

Opening A Box of Miniature Reality

Unseen Memories in an Album

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All of this begins with our leaving each other.

Be covered

Be blurry

Be lucid

They are repeated

They are fluid in this body

How much painfulness you undergo

seeing who left

who is leaving

through remained imagery

How much you can see by that

To experience pain

but get released

which is the end of memories¹

December 2019

¹ Zijian Zhou, 'Poem', *THINKING AND DOINGS*, 2019
<<https://zijianjoe.com/2019/12/12/poem/>> [accessed 4 February 2021].

Be covered

Be blurry

Be clear

They are repeated

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How much painfulness you undergo

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Fig. 0. Zijian Zhou, *Original Manuscript*, 2019

Abstract

Photography lights the memory; memory generates narratives, subsequently evoking emotion. As Zijian Zhou looks through his personal belongings to recall his former lover, there are ruminations being brought up. Recalling the histories behind photographs collected in an album or monopolized on an electronic device is not merely dedicated to the go-by relationship, but a sort of self-indulgence as well. Zhou sees this work as eight sections in his personal album like leafing through different and inseparable parts of the album, to lead reader to open unseen memories and to examine and discuss memory, memory-image and family photography within the personal anecdotes involving love, loss and domesticity of queer and trans.

Keywords

Memory, memory-image, family album, love and loss.

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Prologue



Fig. 1. Zijian Zhou, *Hovering*, Photography 2021

The meaning of memory images is linked to their truth content. So long as they are embedded in the uncontrolled life of the drives, they are inhabited by a demonic ambiguity; they are opaque, like frosted glass which scarcely a ray of light can penetrate.²

² Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 50–51.

Introduction

Photography lights my memory, memory generates the narrative, subsequently evoking emotion. The journey of remembrance and forgetting is of 'Exquisite Pain'³; I was suffering and self-therapying since his leaving from our last relationship. As I look through my personal belongings to recall my former lover, there are ruminations being brought up. Recalling the histories behind photographs collected in an album or monopolized on an electronic device is not merely dedicated to the go-by relationship, but a sort of self-indulgence as well. Four years had passed by the time I positioned this experience through the writing. To suffer but to re-waken. The photograph album is intimate, domestic and cultural. I thus structure this essay as eight sections like leafing through different and inseparable parts of my personal album, to lead reader to open unseen memories and to examine and discuss memory, memory-image and family photography within my personal anecdotes involving love, loss and domesticity of queer and trans. The title 'Opening the Box of Miniature Reality' is a metaphor derived from the archive concept of Joseph Cornell's box art⁴ and Susan Sontag's 'miniature of reality' in *On Photography*.⁵ My writing approach will remain personal in some paragraphs as a style inspired by Maggie Nelson's autofiction in *Bluets*,⁶ to evoke and replenish absent emotions on the cold and unfeeling image pixels or analogue grains being gazed at. The texts in light grey colour for letters to my ex-lover and friends represent the precarious and mercurial quality of remembrance, responding to Sophie Calle's repeating and fading paragraphs in *Exquisite Pain*. I draw my primary perspective and research of memory and image from varied essays in *Memory*, one of the Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art.⁷

Each section derives from an autofiction behind selected images from the album. Starting with a detailed narrative then bringing the reader into a particular context is the methodology I use to interplay between my recollections and the conceptual perspectives from varied sources. In the first six sections this combines with narratives and critical reflections. In 'Unfolding' and 'Self-indulgence' I integrate the pain of loss, love and recollection and forgetting into the act of shredding and reassembling my former lover's photography, to address how image and image-memory interweave in my self-therapy of losing a beloved one by incorporating

³ Sophie Calle, *Sophie Calle - Exquisite Pain*, 1st edition (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004).

⁴ 'Joseph Cornell | Exhibition | Royal Academy of Arts' <<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/joseph-cornell>> [accessed 18 April 2021].

⁵ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Penguin UK, 2014).

⁶ Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (Wave Books, 2009).

