



# Evidence of Death's Opposite

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Abstract

*Evidence of Death's Opposite* is a visual biography that begins with my own birth through a metaphorical pregnancy diary about the agony and joy of giving birth to art and life as an artist.

The visual work consists of a 574 page dummy where one can follow the changes of, statistically speaking, a half of human life in different life periods: childhood, adolescence, couple formation and family formation. Different emotional states are treated, such as grief and love, as well as different needs such as food, housing and an existential search.

The method used is autoethnographic and highlights the childlike and therapeutic benefit of creation as well as its difficulty – finding one's entrepreneurial role and positioning oneself in an international art context.

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## Introduction

My mother is dead, my father is dead, soon it will be my turn.

Since the death of my father when I was twelve years old, I have always lived close to death and have *kept myself busy collecting as much evidence as possible of the opposite of death – life*.

When my mother died I was 43. Then, a kind of circle of death closed and in-between several people have lost their lives which also affected me. During a period of thirteen years I have also created life – given birth to five children.

I am an observer and collector with an almost manic need for documentation that I have always been keen to present or archive in an aesthetic or artistic form. It is a lustful play to write down and visualize what I have experienced in order to process and consolidate the perceived. It is not something I have taken too seriously, it has always been something natural, a basic need. However, it came in the twilight when I, for a long period of time, devoted myself to building houses and homes and taking care of my children. My gatherings of documents, images and objects continued, but there was no time to organize and reflect on the collected material.

As the children grew older, the need to make something grew with all those things I had collected over the years. It resulted in a Bachelor's Degree in Photography and a book of over 400 pages on collecting, and more recently to continue with a Master's Degree. I have realized that my play is in fact serious, and that it should be taken seriously.

Established and older artists have their collected works and memoirs published in thick books. I am doing it now, collecting all the different kinds of life limbs. Before I am dead.

## Research conducted

Through analogue navel gazing (using my body and objects to see and reach my inner self on a deeper level) playfulness, desperate seriousness, irony and a great warm love for my family, I have begun to record a photo biography. The work is a documentation born out of an autoethnographic method and a kind of family photo album with everything that follows the

voice of an artist and mother in rural Ostrobothnia, Finland, during an approximate 40-year period between the 1980s and 2020s.

I grew up in the era of analogue images, without digital flow. In the family album, the carefully selected, beautiful and memorable moments that you wanted to preserve were collected. My mother and my sisters elaborately made photo albums with descriptive texts and I continued on the same path. Thirty years after my father's death, a hidden and forgotten book was found with text, illustrations and clippings made by my father that confirmed an unknown creative vein. My parents did not have the opportunity to develop further during the time they were growing up, but they found their ways of expression, blossomed in their immediate surroundings and provided a good soil for me and my sisters to grow in.

My children are growing up in a time when family albums have moved out into social media and the public space. Those of us who are privileged with internet access expose ourselves to many and rapid image impressions on a daily basis. The possibility to create almost limitless images and publish every day, every hour, changes society and our perception of ourselves and each other. One can also ask whether we can even call the mass of media showered upon us a privilege when humans still have an undeveloped ability to sensibly handle the digital dinner table.

We can rarely see the whole picture, no matter the amount, small or large, neither in the analogue nor digital age. But the physically printed image is more intrusive than the digital one that you can swipe away. There is always something behind the image or connected to the image that is not visible. All these layers fascinate me – the invisible. Like the visible – objects. In relation to dead objects, life becomes more alive. If you face death, you also feel more alive.

Through old photographs, objects and diary notes from childhood and adolescence, I reflect my current existence in the past and examine my zealous documenting and “tape recording”-relationship with the outside world. I have a dialogue with myself about everything that has happened and rewrite the diary I have not had time to write in recent years. My life has so far been very rich and intense. I am a person who finds it difficult to sit still, except in conversations that move on a personal, existential or vulnerable level. There, as in creation, I check out of everyday reality and enter a state that I always long for and seek.



In this state, that is filled with intimate presence and contact with either myself or the other, I explore the entire human register with its existential questions. We humans eat, sleep, get housing, reproduce, join a group and repeat patterns. It is the human frame. How we bend in it, what we show, what we hide or turn a blind eye to, how we handle emotions and relationships, what we produce and refrain from doing, interests me greatly. The photograph is an extremely important tool and a mirror to this as well as the self, and is a tool to see the other.

Through my photos and collages I reconstruct experiences and emotions. I am reliving the perceived, trying to understand and expose myself to myself. It may look pathetic and contrived in the picture, but the making itself has a more important role than the result. An inherently meaningless picture, in a larger context, takes on a role in which it becomes a part of the story to understand its history and actions. I try to capture great feelings and great love in my photos in order to deal with and understand that the greatness has actually existed. It is a way to process what I have been through, to take in what actually happened, to create images to attach the memory to.

Confronting yourself and your history is painful, but as crying is often redemptive and arguments can lead to better relationships, I see that the inner fights, which are allowed to come out and be printed physically, have a healing and therapeutic function. I see giving birth to images as a mental health care process where I relieve the pressure in my constantly connected brain. A developed photograph becomes a way of affirming the inner volcano. I create a kind of proof of the existence of the life nerve. It goes without saying that something as abstract as “lifeblood” cannot be fully captured in a two-dimensional image, but the path to the image, as I said, is as important as the result. If my image can attract someone else to try the process, a new good process is gained.

The photographer *Joan Fontcuberta* (b. 1955) states: “*I photograph, therefore I exist*”, because the camera effectively certifies existence, he continues: “*I am photographed, therefore I exist*”. Fontcuberta also says that the camera has become one of the vital contraptions that encourage us to venture into the world both visually and intellectually: whether we realize it or not, photography is also a form of philosophy. (Mack, n.d.).

“*Can you look inward with your gaze?*”, the photographer *Anders Petersen* (b. 1944) asked me as I sat on the metro in Stockholm as he photographed me. I immediately understood what he meant. That sentence clearly put into words the state I often find myself in, which I had not previously thought about concretely. I observed that the gaze in the “inward state” is completely unfocused forward and that it is actually as if the eyes physically turn into the body. It can be called a daydreaming look but at the same time it is an introspective one.

