

# Points of View: On Photography & Our Fragmented, Transcendental Selves

Matt Colquhoun

What does it say about photography's beginnings that one of the first self-portraits depicts a staged suicide?

Nicéphore Niépce, Louis Daguerre, Henry Fox Talbot... Photography's principle—that is, credited—inventors were predominantly driven by the promised glory of scientific and commercial success rather than the supposedly more “authentic” pursuit of a new form of artistic self-expression. The simultaneous development of a number of chemical processes meant that competition between the medium's would-be inventors was fierce. Hippolyte Bayard, predicting his own relegation to obscurity in the annals of photographic history, having fallen victim to manipulation by some of his more commercially astute competitors, has nevertheless found fame for the bitterly expressive staging of his own demise: *Self Portrait as a Drowned Man*.

A caption accompanying the original photograph reads:

*The corpse which you see here is that of M. Bayard, inventor of the process that has just been shown to you. As far as I know this indefatigable experimenter has been occupied for about three years with his discovery. The Government, which has been only too generous to Monsieur Daguerre, has said it can do nothing for Monsieur Bayard, and the poor wretch has drowned himself. Oh the vagaries of human life...!*<sup>1</sup>

The black comedy of Bayard's performative exit from history is poignant in light of the self-portrait's present ubiquity. Whilst the corrosive cynicism of the contemporary photographic "selfie" is often seen as an explicitly negative postmodern affliction, here we have an antecedent in one of the earliest photographic images ever made.

To look upon this image is not to "observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake", as Roland Barthes would have it in his most famous text on the medium, *Camera Lucida* (1980).<sup>2</sup> Barthes writes of a photography that "reproduces to infinity [what] has occurred only once; the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially", cheating whilst remaining inherently tied to death.<sup>3</sup> Barthes' melancholic treatise was to signal the peak of the medium's death-obsessed discourse which had dominated the 1970s. Susan Sontag, for instance, had similarly declared that photography is "the inventory of mortality".<sup>4</sup> It seems that, in its capacity to represent those who are no longer with us, photography *becomes* death, always a representation of that which has passed or one day will.

More recently, however, some critics have begun to reject the gravitational pull of the oppressively mortal image. James Elkins, in *What Photography Is* (2011), takes "the sign of death in photography" beyond Barthes' "romance and novelisation", towards an explicitly Batailleian formulation of the medium's

1 "Hippolyte Bayard", in: *Wikipedia*, available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippolyte\\_Bayard](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippolyte_Bayard).

2 BARTHES, Roland, *Camera Lucida*, London: Vintage, 1993, p. 96.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

4 SONTAG, Susan, *On Photography*, London: Penguin, 1979, p. 70.

affective power. The “pain” of photographic death is, for Elkins, “so sweet and sensuous; so easy and tempting, so invitingly melancholy, that it is in the end just another source of pleasure.”<sup>5</sup> Elkins’ eroticism of the Photograph, in its entangled representations of eros and thanatos, allows us to unearth many more potentials through which we might consider this difficult medium, its future and its history.



We can consider Bayard’s self-portrait, for instance, in all its artificiality, as the first step on a path left underexplored. It is an image of *another* death. Contrary to so many other examples in the medium’s canonical history, it thanatoidically exacerbates and then inverts the typical Barthesian trajectory, with Bayard’s “corpse” representing something eerily *beyond*: an exit in effigy. But an exit from what exactly? Not from life but from a life-as-photographer. In this instance, it is perhaps only *representation*—or, more specifically, the *representation of subjectivity*—which is the stake here. As such, there is much we can learn from this image and its embrace of the inherent processes of subjective dissolution that have haunted photography and its “subjects” ever since.

5 ELKINS, James, *What Photography Is*, New York: Routledge, 2011, p. 220.

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Following photography's acceptance as an established artform in the latter half of the 20th century, these processes of dissolution have been rapidly accelerated by a succession of technological innovations. Today, the photographic "selfie" is *the* mode of representation for the postmodern subject. Inescapable, they pollute the various social media platforms around which so many of our lives now orbit.