⁷ *Memory: Marina Abramovic; Eija-Liisa Ahtila; Kutlug Ataman ...*, ed. by Ian Farr and Whitechapel Art Gallery, Documents of Contemporary Art (London: Whitechapel Gallery [u.a.], 2012).

elements of Siegfried Kracauer's writing in 'Photography'.⁸ For the section of 'I can't. How Can I? Misery', the poem 'Eloisa to Abelard' quoted in the film *Eternal Sunshine of Spotless Mind* by Michel Gondry⁹ mirrors the agonising process of forgetting a person through this memory-expunged film. 'Recollecting in the Monotony' involves my stay-at-home experiences during the pandemic to re-read the album, which is linked to collective memory, personal photography and family albums with reference to *Family snaps: the meaning of domestic photography* by Jo Spence and Patricia Holland.¹⁰ An old Cosina camera that my uncle used in his family makes me think of the domesticity of homosexual family with Simon Watney's ideas in 'Ordinary Boys'. 'The point has been made by writers such as Terry Dennett, who compare family albums to other sorts of albums that record the lives of clubs, political groups and other networks of support and obligation.'¹¹ In 'Hallucination or Reality', I re-think the experience of my close friends when I look at their snapshots archived in my album. This usually involves intimate venues that merge sexuality and gender identity issues with other networks. They share memories with me over and through my unsettled and nomadic life, which is beyond domesticity¹² but I interweave them with the subversion of conventional domestication. When I narrate the fiction that I recall from our collective memory of a historic town, Pingyao, using loose and breaking phrases to represent the imaginary process of recollection. Whereas I depict the past as the memory-images from my deep consciousness and hallucination, this is both the condensation of 'pure memory' and image that Paul Ricoeur discusses in his essay 'Memories and Images'¹³ and the integration of text in *Matter and Memory* by Henri Bergson.¹⁴

In the final narrative, 'At Odds' and 'Burning Memories', I deploy an experimental perspective concerning transgender people whose family albums and collective memory confront domestic life. They potentially have a gap or a change to cross after the enactment of their transitioning appearance and gender expression. This alteration is likely to be at odds with the memory of their family or friends in old albums. I present my trans friend, Wang's awkward situation where he burns his early photographs in the family album as he faces up to the normative domesticity and heterosexual family that should not belong to him. In the final section 'The Back of My Album', I articulate further my research on Kracauer's theory of memory,

⁸ 19/04/2021 05:01:00

⁹ Michel Gondry, *Eternal Sunshine of Spotless Mind* (Focus Features, 2004).

¹⁰ 'Ordinary Boys', in *Family Snaps: The Meaning of Domestic Photography*, ed. by Jo Spence and Patricia Holland (London: Virago, 1991), pp. 26–34.

¹¹ Patricia Holland, "'Sweet It Is to Scan . . .': Personal Photographs and Popular Photography', in *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, ed. by Liz Wells (Routledge, 2015).

¹² Holland.

¹³ Paul Ricoeur, 'Paul Ricoeur: Memories and Images, 2004', in *Memory*, ed. by Ian Farr, Documents of Contemporary Art (London: Whitechapel Gallery [u.a.], 2012), pp. 66–70.

¹⁴ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (Mansfield Centre (Conn.): Martino Fine Books, 2011).

memory-images and photography, and how it has intertwined with my anecdotes. Roland Barthes, too, has many perspectives on memory, history and the photograph which contrast with Kracauer. While Kracauer relies on a metaphysical and structuralist approach to the reading of images in his writing, Barthes' text becomes more personal. Barthes argues for the distinction between a person in history and a person in memory in *Camera Lucida*.¹⁵ I find it is the distinction that responds to the question – where does the person exist who Wang has eliminated from his family album?

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Vintage Classics (London: Vintage, 2000).

Unfolding

All of this begins with our leaving each other. Every newly printed photo thickens the album that has accompanied me for five years. I placed it in the narrow gap of my trunk as I have been organizing those letters and notes. Nostalgia or a memory collection had never existed in my mind until I realized that I was suffering the 'exquisite pain'¹⁶ of your leaving. Each remembered scene is linked to the full content hidden in photographs. But that 'memory's record is full of gaps'¹⁷ is revealed by the photo shreds of your portrait, that I cut into a pile of pieces in one of my experimental collage in *The Mnemonic*¹⁸. It is the scattered images that just mirror your face buried in my implicit memories. Memory has never escaped from this body and always lingers in it. But memory cannot exactly trace dates and is constantly skipping years and stretching temporal distance.¹⁹ Photography records the time and brings me back to the remembered scene - I texted you that day, I shared a screenshot of a page from my co-publication, which layout a range of photographs from the last four years. Your butt appeared in the middle of this image - you were washing your hands with pants off in the sink of our studio. I recall so many details and experiences when gazing at photographs bound in the album. Then a movement, from depths to the surface, pulls out a mass of mental scenes or memory-images. They are at odds with photographic representation. How does memory thus intertwine with image?

