

Let's start
some
fires



To whom it may concern,
to whom it may not,

This is a book, and it is mine. This is a copy that is yours. I started this book some four months ago and what I have is a draft. A good draft, but a first one. First drafts don't get printed. First drafts are stuffed into a drawers, they're our little secrets and we do not have to tell anyone about them. The first draft is the thing roughly done. And this first draft is the same. From print file mistakes to typos and missing words, it is incomplete and imperfect. But it is here, and there will be 30 of them.

I am proud of what I did, and I am very happy to show you. But I cannot help being afraid even so slightly. I am afraid of you, mostly, dear reader. We who make books say it seldomly, but I want you to like this thing that I can call mine. I want you to take something from it. As you look down upon this book, I am looking up at you from the pages. This is our little journey. Our journey hurts at some points, at others it is fun, I promise. This is a book and it is my copy. It states on the cover page that you are encouraged to scribble in it, to leave dog ears and whatever treatment a paperback can withstand. With this book comes a pencil. That pencil is yours. That pencils is yours to use.

Underline.

Scribble.

Leave a message.

Draw.

Do whatever you want with this pencil and with this book.

I want you to have fun with it.

I will see you on the pages.

With love

Jacob.

A boy who wants to make it in the world.

THIS IS FOR YOU.

Jacob Heine: *Confessions of an
Autistic ADOX-Drinker*

Texts produced parallel to and photographs² produced for the course
Anonymous Photographers Society
under supervision of Julia Albrecht
Bauhaus University Weimar
Winter semester 2024/25

2 with the assistance of Richard
Schött

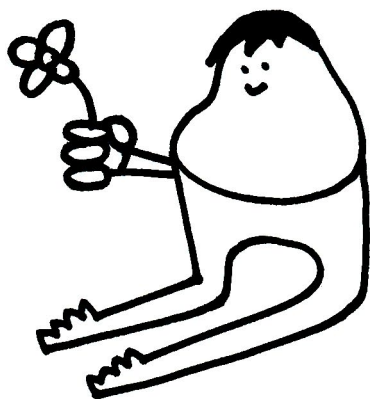
Concept, Text¹ and Photographs
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1 *Wir sterben alle alleine*, p. 214-217
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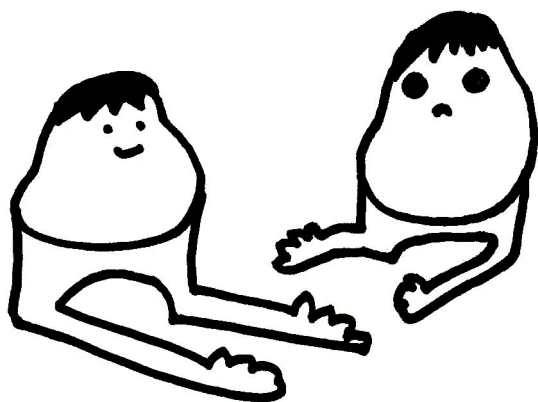
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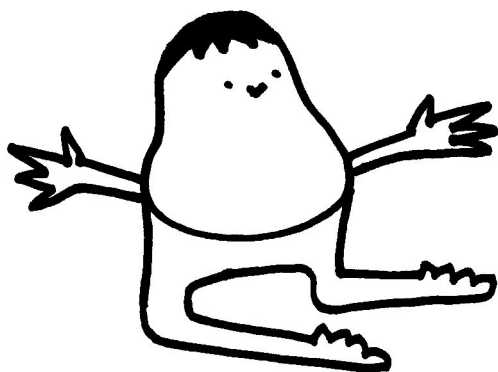


hi, my name is jiffi



me dad WAS a. Jpeg³.

Me mum WAS A Tiff²



1 I'm Also Autistic as stiti

Confessions of an
Artistic
Atax-Drinker
by
David
Nimm

A POIOUMENOLOGICAL¹ & ERGODIC²
GOULASH OF A MANUSCRIPT.
IT HAS (MINI)-ESSAYS, PHOTOGRAPHS & FOOTNOTES
AMOUNTING TO A NON-MANIFESTO
ON PHOTOGRAPHY AND AUTISM³.
IT WAS WRITTEN AND MADE BY JACOB HEINE,
AN AUTISTIC PHOTOGRAPHER AND DESIGNER
RAISED IN SIEM REAP AND SONNEBERG
CLOSE TO FINISHING HIS UNDERGRAD STUDIES IN
VISUAL COMMUNICATION
AT THE BAUHAUS UNIVERSITY WEIMAR.

THIS IS THE
MONOCHROME FIRST DRAFT.

1 *Poioumenon* is Ancient Greek for *product*. It is also a term for a metafictional genre of postmodern literature in which the process of creation a text is part of the story or in which the story is about the process of creation. Though relating to the concept of this book, it was just a funnily absurd word to use – *forgive me Father for I have sinned and wanted to sound smart of the cover page.*

2 *Ergodic* (Greek: *ergon*, meaning *work*, and *honos*, meaning *path*) *literature* describes texts in which following its flow requires added effort. This is used not necessarily as a tool to make a text hard to read, but at the least to make the act of reading interesting past the content.

3 Please do not make the mistake of taking this title too seriously. This is not a book you need a degree for to read. We shall have fun, promise. *Much love.*

This book combines texts with images from the series *Where is the Autism?*

Although it is advised to start with *What? Parts One and Two* and ending with *I photograph therefore I grieve. I grieve therefore I photograph* and *Eine Streitschrift*, the reader is not beholden to the books chronology. The following indexes therefore lists all chapters and images alphabetically as well as chronologically, encouraging the dear reader to continue however they want.

The use of dog-ears, border scribbling, back breaking and highlighting is highly encouraged for this book.

It is an object.

It wants to be used.

The reader has been informed by the title page that this version of *Confession of an Autistic ADOX-Drinker* is a first draft and consents to interacting with its contents out of their own free will.

With regards
the editors

I A TYPEWRITER.
II F.
EIN FRAGEBOGEN.

1 SENSORY END BOSS.
3-20 WHAT? PART ONE.

22 NEGATIVE LIST.
24 FF. WHAT? PART TWO.

28 A DEAD BONSAI. GIFT A.
30-34 IT'S NOT *CLICK*. IT'S [C-LIC-K].

36 F. A DISAMBIGUATION OF "LOOK-
ING YOU IN THE EYES"
38-45 SEEING/LOOKING/PERCEIVING

46 STRESSED FACE TIC.
48-60 HOW TO TALK TO PEOPLE
WITHOUT BEING A BUNDLE
OF NERVES.

64 F. SYNONYMS AND ANTONYMS.
LITERATURE A.
66-72 YOU'RE HOLDING A WEAPON,
SO BE FUCKING DECENT
ABOUT IT!

74 DEEP PRESSURE SITTING.
76-89 NE TOUCHE PAS!

92 F. DER LETZTE MACHT DAS LICHT
AUS.
94-97 THE STUDIO IS NOT A REAL
PLACE.

98 THE PERFECT TURKISH COFFEE.
100-107 PERSVPRIV

108 THE PERFECT SANDWICH.
110 F. HENRY ROLLINS I S A REAL G.

112 BOOKBINDING BOX.
114 F. BEHOLD THIS GARDEN THAT
I HATH FERTILISED WITH
SHITE!

116 ARCHIVE BOXES.
118 FF. THIS IS SO FUCKING STUPID - I
LOVE IT!

122 LITERATURE B.
124-141 ANTI-STUDENT.

002-011 BIBLIOGRAPHY, FURTHER
READING & WATCHING.

142 F. MONDAY, TUESDAY, WEDNES-
DAY, THURSDAY, FRIDAY,
SATURDAY & SUNDAY.

014 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

144 F. SPOONS.

148 F. THE TISM. VERBALISED.

150-162 FIGURED BASS SCORE
IN C MINOR FOR
DOUBLEBULLSHIT.

164 A WORN-OUT PILLOWCASE.

166-169 STOCHASTIC PARROTS
(FRAGMENT).

170 PSYCHOSOMTIC T-REX ARM.

172-195 PHOTOGRAPHY WON'T SAVE
YOU (BUT IT WILL HELP).

196 MOSHPITS ARE THE BEST PLACE
FOR STIMMING.

198-202 AM I A GENIUS?

204 REENACTMENT OF A DARKROOM
MELTDOWN.

206-209 I AM AFRAID.

210 MY LAST COFFIN NAIL. GIFT B.

212-231 I PHOTOGRAPH THEREFORE
I GRIEVE. I GRIEVE THERE-
FORE I PHOTOGRAPH.

232 AN AUTISTIC BEING HAPPY.

234-239 DO IT.

240 AN ARCHIVE OF NOTEBOOKS.

242-252 EINE STREITSCHRIFT.
PHOTOGRAPHY DOES NOT
EXIST. PHOTOGRAPHY IS A
STRUGGLE.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS. 014

AM I A GENIUS? 198-202

ANTI-STUDENT. 124-141

BEHOLD THIS GARDEN THAT I HATH FERTILISED WITH SHITE! 114 F.

BIBLIOGRAPHY, FURTHER READING & WATCHING. 002-011

DO IT. 234-239

EINE STREITSCHRIFT. PHOTOGRAPHY DOES NOT EXIST. PHOTOGRAPHY IS A
STRUGGLE. 242-252

EIN FRAGEBOGEN. II

F. HENRY ROLLINS I S A REAL G. 110 F.

FIGURED BASS SCORE IN C MINOR FOR DOUBLEBULLSHIT. 150-162

HOW TO TALK TO PEOPLE WITHOUT BEING A BUNDLE OF NERVES. 48-60

I AM AFRAID. 206-209

I PHOTOGRAPH THEREFORE I GRIEVE. I GRIEVE THEREFORE I
PHOTOGRAPH. 212-231

IT'S NOT *CLICK*. IT'S [C-LIC-K]. 30-34

NE TOUCHE PAS! 76-89

PERSVPRIV 100-107

PHOTOGRAPHY WON'T SAVE YOU (BUT IT WILL HELP). 172-195

SEEING/LOOKING/PERCEIVING 38-45

SPOONS. 144 F.

STOCHASTIC PARROTS (FRAGMENT). 166-169

THE STUDIO IS NOT A REAL PLACE. 94-97

THIS IS SO FUCKING STUPID - I LOVE IT! 118 FF.

WHAT? PART ONE. 3-20

WHAT? PART TWO. 244 FF.

YOU'RE HOLDING A WEAPON, SO BE FUCKING DECENT ABOUT IT! 66-72

A DEAD BONSAI. GIFT A. 28
A DISAMBIGUATION OF "LOOKING YOU IN THE EYES" 36 F.
AN ARCHIVE OF NOTEBOOKS. 240
AN AUTISTIC BEING HAPPY. 232
ARCHIVE BOXES. 116
A TYPEWRITER. I
A WORN-OUT PILLOWCASE. 164
BOOKBINDING BOX. 112
DEEP PRESSURE SITTING. 74
DER LETZTE MACHT DAS LICHT AUS. 92 F.
LITERATURE B. 122
MONDAY, TUESDAY, WEDNESDAY, THURSDAY, FRIDAY, SATURDAY & SUNDAY. 142 F.
MOSHPIITS ARE THE BEST PLACE FOR STIMMING. 196
MY LAST COFFIN NAIL. GIFT B. 210
NEGATIVE LIST. 22
PSYCHOSOMATIC T-Rex ARM. 170
REENACTMENT OF A DARKROOM MELTDOWN. 204
SENSORY END BOSS. 1
STRESSED FACE TIC. 46
SYNONYMS AND ANTONYMS. LITERATURE A. 64 F.
THE PERFECT TURKISH COFFEE. 98
THE PERFECT SANDWICH. 108
THE TISM. VERBALISED. 148 F.

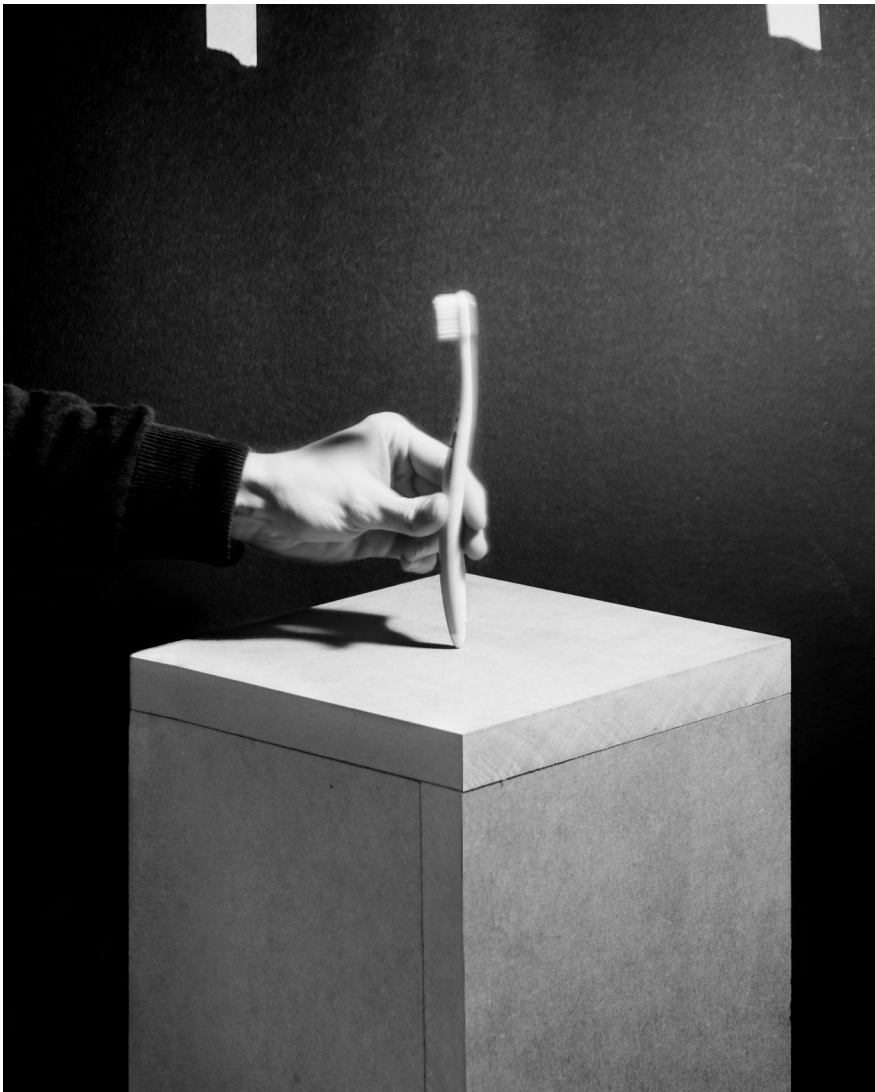


A typewriter.

EIN FRAGENBOGEN.

- How long have you been photographing for? What did your first camera sound like? Where do you store your cameras? Would you use a software by an Adobe competitor if it was free? How many photographs do you take a day?
- Do you prefer the smell of developer or fixative? Have ever considered installing darkroom lights in your bedroom to get back some spice into your sex life? Does your partner let you photograph them? Do you keep photo albums? What is your system of organizing files and/or negatives?
- Have you shot colour negative film not produced by Kodak? Have you been sad the last few days? Do you prefer coffee to tea or vice versa? What is your opinion on Bruce Gilden's ethics? Does philosophy play a role in your life?
- How long is it since you listened to *Cotton Eye Joe*? What and who are you without the label of artist? How long do you wish to photograph for? How many photos are too many photos? Are you in good standing with your family?
- What occasions do/don't you bring a camera to? How much do you charge an hour? How often do you work for free and under what circumstances do you do so? Will you be happy tomorrow?
- Do you think passe-partouts are overused? Do you feel sentient? Do you like being photographed? Do you prefer photographing in 6x6 or 6x7? What camera would you wish for if someone else bought it for you?
- Do you feel like your work needs to be exhibited? What is your digital workflow? What has been your longest project? Do you title your images? Would you like to talk more about your concepts?
- Do you have a subscription for cloud storage? If you could give a workshop, what would it be about? Do you like to work alone or in collaboration? What is your opinion on copyright? How often have you forgotten to export a printing file in 300 ppi?
- How much do you charge an hour? When was the first time you realised you could see? Do you want to keep your memories? What do you think about Instagram filters? Do you prefer baryta or RC paper?

- What is the meanest/nicest e-mail you have ever received professionally? Why do you not like photographing? Do you wish peel-apart Polaroid would come back en masse? What is the most photos you have taken in a day? Have you ever used digital grain?
- Have you subscribed to a photography magazine? What is your opinion of Swiss binding? Do you like paperbacks? Do you like getting drunk? Do you find it important to vote?
- Have you ever purchased a *Playboy*? Are you afraid and if so: what makes you afraid? Are you ethical? Does the darkroom tire you? Do you like commuting?
- Have you ever googled when the sun will implode? What is your opinion on *House of Leaves*? What is your go-to song for the last crunch of a workday? How often do you buy new headphones? Do you like reading?
- Do you photograph light or do you photograph shadows? What is the difference between a flower and a penis? Do you prefer white or black backdrops? Do you prefer panchromatic or orthochromatic film? Do you feel like you live in a short story by Shirley Jackson?
- Have you used generative AI and why? What has been your lowest-paying job? Are you a genius? What is the last movie you watched? How many languages do you speak?
- Are you comfortable? Have you listened to The Caretaker's *Everywhere at the End of Time*? Do you feel financially stable? Are you tired? Have you ever gone to therapy?
- How many film stocks do you shoot on? Are you afraid of offending people? Do you feel like you need to go to university? How do you like *Homo Faber*? Are you afraid of right-wing and fascist booms around the world?
- How many lenses do you own? How much money do you need? Do you own a gun? Have you ever considered abandoning civilisation? Do you need medication to get by?
- Is the Nikon FM2 overrated? Are you afraid of labels? What lies between all the beauty and all the terror? Where have all the Skittles gone? What are your pronouns?
- Do you like being in love? Do you like late-night car drives? Have you ever fantasised about giving a TED Talk? Are you the same you as yesterday? Are you ready?



Sensory End boss.

[D8550. MONDAY.]

He just sent me a post by Zeit Magazine. It quotes Alice Poyzer, an Autistic photographer from the UK. I started dry crying almost instantly while reading and haven't stopped while looking at her work. Her series *Other Joys* is amazing. I am so fucking happy.

What? Part one.

I'm reminded again and again that people, no matter of education, only have a vague (if any) grasp of Autism. I do not say this to feel more enlightened than, it is merely a fact, a fact that can be changed. Since a lot of the following relates to Autism, I want to give a brief introduction to it and by extend, myself.

So, welcome to *Autism*.

I

Autism is a brain thing in the broadest sense.⁷ That's to put it simply. To put it less simply: Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder, means: it's a brain thing. All it is based on is a different neurological wiring. Imagine a website – it must be coded. To do this, developers have a variety of coding languages at hand. Say now you have two websites, both individual, with different topics, styles etc., but both working on the same principles: menu bar, pages, titles and the like. Their difference in this example does not lie in what they are about, how they look, but in what language they are coded – let's say one is in Java, one in C++. Both *are* websites, they share more in common than in difference. But their script varies. Still, they both run, just on different operating systems, one far more common than the other. This is a basic analogy for Autism: a brain wired differently to the vast majority of other brains. Some of these differences can present less obviously and become almost unnoticeable, some may be quite fundamental. But it is the sum of all differences that describe the disorder, in this case Autism. The phenomenon of brains being wired differently in certain ways, at times far apart from each other, is described by the term *neurodivergence*.¹

An important point here. The causes of developing Autism are still being researched; the disorder itself was only named in the last century. Though these is a vast array of hypotheses, a clear answer is not at hand, to a huge part relating to the fact that Autism (as of now) cannot be located in just one part of the brain, ergo how it works is neither described fully. But it does work, in many ways. Nonetheless, a myth is persistent that harms not only autistic people but also those outside the spectrum (*allistics*): in the 1990s, a former British doctor called Andrew

Wakefield) posed the hypothesis that Autism was caused by the newly introduced vaccine against measles, mumps and rubella (MMR). Wakefield had strong personal and financial motives behind maturing his hypothesis, involving himself with unethical and dangerous practices which cost him his accreditation, his *research* on Autistic (although his sample group included also allistic) children did not stand the test of peer review. Nonetheless, his early campaigning for his revelatory *study* and alternative vaccination strategies (which were far more expensive) led to a huge crater in the public's views on a causality between vaccines and Autism. There is none. Sure, Wakefield did not campaign for not vaccinating at all but the legacy of his campaign and his ongoing crusade for his disproven hypothesis has a large part in modern vaccine

7a

6A02 Autism spectrum disorder
*International Classification of Diseases,
Eleventh Edition (ICD-11)*

7b

Autism Spectrum Disorder
*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of
Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)*

Description

Autism spectrum disorder is characterised by persistent deficits in the ability to initiate and to sustain reciprocal social interaction and social communication, and by a range of restricted, repetitive, and inflexible patterns of behaviour, interests or activities that are clearly atypical or excessive for the individual's age and sociocultural context. The onset of the disorder occurs during the developmental period, typically in early childhood, but symptoms may

[continues on next page]

[continues on next page]

¹ *Neurodivergence* is not to be confused by *neurodiversity*: the latter poses that *all* brains are different to one another, that human neurology is diverse in itself. The first describes certain sums of differences to the majority of other wirings, including Autism, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) bipolar disorder, dyslexia and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

7a ICD-11 (cont.)

not become fully manifest until later, when social demands exceed limited capacities. Deficits are sufficiently severe to cause impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning and are usually a pervasive feature of the individual's functioning observable in all settings, although they may vary according to social, educational, or other context. Individuals along the spectrum exhibit a full range of intellectual functioning and language abilities.

Essential (Required) Features:

Persistent deficits in initiating and sustaining social communication and reciprocal social interactions that are outside the expected range of typical functioning given the individual's age and level of intellectual development. Specific manifestations of these deficits vary according to chronological age, verbal and intellectual ability, and disorder severity. Manifestations may include limitations in the following:

Understanding of, interest in, or inappropriate responses to the verbal or non-verbal social communications of others.

Integration of spoken language with typical complimentary non-verbal cues, such as eye contact, gestures, facial expressions and body language. These non-verbal behaviours may also be reduced in frequency or intensity.

Understanding and use of language in social contexts and ability to initiate and sustain reciprocal social conversations.

Social awareness, leading to behaviour that is not appropriately modulated according to the social context.

Ability to imagine and respond

7b DSM-V (cont.)

Diagnostic Criteria 299.00 (F84.0)

A. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history (examples are illustrative, not exhaustive; see text):

1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.

2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of communication.

3. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers.

Specify current severity: Severity is based on social communication

7a ICD-11 (cont.)

to the feelings, emotional states, and attitudes of others.

Mutual sharing of interests.

Ability to make and sustain typical peer relationships.

Persistent restricted, repetitive, and inflexible patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities that are clearly atypical or excessive for the individual's age and sociocultural context. These may include:

Lack of adaptability to new experiences and circumstances, with associated distress, that can be evoked by trivial changes to a familiar environment or in response to unanticipated events.

Inflexible adherence to particular routines; for example, these may be geographic such as following familiar routes, or may require precise timing such as mealtimes or transport.

Excessive adherence to rules (e.g., when playing games).

Excessive and persistent ritualized patterns of behaviour (e.g., preoccupation with lining up or sorting objects in a particular way) that serve no apparent external purpose.

Repetitive and stereotyped motor movements, such as whole body movements (e.g., rocking), atypical gait (e.g., walking on tiptoes), unusual hand or finger movements and posturing. These behaviours are particularly common during early childhood.

Persistent preoccupation with one or more special interests, parts of objects, or specific types of stimuli (including media) or an unusually strong attachment to particular objects (excluding typical comforters).

Lifelong excessive and persistent hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity to sensory stimuli or unusual interest in a sensory stimulus, which may

7b DSM-V (cont.)

impairments and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior.

B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as manifested by at least two of the following, currently or by history (examples are illustrative, not exhaustive; see text):

1. Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypies, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).

2. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat same food every day).

3. Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, DSM-V excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests).

4. Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g., apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement).

Specify current severity: Severity is based on social communication impairments and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior.

C. Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period (but may 7b not become fully manifest until social

7b ICD-11 (cont.)

include actual or anticipated sounds, light, textures (especially clothing and food), odors and tastes, heat, cold, or pain.

The onset of the disorder occurs during the developmental period, typically in early childhood, but characteristic symptoms may not become fully manifest until later, when social demands exceed limited capacities.

The symptoms result in significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning. Some individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder are able to function adequately in many contexts through exceptional effort, such that their deficits may not be apparent to others. A diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder is still appropriate in such cases.

Specifiers for characterizing features within the Autism Spectrum:

These specifiers enable the identification of co-occurring limitations in intellectual and functional language abilities, which are important factors in the appropriate individualization of support, selection of interventions, and treatment planning for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder. A qualifier is also provided for loss of previously acquired skills, which is a feature of the developmental history of a small proportion of individuals

DSM-V (cont.)

demands exceed limited capacities, or may be masked by learned strategies in later life).

D. Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning.

E. These disturbances are not better explained by intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder) or global developmental delay. Intellectual disability and Autism spectrum disorder frequently co-occur; to make comorbid diagnoses of Autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability, social communication should be below that expected for general developmental level.

Note: Individuals with a well-established DSM-IV diagnosis of autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, or pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified should be given the diagnosis of Autism spectrum disorder. Individuals who have marked deficits in social communication, but whose symptoms do not otherwise meet criteria for Autism spectrum disorder, should be evaluated for social (pragmatic) communication disorder.

Specify if:

With or without accompanying intellectual impairment

With or without accompanying language impairment associated with a known medical or genetic condition or environmental factor

(Coding note: Use additional code to identify the associated medical or genetic condition.)

Associated with another neurodevelopmental, mental, or behavioral disorder

(Coding note: Use additional

7b ICD-11 (cont.)

with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

DSM-V (cont.)

code[s] to identify the associated neurodevelopmental, mental, or behavioral disorder[s].)

With catatonia (refer to the criteria for catatonia associated with another mental disorder, pp. 119–120, for definition) (Coding note: Use additional code 293.89 [F06.1] catatonia associated with Autism spectrum disorder to indicate the presence of the comorbid catatonia.)

scepticism and rejection. To re-iterate: vaccines, none, cause Autism. This is a point not up for debate.^{2 3}

In short: I got the MMR vaccine and my brain is wired differently in quite major ways to those of most people. In themselves, these are two separate things. One is very good, the latter is neither good nor bad. It is a thing. A thing that in living with it in the social systems that we have established pose a lot of problems.

II

Hello, I'm Jacob and I'm Autistic.

Autism is not a superpower, and it never has been. Autism is a disability that affects my neurodevelopment. A disability that comes with advantages and disadvantages in a world design for non-Autistics. In themselves, the criteria for an Autism diagnosis neither *good* nor *bad*: they are shaped by the context wherein they exist. Despite a discussion centred on problems in living in such a context, I want to take a moment to look at positive sides this living entails for me – thereafter we'll get to some more presently discussed, weary things.

2 For more on this topic, feel free to watch Hbombguy's *Vaccines and Autism: A Measured Response* as a comprehensive introduction to the topic of Andrew Wakefield's scare campaign.

3 What neither is up for debate is that Autism is an illness (it is not) and that it can be cured (it cannot, see the first part of the sentence).

This is a strange thing to say for me, but I have a brain that runs on maximum as a default.¹⁰ Some when during my school years I became afraid of calling myself *smart* or *intelligent* because I did not want to seem arrogant or as regarding myself better than.¹¹ There are far more fields in which I am of little use than fields I excel in. But still, in some, I am *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. My brain is very good at obtaining information that it finds useful or interesting, and it can hold unto that information for a long time.¹² In addition, I can concentrate for intensely for extended periods of time on a single task, something that more medically speaking is called *hyperfocus*. Hyperfocus is akin to a flow state with your brain *locking in* with a specific task, may that be researching a special interest or practicing it.

Creative as well as research projects are very much alike to crossword puzzle for me. Not only do I like solving crosswords, but my brain will run through possible solutions as a background task if I am putting down my puzzle and carry on doing other things, eventually resulting in making more entries when I return. My brain does this parallel processing especially well with tasks that I enjoy – it is very much like keeping open a tab with solitaire while surfing on the internet. You play the game, but only return to it in full focus now and then. This processing will at times stretch over months. Each project is a code to be cracked, an effective approach to be found, a riddle to be solved. This has less to do with inspiration but with interest. I will have my morning coffee and, without my laptop open, start thinking about how to tackle a project such as this book, reviewing, analysing, strategizing, and at the end of the day fit in another short time slot for pondering before going to bed. In itself this is not out of the ordinary, but the continuity and ever-presence of parallel solving puzzles is worth mentioning. If I start something, I will be damned if I won't finish it sooner than later.

Special interest are a fundamental part of the autistic experience. The DSM-V, although unfortunate in its wording, describes these interests as highly restricted and accompanied with *abnormal* intensity or focus. This roughly translates to them taking drawing a lot of attention when pursuit rather than eclipsing everything else, as well as them being frequented often or with an *unusual* intensity of focus. Such special interests can span from animals to reading to plants to ancient history to taxidermy (as is the case with Alice Poyzer) or, a common stereotype, trains.¹⁴ Pursuing them doesn't just follow out of curiosity, they are an deeply embedded source of joy and vital for reducing stress. I have wondered for years whether photography may be classified as a

10 It constantly goes *I'm fast as fuck boy!*

11 I am, indeed, trying not to be the former and I am certainly not the latter.

12 I was 15 when I memorised the opening monologue of Shakespeare's *Richard III* in English, a language I spoke with a fraction of today's ease, with a very nasal copy of Benedict Cumberbatch's performance in *The Hollow Crown* (2016). When I applied to study acting at the Konrad Wolf Film University of Babelsberg in early 2020, I had to translate the whole thing into German (because they only accepted monologues in German) and, though I had retained most of the English still, learned it anew in what was essentially a week.

14 For more on special interests as well as an overall analysis of the DSM-V's criteria, I highly recommend Donne Henderson et al.'s *Is This Autism?*

special interest of mine since I work with it only a daily basis, may a course ask it of me or not – the chances are high but a closed assessment is muddy since I study this stuff. Instead...

A list of special interests that I have followed between October 2020 and January 2025 in alphabetical order. The 1981 Irish hunger strike, Autistic psychology and sociology, Arabic and Arabic music (theory), bootlegging of music and books, typography, calligraphy and graphic design, bookbinding, critical political theory, ergodic literature, figure drawing and painting, Irish folk music, Jungian psychology, Desert Blues, Greek mythology, Robert Mapplethorpe (period), the music of Master Kong Nay, Reid Miles' cover designs for *Blue Note Records*, music production, composition and arranging, photography and cultural theory, song-writing, the spoken word shows of Henry Rollins, the neurology of synaesthesia, the occupation of Palestine, painting techniques of the Renaissance and early Baroque in regarding to light, various types of philosophy, various form of printing making, various political discourses (see the catalogue of *Hbomberguy*, *Philosophy Tube* and *ContraPoints* as reference), psychology and psychiatry (especially in fields of Autism, depression and anxiety), *Western Jazz*, classical and progressive rock music theory and Yiddish music theory.

I am very good with languages. Although I do not perceive any virtue in eloquent speech, I developed a very mature lingo in my youth (although I developed speech at a *normal* time in my early childhood). I was the personification of the insider joke of the Thomas Mann Syndrome, weaving sentences so long and overly complex that would have filled paragraphs. My vocabulary similarly different vehemently from that of my peers.⁴ My voice maybe wasn't entirely monotone,⁵ but so clean of any accent or even dialect that it sounded like I was training to become a news anchor. Syntax, vocabulary and phonetics of my speech have changed a lot to the more effortless for me and my surroundings (for the most part). I still use long sentences but not to impress, I choose words because they fit and not because they are impressive, I have more of my father's accent and I can change my voice even more effortlessly.

I grew up in Cambodia in my early childhood where I was surrounded by a mixture of German (inside the house), English (at pre-school) and Khmer (everywhere else). Even though I would not openly define this as an advantage, by the time I was 13, I developed a deep and intense interest for English.⁶ Since, moving from extensive self-teaching to conversing with native speakers, it surpasses German in comfort, fundamentally in writing. For a few years, I have been barely reading in

any other language. But most of all, I'm proud to have shed my German accent, even though I therefore dress in the false clothing of various English accents and dialects. English could be classified as my most long-term special interest. I also had a high interest in Spanish (although that wavered due to my classes' quality but time will tell if I pick it up again) and since started learning Arabic.

So I talk a lot and have a thing for languages. This might lead one to the assumption that I might tend to think in words. I do not, at least not exclusively. I'm a visual thinker though and through. Every thought is resolved visually, reasoning is a graphical, spatial thing. I have a good visual memory but it excels at sound. When I was maybe 11, I spent time getting my hair cut with reciting an audiobook that I had listened to again and again of the last few weeks in accurate phrasing and inflection. The words and how they were spoken had remained engraved and I could recall them effortlessly. I still can retain a lot of auditory information which is another reason for why I keep my headphones on all day – I can solve a visual puzzle while simultaneously gathering information in audio. Of course there is no full multitasking in a brain that still has to split energy but still, it works. To summarise: I think visually and remember auditory things very well.

4 although it helped in reading Freud
at far too young an age

5 a fact mainly attributed to me acting
in an amateur drama group for my
entire adolescents

6 This in itself proves that
performance in school is not only
influence by personal interest or
predispositions but also by the person
teaching. I despised English for the
first four years it was part of my
curriculum, and I wasn't good at it.
This would change with an amazing
woman of an English teacher in
seventh grade who I still hold in the
highest of regards. My English grades
literally saved me from failing my high
school diploma, and without that, a
lot of things would be harder than
now.

III

Ever since I was 11 (by now more than half of my life), I increasingly haven't left the house without headphones, making that statement absolute by the time I was 15. I crave a constant background – music, audiobooks, video essays, news reports, whatever keeps my mind focussed. Now, I'm surrounded by stimuli of my own choosing up to 12 hours a day, often more. If I should leave my headphones at home (or more likely, not charge them), a set of earplugs is plan B. Without even these, discomfort about lacking my audio increases to panic quite rapidly. Unable to shut out all that I cannot filter, energy levels run low quickly, focus wavers, overstimulation is soon at hand.

Since I have had a room, I have struggled with retaining tidiness. Order I always have had and with age, structuring my living space has become more and more refined – everything has its place because it makes sense to there and if I were rearrange one section, a number of other must also be altered to keep a balance, a peace of mind, comfort in order. Tidiness is another thing. When I work, I *work* and putting things back becomes a thought soon forgotten. It is not a vice, it is simply a state incredibly difficult to uphold. Tidying up and cleaning in contrast are tasks I enjoy immensely by now; it calms me deeply. But before then, everything still has an order, lest too much untidiness takes over. Then even my sense of order is disrupted.

I have always had problems with maintaining my body. Brushing my teeth I neglect too often (it is a vastly uncomfortable sensation and the day leading up to it is always filled with a bit of dread), showering also (although this co-insides with depressive episodes and is not a problem anymore). Changing my clothes regularly is a task entailing a mental load that might not be huge but is left to the wayside very quickly. Eating and drinking might be the worst. Until now, I have not been assessed for any eating disorders, but I am certain that problems with regular food intake and hydration are not caused by body dysmorphia (problems with one's body image). To eat and drink are things to be reminded of constantly and that take a lot of energy in starting and maintaining. Disregarding signals such as hunger and a need to pee are often overwritten, sometimes out of disregard, sometimes because I want to prove to myself that I have control over my body. In addition I'm a heavy smoker, relating a lot to the repetitive nature and structure of smoking, its numbing of hunger and its readiness for passing the time.

For a lot of these things I feel immense shame and writing down this paragraph has been very uncomfortable. A lot of it relates to struggles

with executive function (as I figure) since stereotypical signs of disorders such as ADHD, like having a messy room, do not apply. I was tested for ADD, I do not have it. Nonetheless many of these things, or more so the struggles with them, are seen as vital for living an independent, an adult life. I technically am an adult. How come I struggle with these simple things? Because to me, they are not simple. But still I often catch myself thinking this and that just takes a good shakeup to overcome. None of the mentioned would be helped by a shakeup, not in the long term. That is only helped by enduring small steps, and small steps are hard to go alone (which you have to if you don't ask for help – but then again: how awkward is it to ask someone to remind you to eat).

It is up to debate for how many years I have been struggling with mental health problems. There certainly are instances of thought and action that are anything but healthy, but for which I was not assessed as a child. After my family and I returned to Germany in 2007, I grew in Sonneberg, a small, isolated town in Southern Thuringia – very much not a place equipped with lots of mental health professionals. It was only when I was 17 that I was suggested therapy. Why? Because my right arm had been twitching uncontrollably for a week. I went to therapy for a dissociative disorder, most likely DPDRD (Depersonalisation-derealisation disorder). Nowadays I question this hypothesis in certain aspects. Regardless, I went to therapy and a lot of year-long problems presented themselves.

Until this day, I have seen nothing but a few acute screening tests for depression,

I do not have a diagnosis. But depression is evident, and I have been struggling with it for longer than I can say for certain. I was the reclusive kid in class and had put myself in the box of someone whose intellect can overpower his body. It took me ages to unlearn this. I had my first circle of friends by the age of 17. It was a dreadful process. My Autism assessment found me living with a huge amount of social anxiety and hypothesised a social phobia. I go along with the anxiety but will be careful about the phobia nowadays.

The doctor who assessed me and presented me my scores was very kind. In many parts of the ADOS¹³ I had scored just above the threshold of what constituted as an *autistic score*. I told her I felt like a fraud and that I didn't find it implausible that I had tricked her into thinking I was autistic. Barely showing *enough Autism* in one sector or another seemed to equate to *not autistic enough*. I remember her not being surprised though taking me seriously. She told me that the assessment could only work with the presentation I had come in with, what could be seen on the outside on the day, or more clearly: what I showed. She explained that for many adult Autistics, it was not unusual to score barely on such a test, since we have spent all of our lives adapting to a world not made for us, trying to hide our Autism. This process is called *masking*, and I did indeed score quite high on it.⁸ Furthermore, she told me that in her experience, it is often Autistics who seem to adapt quite well (no matter their personal costs) that "suffer the most".

Autistic diagnosis in its current form is under heavy criticism. Many tests, just like ADOS, are conceptualised for children, as most Autistics will be assessed during childhood. This leaves round adults without a diagnosis being put through the square hole of being tested in the same way as a child. In addition, many tests, including ADOS, are very much based on the stereotypical group Autism research regarded as *the most likely to be autistic* at time of conception: white cis-boys from middle class to well-off families who are very much into/gifted in STEM. Any group outside their perimeter, may it be in gender, class, ethnicity, is less likely to be diagnosed as autistic and/or misdiagnosed with a mental health condition.⁹

Still, I was close enough to the stereotype to question my diagnosis for a moment. This in itself is absurd. I had just been given a paper with my test scores. They clearly stated that I am Autistic. Still, I was doubting the judgement of clinicians. What the fuck? What kind of notion was that? Sure, this could have been a mistake, but the odds were definitely slanted towards the more obvious. Indeed, adult Autistics can

13 *Autism Diagnosis Observation Schedule*, a standardised diagnosis instrument. One of several, it's the one where you look at a children's book with flying frogs since – surprise, surprise – it was designed for children (or a nervous 21 year old).

8 I scored especially high for a sub-category of masking called *compensation*: establishing methods to present myself as doing things in a *normal* way, ergo learning to do things *my* way and the *right* way. There is an amazing book about the subject of masking by Dr. Devon Price titled *Unmasking Autism* (2022) which includes many stories of Autistics diagnosed later in life as well as extensive detailing of how masking develops and how to unlearn it. Price himself is Autistic, pushing forward a change in literature on Autism away from just being written about from the *outside* towards being written about from lived experience, the *inside*. I had learned a lot about masking beforehand, but this books brought me to tears because I felt so seen. Indeed, the tears are common as I'm writing this.

9 For women, this might be a misdiagnosis of BPD (Borderline personality disorder). Interesting enough, a therapist I was seeing before my Autism assessment told me that he didn't see me as possibly autistic but was quite comfortable with the idea of me having Borderline. That was during our second session. Just to clarify: I, indeed, *do not* have Borderline.

have an immense amount of impostor syndrome. Growing up without a viable suggestion at understanding yourself, going through the motions of therapy and being belittled by doctors, your own judgement, your sense of yourself, your memory for the life you have been living since day one, is put under scrutiny. Not just by yourself, but by others. Family, friends, teachers. At some point, you might just find yourself in a spot where you cannot trust your sense of self anymore. Then being told that you were indeed right, that others were wrong, that you have been treated unfairly, that you have indeed suffered unnecessarily in many ways, can be unreal. Those words might have been a dream, but now that they have become fact, they are somewhat terrifying. They are terrifying because they are the exact opposite of what you have internalised. And then, you go home and have to pick up the scraps and figure out this *Autism*.

Still, and indeed, you are not an impostor. You are Autistic and have been so your whole life.

IV

To write a text about my Autism as a (relatively) freshly diagnosed person brings a lot of struggles and weariness of dangers. I have felt the tears coming multiple times writing this chapter.

This, nonetheless, brings me to the reason for writing this anthology with which I am ending this chapter.

Why do I make such a fuzz about being an autistic photographer? Because I am tired. Because I am angry. Because I am scared.

