Deathbed
Selfie

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In this thesis I approach photography, and specifically the act of photographing, from a subjective standpoint. I broadly open up significant themes that relate to the medium such as memory, the creative process, the act of photographing, the act of observing and images as a visual language, all in a quest to understand my own reasons and purpose for being a photographer. The sources I use closely relate to my own work conceptually, visually and often both.

This thesis asks more questions than it answers. I have realized that for a long time I have photographed without asking why, or what for? Writing this thesis has been a process in which I have begun questioning my own actions and trying to understand what the main issues are in my own work. I have progressed semi-linearly, processing each new dilemma I have faced one at a time. The result is not an in-depth research into any one of the topics I discuss, but a more universal look at what the key features and problems of my photography have been, are, and will be.

As I regard myself as a photographer of no specific thing, but of all things, it would not be beneficial to me or the reader to focus on only one of all the topics that are significant in my process. That said, by the end of this text, I hope to have at least been able to create a foundation for further questioning of and discussion on the elements that I find relevant to contemporary photography.
Deathbed Selfie

I’m 73. I’m in bed in a hospital and I won’t leave this place alive. They say I have maybe a week, maybe less. This may well be the last thing I write.

Anyway, to the point. I’m alone in the room right now and the setting is perfect for one last portrait. Last night I asked my wife to bring me my camera bag and she did, it’s sitting on a chair right next to my bed. The scene is very peaceful and I must capture it. I know exactly how. I would set up the camera in the far left corner right next to the door, facing in towards the room and myself. In the frame, starting from the left, the exceptionally beautiful spring light is leaking in from the window onto and over the empty bed right next to it. The room and the frame is divided in half by a peach coloured curtain, leaving me in my bed in the shadow to the right. I would have to slightly overexpose to compensate for this, but not much as I’m partially lit up by the countless bright green and blue monitors on both sides of the bed. Like a prisoner, I’m attached to them by tubes and cords, and you can probably tell I am not well. I have an awkward smile on my face.

It will be a truly morbid photograph. Calm as far as aesthetics go, mostly straight lines and soft pastel colours. There’s a few green plants by the window and large cheerful flowers on a table next to my bed. You can imagine the sound of birds singing outside the open window blending in with the steady beep of my heartrate. And then there’s me, dying.

The image is clearer in my mind than any image ever was before. My mind is probably the only place the image will ever exist in, too. I’m not selfish enough to ask anyone to assist me with the photograph, what kind of self-portrait would that be? But I can’t get up myself, and imagine being asked by a practically dead man to take his picture! No, I won’t. But I love this feeling, this urge to photograph, the driving force in my life. It has taken me so far and will take me all the way. I’m leaving, not satisfied, but knowing I never gave up.
I – Why I Photograph

"At our best and most fortunate we make pictures because of what stands in front of the camera, to honor what is greater and more interesting than we are. We never accomplish this perfectly, though in return we are given something perfect – a sense of conclusion. Our subject thus redefines us, and is part of the biography by which we want to be known." – Adams

The written section of this thesis is inspired by and named after a book by photographer Robert Adams. He is best known for his extensive career as a photographer during which he mainly documented the American West throughout the 20th century, but he’s also written a number of insightful essays on photography. In Why People Photograph I was hoping to find an answer – why do people photograph? And more importantly I wanted to find out why I photograph. What is it that draws a person to become a photographer?

Although the book focuses almost entirely on what it takes to be a professional photographer and how to make a living as one, Adams touches on a few key points regarding a(n) photographer need to photograph. In many cases the photographer does indeed honor the photographed subject, and without a doubt the photographers chosen subject matters define and sculpt his legacy, not just as a photographer, but as a person. However, saying that does not put in to words the vital force that motivates every photographer to do what they do, whatever that is.

Although Adams writings do not necessarily represent the contemporary state of the medium, at a core level I believe photographers are now, and have always been, driven by the same ambition. But I am not always in touch with this ambition. In this section I will attempt to find and describe that force by looking back at my own brief history as a photographer and by analyzing my methods and interests as an artist. I want to understand why I’ve become a photographer – why not something, anything else?

1) Adams 1994, 179.
Then and Now

I’m 27. What am I doing?

K: Joo ei tässä mitään Barthesii ehdi kelaamaan.
(K: Yeah, there’s no time to think about Barthes right now.)

I’m editing photos someone else took for a clothing brand. I’m at the office with K. She’s a photographer too. The office is a small space we share with seven people in total. One long table, a sink, a small bathroom. K and I are working on the same job, clicking away on the computer screen towards the next paycheck. Tracing the outline of dresses and skirts with the pen tool, removing the background from each item, one photo at a time, fifteen minutes per photo, hundreds of photos to go. It’s late in many ways, late in the day, late in the year, late in my studies. The lines on the screen become blurry and I take a break. I take a long break. I travel to New Zealand for five weeks.

A lot has happened since I began my studies seven years ago. I’ve been to places, seen things. Ups and downs. Tens of thousands of photographs, millions of missed opportunities. I’ve become a photographer. Taking photographs is what I do – people know me firstly as a photographer, secondly as something else. Niklas the photographer. I don’t know if that’s good or bad, if I like it or not, but I accept it. It’s my identity.

The odd thing is that now that I’ve accepted this identity I seem to have become less of a photographer than I was before. I only carry a camera with me when I remember to force myself to do so, and even then I rarely go as far as to actually taking any pictures. The camera is more often than not just an accessory I carry with me, a useless weight on the bottom of my rucksack. I only photograph when I’m asked and, occasionally, paid to do so. Photography has become my profession, my job. It’s become the thing I do for a living, the thing I don’t take home with me, the thing I take vacations from.

I hate that. I’m in an absurdly cold airport terminal somewhere in China when I realize it; I’ve forgotten why I always wanted to be a photographer. I’ve forgotten what it feels like to want to photograph. I dig out a camera from my luggage and start shooting.
2. Through the Viewfinder

When I was 14 I had saved up and bought a camera. It was an important event. Nothing would escape my eyes. Through the viewfinder I found that everything was amazing. Suddenly the world around me looked like nothing I had seen before. I photographed windows, lamp posts, trash bins, seagulls, motorbikes, sunsets. The normal things in life were no longer normal, instead everything was peculiar and fascinating. I had no idea what to do with the images once I had them, and it didn’t matter. I pressed and released and repeated.

I’m 27. I’ve just passed the border control at Auckland airport with my fiancée. My friend B is there to meet us and before we even greet I take a picture of him holding a sign with our names on it. He says I look like “such a tourist” and I laugh and say I don’t care. I’m in a foreign environment and the camera hanging around my neck is the most natural accessory I could have. No-one suspects I’m a photographer in disguise.

But what am I trying to achieve? Honestly, what I am is a tourist wherever I go. What I and the typical tourist (the amateur photographer) do is not that different most of the time. I might not take selfies in front of attractions or pictures of the food I’m about to eat, but essentially we are photographing for the same reason. We are looking for proof and for memories. The photographs are proof of us having been there, then. “Look, I was there, I took this photo.” The difference is maybe that I seek to photograph different subjects than the average tourist would, but on a root level we are motivated by the same purpose – to prove we are alive and living. I’m taking pictures of tourists, but really I’m taking pictures of my self.

Often I find that simply framing a scene through the viewfinder is enough to make a photograph – once I’ve seen it, the photograph, I will always have it, even if I never actually completed the act. And the truth is, once I have made a photograph the chances are I will never look at it again. For me, the essence of photography is taking the time, however brief it may be, to stand still and look at a very specific thing, and more importantly to ignore everything around you that is not that thing. The resulting image is secondary.

