



Unsettling

Capture

Wording, Haunting, Dissolving

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Abstract

Questioning the notion 'to capture' something or someone, a term often used to describe what photography does, this thesis aims to find ways to create and share photographs and words that speak of the realms of illness, death, madness and loss, without imprisoning either the subject or the viewer. In connection to my own practice as an artist working with photography and writing, thematically engaged in the aforementioned themes, I propose three verbs to unsettle capture: wording, haunting and dissolving. Each verb introduces a methodology for thinking and making that is simultaneously performed in the writing of this thesis itself, unfolding in relation to the photographs distributed throughout it. Through thinking together with a wide range of authors while continuously linking back to my own practice, this thesis concludes that in order to unsettle capture while speaking of illness, death, madness and loss, works of art must be alive, with an ability to haunt the viewer and maker, an ability to change and to dissolve into the life that continues beyond the margins of the work.

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Introduction

The recognition of one's own affects in works of art can be a means of understanding both art and oneself. It is through this sense of recognition that certain works touch us deeply. One day I showed a photograph of mine to a friend. It was a portrait. My friend took the small photographic print in his hands and exclaimed "Sometimes I feel like this!" An exclamation I have never forgotten, for it made me wonder; how can he know, and is her feeling visible in that one photograph? He was convinced of what she was going through, certain that he had gone through the same. At the time, I felt a strange mixture of pride (my photograph could convey a strong feeling), disbelief (he didn't even doubt the similarity between his feeling and hers) and guilt (I knew he was projecting on her, she was not feeling exactly how he thought she was, and because the photograph was mine I was complicit in this misunderstanding). In this case, my friend's sense of recognition was an assumption and a false certainty about the person portrayed. He was diagnosing her with a specific feeling that wasn't hers. Besides, the object that provoked his recognition was not only an object (a small photographic print) but a person too (a young woman who entrusted her image to my camera and me).

When describing what photography does, the verb often used is 'to capture.' Any viewer, like the aforementioned friend, might proclaim that I as the photographer had captured a feeling. Or perhaps I had captured a person, captured a moment or captured a likeness. Though, problematically, capturing suggests the imprisonment of the subject matter. The verb is used for words too. It is seen as a goal for writers to capture aspects of life in words. Yet, once something is captured, it is no longer out there, no longer wild, no longer free. It is contained and that is when you should begin to doubt its reality. While a pinned-down butterfly is still technically a butterfly, it loses its flutter and therewith its essence. You can comfortably study its colours and patterns, without fear of the butterfly closing its wings or scaring off when you get too close. However, its colours and patterns may reveal far less about its behaviour than its movement. It is dead, and only in death captured, thus no longer alive, no longer truly there.

In my artistic practice I work mainly with the media of photography and writing, thematically engaged in the realms of illness, death, madness and loss. This is where life shows its teeth. Working with themes like these requires delicacy and sensitivity. You cannot capture people who are ill or seize them by force or throw them in a bag over your shoulder to take

home. The word 'capture' is inadequate because it implies confining people within categories, holding them in a space smaller than themselves. There is a need for nuance, for a way of creating and sharing in which neither the subject nor the viewer is contained or imprisoned. In this thesis I proceed to look for alternatives and methods to implement in my own work, in a wide range of fields, including philosophy, psychology, fiction and poetry. This thesis proposes three verbs as possible practices that can unsettle and oppose the act of capturing: wording, haunting and dissolving. By wording, I refer to the act of finding words for something or someone. Haunting, on the other hand, is about the invisible, ghostly and ephemeral acting upon us. By dissolving, I mean the blurring and disappearing of boundaries and distinctions. This thesis therefore begins from a point that is still close to capture (wording), and then moves on to a more vague terrain (haunting), before ending in a radical indistinguishability (dissolving).

Throughout this journey, the proposed verbs perform as concepts to be with and as a method for writing: I am continuously weighing wording, allowing myself to be haunted and enabling my words and those of others to dissolve. Besides the division into three chapters, there are no defined subsections. The writing gestures from one thought to the next, moving through my mind and through other minds. I take inspiration for this way of writing with others from Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* and Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters*. Based upon these two examples I have used the following style rules: All quotations are in italics. Both long and short quotes are in the text, rather than set apart. Authors, books and page numbers are named in the margins. The full references can be found at the end of the thesis. Furthermore, the text is interspersed with my photographs. Through the presence of these photographs the relation between language and image is not only written about, but performed as well. My desire to refuse capture does not cancel out my practice within the medium of photography. By including these photographs I offer a visual proposal of what unsettling capture could look like.

Wording

Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p.3

ibid, p.4

Are words good enough? Maggie Nelson begins her book *The Argonauts* by recounting an ongoing argument between her and her partner Harry Dodge. *Before we met, I had spent a lifetime devoted to the idea that the inexpressible is contained—inexpressibly!—in the expressed.* While she believes in words, her partner firmly maintains that words are not good enough. *Not only not good enough, but corrosive to all that is good, all that is real, all that is flow. (...) Once we name something, you said, we can never see it the same way again. All that is unnamable falls away, gets lost, is murdered.* This disagreement between Nelson and Dodge exemplifies the very ambivalence of language. We might distinguish words written, letters on sheets, from words spoken, sounds that we've learned to give meaning. Yet in both cases language bears with it dangers of one-dimensional hardness and finality. Words may or may not suffice to convey complex thoughts, ideas and feelings. Of course, the question 'Are words good enough?' poses further questions: Good enough for what? What exactly is it that we want from language?

In this thesis we are moving in the realms of illness, death, madness and loss. The relation between words themselves and the things they designate has been a long preoccupation of philosophers of language. A key figure in this history is the Swiss semiotician Ferdinand De Saussure, to whom language is a system consisting of signs, wherein every sign includes the signifier – something that stands in for something else – and the signified, the thing itself. The word 'lion' stands in for the actual lion while there is no natural link between the letters or the sound of the word to the animal itself. *The same idea might as well be represented by any other sequence of sounds. This is demonstrated by differences between languages, and even by the existence of different languages.* Therefore, any word is an arbitrary sign for something else. This arbitrariness, however, does not imply that the signs are without purpose. We need words *when one's subject resists vision and may not be "really there" at all.* Once you have found a word for something, you can talk about it, point at it and conclude that since there is a word for it, it exists. In such a way, language can provide relief and open up spaces for exchange.

Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 158

Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked*, p.1

The psychoanalyst Melanie Klein writes about mourning and argues that any mourner will go through phases of *the testing of reality*. Someone is no longer there and in order to come to terms with this the mourner needs to test what is real - to prod, to weigh, to observe and to confirm reality. My own urge to find words and make photographs of things that are hard to grasp comes from the mourner in me. I need to test what is

Melanie Klein, *Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States*, p.95

real to confirm that certain phenomena are part of reality, however unreal they may seem. The need of the mourner is the need of the artist is the need of the writer. My practice begins with a testing of reality. I am testing subjects that resist vision in order to confirm that they are real and, in sharing them, finding that they are real not only for me, but for others too.

Ludwig
Wittgenstein
in Maggie
Nelson's
Bluets
p.67

When Maggie Nelson writes the phrase: *The inexpressible is contained—inexpressibly!—in the expressed*, these words are hers, but they are built upon words coined by another: *If only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then nothing gets lost. But the unutterable will be—unutterably—contained in what has been uttered!* Thus wrote Ludwig Wittgenstein, another significant philosopher on language, long before Nelson. It is in the train of thought they share that I will continue to write. I echo Nelson who echoes Wittgenstein and in this process each of us expands the wording of the other. We take on the challenge to speak of the unutterable and the inexpressible. An impossibility is on the table: This cannot be uttered. This cannot be expressed. The same struggle is ongoing within the medium of photography. What I really wish to show is not quite visible. One can neither grasp nor photograph a feeling or a fear. However, in the best of works, to speak with Wittgenstein and Nelson, the unphotographable is—invisibly!—visible in the photographed. Photographs have the ability to bear something within them that is not technically depicted in the image. And often it is the proximity of well-chosen words, in the form of a caption or a title, that brings this invisible layer to the fore.