I am tired of because I have spent too much time solving crossword puzzles in a language that I have had to use a dictionary for. I have spent a childhood and most of my youth trying to adapt to standards that only few bothered explaining, those few still being some of my closest friends. I have endured too much ridicule, too much alienation, too much social boot-kicking for what I was able to handle. And now, I am left with the many things I have to relearn, the many floors I have to dismantle, the many new tiles I have to set. Now, I am angry.

I am angry because I was called gay for my interest in anatomy. I am angry because I was yelled and hit. I am angry because I was bullied, even though I can barely acknowledge that I was. I am angry because I was amongst peers who for the most part didn't give a shit. I am angry because I thought reading Freud at 12 was a good idea because I thought I had to learn how people function. I am angry because a year later I wished to become a sociopath, an emotionless being (so I thought)

that couldn't be hurt anymore (so I hoped). I am angry because writing this paragraph I can feel the tears coming. Because I am afraid of being honest. Because I don't quite know what would be the honest realisation is a lot of the time. I am angry because I have hated myself for too long and that I have so much to work at. I am angry because I am in pain and only have started to feel it, truly feel it. And now, I am scared.

I am scared because I don't have clear answers. There is a whole chapter on it.

And now, I am angry and sad and tired all at once. Being diagnosed as autistic in adulthood is a strange thing. No matter if there have been thoughts of possibilities rumouring through your head and outside of it, a diagnosis is definite. Here I have eight pages of results, and they describe me. Here I have eight pages of scores and notes from my diagnosis session, and for the moment, that's all I will get. A yes. Then comes the actual work. An Autism diagnosis (to me) is a re-contextualisation of everything. Not because everything happens because of Autism but everything happens parallel to it. Everything, every experience never quite resolved in *getting it*, every quirk, every thought of the future – all now happens before this new set of information. And then, I begin to revisit. I examine. Much gets clearer. And then, I find out things about myself. Things I had never imagined. Things that I have kept hidden and written off as oddities best kept hidden. Things I have always done or wished to do. I learn that I am not a bad person. And now, the tears come again. I learn that life was unfair so many times, even though I do not like the thought because mine was so much less painless than other's. I learn that I am indeed a human. I learn that my tics and my stims are okay, that they are a part of me. I learn that I use headphones for most of the day not because I am disinterested in the world around me but because the world is so very loud at times. I learn that I'm not looking at you not because I'm disrespectful but because it is not my default mode.

This time, which still lasts and will for a long time, feels at times like another puberty. It is a moment of great change, change to myself, change for the better. It is a moment of redefining things for myself. Because, even if I also have to learn to trust myself, I know a lot about myself and can make my own decisions. I have a voice and I can take a stand for myself. And even though it is so very tiring at times, it is a good thing. Hello, I'm Jacob and I'm Autistic.

Naturally, when you relearn so much about yourself, it is daunting. *Am I instating the right insight? Am I unlearning the wrong thing? Is this Autism still?* There is no frame of reference, only books and media that

for the most part simply does a shit job at depicting you or any other Autistic. I am alone. But I am not. Meeting other Autistics has been a bliss. Not just because of the exchange of experiences, the discussions of hyperfixations, stims and sensitivities. It is because there, just there, is another person who is like you in a way most are not. May they know more or less about themselves than you do about yourself – they are there. You are not alone.

This is a vital reason for Autism (self)advocacy. Your being is a good thing, and you are not alone.

Naturally, my mind has drifted to researching Autistic photographers – because yes, we do exist. We exist everywhere.

64

NR.	NAME	STOCK	MOTIVES
0062	2301	I D400P	Paula cam test
0063	230111	I FP4+	Lena cam test
0064	230113.01	I FP4+	Mama at Limona
0065	230113.02	I FP4+	Mama at Limona
0066	230124+25	I FP4+	Walter's Voigtländer test
0067	230126-	I HP5+	Kiev 28 test
0068	2301	I D400P	Erfurt, Weimar
0069	230202-22	I HP5+	Erfurt, Weimar
0070	230206	F400	Raoul
0071	230206-47	F200	Bash
0072	230206	I HP5+	Weimar, Sonneberg
0073	230206	F400	Bash
0074	230206	K P400	Lydia at Limona
0075	230206	K P400	Lydia at Limona
0076	230206	K P400	Sonneberg, Erfurt
0077	230309.01	F200	Sarah at Limona
0078	230309.02	F200	Sarah at Limona
0079	230418	ID3200P	Gisrersleben
0080	230424	I O:	excursion SSL, Weimar
0081	2304/05	I PANF:	Sonneberg, Bash
0082	230518	K P400	Mascha
0083	230523-23-23078.22-23	I D400P	Weimar, Thilo, Ferr.
0084	230523.01	I FP4+	Ferropolis
0085	230523.02	I PANF+	Ferropolis
0086	230523.03	K P400	Agri
0087	230527/28+30	K P400	Lena, Yas
0088	230530	K P400	Yas
0089	230603	I D3200P	Kosmic Ocean
0090	230714	I HP5+	Summaery
0091	230714-15	I HP5+	Summaery, Proforma
0092	2308??+09	I SEF	Lucia, Sarah, Anna
0093	230905.1	K P400	Osama at Limona
0094	230905.2	I FP4+	Osama at Limona
0095	231029.1	APX400	Steven, Blinde Flecken
0096	231029.2	I FP4+	Steven, Blinde Flecken
0097	231103.01	I HP5+	Raoul at Limona
0098	231103.02	K G	Raoul at Limona
0099	231106.01	I D400P	Blinde Flecken
0100	231106.02	F200	Blinde Flecken
0101	231107.03	I FP4+	Blinde Flecken
0102	231106+10	I D400P	B.F., Jazztage
0103	231110.01	ABX 400	Jazztage
0104	231106.02	I FP4+	Jazztage
0105	231110.03	I FP4+	Jazztage
0106	231111.01	APX400	Jazztage
0107	231111.02	I FP4+	Jazztage
0108	231204	F200	Blinde Flecken
0109	231215.01	I FP4+	Bahram at Limona
0110	231215.02	F200	Bahram at Limona
0111	231215.03	I FP4+	Bahram at Limona
0112	231215+20	CS800T	WAR, ALAZIA, Swallow Tune
0113	231230	F400	Max

0109
0099 231104
0100

Apknew

Demo Erfurt

0109 231129
0109

10100

Fackhammer intro

negative list.

WHAT? part two.

As these texts live between the topics of Autism and photography, here is a fun little quote: *photographs are not real*.

Before this statement transcends into an assumption of nihilism or absurdism, before you envision me with a Nietzsche 'stache or with gelled-back Camus hair, let me delve into the reasoning behind this statement. Fortunately, this is a fantastic jumping off point for me to define some terms that will be used constantly – as we did for Autism, we will establish some basic vocabulary for photography.

A *camera* is an optical system.

It is also a box. It is an optical box.

Light enters this box, funnelled through an entrance, a hole, in one of the box's walls.

As light enters the box, it hits the box's interior.

The box's interior is sensitive to the light hitting it.

Because it is sensitive, it is altered and/or sends signals.

As it is altered, the surface inside *remembers* in what spots it was hit by light.

This is as much as I will boil down a camera for now. But as cute as the image of a light-swallowing box is, let's make it more tangible. The first cameras invented were analogue cameras. These are *boxes* which light enters through a lens (a cylinder most often containing multiple lenses directing light inside). The lens guides light into the camera body (the box without a lens), where it hits a medium.

Early on (1850-1885), this would often be a plate (glass, aluminium, etc.) which, through a coat of collodion (a sort of glue), held another coat of silver nitrate. Silver nitrate is photosensitive, it reacts with light. If a camera was then loaded with a coated plate inside and light would hit the plate as long as the coats were still wet, the silver nitrate would react, the plate could be developed and held a negative, an inverted image of the light that hit the plate. If the plate was coated with tar or black paint on the back, the negative would become a positive image. This, in short, is the wet plate process to making a photograph – very

old, very tedious, very slow. *And it needs a shit ton of light to make an image.*

In the 1880s, a new medium of film was introduced. Now, a strip of celluloid coated with photosensitive chemicals could be inserted and rolled in the camera body (which is why the first type of film was called *roll film*). This allowed for multiple exposures right after one another, making the process of photographing more fluent.¹ Later, smaller image sizes, more portable film stocks and cameras were introduced to the market. Since the mid-20th century, using a 35mm camera (one that shoots negatives that are 24 x 36mm large) has become the standard for film photography, followed by medium format cameras (which shoot various sizes from 45 x 60mm over 60 x 60mm to 60 x 70mm and so on).² With the advent of digital sensors, cameras capturing images unto a surface transcribing them as data have become a universal norm. Though analogue and digital processes of capturing an image vary in their inner workings, they are based on the same principles and will be regarded as equal.⁴

There are analogue and digital cameras. Analogue cameras use celluloid coated with silver as a medium, which is called film. Films usually have enough area for multiple images (except sheet film and Polaroids), roughly ranging from 10 (6x7 images on a 120mm film) to 36 (24x36 images on a 35 film). These images are called negatives. Digital cameras have a sensor that collects digital data and sends that data to a storage place, maybe an SD card or a computer. The images

¹ Since wet plates need to be exposed to light while the chemicals on them are still, well, *wet*, they allow a waiting time of just about 10-15 minutes between preparation and taking the photo. A dry wet plate is a dead wet plate. But film does not care how long you take between loading and taking a picture. A friend of mine in November developed a film he started exposing during the summer, with week-long gaps between certain images.

² Naturally, the smaller the negative, the more pictures fit unto a roll of film: a 35mm usually holds 36 pictures, a 120mm (medium format), depending on the camera, may hold 8 to 12 pictures. These numbers, such as negative sizes in 120mm, are very variable and often times dependent on the camera system used. I use a Canon EOS 300 and a Nikon FM2 (both take 35mm film and shoot 36 images a film) as well as a Kiev 88 (takes 120mm film and shoots 12 images a film, should its universal transportation flaw not fuck with me).

That much on analogue photography. Obviously, the times of analogue cameras being the only available or the most frequent cameras used are gone.³

³ Which drives (part-time) analogue photographers like me nuts because film is so fucking expensive.

⁴ Maybe let's not start at the beginning of time.

captured are dependent on their file format. The most common file type to capture in is RAW (which has different file name suffixes depending on the brand of camera one uses). RAW files capture merely the data points for brightness and colour of an image area and a range of possible tweaks to them. They are not ready to print and have to be developed digitally and be exported as another file format (often as a TIFF). Analogue negatives can be digitalised and can then be edited similarly to RAW files.

Photographing is a double word: it describes the act of *image-making* at large as well as the *act of taking an image*. These texts often reference *photography* as the total process of making an image – that is, preparation, taking photos, and developing them. A lot of people think that a photograph is only finished when it is edited, everything before (negatives/RAWs) being akin to *image drafts*. Sometimes, I agree with those people, but only in instances in which *making an image* necessitates postproduction. A wedding photo taken with a phone is a photograph, even if you post it straight to Instagram. What these mentioned people and I mean is that there often is a difference between *taking a photo* (using the camera) and *making an image* (postproduction), although, as I said, they can be addressed by the same name: *photographing*. A *photograph* is the result of making an image with the help of a camera.

Editing is the mentioned tweaking of a photograph. It can involve changing colours, adjusting contrast and otherwise manipulating a negative or RAW. For decades now, many photographers add things to their images that camera didn't capture: textures, decorative elements and the like. Some people describe that sort of *image-making* as *photographics*.

Using generative Artificial Intelligence to generate elements of an image or generating the entire image is sometimes called *promptography*. There is much discussion on whether an entirely generated image can be called a *photograph*, and I am one of the people who do not think so. It is an entirely different process that can be *combined* with that of *photographing*, but it is indeed not *photographing*.



A dead bonsai. Gift a.

it's not click.

it's [E-lic-K].

Humans:

OH NO, OUR THREE-DIMENSIONAL PERCEPTION OF THE WORLD LEAVES US WITH A WORLD DEVOID OF AN *EIDOS* THAT DOES NOT ACCOUNT FOR TIME IN A SPATIAL MANNER, WE DRIFT THROUGH TIME LIKE DRIVING A CAR WHOSE BREAKS HAVE BEEN CUT AND WE ARE LEFT WITH THIS INDEFINITE ONGOING OF MOMENTS AND WE CAN'T STOP FFS AND WE JUST WANNA HAVE A LIL BREAK JESUSFUCKINGCHRIST PLEASE FUCKING HELP I'M NOT READY TO DO THIS MUCH ADULATING YET NOOOOOOOOOoooooooOOOOOOOO

Camera: klik.

Time, in human experience, is ever split from those sweet little three dimensions that we can grab like a racoon we want to buy tacos for. We do not experience time as we do space, and it drives us nuts. Space is there and time is too, but time keeps itself always on the periphery of our vision, always in the corner of our glance – it is there, and we know it, but as we turn to look at it, it is gone, it has passed. We cannot see, feel, touch, smell or hear time, only the cans of beer it throws out the car, littering the roadside. We cannot experience time, only its effects, its results.³

As the saying goes, I come after my mother¹ – we look very much alike in the face region. As a kid, many strangers mistook me for a girl, something that I found amusing rather than bothering.² My mother, to this day, gets told at times that I resemble her deeply, and though she struggles to see the similarities, we take it as a statement outside our reach, if not a compliment. Still, my face (and much else about me) has changed over the years – it aged with time. However time is not in its ongoing maturing, but in the difference between me at 23 and me at 11.

And you know what: this difference will broaden with every year, week and day. I know that time passes because I can tell when the sun sets, but the change in my face I am oblivious to without comparison – to yesterday, last month or my childhood. Time is there but not for me, only its results. But still: it is true, I come after my mother (except for the eyes).

In the West, we break down time into the three areas of past, present and future, only one of which, the present, we can live in. The future is a matter of imagination and calculation, the past one of memory. We can account for the present and past, and sometimes even the future, but we can only live one. We literally live in the moment and are bound to it. Lucky for us, with every passing moment,⁴ we get a sequel to the present that just faded into the past. We live in a string of moments, instances, presents, that starts from the moment of birth till the moment of brain death. We get something new every time,

3 Of course different cultures have conceptualised time differently over millennia, but this does not constitute a different experience but a different perception (a different making-sense-of-and-applying-it-in-living).

1 Except for my eyes – I got that tense stare from the stay-at-home political menace I call Papa.

2 Although by now, my face has become so haggard that such instances have gone extinct – I still got the long hair (longer than then), but my features and faint stubbles give quite another look.

4 A fascinating unit of time, one of the most long-standing hot topics of philosophy and science – a true millennial blockbuster. Definitions for the moment as concept as well as a pointing to its duration has varied greatly, from 90 seconds (when the *moment* was an actual time unit in medieval Europe) to 13 milliseconds (when an MIT study studied how long it took participants' brains to take in an image). [Question: if the latter is the metric for a moment, do moments last longer for people with slower cognitive processing and shorter for people with lightning processing?] The duration of a moment, if equated with the *instant*, calls for an infinitesimal number: a number that is closer to 0 than any other. Awesome shit.

all the time. This is how we live, and we have agreed (mostly) on how to deal with it – clocks, seasons, the god-cursed daylight savings time. This is how we process an integral part of nature.

The camera does not care about nature. The camera is one of the most unnatural things we have accomplished.⁵ *In what?* – *p. two* we discussed what a camera actually does: it captures light for a specific period of time on a certain medium.⁶ The camera sees only when we tell it to, i.e. when we use it, but even that statement is not true in full: a camera always sees when light hits the lens, but it only records when we take a photo. Now, what does it need to record? Light and time.

The camera is not unnatural because it sees but because it records like only it, only it, can. Human memory is remarkably good at preserving pictures – we love to fill our hard drives with images. Over our lives, we gather and retain 24 images a second.⁷ According to Reber, the adult human brain has a storage capacity of about 2.500.000.000 Megabytes (2,5 Petabytes) – a storage warehouse for each and every skull (see Reber 2024). But, as everyone who has bought a 1 Terabyte hard drive, thinking that it will last a lifetime, knows: at some point, storage is full; room needs to be made. Our brains do the same: there is a constant flux of neurons connecting and disconnecting, sprouting and dying. Our memory is ever-changing in content and quality. With every year, it becomes harder to remember a day in our childhood we held dear, and with every day, our memory dampens in specifics and accuracy. If it were not so, we would need a new hard drive every other year – at a rate of 24 images a second, we are left with 2.073.600 images after a full day of 24 hours, a 9-5 day job with a one-hour lunch break brings in 604.800 already.⁸ Our hard drive needs to keep up, and to keep up, it needs to change, discard and simplify. We cannot recall things accurately in time because otherwise, there would be no way of taking in another second.

The camera isn't swept up in the tides as we are. It is not the car racing through a tunnel towards the light that it never quite arrives at – it is the tunnel. To produce an image, we need light, time and a medium. To expose a medium with light is not to hit and then scrape off much of the fine detail over the years.⁹ The camera does not suffer the foils of a squishy brain. It doesn't remember, it records. It does not take in a deep breath of a large moment and packs it up neatly into one image. It sits there, jaws wide open, as the moments, time, stack themselves upon one another for the entire duration of a shutter speed.

A 1/250s shutter speed equals 4 ms – if we go with the MIT's assertions, the camera sees even quicker than us. A 1/30s shutter speed,

5 Though I will delve into it: *unnatural* is indeed not an inherently bad thing – it simply states that something is not *of* nature but made outside of it by humans (although we indeed are *of* nature).

6 Could that chapter just have been this sentence? Maybe. But fuck you, I like info dumping and musing for far too long.

7 The threshold for us to perceive movement as *continuous*.

8 As a fun side note: if we equate one second to 24 of the digital RAW files a full frame camera (say my NIKON D800 with its 36,3 Megapixels and median files size of say 30 MB) takes, this 9-5 delivers 604.800 x 30 MB of data. That is 18.144.000 MB or 18,144 TB. As reference to your hourly wages: LaCie offers an external hard drive with a 20 TB storage for around 600 EUR. Your 9-5 would need to pay you 85,71 EUR an hour to just cover the costs of storing your memories, including those of staring at a coffee machine for 5 minutes – but hey, at least shipping is included.

9 Except if you're maliciously bad with negatives. In that case: what the fuck are you doing, scraping off silver from celluloid? Stop that shit.

30 images per second (the closest to our default 24), lingers for between 25,4 and 38,5ms, that is roughly two MIT moments. A 1s speed means 812-1231ms: between 62 and 94 MIT moments. Moments are stacked on moments until an image is visible.¹⁰

We collect and discard, the camera stacks. A memory might be close to 0 in its duration, but a photograph is a time span. I discarded this long (because camera go klik), but a photograph is a window looking on a passage of time, whether it is long or short. A racing car, if photographed at a low shutter speed, will appear as a streak, a flying hummingbird's wings will seem frozen at a low speed. Just like us, the camera needs time to see, but since it stacks what it sees, it shapes a linear process into something close to one-dimensional. With the hummingbird, this is quite clear: it indeed was not frozen, but the speed of its wing was too slow for the photograph to show any movement of joints. There is no discernible movement, there is no discernible start and end to the motion – all is one and incomprehensible as a motion.

The streak of the racing car gives us a start, passage and end, though – like a line, it begins and finishes, and all in between is a blur. There is an implication of movement, clearly, but the duration (start, end and all in-between) has been compressed. Though we can see where the car went, the trajectory of passage is one, all on one single level. The car moved, but it does not move in the image and might very well never have moved.

The camera expands our vision. It shows us the stages of a thing we are too slow for as well as a summary of stages we are too quick for. It cuts and bends time, and in the latter, it does not extend our physics to a fourth dimension, but hammers it down into a single thing, printed on two dimensions.

It does not go *click* but [*c-lic-k*]. And that is awesome.

¹⁰ One can therefore argue that a cloudy day or an ND filter makes the camera take longer to experience its reality.



A disambiguation of
"looking you in the eyes".



[5452. THURSDAY.]

I bought my first camera a few weeks ago, a system Canon. We've spent the last three days in London. I have taken 156 pictures. I've just went about photographing, documenting. In a few months, I will feel like shit because of it and in some years, I will remember almost nothing but the things I've photographed.

[6512. SUNDAY.]

Our school trip brings me London again. I borrowed my father's analogue Canon. We've spent two days there. I have taken 63 photographs. I was selective about what I shot — things that were essential, things I wanted to remember. In a few months, I will be able to tell a story about each and every photograph, my memory is merely strengthened by my pictures.

Commuting

Since 2023, I have taken some 22.000 photographs. That is a multiple of the numbers I took in the 21 years before that, and with every year, the number climbs. At an average of some 30 pictures a day, more than one an hour, I have spent the last two years taking pictures for some 3 minutes (if we take a speed of 1/125s as an average). 3 minutes in two years. I work with my camera on almost a daily basis. Just after working with it became a routine thing to do, I began to notice. Not just the times when I photographed. But equally, if not more, the times when I did not. I began noticing the absence of photographing. I explicitly do not say the absence of a camera — I got one on me, you do too, in our pockets. It is the moment in which the reflex to whip out the thing and take a shot is punctured by not doing just that that became apparent.

I live in Erfurt, ergo I have been commuting ever since COVID started to fade away into memory and the regular in-person course system came back into practice. With photography, working at the Limona and having somewhat of a social life, I now commute three to four days a week on average. With a good connection, it takes me about 50 minutes to get from my flat to uni. Hop on the tram, hop on the train, hop on the bus — for three to four hundred minutes a week, often more. What might seem dull I actually enjoy. It is two windows of time each day to reflect and to settle among transit, to get lost in thought — and to look. I travel with and by several hundreds if not thousands of people a day. Many might be re-occurring passers-by, most might be wholly new — I wouldn't know.

seeing / looking / perceiving

Photographing might be a craft of sight, but it is not one of *seeing*. Indeed, there are three actions that have crystallised in my understanding of what we do with our eyes and smart little brains. Distinguishing between the three is a matter of constant manual practice but a realisation that, by working, has been helpful in making the process of photographing more mindful.¹

Seeing, for those fortunate enough, is an automatic process, a physical and neurological skill that comes installed as a default software to a functioning eye. It necessitates no effort, not even thought, and for the most part goes by unnoticed. I open my eyes and if there is light to bounce off of something, I see. There is no participation trophy, I didn't do anything but merely functioned.

Looking is different to seeing. This might become clear in looking at its form as a verb: to *look at*. Looking implies direction, something outward-going. Some 2,500 year ago, the Greek philosopher Empedocles theorised that human sight was based on beams being transmitted from the eye, sight therefore being a process of emanation – *extromission*. By now, intromission is the gold standard of understanding sight – we do not beam sight into the world like a godlike Superman but receive reflected light rays from the world around us which puncture our retina, sending electrical signals to our brain which processes said information. School stuff. But in his theory, Empedocles set the basis for a, at least semantic, metaphor for looking. As stated, to look is to direct. Direction implies action and therefore motivation. To look, in difference to seeing, is a motion that we consciously perform to direct our sight at something or someone – it is to streamline, to make conscious an unconscious skill, to

use the default software. Not to say that if we look, we indeed shoot beams out of our eyes, but we anticipate the process of sight, may it be out of instinct or with intent. Ergo: looking can be summarised as seeing in manual override.

*Perceiving*² is a fairly vague term. Scientifically speaking, it merely describes the totality of receiving and processing sensory information, that which was already described in seeing. Going beyond that, to perceive something might be more akin to beholding – a word that does not do one any favours in not to seem ostentatious (ostentatious doesn't do you favours in that regard either). Regardless of fancy language: to define perceiving is to scrape in mud. Ergo, I will describe as

2 As with *seeing* and *looking*, I use the term *perceiving*. *Perception*, although maybe more intuitive, for this context can be seen as the result, the end product of the *act of perceiving*. The verb form focusses more on the act described, and in this chapter, I am first and foremost addressing acts done, ergo the usage of *perceiving* rather than *perception*.

1 As much of these texts might show, *doing* and *thinking* are very closely related for me. Not that I think that before starting to *do* something, one is obligated to *think it through* first. Although ideal in some cases, much of experience-based knowledge comes with the practicing act. Yet still, I believe that is helpful to get an idea of what one is *doing* by a certain time. By then or shortly after, the results of *thinking* or not separated from *doing* anymore though. They then are assimilated. An understanding of *doing* is built. In short: when you step back occasionally, you might just find out some interesting things that might further your *doing*.

such: to perceive is to go into discourse with the thing or person being looked at. In this, to perceive requires looking. What is added (or what furthers this motion) is gathering, processing, relating – what we do with that what we receive after we have made the choice to direct our sight.

This might be you looking at an especially ugly looking dog – overbred, barely breathing, running along the feet of its owner on the sidewalk. There is something small moving, it peaks your interest. You look. You behold the poor little thing. You take in information – it is a dog, it is overbred, it is barely breathing. Then, you start to get into discourse with what you're looking at. You might feel sorry. You might feel disgusted. You might cut the conversation short and close it with “oh, a dog, one of those handbag rats”. You might go further into it, start wondering about how life must be for the dog, if it is treating well or ill in addition to its seemingly painful life, why you react to it the way you do – maybe you have a thing for animals in pain, maybe you find yourself annoyed by the thought of caring for it. Whatever it is – you start to do something with what you take in.

The same thing might apply to looking at a photograph in a gallery. Say you stand in front of a photograph of a red chair before a plain white background. The bright red of the furniture has struck your eyes as interesting. You have begun looking. You take in the image: a red chair in front of a white background. You might feel moved. It resembles the kitchen chair in your dead grandmother's kitchen that after you cleared her flat of all furniture got thrown unto a huge pyre, by now fertilising a field of grass as ash. You might feel annoyed. Such a “nothing picture” is staring you blank in the face, because this is utter meaningless bullshit made by and for snobs you find reference in a fucking chair. You might feel nothing at all. No matter what, in processing and moving further, you perceive. Of course, you might also cut the conversation short here or let it run further in this example. The more you do the latter, the more you continue perceiving the image and its details, its possible themes, its meaning to you. Of course, you do not have to – to merely look is a choice given, and not everyone has to turn the picture of a red chair into a therapy session for themselves. In short: to perceive is to engage with.

To summarise, seeing is a thing we do (if we have sight) without having to do much but open our eyes, looking is directing our sight at something or someone and perceiving is to engage with what or who we are looking at. Notice again the prized verbs, especially their prepositions, at and with. As soon as we use our eyes with motivation, we relate to

the world around. Looking here becomes a motion of outgoing attention, perceiving a process of taking in something from the outside, processing it internally and thereafter sending attention outwards again. Naturally, these three have a certain chronology: to perceive means to look first which means to be able to see first.

A side note for the more self-inflicting interested in philosophy.³

One of the most dense and literarily complex fields of modern philosophy is that of phenomenology and its cousin, postphenomenology.⁴ Pioneered by philosophers such as Husserl, Sartre, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is infamous for being a struggle, in thought and text. Broken down before delving into oversimplification, its interest lies in human experience of the world on a subjective level and how that stuff works. Experience here is seen as an interaction between *me* and *the object*, a *me-world* relation. Postphenomenology, established by Ihde, Verbeek and Rosenberger, puts the mediator of technology between *me* and *the object* and asks the question of how technology shapes the world experience in a *me-technology-world* relation.⁵

I was fortunate to take a course of postphenomenology under Natascha Tümpel and got to delve into the jungle that this field is.

3 A I am inserting this side note on Friday, D8505. Delving into postphenomenology might not be the most facilitating thing to do, but it might be interesting still. Maybe the professor in whose course I learnt about this field will get a copy of this book. If so, I hope I haven't oversimplified to the point of missing the field's essence (or should I say *eidos*).

4 I must admit that though I have a fairly good grasp on the English language, the term *postphenomenology* remained a struggle to pronounce smoothly for quite some time.

5 Mind you that this is a harshly abridged summary. (Post) phenomenology are fields wherein every little aspect of experience is analysed and broken down into almost unrecognisable fragments. It is often hard to keep track of things, especially if they relate to an automated process. Still, both fields can offer much food for thought if the barrier of complex (and at times unintelligibly wordy) language is broken. They are fields of simple thought drenched in never-ending argumentation (which, one could say, makes them quite thorough in their research).

As my final assignment, I wrote a paper on the application of postphenomenological theories on photographing. Though a bit timid and shy, this paper comes useful in this chapter. Re-reading it, I remembered Ihde's *mediation theory*. This theory describes for types in which a *me-technology-world* relation can manifest – how technology shapes our experience of the world. Relevant here are *embodiment relations*. In these, technology and *me* build an unite, the tool I use is experienced as part of my body – the tool becomes *embodied* (ergo a (*me-technology*)-*world* relation (see Verbeek 2015: 29). The camera is very close to Ihde's examples of *embodiment relations*, such as glasses or a telescope. The camera mediates a view of the world and as an optical tool, it does so for *seeing* (see Ihde 2013: 352). Using a camera fuses with my *seeing* because I assimilate the camera as extension of my eye. It alters my *looking* because something is brought between *me* and *the world*, ergo the process of *looking* is no more one only relating to my body but something that I use with my body.

Postphenomenology might be described as quite a niche field⁶ and relating its theories to camera usage is quite rare. Still, it would be interesting to see more research in the relation of both. Postphenomenology is quite young and there is much literature yet to be written.

End of side note.

So there we have our three words, neatly dissected and aligned on our operating table. Now what? The thing I gathered is the following. In studying, these distinctions, especially between looking and perceiving, not only became more apparent but the processes of what they entailed did so as well. Funny enough, but studying photography wasn't merely about looking through a camera. It was for the most part sure, but interacting with pictures as a whole (most of which I haven't taken because you cannot compete with the mass of photographs of the last century, I ergo mean photographs taken by others) was vital for similar reasons.

Learning to photograph is not about seeing – if I have poor eyesight, a camera isn't going to do much about it. It is about learning to look for the interesting. That's half the rent – I did it, I have looked at something interesting, I'm getting at least a participation trophy. Then comes the learning of interacting with what you see. I saw that interesting thing

and I photographed it. But why though? Why was this garbage can interesting? And this, ladies, gents and others, is the start of a journey that takes you down endless rabbit holes at the end of some you may ask yourself why you just went into the studio and literally photographed an empty plastic bag. This is a fun journey, I promise. But what it entails is vital. It describes what you do as something, although at times effortless, intrinsically active, not passive. It forms an awareness for what you do with a camera: *seeing* but with some added, active, *spice*.⁷

6 Not judging.

7 But don't you get high on your own supply, otherwise you might fidget with semantic definitions in the shower and spend some thousand words on detail why your nit-picking might have some value in detailing what you're learning at university.



Stressed face tic.

How to talk to people without being a bundle of nerves.

CONTENT WARNING: DISCUSSION OF PANIC ATTACKS.

My first photo series was about hands. I like hands. I am fascinated by gesture. Starting it as a self-conceptualised project for a so-called Free Project module (you think up a thing you'd like to do and do it while consulting with a teacher and other students instead of working under a pre-described topic), a few months in, it was titled *The Hand as Sculpture*. I carried on working on it far after the semester I got credits for it and now, *The Hand as Sculpture* has become a book that still needs to be published.

This was my start in photography at the BUW: a project with the highest load of self-responsibility in the curriculum besides a thesis. And most of all: it involved a distinct perspective on portraiture, and that requires other people.¹

I started in photography with portraiture. To give necessary context, I will add that by the time this project moved into production, I was a wreck – physically and mentally. Said time saw the worst depression I have witnessed until this day, doubled and tripled by winter, grief and the quite brutalising break up of an immensely unhealthy relationship. My executive function was near zero, my anxiety was through the roof – an absolute low point that I wish to never even catch a glimpse of again. *This* is when I decided to do the most seemingly contrary thing possible.

To the savvy, being behind the camera for a portrait might seem like a hyperbole of a challenge for autistics. Not only does it require social interaction with people one might know less and less the more sessions one does, but the interaction bases a lot of its professionalism on being

able to build a quality working environment for the photographed. If the person in front of the camera is severely uncomfortable, I cannot take a good photo of them. In addition, the session scenario (in the standard practice) presents a significant power imbalance. There is a huge shift in advantage towards the photographer – they might be more familiar with the studio setting, the light setup, how it affects shooting and image, and most of all are more likely to be in a directing position. *Turn your head. Smile a bit more. Now, do that look!*

This dynamic, very reminiscent of the atelier artist using a model as a physical reference for a painting or sculpture, makes one a sculptor and the other the subject to be sculpted. This practice has been immensely diversified. Photographers are now more likely not to be in an added position of power due to gender or race as photography diversifies in use amongst all demographics. The process of the two parties working also has seen many innovations towards working *with* one another, not one *for* the other.

But still, photographing implies a load of responsibilities. The portrait is a deeply social thing.

I

Scripting is a technique used in autistic masking. Since so many of us gather a myriad of experiences with Allistics in which our approach to interaction, conversation especially – may it be expressing ourselves in ways too alien, not passing the ball and instead lingering on topics that we could dissect for hours, avoiding eye contact or stimming while

¹ Believe me, the surprise was on my side.

conversing – has produced backlash or rejection, we earn the sense of having to learn. All the intricacies of communication are up for debate, and every minute detail must be studied in order to fulfil a standard that the society we grow up in values, however arbitrary it might seem.

How do I initiate a conversation?

When is it my turn to talk and when is it time for me to stop?

What words should I choose to say what I mean?

How much should I vary my speech melody?

How much eye contact should I force myself into, and when, and for how long?

How do I tell if my partner is making a joke?

How long is a conversation generally?

All those questions, of course, differ in importance to each autistic; some might find themselves asking only a few, and some more. But all are based on a question of presenting oneself to others according to superior standards. Having trouble with and ergo asking those questions is not a matter of personal virtue, of being a good or a bad person, but one of a sincere difference to others. Many times have I sat in front of a therapist and detailed those problems, and many times did I get answers that were based on the irrationality of my fears.³ These problems are not because I cannot relate to or converse with others but because conversing follows rules that I do not acquire naturally, that I have to ingest manually, and that I am not let go of not following without being scolded or alienating others.

A *script* is just what it says. Hours of manual labour have gone into researching the details of conversation and all its variables, often by trial and error, and rehearsing to apply what I have gathered. Questions that I indeed have asked myself in this process over the years include the following.

In what context are we talking (professional/colloquial)?

What is our relationship (colleagues/friends/family etc.)?

What is your background (what do we talk about)?

What vocabulary do we share?

How fast do we play ball (how quickly do we bounce back and forth in conversation)?

How much should I say at a minimum?

For how long can I talk at a maximum?

How often should I insert a question to not seem disinterested?

How long should our conversation generally be? How and by what is our

time limited?

How do I end our conversation without seeming rude?

How much eye contact should I maintain with you?

How much should I vary my speech melody?

How loudly or quietly should I talk?

How much should I withhold aspects of myself for you to like me? What would you/wouldn't you like about me?

How should I posture myself?

This list in its totality is extensive and includes many things that might prompt the thought that *one just knows that kinda stuff* or *that one picks it up*. I did not, obviously. One of the rare groups of conversation partners I could feel a little less anxiety with were adults, most often my parents and their friends. But even then, mishaps occurred, mistakes were made. Problems with social interaction stem from a lot of factors running parallel to but underneath the text layer; to be found lacking is based on not picking up on (and/or not having a previous knowledge of) those factors and their variables based on a diverse field of contexts. To lack is a judgement by standards that people find intuitive for themselves

2 In *Unmasking Autism*, Devon Price, makes the honestly liberating point that such fears and problems, although worsened by anxiety, are indeed not irrational but immensely rational – because they are based on actual experience.

and which it is not the default to adapt intuitively. Much of the rituals acquired automatically (so it seems often) in the socialisation of Allistics (may it be while drinking with friends as a teenager or passing through job interviews as an adult) are puzzles to be cracked and re-assembled to a practicable task for me as an autist. Few things are intuitive; most are vague and contradictory.

Much of my social intuition now either relies on guesswork or a different, more punk-ish, approach to wanting to fit in. But this is a result over 20 years in the making. For most of that time, learning rules of a game I have perfectly good ones for just to be tolerated was the way to go. It was exhausting, as is all of masking. And in the end, it only worsened my alienation and drove my anxiety through the roof – and with your anxiety through the roof, you are much less able to function properly.

As I've enjoyed some years in a drama group, I find a lot of similarities between plays and *scripts*. *Scripts* offer a hypothetical scenario in which I converse with person x in context y. Since x and y (with all the other variables related) are incredibly diverse, I have written *a lot* of scripts. They act as a sort of guideline for even the most basic neurotypical requirements. It prepares me beforehand and leads me through a given interaction, very much like acting in a play. To *act like someone you're not* is a common analogy for masking, and even though it was tiring and it took a huge toll on my health, at least I could take a passion (that for theatre) into the world off-stage. I still like to rehearse talks with people I don't know before meeting them, nowadays almost exclusively people of authority or with higher professional standing, more so out of a wish to know what I want to say and not stumble through my statements, less out of a wish to seem *normal*, therefore I do not fully consider this scripting.

Unfortunately, many people do not conform to a guesswork script. The result is confusion, frustration and helplessness. To not have an approximation of the rule-setting *script* is to walk into conversation while blindfolded. That is, if no change in attitude to conforming to arbitrary rules occurs, and without proof that things could be otherwise, there is little to no incentive. To *script* seem the way of least damage taken, though damage will certainly be taken.

II

The Hand as Sculpture's initially suffered from a plan whose circumstances changed dramatically. I spent the summer thinking about what I wanted to do, but by autumn, all thinking had become impractical. While planning, though definitely not in a good state, energy to try a new thing was at my disposal. The project would see me talking to people on the street, asking them if I could photograph their hands, and during the summer, this process was tested and found viable. Talking to strangers was draining, sure, because such interactions, especially for a purpose so out of the ordinary, lack a *script* which has to be developed on spot. But I made it through somehow. Then, with tripled depression breaking through the door, sitting on the couch and filling my room with the highest rates of anxiety I can recall, this prospect was less than applicable all of a sudden – it was an antidote to getting better, although that came with its own troubles already.

As I started my free project, I presented my initial concept, as did I to my counsellor. We even practiced. As soon as I got out the door, I prepared myself to put into practice what I had proclaimed. On my way home, a couple came towards me. With each step, I went through the words.

200 meters. I have tunnel vision. *Hello, my name is Jacob.*

100 meters. My hands are sweating. *I study Visual Communication at the BUW.*

50 meters. I am shaking. *Could I take a photograph of your hands?*

20 meters. I can feel my heart in my throat. *If not, that's ok.*

10 meters. My throat seems paralysed. I can't breathe and at the same time hyperventilate. *Have a nice day.*

I made a sharp left turn to a bench and let the panic attack⁴ wash over me. This was dreadful. How could I ever have thought of this shit? How stupid – *behold Jacob Heine, the great photographer, let the bells ring. This will never work.* Here, without any signs of hostility, with the chance to make a nice short human connection and then carry on, just needing to be friendly and talk, I was unable to. I felt ashamed and pondered never to touch a camera again. It was a month in, and I was asked how far I was with starting to photograph. – *I haven't started yet.* – *Then you better get going!*⁵

The stereotype of the overly sensitive *artist* is pervasive and this description might prove it right. But as stereotypes tend to, it inherently foregoes the internal experience and its causes. Although less a stereotype but more of a shared experience among Autistics, especially those who are not cis-male, something similar can be said about the feedback we gather over years – *you are too sensitive* or in my case variations of *man-up*. A situation such as this, one that might send me into a panic attack in a matter of two minutes, is not one that *everyone just can do if they are willing*. I was willing and I did my best. No claim of lacking effort can be made – it was partially the huge amount of effort that led to its end.

My then therapist might have suggested to enter this sort of situation again and again until it would be less overwhelming until I habituated it: exposure therapy. This again leads to the point that, although this method can be helpful in certain instances, many debilitating anxieties in social interaction for Autistics are not based on irrational but rational fears. To think that, had I approached this couple, I would have garnered bothered looks, and a condescending reply was not plucked out of thin air but based on many instances in which I had made this very experience. So yes, I set myself a goal that no one forced me to (as part of a project that I could have easily stopped in its tracks, pulling out of a course is a viable option in my field of study until a certain stage) and failed at even approaching it, left hyperventilating on a park bench with the rest of the day drained of all energy and the fear of god (or more so: strangers) in my bones. The situation was of my own making, so it seemed, and I had no one else to blame for it but me and my hubris or my weak feminine side.

Of course, this is an abhorrent thought and I am glad to have softened it quite a bit over the years. But lying underneath set an array of problems that were closely connected – toxic beliefs of others embedded and equally worse self-assumptions born out of it. What was true is: I was a wreck in general and I had tried to force myself into a situation

4a

MB23.H Panic attack
ICD-11, v2024-01

A discrete episode of intense fear or apprehension accompanied by the rapid and concurrent onset of a number of characteristic symptoms. These symptoms may include, but are not limited to, palpitations or increased heart rate, sweating, trembling, sensations of shortness of breath, feelings of choking, chest pain, nausea or abdominal distress, feelings of dizziness or lightheadedness, chills or hot flushes, tingling or lack of sensation in extremities (i.e., paresthesias), depersonalization or derealization, fear of losing control or going mad, and fear of imminent death. Panic attacks can appear out of the blue or can be triggered by particular situations.

3 This exchange sounds far more uncaring than it actually was, since I did not disclose the experience before and my troubles in my course

4b

Panic Attack Specifier
DSM-V

[...] An abrupt surge of intense fear or intense discomfort that reaches a peak within minutes, and during which time four (or more) of the following symptoms occur:

Note: The abrupt surge can occur from a calm state or an anxious state.

1. Palpitations, pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate.
2. Sweating.
3. Trembling or shaking.
4. Sensations of shortness of breath or smothering.
5. Feelings of choking.
6. Chest pain or discomfort.
7. Nausea or abdominal distress.
8. Feeling dizzy, unsteady, light-headed, or faint.
9. Chills or heat sensations.
10. Paresthesias (numbness or tingling sensations).
11. Derealization (feelings of unreality) or depersonalization (being detached from oneself).
12. Fear of losing control or “going crazy.”
13. Fear of dying.

