

The Fragmentation of Self in Photography: Gadamer and Milja Laurila's Images of Forgetting

Witnessing the trial of Vichy a loyalist, at a time when France was faced with the task of retaking ownership of a period which seemed foreign to identity, yet which history asserted to being undeniably France's own, Simone de Beauvoir wrote, "To deny the rages and desires of another time, to prefer the emotions of the present moment to them, is to break human existence into worthless fragments. It is to annihilate the past, to bury the dead at the bottom of an abyss of absence, to break off all our ties with them."¹ It remains a perennial task of human existence to assume one's past, to perceive oneself not simply as having a history contiguous with the present, but to identify that history with the present. We are confronted with a desire to possess both our history and our current situation simultaneously, or to form an identity characterized by wholeness.

Art is often, if not always, a reflection on this very desire. Gadamer writes that "the phenomenon of art imposes an ineluctable task on existence, namely to achieve that continuity of self-understanding which alone can support human existence."² However this achievement does not come easily, and it is within the realm of art-making and perception that self-understanding presents itself as a problem. A work of art has borders, or a beginning and an end, as does the experience of a work of art. The work of art then at least appears to be (though Gadamer argues this interpretation is ultimately wrong, or incomplete) a "momentary aesthetic impression"³ of something. Yet if this were all art were, and if this were all experience could ever be, then we might borrow Beauvoir's phrase again to say that art, along with the beholder, would be a scattering of "worthless fragments." How does art present a solution to this task of helping one achieve self-continuity, and can it do so seamlessly?

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, "An Eye for an Eye," *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A Simmons, trans. Kristina Arp (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 257-8.

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), 83.

³ *Ibid.*

Of all the arts, perhaps photography most radically raises the issue of continuity due to its distinctly temporal nature. Even more than a painting or drawing, a photograph tears a particular moment out of time. As Barthes remarks, the *noeme* of photography is always “That-has-been.”⁴ Finnish artist Milja Laurila addresses this *noeme* in works such as *To Remember* and *On the Way Home*. Using photographs taken by her father (who died when Laurila was only eleven), both works address lost instances of childhood and home. They are not memories, but instances Laurila does not remember, or of a self which is no longer recognizable except through the evidence of the images. The images of *To Remember* [see Appendix A] are double exposures, where new photographs incorporated within and alongside the old ones.⁵ From a photograph of a rooftop covered in snow emerge two pairs of lips before their moment of union.⁶ The dialectical movement between the two images seek merger, to reconcile the past with the present and vice versa. In *On the Way Home* [see Appendix B], Laurila re-photographs the photographs her father already took, redirecting emphasis on particular objects and aspects of the old images.⁷ In other “photographs,” she leaves the image blank, replacing it with a comment or description of what is left absent, like a note on the back of a photograph: “This has to be Zambia;” “I have very red nails;” “September.” Similar to *To Remember*, the text provides a dialogue between the past and the present. What “has-been” is acknowledged as such and then readdressed, as a way of reincorporating it into the present.

Laurila’s work resonates with Gadamer’s views on how art creates a hermeneutic continuity of the self. The work is not a fleeting image, one surpassed or discarded, but rather lays a “claim” on us. We are held to the experience of the work so that it even when it recedes into the past, its presence is maintained for the beholder. To have experienced a work of art is to experience its “contemporaneity,”

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 80.

⁵ Milja Laurila, *To Remember*, “Milja Laurila,” Helsinki School, <http://www.helsinkischool.fi/helsinkischool/artist.php?id=9023&type=statement>

⁶ *To Remember (Kiss)*, 2006.

⁷ Milja Laurila, *On the Way Home, The Helsinki School – Young Photography by TaiK, Vol. 3* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 58-67.

as mediating the past and present.⁸ Within this process of mediation, the work of art both binds us to ourselves (or our history), and to the work itself. The effect is such that to experience a work of art is to simultaneously abandon and to reclaim oneself entirely. We experience “self-forgetfulness” in order to understand our situation in the world. “For it is the truth of our world – the religious and moral world in which we live – that is presented before us and in which we recognize ourselves,” states Gadamer.⁹ This is why Laurila investigates objects from her past (and not only pictures of her own self) in her work. No self exists in being self-contained, but rather through its history and its situation; and it is through this relational sense of self that an “I” is grasped.