¹⁶ Calle.

¹⁷ Siegfried Kracauer, 'Siegfried Kracauer: Memory Image, 1927', in *Memory*, ed. by Ian Farr, Documents of Contemporary Art (London: Whitechapel Gallery [u.a.], 2012), p. 45.

¹⁸ Zijian Zhou, *The Mnemonic*, hand-made paper with photo shreds, 2019.

¹⁹ Kracauer, 'Siegfried Kracauer: Memory Image, 1927', p. 45.



Fig. 2. Zijian Zhou, work-in-progress of *The Mnemonic*, 2019

To look through the album
to keep thinking of you
thinking of our shared time
our last three years
becoming a habit

I hate this feeling
I cannot look at you when I miss you
Yelling may be a way to forget it
Yet you linger in my mind forever
Thinking of you
then becoming
to eliminate your appearance
from my brain
But I can't
how can I
I shredded your images
Re-assembling them in the paper pulp

I was washing these photos in my bathroom
Check the date of each image on my phone
Looking for the chat history
the date of the notes
Maybe I would find what I texted you on that day
These loose words become a memoir in my essay

I usually wrote to you
to bring out the thoughts
that I can't cover up
after the year our relationship ended
Desiring
Burning
response from you
Only short phrases
you sent



28 days ago, the man I love left me. For three months I'd been looking forward to that day. It was January 25, 1985. I was in room 261 of the Imperial Hotel in New Delhi. A spacious room with a gray moth-eaten carpet, bluish wallpaper and twin beds. I was sitting on the one to the right, holding the telegram telling me to call my father because M. had had an accident. I had left France ninety-two days earlier and we were supposed to be meeting up at New Delhi airport on January 24. He was coming from Paris and I was coming from Tokyo. Then this message. Hours of imagining the worst went by before I got through to my father. He hadn't heard anything. So I tried to call M. He was at home – stupid but true. And, the accident was an abscess. I realized that he was leaving me. He wanted to make it less painful. He said he wanted to take me in his arms and explain a few things. Except that he didn't. Egotism, cowardice or plain stinginess? And the best he could come up with was this childish excuse, this infected finger, using my own father as a medical alibi. I hung up. I sat there for hours on the bed, staring at that damned phone. That red phone.

Fig. 3. Sophie Calle, *Exquisite Pain*, 2003

Self-indulgence

'An individual retains memories because they are personally significant. Thus, they are organized according to a principle which is essentially different from the organizing principle of photography.'²⁰

In *Exquisite Pain*, Sophie Calle counts the days when she is waiting for a call from her former lover, but only one photograph is repeatedly represented in 99 pages – a red rotary dialling phone placed on a bed of the hotel. (fig.4) The printed text of her narratives gets lighter, less vivid until it disappears from our vision. Calle wrote many on her trip from Europe to Japan, but she could not wait for her lover's arrival and response. She repeated her story of loss of love to 36 persons whilst they were asked to tell back an 'exquisite-pain' story. Calle's pain is subdued by the story repeating, from the emotional to the calm, as the written words disappear on each page.

I spent one year 'organizing' my memories which I celebrated and suffered with you. The significant scenes are the traces you left, that you or we marked on the long scroll of our memories. But every time I reach to the marks, they drift in and out of clarity, as scenarios in the dream are light in the centre yet darken among them; they stir up my emotions, whether happy or sad. They are fragmentized memory images, unlike the photographs in my album, which are clear and lucid and of which I am capable of contemplating.

