

**Title: How can the photographic image mediate experiences that
occupy the space between the real and the unreal?**

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"The corpse [...], that which has irremediably come a cropper, is a cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death... These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until from loss to loss nothing remains in me, and my entire body falls beyond the limit - cadere, cadaver."

- Kristeva, J. *The Powers Of Horror; An Essay on Abjection* (1980)

Indelicate is he who loathes
The aspect of his fleshy clothes, —
The flying fabric stitched on bone,
The vesture of the skeleton,
The garment neither fur nor hair,
The cloak of evil and despair,
The veil long violated by
Caresses of the hand and eye.
Yet such is my unseemliness:
I hate my epidermal dress,
The savage blood's obscenity,
The rags of my anatomy,
And willingly would I dispense
With false accouterments of sense,
To sleep immodestly, a most
Incarnadine and carnal ghost.

- Roethke, T. *Epidermal Macabre* (n.d)

Prelude

Jean-Paul Sartre's statement in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 1943) offers a contemplative way to think about photography. The photograph long began as an act of existence before becoming an object of meaning. Photography has always existed in the realm between a record of the 'real' and its undeniable ability to conjure the unreal. A photograph acts as both a trace of something that *has been* and an object that evokes memory, emotion and even unease. This dual nature of the material and the immaterial, raises the fundamental question of this thesis.

How can the photographic image mediate experiences that occupy the space between the real and the unreal? By dissecting how photography and moving image can both reveal and contort reality, this dissertation will act as a way to understand imagery, not only as an index of the world but as an encounter of creator and viewer, and the tension between perception and presence. Through concepts of ontology, phenomenology and abjection I aim to understand the fragile boundary where existence and affect lie, referring to the writers Roland Barthes, Martin Heidegger and Julia Kristeva.

Chapter 2: Ontology

In its simplest description ontology is the study of what is real or what exists. It helps us to better understand the world, it is science, logic and comfort. When considered ontologically, the photograph is a material object that captures a record of what has existed. It is a trace of reality that persists regardless of human observation. However, its effect and significance is totally reliant on human perception. Roland Barthes observes in *Camera Lucida* (1980), that the photograph is an "emanation of the referent" (Barthes,

1980), meaning it is a direct trace of what once was. In this sense, the photographic image captures a past moment that only comes to life in the viewers present experience. It bridges the space between, what has been and what is observed in the now.

This way of thinking can be linked to the philosophical ideas of Heraclitus, specifically his often paraphrased observation, “no man ever steps in the same river twice” (Apx 500 BC). It encapsulates the idea that the Earth is not in stasis. Reality is in a constant state of becoming. Although the exact phrasing varies across different translations, the sentiment still remains. The river is never the same because the water continuously moves, just like humanity. Nothing holds its form for long. The photograph, therefore, becomes even more complicated. Photography tries to inject stasis into something that is always transforming. From the very moment light reacts with chemical, our world has already changed. By nature photography is *always* the past, always something that is already gone. The image functions as a ghost, a moment that can never be experienced in the same way again.

In that sense, the photograph becomes haunted ontology. It is a medium defined by both presence and loss, by showing what was real, but confronting us with the inability of returning to that place or time, because it no longer exists.

Chapter 2: Phenomenology

Understanding the photograph as a haunted ontology, only raises more questions. It tells us what the image is, but it doesn't explain the strange pull that certain photographs have, the ones embedded in the world, that make us feel something . The confusing, gut feeling when looking at images of old relatives, even those we have never met, reminds us that

there is something more to this medium. It is the historical context, our relationships, our blood, that binds us to the image, shaping how it resonates in our body and our memory. This is where we encounter phenomenology, it takes the image away from *what it is* and focuses on *what it does*. More specifically when we experience it and something stirs within us.

Here, Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*, from his magnum opus *Being and Time* (1927) connects with the inquiry of my dissertation. It is a particular essence that only belongs to human beings. It refers to a being in the world, a presence that is entailed with its surroundings, one that Heidegger defines as "a unified phenomenon" (Heidegger, 1927 - Translation, 1962). When we observe an image, that is *Dasein*, our situated and interpretive bodily experience, is what responds. An image doesn't just show us another world, it calls to us within our own. It reveals something about how we exist, how we remember and how we see ourselves as being shaped by time.

