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Abstract

My thesis, *Notes on Loss and Photography*, consists of two parts, of a written process description and an artistic part, the images that are the result of this process. Both parts are shown together in a booklet.

The written part of my thesis aims to narrate how I have dealt with the sudden loss of my sister through my artistic practice. In my thesis I focus on examining how can photography be used to express personal experiences of grief and loss.

The written part of my thesis is divided into three thematic parts. The first part, *Loss*, addresses the special relations photography has with both, death and memories. In the second part, *Clothes*, I focus on illustrating how used clothes can work effectively as symbols of absence, particularly in the works of the two artists, Cristian Boltanski and Louise Bourgeois. A key term regarding my thesis is Bourgeois's "exorcism": the idea of liberating oneself of traumatic experiences through art. The last section, *Body*, deals with the importance of touch and bodily aspects to my artistic practice, together with the challenges they present. Finally, I conclude by deliberating my process.

The artistic part of my thesis, 15 photographs, is presented at the end of the booklet. The photographs echo the themes presented in the written part: the loss, the clothes, and the body.

Keywords body, clothes, death, loss, memory, photography



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Taiteen maisterin opinnäytetyöni *Notes on Loss and Photography* koostuu kirjallisesta ja taiteellisesta osasta: prosessikuvauksesta sekä prosessin lopputuloksena syntyneistä valokuvista. Molemmat osat ovat esitettyinä yhdessä vihkosessa.

Opinnäytetyöni kirjallinen osuus on narratiivinen kuvaus siskoni äkillisen menehtymisen käsittelystä taiteellisen työskentelyni kautta. Opinnäytetyöni pohtii, kuinka valokuvan keinoin on mahdollista käsitellä henkilökohtaisia surun ja menetyksen kokemuksia.

Opinnäytetyöni teksti on jaettu kolmeen osaan, joista ensimmäinen osa *Loss* (menetys) käsittelee valokuvan erityistä suhdetta kuolemaan ja muistoihin. Seuraavassa osassa *Clothes* (vaatteet) käyn läpi käytettyjen vaatteiden erityisyyttä poissaolon symboleina, erityisesti kahden taiteilijan, Cristian Boltanskin sekä Louise Bourgeoisin teosten kautta. Tärkeäksi käsitteeksi nousee Bourgeoisin työskentelystä käyttämä termi "manaus": miten taiteen kautta on mahdollista ikään kuin vapautua traumaattisista kokemuksista. Viimeinen osa *Body* (ruumis) kuvaa kosketuksen ja kehollisuuden merkitystä työskentelylleni, sekä niiden mukanaan tuomia haasteita. Tässä kappaleessa avaan myös ajatuksiani lopullisten teosten taustalla. Kaikkien kolmen osan läpi kerron teemojen kautta taiteellisen työni kehittymisestä vuodesta 2012 vuoteen 2017. Lopuksi esitän pohdintojani koskien prosessiani.

Opinnäytetyöni taiteellinen osa, 15 valokuvaa, ovat esitettyinä opinnäytetyöni lopussa. Valokuvissa toistuvat jo kirjallisessa osassa käsitellyt teemat: menetys, vaatteet ja ruumis.

Avainsanat keho, kuolema, menetys, muisto, vaatteet, valokuva

NOTES ON LOSS AND PHOTOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

My thesis consists of a process description and the results of this process: 15 images that are presented at the end of this thesis.

This thesis aims to chronologically narrate how the experience of losing my sister has translated into my artistic work, over the course of six years, from 2012 to 2017. The main means of conveying the experiences of loss and healing is the evolving usage of my late sister's clothes in my images.

The thesis is divided into three parts: *Loss*, *Clothes*, and *Body*. These are also the main elements of my images.

Even when the images are a part of my thesis, the main focus of it is on narrating the process of how they came to be. Thus, I took the liberty of risoprinting the thesis.

Life changes fast.

Life changes in the instant.

You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.¹

This is how Joan Didion starts her novel *The Year of Magical Thinking*. These three sentences mark the beginning of her new uncharted life; they are the first thing Didion wrote after the sudden loss of her husband. To describe loss, it is essential to capture the immediacy of the break it causes: one moment you are sitting down to dinner, and suddenly everything has changed. Unlike Didion, I did not make it to dinner time. The phone call that ended my life as I had known it arrived sometime after breakfast March 24th, 2012. My sister, aged 28, had died.

In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion goes on to recount the following year after her husband's passing, the void and peculiar madness that followed. She calls this madness her "magical thinking": not being able to throw away her husband's shoes or suits, for he would need them when he would return.² Without my knowing, a similar void and madness awaited me. The need to try to make sense of a life I no longer recognized would form the basis of my artistic practice for years to come.

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1 Didion 2005: 3

2 *ibid.* 37,44

To experience loss as being deprived of meaning, implies being lost. The author Rebecca Solnit has written that “to be without a story is to be lost in the vastness of a world that spreads in all directions like arctic tundra or sea ice”³. When my sister passed away, I felt as my story was had been taken from me, and replaced by a tale of grieving. For the past six years I have tried to rewrite my story through photography. This thesis is my attempt to narrate the process of grief’s transition into mourning, and finally healing, through the development of my artistic practice. The starting point of my artistic practice was to understand the connections between loss, memory and materiality, and how all three are linked to photography.

1.1

PHOTOGRAPHY AND LOSS

A photograph can only show us the past, something that is already gone. Consequently, Jay Prosser claims that photography and loss are intrinsically related. This relationship makes photography emphasize not the presence of the past, but in fact the pastness of the present.⁴ The present can only be understood in retrospect, the real is realized only in its returning. When bringing the past to the current moment, photographs also mimic the mechanics of trauma: something is unconsciously recorded and only realized in the recurring, in the returning of the image. Thus, Prosser

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Solnit 2013: 3

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Prosser 2005: 2

claims, photography in itself can be traumatic.⁵ In addition, if loss and traumatic structure are inherent to photography, this presents a challenge of how to address the traumatic itself through photography.

Roland Barthes confronts this link between photography and death on personal and theoretical levels in *Camera Lucida*. In this book, considered one of the most influential books in the photographic canon, Barthes sets out to specify the essence of photography. This task is influenced by the fact that Barthes had lost his mother only few months before starting the writing process, and this loss is vividly present throughout the text. Barthes had expressed prior to writing, how every contact with a photograph “is a contact with death” and had talked about his fascination with “what has died, but is represented as something that wants to be alive.”⁶ According to Geoffrey Batchen, the editor of *Photography Degree Zero*, the first anthology of writings on *Camera Lucida*, this fascination is ultimately what Barthes writes about when describes the essence of photography⁷. Prosser goes as far as to suggest that *Camera Lucida* was in fact Barthes’ quest for his dead mother⁸. The essence of photography and the essence of Barthes’ mother are thus intertwined.

