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More than a Self-Portrait: Photography as Self-Therapy to Deal with Mental Trauma after Physical Trauma

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More than a Self-Portrait

**Photography as Self-Therapy
to deal with
Mental Trauma after
Physical Trauma**

ESMEE DE KREIJ

More than a Self-Portrait

Photography as Self-Therapy to Deal with Mental Trauma after Physical Trauma

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Abstract

Dealing with one's mental health after experiencing physical trauma is brave but sharing one's own experience with a broader public opens up an important conversation about trauma and mental health. Contemporary emerging photographers deal with their trauma through self-portrait photography, which has a therapeutic function that is self-initiated but also opens up a bigger conversation. By showing visible and invisible traces of their traumatic experiences by taking self-portraits, these photographers deal with their personal traumas via self-reflection. This thesis uses visual analysis to analyse two main case studies and their peers to see how self-portrait photography can be used to reflect on mental trauma after experiencing physical trauma. The aim is to see how self-portrait photography specifically can be used to reflect the mental trauma that is left after having suffered from physical trauma that was inflicted onto the body.

Keywords: Trauma, self-portrait, photography, traces, mental health

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Introduction

There are many forms of art to express yourself, but I always reached for the camera. During my time at the art academy in Utrecht, I had to create a graduation project and I decided to work on something very personal. I have always used photography to express myself but while creating my graduation project *Not Your Muse*, I discovered a new use of photography for myself, a therapeutic one. While taking photographs of my body I became more aware of the distance I felt between myself and my body. Photography brought me closer to myself, but also gave me a way to communicate my trauma to the outside world. *Not Your Muse* exists out of self-portraits that I took in order to get in touch with my own body again. I noticed a distance between myself and my body because of the expectations and social standards created by society. This distance increased even more when I was sexually harassed by a group of boys when I was thirteen. I was confronted with the fact that people can touch your body against your will, making your body no longer feel like your own. In order to regain control over my body and its representation, I searched for myself by photographing my body, reclaiming it bit by bit, photograph by photograph, as my own. After showing my project during the graduation show, I finally felt that I had dealt with my trauma and that I could look at my body in a new way. For me, photography worked therapeutically and when I started my studies at the University of Leiden, I wanted to learn more about how photography can be used therapeutically to deal with trauma.

Therefore, this thesis will focus on the topics of self-portrait photography and trauma. By examining emerging contemporary photographers from 2010 until the present, this thesis asks how they use the genre of self-portrait photography to reflect on their personal trauma and mental health after having physical trauma inflicted on their bodies. In order to acquire the answer to this research question, three sub-questions will be answered in three chapters. The first chapter will address how photography and trauma are connected in relation to how these emerging photographers from 2010 until the present use the medium of photography to reflect on their trauma. The second chapter will

look at the role self-portrait photography can play in dealing with trauma. Why do these emerging contemporary photographers choose to use self-portrait photography to reflect on their trauma? The third chapter will address the impact of showing the self-portrait photographs of emerging photographers that are dealing with trauma and (in)visible scars to a bigger public. These questions will be put into perspective by using two case studies: *When life gives you lemons, squeeze them out in the eyes of your abuser* (2022) by Mandy Nijhof (1995) and *Mirror, mirror* (2022) by Auriane Kolodziej (1993). They are both emerging photographers that deal with their mental health and trauma through self-portrait photography, after having physical trauma inflicted onto their bodies. Besides their projects, some additional examples of other emerging photographers who work on similar projects and work with self-portrait photography will be discussed. More examples of emerging photographers who work on this topic are included in the visual thesis.

Theoretical Framework

There are many theories that look at the relationship of photography and trauma from different perspectives. Although the literature covers a wide variety of theories, this thesis will focus on the definition of trauma according to three theories of literary and media studies. The main concepts of trauma that will be addressed are the theories of Cathy Caruth who argues that trauma is a wound on the mind, Lutz Koepnick's concept of the black box, and Ulrich Baer's idea of trauma that cannot be understood but only witnessed. In order to relate these concepts of trauma to photography, this thesis will focus on the genre of aftermath photography, as defined by David Company, and the automatism of the camera to focus on their link to how trauma and photography are connected. While photography and trauma are often connected, the connection between trauma and self-portrait photography is not frequently made. Photography is claimed to work therapeutically but there are only a few sources that argue that self-portrait photography specifically can work therapeutically. One of the main examples that will be addressed is by Christina Nuñez who developed *The Self-Portrait Experience* where photography serves as a form of self-therapy. However, these theories of self-portrait photography

claiming to be therapeutic are not specifically aimed at dealing with trauma. They focus on concepts of self-awareness, self-expression and introspection. While these theories are not specifically aimed to deal with trauma, they contain elements that can help with processing and reflecting on personal trauma. This is mainly in the element of control; the photographer has control over how they want to present themselves in front of the camera. Through the concept of posing, relating to the concepts of Amelia Jones and David Campy, the photographer and therefore model can carefully construct their own image and perform what they want to get across in front of the camera. In order to understand the influence of these carefully constructed self-portraits and how they reflect on their trauma, there will be a focus on the visible and invisible traces that can be found inside the photographs. The definition of traces will be defined according to Mary Ann Doane's of pointing to the "thereness" of a moment that has happened, Gregory Curry's concept of traces that leave directions and have traces within them, and Margaret Iversen's concepts of the absence and loss of the present that is shown through the traces of the past. These concepts of traces are then looked at from the perspective of the invisible trace, the trauma on the mind and the visible trace of the scar in relation to the case studies that are discussed. Combining all these theories and concepts will give an insight into how self-portrait photography can work, specifically, therapeutically when being used to reflect on mental trauma after the infliction of physical trauma onto the body.

Methodology

The method that will be applied to the different theories and concepts is comparative discourse analysis, in order to fill the gap in the academic field that discusses the therapeutic working of self-portrait photography in relation to trauma. Therefore, the different theories of trauma, self-portrait photography and traces will be compared in order to understand how self-portrait photography can be a form of self-therapy to reflect on trauma. This comparative discourse analysis will be related to the case studies through visual analysis. The main focus will be on the work of Kolodziej and Nijhof in order to make an in-depth analysis of their work. While there are two main case studies, a few

other examples will be introduced to compare and contrast the different approaches of dealing with this topic. The visual elements of the case studies will be deducted through the visual analysis and are related to the different concepts that are distinguished in the comparative discourse analysis.

To elaborate on the case studies and their peers, this thesis also contains a visual thesis that will go into more depth about different ways that photographers use self-portrait photography to reflect on their mental trauma after having physical trauma inflicted onto their bodies. The visual thesis contains multiple photographic projects and/or singular photographs of emerging photographers who deal with this topic through their photography. These photographers were selected based on a time period, 2010 and later, and on where they are in their career. They are emerging photographers who have had only a few publications and/or exhibitions and their projects are often graduation projects or one of their first projects. Their works are carefully combined and collected into a visual thesis that deals with the same research question as the textual thesis but is answered through a visual narrative.

