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Still Life Revisited in Photography: Examples of Still Life-Like Elements and Approaches in Selected Works by Joel-Peter Witkin and Nobuyoshi Araki

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Melissa Michelle Lumbroso

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INTRODUCTION

Twin zoologist brothers lose their wives in a freak car accident. The story develops with a series of bizarre events and overt sexual encounters (a ménage à trois, a doctor who seems a little too interested in amputating the second of Alba’s legs after her survival from the car accident, etc.). But the leading narrative of Peter Greenaway’s film *A Zed & Two Noughts* (1985) follows the brothers’ attempt to grasp the meaning of loss and ultimately, of the human’s and animal’s mortal condition. One particularly striking scene served as the impulse for the reflections in this thesis: The darkness of a laboratory space at the zoo is unexpectedly and repeatedly broken by the instantaneous light of camera flashes accompanied by the sound of shutter releases. Flashes and shutter releases, one after the other. Simultaneously the viewpoint of the film slowly moves through the room allowing the viewer to take stock of what has become an obsession. The obsession began with collecting the items with which the late wives had last been in contact with the goal of documenting the decay of these items, a kind of attempt to hold on to the last essences of the beloved wife. It continues to such a point, that the entire laboratory has been transformed into a photo studio of sorts: Numerous cameras on tripods are installed, each camera with a timer set to release at regular intervals, the lens focusing on apples in various stages of decay or a dead alligator for example, items no longer having anything to do with the tragic loss, are individually staged on a dark background, at times featuring a grid offering a visual guide as to the development and changes the items go through during decay. With each click of the camera, the things photographed gradually approach a state of total disintegration. The series of time-lapsed photographs are then shown one after another in a slide-show sequence allowing for a closer review of the degeneration towards final decay.

The consistent usage and implementation of traditional still life vocabulary in Greenaway’s film—the decay of objects, animals, food items and eventually of the human body—constitute not only the focus of the film’s narrative, but still life is used as a formal and aesthetic element to visually structure the film: Scenes with
dialogue to be heard in the background stare at the still life-like arrangements of a bedside table, for example.¹ Coupled with this laboratory scene, my initial interest in the topic of still life in photography was spurred by the observation of a trend in contemporary art. The almost prototypic still life, specifically that of the Dutch seventeenth-century, appears to have gained a new relevance. This art historical category not only serves as the basis for a series of artistic appropriations, reinterpretations and even parodies in formal or aesthetic terms, rather the internal structure of still life and the themes associated with this genre—the display and arrangement of inanimate things and food ranging from domestic everyday items to luxury objects as well as an attempt to depict the passage of time, decay and decadence, and explore mortality—have equally motivated a wave of recent artistic inquiry and production.

But what is still life anyways? How may the genre be defined beyond its mere formal and aesthetic criteria? In the first chapter, several themes are identified, themes that are central to understanding the genre historically, but which remain relevant for an understanding of still life today. The term *fetishism*, which is likewise central to a genre whose ultimate concern is the world of things between life and death, will also be addressed.

The subsequent chapter outlines the relationship of the genre to the medium of photography. The “overlookedness” of the genre itself may have been increasingly addressed over the last two decades, yet still life in media beyond painting remains underexposed. But besides being doubly overlooked, why specifically the medium photography? I will argue that photography shares a couple of fundamental interests with the genre of still life. A discussion about the kinship of photography and still life, which for example, share elegiac qualities, an illusionistic proximity to their referents, as well as a similar faultily fetishistic structure may prove to be especially productive. Furthermore, examples of how the genre was shifted and shaped by the possibilities and capabilities offered by the newer medium will be

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¹ It goes without mentioning that Greenaway is known for his appropriations and references to art historical icons, especially those of the Baroque era and Dutch painting. In this particular film, Jan Vermeer’s *Allegory of Painting* (1666) is immediately recognized in a scene that is transformed to become an *Allegory of Photography*. The artist’s tool is now the camera, the model a nude woman with a fancy feathery red hat. In the short scene that ensues, the tense relationship between model and photographer is directly addressed.
explored, closing with a few recent artistic examples of the application or employment of still life, moreover demonstrating a tendency towards the reappropriation of traditional still life vocabulary since the 1980s.

The instances of the reception of the still life thematic or formal tradition in contemporary photography are too innumerable to mention them extensively here. Hence examples by two specific artists, who both gained (Western) renown since the 1990s (while both artistically active already decades before), have been selected for specific reasons. Not unlike Greenaway, still life themes reappear as a leitmotif, both formally and in terms of content, in the vast photographic oeuvre of Nobuyoshi Araki (born 1940 in Tokyo, Japan) and Joel-Peter Witkin (born 1939 in Brooklyn, NY). The underlying, yet outright erotic themes in Greenaway's film are also present in the erotically-charged nature of Araki's and Witkin's photographs. Additionally, the artists' explicit concern with death make their works ideal candidates for a discussion in this context. The inherent conflict or struggle between the forces of life and death, *Eros* and *Thanatos, libido* and *mortido* are clearly at work in both Araki's and Witkin's photographs. While Witkin and Araki are better known for their erotic, at times pornographic, photographs representing women nude in bondage and staged studio photographs of 'deviant' sexual practices or 'freaks' with physical anomalies, the less sensation-provoking photographs of inanimate and apparently trivial objects, that I argue are central for an understanding of their work, go largely unmentioned.

An analysis of the still life elements in the work of these two photographers was primarily motivated by the fact that the photographs with the appurtenances of still life particularly share a common interest in questions about life and death, yet by using the notion still life, I am not limiting myself to a group of works that feature only arrangement of things or concerns with death, but rather take still life as a paradigm within which specific themes or approaches may be considered. Joel-Peter Witkin's photograph *Feast of Fools, New Mexico* (1990) and Nobuyoshi Araki's *The Banquet* series (published 1993 as a photobook) could function as the starting point for an exploration about the still life-like elements and approaches throughout their work.
Witkin’s studio photograph *Feast of Fools* (1990) (Ill. 42) formally makes recourse to the iconographical tradition of Dutch still life with a shocking addition. The black and white photograph displays in a dark space the entanglement of fresh fruit, animal and decaying human flesh. Among the highly-composed confusion, an infant cadaver comes into focus. The photographic surface shows traces of interferences in the photo-processing stage: yellowing streaks in the almost black back- and foreground, as if a wet sponge were smeared across the photographic surface before the image was entirely fixed. But beyond this direct formal association to, for example Dutch *pronkstilleven* or other still life imitations in early photography history, how else may Witkin’s work be characterized as carrying the traits of still or *stilled* life? How may one describe the tension visible in Witkin’s photographs, both appealing and repelling, be explained in terms of the still life? How do Witkin’s “still life photographs” depart from the conventional understanding of still life?

Araki’s *Banquet* (or *Shokuji*) (1993) (Ill. 73-Ill. 86) includes numerous photographic spreads documenting the dishes consumed with his wife Yoko before her death in 1990. The photographs are extremely close-up snapshots allowing the texture and moisture of the food to be visible. The dishes however remain largely unidentifiable and a certain film or gloss that appears to hover over the image impedes access to its contents. This series of photographs is by no means the intentional citation of classical Western still life, however, certain aspects and recurring themes (flowers, food, things as well as death and eros) allow for an analogy with still life. Beginning with a most obvious example of a photograph of *kinbaku*, or Japanese bondage, we ask ourselves what still life and bondage may have in common and likewise examine how Araki’s photographic still life departs from or may be considered a variation of the traditional still life.

In an attempt to fathom the vastness and diversity of both artists’ work, a rather eclectic approach as been taken, drawing upon literary, philosophical, photo-theoretical and psychoanalytical sources, with the hope of doing justice to a certain eclecticism on the part of Witkin and Araki, whose work reflects a fascination with a myriad of themes and motifs that range dramatically.
The survival of any such innovation must rest on its capacity to satisfy a variety of conflicting aims. The success of the still life genre may be a case in point.²

A basket of apples, grapes, figs or pomegranates on a table ledge, a lavish bouquet of flowers, tulips, roses, or sunflowers—compositions that fill the field of image. Oysters on a platter, a peeled lemon alongside a goblet and a loaf of bread on a white tablecloth or an array of musical instruments, watches, jewelry, a candlestick and a skull. The mere *ekphrasis* of certain motifs conjures for most listeners or readers a precise set of images that are identified nearly unanimously as belonging to the genre of still life. Norman Bryson considers the sparseness of profound theoretical discourse about the traditionally “overlooked” genre of still life and states that it is “the genre farthest from language, and so the hardest for discourse to reach.”³ And yet for a discussion about still life and how it may be understood in the context of the production and reception of today’s art, we cannot ignore that our perception of the still life as a broad category encompassing centuries of developments across region and style is determined historically, culturally and by discourse. As Ernst H. Gombrich wrote, the genre will “evoke in most of us a similar cluster of memories that will influence our expectations.”⁴ But what are some defining characteristics of the genre, beyond the formal and aesthetic criteria of the historical ancient, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, French, modern or even contemporary still life? To provide us with a common point of departure before an exploration in the following chapter of an expanded notion of the still life in photography, and more specifically in the photographs of Araki and Witkin, it is necessary to identify some consistent themes that contribute to the coherence of the category up until modern art.

Drawing primarily upon Norman Bryson’s interpretation of still life in his seminal book *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* and upon well-

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known examples from art history, a definition of still life for the intents and purposes of this thesis may be outlined identifying four paradigms within which the genre operates. The first and enduring parameter deals with the subject matter of the still life: the concern with the things of material culture as well as that which is considered menial and insignificant. Secondly, still life is characterized by its isolation from the presence of the human form and narrative. A third dimension is concerned with the consistent illusory quality and naturalism of still life, frequently on the threshold between ‘reality’ and its representation. Coupled with deceptive painterly tradition of still life, the genre is accompanied throughout by a fourth aspect: the artificial, through its deliberately staged displays to mimic the seen world. The apparently ‘real’ reveals itself ultimately as an illusion, shifting the focus to a rejoicing in the artifice. These four themes also lend themselves as useful in a discussion about the still life-like elements in the photographs of Araki and Witkin. Finally in this chapter, the discourse of fetishism is introduced, drawing upon Hal Foster’s argumentation in his essay “The Art of Fetishism: Notes on Dutch Still Life,”\(^5\) as it continues to prove to be a productive term in the attempt to negotiate the prevailing tensions in the still life image.

**The Familiar and Overlooked**

Accounting for the contents of the still life, not unlike other art historical classifications of genres, the term draws upon a description, not of its artistic style, but of its very contents.\(^6\) The items of the still life repertory range from food items, raw in the form of dead animals and the fruits of the earth or prepared, to the containers holding food and cultural tools of the table (silverware, glassware, dishes), from personal affects (books, musical instruments, pipes, jewelry, quills and inkwells, etc.) to decorative vases of flowers. The very core of the still life,


\(^{6}\) For example, the still life is described as: “Type of work in which an arrangement of diverse inanimate objects, including items of food (especially fruit and game), plants and artifacts is depicted. This arrangement is often apparently random and is usually within a domestic setting. The form is normally associated with oil painting, but other media have been used, including mosaics, watercolour, collage and photography.” *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*, s.v. “Still life,” http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T081448 (accessed January 27, 2012). See also HarperCollins Dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques, 2nd rev. ed., s.v. “Still Life,” and Lexikon der Kunst (electronic version), s.v. “Stilleben,” Digitale Bibliothek Band 43, Directmedia Berlin 2001. Both the HarperCollins dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques and the German Lexikon der Kunst highlight the aesthetic intention of the still life as well as its symbolically charged nature.
since the *xenia* of antiquity (Ill. 1) through the seventeenth century and up until today revolves around what Bryson identifies as the materiality of the things themselves: The “level of material culture to which those objects belong” is an important transhistorical factor contributing to the constancy of the category. The apple or the culturally and functionally formed container of the bowl or basket, in a *xenia* of antiquity reappears hundreds of years later in Caravaggio’s *Basket of Fruit*, (Ill. 2) in Dutch still life painting, or in yet another region another hundred years later in a largely varying form, yet still the same subject, Cézanne’s apples (Ill. 3) or the even more recently in yet another form of a halved apple in a photograph by Araki (Ill. 4). The constant state of a host of things as well as their resistance to change over thousands of years of history and culture gives them familiarity, a familiarity that makes us take the things of nature and culture, the odds and ends that make up the web of our life for granted.

Just as the slow and enduring force of culture determines the shape and form of the items and their presentation in painting, it comes as no surprise that the appearance of material things in the re-birth of the still life since Antiquity, beginning with its precursors in the market and kitchen scenes of the sixteenth century, accompanied fundamental changes to the economic and social structuring of wealth also resulting in a renewed interest in the conditions of production. The economic surplus and abundance generated in the Netherlands during the Golden Age likewise finds its materialist expression in the unique *pronkstilleven* by painters such as Willem Kalf and Jan Davidsz. de Heem (Ill. 5) or in the flower pieces of Ambrosius Bosschaert (Ill. 6) that are contemporaneous to the increasing tulipomania. These paintings intrude upon or replace the usual domesticity of still life with the objects of prestige, wealth and demonstrations of colonial power with imported goods such as the increasingly valuable tulip, conch or nautilus shells, Chinese porcelain, Venetian glass, tobacco, etc. In contrast to the

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7 Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 12.
8 Ibid., 138-40.
pictures of the items of necessity, these luxury items likewise remind the viewer of how quick the focus on the mundane things of everyday life can be replaced by the representative objects symbolizing power and wealth. In a sense, the *prontstilleven* tips more towards becoming a painting of a higher order, yet all the while, it is a still life that rejects the depiction of the owners of these tokens of wealth.

In any case, the still life turns its gaze to *things*, be they the accessories of daily life or of distinction, that are nonetheless otherwise excluded from the pictorial scene dedicated to ‘greater’ historical or religious scenes. In the earliest known account of a painter in the Western tradition who made paintings of things, Pliny the Elder tells of the famous Piraeicus, who for his paintings of the shops of barbers and cloggers, donkeys and food items (or *rhopos*: the trivial, small wares, things of seemingly unimportance) fetched prices at times higher than for the paintings of ‘major’ concern,\(^1\) or what could be called *megalography*.\(^2\) The odds and ends of still life are ignored because of their apparent inactivity, yet they nonetheless permeate human life and are often necessary to fulfill even the most primitive needs, as in the case of eatables. Or in the case of other quotidian artifacts of culture, since they are things that are subject to our demands, existing only to heed our bidding and obey the laws of physics, it is no wonder they often go forgotten.\(^3\)

The relegation of the genre to the lowest rungs of the hierarchy is already manifest for example in the pun of antiquity, when *rhopography* is turned ironically on its head when Piraeicus earned the mocking moniker *rhyparographer*: *rhyparos* referring to waste and filth, the vile and vulgar.\(^4\) This disregard of the humble and lowly in contrast to *megalographic* depictions of greatness, achievement, and heroism is determined by contrasting social, economic, and cultural factors, and as Bryson demonstrates, by yet “another polarity, that of gender.”\(^5\) As the word

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\(^1\) Originally in Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, Book XXV.


\(^4\) See notes 10 and 11.

familiarity suggests, it is the things associated with the domestic, family space traditionally reserved only for women that find their way into still life painting and hence also influence the negative appraisal of the still life.16

Demonstrating how still life not only sheds light on the materially disregarded, Bryson thematizes the opposition in Diego Velázquez’s painting The Kitchen Maid with Christ at Emmaüs: The “high-plane reality”—a religious scene showing the moment Christ revealed himself to his disciples after his resurrection—is confined to being a painting-in-painting in the upper left-hand corner. In the foreground, the depiction of a woman servant, whose facial expression implies exhaustion or a blank stare into space, is in the midst of rhopos, surrounded by bowls, jugs, pots, mortar and pestle, the apparently trivial things of the generally more hidden space of the kitchen.17 In an associated painting (Ill. 7), the religious scene is no longer present and the woman and her duties gain the same status as the ignored objects of use. Bryson suggests that this “still life expresses here the suppression and confinement of those outside the charmed circle of history and greatness.”18

Isolated and Without Narrative

Yet it is not only this shift of attention to the waste of society and the long-ignored ‘feminine’ space that differentiates the still life from other traditional categories of painting. Genre paintings likewise make scenes directly connected to material culture and the seemingly mundane aspects of everyday domestic life their theme. How is the still life different? Beyond depicting an endless list of material things from the zone of the overlooked, the still life is more specifically characterized by the rejection of the human presence: Bryson identifies the “exclusion of the human

16 Following an orientation towards neoplatonism and drawing upon ancient literary sources meant that a hierarchy similar to Pliny’s hierarchy of genres in Book XXXV of Naturalis Historia, where deities and mythological subjects were considered to be the most noble of all paintings, paintings of flowers and everyday objects (Lat. humilia), animal paintings (Lat. aselli), representations of food (Lat. obsonia, or in the Greek tradition, offerings of hospitality, xenion, xenia) figured on the lowest end of the spectrum of genres. In the tradition of Alberti’s treatise Della Pictura, where istoria figured as the highest of all art forms, still life was relegated to the lowest rung. André Félibien’s estimation of the still life is so low, he describes the subject of still life as “des choses mortes à sans mouvement” and is seen as being on the opposing end of the spectrum of the rendering the human form in God’s image.
17 Bryson, Looking at the Overlooked, 155.
18 Ibid., 156.
form and its seeming assault on the value and prestige of the human subject” as a definitive feature of the genre.\textsuperscript{19}

To compound the lack of the human form, the still life lacks narrative or istoria. While arguably the human form is principally physically absent from the still life, the human presence is at times suggested, hints of the human presence lingering for example, in the wear and tear in the represented objects (Ill. 8) or in a captured moment, (Ill. 9) where traces of physical gestures are tangible in the interrupted meal and overturned goblets. The narrative aspects are in these cases however not a recourse to a specific or textual narrative, rather acquiring the quality of a common or universally applicable plot of everyday life, or better yet a tale of the things themselves. Whereas religious, history and even genre painting relies intensely on the anthropocentric narrative, in short, still life may be described as “the world minus its narratives.”\textsuperscript{20}

Beyond being largely divorced from the narrative context, after the still life arrangement was pushed into the foreground and had switched places with the religious scenes in the “inverted still life” paintings by Pieter Aertsen and his nephew Joachim Beuckelaer,\textsuperscript{21} and gained independence from its subordinate role in religious (Ill. 10) painting, the appurtenances of the still life begin a life of solitude in visual isolation.\textsuperscript{22} Denying their largely domestic origin, the insensate objects are frequently embedded in an often unidentifiable space reminiscent of their marginal place in niches and edges before the independence of the genre.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{19} Bryson, “Text of Still Life,” 228-34 and Looking at the Overlooked, 60.
\textsuperscript{20} Bryson, “Text of Still Life,” 228.
\textsuperscript{22} “… We may conclude that some particular magnetic virtue lies, not in the inanimate object in general—that virtue lies in all the elements of the visible world—but in the isolation of the inanimate object.” Sterling, Still-Life Painting, 148.
\textsuperscript{23} When the still life then conquers the entire surface of the painting, it still clings to this “interactive ‘aesthetic boundary’”; it is in fact “the limit become painting.” Stoichita, The Self-Aware Image, 26. Examples of the remnants of this boundary continue to play a role in numerous still life paintings through the Golden Age, with perhaps the most recurring motif being a knife balancing at the edge of the table or the lemon peel dangling over the edge of a pewter plate that is likewise at the very edge of the table, acting as kind of repousoir.
The flat yellowish surface and thin brown ledge upon which Caravaggio’s *Basket of Fruit* (Ill. 2) the embrasures or window sills in the flower paintings of Ambrosius Booschaert (Ill. 6), the niches of Juan Sánchez Cotán’s *bodegónes* (Ill. 11), the ocher or olive green opaque surface serving as a monochrome backdrop for the richly set tables in the *ontbijtes* (breakfast-pieces) and *banketjes* (banquet-pieces) of Pieter Claesz and Willem Claesz. Heda (Ill. 9), the stone-like plinth or ledge for Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin’s (Ill. 8) still life arrangements, the high viewpoint negating any other suggestion of three-dimensional space in Cézanne’s studies of apples (Ill. 4), the dissolution of form and space towards the outer edges of Georges Braque’s early cubist still life paintings (Ill. 12) and collages do not offer the viewer any indication as to where scene of the still life takes place.

While the codes of culture and domestic space are inextricably part of the still life picture, the dark and lonely space appears to isolate the items from their immediate context alienating them from their function. This de-contextualization allows for a kind of visual attention so intense that the things are elevated to a status worthy of notice. The still life takes the familiar things of nature and culture, and bestows upon them the state of the object, in its original and literal sense of the word, as *obiectum*: Things are thrown up against us in a still life painting in a way that forces us to take notice and consider the relationship between the thingly world and our world, the place that the things and the human subject occupy as well as the instability of these categories. The human narrative and form evicted from the pictures of arranged mundane things, still life possesses an almost accusatory charge, threatening the primacy of human subject and making the trace of the individual seemingly superfluous. Against the “ideology geared to achievement and competitive distinction” the still life’s concern with things menaces the human subject.

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24 For an analysis of a series of apple paintings like this one painted by Cézanne around 1877 see Friederike Kitschen, *Cézanne: Stilleben* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1995), 68-82.
26 Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 142.
Naturalist or Illusionist Representation

This threat is given yet a stronger foundation in still life’s preferred mode of representation up until the eighteenth century: naturalist and trompe l’oeil painting at the boundaries between ‘reality’ and image. A trompe l’oeil by Samuel van Hoogstraten (Ill. 13) offers a prime example of the destabilization of the primacy of the human subject’s position: The various stationery and toiletry items—letters, papers, a notebook, a letter opener, sealing wax and stamp, a feather quill, scissors, a comb, spectacles and necklaces with pendants—are strapped by two ribbons horizontally spanning across a rectangular board. At first glance, the viewer is overcome with momentary shock, a split-second where she is almost tricked into believing what is seen indeed exists beyond its representation. Where does the image end, and where does the ‘real’ world begin? Does the wooden paneling of the Steckbrett belong to the realm of the painting or the real space of the viewer? Whereas the visual frame usually subordinating its contents (in this case the inanimate household objects) is derived from the position of the viewing subject, the things and the panel holding the contents have conquered the entire visual field and appear to exist of their own accord, as if in turn looking back at us: “The veiled threat of the trompe l’oeil is always the annihilation of the individual viewing subject as universal centre.” Speaking of the visual immediacy of Dutch seventeenth century painting, but which also proves applicable to still life, Svetlana Alpers speaks of the “dislocation of man” or “deanthropomorphized

27 One explanation for the naturalist tendencies in still life painting until the Avant-garde is the epistemic shift since the Renaissance, where the dominating theological structure was increasingly influenced and replaced by rational philosophy, mathematics, empirical sciences, optics and cartography and motivated scientific inquiry into the inert matter of nature and everyday life, and is considered to be vital in leading to the nascence of the still life. It is certainly not by chance that the search for new subjects as well as new modes of viewing and representation coincided with the invention of a series of scientific and optical instruments, specifically the microscope, telescope, lenses and the camera obscura. A late sixteenth-century example of a possible precursor to the independent still life may be seen in the works of the Flemish-born painter and miniaturist Joris Hoefnagel, whose primary interest lay in rendering plant and animal life (flowers, butterflies, insects, shells, etc) in a number of illuminations based on faithful scientific observation. Cf. Bergstrom, Dutch Still-Life, 33-41; Sterling, Still-Life Painting, 27 and Schneider, Stilleben, 10-17.

28 Bryson, Looking at the Overlooked, 62-63. Stoichita accounts for the emergence of still life in the late sixteenth century as being founded on a certain tension at the threshold between reality and image, the conflict between the “insignificant, vain nature of the subject and the illusionist quality of the representation.” Stoichita, The Self-Aware Image, 18.

29 Bryson, Looking at the Overlooked, 144.
vision”\(^{30}\) where the subject is not offered its usual fixed viewpoint, emphasizing the passivity of viewing and the increased activeness of the painting and its contents.

Before the establishment of still life as an independent genre, the physical attributes featured in earlier painting as *marginalia* around the edges of religious paintings or portraits, for example in Joos van Cleve’s *The Holy Family* (Ill. 10), are consistently confined to ledges, niches and embrasures, the liminal spaces between the major theme of the image and the space of the viewer, a space that relates directly to the surface of the image suggesting that the middle ground and therewith the major event of the religious scene belongs to another ‘reality’.\(^{31}\) In the case of Memling’s *Vase of Flowers* (Ill. 14), the still life takes place literally beyond the painting on the reverse side of a portrait, but is likewise embedded in a niche, the ornamental pattern of the gul rug aiding in the suggestion of the depth of the surrounding space quite literally offering up the vase to the viewer.\(^{32}\) Going from the extreme of entirely ignoring the insignificant or only including it as an addendum to the ‘more important matters of the spirit and mind’, still life painting demonstrates the versatility of shifting between various registers of ‘reality’, offering a kind of bridge to themes of a ‘higher’ spiritual ‘reality’.

The assumed triviality of the contents of the still life painting is overcome by or compensated for with the wealth and detail of the representation and operates with what Stoichita calls “the essence/appearance, truth/illusion, reality/image dialectic.”\(^{33}\) Since antiquity even the first mention of the painting of an item representing both food and drink—Zeuxis’ grapes—is associated with the deceptive capabilities of representation. Oscillating between various modes of representation, the image may concern itself with issues *rhopographic* in nature, yet ironically the detail of texture, surface, and tactility in the representation of the insignificant is consistently allied with painterly virtuosity that the *megalographic* order is often denied.


\(^{33}\) Stoichita, The Self-Aware Image, 29.
In an example of the dialectic at work between nearness and distance, fiction and reality, Francisco de Zurbarán’s painting (Ill. 15) on the one hand invites the viewer through the naturalist depiction, the precision of the minutely treated surfaces and textures, the convincing plasticity of the lemons, oranges and the woven basket, the reflection of the metal serving plates to an intense viewing experience, all the while blocking our access to it and assaulting the primacy of the human subject. On the other hand, while the frontal view is aware of the viewer’s position, the “anti-Albertian” still life blocks the viewer’s access to the painting including the use of such strategies such as the lack of perspectival space, a composition of things at equidistance from each other, keeping things out of the viewer’s reach, the intactness of the image gives the viewer the sense that if one were to touch the things in the painting, it would only be through an act of destroying the precise order of the painting’s arrangement.34

While the still life at long last brings us closer to the things overlooked, as Hartmut Böhme writes, the closer we find ourselves to the things themselves, the more it appears as if they withdraw from our reach, as if the things were harboring a kind of secret.35 The deployment of hyperrealism demonstrates well this course of events. The hyperrealistic rendering of the surfaces and textures of fruits and vegetables in Cotán’s cantareros (Ill. 11), achieves an effect that even the optics of human vision are unable to master: An equal amount of attention with macrovision is dedicated to the tiniest of cracks or bumps in the melon rind, the ridges of the cucumber, the lettuce folds and the twisting of the twine that suspends the quince and head of lettuce. Regardless of the food item’s position, the focus remains perfectly clear directing the viewer’s attention to examine the details we do not even bother looking at in the ‘real’ pantry. The shift to this degree of hyperrealism makes the pantry goods then appear foreign or otherworldly,36 our focus on their objecthood transforms the food items into things that are no longer edible, rather only there for our visual pleasure.