What one can see is in every way related to what one can say. Photographs are regularly leaning on words to gain strength. I call myself a photographer though lately, as the number of words I write far exceeds the number of images I create, I've started to wonder whether the term is correct. An image can tell many stories all by itself and certain images are overwhelmingly powerful without the help of any language at all. Yet in many cases an image can penetrate the mind especially deeply when it joins forces with well-chosen words; often words are needed to carry the image. *It is not enough to simply see the work to decide what the subject is (...) at the edge of the work, neither inside nor outside, readable rather than visible, the title is our only recourse. As for deciding the subject, the initiative is always left to words.* So Jacques Derrida elucidates the practical function of the title. It is a tool that helps us to understand art, to fathom what we are looking at. The trouble is that language in relation to images can be too dominant. For we listen to titles and captions. We trust them more than we do the image. As if the images are whispering and murmuring, while the words are loudly proclaiming. This is

Peggy
Phelan,
Unmarked,
p.2

Jacques
Derrida in
Peggy
Phelan,
Unmarked,
p.15

troubling, for if words already say what the image is or does, very little is left for the image to say or do. Interestingly, the power relation between image and language has been played with by generations of artists. Think of Magritte's *The Treachery of Images*, in which the image of a pipe is accompanied by the words: *ceci n'est pas une pipe*. Many artists all through the history of art choose to display their works as untitled, consciously leaving things open for interpretation based on the visual alone. The 'Untitled' is a recurrent yet radical choice of defying the ascendancy of words.



My own work includes texts and titles in various ways. Transmitting and conveying something through photography is bound up with wording for me. In a recent photobook I combine photographs and textual dialogues of psychiatric patients. In the book you are invited to ponder the (in)ability to place yourself into another's shoes, the absurdity of mental illness as well as the familiarity and humanity of those who suffer from voices in their head, delusions, psychoses and depression. As a title for this work I chose a Dutch phrase by one of the patients: 'Zolang je niet zo over problemen praat zie je er toch niks van,' which translates roughly to 'As long as you don't talk about problems so much, you won't see them anyway.' The title brings to doubt the work itself and the impossibility to photograph something as complicated as mental health problems. It not only names the work but questions it. This example shows how language can work with images without constraining them, instead opening them up for a closer look, for reconsideration.

Virginia Woolf,
*The Death of the
Moth and Other
Essays*, p.343

ibid, p.345

ibid, p.349

When attempting to use words in such a way that they are not confining, it may help to see them as things that are alive. In this light, an interesting example of a writer who considered words carefully yet experimented with them freely is Virginia Woolf. Besides using words in her famous fiction, she has written many essays, and in some of those has reflected deeply on the acts of wording and writing. She speaks of words as if they are complex beings with a will of their own. It is because words *have been out and about* and *have contracted many marriages* that they are so stored with meaning, she states. You are never the first to use words – they have been somewhere before, they have been someone else's. Like Nelson echoing Wittgenstein's phrase, we are constantly rephrasing each other, reordering words in new combinations in our never-ending attempts to express. Words are not going to make it easy for us. *They are the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things*. And significantly, their most striking peculiarity is their nature to change, their ability to be many-sided. *We pin them down to one meaning, their useful meaning, the meaning which makes us catch the train, the meaning which makes us pass the examination. And when words are pinned down they fold their wings and die*. Although certain books are called 'wild' or some writers are deemed 'free', rarely do we acknowledge wildness and freeness as the nature of words themselves. Woolf opens up the possibility that words have wills, tempers and traumas of their own, unrelated to the speaker or writer that wields them.

Frantz Fanon,
*The 'North
African
Syndrome'*, p.5

Here, we have to return to Maggie Nelson's question that poses the next question: Are words good enough? Good enough for what? First of all, let's focus on whether words are good enough to express pain and illness. Language has a complicated relationship with the ill. The sick long for a diagnosis, to give themselves at least something to hold on to. Yet it is precisely in naming illness that words often fall short. *And he tells about his pain. Which becomes increasingly his own. He now talks about it volubly. He takes hold of it in space and puts it before the doctor's nose. He takes it, touches it with his ten fingers, develops it, exposes it. It grows as one watches it. He gathers it over the whole surface of his body and after fifteen minutes of gestured explanations the interpreter (appropriately baffling) translates for us: he says he has belly-ache*. In Frantz Fanon's essay *The 'North African Syndrome'* he writes of grievous misunderstandings between North African patients and French doctors. The most common affliction the North African patients arrive with is plainly: "doctor, I'm dying". And of course, they are dying. It is a true phrase they are speaking, but it is also a phrase that bears witness to a lack of words, an incapability of language. A patient is asked about the periodicity of his pain, the 'when' and the 'how often'. This information is

ibid, p.4

necessary for the doctor to reach a diagnosis, to advice on further treatment. For the patient however, the present pain suffices. *It is as though it is an effort for him to go back to where he no longer is. (...) He does not understand that anyone should wish to impose on him, even by way of memory, the pain that is already gone.* This is but one example of the many ways in which the two cultures do not express themselves in a compatible way. The French doctors, not being able to find a sickness that they can treat, come up with the diagnosis ‘North African syndrome’, concluding that these patients simply fancy themselves to be ill. This semi-diagnosis is a form of capture, an example of how wording can be capturing in a profoundly political way, in this case bound up with settler colonialism. Resulting from the power relations between the colonizer and the colonised, and the language that one imposed on the other, those in pain are not heard and, consequently, not helped.

Virginia Woolf,
On Being Ill, p.7

Virginia Woolf also writes about the incapacity to find words for illness. She speaks of the poverty of language – the English language in her case – and the lack of words for the shiver and the headache. She marvels at the fact that illness is not one of the major themes in literature, alongside love and battle, since it is such a common and utterly transforming experience. *Let a sufferer try to describe the pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. There is nothing ready made for him. He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand and a lump of pure sound in the other (...) so as to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out.* And that is what patients do; lacking words, they moan, they scream, sweat, shiver and gesticulate. Lumps of pure sound and crude gestures become desperate attempts at conveying what words cannot. We have no words to encompass the transformative experience of our bodies letting us down and in the translation between one’s bodily sensation to another human being, with whom one does not share a body, much is lost. This is a field full of misunderstanding and mistrust. How tragic must be the realization that your existential suffering, your “doctor, I’m dying” is belittled to a case of North African Syndrome, a diagnosis that is in itself a deprecation, a figment of imagination, based upon a lack of words and social inequality. It is vital to the patient to transmit his or her pain, in order to remain alive and in order to feel heard, seen, understood.

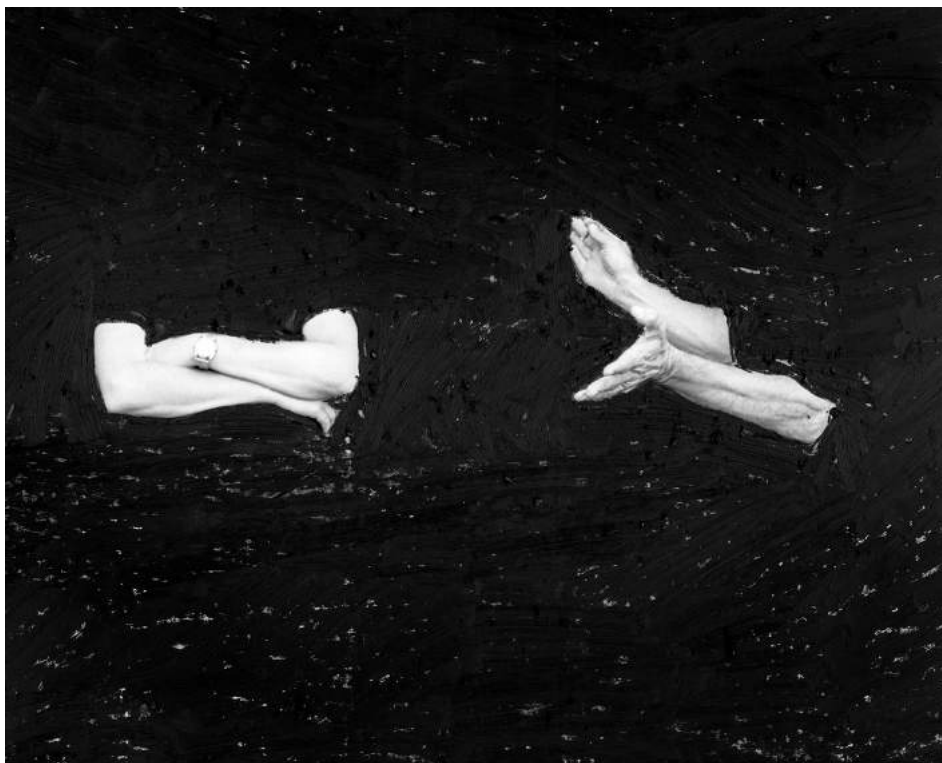
Still, a recurring issue is, what can and what cannot be named? *Such thoughts could not be borne by us, so we did not try them out,* Peggy Phelan writes, after narrating the story of her and her siblings sensing an unfathomable sadness emanating from their mother during their childhood. Some thoughts or experiences are too much to bear, let alone put into words. *Even as we named my mother’s sadness “grief” and silently*

Peggy Phelan,
Unmarked, p.13

ibid, p.13

Chinua Achebe,
*Things Fall
Apart*, p.36

attributed it to the death of my sister, we also recognized, however dimly, the possibility that her silence had nothing at all to do with the loss of her child. Yet, in order for them to cope with it, the sadness was named grief, since a sadness that has been named is far less frightening than a sadness unnamed; a sadness unutterable is unstoppable. The risk is to give a sadness a name that does not belong to it. Phelan's narration brings to mind a phrase by the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, which he writes after a death: *I cannot yet find a mouth with which to tell the story.* Sometimes we have no words, no language, no mouth. If you name a depressed woman as a mourner or a sick man as a pretender, you thwart their recovery. A diagnosis, condition or name that fits with what you feel and suffer from can be a relief, though it is a dangerous thing. The wrong conclusion can further confuse and damage the person who suffers.



