University of Nevada, Reno

Losing Touch

Sense of Self and Constructed Identities

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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INTRODUCTION

As a young photographer, 30 years ago I was bothered by the feeling that I was not fully experiencing the present moment. I was representing and witnessing incredible parts of the world, but I was not really there.

Our magazine crew went to South Africa to shoot fashion stories and to document the best places to stay for a honeymoon. We sampled, photographed and wrote about everything the resorts presented. From tented lodges in the Kruger National Park where giant shadows of lions passed across our tents in the night, to the extreme wealth of Sun City, to winetasting in Johannesburg, to viewing whales from Table Mountain, and walking with penguins on the beach below; it was spectacular.

Early one morning we set off in a hot air balloon over the Savannah. Everyone else was present it seemed, fully alive and apparently aware with every one of their tingling senses of the beauty surrounding them. In contrast I was physically struggling with brutally heavy cases of equipment and was always experiencing everything through a multitude of camera lenses. What I was looking at felt remote, as if I was watching a National Geographic documentary on TV, instead of the tangible, land, giraffes and elephants below. Ironically, my assignment to document this amazing land for others to experience interfered with my own experience of it. I felt acutely the paradox of photography: its promise to represent what we see but capturing instead the impossibility of unmediated experience; its technologies replace and structure "the real." My alienation could be explained in part by the German cultural critic and philosopher Walther Benjamin, who wrote, "'Getting closer to things in both spatial and human terms is every bit as passionate a concern of today's masses as their tendency to surmount the uniqueness of each circumstance by seeing it in reproduction."[1] Having seen all of these wonders on TV, I had the impression I was re-watching a documentary, not living it.

I had a strong feeling of being unable to connect with the land, or the moment, while experiencing a flattening of affect that distanced me from my surroundings. It was just work, a familiar routine that disconnected me from a new, unusual place that was instead, seen and recorded through a lens, reconstituted into material object. The sense of flattening connects to what American writer and philosopher Susan Sontag describes as a potentially problematic effect of modern photography. "Taking photographs," she writes, "has set up a chronic voyeuristic relation to the world which levels the meaning of all events."[2]

In the moments described I was absent.

What bothered me as a photographer in the 1980s and 90s is now integrated into almost every person's life with their mobile devices. Now, everyone has a *phone-camera-computer-friend-connector* in their pocket and seems to experience everything mediated by the screen, along

with an urgent need to record every moment. We take, collect, and post photos as proof of existence, as evidence of the self in a perpetually exciting now.

Yet even in the 1970s Susan Sontag anticipated the tension in photography, between its representation of the experience of the real and its power to embellish, falsify, or at least finesse both the real and our agency. She wrote that photography had "become one of the principal devices for experiencing something, for giving the appearance of participation."[3] Her words resonate across time. Now that we are all photographers, the phone can be used as an excuse, a diversion, a distraction, while the photograph is the grounds for debate about the nature of our agency and our relation to our lives and the social.

Paradoxically, in this moment where images proliferate and privacy is endangered, we can hide in plain sight.

When we don't know what to do, when we are uncomfortable, or bored, we pull out our phones and engage with them. We sit in public spaces and focus solely on these small flat shiny objects, while the material world surrounding us disappears from consciousness. They have become our most intimate companions, our conduit to others, the instantaneous connection to everyone and everything, while at the same time conveying us elsewhere and out of the present moment.

As a shy person myself, I take full advantage of this phenomenon. There is no further discomfort to eating alone or sitting alone, as I can be fully occupied, distracted and entertained without shame. I can control my response to hostile or boring environments by ignoring them, while they ignore me.

Time slips by unnoticed.

But what if this technological world in our pockets desensitizes us to the physical world and removes our abilities to be human, to function and to communicate together in our present time? Kitty Taube, a friend who also consciously works with this in mind, said, "we are becoming accustomed to being alone together, which sadly has become our everyday way of relating to each other."[4]

As "connected" as we are, we may be evolving into the loneliest, most distracted, isolated and anxious generations, whose false sense of community obscures the increasingly threadbare essence of human connection.

THESIS STATEMENT

Losing Touch explores presence and absence in real and virtual spaces. It engages with tensions present in and between communication, self-hood and control. The project originates in my own recollections of the intensity of childhood sensory perception and the diminishment of that intensity as a result of the augmentation of those perceptions with photography, screens and virtual spaces. The promise and lure of these technologies of the self, attract more and more of our attention, time, and connection, to the detriment paradoxically of physical human interaction and material states such as sleep and self-care.

This project raises questions about how we currently experience the world, in response to my own fears of a diminishing sense of myself in my world and of ourselves in both the material and social worlds. Are we losing the ability to distinguish our real selves from our virtual constructed identities and is it less relevant now to discern the difference between physical experience and spectacles mediated by screens?

Chapter 1

PHOTOGRAPHY

the beautiful pretense

"A double leveling down, or a method of leveling down
Which double crosses itself
With the daguerreotype everyone will be able to have their portrait taken - formerly it was only the prominent; and at the same time everything is being done to make us all look the same - so that we shall only need one portrait"
-Kierkegaard (1854)[5]

The invention of photography changed the world.
From the start it changed the way we read or understood the world.
Photography is now how we communicate with the world.

There is a camera in almost every pocket. There is a new malleable visual language that is morphing before us as we construct our online identities and prove that we exist to a global audience. Our communities and "villages" cover the entire world. It is faster and easier to talk to the world with pictures instead of spoken word and written paragraphs. The images we make of ourselves are often improved by filters and apps like *Face Tune*, *Beauty Editor*, and *Face Change*, with results that are quite impossible to physically achieve. Icons and emojis are quick shorthand for communication, fast becoming contemporary hieroglyphs. We feel appreciated when we count our "likes," "friends," "views" and "follows." There is an economic agenda attached to many virtual profiles. Curating an online presence appears to be more important than a real-world absence.

PHOTO HISTORY

There has always been a tension in photography between ideas of truth and illusion, reality and fiction. Photographers were alchemists and magicians toying with our desire to believe. Almost from the earliest days the ability to delight and defraud the viewer has been at play. The work of spiritualist photographer William H. Mummler is an example of this phenomenon. Ephemeral images of someone that might look like a departed loved one could be mysteriously added to commissioned portraits, proving the existence of an afterlife, while giving comfort to those suffering loss.

The camera also forged the ability for us to see far off exotic places, and to look into war zones, where documentary photographers in the field, like Timothy O'Sullivan, created series such as "Harvest of Death," and would move cannon balls and dead bodies around to greater compositional and emotive effect. The photographer's intervention in the image began almost immediately, creating a tension between objectivity and their own subjective view.

In the early 1860s humans-at-war could not be photographed "live action" due to the slowness of the wet plate collodion chemistry and its inability to register anything that didn't stay still for 1 or 2 minutes. Cameras were huge and cumbersome, while darkrooms to process the glass plates were in covered wagons pulled by horses. The American Civil War was one of the first photographically documented battles, leaving a public hungry for visual proof, imagery of death and of places where they were not.

Eastman Kodak produced the portable Kodak camera in 1888, initiating popular family and social documentation. Now we can reach back into those newly invented family albums of the time and see what our ancestors looked like. What must it have been like for the majority of folk to not know where their inherited traits came from? Living memory had been paramount to survival, knowledge, being, belonging and constructive thought.

The photograph became a document, a memento, but also a memory aid, possibly augmenting or eventually replacing the actual memory with the image. People started to practice using memory less, while relying on the visual document. But the photograph represents only a fragment in time and space. Memory seems to me to be a series of visuals in a place, with context, and associated smells and sounds, activating all the senses, not a single image out of context.

While augmenting and cementing memories with photographic portraits, on another front photography rapidly released painting from its previous need to represent the real. Artists began experimenting with abstraction, color and conceptual ideas that were non-representational, leading to the birth of the Abstract Expressionists, Cubists and a large number of other artworld -*isms*.

While the art world jumped away from representational imagery, experimenting with perceptual and conceptual matters, photography was immediately picked up by artists as a tool to speed up processes and even as a basis for some of these new forms, resulting in, for example, the political collages of Hannah Höch. With its obvious usefulness, photography was also quickly adopted by newspapers, industry, government, police, and the general public. Photographer and author, Jerry Thomson, describes photography as "a protean medium,…It connects to and insinuates itself into other disciplines, other modes of thinking, and invites analyses from multiple points of view."[6] Like a spider spinning a web and throwing strands out to catch other branches, photography connected and situated itself into everyday life.