34 Bryson, Looking at the Overlooked, 71-77.
35 Böhme, Fetischismus und Kultur, 52.
Centuries later, analytical cubism and the early collages by Braque and Picasso take the recognizable forms of still life for an exploration of the conditions of representation, perhaps precisely because of still life’s enduring kinship to the illusionist quality of painting and the genre’s enduring status at the threshold of ‘reality’ and artifice. In a dramatic dismantling of mimetic structure of art, Braque’s early still life Violon et palette (Ill. 12), not entirely unrelated to the division and aggregate views of Dutch still life, offers fractured and additive facets of views of a violin, sheet music and a palette that shift between the forms of flatness and depth. The constant shifting between varying modes of representation and degrees of proximity to ‘reality’ is reminded of its heritage by the nail painted in illusionist manner, even casting a shadow at the top of the canvas. Furthermore, employing the recognizable schemes of the still life, the structure of cubist collages rests upon the absence of the referent and its replacement by signs that represent depth and space.

Artifice and Display

The deceptive power of the still life allows the representation to function as a surrogate for the absence of some kind, as suggested by Frederico Borromeo, who wrote of the simulation capacities of the flower-pieces he commissioned. Borromeo expresses his praise for the paintings of the flower as even superior to the flowers otherwise adorning his study that are not available during every season. Jan Breughel’s flower-piece (Ill. 16), an ensemble of flowers that were only seasonally available and often had to be imported are gathered together negating

37 Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 83-86.

38 Rejecting the dominating iconological discourse attributing still life with the function of hidden symbolism and moral messages, Alpers proposes an alternative to interpreting the deception at work between nature and artifice. In the still life paintings by Kalf for example, she writes: “we have to consider if, more often than scholars have been willing to admit, deception here engages not a moral but an epistemological view: the recognition that there is no escape from representation.” Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, 35. The specific naturalism in Dutch painting of the Golden Age is about things being subject to the “probings of the eye”. Beyond being presented with a catalogue of materials, an “anatomical view of the lemon” is achieved by the microscopic view that multiplies and divides, cutting things open. Simultaneously to revealing the inner workings of the lemon, the dangling spiral pictures the outer appearance and texture of the lemon rind; and as if that was not enough, the observer is shown further fragmentary perspectives of the same object through the reflection on the glass or metal surfaces of neighboring roemers or goblets. Ibid., 58-61, 90-91, and 252.


40 Borromeo was one of the earliest patrons of the genres ranking below istoria and whose first still life painting acquired was probably Caravaggio’s Basket of Fruit. Pamela Jones, “Federico Borromeo as a Patron of Landscapes and Still Lifes: Christian Optimism in Italy ca. 1600,” *The Art Bulletin* 70, no. 2 (June 1988): 261-72, here esp. 269.
time and space to produce an ideal bouquet of beauty that can never wither or fade, a bouquet that not is not only pleasing to the senses, but represents abundance and wealth, not only in content, but in its form as artifice.

From its status at the threshold of reality, when an arrangement of food and fruit is depicted alongside its original counterparts say in Borromeo's study, the kitchen, or dining room—an apparently not uncommon practice, where the image functions as an extension or mirroring establishing a direct connection between the pictorial space and space in which it is exhibited—\(^{41}\) the image shifts into another mode of 'reality', becoming 'simulation'.\(^ {42}\) In this constellation, the result of which is a “rivalry between representation and its objects.”\(^ {43}\) Desire is transferred from the thing itself to the image, where the ‘real’ is replaced with an artificial substitute.\(^ {44}\) The fascination that is projected onto the things themselves is replaced by the pleasure taken in the nature of the illusory representation. As Goethe once wrote of a Dutch still life, if he could choose between the golden vessels in the painting or the painting itself, he would choose the picture.\(^ {45}\)

To maintain or heighten the effect of the illusion, the aesthetics of presentation and display exaggerate or parody the level of ‘realness’ of the depiction, intentionally staging an unintentional arrangement.\(^ {46}\) The *pronkstilleven*, as its name suggests, prides itself in a pyrotechnic show of wealth, but also in its dramatic, pompous, and likewise artificial display. Theatrics include the overturned goblet, the *roemer* whose glass has not survived the fall, the peeled lemons, the half-eaten pie and cracked nuts with shells strewn across the seemingly nonchalantly draped and blemished white tablecloth. (Ill. 9) In praise of both the goods of nature and of culture, the still life further sets its cultural mark on all that it houses by offering it

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\(^{42}\) Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 36.
\(^{43}\) Ibid., 124.
\(^{44}\) Eventually, painters of Realism and Impressionism (such as Courbet or Manet), moving away from pure *imitatio*, but still using the given coordinates and vocabulary of still life as a basis, introduced a newfound painterly expression of subjective moods as well as atmosphere, where the tantalizing of the senses no longer occurs by deceiving the eye with a hyperreal or simulating depiction of food and fruits. Here one could argue the texture of the paint and the materiality of the image itself is what is to be desired.
an artificial and manufactured stage that attempts to substantiate its claim to ‘reality’ by mimicking its haphazardness, while the imperatives of established and ‘man-made’ aesthetics, e.g. the diagonal and pyramidal composition and a fixed viewpoint, still maintain control of the overall display.

I explicitly employ the gender-biased term *man-made* and speak of the discrepancy that exists between what was introduced as the space of familiarity and the ‘masculine’ gesture in the display of many still life paintings as already pointed out by Bryson in his essay dedicated to “Still Life and ‘Feminine’ Space.” The intrusion of attributes associated with ‘masculinity’ especially in *pronkstilleven* (Ill. 5)—pipes, swords, tobacco and drink, whose owners were historically restricted for men—disturb or are out of sync with the rhythm of domestic ‘feminine’ space. This is coupled with a style of painting that is interested in the “bravura display of skill”—the textural intensity, the naturalism, what Bryson calls “meticulous particularity,” “high focus” and “minute transcription”—going to the point of trumping its humble subjects of food and flowers, causing even the natural to appear artificial. By contrast, the more ‘feminine’ approach, for example in a still life by Fede Galizia (Ill. 17), softens the view; having been painted from the same level of existence, the things are already fascinating enough in their own right, without needing to dramatize their wholly tactile presence. Whereby, in Caravaggio’s *Basket of Fruits*, it is as if the interest is in rendering the fruits to a point of a yet unattained degree of naturalism, elevating the objects above the status of the mundane, almost to a heroic status, where even the defects and wormholes of the fruits look manufactured. However, even with the gaze of painters Bryson identifies as employing the softened ‘feminine’ gaze, the viewer is caught in the act of *scopophilia*, the love of looking, between the visual naturalism of the representation and its obviously composed and artificial display. There exists a tangible tension between the life-like appearance of the objects and the imposed breath of artifice.

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48 Ibid., 160.
49 Ibid., 162-4 and 170.
Fetishism

In Hal Foster’s essay “The Art of Fetishism: Notes on Dutch Still Life,” the poignant contradictions present in the Dutch still life picture are highlighted. Time and again, the status of things in still life shift from being familiar to estranged, tangible to distant, at once inert and animate. The tension between the evaluation of things as insignificant, but then worthy of being pictured, between proximity and distance to the things and their representation, between fiction and reality, between life and death can be negotiated using a model that itself thrives on addressing irresolvable ambivalences: the discourse of fetishism. When involved with viewing specifically the Dutch pronkstilleven, Foster suggests that the “visual intensity cannot be explained away as an effect of a disguised symbolism or a residue of a religious gaze; a fetishistic projection on the part of artist and viewer alike is involved.”

But what is fetishism? And which of at least three variants of the term are relevant for a discussion about still life? What all three definitions have in common is the focus on the material thing, which is endowed with or possesses a special kind of mystical power or an independent life. Furthermore, the etymological origins of the word alone—using as its root the Latin word factitius—refer to that which is crucial to all three discourses and constitutive of almost all forms of cultural representation: the artifice. Both these factors are relevant not only for the definition of fetishism, but are constitutive of the still life picture.

The anthropological or religious context of the definition can be traced back to its use by Portuguese traders as an expression to describe the cult objects of the indigenous peoples of the Gold and Slave coasts of West Africa. A pidgin word fetisso was first used to describe the objects used in religious practices, things that possessed a special metaphysical force in rituals. It was a word employed alongside and in the same context as the word idol, until very slowly the ethnographic discourse about idolatry was replaced with the concept of

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50 Foster, “Art of Fetishism,” 253.
51 Böhme, Fetischismus und Kultur, 187.
52 See “Die ethnographische Vorgeschichte des Fetischismus,” in ibid., 178-86.
fetishism. Interestingly enough, *fetish* was a term that found use and development especially by Dutch traders from the seventeenth to eighteenth century, including a Protestant comparison of fetishism to Catholic idolatry and worship of imagery and relics.

Foster points to a shift from a religious type of fetishism to commodity fetishism in the Golden Age with the dramatic rise of affluence and wealth through Dutch trade. Marx analyzes the “mystische Charakter der Ware” describing commodity fetishism as the result of the projection onto and incorporation of the social and economic conditions that determine production, whereby commodities acquire the characteristics of social relations:

*Das Geheimnisvolle der Warenform besteht also einfach darin, daß sie den Menschen die gesellschaftlichen Charaktere ihrer eignen Arbeit als gegenständliche Charaktere der Arbeitsprodukte selbst, als gesellschaftliche Natureigenschaften dieser Dinge zurückspiegelt, daher auch das gesellschaftliche Verhältnis der Produzenten zur Gesamtarbeit als ein außer ihnen existierendes gesellschaftliches Verhältnis von Gegenständen."

Where in religious fetishism, the fetish possessed a mysterious force connecting human kind and culture with some kind of higher or more powerful being, commodity fetishism describes the magical power things gain, that invoke desire to acquire and possess an item beyond merely for their functional use. The thing gains the mysterious nature of the commodity in production and circulation.

Following the Protestant Reformation and the wave of iconoclasm in the sixteenth century, the vacuum created by the lack of the Catholic fixation on relics and its culture of images was replaced by the fascination in market goods: “As religious fetishism was suppressed, a commercial fetishism, a fetishism of the commodity, was released; the Dutch denounced one overvaluation of objects, only to produce

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54 Notably the letters by Willem Bosman, first published in Dutch and subsequently translated into several other European languages in the early eighteenth century. Ibid., 179 and 184.
another one of their own.”  

56 We are reminded of the *pronkstilleven*, that not only shows the splendor of the exotic things of gold and glass themselves, but makes a point of the painterly skill invested in their image. The banquet-piece or sumptuous still life is invaded by the objects of exchange encountered and acquired through market expansion, representing them in such a way that they are “at once phantasmagorical and palpable.”  

57 In this context of increasing market activity, the capitalist gaze projects a certain shine onto the object, endowing the object with a life of its own, yet at the same time imbuing the still life painting with “the chill of commodity”: On the one hand the items of use appear very real and tangible rendered with the deceptive finesse of illusionist painting, on the other hand, it is as if even the useful things are “coated with a special shellac” resigning them to disuse or inedible, and merely for the pleasure of the eyes.  

58 Foster writes: 

*As a result, the objects appear caught between worlds—not alive, not dead, not useful, not useless, as if lost between the tangibility of the common thing and the visibility of the distanced commodity. And the pictorial effect is often one of deathly suspension or ... of eerie animation, with the objects at once chilled and charged by the speculative gaze fixed upon them.*

59 While the contradictions and the anxieties of the seventeenth century Dutch society may not be resolved in the still life, they are at least addressed: An emblematic reading of still life reveals the intention of delivering a moral message of restraint and a reflection about the ephemerality of life and earthly pleasures, all the while the painted objects and display praise and encourage wealth and spending.  

60 The deceptive gesture that at first proffers the natural beauty and wealth of things to the viewer, is then cancelled out in a gesture that takes back its offer by revealing its shiny artificial nature. Yet to finally get the moral message across reminding that the desired objects only temporarily exist in the material world, the viewer is first tempted, her eyes are taken on a journey during which

57 Foster, “The Art of Fetishism,” 257.  
58 Ibid., 258.  
59 Ibid., 257.  
60 Ibid., 260-61.
she comes to terms with the tantalizing ‘dangers’ of earthly pleasures and the reminders of the transience of human life. Or as Gombrich points out:

_The pleasures it stimulates are not real, they are mere illusion. Try and grasp the luscious fruit or the tempting beaker and you will hit against a hard cold panel. The more cunning the illusion the more impressive, in a way, is this sermon on semblance and reality. Any painted still life is ipso facto also a vanitas._

To understand this inherent tension, Foster further suggests a look at Freud’s notion of fetishism as fruitful for an analysis of still life. Freud describes the fetish, not merely as a substitute for the perceived castration of the maternal phallus, but as a compromise, admitting both scenarios, both the castrated and the whole mother and thereby offering a way to deal with the immense threat without simply repressing the knowledge that opposes the belief about the mother still possessing a penis. In this sense, the fetish plays an apotropaic role, warding off and protecting from the fear of castration, yet more importantly in this context, the fetish is also a “memorial” to the loss. It is this critical moment found in the concept of the “memorial” that Foster locates the possibility to see Freudian fetishism in analogy to the structure of the Dutch still life “which, on the one hand, points to the social contradictions beyond its reach and, on the other hand, tends to a psychic splitting of the subject.” As already discussed, the still life disavows the human subject, both in its form (the “anti-Albertian” mode of “deanthropomorphized vision” and the use of deceptive illusory painting as its preferred mode of representation) and in its content (the lack of interest in the human form and history). Yet, at apparent odds with the disinterest in the human subject, the still life simultaneously entertains the intense voyeuristic gaze of the subject with the shine and perfection of its representation, all the while reflecting our gaze. Not unlike the fetish in the Freudian sense, the very scopophilic act

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61 Gombrich, _Western Still Life_, 104.
63 In the language of origin, Freud calls it a _Denkmal_, ibid., 385.
64 Foster, “The Art of Fetishism,” 261.
reminds of and is a “memorial” to the threat of loss: “The luminous shine of these still lifes is more faultily fetishistic: it recalls our lack even as it distracts us from it. It is as if we are seen as we see—only it is objects that ‘see’ us.”

Fetishism in both its economic and psychoanalytical formations continues to prove to be an especially suitable model for the explanation of the ambivalent structure in which a displacement of the gaze or fetishistic projection occurs resulting in a confusion of animate and inanimate states, an uncertainty about the value of objects and as well as an inversion of subject-object relations that continues to be valid for art of today. In the tension of still life and of the fetish, the still life breathes life into the insensate with the ‘naturalist’ mode of representation, while literally stilling life with the freeze of the representation. This dialectical relationship I would argue is reinforced and raised to higher power with the introduction of the photographic still life to be explored in the following chapter.

The idea of commodity fetishism is especially useful when considering still life-like motifs with the return of the object in art, firstly with Neues Sehen, Neue Sachlichkeit and then in Pop Art. By the 1960s, not only do the processes and techniques of artistic production appropriate those of the late capitalist society, use and commodity items return to the field of art even more “chilled” and displaced. Instead of the display of a meal or its rests at the table, Andy Warhol shows only the packaging of Campbell soup cans that in and of themselves are incapable of satisfying hunger, representing merely the sign of food and signaling the capitalist consumer matrix in which the items are caught. Claes Oldenburg “soft sculptures” for example glorify everyday items giving them a soft, palpable form and by then stretching their size to outrageous proportions in his large sculptures ranging from office to food and household items that in their magnitude appear capable of overwhelming the human subject and challenging its position of primacy. In its psychoanalytical conception, Freud’s fetishism for example also allows us to negotiate the tensions that continue to dominate in still life of today, albeit without allowing a final resolution. Finally, fetishism serves as a useful paradigm with which to explore the very medium that both Witkin and Araki,

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65 Ibid., 262 and 264.
whom this thesis is ultimately about, employ to create their still life-like pictures: photography. The relationship or overlap between still life and photography, as well as the fetishistic discourse around the medium will be explored in the following chapter.

In summary, the goal of this first chapter is an attempt to break away from a classical definition of the still life as bound to a specific set of formal-aesthetic principles and its historical contents, sketching out other consistent themes that are constitutive of the genre. But what has happened to the still life genre since modern art? How has its boundaries been shifted? What is its relevance for today’s art and artistic production? One of the most prevalent art historical readings of still life focuses on the “buried allegory,” the evident moral messages in still life’s sub-genre of vanitas and the paradox of the alive representation of dead things. Such thematic parallels may undoubtedly be drawn in both Araki and Witkin’s works, which deal explicitly with the opposing forces of eros and thanatos, intending for life and death to coexist in their photographic worlds. Yet my interest also relies on an a more abstracted idea of the still life, not merely dealing with the “buried allegory” or the pitting of life against death. I have tried to expand the notion of still life by highlighting still life-like characteristics, themes that are allied with the still life—the focus on rhyparos, illusionist representation, the artifice and dramatic display. Eventually I would like to argue that these, as well as a strong re-emergence of the subjective narrative and human form feature as a leitmotif even on a metaphoric level in the vast oeuvre of Araki and Witkin.


PHOTOGRAPHY AND STILL LIFE TODAY

Knowledge of the potentiality of the medium ... is at least as important as is knowledge of the motif itself.68

An outline of several parameters circumscribing the notion of still life in the preceding chapter provides us with a common frame of reference about the genre. This chapter follows an inquiry into questions about the medium of photography, a second set of coordinates that will prove to be vital for a reflection about still life-like themes in the photography of Araki and Witkin. Scholarly discourse and publications about still life painting indicate that the grave overlookness of the genre has been increasingly addressed in the last few decades, yet the presence of still life in media beyond painting remains relatively underexposed.69 The following reflection about still life-like themes in photography is not only motivated by the desire to bring into focus, that which has been doubly overlooked, but to examine the remarkable overlap and similarities in the structure of the genre and the medium.

Certain issues at the heart of the genre are equally central to the newer medium of photography, sharing at least three fundamental topoi, which will be argued in the first section of the chapter. Secondly, this chapter is interested in demonstrating by means of specific examples how the century-old understanding of the genre of still life is reshaped or expanded with the medium of photography. Historically, traditional still life motifs made a relatively frequent recurrence in early photography, but what happens to the genre and the above-discussed parameters as they are tried and tested in a new and different medium? What happens to still life’s focus on the inanimate? How does the photographic act of literally stilling life

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69 Bryson’s contribution to art historical discourse around the genre of still life was and is still substantial. However, his analysis and interpretation for his intents and purposes remain limited to the medium of painting. An exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1997 is another example of an attempt to explore the reception of a genre and past tradition in modern art, which however neglects to include any examples of artworks in media other than painting and sculpture. See for example Margit Rowell, ed., Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life (New York: Abrams, 1997). An exhibition and accompanying catalogue worth mentioning is the recent show with the title Augenschmaus: Vom Essen im Stilleben: Ingrid Brugge and Heike Eipeldauer, eds., Augenschmaus: vom Essen im Stilleben (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2010). While still dominated primarily by painting, a variety of videos, sculptures and installations including works up until the early 21st century also found their place in this exhibition.
expand or even reinforce the genre? What happens to the hitherto largely absent narrative, the isolation of objects and definition of space? The final focus of this chapter asks: What can still life mean for us today? In what ways does recourse to the pictorial category then change or update it for its own time and purposes?

**Shared Topoi**

Beyond the mere inquiry into why and how aspects of this pictorial genre have been received since the advent of photography, a medium-specific reflection may be justified as such: The medium of photography shares at least three topoi with the classical genre of still life. Firstly, both modes of representation maintain visual proximity to 'real' life, and in the case of photography, even by an assumed physical connection to the referent. Photography and still life both employ mechanisms of representation that narrow the threshold between ‘reality’ and representation. Secondly, on a structural level and in apparent contradiction to the formal quality that suggests that what is depicted is alive, still life and photography share an attachment to the moment, both calling forth elegiac associations. The reflection about human mortality in the memento mori may thus be seen as reinforced in a medium that itself is time-based and perceived as evidence of a bygone, nevermore-to-be-repeated moment of the past. This is evident not only in formally labile compositions that could collapse at any minute, but also inherent on another level, with the capturing a slice of time before the consummate decay of its depicted contents. Moreover, the ambivalences observed in the still life also structure the medium of photography, leading thirdly to a term that has been outlined in the prior chapter as one that is equally central to the still life: the fetish, the photograph as fetish, at once apotropaic and as an ersatz to the loss of the thing or person that no longer exists exactly as they once did in the image from the past. Despite shifts in the determination of the art historical genre of still life, these three aspects remain relevant for both still life and the medium of photography of today.

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70 This proposition may at first appear to lose relevance when considering the still life of modern art and the avant-garde. Whereby, one could argue that the strategies used in Braque’s and Picasso’s early still life collages combining the use of newspaper clippings, painting, lettering, chair caning or oil and wallpaper for example stem from an interest in exploring the very modes of representation across varying registers of ‘reality’ onto a single pictorial plane.
The characteristics of the still life, specifically of the Dutch tradition, share with photography not only their similitudinous quality. Other characteristics found in the genre, such as fragmentary views or seemingly arbitrary frames that reject what Albertian pictorial conventions dictate, find kinship in the representations of the newer medium of photography. Moreover the photographic mode of representation likewise “deanthropomorphizes vision,” dislocating the human viewing subject presenting views and perspectives that otherwise seem humanly impossible. The focus on imitatio in still life painting returns in the mechanically-made photograph, an acheiropoietic image, that is not rendered by human hand, presumably mimicking that which the camera sees. Naturally, the veracity of the photograph has long since been revealed as representing only part of the whole picture. Our understanding of the photograph has been expounded upon to include the idea of the photograph as an image beyond apparent objectivity, as the social and cultural framing of looking. David Campany suggests that the photograph “is unique in appearing to point at things transparently (‘there it is’) while fashioning appearance artificially (‘this is how it is’). Photographs are taken and made, natural and cultural.” Despite the recognition that photography and the photograph shape and are shaped by cultural and social factors, the residues of a belief in the apparent authenticity of the photograph are hard to shake.

In an attempt to understand the nuanced relationship of the photographic image to ‘reality’, the particularity of photography has historically been discussed and defined, drawing upon Charles Sanders Pierce’s system of signs, along the terms of the icon and index. Not unlike figurative painting, a photograph may be considered an icon, a sign that resembles its referent, in that it generally mirrors that which was seen by the camera in all its detail. Yet what is particular to the photographic image, is its relationship to reality, not through its likeness, but by

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71 Alpers, The Art of Describing, 43.
means of its physical properties and mechanical process. The resulting image is understood as indexical: being factually bound to the seen world, having truly encountered or been in physical contact with the seen world. While the ontological status of the photograph as an indexical or iconic sign is still up for debate, the general consensus is that the photograph may be understood as an “indexical icon.” Or as Rosalind Krauss formulated: “The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object.”

In any case, the discourse about photographic image—whether the photograph operates as a mirror, trace, imprint or index of nature, as all or none of these things—stems from the very notion of the photograph being located at the narrow threshold between image and ‘reality’. Joel Snyder, however stark a critic of the indexical theory of photography, also suggests that the photograph seems to lie somewhere between the ancient Greek categories of art (or artifice) and nature, being one step closer to ‘reality’ than other classical forms of image-making. Regardless of being able to prove the direct physical relationship between image and the referent, one can at least argue that, with photography, the distance between the eye and the hand with the camera has grown shorter, requiring merely a click and considerably less time and effort to make an accurate image of nature. Moreover the approach to understanding the photograph as a trace, imprint or index of nature further reinforces the dialectical interplay of physical nearness and distance, presence and absence. Just as the liminal space between nature and artifice in the conventional still life remains unstable, the photograph also interfaces between nature and artifice.

Hence, the photograph, suggests Christian Metz, also works as a fetish, with the double and contradictory function of inciting visual or other pleasure through its

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76 Van Gelder and Westgeest, Photography Theory, 35.
78 Cf. Geimer, “Bilder durch Berührung,” in Theorien der Fotografie, 13-69, for an outline of the problematic and inconsistent use of the terms trace, index and imprint (Spur, Index, Abdruck) in regards to photography theory.
likeness and apparent nearness to reality on the one hand, as a replacement warding off loss. Yet the image remains an image, a kind of sign reminding of what was and no longer is. The dialectic of proximity and distance inherent in the media of photography stimulates a fetishistic relationship to the object depicted. A favorite loveseat, teacup or a long lost lover, a mother captured in a photograph are, like a fetish, unable to entirely fulfill the promise of their deceptively real suggestion, serving as a “compromise between conservation and death.” The ambivalent structure and the confusion about the status of the objects as animate or inanimate as we have come to know in still life painting continues or may even be intensified in the still life motif in photography, a medium that is associated with death in its own right.

Before jumping ahead to quasi the end of time in analyzing the relationship of photography and death, the medium’s deep ties to ideas of time should be briefly addressed. Ever since the beginning of photographic history, the photograph was marveled for its unique capability to arrest a moment of time—whether instantaneous or a long-exposure over an extended period, or even the depiction of a sequence of time—allowing us to see what otherwise remained hidden to the human eye. Increasing technical capabilities allowed for fractions of a second to be captured, thereby allowing the documentation of sequences and stages of suspended movement hitherto invisible to the human eye (Muybridge, Marey, Edgerton, etc.) Incidentally, still life’s dedication to the visually captured moment makes it a close ally to the conditions of the photographic medium. Take for example what is often referred to as one of the very first independent still life paintings since antiquity, Still-Life with Partridge and Gauntlets by Jacopo de Barbari (Ill. 18): A dead partridge, two mail gauntlets and the bolt of a crossbow are hung on a wall. The composition however appears to be so labile, as if at any moment the weight of the dead bird and heavy gloves could topple this precarious arrangement. Granted it is not only the still life category that features the

81 Ibid., 85.
83 Cf. König and Schön, Stilleben, 17.
standstill of motion in painting, but it seems to capitalize on it as its very subject matter is concerned with warning of the passage of time, announcing the transience of life, decay and ultimately death. In *Humana Vana* by Jacob de Gheyn (III. 19), among numerous other *vanitas* motifs, a moment is captured in which the smoke still drifts from the candle, implying it had only just previously been burning. The *homo bulla* still maintains its fragile surface, but is bound to burst shortly illustrating the fragility of life. The notion of time is not only represented in still life through symbols, it is frequently reinforced by the precariousness of its composition. The compositions in the breakfast or banquet pieces by Heda (III. 9), for example, show us the arrest of time in what feels like an instantaneous, albeit intense glance at a table where overturned jugs and goblets are held in a fragile balance as if they were to collapse or roll off the table any second.