If physical illness is a condition for which words are hard to find, mental illness is even more so. Diagnoses sprout like weeds from the minds of doctors and scientists, but rare is the patient who identifies with his own diagnosis, rare is the word that conveys what is happening in the mind of the mentally ill. Interestingly, in the field of psychiatry there are many cases where naming happened through photography. In Jean Martin Charcot's *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* a diagnosis was paired with a photograph, creating a tableau that served as evidence of an illness. Charcot was a French doctor who worked in the Salpêtrière in Paris from 1862 until his death in 1884. Salpêtrière, at that time, was a large hospice for women with mental and neurological disorders. Charcot

mainly made his diagnoses on the basis of minute visual observation. He was famous for rarely asking his patients ‘What is the matter?’ or ‘Where does it hurt?’ for he assumed that he was able to see just that. He believed in a clinical, impartial method of perception. While to others the Salpêtrière was known as a hell and as ‘la cité des femmes incurables’, Charcot saw it as a valuable museum of pathology. As every proper museum requires a catalogue, he set about creating the Iconographie, with the help of doctor and photographer Paul Regnard. An illness that was extensively documented was hysteria, an illness always bound up with the figure and feelings of only women. Photographs of women were treated as evidence, labelled as being physical proof of what a certain type of madness looks like. This is hysteria. This is how a hysteric woman moves. This is how a hysteric woman sleeps. This is how she smiles. This is how she walks. Admittedly, there is value in these images. They show us how these women with mental disorders looked, moved and expressed themselves. The trouble is that the images were used as if they were facts, as if they were evidence. In *The Invention of Hysteria* Georges Didi-Huberman argues that the most important thing Charcot forgot is that *madness can change form and does so*. By this method of photographic naming the women were captured in the worst sense of the word: They could no longer be anything other.

Georges Didi-Huberman,
The Invention of Hysteria, p.6

As a photographer, I know that as soon as I take out my camera, nothing is simply as it was. People know they are being watched and change their behaviour according to how they wish to be seen. I gain the power of choosing a moment that suits my interests. I might shoot many photographs and I will be the one selecting the photo among these that I find most telling. This image is never a simple registration, it has gone through the filter of my presence, wishes and choices. Charcot stated; *but, as for the truth, I am absolutely only the photographer; I register what I see*. He repeatedly photographed patients, making them used to the camera, which of course changed their behaviour in front of the camera. One of Charcot’s patients was a girl named Augustine. *During the period when [Augustine, a young girl who entered the hospital in 1875,] was being repeatedly photographed she developed a curious hysterical symptom: she began to see everything in black and white*. Augustine’s reality became the black and white world of the photographs she inhabited. A tragic case, where the box that the world has put someone in becomes that person’s world. The photograph becomes the reality. The name becomes the identity. And I hear in my head Harry Dodge’s retort to Maggie Nelson’s defence of words again: *Once we name something, you said, we can never see it the same way again. All that is unnamable falls away, gets lost, is murdered*. The Augustine that existed outside of the photographs, in a world made of colour, not black and white, was murdered.

Avery Gordon,
Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination, p. 35

ibid, p.35

Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p.4

In an effort to give language another chance, it is time to involve poetry, a genre in which words stand by themselves, free from the burdens of a clear-cut story or a defined purpose. Poetry is perhaps where words can convince us of their ability to express the inexpressible.

Elisabeth
Bishop,
Geography
III, p.40

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

In the poem *One Art* Elisabeth Bishop writes of the art of losing, assuring her readers that it isn't hard to master, in phrases that are soothing in rhythm and rhyme. As the poem continues, the losses increase. From door keys and the hour badly spent we move to names and where it was you meant to travel, to my mothers watch, three loved houses, two cities, some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent. In all of these cases the reader is repeatedly assured; the art of losing isn't hard to master, it is no disaster. The first five paragraphs end: disaster, master, disaster, master, disaster. Then there is the sixth and final paragraph. The form is different in several ways: it starts with an em dash, there are two uses of parentheses, there are four lines in total, as opposed to three lines in the previous paragraphs. All of these can be read as clues that she is writing

more than she might have intended to, she is exceeding the boundaries of her own poem. And then, the most fascinating words wait within the parentheses. The first instance of parentheses (the joking voice, a gesture I love) is referring to 'you', clearly the deepest loss in the whole poem. This decision can be read as a nonchalance, as if she pretends that this loss too isn't so important and therefore she just mentions it in passing. Or perhaps, it is a way to keep it safe, contained, apart from all the other less important words. Anything that is between brackets is, in a way, untouchable. The second use of parentheses (*Write it!*) is also in italics and followed by an exclamation mark. In this way it is triply emphasized. The exclamation creates a command. This command affects everything around it. It is a call from Elisabeth to Elisabeth, forcing herself to write, thereby attempting to convince both others and herself that loss is no disaster. An order to deal with disaster by writing about it in such a way. A summon to write the final words of the poem 'like disaster'. Simultaneously, we, the readers, are urged to write it ourselves.

The (*Write it!*) disturbs the entire tone of the poem. However much she may assure us that it isn't hard, through the insertion of these two words and through her treatment of these words (parenthesis, italics, exclamation mark) she inserts a strong, violent shout. A shout that tells us, without needing to literally tell that not only is it hard, it needs to be written. It needs to be worded. The (*Write it!*) brings us back to Nelsons —*inexpressibly!*— by mirroring it in form and urgency. These women are both calling out for the necessary act of searching for words.

José Esteban Muñoz, writing on Bishop's poem in his book *Cruising Utopia*, sees the parenthetical remarks as ephemeral evidence; as a remainder of something short-lived. *The command to write it is a command to save the ephemeral thing by committing it to memory, to word, to language*, he argues. He asks himself whether Bishop is inviting us to understand loss not as loss but as something else, since *her mother's watch now exists, or perhaps has found an afterlife, in its transformation and current status as residue, as ephemera*. The lost object partially (re)lives in its documentation, and in this way Bishop's one art might not be the art of losing, but rather the art of writing about what she lost. By the act of writing she is saving what she has lost. And she has lost much; the 'you' in the poem likely refers to her lover, Lota de Macedo Soares, who committed suicide. Bishop's queerness lingers within the hold of the parentheses. Queer love is a hard thing to write. *We can understand queerness itself as being filled with the intention to be lost. Queerness is illegible and therefore lost in relation to the straight minds' mapping of space*. An awareness of Bishop's queerness and her life story further strengthens her every word. Danielle Goldman, theorist and dancer,

José Esteban
Muñoz,
Cruising Utopia,
p.71

ibid, p.71

ibid, p.72

writes about *tight places*, a strong term for places of constraint, places where one can barely move. Within these places of constraint, there is a constant negotiation that necessitates improvisation. It is in these tight places that one must dance. It is in these tight places that one must write.