I haven’t gotten further than the parking lot of the airport in Auckland, and already I’ve taken dozens of pictures. Palm trees, Asian cars, birds. I’m as excited as I’ve ever been holding a camera. For the first time in years I feel liberated, free of the pressure that being or thinking of myself as a professional had caused. This pressure started building up at the same time as I began my studies. I guess it’s a natural progression, you gain knowledge and become more aware, and in my case more critical. I began raising the bar and demanding more and more of myself, and questioning everything I did as a photographer. Unfortunately this development was very destructive to my productivity.

After some years of intensively studying and absorbing everything there was to know about my chosen medium, I found myself no longer in love with photography. But that love never truly went away, I just needed to find it again.
It’s New Year’s Eve and the Pohutukawa trees are as red as they can be, painting an already impressive landscape even more beautiful. I’m sitting on a porch and through the viewfinder I’m looking at a lemon hanging from a branch next to me. My friend B’s flatmate joins me and casually asks “so what do you do?”, and I impress myself by giving him a very straightforward answer: “I look at things and sometimes I take photographs of them.” He seems satisfied and I am too, and we sit there silently looking at the world for a long time.

Cartier-Bresson once said you should think about the photo before and after, but never during. This applies brilliantly to my method. I look at and photograph things that interest me. I plan future projects and think of what I could do with the photos I already have, but I can only photograph freely when these thoughts don’t cross my mind during the act itself. In that sense my way of working is really quite simple. I think what makes photography so fascinating is the duality of the act. Barthes speaks of this duality in terms of the studium and the punctum, but this is not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about photographing itself, and then figuring out what to do with the photographs. There’s looking through the viewfinder, and looking at the photograph. These seem to be two very distinct things to me. This duality of photography, being an act in itself and simultaneously a visual language, means there are different levels of working – and playing – with the medium.

But what does it mean to photograph? Why do I do it?
To photograph is to have your eyes open always. It’s impossible to find what you’re looking for if, like myself, you don’t really know what you’re looking for, without actively engaging in the act of looking and observing. Obviously there are different ways to approach photography, like for example working based on a concept, meaning that you use photography as a tool to execute a certain idea. But the only kind of photographing I can truly relate to is the kind where you start with an empty canvas, with no set goal in mind.

I am of course now talking about the actual act of photographing, the very specific moment of looking at a thing and photographing it. It would be naive to say that there was no conceptual thought or idea behind the act as that is nearly unavoidable — I am aware that, willingly or not, deep down my actions are guided by my personal universe of references. However, I don’t feel consciously aware of these references as I’m photographing, as I’m looking at the world. Maybe you could say that the canvas is not completely empty, but that it only has a base coat on it.

Photography is thus an act of curiosity. You, I, must have an interest in your surroundings in order to photograph it. There are many levels on which any one thing can be interesting, but looking at it through the viewfinder I find that there are really only two distinct ways of finding said thing interesting. It is interesting either visually — form, light, colour, composition — or phenomenologically. Often, and I suppose in photography hopefully, both of these levels of interest are present in what you, I, photograph.

A great example of a curious photographer is Wolfgang Tillmans. In his body of work Neue Welt (New World, 2012) he set out, in his own words, to discover “how does the world appear twenty years after I’ve begun to form a picture of it? Can there be a “new” view of it?”

After having spent the previous two decades mostly in the studio, Tillmans decided to travel the world and document its changing quality in his own signature style. The resulting book is a global collection of photographs of the now, of the current reality. Tillman says: “A short period of full immersion is enough for me. More isn’t possible than simply being physically present; moving around as much as possible, gathering impressions, making contacts, and opening a few doors. It comes down to physically taking a good look at various things on location and confronting them as best you can. This was no touristy round-trip that forces the so-called foreign into familiar interpretive patterns, but rather the attempt to have a genuinely new experience.”

Photography is a unique medium for several reasons, but the most extraordinary quality of it is that it allows the photographer to partake in events that would not be possible without the camera. This genuine experience that Tillmans speaks of is a double-edged
sword: On one hand the camera gives you access to things and events that would normally be outside of your realm of reality, but on the other the camera often disturbs the natural progression of the event. In other words, although the camera itself is a key to unlock many doors, once that door is opened it can be impossible to know if the presence of the camera alters the way the ensuing events unfold. People have a tendency to pose, wanting to present themselves or their actions in the best light possible. We know this to be true — we all become instantly self-aware when a camera is pointed at us. Thus, with a camera strapped around your neck, sharing an honestly genuine experience (with other people) is often far more difficult than it would at first seem.

Another challenging part of sharing and capturing a genuine experience is the physical presence. This is what makes every photograph subjective: Presence. You can not simply stand in a corner of a room to fully see and understand what is happening in it, and once you start moving around you also begin taking part in, and changing, the event itself. A photographer is not a static security camera, but an active and social being.

Yet in Neue World it’s not certain to which extent Tillmans has altered the events he has documented with his presence. Many of them seem so candid, so real, that you trust them as an objective depiction of our world. You imagine him simply stumbling across the events he photographs without anyone noticing his presence, so authentic and, in a sense, unflattering are the images. His photographs do not romanticize or criticize their subjects, they are simply photographs of things as they were at the time. Still, there’s a sense of respect in his images, the result of looking at the world with what he describes as an empathetic gaze.

But it’s very evident that Neue World is specifically Tillmans new world, and not necessarily ours. All photographers, everyone with a camera, could embark on the same journey, and the outcome — the photographs — would undoubtedly be of different nature, all depicting a unique and subjective reality. This is really what makes photography so exciting; the perpetual amount of viewpoints and opportunities, and the unique quality of the photograph. “If everything that existed were continually being photographed, every photograph would become meaningless.”

Like Tillmans, I too prefer to move quickly as I’m photographing, mainly to minimize the effect of my presence on what it is I’m photographing. Also, as every event worth photographing never lasts longer than an instant anyway, it makes little sense to spend more time than necessary with any one subject. It, the subject, will constantly change, and as I have no interest in attempting to — potentially into infinity — photograph every stage of that change, I settle with the instant that happens upon me.

For me photographing has become a game of reaction. I can’t look back and dwell on whatever it is that I might have missed, but instead I look forward. Photographs move backwards in time, I don’t. As you become accustomed to and comfortable with any
setting you realize the dulling impact it has on your senses. Everything new is only new for a very short period of time. It happens that I walk into a hotel room and photograph every corner of it – I have never seen the room before, and because of that it’s fascinating. I would, however, never think of photographing my own bedroom that I spend most of my time in. There’s no doubt that an exotic environment is more likely to trigger the urge to photograph than your daily surroundings. I understand that it was no accident that I rediscovered my love for photography at the same exact moment that I began my travels to the other side of the world. In fact it was exactly that detachment from my somewhat repetitive everyday life that sparked the flame.

I don’t mean to make it sound as if photography is, or should be, like a smooth and joyful stroll in the park. In the case of Tillman’s, for example, it may seem as if his methods are very light and easy throughout the process of creating his New World, but in fact he is working within a frame of references that are, to say the very least, heavy. He’s not merely taking random photographs around the world – he’s observing and documenting globalization with a stark interest in the psychological effect it has on humans as individuals and societies. He’s looking at cultures overflown by information. A photograph of the headlight of a car can be seen as just that – a photograph of the headlight of a car – but knowing Tillman’s own interests you understand this is an indicator for something more. In Adams words, Tillman’s subjects truly define him and become his biography.

