

# Absent Presence: an exploration of memory and family through printmaking

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A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Fine Art.

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## Compulsory declaration

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Signed

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# Absent Presence

*“Perhaps forgetting and remembering are equiprimordial in human experience; both are valuable, both are required.”*

(Casey, 2000: 307)

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# Abstract

Visual and linguistic metaphors help to conceptualise memory by reducing its physiological and philosophical complexities to a degree that allows its processes to be easily understood. Two commonly used metaphors are ‘memory as an imprint’ and ‘memory as a photograph’. However, these metaphors ignore vital aspects of memory, such as its fluidity, the interplay between remembering and forgetting, and the role of imagination. They can thus be considered misleading and problematic. Of particular interest is the ‘memory-as-imprint’ analogy and how engagement with the visual language of printmaking can modify it to create a more comprehensive depiction that accounts for the physiological processes of individual memory and the retention and transmission of collective, familial memory. Through my practical work, I seek to address these concerns through both traditional and experimental printmaking techniques, which I reflect on and analyse through the theoretical framework of printmaking. I use photographs sourced from my family archive as references, focusing in particular on those from the German post-war period, and remediate them into various print mediums, each addressing particular facets of memory that I consider important. My work is intended to serve as a reflection on what memory is and how it is experienced, the theoretical aspects of printmaking and my own relationship with my family memory. I argue that through a conceptual engagement with printmaking, print can be used as a metaphorical device that extends beyond the simple ‘memory-as-imprint’ analogy.

# Preface

Three of my grandparents have already passed away, and with them my family has lost a large part of its collective memory. Throughout my life, I have tried to hold the stories that were told to me in my memory, attempting to collect as many as I could. The more 'memories' I collected, however, the more it felt in vain. I started to forget details or even whole stories altogether. The gaps in our family memory were pervasive and were multiplying, and I could only hold onto the photographic archives of my late grandparents entrusted to me by my family. I found photographs of my grandmother as a small child, photographs taken during World War II and a large number of photographs taken in the post-war period. As is typical of family photographs, most were snapshots taken at social occasions. I am particularly interested in these photographs and the scenes they contained, but the photographs again confronted me with what had been irretrievably lost and forgotten. For every person I recognised in these photographs, there were multiple people I did not. While looking at a photograph of a celebration, for example, I might be able to identify the location, but the purpose of the celebration or the identities of the participants remained a mystery. These frustrations caused me to re-evaluate how I approached my relationship with my family memory.

The artworks I produced over the course of my postgraduate studies are the product of my autobiographical impulse as an artist, simultaneously personal and general, emotional and detached, memorial and anonymous, and intuitive and reasoned.

# Introduction

Joseph Nicéphore Niépce

*La Table Servie*

1832-1833

Physautotype

7 cm x 11,7 cm



Sometime between 1832 and 1833, Joseph-Nicephore Niépce, in collaboration with Louis Daguerre, created *La Table Servie*; one of the first photographs – or *physautotypes*, as Niépce called them (“Revisiting Niepce’s processes - Niepce in England”, n.d.). To produce the photographic image, Niépce coated a pewter plate in a film of a bitumen and lavender oil solution. This film was slightly light sensitive and, after several hours’ exposure time, fixed a projected image onto the film that could be etched into the pewter plate with acid (Stulik, Kaplan & Khanjian, 2013). The process of physautopy is almost identical to the process of producing etching plates for intaglio printing. Niépce’s initial motivation for inventing photographic processes was not to capture scenes of his environment but to create a more efficient process for the duplication of text for large-scale

printing. Before he created the first photograph from his upstairs window, his photographic experiments were reproductions of printed artworks (Wickliff, 2006). Photography's roots are firmly planted in printmaking.