Note: Culture-specific symptoms (e.g., tinnitus, neck soreness, headache, uncontrollable screaming or crying) may be seen. Such symptoms should not count as one of the four required symptoms.

Features

The essential feature of a panic attack is an abrupt surge of intense fear or intense discomfort that reaches a peak within minutes and during which time four or more of 13 physical and cognitive symptoms occur. Eleven

[continues on next page]

DSM-V (cont.)

of these 13 symptoms are physical (e.g., palpitations, sweating), while two are cognitive (i.e., fear of losing control or going crazy, fear of dying). “Fear of going crazy” is a colloquialism often used by individuals with panic attacks and is not intended as a pejorative or diagnostic term. The term within minutes means that the time to peak intensity is literally only a few minutes. A panic attack can arise from either a calm state or an anxious state, and time to peak intensity should be assessed independently of any preceding anxiety. That is, the start of the panic attack is the point at which there is an abrupt increase in discomfort rather than the point at which anxiety first developed. Likewise, a panic attack can return to either an anxious state or a calm state and possibly peak again. A panic attack is distinguished from ongoing anxiety by its time to peak intensity, which occurs within minutes; its discrete nature; and its typically greater severity. Attacks that meet all other criteria but have fewer than four physical and/or cognitive symptoms are referred to as limited-symptom attacks. There are two characteristic types of panic attacks: expected and unexpected. Expected panic attacks are attacks for which there is an obvious cue or trigger, such as situations in which panic attacks have typically occurred. Unexpected panic attacks are those for which there is no obvious cue or trigger at the time of occurrence (e.g., when relaxing or out of sleep [nocturnal panic attack]). The determination of whether panic attacks are expected or unexpected is made by the clinician, who makes this judgment based on a combination of careful questioning as to the sequence of events preceding or leading up to the attack and the individual’s own

DSM-V (cont.)

judgment of whether or not the attack seemed to occur for no apparent reason. Cultural interpretations may influence their determination as expected or unexpected. Culture-specific symptoms (e.g., tinnitus, neck soreness, headache, uncontrollable screaming or crying) may be seen; however, such symptoms should not count as one of the four required symptoms. Panic attacks can occur in the context of any mental disorder (e.g., anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, bipolar disorders, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive and related disorders, personality disorders, psychotic disorders, substance use disorders) and some medical conditions (e.g., cardiac, respiratory, vestibular, gastrointestinal), with the majority never meeting criteria for panic disorder. Recurrent unexpected panic attacks are required for a diagnosis of panic disorder.

that I was not prepared for and that I couldn't just *pick up* on. I needed a *script* that had yet to be written. And even written, I was lacking much of the energy to put my *script* into immediate and flawless practice.

[When I started studying at the BUW, we saw our first COVID winter. I had moved to Erfurt, meaning I had to commute 50 minutes to uni. Then again, I didn't have to commute frequently. Courses had taken a hybrid or digital form, so I could stay in my room, streamlining how I spent my time studying and focussing on building a relationship to my roommates. All fair and good but by next spring, hybrid courses would become more recent and would continue for a year. One trip to Weimar every two weeks became two a week. Not that commuting was a strain in itself (although it was needing years of getting accustomed to), but changing my still faint routines in Erfurt was a challenge. The second semester also laid bare a very fundamental aspect of how the Arts and Design department structures its courses – ever-changing, with contents revealed on short notice before application and rarely any constant variables. Every six months, my weekly structure would be set

back to one and the faces around me changed constantly. Apart from a handful of people, maintaining relationships at uni was not feasible. Start a new semester, get to know a new set of people, get accustomed, change – that was the drill. And even then, I saw the few I had the speed to cling on to only a few days a month. *Scripting* concerns itself with social interactions, but looks for some sort of consistency and frequency, and I had anything but.]

III

As a predominant portrait photographer, I have to admit: photographing people is a weird thing to do, in concept as well as in praxis: *Hey, could you project light rays into my optical box so that I can record them?* Obviously, this is not the basis for such discomfort, we are not little Heideggers, Husserls and Merlau-Pontys running around. Photography, as stated in other texts, is a deeply social thing with the camera as a simultaneous mediator and threat.

One: some people, even some of my longest and closest friends, do not like to be photographed. Having your picture taken can indeed be immensely terrifying because it is never just about the technicalities: we are not documents to be scanned and the camera is not a neutral copying machine. Never can only ever see and never *unsee*, it has no sense of emotional sensitivity and empathy. It is here to do two things and will do nothing but: see, record. But the camera never operates on its own, even the ever-vigilant of a grocery store did not jump into existence on its own. The camera, though not always dependent on a human operator, has no agenda of its own, it is a lifeless tool without and ergo always further a human goal. And as the store security guard has an agenda, so does the portrait photographer. Goals and agendas in themselves are not malevolent in and of themselves but can take such forms, and if they do, a subject to the camera doesn't even have to know about it.

The camera only ever sees and records emotionlessly, all emotion is attached externally: an unstoppable force hits and immovable object. No wonder that insecurities we hold are first exposed and second neglected by the optical box. Every single person I love and like who is not comfortable with having their picture taken, not even for professional purposes, has their reasons. They do not need validation from my side because I am in no place to judge them.⁵ All I may do it inquire about them and maybe find a way to address and soothe them, but in the end, a photograph is nothing without consent. An insecure person may become more secure by being photographed, but that is not a given: without sincere communication, the danger of eroding trust

and furthering anxieties is too high to forego it. The box becomes less than neutral in your hand and the other is not a neutral subject to it and you have to be conscious of it.

Second: As described before, what I was lacking was a *script* for portrait photography. Coming by it is rather unspectacular. Slowly but steadily, I began asking fellow students and friends to come to the studio with which I made myself accustomed. Many people, many sessions, many photographs, many experiments and many, many hours. In retrospect I realise that I looked for people in a similar state to work with, all of them either never having been in the studio and/or rarely in front of the camera. An equilibrium of me being afraid them and them being afraid of the camera unfolded in which both parties were willing to learn how to be less fearful. *Hey, could I take some photos of you at the studio?* became a question less and less terrifying and the more ease came with photographing, the more often my thanks for people putting up with me and my bullshit was met with thanks for beautiful views some of said people hadn't yet seen of themselves, sometimes elevating their selfconsciousnesses ever so marginally.

With time, I learned that I was not pressured to be an all-through master and manager to take people's photographs as well as that we shared more in common than what a separating camera might lead me to believe. And sooner or later, without much doing but going through the motions, a *script* developed. By now, I barely hold back at asking people whether I could photograph them, leaving me and my others with beautiful memories (see *This is so fucking stupid – I love it!*). As a closer, I want to end with a short approximation of this process for *my* work (not only might it differ for others but it should *not* be taken as a default in its specifics).

5 I, for my part, accept them as a default.

How to talk to People and not be an Ass

- One Finding a person you want to photograph. *Why do you want to? Do you have an idea for them? Do you find them curious? Do you have a project they might fit?*
- Two Approaching them. Tell them who you are and that you want to photograph them. Answer the five Ws. Leaving room for thought. Honesty. Leaving possibility of saying *no*. Being friendly: at the moment, you want something *from them*.
- Three Making an appointment at the studio. Making preparations. Being punctual.
- Four Explaining how the session is structured. Making room for questions. Being more thorough than necessary rather than keeping it too short. Talking about what the photographs are for, how they will be published and that they first need to consent. Showing them the studio, maybe showing props. Maybe having a cigarette. Making sure that they can say no to propositions during the session, express discomfort, ask for (more) breaks and end the session early.
- Five Session start. Testing. Checking in. Do you one setup. Showing photographs.
- Six Break. Checking in. Repeating what comes next. Maybe a cigarette.
- Seven Continuing session. Checking-in. Showing photographs.
- Eight Break. Maybe a cigarette.
- Nine Last part of the session (the shortest). Showing photographs.
- Ten End session. Reviewing session together. Talking about when the photographs will be ready. Thanking them.

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You're Holding A Weapon,
So be fucking
decent About it.

Still, there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time. (Sonntag 2077: 19)

In her essay *In Plato's Cave*, Susan Sontag likens the camera to a gun, characterising the act of photographing as one of aggression. Not only is her claim a reference to words such as to shoot, the intent of using a camera in her argument in itself is an outward-going, claiming one. And to a certain extent, she is right. Surely, taking a photo is not the same as shooting a gun and not every photographer is a gun nut. But Sontag's assertion that photographing is anything but passive but active, violating even is not far off. Amongst many ethnic and religious groups, such as Native Americans and Hindus, to take a photo of someone is taking (at least a part of) their soul. Not *akin* to taking it but taking it blank-point. But what does this matter to someone who does not care about the soul further than the generic expression of selfhood? Not much.

If the camera is a gun, then studying photography is akin to getting a hunting permit. Everything and everyone becomes photo-worthy; everything and everyone is just another subject to be captured. And in the ubiquity, the sameness of everything and everyone, all is an aesthetic object in the making. Subject to object by gunshot. *Bam*. Everything is permitted. I have a camera. I am out hunting for a purpose. I have a higher calling. I'm a gunslinger, and if you fuck with me, you better have the instinct to face away, or better, face towards me. Everything goes if

it's *art*. *Art* allows everything.

I call bullshit.

Over the years, I have had heated discussions on Germany's strict laws around the right to one's image. To photograph someone in public, you need their consent except for these instances: you photograph a public event, you are a student and you photograph an event that can be taken as a document of the *Zeitgeschehen* (current events of history). But even then, being allowed to photograph does not equate to being allowed to publish. I, for my part, find this amazing. Others...not so much. I've heard a lot about frustrations with such laws, that other countries were more relaxed and why we Germans love to stick sticks up our rectums so much. I am bewildered by this argument. A difference in law does not necessarily mean a difference in general rights. *Look over there: women can't vote. They just have different rights over there.* Absurd. Every woman has the right to vote, every person has a right to privacy. Separate law standards do not negate transnational morals and ethics. If you walk through a German inner city, take someone's picture without their consent and get spit all over you from the preaching outrage coming towards you – that's on you. If you take a vacation in Egypt and take a photo of someone at a market and they tolerate it because the Westerners are just gonna do what they do, that does not equate to them not being bothered by it.

A camera does not make you superior.

Art also does not.

Art is meant to push boundaries, to explore the limits of expression and re-map the routes to it. Yes. And in a sense, freedom of *art* equates to freedom to do everything. But with this fundamentalist statement flung into the ring, everything else shall be flung in, too. *Everything* can be *art*, is therefore everything up for grabs? For many, sure. What about butchering a pig and displaying its carcass in a gallery? What about pornographic images of a child? What about a bag of cocaine wrapped in a Snickers bar? The limits of *art* are far off, its morals vague. In an age of boundary-pushing (a good thing for the record), they are redefined at every instant. But still, often their discussion at times keeps itself in the comfort of traditional *art* forms. To discuss what *art* is allowed is to ask what constitutes *art* and therein what *art* is – a futile discussion for now. Let's agree to the statement that the freedom of *art* justifies the piece at hand: everything (or most) can be justified by the freedom of *art*.

(Nearly) endless freedom of *art*. What a great gift. A gift to every

creative. A gift for the world. A gift of god-like attributes.

But as a matter of fact, we are not god. We are bound. Bound by dignity. Bound by respect. Bound by responsibilities that preserve both. If everything goes, endless responsibilities ensue. The *artist* is not ineffable, they are not un-judgeable, they do not live in a world without consequence. To *art* is to be aware of one's responsibilities and to be criticised for one's stance on them. This is the very point: *do what thou wilt but take responsibility*.

Just like Sontag equates photographers to Safari enjoyers, I equate the act of seeing everything and everyone up for grabs to be *touristic*. In a world where everything can be photographed without regard, every place becomes a sight, every person a wax figure in an endless cabinet. To photograph there means to pass through, to take a snapshot, to carry on. No interaction, just a shot. A dead elephant, and then a zebra. *What will come next?* I hope it's a panda.

But the man sitting at the café is not a panda. He is another human equal to yourself. You and he are equal; only you are armed. You are free to shoot him at will, take his visage as a trophy. You have the choice of making him an oddity on your guided route through the jungle of the city. You have the choice to just take him, make his surface become part of your story without him even knowing. He and his life have only existed for this moment. Decades of moments, labour, happiness and sorrow – embellishment for your story. Him a side character to his own story, and most of all: to yours. You are the hero of your own journey. No one can even touch you.

In *Ne touche pas!*, I describe some instances when I noticed that curiosity and ethicality have to be measured against one another. A photographer is handed a medium with which they can transcend space and time with everything in reach and nothing off limits to the camera as an apparatus. The photographer is encouraged to see, look, perceive, to experience the world anew and make something of it. For all of us, this goes along with an inherent curiosity. We don't want to merely see, look, perceive: we want to *photograph*. I, for my part, am curious about many, many things, and many of them I want to photograph. Curiosity is good, more than that.

In the same chapter, I also touch on some overlaps between the act of photographing and social norms. Photographing, as established, is an active thing, it is a social thing, and is therefore beholden to the rules

we impose on ourselves when interacting with another human.¹ As an Autistic, I often struggle to understand and/or follow many of these rules, especially when they are not stated explicitly. But I can learn, even if some are more than arbitrary and less than making sense. Even though the *social contracts of interaction* are based on Allistic standards, doing some research reduces stress for Autistics.²

I work with people a lot, and some I don't know well enough to outright trust them with interpreting me when doing something social, *not the right way* from the get-go. I have made many memories not merely doing things *the wrong way* but now and then have hurt people with my practice. All that was years ago and I was young and greener than I am now, but I am still deeply sorry and at times ashamed. Some of those situations are directly related to a disregard for privacy.

I am a curious person and sometimes a naïve one, and there are reasons for both. Learning to do something like portrait photography for me is not just about acquiring technical skills but also learning a lot socially. I have come to learn that the second, though many Allistics struggle with social interaction, is very much based on fundamental differences between me and many other people; that is a fact, it is part of the diagnostic criteria for Autism (see *What? Part One.*) But as hard as it is at times, I like the outcome

2 Though we in the majority of cases overcompensate by masking.

1 Although we haven't found a consensus on that for thousands of years.

of understanding a bit more: because I like photographing people and because I like worrying a bit less. Many of my stances on photography, especially topics around its social aspects, are very firm (although no opinion is ever *not* beholden to change).

Many of the texts in this may read as quite stark, but sometimes, we stances are stark. I have realised over the last few months of writing that lots of these concrete corners are as firm as they are for two reasons. First: I like to know what I am doing and why I am doing it, and knowing both helps a lot with doing things as well as connecting with people over them. Second: photography, as described, easily gives way to bending social rules. Many of these rules *are* to be bend, pushing boundaries is how we arrive at a new place. But many of the ethics and practices I have come across, including but not at all limited to portraits, frighten me. The first half of this chapter is so full of anger because it is really there. But with that anger also comes fear, and the fear sometimes informs the anger.

I have spent a whole childhood and youth being mistreated in various ways for not conforming. Neither did I know for long that I was not conforming, nor did I know what conforming looked like and how I should do it. That is an almost universal experience for Autistics, especially those diagnosed later in life.³ With many different epochs of growing up, I found different ways of either trying to conform or, especially if that didn't work out, not conforming on purpose. Most of those ways were anything but healthy and they have left some scars. For the last few years, I have been fortunate enough to learn about the *hows* and *whys* of *being different* and to find some of these old scars, especially those I didn't realise were there. Much is clearer now, and I am glad that much will become clearer still. By now, I am confident enough to say that I actually *know* some things, and more likely than not, I will know more things in the sequels.

My adversity is not one of ill will (see *Anti-Student* for more on that). But as someone who has some (for most people) improbable hypotheses of how social interactions can go south, I have a different perspective on many things – not a *better one*, a *different one*. People like Bruce Gilden and Martin Parr terrify me while Vivian Maier fascinates me. I have spent so much time trying to be pleasant to people who weren't pleasant to me, and I took it. Now, I begin to understand why that was and that I wasn't in the wrong more often than not. But still, I like my *code of ethics*. It is a book written by the wish to make other people like me and/or to be less of a nuisance, but in subsequent editions, it has become a collection of

things that I believe for my own sake and according to my own thinking.

Photographing other people without their knowledge, most often, makes me extremely uncomfortable. The base reaction sometimes still is that of fear that I might be screamed at. In that case, I often think I am indeed wrong. The first fear is that of punishment. The second, and this one is vital to me, is that of hurting people. Photography, as Sontag states, can be a form of violence itself, and I think she is right in many instances. (Mostly) gone are the days when I felt like a beggar asking for some change when I asked people to photograph them. Now, I have become more comfortable with the thought that *hey, maybe this is just a thing that I like to do – what if I gave people the possibility of liking to contribute to it?* This approach has brought me much joy and some good friends as well as work that I regard as great. Fear of punishment has loosened because my fear of people has loosened.

As much as I have learned about the freedoms photography entails, I am steadfast (at least in my own work) that others are not subjects to my camera but collaborators (sooner or later). It is my responsibility to think about my curiosity and, thereafter, make a conscious decision

3 Although those diagnosed as children will not automatically have been save from bullying. Kids whose world does not include Autism don't always pay regard to what it is and why that one quiet kid in class is so *odd* to them.

about how I want to follow it. I have to be able to stand by that decision and cannot (and will not) cry *naïveté* once I am criticised. I rarely photograph in the streets, but once I did with my dear friend Johannes Heppner (a stunning photographer in his own right).

At the very start of our first semester, Johannes and I spent some 10 walking the streets of Weimar. We were asked to work through a project which had to relate to the theme of breaking down walls. Johannes and I approached strangers, asking if we could photograph them, asking them if they also wanted to photograph us with a spare camera we had brought. For the most part, it was a deeply stressful and unpleasant experience for me: I was depressed and I was Autistic without knowing it (and I might have had a social phobia, but we cannot be sure as of now). Still, Johannes and I, every time we saw someone interesting, followed our protocol of approaching, asking. We even gave people the choice to turn away from the camera if they didn't feel comfortable (which some did). Doing the same thing over and over again, by the end resulting in a script we could recite in our sleep, we went out of our way to not be dicks. And though it was dreadful, it made sense. I have often heard that doing things this way takes away people's momentary authenticity. I argue otherwise. The people we approached (always beforehand, remember) were bewildered, sometimes curious, sometimes agitated. But we talked and took *yes* for a *yes* and *no* for a *no*. There are honestly beautiful photographs in this series we called *Die Anderen* (The Others), and I am happy to have made this experience with Johannes, who I had known for two weeks by then.

We went out and we had guns.

And we shot people, but always with their consent.

We were holding weapons and tried to be fucking decent about it.



deep pressure sitting

Ne touches Pas!

Recently, I was called a personified reality check by a teacher (in a friendly manner). They are right somewhat. Especially when in a context of conversation that focusses less on judging a contribution because it is honest but rather appreciating authenticity, the years of (over)thinking my own work at times provides some insightful contribution. Not because I am especially smart but because if you think a lot, you have to have a good moment now and then. The same is true for talking a lot.¹

I'm generally one of a courses' students who talks the most, especially when I actually have something to say. Sharing questions, approaches and furthering insight is vital in such a context, and participating is thrilling more often than not. This extends not just to discussing another's project that I enjoy but also projects that I find harder to reconcile. Constructive feedback is imperative and at times can bring forth changes in approach that can only occur in discourse. What I mean to say is that, though I am a very honest and (mentally) direct person, I will always make an effort to take a step back and formulate my opinion respectfully.² We're all students, we all are (still) learning and we are dependent on exchanging our ideas, if we like it or not.

As it might come across in many of these texts, I like to take a critical approach to photography. The field is, by very nature of it, connected to more than cameras, lights and Photoshop: societal topics and dynamics, politics and economics are never far off. Positioning your work can be a gruelling task that comes with a lot of anxiety, especially when it is in its early stages. *I wanna take pictures, why do I have to formulate what is essentially an essay on what I am doing here?* The answer is that you do not have to, but thinking about what you are doing goes along with the doing, whether it is before or after, because answering any question about your work would be even more gruelling otherwise.

I

I was raised to be a decent person, and I figure I am one.³ I was in the pain-in-the-ass kid that told other children about poverty when they made fun the people in Cambodia when I was 8, thereby not only falling into their traps of bullying but planting the seed of my by now non-chalant attitude towards people talking bullshit. I grew up very

politically conscious, mostly because my parents took me seriously from a young age. But in a conservative town environment, your parents can only further you so much. I've done stupid shit, said stupid shit in the name of creativity and some of it haunts me to this day. Fully grown awareness for so many of the things I had limited sources for could only come when I moved to Erfurt and started studying in Weimar.

In my second semester, I took a wonderful anti-discrimination course under Margarita Garcia in which I learned about much that I have written about in a deep manner for the first time. Learning about various forms of discrimination, their workings in Western societies and how to

1 Although brute-forcing smart
comments like a chimp on a
typewriter is something that people
surprisingly enough don't find very
sympathetic a lot of the time.

2 Even if it more often than not
ends up in drifting off into extended
monologue that would make
Shakespeare shiver in his grave.

3 That's a compliment 'round the
corner for you, Mama and Papa.

combat them was an eye-opener and I am glad about my participation.⁴ What is also entailed is little surprising if we take into account at that time, I was still not diagnosed as Autistic. Understanding systems of oppression, some of which you yourself might suffer under, is vital, but it double-layers understanding mechanism and rules of social living and how they often are indeed not to be aspired to. If you have spent your whole life trying to learn how to *behave yourself* in a way that makes people not want to bully you as much, it can be deeply confusing to learn that they were not just in the wrong but some things you picked up in themselves are not right. Whether you picked up those things without a want behind it or you assimilated them in order to *fit in* is of little importance: they are still wrong.⁵

The way I was raised to do the right thing became the source for a lot of confusion and stress for some during this course.⁶ *Doing the right thing* was up for debate itself. To simultaneously reconcile that I had spent so much time failing to fit and that, maybe, possibly, I myself might be unconsciously discriminating was terrifying. Furthering practices of oppression, whether micro-aggression of bigotry, was (and is) a moral failing to me – one that could be overcome, for sure, but still a moral failing. I felt shame just for the possibility that in 20 years, I hadn't thought through all workings of society. I have spent the years since reading and listening to more and more about the themes we tackled in this course and diversified my research. I do not find my old notion silly (it was not), but I can see how much of internalised ableism I projected onto myself, and that helps nobody. By now I am at a point at which I know that I can read about anything, but that there will always be something I still need to be introduced to, that there will always be experiences that I so not share and that my life is a bit easier because of it.⁷ Learning about critical theory is, at its core, not an academic thing, but one of decency and I believe that more people are capable of approaching it if they be given a chance. This in turn is furthered by more people knowing about such theories and academics getting some time off from feeling they have to save the world.

As made clear in *You're holding a weapon, so be fucking decent about it!*, I have very open qualms with certain practices in photography. Such qualms are not just enforced by exposing myself to learning about new things and learning about criticism I would never have thought of by myself, but also by personal experience. As much as I might seem like it, I am indeed not a guru. I have done things that I am less than proud of, mostly because I was young and didn't know any better. But the older

4 And the only time in my academic career so far I have even come close to *being indoctrinated by CRT (Critical Race Theory)*, but I'd dig that shit more likely than not.

5 An example for the first might be thinking gay marriage is bad because you grew up in a homophobic household, one for the latter might be having Tourette's and chiming in on bullying the kid in the wheelchair in order to deflect your bullying by becoming a bully yourself.

6 I remember that, after a seminar on exoticism, I wondered whether I cherished my sibling because they were a Cambodian POC and that I had fetishized her as a way to make myself more interesting over the years. I had not, and I do not. She just reminded me of a place I had called home and had remained a connection to it after we moved (back) to Germany.

7 Which is the very reason why I should always listen more and do what I can to help without pushing myself into the limelight.

I got, the more such experiences accumulated, the more I wanted to do things *the right way*, that is *the way that is decent and doesn't hurt anybody just for the sake of it*.⁸ I want to detail how this played out significantly with a specific genre of photography when I first explored it: portraiture generally and nude photography more specifically.

II

More than one friends has told that I tend to find rather attractive people for my portraits. Maybe they're right. I don't specifically care, or at least so I think. I believe myself to be rather good at complementing people with the photos I take of them, but I do not ask them to work with me because they fit a certain image of beauty. Such a statement also fails to mention that I have photographed people who do not submit to the same norms of *beauty* – I have also photographed my father at the studios, and yes, he is beautiful, but he isn't meant in the comment mentioned.

When I started with portrait photography,⁹ it coincided with the devastating mental backlash of a breakup with a good mix of grief and overall depression. This time frame only amplified a notion that I had held for years – less a notion but a fear. For various reasons, I was scared of people I found attractive, whether conventionally *beautiful* or not. Being attracted to someone by then automatically scared me and I would grow fearful of people who got into my head through so natural and human a way. Attractiveness was generally linked to a possibility of rejection at the most soothing and mistreatment at the worst. This mixed very well with a less that flattering image I had of myself mentally as well as physically.¹⁰

I began photographing not only people who I had known for years but also those I had only recently met. Going to the studio, as previously stated, is an amazing way of socialising for me because it is based on routines and orients itself towards a specific goal. After a year, I began to realise that some of the female acquaintances (and friends) I had asked to come to the studio were those I found (rather) attractive and/or those I was somewhat afraid because they were attractive to me.

Being a male photographer automatically means being connected to a legacy of exploitation going back to times of painting and sculpture, and therefore hundreds of years. As stated in John Berger's *Ways of Looking*, the history of female portraits (and nudes) is one of arguing away voyeurism. The *Vanitas* (vanity) painting is a good example. To paint a nude woman is pleasing, especially for a male audience. The

8 This does not necessarily include
pissing off people – pissing off people
can be very fun as well as informative
in its own right.

9 I cannot believe how many times I
have used and will used variations of
this opening.

10 That is one reason why I feel a
strong dislike to comments such as
that I have benefits, as a *model* for
others and myself, because I look
attractive to some. The other is that I
want especially my self-portraits to be
appreciated not because of my looks
but because of my photographic work.

painting is directed specifically towards men and is so ever more openly the more lascivious the woman's pose and staging is. Rather than stopping at this purer form of voyeurism, of the woman is then given a mirror through which she occupies herself with her own naked body, the painting can now be titled *Vanitas*. It is now not a propagation of misogynistic oppression through a visual medium (this is where the term *male gaze* would be explained if we had more time) but a critique of female vanity, thereby jerking off the male ego one time after another.

Practices as such as deeply embedded into the visual language of *Western* culture, it is a given. As a given, it is internalised through socialisation without any effort, decoding and unlearning it is hard. But hard lessons have to be learned at times, and reflecting on creative practices that further any kind of oppression is vital in order to do gone by yourself. *The male photographer* himself has become an icon of many of such practices himself in and outside of fiction. Revamping such concepts as the (almost ever-female) muse, the male photographer is a master of his craft, shaping the beauty before into a vessel for his creative practice, flooding the world with beautiful photographs, immortalising his muse and making her a prop of his journeys through the jungle of something that borders on holiness: he is a prophet and his teachings are that of *the male gaze*.

Photography is not separate from how we chose you practice society, it is intrinsically connected to it. It is not just about what we make visible – what we photograph and who can see our pictures – but also how we make things visible; cause and means. Women especially have been at the short end of this question, made submit to dynamics in which they are not considered an independent actor but something akin to a vase of flowers – beautiful, yet in need to be made more beautiful, lifeless and with no agency of their own, ever-dependent on a man to finalise their beauty. The studio does not become a safe space in which to collaborate but one in which the woman is an alien curiosity.

On the first day I met my girlfriend, I was enamoured by her. I could write about the depth of her personality itself, fill pages with praise, adoration and lamentation. She is also exceptionally beautiful to me, and I love her deeply. When first we met, I had suggested bringing my Kiev and shortly before I left, I took two photos of her and she one of me in her living room – no studio, no flashes, just a desk lamp. On one, she laughs, and she has the most beautiful laugh. On the second, she looks at me behind the camera with a mix of curiosity and thoughtfulness. On the third, I look at her, struck by everything about her, already in love.

On Valentine's Day, just two weeks later, we went to the studio.

Photographing for me is not just a nice thing to do, it holds immense advantages in breaking down and understanding things visually. Just like the human brain can process written words better than mere thought, I am helped significantly if I can visualise something, and in photography, I visualise what is already there, the approach to something moving in the foreground. Just like with others before my girlfriend, I was confused by (and fearful of) the nice feelings she invoked in me, and the deeper they were, the more confusing they became. I did not seek to break her down and stuff her in my pocket, I wanted to get a grip on what was happening to me.

Taking a photograph of a person, especially when it is the first time, changes your view of them, sometimes more significantly than other times. By the mere fact that now, someone exist not just in the moment or your fleshly brain hard drive but outside of both, your connection is in change. To take a photograph meant to cool my servers because part of their working now could be externalised, giving me room to think and understand what was happening. It was never about capturing beauty for beauty's sake. It was about exposing myself to someone who frightened me and to sit with those feelings. It was not about domination or antagonism, it was about understanding myself. I still photograph beautiful people, but I am less afraid of them – and learning to not be afraid of my girlfriend, least to say, is something I pride myself with. I still love photographing her, she truly has the most stunning smile.

III

I came to photography through figurative painting. Though the BUW does not place a lot of emphasis on it in its curriculum, I still managed to get insight into the entry and intermediate material for academic drawing. Here, a lot of emphasis is placed on knowledge of anatomy, proportion and composition regarding the human figure. Naturally, the best way to learn about these aspects, especially with approaching them more in-depth, is to study the nude body.¹¹ Drawing from nude models was a given for me – though it came with some discomfort at beginning,¹² I had understood its reason when I was young already, drawing from Greek statues rather than wood puppets.¹³

Figurative painting is a part of photography's original sin – it most of all shaped the dynamics and practices that were never right but have to be unlearned now. There is a slim line between sitting in a circle around a naked woman in order to gain skill in drawing all people and just being there because you enjoy looking at breasts, the drawing being only a means to.¹⁴ Without a professional distance to a model of a gender you are attracted to is imperative, otherwise you're just a creep. I have been a nude model myself and did not mind the experience, but I am not the standard in this because I have to deal with far less objectification than a woman would.

In my time, I studied nude bodies almost frantically, most of which were female for various reasons, the most apparent that studying the female nude first is still established and I didn't think much of it. Quickly, I expanded into needing references that I could not find online, therefore taking photos of myself. As I discovered the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, photographing nude bodies for reference extended into an interest in photographing them for their own sake. Mapplethorpe, a gay man of New York's 70s and 80s, was borderline revolutionary in approaching such photography but is contested nevertheless, may it because of aspects of his practice or because he idealised the nude extravagantly – he is one of my photographers still.

Nude bodies were and are deeply interesting, no wonder Mapplethorpe likened them to a flower. As soon as got comfortable in the studio, I wanted to do a series on them. Breasts, butts, legs, torsos – I wanted to document all of it and do it a lot. Putting all my focus and passion into a project is something the closes I can come to a non-verbal compliment. Nude bodies fascinate(d) me, the terrified me. If so much of my early photography was exposure therapy, nude photography would be the ultimate.

11 Just by the fact that clothes in themselves are excruciating to draw and that they veil too much of the underlying anatomy at times.

12 For many of the reasons stated earlier.

13 Which is the clearest source of school bullying that I can point out.

14 I have been in figurative drawing rounds in which members indeed seemed to be there for the latter reason and least to say, it was disgusting.

The question now arises what kinds of bodies I had in mind: female, white and rather slim. The follow-up is what kind of poses I wanted to take: *well obviously those like Mapplethorpe or Fabien Dettoni or Ronald Martinez!* And here I stopped. The way in which I had assimilated the stark imbalance in reference and model practice, the (beauty) standards associated, the visual language of centuries of painting turned out to be something that I had to consider. I had and have no interest in pornographic images, I am more fascinated by the intricacies of the body as a moving sculpture. But the shades of objectification or quotes of it from contemporary photography were something lost in what I want to jokingly call Autistic naïveté. Had I wanted to reference works that dancing on a tightrope between professional distance and tradition to be refused, I wouldn't have been able to – I was too fresh, far too green.

Photography is like a big candy store for someone like me, meaning white men. I can just go grab something and take it home, photograph it, and have for now not have to worry about intense backlash for presumable decades. But especially in nude photography I learned that

I had to articulate my approach before jumping in. Live nude bodies, though interesting, could and can be something deeply triggering and an exploitative approach would make a model uncomfortable and send me into a panic. What did I actually want to do and why did I want to do it? I couldn't just go and do the thing, I had to take what I had signed up for with my interest: responsibility.

I researched and sat more than one day just sitting on my sofa, thinking about how to find a balance between following an interest and simultaneously not dragging someone through it. I had no interest in pleasuring myself, in subjugating another, following patterns that I had been socialised with. I wanted to do it right. Hence I defaulted to what I had already been doing. I took pictures of myself in my room with the little light I had and spent hours editing a black background into my photos. *If I want anybody else to do this with me, I gotta be comfortable and able to do it with myself* I thought.

What entailed was an unforeseen realisation. I, indeed, felt deeply uncomfortable at first. Most of all I felt shame. The why is still up for debate, but I could feel the stress rising whenever I undressed although every possible entry to sight into my room was covered. What resulted later in the editing process then was a morphing of shame and fear of my photos into something entirely different. I felt relaxed every so slightly, and I wondered why. This why is also still up for debate, but what has become clear (also in other experiences) is that by this time, I had a complex and less than healthy relationship not just to my body but also how my body looked. I'm chronically dancing on the edge of being underweight and have had longstanding quarrels with my posture. I had been afraid of looking cringe or all in all pathetic. But in my pictures, I was well lit, my postures were delicate – I was beautiful in some way.

I would continue taking photos of myself in various stages of undressness and eventually began doing so at the studio. This environment brought stresses with itself for sure, but for the large studio, there is a second curtain which I only used for shootings that are *definitely* not to be disturbed. It, as sign telling you to keep out are always respected by the employees and doing so the same is expected of students wandering through the halls of the workshop.

Now, with a full arsenal of equipment, I could further my *craft*. I began a series of black-and-white photographs titled *Sculptural Studies* in which I focus on the, well, sculptural qualities of nude bodies. The series started a year and a half ago and now and then, images get added. I was fortunate enough that three of my early pictures were exhibited

in early 2024 at the IRRE.Space, an exhibiton room at the BUW. My description reads:

Robert Mapplethorpe likened the naked body to a flower. A subject of immense beauty. To me, such beauty infers delicacy. Because of the vulnerability of a photographer and model working together. Because of traditions in which naked images are a vehicle to oppression, objectification and sexualisation. To photograph a naked body is to pull on a rope of history. A rope meant to be cut if immoral or to be woven further if aligning with one's own morals.

My interest in the nude is simple. The mechanism that the human body entails – its forms, distributions of weight, its composition and character of transformation – fascinates me. A mechanism as is, removed from romanticising, glorification and objectification. A sculpture in itself but breathing, beating and twitching. A subject of endless intricacies to be marvelled at.

“Sculptural studies” started as self-inflicted homework. Since I wished to delve into nude photography, I sought to communicate what I wanted to involve others in. With a background in figurative drawing and nude modelling, I therefore photographed myself. The process entailed quarrels of socialisation deeply embedded, ridicule internalised and insecurities half-hidden – surprising but not novel. The experience was challenging but fruitful in its teaching which I hope to use in further works with this subject.

The flower bloomed. The thorn stung. But the flower still bloomed.

Already before this exhibition, I had begun photographing others, starting with my friend and mentor Bahram Nematipour, the very teacher who had introduced me to figurative drawing and who shared many of the same qualms with it. Bahram, also with experience in nude modelling, and I established a work environment in which I communicated what I wanted to do before doing it, getting his consent and making working easier, taking breaks, showing him results in-between, always keeping in mind that, though we are friends, I was indeed doing *me* a favour and

that I had to be responsible with it. It was exhilarating and the results are something that I am very proud of.

To this day, with one exception, I have only photographed male nudes. Not because I find the male figure more interesting than the female, but because for much of my work, it does not matter.¹⁵ I am looking forward to working in this field. Nude bodies as well as portraits still fascinate me immensely, but the longer I have been doing them, the more I come to understand the intricacies of the why as well as the how of approaching them. It is the least I can do.

15 Funny enough my friend Luciana Salgado, who is an amazing Brazilian photographer also working with nude self-portraits now and then, was quite confused when they saw images of my first nude session in the studio – in their eyes I had managed to full-on dive into veiling my gender in presentation and delve into androgyny, and I felt very accomplished and happy about it.

Der Letzte Macht
das das das Licht
aus.





The studio is Not a Real Place.

When I started studio photography, I liked it because it was not real.

The studio can be defined as any environment designated for taking a photograph. It is a studio for as long as it is used as such. I have used my bedroom as a studio multiple times. Some of the photos taken were indeed bedroom photographs, some studio photographs made in a bedroom. The question of which is which can be derived from the photographs relation to the scene depicted. A self-portrait on my couch using a flashlight relates to me in this room with its own nature — bedroom. A self-portrait emulating a studio made in a bedroom seeks to distance me from the room in which I also live. Both can be staged, but one relates me to a surrounding that itself is not separate from me in the sense that I stand in direct relation to it, the other puts a distance between me and my surroundings — it designates a new meaning unto the room of which the room is separate. Before and after photographing, my bedroom still is my bedroom, it only functioned as a studio temporarily. Ergo, any environment can be a studio, but for now, I will distinguish between the *designated* and the *make-shift studio*. The *designated studio* is as close to a void as can be. It, like all rooms, has its own characteristics: walls, ceiling, floor. It is a room with a specific purpose, but it is still a room. This room, like any other, can be used on its own to function as an environment for photographing, but it finds its separation in how much it retains. To work there is a part of living — the studio is situated somewhere, one goes there, one takes the photographs taken there into the outside world. But in difference to the outside, the studio necessitates life being brought into it. It is only lived in when used — as are all rooms, but here, life is designated to a specific work which lives on shaping the environment to one's liking from a “neutral” state and thereafter returning it to such a state. All life in the studio is immensely temporary, it leaves no trace but pictures. The function of the studio as a room is that of being re-shaped over and over again with the intention

of never leaving anything behind — a *room-as-tool*, fulfilling a function without retaining traces of the function. It is part of the world around it but simultaneously gives the impression of a separate cosmos.

The studio is meant to not tell us anything, it is a supposed room without retained life. Ergo, life has to be brought into it. To add to this environment, to use this room-as-tool ranges from setting up backdrops to setting up lights to staging requisites. If wanted, the studio can literally be the black void into which light, and therefore life, is brought. Studio photography is fiction, a sort of magical realism. The studio is not a fully black canvas but one on which the gesso of being a room is already applied. In painting, gesso is the foundation of a painting.

In order to drive the discussion about the studio away from the vague schemes of generalisation, I will include and centre it on a specific studio and the experiences I made there. This will not only, so I hope, distil the image of the environment described but also spare me from making to generalised assumptions that are not applicable to other studio environments.

The photography workshop of the Bauhaus University Weimar (BUW) is located in the third and fourth floor of Steubenstraße 8 right across the university library in an old red brick building, a former lemonade factory from which it derives its colloquial name: *The Limona*. On 600 square meters, it includes two studios (The Big and The Small), a development laboratory, two black-and-white darkrooms, a colour darkroom, two workrooms for negative digitalisation and reproduction, a computer pool, a print room a lamination room as well as a seminar room. This is the space where students of the BUW can produce, develop and print photographs. All usage of equipment is free, services such as the development of colour negative film or the usage of materials such as paper are charged to a much lesser fee than outside the university. Much of the services are accessible directly, such as the lending of equipment for work outside the workshop, yet many inside require introductions. These include: usage of the laboratory and b/w darkrooms, of the computer pool, of the digitalisation and reproduction stations as well as of the studios.

The staff of *the Limona* give these necessary introductions multiple times during a given semester, the introduction for the studios being separated into three dates: *a) equipment and camera usage*, *b) basic studio lighting* and *c) digital post-production*. With completing these three courses, one may reserve a studio to a given time on a given date, using the equipment and props of the Limona without supervision.

The studio is not a real place. The studio is a tool .A room-as-tool. At the Limona, the University workshop situated at Steubenstraße 8, 99423 Weimar, there are two such rooms-as-tools: a big one and a small one. All call them *The Big Studio* and *The Small Studio*. There are backdrops and lights and coloured screens and chairs and tables there. And there are cameras and computers for tethering. Through what they do, these rooms-as-tools are more like heavy machinery. That heavy machinery is maintained and supervised by two people, and the names of the people change over the years. But right now, their names are Jonas and Alex whose name used to be Andreas. There are also other people who help them. Those people are students and they are called HiWis. The names of those people change more frequently. For the last few months, they were Johannes and Jacob.

Whoever has underwent a boot camp may use this heavy machinery. Many do. Many do so very early on in their studies, some later on. I was of the kind who did at the beginning but was afraid to make us of the machine for so long he imposed another boot camp on himself. I have barely left the studio since. It has been estimated that I make up around 4% of the workshop's usage some years and there are weeks I am there for four to five days a week. You can only be there up to five times a week. If there was a couch or a mattress there, I'd probably sleep there, too.