Camera Lucida is divided into two sections. In the first section, Barthes under-

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5 *ibid.* 8
6 Batchen 2009: 9
7 *ibid.*
8 Prosser 2005: 165

takes the task of defining the photographic experience through common denominators and terminology. Even when his approach is subjective, his aim is to define the universal essence of looking at photographs. The second section begins by Barthes contemplating the photographs of his mother. Another nature of things is revealed to Barthes when he finds an image where he can finally rediscover her.⁹ This image, referred to in the text as the *Winter Garden Photograph*, is so powerful, so pricking, that it seems to render everything he had previously written about the photographic experience insignificant.

Between these two sections, in the last chapter of the first part of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes presents the term *palinode*¹⁰. According to Prosser, the *palinode*, meaning “the return to the ode”, can be understood as a “take two, but more authentic than take one”. A second take on things, another look that reveals their true nature. It is a return that acknowledges how the realization could only come with the loss from the original.¹¹ In the context of *Camera Lucida*, the introduction of the *palinode* marks a transition in the text, where Barthes recognizes the need to “descend deeper” into himself and turns his gaze from “public” photographs to the photographs of his late mother¹².

In *Camera Lucida*, the *palinode* is also present in the structure of the text¹³.

9 Barthes 1980: 67
10 *ibid.* 60
11 Prosser 2005: 163
12 Barthes 1980:60
13 Prosser 2005: 45

Barthes returns not only to the earlier chapters of the book, but also to his former notions of photography and linguistics. Prosser quotes John Updike when describing this turning in oneself as kind of “scab-picking”. This “picking,” a form of autobiographical reflection, is triggered by the *Winter Garden Photograph*. Prosser suggests, that here “the *palinode* is to pick open the first layer of skin to open and heal the wounds in the second”¹⁴. However, could the photographic *palinode* be only the act of picking, without a promise for the wound to ever heal? The term *punctum*, first presented in *Camera Lucida* as a poignant, partial detail of a picture, becomes in the second part “the photographic incarnation of Barthes’ melancholia, a loss that won’t be healed.”¹⁵

Despite the apparent personal importance of the *Winter Garden Photograph*, it is not included in *Camera Lucida*. Barthes does not publish the most referential photograph, because for others it would fail to convey the same meanings¹⁶. As Barthes states, the picture does not exist for anyone else: “for you, no wound¹⁷.” The photograph, so painful for Barthes, would to others show only historical details and notions of an era: a young girl in a garden in the late 19th century. The photographs that act most like wounds bleed only for the person they prick. If this elusive referential-

14 *ibid.* 164
15 *ibid.* 25-26
16 *ibid.* 165
17 Barthes 1980: 73

ity is common to all photographs, can photography be used to communicate the individual acute longing at all?

There have been multiple photography projects dedicated to the lives of lost loved ones. Phillip Toledano has made photographic projects on both, the loss of his father and sister. First Toledano spent the last two years of his father's life photographing his father's dementia in *Days With My Father*. He then continued the process when his father passed away by multimedia story *A Shadow Remains*. Toledano has also published a book *When I Was Six* dealing with the death of his sister. His sister died in a fire when Toledano was only six years old, resulting the project to be based on her things their parents had stored in their garage in a cardboard box. The project consists mainly of archival images and photographs of her sister's belongings.¹⁸ Also dealing with a past loss of a sister, Päivi Anita Ristell collected and presented artefacts of her little sister's existence and the car accident that ended it in the exhibition *Four Boxes Of Her*¹⁹. Ristell's approach consisted amongst other works of printed out emails, detailing her reaction to hearing what had happened, a photograph of the scene of the accident, and installation of four cardboard boxes, in them everything that was kept of her sister's things.

Common to these photographic projects is choosing a primarily documen-

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tary approach. Photographs are used mainly as evidence, showing us scenes of the tragedy: worn out boxes, a lock of baby hair, a site of an accident. To my surprise, despite my own loss I could not identify in these stories. They only seemed to manifest a particular death: for me, no wound. I could feel sorry for their loss, each death being an apocalypse of its own, but only access it by the framework provided. Outside of the context, the images would be of generic interest. As Barthes framed it, these images do not exist for others. By being so attached on proving what had happened and to who it had happened to, the photographers seemed to close other tragedies out. In order to move me, I needed to find something of *my* death, an element I could recognize.

Instead of images, the album *A Crow Looked At Me* by *Mount Eerie*, offers an alternative presentation on grief. The musician Phil Elverum (who is behind *Mount Eerie*) lost his wife to cancer soon after their first child was born. He recorded the album, described as “hailing from grief’s rawest place” in the room his wife died soon after she had passed away.²⁰ The album’s opening track is titled *Real Death*, expressing the impossibility of representing loss:

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*Death is real
Someone’s there and then they’re not
And it’s not for singing about
It’s not for making into art*

When real death enters the house,
all poetry is dumb
When I walk into the room where you were
And look into the emptiness instead
All fails
My knees fail
My brain fails
Words fail²¹

What Elverum accomplishes by stating bluntly the *nothingness* of death, was a familiarity I had looked for in vain in the photography projects. Barthes writes about his mother in a similar way: “Nothing to say about the death of the one whom I love the most, nothing to say about her photograph²²”. This failing of language, blocking of meaning, is trauma itself²³. Culture fails Barthes, the trauma of losing his mother suspends the connotation procedures. This failure manifests itself in the palindomic structure of *Camera Lucida*; Barthes has to move backwards, since he cannot move forward — cannot turn his grief into mourning²⁴. After speechlessness, there is only death — the loss of meaning²⁵.

This descend into trauma and loss is where the writing process of *Camera Lucida* began and where it ends. Curiously, the end of Barthes’ life followed soon after the publishing of *Camera Lucida*. What killed him was not the accident, but an old childhood malady, and to a degree,

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21 Mount Eerie 2017
22 Barthes 1980: 93
23 Prosser 2009: 29
24 *ibid*: 24
25 *ibid*: 35

his refusal to get better. Prosser presents the death as a *palinode* that was put off to be returned later. Prosser goes on to suggest, that in Barthes' case it is as the photograph really did take Barthes' soul²⁶. Consequently, the *palinode* is as intrinsic to photography as it is to loss: both death and the returning are tied to photographs. Photography itself is not only melancholic but *palinodic*, for it gives us the thing only to lose it — only to present it as already lost²⁷. According to Prosser, it is precisely this pastness of the referent, the repeal of present that makes photography so tied to death.

Looking at photographs of my sister did not give me any solace. Quite the contrary, I avoided looking at them, since the photographs only stood as proof of the monumental loss I had encountered. According to Prosser this avoidance could be explained by a photograph's failure to kill death; it continues to present us with a living death that refuses to succumb to a memory one can mourn²⁸. This trade I was not willing to make: every time I would look at her photographs, I would have to face with full force her not being there. And every time I did face it, everything else fell away. In addition, I was afraid that the photographs would become her deathmask: petrify her features and replace the living memories I still had of her. Knowing all this, I started to doubt could there then be a way for photographs to heal?