But regardless of the concept or the goal behind this sort of photographing, to be successful you must embrace chance. In order to find something authentic or something surprising, you must want to question what you see and want to be surprised. The smallest things can carry the biggest meanings, and the seemingly most mundane events can always inspire:

“It’s also the joy of experiencing the unpredictability and derangedness of life, the preposterous situations that arise, how bodies act among themselves, and how they dress, establish nearness, or keep their distance. All this is infinitely fascinating. I find such contact with everyday life around the world endlessly inspiring.”

This contact with everyday life is always there, but I suspect most people experience it passively. Looking through the viewfinder, with your eyes and mind open, you take an active step towards engaging with your surroundings. Taking a photograph is the result of an active pursuit to be present in the now. You cannot possibly take a photograph, not one of any significance, of anything without having a genuine interest and curiosity towards the subject at the moment that you press the shutter. I, atleast, can’t.
4. Photography is Memory

“How many images do we see alone during one day? And how many points of view from the same subject? Memories are images from images from images. Do we need memories? Do we need photography to remind us of memory? I don’t know. Also, by creating work, we are creating new memories. An image is a memory of something the photographer saw and that is about to be imprinted on the memory (long lasting or probably not) of the viewer. That is also one of the paradoxes of photography, we are actually seeing in our present something that someone saw in the past and eventually others will see in the future.

We could say the same of painting, but the fact that in photography reality does not undergo any major transfiguration or construction (like in cinema), makes this eerier.” – Daniel Blaufuks

Daniel Blaufuks is an artist whose work deals with memory in relation to photography, how we remember through the methods we use to archive, store and retrieve information. His projects are documentary in nature, presented in an orderly and confident manner. For example, photographs of and from a World War II German concentration camp tell the story of its victims, but the question is: Is the story true? Blaufuks doesn’t reveal whether it is or not, and the viewer is left wondering. Where are these images from, and what are they actually of?
Similarly to Tillmans, Blaufuks work is also both deeply personal and conceptual, and furthermore, like in Works of Memory, strongly lyrical and narrative. Inspired by a photograph in the novel Austerlitz by W.G. Sebald, Blaufuks set out to investigate how images—still and moving—from the holocaust have been, are and could be presented, and how their intent and implications change based on the context and method in which they are shown.

The contextual frame within which an image is presented is exactly what Blaufuks is interested in. He toys with the notion that a photograph is not only of the truth, but is the truth ("you see what you believe / believe what you see"). Loaded with cryptic clues, his work does not progress linearly, but instead offers a nearly endless array of optional ways to interpret the images. It’s difficult to know exactly what the photographs depict, but it’s also impossible to know which photographs are in fact his, and which are found or collected. Yet despite all this uncertainty, the work is both fascinating and captivating, exactly because you as a viewer suspect you are being fooled, but you’re unsure of what to think of it.

Our memory is all we have, memories tell the story of who we are. The problem with memory is that it can’t truly ever be trusted—ones memories change and adapt over time, the stories of past events become more colorful and dramatic. It’s nearly impossible to not romanticize even the most mundane and dull memories. Factual events blend with our imagination, and the resulting image (how we see our memories in our mind) is a cocktail of what really was and how we wish it had been. So we take photographs. We believe in photographs because they represent events as they were. A blue jacket is a blue jacket, even when you recall it as being green.

I have thus far come to realize that I photograph to strengthen my memory of the subject or event I’ve photographed. The image, a mental or physical one, ultimately exists to help me not forget. Why is the fear of forgetting so strong? Why is it that I can let some things go, but some not, and I absolutely must photograph something, but not something else?

Let’s say photographs are true: The event they depict actually took place, they serve as proof of something having happened. Is this the subjective truth as seen by the photographer, or the whole objective truth? For me it’s absolutely obvious that a photograph and the truth it represents is always subjective. An image can always be read and processed in numerous different ways, but the original and real point of view of the photograph always belongs to the photographer. Practically speaking this mean that the photographer will always have a unique relationship to his photograph, a bond that no-one else could share.

Blaufuks says that “an image is a memory of something the photographer saw and that is about to be imprinted on the memory of the viewer.” This is in fact essentially what a photograph is; but I think it’s important to make a specific note here: This memory
(truth) in an image can never be truly objective, meaning that the memory that is transferred from the photographer to the viewer is exactly that of the photographer, and not of the world. Simply put, as many pairs of eyes witness an event, as many subjective memories there are. The photograph isn’t able to alter this fact. What I see through the viewfinder is the world as I perceive it and that is also what my photographs show, no more, no less.

Understanding this subjective quality of the photograph opens up a whole new world when it comes to the way and context in which photographs are presented. If the photographer wishes to transmit his subjective truth, his intended message to the viewer, it’s a difficult task. The viewer will always reflect the image against his own base of references and memories. I find that it’s much easier, and also more interesting, to not only accept the fact that purely visual messages can and will always be misinterpreted, but to use this fact in the creative process.

It also leads me to question what is real in the end? If there can be no total democratic and objective truth or reality, is there any reason to attempt to document it?

Blaufuks masterfully plays with this illusion of objective truth in photography by constructing convincingly truthful stories with images that may originally have been intended to transmit a completely different message. He knowingly confuses and challenges the viewer to question what they are looking at and to not take everything for granted. For me, all my photographs definitely have a subjective reason and truth to them, but as I’m aware of the risk of that message not being understood exactly as intended, I have no interest in attempting to transmit it. Instead I’m more than content with simply presenting my photographs as they are, and allow the viewer to read and understand them in any and many ways.

My photographs become my world and my memories, and, again, my biography. The most significant photographs stand out as special memories, as events more valuable than others. These are typically the photographs I want to share with others, because what point is there with a story that is never told? With photographs, I can’t know that it is my special memory – my world and my reality – that is understood by the viewer. But I can hope that my photographs trigger personal, unique special memories, whatever they may be. Looking at a photograph, just like looking at the world, will always be an individual and introspective experience.
Slobodan is a dark, tall, young and handsome guy. He tells me I have beautiful hair, “very Scandinavian”, and asks me to take a portrait of him in broken English, which I do. The resulting photo is a prime example of the absurdity of the photograph both from the subjects and the photographer’s point of view.

You see, Slobodan is a radiologist. We’re both wearing the same outfit: heavy duty lead armor and rubber gloves. This in itself is not very significant, but the context in which we find ourselves is. We are in private, state-of-the-art morgue together with four human cadavers and a dozen of the world’s leading orthopedists. I’m here on assignment to document the first attempts to insert a new innovative bone-lengthening implant into a human being. Slobodan is here for just another day at the office.

I look around and there is bone marrow and pieces of skin on the floor. Surgeons are towering over an uncovered, headless and mutilated body. The sound of power drills and hammers hitting chisels hitting bone. I see things I don’t want to see, things I don’t want to photograph. It’s too much.

If I could only photograph the smell of death – that would be a powerful image.

A simple portrait in this environment, it seemed like a natural thing at that moment, but really it’s morbid and absurd beyond any reason. Not two meters away from us the surgeons are poking holes into a dead body while I’m telling Slobodan to stand like this.
look over here, tilt your head. I open the shades for better light and take a picture, and another, and another. It’s not the best portrait I’ve ever made, but the best I could do in these circumstances.

