Chapter 9
The Intertwining—The Chiasm:
Embodiment, Affect, and Autobiographical Photography

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ABSTRACT

The author deploys the notion of embodiment to provide a theoretical framework for a series of autobiographical photographs, Encountering Windrift (2012-2018). Applied to certain modes of autobiographical photography, the theory of embodiment proposed is based upon the notion of the photograph as the embodiment of an encounter between the photographer, the photographed subject, and the viewer. In autobiographical photography the embodied encounter may be heightened by the apparent intimacy between photographer and subject. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of the chiasm and Jill Bennett's notion of an affective transaction serve to support this conception of the photograph as an embodied encounter in that both imply an intertwining of self and other. While the viewer may never be able to access another person's subjective experience directly, certain formal and conceptual approaches to autobiographical photography may enable the viewer's understanding of the photographer's personal experience of space and time, whilst simultaneously triggering their own autobiographical memory.

INTRODUCTION

I remember the images... They have substituted themselves for my memory. They are my memory. I wonder how people remember things which they don't film, don't photograph, don't tape... (the narrator in Chris Marker's Sans Soleil, 1983.)

The primary motivation for the research outlined in this chapter is to provide a theoretical framework for my body of work *Encountering Windrift* (2012 – 2017), a series of autobiographical photographs focused on the domestic sphere of suburbia, familial relationships and the experience of mortality. I posit the autobiographical photograph as the embodiment of an affective encounter between photographer,

photographic referent[1], and viewer. I argue that certain photographs, in their resemblance to vernacular photographs found in the family album or on Instagram, despite not being part of the viewer's autobiographical narrative, may trigger autobiographical memory. My autobiographical memory has been deeply informed by my family photographs. Whether these photographs show a constructed, idealised view or have eclipsed actual memory to become a counter-memory, it is undeniable that they form an essential component of my autobiographical narrative. This complex and intertwining relationship between autobiographical memory and photography underpins my own photographic practice.

Photography is frequently accused of transforming a subject into an object (Barthes, 1981, p.14) and indicted as being aggressive and voyeuristic (Sontag, 2008, pp. 7-16). While I agree with aspects of this criticism, I believe that in instances where photographers are deeply involved in the lives of those they photograph, the degree of objectification is lessened.

Photography theorist Ariella Azoulay, in her ground-breaking book *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008), suggests that which is inscribed in the frame of a photograph, as well as the interpretation thereof, is the product of an encounter of several protagonists: "camera, photographer, photographed subject, and spectator" (p.21). Azoulay (2008) writes that anybody involved in photography – the photographer, the referent, and the viewer of the resultant image – are caught up in the "civil contract of photography" (pp. 21-22). Through the notion of the civil contract, she offers a more nuanced approach to the act of photographing the suffering of others than the disparaging view frequently expressed by photography theorists[2]. She suggests that the act of photography gives visibility to people who have been politically side-lined, thus giving them agency. Like Azoulay's contract, I consider a photograph as embodying the encounter between photographer, photographic referent, and the viewer. Indeed, I use the term embodied encounter to signify an interrelationship between people, objects and places – a citizenry – brought into being through the photographic act and the viewing of the image. The word encounter on its own signifies a confrontation, the embodied aspect of the encounter is where the interrelationship occurs, thus my formulation *embodied encounter*. In support of the theory of photography I propose, I draw on notions of embodiment, the chiasm and affect. Maurice Merleau-Ponty insists on our embodied "being-in-the-world" as cited in Grosz (2020, p. 86) and a "chiasmic intertwining" (1968, p.130) of self, other and the world. Jill Bennett (2005) posits that photographs convey an embodied affective experience because of their ability to evoke the viewer's own emotional and bodily memories: "to *touch* the viewer who *feels* rather than simply sees" (p. 36). These notions challenge the separation of mind and body, and self and other. I postulate that photographs taken by a photographer directly implicated in the events portrayed may *enhance* the experience of the embodied encounter.

In my series of photographs, I aim to evoke certain embodied qualities of everyday life in a middle-class suburb in post-apartheid South Africa. I began these photographs of my family in my childhood home after my mother had been diagnosed with a terminal illness. I photographed my family as we dealt with the trauma of my mother's pending death. I continued photographing as my father, my sister and I went through the process of grieving and readjusting to the 'new normal' of the situation. While *Encountering Windrift* portrays a family dealing with grief and loss, it is also about the "the ordinary days [that] form a forgettable continuum" (Langford, 2007, p. 5). These are often moments that if they had not been photographed, would most likely not have been remembered.

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