To organize photography is to retain our memory. I am afraid of losing the memories and afraid that I would forget you. To look at the album again and again is how our memory persists. I dream of it, in the condensation of a cloud of memory, images pass by, you and you. I experience our intimate time on the sofa, our dinner at dusk and our fight in the room. I feel extreme pain and so close to you, like you are in front of my eyes, yet I cannot touch your face. I attempt to escape from the self-indulgence. Subsequently jumping back to the reality, I wash your photos in my bathroom and rub them with my hands. Photos then appear to be fragment images, to be paper shreds. They resolve and integrate the memories in the paper pulp of photo shreds. They are reformed as an agglomerate whole of fragments. Memory loses its depth and emotion when photography documents it, as 'photography appears as a jumble that consists of garbage.'²¹ When memory stored in a photograph does not grasp its warmth and emotion, photography reduces memory to many callous pixels or analogue grains. Memory is of fragments and vestiges overlapping with images in the album, while it is being expunged.

²⁰ Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, pp. 50–51.

²¹ Kracauer, 'Siegfried Kracauer: Memory Image, 1927', p. 46.

Recollecting
repeating
then
avoiding
forgetting
as a self-therapy
the pain of loss
fades out
'The exorcism has worked'.²²



Fig. 4. Zijian Zhou, *The Mnemonic*, 2019

²² 'Sophie Calle: Exquisite Pain – Press Release | Paula Cooper Gallery'
<<https://www.paulacoopergallery.com/exhibitions/sophie-calle-exquisite-pain/press-release>> [accessed 31 January 2021].

I Can't. How Can I? Misery.

'How happy is the blameless vestal's lot, the world forgetting, by the world forgot, Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind, each prayer accepted, and each wish resigned.'²³ The poem written by Alexander Pope describes Elois's extreme ambivalence. She still loves Abelard, but they cannot be together. She must live a life devoted to God.

The melancholy or joy would come together following the recollection. I could not avoid the trap of thinking of you whilst getting rid of the painful memory. It was not so clear that I was spontaneously erasing any memory about you. I did not realise that my act of organising and shredding was an attempt to forget you until I watched *Eternal Sunshine of Spotless Mind*.

Eternal Sunshine of Spotless Mind depicts a relationship dilemma. Joey loves Clementine and refuses to erase her from his memory, but there are always conflicts in reality. There is no ideal love, and the longer the two stay together, the less love feels like a pleasure and more like torture. The narrative subsequently takes place in Joel's mind during this memory erasure procedure. Joel finds himself revisiting his memories of Clementine in reverse and experiencing their erasure, starting from the downfall of their relationship. As he comes across happier memories of Clementine early in their relationship, he attempts to preserve at least some memory of her and his love for her, trying to evade the procedure by taking his idealized memory of Clementine into memories not linked to her and attempting to wake up and stop the process. Joey runs through different and dream-like scenes in his memories map, experiencing the memory images that Clementine exists in. Joel runs across his memory scenes when repeatedly seeing that Clementine has come and gone and suffers the misery of loss, just as I shatter your photographs in my album but then put them back in a new whole of fragments. He swims in the brain, but Clementine always vanishes from the bed, the coach, the house and the frozen lake where they lie to look at the starry night. Joey wakes up on a normal morning and Clementine has gone.

²³Alexander Pope, 'Eloisa to Abelard', a poem quoted in film by Gondry.

To you

Re-wake. The failed relationship. Memories collected in the album contain a significance beyond love and loss not just as visual images. Since I never believed that temporal distance would prevent me from maintaining this relationship, although you were far away from me in the furthest northwest. I never believed that you did not love me anymore when leaving. We both were looking for a lasting and settled state in our life, close to normative domesticity and heterosexual family, but we could not find a true way to attest our love, this undisclosed love that only intimate friends know. I know that marriage is not the only one ritual. Even we treat it as extreme, just as Beauvoir and Sartre regarded their love. They never stop looking at us. So many gazes are there and they become a spectre, a haunting obstacle. It prises us apart.