Chapter 1: Photographing The (In)Visible Trauma

After suffering from a physical trauma, the invisible trauma in the mind must be dealt with. But what if the physical traumatic event only left invisible traces, how does one visualize the mental trauma they are dealing with? Photographer Mandy Nijhof has been taking self-portraits for a decade, capturing herself and her battle with depression and PTSS after being sexually abused as a child. Nijhof photographed herself by using the Photobooth app on her MacBook (see fig 1.). She has an archive of multiple years of self-portraits taken with the Photobooth app. As she got older, she started using a digital camera more often. After putting her whole archive of self-portraits together, Nijhof discovered a hidden underlying narrative (Pringels). Nijhof rarely smiles in her photographs, they only show her with a serious face and emotions ranging from sadness to depression. There is an incomprehensibility of her trauma in her photographs, as she started to acknowledge her trauma some years after she took her first photographs with the Photobooth app. These photographs show someone who was affected by trauma, but Nijhof had not acknowledged the reality of the violent event just yet. Her photographs show that something is wrong and that she is unhappy, but the reason behind this is not visible as she is documenting herself and therefore just the aftermath of the traumatic event. Her archive of self-portrait photographs is combined with drawings and paintings in her project *When life gives you lemons, squeeze them out in the eyes of your abuser*.

This chapter will look at how photography and trauma are connected in relation to emerging photographers from 2010 until the present who use the medium of photography to reflect on their personal trauma and mental health after having physical trauma inflicted on their bodies. This will be done by looking at the photographs in the series *When life gives you lemons, squeeze them out in the eyes of your abuser* by Mandy Nijhof. Her work will be put into perspective by looking at theories of trauma and photography but also by looking at her peers; other emerging photographers who use self-portrait photography to reflect on their trauma. First, there will be a focus on the definition of trauma by looking at theories from literature studies and media theory. How is trauma defined and then

related to photography? After looking at various definitions of trauma, there will be a focus on the genre of late photography, as the traumatic event itself is not captured but rather the aftermath is. This will then be connected to the way the camera and the medium of photography operate from a technical perspective and how this is related to trauma. All of these concepts and theories will be related to the case study, the photographs of Nijhof, and its peers.

A Wound on the Mind

In order to understand why photography is used to reflect on personal trauma, it is important to establish the definition of trauma itself. In *Unclaimed Experience*, trauma theorist Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is a wound on the mind, not upon the body (3). She refers to Freud's concept of trauma and states that the wound on the mind cannot be compared to the wound on the body that is able to heal after an event. The wound on the mind is an event that is experienced too unexpectedly and too soon to be fully grasped and available to consciousness (Caruth 4). Therefore, trauma happens at the moment when the mind cannot comprehend what is happening, which causes a fracture in the mind. This happens due to the incomprehensibility and suddenness of the event, leading to a wound on the mind. This wound can return and haunt the victim at different and sudden moments in time. Caruth argues that what haunts the victim is not necessarily only the reality of the violent event, but also the reality of the incomprehensibility of the event; the unknown (6). This incomprehensibility of the event is reoccurring in the photographs of Nijhof. At first, she was unaware of what had happened to her as a child. She knew she was depressed and that something had happened during her childhood. During therapy, her memories of the sexual abuse got back and she got aware of what had happened to her (Pringels). Nijhof was aware that something had happened, she was aware of the unknown as Caruth calls it, but she needed therapy in order to trace back where this incomprehensibility and unknown came from.

Lutz Koepnick defines trauma as an extreme experience that is lived through without actually experiencing it. This traumatic event punctures and obliterates the psychic shields of protection and

integration, freezing the event and the traumatic moment in time and replacing it with a black box (106). This black box Koepnick refers to beholds the traumatic experience, replacing the actual memory in the mind. Photography can put this black box into perspective by looking at it from various angles and documenting temporal moments (108). Koepnick's concept of trauma, therefore, focuses on the blacked-out moment that can be viewed from various angles but never completely at once. Photography documents temporal moments and the photographs of Nijhof that were created in the last decade, show moments in time when the trauma has been revealed through her depression. By photographing herself at various moments in time, she looks at herself and her trauma through different angles. For example, the photographs taken with the Photobooth app, when Nijhof was unaware of the actual trauma, are different from the photographs taken when Nijhof was aware of her trauma. The photograph *You be heavy in my mind* (see fig. 2) shows Nijhof sitting on a bed, hugging a stuffed dog and holding her phone while looking into the camera. On her Instagram, Nijhof expresses her feelings that are held in the photograph in her caption. She just got back from the clinic where she spent nine months in therapy to accept her past and the present. Now, she is trying to get back to normal everyday life. The photograph shows Nijhof in a different phase of her dealing with her trauma compared to seven years earlier in *Untitled* (see fig. 1). Both show a different phase of dealing with her trauma; *Untitled* shows the incomprehensible moment and the unknown, as meant by Caruth, while *You be heavy in my mind* shows the moment when Nijhof is photographing and angling herself in order to understand the black box that has is keeping her trauma, as meant by Koepnick.

Another take on trauma is Ulrich Baer's concept of trauma in *Spectral evidence: the photography of trauma*. Baer argues that when trauma happens it blocks mental processing and that this causes an experience to not be converted into a memory or something that is forgotten (9). This refers to Caruth's idea of the incomprehensibility and the unknown. However, Baer focuses more on the inability to process and convert the occurring event into a memory. These traumatic experiences have passed through the subject as something real, but the actual memory of the event has not been

stored or forgotten. Baer argues that therefore these experiences cannot be seen or understood, but they must be witnessed (13). This relates to Koepnick's concept of the black box that replaces the memory; the memory is just a black box and is unprocessed, but locked inside the mind. However, Baer argues that it is not stored as it is not processed. This can be seen in the case of Nijhof as she is aware that something has happened which has caused her depression, but she is unaware of what that is specifically. During her time at the art academy, she got more aware of her trauma via her self-portraits as she had to reflect on them. Together with her therapy, this caused a shift in awareness of the sexual abuse that took place and caused her depression. While the traumatic event remained unprocessed at that specific time, Nijhof is trying to process it now through therapy, but also via self-portrait photography by looking at herself from various angles.

Photographing the Aftermath

What can be deduced from Nijhof's case, is that she uses photography to capture herself and indirectly capture her trauma. After she got aware of her photographs' relation to her trauma, she started focussing more on portraying the effects that the traumatic event left on her mind via her self-portraits. Photography is considered a late medium, as it usually comes after the event has happened, to capture the aftermath. This relates to trauma quite well as this, according to Caruth, returns to haunt the victim after the traumatic event has happened. It is an unhealed wound on the mind and therefore the trauma will still continue to take place after the traumatic event has happened. Trauma, therefore, is the aftermath. This can be seen in the photographs of Nijhof, as they specifically focus on her depression which is caused by PTSS after being sexually abused as a child. Nijhof's photographs show the lingering wound on the mind that was caused by the sexual abuse. Her photographs are taken after the fact, but still show the lingering traces of the wound on the mind. David Company referred to this type of photography as "late photography" and his take on this genre is that it makes the viewer think about the photographs taken before, during and after events. According to Company, photography is at the aftermath of culture, as in the present time the film camera's document the actual event, and

photography comes after. Photographs also appear in slower forms of media, such as magazines and galleries, again after the event has taken place (127). Nijhof's photographs are taken after the event has happened, but they make the viewer think about what happened before the event, as this is what is expressed in her photographs through her facial expressions and posing. Company describes the visuality of these late photographs as static, sombre and unaltered (124). Company argues that visually these static photographs have a stillness in them, complementing the stillness of the aftermath of the traumatic event. Even though there is this stillness in the photograph, it does spark a feeling that an event has taken place there (Company, 126). Company refers to the visuality of the photographs in relation to photographs of places. However, the photographs this thesis is dealing with are mainly portraits and photographs of the human body. While these are not geographical locations, the body that is photographed has been the site of trauma. Furthermore, there is an overlap in the visual elements, the static, sombre and unaltered. Looking at the photographs of Nijhof, they are all similar in their aesthetic because they were taken using the same settings via the Photobooth app. They are static, as they are taken in a fixed frame and they are also unaltered, as they are photographed with the app. While the photographs are quite still, the face of Nijhof reveals that something has happened that has sparked the emotions that she expresses on her face.