Danielle
Goldman,
*I Want To Be
Ready*, p.3



Wording can be saving. Wording can be harming. In this chapter I've been seeking to think about the tensions brought about by wording and naming in the realm of illness, death, madness and loss. Critiques on wording come from subjects who are oppressed by language and captured by it. It is important to take note of the tight places where the voices of the people I reference come from. Maggie Nelson is a queer author, her partner Harry Dodge a trans artist. Their relation to words is a different one than it is for someone who fits snugly within heterosexual norms. Virginia Woolf was an early feminist as was Melanie Klein. Both women struggled to get their voices heard and published in a male dominated world. And then Frantz Fanon is a former-colonial subject, philosopher and psychiatrist, whose whole revolutionary oeuvre was a political struggle against colonial violence and a resistance to the European repression. Phelan is a feminist, Bishop and Muñoz were queer. All of these authors are in some way marginalized by language. They teach us that capturing is not just about fixing what escapes us, it is also a political problem; it is about categorizing. For these authors, both their words and their doubt of words come from a place of struggle against categories, against capture. It is precisely in these situations of struggle that wording matters. Every word matters and every letter counts

when it is defining who or what you are. Consequently, it is vital for those of us inhabiting the tight places to find our own words, phrase our own suffering, question our own names. Strongly, with exclamation marks, or carefully, in parentheses. Each of us who speaks a language has the ability to bend language, and use it to write - (*Write it!*) as Bishop urges. Write the loss. Word the struggle. In wording and naming something, the risks of capturing and imprisoning it are great. That is why words need doubt as reality needs testing. To find one's own words and to use, write and speak them without capturing anything or anyone is a continuous challenge, never finished, that requires care, courage and doubt alike, all of which these authors have demonstrated. The argument between Nelson and Dodge should never be resolved. May it repeat in our minds. Are words good enough? Have the words in this chapter proved good enough to express the complexity of wording? Is that word good enough for this? Is this name good enough for me?

Haunting

Haunting is a verb that invokes ghosts. We all have ghosts, both people and places do; a loaded past can be a ghost, an untold history can be a ghost, some ghosts we share, some are our own. Haunting is, above all, a verb, therefore, the ghost is not lying low, it is stirring. It is doing something to you, to us; it is making itself known. In this chapter I borrow the notion of 'haunting' from Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters*. The very words 'haunting' and 'ghost' are able to induce fear. In a contemporary Western context it is common to say that it is wiser to leave those things that are unseen, dead or foregone alone, it is better to let them sleep and pretend they are not there. *I used the term haunting*, Avery Gordon writes, *to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future.* We are speaking of instances when reality is tested and expanded, when your balance is unsettled.

Avery Gordon,
*Ghostly Matters:
Haunting and
the Sociological
Imagination*,
p.xvi

When looking for the term 'haunting' in the dictionary, the definition given is '*continually recurring to the mind; unforgettable*'. Examples are haunting melodies, haunting memories and places with a haunting beauty. Melody, memory and place here are the things that haunt: the ghosts. In each of these cases the ghost clings on, refuses to let go. In the act of haunting, the melody, the memory and the place act upon the human being with a strong will of their own that does not coincide with the will of the human whom they haunt. *Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition*, Gordon writes. She furthermore relates haunting to experiences of being exploited, traumatized or oppressed, stating that haunting often involves these experiences or is produced by them. However, haunting can be distinguished from those experiences; it is not the same. The significant difference is that haunting produces a '*something-to-be-done*'. While trauma, for example, is something you carry with you, something you suffer from, haunting is more active. You shall be haunted until you act.

*The Free
Dictionary*

Avery Gordon,
*Ghostly Matters:
Haunting and
the Sociological
Imagination*, p.8

ibid, p. xvii

Gordon's book is titled *Ghostly Matters*. The ghostly is vaporous and see-through, while matter is solid. Meanwhile, José Esteban Muñoz writes of ephemera as evidence, as briefly mentioned in the previous chapter's analysis of Elisabeth Bishop's poem. Again, these two terms are not easily

José Esteban
Muñoz,
*Ephemera as
Evidence*, p.10

ibid, p.10

linked. Ephemera, referring to the short-lived and transitory, constitute the antonym of the solid and conclusive qualities that are attributed to evidence. Muñoz builds upon the notion of ‘*structures of feelings*’ by Raymond Williams, introduced as *tropes of emotion and lived experience that are indeed material without necessarily being ‘solid’*. Consequently, Muñoz uses ephemera as anti-rigor and anti-evidence, stressing the importance of lived experience and the feelings that remain after something has expired. Rather than focusing on the solid, he believes in *following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things*. This connects to Avery Gordon’s ideas of haunting in many ways, for what is more ephemeral than the ghostly matters she speaks of? The most important link here is that both Muñoz and Gordon urge us to take all things fleeting, barely visible and ungraspable seriously in what they do. The ephemera and the ghosts, they are there, they are matter and they matter, they are evidence; they act, unsettle and do things.

What if photographs haunt, in Avery Gordon’s sense of the verb? There are cases when photography is hard, factual, when it shows something in a clear, unambiguous way. On the other hand, there can be a more intangible photography, where what matters is not even visible in the photograph, but rather seeps through it, or occupies the spaces between one image and the next. This could be a photography that haunts. Roland Barthes speaks of the indistinguishability of the photograph (the object itself, the paper print or today’s jpg file) from its referent (what it depicts). Often we speak of the photograph as if it not only depicts but is the referent, accompanying the sharing of images by the use of phrases such as: “Look, this is my son” or “Here, let me show you my house”. *It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures; or even like those pairs of fish (...) which navigate in convoy, as though united by an eternal coitus*. This very togetherness already has a haunting quality, for the object that I can hold in my hand is still here right now and even tomorrow, while the scene that it depicts is always in the past and yet we do not distinguish the present object from the past scene. This is how, in Barthes words, there comes to be *that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead*.

Roland Barthes,
Camera Lucida,
p.5

ibid, p.9

A friend’s mother died. The day after, the daughter said all photographs of her mother had changed. She said: “Yesterday this was a photo of my mama. Today it’s a photo of my dead mama.” As if, by the death of the referent and the remaining of the objects, her mothers’ appearance in them had morphed, altered, transfigured. The daughter might have been

ibid,
p.66

ibid,
p.91

satisfied with certain depictions of her mother during her lifetime, believing that they were a good 'likeness', representative of her. It is different now. The living mother in the photograph doesn't match the living mother in the mind or the dead mother in the world. Barthes, too, lost his mother and struggles with her photographs. He dislikes many of them, judging them to be *partially true, and therefore totally false*. Furthermore, he contradicts the notion of the photograph as a way of saving memories; *it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory*. What the mourner wants from the photograph is to keep the subject alive. The photograph almost fulfils this desire. Almost.

When the question of desire is raised, one often asks: What does the viewer want from the photograph? Or: What does the maker wish to achieve with the photograph? In the essay *What Do Pictures Really Want?* W.J.T. Mitchell shifts the location of desire to the images themselves. He argues that there are pictures that want to exchange places with the viewer, pictures that want the viewer's body and blood and spirit, as well as pictures that do not want to be seen. Eventually he concludes that most pictures don't know what they want; they have to recollect it through a dialogue with others. What interests me most in this endeavour is that in order to embark upon this thought-experiment, he tentatively uses the idea of the personhood of things. *Pictures are things that have been marked with all the stigmata of personhood: they exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively. They present, not just a surface but a face that faces the beholder*. Remarkably, in this text too, the example is given of a photograph of a mother. *Everyone knows that a photograph of their mother is not alive, but they will still be reluctant to deface or destroy it. No modern, rational, secular person thinks that pictures are to be treated like persons, but we always seem to make exceptions for special cases*. And in these exceptions, we echo the sentiments of long ago. As Giorgio Agamben points out, *the viewers of the first daguerreotypes had to turn away – they felt they were being watched by the people portrayed*. The resemblance of the photograph to the real brings to doubt whether the photograph is not in itself more than a piece of paper, a jpg file, or whatever carries it.

Giorgio Agamben,
Profanations, p.26

W.J.T. Mitchell,
What Do Pictures Really Want?,
p. 72

ibid,
p. 73

In some cultures portrait photography is or was avoided for fear of losing part of the soul to the photograph. Colonizers used photography to capture the colonized. The occupied were often portrayed for the first time by their occupiers and this provoked deep violence and indignation. Through photography, an image of a person has the ability to move away from the body (as opposed to one's reflection in a mirror) and thereby act as replacement for the person it depicts. Without the photograph, there is nothing that resembles a person as closely, which has this ability to travel

Karina Eileraas,
Reframing the Colonial Gaze: Photography, Ownership, and Feminist Resistance, p.828

beyond, to stand-in.

What happens, if we see a photograph of a person as the person itself? It is only a small step from an accurate depiction to an uncanny aliveness. If the photographed people are alive in the photographs, they witness me, looking at them. They look back at me. My younger self. My friends from long ago. My family. People I lost. By their aliveness they blur the distinction between past, present and future. It is a peculiar case of time travel. Rather than going back and forth, as happens in fantasy and science fiction, they prove capable of remaining. Whatever happens around them, wherever time takes them, they are there, they are seen and can see.