Recollecting in the Monotony

An album in the dusty drawer or just a photo application on the phone, they both instigate the torrent of memories until I cannot hide the moment. When this monotonous and passionless stay-at-home takes place, I re-read my albums to immerse in the melancholy yet joy of memories. This reminds me of when my mother holds an album, telling the stories of each photograph in that vintage and dusty family album...I looked down to my phone screen and attempted to dig out a social media post from two years back, to look for the brand name of a camera I used for my first analogue photography study. Swiping up on the screen, every image and each text poured out from social media posts history. Compelling photos constantly diverted my gaze and devoured my time as I tried to recall the camera's name – a montage of memory images rushing through my mind. Cosina. The camera's brand name is Cosina. A typical analogue camera from the 1990s. My uncle used to photograph his wife and children with this hand-held camera in an ordinary Chinese family. In such earlier times, every single man was supposed to desire an attractive girl as their *virtuous* wife.

I have never, however, thought of marriage, never imagined what my future family would be like when they appear on those framed photographs. Family snapshots and albums have been routinely identified as symbols of normative heterosexual domestic life.²⁴ I *do* know that personal lives and intimate relationships contain so much more than domestic lives do²⁵. But it is not just 'a piece of cake' to get married to a gay man in this country and whose parents would never expect that and accept that.

Every time I looked back to people whom I photographed in my small album, all the remembered scenes were brought up from this folder-like box with frosted plastic covers, not like an aged leather photo book at all. Then I am thinking, who are they to me? They are my friends, ex-lovers, peers close to me or whom I've just seen once. I travelled with this album to different places, shared it with various persons, archived it at different homes since I left from my parents' house. Many of my close friends indeed stayed with me for a more extended period than my original family did. I underwent so many shared memories with them yet now I can only contemplate their printed faces. Yet we were trying to figure out who we were and we faced others' in the most devilish and the kindest moment. I was trying to clear up my fog of confusion of being gay, to learn that gender always flows in our vulnerable bodies. I touched them at their heart-broken moment and they became a most mellow therapist to me when I lost my own. We took risks to seek our

²⁴ Spence and Holland, pp. 26–34.

²⁵ Holland, p. 133.

truth, to elicit challenges like Simon Watney who wrote about his photographs as young gay men - 'We all took great risks, my generation, because great damage and injustice had been done to us, because we had so much catching up to do, through no fault of our own.'²⁶ When was domesticity reformed? Whenever we were more honest and flexible to each other than those threw us out, whenever I archived their snaps to my memories collection, in that very brief of time, they became my extended family.

²⁶ Spence and Holland, pp. 26-34.

Sitting in this finite room
during this pandemic
Events aren't coming up
friends are grounded
the faces you can see
pixels
ink grains
they are
Grasp a thread
to seek
to map
to depict
hallucinations
from a chaotic jumble



Fig. 5. Zijian Zhou, *Untitled*, photography, 2019

Lick
kiss
drama
reality

Returning to this photo
Unfocused
blurred
walking on the flagstone pave
drunk faces
we were wandering
at a jiggling pace on the peaceful path
leaving from the clattering bar
We were ordinary girls and boys
who wanted to release the chutzpah
following the smell of alcohol in the air
Jumping
rotating
dizziness

We ran into the tranquillity
of this historical town
encircled by a brick-built city wall
Girls said boys should put on this skirt
a red skirt with floral patterns, an old northern style
Someone dragged the skirt out from a bag
throwing it over this old town
flying into the darkest night
without a starry sky
waiting for it to fall down
on the path

A blinding flash of white light lit up the town
'Hey! We should record this moment for "photographic history"
a loud voice said

Someone picked it up then and put it on me
I felt I couldn't help wiggling my body
to dance on the street
to float the hemline
to free my limbs
Pingyao
A town