Another take on taking photographs after the event has happened, is the idea of Marianne Hirsch that photography promises to offer access to an event itself. She states that the easy assumption of the iconic and symbolic power of photography makes it a powerful medium for the transmission of events that are unimaginable (107). Therefore, the photographs that are taken after the traumatic event are reflective of the event in a different way, offering an indirect relation to the actual traumatic event. An example of this by one of Nijhof's peers, is one of the self-portraits by Marvel Harris. Harris made the photo series *Inner Journey* which is a portrayal of Harris' struggles with mental illness, self-love and gender identity. The photographs document their journey of being transgender and dealing with their mental struggles. Due to their struggles with gender identity Harris developed an eating disorder to avoid the bodily changes of becoming a woman during puberty (Pf Fotografie Magazine).

In one of their self-portraits, the different trauma's come together (see fig. 3). This self-portrait shows the struggles and trauma of both gender identity and mental health through the physical scars. The scars of the self-harm are healed, but the scars of the top surgery are still healing. These scars and forming scars offer access to the personal trauma of Harris after the trauma has happened. Art historian Henry M. Sayre states that "Disfigurement leaves scars. Scars trace disfiguring's violence. But scars mark, as well, the scene of healing." (65) The audience is late to the trauma, the scars are healed or almost healed, yet they show traces of the physical trauma on the body. However, as Caruth stated, trauma is a wound on the mind and does not heal as the wound inflicted on the body. Harris' facial expression shows that the trauma on the mind is still there, as their expression is vacant and displays sadness.

While Harris' body shows physical traces of trauma through scars, Nijhof's trauma is not visible as they are on the mind. However, there is an overlap through the facial expressions that show depression, sadness, and vacancy. Therefore, there is just the aftermath of the traumatic event that is shown and is, as Hirsch argues, an indirect link to the traumatic event. Referring back to Baer's take on trauma, he argues that the photograph does not provide evidence of the trauma, nor the chance for the viewer to experience the trauma through the photograph. Rather the photograph testifies to the theft of the experience and the invisibility of trauma (17). The photographs of Nijhof show this moment of theft of the experience as there is no visible evidence of the traumatic event itself, just the effects. As Baer argues, traumatic experiences cannot be seen or understood but they must be witnessed (13). As the photographs do not show the actual traumatic event, the sexual abuse is not visible or understood. However, the viewer is witnessing the effects that the sexual abuse left on Nijhof by seeing her struggle with PTSS through her facial expressions. Even though Nijhof does not have visible traces of trauma, as Harris has, the viewer is still able to witness the aftermath of the traumatic event through her self-portraits.

The Automatism of the Camera

Photography captures the aftermath of the traumatic event, therefore capturing the effects the traumatic event left on the victim. However, photography and trauma are connected in another way that makes the medium more than just a tool to photograph the aftermath of the event. Margaret Iversen opens her first chapter in *Photography, Trace and Trauma* with the connection that photography is a medium that is linked to the effects of trauma on the mind. Iversen states that: "The automaticity of the process, the wide-open camera lens, and the light sensitivity of film all lend themselves to this association. Just as photography, to some extent, bypasses artistic intention and convention, so also the traumatic event bypasses consciousness. Both involve an indelible impression of something generated outside" (1). While the photographer can time the moment when the shutter is released, there is this moment when the lens is open and the exact moment the photograph is taken is determined by the automaticity of the apparatus. Iversen divides the relationship between trauma and photography into two elements: the automatic mechanism and the exposure of what it encounters. The automatic mechanism of the camera and the exposure to what it encounters are closely connected to the subject of trauma. The first element of Iversen's theory, the automatism of the camera, connects it to the traumatic experience that is "recorded" without being properly comprehended by the subject (9). When the camera takes the photograph there is this moment when the shutter is open, the light is coming in and the photographer does not have control of what is being captured at that particular moment. Therefore, the exact moment a photograph is taken is not being properly assimilated by the subject, as it is not this moment that they actually see. It is, referring to Koepnick's concept, a black box moment that is not grasped by the photographer but is being recorded by the camera. The second element of Iversen's theory is exposure which she links to the indexicality of photography. She refers to the vulnerability of the subject of trauma and the empathetic feelings towards the other (9). The trauma that is being photographed is exposed to the camera and therefore the person who is in front of the lens becomes vulnerable as their trauma is being exposed. This draws out the feelings of the viewer to the exposed subject in the photograph. When looking at Nijhof's photographs, she is making

herself vulnerable, or exposed as Iversen would say, by showing the effect of the traumatic event and by making herself visible. This can especially be seen in *You be heavy in my mind* (see fig. 2) where Nijhof is holding a stuffed animal while looking hurt into the camera. She is in her bedroom, her personal space, and captures this private moment that exposes herself to the camera.

Art historian Henry M. Sayre looked at physical scars and their relation to photography. He continues the idea of the relationship between the technicality of photography and trauma by stating that a photograph is a slice of life, a physical cut from time. He says that “the violence of photography is that it severs its subject from life”, referring back to the idea of photography capturing an event that has already passed and belongs to the past (70). Sayre argues that photography cuts through time and cuts through the surface, bringing things to life. He considers this a necessity for making art as he sees art as a way of recovery that deals with all the scars. Referring back to his idea that scars show violence but also healing, he states that art goes on with its endless possibilities (73). Therefore, photography can serve as a medium to deal with these scars and the process of healing. As photography deals with the aftermath of the trauma and can only refer to the actual event, not represent it, it can show the visible and invisible scars that the traumatic experience has left.

Another peer of Nijhof is Laura Hospes, a photographer who worked with her trauma throughout the years, capturing different moments and building upon her self-portraits from the past. She created her photo series *UCP-UMCG* during her hospitalisation after trying to commit suicide. A big part of her oeuvre is focused on self-portraits throughout the different phases of her life. Her photograph *New Dawn* (see fig. 4) is part of *UCP-UMCG* and shows Hospes in the hospital with bandages around her wrists. She poses in front of the camera, touching her face softly while her wrist and bandages catch the light. While the photograph looks peaceful, through the posing and the soft look on Hospes' face, it shows the painful truth of her suicide attempt. The photograph captures the present, a new dawn for Hospes as she is hospitalised in a mental institution to work on her mental health, but also the past of her suicide attempt. The bandage around her wrist shows the visible traces of the traumatic experience, her suicide attempt, while also showing the invisible trauma that is on

the mind via her sad facial expression. This particular photograph shows a moment that Hospes calls the *New Dawn* which refers to Sayre's idea that photography can serve as a medium to deal with scars and heal them. She cuts this specific moment from time, by photographing it, and titles it *New Dawn* to announce a new phase of healing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter looked at different perspectives on using photography to reflect on personal trauma and mental health after experiencing physical trauma on the body. This was done by mainly focussing on the case study *If life gives you lemons, squeeze them out in the eyes of your abuser* by Mandy Nijhof, but also by looking at her peers, Marvel Harris and Laura Hospes. In order to put the work of Nijhof and her peers in perspective, the definition of trauma was defined. While the theories are different, there is an overlap in the idea that trauma is incomprehensible and that it is a wound on the mind that can come back and haunt the victim. Trauma was then related to the genre of late photography, as the photographs that were discussed were taken after the traumatic event had happened, but are the only visible remains of the traumatic events. The photographs do not represent the traumatic event but rather the aftermath of the trauma that has taken place; they refer indirectly to the traumatic event. Therefore, the aftermath of the traumatic event, which is incomprehensible for the victim, is photographed and made visible to the viewer. Photography, therefore, shows the aftermath rather than the traumatic event itself. Moreover, trauma and photography are also linked through how the apparatus operates as this is similar to trauma taking place. Due to exposure and the automatism of the camera, the concepts of Iversen, the process of taking a photograph is similar to a traumatic event taking place. The connection between photography and trauma focusses on the aftermath of the traumatic event and the act of taking a photograph creates an incomprehensible black-box moment itself, making it a medium that simulates trauma itself.

