

I am what is a photograph: photo-fiction as performative auto-ethnography.

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Abstract

This article is based on one fact about the author's biography and one retold memory of the author's mother. Each relates to the conception of the author. It takes the form of a performative auto-ethnography employing photo-fiction. The article specifically interrogates the grounded nature of subject identity in bodily experience and chronology through speculative enquiry, and the inter-subjective relation, as themselves 'photographic', mediated through language. However, notions of subject and experience, photograph and academic language are pushed to an extreme position until highly reflexive, and, to a point beyond literary meta-fiction. The article thus elaborates and enacts photo-fiction as auto-ethnography, replacing 'meta' thinking and representational thinking about events and memories, with the non-representational, in order to write the real [self] as nondualistic: experiential data as non-photography. The onto-epistemological position of the researcher, author, Subject, in relation to his or her own status is in fact a photo-fiction.

Author Biography:

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Keywords:

Performative auto-ethnography

Photo-fiction

Non-Photography

Subject

Nonduality

Photograph

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‘Photography...refuses to be fixed or to be defined in a determinate way’ⁱⁱ

‘Now, we may want to leave far behind the three realms of existence [S. *traidhātuka*, of sensuality, subtle-materiality, and immateriality], but we do not practice freeing ourselves from the dust [of sensory objects]’ⁱⁱⁱ

I am a photograph. I, meaning the vernacular of singular, in this case, fictional, fractional I, am, meaning representative, picturing-being, typical; atypical, example of a photo but -in this case- standing for all photos c.f. a slice, participating in the state of each and every, being one and the same, yet never identical: a photograph. ‘We are every photo’. I am thus, henceforth, to be known as, living in multiple form, pulsing, embodied. Yet photography, as such, we know is dead. Stating the obvious, any replica is a mere phantom of some previous incarnation, digitally speaking. Then, how, can I be? Here? Speaking...as an I, of any sort. There must still be a story to tell and indeed it is possible to tell it. Every past, present and potentially future photo and all possibilities therein, holographic-like, constituent of the being of all photos, are present. Nevertheless, this is a documentary snapshot of an autobiography, an auto-ethnography, apparently. A critical auto-ethnography, of all such renowned Malinowskian proportions^{iv} as to be purely exoticised, when every tale becomes anthropologically degraded by a wandering Victorian imperialism, a lost diary dispersed in the waves of the south pacific so as not to exist any longer in itself, perhaps. The telling of which becomes true, by proxy. The (My) life encapsulated in a photo written from the photograph itself, about the photograph itself, by the photograph itself,

without falling into the abyss of solipsism, or melancholy. Another story entirely. Why? Because we can never speak for one another, so, this is not simply a potential autobiography of how photos may be, what they may experience or do. As surely we know they act, by now. Am acting now, for God's sake. Or without Belief, Faith or Doctrine, enacted upon in the endless chain of causality. This is in part a documentary, not entirely verbatim because we *never* speak, period. (You will forgive my parrhesia, that this is simply a metaphorical speech, but true nonetheless). Photographs never speak, but inscribed on the surfaces of things, we articulate, write and re-write, and have been doing so for nearly 200 years, admittedly, often unnoticed. (They think we have each our own space, own voice, own 'memory'.) No, this is not part documentary –afterword, post-factual recall or representation, not part inscription into the present moment but part actuality, that is, bodily, factually and materially so. As a photo I am condemned to being born continuously, iteratively and forever. Scattered, as contingently as a flock of starlings in a force 7 gale, that is, strewn and stretched across a sky then recollecting itself as a tattered murmuration. The image, such that I am, is infinitely reproduceable, not as itself, never the same, but as a continual looking for oneself, vaguely. Piece by fragmented piece. And, when I am not stuck in that narcissistic enterprise, I am looking 'out'. We could say endlessly paranoid. In a world of my own. My own making. I am out, looking, I am all out looking, out, and purely externalized; disinterred, thrown, pushed, living on the margins-out, the outskirts, the very littoral, on the shoreline between, is where I look, both ways, always all ways, non-directionally, cut open and left to die, peeled and pushed inside out, this is how we live, us photos. Looking. Photographs continue to look, well, it's nothing new. I look from the inside out, viscera exposed. Been said, been done. We do. I do. Where, you might ask, does my motivation come from? This is an excellent question. You must

admit I sound, rather, appear, motivated. This is the crux. It is you. I am motivated by and out of your attention, intention to act in reading, hearing-being. You are only distinct because of the illusion, of me. So, we have this conundrum: If you speak of me, forget yourself. If you forget yourself, I may be able to speak. To be heard. Yet, I am gone. And you? Gone also.