I took a photograph of my father sleeping on the couch. I only have an analogue print (hopefully a negative somewhere). He frequently slept on the couch, for he was ill. He's wearing a fleece sweater and is covered by a thin fleece blanket. I took the photograph in my first months of studying photography. I was learning how to tell a story in photographs. The print I made myself, in the school's dark room. I wonder if I fixed it properly. I recall being too impatient, in the early days. Seemingly successful prints dissolving. But this one is still here, eleven years after. I, the photographer, am standing on the side of the couch on which his head is resting. That's where the focus is. Wrinkles, cheekbones, eyes closed, an expression between innocence (is that what sleep brings?) and something darker, more painful (in his dream or in his body?). His body's shapes and outlines are clearly visible beneath the thin blanket. In this roll of film I also photographed him playing the guitar, fixing the car, working in the garden, telling a story. Why is it the act of sleeping that feels like him - more than the others, at least? The photograph holds a power over

me. It is a scene I saw so often, but I never documented it. And then I did. My father saw the photograph and was shocked, so my mother tells me. I don't remember. Less than a year after the photograph was taken, my father slept his last night. Or rather, suffered his last night. There was very little sleep for him then. I was upstairs and miraculously, sleeping like a baby, all through the night. There is nothing I regret as much as that night's sleep. He was there, still there, and I knew it. And yet, I slept. I could have - should have - been there with him. The photograph fills me with tenderness and guilt simultaneously. If the photograph were alive, I would be able to hear my father's soft slow breathing. If it were alive, his expression could have softened. If it were alive, I could wake him up. If it were alive, it might stop haunting me.

Avery Gordon,
*Ghostly Matters:
Haunting and
the Sociological
Imagination*,
p.32

There's photographic evidence of her absence, Avery Gordon writes. The photograph of my father can be perceived as evidence of his aliveness that once was, though it is no more. It is a piece of evidence of his once-upon-a-time presence, carrying within it his sleep and his illness. Due to the fact that the moment in time held within the photograph was eventually followed by his absence, the photograph is simultaneously evidence of his presence (once) and absence (today). The photographic presence summons in the mind (of those who know) his current, real life, absence. If one can say "*I see you are not there*" we open up a domain of visible invisibility.

ibid,
p.32

Gordon's phrase '*there's photographic evidence of her absence*' refers to Sabina Spielrein, one of the first female psychoanalysts and a patient suffering from schizophrenia, who was absent from a group photograph depicting the attendees of The Third Psychoanalytic Congress in Weimar in 1911. A compelling statement, for the question is whether a person who is missing in a photograph is necessarily missing. A person who is in a photograph can be proven to have been there (trickery left aside for a moment) but a person who is not in a photograph could, much more easily, have been there nonetheless. Especially since the woman Gordon is talking about, Sabina Spielrein, is described to have avoided being photographed. She has refused to pose in the past, she has been photographed shielding her face, and during her hospitalization for schizophrenia she has been described doing the following: "*cover her eyes with her hands—not even the world of images could get through, since all of her anxiety was projected onto them, transforming them into terrifying symbols*". *Maybe she was afraid of her own image and the harm it might do her*. Again, here we encounter the personification of the photograph. An image of oneself that can inflict harm upon the self. It makes sense to fear your own image if you are suffering from schizophrenia. If in yourself there are several personalities at work, clawing through your

ibid,
p.33

ibid,
p.32

skin, distorting your voice, if in you there are beings that are clearly not you yet turn out to be you in the end, who knows who the image will reveal. Be that as it may, she was missing from the photograph. She was supposed to be at the Weimar Conference but she never made it; *she had found a psychosomatic pretext*. The fact that she is missing from the photograph is disturbing due to the neglect of her work and the part she played in the history of psychoanalysis. She was erased from that history, but she haunts it, she haunts Gordon. The fact that these women connect, decades after Spielrein's death, proves the transformative and political potential of haunting. Spielrein is brought back to life in Gordon's writing. She was a doctor treating mental disturbances, an original thinker in the psychoanalytic field, as well as a former patient. She was a young woman who felt desire for and was desired by her doctor, Carl Jung. She was an admirer and pupil of Sigmund Freud yet also far ahead of him, writing about the death drive ten years before he did so. Through Spielrein's complex story, Gordon proposes the idea of *the specter of all those "someone elses" unknown to us and to one another taking residence within us, without our full permission, making us who we are yet alien to ourselves, showing up in "incredible" forms*, and I believe it is precisely because of this multitude of someone elses residing in her that Sabina Spielrein eluded photography.

ibid,
p.34

ibid, p.48



Once, Sabina Spielrein looked into the mirror and saw a wolf. *When I looked at myself in the mirror before going to bed, I was taken aback; that couldn't be me, that stony grey face with the uncannily grim, burning black eyes staring out at me: it was a powerful, baleful wolf that lurked there coldly in the depths and would halt at nothing. "What is it that you want?" I asked myself in horror. Then I saw all the lines in the room go crooked;*

ibid,
p.49

everything became alien and terrifying. "The great chill is coming..." The mirror, like the photographs of herself she fears, ought to show Sabina to Sabina. But it is not herself she sees. It is the wolf. Her very appearance is haunted by her fears. Spielrein does not shy away however; she talks to wolf and listens to its answer. In doing so, she faces the ghost in bravery and learns from it, taking from it lessons that allow her to continue her life. Despite her fear, she perceived that the wolf was in some way part of her and by speaking with it she accepted this wolf-ghost as material, as matter, as something-to-be-done. Spielrein's wolf experience brings to mind Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, a novel narrating the story of someone who perceives himself as part-wolf, part-man. *'Wolf' is the name he gives to all the wild animals within himself. He feels them to be wicked, dangerous, apt to frighten the life out of respectable citizens, yet – despite thinking himself a highly sensitive artist – he cannot see that apart from the wolf, behind the wolf, there are a lot more creatures living inside him. Nor is every creature with sharp teeth a wolf.* In comparison with this imaginary man-wolf dichotomy, Spielrein's case is even more interesting. She is a step ahead of *Steppenwolf*, for while she recognizes the wolf as part of her, she does not let it constitute her identity. She allows herself to be spectral.

Herman
Hesse,
Steppenwolf,
p.68

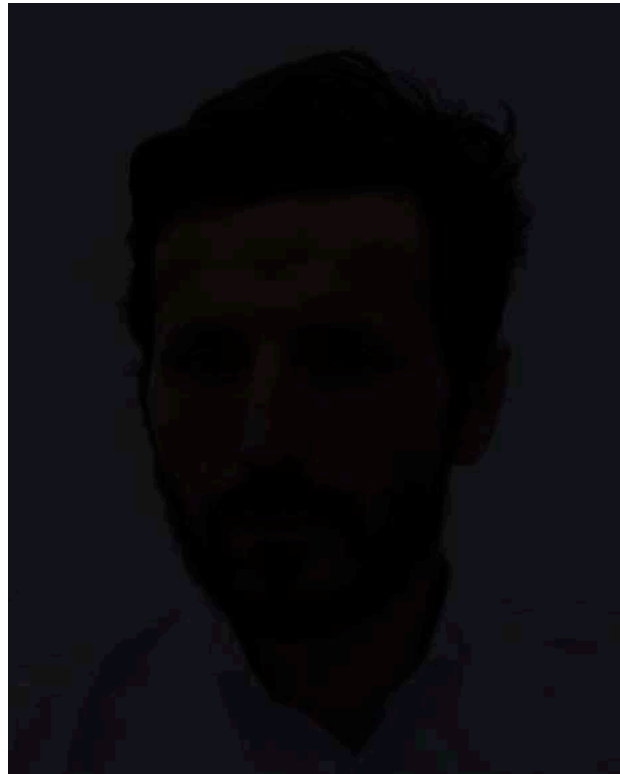
Two of my artistic projects are about the wolf. It is a being both mythical and real, flesh and blood, roaming the woods as we speak. Its symbolism and reputation as the villain, the predator, the wild, evil, big and bad is what draws me to it. In Romania, I spent a month in an area where many wolves dwell. I saw their tracks, heard their howls and went looking for them, with a tracker, often spending a long time in one place. There, every sweeping branch and change of light could signify a wolf's arrival. A few years later the first wolves in a hundred and fifty years came to the Netherlands. I felt the forests change before my eyes. A forest that a wolf might enter is a different forest altogether. I filmed and photographed Dutch forests as if they are a stage that the wolf might enter any moment now. The anticipation is enough to give every innocent bush the power of hiding a predator. In my own body of work, these 'wolf forests' are the clearest example of haunted photography. The subject that the projects revolve around, the wolf and all that it stands for, is not technically in the images. It is, however, haunting the images. Through contextualizing the forest photographs with other material (title, text, found footage, other layers of imagery) the viewer knows that the wolf could be there now, could have been there just a second ago, could wander in any moment. The wolf is felt rather than seen. It is important to note that these visual projects only work in this manner because of the text that is accompanying the imagery. Wording is put to work. Simply by using the

word 'wolf' the forests transform: The language works on the image and vice versa.