This becomes more clear when we encounter images that have an eerie, uncanny quality to them. Heidegger's *Dasein* responds not just to what we recognise as real, but also that which unsettles reality and disrupts our usual way of being in the world. Photographs that contain blur, double exposure or appear distressed in some way tend to create a kind of disturbance. They take something familiar and make it slightly wrong, just slightly impossible, as if the very fibre of our existence has shifted out of joint. Our perception tries to grasp for reality, but these type of images push against that and draw out a reaction, because they lay between the real and the unreal. Though the camera has recorded what is in front of it, the visual disturbances detach them from the ordinary, the normal. An uncanny photograph does not only depict strangeness, it triggers that strangeness within us. It reveals how our sense of what is real depends on our personal embodied perception,

and how photography can disturb the thin boundary between what is seen, what is felt and what is imagined.

Chapter 3: Abjection

This disturbance inside us, that feeling of being pushed out of the familiar, can go further into a deeper type of unsettlement. Some photographs do not simply feel uncanny or out of place. They confront us with what we push away, something we do not recognise as part of our own being.

Julia Kristeva's analysis of abjection in, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980) helps us to understand this reaction. The abject does not respect borders, rules or positions. Photography has a capacity to evoke that unstable place, especially when concerning themes of the body, decay, or the very limits of human form.

Kristeva's writing is particularly powerful when she addresses the corpse. She explains, that abjection arises when we encounter something that "disturbs identity, system and order" (Kristeva, 1980). We experience this in response to things that break down boundaries that we rely on to feel balanced. Open wounds, vomit, rotten food, sewage and also the corpse, create an immediate sense of unease. Another notable example is trypophobia, where clusters of small holes spaced tightly together, cause a full body response, in the form of itching or goosebumps. These reactions arrive before thought, a recoiling that reveals how fragile our sense of order truly is. The corpse makes way for the most severe psychological dilemma because it is, as Kristeva states "death infecting life" (1980). It confronts us with our own mortality. This rejection helps to cement us in the living, to keep that vulnerable line separate from what we fear becoming. The abject also exists within spaces that lack meaning or familiarity, those liminal places where reality

becomes thin. This is the reason why so many people are drawn to horror, as it allows us to define what we are, while understanding the borders that frighten us.

When considering photography, this idea deeply resonates. The photograph holds something that no longer belongs to the present, a form that once existed but is silent and without life. In this sense, the photograph becomes a sort of symbolic corpse. It contains the presence of a moment or person, but only as a still remnant that can't change or respond. The image remains, while our world moves forward. Kristeva labels the corpse as "the most sickening of wastes, a border that has encroached upon everything" (Kristeva, 1980). Each photograph confronts us with the unsettling truth that images are a small shrines or memories, that can never return. Even when we properly care for them, when we put them behind glass or place them into photo albums or dark boxes, the inevitable and insatiable appetite of time will eat them, consume them, until nothing remains.

Chapter 4, A Case Study : The Work Of Sally Mann

The work and philosophical ethos of American photographer Sally Mann, lives at the core of my thesis. Her practice emerges from a place of familiarity. The land she lives on, that anchors her families history, is the site of her photographic practice, yet it never settles within the comfort of these origins. Her photographs are suspended in time and place, and become bruises that unsettle the human condition. They lay in a place of loosening certainty. The familiar becomes alien, what we know becomes uncertain. Mann is often viewed under a gaze of provocation, but when listening to her discuss her work, it feels like that is never her intention. Within the intimate documentary, *What Remains: The Life and Work Of Sally Mann* (2005) she speaks of searching for "a moist, enveloping, womb-like

moment in the landscape” (Mann, 2005) or following traces of childhood that still reverberate across the land.