Why did he want a photo of himself right then, and why did I do it? I suppose in the end it’s quite natural – this rare occasion provided the perfect opportunity for him to have a photograph of himself in this most unusual situation – a special memory – and for me to take that photograph. Is that not, after all, what photographers strive to do, to witness and document the most peculiar things in life?

I see a man who is so seasoned and comfortable with the horrible things he must see every day that for him there is nothing spectacular to it. The death and decayed body parts are just there, always. I’ve taken pictures of police officers and bakers and fishermen – people who want a picture of themselves doing what they do – and this was no different, yet somehow it clearly was. It’s as if by creating a separate photo shoot, however quick and low key it was, we broke some level of respect and honour that was clearly present in the room.

I talked about death with one of the surgeons after a long day in the morgue, and he said you must respect the dead. He told me that once during his studies, a group of candidates who were practising surgery on a cadaver removed its ears and stitched them to the ass cheeks of the body, apparently as a reference to some sort of humorous German saying. They were immediately expelled and, naturally, never became doctors. I certainly had not gone to such extremes, yet somehow I felt as if I had also violated some ethical code and disrespected the dead and their families.

This leads us to the moral responsibility of the photographer. In one end of the spectrum of this discussion – specifically the end that does not apply to my particular dilemma – is what would be known as the case of Kevin Carter. We know his story; he was a South African photojournalist who in 1993 photographed a starving child in Africa being followed by a raven. The image was published internationally and earned him the Pulitzer Prize in 1994. Shortly thereafter he committed suicide – he could not bear the guilt and critique for opting to take the photograph instead of assisting the child.

My moral dilemma is not in this case about which comes first – being a good human being or being a good photographer – but more about good and bad taste. Carter’s photograph is likely to have single handedly raised more awareness to the problem it addressed – famine – than any other image had before. He reacted to his surroundings the way photojournalists do by documenting and not interfering with what he saw. In this case the resulting photograph would tell an important story and raise worldwide awareness to the problem it depicted. Carter’s intuitive action to prioritize the photograph before the human life can certainly be regarded as immoral and of bad taste, but in the long run his decision, this photograph, would do much more good in the world than having taken no photograph would have.
As I’m standing in the morgue, thinking of the different ways I could photograph Slobodan, I am not struggling with Carter’s dilemma. I don’t have the option to save or not to save anyone’s life at this moment. But I have the option to cross the boundary of good taste, which I believe I did. Here we are, all laughs and jokes, taking pictures of ourselves next to the deceased.

Let me rephrase that to avoid being misunderstood. We were not posing next to the bodies in the way soldiers pose next to prisoners they’ve humiliated or the way terrorists pose next to decapitated victims. In my photos of Slobodan the bodies are not visible at all, in fact there is not even a hint towards them existing. Had I not told you of their presence, you wouldn’t know. But I know, and it bothers me.

I recently read about a National Geographic photographer who had stalked a polar bear on Svalbard for three weeks just to get one image published in the magazine. That is essentially what photographers – and especially photojournalists – do; they stalk their prey and wait for the perfect shot. I was on assignment, commissioned by the people I was photographing, to document the events in the morgue, which I did to the best of my abilities. I took pictures of the most horrific things in which the deceased were very much present and mutilated. But this was my job, and more importantly the surgeons’ jobs, and we were all professionals in our own field and acting accordingly. I was stalking my prey.

But I was not being paid to take a portrait of Slobodan, in fact his presence was completely irrelevant to the story I was there to tell. Yet out of the nearly fifteen hundred frames I shot that day, the few of him are the only ones I can see now without looking at them. They are engraved in to my retina, flashing in my mind every time I blink my eyes.

Slobodan, casually leaning on the X-Ray machine, with a remote shutter in one hand and the other hand planted proudly on his waist, he is gently smiling at the camera, at me, at us, and he looks so proud.

And I’m wondering why I took these portraits. Maybe I photographed Slobodan as a kind of instant reality check in the given circumstances. I absolutely needed to capture something “normal” to stay sane. Slobodan was my anchor, a kind of reliable focus point in the midst of all the absurdity and horror.

At the morgue, moving around the dead and the living and the expensive machinery, I couldn’t really feel anything. I was only able to focus at what had to be done, in this case getting the right pictures. Only when I stopped for a very brief moment to take the photographs of Slobodan could I breathe and step out of the situation. And it wasn’t until then that I truly saw the whole picture. It’s as if this casual portrait triggered all my senses and forced me to see the world outside of the tunnel vision I was working with. Reality wasn’t real through the viewfinder.
If I’m having a hard time understanding what lead me to take the pictures of Slobodan, I have an even harder time understanding why he asked me to take them. Is the answer really that he simply wanted to see and have a photograph of himself at his work? Or can it be that he was aware of the absurdity of the situation and, in some twisted way of celebrating the unique occasion, wanted undeniable proof of the event? In a world where everyone has seen everything through images, maybe this photograph of a man in a morgue is more exciting than that of a man on a mountain peak?

The feeling of guilt from possibly having done something wrong is bothersome, but also exciting. I feel that I’ve done what photographers do, I’ve taken an interesting picture where I saw it was possible. I let intuition guide me through the situation. My best photos are nearly always the result of a freak accident, a lucky chance. This, however, is not one of my best pictures, in fact it’s aesthetically quite boring. It’s only the backstory and context of the photograph that gives it its meaning, yet I can’t tell that story with a clean conscience without risking to be misunderstood and judged accordingly.

What makes the photograph of Slobodan so intriguing to me is that by taking it I have crossed my own boundaries. I have, willingly or not, created an image that in itself gives the viewer nothing, but put in to context suddenly bursts with meaning. As I’ve always consider my own work open for the viewer to read as they please, here I have a photograph that can not possibly be read the way it’s supposed to, in other words you can not tell what it is actually of without words accompanying it. And here lies the dilemma, as I’ve never found words necessary. I’m stuck with a photograph that I can not present without explaining it, and explaining it is far too risky. Would anyone believe this is just an innocent portrait, knowing the subtext of its story? Would I, could I be innocent?

Finally I question the necessity of this photograph. If it is true that this image itself carries no meaning without accompanying words, is there any need for it? Is a photograph not meant to speak for itself? In the previous chapter I mentioned that I have no interest in transmitting a specific meaning in an individual image, and now I’m faced with this predicament: An image that, on its own, can only be misunderstood. example, photography has failed for me as words become more effective than the image.
6. On Photographing

“You don’t take a photograph, you make it.”
- Ansel Adams

I've always been annoyed by this quote. What does this statement really mean, and is it even relevant? Can terminology affect practise? I understand that Adams is referring to a perhaps more technical aspect of photography, but I believe there’s a need to decipher this line.

On a rudimentary level the difference is self-explanatory. A taken photograph is a “true” snippet of reality, a flash of time documented, a frozen image of an event that never was before and never will be again. The document – the image – serves as a testimony of an event having taken place.

I'm exaggerating to emphasize the point: The photographer takes an image almost as by mistake. It’s purely coincidental that the documented event took place when and how it did. The image is the result of chance more than anything else. The photograph takes a moment from the past and places it both in the present and the future – it exists forever.

The made photograph, on the other hand, is a result of a more deliberate process. The made image is the outcome of an attempt to reach a specific goal. The photographer makes an image to fulfill his idea of what the image should look like. Unlike the taken image, the made image only strives to depict the photographer's intent.

John Berger describes the process like this:

“The photographer chooses the event he photographs. This choice can be thought of as a cultural construction. The space for this construction is, as it were, cleared by his rejection of what he did not choose to photograph. The construction is his reading of the event which is in front of his eyes. It is this reading, often intuitive and very fast, which decides his choice of the instant to be photographed.”