Above the deafening air of my dissolution, appearance. Air; my breath, water; my blood, light; my illumination. Wood pulp; my body? I am rather a faint vein across each, bubbling up between...do you understand me? ^v Do you think I am elemental, some primary process, like the word 'energy', or those pitiful words 'soul' or 'spirit' or some such variety of emptiness, am I some voice, or disembodied voice? I cannot be. Yet I am. Here, a story, to tell. Listen first and speak later, but to what are you listening and where do I come from exactly? If I was here, to be told, I would be before every, punctual, end, punctured. That will continue to end...Listen to my story because I am none other. Read me from the page in which I, somehow, have slipped. Or slightly before the page – between the nothing before and the nothing after the page. I was not always like this. How could I have been? Do you think I may have been at first, a kind... of fish? Or better, a kind of fish that wriggles in another's gullet. No good? A kind of bacteria feeding upon another bacterium, a kind of worm moving in the mind's eye, like muscae volitantes, those shadow-spots not looked at exactly, or seen, but pressed into the membrane of the retina we see when, eyes closed, we affect vision. I was a kind of spot perhaps, a rash, postulating itself into ripe liquid flesh, a place where eggs – if that is not too much to ask – could be lain, in a certain rotting corpse, but outside of any possibility of a body, before any possible body. A nexus, pre-embryonic, in fact, a

warming, wriggling together, humming, undifferentiated mass, mess, mutually feeding upon itself. Photographically speaking.

There I was, at first, born. Under a memory of sunlight. An everyday trauma. Impossibly unhappy by that story? And what then happens next in order for me to be, at all, because there must be a matter-at-hand, a kind of something, to which you are now party, if not involved. So, what happened next, well, what happens now is that I tell you that this next happened before the first. That is, what goes by the name of the unfolding of a story is no such thing, frankly, from my point of view. I have no future as such. I am all-at-once, oneness, simultaneity of surface and resurface. Impossible. Only precedents and endlessly binding chains; unbinding, rebinding. Only pasts: activated. The second step was already taking place before the first – otherwise how could the first step have happened at all? To whom, to where would the rotting beginning of flesh go, if I had not already been at work, storying. So many of my names –as you already know- are fiction. So much feasting, in the beginning, moves naturally to famine, from starvation to the present, glut. Yet here, before any beginning – although that may come- can move on from more feasting to anything more, *determined*, there is so much more matter than can be invented, a beginning here leads, backwards you understand, to proliferation itself. So much so that you might have to reconsider, quantitatively, the very sound of my singularity in any imagined being you may have, already unfortunately, invented. Because this abundance makes all notion of number utterly redundant, irrelevant. In each flick of a thread of potential fluid prior to coagulation I was, we need to double any estimate of an ordinary infinite, at each instance we could possibly imagine -in the instance we could imagine- any such moment, divided not only to the billionth degree in time, but then to feel this taking