She chooses wet plate collodion as her medium, a substance that was, during the civil war, used to seal wounds and protect against infection. In a darkroom, a plate of glass is coated with the collodion substance and submerged into silver nitrate, so it can become light sensitive. While the surface is still wet, it must be placed into the camera slide, exposed and then promptly moved back into the dark. These images are poured into existence, they spend time in an unpredictable chemical state. This process is so meticulous and delicate, it insists on touch, timing and physical proximity to pungent chemicals, it's whole performance is sensory. The image is not just taken, it is held in a place of what *will be*. The still wet surface is vulnerable, able to be transformed by the smallest of movements. This tangibility gives the photograph an aura, a presence that feels fragile and layered. The plate becomes a body, with a filmy skin where chemistry and light react and leave trace. Because of this connection to fixing torn flesh, Mann's plates represent the medium's duality. They preserve as they expose, they bind as they fracture. The plates' surface resemble sealed wounds or stretched out healing membrane, that metaphorically tethers the living with the dead. It is the grace of imperfection found on these plates, which her practice depends on, the mistakes are just as part of her images as the subject. She jokes within the documentary, that there is a deep worry she may “perfect this technique one day” (Mann, 2005), a possibility that could remove her process from a strange, liminal place of rupture and preservation.

The photobook *What Remains (2003)*, begins with the death of her beloved pet greyhound, Eva. Mann buried Eva along with the help of a friend, inside a metal cage so

her body could later be retrieved. Though fearful it would be ghoulish or disrespectful, she admits to wanting to know what Eva would look like after death. In some photos, Eva's hide is hung on a hook, sprawled out and glowing white. I am particularly drawn to an image of Eva's paw and leg bone. The foot appears like a gnarled, mummified crow claw, surrounded by bone ash, as if it did not belong to a familiar pet, but an archaic creature from another aeon. Mann discusses the body as "just a carapace" (Mann, 2005), a protective, outer shell that holds "the real you" (Mann, 2005). She says, after death "all that's left is the carapace, it's meaningless". She further extends this thought to her own wishes for her body ; "Leave me for the buzzards...let the little foxes eat me...let me nourish those hickory's" (Mann, 2005). It visualises decomposition as letting go of control, as a sort of return. It is the sanctification of the land by presence of death.

Deepening Mann's fascination with the macabre, the project shifts to Mann's time at a body farm in Tennessee, where the decomposition of human specimens is displayed slowly, yet relentlessly. In these delicate images, rotting skin resembles the splitting bark of an old oak tree. Deflating flesh caves in, mirroring shapes of black bin liners or surfaces basted with thick, shiny tar. This photograph shows the head of a corpse with milky, white hair and holes for eyes, surrounded by a pale, fuzzy mist. In her memoir, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs* (2015), Mann revealed that the "mist" is actually a long exposure of a swarm of blowflies, capturing their movements as they buzz and crawl around the decaying orifices. Some bodies are wrapped in broken plastic sheeting, bloated and wet from rot, mirroring each other's material, falling into entropic collapse. These bodies are held in a strange middle state where the dead do not fully appear to be dead. This abjection affects me more than either side of the process. When the flesh first starts to decay, yet to be ravaged by skittering insects, to me they look more like latex coated props or wax dummies. They are intact, assembled in a way we are used to. Perhaps this is self

preserving disconnect, or another layer to abjection caused by modern exposure to violence and death? But when their flesh and viscera turns to bone, the body becomes symbolic. Where you can see the skeleton under-neath, hollow eyes and teeth protruding out of remnant tissue, they are recognisable again. It is the middle, the mushy collapse of skin, the infestation of insects, the drifting from identity, that feels the most unreal while being so viscerally unerring.

The book concludes with 20 close up portraits of Mann's three children. Within the documentary she asks them to lie down, an antique camera looming above them, precious yet obtrusive . She tells them to get comfortable as each exposure is around 2-3 mins, in which they need to keep as still as possible. There is a ritualistic quality to this action, it's calming and allows their bodies to soften in the moment. It feels that Mann wanted to conclude the project on a less somber note but on something more contemplative, a pause of reflection, away from the heaviness of decay.

She mentions her son's hard brow and deep eye sockets, picking up on the architecture beneath his skin. The skull, the thinness of flesh, the bone, all just living and working under the surface. She notes that his bone structure casts shadows much harsher than the others, his sockets often appear hollow, obscuring most detail. The soft, stillness of the images, remind me of old death masks, the strange castings that keep a face suspended in presence before they inevitably disappear . Their eyes are barely open, they appear angelic, sacramental even. Floating between states of being and transcendence.