The time-related aspects of still life painting in relation to photography inevitably evoke Roland Barthes’ suggestion that the *noeme* (or essence) of photography is “that-has-been.”84 Related to the idea of the indexical, the notion that the camera has physically seen what is pictured in the photograph, the photograph points to what was, but that which no longer is. It is a monument or Denkmal, in the Freudian sense, to the moment, a moment that would otherwise slip away for eternity without leaving a trace. The photograph was for Barthes more than an art, rather “a certificate of a presence.”85 Hence the frequent practice of photography in family circles: snapshots during family reunions or holidays attempting to steadfastly hold onto a moment that is wished to be cherished and allowing the past to be revisited in the monument of a photograph.86 In regards to the photography of things, already in the nineteenth century, the medium’s use in the documentation of objects from museums, collections and archeological digs also signals the conservational capacity of the photograph: “Die Fotografie konservierte die Dinge und schrieb sie in ihrem gegebenen Zustand fest, was ihr zu einer neuen

85 Ibid., 87. Comparing film and photography, Metz also views the photograph as belonging to the past, a thing of the memory, and relates this especially to the photography of social practice.
Aufgabe verhalf. Sie erfüllte jetzt die Funktion eines modernen Konzepts: das des Monuments . . .”

The potential of the photograph, even with our current knowledge of the camera’s deceptive nature, causes us to assume that what have before our eyes when we look at a photograph (by contrast to a painting where the depicted object may be a figment of the imagination) existed in ‘real’ life in front of the camera before the photograph was shot. I intentionally say shot and refer thereby to the fear reported, especially in the earliest days of photography’s history, of having one’s soul or parts of themselves stolen by the camera. We are reminded for example of the famous report by Félix Nadar of Honoré de Balzac’s suspicion of photography as an operation that stripped from the photographed subject of one of its constitutive layers. Philippe Dubois speaks of photography as “thanatography,” suggesting that in the act of taking a photograph, life is interrupted, the referent photographed is “mort pour avoir été vu.” This is reminiscent of the gaze of the still life genre, of what Bryson calls the “vision of Medusa, or What Medusa Saw”: “Still life’s vision conceives of objectivity as the negation of what lives and breathes.” This phenomenon is all too familiar to photography, a way of seeing that petrifies or immobilizes that which it looks at. Susan Sontag writes:

*Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. ... All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt.*

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87 Michel Frizot, “Der Zustand der Dinge. Das Bild und seine Aura,” in Neue Geschichte der Fotografie, ed. Michael Frizot (Milan: Könemann, 1998), 381. See especially 376-80 for a discussion about the parallels between archeology and the photographic medium and the function of the photograph as the replacement of objects of cultural and historical memory.


Yet another example of an underlying uneasiness about photography stealing life is thematized Roberto Rossellini’s film *La macchina ammazzacattivi* (or *The Machine That Kills Bad People* from 1952), where a photographer’s camera gains the power to freeze, in effect kill those who he photographs.


Metz provides a couple other explanations for the associations of death with photography, two of which deserve special mention in this context. Firstly, “immobility and silence,” two qualities essential for the photograph, but also for the still life genre, are not merely characteristics of death, but as Metz suggests “they are also its main symbols, they figure it.”  

The expression used to denominate the still life genre—whether in English, German, Dutch—reveal to what extent motionlessness is characteristic of the still life genre. As noted in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition Life of Things: The Idea of Still Life in Photography 1840-1985, the medium of photography, “with its ability to freeze life in order to at the same time stylize it as a sort of memento mori, shows its kinship to still life.”

Metz identifies yet another instance where photography and death may be seen analogously: “the snapshot, like death, is an instantaneous abduction of the object out of the world into another world, into another kind of time.” Not at all unlike the still life painting, the photograph time and again takes objects, isolates them from any narrative or spatial context transporting food, fruits, flowers and things, to a world where they are objectified, but in turn are left to have their very own life unfold. Through the very nature of the photographic act of taking pictures, the camera viewfinder and lens channels looking, whereby a magical power is projected onto things and may be even more tangible than in painting. As Peter Weiermair (curator of The Nature of Still Life: From Fox Talbot to the Present Day, one of the few exhibitions dedicated to photography and still life) writes in the accompanying catalogue: “The photo intensifies the ‘freeze’ and focuses the persistent gaze of the photographer, thus allowing things the possibility of a survival beyond their earthly reality.” Edward Weston’s Peppers of the 1930s (Ill. 20), as well as numerous of his photographs of the nude body (Ill. 21) demonstrate

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92 Metz, “Photography and Fetish,” 83.
93 For a history of the term still life, its roots and variants in various languages, see König and Schön, Stilleben. The French expression employs a more tragic adjective, namely implying beyond mere immobility, death itself. Charles Sterling also emphasizes the silence of the still life as constitutive for a tradition that spans across still life pictures from hundreds or even thousands of artists across centuries. Sterling, Still-Life Painting, 147.
95 Metz, “Photography and Fetish,” 84.
the photographic freeze, the dissociative as well as objectifying effect of the camera. The fragmented and cropped torsos, the close-ups of the twisting, bowing and introverted folds of bell peppers allow these familiar sights to achieve a status beyond that of the body and the vegetable. Not immediately revealing their direct connection to the referent, the shape and folds of the body are almost interchangeable with those of the pepper, further imbuing the human body with the quality of things through the objectified view of the camera and photograph. These two photographs by Weston represent a first attempt here in this chapter at describing still life beyond its conventional themes and motifs. Against the notion of the human body as absent from the still life, it becomes here the sole focus of the photograph and yet it is not a far stretch to also attribute this image to the category of the still life, a body in its thingly quality in its paused photographic medium, extracted from a recognizable context.

Still Life Expanded

And now we return to the goal of this chapter, attempting to find a different way to define still life beyond its mere subject or formal distinguishing factors, to explore how the understanding of the still life genre may have expanded, shifted, or shaped, or reinvented in context of photography. Before embarking upon this task, it is worthy to note that in many cases, the classification or categorization of certain photographs as still life is superimposed by art historical discourse, titles after the fact, or thematically curated shows. In many cases, besides the most obvious formal appropriations, the pictorial tradition is not necessarily consciously the determining factor for the production of the images. Indebted to art historical interpretation of the reception of the still life in photography, the following aims at tracing how the genre developed in the relatively new medium. As a brief reminder of what has been determined thus far as defining factors for the pictorial tradition, still life was first and foremost a pictorial category with a focus on inanimate objects, the human figure *in absentia*, artificially arranged, most often on tables or in niches, but in an otherwise undefined space largely isolated from narrative function or immediately recognizable context.
Early Experimental Potential of Still Life and of Photography

In the early period of photography's discovery, we encounter concrete examples of the inextricable entanglement of the traditional forms and interests of still life and early photography. Thus it would be neglectful not to mention the paradigmatic role of still life or its variants in the earliest experimental stages of this newly discovered technology. Whereas the general consensus today is that the first photographic images emerged with the camera facing the public exterior space rendering views from windows overlooking rooftops or cityscapes by inventors Niépce, Daguerre and Fox Talbot, not surprisingly a still life-like arrangement features prominently as likely to be one of the first photographic images in our history: *La table servie*, attributed to Joseph Nicéphore Niépce and dated to 1832-33. A series of other images that followed and that are commonly subsumed under the category of still life, ranging from Louis Daguerre's collection of fossils and Hippolyte Bayard's plaster casts to William Henry Fox Talbot's "photogenic drawings" of Breakfast Tables demonstrate that the primary interest was motivated by experimentation with the capabilities of the camera to photographically and accurately render from nature form and line, volume and space, color and light, texture and a catalogue of materials—cloth, metal, soft, shiny, patterned, rough, smooth, reflective, opaque, and so on—specifically in the private space of the interior or work space of the studio or

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98 This image was printed in the *Paris Match* in September 1972 in celebration of the supposed 150th anniversary of the invention of photography and reprinted a month later in the *Sunday Times*. Timm Starl, "After Nature - After Life: Photographic Still Lifes in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Nature of Still Life: From Fox Talbot to the Present Day*, ed. Peter Weiermair (Milan: Electa, 2001), 15. The precise origins, date of production and author of this image has been disputed, however the most recent literature suggests that this image may be classified as a physautotype, produced by using as a photographic agent the residue from the distillation of lavender oil applied to a silver plate or on glass and was probably one of the final images produced by Niépce between the summers of 1832 and 1833. Cf. Jean-Louis Marignier, *Nicéphore Niépce: 1765 - 1833; l’invention de la photographie*, (Paris: Belin 1999), here Annexe 2, 478-91. For an attempt at reconstituting Niépce’s *La table servie* using the same physioautotype process today, see Marignier, *Nicéphore Niépce*, 488 and Marignier’s website: http://pagesperso.lcp.u-psud.fr/marignier/#La_Table_servie (accessed March 20, 2012).
True to its original etymological roots, the arrangement of still-standing and motionless objects, served as ideal candidates for a medium that, with its long exposure times and large camera sizes, was restricted to looking at the inanimate for the sake of precision. Just as the contents of the genre in its lowliness and stillness offered itself as an appropriate field for practice and experimentation in painting, the things of still life served as constants whereby other image-making parameters of the new technology could be independently adjusted, objects with which the camera could be “trained.”

Beyond its role in the experimental phase of early photography, precisely the genre that was ranked the lowest in painting was appropriated to prove the aesthetic capabilities of the medium and establish its claim to the “discursive space” of art. It is now not still life, but photography, a medium to which the academic hierarchy of genres did not apply, that gained a specific potential to question the validity of a strict differentiation between genres, and more specifically to destabilize its hierarchical structure. Carol Armstrong highlights that the recognizability of still life genre deeply rooted in the historical artist tradition provided photography with a viable way to prove the medium’s versatility to be employed as an artistic medium: “le moins prestigieux des genres picturaux lui permet d’exprimer sa revendication la plus forte au sujet de la photographie.” In the competition between the media of photography and painting in the nineteenth century, numerous imitations appear especially during the 1860s, but into the age of
documentation...

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100 The Oxford Companion to Photograph, suggests that the still life is one of the “staples” of photography, due to the availability as well as lifelessness of the things lending themselves to be captured more accurately in the photographic image. The Oxford Companion to the Photograph, Oxford Reference Online, s.v. “still life,” http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t207.e1480 (accessed January 27, 2012).
101 For more about the experimental potential inherent to still life painting, see Bryson, Looking at the Overlooked, 81-86; König, “Vom Beiwerk zur revolutionären Gattung der Moderne” in Stilleben, ed. König and Schön, 66.
102 The notion of Fox Talbot training the camera on various subjects from portrait and landscape to things is suggested by Sontag, On Photography, 90.
104 Carol Armstrong, “La plus belle nature morte du monde,” in La confusion des genres en photographie, ed. Philippe Arbaâb and Valérie Picaudé (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2001), 141. Interestingly enough, in his lecture in 1866, Ludwig Schrank, photographer and publisher of Vienna’s Photographische Correspondenz, inverses the hierarchy of genres, placing still life at the top, emphasizing the photographic optics at work in the ‘lesser’ genres (such as still life and landscape) seeing the still life as the “Bravour-Arie der Photographie.” (Ludwig Schrank, “Aesthetische Studien auf dem Gebiete der Photographie,” Fotogeschichte 26 (1987): 3-13, here 5.) The photographic still life in this sense leaves the realm of experimentation and documentation to entertain thoughts about the beauty of things, but more importantly, the traces of the human presence.
of Pictorialism, where photography takes its formal and compositional lead from painting. These photographs include artificially arranged compositions ranging from flower and fruit pieces to set tables and “after-the-hunt” game pieces by photographers Adolphe Braun (Ill. 26), Charles Aubry (Ill. 27), who even made still life photography his specialty, and later among the Pictorialists, Heinrich Kühn (Ill. 28) and Baron Adolf de Meyer (Ill. 29). Despite the lack of genuine market interest in still life photographs, still life themes continued to figure as a popular theme among amateurs and the exhibitions organized by the international photography societies or associations, who however, for the most part did not undertake innovative stabs at expanding or reinterpreting the genre.

Roger Fenton’s diverse body of work however, demonstrates the newfound flexibility of the medium, if not of the genre, to shift, as Armstrong would suggest, latérallement between the “discursive spaces” of art, commercial, private and journalistic photography. Gaining recognition for his photojournalism after the Crimean War, from which The Valley of the Shadow of Death (Ill. 30)—the most iconic image of a series that Armstrong calls Fenton’s nature mortes de guerre—was produced, Fenton also exhibited and produced no less than forty-eight still life photographs (Ill. 31) and stereographs: game-pieces, fruit baskets, flowers, as well as arrangements of ‘exotic’ artifacts from China relying entirely on the vocabulary

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105 At this point it seems relevant to address the close relationship of photography and other forms of picture-making. It is no coincidence that the very first inventors of photography brought to photography their desire to make the pictures that they had already encountered and been surrounded by: “Their dreams were dreams of pictures.” Snyder, “Inventing Photography”, 4. The motivation was not to rupture with the conventional modes of making pictures, but was rather, as Hubert Damisch writes, driven by the desire to find a mechanical way to fix the pictures that were rendered in the camera obscura. Simply the use of the camera obscura demonstrates that the intention was not “to create a new type of image or to determine novel modes of representation,” rather the invention of photography itself was influenced by the already familiar conceptions of space, “to which photography belatedly brought an unexpected revival of current interest.” Hubert Damisch, “Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image,” 1963, October 5 (Summer 1978): 71.


107 Starl, “After Nature,” 18. Starl goes so far as to contend that the new medium “forestalled the still life,” even in the developments of painting in the nineteenth century. Based on the existing photographic still lifes, it may appear to hold true for the medium of photography, this cannot hold true for painting of the nineteenth century simultaneously being developed alongside the discovery and improving of photography technology. The Realists, Impressionists and Post-Impressionists most certainly experimented with still life, indeed revolutionizing it in their own right up until Cubism.

108 Armstrong, “La plus belle nature morte,” 142. Armstrong uses this idea in regards to Fox Talbot’s early photographic images shifting between scientific illustration, inventorization, and experimental procedure, but this flexibility can be witnessed in the practice of numerous photographers since its discovery up until today.

109 Ibid., 144.
of still life tradition, more specifically contemporary British still life painting.\textsuperscript{110} While photography's toddler years are preoccupied with developments towards affirmation in the world of picture-making through the demonstration of its flexibility and its ability to incorporate existing artistic values and pictorial traditions in a gesture that was largely characterized by imitation, later use of the camera and photography demonstrate the medium's potential at not only reformulating terms of image production, but as Siegfried Kracauer put it, also “exploding perceptual traditions.”\textsuperscript{111} Eventually the approach to the contents and forms of the classical still life is modified, adapted and even subverted. This lead, in light of new artistic strategies and practices in the works of photographers who likewise operated between discursive spaces of art and the commercial world during the era of Neues Sehen and Neue Sachlichkeit, to the “heroic vision”\textsuperscript{112} of the 1920s and 30s.\textsuperscript{113}

Stilled Life, the ‘Found’ Still Life and Display

Before moving on to this era of photo history, in a contribution to the catalogue accompanying the aforementioned exhibition curated by Weiermair, Timm Starl originally defined still life in early photography adhering largely to a structure of analogies to still life painting.\textsuperscript{114} He attempted to revise his approach in a later article, rightly suggesting that in order to adequately define the genre as it may appear in a different medium, it is better to approach the task by outlining how the interpretation of the genre in the newer medium departs from conventional understanding of the pictorial tradition and how it may defined independently from painting, within the context of its own medium.\textsuperscript{115} In the early history of photography, Starl identifies at least two structural differences. The first difference is related to the aforementioned \textit{stilling} capacity of the camera, meaning that still

\begin{itemize}
  \item 115 Timm Starl, “Nach den Dingen: Die Erfindung des STILLLEBENS durch die Fotografie,” \textit{Fotogeschichte} 91 (March 2004): 6. For lack of better terminology, Starl decides to differentiate between Stilleben (in painting) and STILLLEBEN in photography.
\end{itemize}
life is no longer limited to picturing inanimate objects. It may also include the human form or other non-still life compositions that in a photograph, are rendered as *stilled* life, or life that is still.\textsuperscript{116} Secondly, the defining composition is shifted from an artificially pre-arranged still life to the discovery and recognized aesthetic value of a ‘found’ subject or arrangement possessing the compositional as well as motionless qualities of still life.\textsuperscript{117} Following his impulse, perhaps it is possible to elaborate on the differences, as well as similarities, that expand while simultaneously making recourse to the aspects I have described in the first chapter that are and remain central to the notion of still life.

Exploring the aesthetic relationships between early photography and Dutch naturalist painting of the seventeenth century, the context that nourished the pictorial conventions for the stereotypical still life, Carl Chiarenza focuses on the “photographic vision” characteristic of Golden Age painting.\textsuperscript{118} By contrast to the highly staged compositions of the traditional still life, the photographic still life in this sense is expanded to encompass pictures of a specific quality, pictures that attest to momentarily captured living slices of time, *stilled* life. Among other images of photographer’s studios, Starl identifies the early images by Fox Talbot, both *The Open Door*\textsuperscript{119} and *The Ladder* (ill. 32), as such instances of *Zufälle* and *Fundstücke* (coincidences and finds) that, similar to Chiarenza, may be understood as belonging to an expanded notion of the genre of still life.\textsuperscript{120} The unidentifiable or domestic space is replaced by an outdoor context. While albeit the image is dominated by the inanimate, no less than three men figure at an equal rank alongside trees and vines, stone architecture, and the main protagonist for which the image is named, *The Ladder*.

\textsuperscript{116}Ibid., 4 and 12.

\textsuperscript{117} Starl highlights these shifts, all the while cleaving to an idea of still life as defined based on the subjects it photographs. Furthermore, the subjects he identifies are largely the same as the ones we recognize as still life or as being related to still life in painting (the set table, filled shelves, scenes from the studio or atelier). Ibid., 10, 3-14.


\textsuperscript{119} Worthy of notice is Fox Talbot’s accompanying text for this photograph in his 1844 book *The Pencil of Nature*, in which he references the “Dutch school of art, for taking as subjects of representation scenes of daily and familiar occurrence. A painter’s eye will often be arrested where ordinary people see nothing remarkable.” William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (1844; repr., Chicago: KWS Publishers, 2011), text following Plate VI, n. pag..

\textsuperscript{120} Starl, “Nach den Dingen,” 10-12.
In a similar vein, the aesthetic principles for photography put forth by Kracauer, highlights an approach to photography that draws upon the specificities of its medium. One of these specificities is the candid capacity of the medium: its “outspoken affinity for unstaged reality,” as well as for the “fortuitous,” whereby it is left to the viewer to organize the contents of the photograph. The apparently haphazard, but inevitably staged moment in still life painting shifts in photography to a staging of the arrangement that takes place in the process of taking the photograph, or in the act of stilling life—determined by the camera settings, shutter speed, the framing and point of view. A photographic still life as such includes arrangements or things selected and deemed image-worthy by the operator behind the camera: compositions in studios, in shop windows or embedded in a landscape and often including people, or their surrogates in the form of mannequins for example. Yet another of the medium’s “affinities” that Kracauer spoke of, one that “tends to suggest endlessness,” points out that, unlike the frame of the traditional and self-sufficient still life image, the new still life hints at the objects beyond the frame, hints at identifiable real-life situations and spaces. Whereas precisely these parameters inherent to the medium coincide with what could be called the nature of still life, caution should be taken so as not to categorize all photographs that exploit these specific stilling qualities as still life.

Storefronts by Eugène Atget (Ill. 33) illustrate a new kind of still life that lives from the above-mentioned medium specificities. The largest portion of the image is occupied by a window, showcasing the shop’s products: corsets and undergarments. Between the window and front door is yet another mannequin fitted with a corset. The frame of the image crops the façade; the lettering with the shop’s name is not legible in its entirety. To the far left, a long rectangular window displaying further undergarments available for purchase is only a fragment of

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121 Kracauer, “Photography,” 255.
122 Ibid., 259, 263-64.
123 Ibid., 264.
124 This is just one among a series of Atget’s photographs of Parisian street vendors and storefronts. See also *Chemiserie, Boulevard de Strasbourg* (ca. 1900?) and *Magasin, Avenue des Gobelins* (1925) both in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. A couple other storefronts or display windows included in Weiermair’s exhibition are just as illustrative. Cf. Weiermair, *Nature of Still Life*, plates 68, 77, 78, 84, 85. Another series of photographs of second-hand and antique store windows by Walker Evans featured as “Collector’s Items,” *Mademoiselle* 57 (May 1963) have also been mentioned in the context of still life photograph in Campany’s article, “Out in the World,” 96-100.
what is presumably a larger storefront. The cropped framing of the photograph is illustrative of the “endlessness” generated by the spontaneous character of the photograph, with fragments at the edge of the image as well as the reflections in the window of the trees hinting at what goes beyond the image. A white cone-shaped blur are of textile or tissue hanging from the mannequin appearing to have been blown by the wind during the exposure time that surely lasted longer than a fraction of a second. This instant indicates movement, a flighty instant where the photographer did not have control over every aspect of the composition, a “fortuitous” moment suggesting a snapshot of “unstaged reality.” The nature of the spontaneous, that which is really not prepared for the eye invites the imagination for the anecdotal, the stroll past a shop window, what is beyond, what took place before or after, what goes beyond what is seen in this obviously cropped image.

From the photographer’s point of view, while we could suppose we are dealing with what appears to be “unstaged reality,” the entire storefront demonstrates quite the opposite: a thoroughly thought out staging of commercial goods designed to attract potential costumers with three neat rows of various models of corsets, some of which are fitted to dress forms. In Atget’s photograph, to each corset is attached a price tag and around the edge of the display are small plaques providing the passerby with information about the brand names, the shop’s offers and opening hours. On the one hand, one could say the photographic still life is far more infatuated with the actual display or arrangement aspect of still life, at doing what it does best, pointing to commodity goods. After all, as Kracauer put it, photography “is a secretion of the capitalist mode of production.”125 We are reminded of photography’s birth in precisely a century where staging and the display of things—in the form of fairs, expositions, exhibitions, the museum, shopping centers, and display windows—became a dominating way of organizing the increasing wealth and abundance after the industrial revolution.126 The void and undefined space, including the niches, margins and embrasures that had come

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to be associated with the still life here give way to an identifiable context and space around the things. The intimate domestic spaces and items are replaced by those of industry and commerce that increasingly lay claim to the space of everyday life.

Pre-figuring photographs of storefronts and displays in shop windows, are a number of photographs documenting displays of artifacts found during archaeological digs, or of collections of prized goods.\(^{127}\) In many cases, the objects themselves function as memory of a history then attaining image status in the form of photography, in turn immortalizing their existence yet again. The display of the objects is further highlighted by the displaying quality of the photograph: “Ein Ding zu fotografieren bedeutet, es auszustellen – zumindest im Geiste.”\(^{128}\) Furthermore, the photograph as an “emanation of past reality” functions as kind of testament to possession.\(^{129}\) Hence it could said of the photographs of personal or cultural affects, they not only display or act as proof of the object’s existence, but in Campany’s words, it is “a way of securing possession of them.”\(^{130}\)

The ‘Ordinary’, Isolation and the Human Form

The close relationship of photography to commodities may be explained by its discovery coinciding with a series of other major technological, industrial and commercial developments, during a time when the relationship between humankind and things was being rearranged. In this new “order of things,” photography and the images of things increasingly assume the role in the recognition, description, categorization, and selling of things.\(^{131}\) On the one hand, a fascination with technology, industry and science on the one hand, and the desire to save things that were threatened to disappear in all the movement of modern life by “subjectifying the objective object” through the camera’s ability to “de-
accelerate” life may have motivated the renewed interest in the world of things. Furthermore, for Albert Renger-Patzsch (Ill. 34) for example, precisely the ‘objectivity’ of the photograph, the accuracy of photography technology meant that the camera was the predestined medium for an exploration of the qualities of things. What began as a mastering of the direction of light’s rendering of things, now became a focus on the “extraction” of things in relationship to their endless surroundings involving operations of reduction, parallel to strategies in other fields of art at the time, but most of all, dealing with the thing as if it were an individual, of whom a portrait were being made. The camereless images of things—Moholy-Nagy’s photograms, the rayographs (Ill. 35) and Schadographs—show as it were the inner life of things and the indexical quality of the photographic image is here reinforced by the fact that the photogram can only in fact be produced by direct contact of the object with the surface of the photosensitive material. Beyond exploring the essence of objects, rayographs present an abstract visionary world with room for free association important for avant-garde movements of the time, specifically Dadaism and Surrealism.

The ‘found’ still life or display is embellished or replaced with a new way of looking and artificially staging the thing relying on a strategies familiar to us from the classical still life: de- and re-contextualization as well as isolation of the thing (or body). “Photographic seeing meant an aptitude for discovering beauty in what everybody sees but neglects as too ordinary.” Still life’s commitment to the ordinary and generally disregarded became the concern of the photographer who took the apparently unspectacular and generated interest by presenting it from a new and unconventional perspective. Edward Weston confirms his intention of

revealing to others “what their own unseeing eyes had missed” for example, with a photograph searching for beauty in one of the humblest, most shameful things of any household, the toilet bowl. *Excusado* (Ill. 36), Spanish for *excused*, emphasizes the status of the toilet, as a private, usually hidden place to which one withdraws themselves, the bowl a receptacle for human excrement. The unusual worm’s eye frontal view of the toilet bowl as well as the close crop, detaching the bowl from its hollow, seat and lid and thereby from its function, highlights entirely other qualities of an all too familiar everyday item: On the one hand, its glossy wet and hard appearance, on the other an impression of kind of bodily suppleness, the soft ripple forming the lip of the bowl, the protruding long duck-like neck of the toilet folded in onto itself. The organic and inorganic, the human and the thing are looked at in the same meticulous manner. In so doing, a strange thing occurs: The pepper (Ill. 20) or the toilet bowl gain erotic anthropomorphic traits, whereby the headless woman’s torso (Ill. 21) approximates the forms of insensate things, a vegetable or a stone. The estranging view of the camera, distorts the woman’s body, the pepper and the toilet bowl, blurs the boundaries between the thing and the living in what Sontag describes as “one of the perennial successes of photography has been its strategy of turning living beings into things, things into living beings.” Things are not as they seem; what appears to belong to the ordinary has become extraordinary.