Chapter 2: The Therapeutic use of the Photographic Self-portrait

While Nijhof mainly focuses on her trauma via self-portrait photographs of the face, photographer Auriane Kolodziej mainly takes photographs of her body. Kolodziej used self-portrait photography for dealing with her depression and recovery from anorexia nervosa. She states that “After years of living dead, my self-portraits became a way for me to prove to myself that, still, I existed” (Kolodziej). In Kolodziej's project *Mirror, mirror* she makes her self-portraits physical by putting her photographs into transparent resin, locking up her past inside these blocks that are poetic coffins, where life and death cross and merge together. Kolodziej describes her photographs as fragments that mourn who she was and allow herself to make room for who she is in the present and who she is becoming. Her series features multiple unique pieces such as *The weight of the dawn* (see fig. 5) which is a block that shows a fragment of a photograph of Kolodziej laying naked on a bed. Her body is folded together and her eyes are closed. The photograph is vulnerable and Kolodziej looks almost asleep, if it were not for the pose that she is in with her body, being unnatural and posed. By photographing herself nude while dealing with recovery from anorexia nervosa, she displays her body in the present, knowing that it will become a moment of the past. While creating these works Kolodziej is working with the present, but she knows that these photographs, and the state of her body, will change in time and that these photographs will present a specific moment in time that now belongs to the past of her recovery.

Philosopher Ina Loewenberg argues that “we understand a portrait in any medium to be an artist's interpretive rendering of the "subject" while a self-portrait is an artist's presentation of self” (399). Via self-portrait photography, the photographer can present themselves according to their own view, giving them control over how they present themselves and their trauma. This control forces the photographer to reflect on their trauma and become conscious of how they present themselves through self-portrait photography. This chapter will explore the genre of self-portrait photography in relation to the topic of trauma and what role it can play in dealing with trauma. Why do these emerging

contemporary photographers choose to use self-portrait photography to reflect on their trauma? In order to understand why these emerging photographers choose to work with the genre of self-portraiture, this chapter will look at the therapeutic way of using photography to deal with trauma. This will then be connected to how self-portraits can offer control to the photographer in how they want to present themselves. As the photographer is both the maker and the one in front of the camera, this chapter will also look at posing and performing. When the photographer has all control, there is more thought in how they want to present themselves through posing and performing. All these theories and concepts will be connected to the case study *Mirror, mirror* by Auriane Kolodziej and some of her peers who work on a similar topic.

Self-Therapy through the Self-Portrait

There are several ways of using photography in a therapeutic context. According to psychologists Emanuela Saita and Martina Tramontano, there are three types of photography that can work therapeutically: Photo Therapy, Photo Art Therapy and Therapeutic Photography. Photo Therapy is used by trained professionals to help clients during their sessions and is a form of therapy that is based on photography and personal snapshots. Photo Art Therapy focuses more on the technicality of the medium and is more used practically as a form of Art Therapy. The third type is the one that will be referred to in this thesis, Therapeutic Photography. This form of photography is self-initiated and conducted by the photographer. Therefore, no formal psychotherapy is taking place (Saita and Tramontano, 2). Photography can therefore be therapeutic without it being used for formal psychotherapy. To expand on the concept of Therapeutic Photography, Howard Zehr defines Therapeutic Photography similar to Saita and Tramontano, but he elaborates on what it can do for the photographer. He argues that the process of making the photographs can help with personal healing and give more insights about the self. It also gives the photographer an opportunity to reflect and contemplate on the world around them. He states that when using photography as an attitude of wonder, one can open up for receiving and taking, which can make photography a meditative process

(16). While Therapeutic Photography is not necessarily a formal form of psychotherapy, it does offer therapeutic use for the photographer as it can help them with getting more access to their feelings and use it as a way to reflect on oneself, but also the outside world.

But why do these emerging photographers use the genre of self-portrait photography specifically? Psychologist and art therapist Judy Weisser argues that self-portraits give the photographer total control over the making and taking of their own photographs. Self-portrait therapeutic photography can help the photographer, and therefore the model, to work on their self-image while raising their self-esteem and working on their self-confidence by making, viewing, and accepting the images of themselves (130). Photographer and writer Christina Nuñez expands even more on the relationship between the self-portrait and the therapeutic function of it. She has developed a program called The Self-Portrait Experience, where she argues that self-portrait photography can serve as a form of self-therapy. Nuñez's idea of self-portrait photography is related to Loewenberg's theory of having control in self-representation, as Nuñez states that the image of the self means that one is creating their own image (53). Taking self-portraits can feel empowering as photography can be used for introspection. Photographers can work on themselves and express themselves; it can start a dialogue between the mind and the feeling to eventually make visible what must be expressed. This can be liberating, as it expresses the feelings that were hidden and now have become visible through photography (Nuñez, 55). The process of creating a self-portrait is like peeling away the layers of an onion; as the layers are peeled away they reveal the true essence (Nuñez, 56). The entire process of capturing the actual self-portrait makes the photographer think of how they want to present themselves and therefore go to the core of what they want to express and how they can make this visible through photography.

When relating the work of Kolodziej to Nuñez's ideas on how photography can be therapeutic, one has to look at the physical presentation of the photographs. Kolodziej puts the prints inside boxes. By taking these photographs and placing them inside the boxes, Kolodziej is taking action in a process that helps her therapeutically, putting the past away in these blocks that she describes as coffins.

Nuñez argues that the process of taking self-portraits becomes an autobiographical project that captures many phases of life that are not always understood immediately, but will be understood over time (57). While creating these works, Kolodziej is working with the present, but she knows that these photographs, and the state of her body, will change in time and that these photographs will present a specific moment in time that now belongs to the past of her recovery. By creating the photographs, she can reflect on the image of her body. As the relationship between her and her body is distorted due to anorexia, the self-portraits offer her a way to reflect on her own body and look at it from a different perspective. By putting the photographs away in a box, this act is enhanced even more as she is literally processing the image into an object and putting it away. Kolodziej refers to this as follows: "When I pour the resin on the mirror fragment, I feel like I am burying myself. It's this gesture: I pour the resin as one pours earth, concrete, on a coffin." The whole process of creating the final product, the processed photographs onto mirror shards in the resins, can be a therapeutic process of photographing the present and storing it elsewhere. This creates a healing process, referring back to Zehr's idea, and offers acceptance of her past body.