The work of W.G. Sebald is an exemplary case where words and photographs mutually haunt each other. In *The Rings of Saturn* the narrator walks across England's eastern coast while musing on an endless variety of histories and peculiarities. The recurring motive in this book is how things and beings die and how indifferent we are to this. When dead, the herring begins to glow. Black mourning ribbons were draped over all the mirrors, all canvasses depicting landscapes and all the fruits in the field. A tomb has holes bored into it, similar to the air-holes children make for caught insects. An entire village toppled down a cliff and all that remains are the walled well-shafts. In a period of draught and starvation in seventeenth century China, people exchanged children because they could not bear to watch the dying torment of their own. A prince told his princess at their wedding: *today our bodies are adorned, but tomorrow they will be food for worms*. The tales are peculiar and heavy, though they are told in a calm voice, in the pace of a walking man, serenely reminiscing about history's relation to life and death. All of this is interspersed with images. They are in the text, with a few millimeters of space between letters and image, without space to breathe, without caption or index. There are archival photographs, newspaper clippings, paintings, landscapes; some clear, some unfocused, barely legible. Often there is an obvious connection to what is written, though sometimes there is none to be found. When Sebald writes of the luminous herring, there is a drawing of a herring. Barely a page after that, though, he writes of an aristocrat in a great manor house and his relations to his housekeeper. In the middle of the story he briefly mentions that this man served in the regiment that liberated the camp at Bergen Belsen in 1945. The year '1945' is the last word appearing on the page, and when you turn the page, there is a spread filled with a photograph of a forest where the ground is filled with countless blanket-covered bodies. The image is grainy, and the first time I turned that page, after my initial shock, I remember convincing myself that I must have been mistaken. These bumpy shapes on the forest ground cannot be bodies, surely not. On the next page, Sebald continues with the tale of the eccentric aristocrat, recounting how he required his housekeeper to have dinner in silence with him every day and how after his death he bequeathed all his money and possessions to her. The photograph is not explained, neither the holocaust nor the war is referred to for a long time after. As I continued further in the book, however, I realized that the images constituted a layer that existed in relation to the words in an unusual way. Yes, these bumps on the forest ground, clearly, are bodies. They do relate to what Sebald is writing very much: To his overall themes, yes. To the words on the pages

W.G.
Sebald,
*The Rings
of Saturn*,
p.86

that surround the image, barely. It is as if Sebald used the brief mentioning of a fact in the year 1945 as a pretext to insert this image. The whole story about the housekeeper's inheritance, a sweet and funny tale, might be there simply as a harmonious companion to the cold dissonant chord of the massacre depicted in the photograph. In between tales of herrings and housekeepers, the reader is pierced by the reality of the massacre and from that moment onwards is haunted by it. When, much later in the book, the holocaust is mentioned the eeriness and horror provoked by the image are already ingrained in the reader.



In the chapter on wording, where I questioned whether words are good enough to express the inexpressible, the frequent dominance of text over images, and tension between them, was addressed. Sebald's work manages to re-invent the relation between the two. His work demonstrates how photographs can and do haunt, how they are far from passive and in fact do things to us. In this chapter, photographs regain the agency to be alive. Barthes teaches us how an image is indistinguishable from its referent, Mitchell tells us that pictures want things too. It is through the aliveness of photographs that they gain the ability to show complex being and feeling. Even an absence from a photograph can cause the rediscovery of a person, of a life. Photography has the power to continuously recur to the mind, to be unforgettable. These qualities allow photographs to overshadow actual memories and play the memory's part instead. As Gordon points out, haunting happens *sometimes against our will and always a bit magically*. The people inside

Avery Gordon,
*Ghostly Matters:
Haunting and
the Sociological
Imagination*, p.8

photographs or missing from them interact with the people outside of photographs, watching them. It is a magical, ghostly co-existence. In the attempt to unsettle capture, it is precisely these ephemeral instances that we must emphasize so as to undo the fixtures of both the viewer/reader and the subjects of photography and writing.

Dissolving

Between the real and the imaginary, between waking and sleeping, between self and other, it is often assumed that distinctions exist. Whereas you could also argue that in between one and the other, there is no clear line, no margin, no boundary, at least, there is no line of distinction that applies to each of us. Instead, we find blur and indistinguishability. In an essay by Roger Caillois, the philosopher introduces a sensation of displacement that blurs the boundaries of the individual and the surrounding world. *Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them*. According to him schizophrenics invariably give the same answer to the question: where are you? *I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I'm at the spot where I find myself*. Caillois uses the term legendary psychasthenia for the condition in which the subject lacks a sense of distinction from its surroundings, and lacks a connection between its consciousness and a particular point in space. Many animals transform themselves in order to blend in with their surroundings. Although chameleons, for example, can take on the color of the plant they find themselves on, humans have no such ability, but can have a similar sensation of blending in, by or against their will. Legendary psychasthenia implies an inability to define your own edges, not knowing where you end and something else begins. Caillois hints that the origin of the widespread fear of the dark *also has its roots at the peril in which it puts the opposition between the organism and the milieu*. Though one may think of the fear of the dark as originating from not seeing what is around you, it might rather originate from not seeing your own self; not seeing where you end and something else begins.

Roger Caillois,
*Mimicry and
Legendary
Psychasthenia*,
p.30

ibid, p.30

ibid, p.30

A fictional character known both as Lina and Lila in the series of Neapolitan novels by Elena Ferrante (a pseudonym for an anonymous writer) suffers from dissolving margins. In Italian the word used here is *smarginatura*, which bears the word margins within itself, while in the English translation the phenomenon is alternately described as dissolving margins, dissolving boundaries or dissolving outlines. *She said that on those occasions the outlines of people and things suddenly dissolved, disappeared*. The phenomenon is physical, material and real to her. *This sensation was accompanied by nausea, and she had had the impression that something absolutely material, which had been present around her and around everyone and everything forever, but imperceptible, was breaking down the outlines of persons and things and revealing itself. (...) How poorly made we are, she had thought, how insufficient*. Episodes of dissolving boundaries keep on occurring in Lila's life throughout four books. She fears it. It is to her as if she sees the world coming apart,

Elena Ferrante, *My
Brilliant Friend*,
p.137

ibid, p.138

people falling apart and breaking and this is not just happening at that moment, it is happening all the time, usually unseen.



While both Caillois and Ferrante describe dissolving as a mental illness and as something fundamentally frightening, perhaps dissolving is the verb that can oppose and unsettle capturing. Objects and beings can spill over, becoming more than only themselves. Photographs can dissolve their own margins. I work with series of photographs, carefully combining them in books and installations, with writing as a vital element. Rarely do I present a single image, for when the images come together, they act upon each other, they talk amongst themselves. I recall a comment that a curator once made about my work, he said: “it is happening in between the images, rather than in the images themselves”. By ‘it’ he was referring to the heart of my subject matter, for the content is never clearly depicted in my photographs, rather it is evoked by them. In the project about the wolf that I wrote about in the previous chapter, the wolf is not there, though it is lurking in the shadows between one image and the next. In between is the place of action. In between images, in between beings.