A different strategy of New Objectivity contributed to a fetishistic projection, focusing on the textural structure of the objects and evoking the tactile qualities of the thingly world. Renger-Patzsch wrote: “Greifbar soll die Wolle der Schafe sein, Tau und Segelleinen des Bootes.” Reminiscent of the hyperrealist modes of representation common to traditional still life painting, photographic works by Renger-Patzsch or Weston also operate at the boundaries of a conflict between intended tactility and the mechanical, cool and detached representations of the world, whether thingly or creaturely. The optical allure and simulated tactility is at odds with the flatness and texturelessness of the medium’s surface putting the viewer at a distance. As Victor Burgin wrote of the faultily fetishistic structure of

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136 Quoted in ibid., 96.
137 Ibid., 99.
the photograph: “To look at a photograph beyond a certain period of time is to become frustrated: the image which on first looking gave pleasure by degrees becomes a veil behind which we now desire to see.”

This ambivalence as well as the phenomenon of reification can best be described in terms of fetishism as outlined in the first chapter, whereby the position of subject and object remains unstable and even switches places. The fetishistic gaze finds its expression in strategies of intensified macro-viewing as well as the reductionist isolation and staging of the thing through camera views, whereby the object gains the status of the subject. Considering the kind of looking that still life engages is, it is thence no surprise that still life finds its frequent implementation in the world of advertisement. In this dialectical relationship between commodities and the labor force, the human body, uniform and exchangeable, is then reified. When the human body appears, especially in advertisements where the thing dominates the pictorial space, it is merely in the function of display or support. The body only appears in relationship to the mass-produced commercial object, providing proportional scale, employed in the demonstration of the object’s function, or with suggestion to the viewer that the attractive body, body parts, or status shown may also be acquired by possessing said object.

It is however not only the still life as a pictorial theme that is “promiscuous,” figuring in the field of art and likewise in commercial design and advertising. In addition to subject matter from mass media and pop culture, its production strategies overflow into the field of art. Depictions of the commodity are replaced by the commodity names. The brand and the packaging in no way resembling the materiality of its substance becomes the focus of much of Pop Art. Situated by art historians between Pop and Conceptual Art, it is the products of postwar American consumerism that frequently appear in Ed Ruscha’s photographs, for example in Product Still Lifes of 1961 (Ill. 37). The full frontal photographs show a range of

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141 The photographs were first shot in 1961, but were published only later for the first time in 1999 and exhibited as independent works in the spring of 2003 in the Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles. Cf. Lisa Pasquariello, “Ed Ruscha and the Language That He Used,” October 111 (Winter 2005): 81. Paintings associated with these photographs
found items, rather, the mere signs of these items in their packaged form, a few also photographed unwrapped, including a range of edibles and household products: a tin of Spam, a box of Sun Maid raisins, a can of Campbell's vegetable beef soup, a box of Maja soap, a box of Oxydol laundry and dish detergent, and a can of Sherwin-Williams turpentine, to name a few. Each item is photographed in front of a white background, the only suggestion of depth being a shadow cast to the left of the object and the blurry lower edges of the photographs. Whereas the title itself may hint at the series' relationship to the tradition of still life, one could posit that throughout his work, Ruscha has the posture of a still life picture-maker. The artist's concern is the overlooked, showing a deep curiosity in the rendering of things and signs of quotidianity regardless of the import accorded them by society across his palette of media; Ruscha's focus on the wealth as well as decay of the West Coast of the post-war era; the largely consistent absence of the human form. In an analogy to the gaze of the still life, almost in avowal to the concept of fetishism, Ruscha said about the Product Still Lifes: "Indians might look at a kachina doll and say that it has amazing power. Here, if you look at a product that is easily overlooked or not meant to have any real importance, you can focus on it to the point where you give it importance."

Still Life Today

After photography had established itself through the 1960s as a medium in the field of art—especially in the investigation between image, signs and language with Pop and then Conceptual Art, as a documentary aid for the movements of Fluxus and Happenings—the 1980s see a strong emergence of appropriation strategies. With the backdrop of increased nourishing from art historical tradition include Ruscha's paintings *Box Smashed Flat* (1960–61) and *Actual Size* (1962). Sylvia Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2004), 101-07 and 215.

142 As early as 1961, during his travel through Europe a series of photographs of store fronts, in addition to the documentation of various typography and signs, are reminiscent of the aforementioned store fronts by Atget. Yet in Ruscha's photographs, at times the displays are reduced to a bare minimum showcasing only a single object, almost a leftover, or they are entirely empty. Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, 41-54. See also ibid., 265 where Ruscha acknowledges his admiration for Atget's photographic work.

143 Or at least, not unlike the interrupted banquet meals of Dutch Golden Age still life, the traces of the human presence only find their way into the images of barren places via footprints leading to the diving board in *Pools* (1968) or in the accumulating oil spots underneath the absent cars in *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (1967). Ibid., plates 157 and 168.

144 Ruscha cited in ibid., 263.
of painting as well as recourse to the history photography, we ask ourselves what can still life mean for us today? In a survey of the works in recent exhibitions dedicated to still life,145 there exist countless examples of direct formal citation or appropriation, consistently part of postmodern and contemporary strategies of appropriation in the arts, appearing in photography, sculpture, and also in films such as the aforementioned A Zed & Two Noughts by Peter Greenaway. In Weiermair’s show, he included numerous images that do not fit the classical definition of still life, including shots of albeit still (in the sense of quiet and immobile) or paused life, depicting scenery of spaces and things beyond the isolated food or drink on the table, at times even showing events at the table with the fragments of the human body, pushing the human figure and a kind of narrative into the foreground again.146 Fragments of landscapes or architecture, merely interiors, while representative of stillness, may leave the viewer grasping as to why these images are also classified as still life.147 Yet Weiermair justified his curatorial decision to expand the boundaries of the category to be able include the works of contemporary artists who he believes “sidestep the definition or point out that also the living can be part of still life, playing with old themes and symbolic inventory pieces and giving them new life.”148 Even with an expanded notion of the pictorial tradition, in more recent art since the 1980s we witness the return of conventional still life vocabulary formally, but also thematically where at least two themes can be traced as relevant reflections in recent art production: a critique of the driving capitalist force and our society’s capitalist condition on the

146 The interest in what is generally considered old-fashioned, bourgeois and uncool, served as the central theme of focus for a pop culture magazine VICE in a special photo issue dedicated to still lifes featuring photographs from known artists, including Araki and Stephan Shore as well as less-known artists, photographers, filmmakers: “The Photo Issue 2010: Still Lifes,” special issue, VICE Magazine 4 no. 7 (August 2010). Most recently an exhibition with at Foam, a renowned photography museum in Amsterdam, showcased an overview of works by a number of contemporary Dutch artists addressing and “modernizing” or “updating” the genre of still life in their photographic work. Cf. a 32-page booklet published in conjunction with the exhibition: Still/Life – Contemporary Dutch Photography (Amsterdam: Foam, 2011). Another recent show which travelled from Innsbruck to Berlin in which, among others, Araki’s photographs were also featured was “Time, Death and Beauty: Blumen in der zeitgenössischen Fotokunst.” Cf. Matthias Harder, ed., Flower Power: Blumen in der zeitgenössischen Fotografie (Cologne: DuMont, 2010).

147 For example the inclusion in the exhibition of a photograph by David Hockney Untitled, depicting a scene of a couple chairs, a table and sun umbrella on the balcony. Ibid., plate 98.

148 Ibid., 13.
one hand, and a reflection about the fragility of the human condition in expressions of *vanitas* on the other.

By means of another inherently mimetic medium, that is equally caught up in the transmission of commercially motivated messages, in his film *Stilleben* (1997) (Ill. 39) Harun Farocki weaves imagery, including crops and close-ups, of critically commented sixteenth and seventeenth century still life painting with the uncommented filming of painstakingly tedious preparations and artificial staging of consumer products: a luxury watch, beer, and a cheese platter. Farocki’s narrative tells of still life painting highlighting the magical power of its contents, their relationship of things to another within the painting, the “alchemy” of illusionist painting, the discourse of fetishism, heightening awareness about the production of commodity goods and its display and so forth. In summary, Farocki draws the attention to the capitalist logic of still life painting (“Liest man dieses Bild so wie man heute Werbebilder liest...” 149) juxtaposing the commented historical tableaus directly with long looks behind the scenes at the efforts gone into producing the still lifes of advertisement.

By contrast, another trend of the resuscitation of classical still life forms and themes in postmodern art is the anthropocentric reflection on transience, decay and mortality despite—or perhaps precisely as a consequence of—an age that has been intensely occupied with staving off the aging process and death specifically in the omnipresent representations of the human body in the media. The still life gains a very personal touch, where the human presence has not merely left its trace, it begins to figure more prominently in the still life images, either physically or in the form of an accompanying narrative. For example, the installation and objects in *Strange Fruit (for David)* of 1992-97 by Zoe Leonard (Ill. 39) composed of the rinds of over three hundred pieces of fruit, real oranges, lemons and bananas, dried and re-stitched along their seams with colored thread, wire, zippers and buttons. This project initially accompanied the artist’s grieving process after the death of her friend, David Wojnarowicz, and it is difficult to interpret separately from the context of Leonard’s activism for feminist and gay rights as

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149 Harun Farocki, *Stilleben / Nature morte*, DVD (Berlin: absolut MEDIEN, 2009), 2:16 and repeated again at 3:06 while describing a market scene and a *Butcher’s Stall with the Flight into Egypt* both by Pieter Aertsen.
well as on behalf of AIDS awareness. The skins of the various fruit continue to metamorphose in their decay surely posing a technical conservation and restoration nightmare. About this work Leonard said: “This act of fixing something broken, repairing the skin of something after the fruit of it is gone, strikes me as both pathetic and beautiful. At any rate it is intensely human.”

Along with the return of the form and motif of the traditional still life, the subjective human experience and narrative that is expelled from the classical still life and from much of object photography of the twentieth century also make a come back in Sam Taylor-Wood’s short films Still Life (2001) (Ill. 40) and A Little Death (2002). In contrast to the deliberate representation of frozen or prolonged moment essential to her work, both of these short films show the speeding up of time, where the gradual and relentless decay of a bowl of fruit and a dead hare respectively over the period of nine weeks is compacted into four minutes: What at first is entirely immobile, develops life from within, growing brown spots, beginning to crawl with the fuzziness of the growing mold or with the busy movement of degenerating flesh and fur falling prey to legions of flesh-devouring maggots. The rapid decay is contrasted by the constancy of a blue ballpoint pen and a “non-organic, supermarket peach” remaining unscathed by the ravages of time. The imperviousness of the peach and pen to degeneration is a stark contrast to the rapid disintegration all around. The sequential character of the medium of film already suggests a sort of narrative with a beginning and an end, but perhaps more poignantly, Taylor-Wood, who also figures in many of her photographic works as her own model, experienced close brushes with death surviving two bouts of cancer in 1997 and 2000. Consistent with the notion of still

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152 A Little Death shows the decay of a hare that is trussed up in such a way that mirrors the picture of Chardin’s hunting pieces in our mind’s eye.
life and these films, Taylor-Wood’s ongoing interest is to “reveal the extant drama in the banality of the everyday.”

This chapter began with an exploration of the parallels between the upheld notion of the still life and the discourse around photography. Subsequently, a series of developments that reshaped the genre in a different time and medium has been outlined. Thus far, I have attempted to highlight how the still life as a stage for the lowly items or banality of everyday life still holds largely true even for today’s understanding of the definition of the pictorial category. The photographic condition maintains its largely mimetic structure, even during the experimentation with new perspectives and ways of looking, stimulating a similar illusionist and fetishistic still life gaze. The genre’s constitutive paradigm of display is either found and staged through use of camera settings or artificially simulated and staged for the camera. As such, the medium functions as a pointer to the world of things, bringing commodity goods to life while pausing that which is normally alive. Moreover, while the human body largely remains absent, it often appears in a reified or stilled form. A specifically poignant observation is the return to or appropriation of classical still life vocabulary, and the symbolic and semantic level it invokes. Still life is not only associated with a reflection about subject-object relations, in other words, the human being’s relationship to consumerist goods. It is employed once again today in contemplation about the daily, but frequently ignored reality of our inevitable mortal condition. It is the still life approach to things and human subjects alike, the shared interest in questions about matters of life and death in their photographs populated by still life elements, the fascination with the banal to the grotesque of the everyday, as well as the fetishistic structure of their photographs that motivates a closer analysis of the work of the two photographers Witkin and Araki in the following chapters.

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JOEL-PETER WITKIN AND STILL LIFE

...so that the fear (natural) and the wonder of death (supernatural) drives the genre of still life, which is the art of mortality.155

A toned gelatin silver print (Ill. 41), at its center a woman, her breasts exposed and her truncated arms outstretched, is propped up from the waist up in an ornate fountain-like basin. Adorned with a pale gown and tassels, a large pendant necklace, her hair (is it a wig?) done up with pearls. With a straight face, she casts her gaze off into the distance. Atop her head balances a basket laden with fruits and flowers. Almost flanking the square base of the sculpture rests a singular pear and its counterpart, an apple. From the stumps of her right arm that ends before the elbow and her deformed fingerless left hand float small petal-like fragments. In stark contrast to the darker tones that serve as a background, her skin glows white and possesses a finish that resembles crackled paint, or dried clay, resembling more the surface of a thing petrified or cast from a mold. The model, Mirka, a woman from Prague and the survivor of a botched abortion, is transformed into an eighteenth-century garden sculpture crowned by the symbols of copiousness. But what does this image, besides the obvious still-life attributes, have to do with still life? Explicit still life images by Joel-Peter Witkin, such as the extravagant Feast of Fools (1990) (Ill. 42) and Anna Akhmatova (1998) (Ill. 43), are reminiscent of the pronkstilleven and the vanitas, as are the relatively reduced compositions of Still Life, Mexico City (1992) (Ill. 44) and Still Life with Breast, Paris (2001) (Ill. 45) numbering among a series of still life’s in the artist’s vast oeuvre.156 Yet how else could the notion of still life be employed, beyond its formal aesthetic or even semantic determination, to describe a consistent mood and gesture throughout Witkin’s work? What other parallels may be identified between Witkin’s approach to his subject matter and the tradition of still life as described thus far?

155 Joel-Peter Witkin, in his e-mail response in the Appendix.
156 This is just a selection of the still-life themes in Witkin’s oeuvre. Two more examples include: Still Life, Marseilles (1992) (Ill. 46) and an earlier of Witkin’s works, an Arcimboldo-like composition Harvest, Philadelphia (1984) (Ill. 47).
The title of the print, *Abundance* (1997) (Ill. 41), an allegory, lends the main protagonist of the image at once the status of a person and thing: a person as a thing, as an emblem of an idea. The representation of a human body between the status of person and objectification is reminiscent of a similarly petrifying gesture that is also central to the literary works by Austrian writer and painter Adalbert Stifter\(^{157}\) and may provide us with a hint about a tension manifest throughout Witkin’s work that could be characterized as still life-like, containing still life’s inherent ambivalent structure between endowing life to objects and objectifying that which is alive. Stifter’s descriptions of rural and urban landscapes include metaphors that blur the boundaries between body and thing, life and death.\(^{158}\) And while his painting is dedicated primarily to the genre of landscape, a number of his studies demonstrate his fascination for the inanimate things of nature, endowing painterly movement and life to stones, rocky landscapes and tree stumps.\(^{159}\)

**Realism and rhyparography**

Before exploring what Georg Lukács criticized as excessive description and reification in Stifter’s writing in connection to the still life character of Witkin’s photographs, another interesting parallel is both authors’ commitment to a kind of romantic realism. Stifter is primarily considered within the context of the *Biedermeier* aesthetic, a realism that lacks social commentary, but a number of scholars have made the observation that his literary work in fact hints at the encroaching alienation of capitalism and industrialization, and at the changing relationship of humankind to the object world and his descriptions give equal attention to the important as well as to the apparently insignificant.\(^{160}\) In direct

\(^{157}\) I thank my advisor Prof. Friedrich Teja Bach for alerting me to possible parallels in Stifter’s writing.


\(^{159}\) Geulen, “Depicting Description,” 276 in reference to *Bewegung*, a study of a stone whose surface gains the quality of movement. I find the studies of toppled tree trunks and stumps even more convincing of this attempt to breath movement into the sturdiest part of a tree. Cf. Fritz Novotny, *Adalbert Stifter als Maler* (Vienna: Anton Schroll & Co., 1941), plates 19 and 57.

\(^{160}\) This is perhaps most plausible through Stifter’s descriptions of objects in the urban space of Old Vienna, for example in his essay “Ein Gang durch die Katakomben” published in *Wien und die Wiener in Bildern aus dem Leben, Wien, 1844*. Cf. Joseph Metz, “ ’Es ist ein seltsam, furchtbar erhabenes Ding, der Mensch’: Verdinglichung, absoluter Mehrwert und das perverse Erhabene in Adalbert Stifters proto-benjaminischen Stadtbildern,” in *Organismus und Gesellschaft*, ed. Christiane Arndt and Silke Brodersen, 49-67.
tribute to Gustave Courbet’s brand of Realism, among other old master paintings, Witkin has in his own studio re-created and re-interpreted L’Atelier du peintre (1855) and La Source (1868). The subject matter that serves as the leitmotif for Witkin’s explorations is indebted to a kind of realism that could also be considered fundamental for the notion of still life, a realism that opposes the conventions and aesthetics of the ideal and impartially chooses its subject matter from the “gutter.” Furthermore, the ideals of Courbet’s brand of Realism employ the arena of art to depict or motivate social concern by attempting to objectively represent socioeconomic and political effects on daily life despite its ignoble or lowly appearances.

Just as the rhyparographer renders the seemingly foul, vile and worthless in pictures, the elevation of the sordid is a theme throughout Witkin’s work. The grotesque, the word’s roots grotto referring to dark and cavernous subterranean place, well represents the domain that Witkin frequents with his photographs. Not entirely uninteresting to mention as a free association in this context are the original grotesques, the rediscovered vegetal and fantastical decorative paintings of Ancient Rome, which are considered by art historians as an important precursor to still life painting. Witkin’s prevailing interest in the transgressive and what is marginal, albeit existent in society began with his encounters and photographs of carnival ‘freaks’ in Coney Island as well as his fascination in ‘deviant’ sexual practices and has persisted throughout his artistic career. Individuals with physical anomalies or missing limbs, at times due to tragic circumstances (an accident or an illness), those who suffer discrimination are celebrated in Witkin’s pictures where the individual, in the case of Abundance for example, are literally put onto a stage, up on a pedestal, dressed up and decorated with fine cloth and

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161 Not only do Courbet’s paintings serve as the basic structure for these two photographs by Witkin, also including scenes from Courbet’s The Bathers (1853) or Young Ladies on the Bank of the Seine (ca. 1857), they draw references to icons of art history and early photography such as Étienne-Jules Marey in Studio of the Painter (1990) (III. 49) or Oscar Gustave Rejlander in Courbet in Rejlander’s Pool (1985) (III. 50), reminiscent of composite photography of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

162 A contemporary critic wrote of Courbet’s After Dinner at Ornans, that “no one could drag art into the gutter with greater technical virtuosity,” to which Courbet responded: “Yes, art must be dragged into the gutter!” Cited in James H. Rubin, Courbet, Art and Ideas Series (London: Phaidon Press, 1997), here especially Chapter 2, “Gutter Art”, 49.


164 Bergström, Dutch Still Life Painting, 30 and Sterling, Still-Life Painting, 33.
jewels and elevated to the status of a model in the service of art, but more so, the subject of an artwork. In *Disciple & Master*, a book in which Witkin’s photographs are juxtaposed with images that served as a master for his photographs, *Abundance*’s counterpart is an anonymous photograph of a Miss America Pageant in 1946. In his description, Witkin addresses the notion of beauty as fiction and in the tradition of a Realist claims to find everything beautiful, from a flower to a limb, despising no one.

For his studio photographs, Witkin searches for models, often with announcements in the afterwords of his monographs or exhibition catalogues, inviting people he calls “physical marvels” or “physical prodigies of all kinds ... Any living myth” ranging from dwarfs to giants, hermaphrodites, transsexuals, sideshow performers, contortionists, corset and bondage fetishists, bearded women, hunchbacks, amputees, and so forth to pose for him and be the stars of his photographs. In the mood of Realism, Germano Celant sees Witkin’s photographs as a way of overcoming social contradictions, as a project towards the “transcendence of distinctions,” be they of gender, sexual or bodily norms. In a way, Witkin’s photographs become, using Foucault’s words, “heterotopias of deviation,” housing those “individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm.”

It is not only social pariahs who find a platform in Witkin’s fantastical images, but waste and human refuse. Bodies of the dead that have, since the nineteenth century, been shifted to the heterotopia of the cemetery, return as a constant motif in Witkin’s photographs. Witkin’s still life, *Feast of Fools* (Ill. 42), displays the

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170 Beyond the use of human remains in his own artistic work, Witkin’s interest in historical images of anomalies and politically outrageous events is manifest in a publication he edited with forty prints from the private Burns Archive, an important and very large collection of vintage prints of medical, post-mortem, and spirit photography, as well as historical photographs of the consequences of war and crime. Joel-Peter Witkin, ed., *Masterpieces of medical photography: Selections from the Burn Archive* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1987).

obviously composed entanglement of flesh: the flesh of fruits and animals, but also that of humans. In an undefined and dark space, red and white grapes are heaped up with unpeeled, partially cracked and entirely exposed pomegranates and the flesh of the sea: crabs, crayfish, and an octopus. Fragments of decaying human bodies—two hands severed at the wrist and two oozing feet, one cut off mid-calf—complete the heap and serve as a kind of visual structure holding the pyramidal arrangement together. Half-hidden among the intentional disarray, an infant cadaver with a wide ornamented ribbon covering its eyes. Its cut open belly and thorax are visibly held together by a series of large dark stitches. Witkin describes the “task” creating this photograph as a “test of his will,” but as the great realists and rhyparographers of art history, felt he had the “capacity to find beauty in the most vile, ugly things.”

In stark contrast to the reduced and simplified still-life motifs of New Vision and Pop Art as outlined in the previous chapter, Witkin follows a different tradition, whose representatives include photographers like Diane Arbus (Ill. 53), who herself contributed to the rediscovery of Weegee’s (Ill. 52) photographs of crime scenes and the social reality in urban low-income neighborhoods or the drags and transsexuals in night clubs of New York City, both photographers dedicated to the outcasts of our society. Susan Sontag’s contemporary description of the trend in photography in the late 1970s indicates a kind of historical starting point for Witkin’s artistic work:

Darker, time-bound models of beauty have become prominent, inspiring a reevaluation of the photography of the past; and, in an apparent revulsion against the Beautiful, recent generations of photographers prefer to show disorder, prefer to distill an anecdote, more often than not a disturbing one, rather than isolate an ultimately reassuring ‘simplified form’ ...

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172 Witkin cited in his e-mail response to me. See Appendix.
174 Witkin expressed his admiration for both Arbus’ and Weegee’s images and recounts his first memorable encounters with them. Witkin, Zögling und Meister, 19 and 59.
175 Sontag, On Photography, 102.
‘Freaks’, ‘deviant’ and multiple sexualities, female impersonators, children and adults with disabilities are embraced, and celebrated in the body of Arbus’ renowned work, where at times even ‘normal’ people look like ‘freaks’. Weegee’s photographs directly approach topics the aesthetics of art did not meddle in, revealing the uncomely as well as extreme emotion in photography. Using Adorno’s understanding of the violent ‘ugliness’ in the art of the Avant-garde and Surrealist movements, one could understand the repulsiveness in these photographs as way of attacking social hegemony, as a way “to denounce, through ugliness, the world that creates it and reproduces it in its own likeness. ... Art accuses power and bears witness to those things repressed and denied by that same power.”

The marked anecdotal increase which Sontag speaks of is manifest in Witkin’s oeuvre, even in his still life photographs, a genre that usually excludes the human narrative: When not inherently apparent in the photograph itself, most of his photographs are supported, almost obsessively, by a myriad of anecdotes around the choice of the model (either dead or alive), props, studio scenery and the making-of process for each photograph which are published in his monographs, recounted in interviews and at artist talks. Additionally, Witkin’s title for this particular still life inherently contains textual reference to the medieval Feast of Fools, a feast that may echo the Roman tradition of Saturnalia associated with mockery, extravagance and rambunctious behavior. Yet more importantly in this context, it was an occasion where the usually strict social order was thrown to the wind for a couple hours of hierarchical leveling. A junior member of the clergy was to usurp the roles of the leadership and perform a burlesqued liturgy. This ritual was preformed with the elected Lord of Misrule often dressed up in women’s clothing or wearing a mask, he would ride in on an ass singing obscene ditties, carrying foul-smelling incense, playing games and doing quite the opposite of what

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177 Eugenia Parry, Joel-Peter Witkin (2001; repr., Berlin: Phaidon, 2007) and Witkin, Zögling und Meister, both featuring the anecdotes directly from Witkin himself or retold by the author. At an artist talk on 22 March 2012 on occasion of the opening of a solo exhibition of Witkin’s photographs, The Thanatograph at The Lust Gallery, Vienna I was able to experience firsthand how Witkin willingly reveals anecdotal and behind-the-scene information accompanying each of his images.
one does at the church altar. Witkin’s choice of title is consistent with the current of his work, interested in calling attention to and with the potential of undermining the established social norms determined by a structure of differences and dichotomies.