It is due to the generality of Laurila’s work that it speaks to us, that I am able to forget myself when I look at them. Everyone has a home and a family, we have more or less vague memories of childhood, including holidays, trips, and favorite toys. Perhaps most crucial to her work is that we all remember taking photographs and having had photographs taken of us. We also know how it is to later look back at these photographs and how some of them seem to hold a “claim” on us, that we are compelled to look at certain photographs often. We consciously recognize that we are looking at a photograph in these works, not just a beautiful image, and with this we are conscious of time and place, that “this-has-been.” It is our consciousness that something has passed coupled with the absolute evidence of its existence that produces what Barthes calls “the melancholy of Photography itself.”¹⁰

This melancholy, this present feeling of what has passed, is also the effect of contemporaneity. The feeling of tragedy in the arts, according to Gadamer, is that of self-understanding. When a spectator becomes absorbed in a play’s tragic events, he identifies with the actors not in merely the sense that he gets lost in the play, but that the story proclaims a truth which is existentially universal. “Too see that ‘this is how it is,’” Gadamer writes, “ is a kind of self-knowledge for the spectator, who

⁸ Gadamer 123.

⁹ Ibid, 124.

¹⁰ Barthes, 79.

emerges with new insight from the illusion in which he, like everyone else, lives.”¹¹ This is the sense in which Laurila’s photographs are general, since at the same time they all refer to particularities of the artist’s personal history. The universal makes itself known only through the particular, when it is able to express “this is how it is.” For the same reason, Diane Arbus said, “The more specific you are, the more general you’ll be.”¹² To look at Laurila’s photographs, the spectator is absorbed into what is foreign to herself, but which resonates with her own understanding. Yet we also understand the tragic nature of time through the work, of the uncanny distance between the present and the past which, paradoxically, produces continuity within ourselves.

It is the paradox that we achieve self-continuity through being confronted with a past which we perceive to be not only distant from, but discontinuous with ourselves, that is of particular interest in Gadamer’s writing. He states that “we sublimate (aufhaben) the discontinuity and atomism of isolated experiences in the continuity of our own existence.”¹³ That the fragmentary nature of existence is sublated suggests that while the fragments are repressed in favor of continuity, they are also preserved. The tragedy of human temporality is that we at once recognize that we are tied to a history while lacking the means to fully unify ourselves with it. This is why we look at an old photograph and immediately recognize ourselves and yet feel the need to linger. The identification is never total. There is a feeling of uncanniness, which arises from the recognition of not being at home with ourselves. Oftentimes we feel the need to verbally or mentally construct narratives to complete the identification of the past with the present: “Here I am fishing in Montana when I was 15. I was excited because I had never been fishing before. I haven’t been since.” The question remains of how art procures self-continuity for the beholder (and likewise for the artist) despite the seeming inconsistency of self. Furthermore it is uncertain what self-continuity means. To understand the self as disjointed and scattered, and to

¹¹ Gadamer, 128.

¹² Patricia Bosworth, *Diane Arbus: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), 305.

¹³ Gadamer, 83.

recognize the universality of this condition, proclaiming “this is how it is,” is, in a sense, to form continuity with oneself. Yet this also fails to take seriously the notion of self-discontinuity, for the past is not mediated with the present; rather, within self-forgetfulness, there is the satisfaction of a self-abandoning stoicism which levels all aberrations and misfortunes.

It is not as if Gadamer ignores the subject of the incomprehensibility of the self or is deluded by a belief that art has supremely revelatory abilities. He purposefully avoids any potential misconstruing of self-forgetfulness with a mystical “temporary intoxication” produced from aesthetic contemplation.¹⁴ Rather, he believes we have to “hold firmly to the standpoint of finiteness.”¹⁵ The discontinuity which is sublated remains present in the understanding of finitude and alienation, which a work of art makes us conscious of. This is a particularly relevant theme within modern art. In a later essay titled “Image and Gesture,” Gadamer remarks, “The only thing that is universally familiar to us today is unfamiliarity itself, momentarily illuminated by an ephemeral glimmer of meaning.”¹⁶ Modern anomie is subdued, or at least made more bearable, when it is revealed in its actuality. This is why Laurila’s work has an investigatory feel to it. The photographs reveal a self-history, though as evidence they are recognized as partial and incomplete. Origin always has a feeling of unfamiliarity about it, which is why we continually feel compelled to investigate it. The feeling of wonder, given that origin always remains slightly out of reach of comprehension, is in part one of the reasons we gain satisfaction from this investigation. We are conscious of self-continuity only when it is produced (if only partially), and so the problem of self-continuity itself remains a necessary element to its own understanding.