Fig. 6. Zijian Zhou, *Pingyao*, photograph, 2019

Hallucination or Reality

I have to write this poem before I speak of pure memory and memory images. Poem with scattered lines, breaking description but the continuous flow is just a fitting and appropriate form to narrate the scenes of initial impressions existing in our mind. To narrate the fiction is to call up memory images from the past, to which I attempt to return. Jumping back to that old town where we generated collective memories, I must withdraw myself from 'at the moment' to 'in that moment,' to bring me to the previous scenario is fugitive. Every time I keep remembering, at that night and in that tranquil town, what my friends said and how they acted, as though I dragged an opaque scene from the darkness of my deep consciousness into the light, ever at the point of escaping me. The earlier stage this recollection returns to, the more the present moment foils its backward trend. 'His backward turning memory was thwarted by the other, more natural, memory, of which the forward movement bears him on to action and life.'²⁷ I dig it out so hard from the most initial origin, to seek simple and clear memories, those which Henri Bergson calls 'pure memory,'²⁸ to avoid the imaginary scenes flashing in front of my closed eyes. Yet the scenes come with narrative and fiction all the time of my recalling, as if flipping over photographs in the album, the photos up and down from either side catch my eyes more than the one that I sort. They, pure memory and memory image, live in together and mix as a coalescence,²⁹ but a memory image is not a printed photograph that you can contemplate and re-tell every single detail. Instead, it is a frosted glass that a ray of light can scarcely penetrate.³⁰ Memory image is precarious, as a fluid and translucent liquid, a sort of mental image of the visualized memory.

I looked at this unfocused floral-dress image (fig.6) while I was writing the poem telling the narrative of Pingyao town in which we young girls and boys burnt our life with desire, in the moment of which I got rid of this body from the obstacle of the other current memory, to dream with each other in the condensation of a cloud of memories. This fusion of the memory and image - 'putting the pure memory into images'³¹ - reveals the buried narratives in the poem and retains memories' hallucination. Recollection is to put the pure image into imaginations, into hallucinations, into images. This photographic image stores our narratives in the analogue grains, in the digital pixels, then in the collection of our snaps. Photography produces snapshots as a spatial and temporal continuum³², at which we gaze through

²⁷ Bergson, p. 94.

²⁸ Bergson.

²⁹ Bergson, p. 103.

³⁰ Kracauer, 'Siegfried Kracauer: Memory Image, 1927', p. 46.

³¹ Ricoeur, pp. 66-77.

³² Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, pp. 50-51.

an album, not like precarious and unreliable memory images. They both are yet a hallucination of represented reality. 'the logical distinction between what is imaginary and what is real tends to disappear.'³³ Photographic images trigger us to imagine that the image exists in our memory to figure out what was happening in the past reality; pure memory grasps this reality but constantly attaches itself to the mental images. This coalescence is just as the metaphors here:

'As a movement from the virtual to the actual,
or again as the condensation of a cloud
or as the materialization of an ethereal phenomenon.'³⁴

'movement from the depths to the surface,
from shadows to the light,
from tension to relaxation,
from the heights to the lower levels of psychological life.'³⁵

'The entire modern problematic of "mnemonic traces" is, in fact, heir to this ancient alliance between eikon and tupos.'³⁶

Recollection, nomadism and loneliness.

³³ André Bazin and Hugh Gray, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', *Film Quarterly*, 13.4 (1960), 4–9 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1210183>>.

³⁴ Ricoeur, p. 68.

³⁵ Ricoeur, p. 68.

³⁶ Ricoeur, p. 67.

To you all

The third day back in Xi'an City, I met a couple of old friends in a pub down by the City Wall. Alcohol usually makes people feel delightful but not the only one. We caught up with a busker with a guitar walking through Pine Park. I thought they stopped to enjoy the music just for a moment, yet we were immersed in it until four in the morning. My friends still now pop back into singing with that busker. "Such a romantic Xi'an!" Cici shouted to us. We have indeed been going far from the chutzpah. Maybe it is we that are passionate rather than the City. No one knew how long it would last.

'I used to think that I couldn't lose anyone if I photographed them enough.'³⁷

³⁷ Nan Goldin and Taka Kawachi, *Couples and Loneliness*, 2. printing (Kyoto: Koinsha, 1999).

At Odds

'I'm not taking testosterone to change myself into a man or as a physical strategy of transsexualism; I take it to foil what society wanted to make of me, so that I can write, fuck, feel a form of pleasure that is post-pornographic, add a molecular prosthesis to my low-tech transgender identity composed of dildos, texts, and moving images; I do it to avenge your death.'³⁸

He dressed up and kept well-groomed in the front of an advertising mirror before the Manga cosplay party started. I found this cosplay snap of Wang when I was thinking of a couple of lines written in *Junkie Testo*. Beatriz Preciado's longing words have the power to evoke what Wang was trying to convey to me during his most challenging time of being a transgender boy. We got to know each other in the Autumn of 2017; everything was waning and exuviating old layers ready for rebirth after the hibernation. Wang's brave and effort are not just the heavy makeup and costume in this snap. Testosterone helped him to free himself of the fetters. He was rebelling against his dead flesh and releasing his buried soul.