Yet while the social concern is documented in Arbus’ and Weegee’s photographs of real people in their real ‘ghettoized’ environment, Witkin’s motivation and attraction is in fact the wonder of these very real conditions and manifestations of death and ‘deviation’, which he repackages. He in fact uses the realism of the natural world to create a super-natural world, a world beyond the real.\textsuperscript{179} In the narratives about the artist’s background, most sources retell of his early childhood experiences with death and the macabre.\textsuperscript{180} Undoubtedly, these traumatic experiences were poignant for the artist, but the question is whether or not their repeated mention does more to minimize or explain away the images by basing their motivation primarily on biographical anecdotes,\textsuperscript{181} where there are perhaps other ways to describe the reception of his oeuvre. And while connecting Witkin to a tradition of Realism is plausible in a certain sense, in apparent contradiction to its core of representations that do \textit{not} look at the world through tinted glasses and with the intent of undermining academic conventions and resisting imitation of any kind, Witkin’s work regularly and unabashedly nourishes itself from the icons of art history and early photography, and as such, frames the disturbing content of his photographs within the aesthetics of established and accepted visual norms.

As has already been alluded to thus far, Witkin’s work is characterized by a certain eclecticism in his approach to the recycling of art historical themes and traditions. He claims that as a child, while other children were collecting baseball cards, he

\textsuperscript{179} Cf. Witkin’s response in the Appendix: “...the fear (natural) and the wonder of death (super natural) drives the genre of still life...”

\textsuperscript{180} Celant, Joel-Peter Witkin, 14-15; Parry, “Convalescent...Incorruptible,” 184; and Van Deren Coke, “Introduction: Joel-Peter Witkin,” in \textit{Joel-Peter Witkin: Forty Photographs} (3rd ed. San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1990), 7 and 9.

\textsuperscript{181} For example, in his master’s thesis “Revolt against the Mystical” from 1976, Witkin tells the story about one of his experiences as a six-year old child witnessing a terrible automobile accident. He observed something roll out of one of the overturned vehicles: The decapitated head of a little girl, from whom, as he was about to reach out and touch her, he was whisked away. A further biographical justification for his themes draw upon his time served in the Army during the Vietnam War, where Witkin trained and served as a combat photographer in Europe and the U.S., documenting the deaths at bases caused by accidents and suicides. Witkin, “Revolt against the Mystical,” 1976, reprinted in Celant, Joel-Peter Witkin, 49-51.
was spending his time collecting repros of art and visiting museums.\textsuperscript{182} Very much operating in the climate of photography's firmly planted status in the field art, Witkin's practice too is concerned with “the intense historical self-consciousness of the new photography of the 1980s.”\textsuperscript{183} In a gesture familiar to us from the Pictorialist movement, where amateur photographers worked eagerly towards proving the camera’s ability to participate in creating art, Witkin reappropriates and reworks a similar aesthetic, producing almost exclusively black and white photographs, appearing stained and aged, while also drawing upon the Western visual tradition, from Velázquez to Courbet (Ill. 54 and Ill. 49) and from Charles Winter to Diane Arbus (Ill. 57 and Ill. 53). To lend a less pejorative connotation to the phenomenon of appropriating visual history in photography as more than pastiche, Van Gelder and Westgeest proffer the term “multimediating” for composite or hybrid images that refer to the painterly tradition, suggesting that a “shift from one medium to another is not a complete one. Multimediating pictures ... generate reflection that precisely flows from their combining effort, rather than in the negative meaning of stealing or merely passively reproducing or rehearsing various media.”\textsuperscript{184}

\textit{Feast of Fools: Vanitas verbatim}

In Witkin’s still life \textit{Feast of Fools} (Ill. 42), we immediately recognize the art historical precursor in the still life that is not only a match formally, but thematically. The contents as well as the pyramidal composition of this picture will be familiar to us with a formal counterpart found in, for example, a \textit{pronkstilleven} with a lobster, pomegranates, a champagne glass and a pipe by Jan Davidsz. de Heem (Ill. 5). Semantically, the “hidden symbolism” in still life painting with allusions to a moral message about the transience of life and earthly pleasures, is transformed here to a very visceral introduction of death in the form of a cadaver and severed limbs from a hospital morgue in Mexico City. The viewer is essentially confronted with the uncanny in the sense that beneath that which is familiar, lays something ghastly, something beyond the expected, making us feel uneasy. Firstly,

\textsuperscript{182} Witkin, \textit{Zögling und Meister}, 6.
\textsuperscript{183} Colin Westerbeck, “Beyond the Photographic Frame,” in \textit{On the Art of Fixing A Shadow: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Photography}, 375.
\textsuperscript{184} Van Gelder and Westgeest, \textit{Photography Theory}, 53.
we encounter an uncanny image, that is all too familiar to us through its recourse
to iconic images belonging to our cultural memory, presenting at once the foreign
objects of human limbs, things that do not belong to the scene, much less to the
highly esteemed works of old master still life painting. The disturbing
displacement of the still life distresses us. And while still life or the vanitas, address
issues of the mortal human condition, we are encountered here with what is
otherwise kept under wraps, a horrifying scene laced with sensual or erotic
connotations through the oozing and fluid excretion, the intertwining of flesh and
fertility of fruit, but ultimately a scene revealing to us what is what Freud
described as the most uncanny of all, death.185

The painted still life, usually only alluding to the tension between death and life, is
transformed into an illustrative, almost exaggerated vanitas, no longer relying
merely on the stand-in symbols of impermanence such as the timepiece in Anna
Akhmatova (Ill. 43) or a butterfly in Still Life with Breast (Ill. 45) in contrast to the
still fresh fruits, flowers or vegetables to represent the impermanence of life.
Additionally, the generally expelled human form is literally re-injected into
Witkin’s still life, heightening the tension while forcing death and life to co-exist.186
The dead infant, found swimming in a drawer in the basement of the medical
school in Mexico City along with the other human fragments featured in Feast of
the Fools (Ill. 42), shows us a life that had hardly begun. The infant, normally
recalling notions of youth, life and freshness here is turned on its head as a far
sterner admonition of life’s shortness and a reminder that death continues to
remain just as much a part of life.

The exclusion of narrative in the still life as we know it is reintroduced here in the
moment we begin to speculate about how the artist gained access to the hospital
remains, to whom did these limbs belong, how did they end up in the morgue,
what traumatic event happened to bring about the amputations of limbs or to the

185 “Im allerhöchsten Grade unheimlich erscheint vielen Menschen, was mit dem Tod, mit Leichen und mit der
Zeitschrift für Anwendung der Psychoanalyse auf die Geisteswissenschaften V (1919), 315.
186 “Access to death is forbidden, since death has its place in the soul; nevertheless, the artist wants to take
possession of it, to unite it with life. This is why he touches it, manipulates it, uses it as a kind of visual plastics, a
magical icon depicting the unknown, closing the circle of existence.” Celant, “Photography between Flesh and Spirit,”
13 and 32-33
infant’s body being torn open and sewn back together, what did the artist himself experience in the process of staging the image, and so on. The subtle ambivalence of the competing forces of life and death becomes verbatim in Witkin’s still life, which he calls the “art of mortality,” 187 with the scales maybe even tipping in favor of death. Except that even the limbs that do more than suggest death seem to be crawling with a life-like quality of their own in a visual representation of extreme materiality: the mess of muscles and tendons, the slick and slime of bodily fluids, the hair on the toe knuckles and calf, the shine of the bloated surfaces of the limbs and so forth.

In the late-nineteenth-century photographs of the dead, Katharina Sykora identifies two differently coded spaces: the photographs intended to serve a memorial function in the context of mourning the death of a loved one, and on the other hand, as a kind of elimination of the criminal; evoking empathy on the one hand, and shock on the other. 188 It is a difficult task to identify or even separate the mixed emotional response to Witkin’s still lifes and their use of human remains. The initial response is related to the “that has been” quality of the photograph triggering shock in a moment of realization that these specimens of, to the viewer, unknown persons in fact existed in front of the camera and were arranged by the author of this photograph. 189 Speculations as to the shocking or even criminal motivation of the photographer are allayed by the supplemental information provided by Witkin, but not at all apparent in the image, where he insists on the associations of the gore and fragments of bodies of unidentified people who died violent deaths as well as the gruesome conditions surrounding the making of Feast of Fools with the shockingly horrific and violent consequences of the Holocaust. 190

The fascination with the dead human body turns the classical still life into the stage

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187 Witkin cited from his e-mail response in the Appendix. One could deduce from Witkin’s responses to my specific question about the use of the still life genre, that the use of dead body parts is vital to him for his understanding of the genre, in which he mentions The Kiss (1982) (Ill. 55) as one of his earlier still life images. See Appendix.


189 Geimer writes about the difficulty, even with our critical knowledge of the photograph’s ability to deceive perception, of ever shaking the photograph’s connection to an actual event. He describes the ability to shock as a specific quality of the photograph, and that the resulting reaction or reception goes beyond conventional academic conventions of analysis or interpretation, evoking strong emotion. Peter Geimer, “Fotos, die man nicht zeigt: Probleme mit Schockbildern,” in Fotografische Leidenschaften, ed. Katharina Sykora, Ludger Derenthal, and Esther Ruefis (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 2006), 254-55.

190 See Witkin’s e-mail response in the Appendix.
of human drama, where not a single but collective human narrative usually excluded from or at least hidden in the still life become central to it. As Eugenia Parry writes of *Feast of the Fools*: “With his *vanitas* he establishes an erotic territory of majestic sacrifice and sacrament, the meaning of which, for him, lies somewhere between the unspeakable suffering of the crucified Christ and that of the Jews under Hitler.” Shock gives way to empathy or at least a memorial gesture where Witkin's staging highlights traits of a personality in the forms used for still life, for example with the gracefulness of the bodiless arm in *Anna Akhmatova* (Ill. 43) whose index finger and thumb almost seem to be stopping time. Its title furthermore pays tribute to the memory of a poet who was subject and a witness to the suffering in the USSR under Stalin’s regime in a message reminding of political and historical contexts that in fact otherwise have nothing to do with the visual contents of the still life photograph.

The breath of death is encountered frequently throughout Witkin’s oeuvre, even beyond the still life photographs or the works that include cadavers or severed limbs. The *memento mori* reflection is for example evident in an even earlier photograph, such as *Testicle Stretch with the Possibility of a Crushed Face* (1982) (Ill. 56), it too at first appearing with a similar static and artificially staged quality of a still life, portraying a literally immobile subject bound by dark bands to a plank mounted at a slant. Through a construction of ropes and weights, the man’s testicles are stretched upwards. The man is alive and is engaged in an erotic ritual of pain and pleasure, with the threat of death looming above him in the form of the weights dangling from a rope above his masked face. Here too, in Celanto’s words, it is “as though the artist where trying to externalize an eros-thanatos drive.” In an almost typically Baroque gesture, Witkin’s desire is to blur the boundaries between the traditionally opposed, attempting to render the invisible visible, the material and immaterial, the spiritual become carnal in extreme expressions of corporeality and ecstasy. The Baroque still life is also characterized by a prevailing ambivalence between the desires of the body represented in the erotic and lucullan displays of food and drink contrasted with the moral reminder of

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191 Parry, “Convalescent...Incorruptible,” 177.
192 Celant, “Photography between Flesh and Spirit,” 12.
193 Ibid., 30.
restraint and impending death. Another more subtle, yet still literal example of the forces of _eros_ and _thanatos_ at work in Witkin’s work may be read in _Still Life with Breast_ (Ill. 45). At the image’s center is a detached breast on a silver-rimmed plate, accompanied by a mangosteen and a fig missing a section. In the foreground lay a gerbera daisy and a rose, upon whose petals a delicate butterfly rests with open transparent wings. The scene takes place on a solid surface that is interrupted in the background by alternating light and dark striped wallpaper. In the upper left-hand corner a fragment of a pulled back dark curtain, adorned with a printed or embroidered design of a dragon, is visible. This dark triangular corner of the image is reflected in curious dark shadows varying in shapes and length at the other three edges of the photograph creating what appears to be a frame within the material boundaries of the photograph. Whereas in contrast to other more macabre scenes by Witkin, death does not monopolize the stage here. The lonely breast, perhaps the remain of a mastectomy, indeed alludes to death in the form of malignant cancer, while at the same time the breast functions as the organ of life-giving nutrition for new life, physically or metaphorically, or the object of erotic desire. The status of the butterfly operates with similar ambivalent symbolic meaning, alluding to the brevity of life, and likewise to rebirth and transformation.\[194\]

The allusion to death inherent in every photograph—an image that captures a since bygone moment, yet bringing back the object or person to life in the true-to-life image—becomes in Witkin’s work post-mortem evidence, capturing a fragment of the body still in limbo, not yet decayed, dead, but still possessing the materiality of the living. Like the still life genre that is caught somewhere between life and death, between naturalism and artificiality, the replacement of the real and hidden symbolism, photography lends itself as an interesting candidate for this attempt: as a medium that is historically caught up with creating an as objective as possible rendering of the visible world, but which also has its history with seeing

the invisible world in the early twentieth century with spirit photography.\footnote{195} Further removed from the initial suggestion that Witkin’s approach is indebted to Realism, the interest of these images is in fact an inquiry into what is \textit{behind} the reality of our earthly lives. Returning to school after a stint as a photographer for the army,\footnote{196} Witkin’s ambition was to find a way to create an image of God: “In order to know if I were truly alive, I’d make the invisible visible! ... I believe that all my photographs are incarnations, representing the form and substance of what my mind sees and attempts to understand.”\footnote{197} While it became clear to Witkin that the photographs themselves are illusions, the photograph functions at the locus where the two worlds meet, a membrane or a passage through which the sacred or spiritual world emerges in a material form, resulting in a body of work that is at once spiritual and carnal.\footnote{198} This is confirmed in Witkin’s expression of his photographs as “the marriage of the body to the spirit, the eye of flesh to the glass eye of the camera.”\footnote{199}

\textit{Studio de Winter: The stilled life}

In addition to the obvious borrowing of visual references from iconography of painting of the old masters, Witkin pays equal tribute to the great icons of photography history. Admitting openly to creative inspiration generated by painting from Cimabue to Félicien Rops, early in his artistic process Witkin hoped to isolate himself from the influences of other photographers, excepting the work of August Sander.\footnote{200} By and by, the fascination with photography history becomes visually apparent in Witkin’s work, not only in the choice of subjects, but in the treatment of the photographic medium and in the printing effects. Witkin’s \textit{Studio de Winter} (1994) \footnote{195 We are reminded of discussions about the the special power of the photographic light, acting as an interface between earth and universe, death and life, especially as explored by Flammarion. Cf. Stiegler, “Bilder aus dem Tolenreich: Photographie und Spiritusmus,” in \textit{Theoriengeschichte der Photographie}, 115-30.} \footnote{196 Not enrolled as a full-time student, Witkin was drafted into the Vietnam War. Before that in 1961, he had began his studies at the Cooper Union School of Art in New York with evening classes alongside his full-time work in commercial photography as a dye-transfer technician. At this time, his major was sculpture. Witkin, “Revolt against the Mystical,” 51.} \footnote{197 Ibid., 52; Witkin’s process towards photographic proof of Christ, or the “photographic Icon,” is outlined in greater detail in his thesis, ibid., 49-54.} \footnote{198 Celant, “Photography between Flesh and Spirit,” 10. In the exhibition catalogue, the title of the essay alone summarizes how Celant assesses Witkin’s use of the medium.} \footnote{199 Witkin cited in Parry, \textit{Joel-Peter Witkin}, n. pag.} \footnote{200 Witkin, “Revolt against the Mystical,” 51.} takes Charles Winter’s daguerreotype (Ill. 57) from
around 1850 as its point of departure, an image depicting the contents of Winter’s atelier, itself recalling for example the arrangement of objects in David Bailly’s *Self-portrait with Vanitas Symbols* (Ill. 59). Like Bailly’s painting, the photographic image of Winter’s atelier shows an array of objects from musical instruments, plaster casts, paintings on paper or framed, a vase of flowers, and the tools of the painter’s trade—a palette, easels, and a maulstick—with a backdrop draped with heavy cloth. The main protagonist, the self-portrait as well as the blatant *vanitas* symbols of Bailly’s painting are not present in Winter’s image and the objects that, while numerous, remain countable in the painting become an excessive overspill out of every corner in the daguerreotype. Winter’s atelier is chock so full of artist’s paraphernalia, the viewer is unable to maintain an overview of its contents. The jam-packed quality of Winter’s atelier becomes even more tangible in the small dimensions of the daguerreotype, measuring just over ten percent of the Leiden painting (9.8 x 13.5 cm to the dimensions of Bailly’s *vanitas* at 89.5 x 122 cm).

For *Studio de Winter* (returning the image to almost tableau size and format of 100 x 114 cm, emphasized by an ornately decorated golden frame)\(^{201}\) Witkin spent at least a month amassing objects resembling those in Winter’s image, ranging from breastplate and swords, and easel, and numerous busts, plaster casts of the human body, a lion, a horse and so forth with the hope that in re-staging Winter’s photograph, he would find a way to interpret it.\(^{202}\) The two framed paintings in Winter’s daguerreotype are replaced by two aforementioned tableaux by none other than the author of the reinterpretation himself: *Feast of Fools* and *Studio of the Painter* (Ill. 42 and Ill. 49). The composition is rhythmized with the repetition of three *Rückenfiguren*, or persons seen from behind. The first *Rückenfigur* finds the form of the plaster cast in the foreground with his outstretched arm leading the viewer’s eye towards the center. This figure is also featured in Winter’s original print, as the only figure with its back facing the viewer. In contrast to Witkin’s composition, where the balance of light and dark subjects are scattered fairly evenly across the photograph, besides a couple prints and wrinkled cloth on the


\(^{202}\) Parry, *Joel-Peter Witkin*, text accompanying plate 34.
right edge of the image, Winter’s Rückenfigur stands in contrast to the primarily dark lower half of the photograph. Midground in Witkin’s rendition, the second rear-view figure is his model, a woman with scoliosis is embedded in the scene, the length of her torso interrupted just at the end of her buttocks. Her arms are raised, folded behind her head holding her hair up, she appears to float or be resting on ledge or shelf that obscures any visual cues to the existence of her legs. In Winter’s studio, the woman’s place is occupied by a row of full-figure and animal plaster casts, including a cast of the famous statue Laocoön and his Sons. Two framed paintings flank the table of plaster casts, referencing as an ensemble, along with a palette of paints and the musical instrument to the left of the casts, the fine arts. Returning to Witkin’s homage, in a kind mise en abyme of artistic self-reflection, the repetition of the Rückenfiguren ends with the nude backside of Courbet’s bather as re-staged in Witkin’s Studio of the Painter (Ill. 49), the meaning of her gesture remaining just as enigmatic here as in the original Courbet painting.

Excurse: Photographic process

Beyond visual and formal reference to an iconic image of early photography history, Witkin’s photographs mimic certain ‘accidents’ or unintended side effects of the still young photographic chemical processes. As surely already observed in the surface of the Feast of Fools (Ill. 42) and other examples introduced so far, here too in Studio de Winter the traces of interference with the photographic surface may be observed. Witkin’s artistic process begins with a study, a sketch of his idea for a staged photograph with a drawing or collage (Ill. 48 and Ill. 51). Witkin then elaborately and meticulously stages his scene with props and backdrops, he poses dressed up or nude and frequently masked models in his studio or on location, as is the case with Feast of Fools and some other photographs featuring cadavers, which were shot in the hospital morgue. The tableau vivant, or what could be called a tableau mort, in this case with Witkin’s subjects appearing mostly mortified even when they are not corpses, is subsequently recorded using the camera. Witkin develops his own film from which a single negative is selected from

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203 Cf. Celant, Joel-Peter Witkin, plates 54
several contact prints. He then proceeds to alter the negative by scratching or cutting into it before it is enlarged. The alterations and redefinition of the image take place through applying a piece of tissue over the enlarging paper, at times treating this fragile surface with a spray of water or chemicals such as potassium ferricyanide causing yellowing or brownish hues. While the negative is being enlarged, pressure may be applied to the tissue, at times the tissue is torn or crinkled along the edges, redefining the light and focus in the image, imbibing it with a specific almost nostalgic quality of daguerreotypes and calotypes. It goes without saying, this process is a tedious one, at times requiring Witkin days to carry out and one which may be repeated with additional adjustments made to the negative, exposure settings, diffusion or treatment of the paper changing the texture of the photograph from which process it emerges with greater proof of its birth as an image. The otherwise brittle photography that is time and again thought of indexical, as bound by a physical or causal relationship to its referent bends to Witkin’s imagination and manipulation.

The first motivation to alter the photograph in this way came from the desire to efface the presence of the unknowing witness to what Witkin calls his sadism as he photographed himself, and inadvertently the passerby, (Ill. 60) in the act of strangling an object he had made out of rubber toys, half-woman, half-alligator. What was initially the need to expunge the presence of any person in the photograph, transformed into a strategy that is employed consequently throughout Witkin’s oeuvre and which Witkin explains with the following intention: “I expand the visceral impact which originally occurred in front of the camera.”

The streaks, splotches and smearing on the photographic surface show the interferences and manipulation that took place before the image was entirely fixed. In this specific version of Feast of Fools, the form of the hand with only three visible

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204 Unless otherwise noted, information about Witkin’s process in the dark room uses the following as a reference: Van Deren Coke, Forty Photographs, 13 and Celant, “Photography between Flesh and Spirit,” 20.
205 Parry speaks of a different process, in which a glass impermeable surface is treated with liquids such as coffee, tea, or eggs, “anything he can use” to achieve the effect. Parry, “Convalescent...Incorruptible,” 184-5.
206 Witkin, “Revolt against the Mystical,” 61.
207 Witkin, introductory text in The Bone House, n. pag.
fingers and fingernails crowning the heap of flesh and fruit is mirrored twice in the traces of dripping fluids on the photographic surface just left of the top of the pyramid, quite literally reminding the viewer that this photograph was manually made, not just taken. The blurred edges of the unidentifiable space reinforce the notion that this scene is floating in some kind of netherworld, the decay of the contents of the still life are mirrored in a kind of simulated decay of the photographic surface. The version of *Feast of Fools* used in the analysis thus far was painstakingly scanned for this thesis with attention to color and accuracy of detail and varies dramatically from other editions printed in other catalogues or monographs or available from art galleries. Namely, the other editions seem to lack the sepia tone and more importantly in this context, the manipulation around the central composition towards the edge of the image have less of a smeared, and more of a cloud-like quality. The two dripping blotches disappear, and the saturated black space above the grapes and infant in the version cited here, is dulled by what appears to be a hovering fog. According to Witkin, each version of the photograph is made manually to match a master print that has been manipulated and worked on to Witkin’s satisfaction. The discrepancy between these two versions remains unaccounted for, but may indeed be the result of the almost impossibility to match one-to-one effects of manipulation of the photographic surface or an entirely different attempt, resulting from the creative process.

*Studio de Winter* (Ill. 58) also features the manipulation of the photographic surface in the forms of almost obsessive scratches and scribbles, leaving hardly any section of the image unscathed. The alternating white and black scratches (probably of the print and negative respectively) add noise to the already busy composition. Some scratches take on the quality of hatching or shading, other longer and deeper wounds reinforce certain diagonal structures or formal details. For example the long white scoring that duplicates, but also obscures the leaning lute parallel to the plaster *Rückenfigur*, or the overlapping v-shaped scratches to

208 See Witkin cited in the Appendix: “Your question about the original print is naive because you assume I make a master print and then copy it. I don’t. Instead, I do make a master print and then make every print in all editions to match that master print with that negative! I develop my own film and I make my own prints.”
the right of the woman’s torso mirror the branch structure of the apparently dead plant. Small dots and splotches speckle the image, most visible at the edges of the image or lacrosse the largely white surfaces of the woman and the plaster casts, suggestive of the fluid origins of the process.

Not all Witkin’s works undergo this invasive process. Witkin intuitively decides which images merit the process; others are left untouched. The “old-masterish look” is compounded in yet others photographs that are submitted to an additional process, in which the print is mounted and hand-colored with pigments, and finally encausted in molten beeswax and polished. Studio de Winter and Studio of the Painter (Courbet) (Ill. 58 and Ill. 49) are just two of such works. The effects of both the manipulation and encaustering processes lend the photograph the form that resembles the painterly tradition. Compounding the old-masterish look and historical and distancing effects of manipulation and encausting, is the presentation chosen for Studio de Winter: an opulent Baroque-inspired golden frame. Despite the fact that the photograph is perhaps originally black and white, setting it apart from most painting, the toned print, the processes of hand-painting and encausting, as well as the choice of display transforms the photograph into what Jean François Chevrier would call a “photographic painting,” or a tableau, easing it into the history, tradition and institutions of art.

Returning now to Winter’s ‘found’ still life: To a world brimming with the insensate, Witkin inserts a live woman onto a stage set he found to be empty. Witkin sees in Winter’s image too much love for it to be just about the abundance of possessions and introduces a narrative about Winter’s overflowing atelier as perhaps being an expression at an attempt to replace an unrequited love or the abandonment of his beautiful lover with an abundance of things and treasure. The question remains as to whether or not the vitality of the image has changed at

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209 See Witkin’s e-mail response in the Appendix.
210 Van Deren Coke, Forty Photographs, 13.
211 Celanto, “Photography between Flesh and Spirit,” 12 and Appendix.
213 Witkin, Zögling und Meister, 71.
all or not, whether it remains a kind of still life arrangement or not with the introduction of the human figure and the human narrative.

The mention of Lukács and Stifter at the outset of this chapter may offer useful parallels to explore the phenomenon of excessive visual description and reification in Witkin’s photographs. In his writings about literary Realism in “Erzählen oder Beschreiben,” Lukács identified Stifter’s excessive description—for example in “Eisgeschichte” from Die Mappe meines Urgroßvaters—as teetering towards alienation, carry the threat of effects that are dehumanizing and mortifying: Description that is not subordinate to the narrative, writes Lukács, “zieht die Menschen auf das Niveau der toten Gegenstande herab” and is a mirror of the capitalist world without offering any other insight.\textsuperscript{214} The effect of excessive description is one that we also encounter with hyperrealist still life painting, where the more detailed the description of an object is, the less we are able to recognize it, the further the things seems to drift from our grasp, leaving us only the shell of what it is trying to depict. Lukács further writes:

\begin{quote}
Wenn der Schriftsteller als beobachtender Beschreiber eine gegenständliche Vollkommenheit des Dinges erstrebt, kann er entweder Überhaupt kein Auswahlprinzip besitzen und unterwirft sich der Sisyphusarbeit, die Unendlichkeit der Eigenschaften in Worten auszudrucken, oder es werden die pittoresken, zur Beschreibung geeignetsten, oberflächlichen Seiten des Dinges bevorzugt.\textsuperscript{215}
\end{quote}

In connection to the busy manipulated surfaces of Witkin’s photographs as well as the compositions of both \textit{Feast of Fools} and \textit{Studio de Winter} that are charged with symbols as well as formal and aesthetic references, the question is if the excessiveness of the representation affects in Witkin’s works what Lukács criticized in Stifter’s writings: “… die Beschreibung nivelliert.”\textsuperscript{216} What happens to the woman that figures alongside the obsessively collected things in the restaging of Winter’s studio? Does the live and breathing woman’s torso even stand out among the forest of things? Or is her pose, the interrupted length of her body, the

\textsuperscript{214} Lukács cited in Geulen, “Depicting Description: Lukács and Stifter,” 271-2.
\textsuperscript{215} Lukács cited in ibid., 269.
\textsuperscript{216} Lukács cited ibid., 273.
surface of her skin, the choice to show her disfigured back, a gesture of in effect stilling or mortifying life? Of leveling the woman’s presence to match the inanimate state of the personal effects, especially the numerous plaster casts that populate the space?