Kim Kardashian's photo book *Selfish* (2015) is perhaps the most well-known, excessive and, as such, widely-derided example of such a tendency towards dissolution in recent memory—although I would argue it has more to say about the contemporary photographic subject than any other recent photo book. *Selfish* is comprised of a wealth of self-portraits: everything from previously private nudes to public Instagram posts. It presents us with a cross-section of two lives: documents of the lives of Kim Kardashian and Kim Kardashian™. In light of this subjective split, the book's title seems to refer less to a lack of consideration for others and more to the ambiguity of modern selfhood. Kardashian's is only a self-*ish*—which is to say, hers is only a self *sort of*. The book is a perversely enjoyable document of a cyclonic process of self-empowerment via self-objectification. Through its unprecedented repetitions, Kardashian *embodies* a process of self-dissolution exemplified by the compartmentalised subjectivity of the postmodern celebrity. Within the milieu of super-public representation, we watch as the self itself dissolves.

Other less recent and less (in)famous examples of such dissolution include, for instance, Francesca Woodman, whose underfunded attempts to give subjectivity the slip led (all too predictably) to her early suicide. Hervé Guibert, the author of *Ghost Image*, a criminally underappreciated book of short essays on photography, lists many more examples in his essay on self-portraiture—André Kertész, F. Holland Day, Pierre Molinier, Urs Lüthi, Dieter Appelt, Duane Michaels—many of whom, notably, engage in an active *queering* of the self; all of whom explore the disintegrative potentials of the photographic self-portrait in our very overcoding of it.

Much like Roland Barthes' unseen *Winter Garden Photograph*—one of the last photographs of his mother taken a year

before her death which serves as the inspiration for *Camera Lucida* and continuously haunts it throughout—Guibert’s titular “ghost images” are not images of absence but rather absent images. Writing, for him, becomes a spectral photography in itself where the task is to describe that which is not seen. Self-portraiture dissolves into autobiography. Each image of the self abstracted to an “I”. Death also looms large in his work, with Guibert suffering with AIDs and dying in 1991 from complications following a botched suicide attempt. His experiences of the disease are repeatedly alluded to as he engages both photographically and textually with his own slow death. This dissolving of subjectivity, in whatever mode, demonstrates, for Guibert, the entangled Icarus complexes of photographer and photography, writer and writing, with each abortive attempt at exceeding the limitations of the latter capturing the successful social transgressions of the boundaries of the former.

Take, for example, *Ghost Image*’s only accompanying image which is offered to us on the cover.



We see Guibert’s shadow in the centre of the frame, fractured by the dissecting line of the corner of a room. To the right of his shadow is a small, square painting: its subject is unclear but it appears to show a moonlit lagoon. To the right of this, a

decorative butterfly hangs above the corner of the painting's ornate frame: the symbolism of the insect's rebirth alluding to a richness of life that exists beyond the cocoon of the painting's (and, recursively, the photograph's) frame. The image makes us explicitly aware of Guibert's own vision which is, within the book itself, re-presented to us in writing—*beyond* photography. As such, his otherwise anonymous shadow appears as a ghost of himself before himself, and likewise before us. However, this image, like those Guibert admires by others, does not depict an anterior death but rather represents a transcendental experience, offering us a glimpse of the outside of present existence, exacerbating photography's claustrophobic limits and alluding to an outside of the illusionary prison of the holistic subject.



This image reminds me of the work of one other photographer whom I would like to add to Guibert's list—arguably one of the most successful photographers to engage in an intensive investigation of the self, and, it should be noted, one of the few to emerge out the other side seemingly unscathed: Lee Friedlander.