The importance of the invention of photography and its current infiltration into every aspect of life cannot be underestimated

PORTRAITURE

When tintypes were invented in the 1860s, photography became widely accessible to greater numbers of people, and the act of portraiture developed visual rules and trends followed by most professional photographers. The wet plate collodion emulsions still required up to a minute of absolute stillness by the sitter, so posing and posing stands came to be a necessary studio procedure. The posing stand would clamp the subject's head at the back in a circular cradle standing on a large wooden hat stand with a heavy pedestal at the bottom. Eyes needed to be held open for the entire exposure time and every limb was positioned to remain stationary. Going to the photographer must have been akin to going to the dentist or doctor, but as proof that one was genteel and of good character it had to be recorded for posterity, or at least for the family. Best clothes were worn, and intricate hairstyles were fussed over before the sitting. The posing subject was presenting the best version of their visible self.

Sontag described the photograph as "both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence."[7] From the invention of the cheap tintype onwards, portraits of family members were now carried in pockets, as men and later women went to war. They were treated as precious objects representing loved ones.

Prolific writer and French literary theorist Roland Barthes described the photograph as "an extended, loaded evidence — as if it caricatured not the figure of what it represents (quite the converse) but its very existence ... The Photograph then becomes a bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, ...a mad image, chafed by reality."[8] The photograph has always had an odd relationship to truth and illusion, visible and invisible. Now that photographs are usually not printed as tangible objects and are more likely to be viewed on a screen, they have an even more tenuous grasp on reality, relying on our willingness to accept that illusion as reality.

Within my series *Obscurations* I created 8" x 10" tintype self-portraits, returning to this incredibly slow historical process, exploring my own traces suggesting presence and absence. Instead of a crisp representation of the self, the images are blurred, imperfect and the face is obscured. Often areas of the human form are partially invisible with the background appearing through the legs or arms. The photography studio is set referencing a traditional manner with a forest backdrop and the subject, (myself), positioned on a cube. I must remain still, controlling my breathing for up to 4 minutes.

THE IMAGE/SPECTACLE

The *Obscurations,* tintype self, series reduces information that a portrait would normally try to convey. The images are not documentary nor are they improving on reality, instead they are an interaction of the photographer, self and time, a meditation on my own apparition-like appearance and disappearance. The element of extreme control that is so prevalent in most

digital photography and self-portraiture today is missing, as the chemical reactions that occur on the plate haphazardly alter, disrupt and embellish the surface.

British novelist and cultural thinker John Berger (1926-2017) wrote *Ways of Seeing,* a seminal work relating to how we look at and analyze images and art. He writes of the image as "a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance…Every image embodies a way of seeing…For photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights."[9]

As Berger explains, the photograph is a contextually reduced sliver of a view, from the perspective and bias of the photographer. The photographer has chosen to capture an image from an exact location, with a lens that can distort or alter depth and distance, emotive lighting, and the direction of a posing subject, at an exact moment in time. The photograph always had the potential for image alterations at exposure, processing and printing phases. This was followed more recently by facial recognition systems, and the extremely limitless fantastical possibilities for change and perfection in current digital photography with high velocity apps, filters and Photoshop.

In his book *The Society of the Spectacle,* French philosopher and writer Guy Debord also describes our relationship to the image, mass media, commodification, the degradation of our perception and our need now for spectacle (appearances), rather than participation. His thought in the 1960s foreshadows today's problem of discerning between the virtual and the real. He states, "Where the real world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic behavior. The spectacle, as a tendency to *make one see* the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs…It is the opposite of dialogue."[10] Debord's words in 1967 already warn of the effect of images on our behaviors, self-representations and addiction to the internet. "…the opposite of dialogue," just as we post images out into a decontextualized space, to connect with others, "the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of generalized separation."[11] He speaks of the "real consumer [who] becomes a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this factually real illusion, and the spectacle is its general manifestation."[12] It becomes more important for the images we consume and send out, to "seem" a certain way than to convey the truth.

In the series, *Obscurations* I return to traditional processes to play with this idea of the photograph conveying truth, a fragment in time, but delivering an illusion.

Chapter 2
TECHNOLOGY

smoke and mirrors

Our ways of communicating are changing; we speak with photos, "selfies," "memes" and "emojis." Fast solutions to a speedy world devouring our information almost faster than we can create it. Questions of privacy, identity, our attention and what we can actually control in our lives need to be addressed.

One hundred and twenty years after the invention of photography, there exists, at center stage, the world wide web (1989-90), the internet. It produced revolutionary changes in how we communicate, how we experience and perceive the world. People say the world has shrunk. We know and see things on screen before we physically experience them, and the real experience somehow feels depleted and fragmented.

I relate this to my own feelings of disconnection and separation in South Africa, through the lens 30 years ago, that apply to almost everyone now. Jerry Thomson wrote, "Today we know mostly pieces of things," [13] with an earlier analogy about how no one knows how to work out a square root anymore, or even what each of those words mean. He says, "Photography is a present-day art…it was embraced as an ultimate short cut: it yielded automatic pictures, more accurate than hand drawn ones, able to be made without spending time on either lengthy training or laborious execution." [14] Today the truth of these words is evident with the advent of cameras within smart phones and the ever-increasing speed of the internet. We use short cuts for language and communication daily. Often research is in bits, fragments on the internet often without finding out or understanding the full context of each piece of information. The range of digital vocabulary is reduced to a standardized series of quick responses.

Slowly we discover we have lost control of our personal information, time and privacy are under threat, we are counted as *eyeballs*, defined by our looking habits and the data harvested from our every online action. Algorithms decide what we see of our "friends'" feeds, and how we can be advertised to. Jonathan Crary, an art critic and theorist, elaborates further on the work of Guy Debord regarding commodification, the society of the spectacle and its embeddedness in contemporary culture. In his book *24/7*, he writes, "One's casual perusal of a single web page can be minutely analyzed and quantified in terms of how the eye scans, pauses, moves, and gives attentive priority to some areas over others." [15] We forget our devices are monitoring and listening to us, curating new endlessly fascinating scrolling images for us to look at and consume. Voluntary participation in the surveillance of our lives is implicit and taken for granted.

On the flip side of this phenomenon some revel in the lack of privacy and open themselves up to vulnerability and connection with like-minded others they will probably never meet. The online self takes on a confessional nature. On a personal level, I have found it incredibly

unsettling and strange when I meet up with acquaintances and sometimes realize I know more about them; and have seen into more of their private lives via social media than they would ever actually talk to me about face-to-face. It seems paradoxical, voyeuristic and a little disturbing, to discover I am more connected to them online, than to their real life being.

Loss of face-to-face human sensory interaction is replaced with a reductive, baby talk language of clicks, "likes," "hearts" and "emojis," and the running in-jokes presented by "gifs" and "memes." There is no time to meet anyone anymore; time is eaten away with all of the things that must be seen to online, including styling multiple personal identities, proving we exist, entertaining ourselves, working and shopping. As we become more occupied with the appearance of our presence in the digital world, self-awareness and selfhood in the *real* world, diminishes. Crary writes, "So many long-standing and multivalent forms of social exchange have been remade into habitual sequences of solicitation and response. At the same time, the range of what constitutes response becomes formulaic and, in most instances, is reduced to a small inventory of possible gestures and choices."[16] The possibility of misunderstanding is reduced by the generic standardized language, some form of contact has been made in milliseconds and busy lives can continue speedily on.

I worry that if I give more of my time connecting online in place of real-time human connection, how it affects my practice and confidence in real situations? How much do I actually "belong" to those online communities? Isolation and loneliness are contributing factors in this new way of communicating, giving a false sense of connectivity and community. They are the carrot on a stick enticing the self to continue with the ongoing hunt for more virtual experiences that might lead to actually feeling something.

THE SNARE

We appear to be caught up in a web of indispensable connectivity, identity construction and self-commodification. A witty incisive contemporary writer for the *New Yorker*, Jia Tolentino, discusses our entrapment in her recent book *Trick Mirror*. She describes the type of Pavlov's dog reward/no reward experiments we are cycling through during our social media internet usage today. She writes, "On the internet, this dynamic has been automated and generalized in the form of endlessly varied but somehow monotonous social media feeds - these addictive, numbing fire hoses of information that we aim at our brains for much of the day…Rats will eventually stop pressing the lever if their device dispenses food regularly or not at all. But if the lever's rewards are rare and irregular, the rats will never stop pressing it. In other words, it is essential that social media is mostly unsatisfying."[17] We have unwittingly become trapped in ungratifying relentless virtual spaces, always trying to connect and feed on visual information to experience some sort of emotion or feeling of pleasure.

Like addicts we keep scrolling.