Concerning Lukács’ critique, Eva Geulen draws a different conclusion about the role of description in Stifter’s writing, one that is perhaps also applicable for a more nuanced look at Witkin’s photographs. Privileging the successive character of literature, Lukács identifies *Stilleben* as a metaphor to criticize the threatening “literary movements of petrification” in Stifter’s work. Yet the paradigm of the fluid and frozen, the still and the moving, life and death in the “Eisgeschichte” “is shown to entail something much more threatening: The liquid and the frozen coincide on the surface in indistinguishability.” The living is mortified, while inversely the assumedly deathliness of the world of objects grows alive: The growing trees are petrified by the freezing ice, just as the sound of the wind blows life into the grey and black forest. The obviously dead limbs ooze and undulate as if alive. The woman is petrified and fragmented resembling a plaster cast. Everything is undecisely dead, and at the same time undecisely visually alive with activity. It is precisely this “indistinguishability” is what Witkin’s pictures thrive on. On the one hand, the viewer is tantalized by the visual excess and the door opens to a voyeuristic adventure into a world that is normally hidden. But more importantly, the viewer is encountered with an image where its contents, to once again use Foster’s description of Dutch *pronkstilleven*, “appear caught between worlds—not alive, not dead ... And the pictorial effect is often one of

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217 Ibid., 273.
218 Ibid., 274.
219 “The literary still-living still life, by an author who wanted above all to be a painter, traverses new paths across old differences.” Ibid., 274-75.
220 Silke Brodersen, in contrast to Lukács, sees Stifter’s approach to the human body, his interchangeable use of metaphors for body and the world of things, not only as a phenomenon of *Verdinglichung*. She suggests Stifter acknowledges and incorporates the texture of the inorganic or “unbelebte Materie” as part of the new scientifically determined understanding of the living body. Brodersen, “Physiologische Körperfigurationen bei Adalbert Stifter,” 49-67.
221 It is no surprise that Witkin’s work is compared to the Surrealist and Dada movements, who live from an excess of references with the potential for endless associations and interpretations. Celant, “Photography between Flesh and Spirit,” 21.
deathly suspension or ... of eerie animation, with the objects at once chilled and charged by the speculative gaze fixed upon them.”

Distance and the Visceral

The tension between corporeal appeal of Witkin’s works and at the same time, the distance created between the viewer and the image recalls the discussion of the ambivalent structure of the Dutch still life in terms of fetishism. The often disturbing subject matter both physically attracts and repels the viewing subject. The excess of referents in the image as well as the lively surfaces that crawl with scratches and traces of the photographer’s gestural process stimulate a visual adventure. Simultaneously stylization and the artificialness of the display operate as spacers between the viewer’s active engagement with the image, a posture that could be described as inherent to the functioning of the still life.

There are similarities of Witkin’s manipulation of the image’s surface to Antonin Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty. In a literal sense, the cruelty and insanity of life as well as the cruelty of society’s degradation and discrimination of the base, ‘abnormal’ or deviant enters the spotlight on Witkin’s stage. In a less literal sense, the Theatre of Cruelty is not about the violence of the cruelty itself, but about reducing the aesthetic distance with the goal of revealing or expressing the spirit in a corporeal way, something that is impossible to do merely with text. Offering us with another plausible reason for why still life, a genre dedicated in a large part to the things—namely food and drink—required for our very bodily existence, conveniently fits Witkin’s artistic program and his intention to get at his viewer, like still life gets at its viewer. The stygian scenes are a fathoming of the human psyche including the darkness therein. Like Artaud’s preoccupation with breaking through the paper or image support with his (projectile) actions and the desire to transgress and join the boundaries of flesh and spirit, the photograph functions as this membrane, the epidermis for Witkin where universes may meet.

Yet in addition to the recognizable recourse to art historical iconography, the aesthetic treatment of the photographic surface gives the disturbing subject matter

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222 Foster, “The Art of Fetishism,” 257.
223 Celant, “Photography between Flesh and Spirit,” 10.
the face of a daguerreotype, of a historical event thereby dampening the potential of soliciting emphatic participation to the horrors being witnessed. The almost exclusive use of black and white photography (excepting a few hand-colored and encausted works) and the darkroom manipulations give, as Witkin himself acknowledged, the “effect that the images were sealed in time.” Thus against the intention to “expand the visceral impact,” a “veil” is put up through an insistence on the membrane separating the viewer from what occurs within the image, placing a buffer through nostalgia and history. The frequent masking of his subjects is reflected once again on a metaphorical level with the application of history as a mask or filter through which the viewer experiences Witkin’s photographs.

Barthes’ punctum, a detail in the photograph that “pricks” or “wounds” the observer, what Michael Fried highlights as antitheatrical, as “a pure artifact of the photographic event,” for example the inadvertent effect of photography in the form of scratches that James Elkins finds “thrive in my peripheral vision like an infestation,” may become more “absorbing” than the subject of the image itself. Yet the accidental is artificially produced and deliberately stylized in Witkin’s work. In a modernist reading à la Fried, Witkin’s photographs would as such not be linked to the antitheatrical tradition, in fact opposing the absorption that Fried posits is for example present in the pictures of Jeff Wall. By contrast, the dramaturgy and excesses typical of the seventeenth century inform Witkin’s vocabulary effectuating more of a distracted glare through the excess of provocative optical stimuli in images so charged that they rather operate with a violent pushing and pulling to and away from the content of the photograph.

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225 Witkin, “Revolt against the Mystical,” 63.
226 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 26-27 and 42-47.
The ‘masculine’ gaze of Caravaggio’s still life that Bryson wrote about “stresses drama, spectacle, and a bravura display of skill” and is also manifest in Witkin’s still-life like photographs, with the intention appearing likewise to be “to inject into his scene qualities of the heroic and the extraordinary; mundane space is intensified to the point of theatricality and hyper-reality.”

Except, the theatricality and apparent artificiality of the scenes are punctuated by moments that bring the viewer in, that entertain a visual representation of the tactile. Witkin deliberately calls upon his viewer by making the tactile process forcibly visible within the images that also make use of extreme elements, the both tantalizing and repulsive abject. Julia Kristeva describes the abject as ambiguous, neither subject or object, it is that which both “beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, [...] a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.”

Undeniably, while obviously staged and artificial, the viewer is fascinated by the horror; curiosity is more than piqued by the uncanny scene. Or the viewer pulls away from the spectacle in disgust. Regardless, the photograph demands some kind of reaction. Celant argues:

*Every photograph of Witkin’s is a tool for soliciting and spurring a participation. That is why they are dramatic and baroque; they turn an unpredictable, terrifying sensibility inside out, and they are frightening because they are based in a pragmatic, real vein whose truthfulness involves the spectator in such a way that he cannot escape.*

Despite the horror of the scene, there are moments in which the viewer may empathetically participate in Witkin’s hellish scene. The disgust of the truncated limbs in Witkin’s *Feast of Fools* is contrasted by a tender moment in the gentle grasping of a cluster of grapes by the infant cadaver. Or in which the disembodied

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231 Both fetishism and abjection are described as phenomena occurring early in psychosexual development: Abjection during the separation of self from the mother, and fetishism as coming to terms with the overwhelming threat of lack in the observed castration of the mother. Abjection is also a fixation, like fetishism: fixation on that which is neither subject or object, but like fetishism that can never escape the ambiguity of its condition. Furthermore, in connection to the rebellious and realist character of Witkin’s photographs, the use of the abject is also a tool to undermine conventions. As Kristeva writes: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” Julia Kristeva, “Approaching Abjection,” in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, European Perspectives Series (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
232 Celant, “Photography between Flesh and Spirit,” 24-25.
hand gently holds the tentacle of an octopus, reminiscent of the suggested erotic entwinement of feminine arms holding masculine legs in one of several similar still life paintings by Géricault (Ill. 61) almost two centuries earlier.233 Once again, the effects already reiterated as being a staple of the fetishistic still life suspends its contents between the illusionist alive quality, and its unattainable, artificial and dead status on the cold hard panel. With Witkin, the bodiless limbs are suspended in a space in-between: living dead or indisputably life-like, but undeniably dead.

To compound the effect of the human remains and the participatory opportunity in such instances, the photograph's inherent proximity and causal relationship to the referents perhaps even heightens the relationship of the viewer to the photographed event as compared to a painting of the same event. Furthermore, the carnal contents of Witkin's photographs are complemented by the photographic recording process, which Barthes called a “carnal medium”: “A sort of umbilical cord links the body to the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.”234

Closing remarks

Athanassoglou-Kallmyer’s reading of Géricault’s “horrific still-life” as an image where “morbid reality and morbid fantasy merge,”235 offers a model for considerations about the gruesome themes in Witkin’s work. Just as “Géricault’s paintings and drawings of decapitated heads tread the uncertain ground between empathetic social statement and delight in social horror,”236 Witkin’s work may be likewise be read as stemming from a motivation to seek out and reveal the social cruelties of life, but also produced in the context of a specific aesthetic mood.

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233 Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, “Géricault's Severed Heads and Limbs: The Politics and Aesthetics of the Scaffold,” in The Art Bulletin 74, no. 4 (December 1992), 614. The author argues that, based on the thought gone into the composition as well as preparatory drawings, that these are more than just anatomical studies but were in fact self-sufficient works. Ibid., 602. My thanks goes to Gabriel Hubmann, for alerting me to this article and for discussions about a possible parallel of Géricault's paintings of limbs and the beheaded and Witkin's Feast of Fools.

234 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 81.


236 On the one hand Géricault's limbs and decapitated heads were painted in the context of strong political debate about capital punishment, more specifically, public hangings and guillotine executions, and at the same time, during a time of general social fascination with horror, reflected in the themes of Gothic novels and theater: “Like his contemporary genre noir authors, Géricault explores capital punishment and autopsy in a spirit of ambivalence in which empathetic social intent and ingenious strategies of terror dovetail.” Ibid., 610 and 613.
interested in the darker sides of life coinciding with *noir* themes of Gothic subculture since the 1980s. Growing out of the Punk music scene, the flourishing Gothic subculture since this time is in brief characterized by a black romantic mood, a combination of horror and romance as well as a morbid and eroticized aesthetic, interest in fetish and S&M play, frequently inspired by Victorian or Romantic aesthetics. The increasing reception of Witkin’s work coincided temporally with the subculture’s growing popularity, and even if there may not be any direct links to the scene, a similar apocalyptic mood in goth circles may be sensed with expressions by Witkin for example who hopes “not only to show the insanity of our lives, but also that this work will be seen as part of the history of diverse and desperate times.” Or with his statement in the epilogue of *Disciple & Master*: “We are living in dark, prophetic times.”

Ambivalence structures Witkin’s still life and still life-like photographs not only with regard to the conflicting issues between the lifelike and death, between revealing the present and brutal reality in a highly artificial scenery, it also structures the cradling context where Witkin’s works vacillate between or even merge the fascination with both the morbidly real with the horridly fantastical. The hybrid of artistic or literary appropriation in Witkin’s work is hence not only an attempt to legitimize or justify his artistic production by enrolling it in an art historical genealogy, but one that sets itself apart from the dichotomies of belief, sexuality, and gender that still structure our society. None other than the genre of still life, it a genre marked by tension, seems to offer itself as an ideal ground to negotiate the variety of conflicting interests.

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239 Witkin, Epilogue to *Zögling und Meister*, 119.
NOBUYOSHI ARAKI AND STILL LIFE

All photographic subjects are still life, not to be confused with life still going on.240

Bondage and Still Life

Combined in photobooks and magazines, a myriad of snapshots depict women in various states of undress, half-dressed to stark naked, in indoor and outdoor settings bound with rope to varying degrees in an intricate play of knots known as kinbaku, or the Japanese art of bondage. The women lay on tatami mats, in beds, balance on chairs and other household furniture or are suspended in mid-air. These photographs, at times censored, were and still are cause for much sensation around the artist personality Araki. Granted, Araki is most renowned (or infamous?) for these specific erotic photographs, but why begin a chapter that is in fact interested in the still life elements and approach in Araki’s work with a discussion about kinbaku?

After discussing the ‘masculine’ view in Witkin’s work, where things and humans are leveled on an intensely artificial stage, we encounter in Araki’s work the necessity to address the photographer’s relationship to his models in his photographs. The women bound by Araki—consensually—are apparently the passive participants in this sexual ritual.241 One could argue that there are certain resemblances between the bondage photographs of Araki and the notion of still life. Like the contents of a still life, the woman is literally forced to be immobile: firstly, in the act of bondage through Araki, and secondly, through freezing the act in a photograph. A further analogy between still life and bondage may be found in the instances of artificial display present in these photographs. In comparison to Western bondage techniques or rope play, kinbaku (or shibari, literally meaning


241 Important to note however, is that the relationship of the passive and active members in such a ritual is in fact more nuanced than that. As Freud wrote in his Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex (1905): “Every active perversion is here accompanied by its passive counterpart. He who in the unconscious is an exhibitionist is at the same time a voyeur, he who suffers from sadistic feelings as a result of repression will also show another reinforcement of the symptoms from the source of masochistic tendencies.” Freud, Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex, 1905, trans. A. A. Brill, 2nd rev. ed., 1920, Project Gutenberg, February 2005, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14969/14969-h/14969-h.htm (accessed August 11, 2012).
“to tie or bind” in Japanese) is to a much greater degree indebted to the tried and tested methods of tying and specific knots that have been employed historically in both martial and erotic practice paying much attention to notions of form and aesthetic.\(^\text{242}\) Araki’s photographs may appear to be instantaneously snapped shots, but what in fact leads up to the photographs, involves what could be called a performative process. The process begins with the first step of meeting a model, a relationship or connection of sorts between photograph and model ensues, at least for the duration of the photo session, in which the skillful process of binding with elaborate knots and suspension constructions is begun. Often the women are not entirely nude, but clothed in kimonos or sexy lingerie further hinting at the staging of the act.

One could suggest that the women are subject to reification, in what could be called a still life gesture, reducing the human being to the status of a thing: The women are literally packaged as if for display or consumption. An extreme example would for example, be this photograph of a woman folded up to fit into a travelling suitcase (Ill. 62). The entirely nude woman with a bob of black hair and a perfectly made-up face stares out from her position strapped into a suitcase positioned diagonally on a hardwood floor and in the photograph. She carries a key on a black choker and a silver spider ring. Beside her is a bottle of the popular Japanese soft drink, Calpis. This particular image also has a curious portion along the upper edge of the photograph. The play of counter-diagonals (the position of the suitcase against the floorboards, and the cropped balustrade) is increased by yet another curious set of unidentifiable diagonal shapes hovering in the upper third of the image. Their translucent quality partially obscures the image, or is at least a disturbing element to a clear and unambiguous reading of the photograph. It is difficult to tell from the image if this is an intended double exposure, or an unwanted effect in the image production. Another photograph exists of the same woman and suitcase, with more of the architectural room situation in view, where

\(^\text{242}\) Purely scholarly English language sources on the history and methods of kinbaku are scarce. Recent publications on the topic, with brief historical backgrounds and how-to’s for ties and knots include: Master “K”, The Beauty of Kinbaku: (or Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Japanese Erotic Bondage when You Suddenly Realized You Didn’t Speak Japanese (n.p.: King Cat Ink, 2008) and Midori and Craig Morey, The Seductive Art of Japanese Bondage (Eugene, OR: Greenery Press, 2002).
no curious translucent foil exists in any part of the image. In any case, this photograph is printed at least twice in the major monographic publications about Araki’s work and as such, the effect of the translucent foil may not be neglected. In fact, precisely in the context of reification, one almost has the impression as if this disruptive element may also be a reflective surface between the woman and the viewing camera eye emphasizing the notion of the woman as if she were an object on display, under a glass display case or vitrine that allows a view, but prevents direct access, what turns out to be a constant element in Araki’s photographic work and will be looked at in greater detail when discussing *The Banquet*.

Moreover, while reification is one way to describe what is at work here, it is perhaps even more plausible that the women models in Araki’s photographs are subject to objectification in its psychoanalytical conception. Early in psychosexual development, Freud described the object as that which is required to fulfill a need, the instinctual aim of staying alive (for example, mother’s milk from the object of the breast); the object metamorphoses into one of sexual desire, in a process called “propping” or “anaclisis,” eventually separating itself from the initial drive of self-preservation. It could be said of the nude and bound women in these photographs, that they become sexually objectified for the pleasure of Araki’s or the spectator’s (‘masculine’) gaze in a sadomasochistic or exhibitionist charade for the camera. In his own defense, Araki underlines that in fact he feels the role of his model is more than just being subordinate or the object of his photographic view. The exchange between subject and object, if one can even put it that way, is a vital part of what makes the photograph what it is. Highlighting the active status of his model, Araki states: “I’m interested in people who fight, be they men or women. My photographs are in their own way a fight between my subject and myself.”

Undoubtedly, Araki remains the person with the camera, and as such is armed with a greater degree of power. And several photographs do indeed feature a woman resembling something other than a human being (Ill. 63): A dissociative view for

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example of this woman shows presents her to us, immobile, as a bundle of bound flesh, reminiscent of Hans Bellmer's fragmented and distorted doll, mounds that resemble sections of a sausage, her face or expression are entirely obscured from view. Moreover, to look, in the Freudian sense, is to touch the surface of the woman's body, to explore the taut rope that press into her body. Jean Laplanche expounds on Freud's concept by describing the act of looking to the protracting and retracting motion of the snail's horns, “relating vision to exploratory groping (tâtonnements) ... comparing it to a collecting of samples (prise d'échantillons) in the exterior world.” Where the analogy of Araki's kinbaku photographs and still life may be located is in the faulty fetishistic condition of the medium of the photograph itself: The scoptophilic instinct in sexual foreplay generally leads to contact with the object or desired partner, whereas as Otto Fenichel wrote, “an object which is only seen remains at an unattainable distance”; reminding of the similarly frustrating situation we are confronted with in the hyperrealist still life, exciting scopophilia, but whose contents remain at a distance. Araki's images of women in bondage may serve to excite the one or other spectator as a voyeur, or incite identification or empathy in the other viewer, especially through the deep and direct gaze of the woman subject in the photograph. All the while remaining a fiction, however objective it may appear, on the surface of a page or stuck to a wall in the exhibition space.

But what is the limitation of the employing the notion of still life to describe these images of women in bondage? Since, in the act of looking, whether we are the photographer or the viewer of Araki's photographs, there is “no objectification without identification.” Fenichel reflects in his 1935 essay “The Scopotophilic Instinct and Identification” on the relationship between looking and identification. Using examples from fairy tales and magic, he highlights the ambivalent mechanics of looking: “the eye plays a double part. It is not only actively sadistic (the person gazing puts a spell on his victim) but also passively receptive (the person who

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looks is fascinated by that which he sees).” In the act of looking, “one looks at an object in order to share in its experience.” This proves especially to be the case in a large number of Araki’s nudes, where the woman’s extra-diegetic gaze (see Ill. 62, Ill. 64 and Ill. 65) addresses the spectator, or at the time the photograph was shot, her eyes must have met with the eyes of the photographer Araki, demanding identification and acknowledgement from both the photographer and the spectator. In addition to the direct eye contact, other expressions, such as grins, smiles or gasps of what may be interpreted as pain or pleasure, in fact require empathetic participation on the part of the person viewing the photograph.

In an interview with Nan Goldin, attributing the language barrier as the reason for which he does not frequently travel to photograph abroad, Araki emphasizes the human interaction necessary for his concept of photography: “I usually talk to the model as I’m shooting—it’s a ‘word event.’ Words wouldn’t be necessary if I were looking at the subject as a ‘thing,’ an object, but I want to capture my relationship with the subject, the action between us, the flow of time and mood.” This statement almost lends the photograph a performative quality, but more crucial in this context is Araki’s insistence that the subjects of his photographs are not to be compared to things or objects. But what does his personal appraisal of the situation mean for our reading of his photographs? The behind-the-scenes relationship between Araki and his models is not necessarily a visible topic in all of his photographs. What the viewer is often left with is merely the woman as the object of an unidentified gaze, replaceable with one’s own (‘masculine’) gaze.

Yet the question remains as to whether or not calling the women in these photographs by Araki “still lifes” is a misattribution, in fact only reproducing the

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249 Fenichel, “Scoptophilic Instinct and Identification,” 328.

250 Ibid., 330.

251 Further in defense of Araki’s work, which is often criticized as being misogynist, Nan Goldin writes: “I’ve seen and known his generosity and curiosity about people and about life, his love for and appreciation of women, his naughty-boy attitude toward what is taboo or revered or overserious. Much of his recurring imagery—girls in school uniforms, girls in complicated rope tricks, girls in love hotels—is popular in Japanese pornography; but Araki crosses the line between pornography and art. His work is colored by love, and meant as homage—to women and to beauty and to his own desires. In Japan, where women’s roles are in a period of flux and the idea of female identity in the Western sense is a new one, many young women find Araki’s images liberating. To show their bodies, to flaunt their sexuality, feels to them like freedom; teenagers flock to Araki to be photographed by him.” Nan Goldin, “Naked City: An Interview with Nobuyoshi Araki by Nan Goldin,” Artforum (January 1995): 56.

252 See also Araki, “Photography Is All About Collaboration,” in Araki: Self, Life, Death, 378.
(‘masculine’) gaze that fetishizes and objectifies the depicted women, relegating them to the domain of the overlooked things of the object world. Granted, the loss of the power of motion usually signifies death, but calling the contents of these images still life would be to ignore the vitality of the women in bondage, who are by no means the silent and insensate objects of still life. Admittedly, the women’s status may possess the similar quality as the status of things in still life, appearing to possess its own mysterious life. But do these apparently lively and incredibly appealing things even possess the capability of making as strong an appeal as these women? At most, the nude women in Araki’s photographic work share with the still life, signs of vitality in the face of death.

A few final remarks may however illustrate what appears to be a common theme not only in Araki’s photographic works: Interestingly enough, bondage is a theme that also crops up in Witkin’s earlier photographs (primarily of the 1970s and 80s) that focus on fetish play, S&M, and other sexually ‘deviant’ practices. This can be seen for example, in an already addressed image Testicle Stretch with the Possibility of a Crushed Face (Ill. 56), in which the man featured is bound to a plank that is elevated at an angle, his feet higher than his head, with a threatening cluster of weights dangling above his chest and head area, suspended by a rope construction that is connected to the man’s testicles and a further point or pulley in the ceiling. Bondage and suspension also feature in a series of self-portraits by Sam Taylor-Wood, an artist mentioned in the second chapter in the context of still life in contemporary art. The making of the series Self Portrait Suspended (2004) (Ill. 66) and Bram Stoker’s Chair (2005) (Ill. 67) involved inviting a bondage expert to truss up the artist in harnesses for hours at a time in various poses. Only in Taylor-Wood’s case, the traces of restriction have been edited out in digital post-production (see Ill. 68 unedited stage), instead showing the artist in, what Ossian Ward calls, “poses that evoke sexual abandonment, both in the sense that she is surrendering herself to ecstasy and in the sense that she is renouncing her fantasy

253 Cf. Christian Metz’s aforementioned suggestion that immobility and silence as two features signifying death.
through the digital removal of the bondage implements.”256 By contrast to Araki’s or Witkin’s images of bodies, Taylor-Wood is in full control of how her own body is represented, countering the traditional ‘masculine’ gaze of the camera, in a liberated kind of sexuality, ecstasy, or fantasy as determined by the artist, who is likewise her own model in her photographs.257 Perhaps we may content ourselves with saying that the motif of bondage in these artists’ photographs has less to do with still life pictures or the act of stilling life itself, and has more in common with the notion of freezing, suspending or extending a captured moment of time.

Locating Araki’s Work Culturally and Historically

Notorious in the West for his photographs of Japanese women in various states of nudity, engaging in various sexual acts or in *kinbaku*, the works of Araki that are considered more influential and provocative in Japan are in fact his photobooks that offer a glimpse into the intimate emotional states of the private space as well as the realist photographs that document daily life and decay in the urban environment, specifically in Tokyo.258 Throughout these works, even the photographs and photobooks that focus on nude or bound women, genitalia, or the documentation of personal and urban life, the familiar staples of still life such as bouquets of flowers, fruit, food, complemented by other items, such as shoes and plastic toy dinosaurs, run as a leitmotif of still life-like themes across Araki’s vast number of images. The following will focus on one of his photobooks *Shokuji (The Banquet)* (photographs from 1985-1990, published in 1993) along with other selected examples of fruits, flowers and things to demonstrate the role of still life elements as well as the limitations of employing the notion of still life. The predominantly Western definition of still life and photography as outlined thus far, falls short of addressing the context and tradition from which Araki’s work emerges. For example, in regards to the prevalence of nudity and sexuality throughout Araki’s work, the highly erotic motifs and themes were already present

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256 Ibid., 66.
257 Ibid., 65.
in the postwar photography of Hosoe Eikoh, Moriyama Daidō, or Tōmatsu Shōmei.

Regrettably, most authoritative English language sources on the tradition and history of photography focus on the subject from a primarily Western point of view, making only minor mention of Japanese photography. Likewise, for lack of space and time, the second chapter of this thesis unfortunately does not do much to change the status quo, drawing primarily upon known examples of Western photography. However to better grasp Araki’s photographic work, it would not do his work the subject justice to exclude the specific developments of photography in Japan. Relying for the most part on information in the extensive exhibition catalog *The History of Japanese Photography*, including essays from prominent Japanese photography curators and critics, a few historically relevant developments and artistic positions since post-war Japan.