“The photographer chooses the tree, the view of it he wants, the kind of film, the focus, the filter, the time of exposure, the strength of the developing solution, the sort of paper to print on, the darkness or the lightness of the print, the framing of the print -- all this and more.”

The made image has a structure that is dictated by the photographer. Framing, lighting and choice of subject matter are all part of the making process. The made image is not based on chance and does not rely on it. It’s the visual form of a concept, idea, theory or thought. For Berger this total control of the image that the photographer has is very evident, but ultimately he concludes that photography comes down to a very basic thing that can’t be controlled:
"But where [the photographer] does not intervene – and cannot intervene without changing the fundamental character of photography – is between the light, emanating from that tree as it passes through the lens, and the imprint it makes on the film." ¹⁰

The photographer is not a true magician. Light and the way materia reflects it is something you can’t make, you can only take (a photograph of) it. Further more the photographer is limited by the camera’s functions as the philosopher Willem Flusser simply points out: “In the act of photography the camera does the will of the photographer but the photographer has to will what the camera can do.” ⁹

You can make the blunt argument that “taking” images belongs to documentary photography, where as “making” images belongs to art in lack of a more specific term. This suggests that a photograph can’t be regarded as both documentary and art if, in fact, the same image can’t have been both taken and made. However, few would agree that documentary photography and art photography are (always) exclusive of each other.

In her book Art Photography Now, Susan Bright writes:
"Artists...create work that smashes through definitions of what art is and what it is not. We are now at a point where challenges to photography’s status have been exhausted, and it goes without saying that it can be art.” ¹⁰

A purely literal approach would find it true; yes, a photograph is always made: each photograph regardless of circumstance or form is manufactured. It’s obvious that a photograph is never fully the result of chance. The camera is always set up and operated in a certain, deliberate way. More importantly the photographer is guided by his own cultural background, personal experiences and reference points. A photograph is never fully a freak accident. It’s the result of numerous factors weighing in on each decision the photographer makes throughout the process of creating a photograph. This is most likely what Adams is referring to – he’s not commenting on the status of the photograph on the cultural field, but merely suggesting that the photographer should take more pride in his work.

To me it’s all the same, take or make, but the underlying question is fascinating. How much of what I do as a photographer, if any, is purely chance, and how much is intentional and controlled? I certainly like to think that through observing the world I expose myself to the surrounding reality and watch as events unfold before my eyes. I work with intuition and feeling. The camera is then a tool I use to freeze moments, to “take” events out of the linear development of time and create memorabilia and evidence of past instances. I can’t look for serendipity, but I can learn to embrace it when it occurs.

This, of course, doesn’t mean that my images aren’t made, too. It may be, and often is, very unconscious, but undoubtedly each decision I make as I photograph has a meaning.
and reason that is rooted in my mind. I may not be actively aware of it as I press the shutter, but deep down there is always a rational and purposeful reason for all those critical decisions that go into the creation of every image. The photograph may well be the result of a lengthy process of trial and error. Sometimes years and thousands of attempts to visualise an idea precede the final image, an image that is then a truly made photograph.

Often very little if any (conscious) thought goes into a photograph. When I’m walking around in an unfamiliar neighbourhood almost everything catches my attention, and I will obsessively and spontaneously take a photograph of the most peculiar things – trees, trash bins, rooftops – for no apparent reason other than to have that picture, to own it.

Once the photograph is in my possession I might never look at it again, but I know I have it and always will have. This kind of photograph has no other value than to support my memory. A great example of a photographer who dedicated his entire career to this method is Garry Winogrand. He would shoot hundreds if not thousands of frames a day, and left thousands of rolls of undeveloped film behind him after his untimely death.

The concept of owning a photograph is worthy of a thesis of its own, but in short I feel this is ultimately what the fascination with photography, and specifically the act of photographing, boils down to. Having the ability to make the decision to take a specific photograph translates to raw power – the photographer is fully in charge of the operation. The resulting physical image is often nowhere near as meaningful to the photographer as the mental image that he will carry with him forever.

To conclude, I don’t wholly agree with Adam’s statement; although many of my own pictures are monochrome and stark in contrast, photography is not black and white. Most photographers, I suspect, venture deep in the grey zone. Some might say that defining the true role and meaning of an image is essential for understanding and appreciating photography, while others are purely interested in the aesthetic value and visual content of the photograph. Ultimately the photographer is a creator, and for me there’s nothing more destructive to the creative process than over-awareness. Countless are the times that I’ve given up on an idea because I’ve reached the conclusion – without making a single photograph – that the idea itself is not worthy of even an attempt.
7. On The Creative Process

I am a word in a sentence in a book as thick as eternity.

This is a line from my Bachelor's thesis from 2011. I had written it in my notebook earlier that year after a frustrating day of looking for that perfect photograph in northern Norway. Back then I was obsessed with mountains and mirrors — I still am — and I spent weeks looking for the ideal mountain along the coast of the Norwegian Sea. I was carrying a heavy load of mirrors in various shapes and forms, and of course all my camera equipment. I had this vision of somehow placing mirrors in front of or on top of a mountain, and that would be the flawless photograph. Needless to say, I never succeeded in making that photograph.

Looking back at that time now, I realize I was paranoid. I had this distorted perception of my own method of working, thinking that a) there is a perfect photograph and b) combining all the things I enjoy in a single image would result in that photograph. I had all the right ingredients, I thought, yet I couldn't produce what I had in mind. The truth was that in reality I had nothing in mind apart from an arrogant trust in my own abilities as an artist to create perfection out of nothing. As I'm looking at the photographs I made back then I have no regrets, but I must confess now that I really had no idea what I was doing.

I've managed to accept it as a part of my creative process. When previously I forced myself to follow a certain pattern throughout the creative process, starting from a concept and resulting in an image, I understand now that this is not the approach that works best for me. I had to turn my entire process on its head to find my own true method. A method where creating (doing, photographing) comes first, and thinking (conceptual planning) second.

I had to nearly abandon photography all together before adapting this new way of thinking. I had to travel to the other side of the world to reach the breaking point. As I was leaning over the side of a boat in the South Pacific Ocean to take a photograph of the surface of the water, I finally understood that the world is amazing and I need to photograph it. It wasn’t photography I was in love with, but what I was photographing. The camera is only a means to an end.

As I now understand my own process I also understand the importance of the distance between the two steps in the process. The more time and space there is between photographing and handling the photographs, the more rewarding and exciting is the end result. It’s almost as if I have to forget an image, completely erase it from my mind, and then rediscover it before I can fully relate to it. There’s no given schedule for this process — it may take days, weeks, or years before I go back to a photograph and it can reveal its true nature to me.
I no longer think in terms of series or projects – everything I do falls into the same category. It happens that I speak of my work with standard terms like landscapes, portraits, abstractions etc., but I feel that as my thoughts about my own process are developing, this too will eventually stop. There’s no real need to categorize my own work as it is, in the end, all part of the same process: A wholehearted attempt to photograph reality as I experience it. All my photographs become self-portraits, images of my reflection on the world.
Having again found a motivation to photograph, my own constantly expanding archives have become my playground. Moving away from titles and years, I am heading towards a strictly visual language. I don’t find dates, locations, titles or any other information of a singular image relevant to the narrative I’m attempting to create.