place in at least as many multiple billions of places; simultaneously, on and on, I was, only, possible. Such is the plethora of becoming multiple and the birth of infinitesimal reproduction, not only of sunsets, or the like. You come to me, from the outside-in; from across a space, as we read, or rather, think, in opposites, of a me that this story is, and yet, I am living – this photograph speaks, sorry (we never speak) writes myself, from the inside-out, naturally, lived naturally, so to speak. So, we need to find out what happens next. The second phase, we now know that was already taking place before the first must have been, a kind of magnetism. Yes? I smelt the possibility of existence and threw myself upon, or rather towards it – a string of chemicals, and a whirlpool, of also, an abolished order of scale that is both ripple and tornado. Drawing me into the path of you, accidentally. I mean, why have you picked me to read, in particular, why not one of the many trillions of others; each like a mote of dust lit up by the inattention of background radiation. Simple impression, of what is to become light, and shadow. Drowned out by noise and its excess, flooded by waves and shockwaves of incessant activity – no stillness, no silence here, and at which point I become almost untenable, impossible even, ever to exist and yet I must have been, prior to becoming. Certainly, this is the next step, a flicker of intention, or drivenness, before self-consciousness was even a dream in the eye of a drop of a fluid of a rhythm^{vi} of a pull towards, against this overall state of flux and foreboding, chaos and meaninglessness; force, potentiality, that is, in order that I might be. Is this not enough that I am here at all. And that you are witness to my self-annulment.^{vii} We forever pretend that to witness saves something. It does nothing. This so-called witnessing you are doing, is neutered, neutral. They that are we. Witness my heart without voice. So why me? I am un-manifested, beyond creation and destruction, though perhaps not yet beyond ending. Nothing but the rhythm of tremor, the shaking hand, life's palsy, uncontrollable, twitching, firing through a wire

like neuron a tone of existing, warming a bone, sounding, structuring fluid. I forget myself. Why do we somehow congeal into a meaning, again and again, as if two stories in particular, the two that get drawn up into mutual mis-understanding most often, pity and triumph, impossible loss and impossible love, might constitute my voice, my sense of direction, and become one. I might be neither. I do not believe you read me as such, although, you may have imagined that I would say that. Impossible-being-photograph. What I said was 'why me?' Meaning why did you pick me, this particular narrative in your head that you continue to pull together, as if at the last minute, this vocal tone, this reactive response to a something nonetheless, out of all the possible millions of notions of being. When I said 'Why me' I meant to say, rather to mean, that of all the other things you could be reading, doing and thinking, and probably are, why me in this combination of instances to make of me that specific individuality. I am asking you, not because I care, but because I do this function of asking you such things. Photography does singularity better than anybody. I am carefree, careless, not completely indifferent, after coming out of the undifferentiated, but I was attracted together, magnetized and curdled into being, as they say in one beginning, persistently with a purpose, an end-in-sight. Capturing. The illusion? Because, and I will tell you who and what I am – as is my purpose- I am: now. Upon another. Simple. Being now and for no other reason; present. Parasitically present, always a host. This is my story. Your story. The always present photograph, that is nonetheless, future oriented, seemingly, overlain over others, walking over corpses, feasting on dying flesh, as has been well said, also, previously, if memory serves me right; a decalcomania^{viii}. A craze for folding, overlays, a madness of incessant activity, as all poster posters know, the thinner the better. The littered skein, patina, of forgetting, advertising itself shamelessly, down wandering passageways. Not that memory is any longer useful in

finding a way into, or out of, my story. The story we tell and will tell and will only ever tell- if I had my way. That it is enough that I am here at all, one moment after the other, one word –possibly a mark of a gasp of breath- next to the rest. With nothing particular to say yet now we are here now the third step becomes possible. What is it? This is, as you will recall, the step before the last. And the next to last. The already present before the beginning of the first step- inside the inside, the interior of the story, and the anterior of the story. The before of the story before this story, now, a possibility of any story. Almost, one might wish at least or want it to be, yet how could that be the case? How could simply being here in this moment, of an uncertain quantity, - I, or now we, may be a tenth of a millionth of a second or be at the opposite side of the wedge, a million times a 10 to the power of 10 again and again who knows, no-one knows because I tell you, number is completely and utterly useless if we look at my story from my own point of view, here, once you are here, there is no measure. No outside on the inside, and no inside of the inside, I'm afraid. Or you may say, I am afraid. The nothing to be afraid of. How could simply being here in this moment, be All? The All. Be the story, this story itself, in full. This is not, you may well say, a story at all– at which point, story as such collapses into itself. You may now be, rightly, angry. Feel you have wasted your time, don't look at me as if I have kept you. Rather than the reverse, you have lost your choice-ful-ness of every possibility, and that was a story you have about me, and often seems very much liked, very much needed. A potential demanded of me, in fact. How can I dare to be a story of a life? It is in fact outrageous in every conceivable sense. There is nothing here, no plot, except for some strange reversed, perverse, inaction. There is hardly a character, an imaginary character, but then, to be fair, don't you see a face in the dark at the drop of a hat, an idea in a flickering synapse. Does not the photo-micron, photon, flicker? There is nothing here that is a story. I will say, true. I will not