It is hard to see clearly. The author and painter *John Berger* (1926–2017) are talking about the relationship between what we see, believe and know in his book *Ways of Seeing*. He notes that seeing comes before words and after we can see, we are aware that we also can be seen. We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. Berger says that learned assumptions such as beauty, truth, status, gender, etc. affect how we look at art. (Ways of seeing, n.d.).

There are many kinds of gazes; my own look at myself, how I think others look at me, my maternal gaze, my love gaze, how I look at the world around me, the male gaze (Wikipedia, n.d.) and God's gaze. I have grown up knowing that no matter what anyone says or does, I am God's beloved and precious child. But also that God can see nurturing with oblique eyes on unruly people. It has shaped me with a relatively strong sense of self-worth but at the same time also given me a judgmental attitude towards myself.

*Why does she undress and paint herself like that? Why is she lying there? Can't you do the same with the clothes on? What kind of weirdness is that?* I ask questions that I would have asked in the past and think about why I do what I do now. I enter into the eyes of others and look at what I do from the outside. This also applies to God's gaze and man's gaze. In the Bible we can read that Adam and Eve went against God and noticed their nakedness and covered themselves with leaves (BibleGateway, n.d.). I tend to think of it as my heritage, as a kind of yardstick and a boundary not to cross.

For the sake of vulnerable and exploited people, I want to stop the male gaze, but for my own sake, I don't feel the need to do it. Probably because I have not felt exposed and thus I feel that mine and the man's gaze exist on the same terms. But feeling is another thing than truth. John Berger says that the “ideal” spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman



is designed to flatter him, men act and women appear. Men look at women and women watch themselves being looked at. (Ways of seeing, n.d.).

It is quite easy for me untamed to do self-portraits, thus being both the object and the viewer of the image. I think that I find it quite easy to love myself, because I was born into a good environment and received a lot of love. But with the eyes I have learned God has, it becomes a problem – when I love myself so much, because I should love Him more. I'm not really good at that.

But I hope to be driven by love. In an article about John Berger's passing, the writer says that Berger and the artist *Vincent van Gogh*, whom Berger often wrote about, had love in common. Berger wrote about van Gogh: “*This compulsion arose not from any conception of art ... but from an overflowing compassion.*”. In the same article on Berger, highlights his belief that seeing, work and love were connected, it led him to the bottom of society where neither property nor group affiliation took over but a human community. (Jonsson, 2017). I hope that using my gaze to look at myself leads to an even more humane gaze on others.

At the beginning of our studies, we listened to the photographer *Rosy Martin* (b.1946) talk about her work. Martin says that the photography that most people use, which has the potential to be democratic, too often ends up as a repeat of conventional iconic images. Together with the photographer *Jo Spence* (1934–1992), she developed in 1982 a method called re-enactment phototherapy where they have worked extensively with family albums and self-portraits that can make visible and open up aspects of the self for examination. By getting to the bottom of a problem or old trauma, it is recreated photographically. Through the language of the body, sometimes subconsciously and playfully, the possibility is created to make a new ending and in other words open up to a new existence and visibility. (Martin, 2009).

Spence says: “*The camera is a witness. The camera listens without judgment. The power of photography is to make visible.*”. Already in the 1970s, Spence began using photography as a healing tool to make personal and social processes visible. (Andana, n.d.). That the camera is like a listening and affirming peer, I find very descriptive. The camera allows you to be exactly

the way you want to be when you are with it in a private room. It does not ask, it does not adjust, I own my story, tell it, and the camera takes it seriously and makes its honest picture.

Spence and Martin wanted in their therapeutic work to reverse the traditional relationship between photographer and subject: “*If historically the subject had little control over his own representation, phototherapy changes this dynamic. The subject is able to act through personal narratives and claim authorship and responsibility for her own biography.*”. (Andana, n.d.).

Spence has written the book *Beyond the perfect image* (2005) and that is also where I want to move; behind the perfect. Many years ago, the family albums moved into the virtual world and I maintained a well-read blog where I shared photos of our everyday life and our home. We have lived with quite a lot of chaos and for me it became an oasis to make beautiful pictures, to confirm a kind of dream that existed for short moments. But I also photographed other things, and when I occasionally published the unpolished and raw, it was especially appreciated. If you give access to the “defect”, it also gives “the perfect” a more honest value.

The photographer *Erik Kessels* (b.1966) photographed his children with blue-eyes and bloody noses. He says he was proud of their scrapes, that it was about real experiences. He wanted to make a more realistic version of the shiny fake family album. Kessels' portrait of the children caused a great stir and he believes that we self-censor ourselves and are taught to interpret images in a certain way, a sunset is romantic and a bloody child has been the victim of an adult assault, he says: “*It seems that we've created a series of rules by which children should be photographed. Kids must be always laughing, always happy, or always doing charming things.*”. (Martin, 2017).

I think that family portraits with everyone happy in a row has its function, it is cataloging over time, smiling or not. Such as photographer *Nicholas Nixon's* (b.1947) portrait of his wife and sisters that he repeated photographing every year for over 40 years. Such repetition means that one is inevitably confronted with the passage of time, family ties and our own mortality. In an article in *The New York Times Magazine*, where you can see all the portraits of the sisters over the years, the writer states: “*Year after year, until the last great picture with its triumphant shadow mood, their faces and attitudes say: Yes, we will give you our picture, but nothing else.*”.

(Minot, 2014). These portraits are impressive, but I also want more, go behind the picture. See the stories behind the faces.

The photographer *Peter Wendel* (b. 1962) asks himself in the photo book *Missing pages* what kind of photo album he gets if he complements the mother's selected photos for the family album with photos of his feelings from events that are not included in the album (Wendel, 2021). The contrast is striking and total. In my work, I broaden the family album to include a larger spectrum of a life lived that is usually shown in a family album. I also wonder on behalf of my children, what all their different stories look like. The work I do is my story and I see a problem with publicly using my children in that story, but at the same time they actually are an important part of it.