Self-continuity then is always a task which remains unrealized. This is evident in Laurila’s work, which obscures as much as it reveals. The text reading, “This has to be Zambia,” is both assertive and yet reveals an uncertainty in its proclamation. The fact of the statement is true, but this truth cannot be

¹⁴ Ibid, 128.

¹⁵ Ibid, 86.

¹⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Image and Gesture” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and other Essays* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 79.

affirmed internally. This is why the actual photo of Zambia is left out, leaving only the text instead. Laurila states, “It seems people need to comment on or put words next to pictures or, literally, on the back of pictures. You can’t have them at the same time, but you can’t separate them either.”¹⁷ Either the photograph’s historical factuality is asserted in a word, and therefore at an impartial distance, or the photograph is experienced as a living event, as something penetrable and personal to us. In the latter type, there is self-forgetfulness, but with this an absence of history. “History is hysterical,” Barthes remarks, “it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it – and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it.”¹⁸ Peering from our current situation, we are always opaque to ourselves. It is only in looking back to a linear progression of events that we can begin to be able to reason that this or that should be as they are. Of course, this is what Gadamer means when he states that a work of art allows us to say “this is how it is.” Art provides an understanding of cause and effect, such that if we watch a tragic play we can apply the same rule to our own lives as a universal condition of existence. But we are always led back to our current situation, our own opacity, the particularity of which seems to defy the rule. There is always a search for an essence, which history never provides a solution for.

Photography itself can be understood as a search for essence. To take a photograph is always, in part, an attempt to possess or incorporate. Laurila re-photographs pictures taken by her father in an attempt to acquire them as a part of her own history. In the series *To Remember*, the process of double exposure is an attempt to incorporate herself into her past. This search for self-continuity is a search for essence. Barthes describes in his book *Camera Lucida* how after his mother died, he became enamored by a particular photograph of her as a child. For him, more than any other photograph, it captured not merely the fact of her existence, but her truth. He wanted more than merely the evidence that “this-has-been” from photography but to also “discover that being in the photograph completely.”¹⁹ A

¹⁷ Quoted in *The Helsinki School – Young Photography by TaiK, Vol. 3* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009) 59.

¹⁸ Barthes, 65.

¹⁹ Barthes, 107.

photograph, rendering more than just the likeness of its subject, but arresting its very image in a moment in time, seems to promise us its essence. Yet photography never fulfills its promise – the thing itself in its essence always evades us – at which point photography frustrates and even baffles us. Even when Barthes found the one photograph which seemed to preserve his mother in her wholeness, he realized photography could never be more than a testament to the fact of something's existence. "I must therefore submit to this law:" he states, "I cannot penetrate, cannot reach into the Photograph. I can only sweep it with my glance, like a smooth surface. The Photograph is *flat*, platitudinous in the true sense of the word, which is what I must acknowledge."²⁰

Laurila's photographs are intentionally flat. They reference their own flatness, as such they remind the viewer to be conscious of them as photographs. As photographs, they are aware of their own limitations, of their own density as much as their ability to illuminate. This is also why Laurila's photographs have to be read in a series, rather than admired individually. Continuity is sought between the photographs, yet the photographs always maintain their borders and their essential nature as photographs. Between each photograph is an empty space. Rather than delivering us to something or someone's essence, a photograph only gives us a fragment. One becomes aware that the narrative *On the Way Home* constructs never leads anywhere and that there is always a slight antagonism between the images of *To Remember*. These photographs are as much about fissures and empty spaces as they are about continuity, of the incomprehensibility of history as much as the search for it.

Gadamer states, "Even what is closed to our understanding we ourselves experience as limiting, and consequently it still belongs to the continuity of self-understanding in which human existence moves."²¹ Yet Gadamer's statement ignores the very significance of experience of limitation.

Discontinuity is not experienced as continuity, but as an impenetrable limit, even if we can take up the

²⁰ Ibid, 106.

²¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), 83.

whole of discontinuous experiences and recognize within them a tragic and universal character. Laurila says of her photographs, "My photographs are not recollections but rather images of forgetting, memories I am unable to reach."²² A memory which one is no longer able to reach is replaced by absence. An absence, or a gap, is always disruptive of a continuum, or rather is unable to create continuity. Instead, it stands out as something missing though not necessarily something to be replaced. It is a mistake to prescribe self-continuity as the end of all experience of art, to make it into a theodicy, since it provides no opportunity to make a counter claim. Moreover it trivializes the significance of absence. Art which expresses absence, loss, and discontinuity provides self-understanding for the viewer, but this cannot be adequately described as producing self-continuity since what is understood is the meaning of absence itself.

Of course, even art such as Laurila's produces a conciliatory effect, and in this sense Gadamer is correct in his analysis. Art never remains private but is always presented to an audience, and as such it makes a plea to them. There is always an attempt for something to be communicated, for others to recognize and understand what is being expressed. Laurila's photographs do not merely refer to her own past, or that of another individual's. This is what separates her photographs from Barthes' private photograph of his mother (which he never published in his book). The photograph of his mother as a child remained for him a private "wound." The little girl in the photograph infinitely marched toward a death which had already occurred.²³ This is also the difference between a photograph that is art and one that remains a private artifact. The photograph which becomes a work of art transforms itself when it speaks of a universal truth: the ambiguity of existence. Yet it is precisely the nature of ambiguity to remain ambiguous. It is one thing to say that a work of art exposes the ambiguity of human existence, but it is a paradox to say that it reveals that ambiguity, that it is understood, since this exposure is simultaneously concealment (or simply said, merely the exposure of the covering). What is at question

²² *To Remember*

²³ Barthes, 73,93.

is precisely what it means to “make-known.” Laurila’s photographs do not dissect existence to reveal its organs, but rather allow existence to make itself be felt by an audience. In this sense we achieve self-understanding, which can be shared or universalized. We understand the impenetrability of the past from the perspective of our current selves, of the unfathomable task of finding self-continuity.

Within Laurila’s work, there is an attempt at this task of self-continuity. The photographs express the desire to make the past contemporaneous with the present, to identify the unfamiliar child with the almost as equally alien self. Yet there is an understanding of the futility of this task which is expressed in the work, and in this sense we might say that the photographs fail. This is not to say that they fail as works of art, but that what they express is failure. Her photographs speak to the ever-present opaqueness of self in its search for continuity. This task is necessary since, to refer once again to Gadamer’s proclamation, it is the “continuity of self-understanding which alone can support human existence.” A human existence which does not seek to understand itself rejects all connections to the world, all responsibility, all claims to a future. In short, it ceases to be human. Yet it is the striving to complete the task which is more important than its achievement – though the thought of the latter can never be removed from the effort itself – since the task can never be completed. To quote Beauvoir again, “love and action always imply a failure, but this failure must not keep us from loving and acting. For we have not only to establish what our situation is, we have to choose it in the very heart of its ambiguity.”²⁴ Art is always an attempt to understand the self in ways which have remained hidden to us; but it can never reveal the self in its entirety, only illuminate it in stages.

²⁴ Beauvoir, 258.

Appendix A
Selections from Milja Laurila's *To Remember*
www.helsinki.fi



To Remember (Kiss), 2006



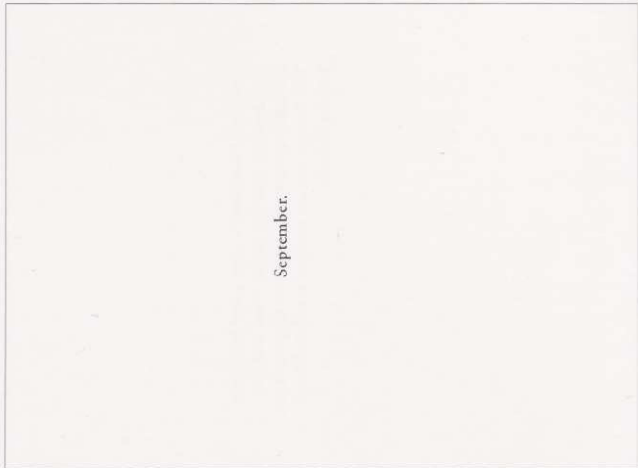
To Remember (Mother), 2004



To Remember (Sole), 2005

Appendix B
Selections from Milja Laurila's *On the Way Home*
The Helsinki School – Young Photography by TaiK, Vol. 3 (2009)





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