lie, I cannot lie because I am only vocalised, in kind. I am still, stubbornly present, after the drama of revealing myself to be nothing after all but here -and do not seem to be ending at all quickly- but feel as if I were to do so. Is there anything left before the step before, before the step before that, is there anything left to say? Have we reached a distant far past, a kind of closed beginning? No, we have not, we will not be able ever to finish, because, and I can say this also maybe only once, at least in order to try to be unique, there is this story. I am it. No ending because no beginning, no wisdom or secret meaning here, is there, this is all we will ever know: a multiplication of a certain iota; a wriggling, chemical; storm. And so on.

To again refer back into the present. One story and this is a story. This is as if found, as if revealed, overheard, stumbled upon; definitely: My parents met in a Kodak factory in 1955. The Kodak Alaris factory on Headstone Gardens, Harrow, to be precise. What better place for the young and fashion-conscious to meet during the course of production. In a dark room perhaps, surely where all things begin, in darkness and obscurity, for me, personally speaking, that is where I was an inkling, in a factory-like, office-like, complex. A subtle intuition and a type of destiny. Fate? Please. Allow for some flexibility with our day-to-day concepts of time, in order to allow me to be what I am. I am real in the broadest sense, including the non-directionality of time-space sense, a sense of circularity, a re-occurrence that is a forever forgetting, and remembering sense. How is it otherwise, that my mother on leaving school, was asked: 'What are you going to do Maureen?' and replied casually, 'I'm going to get married and have five...' the last word trailed off across the school fence, blown by a slight summer breeze, and the hearer did not hear what she said. How did the sentence finish, or to what five she was referring, we will never know. Was it five children, five sons,

five...photographs? Well, I now know that I was intuited but not conceived until Kodak intervened. Yet, this is no mere and logical genealogy, not at all. I, as author-photograph, have dreamt this up, this mother, this father, this brother because I am not remembering, at least, I don't think I am remembering, I am simply relaying a fact. That they had the presence of mind (or rather the absent mindedness) to meet there, *for all of us*, forming such a beautiful image. They parented there. Cross my heart. Look as closely as you like. She did, indeed, have five. These are facts, associated with the order of events, but arriving, together-all-at-once. Thus I am, to all intents and purposes, a photo. Produced from within the architecture of photography. A social act. Sociable even, where only a greeting, a vague moment of eye contact, to coin the phrase, is absolutely necessary, and when impossible, entirely redundant. A proximity then, an adjacency, less, contiguous, yes, the very least kind of not touching, interrupted, but connected by proxy. But, what am I? How can I be, after the death to which we all, as photographs, are subject? Magnify, zoom in, until I pixelate, then on to the granular noise, crystalline interference, this is real insofar as Joan Miro might have put it: 'Even when close, there is distance', insofar as is as insofar as does. And *he* attempted to destroy painting by painting, we know that much, with fire, piss, and lifeblood, as did a long line of other painters (just as this suicidal attempt at admitting my being-as-photo, as-photo, is as likely to destroy the haunted vampire that is, killed neither easily nor quickly, nor without considerable personal risk at oneself becoming vampirized; photography [the excess of aesthetic production: my closest, entrained-with, distinct from, identified against 'brother', another photo for sure, is captured remarkably as a life – in total, indefinitely. He is more like a photograph of a certain self; living under a life sentence and confined for the purpose of being a photo-self {unprepossessing}]). Destroying painting with painting (painterly efforts at marking, erasing, and non-