The studio is not meant to be a real place. Photography is magic, but magic doesn't always want to deceive you. Studio photography does though, more often than not. Studio photography sees reality as it is and then goes *nah, I don't think so*. With its spells, we create another dimension – close enough to the realities outside the workshop, far enough to make it interesting. There are many shades of these realities and each photographer has their own prosody and vocabulary.¹ We all go into a room that is as close a blank canvas as can be. Then we start to sculpt with space and paint with time and dance with light. We don't even need a sun. We have our own suns that run on electricity and that we measure in Watts. We construct realities that are alive only for the viewfinder and that don't extend much further than the perimeters of the lens. But that is enough for us because that often is sufficient.

Then, the studio is as unreal a place as it ever was, but it has become a *different* unreal place. It can be a black void, a white void, a living room, or just an unfurnished room at Steubenstraße 8. It is whatever we want it to be: unreal and akin to something else, even if that something never existed. It exists for the camera and our magically fooled brains.

And we love that shit. And then, when all photos are taken, the studio is changed back to its original, universally unreal state. Georg Samsa is not a bug anymore. Reality has existed only for a few hours. The blank canvas, the room-as-tool in default settings, is back.

The studio is not a real place. I needed an outpost in Weimar because I don't live there. I needed something to get a grip on the day, the week, the month because I had none. I was terribly afraid. For a grip on your day, a place in a town you don't live is ideal. The studio is not a real place. Still, it is home as much as other places are. I am deeply glad that I got to take the keeps and close the door to home for some months. *The Big Studio* looked like a glade. Soon, I will be leaving home and I am terribly afraid. I have friends there and some people who I feel similar about, even if they are my bosses and I call them *Chef* (German for boss). I don't have to do so, but I do it in a loving way.

So tell me, what was there between all the beauty and the terror? A place that is not a real place. A glade under an artificial sun and a room-as-tool.

1 *prosody*

Encyclopaedia Britannica

prosody, the study of all the elements of language that contribute toward acoustic and rhythmic effects, chiefly in poetry but also in prose. The term derived from an ancient Greek word that originally meant a song accompanied by music or the particular tone or accent given to an individual syllable.



the perfect Turkish
Coffee.



I have eyes and I want to speak. I have eyes and a mind and I am person who wants to be seen. I have eyes and a mind and words and want to share myself with the world. I have everything but I want to give everything and be left with more than everything.

The age of social media and the globalising, connecting and mingling effects of the Internet at large are argued to be a democratisation of self-expression. Never in history have we been able to show ourselves the world as we are now. Never before could I know what some stranger in Japan had for breakfast and feel hungry because of the food and jealous because of the delicate order of their kitchen table with clean utensils, a mug with coffee topped with the whitest of foams and a glass filled with the orangest orange juice I have ever seen. Never before was the border between wishing and doing so thin. Never before were we able to take a camera out of our pockets and publish our pictures with a community spanning the equator in a matter of minutes, always with the possibility of fame and recognition an adoration, nothing standing in our way but the free market of social media flooded with millions of people just like us. This is the time. This is my century.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter¹ pride themselves with furthering the *free marketplace of ideas*. Free expression is only a click away, with no guard dog but the need to sign up with a private account. And the best: it's *free*. The boom the internet and platforms such as the stated, especially with growing commercialisation, advertising self-presentation and rising share values, was one-of-a-kind. The growing digital connection to every corner of the world makes everyone seem closer to us than they ever were, our opportunities in simultaneously making ourselves closer to them has changed our perception of what it means to present oneself.

We live in an age when we are invited to share more and more about ourselves and to constantly re-evaluate what it is that we might want to share. Facing these possibilities increasingly morphs into a dread of *having to* rather than *being able to*. Platforms that are based on social currency translated into the digital realm, such as likes, comments and other measures of engagement, invite us not only to feel valued if we

attract, but simultaneously to question the worth of what we put out. Since our output on such platforms is directly linked to us, especially with accounts simply sharing personal images, this razor's edge keeps us hypervigilant, keeping us drifting from spontaneous posting to measured and planned feeds. This obviously is not true for everyone, but such dynamics increase in significance for persons sharing and promoting their work on social media, a vast number from various creative fields. As of early 2025, I can reach two billion people on Instagram (Kuram 2025), more than enough to *make it*, meaning: making enough people interested in my photography to sell prints and gather commissions, allowing me to earn a living from it. As of now, this hasn't happened, and it isn't because I am a bad photographer but because I am *competing* with and for the time and attention of two billion people.

¹ Elon Musk is a fascist and will not gain credit from me absorbing his stupid X label.

Systems that further self-promotion based on stories, and personal stories most of all, also further new approaches to shared privacy. In many ways, this is a good thing. It gives space especially to marginalised groups that are able to use their platforms to articulate experiences and views that are less visible in broader contexts outside of the Internet since those contexts differ in their dynamics and ways of filtering voices.² In as many ways, it is unhealthy. It promotes a business model in which selling *yourself* is directly and unbreakably connected to revenue. Not only does the constant breaking down of barriers between yourself and the outside, digital, world keep you stressed, but it holds enough dangers of unhealthy (and at times downright hateful) engagement to allow seconds thoughts. For now, I will describe one of those thoughts.

A vital distinction in all creative projects, especially those in which we are in conversation with ourselves, in which we present ourselves and in which our end result is deeply and superficially linked to us, is that of *personal* and *private*. Two words that we use almost interchangeably, *personal* and *private* share more than what divides them, but their difference informs points too fundamental in approach a work, mine your yours.

Pursuing a projects is always (also) a statement about yourself, least of all because you have made a conscious decision in starting (and finishing) it. We cannot escape making these statements about ourselves, whether we want to or not, and can either lean into this unchangeable fact or decide to try disengaging. Disengaging, cutting yourself out of your own work is futile, even if Barthes has buried you. We create because we want to work with something – a topic, an emotion, an act. We do this because we always find some reason for doing it, and the reason more often than not is that we enjoy it. We do something we enjoy and want to share it (if we share it at all).³ This itself presents one of the true beauties of creative work because it describes it as an act with intrinsic social potential.

In early 2024, I finished a photobook titled **ក្លិនផ្លឹកមល និង ដង្កូវនាង** / *the smell of mulberry leaves and silkworms*. It holds a series about a collection of textiles my parents brought over from Cambodia when we came back to Germany 17 years earlier. Khmer weaving is a cultural heritage of deep significance, not to speak about the fact that it is immensely beautiful. I had borrowed meters upon meters of fabric from my mother and brought them to the studio and continued photographing them for months. Doing this project became very

2 Social media platforms are guilty of this as well, and for good reason in some instances. Far-right voices are not to be given a platform and are dampened by a site's fact-checking and discrimination policies. An upheaval against such measures has been growing for years, not only founding new platforms especially lacking those policies and/or being designed *for* conservative and right-wing tirades but also dismantling established policies as is the case with Twitter after Musk's takeover and Meta with Mark Zuckerberg's proclaimed returned to *community fact-checking*.

3 A painting you painted and decide to hang above the dinner table of the one bedroom apartment you live in by yourself, with no guest coming, no one but you ever seeing your painting, is a creative act still. Creative project do not rely on being presented.

emotional the longer it went on. I was not born in Cambodia, I merely grew up there for some time, and haven't returned except for a three week visit in 2017.

Keeping in touch with Khmer society, culture, history and politics and maturing in my understanding has become more of an intellectual task than a practical one – I have little to no contact with the Khmer diaspora in Germany. As much as I was the privileged white kid then, I am to this day struggling with pointing out a place and calling it home in general – Cambodia ergo is almost as much home to me as any other where I have lived or live; it is not home but a fragment of the feeling. The textiles I photographed are artefacts of this fragment and eventually, I teared up just looking at them. I was reminded much of the childish joys of Siem Reap and my sibling, we had been born in Cambodia. Least to say: I finished the series and produced two copies of the photobook: results of manual, cognitive and emotional labour.

the smell of mulberry leaves and silkworms is an example of a *personal project*, as is *Es ist schwer, die richtigen Worte zu finden* (see *I photograph therefore I grieve. I grieve therefore I photograph*). Both concern themselves with material from my private arsenal: one with textiles, one with condolence cards. These objects have emotional significance because they are parts of or associated with emotional experiences of my own, the photographer's, life. By becoming the centre point of a project, objects of privacy become something different, just as they did before: an object is an object which then is painted with association and/or experience which is then a case study of a project, thereby splitting two layers of the object's *being* into three. Simultaneously, I as a photographer (a work's author) also find myself not just in the position of the maker but by connection to my studied objects a part of my own study: I am botanist and tree at the same time.⁴

As of now, with the double- and triple-sided roles of object and creator established, we are not solely in the field of the *personal*. The implementation and/or centring on private objects, the private person being implemented and centred on themselves, is a layout that is very enticing. It invites not just the creator to offer glimpses into their life but also invites others to relate to their project because they can draw a connection between a given topic and themselves. As said, this is one of the beautiful things of creative works: we like to connect and such works gives a common ground for doing so. But where there is beauty, there is titillating trouble.

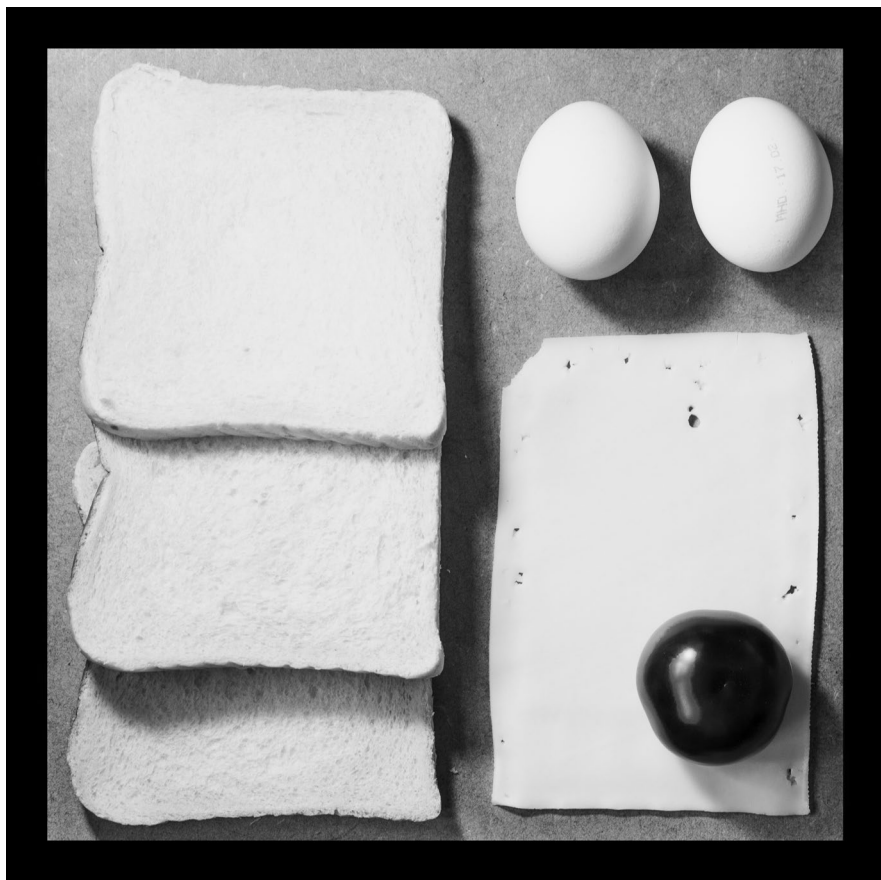
Working with private material can be quite exhausting. Without external objects, there is no room *worry about something else*. It can also be quite terrifying. Being open and vulnerable about yourself opens you up to every reaction under the sun, and enough of those reactions can be hurtful. Furthermore, a drifting from a more distanced perspective on my project may leave me struggling to understand other's views on it, making it hard for the project to come to its best possible end and possibly pushing me to seek validation for my experience's rather than a discussion about my project.

The gift of social creativity can be corrupted if we don't remind ourselves of it. I had this to learn myself. In the beginning, I like many others, started with projects that I bonded too with deep emotions because they were about me in one way or another. I would become increasingly aggravated and hurt if someone brought forth constructive criticism, feeling like I was attacked, not just for my project but for being me. I learnt the hard way more than once that I was wrong, even though my reasons were understandable: I wanted a quick entry and supposed that projects about myself would be a shortcut. They were not. But I still do projects that heavily involve myself, this being one of them, ergo there must have been a turning point with which I will end.

Doing projects with or about personal topics is great; for you and for others. But as with every other project, these necessitate responsibility being taken; for you and for others. It is not double the work but a different kind of work. A project which focussed on you (or those close to you) can always be something that some call a *private* and others call a *therapeutic project*. Art therapy loves these: you produce without have to show, the process of making being taken for itself and not a means to

⁴ I think my friend Luciana Salgado will like this allegory a lot.

get to a product. I highly encourage trying to do a small project for only a few or even just yourself, it sometimes oil the motor quite well. *Private projects* have a lot of merit and are not a *wrong* approach. They only drift into dangerous territory if published, exhibited or presented otherwise to the public, not because they are of no worth but because the chance of hurt as well as a miss of what you were actually trying to do is too great. Furthermore, some projects are only just for your eyes: the public can take a lot, but they also have to be taken seriously, and overloading them doesn't always lead to the best of results. *Personal projects* are those that may share topics and approaches with *private* ones but whose concept either includes presentation from the get-go or allows for it afterwards. Here, a distance in approach to a topic at hand protects you and the public from hurt feelings and fears of criticism, leaving more room for meaningful interaction and discussion. Establishing the process for *personal projects* is difficult for each of us, but in the end, it is more than worth it.



the Perfect Sandwich.

Henry Rollins is a real 5.

Henry Rollins is a human. He grew up in Washington D.C.

Left to his mother were Bob Dylan and a wall. He suspects his father to nowadays clutch his rifle in the weeds of the South, awaiting his next directive from FOX News. That was years ago.

Henry was a hyperactive kid that worked at an ice cream shop.

One day, Henry went to a gig of a band called Black Flag. Henry hated the singer whose name was Dez Cadena. Henry hated him because he wanted to be in his place.

Some day, Henry ended up on stage and was asked to sing a song because he had to leave for work. He chose *Clocked In* though he didn't properly know the words.

Shortly after, Henry was invited to attend a test-out for a new singer. Dez wanted to move to guitar. Henry went.

Henry got one job and quit the other at the ice cream shop. The store owner already imagined him coming back, so tells us Henry.

Henry went on being the front singer of Black Flag and later started a group called Rollins Band. In 1994, he became famous because he jumped angrily on MTV. He was painted all in red and shouted through the TV that he was a liar.

Henry Rollins is a household name. He was friends with many people. He travelled a lot. He did a lot of charity. For decades, he has been doing spoken word gigs. Some of them are very funny. But Henry isn't a comedian. Some of his speeches are as sad as things can be, especially when he talks about his friend who was Joseph Denis Cole, who people called Joe. Joe Cole was shot in an armed robbery. So it goes.

Henry is a very angry human. Least he thought so. Over the years, Henry has said stupid shit. But more often than not, Henry has spoken truth to power.

Henry has done a lot in his life. He was an ice cream shop worker, a singer, a writer, an actor, an organiser, an activist, a vinyl lover. And always he has followed the rule of *this is ours to lose*. He comes from the working class and takes nothing for granted. My guess is that he hasn't slept since the 70s.

At some point, Henry started filling a 1 TB hard drive with music and

gave it to a boy in Kandy for distribution.

I found out about Henry during the first COVID lockdown. I haven't stopped listening to his performances since, even when he was talking shit. Henry takes everything serious but not himself. At some point, Henry must have realised that he wanted to live as much as he could. That also included listening to Iggy Pop in Antarctica while a few yards away, there were penguins fucking.

Henry has lived as much as he could, and he will further on. His stories are a deep comfort and somewhat of an anchor, especially when I am not well. I learnt much about what stories one human can live, and I realised that I wanted that for myself. And then, at some point, I started to realise how pissed I was. And then, at some point, I started being a bit less afraid. Not because of the anger but for itself.

I am a bit sad. I feel like I'm writing a eulogy.

I have never met Henry. But maybe I can manage to send him a copy of this book. That would be stupid and fun.

Henry is a parasocial ghost. Of the humans that I only know through the media, of the persons I don't know, he is one of my favourites.

I guess he still is alive. I wouldn't know if he wasn't, at the very least for some days. So it goes. When I find out some day, I will be sad for certain.

But for now, I am happy.

Henry Rollins is a real G.



Bookbinding box.

betold this garden
that I had fertilised
with shit!

Photography, like all skill-based pursuits, is harshly nebulous in the beginning. Without knowledge of the process, the events between whatever starts a photograph and the finished thing can only be guessed. This guessing becomes easier the more the usage of cameras has a low-level entry. Filmmakers of the New Hollywood era describe that nowadays, with everyone having a camera in their pocket, one should just start making movies. Most of the barriers of starting they experienced in their youth have been broken down, there is nothing stopping the younger generations. Of course they're right, in a sense. For everyone with an interest in photography, there is no reason not to photograph.

But in starting, there comes the dreadful time most of us fear, especially in an age of an image cosmos filled with "professional" images (meaning images made by those further along in their progress): the time when we are shit at doing it. In hindsight, this time seems almost trivial. But make no mistake: I am no savant. I have taken a lot of shitty photographs, catalogues of them. I still do, not rarely but almost constantly.

In this lies a secret that studies in photography or a profession therein conceal with a faint veil of hierarchy: you can learn everything technical about basic photography in a day, two at the most. Basic studio photography takes maybe three more. Streamlining education in the technical part of photography is a matter of chances awarded – not because they are meant for the few but because they are kept from the many. Therefore, the many have to figure this shit out by themselves. That takes time and produces mistakes (just like in education but the period is prolonged). The vast amount of mistakes made in the beginning are technical, and technical knowledge is transferred fast, if

it is transferred. The longest times spent thereafter is with applying, and therefore deepening, technical knowledge. This is when creativity can truly blossom: when the camera is not a beast fighting against you but a tool you can use. This when you can say: I meant for it to look like that. And with this, no limits are placed upon you. This is where the fun truly begins. This is when I realised that a ton of photos I didn't like were necessary to know how to make photos I did. It is gruelling, barely fun while it lasts, but it makes a lot of difference – *behold this garden that I hath fertilised with shite* I can say, *and look at this shit that I at times add to it!*

¹ To clarify: a shitty image here refers to one that leaves a gap between what one can produce (based on skill) and what one wants to produce.



Archive boxes.

[D8160.WEDNESDAY.]

NUN: Ich möchte trotzdem – trotz all des Spaßes und Bullshit-Laberns, das ich gerne mache und auch gut mache–

JAC: Diese Bescheidenheit!

NUN: Diese Bescheidenheit, ich liebe dich auch...ehm... ne kleine Triggerwarnung aussprechen. Ich hab den in ner sehr dunklen S

Swallow Tune, a punk band from Weimar, plays at a Christmas party at uni. This is the second time I photograph them. There have already been some talks, there is a sense of mutual respect.

Again they tease their debut album that is set to release in January of next year. After the gig, I ask them whether they need a cover and some promotional photos. They are take my offer. Gonna do a punk cover – stupid shit.

D8226.SATURDAY.]

February. The album's not out. We haven't yet scheduled a session. I photograph another gig at Kasseturm. We agree on mid-March.

[D8245.THURSDAY.]

Mid-March. We got the small studio because Jojo and Tarek are doing a workshop downstairs. It's enough. After some setting up, all have arrived. I brief them and what we're going to do, ask them what kinda photos they want. All in all, we shoot for a bit more than two hours. Between Kublai Khan TX blasting through the Bluetooth speaker, Sternis of the library and a lot of loud screaming while the four stack and cuddle themselves, the workshop is filled with joy and youthful energy.

I love this shit.

[D8247.SATURDAY.]

I realise we did too many good photos. Too many for a mere Instagram promotion, too many to be just left online. Then, an idea.
"Can you send me all your lyrics? I wanna do a zine."
Have I done a punk zine before? No. But fuck it, why not.
So I do a punk zine. No type setting, just scribbling.
No quality printing or binding. I use whatever paper I have and occupy the copying machine at the Limona for a few days.
This is so stupid - I love it.

[D8309.FRIDAY.]

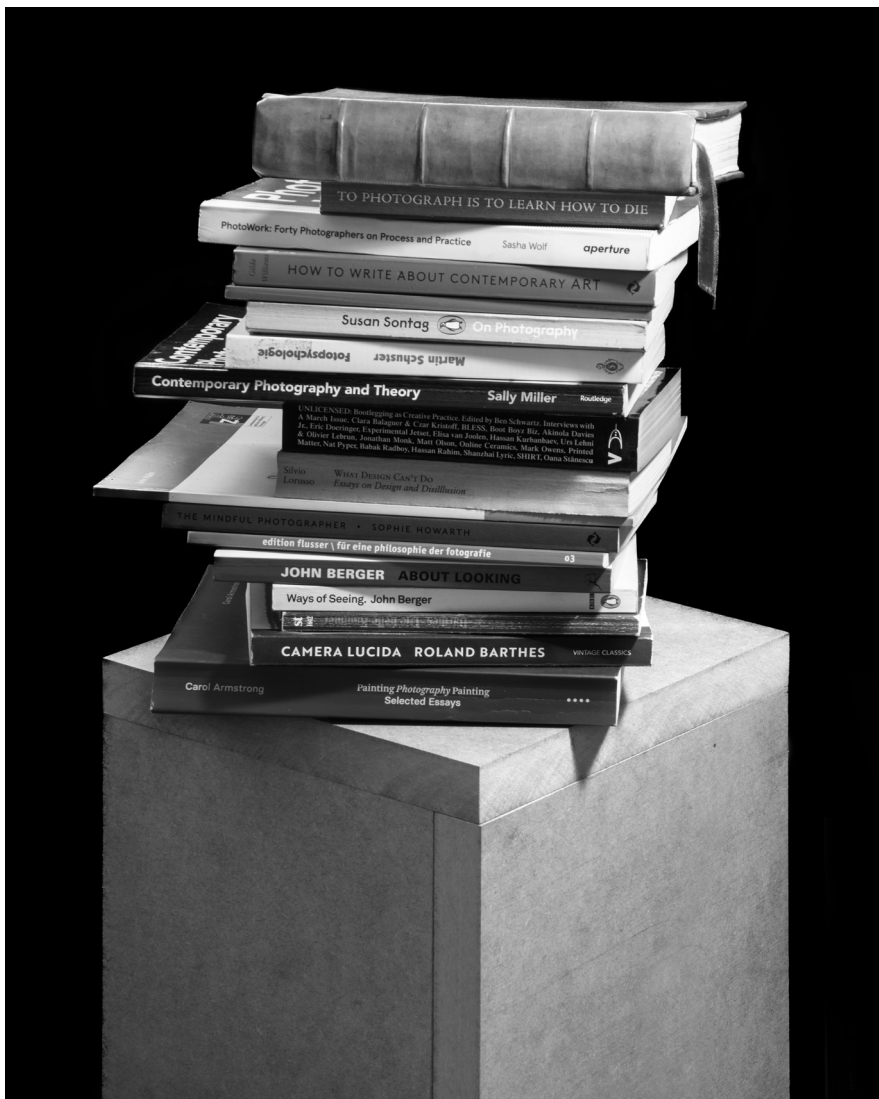
The boys have done it. Their album and the singles before are out. I'm proud of them and it feels like the highest compliment that all covers are photos that I have taken. I've brought thirty zines. People can take them for free, they can donate whatever they want.
Over the next few concerts, almost all zines are gone and money for gas was made.

—this is so fucking
stupid— I love it!

Going back to Rollins' attitude of saying yes, I have found joy in projects that in theory carry a certain amount of ostentatiousness or even stupidity with them. Much of that comes with the step back, with looking at what is proposed in a certain context. *Me* – a bachelor student of a university that prides itself with a cultural heritage that by now is as far from punk as can be, a guy who concerns himself with photographing hands and cloth, who cannot form a sentence less than three thoughts and four deviations long – doing a *punk zine*? In what world would that be an obvious occurrence? Imaginable in only a few, obvious in none.

At times I like to feel like an infiltrator – inside and outside of academia. If a thing seems stupid to do, then let me have a swing. This could be fun. And if it isn't, I still got some experiences out of it. What are eight semesters, the occasional job that I cannot stand and all the fancy bogus worth if it wouldn't be sprinkled with a bit of doing things that might be well out of my reach? Who is to know that I cannot do something before it is attempted? Surely not me. I have a habit of planning over the limits of time, capacity and knowledge. But at times, the stupid projects- even the very serious ones – are the most fulfilling. My time and effort are mine, so why not spend them on the occasional adventure? To think that it would be stupid to do something – whether project or submission – has become an indicator something having the potential to turn out well.

Punk's not dead, sucker – I ain't no Mr. Fancy Pants.



theory. literature &.

~~fuck "art"~~

~~First, I wanted to be an author.~~

~~Then, I wanted to be a painter.~~

~~Now, I seek to be anything but an artist.~~

~~I've had the great fortune of growing up in a household that encourages creativity and critical thinking. I also had the fortune of being asked quite early on about what I wanted to do after school. By that time, I was certain of studying something skill-based that still left room for creative expression — graphic design was on the forefront of my fantasies. Close to my A-levels, I was certain of the BUW and of Visual Communication, Free Arts never interested me — I made a habit of jokingly saying that I liked money too much for that (although it turns out to be not quite fair in the end). The real reason lay in the fact that I was deeply concerned of not being able to earn a living afterwards. I had all the freedom I could wish for to choose a carrier, the only condition was to be honest and to do it well. There was no push from my parents, except one towards acting, but honest conversations about troubles after uni and how to avoid these as best as I could were had. Visual Communication it was. I took up painting, even got exhibited, and received lots of encouragement from Bahram Nematipour to pursue it further. But still, photography took up more and more space. Till today I can tell that I have experience with painting in my photographs.~~

~~In the summer of 2023, I remember the term "art" being used more frequently in describing my photographs. I had finished a series titled "Ozymandias" and was fortunate enough to sell a print, the images quite telling of my joy playing with the new toy of the camera and flash in the workspace of the studio. I took Bahram, who had been a mentor figure of sorts to me, to see the print exhibited, whereafter a conversation unfolded in which he, like with my drawings and paintings, described the work wherefore he stood as "art". This was not uncommon for him but the word rumbled through many conversations with others thereafter. The art term crept up to a noticeable degree.~~

~~Least to say: I did not like it.~~

~~What might sound like boasting till now actually is a topic of deep frustration and even deeper fear. Ever since my studies, most likely even longer before, I had set my mind on acquiring skills to further creative projects that, most of all, were approachable to others [than me] — projects of a communicative nature. To this day, I enjoy showing and discussing my work with others that do not share my academic context. I feel like, to be quite generalising here, talking to people that do not share neither education nor practice is vital. Not only does it further fundamentally important communication and self-reflection skills, it has an advantage few courses share: to emulate (if~~

even slightly) the situations that will, and should definitely, prevail through a creative life. People unlike you will interact with your work. If I cannot explain a project to my father or mother so that they get not even a glimpse of its concept, I know I have to refine (or, rarely, trust that the project will be more digestible when it is done).

This is where the art term comes in. Simply put: I detest the term because it distances, because it makes lonely. From the start to the end of a project, I am in constant discourse with "academic outsiders", meaning anyone who doesn't share my studies or uni — friends, family, rarely acquaintances. All through this process, I am reminded of one question: "can someone get this?" This can be re-assembled to: "is this for me (and just me) or do I want others to have a share?"

-

I've been learning a lot about how things were back when. I was a lonely and a lonely teen — not an uncommon experience for late-diagnosed autistics. Creativity was a space of escaping insufficiencies in living with my peers, hued in the fatal flow that our Western canon has spun around the artist: that of seeking admiration for the genius one is. Of course, admiration seems a nice, sensation, levitating oneself, assuring that time and labour were well-spent. But even in this description, the floorboards seems to be pulled out from under the term. Admiration isn't desirable because of the status it enforces. It is desirable because it is nothing but validation clothed in words of ritual, laying flowers on an altar that is little more than decor. The feeling of levitation is indeed not one above others but one of being brought amongst others, embraced deeply and warmly. The years I spent sitting in my dark room a-crying, I wanted to be loved, feared, admired, sure. But as every child learns, consciousness changes and deepens with vocabulary. So, in my current and thinking back, I will simply state that (quite obviously) I wanted to be validated by my peers. A conclusion of the non-shit-Sherlock kind perhaps but meaningful in connection to creative endeavours that have brought me here. Alienation from my peers, of course, was a social problem, a problem I saw but couldn't understand further than "they think I'm weird, probably because I'm smart and they're not". For years, that was my hypothesis, cruel as it seems. Turns out later: it was Autism and I tried playing social games I didn't understand because kids don't behave like adults I knew. In this, a daunting and immensely unhealthy solution crossed my mind. Realising this is the true and revelatory conclusion I've come to years after. No therapy I've done let me to it

What does photography do that therapy doesn't? Somehow, I developed the sense that if I tried hard enough, made pictures beautiful enough, spoke eloquently enough, my peers wouldn't have any other choice but to respect and ergo like me.

I cannot begin to describe how much that thought saddens me. Truly, as I'm writing, I'm overcome with pity and a wish to dispel this youthful illusion. Because indeed, creative pursuits did not help in bridging this gap. They hardened it. I'; deeply thankful to have made a few friends near the end of school and even more at uni. To be surrounded by peers who weren't appalled but interested in my passions was a thing truly novel and foreign for my first few semesters. Here, I found not only validation but also compassion, and I continue to find them. I'm thankful to have made so many experiences that proved I didn't have to create for sympathy but just be ready to get to know people. And for the respect: that came with doing what I had always wanted to so, and more, whether I was particularly good or not.

What I mean to get to, since I'm still talking about my adversity to the term "art", is quiet simple but needed a lot of context and a thorough explanation: "art" and "artist" terrify me.

To be transparent: validation, or even praise, also terrifies me, although I'm of course grateful for it. Dealing with praise is something extremely uncomfortable for me. Although I fancy myself as trying to be somewhat humble, my discomfort goes deeper and eventually ends at the realisation that I meet any and all kind of validation with a certain amount of distrust and ergo negation.

Elaborate

To be clear, a discomfort with praise and one with the art term are different to me because they do not share the same root. The first is one of mistrust, the latter one of attachment.

Remember the question of who a project is for? The options of "for me" and "for others" work in two ways when describing freelance, non-commissioned work: a project for me can be one for others, a project for others must be one for me. Whenever I could help it, the projects I've done always include others and myself in the target group, I rarely do projects only for myself and then just present them, not without thinking about how I may communicate them. Most, in addition of doing them for myself, are meant to be shared from the get-go. I started my studies in order to create a dialogue I had craved for so long, but a dialogue in which only one is fluent is not one. If I wished to monologue, I could - I did monologue a lot as a kid. Monologues thought to be dialogues have not done me well. But I do not choose the monologue, and I if did, you wouldn't know about it. The dialogue, a thing of trouble that be a cup never filled, it is then.

[D.8462. THURSDAY. CONT.]

When I started in photography and properly made use of privileges as a student, soon people from the outside offered validation, yes, but with the growing suffix of "I wouldn't know how to or couldn't do that." This, in essence, is something unimaginably and, to a certain extent, false. "How" is a technical word. All techniques that I use can be learnt in less than a week. All difference lies in the "how long". I learnt the same things all students learn in their studio introduction, and most continued to use the skills learnt, and all have made marvellous uses of the same base of information. Skill is a question of time and resources.

[Sure about the resources?]

And it is here a problem presented itself. The distancing remark of putting oneself down was not uttered in a plain level conversation but between someone with time and resources and someone without. Of course everyone has a camera in their pocket but to take it and take on a learning process is daunting. It is daunting because, and I can attest you will be shit at the beginning, you literally have to be.

[Elaborate]

Nevertheless, the distancing of the self-described unknowing to me grew larger with time. Once met with discomfort because I was very aware if my journey of learning and more of it to be trodden yet, it morphed into something deeper. It was less "in three weeks, you could be at a point where the difference between our skills is lesser" became soon engulfed by roots of the jungles of professions. The more time passed, the more different pursuits manifested different availabilities, and therefore attitudes towards creativity.

Bauhaus Christmas Market. Jojo and I are selling postcards from our series I left my lungs in Sonneberg, he offers some additional prints, I offer books: notebooks, a dummy for 250 test strips and a few copies of The Stripped Preacher. Silly as I am, the days before I have calculated the material and labour costs for each item in an Excel spreadsheet. The prices read 6,85 MP, 7,62 MP, 8,07 MP, 8,24 MP, 7,97 MP. MP stands for minimum price. This is the amount of costs for one book. An example: The Stripped Preacher (12x17,5 cm, 74 p.)

content: 7,65 EUR
drawing paper, 250 sheets in A5
cover: 1,25 EUR
tone paper, 1 sheet in 50x70 cm

one copy means:
paper: 1,14 EUR (37 sheets, 12x17,5 cm)
cover: 0,16 EUR (1 sheet, 24,7x17,5 cm)
printing: 0,10 EUR (flat-rate)
glue: 0,10 EUR (flat-rate)
labour: 6,21 EUR
30 min. flat-rate
minimum wage (DEC 2024):
12,41 EUR/h

total: **7,97 EUR**

I tell people how much cost I put into the making of a given book. If they wanna give me more than that, they are free to choose how much. At the end, I have two books left of the 19 I made. Everyone gave more than the minimum price asked for. I have made my money back and a bit than that. The idea of charging so little money was discussed in the weeks before and I encountered varied responses. In The end, the few customers who brought up these strange numbers found their reason intriguing.

Each book features م, the Arabic letter m, on the cover or spine. The Stripped Preacher and 250 test strips state: made by Al-Majnoun Books. Al-Majnoun (المجنون) translates to The Madman in Arabic. Al-Majnoun is not a publishing house, it is not a trademark. It was an idea I had when I began recording concert bootlegs and designing covers for my CDs, later on my books. It is the silly idea of having a sign and a name attached to my products, whether commercial or not, that emulates publishing but in practice does not care for its rigidity. A notebook is made by AL-Majnoun Books, a burnt CD by Al-Majnoun Records. Should I ever do chairs, they might be made by Al-Majnoun Furniture.

[D.8513. SATURDAY. CONT.]

Stachi comes over at the end of the market. I tell him how well it went. He tells me that I am the most anti-student he knows and that he means it as a compliment.

[D.8541. SATURDAY.]

B: She was always like 'he's so full of himself and wants to be profound.' She really thought that you are that stereotype of an art student. I told her: 'Na, Jacob hates being a student. He'd like to be anything but.'

anti-student.

I

At school and at home, I was bullied by my peers for my creative endeavours. At home, I was encouraged to do what I found enticing by my parents. I was also taught to think critically between the sensitive enjoyment of my mother and the rational of my father. *Do what thou wilt but think about what you are doing.*¹

For reasons that also appear in *Fuck Art*, I am very sensitive for behaviour that is *too* free-flowing, vibe-based and *artsy* – in short: behaviour that triggers my own memories of bullying. *Form follows function*² is a maxim that I have clung to with everything I had in one instance or another. Studying Visual Communication, like many creative fields of study as I imagine, goes along with learning to stretch and flex your muscles – like *bullying*. Ever since my studies started, I have ranted to family, friends and fellow students about works and product coming out of our programme that I found appalling. They were boundary breaking, though breaking the boundary seemed to have been broken just for the fun of it and without inherent merit. They were loud, though *loud* does not in fact equal *better*. They were free in *form* and seemed to lose or have lost their *function*.

Never would I have told any of the designers to their face what I said in a private setting. For one: I study with them. For the other: just because I like to rant does not mean I want to hurt your feelings. I am not a bully, and as a non-bully, I truly wish you well, even if I don't dig your stuff. Even the people whose work (my prime example is based in photography and sparked *You're holding a weapon, so be fucking decent about it*) I find ethically downright disgusting and who I may have personal quarrels with will at least get the benefit of distance that I put between me and them. In a given situation they may be criticised, but critique without at least some respect and civility does no good at all.

Still, I have my grievances, as I imagine some might have with my work.³ They, as I, are entitled to those grievances. I forming them, we simply learn what we like and what we do not. In the best case, we learn how to utter them as constructive criticism and leave the rants for our friends.⁴

II

The term *anti-student* in itself describes that there is the figure of a *student*. Students come in many forms and varying fields and backgrounds. So do design and photography students. Since I am addressing a general *cliché* of design and art students at large, I will quickly summarise how a student of the BUW's Visual Communication programme might be described. Afterwards, I will describe how they might be perceived in a short but ergo rather superficial way. Nonetheless, it is partly based on comments I have received myself.

1 Citing Aleister Crowley might not be the smartest thing but to be fair, he had a thing for wall tattoos

2 Funnily enough a quote by architect Louis Sullivan, preceding the original Bauhaus with which the maxim is associated a lot.

3 Hopefully not with me as a person, and if so: *fuckem*.

4 For whom I imagine some of my rants might be quite entertaining at times.

Students of the Visual Communication programme are likely to have an Abitur, a general qualification for university entrance, although this is not a universal requirement at the BUW. Most start the bachelor's programme in their early to mid-twenties, more often they haven't gone to school in Weimar and will settle in a single flat, but more often a student dormitory or shared flat.

The bachelor's programme of Visual Communication at the BUW, split into five departments (Graphic Design, Typography, Film, Photography and Image-Text Conceptualisation), is quite diverse in how students who specialise in one (or more) of these fields forms groups, which then are perceived by different groups. Obviously, generalisation and stereotypes emerge inside and outside of the programme. For the most part, these are entirely harmless and may be expressed through colloquial rants, which, as stated, do not mean to do any harm. Still, prejudices against certain groups persist, may it be because of re-occurring attitudes inside a specific group or because of a vague gist of what kind of projects are put out by one group or another.

Indeed, students and professors might be aware of these images. A typography project exhibited during the BUW's summer exhibition presented second-hand clothing that were printed with quotes that reflected the typography department's image as *a bunch of elitist fashionistas* (words of the project heads) in a humorous meta way. Of course, this stereotype may be shared by some, yet I know enough typography students not fitting into it.

Photography at the BUW once was hypothesised to be the field of *people who photograph ice cream while it melts*. This statement came from inside the department. And I must say: I found it quite plausible. The students of the department, for the most part, fall into either elaborate editorial studio work or stripped-down, *serious*⁵ documentary work. Every student in this department has a right to be there, all works have at least some merit⁶ and most are amazing. With time, I have had the pleasure of seeing and helping out in such a variety of photographic projects that not only my horizon for appreciation has broadened, but my own work has profited immensely.

Still, stereotypes and prejudices persist. They do all day and every day, concerning every possible topic. But although seemingly universal, stereotypes fulfil a need, otherwise they wouldn't be so persistent. They, as overgeneralised concepts, break down the topic of an uncomfortable, complex or distant group. To internalise a stereotype, however wrong, makes the world a bit easier to grapple. Still, a need for a simple world

does indeed not excuse a hostile way of thinking and acting. This, in relation to photography, might seem dramatic (and indeed, there are far more harmful stereotypes), yet stereotypes do inform the image of the *photography student*. I will take myself as an example.⁷

I am very much a photographer who might be wrote off as an *artist*.⁸ I follow a stylistic direction that, as I have been told by a professor from another university, does not exist anymore – very painterly, very stylised, very fictional. I am a reclusive guy who likes to work in a dark room where obscenities like *natural light* cannot bother him, where he can play god a bit and create his own light.⁹ Beyond the up-the-ass reference to painting in photographic style, my topics can be very *out there*, from excessively photographing hand to making about book which linguistically breaks down a collection of condolence cards (although the latter far heavier in typography than photography). My works tend to be rather expansive and conceptual, always going along with

7 If you are someone who remembers the good ol' days of the *Roast Yourself Challenge*: hey buddy, it's been a rough few years since 2016.

8 Indeed I have been called an *artist* a lot in the last few years, and it frustrates me immensely. For more, see *Fuck art*.

9 For more, see *The studio is not a real place*.

5 *Serious* here refers to a sense of professionalism, something that might be seen as more sophisticated on the outside. But indeed, all work is serious and there is no basis to refer to some as *better* because it seems more *serious*. This is not how this shit works. *Serious*, in fields such as documentary photography and photojournalism, can be exemplified by the omnipresent motive of a medium close up portrait at a kitchen window – all natural, no fancy shit, all of the proliferation taught in private schools such as Ostkreuz in Berlin (no shade towards them but this sort of motive is their melting ice cream).

6 This is more a question about ethics rather than taste. I may not like something but will still appreciate the work, but will less so if I have ethical qualms with it.

extensive research: always a mouthful when I talk about them and a headache for some I imagine (for which I couldn't possibly fault them).

The cliché of photography and design students, in my experience, is based on indisputable facts that deviate in their conclusion. We are a somewhat reclusive bunch. We keep to our own and form strong connections. This, of course, is a very advantageous process for us. Networking is an essential skill in the creative fields – to *know someone* can save your project last minute. Furthermore, studying VC, is a jungle to hack through. With the myriad of possibilities of an institution with the added privilege of direct education, finding your place, what you want to be done with your studies and the time after (the great, big, scary *job life*) can indeed be a struggle. This struggle deepens depending on your programme's structure, and universities, such as the BUW, are prone to letting you off the leash as soon as possible, leaving you scraping for coherence and a guided path.¹⁰

The amount of freedom associated with my struggles might eventually dip into a source of stress, especially for people such as much myself who need some sort of structure (and at times intense guidance) in order to excel. My programme offers little to none of that and it fucked with me for years before I got a grip on it. Said grip I got like essentially everyone else did (before me): finding people I could hang around, discuss and collaborate with. In town such as Weimar where students make up some 10 percent of the population with an infrastructure that centres lots of live on uni, the need to come outside of the academic ecosystem rarely arises.