He made his toughest decision in that winter of four years ago to inject testosterone into his body. The transition had been taking place since that moment. I was glad that he was willing to engage with my short documentary film as we all think it is significant to give visibility and voice to trans people, even though we couldn't make the film public at that precise time. I gazed again at this snap from a time before he had changed his legal name – he attempted to substitute for the gendered given name, the deadname.

³⁸ Beatriz Preciado and Bruce Benderson, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*. (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013), p. 16.



Fig.7 Wang Yan, Still from *Wang Yan*, Documentary Film. Dir. Zijian Zhou

Burning Memories

Indeed, quite enigmatic and exotic memory is. It appears as an image in my mind just when I come across the photograph of Wang's dressing up in my album and think there should be something linked. Wang is burning his old photos as he is to transition his physical appearance; to destroy his family snapshots is to erase his *feminine persona* of the past. The uncomfortable pasts and the memory that Wang eliminates break the continuum of his family album. But he must do this to create a gap between his present memory, pasts, and other family's memory, which presents as the only way to get rid of the body, the one which is wrong one for him. 'Family snapshots and the albums in which they appear have routinely been a site of anxious disidentification for queer and trans family members.'³⁹ This alteration is likely to be at odds with the memory of their family or friends in old albums. Wang loses his connection and belongings of the family as he removes the snapshots from his album. He seems immersive to the role-playing with the blond wig and dramatic mantle, obsessed with the vague and free moment at which he is not concerned with which gender is in being. Flesh has gone; the soul is soaring without anxiety. Roland Barthes finds when he is in front of the camera: 'I constitute myself in the process of "posing," I instantaneously make another body for myself.'⁴⁰ This time, Wang is not posing at all.

Some elements of collective memory that eliminate uncomfortable pasts have been called an 'amnesia archive' by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner. The very form of the family album pursues a purging of the uncomfortable, the painful and the awkward. It is not by accident that many family albums are a collection of rituals designed to create family reunions, from holidays to birthday celebrations, then to summer vacations. 'The photographs that do not fit the album are the queer ones: those images that trouble the "normalcy" that this conservative form has historically sought to produce.'⁴¹

³⁹ Spence and Holland, pp. 26–27.

⁴⁰ Barthes, p. 10.

⁴¹ Elspeth H. Brown and Sara Davidmann, 'Queering the Trans* Family Album', *Radical History Review*, 122, 2015, 188–200 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2849612>>.

To Wang

We were chatting on the roof of your parents' old house, where you told me so many anecdotes from your childhood. You threw away your barbie dolls and grabbed your cousin's transformers; you could not accept squatting to urinate – you had to stand. You talked a lot of words in that afternoon as if you had just come back from an uninhabited island. Dusk came as night was falling. You were exposed to a ray of the phone's flash in front of my camera since I did not plan to disturb your telling, as if a monodrama presented in the hopeless darkness. I was able to perceive you were being ambivalent when you told me it would be better to be a trans without medicine use and physical change, but you had started your transition. You said you decided to burn those photos that had your younger appearance in the family album. I made you show me some of them; you refused.