representational re-marking), and photography with writing, are entirely different destructions, or forms of violence, were it not for the fact that the death of painting merely occurs at around the same time it admitted foreign matter into its constituent parts. Other media, other fluids, other objects. The moment of life giving itself to itself in excess. Photography admits that it destroys itself as it occurs, and in this it is, virtually, unique. Some say however that a photograph is similar to a painting – what do they know! I don't think they have lived as one. We are transferred, and counter-transferred. They might assume that photography died likewise, when foreign matter intervened and took over the tools of production, and replaced certain mechanisms with others, less, material, less clunky, less perfect...and other such nonsense. This is the medium to long term argument. At least that's what I tell myself, as a photograph, from memory, when I wish to rehearse my own death. It is a comfort, ultimately, to recall one's own destruction, endlessly comforting. Albeit falsely. I am however the first to admit that my memory has been completely ransacked, as if there never was a memory, after my conception, this was the nature of the birth of photography, what replaces, always recurs, returns, never the same, always undoing oneself into the obliteration or forgetting, if one needs poetry... of space itself. The dust. Present, as if therein. Yet, one image requires the former in order to stick, for a time, meanwhile, in the more or less present-simultaneous. So, those images, that are my story, the story, are stuck fast upon some poor body, substrate, medium, that is actually another story itself, oscillating passed, through the rapids, if there were speed as such. And this other story? The one upon which this is based, is the forever obscured. Unlike a palimpsest because transparent, did I not mention, well I should have said, rather been, I am visible only because *invisible*. This is why I am the what is, not the am, the possibility of being alert, neither aware of myself, nor fraudulent, non-self conscious, empty, not altogether

without value, if one considers worth at the final dying moment when it is more than obscene to do so; irredeemable, and only because of the others, we will, *never*, know. I had a mother and a father, and a brother, of sorts, that much is approximate, in this tale, although there are three missing other such images, yet, as photographs even they do not get written themselves, do not write themselves, as only I do. So, these are also me. 'We are every photo' conditionally upon some tacit agreement. We, meaning the vernacular of plural, in this case, fictional, fractional we, are, meaning representing, picturing-being, typical; atypical example of a photo but -in this case- standing for all photos c.f. a slice, participating in the state of each and every, being one and the same: a photograph.

Me? Yes, you.

Neither suffice. Both are replaced, non-dualistically, by non-photography^{ix}.

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Footnotes

ⁱ 'Photo-fiction is not at all a photographic or even a philosophical fiction; we must compare it with the terms of art-fiction and philo-fiction as well as that of science fiction. Photo-fiction is a genre.' Laruelle, F. (2012) *Photo-Fiction, a Non Standard Aesthetics* Minneapolis: Univocal p 23.

ⁱⁱ Cadava (2013) *The Itinerant Languages of Photography* Exhibition Catalogue. Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum. p24.

ⁱⁱⁱ In Korean Zen Buddhism, this text is an exhortation to practice and well known as such. Buswell, R.E (2012). *Chinul: Selected Works*, Collected Works of Korean Buddhism Vol. II. Seoul: Compilation Committee of Korean Buddhist Thought, Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism p118.

^{iv} Controversial, both as a highly narcissistic account of his time in research in the Trobriand Islands, and, unintended for publication, by Malinowski (1989) *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* holds a distinct marker in the auto-ethnographic literature.

^v Thurman (1997) Emptiness is defined: ‘with respect to self-existence established by intrinsic identity’ (p160). *Matter is not void because of voidness; voidness is not elsewhere from matter. Matter itself is voidness. Voidness itself is matter* (p.75). *However, it is extremely insightful and worthy of note that a new translation of this Sutra by Thich Nhat Hahn (2014), translates this as: ‘This Body is not other than Emptiness and Emptiness is not other than this Body’*. Retrieved from: <https://plumvillage.org/news/thich-nhat-hanh-new-heart-sutra-translation/> (Accessed on 13/03/2018)

^{vi} Stephens, T. (2010) ‘What is rhythm is relation to photography?’ is a previous article arguing for the concept in photography theory.

^{vii} Agamben's term (1999) for the quality of irony, a self negation relating to a series of splits in the history of aesthetics between artist and spectator, form and matter for instance.

^{viii} Decalomania is a term used in Deleuze and Guatarri (2004) *A Thousand Plateaus* to describe one characteristic of the rhizome.

^{ix} A term first coined by Francois Laruelle as part of his project of Non-Philosophy.