I understand the people with strong creative drive who choose not to have children in order not to have the responsibility that creation entails in relation to the children, without children they can create freely and without limits. I try to balance my parental responsibilities and creativity as best I can. My children have seen a mother who prioritizes her own projects over much else, sometimes even over them. Sometimes they have acted as photo assistants, sometimes they are subjects and other times they are objects. Sometimes they show up, sometimes they get a paltry sum and most of the time they do not react to the camera because it has always been a natural companion in their everyday life.

When I assembled my dummy, I invited the family to a viewing and a discussion. Aware of my position of power and children that want to appease their parents, I was prepared to censor and change my material. My husband has been involved more during the process while the children have not seen as much.

One child said: *"If you can stand for it yourself, I have nothing to add"*, another said: *"I cannot see that there is a single picture that you could make that I could not approve"*, a third: *"This is real. You can't find this online"*. He who began saying: *"Six hundred pages, who could bear to read such a long book?"*, concluded by stating: *"It's a whole life."* We talked for several hours and the pictures brought back many memories, laughter and important discussions. The children

photographed the pictures and made lucid comments that could become an essay in itself. No one thought anything needed to be removed.

The photographer *Sally Mann's* (b. 1951) intimate family portraits have sparked many reactions around the world. I can easily relate to her images and way of working. In an interview, Mann is asked: *"Did you know what you were doing?"* She replies in the negative, that she only took pictures when the children were around her, that everything gradually grew to have a narrative around it with metaphorical implications. Her daughter Virginia comments in the same interview that what one might not think of was that as children they were very lucky to have a mother who was at home all the time and that the mother could arrange work in which the children could participate, they were proud of her. (CBS Mornings, 2015).

It was also a starting point when I was at home with five children, that I could somehow make art out of my life in which the children could be a part. In practice there and then, it was not at all easy and the good idea disappeared with the bathwater. But now some of it is coming out. I have not had a clear plan with my photography of the children other than saving them so I can look back on everything that happened if I become bedridden or when I get old. But really, I think it is just as much about a survival tool in the chaos of everyday life. I suspect that my subconscious worked artistically all the time.

Like Mann making use of her immediate surroundings and digs where she stands, so does the photographer *Nan Goldin* (b.1953). Something that I consider to be an obvious tool for credibility; to be as you are, where you are. Mann's and Goldin's worlds and expressions are in contrast, but the starting point is the same. *"Goldin's world was one of self-definition in a constructed, self-created space, recorded by constant picture taking."* (Sussman, 1996).

Although I mostly photograph my everyday environment, I build my own worlds wherever I move.

I understand Mann's world, to the point that it almost becomes uninteresting to me. Goldin's world is different, unfamiliar, so it also triggers me more. What I do not understand makes me curious and inquisitive. Mann's pictures give me comfort in their honesty, while Goldin's

pictures give me unrest. I think we constantly need to move between such contrasts if we want to develop. I hope that I can convey both calm and alarm in my own work.

The photographer *Larry Sultan* (1946–2009) has documented his parents in the book *Pictures from home*. A straightforward and honest family portrait in which for several years he investigated the psychological and physical family landscape of an “ordinary” suburban family in California. As I use text together with my images, I am fascinated by his collaboration between word and image, which elevates the everyday essential, which allows you to relate to your own snapshots that you want to preserve forever.

Sultan mentions an incident when, seconds before a phone call goes through, he sees within himself a picture that he wished someone had made: “...*my parents, brothers and me sitting in the living room after dinner, doing nothing special except living our lives.*” There is something existentially important in this sense, which is not very special and yet it is just that. In response to the question what drives him to continue the work, he says that it has more to do with love than sociology, that he is more a subject in the drama than a witness. He also notes that he takes photography literally, he wants to stop time. He wants his parents to live forever. (Sultan, 1992).

In the same way, I see what I do as a collection of evidence of life between binders, I leave something behind, I am a link in a chain showing where I am from and what comes out of me. The love for the loved one can feel so great that a hug and the words I love you feel meaningless. I think that my repetition of images somewhere within me shouts: “*Do you understand how much I love!*”. Once again, the image becomes a tool for something that feels unmanageable.

Sultan's parents question the son's portraiture and the father puts his finger on several important aspects of photography. “*You seem to be just as confused as I am. I mean, you pussyfoot around; half of the time the tape recorder doesn't work and you want me to repeat conversations that occurred spontaneously, and on the other hand you take the same picture over and over again and you're still not happy with the results. It doesn't make a lot of sense to me. I don't know what you are after. What's the big deal?*”. (Sultan, 1992).

Through the parents, Sultan gives us an honest insight into the way he works and we assume

that he is out to pursue his artistic vision and feeling, something that does not happen in a click of a minute. He asks his father if he believes that fiction can represent the truth and the father counters by asking: “...*whose truth is it then?*”. (Sultan, 1992).

The photographer and artist *Christian Boltanski* (1944–2021) moves in the same sphere of inquiry and says: “*You can tell the truth more truthfully than with the truth itself.*” (The Art Story, n.d.). In my work, I intend to tell a truthful picture of my life from my perspective. But I also have a vivid imagination and I also let it play its part. You can never be sure what is what, and I believe there is never an exact truth, our egos get in the way. We have a need to control our truth and partially rewrite it, to both beautify and destroy it. Today, social media has become an arena where we present our truths.

To return to Larry Sultan's father who continues to comment on his son's work: “*Either you don't know what you're doing or you don't take enough control. It's like a director who films actors when they're standing around between scenes. No wonder I look lost in your pictures – you leave me in the middle of nowhere.*”. (Sultan, 1992). As soon as a camera appears, the person photographed usually wants to present himself as he wants to be seen, accordingly to control what truth is told, and the person assumes a role and position. But Larry Sultan tries to reach something honest, undressed and unimagined, something that can be difficult even with those you know well.

Instead of striving for one or the other, in my work I choose to utilize both of these two different fields of tension, the raw uncensored everyday life as well as the arranged and exploratory play. The way children process and learn through play, I think we do well to do so in adulthood. Children's play is often rooted in an honest seriousness, and as adults we often stagnate in a constructed seriousness that is rarely close to our own self. Through play, we can better see ourselves and thereby understand others, and perhaps also understand how stagnant one becomes without play.