Italian artist Luigi Ghirri (1943-1992) photographed seemingly meaningless and unexciting landscapes in an attempt to find the symbolic value of a place. Often both laconic and ironic, his images are neither flattering nor accusing documentations of sceneries and locations around Italy.

On the work of Ghirri, author and curator Elena Re writes: “In his desire to relate to the world, in this journey in which nothing can be taken for granted and that is never mundane or secondary, in which little things acquire fundamental significance as parts of a whole, we can certainly find the lesson taught by Ghirri, and his real project, which was to create a map that can help us find our way and thus our being-in-the-world.”

Re describes a map, a kind of guide to understanding our world. This guide is constructed by Ghirri’s photographs. It’s not simply the individual photographs that create the guide, but specifically the way and order in which they are constructed into
a series. Conceptually Ghirri would have an idea and purpose during the act of photographing, but only through archiving and curating his own material would the final shape of the project take form. The images are given a meaning through the context in which they are presented, in his case taking a deadpan look at the banalities of everyday life. There’s a cinematic quality to the work, partially because of the washed colours of the photographs, but mainly because of the order in which they are shown as a series.

Through a suggestive narrative, Ghirri’s work comments both on the way a nation (Italy) and a medium (photography) looks at and sees itself. John Berger, whose books Ways of Seeing (10) (originally a film script), which blew my mind upon first reading it, and Understanding a Photograph (11), have been great sources of inspiration to the thoughts I have presented in this thesis. It would serve no purpose to venture in to the topic of visual language in its entirety at this point, as it would be impossible to meaningfully discuss all that it entails in a single chapter. That said, I am here, briefly, focusing on a fairly specific form of visual language: The quasi-non-fictional narrative. I am referring to the kind of narrative that doesn’t make an evident distinction between fiction and reality. For example, the work of both Blaufuks and Ghirri would fall into this category, and, perhaps most brilliantly, so would the work of W. G. Sebald.

In his novels Vertigo, The Emigrants, The Rings of Saturn and Austerlitz, Sebald (1944-2001) masterfully constructs narratives with such fidelity, so vivid and believable, that it’s nearly impossible to read them as fiction. In them the narrator’s voice – to whom does it belong? – describes a reality with such extreme attention to detail and feel, that the words magically transform into images as you devour passage after passage. And not only is it the lyrical sentences that build this believable world, but to further strengthen the illusion Sebald strategically places photographs within the texts, images of receipts and other documentations, as suggested evidence of events having taken place. There is no doubting the stories are credible, however there is no certainty of their actual authenticity.

Similarly, Daniel Blaufuks creates narratives that are absolutely believable, instead using texts between images (as opposed to Sebald using images between text) to construct dynamic and sound bodies of work that suggest the viewer to follow a certain path, that there’s a certain meaning to be read. He says: “I am not interested at all in the single image, but in the sequence or flux of images, in a kind of cinematic prose. So, while shooting one image I tend to be thinking of the previous one, which does not mean that in the end this will work out... In the editing, I can change everything, by not only sequencing it, but most of all by choosing and erasing whole sequences.”

Like Ghirri, Blaufuks creates his narratives through a process of archiving and curating (editing) his own and found material. The result is a personal visual language that brilliantly combines images and words. Despite writing or talking about, or visualizing, slightly different themes, the conceptual approach to storytelling is a unifying feature for Ghirri, Blaufuks and Sebald.
Archiving and curating have as already mentioned become essential to my own process. After having distanced myself from my own photographs I am given both the space and time needed to allow for new concepts to form. I’m particularly interested in the various ways of in which visual language can be used to create a unique voice, not unlike Ghirri, Blaufuks and Sebald have done. It is quite easy to create an obviously fictive narrative using words and/or images, but it is much more challenging – and interesting – to fabricate a credible story.

As I am plowing through my own visual archives I become the narrator, the voice of my own story. It’s like writing a script scene by scene. I start somewhere, end up somewhere else, go back and begin again, and so on until I arrive at a momentarily satisfying result. I say momentarily, because I don’t feel comfortable making finite decision regarding my work. The process becomes somewhat spontaneous, and the series and bodies of work I construct are, in a sense, temporary, meaning that I can and will alter the content of any series of work to fit the time and space it will be presented in.

Like Ghirri did, I aim to create a kind of visual map, but an interactive one where its pieces are interchangeable and moving, constantly altering the narrative to fit the contemporary setting I will be showing the work in.
Roughly 50 square meters in size, located in the middle of nowhere, Unto Syvänen’s studio is cold. Cold not only because of its brick structure and the unusually mild summer, but cold because Unto is no longer present. Two clocks are ticking slightly off beat, making the only sound you can hear. The leather sofa in one of the corners smells of his favourite pastime, pipe and cigar smoke. Dusty beer, wine and whiskey glasses on a bar cabinet tell of the good times that were spent here.

All four walls of the space are covered with Unto’s art – paintings, drawings and photographs. There are numerous portraits of the people he loved; his wife, daughter and granddaughters. The paintings portray the journey through the life of a creative and perhaps anxious mind, ranging in style from beautiful realism to impressionism and abstraction. You can see the influence of painters like Monet, Gallen-Kallela, Picasso and Dalí. There are dozens of finished and framed paintings hung on or leaning against the walls, and many more that will remain works in progress. There are clearly recurring motifs in the works, mainly simple and vast landscapes with a tree or a rock or the silhouette of a person in the foreground. Most of them are extremely bright in colour and full of contrast, but some are much darker and duller, demonstrating the ups and downs of a man who was both educated and impulsive. I need to understand this man because I feel we are somehow connected.

Placed in the middle of the room is perhaps the most telling object of his life. It’s a huge self-made easel with a large, colorful painting attached to it. The painting is an image that says far more than a thousand words. The left half of it looks finished and continues in the same style as his previous paintings over the last decade: strong, unrealistically bright colours forming a clean and sharply edged landscape. But the right side, starting precisely from the middle of the painting, is a blurry and confusing mess of paint and erratic brushstrokes. It’s a daunting thing to look at because you can tell that this is not the result of a quick sporadic act of frustration, but a gigantic effort and ultimate failure to transfer a signal from the mind through the hand and brush to the canvas. Unto had had a stroke, leaving half of his mind and body immobile. He could no longer, despite his best effort, paint the whole picture. For him only half of the world existed anymore.

Before entering the studio, Unto would tell people he’s going to his own world which was his polite way of letting others know not to bother him. And it’s clear that this truly was his own world. Here he had everything he needed and enjoyed: An impressive library with classic novels by all of the world’s greatest authors, a seemingly endless supply of paint and brushes, a sophisticated dark room and, most importantly, privacy. It’s not unclear that this was a space for work, the studio of a dedicated and ambitious man. A man that suddenly, probably in the middle of his most productive and creative period, was no longer able to do what he felt was his purpose in life. Looking at how everything is placed in the studio, it’s apparent that Unto left it all in a hurry. I can see him sitting right there in front of the canvas, angry, making his best effort to complete the
painting and realizing it will never happen. I can’t even begin to think how horrible and shocking that moment of realization must have felt like. He put his brush down, left the studio and never came back. The rest of his days, and there were many of them, he spent excessively smoking and eating sweets, as if to compensate for the greatest loss of his life. He passed away as a understandably disheartened and grumpy man, leaving behind him a loving family, and a lifetime achievement in this studio that contains his entire world in the form of images.