Controlling your own Image

When being both the photographer and model, there is more control over how one can present themselves in front of the camera as they are also the one operating the camera. Loewenberg argued that when taking a self-portrait, all control is given to the artist's presentation of themselves (399). In her article *Reflections on Self-Portraiture in Photography*, Loewenberg looks at the act of taking self-portraits through her own photographic experience of working with self-portrait photography. By creating her self-portraits, she notices that every photographic portrait is a moment in time when everything comes together and that specific moment is chosen by the photographer when they activate the camera's shutter and take the picture (399). All the components, from lighting to posing, are determined by the photographer and this is controlled even more when the photographer figures as both the artist and the model. However, this does influence the "reality" of a photograph. Loewenberg

states that even though we know that photography is not a mirror, we do feel like we are actually looking into the eyes of the person that is photographed and that we actually see a real figure that once was (400). When looking at Kolodziej's project in light of this particular statement by Loewenberg, an interesting contrast can be found. Kolodziej's project is called *Mirror, mirror* and she states that: "The mirrors are like chasms into which I dive, I sink, to explore my own depths." Kolodziej puts her photographs onto mirror fragments that are then put into the resin coffins. For example, *The soul keeper* (see fig. 6) shows a photograph of Kolodziej's eye that is shown on a shard of mirror. She deliberately chooses to work with a mirror as she struggled to look into the mirror and her own reflection has made her unhappy for years (Kolodziej). While Loewenberg states that photography is not a mirror because of the influenced reality, Kolodziej literally makes her photographs into pieces of mirror to create little reflections of her past self. While Loewenberg argues that the photograph is controlled by the photographer, she states that even though an artist is in control because they can choose the moment to photograph themselves and press the shutter, being in front of the camera means that they are not behind the camera. Therefore, she argues that artists cannot exactly determine when the photograph is actually taken. They can only imagine what they will look like (Loewenberg 400). When taking the photograph, there is a brief moment when the photographer is not in complete control; the moment when the shutter is released.

Philosopher Dawn M. Wilson nuances Loewenberg's idea of having all the power of one's own representation and continues on this particular moment when the shutter is released and the photograph is taken. In her article *Facing the Camera: Self-Portraits of Photographers as Artists* she looks at the medium of photography and the automatism that it has. She argues that in the discussion of photography and art, the idea of the automatism of photography stands in competition or conflict with artistic agency. Her definition of automatism is that "a photograph is the product of a nonconscious, natural, or mechanical process" (55). Therefore, it is not just a product of the artist's control, but the artist is limited in its control by the apparatus (Wilson, 55). Wilson observes the self-portraits not only from the perspective of the photographer, but also from the perspective of the viewer

and notices that “any given photograph could have been produced without intentional agency: perhaps, it is said, the camera could have been triggered by accident, yet the photograph would still look exactly the same” (56). Wilson looks at the credibility of photography, being a medium that is totally controlled by the artist. However, because of the automatism of photography there is some lack of control and that is the specific moment that the shutter is released and the actual photograph is being taken. To elaborate on the concept of automatism; while the camera is a mechanical object, it does require human agency. Writer and photographer Peter Henry Emerson describes the photographer making a set-up, which will result in the representation of his vision. However, as the camera is a machine it does impose conditions that were not included in the photographer’s mind but are in the photograph (185). While the automatism of the camera was referred to in the first chapter in relation to its similarity to how trauma operates, this chapter focuses on the moment where there is no control by the photographer. The photographer has a lot of control of their representation, but the moment the shutter is released they do not see the exact picture.

Wilson relates this idea of not having all control because of the automatism of the photographic medium, to the self-portrait that is taken using a mirror. The photographer is unable to see their face so a mirror can play an important role in self-portraiture by giving the possibility for the photographer to create a likeness of their appearance without standing in front of the camera (58). Therefore, the viewer thinks that everything is real and of true likeness as everything is reflected in the mirror, both the camera and the photographer, and what is in the photograph is a direct product of what can be seen in the mirror. The camera records its own reflection (Wilson, 59). While Kolodziej uses shards of mirror, she does not take her photographs via them. However, one of her peers, photographer Kimbra Audrey, also works with the genre of self-portraiture and she often uses a mirror in her self-portraits. Her latest work is only published on her Instagram because she is in an ongoing battle with breast cancer. In her Instagram captions, she writes about how hard it is and how she is dealing with a lot of difficult emotions and pain. She is dealing with her changing body, after having a mastectomy, and grieving the body and breast she once had. Her self-portrait *Hospital self-*

portrait with drains (see fig. 7) shows Audrey in the hospital with drains, her chest is bare and she is holding her camera. Wilson argues that the photographer can be more than a person who is using the automatic mechanism of a camera, contrasting the idea of photography being dominated by the automatism of the medium (61). The automatism of the camera makes it possible to pose for self-portraits in a new way that creates a distinctive form of self-awareness (Wilson, 63). Audrey has a lot of control in how she wants the photograph to look: the place, the settings, the choice for the black-and-white, the position of the camera, etc. Due to the automatism of the camera, she gets the opportunity to pose in front of it while taking the photograph directly via the mirror. There is the ability to create a self-portrait without looking at something in-between, it is direct in its communication and a direct product of the moment (Wilson, 62). Audrey's self-portrait is quickly taken to document herself during this time, showing an intimate moment where she poses and shows herself to the viewer. The mirror is an easy way of photographing herself and having control over how she poses, being able to look at herself and therefore being able to control how she presents herself.

Performing the Self

As described above, self-portrait photography can offer control to the photographer. However, there are some limitations because of the automatism of the medium, specifically the moment when the photograph is taken and the shutter comes down. Art historian Amelia Jones looks at self-portraits and the control in representation from a different perspective. In *The Eternal Return* Jones looks at how the photographer, and therefore the model, present themselves in front of the camera. She states that there is a duality there; she looks at the self-portrait photograph as a representation of a subject that is frozen through a photograph while the photograph also is a death-dealing apparatus that congeals time and fetishizes. However, the self-portrait is also performative and therefore gives life (949). The self-portrait photograph puts focus on the performance of the artist in front of the camera and lays the focus on the I instead of the other. By performing the self through photography, artists

act out identity and human existence and therefore become embodied subjects (Jones, 950). Jones notes that the tension of the self-portrait photograph resides in the posing: "the embodied subject is exposed as being a mask or screen, a site of projection and identification. It is thus through the pose, via the screen, that the subject opens into performativity and becomes animated" (959). When having control over your representation, a performative aspect happens when posing. The pose is deliberately chosen by the artist to express and present themselves. This can be seen in the self-portrait of Audrey (see fig. 7), who deliberately poses in front of the mirror to take a photograph of herself while being in treatment. She poses in front of the mirror and in front of the camera to showcase a specific situation. Jones argues that the photographic self-portrait is like history or the memory that forms it, as it is always developing and taking new meaning that is given through engagements where new contours for the subject are depicted (975). The photographs of Kolodziej and Audrey belong to the past; they are past representations of who they were. However, the artists present who they are at that specific moment in time, giving life to the photographs through the performance of posing, as Jones would say.

Photographer Ciara K. Walters works with this idea of showing who she is in the present in her self-portrait photographs, rather than who she was in the past. After being raped, Walters was unable to look at her own reflection or be in photographs. After five years she started to take self-portraits to reclaim her body and also deal with her feelings of shame and loneliness. She does this by posing in remote landscapes, sometimes dressed and sometimes naked. The nakedness displays the freedom that she has found within her body and has developed throughout the process of taking self-portraits (Baritoux). One of her nude self-portraits, *Untitled* (see fig. 8), shows Walters standing in front of a tree stretching herself and showing her entire body to the camera. She is naked and vulnerable, yet her pose is strong and powerful. Jones argued that the photograph of the body is a flesh-like screen; "one that presupposes the depth and materiality of the body as subject" (97). The depth of the photograph of the body is taken through displacements, identification, and projections of an interpretive relationship that makes the photograph come to life by working with the embodied

memories of the body (Jones, 968). The photograph of Walters standing in front of the tree, showing her body and posing in front of the camera makes her memories visible through the enlivened story of her body. Walters was raped, a trauma that happened to her body, and she decides to show her naked body on her terms: surrounded by nature, grounded and powerful. The acknowledgement of her past is what brings her to the present. Her body is a testament to what happened in the past but also to how she wants to present herself in the future. After having taken the photograph, which now belongs to the past, she rewrites the past of her body through a new image that does acknowledge what has happened to her, but represents her in a different way that fits with how she is feeling now about her trauma. The photograph of Walter, therefore, reflects the idea of Jones that the self-portrait photograph is both alive and dead, it is a past moment but shows life through the embodiment and performance that is within the photograph.

