# Chapter 22
# Photographic Non–Self

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## ABSTRACT

*Non-self has unsurprisingly been featured very little in explanatory material of-object-based contemporary art history. Buddhist nonself has contributed to subjectivity research, but non-self in photography is, perhaps appropriately, absent. This chapter will explore how the experience of non-self might differ from but overlap with emptiness in the 'history of art' specifically 'photography theory and practice.' The author's research in experiential non-self wrestles with the complexities of non-representation when articulating embodied affect, of childhood racial discrimination, for instance. Yet, embodied autobiographical non-self is an impossible category. This is a subjugated knowledge that disrupts self-hood, undermines historical artefacts -leaving us with no birth of photography- and ruptures socio-cultural identity. Can a contemporary secular Buddhist non-self function as liberatory? Photographic non-self might render 'writing on/and photography' disastrous, when indelibly marked by the failures of representation.*

## INTRODUCTION

Roland Barthes (1981/2006) discusses how we "designate reality" through photographs, and summarily invokes Buddhism no sooner than to reduce it:

*Buddhism says sunya, the void; but better still: tathata, […] tat means that in Sanskrit and suggests the gesture of the child pointing his finger at something and saying: that, there it is, lo! but says nothing else (p.5).*

Likewise, Buddhist terms are easily misrepresented due to their ready appropriation. In talking about "detail" Barthes describes: "a tiny shock, a satori, the passage of a void (it is of no importance that its referent is insignificant)" (p.49). Here, he conflates "satori" with "void", which explains neither whilst confusing both. A lack of clarity regards 'the East', the 'naïve insight' embodied in a child, are both problematic. Yet, Buddhist philosophy and cultural perspectives had certainly infused themselves into western

social cultures, long before, but certainly visibly culminating in numerous examples from the arts from mid-twentieth century onwards (Fields, 1992; Westgeest, 1997; Baas & Jacob, 2004; Batchelor, 2011).

So, a hyphenated 'non-self' will be used in some contexts where a western perspective, biased towards the cognitive, is indicated, whilst the spelling 'nonself' indicates its Sanskrit/Pali derivation and more complex connotations.

Non-self seems to come into sharpest focus when considered in autobiographical, or photographic 'self-portraiture'. Self-Studies has been developing over the last two decades and addresses a puzzle, well summed up by Metzinger (2011) in *The Oxford Handbook of the Self* when he said: "…there seems to be no empirical evidence and no truly convincing conceptual argument that supports the actual existence of 'a' self" (p.278). I will ask: how is the *Self* represented if the Self is, in fact, *empty*? This philosophically and experientially informed notion of Buddhist-heritage, *śūnyatā* (Sanskrit) emptiness, has arguably already added depth and insight in numerous curatorial readings of contemporary art of a minimal or ephemeral type (Baas & Jacob, 2004, Weinhart & Hollein, 2006). This is closely aligned to nonself, *Anattā* (Pali) but not synonymous. Its neglect may be due, as Metzinger points out, because: "many… automatically assume that an entity like 'the self' must actually exist and that a relevant and well-posed set of scientific and theoretical questions relates to this entity" (2011, p.278). This is especially complex when the 'non-self' in question is subjected to identity-based (racial) discrimination, or, a photographically enacted non-self disavows (its) identity.

This chapter's strategy, therefore, addresses the problems of appropriation, epistemic violence (Spivak, 1999, p.266) and Buddhist nonself as a form of "subjugated knowledge" as expressed by Spivak (1999, p.267) from Foucault. Foucault (1980) defines subjugated knowledge as: "a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it" (1980, p.82). Childhood experiences, of wounds caused by racism, of deprivation, or equally of joy and connection with place, for example, of family and community identity, each seem to offer the longevity and solidity of memory that forms and manintains self-identity. Yet, if these very same experiences are realised later as akin to an experience of non-self; and are accompanied by the necessary failure of articulating "the Self" in writing, or through photographic art, can this provide insight into how an embodied subjugated knowledge of non-self is enacted? This line of research also stems from my recent contribution on Buddhism and race (Stephens in Harris, 2021 pp.346-351).

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There will be a series of paragraphs, written in a strophic form, like verses or fragments, derived from Blanchot's (1986) example in *Writing of the Disaster*. Theories and practices appear in combination, in short narratives, or separately, emblematically. Each paragraph will be separated by a fleuron "U+2766 ❦ FLORAL HEART (HTML &#10086)".

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Both Barthes (1967/1977) and Foucault (1969/1977), in the *Death of the Author* and *What is an Author?* respectively, enact the decentring of the author-self, and evoke forms of non-self by doing so. In these texts, Barthes concludes with the "birth of the reader" and Foucault "the author function", both become key features of post-structuralist discourse.

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