PRESERVING MEMORIES

My initial reluctance to look at the photographs of my sister could be explained by the complicated relationship between photographs and memories. Prosser claims that a photograph has a limited capability to aid our remembering: photographs do not work as “an *aide-memoire*, but more like a *memento mori*”²⁹. They remind us of what has been, but not necessary in the nostalgic and proustian way we might crave. David Bate notes how with the massive increase of photographs taken there has been growing critique of their capability to “suppress human memory”³⁰. Bate quotes Derrida in noting, how “an anxiety about memory always has an element of death or ‘destruction drive’, ‘of loss’ at work in it”³¹. Do photographs hasten this loss of memory or rather vice versa? Bates formulates the question as not one regarding loss but change: do we learn to trust the photographic memory more than our own?

Bate suggests, that even if photographic memories do not override personal memories, they do interact with them in unconscious and complex ways. The photographic memory is not neutral. Bates compares photographs to childhood memories; both having simultaneously a sharpness and innocence, yet belying meanings. There can be no clear distinction between cultural memory and individual memory

in a photograph, since photography alters their relationship.³²

Because of its “affective and subjective” status, Bate regards photography as a mnemonic device³³. Mnemonic trace, a term introduced by Freud, accounts for an unconscious perception stored in the pre-conscious or unconscious. Mnemonic traces are not memories as such, more like inklings of memories: unconscious perceptions of perceptual phenomena. Memory is in the preconscious, where we can at will (or unwillingly) fetch it to the conscious. Thus our memory is in a constant state of “temporary forgetting” and re-remembering.³⁴ Photography as being a mnemonic device refers to its ability to evoke these mnemonic-traces, and bring forth memories, some such we did not know even existed. Since the memories have to be re-constructed in the process of re-remembering, they are vulnerable and prone to alter.

Memories and remembering rose to a crucial theme in my life after my loss. Didion writes, how “grief turns out to be place none of us know until we reach it”³⁵. The most fitting description of the months that followed my sister’s death would be to say they were “each slowly developing, in sequence, like a garden coming into terrible bloom”³⁶. I had anticipated the feeling of being deprived of the future I had

32 *ibid.*
33 *ibid.*
34 International Dictionary Of Psychoanalysis
 2005
35 Didion 2005: 188
36 O’Rourke 2013. Originally this description

had in mind. What I had failed to foresee, would be the sensation of also losing my past. The realization of both, my fading memories, and the horror that there would be no one there to remind of them once they faded, acted as the starting point to start working with my experience of loss using photography. Regarding the relations between photographs and memory, I was suspicious of photography's possibilities to restore memories. Instead, I could aim to create images that would work as traces, not to the actual memories themselves, but a path to this place in time where I still could remember.

The second year of my bachelor studies on the fall of 2012 started with a course that would run for the length of the school year, called "Method, Theme, Subject". We were to focus on producing one body of work on a theme we should formulate around the question "What is the most important thing above all?" My initial answer to this question was "mercy". For me, the answer was linked to giving myself the permission of using my tragedy for creating images. Photography became my way of making meaning in the void and negotiating the changes I was faced with. The following excerpts are from the

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was used by Meghan O'Rourke when depicting her experience of developing subsequent autoimmune diseases. I appropriated the term, since for me the failing of language manifested itself as a habit to build meaning from the fragments I read or heard. This habit can be seen throughout this thesis when I quote for example song lyrics.

statement I wrote as the course was
nearing its end:

24.3.2012 — 24.3.2013

The first year after a loss is called *the grief year*. My year of grief started suddenly and without any preparation last spring, when my sister passed away. My life was filled with the sensation of everything being out of place. I was drifting, in my own life and mortality. I became afraid of the future: of my memories fading, of new losses — I was terribly afraid of dying. I wanted everything to stay the same, forever as it was just then. I wanted to preserve my loved ones and my memories, I wanted to stop time. But change is as inevitable as is loss. I was changing, I just did not know how, and what to. I wanted to illustrate my innermost emotions in the midst of the process of grief and survival that one has to travel through during that first black year.

In these images I deal more with my emotions, than what had happened as such: not what had happened to my sister, but what was happening to me. I felt I did not have the right to reduce her fate to the subject of my images. However, only I could tell about my feelings, and for that I could give myself the permission. Yet, the pictures include some belongings of my sister: black dresses, powder, pearls...

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[...]

The items are my memories, charged and suffocating. The black dresses of my sister represent the all-consuming grief. I try to undress them, let go, to unsuccessfully peel them off

to show myself. One image shows the dresses as a burden, piled on my bent back.

Two images show a figure under a sheet, lingering in forgotten rooms. It might be waiting, or it might be forgotten too. The furniture in the room is also protected by bed sheets, to salvage them from dust and effects of time.

[...]

I regard the images to have more to do with living than dying. They are silent. I have no need to prove that horrible things happen. The most important thing is to go on, to survive: to find the way back to the living.³⁷

For months I had felt I was lingering in a curious limbo of not wanting to be in the present moment but not wanting time to pass either. This was a paradoxically active stance: I was waiting for everything to stay the same. In Finnish there is its own term for the first year following the loss, *suruvuosi* (the grief year). This was also my working title. The initial, and in retrospect, naive, idea I had had, would be to work through the grief during this first year and document the process with photographs. The belongings of my sister offered me the channel to address the tragedy with a non-literal take, but still maintaining the particularity of the event. Not documenting her belongings as evidence, but using them as symbols: a counterpart I could start building a dialogue with.

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I presented the photographs in a small booklet as my coursework in March 2013. I did not plan to work with the subject further, and had no plans to show the work thereafter. Still, some of the images had brushed on the relevant connections of memory, materials and identity. I had for the first time included self-portraiture and the conscious use of objects as symbols to my artistic practice. Regarding the relations between death and photography, and memory and photography, could the use of symbolic material provide a more fruitful and effective way to address the theme of loss?

1.3

MEMORIES MATERIALIZED

Photographs are not the only painful things left behind when someone passes away. Every object can become a trigger. Using objects and things as symbols can provide the photograph a non-literal way of pointing further than what is presented before the lens. Instead of using archival images of my sister or documenting her belongings as such, my first attempts to illustrate my state had echoed alternative presentations of loss and absence, through the symbolic use of her objects.

Similar kind of symbolic imagery is often present in Annika von Hausswolff's photographs. Her work is an example of addressing the relations between mem-

ory and material through photography. Von Hauswolff has also dealt with the theme of loss in her photographs, where things, instead of people, are her main focus. In her photographs people are most often portrayed as being anonymous, fleeting or lifeless, when not completely absent. This absence heightens the bodily presence of the objects in the images.³⁸

One recurring element in von Hauswolff's images are beige tights and underwear. Von Hauswolff has said, how in her photographs the "beige things [sic] are her mother's clothes"³⁹. The fabric becomes a stand-in for a body, and the beige color for skin. Even when portrayed only as an image, the garments are able to preserve some of their tactility and transport it to the image.⁴⁰ Through the use of garments the photographs gain a tactile quality, not only seen but also felt.