In more precise images, freckles, hair and blemishes are all present. Blotches from the collodion reacting and wearing away, looks like ink dropped into water, fraying and spreading outward. The chemical gives a creamy tone to the image, similar to that of

archival wet specimens bloating and losing their live, fleshy pigment. Bubbles under the collodion appear like blisters or flaking dried skin, bringing together bodily deterioration and material rupture .

This plate in particular has barley any semblance of a human, just a nostril and part of a mouth is visible. The rest of the plate is a foggy grey, with slight ripples, like when you open your eyes underwater. Someone was in front of the lens, exposed to the plate, yet nothing has fully formed. It depicts absence as presence. We sense what could have been, but all we see, is what remains.

Spliced between the chapters are poems and excerpts of writings from Jaques-Benigne Bossuet, Galway Kinnell and Walt Whitman, touching on the passage of time, solidifying this projects title, by making the audience question: *what truly remains?*. This question has always haunted the human mind, historically and philosophically, but it is one that can never be truly answered. Ultimately, Mann's photography displays the liminal threshold in a quite tender way, despite the main subject being so strongly abject. These images *are* a mediation, where the land drinks the body, holding the viewer between familiarity and disorientation. The very real event of death creates uncanny sensation, allowing these photographs to reveal where the real and unreal coexist.

Chapter 5, A Case Study : The Work Of Lieko Shiga

Japanese photographer, Lieko Shiga creates work that frays reality, depicting strangely illuminated spaces that feel haunted in nature. Since relocating to the Miyagi Prefecture in 2008, specifically to the coastal village of Kitakama, Shiga's practice became an almost symbiotic relationship with the land and its residents. Though not originally from the area,

she quickly became attached to its history, rituals and customs, even becoming the unofficial photographer of the village. However, her images reject the calm, familiarity that you would expect from this kind of documentation. They carry such a heavy atmosphere, that's intimate and spectral, detached from linear time. She places such emphasis on photography's ability to help hold onto something, capturing the reminders and relationships we all experience. Within *Rasen Kaigan (2008-12)* (Eng: *Spiral Shore*), her series at the centre of this analysis, Shiga's photographs take on the appearance that they have been pulled from the land itself. Layered with an almost mystic presence, tied to loss and holding the trauma of the earth. She has spoken on her wish "to portray a world we could not see with the naked eye...to capture the invisible spirit of the village" (Shiga, 2018), a search for something that opposes the literal. Her photographs slither out from the liminal space, becoming less a document of what is seen but more an implication of *what is felt*, *lingering*, beneath the surface.

As her medium, Shiga uses film. It's light sensitivity and alchemical properties make it a medium of threshold. Historically, there lies an association with the paranormal. Spirit photography, unexplained orbs and phantom mists, place it within both scientific recording and fantastical suggestion. Shiga plays into this. Her film takes on strange colours, almost rotting green's and metallic blue's are produced through purposeful cross processing, underexposure and flash distortion. The flash seems to breakdown the barrier of the in-between. It creates that weird, sickly feeling of seeing something you shouldn't have. It draws you in, colours merging like nebulas, visually alluring but carrying an undercurrent of horror and fear of the unknown. The images lull you into a sense of comfort though their visual appeal, only for unease to take over, like seeing an unknown creature caught on camera at night. Shiga makes me uncertain of what I'm looking at, all I know is how it makes me feel. Drawing her work further into the eerie by making us question the real.

Rasen Kaigan (*Spiral Shore*) was made both before and after the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and subsequent tsunami. Though Shiga has stated the series is not directly a documentation of the catastrophe, its impact is undeniably felt throughout. There's this lingering, foreboding presence of something not being quite right. Like you can sense something is coming. Kitakama at the time was the home to 107 families, but unfortunately 60 of those residents were killed because of this event. The village ended up as rubble, large areas of pine forest ripped from the ground and the earth was torn open. She claims the work acts as more of a poetic ode to the long history of Kitakama's people, their traditions and its foundation by creating a winding, dreamy narrative that is tethered between life and another world.