The photographs of Kolodziej, Audrey, and Walters are all similar in the fact that they are posed. The photographic self-portrait is a representation of the photographer embodying the present and how they want to present themselves through posing. By taking self-portrait photographs, introspection happens throughout the process of taking them as the photographer has to consciously think about how they want to present themselves and tell their story. This is done mostly through posing. In all the photographs discussed, the artists are posing in front of the camera. Writer and curator David Company argues in *Posing, Acting and Photography* that posing refers to the stillness of the photographic medium (98). When the photographer steps in front of the camera, the camera becomes a tool to document the acting that is happening in front of the camera. Therefore, the performance is for the image and the performance becomes an image. This indicates that the self-portraits created by these photographers are carefully constructed according to their own considerations and how they want to present themselves (Company, 100). There is a sense of melancholia in the presentation of themselves because of the self-performance that is happening in front of the camera. This is due to the conscious condition of posing in front of the camera and feeling the gaze of others and of themselves on them (Company, 111). By posing in front of the camera, the

photographer is scrutinizing themselves and looking at themselves through a lens, giving them the opportunity for introspection and self-therapy as they look at themselves from a different perspective. Kolodziej does this not only through the act of taking a self-portrait, she takes this even further by printing the photograph onto a shard of mirror and by putting it in a box. She performs in front of the camera, which becomes the image of herself at that specific moment in time. This is then put away into a box which makes the photograph a physical object. The physical object becomes an object of melancholia, as this feeling is being evoked through the presentation of herself in front of the camera.

Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter looked at Therapeutic Photography, which is defined as photography that can be therapeutic without professional help and is self-initiated by the photographer. According to Nuñez, specifically self-portrait photography can be therapeutic as it can be empowering for the photographer to create their own image and to get to the core of themselves. Self-portrait photography makes the photographer reflect on themselves by putting themselves in front of the camera and posing in front of it. While the artist controls a big part of their own image, there is also a lack of control as they are posing in front of the camera and do not see the exact moment the shutter is released. However, the photographer has almost all control over how they want to present themselves and they can do this through posing. According to Company, the photographer and therefore model becomes conscious of the gaze of others upon them through posing. This can make them reflect on how they want to present themselves but also reflect on their trauma through self-portrait photography. Kolodziej was the main case study in this chapter and besides her self-portrait photographs being therapeutic for her as they capture the present body that will become the past, she goes even further. By putting her photographs on mirror shards inside boxes, she continues processing her trauma. While taking the photographs itself can be therapeutic, the actual physical processing of the photographs enhances the therapeutic effect.

Chapter 3: The Impact of Showing the (In)Visible Scars

The common ground of the self-portrait photographs that were discussed in the previous chapters is that all the photographers have suffered from physical trauma on the body: self-harm wounds, cancer, rape, and anorexia nervosa. All of these have caused physical trauma on the body and left traces that are either visible, invisible, or have become invisible as time passed. All of their traumas have left scars on the body and they are either visible to the eye or have left invisible traces on the body. While they have suffered from physical trauma, there is still the trauma on the mind that has to be dealt with and they decided to deal with their trauma through self-portrait photography. Self-portrait photography can be therapeutic and help the photographer to deal with their trauma. Photography is a medium that is closely related to trauma because the act of capturing trauma is close to how trauma takes place. While the process of taking these photographs can be healing for the photographer, what is the relevance of bringing them to a broader audience and showing them to the public? What can be the impact of showing self-portrait photographs of emerging photographers dealing with trauma and (in)visible scars?

To understand the impact of these photographs on a broader public than just the artist themselves, this chapter will look at traces in relation to photography. The (in)visible scars that are shown in the photographs are traces of the traumatic events that happened and led the photographer to take these self-portraits as a form of self-therapy. In order to understand the relationship between photography and traces, the definition of a trace will be discussed in relation to the case studies of Nijhof and Kolodziej. How do their photographs contain traces of the traumatic event? This will then be related to the difference between visible and invisible scars and how they can both be traces of a traumatic event. By looking at these different aspects, the relevance of showing these projects to a bigger audience than just the photographers themselves will become clear.

Tracing Trauma

While the self-portraits of Nijhof and Kolodziej show themselves after the traumatic event has happened, inherently they also refer to the event that has caused the trauma. Their self-portrait photographs therefore function as traces of the traumatic event that has scarred them either physically or mentally, leaving visible or invisible traces on the body and the mind. In Nijhof's case, the traces of the sexual abuse are not visible on the body, but they are on the mind, showing through her depression. Kolodziej's recovering body still shows traces of Anorexia Nervosa as she is still in the process of recovery. In order to understand how these different traces function and become visible to the viewer, it is important to define the term traces. There are different interpretations of the term trace and its function within photography.

Film theorist Mary Ann Doane relates her interpretation of traces within photography to Charles Sanders Peirce's idea of the index that is not as clear in its relation to the object as, for example, an icon. Peirce applied the term index to a lot of diverse signs such as a footprint, a pointing finger and the photographic image. Doane states that in the case of the photographic trace "the index seems to harbor a fullness, an excessiveness of detail that is always supplemental to meaning or intention." (2). This is contrasted to the emptiness of the deixis, a shifting index, that is considered empty as its meaning shifts and can occasionally be filled in mutating situations (Doane, 2). When a photograph is taken of something that is happening at that time and a process of the light hitting the camera takes place, it is full as it relates to a specific moment in time when the photograph was taken. According to Doane, in light of Rosalind Krauss' idea of the index as meaninglessness because of its sole proposition to refer to "thereness", the index "only purports to point, to connect, to touch, to make language and representation adhere to the world as tangent—to reference a real without realism" (4). The index as a trace points to the thereness that once was. The photograph is a trace of a moment that once happened and was captured by a camera. A photograph itself is a trace of a specific moment in time but within a photograph, as it is full of details. According to Doane, there are more traces that refer to moments that happened before (2). For example, the photographs of Harris (see fig. 2) and

Hospes (see fig. 3) are traces of the exact moment the shutter was released and the photographs were taken. However, in the photographs themselves are traces of physical trauma inflicted onto the body that resulted in scarring. This is the same with Kolodziej, but in a different way as she does not have physical scars. Her body is in a different state at that time because of her Anorexia. Therefore, her body shows traces of her illness and her trauma through the state of her body. It points at the thereness of her illness through her body, showing a specific moment in time when her illness was visible through the body.

Philosopher Gregory Curry states that a photograph is a trace of its subject, a real moment in time that belongs to the past (287). He argues that traces can leave a direction and that these traces can carry traces in themselves (289). While the scars of Harris and Hospes are visible traces of what happened to them, the traces of what happened in the case of Nijhof are harder to show as what happened to her was physical but did not leave any visible traces on her body. However, she does express the scars it left mentally through her facial expressions that show her depression and PTSS as a consequence of the traumatic event. Therefore, her facial expressions are traces of her mental trauma that trace back to the physical trauma that was inflicted on her body. Referring back to the idea of Doane of “thereness”, the “thereness” of her physical trauma is present in the current expression of her mental trauma through her facial expression. The viewer, therefore, has to trace back several traces in order to reach the origin of the mental trauma. This can be done by following the traces within the photograph.