In addition, for von Hauswolff the beige color represents the memory of the mother⁴¹. Among her photographic works, von Hauswolff has also shown a fabric installation, a big curtain titled *The Memory of My Mother's Underwear Transformed into a Flameproof Drape* (2003). The skin colored super-sized drape, modelled after the color of her mother's underwear, looms over the viewer, covering a large wall from floor to ceiling. The effect is soft and menacing at the same time. A simi-

38 Blegvald 2013: 34
39 Von Hauswolff 2004: 49
40 *ibid.* 52
41 Blegvald 2013: 33

lar drape was first seen in a photograph by von Hausswolff, titled *No You See It, Now You Don't* (1999). The photograph shows a beige curtain hanging in front of a window, blocking the view outside, allowing only a dim light to enter the room from what seems to be blazing daylight. In von Hausswolff's pictures light functions as a stand-in for the gaze⁴². The gaze is often a violent one, a harsh flash lighting deserted rooms or revealing bodies in the darkness that do not wish to be seen. Thus, here the curtains provide protection from this gaze.



Regarding the two pairs of drapes, the photographic one and the actual drape, it can be concluded that in von Hausswolff's photographs the materiality is able to move to and from the image. In *Annika von Hauswolff in Dialogue with Sara Arrhenius*, comparing the difference of the image of a curtain and the curtain modelled after this image, the curator Sara Arrhenius suggests that the image transformed in to material in space does not in fact make the photograph more real; it makes the space become more of an image⁴³. The materiality

of the curtain is lending tactility to the photograph, but then again this photograph is bleeding into being, giving physical reality the symbolic qualities of an image. The realness of the drape is not enhanced by being produced back into an actual drape, on the contrary, it is taking the real in the direction of being an image. Both, the tactile and the photographic, have a power to resist each other, and add to one another.

In the case of *The Memory of My Mother's Underwear Transformed into a Flameproof Drape*, the change in the drape's size is essential. The supersized drape is no more a curtain plainly hanging in front of a window; it resembles more the curtains used in a theatre than in a household. The drape is not just protecting the viewer from to be seen, it is preventing the viewer from seeing. This is the memory of von Hausswolff's mother, enlarged and flameproof, a memory made indestructible. Here von Hausswolff presents another tactic of preserving a memory, but at the same time this memory becomes suffocating. If the memory stays and grows, it prevents one from seeing out to the world. Staying protected from the threatening gaze of the world outside simultaneously means to be blinded.

Hence, von Hausswolff's work gives clues on the nature of memories: how memories materialized as objects can be binding. The sudden loss of my sister transformed her belongings to something else: they started pulsing with the "living death" Prosser claimed photographs present; as memories, but not succumbing to

mourning. The objects escaped their original purpose, and started to work more as symbols of her absence. This resonating could lend itself to be used effectively in images to address grief. However, even objects of pure symbolic value take space in real life.

The fall of 2013 I returned to school hoping to have magically defaulted to my former self. The same time my late sister's partner had to go through heart surgery. When he refused to wake up, and stayed months in an unconscious state, my grief started to give away to anger. Despite my best efforts the present moment started to feel more than I could take. I had had this ominous idea all my life, that there would be a point of no return towards sadness. I had seen my parents, and their parents before them, have their go at happiness but ending up broken down by life. The pretty dresses of my sister had turned from a symbolic burden to a real one. They formed black piles on the corners of my room, a dark undercurrent flowing under each day.

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Of all my sister's belongings, her clothes felt the most painful. Maybe this was because clothes can bear the resemblance of their owner, even to the point to be considered as second skin. Prosser claims, that "[i]n saying second skin we cannot come any closer in language to embodying our corporeal skin, it has the greatest proximity to our literal skin — it is the met-

aphor closet [sic].⁴⁴” So if her clothes were her second skin, and the first, literal skin was gone, this was the closest I would ever be able to be to her corporeal being. And yet, it would always fall short, remind me of the gap between the representation and the real thing. Jan Kaila compares used clothes to photographs, them both situating on the push-pull between presence and absence⁴⁵. Used clothes and photographs of people are similar in how they have a paradoxical relation to presenting their subject being there and not-there simultaneously.

For me my sister’s clothes are more alive than her photographs, as they do not exhaust her memory, they evoke it. A garment is not tied to a certain point in time or a single memory, but a cascade of memories spanning over years or even decades. They can still hold the mold of a person: their shape, odour, proportions, stains... The clothes are a memory for the senses, something to touch and something to smell. To throw them away would have felt like cruelty. Giving them up would have meant giving up hope of her ever returning. This was the same difficulty Didion was faced with, when she held onto her husband’s suits and shoes. Through the practical question of what to do with the clothes of a lost loved one, I was left wondering how do these objects have the power to bind us and define us, and if there would be a way to utilize this power by intervening their materiality.

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CLOTHES
AS BODIES

For artists, clothes can provide a vessel to deal with themes of loss and absence. The use of used clothes as markers of absence is particularly present in the works of two artists, Christian Boltanski and Louise Bourgeois. When discussing Boltanski's and Bourgeois's works, the artist Louise Baker goes as far as to suggest that used clothes do take on a bodily resonance rather than to offer up merely a symbol of such⁴⁶. Both artists have utilized used clothes, but on a different scale. While Bourgeois's works are about her personal experiences and intimate emotions, Boltanski's works can be seen pointing more towards universal mass tragedies.



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Boltanski is known for his immersive installations dealing with identity, memory and loss. For *Personnes*, Boltanski filled the Grand Palais in Paris with thousands and thousands of old clothes, being scooped up and moved from pile to pile

with caterpillars. The soundscape was created with a multitude of recorded heartbeats. A similar display was later seen in *No Man's Land* at the park Avenue Armory in New York. Boltanski has stated, that his work is “about the fact of dying⁴⁷,” and how for him the clothes used are “bodies⁴⁸.”

Boltanski has often combined clothes with photographs of unidentified people in his installations. Boltanski describes, how for him “used clothes [and] a photograph of somebody [...] are the same thing. [...] In fact, it's like when you see a photo of somebody, you feel more that this person is dead⁴⁹”. He has addressed that in essence he is dealing with the same problematic nature of the clothes left behind that I myself had been struggling with:

It's not intellectual at all... In all my work, from the beginning to now, there's always this idea that used clothes are like a body. If you have lost your father, what are you going to do with his clothes? You know that the clothes belonged to the man, and you don't know what to do with them⁵⁰.

However, the way Boltanski works, presenting the used clothes in masses, the pain of loss transforms. Boltanski describes, how the clothes he uses are “dead clothes⁵¹”. They are dead precisely because of the relation between the owner and the garment

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47 Garb 1997: 22
48 Rosenbaum-Kranson 2010
49 *ibid.*
50 *ibid.*
51 *ibid.*

has been erased: “in the mountain of clothes there is no more identity⁵².” This loss of identity, the impossibility to locate a fixed memory, adds to the feeling of tragedy. The non-living material becomes even more breathless. When all the traces to the person have been buried in bulk, they are lost twice. Boltanski uses photographs the same way, without referring to the source or the subject. They are photographs of no one, as they are the clothes of no one, even when we know they have once been, and belonged to, a living person. The act of mourning is suspended, when we do not know who to mourn, except the loss itself.