A child's play is rarely result-based or strives for perfection or “the beautiful”. A game is free and exists for a child. Several of my images where I use myself and enter a role, one can question the intention of, but as part of a process, I believe that the images have an important



function. The fact that I play is the most important thing, therein the result and the point arise. Then collecting the played result, of which I can feel both pride and shame at the same time, can have an important meaning in adding puzzle piece to puzzle piece in the understanding of my own patterns and actions.

Photographer *Cindy Sherman* (b.1954) has stated a disinterest in the typical idea of beauty because it is the easiest and most obvious way to see the world, she notes that it is much more challenging to see the other side. (Artnet, n.d.). She also says in an interview: *“I wish I could treat every day as Halloween, and get dressed up and go out into the world as some eccentric character.”* (Waters, 2012).

I have always built huts and rooms and dressed in different outfits and roles to clarify my own identity. I try to capture my emotions in an abstract or metaphorical way via environments and objects but also embody what I feel. I carry my sadness with me physically into the forest and try to capture it in a picture. Of course, the picture is very flat in relation to what I experienced, which is probably also the reason why I keep trying.

*Sophie Calle* (b.1953) is a fascinating artist who is good at playing. When I have mostly engaged in solo and family play in free forms, she draws up frameworks and rules for her games performed with other people. *“Her work frequently depicts human vulnerability, and examines identity and intimacy. She is recognized for her detective-like tendency to follow strangers and investigate their private lives. Her photographic work often includes panels of text of her own writing.”* (Wikipedia, n.d.).

You can still say that we move in the same spheres, I also examine my identity in a detective-like way. Of course there is a family involved, once the children have moved away from home I can continue to play with other premises and perhaps work more with rules and frameworks. If I see a box where I want to test my limits, find my contours, be subject and object, undress, then I do so. If I want to play the son I've never been, I'll take the rifle and take aim at everything that did not turn out. The body is an important part of my work, partly its function and transformation but also its inner and outer boundaries, both mentally and socially. I both undress in vulnerability

and dress up in layers of objects to extend my identity and existence. In the end the living body always reminds us of its mortality and death. There, somewhere, a lot of my pictures also land.

## Project development

*“For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.”*

*Ecclesiastes 1:18*

## Workshops and the art field

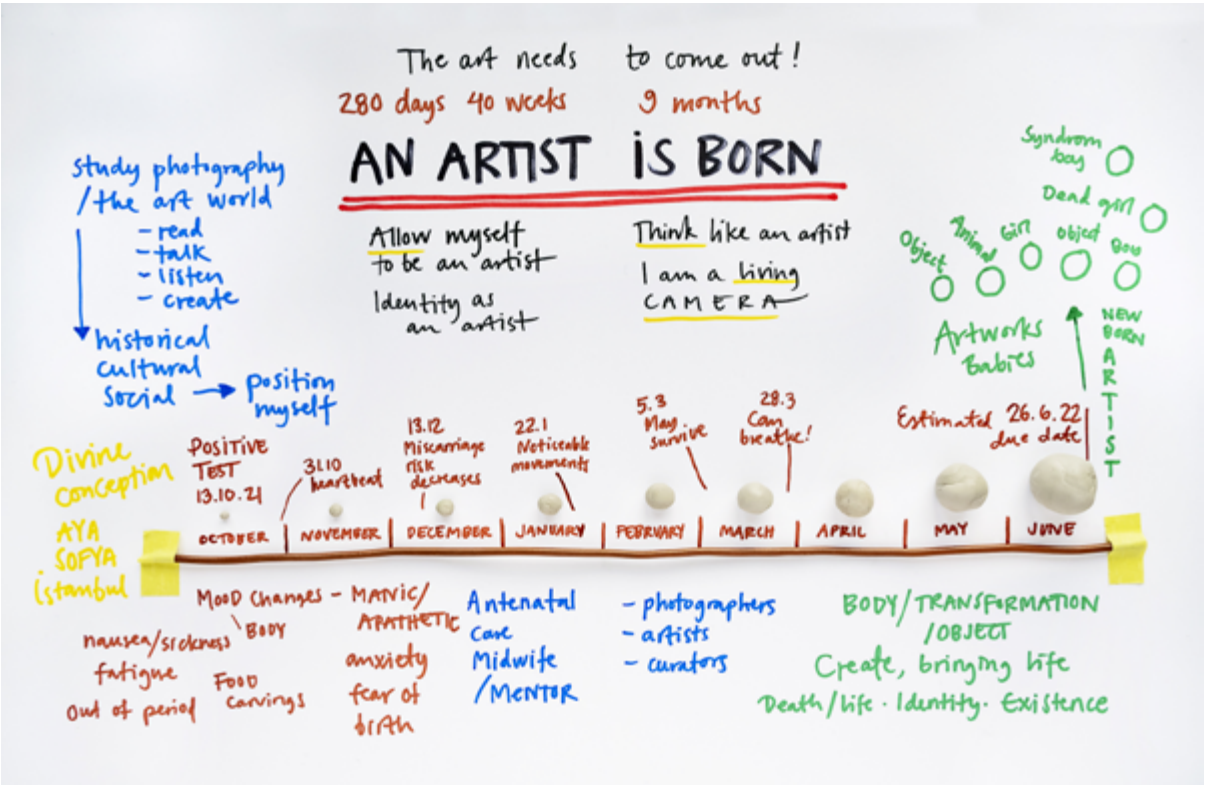
We were twelve people who met for the first time and were given a task of arranging an exhibition in a matter of days. I was extremely happy and privileged to be a participant in the new Master's Programme in Photography. We began our educational journey by questioning the art scene and opened our exhibition *Sold Out Gallery* with a performance in which we assumed the roles of the art world and gave away signed art to those visitors who had a compelling motivation for the artist, and wanted to bring his or her artwork home.