After decades of a repressive regime and the dramatic ravages of the Second World War, the subdued activities and publications of numerous existing photography associations and magazines were reactivated and new such instances began emerging. In many senses, the aesthetic developments and thought processes around photography immediately postwar are characterized by an attempt to continue where the avant-garde tendencies of the 1930s had left off. A few

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259 In the catalogue accompanying a relatively early exhibition about Japanese Photography beyond Japan’s borders (and inspired by John Szarkowski’s and Yamagishi Shōji’s exhibition *New Japanese Photography* in the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1974), Otto Breicha, goes so far as to state that the erotic themes in photography are “eine japanische Spezialität.” He furthermore highlights the strong presence of emotion in the photograph of the time, which will be discussed at a later point in this chapter. Otto Breicha, “Nach Japan, die Fotografie zuliebe,” in *Neue Fotografie aus Japan*, (Graz: Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts, 1977), 23.

260 With the exception of Nobuyoshi Araki, who is internationally known by this name, an attempt is made throughout to remain true to the Japanese custom by stating first surnames, followed by the given names of Japanese authors and artists.

261 As an improvement on the state of affairs, Frizot’s *A New History of Photography* has one of forty-one chapters dedicated to the developments of photography, a technology inherited from the West, in Japan: “Japan and Photography: In Quest of the Other,” written by Minato Chihiro. In Rosenblum’s *World History of Photography* includes several pages and images in the over 700 pages otherwise mostly describing the history of the European and North American situation.


263 For a biographical approach to reading Araki’s photographic oeuvre, see Akiko, “The Photographic Life of Nobuyoshi Araki,” 13-20.

veteran prewar photographers such as Hamaya Hiroshi and Domon Ken already announced an increase in social documentary interested images, that are less indebted to the previously dominant Pictorialist or l’art pour l’art of the avant-garde movements in Japan that had been influenced by New Objectivity and Surrealism up until the 1930s.\textsuperscript{265} In the years that immediately followed WWII, the photographs being taken reflected harsh postwar conditions, depicting the devastation and human effects of the nuclear bombs in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, orphans and street children, the black market, and the influence of U.S. occupation.\textsuperscript{266}

The 1950s were followed by two decades of rapid economic growth and societal transformations, and by this time, a generation of new young photographers had emerged. With the backdrop of U.S. occupation and growing dissatisfaction with the state of foreign affairs, the 1960s saw a time of political and violent opposition as well as confrontations and student riots that would continue to concern artists and intellectuals leading to a personal subjective expressionist form of photography, with highly political and social subjects. Debates about the ‘correct’ use of the photojournalistic image for as well as photographic image’s potential to transgress boundaries and discover new territory for expression became increasingly prevalent. Ironically even during a time of protest against Americanization, the literature suggests the strong influence of William Klein’s and Robert Frank’s raw and visceral approach, whereby an independent Japanese style


\textsuperscript{266} Domon Ken himself published a series of photojournalistic images of postwar distress, rendering the squalid circumstances of children’s daily lives as well as child labor in the coal-mining village of Chikuho in southern Japan: Chikuho no Kodomotachi (or The Children of Chikuho) (1960). Cf. Gerry Badger and Martin Parr, eds., The Photobook: A History (Volume 1) (London: Phaidon Press, 2004), 278. In one of the columns of Camera, bearing the title “What Is Realism in Photography?” Domon described this new mode of photography as ‘strictly a realm in which only the objective truth in the subject motif is pursued, not the subjective image or fantasy of the artist,” emphasizing “the direct connection between the camera and the subject,” and on creating “the absolutely pure snapshot, absolutely unstaged.” Domon cited in Iizawa, “The Evolution of Postwar Photography,” 211.
had begun to emerge with imagery that was more extreme and possessed a much harder edge.  

An example of the increasingly expressive and gritty aesthetic, especially worthy of mention in the context of still life, is *11.02 Nagasaki* (1966) (Ill. 69), a photobook by Tōmatsu Shōmei, which illustrates this shift away from pure social documentary and its literal images towards an expressive vocabulary that would dominate into the 1970s. The book cover shows a watch stopped at the precise time the atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. The pages that follow include black and white close-up of melted beer bottles, where the association to the horror of melted bodies can hardly be avoided. *OO! Shinjuku* (1969) (Ill. 70) is another example of a photobook by Tōmatsu, which functions almost as a precursor of themes, where even the district is the same as the one that recurs frequently in Araki’s work. The gritty black and white photographs draw upon the blurred motifs of sex, drugs and student riots in Shinjuku district (a centre of postwar Japanese counter-culture comparable to Kreuzberg or Haight Ashbury).

Regarding his approach to photography disregarding the conventional formal aesthetics of photography, Tōmatsu wrote: “In order to prevent the hardening of photography’s arteries, I believe we should drive off the evil spirits that haunt ‘photojournalism’ and destroy the existing concepts carried by those words.”

In a similar vein and likewise in the tense atmosphere immediately following major student protests in 1968, a new photography magazine including a manifesto by group of men photographers was published. The goal of *Provoke* was to free photography from the constructs of language. In their manifesto they state:

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271 The founding members included Nakahira, Takuma, Tagi Koji, Takanashi Yutaka, and Okada Takahiko and later Moriyama Daidō, disbanding in 1970 after an influential two years of activity.
At a time when language has lost its material base, its reality, and is simply dancing in space, what falls to us photographers must be to capture with our own eyes the shards of reality that existing language cannot possibly grasp, and to aggressively confront language and confront thought with a variety of data.272

The group saw the medium of photography much more as an instrument connected to various other modes of expression, including underground theatre and cinema, as well as the burgeoning performance scene. In Hosoe Eikoh’s photobooks already prior to Provoke, the link to theater and dance is manifest in collaborative projects of the time, with for example, Hijikata Tatsumi (one of the early founders of the avant-garde Butoh dance).273 In collaboration with author, playwright, actor and three-time Nobel Prize nominee Mishima Yukio (with whom Hijikata also collaborated with), in a series of dark theatrical and erotic images in Barakei (or Ordeal by Roses, Ill. 71), Mishima appears in at least one of these images bound with a garden hose.274

A key work that is representative in many ways of the Provoke project is Moriyama Daidō’s photobook Sashin yo Sayōnara (or Bye Bye Photography) (1972).275 The crudeness and illegibility of the photographs, a kind of coarse, dissociated stream-of-consciousness imagery of the street, the metro, poster-covered walls, images of car accidents, photographs of the images glowing from the television shifting between a frenetic psychedelic dream and nightmarish quality is composed using a photographic vocabulary of “blur, motion, scratches, light leaks, dust, graininess and stains.”276 The rough, blurred and out-of-focus—or in Japanese are, bure, boke—became a kind of emblematic rhythmic phrase representing the iconoclastic quality of the images by Provoke photographers.277 In his literal adieu to the guidelines of ‘good’ photography, Moriyami’s interest is in “distilling raw experience.”278 In the second issue of Provoke, titled Eros, a series of nudes by

274 Ibid., 280-81.
276 Badger and Parr, The Photobook, 298.
278 Ibid., 220-21
Moriyami were published, which Araki also took note of, in regards to the provocative disjunctive images, but also in regards to the aesthetic of their presentation in a publication with coarse paper and printing.

At this time, Araki was employed at Dentsu, one of the largest advertising companies in the world, but he was aware of Provoke’s activities and later acknowledged: “I was inspired by Provoke. Most people paid no attention to it, but really it was like a bomb in Japanese photography.” The developments as outlined thus far—a social realist focus on the aspects of everyday life, snapshot or documentary aesthetics, erotic and theatrical themes, the choice of the intimate and simultaneously mass medium of the photobook or magazine—surely informed, or at least paved the way for the reception of the images that would constitute the bulk of Araki’s work.

The coarse and expressive photographic images in which the contents are blurred and not immediately identifiable, represented a more “private vision” in contrast to the dissociated and mechanical vision of New Vision and to the social realist approach of photography in Japan up until that time. We could understand Araki’s work as a continuation of this “private vision,” the use of photography for documentation of self and the intimate experiences that had already begun to infiltrate the dominating tradition of documentary and photojournalistic images.

In the early 1970s, Araki founded his own magazine: Fukusha shudan geribara 5 (or The Diarrhoea-Shit Reproductive Collective of 5), but Provoke would remain the most important of such ventures. As authors Parr and Badger suggest, “Provoke was Japanese photography’s primal scream” reverberating in the works of Tōmatsu and Moriyama, but culminating in Araki’s prolific production of over tens and thousands of photographs in hundreds of photobooks and magazines. One of the first of a generation of Japanese photographers who turned the eye of the

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279 Araki cited in Badger and Parr, The Photobook, 270. He admits that his observations of Provoke’s activities were conducted from “the safety of the castle keep.” Araki in Araki: Self, Life, Death, 74.
281 Ibid., 222-25. A prominent example of this new trend of turning the camera towards the self and the immediate family environment is the work of Fukase Masahisa, whose photographs are primarily comprised of staged and unstaged photos of his wife and family, travel photographs, as well as a series of ravens that he captured in images during the difficult emotional time after his divorce in 1986.
camera inward, making the main theme their private lives. Araki is considered to be a photographer who has so radically changed and diversified photography, experimenting with various formats from sado-eroticism to street documentary and including so-called “I-photography,” a genre which may be elaborated with the collection of still life-like images in Araki’s photobook *Shokuji* (from this point forward referred to as *The Banquet*) (1993) (Ill. 72).

*Shokuji (or The Banquet): Narrated Still Life*

Indebted to a very personal mode of photography, *The Banquet* includes over fifty photographic spreads showing close-ups of food and drink consumed by the artist and his wife Yoko before she lost the battle to cancer in 1990. A series of twenty-eight (including the title page) flamboyantly colorful images (see Ill. 73, Ill. 74, Ill. 75, Ill. 76, Ill. 77, and Ill. 79) depicting half-eaten plates of food highlighting the slippery surfaces of squiggly noodles and chunks of seafood or rare meat, the crispy texture of fried fish or vegetable stalks al dente, the stickiness of white cake icing, the stringiness of green vegetables, the and so on. Interspersed throughout the cropped images of the interrupted meals are at least two zoomed-in bird’s eye views plunging the viewer into glasses filled with drinks (Ill. 78), the octagonal shape at the image’s border hinting at the fluid’s container. Halfway through the book, eight pages watermarked with grey images of what appears to be spilled liquids (or floating petals?) describe in diary format (Ill. 80) what he and Yoko had consumed. For example:

*January 27, 1985: Watching a noon daily TV show: green pepper, rice, radish with small fish, potato and fresh herb miso soup, egg. I prefer rice*

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283 Outlining the developments of photography in Japan since the 1980s, Dana Friis-Hansen identifies a paradigm of activity with representations located between tradition and modern culture, between cultural/national identity and internationalization, including expressions of a kind of escapism from the domestic into the world of mass-consumerism and, crucial for Araki, expressions of individualism. Friis-Hansen identifies one category of increasing photographic activity that for our intents and purposes is especially relevant, namely the “self”. An artistic position that presents a kind of antithesis to the works of several photographers that are concerned with documenting or exploring intimate topics—e.g. the aforementioned Fukase or Ishiuchi Miyako with, for example, her project 1.9.4.7. (1988-98) collecting images of the hands and feet of fifty women friends born in 1947—is the internationally renowned minimalist Sugimoto. Dana Friis-Hansen, “Internationalization, Individualism, the Institutionalization of Photography,” in *The History of Japanese Photography*, 260-303.
to bread and milk. Asian ginseng juice. Strawberries: mashed and mixed with sugar and milk. That’s how Yoko likes to eat them. Japanese tea.284

Immediately following these diary entries, the photos turn black and white (Ill. 82, Ill. 83, Ill. 84 and Ill. 85). The dishes become even less identifiable, obscured by increased blurredness and graininess. The intensified textural quality—bumpy and smooth surfaces in a humid world where everything appears to be covered with a thick viscous fluid of sorts—is contrasted by the alienating food forms, where not even color offers the viewer a hint as to how to identify the dish. In many ways, they are reminiscent of the Provoke aesthetic, but instead of a social or political interest, the focus is on the intimate sphere. In what appears to be handwritten text on one of the first black and white pages (Ill. 81), Araki announces the switch to black and white photographs with the following:

After leaving the hospital, she put much more love into cooking meals. Yoko must have known that her life would only last one more month. I used to take color photographs using a macro-lens with a ring flash. Then I switched to monochrome. One table light with a tripod. F32/1 second. I cannot forget the long one-second shutter sound. The meals were a love affair with death.

The Banquet can by no means be directly categorized as belonging to the genealogy of Western still life, yet it explores topics that have consistently been a staple of the still life genre, beginning with the most obvious aspect, the very contents of food and drink. Moreover, thematically, the concern with what could be called a memento mori motif allows for an analogy with the iconological interpretation of the Western still life. And finally, the tensions familiar from the structure of a classical still life that has its contents oscillating between being tangible and simultaneously far from reach crops up in Araki’s The Banquet ever so blatantly.

The depiction of food, while not limited to the still life, makes up a large portion of the content for the genre ranging from tables set for feasts, for just one, including imagery of lonely pieces or entire families of fruit, fish or flesh taking the stage.

284 Unless otherwise noted, the translation of the text portions in Shokuji are by Etsuko Starkey, for whose expertise I am most grateful.
And not surprisingly so, since still life is the genre dedicated to casting an eye on the neglected things of daily life. What could be more quotidian than food, our daily bread, than the need to imbibe products of nature to keep on living? Beyond the daily necessity to take in nourishment, food is historically associated with social rites, class, wealth, health, and symbolic connotations, whether religious or mythological, and sexuality. As a viewer informed by Western tradition, any specifically Japanese symbolism or connotations in the array of dishes in Araki’s Banquet go lost, or are replaced with the knowledge of the visual tradition of food in the arts. Interestingly, here too, as in the Western tradition that reserves the act of eating for people of lower class or burlesque scenes, the actual act of eating remains off frame. The act of eating is implied through the disorder of the interrupted meals and reinforced through the narrative text component accompanying the images that specifically describe the dishes as well as Yoko’s and his personal tastes and preferences.

In an intensely un-still life gesture, Araki’s photographs of the dishes depart from any kind of established formal constraints or artificial arrangement of both the artistic tradition of still life and the commercial aesthetic used in the display of food and food products. Araki’s rejection of the high-gloss, retouched aesthetic is not only manifest in the unstaged nitty-gritty photographs of food displayed in a more repelling than appetite-inducing way. Even the choice of the non-glossy, coarse paper upon which the photographs are printed in book format does not allow for entirely saturated high-contrast images, reinforcing his gesture against advertisement aesthetic, the very background from which he comes.

Yet the representation of incredible tactile materiality of Araki’s food photographs remains, demanding the viewer’s visual participation. The tension that on the one hand, appeals to or repels the senses and on the other, only leads the viewer on is reminiscent of the fetishistic structure of the still life as outlined by Foster.

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286 Ibid., 49-52.
287 In a statement about his preference for analog photography and especially the Polaroid camera, Araki emphasizes his dedication to invoking a haptic effect: “You use this camera and it has the effect of bringing to the fore what you want to see and touch … Photographs should be wet.” Araki, “Photographs Should Be Wet,” in Araki: Self, Life, Death, 413.
Our appetites are whet (or ruined?) by the image of sweet dish, the spongy texture of the cake (Ill. 77), the creamy white frosting, and shiny taut-skinned red strawberry, yet the perspective and macro-view makes the dessert appear almost alien to us. This is perhaps more plausible with a different photograph. The sensual texture and moisture of the egg yolk, the beans, onions, herbs and other unidentifiable chopped vegetables in this soup are tangible, nearly tasteable (Ill. 79). Yet the intensity of the haptic space is interrupted by the centerfold of the book. The dominating reflections caused by the strobe flash of Araki’s camera create a kind of transparent film or shellac preventing access to what would provide us with life and sustenance, putting distance between the subject and desired object. To use the discourse of fetishism, we find ourselves once again confronted with living things (plants or animals) that have been transformed into dead objects, nature that has been subject to our control, commodified or objectified, if one will, for our consumption and satisfaction. The fulfilling of our lustful desires, beyond mere hunger, remains incomplete in what is only a depiction, only illusory truth.

The tension between vitality of the representation and looming death inherent to the still life, is here strongly dependent on the narrative aspect that Araki includes in this photobook: A conflict between the life-giving substance, presented in all its sensuality and the poignant narrative that ultimately ends in death. Food and death are entangled in an ambivalent relationship: While necessary to provide life, as it is eaten, it metamorphoses into the nutrients required for life, but at its own expense. The blurred and unidentifiable dishes gain their own curious life comparable with the unseen mysterious inner workings of the body that determine whether or not we stay alive, and specifically in this case may even be read in analogy to the metastasizing cancer within Yoko’s body. Beyond associations with the organic forms and textures of the body’s interior (Ill. 82 and Ill. 83), a number of these photographs explicitly evoke the imagery of genitalia (Ill. 84 and Ill. 85) making an association about the tension between libido and mortido, eros and thanatos inevitable.

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Death is also explicitly illustrated by the loss of color simultaneous to his wife fading from life. Araki’s withdrawal of color is his very blatant unsubtle way of expressing the encroaching death of his beloved wife. Regarding the contrast between color and black-and-white photography, he says: “Reality is in color, but at its beginnings photography always discolored reality and turned it into black and white. Color is life, black and white is death.”

Or once again: “Black and white photographs represent death. To take a photo is to kill the subject.”

Araki’s open acknowledgement of photography’s relationship to death is at times contradictory, or evaluated less negatively, at least highly ambivalent. On the one hand he writes: “After Yoko’s death, I didn’t want to photograph anything but life honestly. Yet everytime (sic) I pressed the button, I ended up close to death, because to photograph is to stop time. I want to tell you something, listen closely: Photography is murder.”

And on the other: “For me, taking photos is life itself.”

To counter the static quality of a medium that he considers as a boundary between life and death, Araki invented something that interfaces between the static medium of photography and cinema: Arakinema. Using two slide projectors and with musical accompaniment, his photographs are superimposed in an almost childlike attempt “whereby a ‘dead’ photograph is brought back to life” through the movement that is artificially breathed into the soul of the photograph.

I mention Araki’s consciousness of the deathlike quality of the photographic act, beyond the representation itself and the associations evoked therewith, because, as mentioned in a previous chapter, the elegiac character of the photograph likewise its claim to life-like representation makes it an ideal medium for dealing with a still life topic, such as food, that evokes its own associations with the opposing forces of life and death.

Furthermore, while Araki’s The Banquet may share certain aspects with the still life, it sets itself apart from the genre not only in its non-staged appearance, but with the blatant insertion of the human narrative, one that is concerned with the
very real death of his own wife. Araki believes that each captured subject innately contains a narrative essence, which he hopes to vividly return to life with his photograph. He compares his approach to photography with the I-Novel. The I-Novel (shi-shōsetsu or watakashi-shōsetsu), popular during the early twentieth century, is a first-person narrative, an autobiographical story. It is a confessional kind of literary genre, one that, according to Iizawa Kōtarō is not “organized by a fixed, absolute ego. Rather, the locus is the self as a fluid, quaking mobility, newly discovered in the process of making photographs.” In this mode of “I-photography,” Iizawa goes so far as to suggest that Araki’s own identity is defined and redefined by his shifting roles, his gaze, but also the gazes of his wife and other models. As one of his inspirations for this approach to photography, Araki names Nagai Kafū, author of Danchōtei Nichijō (or The Danchōtei Diary), a book that was written as a diary over a period of time from 1917 to 1959, a diary, that is however peppered with fiction, fictive moments that are not necessarily detectable; entangled so deeply with the truth, that they become part of the objective depiction of the author’s daily events.

The first manifestation of his reference to the I-novel, in what could be called his magnum opus, can be read in one of Araki’s first photobooks, the self-published Senchimantaru na tabi (also known as Sentimental Journey) (1971) (Ill. 86). Sick of what he called the “fake photographs” of the commercial world and out of love for his wife, this by now iconic collection of 108 photographs documents the events of his own wife. Araki believes that each captured subject innately contains a narrative essence, which he hopes to vividly return to life with his photograph. He compares his approach to photography with the I-Novel. The I-Novel (shi-shōsetsu or watakashi-shōsetsu), popular during the early twentieth century, is a first-person narrative, an autobiographical story. It is a confessional kind of literary genre, one that, according to Iizawa Kōtarō is not “organized by a fixed, absolute ego. Rather, the locus is the self as a fluid, quaking mobility, newly discovered in the process of making photographs.” In this mode of “I-photography,” Iizawa goes so far as to suggest that Araki’s own identity is defined and redefined by his shifting roles, his gaze, but also the gazes of his wife and other models. As one of his inspirations for this approach to photography, Araki names Nagai Kafū, author of Danchōtei Nichijō (or The Danchōtei Diary), a book that was written as a diary over a period of time from 1917 to 1959, a diary, that is however peppered with fiction, fictive moments that are not necessarily detectable; entangled so deeply with the truth, that they become part of the objective depiction of the author’s daily events.

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297 Ibid.
298 Ibid.
300 Hiromix (born 1976 and a former student of Araki) is one of few young women artists in a male-dominated photography world in Japan, who likewise draws upon this photographic approach. As a contrast to the primarily “masculine” narratives by Araki, Hiromix’s photobook, Girls Blue: Rockin’ On (1996) for example, documents the lives of young teenagers in primarily urban consumerist environments, spending time in shopping malls, etc. Hiromix also includes portraits of herself and her friends, at times in the nude from a very different perspective, from her perspective as a young or teenage woman. The still life elements that are featured range from arrangements of close-ups of food, flowers to shoes purchased with a similar snapshot aesthetic that we are familiar with from Araki.
301 Cf. Araki’s Preface to Sentimental Journey in Nobuyoshi Araki: Self, Life, Death, printed in Araki: Self, Life, Death, 46. Originally, Araki submitted his book draft without including any text, to which a bookstore owner responded that it would be impossible to print a book without text. Araki then penned a letter to the viewer / reader expressing his
of Araki and Yoko's honeymoon, mostly depicting Yoko during their travels (asleep in a boat or during a train ride), but also sitting or standing in various hotel rooms or lobbies, often in the nude, and in at least one photograph, captured apparently in the act of sex. In 1990, *Sentimental Journey* was extended to include a series of photographs taken by Araki during a period of time before Yoko’s passing: *Senchimantaru na tabi: Fuyu no tabi* (or *Sentimental Journey: Winter Journey*) (1990) (Ill. 87 and Ill. 88). The *Winter Journey* combines several light-hearted photographs (the couple dancing to karaoke, Araki posing at the hospital wearing a surgical mask, and frequently the beloved cat, Chiro) with a series of drab and grey winter city landscapes, the view from Araki’s lonely empty balcony and scenes from the hospital in the days leading up to Yoko’s death. Towards the end of the book are a series of photographs showing the funeral including a photo of Yoko dead in a coffin overflowing with flowers several hands reaching towards her. The timestamps intentionally included on most of the snapshots in the *Winter Journey* highlight the chronology required for a typical narrative.\(^{301}\)

As a whole, the story of *Sentimental Journey* and *Winter Journey* combined tells of a young couple beginning on life and love’s adventure ending with Yoko’s untimely death. The photograph of Yoko, as featured in *Winter Journey* on a mantelpiece or held by Araki, in this case becomes the epitome of a *memento mori*, the photograph as fetish as spoken of in a prior chapter: both preserving his wife in a photograph, yet incapable of replacing her presence in life. About his process in shooting the photographs for the *Winter Journey*, Araki reinforces the fetishistic tension that the viewer feels from the combination of these images: “I found consolation in unmasking lust and loss, by staging a bitter confrontation between symbols.”\(^{302}\)

The *Winter Journey*, while hardly to be called still life in its entirety, in addition to serving as a *memento mori*, definitely contains certain still life elements, especially insofar as it is a continuation of Araki’s interest a desire to record the drama of the

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\(^{301}\) Or for example, for his book project *Araki Nobuyoshi no nise niki (or The Fake Diary of Araki Nobuyoshi)* (1980).

ordinary, something that was already evident in his earliest photographs. The almost obsessive need to capture every thing around him, what he calls “sentimental” things, results in the consistent appearance of flowers, generally ignored objects, and the still life-like arrangements in his home or his Tokyo neighborhood in his oeuvre.

Excursus: Photobook

Besides the obvious differences in the use of the camera—Araki’s thousands of snapshots using various camera formats and models versus Witkin’s staged and finally selection of just a single image—in contrast to Witkin’s photographic process so critical for the presentation of his images, Araki’s presentation of choice, one that is especially convenient to the mediation of personal narratives, is the photobook. As can already be deduced from the examples in my aforementioned summary of postwar Japanese photography, the format of the photobook played an important role in the presentation and reception of this generation’s photographic work. Yamagishi Shōji suggested that the format of the photographic monograph flourished due to a delayed acceptance of the medium in art institutions in Japan: With a limited amount of galleries and museums able to or interested in showing artists’ photographs, meant the book offered an ideal medium for the presentation and distribution of their work. The ease of transport allowed contemporary Japanese photography to be introduced to curators and editors transnationally, often resulting in exhibitions through the late 1960s and early 1970s. Parr and Badger locate the potential of the medium as

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303 See for example, Satchin (1963), the story of a young boy’s life over a period of one year in a Tokyo apartment block in the Mikawajima district, winning Araki the first Taiyo Prize.

304 However, already prior to postwar times, the Japanese photobook had a precursor in the form of woodblock prints from the seventeenth to twentieth Century in ukiyo-e, or prints of the “floating world” depicting landscape, tales, theatre, fleeting beauty, etc. in the form of illustration, singular sheets, or posters offering a fine but inexpensive way to distribute images. Cf. Badger and Parr, The Photobook, 269. Furthermore, since the beginning of photography history in Japan in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the presentation of the photographs seems to be more than just an afterthought: As depicted in The History of Japanese Photography, the images are frequently maintained in their original wooden or metal cases, in delicately decorated photo albums with a wooden lacquered cover, inlaid frames or mounted on a paper scrolls with silk borders with a great attention to detail. See for example, The History of Japanese Photography, Plates 8 and 9, 21-26, 43 and 68.