The difference between Boltanski’s and Bourgeois’s use of clothes lies not only in scale, but also in the particularity of the clothing. For Bourgeois it was fundamental, that the clothes she used were her own. The sculptures and installations work as personal memorials. For Bourgeois clothing was “an exercise of memory... They are like signposts in search of the past”.⁵³ The clothes worked as memory traces, that granted her access to her traumas. It is her past, that she pursued to access and resolve through the materials used. In this quest, the act of sewing symbolized the mending of her past and her personal relationships, and the act of cutting being in control of her life.⁵⁴

Bourgeois used clothes in various ways. In 1990s the clothes emerged as an

52 *ibid.*
53 Bourgeois 2000: 363
54 Fabric Works. Louise Bourgeois, *The Complete Prints & Books 2018*; Bourgeois 2000: 254

essential material for her sculptural works. Sometimes they were presented intact as part of a sculpture, and other times she sew them into sculptures of their own, soft mutilated heads made out of patches. In



Pink Days and Blue Days (1997) the slips and nightgowns are hung on a bare steel frame. Similar contrast between the fragile worn cloth and the rugged steel is present in some of her *Cells*. Bourgeois later continued to use old handkerchiefs as her canvas, and constructed collages out of fabric.⁵⁵

Louise Bourgeois's body of work can be described by countless dichotomies. It is both breaking and repairing, simultaneously violent and tender. She did not only do and undo metaphorically, she also cut and mutilated her finished sculptures, and sometimes even destroyed them in fits of rage. Bourgeois saw that behind this violence was the frustration caused by her mourning, and that the violence could be repaired by restoration⁵⁶. This repeating cycle of doing, undoing and re-doing, combined with Bourgeois producing many variations of the same theme, make her artistic work seem almost possessed. It is fitting, that throughout her career

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Fabric Works. Louise Bourgeois, *The Complete Prints & Books* 2018

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Bourgeois 2000: 194

Bourgeois referred to her artistic practice as “exorcism”⁵⁷:

To have really gone through an exorcism, in order to liberate myself from the past, I have to reconstruct it, ponder about it, make a statue out of it and get rid of it through making a sculpture — I have paid my debt to the past and I am liberated⁵⁸.

The connections between Bourgeois’ traumas, her efforts of repairing, and her use of fabric are all connected to her childhood. The use of textiles was a natural continuum to her work, since Bourgeois spent her childhood helping in her family’s tapestry restoration workshop⁵⁹. Her childhood and the complex feelings she harbored for her parents were the past she set out to liberate herself from.

2.2

EXORCISM

On the fall of 2013, while I was waiting on hearing news from the hospital about the fate of my sister’s partner, I attended a course titled “The Process Workshop”. I decided to try to refuse the overpowering sadness and channel my newfound anger through my working. As a part of the course work for the workshop, I took some my sister’s dresses and cut them to strips. I proceeded to weave a small rug out of them, using an impromptu loom I constructed

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57 *ibid.* 133, 158, 245, 249, 357

58 *ibid.* 257

59 *Fabric Works. Louise Bourgeois, The Complete Prints & Books 2018*

with tape and thread in to my drawer. The tradition of cutting old, unnecessary clothes for weft used in rag rugs was something I had accustomed to do with my grandmother and my mother when growing up. This act of cutting felt necessary, a concrete act of resistance, something Bourgeois had described as “emotional aggression”⁶⁰.

I presented the small rug framed, together with a diptych of old portraits of my mother and father, and a small box containing photographs of my relatives. The three objects represented my family’s trag-



edy, my parents tragedy and finally my own. I felt that like ripples on a lake surface, the misfortune had spread through generations, and had finally reached me. I regarded the weaving of the rug to have to do not only with my sister, but also with the sense of impending failure, something I felt I had been trying to fight against all my life. I was trying to make sense of the current situation by making sense of my past. The three objects, the rug, the diptych and the box of photographs, made the connection to the past visible. Bourgeois

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saw the need to reconcile the past as a key incentive for her artistic work:

Some of us are so obsessed with the past that we die of it. [...] [I]t is really the situation of artists who work for a reason that nobody can quite grasp. They might want to recreate something from the past to exorcise it.⁶¹

The ability to resolve the past, by pursuing actively to interfere with it, was necessary in order to survive. For Bourgeois, to be too attached to the past was equal to death. In order to live, she needed to give her past physicality. By giving emotions a form, Bourgeois was able to interfere with them, to “hack away” at them. For her, this movement was from a passive spectator to an active artist who could proceed “to be alive here and today.”⁶² To become active meant taking control. For Bourgeois, one of the means of being in control of her past was cutting, with either scissors or a saw⁶³. This kind of symbolic violence was not only necessary, but also acceptable. Bourgeois stated, that “things [sic] can be repaired⁶⁴”.

By cutting my sister’s clothes and weaving the rug, I too had taken an active role in resolving something from my past. The symbolic action of working with her clothes enabled me to form a new connection to the material. The small rug held a rectangular shape similar to a photograph,

61 *ibid.*: 133
62 *ibid.*. 357
63 *ibid.*. 254
64 *ibid.*. 194

and I started to perceive it as a portrait of my sister. I saw in it a fragment of likeness I had failed to recognize in the photographs of her. I felt a gush of protectiveness, an echo of the dynamics of our relationship. As Bourgeois had framed it, I had taken an active role by working with my hands. Even if I was not able to throw the clothes away, I managed to transform them to something different, and through it alter the meanings they held for me.

Was something changing in the clothes themselves, as they transformed into a different object, a rug? When Boltanski had referred to the clothes as “dead”, was he implying that there could be such thing as a living garment? Despite the hopelessness one feels facing Boltanski’s installations’ mountains of rags, they seem to have a promise of resurrection enclosed in them. The clothes are always fluid, unable to form a lasting monument for loss. Boltanski has stated, how he believes that “what is important for an object or for a person is to look at it and give some love. And if you give some love, you give life⁶⁵”. Boltanski gives the example of how after *Personnes*, the clothes were given out to people for use. Through use, the clothes no longer represented a loss, but took on a new life. By cutting and weaving, I was tending the fabric, smoothing it out, and adjusting it to the threads on the loom. I was giving the fabric my attention, which made it possible to build a new

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connection to the material, a one where I was in control.