When speaking of the in-between, we might ask whether touch can also be a mode of dissolving, through the writing of Karen Barad. *When two hands touch, there is a sensuality of the flesh, an exchange of warmth, a feeling of pressure, of presence, a proximity of otherness that brings the*

Karen Barad, *On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am*, p.1

other nearly as close as oneself. Perhaps closer. And if the two hands belong to one person, might this not enliven an uncanny sense of the otherness of the self, a literal holding oneself at a distance in the sensation of contact, the greeting of the stranger within? So much happens in a touch: an infinity of others—other beings, other spaces, other times—are aroused. A body that has no end comes to mind. As if, when a hand touches another hand, they merge as soap bubbles do. They become one and the same, boundless. Barad, a quantum physicist, argues that all touching entails an infinite alterity, so that when you touch any other, you touch ‘the’ other, you touch all others. When you touch the self, you touch all selves, all the strangers within. This way of thinking could be extended to touch through the camera, touch through the gaze, touch through writing and touch through reading. An encounter with a work of art can be an encounter with the other and through that other, all others. Not in the sense that the one who is photographed or written about represents all others, but in the physical sense, for every finite being is always already threaded through with an infinite alterity diffracted through being and time. There is a connectedness between bodies on the level of the particles we consist of. This brings me to the following declaration by phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A human body is present when, between the see-er and the visible, between touching and touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand a kind of crossover occurs, when the spark of the sensing/sensible is lit, when the fire starts to burn that will not cease until some accident befalls the body, undoing what no accident would have sufficed to do. Like Barad, Merleau-Ponty mentions touch as something that goes far deeper than a superficial contact between skins. He speaks of a kind of crossover, as if from one side of a river to the other, from A to B. But he phrases it carefully: ‘a kind of’ crossover. We could take the liberty to exaggerate a little and replace the word crossover with the word ‘blur’ or even ‘dissolving’. A human body is present when, between the see-er and the visible, between touching and touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand a kind of dissolving occurs. It is tantamount to saying: I dissolve, therefore I am; I am a body because I have no end. We are present as human bodies because we have the ability to be between vision, between touch, between eyes, between hands.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, p.125

ibid, p.7

ibid, p.125

In the essay *Eye and Mind* Merleau-Ponty describes vision as a form of touching what is around us. I recently walked on a mountain valley path on a sunny day, while paying particular attention to my shadow. The angle of light was such that my shadow fell slightly before me, to my right side. It passed over rocks, leaves, flowers, twigs, insects and birds. I became filled with an awareness that through my shadow I was touching all of these things, thereby affecting, even if only for a fraction of a

second, every inch of earth that I briefly deprived of sunlight through my passing. My walk became a caress of the path, a caress of the valley. According to Merleau-Ponty, my reach goes even further than the reach of my shadow – it goes as far as my eyes can see. *Everything I see is on principle within my reach, at least within reach of my sight, and is marked upon the map of the “I can”*. Consequently, seeing something becomes more than just witnessing it. A possibility is implied to affect each thing or being one sees. The eyes are not merely receiving information of the surrounding world. They are acting upon the surrounding world. *We must take literally what vision teaches us: namely, that through it we touch the sun and the stars, that we are everywhere at once*. Everywhere at once, thus more than a single place, a single body, a single being – dissolving. The idea of vision as something that acts upon what is being seen is alluring when it comes to looking at art. The viewer loses its passivity and becomes co-author of the work.

ibid, p.124

ibid, p.146

In my work *Recollection (fade)*, a large object is standing in an exhibition space by itself. It's a little higher than a human being and three times as wide. Yet it is subtle, almost insubstantial, due to its main material: glass. A rough steel frame encloses a translucent photographic print on a glass plate. One can guess that it is a photograph because of the visible borders of the negative. You can see straight through it, though. There is a person in the photograph; that much is clear. In order to make out more, you search your references and recollections. You have to look carefully. It is hard to see who it is. It might be some one you've known and lost. You might take some steps backwards, some steps forwards. When you get close you see yourself reflected back to you. When you move around the work you notice how its visibility depends on the white wall behind it. Without it, there is only the steel frame and the construction that ensures the plate remains standing. When you walk around it, everything around it literally becomes part of the work. Without the white wall neither photograph nor person can be seen. The space and its visitors intervene. In my oeuvre so far, this is the work that comes closest to a dissolving photography, for neither the subject in the photograph nor the viewer are captured directly. The subject remains invisible to such a degree that he himself is not really there. What we see is an echo of his presence, a haunting, an opening. While the viewer attempts to see more of this echo, she will inevitably also see herself reflected. Thereby she becomes part of the work. It is not clear where the work ends and the viewer begins.

From the touch of our eyes, with which we act upon the surrounding world, we move into states of being when eyes are closed. Not knowing time or place, barely knowing oneself: it is a temporary blurring that happens every night. Falling asleep is a sinking, a dropping, a sagging and

Jean-Luc Nancy,
*The Fall of
Sleep*, p.5

ibid, p.11

ibid, p.41

a succumbing. Everything becomes indistinct. Jean-Luc Nancy writes of sleep as a fall, as a place where the 'I' dissolves. With the fall of sleep comes a second fall, a fall of distinctions, he argues. *I fall to where I am no longer separated from the world by a demarcation that still belongs to me all through my waking state and that I myself am, just as I am my skin and all my sense organs.* With the fall the sleeper passes a line of distinction and slips away from it. The sleeper cannot say she sleeps. The sleeper cannot say where she ends and the night begins, where her pillow ends and the dream begins, where her skin ends and the blanket begins, where sleep ends and death begins. *I fall asleep and at the same time I vanish as "I".* Sleep is the closest we get to death. Temporary nonbeing. Sleep is the closest we get to dissolving. *Like death, sleep, and like sleep, death—but without awakening. Without a rhythm of return, without repetition, without a new day, without tomorrow. Like death, sleep, for the body stretches out alone there, is alone there outstretched. Outstretched alone there, there, a here like nowhere. Nowhere else but a weighty body cast down, laid out, left on the ground. Like sleep, death: body deposed.* But then, miraculously, we wake up. For all the similarities between sleep and death, from the depths of sleep, we return. The wake-up is a passing from one state to another that often brings with it deep confusion and disorientation. Marcel Proust opens *Swann's Way*, the first part from his *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, with a slow scene of waking up. *I recovered my sight and I was amazed to find a darkness around me soft and restful for my eyes, but perhaps even more so for the mind, to which it appeared a thing without cause, incomprehensible, a thing truly dark.* Eye and mind lack clarity in this state. The brinks on either side of sleep are situations of profound blurriness. Imagine staying in this state throughout the day, going through life in an ongoing vagueness. That would be a state of dissolving margins. And it brings us back to Callois' writing about the dark in relation to legendary psychasthenia. Darkness is the prime condition of no longer knowing where one is. *Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of skin and occupies the other side of his senses. (...) He feels himself becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put. He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar.* Dissolved.

Roger Callois,
*Mimicry and
Legendary
Psychasthenia*,
p.30

Marcel Proust,
Swann's Way,
p.3

William James insisted, long ago, upon the reinstatement of the vague and inarticulate to its proper place in our mental life. According to James there is no thought or feeling that is solely limited to the present moment *for even into our awareness of the thunder the awareness of the previous silence creeps and continues; for what we hear when the thunder crashes is not thunder pure, but thunder-breaking-upon-silence-and-contrasting-with-it.* Therefore, even the strong, clear moment of crashing thunder does not have clear-cut boundaries, the preceding silence and receding of

William James,
*Writings 1878-
1899* :
*Psychology,
Briefer Course /
The Will to
Believe / Talks
to Teachers and
Students /
Essays*, p.159

the sound exceed the moment. *Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead.* James is a defender of nuance and believes we should honor the vagueness and complexity of our thoughts and feelings and express them as such: *We ought to say a feeling of and, a feeling of if, a feeling of but, and a feeling of by, quite as readily as we say a feeling of blue or a feeling of cold.*

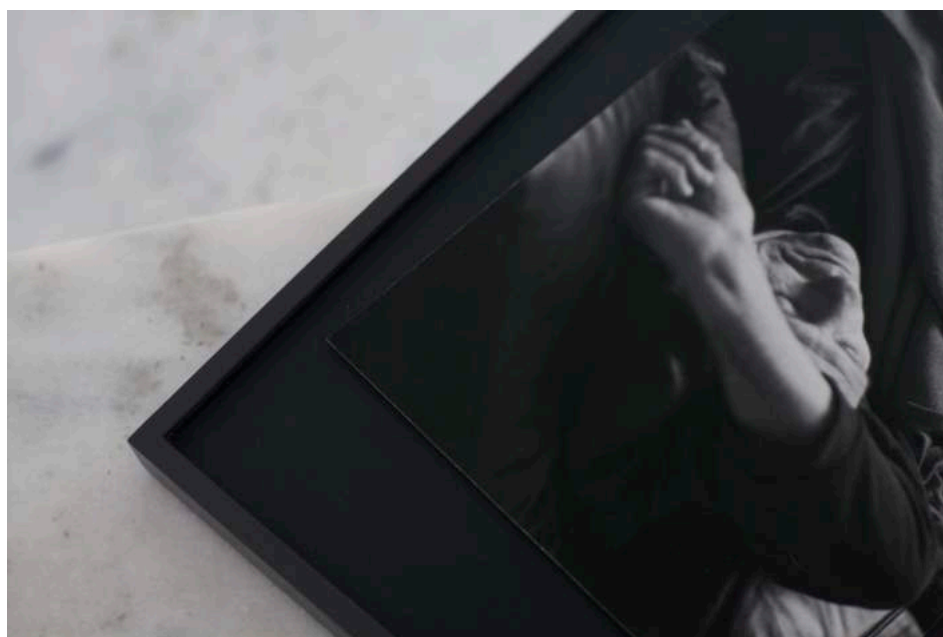


Teju Cole, *Still Lives That Won't Hold Still*

James proposed the phrase *stream of consciousness*, as opposed to a train or chain of consciousness, for consciousness to him was not chopped up in bits but flowing. Recently, Teju Cole wrote an essay about Marie Cosindas' photography for The New York Times Magazine. It bears the enigmatic title *Still Lives That Won't Hold Still*. Marie Cosindas, in Cole's words, made *photographs of such potency that they seem magical, dependent on something beyond mere sleight of hand for their mesmerizing effects and unified mood, so that the experience of looking at a selection of them is like watching a single sentence unfurl over several pages, driven along by an invisible inner consistency.* In writing his homage to her work Teju Cole made the radical choice to use one single sentence that comprises the whole article. One single sentence, divided by dozens of comma's, that connects Cosindas' work to other artists yet sets it apart for its bewitching murmur, its earnestness and complexity, while narrating her life and death, all in one 1485-word-sentence. His writing is a stream of consciousness and flows from a history of experimental writing (including Virginia Woolf's) sparked by this phrase of James. To phrase our thinking as a stream allowed writing to become a stream in itself.