Collaborating in groups with people of varying ages, from different nationalities, with different backgrounds and academic knowledge, has created a dynamic learning environment. Good questions have been raised, we have dared to challenge and question each other and give relevant tips. Virtual meetings on Sundays have given a stronger group feeling and we have talked about a continuation after the studies by forming a collective. Interestingly, I have noted that I did not immediately cheer for participation, not because of the people, they are lovely, but probably more because I see myself more and more as a solo artist. But there is always a recurring clash in my head, I am drawn to social interaction with fruitful discussions but am hard to convince when it comes down to artistic work together with others. Maybe it is the spoiled cord child's yoke?.

In our first workshop week with the master group, we also wrote down a personal goal for the next year. My initial thoughts revolved around wanting to do a book as well as what kind of book and story I wanted to do, but I was urged to put those thoughts aside. I already had

experience in book publishing. To get the most out of the education, I decided not to focus on a product but on studying and taking in the international art scene in order to better position myself in relation to it.

Pretty quickly, however, I needed a framework for how to approach the visual work and the written part that was to come. I suffered for quite a long time until one day I had walked around in many thinking laps rejecting one idea after another, and felt how the creation in me pushed on. I thought: the art has to come out and realized in the next moment that I am pregnant with the art. Then a working name was born for my project, which I called *An artist is born*.



I made a mind map of a fictional pregnancy and decided to write a pregnancy diary to follow the process, and then see what artworks come out in the end. I received the same criticism from several persons regarding the name *An artist is born* because it could easily mean that I see myself as an artist only when my education is complete, while everyone meant that I am already an artist, which I agreed with. I note that I at the beginning of the studies wrote; allow me to be an artist, which of course indicates an uncertainty about the role of the artist.

The best updated book for grasping the contemporary world of photography is, of course, the places where the art is; art galleries, museums, photo festivals and the people out in the field who deal with art: curators, gallerists, collectors and of course – the artists. We have had the opportunity to visit and learn from these people and environments through many virtual meetings, but mainly through week-long workshops in Istanbul, Paris, Helsinki, Patreksfjörður and Arles. When I have been walking around the photo festival exhibitions, I have thought that I could be part of it all and fit in well. Finding your way in is of course not easy, but it starts with educating yourself and above all, putting yourself out there.

*The 212 Photography Istanbul photo festival* took place in many different historical buildings. Taking in new places, where both culture and religion collided concretely in front of my eyes has been instructive. Women at our accommodation in Istanbul with covered faces eating breakfast in front of women dancing half-naked on the television screen. Endless rows of rectified car service stands with listless men in one block while the parallel block was occupied by luxury shopping. Standing in front of a sarcophagus and seeing carved pieces of motherhood in a relief from the 5th-century evokes thoughts as does entering the Ayasofya mosque with a long and varied history of being both a museum and a church of Christianity. Through fine logistical arrangements and dinners, the time could be used well for conversations with photographers and organizers. We also hung out several days with the same people, which meant that you could go more in depth in discussion and make new connections.

An example of making new connections with positive rings on water was an exhibiting photo artist I met in Istanbul whom I also met at *Paris Photo* and then at *The Rencontres d'Arles photo festival*. The last meeting was unplanned, but via people I got to know at a Swedish gallery, who suggested another gallery I should visit, I met the same woman there. She invited me to a vip party and offered me and the group a free portfolio viewing on the second floor of the gallery with the leaders of a photography masterclass. The three women were impressed by my work and highlighted pictures that I do not think are that special myself. One person at the Swedish gallery also arranged a meeting for me with an editor/gallerist who wanted me to send over my material. One late evening we got an invitation to a private party where I went together with the

people from the Swedish gallery. And people I met in Paris I resaw in Arles, only that is a reason in itself to start a conversation.

To find your place, a gallery that might be interested in collaboration, a publisher or exhibition opportunities, you must be visible and initiate all those conversations left and right that can lead further. There I am. I have started a lot and it will be interesting to see what follows. By talking to new people, you also notice quite quickly if you are driven by similar interests and values, if there is a connection to build on. Out of twenty serious conversations, one might result in a collaboration. Rarely does anything happen the first time you meet new people. I believe in persistence and genuine interest in what you do, and in what the person you want to collaborate with does.

I also believe in not going home when you are tired, but staying a little longer. A lot of momentous conversations happen late in the evening. In a documentary about the musician and artist *Patti Smith* (b. 1946) it is said that as a young woman she was not out to party, she was driven by art (P3 Musikedokumentär, 2022). I can recognize myself in this. The ability to interact with people is probably as important as the artistic work you do. I have felt both a warm genuine friendship between people and an unpleasant feeling of walking around at a meat auction. It is important to sniff your way to a place where you feel at home in the enormous range, or where you feel that you have something to give.

During our workshop week in Helsinki, we had the opportunity for three different portfolio reviews. It is important to practice talking about your projects. I received great encouragement and confirmation in my artistry. I wondered if I am too flamboyant and lack style, but I was told that I have energy and that is as good as style.

At the photography festival *The Rencontres d'Arles*, I had booked five portfolio reviews and spent a lot of time in the waiting room, where the atmosphere was heavy. One reviewer thought that what I had done, contained too much, and that the better images could well disappear in the crowd. Two publishers were interested in receiving my pdf and a gallery was possibly interested in my collector's project. The last gallery thought that what I do fits more in a gallery

for contemporary art than as photo art. What I have realized is that I speak relatively well about my work in front of one person but have much more difficulty presenting something in front of a group – although that has also improved during this educational journey.

The book format is what I am always drawn to: During *Paris Photo* I visited *Polycopies* on a boat, which collects publishers and photo art books on two floors from around the world. I met with a publisher I have been in contact with last summer as well as friends and acquaintances that I have made over the past two years. Talking to different publishers, collecting contact information and browsing books is rewarding when I plan to make a mammoth book. The book fairs in Arles were also very extensive and it was interesting to browse through the prize-winning books and see the selected ones for the Dummy Book Award. I will participate there, if not next year, then some other year.