Regardless of feeling a vague sense of accomplishment, I still did not think of continuing to work with the subject of my sister's passing or my past any further. As before, I hoped to do the exact opposite. The small rug and the *Grief Year* images I had done previously had both been what I felt necessary reactions to otherwise unbearable situations. The concept to immerse myself in these themes thoroughly, not just in a reactionary way, seemed alien to me. After all, they had both been something I had had to do in order to repel something from my life. I was occupied with the idea, that what had happened was somehow outside of me, a glitch in the world, still in the realm of magical thinking. The works I had done were propelled by the need to figure out how to approach the loss, the void and nothingness. But according to Bourgeois, to be able to extract any answers from the meaninglessness, one needs to formulate the question right:

35 I think the rage to understand comes from the fact that you do not ask the right question. You will never find the right answer if you do not ask the proper question. [...] Some questions are too painful to answer. Some questions we are unwilling to ask. And some are impossible to answer. When my mother died in 1932 this rage to understand took over me. I simply could not make out the why of her disappearance. Why my mother died and abandoned me would be clear if the ques-

tion was perhaps a different one. If the question was replaced by why do I suffer so much from this loss, why am I so affected by this disappearance. Now these questions are possible to answer.⁶⁶

Just before Christmas of the year 2013, a day after his 38th birthday, my sister's partner passed away. I had failed to ask the right questions previously, and I did so once more. I had tried to find answers to how to preserve the memories and how to defeat the overpowering sadness, "the why of her disappearance", trying to understand something that there was no answer for. As death had returned, I should have realized what I had failed to see the first time around: that ultimately the question calling to be answered would be about myself. The void could never be filled, I would have to grow around it. Another two years would go by, and one more loss would occur, before I finally could take on the task of letting go.

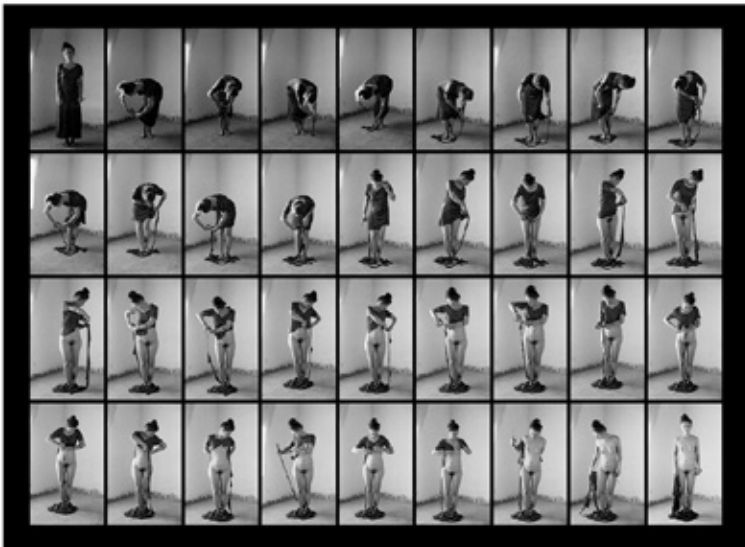
At the end of 2015 I found myself craving for change. The blinds were drawn, I was sheltered by a curtain of my own creation. I was living in a vacuum. Nothing new entered. Nothing was being created. I felt a distinct division inside of me; of what had died and the part still living. By avoiding to have to address the reality of my state I had stopped photographing almost altogether.

In the preceding spring my grandmother had passed away. The following summer my mother cut my grandmother's clothes to weft, and wove them into rugs. My mother's actions were at part a pragmatic solution, the rugs would be used in our summer house, but also an act of mourning. This event reminded me of my intuitive reaction two years before, when I had made my first attempt of weaving and produced the small rug out of my sister's clothes. I started to recollect the countless summer evenings of my childhood, spent on my grandmother's porch beside my sister, scissors in our small hands, cutting endless strings of weft. I remembered how bittersweet it felt slicing through my favorite shirts and dresses, of which I had grown out of. There was no room to be sentimental. Growing up meant letting go.

I understood that I had grown out of my grief. The need to preserve had subsided, and was replaced with a desperation for change I had not felt before. Slowly the thread running through the past years emerged. What I had not thought to be a cohesive or conscious process, presented itself as a continuum of acts related to my sister's clothes and my efforts to intervene with them: first used as the symbols of sorrow, then offering themselves up for the act of cutting. My mother's reaction to my grandmother's passing presented our family tradition, the cutting of old clothes, as a transition phase in both, mourning and growing up. I decided to try to implement both meanings in to one.

As 2015 was drawing to a close, I proceeded to plan to work with the clothes of my sister once more, this time not only as a forced reaction, but with contemplative determination. Still, I was hesitant to start working, for I feared it might evoke back some of the feelings I used most of my energy to avoid. To gain enough distance, I spent January 2016 in a residency in the Moroccan Sahara. There I created a serial image, where I cut one of my sister's dresses off of me as I am wearing it. The image consists of one roll of 35mm film, all 36 frames presented in a grid. The serial form was a nod towards Eadweard Muybridge's works, that show movement too fast for the eye to see. For me, the healing was something too slow to see, yet something I could try to illustrate through photographs.

To bring the element of time more visible, I timed the cutting of the dress to sunrise. Gradually, as the dress is unraveled, the sun rises and the images become brighter. The dark dress gives away to skin, and at the end I am naked, with the dress forming a dark pile at my feet. The act was almost too underlining: traveling from light to darkness, from death back to the living, a rising from the ashes. I decided to acknowledge this by naming it *The Phoenix Piece*. The symbolic act of cutting clothes felt like shedding skin, showing how I finally was growing out of my sorrow.



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The cutting of the dress had similarities with Yoko Ono's performance work *Cut Piece*⁶⁷. In the score the performance is described as Ono being seated in the floor dressed, with scissors in front of her, while the viewers are advised to approach her and



cut a piece of her clothing away. The *Cut Piece* ends, when Ono decides it is done. The differences to my action were that my cutting was not done by, or for, an audience, and I had to execute the cutting from start to finish. The dress was not cut in pieces, but as a continuous, unbroken line. This is also how weft is traditionally cut. Working not only with my hands, but with my whole body, created an enhanced sense of what I had first experienced when doing the smaller rug: how through the tactile approach I could work together with the fabric, and extract something further out of the image.

3.1

CARNAL HERMENEUTICS

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Even before I had lost my sister, I had felt a barrier between me and the world. As if I was constantly distancing myself from the world, trying to see reality as a set of possible images. Photographing had impacted my take on the world,

as everything presented itself as something either worthy of a photograph or not. Richard Kearney has criticized this kind of ocularcentrism. In his text *What is Carnal Hermeneutics* he quotes the philosopher Jean-Louis Chrétien, arguing that “our soul is in fact the act of touch⁶⁸.” According to Kearney, the key question of carnal hermeneutics is how do we interpret the world with our bodily senses. Kearney emphasizes the importance of taste and touch in discerning the world as one thing or another.⁶⁹ We can find ourselves through touching, by distinguishing differences and similarities. We know things that are hotter or colder than us, or softer or harder. Our flesh becomes a medium, mediating between the otherness and the self⁷⁰.

I felt that as a form of my own “magical thinking,” I had not been fully convinced I was alive myself. I had needed proof that I was still part of the living, and in this quest my sight could only take me so far. Working not only with photography, but also with my hands and my body, helped me understand the difference between my living body and non-living matter. After I returned from Morocco, the juxtaposition of my body and the materiality of my sister’s clothes became the focus of my work.