Getting more than through your studies is very much based on your ability to either have a never-ending fountain of energy for a fuck-everyone mentality and doing your thing and/or socialising. Though I have some of the former, my own work only began to blossom after I got a grip on the latter. I am in the workshop four to five times a week, and with that the chance of meeting someone I know and stopping for a short discussion obviously increases.¹⁴ It is fascinating how much insight you can gain into your work through keeping a steadily flow of conversation even if your brain runs on a high speed.

What develops over the semesters is a web of acquaintances and a bundle of close friendship I am very thankful for, professionally and personally. The flipside of the same, obviously, is a tendency for social erosion. To study is also to discern intuitively connecting partners in conversation from those that, though they might bring as valuable

an insight, require more work beforehand and therefore have to be accounted for: you learn to distinguish the people you find it easy to talk to from those with whom you might feel you lack the same ease. All of that is in the nature of the game – I cannot easily jump onto everyone's bandwagon as much not everyone will spring on mine. The result is a close circle of people who you frequent more often in conversation.

What is a healthy building of a social circle can also take the form of unhealthy tribalism. *Why discuss with anyone else? I got my people* might be a familiar thought, it certainly was for me for some time. As thing evolved I realised that, although I had found what I always wanted – a tribe – remaining in my own circle was no beneficial practice in the long run, ergo I started expanding and have been very happy with the results. Getting in contact with people, even those you cannot stand, is a good way to learn things about yourself and ergo your work at the least.

10 According to some, at a technical college this lack of structure could be seen as horrendously irresponsible

14 I can also afford this much time spent at uni because I do not have to take a second job.

Still, cliques in the BUWs photography department persist, and for the most part, they do not rub against one another. But, as much as it pains me, it is those very cliques that have part in making our department less approachable for some. Though I have been perceived as intimidating by some and as full of myself by others, outward presentation, whether conscious or unconscious, of these student groups have had real effects. A friend told me they had to be convinced to start a photography course because the stereotype of students being too material, too technical and all in all talking way too much bullshit was very tangible: we seemed threatening and unapproachable. In the end, they found merit in taking the course and I'm all the happier for it. But it is true: we have a certain something in carrier ourselves, and for the most part, we do not realise it because we filter it out when we are amongst *our* tribe.

Our tribalism in essence is a huge sign of privilege. Bitching about how annoying typography students, how arrogant the *Bagages*, how allergic to reality these and those are is a practice of social bonding, yes, and can help in understanding, pointing out and changing behaviours that are deconstructive. There is a difference between bitching around for some fun or to vent and building a routine around it. To the academic outside, we are all very much the same, and our differences are always prone to become fractals of nit-picking. What gets lost so very often is why criticising one another is vital in our context of uni: if we do not do it to better ourselves, we should at the very least strive to better things for those who do not enjoy our academic privileges. The world *outside* can be so very far off, but it is there, and we better remember it.

III

Though it might read like a disguised slander of my dear fellow students, I am trying to get to a point that informs a lot of my attitude to being a student and working in general by now. I was fortunate enough to be part of the Qualifying Examination Board for the bachelor programme of Visual Communication for two years, meaning I was part of the people who looked at applications, graded them, invited people to interviews and ultimately decided on whether or not they got accepted for *our* programme in the following semester. Naturally, this was a great honour (both times) and though the work can be excruciatingly painful, I felt a mix of nostalgia and thankfulness. I got to be a part of shaping people's lives,¹¹ and more often than not, I was reminded of my own desperation when I applied back when during the first COVID lockdown.

But the situation, not of my own making, in which I got to decide on

people's future base more often than not on projects they did during their school years (as had been the case with me), a situation in which I was sifting through *potential* and *no potential* is a specific shade of bullshit. To be fair: you do not need a Qualification for Higher Education (Abitur) to study VC, and that is a very good thing. But the longer I am a student, the less differences I find between my own *madness* for higher education and that of others outside of uni. By now, I have arrived at the following stage.

What I learned at uni does not, indeed, necessitate an Abitur, but that is cared for. Furthermore I do not think that we are in a state of society in which our system of accepting and denying wishes to get *higher* education is merited. You do not need a bachelor's to know what I know, that is a fact. There is no reason for why the luck I have had – financially, educationally and in regards to my family's academic background most of all – should have given me the benefits that I enjoy. I am far from proclaiming from the mountain top that higher education is of no worth, but the playing field, though never having been level, is indeed still not level, and it pisses me off.

I have never had to truly worry about money or a certainty that I would go to uni if I wanted to. Despite chronic illness and disability, my studies always made enough time for me to do what I wanted to pursue. And although some day I will entered a risky job market, I know that will have enough academic credentials to get somewhere. It makes me furious that others cannot say the same, and I have

been filled with shame more often than not because of it. I say that not because if everyone had the same chances I would feel better, thereby making the problem about me and my feelings. I say it because I wish for little as much as that: others having the opportunities I enjoy, and more, and having nothing more than a chance. I know enough people who have had far less of those chances than me. Neoliberalism is a lie.¹² Germany's pride (although with an iota of merit in comparison with other country, still not making it viable) on being the land of equality and opportunity is a lie.¹³

None of that is new. If it is new to you, that is a problem. Not because you have to be the problem, but because our system of economics and education is based on apathy towards these topics, and one of its most frequent methods to evoke such apathy and/or frustration at addressing them is taking from our time and energy, especially by putting us either in a comfortable or uncomfortable situation. If we are comfortable, we don't have to care, if we are constantly stressed about making ends meet, we think we are separated from these topics and therefore cannot afford time or energy for making a change.

All of Germany's expanded opportunities in education, through scholarships, social programs etc. are a drop on a hot stone in a system which bases opportunity on background, may it be economic or academic. I predominantly grew up in a town in which what felt like half of the graduates of a given secondary school year would study or get vocational training just to return to their hometown, a place that has been struggling with economic stagnation for decades but whose attempts are become more attractive for young people are abysmal. I know I am fortunate with my parents because I know enough people who never strove to grow conscious of their circumstances because they in their own words *didn't have the time* or *wouldn't be able to change anything anyways* – a group who the AfD and the far-right shift in German politics are very attractive (although not everyone I have described here naturally votes for that party). In a year of some 90 graduates, I know of other fellow student pursuing a creative career. She, as I, felt not at home in our town and moved to Leipzig.

I am friends with enough immigrants and non-academics to know that the system that I profit from is broken, and that it takes more than scholarships to fix it. To give opportunities to a select few who depend on the state to support them does not solve the problem of educational inequality: it stabilises and thereby furthers it. I do not feel sorry for those who applied for VC at the BUW and didn't get accepted, I feel

12 neoliberalism

Encyclopaedia Britannica:

neoliberalism, ideology and policy model that emphasizes the value of free market competition. [...] most commonly associated with laissez-faire economics. In particular, neoliberalism is often characterized in terms of its belief in sustained economic growth as the means to achieve human progress, its confidence in free markets as the most-efficient allocation of resources, its emphasis on minimal state intervention in economic and social affairs, and its commitment to the freedom of trade and capital.

Neoliberalism, very popular with figures such as Ronald Reagan, Margret Thatcher, Donald Trump and Elon Musk propagates that a free market regulates itself. There is no concept of intersectionality in politics, economy and society – each citizen is an individual with individual problems, rather than a person struggling with political, economic or societal problems. Citizens are individualised in their experiences and struggles, movements for community and regulation are seen as hostile to the system. Personal struggles are reframed as moral (or at least person-based) defects, making every struggling individual the maker of their own problems since everyone can be his/hers/their *luck's blacksmith* (as the German *seines/ihrer Glückes Schmied sein* goes) – the propagation of the so-called *American Dream*. A famous phrase in this context is *to pull yourself up by your bootstraps*, positioning you to solve your own dilemmas, even if they are not of your own making.

11 Although the thankfulness obviously extended only to admissions – I wasn't grateful for denying people their studies.

13 Germany after WWII took in many guest workers, especially from Turkey and Vietnam; still strong diasporas in German society. After a wave of immigrants, especially fleeing from the Civil War in Syria, Germany again took in a lot of refugees, then chancellor Angela Merkel famously proclaiming *wir schaffen das* (we got this). In the years before and especially since, the AfD (Alternative for Germany), a far-right party, has gained enormous support, starting in German states formerly belonging to the GDR (German Democratic Republic), where frustration had already been brewing because of a still remaining economic imbalance between former West-German and East-German states. The AfD has exploited these tensions with great success, leading most of Germany's major parties to somewhat adapt their tone of anti-refugee rhetoric, paddling back on Germany's position as a land of opportunity for all and calling for more refugees being sent back (Syria for example, since the Assad regime fell in December 2024). Turns out: Germany never accepted their guest workers and refugees as equal, not even if they had become or were born citizens, and now is ready to go the mile towards making their lives worse than it already has. Discussions around *Hartz IV* or *Bürgergeld* (Citizen's Money), Germany's former and current systems of unemployment benefits, that paint the unemployed as slugging money-grabbers more than suggests that Germany is not only well-versed in racism but also classism – we just spent less and less effort of phrasing it more digestibly.

angry. I feel angry because we have to play against the house and I merely got a better hand, and I know that because I could glimpse across the table and see what they got handed.

IV

I want to be an anti-student not because I reject intellectualism. Indeed I think that intellectualism has a lot of benefits. I want to be an anti-student because I am very, very tired and even angrier than I am tired. What I do, what I think, what I speak is not *deep*, it is not *profound* – I reject these terms when used as olive twigs. What I try to do, what I want to do better, is to make things approachable to what they are: not alien but at times deeply human. I am not a good photographer or a good writer because I am intellectual, I am (least I hope) because I try to remember that not everyone has had the same chances as me and that I still want to share my thoughts and work with them, may *they* be from a different program or a carpenter shop. If you are interested, I am too.

I will not get a degree for photographing. I will get a degree for learning about and practicing it for years in a context that allows me to do that. Those two things are anything but dependent on this context and can be achieved everywhere by everyone, it is only *made* harder on the outside. That, on its own, is not only the fault of academia but capitalism and classicism at large, and I want to try to stand for it the least I can.

Talks about expenses equalling value are bullshit. Overpriced photo and theory books are bullshit. Studying for four years and not working with people outside my academic bubble is bullshit. Not being able to adapt to the capabilities and needs of your partner in conversation is bullshit. Bullshitting your way through a presentation while being oblivious to the fact that you enjoy more freedoms than others could count is bullshit. This is an amazing opportunity, but it has to be furthered because the opportunity is more unfairly distributed than necessary (if it were necessary at all). I want to be an anti-student not because I *hate* being one but because I realise that there is no reason for this gap on the student status.

I say all this from the cushy pages of a book I could finance myself, squashed in tens of thousands of words and expanded into extensive passages while here and there, there might be a photo. I am writing on D856 and feel the need to state the following. I started this book some three months ago, and I had no idea of how much material I would gather. There is no grand plan, I merely go along with it. Whatever will

come out of it will come out. I will soon start proofreading and finalising my print files while I am still taking photographs. I can only guess at how long this thing will be, and as of now, my guesses are absurd. This is not an academic work. It does address not only an academic audience but everyone with a well enough knowledge of English interested in photography and/or Autism. I will explicitly clarify on the title page (which you are welcome to return to know) that this is a first draft. Normally something that is buried and left for good, I want to find out what happens if a book is produced while stating that it is indeed only a rough sketch for multiple projects that might come along in the future.

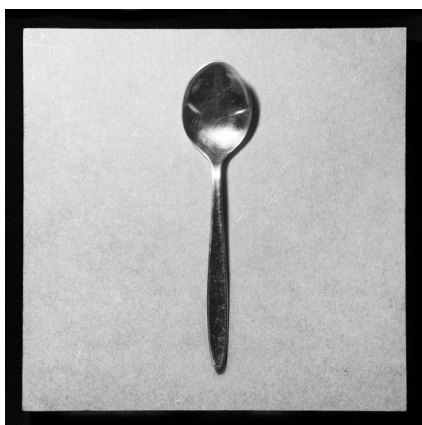
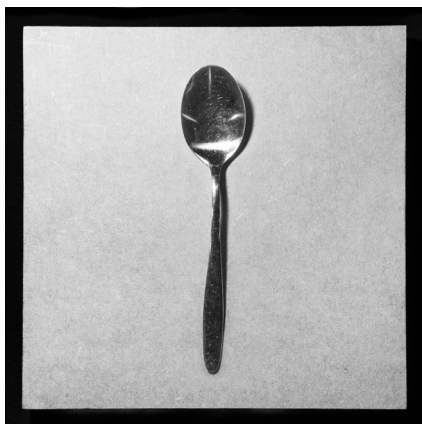
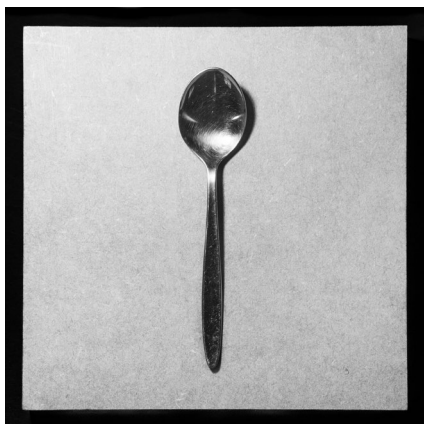
I started writing because I was afraid of my studies ending and because I had too much left to say. I want to start my BA project next month with many topics sketched out and others simply taken from my chest. I sincerely believe that what I write about is not highbrow but can be understood by everyone, and I want to make another step outside of my cosy little ecosystem. It scares me like hell, but in the end, this project will be a fun absurdism at the least and might be something to fall back on while starting interesting conversations at the most. It is indeed a silly journey, but academia needs more silliness.

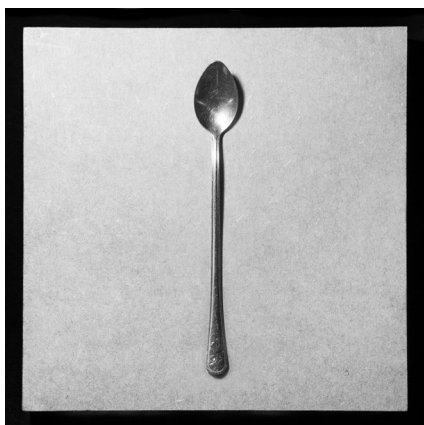
This book will first be printed all in black and white with a QR code leading to my website for colour versions of my photographs. Soon, I will do a colour print, but for now, this things will be printed on the cheapest of paper. This will reduce production costs for me and allow me to do what I truly want. If it were my choice, I would print as many copies as possible and give them away like candy. With some of the first batch, I will do exactly that, but some I will sell still – because buying is a kind sign of appreciation and because it will finance another edition and/or an edition of my BA thesis. Low production costs will allow me to charge as little a price as possible. This is not an academic work, you do not need a degree to read and get it, and it at the foremost is not a work that I will bleed you dry for – it would undermine too much of what I have written and I wouldn't feel comfortable with it. Why produce it at a printing house then? I most likely will work with the *Buch- und Kunstdruckerei Kessler*, a local printing house in Weimar. They are a small team and students print there regularly – they can take all the money they can get and I'd be damned if I didn't support them if I can. Furthermore I am considering making these texts available for free.

This is a counter attack to educational elitism.

And it is a lot of fun.

Fuck the Superman, I am becoming the Anti-student.





Monday, Tuesday,
Wednesday, Thursday,
Friday, Saturday,
Sunday.

Spoons.

In her 2003 essay *The Spoon Theory*, Christine Miserandino describes an innovative way in which to visualise energy. The story goes like this. We need energy to get through and complete our day. We do things that give us energy and things that require energy. Our energy levels are in constant flux. But not all fluxes are made equal. Just like working at a factory in a 9-5 requires a lot of physical energy, sitting in front of a computer for another 9-5 takes mental energy (not to speak of emotional labour). Many of us know our ways of how to regain some energy by exercise, relaxation and many others. Sleep is vital here. We cannot keep on working as well as dealing with our outside-work lives without some energy, and where there are things that take energy, there are things that restore it.

Miserandino wrote her essay partly because of her experiences with lupus. Since her essay, the Spoon Theory has been adopted by many people, especially those with chronic illnesses, disorders and disabilities, especially the invisible ones. The stereotype of the depressed person struggling to get out of bed all day is pervasive because, more often than not, it hits close to home. Such a struggle and its description are not judgemental; interactions with it can be. To state that I struggled to get out of bed is a fact, but the answer of *just getting a grip on it and just go outside* inhibits an implicit judgement. Invisible ailments have the bad reputation of stemming from laziness and the like. Clearly they are not. But not everyone knows that and ergo not everyone with an ailment may know themselves.

The Spoon Theory is an amazing way to get to the source of many energy-related problems: there is less energy than available. What seems obvious at first to some in its execution can be rather helpful. According to it, the energy we have any given day can be symbolised by a spoon. There are many different forms and sizes of spoons, and each day we have a certain amount of energy we can spend. If our spoon is empty, we need to reload it. I will take myself as an example.

My brain is very bad at prioritising sensory input, especially auditory input. To my brain, all noises and sounds are somewhat equal in processing though I may want to focus on only a few. If we sit at

the kitchen table and the kettle is boiling, it is very hard for me to follow what you are saying. The kettle doesn't have to be as loud as you, but my brain takes both of you in and will not separate you from the kettle enough.¹ It takes a lot of energy to discriminate, and there are many, many situations that take more energy than talking in the same room as a boiling kettle. Going to a café is quite daunting. Not because I dislike cafés (I like them very much) but because the noise of other people talking, however faint it may be, will leave me exhausted. I will still go to the café with you, but I will have to regain some energy. One way, *especially* if I enter a state called sensory overload,² is to sit in a dark and quite room where the intake of sensory information is limited as much as possible. Another way would be doing something that makes me happy, like reading.³ Eating something also helps.

I have a lot of different spoons and have had very small sizes at times. There are many things that empty my spoon very quickly, like spontaneous changes of plans, too much sensory stimuli or switching between too many tasks. At the moment, I have quite large spoons. If on a given day I don't, I have slowly but steadily begun to organise my day around what my spoon can give me, focussing on doing enough to feel productive and simultaneously not being left with an empty spoon. The rest of the day is for loading the spoon to its brim so that tomorrow, I may have a bigger spoon. Eating something helps a lot.

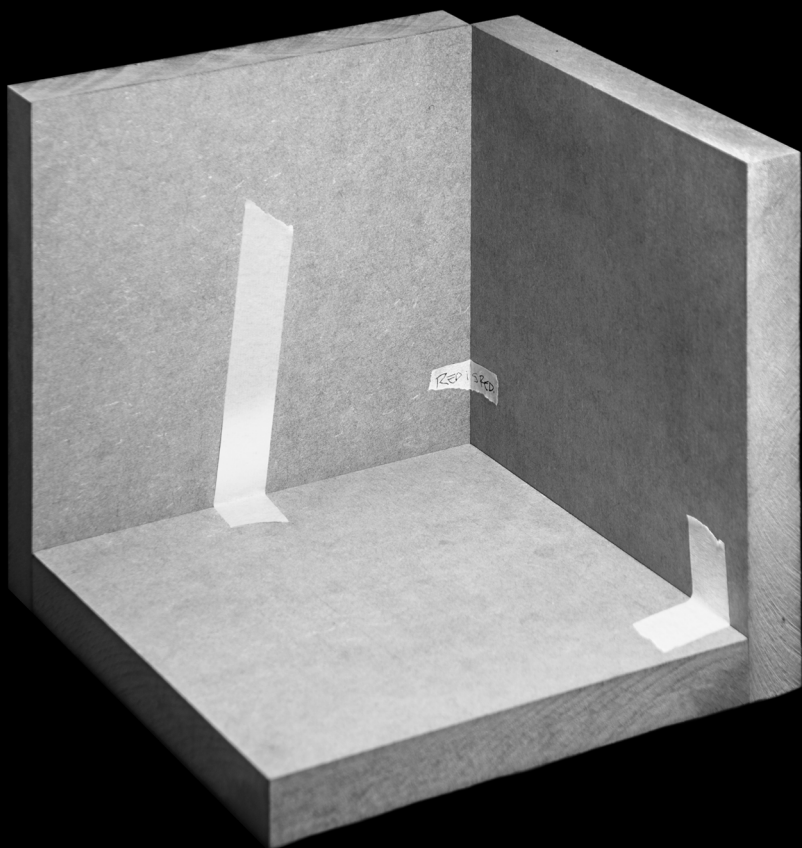
1 Ergo making for a very bad *Aschenbrödel*.

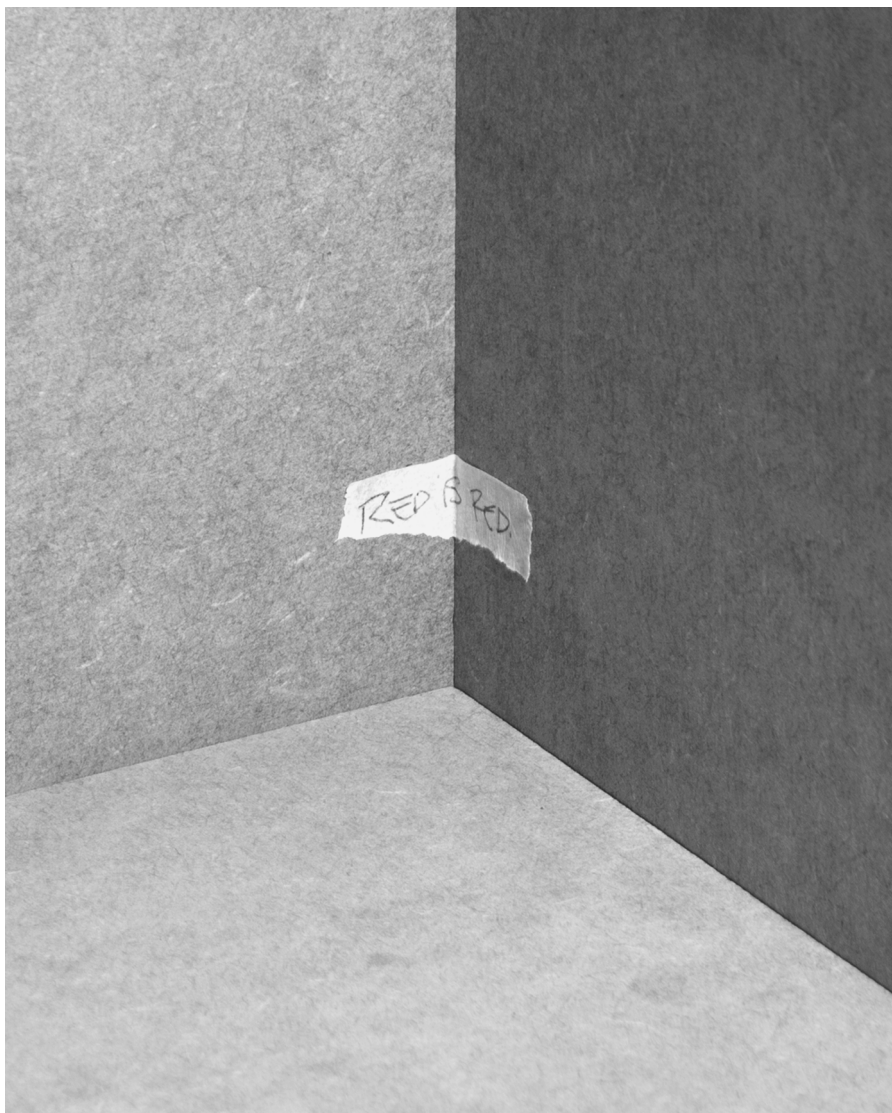
2 *sensory overload*
APA Dictionary of Psychology

a state in which one's senses are overwhelmed with stimuli, to the point that one is unable to process or respond to all of them.

3 Which is very helpful if I am not at home because I can always take a book with me.

the 'Tism: ~~t~~ Verbalised.





figured bass score ~~in C~~
 in C minor for
 double bass.

I have met many creatives who are terrified and even more who I suspect to be terrified. Indeed, we are a nervous bunch, and for good reason. In an industrialist, capitalist society, we feel like we don't just have to explain what we are doing – *no, no* – but to excuse ourselves for doing it. Our passions are declared hobbies before we have a degree to show, that degree will then not be taken seriously. Our carriers are under constant scrutiny, we are deemed *non-essential*.¹ We are othered, and every other family gathering, we are asked if we are still able to make a living from our *fun little projects*.² We are a nervous bunch. We are a terrified bunch. We constantly doubt whether *this* is the right thing to do, whether we are secretly not good at it, whether we are bullshitting our way through life, whether we are enjoying luxuries taken from others, whether we should be *helpful to society*. Doing things that we find worth in, that make us happy, takes a toll of bad conscience, doubt and self-loathing. We simultaneously juggle entrusting the happiness of pursuit to ourselves, make peace with those who doubt or despise us, further our skills and carrier, take care of our own lives outside of work. And when we are exhausted, we are told that we should *stop being so lazy*.³

We are terrified, and we feel like we have to bullshit our way through this mess. So that is what we do, pretty much everyone at some point: it is the natural conclusion and the self-preserving thing to do. And in the end, we have to shake out of the bullshit and face reality. We play the piece, and we might play it well. But the piece is rotten.

Bullshit Concerto in C Minor

MVT. Nº 1 – *Speak Up*

If you're doing creative work, you *have to explain*. There is no way around that terror. Quite obviously, people will not be able to *get inside your head*, creatively or otherwise. To work creatively comes with motivation, concept and practice:⁴ *wanting* to do a thing, thinking about *how* to do the thing and *doing* the thing. All three are integral to you and your work. They are essential context without which your work will be taken at face value

⁴ as in *process/applied skills*.

¹ It is true: we do not keep people alive. But it is much the same people looking down at our professions that also shiver in anger (and/or fear) if any other (*essential*) union demands higher pay. In that case, even the nurse, the teacher or the train captain becomes a *spoiled child who cannot just throw a tantrum to get what they want*.

² Even if we are making (enough) money, we are still asked to always keep in mind that we can change carriers whenever we (or more so: our partner in conversation) find(s) it preferable.

³ I highly recommend Dr. Devon Price's book *Laziness Does Not Exist* (2022) [here](#). The first chapter on the Puritans is reason enough to call bullshit on this now industrialised concept.

and is open to free association, frustration and interpretation. Why? Because people want to understand what you put in front of them, and they cannot be judged for it. Wanting to be complimented, re-assured, validated for what you produced is normal (some might say integral) to *doing the thing*, but the freedom of people to make something of your work outside your own thoughts is equally as normal, integral and to be respected.⁵ To put something on the table and proclaim *behold* and nothing else is a sacrifice that you *can* make. But the outcome has to be kept in mind: to simply *show* a thing is to offer it up for every criticism under the sun; wild, directionless, in disregard of any casualty.⁶

I was a borderline obnoxious kid who always asked about the *why* of things. Now, I am the borderline obnoxious student who most often asks about why people do things the way they do. I most often do it because I am already hooked on your work and want to know more about it. I want to be closer to it and look behind the curtain because it might just reveal the most beautiful stage, drenched in lights. Maybe I want to gather planks to build my own.

But to be fair: on the first look, I might find your work frustrating, infuriating or fully (not borderline) obnoxious. I know that this is due to my own experiences and the lessons the learned, the fears engraved – and anything that comes close is automatically a threat that I need to keep at bay.⁹ But after years and years (and more years to come), I will ask you about the work's background nonetheless.¹⁰ I cannot look behind the curtain, but a glimpse might reveal a new thing that I haven't considered. Getting insight into your thoughts and deeds might *enlighten* me and make a foundation for a more nuanced response. If not that, it will at least confirm what I supposed but couldn't verify.¹¹

Neither of both can be achieved by being left on my own to make of your work what I may. You *have to explain*. I realise that this call can be difficult to distinguish in the jungle of modern art theory and criticism, because both (especially the latter) are themselves fields that have trouble identifying its borders.¹² *Explaining* has nothing to do with serving up all meaning and metaphysical molecules of your work on a silver platter. To explain means to say: *I did this and I will do my best of answer the five Ws*. The five Ws, essential for journalism,¹³ are *who, what, when, how, and why*. They are in every process and can only be failed to be mentioned, never not be there. Much of anxiety lies in *why: why did I do this?* The most basic (and probably universal) answer for it is *because I wanted to* or variations such as *because found value in it* or *because it made me happy*.

5 see *Death of the Author* (1967) by
Roland Barthes.

6 I say this though knowing that many
will resort to this kinda conduct either
way no matter what.

9 Welcome compensatory pride,
welcome protective prejudice.

10 and if I don't, I will keep my mouth
shut for the moment.

11 and even then, like stated in
Antistudent, I will not make my quarrel
with your work a personal vendetta.

12 For writing about art in an
approachable and *non-bullshit* way, I
highly recommend *How to Write About
Contemporary Art* (2014) by Gilda
Williams

13 As I learned in primary school.

I cannot recall ever having heard a student say: *I took this photograph because I liked the scene* or *because it made me happy*. I have often heard things that boil down to *I don't know (exactly)*. Although it can be immensely frustrating for me (on the side of the questions-asker), this self-enforced passivity is not a mere product of apathy, but it is passivity for sure. Proclaiming you did something for the joy of doing it is not a viable reason in a system in which value is your key to recognition. *I did it because I liked it* is as deep¹⁴ an answer as any other. It stands however in opposition to an exploitative value system. But still, it is valid. But though it is valid as any other reason, it comes either with privilege or with consequences. In a system in which women are brought up to be non-offensive, BIPOC as told to be always be polite, least they get arrested or shot dead, and LGBTQIA+ folks to always keep a door to the closet open, in which you can say whatever you want if you're successful, white and male, the struggle to call bullshit on *you liked it is not enough of a reason* is a struggle added on top of *more urgent* concerns of self-preservation. I am white, cis-male and (somewhat) heterosexual: it costs me little to write this essay, even though I'm mentally ill and disabled. I enjoy the privilege of thinking *goddammit, just fucking come out your snail house already!* But behind that privilege lie fears that I do not have (or have somewhat overcome a bit), and the energy for my judgement is better spent encouraging someone to articulate themselves on topics that they might be reasonably afraid of.

To stand up for oneself and simple reason to do things is hard, and it is even harder for some. To encourage talking about your work, to give evidence for the case that it is good, helpful and necessary and that it will not hurt you always is also hard. It puts the fingers in multiple wounds, dark corners with cobwebs that others either profit from not being cleaning or we like to look away from because they are hard to clean and because we have other things to worry about. To encourage to talk is to give confidence, and confidence comes with positive experiences, and positive experiences in this matter are a question of how we do education and how we raise children to think about their passions – not *jobs*, passions.

Of course, I do not deny anyone the right to not comment about their work because they don't want to. That is fine in principle, but it does come with consequences. Indeed: you're not god, and your work is not heavenly scripture, and that is okay, maybe even better. To share your work can be an amazing thing for both parties. *Culture* was never putting the painting in a museum and putting a price tag on it that

14 And profound, if you *need* to be profound.

would give a Victorian child a nosebleed – it always was feeling, thinking and sharing your perspective. Taking a picture and showing it to someone can be blissful if you offer up some explanation. The door to conversation is thrust open and the picture gets cast into endlessly beautiful prismatic shades of colour. You share your work not to get compliments but to experience community with someone outside of it – your work is not your own but theirs too. You do it not for glory and admiration, but because sharing beautiful things is nice.⁷

You're not god and you don't have to be. If the other person is curious about our process: make their day better by telling you about it, they might just want to try it themselves. If they need some help in getting a grasp on things: tell them about what thought process was behind the making of this thing – this may take their overdue respect and fear of interacting with creative works and make them less afraid of thinking about things that their teachers told them is impenetrable.⁸ You are in a position not only to provide a topic of conversation, but to make that conversation engaging, enjoyable and borderline revolutionary.¹⁵

7 I think Mr. Rogers might very well agree.

8 and truly: nothing *cultural* is impenetrable, not even Yves Klein, any Andrei Tarkovsky film or *Ulysses*.

15 Even if the revolution will not be televised.

*Bullshit Concerto in C Minor*MVT. Nº 2 - *The Curtains Are Fucking Blue*

If you inject your work full with allegory and symbolism, there is nothing wrong with it. If you drench it in aura of decoding and translation, requiring interpretation that, in concept and language, is dependent on a specific economic and/or educational background in a system that profits from keeping people from interaction on their own terms, you are complicit in their cultural discrimination or might even willingly profit from it, continuing a game in which the rules are always in favour of people in your position. There is no beating around the bush here. Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation* (1967) is collection of essays that should be taught in every creative field, if not in school. Not because it is profound and Sontag is a *grand figure* of cultural theory, but because she, in her title essay, expresses something lacking in many circles and conversations I find myself in.

The joke of the English (or in many case: German) teacher reading a passage about blue curtains and asking the question about what the blue curtains mean is a common experience of frustration.¹⁶ The teacher might proclaim: *you see, the blue curtains are a symbol for the main character's depression.*¹⁷ What follows then is either a row of bewildered faces or a couple of shyly nodding heads- either because this makes sense or because the students want to make this dreadful exercise end already. Indeed, learning about literary vocabulary like allegory, metaphor and symbol has been a staple of my education. I was encouraged to *decode* whatever text was put in front of me, and the task of writing an *interpretation* was seen as an easy escape in our written German A-level exams. You would receive a list of texts and tasks and would chose one. In a matter of four hours, you could simply so a Hunter S. Thompson and write some esoterically romantic interpretation of a poem and pass your exam while the joint (or Ritalin) you smoked right before wore off. Writing a literary interpretation was a grade saviour.¹⁸ Not because it was an effective, or at least useful, way to interact with and understand a text, but because you could essentially say whatever you want and pass.

Interpretation is highly valued in the cultural discourse. It paints the work as more than mere content as well as an enigma to be solved. In this, all of us become Rejewskys and Turings.¹⁹ It is only in code-breaking, translating, a work that its true form, its meaning is revealed – everything is might just be called icing, not the cake. To *truly understand*,

to be knowledgeable, intelligent, eloquent, it is vital to *work through* the work. And if the levels of meta you ascend to are too high for others: too bad for them. This is serious business. You *mean* serious business.

For all my fellow Autistics out there: that was sarcasm, at least most of it. It is true that interpretation is seen as a staple of *getting art*. The assumption that decoding is necessary is somewhat titillating. To look at a picture and see it unfold like a Christopher Nolan film is fascinating and might further your engagement. You might feel accomplished for *getting it*. Other pictures might seem as less daunting to interact with. You might feel less shame about not being a members of the *art tribe*. For years I would be soaked in discourse and elusive phrasing, meditations and counter-meditations on the *meaning* of a piece of work – not just those by others, but almost my works. To weave an elaborate web of meanings and references, symbols and allegories, made me a *smart* creative – and the smart ones always succeed.

16 Especially if you're forced to read and discuss someone *profound* (like Goethe is in Germany) while you might want to go home and continue your adventures in masturbation – *well hello there puberty*.

17 Which is also a theory of why it always fucking rains in an Edgar Wallace novel when someone is sad.

19 Marian Rejewsky was a Polish mathematician who in 1932 *cracked* the Nazi's encryption machine *Enigma* used for internal communication. Alan Turing, a British mathematician, (together with Dilly Knox) was the leading head for the development of the *bombe* (an early prototype for the computer) in order to break Enigma codes more effectively while working for the Government Code and Cypher School (GC&CS) at Bletchley Park in service of the British government.

18 Funny enough: because my graduation class wrote our exams during the first COVID lockdown, we had kind of a problem here. The written A-level exams we would write were standardised across all of Thuringia: there was no task that any students, no matter from what school, were unprepared for. Due to the lockdown, our final weeks of preparation were mostly online (we came to school for a few days before our exams to wrap it all up). *No worry*, many thought. But as the day of our written German exam (the one always saved by writing an interpretation) came, as we all sat in a big hall, task in front of us, ready to take the easy route (at least many did), a voice from the heavens told us: *strike the interpretation task from your sheets. Some school hasn't managed to get through the material, ergo no other school may partake in doing this task*. I've rarely heard an uproar this frustrated... The trauma of Thuringian student of the 2020 will echo across generations.

When I was in primary school, one of my special interests was Egyptology, especially the study of hieroglyphs.²⁰ In early secondary school, I became enamoured with Renaissance painting and sculpture.²¹ I loved the idea of things meaning other things, and I still do. A lot of my studio work, especially in nudes, is influenced by the second period, and I have been asked more than once if I am Christian because of my work.²² To reference times periods and iconographies makes things very interesting. I do write codes, and I do like to find them in other works. From this, it might seem like I was joking when I praised Sontag's *Against Interpretation*. But I am not, and since I've somewhat beaten around a bush I said was not to be beaten around, I will make it short.

Interpretation moulds a piece of work. If I look at a painting by a censored artist and find a small details that, in their time, was a code that would be transmitted to others through the painting, I do not interpret the hidden message – I see that it is there and learn about it and its background. The message is part of the content. But if I read a text with blue curtains in it, the curtains simply are blue. I might interpret them as a metaphor for depression and thereby mould the text like clay. But a chair whose legs I saw off to replace them with those of a wood I like better is not the same chair anymore. Interpretation, and this is a criticism some have posed towards Sontag's titular essay, is a very human thing. And it is true: interaction with something moulds the thing into something different. Re-legging a chair makes another chair, but it is still a chair.

The content of a piece of work can be seen as *what is actually there* and interpretation as *what can be there for me*. This *me* does not distinguish between author and consumer. An author's intent, coming back to Barthes, is outside his work and *can* be considered as well as disregarded. The text is there and it is up for grabs. We may make out of it what we may. But still, there are things about it that are undeniably there. It was written during a certain time/period and is automatically influenced by it²³, it uses certain linguistic tools, it has themes, characters, places. The author had experienced this and that while writing it. All that is factual. But still, the curtains *are blue*.

To be clear: there is nothing wrong with symbolism. I love to use red accents in my photos, yet red is still only red. Even though doesn't have a meaning (for me), I know a bit about its usage in painting history, the contexts of usage, the characteristics ascribed – all the things not inherent in the colour but stitched to its foot. But stitches can be cut. To talk about ascribed meanings and contexts is very interesting and vital –

20 My parents and I still have some interesting books on them and Jean-François Champollion, a French philologist who studied the Rosetta Stone.

21 I must admit that this special interest started with Dan Brown's Robert Langdon series – pulp novels at best but high literature to me then.

22 I am, indeed, not.

23 Karl May, a German author who has been criticised highly for his portrayal of Native Americans in his Winnetou books, shortly became an icon (though dead) of rebelling against *wokeness* in Germany a few years back – this *rebellion* suffered from the same misconceptions and misreadings of the arguments brought up against him now like many *anti-woke* movements in the United States.

the swastika in Hinduism in a symbol for the sun. In Germany, it is illegal to show it in public – not because we have something against Hindus but because it was appropriated by the Nazis during the Third Reich. In this prohibition, there only exception is its usage as a religious symbol – everything else is illegal. It is not just a matter of look (tilted/not tilted) but of use that determines its legality. Using it in a creative contexts is a slippery slope and will draw an emotional reaction – not because the swastika *is* evil but because it was used by genocidal maniacs. The swastika is a symbol with ascribed meaning, not an inherent meaning, but a powerful one still.

What draws our attention towards reshaping a work is not only intellectual curiosity, I might argue, but also fear. Interpretation adds complexity, whether there is some or none – and a complex piece of work is less easy to be called obsolete, simple-minded or unworthy of praise. Interpretation shields us from seeming uneducated when engaging and *profound* when presenting. To babble about a picture endlessly is not a disguise but a sign of intelligence. And it is here that I want to come back to the beginning of this subchapter. Interpretation as an intellectual practice naturally is based on shared principles and vocabulary – people who interpret in a specific way might be more likely to share a background in education and/or practice. Anyone who *does not get*, someone who very well might not share this background, can be discarded easily. To speak in an overly complex manner can be read as *thinking* in a complex manner. Whether it is so or not – there is no merit in excluding someone from conversation because of it. This is not physics – you *do not* have to get a degree in photography to feel and think about photography. Equally, you don't need to come from outside academic circles to read of blue curtains and take away nothing but that the curtains were blue. By calling them anything else (instead of simply giving context to the association with blue) – to call blue *depressed* – neither makes you intelligent or the discussion more approachable.

We creatives are a terrified bunch. We try to justify our pursuit. By performing a conventional brand of intelligence,²⁴ we hope to be respected by enough people to warrant our passions. I am very much guilty of this. I naturally have a very *sophisticated* (or overly complex) form of speaking and have taken advantage of it more often than not.²⁵ Using it to paint over my insecurities was a common approach. Even without, the thing I feared most was to be seen as simple – not stupid²⁶ but simple. Whenever I showed my work, I'd be able to construct elaborate

detailings of meaning on the spot while throwing rhetorical smoke grenades. I may have been seem as somewhat smug and arrogant and overly full of myself, but eh, what can you do – I wasn't seen as simple, anything but.

Now, after some more or less humiliating experiences (and a lot of therapy), I have changed. *Red is red*. I like to talk about context and might very well go into far too much detail concerning my motivations, thoughts and process behind a photograph.²⁷ Of course this partly stems from a fear that someone might not be able to engage if they haven't had the full Genesis of a given picture, but balancing my comments is a part of the process.²⁸ I will talk a lot, but only because I want to share things with you, not because I feel the need that I have to ascend in front of you so that you may kiss my feet.

As a closing exercise for myself, I will give a description of this book. You could think of it as an author's not in the middle of the book. *Confession of an Autistic ADOX-Drinker* is a collection of different texts, mostly essays, detailing insights I have gathered as a student. Lots of these things are integral to my process and general approach to my work but are seldom discussed – doing a thing does not always mean that you get to discuss

27 An exhausted teacher has told me more than once that I am allowed to let other people do *some* thinking when looking at my pictures, that not everything needs a complete explanation.