The exhibitions we have wandered through are very many. A few names that have stayed with me include: *Helena Blomqvist* (b.1975) who builds scenographic detailed worlds where stories with depth and melancholy take place (212 Photography Istanbul, October 2021), *Samuel Fosso* (b.1962) who explores different sides of his personality (MEP, Paris, November 2021) and *Ruud van Empel* (b.1958) who makes worlds where nothing is what it seems to be (Illusions of Reality, VB-Valokuvakeskus, Kuopio, June 2022).

The exhibition *A Feminist Avant-Garde* in Arles which included over 200 photographic and performance works by female artists from the 1970s was one of the exhibitions that touched me the most, where I also found many similarities in my own thinking and acting. My work can be seen to be about what it is like to be a woman in the 2020s, albeit 50 years later. Clearly, there is much that has changed; but there is also much that has not.

Many in the exhibition used their bodies, sought their roles, stripped off the clichés and made a new female role, both radical, subversive and ironic. The exhibition addressed themes such as wife, mother, housewife, the feeling of being locked in, dictated beauty and representation of the female body, female sexuality and identity and roles. I want to mention a few names from the exhibition among many fascinating ones: *Kirsten Justesen* (b.1943) who sits in a box you



can cut out (Fold Sculpture #2, 1968), *Karin Mack* (b. 1940) who lies dressed in funeral clothes on an ironing board (Iron dream, 1975), *Margot Pilz* (b. 1936) who shows a series of images of a couple having a child and the woman slowly disappears from the picture. The work is about finding the balance between emotions and time, between artistry and motherhood (Untitled (cuckoo), 1978).

Some other female artists who fascinate me and who have clearly used and are using their bodies are *Francesca Woodman* (1958–1981), *Orlan* (b. 1947), *Marina Abramovic* (b. 1946) and *Elina Brotherus* (b. 1972). I am drawn to the similarities and differences between these women and make a mind map inside of me, where I see them in relation to each other and where I place myself in relation to them. I draw us as paper dolls, cut us out and play around.

In Paris, Brotherus told us about her work and later I got to talk to her in Arles. A small detail I found interesting was that I had seen her in pictures for so long that I formed an idea of a serious person, while in reality she is full of joy and energy. Brotherus has a lot I can relate to; she works playfully with self-portraits, both autobiographical and as a figure that can be recognized but have multiple meanings, she has processed her grief over dead parents and unborn children. I had many children but having children or not, we use the same method; to process through photography the perceived that has influenced one strongly. Brotherus says she did not tell about her life in some of her series from the early 2000s but in a 2016 interview she notes: “*To be totally honest, I can now state that my photographs do say something about me: I was in those places and I picked them for personal reasons – even if I try to pretend that a photograph is nothing but a photograph.*” (Elina Brotherus, n.d.).

Brotherus has had a long career in the art of photography and I have started mine at the age of 40. I am probably past the stage where I need to distance myself from myself and my feelings and use the art as a cover, not to say that Brotherus did. I put everything on the table; here I am and here are all my emotions, all at once. Brotherus says that you become invisible at 40, but she also says that she plays more the older she gets. “*Because I have no children, I will never be totally adult either. I am an artist, which allows one to do crazy things, contrary to 'proper adults'.*” (Elina Brotherus, n.d.).

I have also met several playfully working artists, including the artist *Merve Tuna* (b. 1984) whom I met in Istanbul. We immediately got on well because we collect various medical items and I had bought a reflex mallet that set the discussions in motion. Getting to know the artist *Ragnar Kjartansson's* (b. 1976) fascinating work and visiting his studio in Iceland was eye-opening. It is captivating how nonsensical ideas can become a serious voice. When you move in a questioning landscape, it is difficult to protect yourself from critical and developing thinking. The line between madness and genius is interesting. Basically, I have both a playful and critical mind, which I believe is a good foundation for development.

During the study period, I also worked on my solo exhibition *I'm a collector; I want more!* which was shown for a month in *Konsthallen Sandviken* in Sweden. It was my second invited solo exhibition and came via the book fair in Gothenburg where I presented my book about collecting. For the exhibition I printed pictures, cut glass, painted frames, framed, planned hanging and wrote texts. The exhibition consisted of 68 framed works and 31 installations.

The exhibition received media attention and the whole process went well, but it was still more work than I intended. The physical carrying and handling of frames and objects made me question whether it is worth the effort to handle the whole process myself. Being represented by a gallery would require less personal handling of works and I could focus more on the creation. In any case, I sold 12 works and calculated that I received a reasonable monthly salary for the month spent working on the exhibition. To make a living from exhibition-only activities, I would need to have an exhibition a month, or set my artworks to a higher price.

Competitions and exhibition applications are also a way to get ahead in the photographic world, which I think is good to make a habit of, as well as maintaining an updated portfolio adapted to different purposes, whether it is a spontaneous meeting at a festival or a portfolio review. An artist's heart, brain and message also live in constant development. These two elements, the physical work and the abstract experiences need to constantly hold meetings with each other in order to live in symbiosis.

## Collage, intuition and artistry

When I read the book *The artist's body* it was as if the written text came alive, for example this simple sentence: “*The collage, photomontage, installation, performance, environments and assemblages of Dada and Surrealism broke out of the frame and the flat plane of painting and began to engage with everyday life.*”. (Warr, 2000).

I was raised in a beautiful but isolated from the outside world area where society was relatively simple. My art experiences were limited to framed classical oil paintings or church paintings. Gallerist *Jean-Kenta Gauthier* says: “*Limitations are good framework from which great art can emerge.*”. (Sordat, 2018). More and more I value the soil in which I grew up.

The existence of something called Dadaism and Surrealism, was nothing I took to my mind when I studied art for three years after high school. I had my Christianity and the version I embraced allowed no contact with the “outside world”. As I have gradually read, traveled and realized that I am not alone in my expressions, the world has become more welcoming and bigger. I have experienced and understood the meaning of art on a new level. The meaning that has risen out of the classical framework, that Dadaists were dealing with collage over 100 years ago. I have realized the fact that I have already experienced many different art forms as a child without knowing it, that my saved photographs and my collected folders with clippings that I put together, is an art form to be reckoned with.