CONTEXT

One of the predominant effects of the internet is a decontextualization of all information. Information is removed from its surroundings, its author, its maker or creator and their lives. Twitter is a platform that decontextualizes the most, to date. Algorithms were developed by social media platforms to take notice of our online behaviors and direct commerce advertising to our devices, that might interest us and our demographic. But on the internet we are all just fragmented representations, two dimensional shells of ourselves.

I have noticed that after withdrawing my attention, the advertising directed to me on social media is now completely unrelated to anything I have interest in and that it has disappeared the very things I want to look at in my social media feeds.

We live in an "Attention Economy," our attention is being fought for, a lot of money is riding on us being online and having a developed informational profile. Content on the web floats in the ether, invisible until it is called up or searched. American journalist and political commentator, Ezra Klein uses the term "collapsed context"[18] to describe this idea. To counter-balance this "collapsed context" the hashtag was invented so search engines could locate the random pieces of information existing as dots and dashes somewhere on the web. But hashtags have a way of decontextualizing ideas and images even further.

THE HASHTAG

Tolentino writes, "A hashtag is specifically designed to remove a statement from context and to position it as a part of an enormous singular thought…Hashtags subtly equate disconnected statements in a way that can't be controlled by those speaking… What's amazing is that things like hashtag design - these essentially adhoc experiments in digital architecture - have shaped so much of our political discourse."[19]

Using these fragmented pieces of information floating out of context we form opinions. Having an opinion is a big part of online identity and the connectivity between internet communities. Through an object gripped in our hand, we voice our opinion and believe we are the center of the universe relating to this. The inflation of the importance of our own opinion is an illusion. Each of us is just one voice "shouting into the void" via a small digital transmitter.

Physical interaction today is more likely to be with a screen than an object such as a book or human. The phone is now indispensable, a most private and intimate object, recording all of our human traces as we go about our daily life. The marks and human grease of our fingerprints register on it involuntarily. It is touched more often than any human around us. Only when we switch off can we really see the trails that we leave behind of the real body, on what would once historically have been a pocket-sized portrait of a loved one, a handwritten letter, a map or newspaper in the pocket.

While we are voluntarily monitoring and being absorbed by our devices, our devices are also monitoring us. Crary writes, “It is equally a shift of individual life to conditions in which privacy is impossible, and in which one becomes a permanent site of data-harvesting and surveillance. One accumulates a patchwork of surrogate identities that subsist 24/7, sleeplessly, continuously, as inanimate impersonations rather than extensions of the self…Sensory impoverishment and the reduction of perception to habit and engineered response is the inevitable result of aligning oneself with the multifarious products, services, and “friends” that one consumes, manages, and accumulates in waking life.”[20] Crary speaks to the idea that our avatars or constructed online identities invincibly continue to work for us, represent us, (or a version of us), while the human body is fallible and requires rest, food and sleep. The necessity for speed and reductive new languages allows a velocity of interaction with numbers of other constructed selves that would be impossible to achieve in the material world. All of these interactions are creating conglomerates of data that is collected and used by who,… or what?

CONTROL

With all of this in mind, what can we actually control?
From my point of view: I can’t control time, or my data, or my privacy, or my physical body. Physical reactions give me away, ageing is inevitable. I can’t control change, I can’t control spoken and written words out of context, nor can I control nature or the economy. I can’t even control the identifying human traces I leave everywhere I go.

The one thing most of us feel like we can control is our online identity. Perhaps this is why social media has become such a powerful and addictive space. Social media users are working hard to construct the perfect self, many with economic goals in sight. Potential employers also check our social media feeds. Influencers accumulate followers and money; they are the new magazines and advertising agencies.

The reduced language of social media controls meanings, the language is generic and is more difficult to take the wrong way. We are now globally connected but isolated by and with our devices that are watching our viewing patterns. DeBord writes, “The spectacle is nothing more than the common language of this separation.”[21] New online etiquette is developing surrounding where you contact someone and how you contact them. Standardization of reaction has removed the possibility of misunderstanding. Language is transitioning at a frenzied pace during our lifetimes.

Consider the addictive attraction of endless visual information that can be scrolled through with one finger interminably, each piece trying to hook us in to vanish down another rabbit hole of visible delights, information and potential commerce. DeBord notes that, “Under the shimmering diversions of the spectacle, “banalization” dominates modern society the world over and at every point where the developed consumption of commodities has seemingly multiplied the roles and objects to choose from.”[22] In the end it becomes a monotonous habit scrolling through standardized digital material and responses, as our attention gets more and

more jaded, and it is necessary to scroll ever further to find something that lights up our interest.

SELFIE CULTURE / CONSTRUCTED IDENTITY

Social media's main functioning premise today surrounds and emphasizes identity. This has been a liberating idea for many, a way of finding your kin or group, but it has also been the main drive for commodification and data harvesting. In 2003 when smartphones developed a front facing camera on the screen side, for video conferencing purposes, it was very quickly repurposed for "selfie" images. People could monitor and pose and check their reversed images all day long. Technology developers soon realized that the image was in reverse and the "selfie" image soon was automatically flipped to appear as others see you, not as a mirror image. Each person is now in control of making images of themself, unlike the photography of even 15 years ago. Sontag writes, "photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure."[23] The adjusted, finetuned "selfie" acts as a confidence prop, a record of perfection, a permanent image of the self as you will it to be. People now construct their own trails and histories.

Apps appeared for improving or eliminating your imperfections, enlarging your eyes, reducing your nose, and whitening your skin. While feeling like you were in control, undercurrents were, and are insidiously channeling and directing you to standardize your appearance to norms that are the most commercially viable. As soon as your identity and appearance had a potential value, more and more unrealistic "selfie" images appeared and became the norm. "Instagram Face," as it was eventually dubbed, also carries racial undertones. Jia Tolentino wrote of the "Instagram-face" phenomenon, saying "There was something strange, …about the racial aspect of Instagram Face—it was as if the algorithmic tendency to flatten everything into a composite of greatest hits had resulted in a beauty ideal that favored white women capable of manufacturing a look of rootless exoticism."[24]

Reality starts to retreat.

Sontag's words foreshadow what is occurring today, she wrote, "Needing to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted…Today everything exists to end in a photograph"[25] This can be seen in the exceptional lengths people will go to, to create the best "selfie" in a place that is a current hotspot for "selfies," while appearing to not experience the place they are actually in. This reminds me again of my experience in South Africa and the unsettling feeling of not being fully present, while gathering photographic evidence of being there.

French theorist and contemporary cultural analyst, Jean Baudrillard declares ominously in his book *The Perfect Crime* that there has been a "murder of reality"[26] and he writes that "The great philosophical question used to be 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' Today the real question is: 'Why is there nothing rather than something?'"[27] Baudrillard believes that

illusion is everything now, our simulated appearance is a stand in for presence while ignoring the idea of absence. Illusion is the new reality. He writes, “Now the image can no longer imagine the real, because it is the real. It can no longer dream it, since it is its virtual reality. It is as though things had swallowed their own mirrors and had become transparent to themselves.”[28] He goes on to say “we live in a world where the highest function of the sign is to make reality disappear and, at the same time, to mask that disappearance.”[29]

We create online profiles on various platforms demonstrating the constructed self and imagery we prefer to exhibit in that space or location. Becoming an “influencer” through a constructed online identity is a monetizable proposition. Companies offer money for those with large followings of like-minded individuals to endorse, wear, eat, “shout out” their products. The internet profile never has to stop its performance, never needs to rest and never has to go back-stage to regroup. It is endlessly on, accumulating “looks,” “likes,” “views” and “follows.”

It is the age of the “Attention Economy” with all social platforms vying for our very monetizable attention. Tolentino takes the idea of constructed identity a step further saying, “With the internet, it’s so easy to stop trying to be decent, or reasonable, or politically engaged and start trying merely to **seem** so…The internet collapses identity, opinion and action…”[30]
Ethics and selfhood are now in question as we construct artificial selves and interact through these frameworks of illusion with other artificial selves.

We have become simulacra.

SIMULACRA

A simulacra is a representation of a thing that is manipulated and out of context of the real. We know this about photographs and yet it is still possible to be lulled into the sense that it is a representation of the real. In his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard wrote, “Simulacra are copies that depict things that either had no original, or that no longer have an original. Simulation is the imitation of the operation of a real-world process or system over time.”[31]
Baudrillard would believe that in making our constructed identities from images we have created a hyperreal. He explains, “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself.”[32]
His point raises the question; do we even question the un-realness of our constructed identities, the virtual spaces we inhabit and the imagery we see every day?