“somewhere between the mass medium and the hermetic art form,” reaching diverse publics, mass or private, local or international.\textsuperscript{306}

But what is a photobook? Dutch photography critic, Ralph Prins describes it as a medium to be seen in its own right: “A photobook is an autonomous art form, comparable with a piece of sculpture, a play or a film. The photographs lose their own photographic character as things ‘in themselves’ and become parts, translated into printing ink, of a dramatic event called a book.”\textsuperscript{307} Authors Parr and Badger of the two-volume \textit{The Photobook: A History} (2004) titled their introduction “The Photobook: Between the Novel and Film,” emphasizing the conduciveness of the medium for the ultimate desire of telling a story. Beyond merely the function of recounting a story, Parr and Badger describe the constitutive elements of a photobook “as a specific ‘event’ ... in which a group of photographs is brought together between covers, each image placed so as to resonate with its fellows as the pages are turned, making the collective meaning more important than the images’ individual meanings.”\textsuperscript{308} With or without text, a particular theme however broad or specific, the role in the authorship, layout and design of the photobook is just as, if not more important for the overall impression of the work. A major advantage of the photobooks, as previously mentio, is its portability, allowing an artist’s work to reach a broad and definitely more diverse audience than the visibility museum or art institution may offer. The photobook is also a medium in which the photographer is also the auteur, not only of their photographs, but determines the way in which they represent their own approach to photography and to the medium of the book itself.

Araki’s use of the medium began very early on in his career, with a series of twenty-five Xeroxed photo albums, produced in an almost subversive gesture employing the Dentsu office copy machine. Each Xeroxed book was an edition of seventy, gifted to his friends and posted to random strangers picked out of the phone book. The sujets included portraits, street scenes, nudes, images from the TV, etc. \textit{Zerokkusu Shashincho 24 – Nihonjin Nanajyu 15/8/70} (or \textit{Xeroxed Photo

\textsuperscript{306} Badger and Parr, Introduction to \textit{The Photobook}, 10.

\textsuperscript{307} Ralph Prins cited in Badger and Parr, Introduction to \textit{The Photobook}, 7.

\textsuperscript{308} Badger and Parr, Introduction to \textit{The Photobook}, 7. The following information defining the photobook as a unique medium refers, unless otherwise noted, to Parr and Badger’s introduction.
Album 24 – Seventy Japanese 15/8/70 (1970)³⁰⁹ Araki’s officially published books now number in the hundreds—some of them self-published, in various formats, from hard cover to magazine style use of glossy or newspaper, and some of them commissioned for magazines³¹⁰—the original DIY aesthetic of his Xerox Photo Albums is still present in the handmade photobooks he continues to produce for his own personal use. He says: “The book is the best medium for me. It’s intimate and it will stay with me.”³¹ Similar to his disdain for the aesthetics of commercial photography, his preferences for the unconventional hanging of his works includes pinning the unframed photographs or enlarged color photocopies directly to the wall, in any order, overlapping, without a logical sequence, just as is the case with family photos, once again emphasizing the personal narrative.³¹²

Fruits, Flowers and Toy Reptiles

A recurring still life theme throughout Araki’s oeuvre are his black and white as well as color photographs of flowers (Ill. 89, Ill. 90, and Ill. 91)—in opulent bouquets, singly, zoomed in or as a whole, in full bloom, or a withering state. In one instance, instead of the associative aspect and contemplation of death inherent in art historical pictures of flowers, the connection to the otherworld becomes performative: The enlarged color photocopies of close-up shots of brightly colored flowers are floated onto the river in an act that is reminiscent of shōrō-nagashi, part of the annual Festival of the Dead, in which a boat or float is symbolically sent downstream carrying the deceased souls of loved ones to their final resting place.

³⁰⁹ The Xerox books correspond to Araki’s understanding of the medium: “Photography is copying.” (Araki cited in Badger and Parr, The Photobook, 294.) Since the 1860s, the term of consensus for photography in Japanese is shashin, literally meaning “a copy of truth” and was a term that was already in use to describe paintings that were exact and precise reproductions of ‘reality’. (Cf. Kinoshita Naoyuki, “The Early Years of Japanese Photography,” in The History of Japanese Photography, 26.) Naturally, as previously mentioned, Araki’s uses the platform of daily reality to make his “copies of truth,” into which fiction may or may not be embedded. See Araki, Xeroxed photo albums, vol. 13 of The Works of Araki Nobuyoshi, Tokyo: Heibonsha Ltd, 1996.


in the Pure Land of the Buddah Amitābha. But like the still life, Araki’s images of objects and flowers are not merely the occasion for a reflection on life’s shortness, but incite a strong sensual reaction, of either pleasure or disgust. In a frequently cited statement by Araki, he expresses his desire to use the medium to get beyond its inherently mortifying attribute: “Someone has said that ‘photography is a medium of death’. That as long as you are using photography, you are conscious of death, you can’t get beyond death. I react to this by deliberately talking about happiness. I’m not Roland Barthes but ‘Eroland’ Barthes.”

The photobook *Erotos* (1993), an obvious portmanteau of the opposing forces, testifies to his interest in an embrace of both the entangled drives (*Trieb*) of life and death juxtaposing close-up erotically-charged images in black and white of decaying fruit, flowers, insects, mouths, genitals, and couples engaging in sexual activity. To use Japanese notions, Araki’s photographs may be read as operating at the border of *ku*, or the void and the sexual energy of *iro*. He expresses the closeness he feels to “the void – the realm of death” with each clicking noise of the camera’s shutter and sees the potential of medium of photography as “going to and fro between life and death.” But without the illustrative title directly pointing to the contradictory forces at work, the shriveled petals and leaves of flower and the inner life and texture of a pomegranate (Ill. 92) in fact demonstrates how possessed the photographer is with the intense viewing experience of the texture and feeling of the things themselves. The desire to juxtapose formal similarities between the living and sexual human being and the generally lesser regarded insensate things (Ill. 93) does not, on the contrary, level the human being to its thingly counterparts, but elevates the intricate detail and sensual materiality of the thing insisting on its undeniable part in our lives.

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313 Cf. Miki, “The Photographic Life of Nobuyoshi Araki,” 17, 20n12 and Ishida, *Sentimental Photography, Sentimental Life*, 152. Large color photocopies of these flowers from the same series may be seen plastered along the walls in streets of the old city of Shanghai injecting color into an otherwise almost entirely grey landscape. An example of this presentation can be seen the cover of the aforementioned exhibition catalogue. See also Watkins, *Ice That Doesn’t Melt,* 24.

314 Interview with Araki in Ishida, *Sentimental Photography, Sentimental Life*, 74.


316 Araki cited in *Araki: Self, Life, Death*, 645.
Positioned alongside his sensation-provoking erotic photographs, Araki pays equal attention, and this means, with an equal amount of passion and drive to photograph the least controversial, seemingly banal things of every day life: from cityscapes, including its protagonists, to skies, but also a fascination with flowers and other material objects. Iizawa explains the increase in the appearance of still life subjects in Araki's photographs as follows: “Araki was able to recover tactility from the reified world that resulted from Yoko’s death by directing an intense gaze onto material objects.” Flowers, had definitely already cropped up as a theme in Araki’s work as early in 1973, when he recounts his experience discovering with the camera a withered amaryllis near this Jokanji temple, a temple that literally means the “throw-away temple,” where the bodies of prostitutes had been historically disposed. Flowers, suggests Watkins, also coincided, even prior to Yoko’s death, with photographic series about her (Ill. 87 and Ill. 88): Corresponding with Yoko, the flowers represent the love and beauty he saw in her, but likewise represent a frozen captured moment in time, in which both the flowers and Yoko are inevitably victims to the ravages of time, and at the same time immortalized in a photograph.

Araki is not the first to exploit the ambivalence of the symbolic transitory meaning of the flower. Flowers constitute a staple of the conventional still life, in this context, but Araki’s flowers must also be considered in the cultural context of the Japanese art of dedicating to the arrangement of flowers and branches: ikebana. Araki was known to have collaborated with renowned avant-garde master of ikebana and ikebana derived sculptures, Nakagawa Yukio. The ikebana practice, spiritual in nature, focuses on creating balance, harmony and form, and the ephemerality of the flower is deliberately include in the arrangement, with buds, open blooms and withered leaves. Not unlike Araki’s general preoccupation, the ikebana tradition is characterized by two main aspects: On the one hand, its roots

320 Ibid.
may be traced to the animist Shinto tradition, which understands the flowers as ensouled, living beings. On the other hand, associated with death in serving as an offering while paying respects to departed ancestors. The vanitas motif is also present on another level, that of process and presentation. Death Reality is a series of photographs Araki developed over twenty years after having left the negatives to the doings of time and climate. The resulting images show the weather of age, as the enlarged copies frequently used in exhibitions likewise inescapable from the dominion of time, whose colors begin to fade.

A more recent theme that could be also considered still life, which has less to do with the semantic or symbolic level of still life, is the recurring presence of plastic toy dinosaurs in Araki’s photographs. They stand either alone in a cityscape, populate his frequently featured balcony, or participate as witnesses in kinbaku and photoshoots with a nude model (Ill. 94, Ill. 95, and Ill. 96). To the viewer, the toy reptiles appear out of place, almost functioning as comic relief in images that we are otherwise ashamed to be seen looking at. To Araki, they are his adopted them as his alter-ego, with individual names and histories. He compares them to Mame Otoko, the voyeur depicted frequently in shunga prints, peeping at the sexually engaged lovers, and sees them as surrogates for his own representation or presence in the image. Once again, Araki has transformed these apparently childish and insignificant objects of kitsch with a grand narrative stroke of personal importance. In an interview with Jérôme Sans, Araki laments his missing the stars of his photographs, as they were currently featured in an installation and exhibition showing his works abroad. In his explanation for his motivation to photograph these plastic creatures, he states: “I love these dinosaurs, and I just want to be with them all the time and to collect them. That is sexual desire. I want to take photos of the things I love and spend all my time with them.”

324 Shioda, “Contemporary Arakcy,” 73.
326 Cf. interview with Araki in Sentimental Photography, Sentimental Life, 75.
327 Araki cited in interview with Sans, Araki, 7.
In closing, a perhaps accurate attempt to describe what could be called still life photography in Araki’s work is summarized in a statement by the photographer Arthur Tress:

All photographic Still Lifes are inherently a sexual celebration. They deal with the transformation of the inert into the aroused. They animate and engorge the dead weight of the sleeping object by removing it from its natural atmospheric environment on the flat plane of the photographic plate where it can be reborn only in the overheated imagination of the viewer.\textsuperscript{328}

SUMMARY

Still life may be understood beyond its existence as a genre of pictorial arrangement of lifeless things adhering to a tried and tested tradition of arrangements, forms and composition. In the first chapter, I identify five themes that remain consistent in the still life throughout its history since antiquity and that structure the rest of the thesis, with the introduction of a further factor, the medium of photography in the second chapter and finally, with the less abstract analysis using examples of selected photographic works by Araki and Witkin.

The first of the five themes is the most obvious and concerns the contents of the still life. It is hard to ignore that still life is concerned primarily with the world of things. Furthermore, it is perhaps helpful to understand still life as a genre dedicated not only to the things of everyday life, but to the idea of topics that are otherwise disregarded, considered sordid and vulgar and unworthy of being represented as an image in art form: rhyparography, a term that proves useful in looking at the context of both Araki’s and Witkin’s photographic oeuvre which takes as its main theme the outcasts of society and sexual ‘deviance’. This means, not only their photographs of things may be considered still life, but other prevalent subjects in their work (bondage or tableau mort, where individuals take on the pose of stone statues) may be characterized as having the quality of still life.

Another constitutive factor of the still life genre is the fact that the human narrative and form remained absent for most of the genre’s history. In the subsequent chapters, I attempt to trace a shift, beginning with photography, but especially since the 1990s and with the works of both Araki and Witkin, at how the mere traces or allusions to human presence and narrative gain center stage, in which still life becomes the choice genre for very personal and historical narratives. Furthermore, still life has been used to explain a kind of stilling or petrifying gesture, where human subjects are bestowed with a thingly quality. The effect between enlivening what is assumed dead and chilling what is alive seems to be central for this pictorial category that makes the boundaries between such fundamental categories as life and death seem less stable. This aspect of still life is
especially present in the selected works by Araki and Witkin, who deal with death in a direct way, partially reminiscent of the iconographic tradition of *memento mori*, all the while forcibly merging death with the driving forces of life, eros.

Another central aspect of the still life is its interest in the naturalist representation. Throughout its century-long history, the still life genre is frequently implicated in artistic and intellectual explorations about the illusionist capability of painting. Even when no longer committed to naturalist representation, Cubist and modern still life may be understood as an attempt to deconstruct and understand shifting modes of representation in varying degrees of reality. It goes without saying, the assumed indexical condition of photography also puts the media in a genealogical kinship to the illusionist tradition.

Interestingly enough, in apparent contradiction to its naturalist project, still life is also characterized by its effects of the artifice. An intense focus on the means of emulating nature leads to a kind of hyperrealism, a noticeably artificial display and presentation. This touch of the artifice, the breath of death in the still life’s frequently uncanny appearance is a theme that carries over into other works by both artists, regardless of whether or not their subjects are definitively identified as being the lifeless things of the traditional still life or human subjects.

This leads to a fifth constant theoretical aspect vital to reading still life: fetishism. Fetishism, in all three of its formations, serves as an ideal concept to deal with the ambivalent structure of the still life, the contents of the still life, but also of the photograph itself.

To explain the focus on a specific medium in this thesis, it was necessary to explain in the second chapter how the two—still life and photography—reinforce each other and have several aspects in common: naturalist or true-to-life representation, associations with death, and a faultily fetishistic structure. Likewise the condition of photography, a medium that captures a still moment of time, could in some cases be described as a still life-like gesture. With the advent of photography, the still life genre experienced some adjustments. Initially, the lowest ranking of genres was employed to assist the newer medium’s claim to art.
Gradually, new still life-like forms emerged where the composition is determined by the settings of the camera, may be a found composition, and frequently the new still life is associated with the world of consume. A focus on the symbolic meaning of still life as *vanitas* and a contemplation about death returned in around the 1980s, and the historical aesthetic and formal compositions are re-appropriated, as is clearly the case in Witkin’s photographs.

The cultural backgrounds, approach to subject matter, style and material could not be further apart than between Witkin and Araki. Yet analogies in both Araki’s and Witkin’s work may not only be found in the recognizable forms of the typical still life. Beyond form, the *topos* of the still life lends itself as an ideal model for their artistic explorations. Firstly, both photographers are interested in what is excluded from visual culture: the trivial, *rhopos*, as well as what is considered *rhyparos*, vile and sordid, employing the field of art as the discursive space where boundaries may be transgressed, and where that which is expelled or ignored in our society is forced back into visual culture. Moreover, what remains allegorical or “hidden symbolism” in the historical still life becomes more poignant, demanding a response from the viewer in both Araki and Witkin’s images. Almost inevitably in the move towards a more verbatim or directly illustrative of the *memento mori*, the inclusion of the human form and narrative, what would normally be seen as the antithesis to the still life, is affirmatively reinserted. The ambivalence of their work, while focusing on an omnipresence of death, is highlighted by an intense erotic charge, in fact in an attempt to liven what is dead, but at the same time, where the alive may be objectified experiencing the deathly chill of the photographic gaze, the staging, and aesthetic manipulation of its surfaces. Araki’s statement about his prevailing interest to “observe life as well as death embraced in life, or life embraced in death”\(^{329}\) through photography is not unlike Witkin’s: “To me, death means that if a power can end all life, could not the same power begin all life?”\(^{330}\)

\(^{330}\) See Witkin’s e-mail response in the Appendix.
Dear Joel-Peter Witkin,

I had the privilege of meeting you in person at your opening at Lust Gallery in Vienna just over 2 months ago. It was wonderful to hear you speak personally about the works and to hear from you about the amazing amount of tender detail that goes into each and every one of your photographs.

As I briefly mentioned to you at the opening, I am in the process of writing my master's thesis at the University of Vienna, hopefully turning in the first draft by the end of July 2012. You gave me your business card and I finally gained the courage to write you!

The working title for my thesis is: *Still Life Revisited in the Photography of Nobuyoshi Araki and Joel-Peter Witkin*. Briefly put, I am exploring specifically the more contemplative function that still life has in contemporary photography in fine arts. I feel that the still life elements in both your work and that of Araki (I am focusing on his photo book *The Banquet*) have been overlooked, as is typically the case with still life. I find the affinities between still life and photography (their concerns with notions of time, death, life, realistic representation, fetishism, just to mention a couple of keywords) striking. But especially as these notions are explored and experienced in your and Araki’s photographic works. Perhaps you have seen the film *A Zed and Two Noughts* by Peter Greenaway? This film also figured as a kind of impulse for my thematic interest.

In any case, one of my chapters is dedicated to your 'still-lifes'. While I am still working my way through the literature about your work, I wanted to ask you a couple of questions. I will include them below, but if you prefer, I am also willing to arrange a time to discuss over the phone. Ideally, I would be able to refer to or cite your responses in my thesis. Better yet, include it as an appendix to my thesis. But we can discuss this later too.
Once again, thank you very much for your time in advance. I very much look forward to hearing from you.

Kind Regards,

Melissa Lumbroso

Questions with Joel-Peter Witkin’s responses per e-mail on June 8, 2012

(ML: Melissa Lumbroso / JPW: Joel-Peter Witkin)

ML: What is your relationship to still life? Beyond the obvious occupation with such contradictory issues of life and death, freshness and decay common to almost all still life, still life in even its earliest forms (such as the xenia of antiquity), is about casting the attention to and the gaze on things of unimportance (or what was called rhopos in Ancient Greece). A painter of such pictures earned the mocking nickname rhyporgrapher, the painter of "sordid topics" (rhyparos). It seems especially fitting to me that still life, a genre dedicated to drawing attention to the lowly, also figures as a series of works in your oeuvre, alongside your photographs that draw attention to, celebrate and elevate individuals with physical anomalies to a place of beauty and seen as picture-worthy.

JPW: I believe the hinge of history itself is the fear of death. Perhaps that was a motivation of the cave painters, too. I photograph life and death because of two reasons: 1 We don’t know how to live and we never will. But my work is never motivated by despair. In fact my motivation is the joy and wonder of being alive! and 2 Death is, for me, the end of physical life on earth and the beginning of eternal life. To me, death means that if a power can end all life, could not the same power begin all life? I am a Catholic. That faith informs my life. Even Christ had to die so that the fear (natural) and the wonder of death (super natural) drives the genre of still life, which is the art of mortality.

ML: Regarding Feast of Fools, one of your works that I hope to focus on more intensively: I read the text by Eugenia Parry in The Bone House, describing your
process, but I am curious about any specific information behind the motivation, references, influences, ideas etc. for this specific picture. The title may be read as reference to the medieval festival. Am I on the right track here?

JPW: Feast of Fools was one of my greatest challenges. In the forensic morgue in Mexico City, a doctor was pulling out steel drawers containing dead bodies all of whom had died unnaturally. After viewing about thirty corpses, the doctor pulled out a drawer full of body parts and fetuses floating in blood and corruption. It was like looking into Hell. But I knew then that I could make a still life, which would contain all of the horror of life’s violence-in a beautiful and powerful way. I thanked the doctor and told him, through my translator who was on the verge of vomiting, that I would return the next day to make a selection of human remains in that drawer and make a photograph with them. Please note that the conditions in the hospital were, at best, third world. There were no air conditioners so that the stench and heat must have been in a small way comparable to a Nazi box car being emptied of its victims at a concentration camp. P.S. At the facility in Mexico, the skulls were opened with hand saws, not electric saws. That evening I made a drawing for the photograph. I had no appetite because I couldn’t forget the stench out of my lungs. The next morning my translator and I went to a mercado to buy the fruit and fish I needed for the shot. Back at the forensic hospital, I left my translator with my equipment and groceries while I accompanied the doctor so that I could retrieve the specimens. At the hospital, they only used rubber gloves for autopsies so I had to use plastic bags to lift the specimens out of and into a smaller metal box. I entered the room I was to photograph in. The translator I asked to sit outside and wait for me. I then threw the inside bolt to lock the door and proceeded to wash all the specimens. This task took a long time. That task was a test of my will. I set up the lights and my camera and then taped up a large piece of black velvet on the wall. All the rest of the work was instinctive. That is always the way I work. I first place the exposed hand and arm. I supported that with a severed leg and continued choosing the remains, the fish and the fruit until the construction was complete. The last thing I did was to mask the fetus. I did this out of respect to the soul of that child. The rest of my time was spent lighting, composing and photographing from the same camera position. I knew I had created an important image of the evil we do to each other. Yet, I believe that
through my consciousness there was a sense of redemption present in what I had photographed. I had not thought of any historical reference to create this image. The very power of the specimens would show me what I must do to present them.

ML: What is the significance of the gradual introduction of still life elements in your work, apparently emerging later on in your artist career?

JPW: I made The Kiss in 1982. That was early in my work. That was followed by many creations using human remains up to 2009. I feel like my work is growing more tender as I age.

ML: Some of your photographs remain intact so to speak, and do not appear to undergo the scratching and cutting into the negative, nor the tinting and manipulation in the dark room. I am thinking of, for example, the Still Lifes from Marseilles and Mexico City both dating to 1992, or the more recent Still Life with Breast. In an exhibition catalogue from a museum in Jena, Still Life with a Mirror and Anna Akhmatova are listed as hand-colored and treated with an encaustic process. How do you explain which photographs receive this additional treatment? And which prints you decide to leave without these traces, without color or the beeswax coating?

JPW: I never know how I am going to print any of my works until I examine the contact prints. Most times I physically alter the negative and print through tissue paper and/or glass. At other times I leave the negative as it is because I believe it doesn’t need anything else. The use of color and wax I began in 1987. I selectively use the process when I feel the image warrants that approach.

ML: And lastly for now, a bit of a naive and technical question: Since I have only encountered your works in one exhibition and for the most part in your books, do you ever exhibit the "original" print? The print which you have manipulated in the darkroom?

JPW: You should go to Paris before July 1st to see my exhibition at the BNF (Bibliothèque Nationale de France). Buy the hardcover book for that exhibition titled Heaven or Hell and buy the new DelPire book titled Photographs of Joel-Peter Witkin: The Maestro Series.
Your question about the original print is naive because you assume I make a master print and then copy it. I don't. Instead, I do make a master print and then make every print in all editions to match that master print with that negative! I develop my own film and I make my own prints.

I also clean my studio. I have never had an assistant. I only employ a woman named Kris Mills, part time, who paints backdrops and colors prints under my supervision.
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Ill. 53: Witkin, Zögling und Meister, 20.

Ill. 54: Celant, Joel-Peter Witkin, plate 69.

Ill. 55: Celant, Joel-Peter Witkin, plate 27.

Ill. 56: Biroleau, Joel-Peter Witkin: Enfer ou ciel, plate 12.


Ill. 58: Witkin, Zögling und Meister, 73.

Ill. 59: The prometheus Image Archive, http://prometheus.uni-koeln.de/pandora/image/show/berlin_udk-24e3a1904b26aa8354a13a72a9e325d21e6b6581 (accessed September 2, 2012)

Ill. 60: Celant, Joel-Peter Witkin, plate 2.

Ill. 61: The prometheus Image Archive, http://prometheus.uni-koeln.de/pandora/image/show/artemis-7c89894e2e2355d90c721ece6eb43593249a31 (accessed July 19, 2012).


Ill. 70: Badger and Parr, *Photobook: Volume 1*, 290.


Ill. 87-Ill. 88: Araki, *Araki*, 496-7 and 500-1.


Ill. 95: Araki, *Sensual Flowers*, 44.

ABAERT

Still life-like elements or approaches appear as a leitmotiv, albeit largely unmentioned, in the vast photographic oeuvre of Nobuyoshi Araki and Joel-Peter Witkin. For example, *The Banquet* (1993) by Araki is a photo book including over fifty photographic spreads showing close-ups of food and drink consumed by the artist and his wife Yoko before she lost the battle to cancer. Witkin's studio photograph *Feast of Fools* (1990) formally makes recourse to the iconographical tradition of Dutch still life with a shocking addition.

But before a further analysis of these and similar works can be made, the question arises: What is still life? And how may it be defined beyond merely outlining yet another formal and aesthetic history of the genre? Consistent and constitutive still life paradigms are identified and, as such, still life may be understood as an embracing of subjects otherwise disregarded, as images dealing with subjects possessing a charged and ambivalent quality between life and death, and an artistic gesture between petrifying and enlivening the subjects in the image, exemplified in the selected photographic works by Araki and Witkin. An introduction of the term *fetishism* is vital for the analysis of the ambivalent structure of the still life, photography and the erotically-charged works by Araki and Witkin. In justification of a focus on a specific medium, the shared *topoi* and reinforcing effects of the genre still life and the medium photography (reliance on illusionist means of representation, allusions to death, and their fetishistic structure) are outlined, followed by a theoretical and historical description of the expansion of the notion of still life with the development of photography and contemporary art.

Was aber ist Stillleben? Um die Werke der beiden Künstler Araki und Witkin analysieren zu können, muss zunächst eine Definition getroffen werden, das über eine bloß formale oder ästhetische Geschichte des Stilllebens hinausgeht. In der Arbeit werden Themen identifiziert, die es ermöglichen, Stillleben in einem breiteren Sinn zu fassen: Als eine Gattung, die sich dem Übersehenen widmet; als Bilder, die ihre Spannung und Ambivalenz aus einer Gratwanderung zwischen Leben und Tod beziehen; und als eine künstlerische Geste, welche die Bildgegenstände zugleich versteinert und belebt. All das sind auch Elemente, die für die hier ausgewählten Arbeiten von Witkin und Araki bestimmend sind.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Melissa Michelle Lumbroso
Neubaugasse 36/1/15
1070 Vienna
melissa@lumbroso.com

Birth date: 1 July 1980
Place of birth: Paris, France
Citizenship: French and U.S.

Education:

2006 – 2012 University of Vienna (AT)
Art History and Romance Languages (French)

2010 – 2011 Université Libre de Bruxelles (BE)
Erasmus – Histoire de l’art and Français

1999 – 2002 Clark College, Vancouver, WA (USA)
Associate Degree in Applied Sciences: Early Childhood Education (Highest Honors)
Associates of Arts – Transfer Degree (Highest Honors)

Professional Experience:

2009 – present Galerie Raum mit Licht, Vienna (AT)
Gallery Assistant

2008 – 2011 Fotogalerie Wien, Vienna (AT)
Member of curatorial collective

2008 – 2011 Freelance translator (German to English), Vienna (AT)
Texts for exhibition catalogues, artist books, press releases, etc.

2006 – 2008 Roberta Lima (artist), Vienna (AT)
Production Assistant

2003 – 2006 Rockstar Vienna (AT)
Quality Assurance (console games)

1999 – 2003 Clark College – Child & Family Studies, Vancouver, WA (USA)
Early Childhood Education Specialist, Program Support Specialist, secretary to professors the Early Childhood Education Department