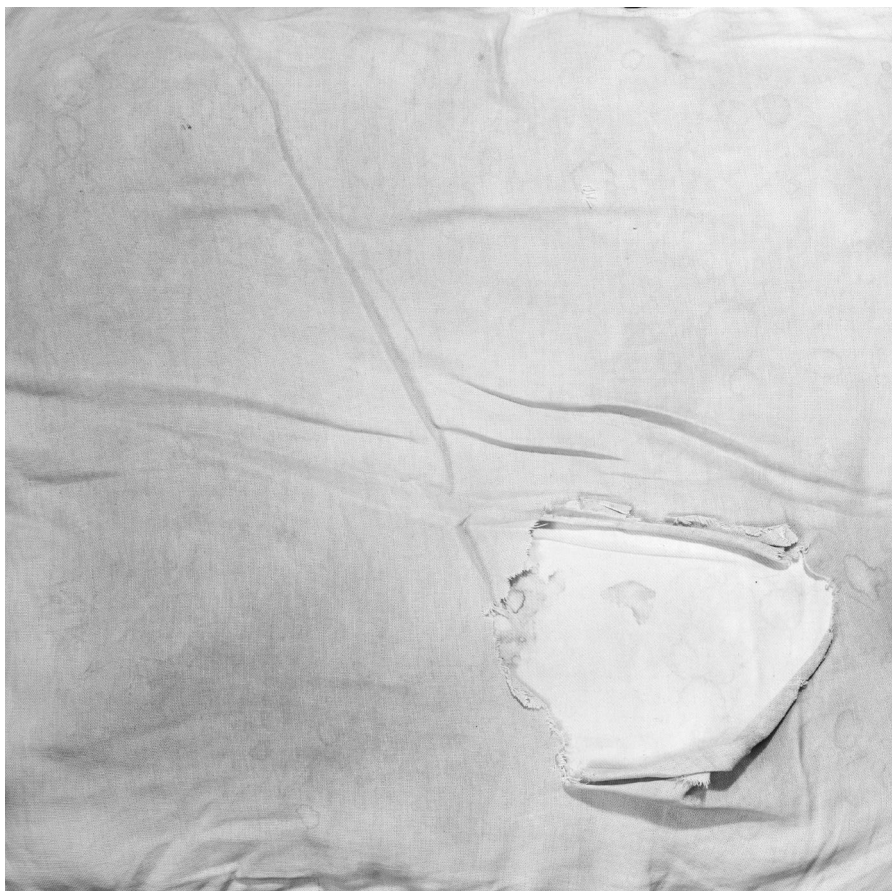
28 Especially because I am learning the difference between an introductory monologue and an answer.

24 one that is valued by circles that are also ready to buy *artworks* for millions of any given currency.

26 although, when I was younger, that meant the same thing.

25 A vital coping mechanism in my masking was (and at times is) shielding myself with highly complex vocabulary and sentence structures, although I always talk in long sentences.

how you came to do it a certain way. These texts were written in the semester before my Bachelor's project and serve to compile what I have learned and think about what I am doing, not only for my own peace of mind, but because many of the topics covered are quite nebulous if you don't study in my fields. They are still interesting and I want people to read about them. The book is structured in an ergodic manner to make the process of writing and reading more engaging (and hopefully interesting). Although essays, all texts are closer to my informal manner of speaking and writing, they rarely fully follow academic rules (such as in my use of footnotes) because they indeed are not academic texts but rather streams of consciousness without the self-enforced baggage of too harsh a writing style (so I hope at least).



Worn-out Pillowcase.

Stochastic PARrots, (fragment.)

I want to say a lot about generative AI. I have a lot to say and I don't have the time.

My generation of photographers, designers and writers will be known as those who witnessed a boom in anxiety because of the rise of large language models. Whether we want to or not, we have to take a stand. Sooner or later, the privilege of disregarding the changes we our professions could face will fade.

Of course, generative AI is a complex field and its discussion centres rather on what it may become than what it is. Taking a stand has to be informed, whichever stand that may be. If I said that I reject generative AI outright, I disregard the benefits it has and can have in projects with physically disabled people, sending me into a rabbit hole of having to nuance my views. Models like ChatGPT, Midjourney and DALL-E can be fun to use and certainly have their uses. But this is not what many of our conversations centre on. Instead, we like to be afraid of a bogeyman instead of how he is used in other instances. Generating images is not photography and no one forced it to be. Generating a text with ChatGPT is not writing and no one forces it to be.

What I see is many interesting experiments with AI,² and though I may refuse to use it, I will not and cannot hold other people from innovatively using it. But we are indeed not a Modern Day Prometheus – we do not bring fire to humanity because it has been kept from them. AI is not a God-given right. It urges us to be responsible, honest and maybe even humble. What I see is not only projects openly discussing their use of AI, furthering our conversations and getting to interesting points – it is also cutting a lot of corners. Cutting corners is not a bad thing, but in a capitalist system, saving time makes not for spare hours we can spend however we want, it makes us crunch and stuff whatever time we have saved with more tasks whose corners are cut, opening up more time which then has to be filled. AI has been widely promoted by tech start-ups and senior companies³ as not only a way to reach more

¹ A term for large language models coined by Emily Bender et al. in *On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big?* in 2021.

² Henceforth, AI will be short for generative AI unless stated otherwise.

³ Although often disguising existing programming as *AI* or otherwise hopping on the train of a hype bubble that will (and should in its current form) burst sooner or later.

efficiency (automation and the continuing of a *spare-time-filled-time circle*), but openly as a way to fully sever creative works for creatives, having *cracked art*, making creatives absolute and scamming their way into the millions (as we saw with NFTs). This is a problem, it is a danger.

I am afraid of fighting a losing battle against technologies that in themselves are neither moral nor immoral but that are free to use in the most malicious of ways by people who might have never respected me for my work but now feel themselves in power of it by means of competition. I am afraid and I will fight, not by rejection but discussion. Rejection will not stop nothing unfortunately.⁴ Discussion is vital. Blindly adopting an instrument just because it is there is not what we study and work for. The instrument is not shiny and some parts are unfinished, prone to error and rotten. Of course I was fascinated when a friend got early access to DALL-E when it first launched, prompting the most abstract and expressionist fever dreams. We are not in that age anymore, at least not on the superficial level of evolved *looks* that we are sold.

We are blindsided by the photorealism of AI, not realising that ChatGPT cannot draw a clock that shows 06:28. The instrument is imperfect and prone to cutting corners that we do not need to cut. I criticise folks, including my dear friends, for using ChatGPT to right a text without having any disorder or disability that hinders them from doing so themselves and not stating it so. Struggling with tasks that are not our preference is natural and not to be met with judgement. But we as humans are not dependent entirely on ourselves and our skills, we are a species of collaboration – foregoing asking for help if it is in your periphery may be understandable, but it does not free you from criticism.⁵ ChatGPT is a tool, not a replacement. If treated as such, taking it as a new standard, furthers the dangers of losing skills and being dependent on a machine that can't even do a certain level of basic calculus right. I will say it again: using AI is not *doing the thing* it imitates, especially if you could do the thing without.

AI will not be stopped fully, and for some, it should not. It is not a devil. But it a Pandora's box, and without honesty, openness and a stern sense of responsibility, it will be more than a shot to the foot, it will be an amputation – because some day, we might realise that what we did was not for the common good but simply bullets in the guns of people who never respected us and never valued our work in the first place.

We have to see AI as what it is: a stochastic parrot, and we have to be careful with such pets.

4 Unless we burn a few servers. [He
says jokingly of course]

5 I myself have earned some stern
talking-tos for not asking for help
when I was severely depressed, and
they were more than well-founded.
Not asking for help is an active choice,
not a passive one.



Psychosomatic T-Rex arm.

The camera is an existentialist.

The photographer has the choice
of being a nihilist or an absurdist.

I fancy absurdism.

~~Profound~~ Theory Won't
Save you (but it will
HELP).

CONTENT WARNING: DISCUSSION OF MENTAL ILLNESS, SUICIDE, RAPE,
ILLNESS, PAEDOPHILIA AND DEATH.

Don't be profound.
Profound is for the rich.
Profound is for the glorified.
Profound is for the dead.
Don't be *profound*.
Don't do it for riches.
Don't do it for glory.
Don't do it for death.

The theory that we are entering a new era of Romanticism is quite appealing.

Again we look for a way out. Out of the terrors that we witness on a day-to-day basis, supercharged by a 24 hour new cycle and social media. Out of the gloom of having to perform better, faster, more efficiently, to look good, to do good, to say good – to be happy. *It is what it is*¹ turns from a conservative passivity into a broader state of leaving things, looking for an escape. Not to say that this is a time of passivity. On the contrary, Patti Smith remarked in an interview that the younger generations of the 21st century have the most capabilities to truly make a change. Black Lives Matter, Fridays for Future, the Women's Liberation Movement in Iran and so many more are charged with crowds of young, interested, energetic people. This is a time of change for certain.

Still, with Millennials and all after, though growing up rather well off for the most part, being faced with horrific scenarios in economy, politics and ecology, the wish to escape is burning. Escapism might be

the antidote to an inescapable *now*.

SUSPIRIA DE PROFUNDIS

For decades, a Western canon of (pop) culture has emerged that deifies those who suffer but are profound in their creative work. Cobain, Winehouse, Van Gogh, Kahlo, Avicii, Bukowski, Hemmingway, Poe, Mapplethorpe, Basquiat, Kafka, Hendrix – the *27 club* is unanimous with greatness. *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara saw immense interest on TikTok last year. Lana Del Rey by some is heralded as one of the most profound musicians of recent history. *13 Reasons Why* became (in)famous for its addressment of mental illnesses. Even in our escapism, we still look for suffering. Sadness for sadness. Torment for torment.

In Victorian England, contracting tuberculosis became a polished ideal of beauty – suffering from a bacterial infection became shaped into an image of beautiful suffering. Sick, white, upper-class patients could be sure of their virtue in the eyes of others. Not that some might have minded sooner or later – virtue

¹ A phrase that drives me nuts.

doesn't mean shit if your dead. To die aesthetically ... sure there is virtue in that. Contracting tuberculosis became less scrutinised, possible even *in fashion*.²

To be clear: mental health struggles (illnesses and disorders) are not contractible like a lung infection. I often hear from friends that relatives or acquaintances label diagnoses of depression, ADHD, Autism, OCD and anxiety as *trendy*: *Back in my day, we didn't have that kinda stuff*. To cut this discussion short (because it is long and weary and doesn't fit in its entirety here), I will merely state that, as soon as we didn't force left-handed children to write with their right, cases of left-handedness skyrocketed and eventually plateaued – it had always been there, it just had become visible. The same applies for mental health struggles. Medical knowledge and societal awareness broaden. Otherwise, we might still practice blood-letting to cure a cold. More prevalent diagnoses and treatments are not a sign of trendiness or a whole generation being infected – if grandpa came from the war and his hands shook, he was a bit jittery instead of suffering from PTSD.

To *contract* mental health struggles are not a trend. It cannot be. To *have* such struggles is not a new t-shirt you can buy at the store. To choose them implies that such choices can be reversed. They cannot because they are not. Even if their development is due to poor choices, the result, the illness, the suffering, is not merely of one's own making. A common example here might be addiction. Addiction itself is a disorder, based in genetics and experiences – it is a lot, but it not a choice. Neither are all other illnesses and disorders mentioned above and all the ones not mentioned. Contraction is not a trend. Performance is.

Tuberculosis was perceived as an *artistic illness*. Many figures of creative accomplishment, from Chopin to Dostoevsky to Beardsley, suffered from it. Admirers (of these figures and the figure of the *beautifully sick*) sought to imitate the pale skin tuberculosis brought with it – as the person sick was the person of genius and accomplishment, imitating their illness seemed to transfer their *aura of the profound*. Sickness was equated with artistry, and a lack of artistry (or a lack of accomplishment) could be cured with sickness. Again: I will not equate tuberculosis with mental health struggles. Still, they share a basis in performance and the motivation behind performance.

It seems to me at times that we discard how we establish beliefs through popular culture.

2 Funnily enough people nowadays again find it to be in fashion to drink *raw* (unpasteurised) milk. And low and behold: that stuff can give you tuberculosis.

I am in the deepest depression yet. Pain is in everything. All day, every day. I seem to have forgotten how to be happy. My memories fails be and my imagination does so, too. I am not sad. I am not not happy. I am fully and fundamentally changed. My system has undergone rewiring. My hedonic set point is somewhere out there, close to the core of Mother Earth. I am not sad. I am a new me, so it seems. I am suffering and don't even know if suffering is the new default, ergo not being suffering anymore, I wonder. I am without purpose. The only thing that gives me some grip on it all are my friends and my work, and the latter is more readily available. I can work all day, every day. Work is there. Work keeps me sane. Work makes things worthwhile. I wonder if I'm deserving of this state. Maybe I'm wrong and there is a god and he has cast judgement upon me. Maybe I am a modern Job. Maybe I am just me. Maybe I have put the universe in misbalance. Maybe I am being punished. Punished for my life. Punished for being me. I wonder if I have deserved this. But the work is there. I can tell the world fuck you. I have a way to show how I suffer. I have a way of defiance. I have a way of transcendence. I have a way of meaning. I haven't been able to cry for months since it happened, and I listen to sad music without end to make myself cry. But I can work. The tears get stuck in my throat. I cannot cry. I cannot cry and want to do nothing but crying. This is damage, for sure. But it is good damage. It is good damage because I make it so. And since I make it so, suffering might just be a gift. And a gift you do not cast away. I am punishment. I am pain. I am the counterbalance. I'm damaged, but it is good damage. I want to be verified as suffering. Maybe that will make it worthwhile.

If I'm not era-defining, transcending and bordering on being a genius, I am helpless for nothing. But for now, I am special.

Discussing the effects of romanticising mental health struggles is a complex conversation. It adds complexity unto an already complex array of underlying problems. Stigma, shame, misinformation, lack of

education. Still, it is vital, but this is not the point to detail it in every aspect. This is a personal account of what I have learned. It is not biblical. But it is fact, for me. The section above is a rough description of my mental state in the winters of 2021/22 and 2022/23. It showcases exactly what this chapter is about. The topics addressed are neither universal nor rare. I am a case of my own study, and there are countless like me – at least the probability is very high. I hope to now get to the bottom of what I mean to say.

Suffering does not teach you anything.

Suffering does not give you virtue.

Suffering does not make you profound.

There is no good damage.

Suffering is excruciating. Not just because of its painfulness, but because it lacks purpose. Friedrich Nietzsche as well as Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl are credited with the quote *to live is to suffer; to survive is to find meaning in suffering*.³ Both had an interest in drawing a connection between suffering and meaning in their respective fields. Their reason, especially Frankl's, is not far-fetched. Frankl survived imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp, establishing logotherapy⁴ later in his life, always in a search for meaning in not just the innocent suffering of the Holocaust but meaning in surviving it. Suffering is terrifying because it does not make sense, and enduring things that do not make sense in itself is painful. Many philosophers and psychologists, even figures worthy of the highest criticism like Jordan B. Peterson, detail the human need for understanding things, knowing why they happen. In this, I can also find myself.⁵ Many painful things have happened to me. Many painful things did not make sense, they did not happen for a reason. They just happened. There was no lesson to be learned. Life isn't made out of fables. Things don't always happen so that we may learn from them. Many of those things involve pain; pain without a moral at the end of the story. *Things don't happen to you, they happen for you* – as well intentioned as this phrase may be – just does not apply to too many things. I didn't learn anything from depression. I didn't learn anything from loved ones dying and others trying to take their own lives. I didn't learn anything from loved ones suffering on their death bed. I didn't learn anything because there was no lesson. Things just happened and could only be left as they were in their *lessonlessness*.

I understand the deep desire to be comforted in pain. Pain isolates,

pain fills with shame. At some point, pain doesn't feel as real anymore and the question of whether I am faking it creeps in.⁶ To hear that, yes, the pain is noticeable or at least becomes noticeable through talking, is not a selfish wish. It is a wish for comfort, to not be alone. It is a wish for verification, proven authenticity.⁷ But since I don't want to be a bother (all the time), self-verification is the next-best thing. A theory about why we enjoy *sad* works is that of self-verification: we see ourselves in the suffering of others, possibly fictional characters, and in our companionship to them feel like we are actually feeling what we are feeling. In

6 ... this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time.

7 A wish that becomes even deeper the more novel an illness or disorder is or the more I cannot admit to myself that I am *authentically suffering from*.

3 though the quote comes from Gordon Allport, a professor of psychology at Harvard University. His entire quote from his preface to Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946) reads:

[...] to live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in the suffering. If there is a purpose in life at all, there must be a purpose in suffering and dying. But no man can tell another what this purpose is. Each must find out for himself, and must accept the responsibility that his answer prescribes. If he succeeds he will continue to grow in spite of all indignities.

4 a form of psychotherapy in which treatment is pursued by healing through finding meaning, the drive for meaning being the deepest force for human pursuits (Kierkegaard would have loved it).

5 This might be the only point in which Peterson and I would agree, and I excuse myself with him having had a good day, of which he hasn't seemed to have had many.

itself, this is a positive – to connect with representation is a key aspect of self-acceptance. But if such sources of self-verification drift into the realm of (re-)inforcing my negligent tendencies, strengthen my beliefs, ease me by finding comfort in a state that, if I don't watch myself, will have detrimental effects on my health and life, their messages and my interaction with them is to be scrutinised.

Looking for meaning in a meaningless state is a search for comfort, for the certainty that this is going somewhere, that I will be stronger in the end and will have learnt *more*. I might want a story, an arch, a goal-driven linearity. My suffering has to have a positive outcome, why would it be so prolonged otherwise?

But in the end, suffering does not teach you anything. It does not follow a purpose.⁸ If you are of certain religious beliefs, you might disagree with this. But spiritual and religious discussions with my arguments, although an immensely interesting discussion, is for another time. To me, if suffering involuntarily, you just do exactly that. There is no goal in suffering but to deal with it – not just to endure, as Nietzsche would argue, but to find ways in which to cope. But on its own, suffering will never teach anything to anyone.

To deal with suffering means to cope. To cope means to rethink. Not to rethink whether or not one suffers, but how to handle it. As non-chalant as it sounds, the process of figuring that shit out is harder than words can describe. In a capitalist system in which illness is equated to laziness and therefore lesser moral character, overcoming stigmata and shame over illness is not the default. One might argue that everything opposes such measures. To *heal* is individualised in the West – everyone has their own bootstraps to pull themselves up from. To *heal* is seen as to *get fixed*, echoing models of wholeness that in their (at times religious, at times medical) antiquity has cost more lives that can be counted and ruined even more. To handle suffering is not to fix myself. I am not responsible for my suffering, because if I were, we could argue that I might deserve it. To *heal* is to incorporate, to adjust, to make life more accessible, as hard and taboo as it is.

But still, *healing* from suffering does not fill suffering with virtue – neither in the moment nor in retrospect. Suffering was always meaningless. Suffering was always without virtue. To suffer is not to become smarter or more virtuous. To deal with suffering is simply that: to deal with suffering. That is reason enough to try, fail and retry approaching it. There is no need for an apotheosis if a way to be less miserable is already an end product. An always evolving product

needing of rearrangements and updates for sure, but still a place to arrive at for a while. You will not find virtue, and you will not need it to get better. People are people, not saints who receive a heavenly *good-job stamp*⁹ at the end of the month. We do this for ourselves, for our friends and loved ones. And that is enough.

9 If your beliefs should tell you so though, I am of the belief that you should wish to get better for your own sake first.

8 Please keep in mind that I am addressing involuntary mental conditions. We are not talking about Thích Quảng Đức, a Buddhist monk who set himself on fire in Saigon in 1963 in protest of the oppression of Buddhists in Vietnam by its then Catholic head of state. If you have ever listened to *Rage Against The Machine's* debut album, you know his face – the cover is a photo of his self-inflammation. His *suffering* came of a conscious choice, and as an act of protest, it came with a clear message, a goal, and therefore some kind of purpose. His *suffering's* purpose was to bring about a political change. Depression, for instance, can make no such claims.

The myth of the tortured artist makes my blood boil like little else. Though yes, *art* as commodity of a capitalist system is something that needs to justify itself and has to handle practice as well as a legitimatisation of existence, we love to look for inspiration in others' works and lives. *Art* relates so very deeply to human conditions and stories, it puts fingers in wounds and gives us tools to cope with realities outside of it. Yet in this, to glorify an *artist* or their work in shortly at hand. If the *artist* then created in times of suffering, a dramatic effect becomes almost inherent to their work – we love a good background story as a meta level of elevation. *Art* history and critique are littered with more than fanciful words and Mann-esque passages about meanings and interpretations – they are prone to *frame*. Framing, obviously, is not malicious in itself: to frame something is to contextualise in the first place. Still, the practice of framing makes malleable – anything can be presented in the *right* way with enough credentials and barrier-building language.

The *art world* loves canon, and maybe most of all the canon of the *suffering artist*. How often have I read or heard about Van Gogh's life and how beautiful his works are? How often have I seen *The Starry Night* and heard about him cutting off his ear and giving it to his favourite prostitute as a gift?¹⁰ His *Korenveld met kraaien* (Wheatfield with Crows) is inextricably linked to his suicide because, according to the canon, it was his last painting.¹¹ The letters he wrote to his brother Theo, a collection that has seen the light of day in various paperback collections, are filled with passion for a craft he saw little success with and the pains of money worries, illness and loneliness. I read Van Gogh's letters when I must have been 15 or 16, and I found them deeply touching. His works seemed to gain an atmosphere of overcoming, and even his early, naïve sketches gained a foreboding profoundness.

Because of his letters and documented history, Van Gogh's life lends itself perfectly to contextualise his works; that is a good thing. Even if he might not be the central figure he is made out to be in regards of technique, the canon of Van Gogh has inspired many to pursue *art*, especially painting, themselves – despite or maybe even because of mental anguish. Still, Van Gogh is a brand more than a person. There is more Van Gogh merchandise than one could possibly by, his faces is plastered on the poster of every exhibition that holds at least one of his works – recently, he has even made the jump into the field of *immersive exhibition experience* as exemplified by *Inside Van Gogh*; a traveling exhibition working with projections of his works, allowing visitors to

be in Van Gogh's world. Outrageous ticket prices and over-commercialisation of a literally starving artist aside, it is not a far stretch to say that the brand Van Gogh would not have seen this kind of continuing success without its canon, and its canon focusses on his mental illness so very much.

Van Gogh was not a happy person, that is documented, and his story is not one of overcoming despite his posthumous success. It is more than fair to say that Van Gogh is dead and that all praise his name has received doesn't mean anything to him because he is, indeed, dead. What is interesting is that the discussion around him and his work share lots of similarities with those in the field of *art brut*, an *artistic* field especially focussing

¹⁰ A story that is highly contested by historians.

¹¹ Indeed it was not, that was *Boomwortels* (Tree Roots), yet *Wheatfield* was portrayed as Van Gogh's final act before suicide in Vincente Minnelli's film *Lust for Life* (1956).

on the works of clinic patients suffering from a diverse range of mental illnesses and disorders. Art brut is centred on autodidacticism¹² and draws a direct line between the works of clinical inmates and the inmates' psychiatric profile. Though a niche subject, art brut found a committed circle of intellectuals and fellow creatives enamoured with painting, sculptures and writing seemingly springing from an educational vacuum with little more input than illness and disorder. The works, so unlike their contemporaries in style and execution, diverge so strongly from what is considered to be a *mature* work that the fact the author did not have educational resources quickly becomes overshadowed by their diagnosis. What might insensitively be called a *childlike picture* becomes a *profound* study of human psychology – in short: works of this field are very prone to being pathologised, the unusual techniques seen as derivatives of diagnosis and not as what a painting might just look like if you haven't had to break your back in academic drawing.

I was fortunate to take a class on art brut.¹³ In it, discussions of different *artists* ascribed to the field quickly centred around whether the author (or more so: their biography and diagnosis) should be separated from their work, whether their clinical background had much a say on how we interact with their work. This is a very interesting discussion which I will cut short just to jump to my point for now. Yes, in the context of art brut, an intellectualised classification of works, clinical backgrounds matter because the field's definition centres on them. No, the works in themselves are not psychotic, melancholic or manic, but their makers were and much can be understood about their work by researching from what lived experiences they came from – put differently: their motivation(s).

CAREFUL WITH THAT AXE EUGENE!

As a result of widening explorations of self-expression I have had the interesting experience of getting in contact with many complex and novel concepts and projects: I might need my time becoming familiar, but I will. Jo Spence was a British photographer who approached photography as a way of *self-therapy*, producing fascinating works that play a lot with symbolism. Although her talks about work fill me with some unease at times, she is a person more than worth researching and I will have to continue to do so.¹⁵ Spence's approach of using photography as an element of therapy by oneself towards oneself has found resonance since the 1980s

12 Doing a thing without formal education but by teaching oneself.

13 For it, I researched Adolf Wölfli, a Swiss painter and writer frantically working at the Waldau Clinic in Bern who also suffered from schizophrenia and was initially incarcerated because he raped minors. Wölfli's work is immensely interesting, but the guy was a piece of shit. Still, his hallucinatory states and delusions made for a creative world that to me, as someone without Schizophrenia, is interesting rather because it is so different to mine than because it was executed technically well.

15 A nice starting point is a documentary by Ian Potts titled *Jo Spence - Putting Myself in the Picture* (1987).

According to German law, I am disabled, and I do not need German law to know it. The WHO classifies me as psychologically disordered (although I can argue that I am developmentally disordered, at least as far the Autism goes). I have been to therapy for a DPDR¹⁴ and depression and in my diagnosis results for Autism, a social phobia was suspected. I am disabled. I do not lay claim to the sole and only right way to live with my disability because I haven't found it. I neither judge the wishes for and ways pursuing of ease of pain without self-scrutiny – I have done stupid shit to get by. But what I experience so often in my surroundings and the outside world at large is troubling at times too often.

With developments in studying mental illnesses and disorders, especially in the age of social media, new awareness and discourses are already establishing themselves, mostly for the better.

Between personality disorders, depressive disorders, addiction, anxiety disorders, , suicidality and self-harm, ADHD, OCD, PTSD, eating disorders, paranoid schizophrenia and (suspected) Autism I find a wide spectrum of *stuff* in my friends, loved ones and myself. I love every one of them. I love them and why they are hurt, I am hurt. But I don't pity them, because pity does nothing for them. I hope they don't pity me, because though I want empathy and compassion, especially in times of struggle, pity does nothing for me. Each of them has their own way of getting by and with time, those ways deviate and change, in short: they mature in the best case. There were (at sometimes are) times when all is very much not well and I tried my best taking care of them, as did they for me. We have had to *adult* at too young an age more often than not and least to say: we have experienced things together and I have been shaped by it.

Our parents' and grandparents' generations, often referred to as *boomers*,¹⁶ are well known for their stance on many of the ailments I have listed: *This stuff didn't exist in my day. You just gotta push through. Stop making such a fuss.* As often as I have encountered such remarks, I myself have to remark that not only do these views prevail also in *our* generations, that is *Millennials* and *Gen Z*, but also that I know many *boomers* that are opposed to them and therefore almost automatically earn the title of *progressiveness*.¹⁷ As times change, I found myself at the age of 17 realising that I had adopted many such beliefs by assimilation of exposure, itself resulting in struggles that are yet to be unravelled completely and that are too be dismantled – an experience not uncommon for late-diagnosed Autistics. I am 23 now and have spent every single day working on it. It has helped me immensely in every

14a 6B66 *Depersonalization-derealization disorder*

ICD-11, v2024-01

Depersonalization-derealization disorder is characterised by persistent or recurrent experiences of depersonalization, derealization, or both. Depersonalization is characterised by experiencing the self as strange or unreal, or feeling detached from, or as though one were an outside observer of, one's thoughts, feelings, sensations, body, or actions. Derealization is characterised by experiencing other persons, objects, or the world as strange or unreal (e.g., dreamlike, distant, foggy, lifeless, colourless, or visually distorted) or feeling detached from one's surroundings during experiences of depersonalization or derealization, reality testing remains intact. The experiences of depersonalization or derealization do not occur exclusively during another dissociative disorder and are not better explained by another mental, behavioural or neurodevelopmental disorder. The experiences of depersonalization or derealization are not due to the direct effects of a substance or medication on the central nervous system, including withdrawal effects, and are not due to a disease of the nervous system or to head trauma. The symptoms result in significant distress or impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning.

14b *Dissociative Disorders*

DSM-V 328

[...] Depersonalization/derealization disorder is characterized by clinically significant persistent or recurrent depersonalization (i.e., experiences of unreality or detachment from one's mind, self, or body) and/or derealization (i.e., experiences of unreality or detachment from one's surroundings). These alterations of experience are accompanied by intact reality testing. There is no evidence of any distinction between individuals with predominantly depersonalization versus derealization symptoms. Therefore, individuals with this disorder can have depersonalization, derealization, or both.

16 A word describing an attitude in association to age rather than a generational title, by now loosened from the term *baby boomers* that is derived from.

17 Although *progress* in this case is merely a return to or arrival at inter-human dignity and respect.

way and my life has become more beautiful in the long run. Nonetheless, the idea of a fast recovery resembling frolicking through wheat fields is absurd. Therapy and everything outside is not easy, it is the opposite in every way, most of all the ways you haven't been able to imagine.

autistica founds research into Autism. On their website, they list a project titled Understanding suicide in Autism. Right below the title, there is a quote: *It's too late for my Charlie, but we can tackle mental health in Autism. Karen, Mum.* Research over the last few months could only go so far. I just learned about *autistica*, I just found their page. Karen's quote is highlighted typographically, it is the first thing that catches your eye. In a split second, I was on the verge of tears. The project described was headed by Dr Sarah Cassidy whose findings are referenced in *Is This Autism* by Donna Henderson et al.

In another study, *A systematic review and meta-analysis of suicidality in autistic and possibly autistic people without co-occurring intellectual disability* (2023) with 48.186 Autistic and possibly Autistic participants (Newell et al. 2023), Newell et al. (including Cassidy) found a rate 34.2% of suicidal ideation,¹⁸ with suicide attempts and behaviours at 24.3% as well as suicide plans at 21.9% (see Newell et al. 2023). The suicide rate for non-Autistics in *Is This Autism* is put at 4%. We are above eight times more likely to want to die and possibly carry through. Suicide is real for all people of all possible groups, but for Autistics, it is a leading cause.

I wanted to start a paragraph saying that I am very happy to be alive and that I am proud of myself and everyone else who also is. No matter how *doom-and-gloom* many of my theses are, I am happy. There were many times when I was not, when I was anything but. This book could not have been made in a state of depression, at the least because it took so much effort to make, and that's exactly what you don't have when depressed. I am happy and I am happy that I can do this. And there goes the paragraph.

Before my final rambling, I want to *grab my own nose*.¹⁹ I have witnessed and followed many ways of dealing with mental health struggles, and there are at least as many unhealthy as there are healthy ones. I have strong but informed opinions in this matter though I will certainly discuss rather than purely take my opinion as cast in gold. Still, I can become quite aggravated by certain methods of *dealing with* which, I have to clarify, I will always keep out of conversation except for scenarios in which an intervention is needed. At some point in the last few years, I was overcome with the question of why many such methods

bothered me so much. *People do what they can, who are you to judge? Don't you want them to be happy?* Indeed I want people to suffer less and be happy because I also want it for myself. You and I are struggling and automatically have more in common than what divides us.

It has taken me a long time to come to a satisfying answer for this question, and there might come a more satisfying one someday. But today's draft is: *you are coping in ways that remind me too much of myself from back when or in ways that I have seen in others – whether one or the other, your way of coping terrifies me.* This is clearly separated from *not doing things my way, my way or the highway* being a common thought struggle for Autistics. No, it is more.

I am secretly terrified of people who romanticise (their) mental illness as well as those who try approaching coping creatively and more often than not border on overload because of it. I have been guilty of both in some ways myself. I thought solitude and magnificence would *save me* if God would not be bothered, with Protestantism and its gospel

18 *Suicidal ideation refers to thinking about or formulating plans for suicide. The ideation exists on a spectrum of intensity, beginning with a general desire to die that lacks any concrete method, plan, intention, or action and progressing to active suicidal ideation, which involves a detailed plan and a determined intent to act on the ideas. Suicidal ideation is closely associated with both suicidal attempts and deaths, serving as a significant risk factor for future suicide attempts. [...] Research indicates that some individuals attempt suicide without prior suicidal ideation, though this is debated due to potential underreporting post-attempt due to stigma. A helpful analogy is to view suicidal ideation as the more significant, unseen portion of an iceberg, with the act of suicide as the visible tip. This perspective emphasizes the need for early identification and targeted intervention of those with suicidal ideation to prevent progression to suicide. (Harper et al. 2024)*

19 *sich selber an die Nase fassen*: a German expression for reflecting on yourself.

of working for salvation still lingering (see *Am I a Genius?*). But those modes of thinking, vastly informed by internalised ableism and decrying of mental health struggles still all too common in German society, are areas that I have been working and continue to work on: it doesn't make you happy for a long time, but eventually I learned that out of *suffering less* something akin to happiness can grow. Still, whenever I encounter patterns similar enough to those old processes, I feel haunted as of a ghost of myself, and that haunting is a problem in itself.

That said: I have learned to reject our romance towards mental illness and will not return to worshipping those idols. They are all dead. Too many died of their own hands. Another's tragic life might bring me catharsis, but it will not make mine less gruelling. I find it sickening to shout against a storm that I cannot stop, but will all air around me in heavy turmoil, I cannot hold my breath either. I am terrified that many of us have come to re-evaluate Nabokov's *Lolita* not as one of many books he wrote about similar subject matters, pushing it to the point of being a wee bit too fond of relationships with minors, but as a style pushed by film and music. In *Lolita: The Story of a Cover Girl*, a vital question is posed: how should the cover of Nabokov's novel be designed? What should it show and what should it not show? Let's quickly ask the man himself:

I want pure colors, melting clouds, accurately drawn details, a sunburst above a receding road with the light reflected in furrows and ruts, after rain.

Lolita's first edition was purely typographical, not at all what we associate with the story: bikinis, heart-shaped sunglasses and lollipops. That came with Stanley Kubrick's 1962 film adaption and was carried and on furthered in subsequent decades. Yes, covers of the book deviating from this now cliché image exist, some quite good, but a struggle against a trope puts the trope in question when it itself went against what was explicitly ordered. Designers went against Nabokov's wish and their choice was assimilated without much question until someone thought of going against their establishment.

Nabokov's novel is not an easy read and it is not a romantic story, it literally is the first-person testament of a paedophile who kidnaps a girl of 12 and rapes her while going on a road trip (fleeing).²⁰ Honestly, I was taken out cold by learning that *Lolita's* characters and dynamics have been heavily romanticised and re-written in such glorifying ways,

first on Tumblr, later on TikTok.²¹ This is not because many of the players in this game were/are young girls and women but because it exactly that demographic that is subjected to immense suffering in the novel.

Similar outcries have to be directed to the rocket-like popularity that Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* especially on book influencer accounts on TikTok and Instagram last year. *A Little Life* is a book that stretches the style of tortured porn to the extent that it paints one of its main character's as deserving of his death because of the amount of suffering he endures. Yanigahara has stated in interviews that she did not consult mental health professionals for this story that makes no stop before some of the most traumatising events a person can experience, instead going in depth, leaving the reader aghast. Filming yourself while reading *A Little Life*, sooner than not sobbing at the character's stories, was a trend flooding social media for a few months. But in the end, readers, whether they knew it or not, were left with one conclusion: *Sometimes it is better to kill yourself than suffer.*²²

There are many examples such as *Lolita* and *A Little Life*. Representation of mental crises in media are vital for us to feel seen

21 For more on this phenomenon, I refer you to Yhara zayd's *The Nymphet femme Fatale (As popularized by Misreadings of Lolita)* and Jordan Theresa's *the lolita resurgence ... when history repeats itself*

22 I highly encourage you to watch Owl Criticism's *Euthanasia fan fiction* for an in-depth analysis and critique of *A Little Life*.

20 For more on *Lolita*, I suggest *Philosophy Tube's Beauty in Ugly Times* (which is also about Nabokov's *Ada* or *Ardor: A Family Chronicle*), *Owl Criticism's Hiding in Plain Sight*, *Man Carrying Thing's How the Publishing Industry Failed "Lolita" (as told by terrible book covers)* as well as *Horses' LOLITA: The Worst Masterpiece*.

and more work has to be done in establishing true representation. This is necessary not only because we deserve good representation but also because the twisted of (sometimes already bad) depictions do not help us, as cathartic as they may feel when we lean in, but make things worse. I say this from the point of view of someone who has known people falling victim to such readings and yes, they worsen your state, self-agency or not. We do not *choose* to be depressed, we *are* and have to deal with it.

Your mental illness and/or disorder shape your work, obviously – in photography and everywhere other corner of your professional and private life. Enough people want to take the fact of your experience from you and they are in the wrong for that and it therefore makes sense to lean in. But there is a difference between *leaning in* and *standing up for yourself*. *Delusion(al)* is a medical term describing terrifying experiences that people actually suffer under. As much as language evolves, using terms that are very much used for a much needed purpose colloquially (and most of all: seriously rather than comically), without really relating to the experiences they describe, without wanting to actually learn about them, is a thing that takes agency from people *really* described by them, and to an extent, it takes their dignity. Liking your kitchen to be clean does not equate OCD. Being forgetful does not automatically constitute ADHD. Stimming does not make you Autistic from the get-go. Feeling exhausted from work is not equal to depression without some other things happening parallel. You are delusional, you fantasise (and if you actually are delusional, please get professional help).

Making a stand, saying *I am here and I struggle* is one of the bravest things you can do and I applaud everyone who does it. You might be surprised, but there are more depressed or otherwise struggling photographers than you might know, and many of them I am happy to call colleagues and friends. I admit without hesitation that I very quickly become a cheerleader for these people – struggling and therein having much in common with me – when they work. Not to do *great* work, just work. I will not shut up about it, I will not stop to make jokes about they're leaving everyone else in the dust, I will not seize to tell them that they are amazing for trying (and most often succeeding). I cannot help but feel immense joy and pride for them. As a nice aside I am more often than not stunned by their beautiful work, even though they didn't even have to produce things on such a level. I do this not just because it is fun (it is) but because I know that I'd like that attitude myself when I am struggling and because I have no reason not to cheer people on, more

often than not stating little more than my honest opinion.

Your works are always a statement, even those without a statement (see *PersVPriv*). Using your work to not only approach your struggles in ways that are healthy and furthering but also being open about your struggles (if you want to) is a strong thing, it is a good thing. That is *making a stand*, and the stand is desperately needed; in the creative fields and society at large. *Leaning in* helps no one, least of all yourself. A very short example of myself doing exactly that as well as illustrating my point may be warranted.

In the winter in which I transitioned from figurative painting to photography, the winter that combined a plausible Seasonal Affective Disorder,²³ the (colloquially) traumatising experiences of a recent breakup as well as the bottled-up grief from my sibling's death a year before, brought forth a project which hasn't been finished to these day and never will be without caution. At some point, somewhere between self-indulgent creative madness and actual conceptions of how the world was, I came up with the character of *Saint Hauck*, heavily based on the atmospheric figure of Nick Cave and the Bad Seed's *Saint Huck* from a song of the same name. Saint Hauck was a personification of depressive terrors, always in the dead angle, always twisting me and the world around me, infecting my thoughts like a cancer. I began a series of illustrations about Saint Hauck. In 10 images, I wanted to encapsulate him, never finishing more than two. Each image

23 SAD lol.

was a finger of mine Saint Hauck would break, each a torture I would be subjected to. I only ever came as far as thinking of the following three titles:

Saint Hauck tells me I can go without another meal and breaks a finger. Saint Hauck, clothed in red, hisses in my ear while I, exhausted and drained of energy, held myself to a windowsill.

Saint Hauck shows me my dead [sibling's] (in my dreams) to make sure I do not forget and breaks a finger. Saint Hauck towers above me, leaning in towards my face which I try to shield, pointing a finger of dread towards someone outside the frame.

Saint Hauck will gift me a blowjob while showing me [their] face. Saint Hauck standing behind me while I sit, twisting in the joys of an orgasm while a head bops between my legs, my eyes widened in horror.

Least to say: this is dark shit. I do not feel cringe or shame about it, I just feel really sad. I spent weeks thinking about this series, wanting to find just the right spot to put my finger into a wound I had not caused, thereby infecting it even more. I wanted to find that singular moment I would break down, I wanted nothing more but sob, and as long as I didn't (or couldn't), I would be righteous in pursuing this work of horror, terrorising the world back into its tracks.

Barely anyone knows about this abandoned project. It is for the better. It is one of the unhealthiest things that I have ever subjected myself to. It was never about finishing it, it was always about maintaining a level and way of suffering that made me feel validated (by myself) rather than getting better. Getting better was a gruelling process, but with time and the help of many wonderful people, I managed; and it is for the better. I do not wish to revisit Saint Hauck. He never was real and the promises of binding him were empty. The project, if finished, would not have been a statement of self-advocacy but one of *Ye look upon me and how profoundly I hath suffered!* No one would have benefited, least of all me. In the end, abandoning the project was the best to be done.