Significant to both the community and the photobook, Shiga recovered a lot of personal photographs from villagers that were washed up onto the shore. Shiga, along with some friends, collected them, cleaned them and returned them to their owners. This almost ritualistic care, speaks to her belief that "photographs render everything into reality: they are a way of bringing something back to life." (Shiga, 2018) It emphasises her view of the importance of the printed photograph, she wants to feel the paper in her hands, allowing distant representations to become a material thing. These photographs become recovered bodies of their own, creased, waterlogged, partly decaying but still holding the traces of Kitakama. By incorporating these images into the book Shiga allows the memory to become just as sacred as the land.

The spiral motif is part of the projects conceptual philosophy. Shiga has explained that it connects with the twisting formation of DNA and by tracing the curves "we can encounter the lives of people before and after our time" (Shiga, 2018). This spiritual energy adds

mysticism to the literal landscape. This uncanny, swirling formation, reminds me of Junji Ito's horror manga *Uzumaki* (2000), in which spirals become an entity of their own. They swallow, distort and collapse the environment as well as psychological states. Though her spiral's do not represent themselves as active horror, they have a similar eerie tension. The land almost comes to life, writhing under the weight of traumatic memory. They also take on a more contemplative role as Shiga describes using a pine branch to draw these patterns in sand over several days, mirroring the historic, mediative actions from famous Zen gardens in Kyoto (Ryōan ji).

This sensitivity toward the land is represented through her anecdote about digging up a pine tree with her bare hands, as a way to understand the plight of Kitakama's elders who had no tools for cultivation. She attempted this after an elder told her the story, and later found out the father of the elder had been the leader of the cultivation. As she unearthed the sprawling horde of intertwined roots, she recalls "I felt like I met his father's bones." (Shiga, 2018). These moments represent the disintegration between past and present, tying to her belief that photography "creates a space that has no past, present or future - or that is has them all simultaneously" (Shiga, 2018)

This is captured strikingly in this image, titled "*Portrait of Cultivation*". An elderly couple stand in a field, their bodies doused in a harsh burst of red flash, which fades out into a haze of dust or tree bark occupying the air. They hold on to each other, but the man is surreally pierced by the barren pine tree Shiga dug from the ground. The woman clings to him as he carries the tree within his body. Behind them, a tangled clump of roots is splayed out above their heads, reminiscent of a Lovecraftian organism. Its trunk juts out from his chest and angles back toward the Earth, as if it yearns to return to the soil, where it once belonged. The image speaks to how ancestral history remains embedded within the soul, tying people to the land that raised them. Even the tree seems to long for the

conditions it once knew, resisting change, resisting decay. Material entropy is inevitable, we may find it uncomfortable but we can predict its cycle.

Another image I am drawn to, shows a different couple wading hand in hand through a woodland pond, submerged to the waist. Filled with unnatural greens and purples, the water and forest surrounding them dissolves reality, altering our certainty of nature's possibility. Thin twigs emerge from the water, while ghostly mist and dust particles combine in the air, like a phantom quickly revealing itself on the frame, only to disperse into fragments of ash. Their situation is unknown, their faces obscured by white light, appearing lost in the middle state between time and place. To me, the scene hints at slight danger but one that is slow, digging under the skin, unsure of whether it is real.

Later in the series, Shiga closes in on bodies, landscapes and objects all suspended in the in-between. The unconscious body of a woman held up by the hands of the community, feels strangely biblical. Paint peels from walls as though Kitakama is shedding her skin, water pooling over remnants that remain. Her flash still renders the images as haunted and surreal, as if the photographs were taken on another planet or beneath the now calm ocean. The sand shaped into weird formations by both nature and the presence of people, mimics the surface of the moon. There is that sense that the land has mutated, people in full plastic suits, large tarps strewn across the floor and shrubs growing in spiral formation, hints that the environment is reviving itself. Her images show a place tainted by trauma, that continues in the real and unreal. A place contaminated by disaster, but born anew in time. The ghost of the future, haunts the past.