The title of Friedlander's first photobook, *Self Portrait* (1970), much like *Selfish*, is playfully misleading. Its lack of a hyphen, in particular, is telling. Whilst Friedlander is the subject of his

images, in truth he is only half there. He, like Guibert, appears before us only as a shadow, a reflection or a figure otherwise obscured by (or, perhaps, as an entangled and inseparable part of) his environment. In this way, his book is a rare portrait of a transcendental selfhood, of subjectivity at the limit of its own elusivity. Throughout the book, Friedlander folds the outside in, wrestling with the objective agency of the camera itself. He is less the subject of representation and more, as Rod Slemmons writes for *American Suburb X*, “the point of view”.<sup>6</sup>

This may seem like an obvious observation to make when considering a medium like photography—the very purpose of which, one could say, is to share points of view—but how often we forget our inherent separation from the images we make; how easily any photograph becomes a sight we ourselves have seen, detached from the eyes that first framed this window on the world which has traveled through time and space to now appear before us. Friedlander, in considering himself so embedded within the world around him, creates an intensive feedback loop unmatched in the history of photography.

What we can learn from Friedlander, Guibert, Bayard, even Kardashian, is that many radical perspectives lie waiting for us if we embrace these fragmentational tendencies which are inherent to photography and its related technologies.

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In his PhD thesis, *Flatline Constructs*, the late cultural theorist Mark Fisher describes our relationship to modern technologies in a way that is particularly relevant to the discussions above—and in a way that is far less fatalistic than the understanding of this relationship that we have unfortunately inherited from the likes of Roland Barthes.

Fisher asks what it would mean to say that “‘everything’—human beings and machines, organic and nonorganic matter—is ‘dead’?”<sup>7</sup> His is not some populist technihilism—instead, with regards to photography, it offers a transcendental thinking

6 SLEMMONS, Rod, “LEE FRIENDLANDER: ‘Just Look At It’, 2005”, in: *American Suburb X*, available at: <http://www.americansuburbx.com/2010/02/theory-lee-friedlander-just-look-at-it.html>.

7 FISHER Mark, *Flatline Constructs: Gothic Materialism and Cybernetic Theory-Fiction*, New York: Exmilitary Press, 2018, p. 2.

through which we might consider, just as Friedlander does, the immanent bodies of photographer and camera. Fisher later draws on the writings of Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard when he writes: “Neither man nor machine is in charge of the process... which treats both human beings and technical apparatuses as non-autonomous components.”<sup>8</sup>

This process, which is, for Fisher, explicitly cybernetic, could likewise apply to the specificity of the photographic process, particularly in its now predominantly digital mode. The shift from analogue to digital processes folds the distinctive actions of photographic exposure and development into code. Now, more explicitly than ever before, we can consider each body—biological and mechanical, organic and nonorganic—as an extension of its other, allowing both subject and object to exit (semiotically and otherwise) from each other into a radical plane of immanence which Fisher names the “Gothic Flatline”, designating an immanent line which cuts through “states adrift between life and death, or states of simulated life”.<sup>9</sup>