Cole describes Cosindas' imagery as densely woven and remarks that her photographs put you under a spell. Through adapting the very form of his writing to her photographs, he is weaving further on her work, dissolving the margins between his magic and hers and putting a spell on the reader that is a collaboration after death, between Cosindas and Cole.

I rediscovered the photograph of my father sleeping on the couch. It is a strong image, not only for me, and I wanted to share it somehow, despite feeling protective of it. I wrote about it, and for a while believed that I could show the text in an exhibition while keeping the image for myself. But that did not sit right with me. I was denying the strength of the photograph, hiding it. Eventually I had a frame made for it, the frame being larger than the print, and we attached the photograph to the frame with only one invisible thread on its back. Consequently, the photograph can move in its frame. In the exhibition the photograph had no fixed place. I asked three people to take care of it during the exhibition and they circulated it, found places for it, showed it to people, and sometimes handed it to them. The texts were also in the exhibition, but in a different place than the image. Every viewer has had a different experience of the work. Some did not see the photograph. Some saw it standing against a wall somewhere, and noticed later that it was there no more. Some saw it being carried around. Some spent some time holding it and caring for it. Some saw the photograph first and then encountered the text. Some read the text first and then encountered the photograph. The work gained dissolving margins. The margins of the print in the frame kept shifting. The whole work kept dissolving and reappearing. I attempted to bring the photograph to life, the closest I can come to bringing my father to life.



Together with Callois, Ferrante, Barad, Merleau-Ponty, Nancy, James, Proust and Cole we have thought about the instances when distinctions cease to exist in a clear-cut manner. Mental illness can cause subjects to no longer know where the 'I' ends and something else begins. Yet even in people who suffer from no such illness, darkness and sleep often bring about a temporary dissolving of our boundaries. Touch can merge us with other beings in- and outside ourselves. The act of seeing can be an act of touching through the eyes. All thoughts and feelings are infinitely complex and vague. Inspired by these occurrences of blur in daily life, dissolving can be used as a methodology when creating works of art. Teju Cole's article is a rare, shimmering example of how wording, haunting and dissolving come together. He uses words, in an experimental and flowing manner that avoids fixing or limiting his subject matter. He allows his words to be haunted, welcoming the ghosts of Cosindas' photographs. The very form of his article is a form of dissolving. The dot can be seen as a distinction, as a boundary. Every dot is an ending, whereas every comma is an opening. Through repeating the comma and avoiding the dot, the article remains open from the first word to the last. As a maker using the tools of photography and words, I too wish for an openness in my work. For each viewer to see my work in a slightly different manner, they are asked to actively engage with the work. Through the act of seeing they ought to join me in the making and thinking processes, for only through this active relation my photographs and my words can nestle in the viewer's hearts and minds and become a part of them. I strive for my work to have the quality of dissolving, so that the viewer does not know where the artwork ends and her own thought begins, where the artwork ends and her own body begins, where the artwork ends and life begins.

Conclusion

Capturing: Taking something, seizing it, throwing it in a bag or placing it in a box. Imprisoning it. I keep encountering the word 'capture' in relation to photographs and texts time and again. Many artists and authors seemingly strive to capture things, beings, thoughts and feelings. After focusing on the implications the word has, I, for one, will refrain from using it to describe what I do. And more importantly, I will strive to make, write, photograph and create work that exceeds categories and unsettles capture. This thesis has been a first step in this process. While working with many ideas, in this piece of writing I have held on to a nuance, as a method to avoid capture. The manner in which quotes are used in this thesis is a performance of wording, haunting and dissolving. My photography has interacted with my writing, adding another layer to it and performing the intricate relation between language and image. The photographs had to be there, in order to not only speak of something, but show it; do it.

Wording: Selecting words to express something. Finding words, forming words and using them. Through thinking about every word, weighing it while allowing it its wildness, wording can play a vital role in expressing struggle, though words lack in many realms, especially in the realm of illness and madness. No place is its name. No person is her diagnosis. No work is its title. To oppose capture, wording should be used carefully while continuously being questioned and reinvented. Words can be life-giving especially when they are written and questioned by those who are deeply struggling themselves.

Haunting: To be haunted is to be affected by structures of feeling that are not really there in a concrete, visible sense, yet are there nonetheless. To haunt is to hold on, to stir, to hover over, to repeatedly be there in the mind. Haunting means that there is something to be done. It can unsettle capture by its ephemeral nature. All ghosts are elusive. When artworks function as ghosts, they are uncapturable. Haunted photographs breathe and look back at you, haunted words change themselves and talk back at you. A haunted work never stays the same and by its ever-changing nature evades the act of capturing.

Dissolving: Not knowing where one thing ends and another begins. To lose all sense of distinction. To be in between. To become similar. Living and being in vagueness and expressing our complex lives, thoughts and feelings in this very vagueness is what dissolving can do. The danger of dissolving is for the vague to take over in such a way that no thought, no

artwork, can be distinguished from the very blur of all there is. However, in a world cut up by distinctions and demarcations, to strive for more dissolving is a powerful, political and sensible goal. A work of art that dissolves into life, dissolves into the viewer and dissolves into its surroundings and will oppose capture.

In each of the verbs wording, haunting and dissolving, there is an unfixed-ness. Through the attempt to unsettle capture we have entered a realm where nothing stays the same. There is an ongoing need for things to change, to question themselves. Or to go one step further, there is a need for things to live. Words and photographs should live. The way Avery Gordon is haunted by Sabina Spielrein and writes about her life, work and absence, brings Spielrein back to life. Similarly, Teju Cole's essay *Still Lives That Won't Hold Still* resuscitates Marie Cosindas and her photographs. Gordon and Cole are not merely writing about people who have died. They are, uncannily, writing with them and through them. Even more aliveness can be found in the cases of Elisabeth Bishop's poem *One Art* and W.G. Sebald's combination of words and images in *The Rings of Saturn*. Bishop's poem contradicts itself, it stirs and it acts, as it commands both the author and the reader to write the loss. Sebald's images haunt his words, and while he has carefully placed them in such a way as to form connections in the readers mind, these connections will work differently for each and every reader, by virtue of their ambiguous and unexplained placement. In Bishop's and Sebald's cases, the works themselves are clearly doing things; they are acting and ever-changing. And in my own, latest work, where the photograph of my father is unfixed and circulating, an uncanny aliveness too can be found. If a methodology can, in the end, be deduced from the thinking and writing in this thesis, it is to bring or retain life in words and photographs. Living photographs and living words are able to breathe, change, interact and thus to avoid capture. Through their aliveness they can relate to other living beings and together, potentially, express the inexpressible.

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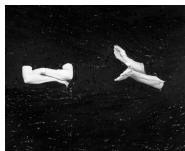
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Photographs

Wording



Untitled from the book
*Zolang je niet zo over
problemen praat zie je er
toch niks van*, 2016



Untitled from the book
*Zolang je niet zo over
problemen praat zie je er
toch niks van*, 2016



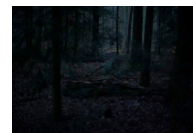
Untitled from the book
*Zolang je niet zo over
problemen praat zie je er
toch niks van*, 2016

Haunting

father, sleeper (detail),
2007, 2018

from the series *Wolf?*,
2015

black-out, 2015



Dissolving

Recollection (stir), from
the series *Recollection*,
2015

Recollection (fade), from
the series *Recollection*,
2014

father, sleeper (detail),
2007, 2018