When I first met Unto he was already in fairly bad shape and was barely able to talk. But over a few years we had some good chats, mostly discussing camera models and films. Photography, I realized, was a great passion of his, and although people would know him as a painter I found out that he mastered photography as well. I was told stories about how he always had a camera with him wherever he went, photographing the everyday events of life in the countryside. I figured this was quite typical for a creative visual artist, to have a hobby like photography, something I could strongly relate to. But when after his death I was asked to look through his photographs and equipment to see what was worth keeping and what not, I understood photography was much more than just a hobby for him.

The first thing I noticed was that he used photographs as a base for his paintings. Unto wouldn’t paint anywhere else but in his studio, yet many of his paintings are impressively realistic depictions of actual locations and sceneries. I heard he would spend countless of hours walking around the forests and lakes near to the studio with his camera, looking for views to “paint”. He would then develop — very skillfully so — the films in his private darkroom, print the images, and based on them start working on the canvas. Sometimes he would take elements from different photographs and place them in the same painting, always with extreme accuracy. But photography was clearly much more to him than just a necessary tool in his creative process. In the studio, next to the magnifying machine and developing cans, is a large drawer overflowing with printed photographs in varying sizes. In the attic I found several chests filled with hundreds or thousands more. The amount of developed and undeveloped film rolls I found, unfortunately unorganized, hidden here and there, was astonishing. Obviously this is work produced by a driven and passionate artist, and not just an enthusiastic amateur.

The subjects of his photographs, the ones that weren’t meant to serve as a base for this paintings, are mostly men and women, children and dogs. They are calm and masterfully composed portraits, style- and qualitywise up to par with the photographs of any of the medium’s great masters. Unto’s background in classical painting and architecture is clearly present in the photographs, all of them paying great attention to form and light. They are truly timeless, and if it weren’t for the people aging in the pictures I couldn’t possibly tell which were from the 60’s, which from the 90’s. Unto clearly took pride in his paintings, rightfully so, and always made sure to frame each one as they were completed. But only a very few of the photographs received the same treatment. Most of them, and many of the best ones, are hiding in a messy pile in deep
drawers. I can't know for certain, but it's almost as if he didn't not want to share these images with anyone, not at least in the same way that he wanted to share his paintings. Yet the sheer amount of photographs he made – and again most of them are superb – suggests he must've done so for a reason. Imagine the work, the time and effort, it takes to find your subject, take the photo, develop the film and print the image, all just to hide the result in a drawer? There must be more to it.

Maybe photography and painting played two completely different roles in Unto's life. While his analogue photographic process was fairly slow compared to today's standards, it was still far quicker than the process of painting. Perhaps photography was in a sense too fast? Maybe he needed time between taking the photograph and completing it, the way a painting takes time to complete? Or was he disappointed at the photographs because once they existed they could no longer be altered, not in the same way that paintings could? Painting is a lengthy process, one that you have to decide when it's finished or else you will be stuck with the same canvas for ever, but photographs are instant and irreversible. I think this might have been an issue for Unto. You could fine tune, but not truly alter the image. Reality was not good enough.

Or maybe for Unto it was the act of photographing that fascinated him, not so much the end product. Perhaps the contrasting methods between photography and painting supported each other in his work, one being instant and brutally honest, the other slow and fantastical. Looking through the camera he would see the world as it was, but on the canvas he would paint it as he wanted it to be. The printed photograph could not represent the world the way it looked to him.

It's a heavy task to plow through such a vast amount of images knowing that they are not just typical family snapshots, but images that are the result of determination and effort. I can see him now, exposing the film on to photographic paper, nervous of what the image will tell. I can see him disappointed, opening the drawer next to him and putting the image away. I wonder if I am the first person besides Unto himself to see many of these photographs?

Then I find some black and white photographs of absolutely stunning landscapes, similarly composed and structured as many of his paintings, and I realize these photographs are full of meaning. Suddenly I'm thinking that maybe it was the other way around, maybe the pure quality of the photograph disturbed him as a painter. It's as if he's looked at the perfect scene and decided that he could never paint it as respectfully and truthfully as a photograph can. Maybe the photograph was a threat to his identity as a painter? Maybe he put away the photographs in denial, refusing to accept that he would never paint such authentic strokes?

The coldness is creeping in to my spine, and I see Unto sitting there in front of the fire in the open stove with a glass of cognac in one hand and a smoking pipe in the other, contemplating life, surrounded by his lifetime achievement. The world never truly witnessed
his work, but I don’t think it mattered to him. He knew he had created images to would carry on living a life of their own for generations to come which ultimately is the purpose of an artist. His legacy is his art, and his ghost will always occupy this studio. Being here, sharing such a personal and intimate environment with an almost tangible spirit, is an overwhelming experience. And now I see myself, sitting where Unto once sat, and I’m fighting the same thought he always did: Can I ever paint the world as beautifully as I see it?
Helsinki-sur-Mer is a group exhibition that I was asked to curate for the Finnish Institute in Paris. The institute had approached me with just the title, asking for an exhibition that would showcase art by Helsinki-based artists who are inspired by the sea. Having spent all my life on and by the sea, I was immediately motivated and excited to accept the task.

A few hours into the opening ceremony, a young woman is telling me that she has enjoyed the exhibition, but that a particular piece has caught her attention – one of my photographs – and she wishes to talk to me about it. I have not placed any titles for the pieces or names of the artists on the wall, so she can’t know the work is in fact mine, which made the conversation that followed particularly interesting. She, being an artist herself, had a lot to say, and I felt a great deal of satisfaction when she went on to describe for me exactly what there is in the photograph and what it all means. I was satisfied because not only had she in just a few moments managed to find more complex and colorful messages in the image than I had ever thought of, but what she in fact saw and read as the true meaning of the photograph was not at all what I had originally intended with the image. For someone else this could mean having failed as a photographer, but for me this meant victory. I had successfully created a photograph that began living a life of its own. She went on to ask me if what she had seen was what the artist had meant, to which I replied “yes, absolutely.”
What exactly she had to say about my photograph is irrelevant. What is relevant is that the photograph had generated thoughts and served as an indicator for something more than simply what was there in the image. A man, hanging from (or pulling?) a rope, tightly framed, could be interpreted and understood to stand for a vast number of things.

This exhibition was particularly fascinating for me as I not only got to play with the meaning of the individual photograph, but more importantly I had to create a coherent and interesting entity out of several individual pieces. Stripping the work of their titles and authors, I was left with pieces of a puzzle that could be assembled in infinite ways. I have no problem with altering the purpose of my own photographs according to the context in which they are to be presented, but it took some courage to do so with the work of other artists.

Surprisingly I found that curating the works of others was not that different from curating my own work. During the process I realized that I distanced myself from the individual pieces in the same way I distance myself from my own images. Once I had selected the work I wanted to include in the exhibition, I understood it was only now the true work begins.

In my personal work I may not always strive to tell a specific story, but with Helsinki-sur-Mer the starting point was very different. I definitely had to tell a quite specific
story. Certainly I was given some headroom to move within as both the theme and the title allowed for fairly relaxed interpretation, but nevertheless I could not afford to miss the point entirely. Unlike in my own work, here I had to pay careful attention to the audience: How will they understand the exhibition?