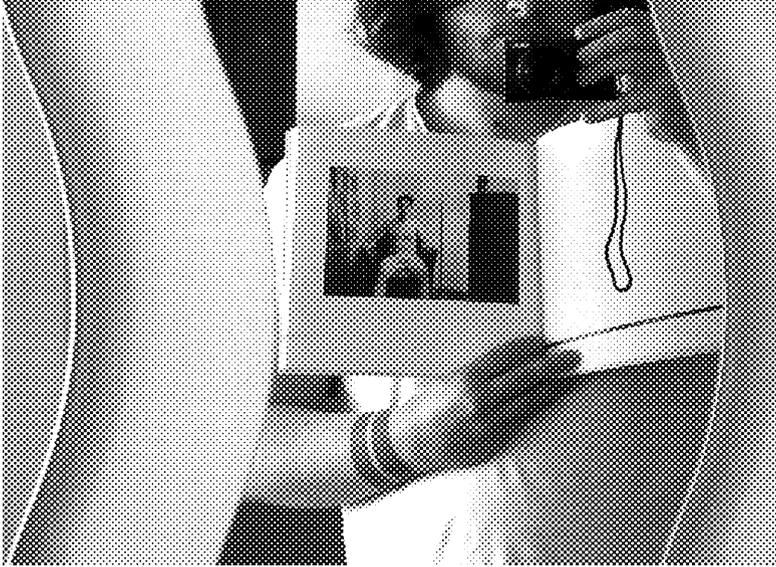
Of course, this tendency towards non-hierarchical collapse, towards horizontality, that our modern technologies exacerbate is not unique to photography, as Fisher makes clear. Whilst his descriptions of a radical plane of immanence cannot be disentangled from digital processes, in the visual arts there is nonetheless a precedent for such considerations. Fisher draws extensively, for instance, on Wilhelm Worringer’s notably pre-digital texts *Abstraction & Empathy* and *Form in Gothic*. In these texts, Worringer traces a trajectory towards abstraction, as seen in European art from the early 20th century, through which he highlights the ways that “aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment”, as if to say that our aesthetic sense is an objectivized sense of self.<sup>10</sup> Photography’s abstractive innovations, in this way, are less to do with aesthetic form alone and more to do with the entangled processes of modern digital production. Many critics and theorists acknowledge this development but they have also, despite this, highlighted its precedent in painting, and, in particular, the ex-

8 Ibid., p. 119.

9 Ibid., p. 6.

10 WORRINGER, Wilhelm, *Abstraction & Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock, Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1997, p. 7.

emplary precedence of Rembrandt's self-portraits as documents of a life-long abstraction of the self.



For instance, in his afterword to Friedlander's *Self Portrait*, John Szarkowski notes how Rembrandt's portraits of himself as an old man are notably lacking the ego of his youth, exacerbating this aestheticised and therefore objectivised self. Rembrandt presents us not with "a personage but a thing, a used tool, a thing as unimportant and as interesting as...a pair of shoes precariously re-soled one last time."<sup>11</sup> This is likewise how Friedlander's body appears to us in his images: as an unimportant but interesting object; as a used and discarded tool of experience, not unlike the camera itself. On one of the few occasions Friedlander's body is presented to us clearly within the frame, he resembles a cadaver propped up in the corner of a room opposite a camera that continues to bear witness without its host, highlighting as well as questioning the relationship between each body as a non-autonomous component within a wider creative process. Friedlander is not considering his own mortality here—biograph-

11 SZARKOWSKI, John, "The Friedlander Self", in: FRIEDLANDER, Lee, *Self Portrait*, New York: D.A.P. / Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., in association with Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, second edition, 1998, not paginated.

ically, *Self Portrait* is the first work by a young man at the start of a hugely successful artistic career. What is at stake in this work is rather subjective agency itself and the ways that this agency slips in the presence of the technology which produces it. Other projects by Friedlander can likewise be considered in this regard. For instance, *America By Car* adds that most American of technologies—the automobile—into the equation, creating a subjective triumvirate out of the bodies of photographer, camera and car. Surely to liken such playful investigations of the elusivity of subjective agency to death, following Barthes and others, is to tragically oversimplify it.



Friedlander, summarising his own work, once famously remarked that he was interested in “people and people-things”. Szarkowski, continuing his consideration of Rembrandt, notes that the Old Master’s interests were perhaps not dissimilar to this. Later in life, Rembrandt seemed to become more interested in “impersonal things, such as the color, shape, and weight of the object he describes; and the way his body occupies its space and accepts the light that falls on it; and the surprising way in which a human head, clearly seen, can resemble so closely patches of paint on a canvas.”<sup>12</sup> For Guibert also, as much as he loved the tra-

12 Ibid.

dition of the photographic self-portrait, none were as powerful as Rembrandt's studies of himself. Enamoured, he began to collect them, eventually owning five small postcard reproductions. However, in collecting these portraits, in which Rembrandt renders himself increasingly impersonal over the course of his lifetime, he instead discovers a fragmented and objectivised portrait of himself. He writes:

*I identified with him. I would have wanted my own self-portraits to be like that, and in choosing these, I also chose my own. I tore up almost all the pictures in which I appeared and through this pictorial absence [...] I located my own self-portrait, I defined a posthumous image.*<sup>13</sup>

Just as Rembrandt depicted himself in the midst of things, Guibert too finds himself depicted in the objects that now surround him, extending the Gothic line of subjective abstraction to a radical new objecthood. What is striking about Guibert's tale is not his identification with Rembrandt's self-portraits in and of themselves, but rather his identification with the other-as-many; with multiplicity in itself; with the *event* of a life lived. Time and self are out of joint here. Guibert is not Rembrandt because, in these images, Rembrandt is not Rembrandt, and, removed further still, in the form of (somewhat photographic) mechanical reproductions, Rembrandt's Rembrandts are not Rembrandt's, and, in the spaces in between all of these instances, a folding of various abstracted and impersonalised lives, Guibert is not himself either. He loses himself in this fractal re-presentation of selves, becoming alongside the objects in his possession.

What Rembrandt depicts, like each of the photographers referenced here, and Guibert also in his writing, is perhaps what Fisher called "unlife" or rather *a life*, as Gilles Deleuze would call it—which is to say, a life made impersonal: not *my* life or *your* life but *a* life. This impersonalisation is itself a form of "death" but one that Barthes and Sontag cannot help us to understand. In his book *Logic of Sense* (1969), Deleuze clearly distinguishes between these two forms of death, with *real death*—the phenomenological

13 GUIBERT, Hervé, "Self Portrait", in: *Ghost Image*, trans. Robert Bononno, Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1996, pp. 61–62.

and subjective death that concerns Barthes—being “an extreme and definite relation to me and my body [which] is grounded in me”. The figures considered here, however, recognise a process of impersonalisation in which death is simply a process of objectivation and, therefore, following Worringer, a process of aestheticization. This death “has no relation to me at all—it is incorporeal and infinitive, impersonal, grounded only in itself.”<sup>14</sup>

Elsewhere, Deleuze would recommend that we

*shouldn't enclose life in the single moment when individual life confronts universal death. A life is everywhere, in all the moments that a given living subject goes through and that are measured by given lived objects: an immanent life carrying with it the events or singularities that are merely actualized in subjects and objects.*<sup>15</sup>

This is perhaps a better and more vitalist description of the affective role of the repetitive self-portrait than the more common Barthesian fatalism of the photographic cul-de-sac. Deleuze notes how the recursive passage from subject to object, object to subject, is itself a becoming but a becoming that is a mere actualisation of the purity of the Event. The Photograph, in this regard, as the representation of a conscious moment from which consciousness is itself excluded, can be considered as a “transcendental field” in the way that it “cannot be defined by the consciousness that is coextensive with it”.<sup>16</sup> It is in this way that the absence of imagery from Guibert’s writings reveals the immanence of which he is just a part. The photographs in themselves are not important. They are mere signs, referents for *his* life that are all too easily overcome in *a* life. As such, Guibert’s *Ghost Image* describes *a life* in the sense that, in his close consideration of the photographic image, he realises that he is not dependent on it and it is not dependent on him. Does this overcoming, by extension, encompass the self? Is the shock of such a manoeuvre what drives so many of these thinkers and photographers to an early grave? Why is an exit in effigy never enough?

14 DELEUZE, Gilles, *Logic of Sense*, trans. Constantin V. Boundas, Mark Lester, Charles J. Stivale, London and New York: Bloomsbury Revelations, 2015, p. 156.