Still hesitant, I was reminded of the song by Johnny Thunders, where he repeatedly warns how “you can’t put your

arms around a memory/ Don't try.⁷¹ I understood that regardless of this warning, this was exactly what I would need to set out to do: to put my arms around the memory of my sister. I wanted to try to portray the pull between seeing and touch in my images, the same pull I felt while I was working. The images I wanted to create would be the outcome of collaboration of senses, a similar cooperation Kearney describes when quoting the poet Octavio Paz: "I touch you with my eyes/ I watch you with my hands/ I see with my fingertips what my eyes touch"⁷².

According to Kearney to live fully is to be constantly exposed to risk. He describes it as being forever attentive and attuned. This attunement is achieved by letting ourselves be touched, inviting both pain and pleasure, happiness and grief into our lives.⁷³ Introducing tactility to my working process enabled me to process my loss and healing in a more profound manner. Yet, the use of my naked body exposed me in a very literal way. When I decided to show the work publicly, it demanded me a whole new kind of an acceptance.

3.2

RESISTING THE FEMININE

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When I returned from Morocco January 2016, I put together the three phases of my work dealing with my sister's clothes: the two images from the *Grief Year*, the small

71 Johnny Thunders 1978
72 Kearney 2015: 106
73 *ibid.* 107

rug and *The Phoenix Piece*. Out of these, I chose to show only the photographs. My body of work consisted of totality of three images, when it was shown the first time for the public at Vienna Contemporary art fair in September 2016.

In deciding to share the images, new doubts and pains emerged. Somehow using my body and textile, the other undoubtedly feminine and the other also associated to femininity, felt problematic for me. In my character I had always shun away from showing emotions or vulnerability in general, and now this work was nothing but. Consecutively, not only was I concerned about being perceived a certain way, I was afraid of becoming something I thought I was not. Through referencing the rag rug tradition, my work linked me to the generation of women in my family, of rural farmers and their traditions born out of scarcity. Suddenly, here was the past I had been running from ever since childhood.

My conceptions of using fabrics as something almost shameful had their roots in the history of textile art and the overall position of women. In the revised introduction to *Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, the author Rozsika Parker returns to evaluate the changes that have happened in using crafts in arts from 1970s to 2010. Parker starts by explaining how throughout history, the art of embroidery was a way of both educating women to the feminine ideal, and a means of creating what was regarded as femininity. Because of this, it

was considered as something that belonged to the domestic sphere and strengthened the conception of women as submissive. Yet, from the 1960s second wave feminism on, embroidery and crafts have more and more become not just as submission to norms, but also a way to fight against them. This change was strongly generated by female artists. Traditionally, crafts were seen as decorative arts, and to be considered as fine arts, it had to first assert itself as a serious medium. The reframing of crafts as a means of creating fine art, or furthermore, as a feminist strategy did not happen by itself. As Parker demonstrates, to second wave feminist artists, the use of crafts was a conscious statement, “a medium with a heritage”, something that the male-dominated canon of art history had overlooked.⁷⁴

Importantly, Parker sees that today there has been a shift in focus in using crafts in art: what earlier was aiming to show the personal as being political, has now become a question of the personal being universal. Using fabric and crafts are seen as an effective way to present numerous themes, not just on topics revolving around femininity. What was asserted decades ago is now exhibited, and even more, celebrated. Parker also points out the exceptional quality and importance of the emergence of Louise Bourgeois fabric works. In them, Parker sees, the symbolic functions of textiles, and their abil-

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ity to convey psychological processes are effectively in play.⁷⁵

The starting point of the newfound acceptance towards my own work came from the curator Gabriele Schor. She is the main curator of the *Verbund* collection focusing mainly on feminist avant-garde of the 1970s. She was kind enough to introduce me to their collection. Consisting of works from such noted artists as Francesca Woodman and Cindy Sherman, to the Viennese Actionism, the collection presents a vast archive of the variation amongst female artists in the context of art history⁷⁶. Browsing through the long list of my predecessors, working with their bodies, and often utilizing clothes as strong and powerful symbols, helped me to come to terms with the use of my body and my legacy.

My perceptions of the connotations of femininity and crafts changed. I began to view my legacy in a new light, and notice the non-sentimental strength in the women in my family, my mother and grandmother, my great-grandmother and so forth. Through exhibiting the work had happened an additional healing I had not anticipated: I had formed a new connection to my body and my past. Like with touch and sight, another dual movement emerged. I had to reach to my past and legacy in order to be able to move forward

PRAGMATIC EXORCISM

Rebecca Solnit wrote, how “to be without a story is to be lost in the vastness of a world that spreads in all directions like arctic tundra or sea ice”⁷⁷. The quote is from her book called *The Faraway Nearby*, in which she recounts her relationship with her mother, of her mother’s illness and death, and most importantly, the importance of the stories we tell ourselves. Solnit’s story of starts after her mother could no longer live unassisted and is transferred to a facility, and the fruit from her mother’s abandoned apricot tree fill Solnit’s house⁷⁸. The apricots, looking like “an anxiety rather than abundance” are her mourning materialized: out of place in her bedroom floor, intruding in her everyday life and calling to be dealt with. The heap of apricots cannot be overlooked, as they start to rot, one by one. Solnit goes on to present the chore of dealing with the apricots as her fairytale.⁷⁹

Solnit recounts, how in fairytales, the protagonist is often faced with an impossible task; whether plowing a field of snakes or knitting sweaters from nettles, the hardships have to be beat in order to move forward:

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Such tasks are always the obstacles to becoming, to being set free [...] Carrying out the task undoes the curse. Enchantment in

77 Solnit 2013: 3
78 *ibid.* 5
79 *ibid* 12-13

these stories is the state of being disguised, displaced in an animal's body or another's identity. Disenchantment is the blessing of becoming yourself.⁸⁰

My quest had turned out to be a mountain of sorrow, a pile of black dresses of my sister's. In the past years my work has grown from a silent meditation on grief to an active search of self. Like eventually Solnit is able to transform the apricots into wine and preserves, I too took on the task of transforming my sister's dresses. The repetitive nature of my images stems from the same kind of exorcism Louise Bourgeois set out to perform every day of her life. The price would be to disenchant myself, to become me, finally. As a part of this self-recovery a tender annihilation has happened, as the dresses give away their form, and transform into images.

In 2016, after *The Phoenix Piece*, I did only two works, in which both I returned to the first images had done in 2013. I also finally titled the original two images from 2013: one as *Undressing Grief*, and the other, as a homage to Solnit's story, became *My Pile of Peaches* (here my memory failed me in one of its many ways, replacing her apricots with peaches). In *Something To Lean On*, I am leaning again to the pile of black dresses, but this time the dresses are under me, not on top of my bent back. The clothes are no longer weighing me down, but to seek support from my loss remains as a hard task.

My body is awkwardly arched, beautiful, but nearly broken. In the other work, *To Hold*, I am holding up the same dress I was trying to take off the first time in *Undressing Grief*. Now the dress is no longer on me, and no longer intact: the bottom is cut off. Still, I am not visible in the image, the dress remains in the forefront.