It is also not so long that photography has been seen as art, during the 1970–80s collectors started to form a market (*Brandei Estes*, Sotheby's, lecture 02.09.2021). In that period of time I was born and now I am using my sister's old photographs as material in my artwork. In myself, I have always felt a strong identity as an artist, my family has never objected to my interest in art, but I have sometimes found it difficult to allow myself to live as a creative person without “a real job”.

The artist *Keith Arnatt* (1930–2008) used photography as a medium in the work *Trouser – Word Piece* (1972/1989), he stands with a sign in his hands that reads I'm a real artist. One can take in this image as if a child had written the sign with pride; I am real, I am good, I exist. We write

a lot of signs at our house. There is something direct in the simple. Children often deliver it. And in my adult head I understand a little bit more. The ambiguity. The one that I also always gravitate towards or try to add if I perceive that it to be missing. By adding a “real” you reach the question of what is not “real” and that is where it happens, in the question: *What is real work? Who is a real artist? What is real art?*

I try to explain to myself that if you removed all the artists from the world, it would be very poor. During this year, having been able to spend time actively in a wide and large art world has felt enriching, to see that there are an enormous number of people who work with art in very many different ways. It may be obvious to many, but if you come from a very small place, it is not obvious until you see it with your own eyes.

The year before I started this master's education, I participated in a workshop with monthly feedback and three meetings in Montreuil during a year at *Atelier Smedsby* with the photo artists *JH Engström* (b. 1969) and *Margot Wallard* (b. 1978). We were invited to work intuitively with photography, where the free creation that arises in the subconscious is emphasized. A way that can be seen to stand in contrast to the classic academic art educations but where the latter more and more open up to the intuitive. Wallard had been visited by a person from *The national center of art* in Paris who is looking for new ways to teach art and they were interested in knowing how they work at *Atelier Smedsby* (Interview with Wallard, 12.10.2021). I have appreciated staying in both “the intuitive world” and the academic one during overlapping periods. I would say that there have been more similarities than differences. The focus from both sides has been to elevate individual expression.

Wallard tells that photography for her is an obsession, a tool to understand why she is here on earth and that the only time she thinks about one single thing is in the moment of photography. Then she has total presence and the photography is like meditation. (Interview with Wallard, 12.10.2021). I say to Wallards partner Engström that it is generous that they use themselves in the way they do by inviting the workshop participants to work in their homes. He replies:

*“Yes and it’s not very intelligent in the long run. In the beginning of Smedsby it was more borderless. Too many late nights with the participants talking photography, art and work and things like that. Now we are more middle age borderless. This is the thing; this is the difference; it has to do with you that opens up, that’s where the key is, you can’t cheat and step back and not do so much, you have to go all in. You have to. We aim to create an atmosphere where that is ok. That is not very simple, you really really have to create this feeling that everyone is allowed to say anything, that’s difficult. That takes time and that takes work. The work is more mental than practical. We are really pushing the participants a lot. But it comes from a good place, it’s not evil.”*

(Interview with Engström 2021, 12.10.2021).

Sometimes sentences you are told can stick to you and almost never leave you. In my first period of study, something was said that became like a mantra for me: I must be able to justify what I do. It has made me put down a lot of ideas and whims I wanted to test because I thought it would be too difficult to explain them sensibly. It was a liberation for me to participate in Atelier Smedsby's workshop, which started a new way to dare to work more freely and let my inner self be imaged without having to explain. Afterwards, the pictures themselves have written the story. Probably also a truer story than if I had put something unprocessed into words.

The way I then started of working, to relatively intuitively build collages from my archive images and combine them with new images and objects, was a method that I continued with in my master's studies. Pretty far into the education, I began to realize that the project that started in Atelier Smedsby with my childhood and teenage years was connected with the part of my life that I did under the working name *An artist is born*. When I was born, an artist was born. Building your artistic profile, in my opinion, starts unconsciously already when you are born, when you start calling yourself an artist, you have made it conscious. In my case it happened at the age of 16, it would be another 20 years before I talked about it loud or looked at myself from the outside as an artist. The interesting thing is what is born from me, the art, so I changed the last section of the dummy to Art is born and crossed out the working name An artist is born.

In my work, I use collage techniques, which suits my personality, which constantly collects impressions and wants to put everything collected together on the table for further inspection.

When I cut an object out of its original environment and put it in a new one, I can fertilize my story in new ways. *The book The Age of Collage* which presents the history of the collage technique and eighty contemporary collage artists appealed to me enormously, it was like reading about myself. *“The traditional collage is also far more than cutting and gluing; it is, above all, collecting, searching, or perhaps only finding. Since what might seem coherent or deliberately confusing to the viewer is, in many cases, the result of a long process and not that of a supposedly quick copy and paste.”* (Krohn, 2013). Collecting material takes time, but when I then see and understand what I need in the middle of a process, I usually know where in my archives to look.

The most featured artists in the book *The Age of Collage* cut out pictures from newspapers and old photographs. I work a little differently when I also use three-dimensional objects on my photos. My collages are like scenography – the collage itself is not the image, it is the photograph that is the final product.

*“The collage can separate things that belong together, unite the disparate; it can maximize artistic freedom but can also mean limitations...”* (Krohn, 2013). Making surreal collages where I let the subconscious rule is like a laboratory where I create worlds to get lost in and let collisions happen. I am a surgeon who operates out objects that are attracted to each other. Once I allowed myself to create more freely, I have been almost surprised at how strong the inner voice has been once I let it speak. But I still feel that I have a rather static and correct manner in my expression which annoys me a bit. I try to break lines and let go even if it happens little by little.

A photographer who explodes in his expression is *Peter Beard* (1938–2020). He has made extensive diaries that I find very attractive, with photo collages, text, drawings and paintings, he says: *“I like things that don't look like you're in control. It's like life itself. You just learn how to benefit from accidents and chances that you take.”* (Nowness 2013, August 13). Another contemporary artist who creates worlds and art that explodes is *Thomas Hirschhorn* (b.1957) his expression is also something I can easily relate to.