15 DELEUZE, Gilles, “Immanence: A Life”, in: *Pure Immanence*, New York: Zone Books, 2001, p. 29.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

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Guibert was a close friend of Michel Foucault and perhaps it is in this friendship that we can find another way of exploring this sense of *a life* and its limits. Guibert's 1991 novel, *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, tells the story of Muzil, a figure who is undoubtedly based on the late philosopher. Edmund White, writing a review of some of Guibert's works for the *London Review of Books*, describes Foucault as Guibert's mentor and notes that he "was perhaps Foucault's best friend".<sup>17</sup>

Foucault's writings on photography are not extensive but his concepts have nonetheless heavily influenced the medium. This writer's first encounter with Foucault, for instance, was as a young photography student, studying his theory of the panopticon—the omniscient system of surveillance and control employed in many nineteenth-century prisons which is regularly referred to as a precedent for modern systems of close-circuit television and the ubiquity of photography itself. Much can be said of the ways we have since internalised its function in the excessive documentation of our own lives. However, it is in his writings on the limit-experience that we find numerous notions relevant to our present discussion.

Closely associated with the writings of Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot and Friedrich Nietzsche, the concept of the limit-experience was, for Foucault, "an invitation to call into question the category of the subject, its supremacy, its foundational function."<sup>18</sup> This essential value of calling the subject into question "meant that one would have to experience something leading to its actual destruction, its decomposition, its explosion, its conversion into something else"—a function inherently tied to Foucault's conception of communism as a radically *other* politics requiring a radically *other* subject.

Similarly, Mark Fisher, who never strayed too far from the Gothic concerns of his PhD thesis, would later note in the introduction to his final, unfinished work, *Acid Communism*, that

17 WHITE, Edmund, "Love Stories", in: *London Review of Books*, 15:21, 4 November 1993, 3–6, available at: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v15/n21/edmund-white/love-stories>.

18 FOUCAULT, Michel, "Interview with Michel Foucault", in: FAUBION, James D. (ed.), *Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954–1984: Vol. 3: Power*, London: Penguin, 2002, p. 247.

*Foucault, seldom comfortable in his own skin, was always looking for a way out of his own identity. He had memorably claimed that he wrote “in order not to have a face”, and his prodigious exercises in rogue scholarship and conceptual invention, the textual labyrinths he meticulously assembled from innumerable historical and philosophical sources, were one way out of the face. Another route was what he called the limit-experience, one version of which was his encounter with LSD. The limit-experience was paradoxical: it was an experience at and beyond the limits of “ordinary” experience, an experience of what cannot ordinarily be experienced at all. The limit-experience offered a kind of metaphysical hack. The conditions which made ordinary experience possible could now be encountered, transformed and escaped—at least temporarily. Yet, by definition, the entity which underwent this could not be the ordinary subject of experience—it would instead be some anonymous X, a faceless being.<sup>19</sup>*

For Fisher, like Foucault, what is required now, politically, is an exit from the self so that we might arrive at a new but long desired “collective subject”. What such a subject looks like is, at present, impossible to say. We are so enamoured of neoliberal individualism and the firm boundaries it has built around us that a collective subjectivity seems like an unimaginably other form of life. However, as we have tentatively explored, glimpses of the outside of our most familiar modes of subjectivity are not unprecedented.

Perhaps photography, in its ubiquity, through its inherently fragmentational tendencies, can offer us a way of enacting this exit from subjectivity, in effigy and otherwise. Perhaps we can see the “selfie”, the predominant mode of late capitalist and individualist subjectification, as a way of reaching the outside of the self through our very preoccupation with it. From Bayard to Kardashian, other forms of subject are increasingly visible and possible. By embracing the vagaries of human life and the self-objectifying production of the sign of the subject, we can succeed in dissolving ourselves into something altogether *new*.

— Images by Matt Colquhoun

19 FISHER, Mark, *Acid Communism*, unpublished.

## Šum #9

**Matt Colquhoun je pisec in fotograf iz Londona. Izdatno objavlja pod imenom Xenogoth ([xenogothic.wordpress.com](http://xenogothic.wordpress.com)).**

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