Chapter 6: Hauntology

It's here, in that weird overlap of what has been and what might still come, that French philosopher, Jaques Derrida's notion of hauntology begins to surface. This idea of hauntology comes from his challenging of ontology. His belief is that *being* is never a clean or stable presence. It is instead, always unsettled by what lingers at its edges. He writes of a 'spectrality' that sits within every moment of time, a disturbance that stops the present from ever feeling whole. Even the word '*Hauntology*' acts of as a kind of conceptual pun, by combining the study of ontology with what lingers from the past. For Derrida, "Ghosts are part of the future" (Derrida, 1983), a reminder that what we think is ahead of us is already intertwined with what *haunts us*. Hauntology puts a label on the strange condition in which past, present and future all collapse into each other, where everything is in the process of becoming a ghost.

In a more current sense, cultural theorist and writer, Mark Fisher, extended this thinking through his exploration of the weird and the eerie. In he turned to literature, especially the writing of H.P. Lovecraft, to illustrate these kind sensations. As argued by Fisher, Lovecraft's stories create the essence of a world that is fundamentally strange, where what is familiar becomes threatening, and the boundary of time and presence are never safe. He described 'the eerie' as a moment when "there is nothing where there should be something, or something where there should be nothing" (The Weird and The Eerie, 2017) . Fisher also believed that these sensations exist within contemporary media. Analogue 'ghosts' interact with digital culture, by revealing a *slow cancelation of the future*, where the digital space oddly makes the past even more formidable. The hiss or click of a digital track, a small crack that should have been fixed, fractures the idea of pure presence. The smooth, shiny surface breaks, and the past returns, reminding us that even the most ordered technology can never completely evade the passing of time.

Chapter 7: My Practise

My practise aims to live in the haunting space that all of these writers and artists encapsulate. I am drawn to the enduring primal fears of humanity. What happens after we die? Where do we go? The passage of time, loss, childhood nightmares and the confrontation with our own mortality. I am less concerned with literal depiction than with evoking a feeling. I work in the in-between, trying to capture dreamlike, surreal and uncanny moments that trace the way memory and the earth are intertwined. For example, the scattering of ashes and photographing that site years later became a way for me to reconnect with what has passed. Decay embodies this for me, bulging trees suffocated by parasitic plants, moulds and rot taking over a form and transforming it into another. A carcass, or its ghost confronts existential dread. *I am not dead, but I will be.*

My photographs act as haunted objects, caught, drifting beyond time. I intentionally work in analog media, polaroid, 35mm film and emulsion lifts, allowing process, imperfection and the unknown to become visible. The polaroid is instant remembrance in its rawest form. It puts you in that place, a moment where a memory has been captured. Like everything, it is not permanent, constantly fading and changing. But it means you were there. The cracks act as physical manifestations of the fight between before and after, what is and what will come. These mistakes are welcomed though not intentional, the chemical process has failed and metaphorically putrefied.

Decay reminds us that nothing is ever truly one thing, everything is always in the process of becoming something else. No matter how meticulous, precise, or perfect, these reactions are never fixed. They will breakdown and eventually disappear. The withering of memory scares me the most. Once we forget, where does that energy, that weight go? I

want to capture the essence of haunted memory, the spectral entity that it is. The material will always become the immaterial. I agree with Derrida's sentiment. Even we are ghosts, we haunt everything. Decay is going to happen, but the action and the result are not finite. Eventually, we all give way to the eternal return.

Epilogue

In conclusion, this practise based research sits between what is known and what is felt or sensed. This investigation starts with what can be named, recorded and shown materially, but it constantly moves towards what is intuitive, emotional and not entirely visible. By exploring this tension, the images function no longer as fixed documents but more as unstable sites where meaning drifts between presence and absence. In this sense, the work becomes hauntographic, shaped by traces and remnants that can't fully be explained. This research shows that by working in this way, photographic practise moves beyond the straightforward and becomes a more experimental approach, where viewers can engage through bodily response, uncertainty and the feeling of time shifting. Ultimately, this dissertation suggests that the most compelling photographic practices exist in the in-between space, where understanding and perception coexist, and where different ways of thinking, feeling and remembering can emerge.

All things summon us to death;
Nature almost envious of the good she has given us,
Tells us often and gives us notice that she cannot
For long allow us that scrap of matter she has lent
She has need of it for other forms
She claims it back for other works

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