The Back of My Album

Narratives recalled from the memory have been placed back in the box as I close my album. The photograph appears to fade, wane and shrink in sizes; memory can be, however, condensed and embellished when people recollect and retell it.⁴² I narrate the anecdotes hidden in my album and may have an imaginary fantasy. Yet, the snapshot is a still graphic on the surface of a photograph and has changed nothing. It is subjective memory that enriches the unfeeling photographs to smash the spatial and temporal coalescence⁴³ in order to assemble the salvaged fragments into a new meaningful sequence – like memories in my narratives of love, loss and transition written by loose and poetic phrases for my album. In Siegfried Kracauer's essay, he writes about the grandmother standing in front of the camera, 'she was present for one second in the spatial continuum that presented itself to the lens. And it was this aspect and not the grandmother that was eternalized.'⁴⁴ The memory image, by comparison, is capable of presenting an impression of the completed person that is unforgettable in every perspective. Photography limits the representation of the subject's appearance, not allowing us to infiltrate into the veneer to seek for the essence of the subject. Kracauer sees photographs as 'a jumble that consists partly of garbage'⁴⁵ without selection. Memory in our brain stimulates and attaches to our emotions; it forms as a mental image in mind. The photograph is an image of sorts that reproduces from reality as thousands of copies of the spatial continuum. A piece of cold and analogue matter on the surface which brings up a chance for us to return to the past hallucinations. We begin to imagine the scenes to depict a memory-image from the past and narrate it in the present, whilst our joy, anger, worry, longing, sadness, surprise, and fear are generated. Memory thus contributes to that function of photography.

That I look through the photographs of my former lover is a process of self-therapy from an agonizing indulgence – Roland Barthes sees photographs as wounds that are capable of reviving personal traumas. Barthes finds photographs of his mother that would never be able to 'summon them up as a totality' from fragments of her. He gazes at them and recalls from his memory, but fragments are not able to make up 'a living resurrection of the beloved face.'⁴⁶ This perspective is subtly distinct from Kracauer who sees photography as a spatial continuum. To speak of memory with a photograph is to recall the person that has existed in our memory. Barthes notes that

⁴² Meir Wigoder, 'History Begins at Home: Photography and Memory in the Writings of Siegfried Kracauer and Roland Barthes', *History and Memory*, 13.1 (2001), 19–59 <<https://doi.org/10.2979/his.2001.13.1.19>>.

⁴³ Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, pp. 47–48.

⁴⁴ Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, p. 59.

⁴⁵ Kracauer, 'Siegfried Kracauer: Memory Image, 1927', p. 45.

⁴⁶ Barthes, pp. 63–65.

memory or anamnesis is the recollection of who has shared experience with our own, those who we remember. Memory is the imagination, the hallucination and the fictional narrative when we contemplate a photograph. 'I could read my nonexistence in the clothes my mother had worn before I can remember her,' writes Barthes, and adds, that 'there is a kind of stupefaction in seeing a familiar dressed differently' when he sees a photograph of his mother from 1913. Memory thus distracts us from the recollection of a person in the photograph. Yet a photograph only triggers our recollection and sentiment of a person with whom we had collective memory in the past. I am only able to retell my narratives from the collective memory that I have undergone with my former lover and close friends. In the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Joel attempts to evade the memory-erasing procedure by bringing Clementine to 'memory area' from his younger age where she has never existed, which the clinic cannot find on Joel's recorded memory map. It 'contained more than what the technical being of photography can reasonably offer.'⁴⁷

Wang removes and burns his early photographs from his family album after his gender transition in order to escape from normative domesticity and heterosexual family life. He wipes out *the person* in snapshots from the album; his family and friends cannot gaze at *that person's* photographs, even fragments. Where is that person now? 'The photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer*,' writes Barthes, 'but only and for certain *what has been*.'⁴⁸ I would say *that person*, the past Wang, lives in Wang's memory if the photograph is only for certain '*what has been*' and he has burned *that person's* photograph. Barthes does not identify the photograph as a timeless testimony of the way people looked. His mother's clothes merely emphasise the materiality of her body when Barthes writes that the attire is perishable so that it makes 'a second grave for the loved being' who presents in the photograph. He attempts to find a division between the person in history and the person in memory (or in recollection) – that a photograph of someone whose existence has somewhat preceded our own, constitutes the 'very tension of history' because its existence relies on our ability to consider, observe and contemplate it, yet 'in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it.' Barthes then uses a photograph of his mother before he was born as his mother's actual existence in history, contrary to Kracauer's writing that 'the last image of a person is that person's actual history.'⁴⁹ Hence, in Wang's memory as a trans, he transitions from *her* to *him* as he takes off the feminine persona that does not belong to him. That person Wang eliminates from the family album has gone from the photographic history yet lives in his memory and family's recollection.

⁴⁷ Barthes, p. 70.

⁴⁸ Barthes, p. 85.

⁴⁹ Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, p. 51.

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