Douglas Kellner adds to Baudrillard’s simulation theory, writing “As simulations proliferate, they come to refer only to themselves: a carnival of mirrors reflecting images projected from other mirrors onto the omnipresent television and computer screen and the screen of consciousness, which in turn refers the image to its previous storehouse of images also produced by simulatory mirrors.”[33]

A photograph is a simulacra in the same way painted portraits had been. Enhancing reality was historically clearly to the benefit of painters and their subjects, followed by its ongoing importance to photographers and their subjects. A simulacra is a representation of our performance of self. The virtual space in which we view our photographic versions of the world is also a simulacra, along with our online profile. Effectively we are looking at a simulacra within a simulacra, presented to an audience of simulated presences accessing a simulated space.

The simulacra has become the real.

THE ECHO CHAMBER

On the internet you can choose to spend time in disembodied spaces where everyone thinks the same way as you, where they "like" your profile and you "like" what they are dispersing out into the virtual world. It is a sort of ephemeral, congratulatory, imaginary coral reef inflating a sense of achievement and self-worth. The danger of this "echo chamber" is that you become less aware of the existence of other opinions, the numbers of people who do not think as you do, and who do not agree with what you believe. A very real example of this is the shock that the USA 2016 election results engendered in the people of major cities such as Los Angeles and New York. Their "echo chamber" of connection gave them a false sense of solidarity and collective consciousness. Omitting to realize that there are a great number of the people in America who are not listening to the same things and are inside their own "echo chambers" with entirely different agendas. There are no balancing perspectives unless you hunt for them, which is often unlikely and overwhelming, because of the enormous amount of information flying at us and swamping our hours of connection online.

On the flip side of the "echo chamber" scenario are those who chase conflict. The internet makes it very easy to operate at high level aggression with no discernable physical real-world consequences. Ideas of manners, empathy, discretion, and diplomacy that would be more likely to be utilized face-to-face are forgotten in the cacophony of fighting and online warfare in some of the aggressive spaces. Trolls became a force online, targeting profiles and out of context statements, while radically devastating real peoples' emotions and lives.

ILLNESSES AND NEW CONDITIONS

Our brains aren't built to handle the amount of information, misfortune, conflict, trolls and bad news that the internet pumps out. The increase in anxiety related conditions is palpable everywhere. New illnesses and physical aberrations are developing such as "tech neck," alterations and immobility in the bones of the neck due to continuous texting postures, along with psychological conditions of anxiety and depression mostly in younger generations. Jia Tolentino writes "…the internet generally minimizes the need for physical action: you don't have to do much of anything but sit behind a screen to live an acceptable, possibly valorized, twenty-first century life."[34] Many of us have voluntarily and without question accepted, been

hooked by and entrapped into a more sendentary, less active life, where time and productivity is monitored and our leisure no longer belongs to us.

In an article for the *American Journal of Epidemiology,* Dr Holly B. Shakra and Nicholas A. Christakis conducted a survey of people using social media and their overall feelings of wellness. They write, "Overall, our results showed that, while real-world social networks were positively associated with overall well-being, the use of Facebook was negatively associated with overall well-being. These results were particularly strong for mental health; most measures of Facebook use in one year predicted a decrease in mental health in a later year. We found consistently that both liking others' content and clicking links significantly predicted a subsequent reduction in self-reported physical health, mental health, and life satisfaction."[35]

The extreme version of humans living their online identity permanently, denying their physical self, or any form of physical interaction can be found in Japan, in the cases of the *Hikikkomori. Hikkikomori* are afraid to go out of their bedroom door and live almost entirely virtual lives, becoming incapable of human interaction. Their families are forced to look after them, and silently leave their food at the door of their darkened, screen-lit rooms. This version of living must act as a wake-up call to our dependence and awareness - or lack of awareness of our human selves with needs the screen cannot effectively satisfy.

Jonathan Crary draws our attention to French Philosopher and Existentialist, Jean Paul Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in which he theorizes the idea of the "practico inert field." He writes, "Central to the Critique is its meditation on the systemic strategies of separation that prevent objective reality of daily life from being perceived by the individuals who inhabit it...It operates as a collective delusion that transforms the experience of the individual solitude and powerlessness into something seemingly natural or inevitable. The "practico inert field" is the field of our servitude…to mechanical forces, and to anti-social apparatuses. His key term for this powerlessness is "serieality" and with it he provides his monumental account of the continuous production of loneliness as a fundamental underpinning of capitalism. Seriality is the dispersal of collectivity into an aggregate of discrete individuals who relate to each other only on the basis of hollow or narcissistic identities." [36]

Ironically while thinking about these issues of powerlessness, and shallow virtual connection versus physical contact, the recent CoVid-19 Corona Virus outbreak enforces our separation and distance making us question whether to even shake hands or hug our friends. This along with the socio-political polarization of the people of the USA, the orders to social distance and remain at home, compel us further to keep our distance and retreat ever deeper into non-human interactions in virtual spaces.

Chapter 3

EMBODIED/disembodied SPACES

out of touch

What happens when we are no longer able to relate to each other face-to-face? If we are more comfortable contacting and communicating through a screen, what happens to our emotions and physically lived experiences? There is always a dividing protective glass barrier between us and the rest of the world. It offers a type of anonymity, separation and a comforting lack of consequences. What can be said online, might often be thought about twice face-to-face in real life. It is very much easier and more comfortable to communicate through the screen. I notice my own increase in discomfort while talking face-to-face with people, this discomfort causes me further anxiety about the loss of this ability to communicate and the depletion of confidence in how we relate to each other now. Crary writes, "One has a fleeting intuition of the disparity between one's sense of limitless electronic connectedness and the enduring constraints of embodiment and physical finitude."[37] The split between these two environments seem like two magnets with opposite sides holding each other at a distance, while one is drawing us ever further into limitless disembodied spaces, promising connection that doesn't ever satisfy.

We say someone is "out of touch" when they vanish or don't respond, or when they have not kept pace with the times. Communication takes practice, the more we relate to each other the more understanding we can generate. If we are constantly connecting while separated, I question how that affects the understanding of ourselves and our ability to be understood in the real world? What can we really control within this framework? How can we practice being human in systems that are designed to continuously strip away the things that are human about us?

John Berger explores the way we relate to the world saying, "To touch something is to situate oneself in relation to it."[38] and that "We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves."[39] But if we watch and look at everything mediated by a screen and our only touch is the smoothest texture-less glass blocking us from the representations we are seeing, could it be possible that our other senses will be debilitated, lessened or may possibly disappear altogether? At that point all sensory information will be received through the screen or the interface and be interpreted only through the brain, without physical nerve endings in our tongues, noses, fingers, ears and hands ever sensing anything much at all.

In her essay *Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche*, Judith Butler explores the physical body and consciousness, in which she puts the theories and thought of two philosophers, Merleau-Ponty and Malebranche into dialogue. Commencing with Merleau-Ponty she writes, "he interrogates the body as a site of mobility and spatiality, arguing that these fundamentally

corporeal ways of relating to the world subtend and structure the intentionality of consciousness….she continues, “The flesh is not something one has, but, rather the web in which one lives,”[40] discussing the idea that touch is “the animating condition of sentience, but continues as the actively animating principle of feeling and knowing.”[41] It is only when “a body is already exposed to something other than itself, (tactile impressions) something by which it can be affected, that it becomes possible for a sentient self to emerge.”[42] Butler’s conclusion is that “Spatial and temporal experience effectively follow from the touch.”[43] While interacting and connecting exclusively or mainly on the internet we are denying ourselves these most basic human modes of understanding, assessing and perceiving the world through the senses, while experiencing the world only through representations of things.

On the internet the representation of the thing now seems more important than the thing itself, including the human self. This absence of the importance of the real is depleting our psychological capacity to understand the world in any way other than the myriad of decontextualized fragments that fly at us online every day. “Baudrillard claims that the negation of a transcendent reality in the current media and technological society is a “perfect crime” that involves the “destruction of the real.” In a world of appearance, image, and illusion, Baudrillard suggests, reality disappears although its traces continue to nourish an illusion of the real. Driven toward virtualization in a high-tech society, all the imperfections of human life and the world are eliminated in virtual reality, but this is the elimination of reality itself, the Perfect Crime.”[44]

Guy Debord writes, “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”[45] What does this mean for our global comprehension and our understanding of each other as living, breathing individuals? If empathy and human understanding disappear it will make it a very difficult world to endure, where fingers on triggers will not surprise or raise any emotion for those fallen.

HOW TO BE HUMAN NOW?