This is one of the reasons why my I so firmly stand against romanticising mental health struggles. It prolongs suffering and without an intervention, it will kill you. It is the reason why I am outspoken against colloquialising medical terminology without regard. It is the reason why I feel terrified by and sad for fellow photographers who

clearly struggle but make connections between their struggles and work that hit a bit close to home. I am afraid for and of them, and I can only present my points, talk about the stances I have developed and how I did it, offer my help. We are here to express, we are not here to suffer. Suffering does not further your work, it doesn't help anyone and it will not cleanse. It will not make you or your work profound. But that is ok. Doing things in a healthy manner is not the same as not doing the thing at all. Gathering new approaches, unlearning and relearning is long, hard and tiresome – but it is worth it. We suffer regardless of our work, but we don't have to suffer alone. Photography is not therapy – therapy is therapy. A healthy approach to work is contingent on healthy approaches to coping outside of work. Asking for help, going to therapy, just talking...those are the little steps, and every step is worth more than what the moment makes it.

Remember: photography is fun, even if *having fun* is difficult. Someday, it will be less so. Getting there is a hard and long road, but there are other wayfaring strangers ready to accompany you. Trust me. I found them. I am one.

For me, things changed already before my diagnosis, and I am happy about it. But true, deep understanding of myself and the acceptance that crept in with it had a fundamental kick-starter afterwards, and I am happy about it. Let me leave you with this:

When I got my diagnosis for ASD in the end, no one was surprised. Those fuckers could have told me.



Moshpits are the best
Place for stimming.

Am I A genius?

Ia

I am writing a book. It is a magnum opus. It follows in the steps of Kurt Vonnegut, James Baldwin and Patti Smith. There is no book like it. And I did it all on my own. I wrote it in a language that I am not native to. I have the best grip on this language out of all the non-natives I know. I can read anything that I want in two languages. Phenomenology is no problem. It is almost easy. I can know everything. There is no one like me. I am a Renaissance Man. The has never been anyone like me. I will be rich. I will be the king of the world. I will be a monolith of my field. I am a monolith already. People will study me. I will live forever. I am a genius no one can compete with.

Ib

None of this is true. It never had to be true. This a remnant from a long bygone time. This is the fury of a child. The child is still there, but he slowly learns that this fury would have never saved him. The child feels hurt sometimes and thinks he is nothing without these aspirations. But he is, and I love him regardless.

II

Autism, depression and everything in-between are not superpowers, but Autism is the most likely to be called one. Since my childhood, I have been confronted with many characters in books, on TV and in films that I latched onto because they resembled me somewhat; they were *Autistic coded*. Many if these had borderline superhuman abilities: Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory*, Raymond Babbitt from *Rainman* and Sherlock Holmes (a favourite then). I would like to throw Alan Turing in *The imitation Game* (played by Benedict Cumberbatch who also portrayed Sherlock Holmes in the retrospectively flawed BBS series *SHERLOCK*). Cumberbatch seemed to have a knack for roles I could identify with. All those characters had problems in social contact, intense fixations but were always redeemed by abilities with which they triumphed over adversities and adversaries.

I often tell it as a joke, but at 12, I read Freud's *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* and *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. I didn't

finish but I could grasp the language used, the ideas described. I was a lonely kid. At some point, all I felt I could resort to in taking up arms against the seas of troubles and misfortunes that I endured from my peers was my intellect. I wasn't the best student, but I was *better than*. For years, I only wanted to be *better than* – to triumph with abilities none could face. I wanted to be terrifying. I wanted to be an exceptionalist that no one could refuse to respect.

The first part of this text is a remnant to that time; a testament still dusting away in my psyche. Little to no people who have known me for the last few years no of this testament. They don't have to, it does little to nothing in daily life. It merely explains why I feel *the bile rising* (German for wanting to vomit) when I come across people who take themselves too seriously and/or think of themselves as *better than*. At some point, I had to realise that neither had this coping mechanism done me any good nor that I still follow it as I did. It also makes a great connection to *Inspiration Porn*.

*Ableism*¹ is the form of discrimination reserved for disabled people. Like any other form of discrimination, it is hurtful and at times fatal. A museum without a ramp or lift for wheelchair users is a form of ableism. Traffic lights without sound signals are a form of ableism. A speech without a sign language interpreter is a form of ableism. Ableism often is a discrimination of omission. It follows vague concepts of what a *healthy* body and mind look and operates, what *we* can and cannot do. Life is structured according to

¹ *ableism*

Encyclopaedia Britannica

ableism, type of discrimination in which able-bodied individuals are viewed as normal and superior to those with a disability, resulting in prejudice toward the latter. The modern concept of ableism emerged in the 1960s and '70s, when disability activists placed disability in a political context.

these vague concepts, excluding bodies and minds that do not conform. The difference between the ableist and the disabled is that though the ableist might be discriminatory out of obliviousness (although antagonism here is *definitely a thing*), they have the option to choose this obliviousness – the disabled person cannot choose their disability. Disabled people in this constellation are automatically nuisances not of their own making and have to ask for scraps of inclusion. You might already guess that this is inhumane bullshit.

In an ableist system, deviations from a vague norm are seen as *disregardable*, thereby excluding none-conforming bodies. But like in many other systems of discrimination, such views are not merely expressed explicitly and learned explicitly. The longer such a system prevails, the more generations grow up with such views, assimilating them as a societal given with no reason or catalyst to question such views. This is where protest and self-advocacy enter the limelight. As with racism, homophobia and classicism (among many others), broader understandings of disability and more diverse voices being heard on the topic of disability have been bringing forth movements to dismantle ableist practices. A vital first step here is to establish a different or all-in-all new understanding of what such practices, and therefore disability, are.

In 2012, the disability rights activist Stella Young presented the term *Inspiration Porn*. Ableists do not like confronting their discrimination. It makes them uncomfortable. It is hard to learn new things. A nice way to cope with that discomfort is heroic stories, just like that of the *Magical Native* or *Undemanding Starving African*. Persons of a discriminated against group as fictionalised in order to make their discrimination and/or oppression digestible. They become characters of a story that is indeed rooted in real life circumstances, but whose arc diverts away from addressing and changing (God Behold) such circumstances. No, these people, under the weight of their circumstances (they we imposed, remember) *make something of it*, thereby transcending into inspirational protagonists.

Stories such as these do nothing for victims of discrimination. Their sole function lies in comforting discriminators. With Autism, like many other disabilities, stories around us often centres on a cosmic balance between our deficits (which are in themselves only products of ableism) and some ability or virtue that doesn't just equal them but heaps us above everyone else in a singular way. Disabled persons are not taken as equal to everyone else, we are fetishized. *Autistics with their*

problems in dealing with people and living a normal life are not at fault for their defects, but they are so smart, they are so well-spoken, they are so much better than us. A common element in this thinking is that of Autism as a superpower. Our brains are wired differently and we are very good at focussing and acquiring knowledge and skills. Many of us are also very good as *making ourselves* pleasant to others (masking). We are direct and honest and *so much like children with the capacity of adults.* We are *pure* though we are *clumsy*. In each of us, there is an amazing *artist* or at least a math genius. *We are all geniuses and we are idols to everyone else. We are a new step of evolution.*²

Such are some of the practices of *Inspiration Porn* for Autism. It has helped not one of the Autistics I know. It is not about finding good qualities to not see our disability as not evil, it is about pleasing people who want to feel better for regarding as *The Other*. I was diagnosed at 22 and had *the pleasure* of first assimilating the image of the *Autistic Genius* before realising that it was a fiction. That realisation was not one of mild discomfort, it was devastating. For some, being unable to reconcile that they are different and still not exceptional is fatal. It was not fatal for me, leaving me glad and angry.

I am indeed not a genius. If I was one, it wouldn't matter. It has taken me a long time to realise, but I know that I do not have to *earn* to be treated well. I am under no obligation to be exceptional. Being not exceptional was never the problem. The problem was that I am different and many

2 Ableism can go 360 degrees and eat its own tale in a movement called *Aspie Supremacy*. Consisting of people who were or would have been diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome before its inclusion in Autism Spectrum Disorder (DSM-V: 2013, ICD-11: 2019), it seeks to still maintain a separation between *Aspies* and *Autistics*. The latter, with their constantly higher support needs and frequent lack of verbal communication and all that, is seen as *lesser than* and a mingling-together of both groups under one diagnosis discards that in reality, *Aspies* are indeed the drivers of human evolution.

people didn't like me for it. In many instances, I could have never earned to be treated well because not being treated well was not my fault. It was not my fault. It is not my fault that there is no *Autistic Superpower*. It is not my fault.

I am not a genius, and I am happy to know that.



REENACTMENT of A
Darkroom Meltdown.

I am Afraid.

I am of the fortunate that are loved by their parents and who have had little to worry about, not in the face of poverty, hunger and bullets. I have been given the privilege to remain a child in certain concerns and not having to face struggles so persistent that they fade into the distant mechanics of how life is, of how the world works. But still, I do struggle. It is the basis of so much conflict and at times, I feel ashamed of it. I have my reasons to struggle but still, mourning the struggles of others is a task done far more easily than to say: "this is hard and I am afraid."

Last year, I made a book. The book is about grief. A collection of condolence cards that my family and I received at the death of a sibling. The book is about grieving. Grieving on my own terms. Grieving with the compassion of my friends. It was a hard book to make. But it was made and it made many people cry. And in the end, we felt a sense of compassion for one another. I am very proud of it.

In making it, I thought a lot about grief, with a distance to the event grieved and a closeness to the emotion. A lot of beautiful things have happened since and I am filled with joy. There are people so very dear to me, a life that is so precious—I feel like only a child would surpass this. For the time being, my life as it has changed is my child.* Now, more than ever before, in my life I can see that there are beautiful things and that I am happy. Not without worry but happy. There probably hasn't been a year before during which I cried so much as this, and I am glad for it. I want to cry more. Crying relaxes your nervous system. It is in crying that I have understood lots about grieving and my photography.

When I did my book on condolence cards, I wrote a letter to myself as those very cards came in one by one, bundle by bundle. I started crying more than once, and I liked it. Not because I felt reassured by my grief, but because then, I couldn't shed a single tear. But now, I felt sad and cried, and it was magnificent. As I wrote myself, one passage stood out in letting lose a special flood—one in which I realised that what had happened to me after my sibling had died was akin to a child sitting at dinner and being told all these things, incapable of comprehending and yet feeling the creeping dread of guilt. *Somehow*, this was my fault.

I will not delve deeper into the book, it is its own thing and anyone

interested can contact me to read it. But the realisation of inner childishness, that is helplessness in safety, is an important point in regards to what I do. I hereby confess that more often than not, I have little to no idea how all of this works. A creative life is stressful through and through, and the thought of not being able to lay out a year or the next five, knowing what point a and b are and how to travel between both, is utterly terrifying. At uni, I have gathered many accomplishments, yes, and dabbled even in some outside of academia. But no one will guide me ever again as my parents did when I was a kid. Never again will I have the comfort of *just doing my thing*, without a worry in the world and oblivious to most. But still, I crave it. I have done as well as I can, but in my mind, I do little more than play with the big toys. I try to do follow the things I was ashamed of to do as a teenager and fill my day with what I am good at. This book is not a piece of academia, it is a game I play with my younger self, and we're having a laugh at some and cry at other things. This is play, and this is work, and I will wait for a long time before doing this as a job will become reality. I want it, yes, but I'll have to accomplish other things before people will let me — otherwise, if I so chose, I will have to dabble for more anxiety and stress than I could dream of.

† Should I ever become a father, this will be an interesting passage to revisit.

I feel like barely more than a child who does certain things very well but still is terrified by *adulthood*. I've had to work for this concept and fortunately have seen some success with it, but the imbalance is still there.

I am of the fortunate that can return to the child they were and say: "this is hard and I am afraid." I am a child still in some regards. I am innocent in my fears. I am innocent in my honesty. I am innocent to the things that have hurt me and that have made me think about much that I am as unfit for as if I was a child still.

I am torn between wanting to be plain and wanting to be something along the lines of poetic. What I am discussing is not poetic in the slightest but it is also not served by being blunt. It is complex and asks for a lot of good will. Being poetic might fall danger to hiding what I want to get at, being blunt might diminish it by stating it as a mere fact. But the facts are filled with emotion. I am not a record of history, I am the living memory of a story like everybody else. Nonetheless, I will not discuss things in full account. Most is for private knowledge only, may it be out of a wish to preserve dignity or to uphold my own ethics.

I am a human. And I am afraid. I am afraid therefore I am human.

I have thought a lot about death. Death in general. Sometimes I still do. I have realised that I am not afraid of my own death but of not living enough. I am certainly terrified of the deaths of my loved ones. But most of all, I am afraid of the death of my memories. Dementia is a bitch. I am sometimes afraid that I am not kind enough. Then I am afraid that I let too many things slip. I am afraid of change. I am afraid of being stuck. I am afraid of the dark sometimes. I am afraid of a light exposing everything, especially the fact that I am indeed an impostor. I am afraid all this will not turn out well. I am afraid of having to do work that I hate. I am afraid of being a bad friend, son, boyfriend and father. I am afraid of being honest. I am afraid of lying. I am afraid of other people. I am afraid of loneliness. I am afraid of sadness. I am afraid of happiness. I am afraid of sex. I am afraid of celibacy. I am afraid of shouts. I am afraid of whispers. I am afraid not making people happy. I am afraid of telephone calls. I am afraid of emails and texts.

I am a human. And I am afraid. I am afraid therefore I am human.

And sometimes, I am afraid and someone comforts me. And sometimes, I can comfort myself. It is alright, even good, to be afraid. Being afraid tells us about the things we hold dear.

So let me be afraid a bit more.

Other people have done it before.



My last coffin nail.

[D8489. WEDNESDAY.]

At the base, I photograph because I'm a selfish prick. I do not want to accept that people will be gone, by death or diverting paths. Through my pictures, I keep the closest I have to the world alive – me and only me. Not because I can play god but because this world that I witness in itself is mine and mine alone. When I'm gone, it will be gone with me. But not my pictures. They will remain as a faint idea, an array between light and dark, a shadow cast by a sun that really shun unto a beautiful world and the beautiful things therein. I keep remnants of the dead world alive. And, according to Barthes, I have also killed it. I am the destroyer and the keeper of the world. So fuck death.

[D8492. SATURDAY.]

Photography is amazing for an existential crises. You literally have to work with the real, you got nothing else at hand. In this, studio photography gives you the double package – you have to invent reality. You gotta do all the work. You have to define. You have to balance. You take the reins and gotta stir it to where you wanna go. If you're afraid of death, the studio becomes a test ground. The studio becomes a backdrop, a stage, to an ongoing cycle of creation and destruction. Guillotine and shrine are the same here. And then you do it all over again. You rinse the blade and repeat the life cycle of a room – a Petri dish of the world outside.

[D8454. SATURDAY.]

Hannah Schuh asks me a question during a portfolio review in Hamburg, one of many. We are discussing "It is hard to find the right words", my artists' book about condolence cards. –"Do you feel like grief is a strong theme in your work or that it might become one?" –"I do not know" I answer. Her question has given me much to think about.

[D8492. SATURDAY.]

It is a strange thing to take a friend to the studio and later be told that your pictures should be used for their funeral service. It becomes even stranger if you were already asked for pictures for your sibling's funeral because they forced you to take so many of them. This was your very start in portrait photography. You hated it when you were 14 but minded less when you were 19. But still, no more portraits will be taken, especially now when you do little else. And then, one of the living already delegates your images for the altars of mourning. They want your work to be the thing for other people to weep at (possibly including yourself), whether in the heat of the moment or with sincere longevity. It is utterly surreal. Here you are, flesh and blood and a beating heart. Here you are - and if Barthes is right, I have already killed you. Awe have produced a thing that will outlast you. As will many things but this one bears your semblance. The person photographed is already dead, the moment is gone and the next has ready come. You are now more than mortal. Your appearance is preserved, drenched in the ethanol of a negative. I can keep your image and it feels to me like I can keep you. Your face will not fade so easily out of memory. I have uploaded you to an external hard drive that extends the capabilities of my brain, my body. I have become dependent but more than human. We both have transcended nature, created a state that is outside of its order. But you are not there. Your image cannot hold you. You live in it only when we look at you, and you will live less clearly the more memories of you fade. Without the memories, you image becomes that of a person, not an image of you. But still, you survive, if only for a bit. I have killed you but you are not dead. I have killed you and I'm grieving all the more. I grieve the person you will become past your image, the person that will die and then will be alive only in fragments. I am grieving you for the ghost you will be and I am grieving the image that your picture will become. A memento mori, a testimony to your once presence. You were here and your visage was bound. You were here and I have proof of it.

[D8379. FRIDAY.]

Nuntius live beim TRM, Jugendclub Vortrefflich

NUN: Ich möchte trotzdem – trotz all des Spaßes und Bullshit-Laberns, das ich gerne mache und auch gut mache–

JAC: Diese Bescheidenheit!

NUN: Diese Bescheidenheit, ich liebe dich auch...ehm... ne kleine Triggerwarnung aussprechen. Ich hab den in ner sehr dunklen Stunde meines Lebens geschrieben. Wenn ihr irgendwie Probleme habt, wenn euch irgendwas aufm Herzen liegt und ihr euch nicht traut, zum Beispiel mit Freunden und Verwandten zu reden: es gibt Seelsorgetelefone. Diese Seelsorgetelefone haben mit zweimal schon mehr als nur doll geholfen. Ruft da an, das sind richtig tolle Menschen da. Passt auf euch auf. Ich hab euch alle lieb. Der Song heißt

Wir sterben alle alleine.

Wir saßen da, ließen andere reden
im Zug von Mailand nach Paris.
Hinter uns lag unsere Hoffnung,
Vor uns lag ein anderes Leben.
Schon lange vergessen der Traum,
Der sich krachend von uns stieß.
Kannst du ihn noch sehn? Kannst du sie verstehn?
All ihr Gelächter, weit vom Winde verweht.
Riechst du auch die Lügen? Riechst du auch den Hass?
Wut macht langsam träge, die Dürre macht uns nass.
[]
Unausgesprochne Fragen, die für immer drauf warten
Nie gefragt zu werden: Vater, was hat uns verraten?
Ein immer neuer Ansatz zur immer falschen Zeit –
Efeu rankt an Bäumen in meinem Zauberwald.

Und die Mutter weint um den verlorenen Sohn,
Und der Vater schreit – jede Chance vertan.
Zeit geht weiter, mit oder ohne ihn.
Er wird eins mit der Erde
und die Erde wirds eins mit ihm.

Der Typ an der Ecke sitzt allein und weint,
Melancholische Flüche –
zum Sterben isser noch nicht bereit.
Wir sitzen nur kurz am Stammtisch,
Sind wir wieder alleine!
Wir werden eins mit der Luft
Und unsre Kinder atmen diese dann ein.

Wir sterben alle alleine.
Wir sterben alle alleine.
Wir sterben alle alleine.
Wir sterben alle alleine.

[D8379. FRIDAY.]

Nuntius live at TRM, Jugendclub Vortrefflich

NUN: Now I wanna – despite all the jokes and yapping that I
like to do and do well–

JAC: This humility!

NUN: This humility, I love you too...ehm...state a little
trigger warning. I wrote this one in a very
dark hour of my life. If you have any problems,
if something lies heavy on your heart and you
are afraid to talk to friends and family as an
example: there are crisis hotlines. These crisis
hotlines have helped me a bunch twice already.
Call them, they have some really nice people. Look
out for yourselves. I love you all. The song's
called

We all die alone.

We sat there, letting others talk
On the train from Mailand to Paris.
Behind us lay our hope,
before us lay a different life.
Long forgotten the dream
That violently pushed away from us.
Can you see it still? Can you understand them?
All their laughter, dispersed wide by the wind.
Smell you too the lies? Smell you tot he vice?
Anger makes slowly sluggish,
the draught makes us wet.
Unstated questions that forever wait
To never be asked: Father, what has betrayed us?
An ever-new approach to an ever-wrong time –
Ivy trails the trees in my magical forest.

And the mother weeps for the lost son,
And the father shouts – missed all chances.
Time moves on, with or without him.
He becomes one with the earth
and the earth becomes one with him.

The guy at the corner sits alone and weeps,
Melancholic curses – he is not yet ready to die.
[]
We quickly sit at the regular's table,
We are alone again!
We become one with the air
And our children then breathe it in.

We all die alone.
We all die alone.
We all die alone.
We all die alone.

[D.8379. FRIDAY. CONT.]

Ich pass hier nicht rein, bin euch zuwider,
mit meiner ekligen Art
und meinen verschissenen Liedern.
Trink noch ein' Schluck und lasse mich falln:
ich werde eins mit der Sonne,
aber die Sonnenstrahln sind kalt!

Wir sterben alle alleine!
Wir sterben alle alleine!
Wir sterben alle alleine!
Wir sterben alle alleine!

Kasper hat gelogen mit dem, was er sagt,
Kein Höhenflug [???] tiefen Grab!
Hast du uns gesehn, damals als wir uns sahn?
[???]
Willst du auch das, was du niemals wolltest?
[???] und dann bereust du's!

Wir sterben alle alleine!
Wir sterben alle alleine!
Wir sterben alle alleine!
Wir sterben alle alleine!
Wir sterben alle alleine!
Wir sterben alle alleine!
Wir sterben alle alleine!
Sterben! Sterben! Sterben! Sterben! Sterben!
STERBEN!
Wir sterben alle alleine.
Wir sterben alle alleine.

[D.8379. FRIDAY. CONT.]

I don't fit in here, disgust you
With my icky manner and my fucking songs.
[]
Drink another gulp and let myself fall:
I become one with the sun,
But the rays are cold!

We all die alone.
We all die alone.
We all die alone.
We all die alone.

Kasper lied in what he said:
No flight of fancy [???] deep grave!
Have you seen us as we saw us then?
[???]
Do you want too what you never wanted?
[???] and then you regret [it]!

We all die alone.
We all die alone.
We all die alone.
We all die alone.
We all die alone.
We all die alone.
Die! Die! Die! Die! Die! DIE!
[]
We all die alone.
We all die alone.

1 Photograph
 therefore 1 ~~is~~
 1 ~~is~~ 1 ~~is~~ 1 ~~is~~
 therefore 1 Photograph.

CONTENT WARNING: DEPRESSION, SUICIDE, ILLNESS, AND DEATH.

The *civilised world* does not know how to talk about death. We are scared shitless by even a mention of it. We do not know how to address death and wilfully ignore it. We are scared shitless and suffer because of it, and it drives me up the wall.

What I do (not only photography) and the reasons why I do it has a lot to do with death. During my studies alone, my sibling died, a grandparent died and several others around me have tried to take their own lives – fortunately, no one succeeded or stepped back from their approach.³ There is no sense in blooming words for this. I am tired. For years, I have wished again and again to shout out what happened, and to many I did. I wanted someone to say *this is so fucked* – and many did. And still, I cannot let it go fully. I am angry, and the better my life has gotten, the more energy I have to express my anger.

When I started photographing people in the studio, the last year had shown me that loved ones can die very suddenly or at least may be swaying very close to death, whether by illness or by suicide. People in my periphery have died or nearly died because of cancer, illness and brain damage, infection, suicide and attempted suicide. So it goes. I was horribly afraid of another person falling into sickness after losing my sibling. It would be not even a year until an ex-partner of mine would try to take their life twice in a matter of two and a half months after our separation.¹ They did not carry through their attempts and I presume

they are still alive. If so, I do not wish to see them ever again. Suicidal ideation had not been a problem of mine for years, and even now, it was not. I am very proud of this. To realise the difference between being overwhelmed and actually wanting to die was long in the making – but here I am, and I have my reasons. *Good reasons*. Still, in a short period, I was confronted by the inevitability of someone dying and me not being able to do anything. It is a horrible realisation, but in both instances, there was nothing (more) that I could have done. I was not insufficient, circumstances greater than me were just overpowering. In later years, other loved ones also dealt with suicidality, but the person who died was a grandparent.

I have had no say in what an array of ways to die I have been exposed to. We in the *civilised world* does not know how to talk about death. We are scared shitless by even a mention of it. Death is always painful, but I have yet to know a person who died simply of old age. What I know are mostly people under the age of 22 who have died or have wished to. I also know seniors who are scared shitless and will not be damned to think about making the last chapter of life easier (and less painful) for themselves and their loved ones. Death never, not during my studies, not before, been an end of a *natural life cycle*, and the thought frightens me.

3 This is certain for most, one I cannot account for.

1 Although I am not pressured to explain myself, I want to add that they were severely depressed during our short-lived relationship and had broken up with me because they felt unable to continue being with me. The details of this relationship are not relevant but the treatment I received meanwhile are regarded as deeply unhealthy by my social circle.

It is a strange feeling if the following question pops into your head out of the blue (though not out of the blue): *If they die, how and when would I know?* It is a macabre thought they you might not know for years. It is a painful thing to know that you will be called every evening for news from the hospital. It is a terror to realise that, slowly or suddenly, I see everyone around you as *the next* – the next to fall ill, the next to have an accident, the next to kill themselves. You start to worry when someone doesn't answer the phone (immediately). You worry even more when you realise how many people you haven't called today. You make lists. You calculate possibilities. Worry is your new friend, and your new friends poisons you slowly but steadily.

I do not know if I could have ever been old enough to healthily deal with things as they happened. I certainly doubt it. The question is not futile, because it informs a way of processing that takes a step back to notice that shit really went down and that I was not ready. The question creeps in slowly and at some point hits you with full force. And then you realise that not only will things never be the same again, but that you will return to moments of realisation reiterating that this really happened. If you are lucky, maybe you arrive at a point where you feel sad in these instances but take it as a testament that people were really important to you – without the spiral.

In such moments, I like to listen to Nuntius' *Wir sterben alle alleine*. It has brought me down sobbing, loosened the barriers to simply feel sad when I actually am. It is one of a very short list of songs that have done that. This is because I know Nuntius (who's also known as Stachi), and because it is a downright awesome song. In other circumstances, it might further a depressive episode, but even since I have known it, it did not. It makes me feel incredibly sad, yes, but it doesn't bludgeon me to death with it. Nuntius has a thing for being very on point with his words, his lyrics often paint pictures that are very much informed by yourself and your experiences, but will hug you and tell you that yes, this is *shit*, but that it is alright to feel like shit.⁴

Stachi is one of my close friends, the sort you dread dying and an example for so many more friends. We met 2021 at an open stage event at the Kasseturm in Weimar where we both performed our music.

Stachi is who I want to be in many ways. He's an apprentice and organises events for youths at the Jugendclub Vortrefflich. We are more alike than we are different and conversations between us never find an end to the well of topics we can discuss – not because we are hyper-intellectual, but because we have an interest for many things.

Furthermore, his attitudes to life, especially in breaking boundaries and disregarding arbitrary barriers mirrors mine heavily, although he has been doing it for far longer. He is kind, he is smart and he is unrelenting. He is a force to be reckoned with, as a bouncer and otherwise. As I got to know the music scene in Weimar, he stood out as a driver of movement, a natural momentum that sends ripples through the town. Stachi and I have wept and shared secrets. When I have a project, he is one of the last instances which I must pass to know that I did something approachable – because he calls me out on my bullshit, and gladly, I rarely give him reason to. In many ways, Stachi feels like another version of myself and I love him as a friend not because of that, but because through him, I feel a bit less alone, a bit less fearful, a bit more comforted in struggle.

What I mean to get at is this: Stachi as well as Nuntius are people who I dread will die. Not *before their time*, dying in general. So it goes. I also dread moving away from him for sure, but death is the ultimate moving: to a town where no one can reach you, except if they move there themselves and thereby have to stay forever. When he sings *Wir sterben alle alleine*, I am not just moved by his pain I hear dripping through the verses, but I am terrified at the reoccurring realisation that this song someday will not be sung by him anymore and that he will be no more. A friend will be dead, yes, and that is terrifying on its own, but his work will not have him anymore to drive it forward. The best he can then is to become a mythical figure, and still that will not bring him back.

We all are terrified of death, yes, and some have (had) to deal with it sooner and/or more constantly. My experiences faint when I think of families in Gaza, a strip of the world whose destruction brought us a new word: *wounded child, no surviving family* (WCNSF). So it goes. But dwelling on such comparisons brings forth nothing but anger, not a lesser pity for myself or any less pain for my own experiences. The comparison changes nothing about my feelings about myself and those I

4 Sincerely, I'd take one of his songs over any by Del Rey, but that is personal taste for you right there.

love because we are safe and I already dread them dying.

We romanticise seeing the world through the eyes of a child because it presumably strips us from our worries and leaves us in the bliss of our own childhood: seeming carefree for us, with adulthood not even looming at a distance. It is true that seeing things through the prism of worriessness and naïveté can have benefits in re-approaching a situation, but we discard how terrifying childhood can be. Dealing with trauma² in therapy more often than not is centred around your *inner child*,⁵ especially if your trauma goes back to your childhood. Here, connecting with parts of you that haven't been able to adapt adult life is rewarding.

Autistic people on the other hand, though with their own share of trauma, are regularly perceived as immature, inept and incapable of being fully mature: not because they are, but because much of their non-conformity to allistic standards is regarded as childish in our society. Being called too sensitive⁶ is a common experience, and it certainly was one for me. And it is true: I am an extremely sensitive person, but I am, indeed, a grown adult who is to be taken serious. What is also true is the following.

In situations of overwhelmedness, especially in matters of death, I am barely different to when I first went to a suicide funeral when I was 13. I am not just terrified of death, I can barely cope with even the thought of it. Death is a thing to great in its implications and my brain has trouble getting a grip on it, making it even more terrifying. As everyone, I am afraid losing people I love because I want them to remain in my life, but in the flesh. On top my brain adds an existential dread of being alone as well as the inrefutable changes to my routines, which are based on certainties (such as someone having a pulse).⁷ Grief and grieving are not a universal in how we do it, it is deeply connected to how we are raised – grief and grieving by their own nature are complicated for Autistics because they rely so heavily on social protocols while diverting in our expressions of grieve may be taken as something it is not (e.g. lack of emotion) or scolded for not being *appropriate*. Grief then becomes a game of making others comfortable instead of dealing with our own shit. So it goes.

Last year, I did a book on a collection of condolence cards we received after my sibling's death, it is called *Es ist schwer, die richtigen Worte zu finden* (It is hard to find the right words). It dissected and analysed how compassionate grieve was put into words as well as how it was packaged (as in what cards were chosen). To avoid making the death of a loved one

2 Trauma is questioned as too popular a term in certain groups. I do not join them – not everything is trauma and those making such claims are not equipped to ponder topic either. Still, the first statement dehumanises those suffering from trauma, no matter how much more prevalent their diagnosis has become – much can be traumatic, depending on the person. Some say that growing up as an undiagnosed Autistic is inherently traumatising. I do not know. I know that Autistic brains are more susceptible to different, neurotypically mundane, events. Research suggests Autistics are more likely (32-45%) than neurotypicals (4-4.5%) to suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (see Rumball et al 2020). Still, due to lack of adequate therapy, I cannot comment on the question of my own trauma. I know only that the described period inhibited some events that might have been traumatic for some, though I will not make that claim for myself without a basis.

7 After my sibling's death, I read *How People with Autism Grieve, and How to Help* by Deborah Lipsky, an Autistic woman who served as a firefighter, medical technician and reserve police officer and who has is a consultant nowadays. If I had taken a yellow marker to the book and highlighted all instances in which I related to what she wrote (that being before my diagnosis, a time when I couldn't barely state that I thought it like that I was on the spectrum), the book would have been yellow pretty much all the way though.

5 A concept developed by Lucia Capucchione in 1976. The *inner child* refers to an part of our personality that encompasses our prepubescent aspects. Such sides of us can become splintered off from how we develop if we, for example, endure trauma during childhood – in therapy, getting back and closer to your inner child can be a vital aspect because it touches on your very real vulnerabilities, even as an adult.

6 The *highly sensitive/hypersensitive person* (HSP) is a concept developed by Elaine Aron in 1996 in order to describe persons who, in her terms, have a very sensitive nervous system. Those persons are regarded as emotional, very change-aware and more easily overwhelmed. More a personality trait than a diagnosis (except in cases in which aspect of an HSP can be described through other terms like *mysophobia* for people who have trouble processing auditory input), the HSP is a label more commonly ascribed to women and female-presenting people because its description can be a beneficial tool in disregarding their troubles. But even in a non-malevolent use, the HSP earns some criticism – not because of its existence but as its presence as a catch-all term replacing far more direct, and possibly helpful, terms, such as Autistic and ADHD. Later in her career, Aron herself noticed and communicated that many of the HSPs she found in her own family were indeed Autistic.

an intellectual exercise, I ended the book with a final letter I wrote to myself from back when; it must have been some two thousand words. The book was a gamble, especially because it put Autism in the centre. First I could not fathom and/or believe the reactions it created while exhibited at the BUW in summer. People told my friends, came to me or wrote me about how much it had moved them, how much they could relate to a situation that, as it happened, is so very rare. Some openly wept at the text. It was not gratifying, it was unthinkable. Especially *my* text found a deep resonance. People stated that they read exactly what they had felt when their loved ones had died, I could believe it only over time.

Du bist in keinem Zustand, das wahrzunehmen, aber es gibt einen Teil von Dir, der wie ein kleines Kind um sich schaut – zu Mama, Papa, der Welt – und nicht verstehen kann, was ihm gerade gesagt wurde.

„N. ist nicht mehr da.“

„Wo ist sie? Wann kommst sie wieder?“

„Sie kommt nicht wieder“, sagt man Dir unter Tränen.

„Warum kommt sie nicht wieder? Warum weint ihr? Habe ich etwas

falschgemacht?“

Ich weiß, dass Du diese Worte von Dir wegstößt. Die Gedanken in Ihnen sind zu tief in ihrem Umkehrschluss. Aber Du wirst feststellen: diese Sache ist so unlogisch, so gegen alles, was Du kennst, gehend, dass der Gedanke, dass Du Teil daran hattest, dass sie passiert, der erste greifbare ist. Irgendwie hast Du hierzu beigetragen. Wenn nicht die ganze, muss Dich doch eine Mitschuld treffen. Irgendetwas musst DU übersehen haben und wenn es nur finden könntest, könnte man alles in Ordnung bringen. Es gibt nichts in Ordnung zu bringen.

N. ist gestorben. Sie ist gestorben und Du hast sie nicht umgebracht.

N. ist tot und es nicht Deine Schuld.

Nichts an dem neuen Gefüge der Welt ist Deine Schuld.

8 Although I feel a bit self-indulgent for citing my own work, an example had to be given as this passage especially relates to this chapter.

You're not in a state of mind to notice but there is a part of you like a young child looking around - to Ma, Pa, the world - and not being pble to understand what just has been revealed to him.

[]

"N. isn't around anymore..

"Where is you? When is she coming back?"

"She's not coming bock" they tell you under tears.

"Why is she not coming back? Why ore you crying? Did I do something wrong?"

I know that you push away those words. The thoughts in them are too deep in their result. But you will .realise: this thing is so illogical, so against all that you know, that the thought that you might hove had a part in it happening is the fixst in reach. Somehow you contributed to this. If not all, paxt of the blame should be laid on you. You missed something and if you could only find it. all could be mode up again.

[]

[]

[]

[]

There is nothing to be made up.

[]

N. is dead. She died and you didn't kill her.

N. is dead and it isn't your fault.

(Heine 2024: 127)⁸

I'd rather live in a world in which I didn't write that text if it meant that my sibling was still alive. I'd rather live in a world in which I didn't have a childlike fear of death. But I do not and I have to deal with. I believe to perceived (and valued) as an intense person in many different ways. Doing a book such as *Es ist schwer, die richtigen Worte zu finden* certainly has not helped dampen that image. The fact my sibling died is not secret, I have straight forward with it ever since and haven't shut up about it – otherwise that and this book would not exist. It is not a matter of whether or not it makes me more *interesting*, whether it gives me a *unique selling point*, not even if I can comfort people with sharing my experience. Although the latter is a source of immense joy, the foremost reason is that I haven't shut up about it for over three years by now is that I am unable to fully reconcile and integrate what happened into my life, to *move on*. I cannot fully move on and I'm accepting of it. I still talk not because I have little else to say but because I *still* have things to say, and I say them not to be a downer but because I want to further things somewhat.⁹

In some ways, I am a child. I am afraid and want someone to switch of the terror of death. But no one will, no one can, and I have to deal with it. The hypervigilance for others around me dying, fearing a domino cascade of funerals, is not an irrational fear – if every funeral you have went to took place because of anything but old age, if funerals have to be arranged quickly because death comes suddenly, the fear of it happening again is indeed a rational one, especially if you have trouble reconciling death. So it goes. And then, at some point, your hypervigilance bleeds into everything. I am glad that it does less so by now, but that wasn't a result of things just *taking their natural course*, it was by hard manual work. I am still child-ish-ly afraid but I have enough ways to approach it healthily, with more certainly to come in the future.

Let me return to Stachi. Stachi will die as certainly as I will, someday. So it goes. It is a comforting and humbling thought that maybe someday, I will be remembered by people who don't know me – it is a gratifying thought and something I wish for, there is no sense in lying about it. But as much as I want to be remembered, I want *him* to be remembered. He is a person too loving, a character too big and interesting, a musician too touching to fade as soon as he can watch the grass growing from underneath. I want him to be in my life, and he is, and I don't want him to leave it ever, but he will (or maybe I will before him, but I don't wish for that either). I also want him to remain part of the world. This is not just about me, it is about him, or what remains, to still be there. He's

9 I'd much rather not have made
experiences as such and not talk about
them. I didn't choose this out of fun,
this is not fun.

on a good path to making sure about that himself with his music, but I want to help, I want to do my part. If I cannot preserve him as he is indefinitely, I at least want to make sure something remains of him – for me, and by sharing, for others, whether they knew him during his lifetime or not.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes argues that young photographers do not realise that they are agents of death, and he is right. We kill things by photographing – not because we do any harm but because through the photo we show that something has been and is not anymore, even if it was a moment ago. So it goes. We preserve things, we are agents of *flat death*. We attest to the death of things by preserving their likeness, and we cannot help it. There is no way to practice photography without being faced with the death of things large and small, inanimate and (formerly) living.

Remember how I spent an entire chapter raving about how photos are unnatural? Yeah, that's right. Photos do not preserve a still moment, but a *momentum*. No matter how fast the shutter, a camera will always capture a journey between two stages and everything in-between. It then and thereby takes its subject out of the natural human perception

of time – here the person of a portrait is, ever-aging in for only a moment, but the moment never aging.

I'm inclined to think that, for a huge part, we suffer from an other's death not because they are gone but because they are not here anymore.¹⁰ We miss them not for *the place* they have gone to (which for me is nowhere) but for the fact that they are not *here*. Interestingly enough, this is the same source of comfort we get from remembering someone fondly: they are gone and we are sad, but they were here and we are happy (if they made us happy). Now, they succumb to the aging of memory and will change and fade ever so slightly in our memory – it is the course things take naturally, keeping their memory (not them) alive in stories. They become less and simultaneously more than what a pulse gave them. I have heard that the dead *remain living in us*, and to a point, that is true and I'm glad about it for my part.

The camera can alleviate our mourning because it seems to keep someone alive, even if only their likeness. It also has the capacity to prolong our mourning because the discrepancy between their preserved likeness sail off the shore of the fact that they do not have an original likeness anymore. But in itself, the camera makes a mere testament to the fact that someone has indeed been. By now, it has been inextricably woven into our process of grief and has been so for decades. We put up photos in nice frames around the house. If someone is cremated or there is no open casket wake, a picture is set next to their urn or coffin. Their photo has become ritualised and we hope to ease our grief with such rituals.

It is a strange experience to be asked if you have a good photo for someone's wake, especially if it happens twice for a ceremony at the same funeral home. In both cases, I could not supply pictures sufficient enough, something that stings me to this day, especially because my first portraits for years were those I took of my sibling. It is also a strange experience to be asked to photograph older relatives not just so there are nice pictures of them for the hell of it but also in case they might die sooner than later – a thing that happened, again with a lack of sufficient portraits on my side.¹¹ I sat there at both wakes, my eyes fixed on decently sized portraits in frames that were a tad too kitschy for my taste, wondering. Wondering what kinds of photos I would choose if other loved ones died and I had to organise their wake. Wondering what kind of pictures you use for such an occasion. Wondering what picture my loved ones would chose for me.¹²

The children of the camera hath become a part of ritual, and they

10 A semantic game for sure but the concept of death will not escape my innate sense for *crumb shitting* (German *Krümelnackerei*, meaning nit-picking).

11 This, I might add, is also in strong connection to the fact that taking such pictures made me deeply uncomfortable.

12 Not because I was afraid I might die soon – just as a pragmatic hypothetical. It is never too early to think about such things and I find it more comforting than the thought of those after me having to scrape through thousands of pictures, too many only half decent enough and little sufficient. But hey, during the last wake I went to I realised that I wanted to hire a band for my own funeral and for people to mosh because it is indeed what I want.

have their place. But I strive for something more. Images of ourselves and all around us are omnipresent and always merely a snapshot away. To preserve a likeness is not a distant thing, the power is right there in our pocket. The magic has faded maybe, it at least fades faster. But it is still there. I want Stachi to be more than a selfie, more than a profile picture. He and everyone else will have this huge inheritance of the digital age – a life in bits and bytes, existent only digitally, ever-dependent on electricity and the Internet and a running device. With the device turned off, it seems like he will fade a bit and come back closer to life when I turn on my laptop and go through my hard drive. I want him to be more than that.

Maybe Stachi will be famous someday, but I do not care about it and I figure he does neither.¹³ No matter if, I will make sure that his likeness exists in the world of flesh and bone. I want his stupid face on record sleeves, in zines (which it already is), in books about his life, on baryta paper fresh out the darkroom, in albums, in galleries, in pockets and wallets. Between us, I am the guy who takes the pictures, and I do so gladly. But I do more than making him more visible, more present, for the moment, for his own good, but I do it for I know what will come. I do it also for the day I will not be able take any more pictures of him. Stachi lives his life and I am making a record, a time capsule, a letter to later generations, because of it. He will become more than what he is, and I want to further it. I want his name to spring from the image and name and image to become a living ghost haunting through minds and dancing on lips.