While some of the photographs that do not show physical traces on the body are harder to trace back to the actual traumatic event that inflicted the physical pain, they do give a feeling that something is wrong and has happened through, for example, facial expression and body language. Margaret Iversen refers to the feeling of something that has taken place, yet it is not captured within the photograph. She states that a “Part of what is traumatic about photography is that it is an indexical trace of someone or something that is no more, or is no longer the same. We are dealing, then, not with presence but with past presence, which is to say, the hollowed-out presence of an absence” (6).

The photograph is a trace of a past event because it belongs to the past. The trauma belongs to the past, yet there is the present that still is dealing with the past that is captured within the photograph, tracing back to the actual event. The index as a trace, according to Iversen, is characterized by “its being a mode of mark-making that has the paradoxical quality of being a trace of (past) presence, that is, a presence invaded by absence and loss.” (24). Traces refer to a present that, when the photograph is taken, belongs to the past. Therefore, the presence that is captured is already invaded with a sense of absence and loss.

The photographs of Kolodziej are a great example of this as she is very much aware of this sense of absence and loss. She specifically makes use of this absence and loss by putting away her photographs in these, as she states, coffins, so that they become physical objects that once were the present. As the photographs are taken during her recovery, the photographs become objects that show the loss of the past. In the case of Nijhof, it is less obvious as she takes a lot of self-portraits but does not specifically point out the absence and loss of the present. Her photographs are more about the past that is presented through the present. The facial expressions refer to the effects she experiences of sexual abuse; depression and PTSS. Her photographs show traces of the absence of the event that took place which caused the depression and PTSS, therefore figuring as traces of traces, referring back to the concept of Curry that traces carry traces within themselves that leave a direction. The photographs of Nijhof show traces of the actual traumatic event that happened and caused the present facial expressions that are traces of the mental trauma that she is dealing with. Therefore, when dealing with invisible traces on the body, the facial expression can become a trace to the mental trauma which is traced back to the physical trauma that has been inflicted, being the source of the mental trauma.

The Inside and the Outside

Both the photographs of Kolodziej and Nijhof show traces to the trauma on the mind, which is a trace of the trauma that has been inflicted onto their body. The main difference between Kolodziej and

Nijhof is that the traces of Kolodziej's illness are visible on her body as she is still recovering from Anorexia. The sexual abuse that happened to Nijhof belongs to the past, but she is still dealing with the mental scars that it left. While Kolodziej's traces are visible on the outside, Nijhof's traces are harder to see as they are more on the inside. However, her facial expressions and body language can figure as traces of her mental trauma that is then connected to her physical trauma. Therefore, the outside can figure as a reflection of the inside.

Writer and curator Jill Bennett looks at the relationship between the inside and the outside expressions through art. She states that "Emotions are felt only as they are experienced in the present; as remembered events, they become representation" (452). Therefore, the work that is created in the act of remembering the emotions that were experienced creates a distance from the emotion, as one has to think about rather than feel the actual emotion. Memory is transformed into a representation, but trauma resists this processing as they are unprocessed memories (Bennett, 452). As these memories cannot be processed but are wanted to be expressed through art, a language needs to be found to express them as this cannot happen through representations. This can be done by stepping into the process of moving outside of the traumatic memory; moving from the inside to the outside (Bennett, 454). According to Weisser, the process of photographing oneself can lead to self-reflection and self-awareness. Therefore, the act and process of taking a photograph can make the photographer move outside of their head in order to deal with their traumatic memory. By moving outside of their head, they can create a work that is related to their trauma, which can help them process it. They express their trauma through self-portrait photography to deal with their trauma outside of their mind. Kolodziej does this quite literally by creating physical objects from her photographs that exist outside of her mind and become tactile objects. While her photographs are concealed in these coffins and therefore are not touchable, the surrounding of them is physical. These coffins can be seen as the body that is concealing the memory, but that has become transparent to show the audience what is trapped on the inside of Kolodziej's mind. The photograph, and therefore an expression of how she is feeling, is just out of reach but has become visible to the outside.

As dealing with trauma is an ongoing process, their visual journey through photography is an ongoing process too. Sayre argues that when a photograph is contextualized by being in a series, the photograph gets a voice and extends itself by relating to other photographs (71). The power of Nijhof's photographs with the Photobooth app lies in the endless repetition of similar photographs that goes on for years. A single photograph shows a young woman looking sad, whereas an endless stream of self-portraits that goes on for years shows someone who is struggling with her mental health and has been struggling with it for many years. It shows her endless struggle for a longer period of time than just one photograph. The single photograph becomes part of a bigger story and as more photographs are gathered, more possible stories and intersections of signifiers are happening (Sayre, 71). The power lies in the quantity of the photographs that each tell a story in their own way, but also tell a story in the bigger picture. Comparing *Untitled* (see fig 1.) to *Untitled* (see fig 9.), they show Nijhof in a different time period and space, with a different hair style and facial expression. However, in the context of all the photographs taken by Nijhof, they show someone who is still struggling with depression and PTSS. The passing of time makes the struggle with the effects of mental trauma visible after having physical trauma inflicted onto the body. It shows the viewer that many years can pass, but Nijhof is still dealing with the effects of what has happened to her. While she cannot show what is going on inside her mind, she can show her depression and PTSS through her facial expression and through the passing of time by showing the many photographs she has taken over the years.

While the photographers are dealing with their traumas and reflecting on them through photography, what is the relevance of bringing their photographs to the public? Why is it so important to show the inside of what they are dealing with and making it visible to the outside? In this regard, Sayre stated the following: "Art as the necessity to refill, refigure, the space it continually opens up between itself and life. Art as recovery, with all its scars." (73). The photographs can help with recovery from trauma and show their visible and invisible scars to the outside. Via traces, the audience can trace the present of the photographs back to the past event of the trauma and, therefore, understand that a traumatic experience has happened in the past which led to the present of the photograph where

the photographer is still dealing with the aftereffect of the trauma on the mind. As these feelings and trauma are dealt with on the inside, by referring and processing them on the outside they make these private feelings accessible to a bigger audience. Bennett argues that, as the spectator of the imagery of traumatic memory, we can regard an affective encounter with the traumatic memory from the outside by coming into contact with the concealed inside (461). This can offer the spectator a chance to understand the effects of the physical trauma on the body that leaves a trauma on the mind that can take longer to heal. By seeing the photographs of Nijhof and Kolodziej, the spectator can sense through the traces that something has happened, which explains the (past) present that is now shown in the photographs. This can help with understanding their trauma on the mind that remains invisible to the outside, but that Nijhof and Kolodziej have to deal with on the inside. By bringing these mental traumas to a broader audience, it raises awareness for the mental health issues that some people deal with. It opens up a conversation through personal narratives. While it raises awareness for mental trauma, it also raises awareness for the physical trauma that was inflicted on the body. All these traces raise awareness for the different aspects of trauma, both mental and physical, and bring a part of the inside experience to the outside. While the photographs are not an exact representation of the inside, they can be a reflection on what is happening on the inside and communicate this to the outside, sharing their personal reflection with the viewer.