After 2016, I hoped to be able to show only my healing progress through the images. However, often another wave of longing arrives, and I rely my old sketches to address it. This is how for example the image titled *Veil* came to be. I had sketched an image of dress that I would be hiding inside of, already as early as 2013, to refer how everything I saw was from the perspective of the sorrow. I realized the sketch in January 2017.

The second image I created in 2017 was *Twins*, the only image I am not in myself. *Twins* shows two almost identical slip dresses sewn together, hanging in a thread. The pull between the dresses becomes visible, when the fabric crumbles up where it was stitched. *Twins* is one of the most moving images I have made. I had envisioned the two dresses on the thread, but failed to foresee how they refused to keep apart. I had to tape the hangers holding the dresses to the thread, to keep them from sliding into each other. As I watched, the dresses came alive, a representation of my relationship with my sister, and my longing as the struggle to still be together.

Recurring themes to my images are cutting, leaning and veiling myself.

I loan visual cues from the actual process of rug making: the shape of the weft and how it is stored rolled into balls. In *Light-weight* I am wrapping the weft to cover my palms. The wordplay in the title is something that could be light and weighing at the same time, and also the word used for the lightest boxers. I chose the name to represent how one's experiences can make one stronger, but how they can also be binding: the weft sheltering the hands simultaneously ties them together. In *Small Black Flowers* I lean my head, not anymore against a pile of clothes, but against a ball of weft. As time goes on, the past is increasingly something that does not pain me to think about.

The process of creating new works is slow. I am wary of any outside pressure in realizing works, since I aim to keep them meaningful to myself. I waited and contemplated for over a year before doing an additional cutting piece. The inspiration to repeat the act came from my sister's dress that was found from my friend's attic. The round and wide hem gave me an idea of cutting it on my knees to form circular lines. In the ready image the cutting forms graphic, expanding circles, almost like ripples in a lake surface. Thus, I titled the work as *Ripples*: a delicate and beautiful thing, caused by a heavy impact under the surface, much like I considered all my works.

My workflow consists mainly of thinking possible interventions on the material I still have left. Because the material is scarce, the same garments can be

featured in multiple images. The black sheer slip dress of my sister was first used in *Undressing Grief*, then on the pile on my back in *My Pile Of Peaches*. It is the same dress I am inside of in *Veil*, and one of the two dresses I sew together for *Twins*. This twin-dress I then opened the inner seams of, and proceeded to sew them together once more, in able to wear the it for *In Between Past*. Furthermore, the slow process is due to working with film and having to perform in the images myself, when the careful planning of the execution becomes crucial. When cutting, there are no second chances. In 2016 I created only 3 images, in 2017 10. Combined with 2 others I had done back in 2013, there is a total of 15 images done to this day.

In addition to cutting and sewing, I had been collecting garments from my friends and family. Finally by the fall of 2017 I had collected enough material for weaving a proper rug with the loom we stored in my great-grandparents old house. The old loom clunking and thumping, like an irregular heartbeat, I weaved my past in place, line by line: not just my sister, but also everyone who had been by my side the past years. I proceeded to use the rug in a series of four images, together titled *Comforter*. I chose the name for the both meanings of the word *comforter*: something I could seek shelter under, or someone to console me. In the images I am wrapping the rug around me, as a way of embracing the past years in their totality.

To conclude, a curious thing happened when I had finished the weaving of the rug. I asked my mother to help me take it down, and when I spread the rug to the floor to inspect it, without giving it a second thought my mother walked over it in her muddy boots. And I understood that here were the pains of past years, transformed into a rug, laying on the floor like a rug should: a successful act of pragmatic exorcism.

Life changes fast.

Life changes in the instant.

You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.

*The question of self-pity.*⁸¹

The complete quote at the start of Didion's book consist of four sentences instead of the three presented in the beginning of this thesis. At first, I was reluctant to admit the importance of the last sentence, "the question of self-pity". However, Didion sees this question internal to her grieving:

Why I was so unable to accept the fact he had died? Was it because I was failing to understand it as something that had happened to him? Was it because I was still understanding it as something that had happened to me?⁸²

All these years, I was not only mourning the loss of my sister, I was mourning myself. Didion describes how she "had been trying to reverse time, run the film backward"⁸³. Like Didion's, my process has been one of resistance. For several years, I was not willing to accept neither, my sister being gone and this being the event that would determine me and my artistic practice for years to come.

81 Didion 2005: 3

82 *ibid.* 76-78

83 *ibid.* 184

To this day, a part of this unwillingness remains. I started my project as a means to preserve, then to repel. But as the works have been gaining recognition, I have been more and more tied to them. Since 2016, the images have been exhibited in art fairs in Vienna, Paris, Madrid, and London, and in a solo exhibition in Gallery Taik Persons in 2017. What initially started out as an attempt to escape and exorcize, has now evolved to a co-existence that I sometimes still struggle to accept. The process is ongoing, and I do not claim anymore to know when it will be done for good.

On deciding to work with this subject, there was a lot of guilt involved. I was determined from the start not to work with my sister's fate, but mine. I did not feel I had the right to appropriate her life. I could only use what I knew firsthand: the grieving, the mourning and the attempt of healing. Part of the guilt, however, had to do with my self-pity. I still question my right to dwell on this single event, year after year, when I know that there is nothing particularly special in losing a loved one. The void, I imagine, is equally horrible for everyone.

Still, I had never understood, how art really could take on a life of its own. My images have revealed me, and healed me, in a way I did not imagine was possible. The sensitivity, femininity and vulnerability I do not feel comfortable in showing in my character has all been exposed. In a way, the images show more of me, than I show myself. The process of creating and sharing this work has made me question

and redefine my relations to myself and others. As the work started to evolve in my first year of studies in Aalto University, it is not an over-estimation to say, that this is the process that has made me an artist as much as my education has.

For me, evaluating whether or not the images have succeeded in any other way is impossible. I am aware that death can be simultaneously a hard and an easy subject. Choosing a personal tragedy can work as a shield, that renders any critique from the outside obsolete. I hope that when seeing my work the viewer does not feel the need to take my feelings into account, and that the work can become opaque and point beyond my experiences, to loss itself.

This thesis follows the same principle as I try to achieve in my work: to be as sincere as I can. In order to construct this thesis, I had to follow my steps back to the horrible thing that happened all these years ago, and parcel the thought processes that have been at play with the aid of my diaries. The writing of this thesis resembled the artistic process also in its quest for making meaning. Both came to be out of the necessity to create a story out of what initially seemed like utter chaos. Hence, it does not feel like an exaggeration to say that by trying to construct a cohesive narrative of the past six years, I was in fact writing for my life.

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My File of Peaches, 2013

Undressing Grief, 2013





The Phoenix Piece, 2016

Something to Lean On, 2016



To Hold, 2016





Veil, 2017

Twins, 2017





Small Black Flowers, 2017

In Between Past, 2017







Medusa, 2017