We photographers are agents of death because we record things as they are no more. So it goes. As sweet it is to indulge in the thought that we prepare a person's final rest with documenting their life, it is not about that, neither is it about *art*. To take a portrait is to leave one more artefact of someone, to distribute one more fragment of them in the world. I do not photograph people because I want to cheat death, at least not as the sole reason. I photograph people because I find them fascinating, terrifying and utterly stunning. To take portraits to me is not just to document another but to attest to the fact that I have indeed lived in a world with them and pay tribute to the beauty and terror of it. Everybody else and me, we will live not just for ourselves but in being known by others, and the photograph has become a beautiful aspect of it in modern history.

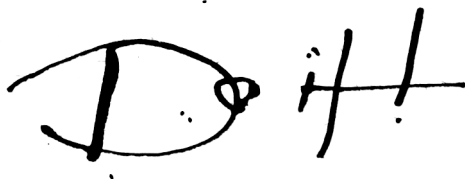
I take a photo of you, and if we are friends, I dread the day you will die and might mourn you already. I dread the day my photo will be more

real than your actual, breathing face. But for now, I take a photo because I enjoy your company, and if you have a pulse, it is all for the better. I will grieve you but we have time before so many others will do to. I might practice grief, I might want to prepare but right now, grief is at a far distance, even if your wake is next week. We live, and there are pictures to prove it. So it goes. I wished to talk with fellow photographers more about this fascinating relation we have to our surroundings and our fellow humans: we are more than agents of death, we are more than scribes – we are witnesses, and even if our pictures cause pain, they also cause comfort, and that is reason enough to pick up a camera.

13 But if he is someday, I will be
damned if I didn't take some good
pictures for him. We are a power
couple too great for it.



Am Autistic
Being happy.



By now, we have spent a lot of time together. You have got know a lot about me and my work, the things I have experienced, the things I think. I'm grateful that you have spent this time with me. By now, for you to hold on for so long, we might have established a vital thing. No matter how you may relate to these texts, may they be distant and abstract or close and tangible: I ask of nothing but to be taken seriously. To take what I write as sincere is important to me. Because I am. I am sincere in what I have written. For one, because I have no reason to do otherwise. For the other, because I have had some important things to say.

Taking me seriously asks for a lot of confidence. We might not know each other, these texts might reach you in years and decades only to come for me. But I am here, in front of my laptop, in the morning. And I am here to tell you something, some last things.

I am young, and there are more things to come for me than have already happened to me. Still, as you might have figured, I have made some experiences that are rare to find, and in the way they happened, they are unique, as are all of life's happenings. But I am confident in myself. I am confident because I know I once wasn't. I am confident and will grow more confident with time. I am here and want to tell you something. I do not care how you come to photography.¹ May you be a Leica aficionado, an analogue purist, an Instagram influencer, a DIY Queen – you are here and this is your thing. Maybe not the only thing you want to do, but a thing still. You are here and I am here. Might your feel like this is a calling, might you see this as a casual thing, might you want to do this for a living – it is all the same. You are here, with a camera in your hand.

I am in no position to give advice, many might say. And indeed, there many more experienced in practice and teaching. But I am not a teacher. I therefore do not teach, nor do I give advice. All I offer is a shared experience – here, for you.

Photography is fucking awesome. And you might know it. ...

But photography is barely in the pictures. All the technicalities, the style, the prep work – sure, they are there. But is photography merely

the end product? ...

Photography does not give you the right to be an asshole. A pain in the ass? Sure. An asshole? Absolutely not. This field is a big-ass playground, so no need to hit others with your shovel. Photographing is an amazing thing to do – you are afforded many freedoms and even more pleasures. Still, what counts for others, counts for you. Holding a camera still leaves you a person. To regard others with respect, no matter what you photograph, is the bare minimum. I might carry some deep judgement about street photography, yet I enjoy it at times. To find the difference is a vital step.

Talk. Talk to yourself and to others. Most of the last few years I have spent thinking about what the fuck I am doing with my camera. Given the chance, I would do it the same all over again. Nonetheless, the day I started discussing with friends, fellow students and colleagues – the day I started touching grass – was the day I actually started learning. Reading books is

¹ I do care but the door through which you break is not important for now.

great and all, but books don't discuss, they address. If you photograph, you have to be able to talk. Seems like a rotten deal for sure,² but it is important and helpful indeed. If you know what you are doing, good for you, I'm happy for you. But, and this might come as a surprise to some as it did for me: others cannot look inside your head, not even through photographs. To show someone a picture, you afford them the right to ask questions. If you, like me, come into this situation with past experiences that equate questions with bad-faith criticism, this deal might seem terrifying and hostile.³ This fear is valid, and fears of talking about your work are valid all the same. Still: do it.

This is not about photography, and it never has been. You are not bound to the camera. This is not about profession. Fuck being a photographer. This is about you, and it is about me. We are not photographers first, neither are we students – we are people. Photographing is not about handling a machine and getting money for it if you're lucky. It is about living. As a kid, I wanted to flee into *being* something, being *someone*, and now I realise that it wasn't about that. I do not have to be someone great. I have no pressure to define a generation. I have to make ends meet for sure, but I'd have to do that either way. But in photography, the most joy has come not from working but living with the camera in my periphery. I am a person, and I am scared of so many things that I know and don't know yet, but I am doing something that soothes me. Still, I am not bound to what soothes me by now, the work with the camera, because that is just a brick of a wall, a sturdy one. So many of the things that I got to learn were not dependent on the camera but came about because of it, and I am glad for it.

I can give up being a photographer, but I will never go back to being afraid as I was. Other ways of learning to live will open up. But nonetheless I know this much to be true: I am. I am happy often, sad less than before but still at times. I cry more often and enjoy it all the more. I look forward to meeting people I just saw yesterday and feel at ease when I am tired (sometimes, I do not feel at ease but can recognise it). I am home and at the same times am not. But I got people, and I got myself.

It is not about the pictures, it has never been. It was about allowing myself to live, because living is a fortune far greater than any profound, possessive drive to earn grandeur. I don't want to be the greatest anymore, but I want a good life, a full life. And the life is not in the pictures, it is ever outside them – it is in their making and the periods

2 Why choose a visual medium just to be forced to prepare something that, at the start, feels like an English class essay? What kinda fuckery is this?

3 At the beginning, I overcompensated by having a reason for everything I did, although I barely knew what I was doing. Lest to say: this wasn't the way in the long run. I love to brag about not knowing stuff by now.

in which they are not made. Photography is not a life but an immensely enriching part of mine, and I love it for it. Photography happens as much during my commutes and the morning coffee as it does when I sit before my laptop or stumble through the studio. It is always there and simultaneously is nowhere. I truly believe that working in this field (like so many others) will come to a grinding halt, a barrier, if we split it from our lives, if we regard it as *separate*. It is not. It is not because we make our images, and everything we do is at the intersection with everything else in our lives.

Photographing is living, but it is not essential.

What is essential is to fall in love,

to weep at a funeral,

to be furious with bigots,

to be tired of doing nothing,

to be relaxed by a hug,

to win and to lose,

to feel desperate,

to care for others,

to dread the future,

to enjoy the present,

to let things happen and to change them.

Not for the sake of furthering our carrier, our standing, our opportunities – because we need to live a bit more at times. You cannot photograph without living, and if living furthers your pictures just a bit, that is a gamble with taking.

At the start of my studies I felt the need to write a raving manifesto. I wanted to legitimise myself, to be taken seriously. It's what people who want to change the world do, right? Now, I do not want a manifesto. Not because I lack the ambition or the drive, but because the discourse is far more fruitful to me. Still, as the very end of our journey, let me state a call to action in a *Streitschrift*.⁴

4 roughly translates to *polemic pamphlet*.



AN ARCHIVE of Notebooks.

Eine Streitschrift.
 Photography does
 not exist. Photography
 is a struggle.

There is no such thing as photography. There is the act of photographing, the photograph and the act of interaction. Interaction with the photograph is interaction with photographing. The space where two or more of these three interact is what might constitute *photography*. It is a hall with many doors, a crossroads with many paths – all leading away from *photography* and, sooner or later, back to itself. To do a *photography* is related to many other things, ergo photography transcends even that what constitutes it.³²

32 I am well aware that this is a semantic play and not necessarily a denouncement of the concept of photography. It resembles the metaphorical story of the Buddhist monk who wishes to be shown an airplane. A pilot shows him his *ride*,

explains all the intricacies, parts and functions of the machine, and yet the monk asks: *that is all very well, but where the airplane?* The answer is of course that the airplane is the sum of its parts, and so is photography.

To do a photography is to be a sibling to drawing and painting, to be a cousin to sculpture, theatre, dance and poetry. To do a photography is to *struggle*. To struggle against capitalism and the locks of price and profit that seal off a pursuit of doing a photography.¹

1 Because all resources deemed necessary for professionalism are expensive, as are those needed to adventure – cameras, lights, film,

development, paper – may it be because *the market regulates itself* or because a monochrome Leica gives you some sort of prestige.

To struggle against the disillusionment of never making it because one is not profound enough² – to struggle against *art*.³

2 Because we are a terrified bunch that tries to justify its passions with the label of being profound rather than the label of simply enjoying a practice.

3 Because *art* as a title that in the end does not further the work but legitimises it in the eyes of some while simultaneously delegitimising it for those you couldn't give two fucks about *art*, only deepening the divide that broken systems of education, economy and society at large profit from.

To struggle against intellectual elitism and closed-off academia.⁴

4 Because if *they* figure that, though you learn a lot at uni, a degree does not free you of struggles, burdens and

the standard of being an approachable, fair and decent human being.

To struggle against inequality of education.⁵

5 Because the formula through which we decide what child is more eligible for what kind of academic carrier is indeed not based upon skill but

the ability to conform to a system of education, to be marked an apple without any spots that is permitted to be sold at the franchise supermarket.

To struggle against ableism, racism, fetishes of foreign cultures and peoples, gendered violence, sexism, homophobia and classicism.⁶

6 Because the discrimination and oppression of these groups is the very thing that barres them from gaining status, transcending their oppressed role and thereby threatening the status of those profiting from *keeping*

things as they are. With people making it, there will always be people who don't, so they say – but the opportunities of making it are anything but equal, not even in a liberal-ish country such as Germany.

To struggle for the pursuit of the people by the people and for the people.⁷

7 Because commodifying creative works and barring the meaning to produce them is the antidote to a truly democratised interest and interest in pursuit. Those who cannot afford to tag along with commodification are

indeed not *uncreative* (nobody is) – they simply don't have enough status and cash to bet in a horse race that in itself is futile and mocks them: horses cannot bet in their own race.

To struggle against boots and for walking barefoot.⁸

8 Because clothing neither makes you intellectual nor creative.

To struggle against boots on necks and bullets in heads.⁹

9 Because creativity is not just for the moments of bliss – it is equally for moments of terror, the release of

fear and anger and the translation of insufferable experiences.

To struggle for the proclamation of *I am here* and *this is*.¹⁰

10 Because the simple act of stating that *I am and I did this* is enough and the need to elaborate in order to gain respect of a contradiction to the levity

we are told to aspire to as creatives by some, while others tell us to have reasons more than being and pleasure.

To struggle for beauty and ugliness.¹¹

11 Because we do not have an obligation to only encounter and produce the beautiful – ugliness is equal to it because it has to keep the universe in balance, but because ugliness tells us as much about our

world, it is as interesting and thought-provoking, as beauty. Because beauty is too often the herald of virtue, and to justify an injustice with virtue is to make it beautiful.

To struggle for truth.¹²

12 Because hiding truths such as *you learn a lot at uni, but you learn the most outside* is one step away from lying.

To struggle for knowing and against the slumber of comfort for as long as your brothers, sister and gender-non-conforming siblings still suffer.¹³

13 Because creativity is not for *numbing*, it is for *dealing with*.

To struggle for change.¹⁴

14 Not because *photography* changes a thing but because people do – and people can be moved to thought and feeling by *photography*.

To struggle against self-indulgence beyond limits.¹⁵

15 Because enjoying yourself because you do a practice is an essential part of doing it (if it is your passion), but

self-glorification is a sentiment that furthers no one but yourself.

To struggle against *mine* and *thine*.¹⁶

16 Because a human endeavour is that of all if shared, because creative work is not a commodity but is made thus –

because my D800 belongs to me but is not inherent to me. Because emotional joys are made commodities.

To struggle against competitive comparison.¹⁷

17 Because it stills courage, because *my* work has no right to stifle *your* work, because the fear of not being

good enough halts to much good in the world.

To struggle against the concept of *genius and fool* and those who *deserve* to pursue.¹⁸

18 Because geniuses do no matter, at least not more than us *ordinary folk*. Because the myth of the genius paint flowery pictures instead of meeting

us were we are, making us not need to pursue to the furthest extend instead of us wanting to.

To struggle for oneself and for the world.¹⁹

19 Because ultimate individualism is a lie that keeps us apart, lonely and fearful for ourselves.

To struggle for life and happiness.²⁰

20 Because that is what this is about – to live, and to live happily.

To struggle because one can and another cannot (like you).²¹

21 Because everyone can but not everyone is allowed to follow creative pursuits and that is fucked up.

To struggle for dignity.²²

22 Because it is dignity that we willingly disregard in the pursuit of greatness – to others and to ourselves.

To struggle against enlightenment.²³

23 Not because ideas of this period are without value but because they are used as a means of othering, oppression and keeping-at-bay – so

it is not *enlightenment* that we need to struggle against, but those of its practices that keep us divided and divide us further.

To struggle for the new and old.²⁴

²⁴ Because reinventing the wheel is a virtuous task, but virtue without merit is virtue steamed. It is when the old wheel is broken that we need a new one, and our wheels *are*

broken. Still, the circle already exists as a concept and we can only learn from our past mistakes of making it a wheel, not invent the concept of the wheel anew.

To struggle for knowledge and understanding.²⁵

²⁵ Because both do not come from us alone, they come from discourse, empathy and respect that we need to show others as we do ourselves.

To struggle against war, hunger and a premarital end to our species.²⁶

²⁶ Because all creativity is not futile in the face of them, but because it cannot exist outside of them, and a

struggle in creativity is therefore a struggle against the ills of the world.

To struggle for those who are *like you* and those who are not.²⁷

27 Because choosing a family, finding your tribe and feeling at home is a pursuit and goal you deserve but must

not denigrate those who will not (or cannot) follow you.

To struggle to transcend the camera.²⁸

28 Not because, as Flusser might argue (if broken down immensely), we need to fight the cameras an apparatus that twists our interaction with the world, but because photography is more than using a camera and interacts with the

world through more than a lens. It is therefore a struggle to enforce what is already there: not the camera *and* the world, but the camera *within* the world.

To struggle for a revolution that will not be televised.²⁹

29 Because solidarity is not easy and never proclaimed to be easy. Because we should do the right thing because

it is the right thing rather than the showers of praise we wish you be engulfed in through it.

To struggle against the banality of evil.³⁰

30 Because Hannah Arendt's words
are important now more than ever.
Because we will slide down roads
which will be a struggle to get off

from in themselves if we don't watch
ourselves. Because voting is a right,
and because it is a responsibility.

To meet the world.³¹

31 Because the world is already there,
we just have to look outside the
viewfinder.

To do a photography is a struggle, and it is a struggle with everything. But here is the sheer beauty of it: a struggle *with* everything means a struggle *for* everything and ergo an interaction *with* everything. To do a photography therefore is not a thing apart and distant: it is right here, in the middle of the world with its family of human pursuits and therefore humanity's hopes, wishes and dreams.

NOTE: As this is not an academic work, the bibliography roughly follows the rules of the German Harvard Style. There will certainly be inconsistencies in citation. The Bibliography will be revised for another edition. Nonetheless, I thank Birgit Schindhelm for her advice.

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PHOTOGRAPHERS

Abrahams, David
 Adams, Ansel
 Ahmadvand, Milad
 Albrecht, Julia
 Azaiza, Motaz
 Baro, Lilli
 Beck, Eric
 Bento, Sofia
 Berestova, Katia
 Brehov, Igor
 Bulin, Dimitri
 Buša, Rita
 Carbonara, Alessia
 Carucci, Elinor
 Carver, Nick
 Chupikova, Eva
 Cuevas, Vanessa M.
 Davison, Jack
 Dettori, Fabien
 de Vries, Neeltje
 Djambov, Ivan
 Do, Mai P.
 Engelke, Anja
 El-Hadid, Sabah
 Fabbri, Bruno
 Farina, Leandro
 Fraiser, Greig
 Frankenbach, Peter
 Frommhold, David
 Geiger, Daša
 González, Cayetano
 Günther, Xenia
 Guerini, Yoann
 Hagenars, Nanda M.
 Hansen, Hans
 Heppner, Johannes
 Hinrichs, Leandra
 Holt, Nicholas
 Hörning, Luisa
 John, Anneliese
 Kerstens, Hendrick
 Khader, Sakir
 Knochenhauer, Elias
 Koebel, Remington C.

Kolde, Thyra
 Kölmel, Marleen
 Kolodziej, Auriane
 Langenfeld, Andreas
 Lanthimos, Giorgos
 Laza, Anna
 Liu, Ziqian
 Luraghi, Valentina
 Maier, Vivian
 Mandarano, Flavia E.M.
 Manzotti, Alessandro
 Mapplethorpe, Edward
 Mapplethorpe, Robert
 Mark, Mary Ellen
 Martinez, Ronald
 Melis, Roger
 Morais, *Vivi*
 Petrara, Nicola
 Pham, Luisa
 Poyzer, Alice
 Rahner, Pio
 Rishmawi, Tarek
 Roversi, Paolo
 Rufai, Ismaila
 Rychlik, Iness
 Sabouki, Ali
 Salgado, Luciana
 Schleif, AK
 Schmidt, Tobias
 Schött, Richard
 Schwenzer, Felicitas
 Shrigley, David
 Siirilä, Mika
 Smith, Eugene
 Specker, Heidi
 Steinert, Jay
 Strietzel, Anna
 Sugimoto, Horishi
 Uyen, Thao N.
 Vieth, Maya
 Waters, Lilli
 Wegener, Carlotta
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Elias Knochenhauer

Remi Koebel

Marlee Kölmel

Vivi Morais

Bahram Nematipour

Andreas Oberthuer

Paul Raab

Pio Rahner

Masihne Rasuli

Max Riedel

Tarek Rishmawi

Henry Rollins

Alexander Rutz

Rojin Safa

Marcel Saidov

Luciana Salgado

Birgit Schindhelm

Tobias Schmidt

Richard Schött

Stachi

Jonas Tegtmeier

Natascha Tümpel

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DER BAGAGES-SONG (BAGAGES, BAGAGES!)

KANN ich bitte wieder einen Workshop machen? Ich will, dass Ricky Dicky wieder Kaffee macht. Lass mal eben in den Nahkauf huschen, weil die Schnitte Torte so anlacht. Die Mate für Liloo lassen wir lieber weg - der Typ teilt dann aus, is' vom Koffein ganz dicht!

2 *Bagages, Bagages! Bagages, Bagages! Bagages, Bagages!*

3 Jojos Schnauzer ist gestriegelt und gegelt, der Typ ist ja mal ein Traum von man! Big M. is' wieder den Laden am schmeißen und lacht sich 'ne neue Elfbar an. Ritchies Bronica is' wieder am rauchen, weil wir ein paar mehr Megapixel brauchen!

4 *Bagages, Bagages! Bagages, Bagages! Bagages, Bagages!*

5 Das kakibraune Licht in der DuKa lacht - hey, ich geh' kurz pissen, kann wer meine test strips mütnehmen? Ok cool, danke! Haste an die Viertelstunde Wässerung gedacht? Ohne die ist der Trockner gefickt! Sorry Jonas, ich hab schon wieder Fixierer in den Entwickler gekippt!

6 *Bagages, Bagages! Bagages, Bagages! Bagages, Bagages!*

CONFESSIONS OF AN AUTISTIC ADOX-DRINKER

APPENDIX & INDEX

INDEX

- ABLEISM 199, 201, 005
- ABSURDIST 172
- ADHD 5, 15, 176, 186, 192, 223
- ADOS 16
- ADULTING 208
- AFD 138, 139
- AFRAID M, N, III, 10, 19, 59, 80, 83, 86, 96, 97, 111, 141, 154, 155, 166, 168, 195, 206, 208, 209, 212, 215, 218, 222, 226, 229, 236
- AI III, 166, 167, 168, 004, 007, 008
- ALLISTICS 4
- ANALOGUE 25, 26
- ANTI-DISCRIMINATION 77
- ANTI-STUDENT 129, 131, 140
- ART 152, 153, 157, 230, 243
- ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE 26, 009
- ASPIE 201
- ASPIE SUPREMACY 201
- AUTISM 5, 8, 9
- AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER 5
- AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER 5, 8, 9
- AUTISTICS 157, 222, 223
- AWESOME 34, 220, 234
- BANALITY OF EVIL 252
- BARTHES 153, 158, 212, 213, 227
- BARYTA II, 230
- BEAUTIFUL 59, 72, 80, 82, 83, 86, 102, 104, 126, 152, 155, 175, 182, 188, 192, 206, 212, 230, 245, 008
- BEAUTY III, 80, 82, 83, 85, 87, 97, 104, 175, 230, 245, 252
- BIGOTS 237
- BIPOC 154
- BIRTH 31
- BLACK FLAG 110, 008
- BOX 24, 58
- BRAIN 4, 9, 10, 13, 31, 32, 40, 83, 134, 144, 145, 213, 218, 222
- BULLSHIT 42, 59, 67, 76, 136, 137, 140, 150, 151, 153, 154, 200, 221
- BUW 48, 53, 57, 84, 87, 95, 124, 131, 132, 134, 138, 224
- CAMBODIA 12, 76, 102, 104
- CAMERA 33, 44, 45, 251
- CAMERA LUCIDA 227
- CHILD 15, 16, 67, 125, 151, 155, 198, 206, 208, 221, 222, 223, 225, 226, 243
- CHILDHOOD 5, 7, 8, 222, 223
- CIVILISED 218, 219
- CONCEPTS II, 82, 132, 184
- CONDOLENCE CARDS 212, 222
- COPYRIGHT II
- COTTON EYE JOE II
- COVID 39, 57, 111, 136, 157
- DARKROOM II, III, 230
- DEATH 31, 55, 174, 209, 212, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231
- DELUSION 192
- DIGITAL 25
- DISORDER 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 15, 17, 57, 168, 176, 179, 184, 187, 192
- DOOM-AND-GLOOM 188
- DREAMS 168, 194, 252
- DSM 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 55, 56, 57, 187, 201, 003
- DSM-V 5, 6, 7, 8, 9
- EDUCATION 4, 114, 124, 134, 137, 138, 154, 156, 160, 178, 185, 243
- EMOTION 58, 102, 206, 208, 222
- ETHICAL III, 133
- EVERYWHERE AT THE END OF TIME III
- EXISTENTIALIST 172
- EXPERIENCE 31, 35, 41, 43, 44, 55, 155, 156, 222, 226, 228
- FEAR 54, 55, 56, 70, 71, 80, 86, 114, 124, 151, 155, 160, 161, 226, 236, 245, 247
- FILES II, 33, 141
- FLAT DEATH 227
- FUCK 33, 119, 212
- GAZA 221
- GENIUS III, 125, 176, 177, 198, 201, 202, 248

- GERMANY 15, 67, 79, 102, 104,
138, 139, 157, 159, 160, 244,
004
- GODDAMMIT 154
- GRIEF 222
- GRIEVING 213, 222
- GUN III, 66
- HAPPINESS 68, 150, 190, 209, 248
- HEADPHONES III
- HOPES 252
- HSP 223
- HUMAN 40, 43, 158, 209, 243,
247, 252
- ICD 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 55, 187, 201, 006
- ICD-11 5, 6
- ILLNESS 9, 137, 174, 176, 179, 180,
182, 183, 184, 189, 190, 192,
218, 007, 008
- IMAGE 31, 42
- INNER CHILD 222, 223
- INSPIRATION PORN 199, 200, 201
- INSTAGRAM II, 26, 100, 101, 119,
191, 234, 004
- INTELLECTUAL 6, 8, 160, 220,
224, 243, 244
- INTERPRETATION 152, 156, 157,
158, 005
- KID 16, 30, 71, 76, 79, 104, 110, 126,
152, 199, 207, 236
- KODAK II
- LBTQIA+ 154
- LIFE II, 8, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 39, 42,
68, 70, 78, 94, 95, 104, 110,
125, 134, 150, 177, 178, 179,
180, 182, 188, 190, 192, 199,
200, 201, 206, 207, 212,
215, 218, 219, 221, 222, 226,
230, 234, 236, 237, 248
- LIVING 31, 150, 213, 227, 228, 230
- LOLITA 190, 191, 003, 004, 006,
008, 010
- MASKING 16, 17, 49, 52, 69, 161, 201
- MEANING K, 42, 57, 85, 94, 101,
114, 125, 136, 152, 156, 157,
158, 160, 161, 177, 178, 179,
180, 229, 244
- MEDIA 7, 19, 100, 101, 103, 111,
174, 186, 191
- MEMORIES II, 33, 59, 69, 130, 177,
209, 213
- MENTAL HEALTH 15, 16, 176, 177,
188, 190, 191, 194
- MR. FANCY PANTS 120
- NABOKOV 190, 191, 003, 004
- NATURAL 150, 219, 221, 226, 227
- NEGATIVES II, 33
- NEOLIBERALISM 139
- NEURODIVERGENCE 4
- NIHILIST 172
- NIKON III
- NUNTIVS 3, 118, 119, 214, 215,
220, 221
- OCD. 192
- ORTHOCHROMATIC III
- PAIN-IN-THE-ASS 76
- PAINTING 12, 49, 80, 82, 84, 85,
95, 103, 124, 133, 154, 158,
182, 184, 193, 242
- PANCHROMATIC III
- PEOPLE III, 4, 9, 18, 26, 31, 39, 48,
51, 52, 53, 58, 59, 66, 69, 70,
71, 72, 76, 77, 78, 80, 81, 83,
84, 96, 97, 100, 101, 110,
124, 126, 127, 128, 130, 132,
134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 140,
144, 145, 151, 152, 156, 160,
161, 162, 166, 168, 174, 177,
181, 188, 189, 192, 194, 199,
200, 201, 202, 206, 207,
209, 212, 213, 215, 218, 219,
220, 221, 222, 223, 226,
229, 230, 236, 238, 244,
246, 004, 005, 007
- PERSONAL 5, 6, 8, 13, 16, 50, 78,
101, 102, 104, 105, 106,
130, 139, 153, 178, 187, 221
- PHENOMENOLOGY 43
- PHILOSOPHY II, 12, 31, 43
- PHOTOGRAPHY J, 44, 114, 160,
212, 213, 218, 227, 242, 246,
251, 252
- PICTURE 25, 42, 58, 66, 67, 155,
157, 160, 161, 184, 213, 228,
230, 236

- PLACE 14, 15, 25, 58, 68, 70, 79,
84, 96, 97, 104, 110, 133,
134, 138, 168, 181, 182, 226,
228, 230
- PLAYBOY III
- POETIC 208
- POLAROID III
- PORTRAIT 213, 228, 230
- PRIVATE 100, 102, 104, 105, 106,
130, 133, 192, 208
- PROFOUND 129, 140, 155, 156, 157,
160, 174, 175, 176, 178, 184,
195, 236, 243
- PROJECT II, 10, 48, 53, 54, 58, 60,
72, 76, 84, 102, 103, 104,
105, 106, 120, 125, 126,
132, 134, 141, 162, 188, 193,
194, 221
- PUNK 120
- PURSUIT 10, 150, 160, 242, 244,
249, 251
- REAL L, N, 24, 94, 96, 97, 111, 124, 133,
136, 179, 188, 194, 200, 212,
223, 231
- REASON 57, 114, 128, 150, 151, 154,
221, 226, 230, 231
- REVOLUTION 155, 251
- ROOM-AS-TOOL 95, 96, 97
- SCRIPT 4, 50, 52, 53, 57, 59, 72
- SCRIPTING 49, 58
- SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER
193
- SERIES K, 3, 48, 72, 84, 86, 102,
104, 124, 128, 159, 193,
194, 198
- SHIRLEY JACKSON III
- SHIT 31, 33, 114, 115, 118, 214, 220,
222
- SOCIAL MEDIA 100, 101, 174, 186,
191
- SO IT GOES. 218, 221, 222, 226,
227, 230
- SPOON 144, 004
- STACHI 124, 125, 126, 127, 129,
220, 221, 226, 230
- STOCHASTIC PARROTS M, N,
167, 003
- STRUGGLE M, N, 15, 43, 69, 134,
144, 154, 186, 189, 190, 192,
195, 206, 221, 242, 243,
244, 245, 246, 247, 248,
249, 250, 251, 252
- STUDENT M, N, 67, 120, 127, 129,
131, 132, 133, 136, 137, 138,
140, 141, 152, 154, 157, 161,
199
- STUDIO 45, 114, 118, 158, 212, 213,
218
- SUCKER 120
- SUICIDE 218, 222
- SYSTEM II, 24, 25, 38, 39, 137, 138,
139, 154, 156, 166, 177, 180,
182, 187, 200, 206, 223,
243
- THERAPY III, 15, 18, 42, 54, 84, 105,
125, 126, 161, 184, 186, 195,
222, 223
- TIME 31, 41, 43, 55, 56, 114, 118,
120, 158, 215, 221, 223, 224,
228, 230, 231
- TRAUMA 157, 222, 223
- UGLINESS 245
- UNDERSTANDING 6, 18, 40, 41,
70, 78, 83, 104, 136, 178,
195, 200, 250
- UNIQUE SELLING POINT 226
- VANITAS 80, 82
- VOID 94, 95, 96
- WEAPON 78, 130
- WISHES 137, 186, 242, 252
- WORLD III, 9, 16, 19, 40, 43, 44,
52, 68, 71, 78, 82, 94, 95,
100, 102, 120, 132, 136, 177,
182, 183, 185, 186, 187, 193,
194, 198, 206, 207, 212,
218, 219, 221, 222, 225,
226, 230, 238, 245, 247,
248, 250, 251, 252

[THE ANONYMOUS PHOTOGRAPHERS SOCIETY]

Messages from HQ

[Homework 1: Your Inner Child]

Task: Search through your archives for your favourite childhood photo of yourself.

Notebook: Get a special notebook to use throughout this course, one you can easily carry. It should be a place for your deepest thoughts, especially outside class.

First Page: Stick your chosen childhood photo on the first page and reflect on it. What thoughts or emotions come to mind when you look at this image?

[Homework 2: Self-Portrait]

Objectives: Use your studio photography skills to capture your current state of mind.

Reflect on where you are emotionally and mentally right now.

Consider what holds you back and what you're longing for.

Explore personal expression through any photographic methods that resonate with you.

Requirements: Create a self-portrait using studio photography techniques.

[Homework [3]: Still Life]

Objectives: Find one object you love. Find another you hate. Use your studio photography skills to capture both. Write about each object freely and without self-censorship.

Requirements: Create a still life using studio photography techniques.

Homework [4]: Sequence

Mission Objective: Visualize your better self: a version of you that has healed, grown, or transformed. Write a short story about this version of yourself. Who are they? What do they look like? How do they act? What makes them feel whole? Use your storytelling and sequencing skills to create a diptych, triptych, or quadriptych that glorifies this better self.

Required Elements: Incorporate portraiture, still life, landscapes, symbolism, or abstraction to represent this better self. Pay attention to:

Composition: Frame your shots to lead the viewer into your story.

Colour: Set the emotional tone and atmosphere.

Interaction: Ensure the images flow together cohesively.

Photograph by Birgit Schindhelm, 2004.



PAPA AND ME. ANGKOR.

[D8469. TUESDAY.]

I was 1,016 days old, today it is 8,469.

It was May 24th 2004, now it is October 24th 2024.

There are over 20 years, 7,453 days passed now.

I'm so young and so fucking happy. There is not a single bad thought, not a single fear in these eyes. This is so long gone. Papa and I seem set into a magical realm, a world just for us two and Mama who took the photo.

I'm so happy. I'm so loved and allowed to be careless. Papa looks exhausted but present. I dunno why but thought of us two sitting there on the steps of an ancient temple in our neighbourhood seems like a beautiful dream.

I did live a dream, already at the very start. And I'm so unaware of it. I'm just happy. Happy about my crappy reed flute that probably never got played right and most certainly would've sounded shitty at best. Happy because I'm sitting next to my Papa, with my Mama only a few feet away on the precipis of a photographic moment she might have instinctively known might preserve, might be worth something somewhen.

Roland Barthes wrote about *Flat Death*. My parents will die and the knowledge of the moment of the boy depicted will too, hopefully in old age. To my grandchildren, this photo will be a fantastical tale, only distantly believable and closely bond to derealisation. A story of magical yet human character.

I wonder if the *Flat Death* has already set in. For so long I didn't care about this kid. I sought to push him behind as far and as soon as possible. There were times when I, still a kid, wanted him to be gone. Youthful bliss and unfiltered joy were so dangerous, even though I was still a kid. A kid seeking to end the kid that had been. A kid wanting to grow up so that it be amongst peers.

I have the expressions of my Papa nowadays and I know this look. But if I were there, I would sob, cries echoing through Angkor and being soaked in by the long roots of ancient figs crushing the stone. I am so afraid for this boy. I am so sorry. I know only part of what to come for him, but I want to take so much from him. He doesn't deserve so many things that will happn, that will burry him under the rubble from which I have spent years to dig him up from, calling for him, fearing to never

again being able to sit like on these steps, watching the sun in the jungle. His body will grow but it is the same that will endure, will have to endure. He will learn too many wrong paths. He will be so lonely.

And for what?

This boy is so safe, so loved. He is still alive though it at time terrifies me to see him. I fear this world would never take him fully. But the jungle is not where he belongs forever, though through this image, he always will at least belong a bit.

We will be fine.

I can take care of him. I will. I will because he always gets taken care of. He is my first child, and my children might some day have his company.

And they will be happy.

In the jungle. At home.



SELF-PORTRAIT OF THE PHOTOGRAPHER AS
VENUS IN AUTISTIC GROWING PAINS.

I look like one of the lost children Darwish writes about in *Journal of an Ordinary Grief*. The children that strayed from home in play and that go missing because they have fallen into wells. Indeed, I have fallen into wells and come out of most. But still, down there, it is cold and only the stars in the night keep you company. Through a circular window you look up and, as for Billy Pilgrim when he tried to explain his experience of time to the Tralfamadorians, that window becomes time. Through the circle the seasons change and night follows day, yet all you can think about is how you can get out (if you can), when somebody will come look for you and call your name or how might make yourself at home. Here, at the bottom of the well.

I never made friends with the wells I fell into, and I am glad. People came looking for me and what they found more often than not was that I had already climbed out or was on my way out. And then they pulled me onto the dry sand. And there I stood, only half-grown. There I stood, a man who was a child that had fallen into the well. There I stood, outside the well, in need of growing at twice my speed like a plant that hasn't seen the light for too long. In the well I had had water, enough to drink, enough to drown. But now, it was time for growing and growing up without knowing how to. I became a potatoe sticking out its roots into all directions.



TELLTALE TRAUMA BOX AND DINO.
[D8503. WEDNESDAY.]

Edgar Allan Poe's *Tell-Tale Heart* is one of the most terrifying stories I have ever read, and the last time was over a decade ago. To be haunted not by a ghost but the actual, grave-transcending incarnation of a dead man – it scared me shitless and I might have lost some sleep over it.

But a decade later, I have found myself housing a tell-tale heart. It is scary how little a box a person who among my friends is only spoken of as *M* can fit. It was sealed shut over two years ago when I started photographing, and has never been opened. It was entrusted to my roommate and later lingered at a friend's place – for weeks it has been hiding in my locker at the studio. I re-taped it, but opening it – never. And even then, I thought a faint smell that I have come to hate slip through the crack. An odour of decay and rot, a washing soap of a person who very well might be dead by now. The tell-tale box harbours other things for certain. Love letters received, photographs taken, two rings and possibly things I haven't forgotten about for good. Bowie once stated that, as a recovered alcoholic, one drop of liquor would kill him, that is the life he built himself through recovery. The images and words in my tell-tale box would do similar things to me. I would die for a moment and all the pains of the colloquial trauma would reincarnate me into a shape less than the human I am today. This is the most dangerous object I own, and when I die, I want it to be burned and the ashes spread. This thing will not outlive me, and neither will my trauma. It is good that packaging and content are highly flammable.

And yet, I will not burn it. Not as of now. Not because I hold a sentimental grudge against burning things – because as long as my tell-tale trauma box exists, I have power over it. *He who can destroy a thing has power over it* Herbert writes. It is a testament to the fact that I have suffered and could still suffer by it. It is a trophy and a reminder. It holds the person within contained. She is held at a distance by simple gaffer, and she has become a ghost to more than me, she cannot haunt me more than she has for too long already. I want satisfaction and don't need to shoot someone for it. I can protect myself from certain things, and my power is in gaffer and a rule.

You've forgotten your dino! Marit tells me. I have indeed. It is such a small thing to keep track of – a small present from her studies. A brachiosaurus. My favourite (as I told her and my former roommates

brachiosaurus. My favourite (as I told her and my former roommates when they interviewed me). I have a little brachiosaurus figurine, and I am a child again. Back I am with a special interest and a book my Papa got me on a whim while grocers shopping. Back I am, a child. She likes to remind me that I as one once, and she does it with love of a mother, a sister my most beloved. It is nothing and it everything, and I love her for it. Maybe it will get a special place on my desk. A little brachiosaurus watching me work, work for myself and for a life with her. Because sometimes, Marit makes me feel like a child. Innocent, simple, kept warm – and with a sick-ass dino figurine. A thing that is a passing thought now but that will never leave my belongings. A thing that will never end in a box. A thing I will treat with respect and cherish in my own little ways. A thing more than worthwhile – a testament to the simplicity of simple acts out of love and kindness and consideration and joy and humour. A little dinosaur, simple, with bulging painted-on eyes, towering over the remains of a dead person. A living thing from a living person built on top of the living remains of a dead person. *A fuck you. A love you*, a sincere one, one I cannot doubt. A statement to the past and a sign of the new, the joy, the love and that is to come. A brachiosaurus proclaiming *I see no god up here other than me, bitch!* The antidote to the tell-tale heart, a transplant and a supply of fresh blood for whoever knows how many years to come, maybe and quite possibly all of them.





UNTITLED

It will be in the evening and they will already be under blankets. They are happy. And they're sleepy already.

I read them a story about big snakes and little snakes and airplanes and roses. And before I know it, I am the one who falls asleep. But they have done so too, so it's alright.

That is how Marit finds me.

She gives me a little push and closes the book.

And then, we got to bed.

Not all is healed, but all is well.

And for now, the rest is only fantasy. But that is well, too.

I watched this book evolve and won't be the same person again. Now to get myself enough copies to build a fortress and never come out. · Die Kunst des Schreibens besteht darin, den Lesenden in den Kopf des Autoren einzuladen; bei diesem Buch wird man allerdings einem LSD-Trip ausgesetzt, bei dem Tom Waits Taylor-Swift-Lieder auf einem Flügel smettet. · Reading this stuff, I feel like I just had very aggressive sex: I am exhausted but happy. In short: I feel fucked. · Poesie kann man lernen, Herz nicht. · I sincerely wish to burn this book so that I can snort it. · Der schmale, aber sehr bestimmte, Weg zwischen Wahnsinn, Wahrheit und Wagemut. · Jacob doing Jacob things.

(Photography does not exist). (Photography is a struggle).

There is no such thing as photography. There is the act of photographing, the photograph and the act of interaction. Interact with the photograph & interaction with photography. There you have two or more of these three interact & interaction constitutes 'photography'. It is a hell with many sort, a crossroads with many paths - all leading away from 'photography' and, sooner or later, leads to struggle. To do a photography is related to many other things, up photography transcends even that what constitutes it.

To do a photography it is to be a being to drawing and painting, to be a carrier to sculpture, theatre, dance and poetry. To do a photography it is to struggle. To struggle against capitalism and the rules of price and profit that had a pursuit of doing a photography. To struggle against the dehumanization of never making it because one is not professional enough - to struggle against it. To struggle against intellectualization and elitism of academia. To struggle against inequality of education. To struggle against elitism, racism, sexism of foreign cultures and peoples, prejudice, religion, homophobia, classism. To struggle for the power of the people by the people and for the people. To struggle against status and for working life. To struggle against both in cities and in the countryside. To struggle for water. To struggle for the proclamation of "I am not" and "I am". To struggle for beauty and ugliness. To struggle for knowing and against

The slumber of comfort for us and for your fellow humans still suffers. To struggle for change - not because 'photography' changes a thing but because people do. To struggle against self-indulgence and death. To struggle against living and this. To struggle against comparison. To struggle for harmony. To struggle against the concept of being and those who desire to become. To struggle for oneself and for the world. To struggle for life and happiness. To struggle because one is and another cannot (like you). To struggle for dignity. To struggle for the new. To struggle for knowledge and understanding. To struggle against war, hunger and be persecuted and to refugees. To struggle for those who are alien to us and those who are not. To struggle to transcend the camera. To meet the world.

To do a photography is a struggle, and this is a struggle with everything. But what is the beauty of it? A struggle with everything means to interact with everything. To do a photography therefore is not a thing apart and distant: it is right here, in the middle of the world with its family of human creatures, and therefore, humanity, hopes, wishes and dreams.