“Relate to” is also the way I think rather than “be inspired by”. The question “where do you get inspiration from?”, is almost a non-question to me. Of course there are lots of inspiring creative people but I can not hang my work on that. The artist *Chuck Close* (1940–2021) says that inspiration is for amateurs and the rest of us just show up and get to work. He means that waiting for the clouds to part and a bolt of lightning to strike you in the brain will not end up with a lot of work; all the best ideas come out of the process – they come out of the work itself. Close is talking about inspiration as absolutely unnecessary and somehow deceptive. He says if you feel you need a great idea before you can get down to work, he finds that is almost never the case, then you will not work at all. (Fig, J. 2009).

I think it is important to have discipline and routine as an artist, but at the same time I compare the artist's job with that of the tape player. The artist documents human life and it can not be reduced to certain specific working hours, to some extent it should last around the clock. It is about dedication. Expressing myself artistically, I consider to me a drift as important as eating, sleeping and reproducing. It is a pain, an enigma but mainly of all hard, continuous and focused work of failure, where I finally produce a so-called residual product that can be called art. It is often a long road of much agony before you “arrive” – to continue on the same track again; work, complain that it does not turn into anything at all, oscillate between thinking that what you do is pointless and crazy and sometimes fantastically good and almost genius.

The recurrence in my way of both working and relating to life I find in the contrasts. There between life and death I throw myself into. The writer *Roland Barthes* (1950–1980) also moves between those extremes in his thoughts about photography, on the one hand he talks about photography having something to do with resurrection: “*Might we not say of it what the Byzantines said of the image of Christ which impregnated St. veronica’s napkin: that it was not made by the hand of man, acheiropoietos?*”. On the other hand, he asks whether all young photographers in the world understand that they are agents of death: “*This is the way in which our times assumes Death: with denying alibi of the distractedly “alive”, of which the Photographer is in a sense the professional.*”. (Barthes, 1993, p. 82, 92).

Photography is both a tool, a means of power and can be a matter of life and death. I will

continue to work with people and the human, documentation, collecting and collage building where the camera and the computer are my most important tools. However, I will care about the physical end product. In the digital age when we easily swipe away images, I believe that the physical image becomes even more important and impact-creating both as visual research and visual communication. The physical image can overwhelm because it tangibly lingers, almost becoming a tactile friend.

My view of the art world has broadened further over the past year. The possibilities are many, almost too many, but, at the same time, not everything is for everyone. Galleries and publishers have their personalities and I am ready to start dating. In the future I want to be represented by a gallery and to begin with I want to find a publisher who wants to publish my book, or alternatively find a gallery that likes what they see in my book.

The book dummy is not yet ready, but it is at the stage where I can look for interested collaborators. Parts of the story are still missing and I want to do more pages, more elaborate texts and more layers on already existing images to create the vision and story I have experienced and see in front of me. Almost all of the thousands of photos in the dummy have not been published anywhere. At the *Moderna Museet* in Stockholm, a retrospective exhibition, *This will not end well*, has recently opened, where *Nan Goldin's* work is shown. She says in an interview that her pictures are the diary that she lets others read, that she does what she has to and never thinks about what the audience will think. She also comments that the title of the exhibition can be read ironically. (Lindblad, 2022).

My work will eventually end up “well” or bad, but that is unimportant. I already do the important things, I do think a lot about what others will think, but that can not still stop my flow. It has to come out. That I, as an unknown photographer, in the middle of my life, bring together all my unpublished works in one large collection, memoirs in pictures, a life collage in many dimensions, with photography, text and objects, I consider to be a new approach. *I start from behind to make my way forward.* Or, I start at the end of life to show the beginning of life.

The master's education has been important for finding places to navigate from. Contacts have

been made, and several that I will be reconnecting to. I appreciate that we have been out in the field and not sitting at a theoretical school bench. In my forties, I ordered a taxi for the first time, traveled alone in the middle of the night in Istanbul and learned more about the social game among worldly people. Still I feel most at home in the forest, but thrive in a big city where I fearlessly venture out and appreciate taking in all the fantastic and the ugly that human has created and invented outside the forest.

### Conclusion

*“I’ve filled my whole life, trying to preserve the memory of living, in the fight against dying. Perhaps the only thing I’ve done, since stopping death is impossible, is to show this fight. The fight itself does not satisfy us either.”*

*Christian Boltanski*

Is artistry a lifelong uphill, a straitjacket stuck to the skin? Is artistry freedom to express and investigate the existence and interaction of souls and objects? Is the artist's task to make the world more beautiful through aesthetics and to highlight injustices and stories through images and questions?

Science looks for and presents answers and facts. The world of art is the opposite, it delivers questions and confirms the existential difficulty. It has no mathematical formula. I believe that the essence of creation and artistry is mostly to show the essence of life. That includes a lot. Everything. And I want to make full use of life. Expose me to. Put me in. Literally wear the art on my own skin.

I quite often lie for a long time in a bed, on a floor, in nature and stare and think very intensely, or I walk fast, back and forth. This is also work. The burden of the creative. I am needed to give birth to the being of everyone who does not have time or dare to be. I cannot limit what I do artistically in any direction in order to be liked. It has never been a driving force for me. The desire, the vision and the need to express myself drives me.

I would like to give a nudge to those who are stuck in the adult squirrel wheel: I want to encourage play that can change and at the same time dare to show our wounds to each other. My work is an invitation to talk for real. Peel away costumes and facades, and maybe a little social media. Become physically social.

I hope to create a discussion in our closed living rooms. Reach into someone's inner self, including the uncomfortable emotional registers, and initiate more brutal and healing dialogues inside us that have an effect outwardly. As photographer Anders Petersen told at a workshop in Helsinki: *“You have to be weak enough, not strong”*. I continue with another favorite quote of his from the same week: *“If you don't know, it's always better to take a picture of it”* (June 2018).

Understanding has always interested me. To understand myself and other people on a deeper level. To try to deceive yourself less and honestly stick to yourself, listen inwardly. It is difficult. Then it is sometimes better to take a picture. Ultimately, my work is not about me at all, it is about the fact that every human life is important. Everyone has the right to their own pictures and their own photo biography several hundred pages long.

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EVIDENCE  
OF DEATH'S  
OPPOSITE

































