography was that photography is a medium of modernism—the mode of the negotiation of the self vastly changed since the Modern era—and a medium of postmodernism at the same time—autobiography gained notable attention with the rise of postmodernism. Paying attention to these parallel features between photography and modernism/postmodernism, this dissertation demonstrated that the medium of photography has contributed to the expansion of self-reflective artistic practice in the visual arts. Photography plays a significant role in contemporary visual arts due to its unique ontological referentiality and its narrativity. Through the theoretical analysis of the mediality of photography and the exemplification of various artworks, I demonstrated the adequacy of the photographic medium for the artist’s negotiation of the self.

As mentioned above, I developed the thesis based on the concept/idea of the autobiographical, rather than the formality of the genre. One of the most essential backbones of the conceptual framework was ‘self.’ Based on the examination of the self on ontological and social levels, this dissertation logically demonstrated that visual autobiography is not merely personal, but it goes beyond the self toward others. Visual autobiography extends to the public as the personal. Similarly, the dissertation inferred ‘empathy’ from the analysis of the self and the artist’s negotiation of it. It stressed that the potential of visual autobiography lies in empathy which is inherent in the genre and in the artist’s negotiation of the self. This part is what I personally appreciate in my research.

The dissertation explored the meaning of visual autobiography in our time in terms of the self. Referring to Han, I diagnosed the root cause of critical symptoms of

our times as the loss of self and demonstrated the potential of visual autobiography to overcome the crisis in our times. It also diagnosed the selfie as a manifestation of the empty self, the opposite of visual autobiography.

The most unique and original imprint of the dissertation is the connection between mortality and autobiographical narratives. I featured that mortality is the underlying motivation and dynamic of the autobiographical act and death is interwoven together with life in autobiographical narratives. Its paradoxical relation possesses a life-affirmative function that aligns with Nietzschean aesthetics. My view and approach are distinct from most researchers who study in similar fields. Many scholars tend to focus on the negative aspects of life such as traumata or tragic events in life and examine those on a thematic level. They focus on the fact that the artists take their traumata as the subject. And many of them illustrate autobiographical art as a healing process. Those studies focus too much on the negative side, regarding trauma as an object of overcoming. In contrast, I illustrated the dialectic of life that equally has positivity and negativity and demonstrated the fateful aptness and adequacy of visual autobiography for carrying out life narratives.

The structure of the thesis also demonstrates the originality of this research. Many studies in art history and art criticism develop an argument starting with the theory and matching it with artworks. In such cases, we get the impression that the artworks are just examples. I was particularly wary of this. I, too, had to first establish the theoretical framework for the research, but in the case studies, I brought the works of visual autobiography to the focal point; I took the artworks as the main objectives. Visual analysis was first conducted, then uncovering the meaning of the works and elaborating the context followed. This aligns with the hypothesis of the research that visual autobiographers narrate themselves in resistance to mortality and the works of

visual autobiography will live after the death of the artists.<sup>426</sup>

The selection of artists for the case studies varied. The dissertation featured an emerging artist, Barbara Proschak. It broadened the horizon of the criticisms of Christian Boltanski. And it suggested fresh lens to overturn the predominant criticisms of Felix González-Torres.

Proschak is an artist I discovered and studied in academia for the first time. Although she has not been studied yet, she was worth researching. So I decided to take on the challenge. This turned out to be the right decision, as her works have multiple significant layers. Her works clearly convey her self.

Boltanski's works have been understood as being divided into personal work about the reconstruction of his identity and sociocultural work related to the Shoah. Those themes are indeed two big streams of his artistic practice. However, attempts to comprehensively understand the relationship between the two types of work were lacking. Focusing on his negotiation of self and death, which are the significant threads of his artistic practice, my research provided an integrated perspective on different types of works and illustrated Boltanski's entire artistic practice as a visual autobiography.

I featured González-Torres's artistic practice as a visual autobiography. I considered the motivational and content aspects before the formal aspects. It overturned conventional criticisms of his works such as Relational Aesthetics / Participatory Art / Public Art and Minimalism which focus on the formal aspects of his works. It was demonstrated in this dissertation that visual autobiography can be a

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<sup>426</sup> One of the artists in the case studies died while I was writing this dissertation—Christian Boltanski. However, his visual autobiography will remain longer than his life. For example, an exhibition *Christian Boltanski 4.4* was held at the Busan Museum of Art soon after his death. I visited the show and saw that many visitors encountered him through his works. Like this, those who did not know the artist, too, will be able to meet the artist through visual autobiography.

meaningful way to reveal the significance and meaning of his work beyond the formal aspects. Furthermore, it can incorporate pre-existing criticisms to illustrate formal aspects of his works.

In this research, case studies do not stop at demonstrating theory. Yet the case studies are cohesively related to the theoretical framework. So it enhanced the narrative of the thesis. Through the establishment of the theoretical framework for visual autobiography and the case studies, this dissertation successfully identified the phenomenon of visual autobiography and its significance: *narrative of self*.

### 7.3. Self-Reflection

Although the thesis was not my autobiography per se, I negotiated myself and wove it into it. The initial reason for my interest in the research topic is related to experience as an artist and a human being. As an artist, I work with my own stories—I am also a visual autobiographer. As a human being, I have sensed boundaries of myself through chronic pain, which struck me suddenly one day and lasts to this day. These led me to think about the self fundamentally and made me devote myself to this research.

The research environment coincided with the research topic in a unique and significant way. Certain timeliness existed. Most parts of the dissertation were written amid the Covid-19 pandemic that humankind had never been affected before in a comparable way; there was no other event that everyone in the world suffered together like Covid-19. It was painful, but quite fateful, considering the theme of my thesis. *I* was isolated and disconnected from others, yet *I* could feel others stronger than ever. It was ascetic to some extent. However, considering the key notions of the research such as self, mortality, empathy, and so on, it was paradoxically perfect.

During the ascesis, I could feel the boundary and limitation of myself. It appeared most evidently in relation to language—both the limitation of language in general to capture phenomena and my own obstacle writing in a foreign language—and I had to consistently negotiate those. Not only because of the limitation of language, but also because autobiography is a complex phenomenon, I could not cover all meaningful aspects. However, I believe visual autobiography will be studied more and more in the future, and other profound meaning will be discovered.

It would be a great pleasure for me if *'I' in Narrative: A Study on Contemporary Visual Autobiography Using Photography as a Significant Medium in Multimedia Installation* could serve as a cornerstone for future studies. Hopefully, my thesis contributed to recovering humanity, to the smallest degree. And I hope my thesis survives after my death. Finally, I promise that I will keep contemplating, researching, and narrating myself even after this work ends here.

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