As someone who has lived in the world both pre-internet and post-internet, my instinctively rebellious nature and until recently, semi-conscious reaction has been to slowly back out of the virtual world, trying to find a balance, re-focussing my attention, following the urge to return to more physically embodied practices. It started when I reached back into my brain’s memory which is something like a curiosity cabinet jumbled with sensory impressions, recollections and knowing, and wrote page after page of freeform memories.

Twenty years ago, during my fashion photography years, I began stitching, drawing and painting into photographs. Later I began painting almost life-size sheep in environments that were habitats they had been bred for, or that their body structures required. Without consciously planning it, I was already trying to add context to my world through the work I was producing.

Recently I began knitting again. I felt a strong urge to make warm clothes for myself that were unique, made by my own hands, containing various imperfections and signs of the hand. These ideas of re-connection to the embodied or material world, and sense of the self continue throughout all of my work. As I begin to think deeply about the need to create with my hands and see my friends in the flesh, I notice how intoxicating and difficult it is to extricate myself from the web of continuous connection.

My latest bodies of work reflect a reactive disruption from the exhaustion and dullness induced by online connectivity. I am tired of my Apple watch monitoring my bodily functions, pinging me when I need to stand up or reminding me to breathe, while my phone buzzes advertising things that I don't want, solely because I mentioned a word in a sentence or searched for something online. I became disturbed by the endless distractions and voluntary surveillance of devices that I introduced into my life in the name of health, being connected, and awareness. All of these devices activated deliberately, because I am not monitoring and working my physical body enough. Life seems so much more sendentary than before.

I return to physical making processes learned as a child.

ORIGIN STORY

Growing up, my father could do everything.

He designed and built some of our houses with his own hands. As an engineer and a child born during World War 2, he could work everything out, and fix or repair anything. He could lay concrete and build. In New Zealand this was not totally abnormal, being a land as far away as possible from the old world, and an island with comparatively limited supplies. Ingenuity and self-reliance are a crucial part of our heritage.

My mother could do everything.

She made all of our clothes, all of our interior furnishings, all of her own clothes. She gardened and grew a lot of our food with my dad. We grew up on fresh from the garden food, and "health food." Everything was made from scratch, and there was no processed food in the fridge or in the house, easy freezer food didn't exist in our world, our drinks were milk or water.

My mother walked me to school on my first day, to show me the way, and after that at 5 years old I walked to school alone every single day. I loved those walks by myself, out of the town past horse paddocks full of gorse, manuka honey flowers, and strange blue flowers full of bees.

I feel like I could smell colors as a child. Smell evokes such powerful memories.

When I was about twelve, Dad decided we all needed some farm life experience, so he found a job in a country town and a small farm in the lush green Hobbit hills outside of Timaru. He then

designed a California style ranch house with long floor to ceiling glass windows and proceeded to build it. Every weekend we would all be bundled into the car to go down to Timaru, a two-hour drive away, to work on the building. The new house was slow to build, my dad working on it mostly by himself, and paycheck to paycheck buying timber and materials. I got to shovel gravel into the foundations and to drive a bulldozer.

As the structure went up, and the roof was on, my dad would spend the entire weekend building and putting dwangs in between all the primary frame-work. I learnt to hammer and get nails straight. It seemed like forever but the house was finally finished. Once we were all moved in Dad started going to the cattle auctions and buying a few animals. The paddocks were so lush that the grass would grow over our knees really quickly.

Eventually we ended up with a little flock of lambs, Romneys. They grew big and Dad leased a prize ram from another farmer. The ram had a big block of pink chalk around his neck on a harness. Within minutes it seemed, the sheep all had pink dots on their fleeces, followed by baby lambs everywhere, springing around all twitchy with flicky tails. A couple of the mothers abandoned their babies, so we ended up with baby lambs crowding around by our pot belly stove in the living room. We fed them from bottles, and they bleated, talking to us, they slept in newspaper lined boxes at night. We adored them.

My sister and I chose one sheep each at this point for their wool, and for Christmas we magically got spinning wheel kits, which we built over the holidays. We stained them, then we varnished them. Finally, the spinning wheels were ready. We practiced with wool we had collected from the barbed wire fences. Sheep rub against the barbed wire and tufts of wool would be left behind. This was our training.

Dad hired people to shear the sheep; gangs of shearers would pass through the town and work for a few days here and there for the small farms. I went to work in the shearing shed as a "rouse-about," pulling the intact heavy fleece off the floor by the shearer. I could barely lift an entire fleece and sometimes had to be helped, but I would get it on the table and in the shed and then had to pick it. This meant pulling out all the dags, thistles and junk trapped in it before it was rolled and put in a bale. The fleece from my sheep I put in a bag and took home. I can't remember how we learnt to spin, but after a time and a lot of practice, the wool I spun wasn't like hard sharp twine cutting my fingers, and it had some softness and flexibility.

First you have to card the wool. With a metal tooth comb and get it all fluffy and light with strands going in the same direction. Then with the tuft in hand you start spinning until it is all pulled and twisted into yarn. At this point the wool was unwashed and had a rank smell.

I spun and spun imagining it was a fairytale, and after the wool was spun it had to be rolled into balls, so it was useable. My sheep had all sorts of brown and black flecks. I can't remember her name, but I spun the entire fleece. Once I had all the balls of wool, I decided to make a jersey for myself. I don't remember how I leant to knit, I guess my mother had shown me at some point. I found a pattern and began the knitting process. I made my jersey and stitched it all

together, finally it was done - such a process. However, there was one piece of vital information missing. I wish I had known how to wash the wool before spinning because the jersey smelt so strong it was hard to wear. I would wear it around the farm because it was completely waterproof in the rain, but it turned out to be a jersey that was so pungent it was un-wearable in public.

As an adult when I think about this story and process from start to finish, the sense of accomplishment connected strongly with a feeling of control. I missed that connection to the physical or tangible object for years after I was forced into digital photography by shorter deadlines and tighter budgets.

I grew up on a little island at the bottom of the world with a frontier mentality and a pride in ability to work things out and DIY, (do-it-yourself). The digital world reduced that feeling of achievement, satisfaction in my own process and the production of a material artifact.

Sensory perception, physical making, enjoying imperfection, the sign of the hand and that sense of achievement forms the spine of my practice today.

Chapter 4

CONTEXT OF MY WORK

in the presence of absence

After allowing myself time to transport my mind back into my past through freeform memory writing, I began to understand why the physicality and human touch of everything was so important to me. It explained why I have been so bothered about how much time I spend in invisible spaces, the pointlessness of that to me right now, but also the conundrum of how indispensable it is, in order to communicate with my real life-long friends all over the planet. It is impossible to extricate myself from this vast web of convenience. My question to myself is how can I recalibrate myself to become more human in the face of this erosion of the self, continual connection and black hole vortex of time and attention?

ART'S WORK

Sontag writes, "Art is seen as a mirror of human capacities in a given historical period, as the pre-eminent form by which a culture defines itself, names itself, dramatizes itself."[46] Perhaps it is now the most pertinent position of artists to question our disappearance into the virtual world and to suggest ways of resisting this vanishing. Art's work is to notice and warn about our information being insidiously removed, analyzed and fed back to us in the form of focused advertising telling us what we need, while disguising the necessity for human touch and interaction in the real world. Meanwhile we lose further control over our time, perception and human-ness.

My partial solution is to return to spaces of uncertainty, vulnerability and physical sensation, reversing slowly out of the relentless distraction of virtual spaces and taking possession of my attention in the real world once more. Through my practice I work to rebuild context for myself, in a generally decontextualized world.

Guy Debord writes, "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation."[47] Perhaps this is why artworks now are expected to be experiential spectacles, the audience demands more, physicality and interaction as they lose more reality each day.

in the middle of this nowhere

in the middle of this nowhere is an exhibition created in parallel to this thesis paper, consisting of several bodies of work connected by interrelated dialogues of communication, control and how we sense ourselves in the various spaces we inhabit.