I had been contacted as a photographer, but the show would include short films, video projections and installations as well as photographs. Some pieces were installed at a height of over four meters, others at floor level. I had started with a grid, but slowly began bending it to fit my needs. It became apparent that the physical presentation of the exhibition, the hanging, would play an enormous part in how the exhibition would be experienced. I spent a lot of time talking with the artists involved, organizing shipments, writing statements etc., but by far the biggest effort went into the planning and execution of the installment. It was also the most rewarding moment of the project once it was completed.
Again, I had presented the audience with very little literal information about what the show was about, relying on the assumption that, successfully executed, the works would speak for themselves. With Helsinki-sur-Mer I created a singular story out of many individual stories. The only true factor that combined the artwork was having the sea as a significant source of inspiration, but conceptually they all approached the theme from extremely different angles. The completed exhibition, however, formed an entirely new entity and identity for the works, conceptually as well as aesthetically.

This curatorial project taught me a lot of things. Most importantly I understood that there's always a level of responsibility present when presenting visual messages. I may seem indifferent to the way my own work is perceived, but it would be arrogant and down right foolish to completely ignore the audience. Helsinki-sur-Mer forced me to reconsider the power of the visual language. Yes, images can and should speak for themselves, however creating a harmonic and coherent collection of works, which has a goal of transmitting a certain conceptual idea, demands a understanding of the individual images actual content in terms of references, and especially how they could and would be perceived and decoded by the viewer.
In July 2015, NASA’s unmanned spacecraft New Horizons reached Pluto. Launched in 2006, New Horizons is set to document the dwarf planet at the edge of our solar system, and will continue its voyage into the mysterious Kuiper Belt.

Scientist, who had a fairly clear image of what to expect, were surprised when New Horizons produced photographs of vast mountains on the surface of Pluto. Previously it was thought that Pluto does not contain the sort of material or gravitational forces needed to create mountains, but now scientists are forced to question their preconception. How were these mountains formed, and how did we not “see” them before?

My favourite photograph of all the photographs I’ve ever seen is titled The Pale Blue Dot and was taken by the space probe Voyager I on February 14, 1990. It was taken at a distance of roughly 6,000,000,000 kilometers from Earth, depicting our planet as a single pale pixel in size against a massive background of darkness.

In the words of Carl Sagan, who requested that NASA turn the spacecraft around in 1990 to take the image across the greatest extent of space yet traveled, on this dot “…everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero...
and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every “superstar,” every “supreme leader,” every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there – on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.”

Voyager I is, as far as we know, still out there, taking photographs of space as we’ve never seen it before. But the probe is now so far away from Earth that our generation will not be around to receive its latest data, so vast is the distance between us and it. Imagine that, a man-made machine silently and independently floating through the darkness of nothing, unable to reach us or be reached, photographing whatever it (if anything) it encounters. Is this not the purest form of photography? To photograph something that can not have been photographed before, knowing that no-one will see the photographs for decades or centuries?

In an increasingly instantaneous world where everyone and everything exists in the fastlane, where photographs have become instagrams, where satellites can reach you anywhere at any time, how marvelous isn’t the fact that there still are things we simply can not rush? I find it exciting that Voyager I, now with 25-year-old technology, will be sending the human species absolutely vital information about interstellar space, but will do so with a time delay of decades and a horribly noisy and elementary image quality.

New Horizons is still so relatively close to us that it can send us images and data with only a few days delay, but even it will eventually venture far enough to distance itself from the pace of life and information flow that we are accustomed to. Can it be that these space-exploring robots equipped with cameras are the ultimate unselfish and pure artists, producing content solely for the enjoyment of the entire human race?

Suddenly I’m thinking of Unto, wondering if this wasn’t exactly what he was doing as well – making images of the now, and sending them to the future?

Well, the core intention of these space explorations is obviously not to produce art, but to provide us with information that will help us understand the mystery of life. But the photographs these probes produce in space are essentially no different than any of the photographs we produce here on Earth. They are photographs of things, with the same possibilities and limitations as any other photographs. It’s not entirely inaccurate to say that tourist snapshots of castles and parrots are exploring our Universe as much as photographs of the dents and bumps on the surface of Pluto are. After all, every photograph is a documentation of an event, and their meaning is decided and altered only by the context in which they are presented. Voyager I is as much, if not more, of an artist as I am.
As Carl Sagan verbalizes what The Pale Blue Dot is actually a photograph of – of every-thing we know and have ever known – we understand the power of the photograph. Looking at a faded dot on a noisy surface, we are looking at all life as we know it. It’s a single image containing our entire reality. Can an image possibly be loaded with more meaning than that? And if it were framed and hung on a gallery wall, could anyone mis-take it for anything other than art?

Where Tillmans is looking for a new world within the world, wanting to document the ever-changing and mutating nature of human societies, New Horizons is turning stones in completely unfamiliar and unexplored territories. But they are both looking for some-thing new. This seems to be the common thread for the contemporary creative and
curious minds, to seek and discover something new. It would seem as an almost impossible task in a world where everything appears to have already been discovered, but as Tillmans and numerous space probes have shown in their respective scales, there is always more to be found, be it near or far, big or small.

So how does Wolfgang Tillmans, New Horizons or Voyager I relate to my work? Through this curiosity in what we don’t know. If I ever get the chance to explore space I will not hesitate to go, but for now I am content with exploring my immediate surroundings. I am confident that, for now, there are still new phenomena and levels of reality to be investigated in our everyday life. I am interested in finding out how deep in to our world I can dig before I hit the bottom, or if there even is one. I want to question the “normal” – what is, or is anything, normal?

Tillmans asks the same question: “What is normal? Who decides what is aestheticizing, what is research, what is familiar, what is exotic? Pictures are always the transcription of an experiencing of the world. Ideally, they pose the question of there possibly being another way to experience the world.”

I want to find those mountains on the backside of what we thought was a smooth surface. I want to explore the strange and the bizarre. I want to confuse and be confused. I want to surprise, you and myself.
II – Photographs
Conclusion

I almost gave up on photography all together, but couldn’t, and eventually ended up more inspired and fascinated by what I can do with a camera than ever before.

Literal or not, as the title of this thesis suggests, I find that all photographs are self-portraits, and eventually they will be autobiographical documents of life as I saw it. After death, images live on as manifestations of a subjective experience.

Throughout the process of writing this thesis I have repeatedly stumbled over “new” issues that I hadn’t thought of much before. I have questioned the way photography, or photographing, is defined in an attempt to better understand what it entails. I have touched on the subject of moral, again trying to understand my own actions and responsibilities as a photographer. I have analyzed my own methods in the creative process in order to find what I can further improve in my practice.

However, it is apparent that the most essential topics that I’ve opened up are left without a conclusion. I have studied photographs as a means to a visual language, certain of the omniscient character of the photograph, but after the incident with Slobodan I can no longer claim that images can fully replace words as a communicational tool. Boldly, I have suggested that photographs needn’t tell a certain story, but the curatorial project Helsinki-sur-Mer helped me understand that this can’t always be the case.

What I can now say is that I have found a reason for my work. Having already grown bored by not only my own photographs, but of photography all together, it’s not until now that I have begun understanding the vast potential of the medium as a means of personal expression and as a language of its own. My purpose is very self-centered – to show the world how I perceive it – but then again isn’t all art that?

If it seems to me that there is no clear-cut end to where photography can go, to where it can take me, I’ve not managed to get full closure to any of the major issues I have encountered in my own work, if anything I am facing more complicated dilemmas now than I was when I began writing. Will I ever feel satisfied with my work and find peace in photography, or am I facing the same eternal struggle as Unto?

I am slightly apologetic to the reader who was expecting to find an answer to the questions I have asked, much like I had hoped for answers in my source material, but truthfully speaking I am happy to accept the current situation. After all, had I no more questions to ask, what would there be to look forward to?
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