Conclusion

The feelings that are felt on the inside by the photographer can be expressed via traces in their photographs. While they might take photographs to deal with their trauma and this process can work therapeutically, their photographs can also show a bigger audience what can go on inside others' minds when having experienced trauma. While trauma cannot be made visible, it can be referred to via traces. These traces can either be visible, for example scars on the body, or invisible but expressed via the traces that the physical trauma left behind, which can then be expressed through facial expressions or body language. The viewer can follow these traces, or traces of traces in case of the

invisible scars, and get an understanding that trauma has taken place. While these photographs do not represent their trauma, the self-portraits have become a reflection of the inside feelings that are shown through traces to the outside world. The photographs can therefore open up difficult conversations about physical and mental trauma through the personal narratives that are expressed by the self-portraits of these emerging photographers.

Conclusion

This thesis asks how emerging contemporary photographers from 2010 until the present use the genre of self-portrait photography to reflect on their personal trauma and mental health after having physical trauma inflicted on their bodies. In order to answer this question, two main case studies were used to reflect on the research question via visual analysis and comparative discourse analysis; *When life gives you lemons, squeeze them out in the eyes of your abuser* (2022) by Mandy Nijhof (1995) and *Mirror, mirror* (2022) by Auriane Kolodziej (1993). While these case studies were the main focus of this thesis, photographs made by other emerging contemporary photographers were included to give an extra insight into different and/or similar approaches on the topic of mental trauma after physical trauma. The works of Marvel Harris, Laura Hospes, Kimbra Audrey and Ciara K. Walters were discussed to show different types of trauma and how these photographers deal with them through different types of self-portrait photography. These photographers used self-portrait photography to reflect on their mental health and the remaining trauma on the mind after having physical trauma inflicted on their bodies. Their physical traumas ranged from self-harm and anorexia to rape and sexual abuse. Their traumas, visual language, and approaches were different, but the similarity in all the different works is that they therapeutically used self-portrait photography to reflect on their trauma. The visual thesis includes more emerging contemporary photographers who use self-portrait photography to reflect on their trauma, showing even more different visual languages and approaches.

This thesis was divided into three chapters that each addressed different aspects of the research question. The first chapter addressed the topic of trauma by looking at how the medium of photography is connected to trauma. This was mainly done by looking at the project of Nijhof, but it also discussed the work of Harris and Hospes to see how these photographers used the medium of photography to reflect on their trauma. The first chapter establishes the definition of trauma according to the theories and concepts of Caruth, Koepnick, and Baer. Trauma is defined as an incomprehensible event that happened too quickly for the mind to process what is happening. This leaves a wound on

the mind that comes back to haunt the victim of the trauma. However, as the traumatic event is incomprehensible, it is hard for the victim of the trauma to understand what has happened, leaving a black box instead of a memory. In order to reflect on the missing memories of the traumatic event, the photographs belong to the genre of late photography. The photographs are therefore photographs of the aftermath of the trauma and they indirectly refer to the traumatic event itself. The aftermath of the trauma is made visible through the self-portrait photographs. The act of using the specific medium of photography to reflect on trauma adds an extra layer of depth as taking a photograph is quite similar to how trauma works. In both photography and trauma, there is an incomprehensibility and a black-box moment, in this case when the shutter is released and the exact moment the photograph is taken is invisible.

After having looked at the connection between trauma and photography, the second chapter dives into self-portrait photography and discusses why emerging photographers chose to reflect on their trauma by photographing themselves. The second chapter discusses the therapeutic aspect of photography that is self-initiated by the photographer and can be done without professional help. Photography can be empowering and the act of taking photographs can help the photographer reflect on themselves through posing. Therefore, they become aware of how they want to present themselves to the audience and how they are reflecting on their trauma. The photographer has almost all control over their presentation of themselves, except for the specific moment the shutter is released, which refers back to the automatism of the camera from the first chapter. However, they have all control over the lighting, framing and posing. Therefore, they can craft their own photograph and presentation of themselves. In order to create this image, the photographer has to reflect on how they want to present themselves and, in this case, reflect on their trauma by posing in front of the camera.

The third chapter looks at the impact of showing visible and invisible scars of the trauma. While these photographers address their trauma in their self-portrait photographs, their trauma is traceable through invisible and visible traces. Some of the physical traumas have left scars while others have left invisible scars on the mind. Because these scars are invisible, it is harder to see the

scars the traumatic event has left behind. By following the traces within the photograph, the viewer can get an insight into the trauma that is left on the mind of the photographer. These traces can be found via the scars that are visible on the body or by seeing the facial expressions and body language of the photographer that express feelings and emotions that are a consequence of their mental trauma. The self-portraits serve as a reflection of the inside feelings via these visible and invisible traces. By showing these personal photographs and projects to an audience, they open up an important and difficult conversation about physical and mental trauma.

The emerging contemporary photographers from 2010 until the present use the genre of self-portrait photography to reflect on their personal trauma and mental health after having physical trauma inflicted on their bodies, by having control over their own image and how they want to present their trauma to the audience. The process of taking a self-portrait can be therapeutic, as it makes the photographer reflect on how they want to present themselves and convey their message to the public. In doing so, they have control over their own presentation and can express themselves through posing. By performing and posing in front of the camera, they put in traces that are either visible or invisible and trace back to the traumatic event. While they have control over how they present themselves, this is limited as they are also in front of the camera and do not have total control of the outcome due to the automatism of the medium. This automatism of the camera simulates the black-box moment that is also experienced when experiencing trauma. However, instead of having a black box that replaces the memory of the traumatic event, a photograph now takes the place of the black box moment. The photograph is a result of posing and limited control that is filled with traces that reflect on the traumatic event that has taken place. While the trauma on the mind is invisible and cannot be made visible, the facial expressions, body language and scars figure as traces to show that something has happened and caused the trauma on the mind. The way they make these traces visible and the way that these photographers present themselves through self-portrait photography, therefore, works empowering as the whole process of creating their self-portrait makes them reflect on how they want

to present themselves and their story to the public. By doing this, they also reflect on their trauma and go back to the memory of the traumatic event, trying to process the unprocessed and therefore deal with their trauma. This process can work therapeutically as the photographer is very consciously dealing with their own image and trauma.

The Self-Portrait Experience by Christina Nuñez is a great example of a program that acknowledges the therapeutic function of the self-portrait. However, a program that focuses specifically on how to use self-portrait photography to deal with mental trauma after physical trauma would be desirable. That way, therapeutic self-portrait photography can be more than just self-initiated. It could be used to deliberately reflect on mental health and use it to process trauma. However, this would require further research that should be done in collaboration with the psychology department as this thesis looks at this concept from a media theory point of view.

When looking at the works of Kolodziej, Nijhof, Harris, Hospes, Audrey and Walters, but also my own experience that I shared in the introduction, it is undeniable that self-portrait photography can work therapeutically and help to deal with mental trauma after physical trauma. It is a creative solution to a painful problem.

Illustrations



Fig. 1. Mandy Nijhof, *Untitled*, 2014.



Fig. 2. Mandy Nijhof, *You be heavy in my mind*, 2021.



Fig. 3. Marvel Harris, *Untitled*, 2019.



Fig. 4. Laura Hospes, *New Dawn*, 2015.



Fig. 5. Auriane Kolodziej, *The weight of the dawn*, 2020.



Fig. 6. Auriane Kolodziej, *The soul keeper*, 2023.



Fig. 7. Kimbra Audrey, *Hospital self-portrait with drains*, 2022.



Fig. 8. Ciarra K. Walters, *Untitled*, 2018.



Fig. 9. Mandy Nijhof, *Untitled*, 2015.

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