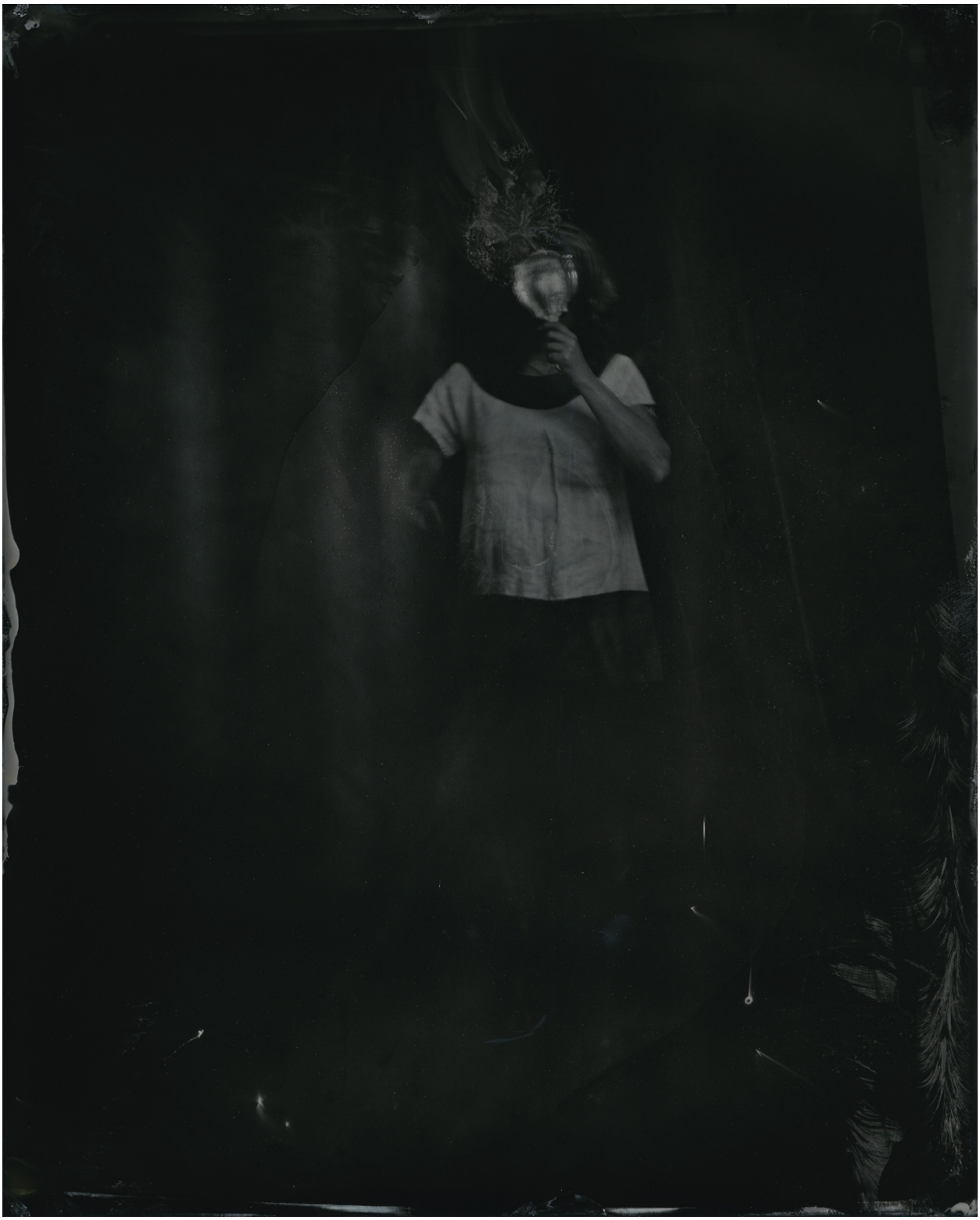
My intention, through my research and exhibition work is to pose questions that might engage viewers in thinking about their own time, voluntary and involuntary interactions, attention, selfhood, privacy and information they give to the web.

As part of this journey of inquiry, I ask - how can I regain control of my own attention? How can I develop ways of interacting with others in the material and virtual world while nurturing a sense of self?

I begin by allowing myself time to assess how to maintain a balance, and discover what is controllable between disembodied spaces, and an understanding of the embodied physical self.

The work I introduce here is one series from *in the middle of this nowhere* thesis exhibition. The body of work is titled *Obscurations,* and consists of over 22 tintype self-portraits, between 2018 and 2020. This particular series represents my return to traditional mediums to explore ideas within my practice and the theory behind my work. It allows me to embrace the history of photography and to delve into the ongoing tensions photography produces between truth and illusion. *Obscurations* illustrates the underlying themes of communication, sense of self and control that I have been exploring, ideas that also run throughout the other bodies of work in various mediums, within my thesis exhibition.

CONTEXTUALISING MY WORK



Obscurations - 8” x 10” tintype self-portraits by Frances Melhop 2017-2020. *Tintype self #28.*

Obscurations - 8” x 10” tintype self-portraits by Frances Melhop 2017-2020. *Tintype self #31.*

Obscurations - 8” x 10” tintype self-portraits by Frances Melhop 2017-2020. *Tintype self #16.*

Obscurations - 8” x 10” tintype self-portraits by Frances Melhop 2017-2020. *Tintype self #29.*

Obscurations is a series of self-portraits made using the wet plate collodion process on 8” x 10” aluminum plates. Each image involves a liquid pour, coating the plate with mixed chemistry to form an emulsion layer. The collodion which is poured on has a strong sharp smell as the ether evaporates off. The plate is then dipped in a silver solution for four minutes, it is removed in complete darkness and loaded into the plate holder, which is then inserted into the back of the 8” x 10” mono-rail camera. The camera has already been focused and is set, ready to expose the plate. I stand in position in frame and flash the lights 12 times with the 300mm lens almost fully open, at f/8. This takes at least 4 minutes during which time I must make sure to breathe when the lights are off during their recycling time, and to be at the same point of the inhale/exhale at each next flash. The plate must be developed while still wet, so the lights are turned off, red darkroom lights are turned on, and the plate is removed from the dark-slide so a developer pour can be coated over the plate. The pouring technique is extremely sensitive, the direction and speed and height of the bottle from the plate causes all sorts of effects. The plate is held in one hand while swiveling around to direct the fluid to all parts of the plate and dripped back into the container from which it came. Once a slight ghost image appears the plate can be placed carefully in a distilled water bath, which acts as a stop bath, stopping any further development. The next step is the fixer stage, the plate is lowered into the fixing bath to finalize the process, clear the image and dissolve any salts that were not exposed. At this point the room lights can be switched on and as if by magic the image materializes before your eyes. Once the fixer has completely cleared the milky fluorescent looking chemistry, the plate can be washed in water for 10 minutes, after which it dries and can be varnished, another pouring technique that needs to be practiced.

I obscure my face in each image. My exploration relates to the fragmentary nature of a person that photography captures, ephemeral traces of the human self at a moment in time, not my particular identity. I stand in the same place for each image on a grey cube in a studio with a giant photographic forest background, referencing the scenography of the early photographers. The images are imperfect, full of unexpected, uncontrollable, strange marks, swirls, flashes, and subtle colors float over the surfaces. A faint scent of lavender wafts off their varnished fronts. The plates are mounted three inches off the wall and hover in a straight line across the gallery. Interspersed between the plates are high gloss black plexiglass plates the exact same size and thickness, they reflect the viewers face as they move past the self-portraits. The viewer confronts the self while looking at the *Obscurations*. The gesture I make with this series is in direct reverse to “selfie” culture, it is painfully slow, no improvements are made, no in-camera tricks are used, and my identity is obscured rather than obvious or idealized, leaving only the idea of a female human standing in place. In some ways there is a parallel to “selfie” culture in the sense that I mask the real face, but illusions are created through chemical mistakes or the invisible pouring technique. It is this lack of control, the alchemy and the surprises that occur in returning to this traditional analogue photography that I most enjoy.

The figure in the images is elusive, obscured, unidentifiable and represents an illusion. If I think about Lacanian theory, I can interpret his theoretical structure of registers, onto all of my bodies of work during our current time period, (2020). I am making imagery, in an era of

simulated representation, that explores the interplay of the *"*imaginary," the "symbolic" and the "real." The "imaginary" for me relates to our online profiles, constructed identities, and perceptions of others, launched in disembodied spaces of virtual reality. A simulacra, (photo), within a simulacra, (constructed online identity), existing in a simulacra, (the internet). In terms of the Lacanian "symbolic," our language on the internet is reduced to norms and symbolic images that express standardized ideas of a small array of our human emotions. This symbolic environment and its language are evolving before our eyes as we interact with the world through the screen via the internet.

The "real," can often be more understandable when thinking of its absence. For example, the material human body of a loved one is sometimes more noticeable when it is absent, at which point we reach for a simulacra, or representation of them for comfort. The intertwining of the registers has become impossible for us to extricate ourselves from, seemingly to the detriment of the "real."

Lacan believed we recognize and identify ourselves through our mirror image from a very early age, so that we have an idea of who we are in relation to others. The "mirror-stage" is the place where the ego and the subject (together the "I") can recognize and misrecognize themselves in relation to others and their environments.

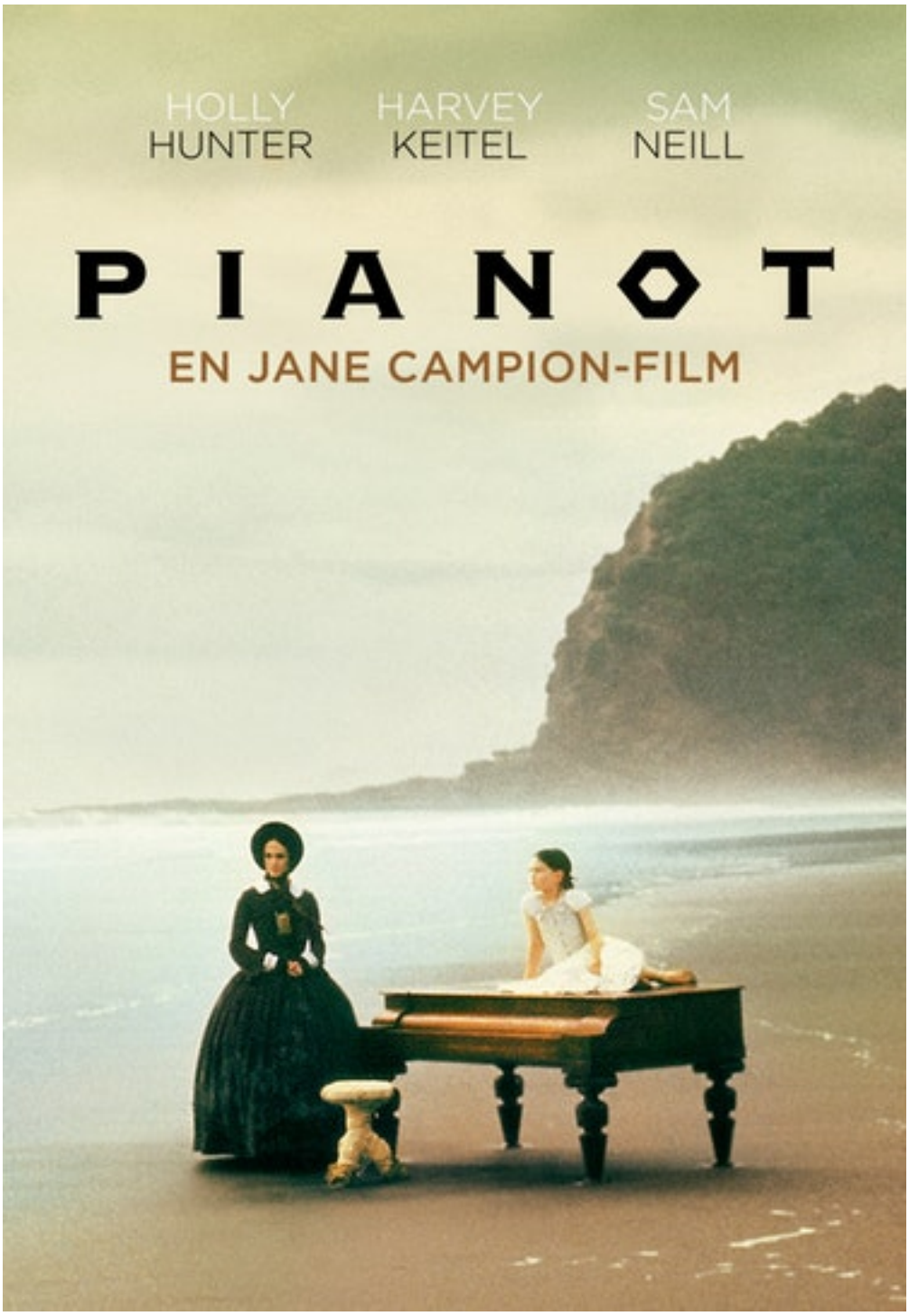
Perhaps now each of us is building our own "mirror-stage" constructed history and persona through online profiles, in an effort to try and understand who the "I" really is as interrelated to the rest of the "mirror-stage" world.

The work I am making counters the internet "mirror-stage," it involves stillness and slowing down, using traditional processes and mediums to contemplate and explore contemporary ideas of identity, self-hood and the human traces we leave behind. These self-portraits are tangible objects which diminish the real self, ephemeral vestiges of myself, almost ghosts, representing the lack of control we have over life, time and our human bodies. I reduce myself to quiet unidentifiable traces, conveying only the sense of a human, rather than a constructed identity signaling the world. An impression more like a memory, fleeting, vanishing, indiscernible. I am exploring the ideas of presence and absence in both embodied and disembodied spaces, and what that can mean to our understanding of time and being human.

Silver gelatin photograph – Francesca Woodman. *Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976*

Relating to these ideas, the photographs of Francesca Woodman have always left an imprint in my mind after seeing them as a teenager. Her explorations into the human self in relation to an environment, while often obscuring her face or head, and leaving an imprint or a mark either photographically or in powder on the floor have always intrigued and unsettled me. Her work describes presence and absence, and I believe this series of tintype essences *Obscurations*, 40 years later are following a similar line of inquiry, thought and experimentation, as relevant to the current image/selfhood culture. The haunting quality of Woodman's work is amplified by the knowledge of her suicide at 22 years old in 1981. She was already partially absent in the photographs, gesturing to the fragility of the human body and the traces we leave behind.

Silver gelatin photograph – Francesca Woodman 1976. *House #3, Providence, Rhode Island*



The Piano movie poster, Miramax productions

New Zealand film director and writer Jane Campion is another of the resonating strongest influences on my work. Campion has contextualized what it is to be a New Zealander, an isolated antipodean Pacific island at the bottom of the world, as maps are drawn currently. In her movie *The Piano,* I catch a glimpse of what it must have been like to be alive in the era of my great great grandparents as first-generation migrants from Germany in the 1800's. The struggles of immigrants on a tiny set of islands, a colony of Britain, as far away from Europe as is possible, are made visible in this film, along with the cultural clashes, and melding of communities as they try and live together. The tensions are palpable between the frontier style Victorians who have immigrated there and the Maori populations who lived on the lands long before the Dutch whalers founded bases on *Aoteoroa, Land of the long white cloud.* The Europeans tried desperately to maintain their standards and decorum, while needing to be able to do everything by themselves, facing continual conflict and ethical crises as the Maori people had entirely different ways of being, believing and thinking.

Film still from *The Piano,* Harvey Keitel, Miramax productions

Film still from *The Piano,* Anna Paquin and Holly Hunter

The coolness of Campion's palette in this movie, the friction and intertwining of cultures and the subtle nuanced identities she develops are distinctly of New Zealand. While *The Piano* delves into the environment of my ancestry, her film *An Angel At My Table* digs into the first World War era, only a decade before my Father was born. The story is of a young girl, Janet Frame, who was brought up in a large family in a rural area, in war conditions where self-sufficiency, self-reliance and strength of character was paramount. While most of the doctors were away at war, the young girl is misdiagnosed with schizophrenia and is put into an asylum. The time is rife with "old wives' tales," mistreatment, creative spirit and bravery.

Film Still from An Angel at My Table by Jane Campion. Actor Karen Fergusson

This film contextualizes my father's life, in New Zealand, a disconnected colony, the death of his mother when he was 4 years old, from a botched surgery, the need for multiple skillsets, thrifty ways, and hardy emotional control and toughness to survive and thrive. Campion captures the essence of what it is to be a New Zealander and how our cultural heritage evolved. As a rebellious Victorian colony at the end of the earth, challenging norms and rules, where individuality was developed as a strength, we were the first self-governing country to give women the vote in 1893. Campion deftly situates my island heritage and surrounds me with the context for the ways I think and make decisions relating to aesthetics, my life, and my visual work. Her films are subtle, ephemeral, sweet but gritty with realism and tortured with all-consuming emotions that the characters do not know how to control. They represent the idea that regardless of the era and its norms, the human body and the human will make themselves known one way or another.

I connect this to the suspended sense I have today of floating between two extreme poles, that of our vicarious lives inside the virtual spaces and our diminishing lives in physical life, with an impending feeling of disturbance, suspicion, and wariness for what this is doing to the human condition.

CONCLUSION

in the middle of this nowhere, of all-consuming disembodied virtual spaces, we need to refocus and look around.

Our attention is the one thing we must try and regain some control over, while it is the one thing that is being wrested from us continually in the age of distraction.

Who is to say that virtual reality is not a new form of physical reality and that those who grew up with contact and connection through screens don't feel the world as deeply as those who grew up on 100% embodied space? They probably have developed entirely different neural pathways that process information and interpret the 2D world they are presented, differently than those of us who grew up without an i-pad in our hands at 3 years old. My thought however is that as we have less encouragement for creating offline, and with art removed from the curriculum in many schools, people might not even be aware of alternative, slower ways to work out, experience and question the real world.

Jenny O'Dell is a Bay area artist who suggests "deep listening" as a mode of re-connecting to ourselves and physical environments. She spends some of her retreat hours in a public rose garden in Oakland California, listening intently for birdsong and any sound she has never identified. We insulate ourselves and subconsciously process so much of our daily lives, discarding or ignoring it, tuning out, without turning our attention to the things around us. O'Dell talks of a John Cage concert she attended, which was basically the audience listening to themselves as the orchestra remained silent. Her auditory response was to fully tune in to every sound on every level, her sensory perception on full alert afterwards as she walked home noticing things she had never seen or heard before.

"Deep Listening" is one method to reactivate our physical senses, I further propose turning to traditional mediums that pursue slow questioning and improve motor skills along with visual perception engaging more than one sense. Perhaps we could do this in real life situations of community, so that human interaction and connection is tangible. In the Pacific Islands such as Tahiti, the women of the villages have traditionally sat talking, thinking, singing, laughing, …a lot of laughing together, making bed covers known as *Ti vai vai*. With one woman at each corner of the quilt they begin to stitch giant colorful hibiscus flowers and abstract patterns from all 4 corners at once until they reach the center and the piece is done, ready for a happy bed.

As I write this conclusion, the irony of the situation in the world, of April 2020 with my themes of communication, touch, selfhood and control, while creating an exhibition that no one will see or experience except for in virtual spaces, is sadly almost comical. I write in self-imposed isolation, not only as a thesis writer but as a State of Emergency has been declared across America, as universities and schools are closed down to slow down the pandemic Covid-19 Corona Virus infections which are ravaging the globe. Throughout all countries people are being

warned to not contact, not shake hands, not kiss, sneeze into something and throw it away and to not come within 12 feet of each other.

I am self-quarantining to finish this thesis within its deadline, while hospitals and their staff in places like China, Italy, Iran, and South Korea are overflowing and are staff are working on vapors as their ability to rest is decimated, while supplies disappear from all shelves and even medicine becomes scarce.

But perhaps this thesis is even more pertinent and even holds some tiny kernel of hope as we stay at home and go fully online. Could this enforced separation time reconnect the possibilities of living and doing things in a simple way, to rediscover physical selfhood and identity in the material world. This week I will begin making bread again as the supermarkets are emptied by frightened people trying to survive without getting the virus for as long as possible.

In a large bowl tip 3 cups of any type of flour, and one and a half cups of any seeds and cereals, bran and rye, fresh rosemary or herb that you particularly like. In another container put 2 teaspoons of dry yeast, or one cube of active yeast, a table-spoon of sugar or honey and some luke-warm water. Let it sit for a while, away from drafts, until the surface is covered with tiny popping active bubbles, then add it to the dry bowl ingredients. Stir with a wooden spoon, then roll up your sleeves and grasp the mixture in your hands, push it around the large mixing bowl and start to fold it over onto itself – kneading the dough… adjust the water or flour as the dough gets too dry or too wet. When it is responding to your hand and a fingerprint returns out towards you after indentation, pour a drizzle of olive oil over the surface and cover the bowl with a wet cloth. Place in a non-drafty area that is slightly warm and allow to prove or rise.

When it is double the size, this depends on climate, elevation etc… (in the desert and at elevation it could be a full night before the bread can be worked), re-knead the dough for a few minutes then cover and leave for about an hour. Turn the oven on to 450F or 230C and put a Dutch oven or lidded casserole container in to heat up. When the oven reaches temperature take out the Dutch oven and carefully roll the bread dough into it. The heat will stop it from sticking to the surface and give it a lovely crust. At this point you can sprinkle more seeds or salt crystals onto the surface of the bread. Put in the oven and bake for 35 minutes with the lid on and a further 15 with the lid off. The bread should sound hollow when you tap on the top of it.

Allow to cool on a rack

In the poignantly beautiful words of Jia Tolentino, “we’ve got nothing except our small attempts to retain our humanity, to act on a model of actual selfhood, one that embraces culpability, inconsistency, and insignificance.”[48]

Everywhere I have lived in the world I have always made bread. If I think about the reasons behind this, I believe it is a sub-conscious inherited instinct, of self-reliance and kindness, making a shareable loaf, filling the house with a comforting aroma. It reconnects me to the most basic survival and making processes we know as humans.

But mostly I just like the simple act of hand-making bread, which involves all the senses.

ENDNOTES

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4. Kitty Taube personal quote
5. Susan Sontag, *(On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 208
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25. Jean Baudrillard, and Chris Turner, (*The Perfect Crime*. London: Verso Books, 2008), xi
26. Jean Baudrillard, and Chris Turner, (*The Perfect Crime*. London: Verso Books, 2008), 2.
27. Jean Baudrillard, and Chris Turner, (*The Perfect Crime*. London: Verso Books, 2008), 4.
28. Jean Baudrillard, and Chris Turner, (*The Perfect Crime*. London: Verso Books, 2008), 4
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Merleau-Ponty after Malebranche philosophies, an essay about the physical body and consciousness. “The flesh is not something one has, but, rather the web in which one lives.” (p. 36) Malebranche disputed the Cartesian distinction between body and soul… (p.39) Merleau-Ponty writes, “We are our soul but we do not have the idea of it; we only have feeling’s obscure contact with it.” (p. 40) He continues later with the idea that ‘touch’ is “the animating condition of sentience, but continues as the actively animating principle of feeling and knowing.” (p. 42*)* It is only when “a body is already exposed to something other than itself, (tactile impressions) something by which it can be affected, that it becomes possible for a sentient self to emerge.” (p. 41) Butler discusses the two philosophers’ work saying that*,* “if touch inaugurates a feeling that animates self-representation, and if self-representation can never give a full or adequate account of what animates it, then there is always an opacity to any account of myself I might give.” (p. 46) “Spatial and temporal experience effectively follow from the touch.” (p. 47)

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An essay about the non-real and our relationship to it by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard

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Photography is the medium of our time, it is democratic, fast, immediate and it involves chance. The author Jerry Thompson writes Photography is, "A way of knowing the world, that transcends our educations, our opinions, our intentions, hopes and desires – in a word our 'subjectivity'." (p. 9)

It is a 150-year-old visual medium that informs how we understand *today,* which forms our comprehension of how the world works. Thomson continues saying it is "a new kind of epistemology, a new hitherto impossible way of learning about the world." (p. 12)
The discussion advances into a discourse about "inside" and "outside" and how they relate to photography. He writes "there exists a balance between the 'outside' (our visible world)…and the 'inside' (the perceiving, shaping, intelligence of the photographer)." (p. 19)
When a photographer takes their first image, "The picture shows the first, provisional agreement between the multiplicity of the world and the narrow understanding of the artist." (p. 20)

Photography became a form of language just as writing is. Thompson writes in his analogy of writing and photography, "the choice and sounds of the words forcefully propel, even in part create, their sense…pictures work the same way, by finding a sensible form and an intelligible understanding together, intertwined and inseparable…Each new try begins with the untidy chaos of the world, with taking a fresh look at the raw feast." (p. 22)

Thompson talks about how photography has become a kind of shorthand and how the familiar imagery becomes "worn out because we no longer consider them carefully." (p. 72) He writes that "Walker Evans as an artist calls our attention to humble objects, out-of-the-way places, and details of gesture, attitude, and character we would not likely have seen so clearly without his agency." (p. 76)

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Against Interpretation
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IMAGE SOURCES

Page 27-30
Obscurations - a series of 8” x 10” tintype self-portraits by Frances Melhop 2017-2020
Tintype Self #16, *Tintype Self #28, Tintype Self #29, Tintype self #31.*

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Francesca Woodman “Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976,” one of about 120 photographs in a survey of this artist’s brief career, on view at the Guggenheim.Credit...Courtesy of George and Betty Woodman, 2012

Page 34
Francesca Woodman, American. 1976. House #3, Providence, Rhode Island. Photograph. Place: The National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.), Gift of the Heather and Tony Podesta Collection. https://library.artstor.org/asset/ANGAIG_10314024421.

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The Piano movie poster
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0107822/mediaviewer/rm1438736128

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Harvey Keitel Film Still from *The Piano*.
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Page 37
Film still of Ana Paquin and Holly Hunter from *The Piano.*
https://www.miramax.com/movie/the-piano/

Page 37
Film still of Karen Fergusson in *An Angel at My Table.*
http://sensesofcinema.com/2017/cteq/an-angel-at-my-table/

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