*La Table Servie* is a still life in the tradition of paintings. Niépce probably chose a still life as his subject matter because the required exposure time of several hours prevented the depiction of people. Like many still lifes, *La Table Servie* suggests people through its presentation of quotidian objects that facilitate bodily needs, objects that are “still charged by an unseen human presence” (Hustvedt, 2005: 45). It shows a bottle of wine and a glass, a knife, a soup bowl and a spoon and a hunk of bread. In one corner stands a vase with flowers, and in the other an object that is difficult to identify, perhaps a pitcher. The picture is noisy and difficult to resolve, the process of its creation betrayed by scratches and splotches. It is not as clear or immediately readable as contemporaneous still life paintings, but it possesses other qualities that paintings do not. Unlike the subject of a painting, the scene we are presented with was necessarily real (Barthes, 1981). As a photographic image it is evidence that this table and the objects on it existed. Reality was objectively recorded: the likeness of a perceived, natural scene was imprinted into metal via reflected light, seemingly paralleling an age-old analogy that likens memories to imprints in wax.

*La Table Servie* embodies most of the formal elements and conceptual concerns of my own work. It is a photographic image and thereby speaks of memory; it is rooted in printmaking and its traditions; it is rendered unclear through its mediation and requires active engagement to read; and it has as its focus a table and objects that speak of human absence and presence.

My relationship with memory has always been a difficult one. As a person of German ancestry, working with my family memory has presented challenges. Firstly, the widespread destruction of World War II has rendered many photographs, letters and records without documentary context. Secondly, potentially problematic ancestral involvement in the war, as well as trauma caused by the war, led to much family memory<sup>1</sup> being purposefully erased and

1 I favour the term *family memory* over Marianne Hirsch's term *post-memory*, as post-memory as initially defined by Hirsch is strongly tied to the effects of trauma in one's family history – in particular the Shoa (Hirsch, 1997). While World War II was certainly a source of trauma for all regardless of their nationality, I would like to avoid any conflation with the survival of genocide.

2 Memory art is a general and open term that can be applied to any art that is primarily concerned with memory in its varied forms – personal, collective, cultural or national – and its affects, experience, expression and/or function amongst other aspects.

forgotten. Sorting through my family’s photographic archive, I became less interested in its function as a preserver of family memory and more in how it responded to my own memory. I was attracted as much to what was absent as to what was present, and the interplay between what has been forgotten and what is remembered became apparent.

I have sought to address these concerns in the artworks I created in response. Of particular importance to my work is a paper by Diedre Brollo (2013), in which she describes how the analogy of memories as imprints constrains our understanding of the processes of memory and ignores vitally important facets, such as the interplay between forgetting and remembering. However, Brollo notes that these same analogies can be used to undermine and create memory art<sup>2</sup> that acknowledges and includes these aspects, as in work by artists such as Christian Boltanski. I position my work within the context of this discourse.

In the following text I investigate the philosophical parallels found between memory and print, the autobiographical response triggered by photographs and objects, the materiality of my prints as it relates to the physiology of memory, the meaning of authenticity and uniqueness in print and memories, the codification of information in prints and memories, and the role of time and motion in images to suggest the narrative structure of memories. Practically, I express these concerns through printmaking method and content and the confluence of the two.

# Memory as an imprint

*“Prints layer information, embodying traces of past thoughts and acts; they are metaphors for the way in which memory traces impose themselves on all perceptions and thought.”* (Field, 1994: 171)

In *Untying the knot: memory and forgetting in contemporary print work* (2013), Diedre Brollo writes that print and photography are regularly used as metaphors to help us envision how memory may work. While these metaphors are useful, they do not sufficiently account for the role of forgetting in the mechanism of memory (Brollo, 2013). Brollo suggests that forgetting is usually thought of as the opposite of memory, as a full obliteration of memory, with the memory-as-impression analogy establishing the distinction between the present and the absent. However, many commentators claim that memory function is closer to the interplay between forgetting and remembering (2013), with Edward S. Casey pointing out that “forgetting is [...] a condition of remembering” (2000: 308).

The metaphorical connection between print and memory has a long history in western thought. Brollo (2013) writes of the classical metaphor of memory – first established in Plato’s Socratic dialogues – that compares memory to the imprint of a signet ring in a wax tablet. This pervasive motif has “continued to inform and direct thinking on memory to the present day” (Brollo, 2013: 81) and has become embedded in the English language (among others); for example, an event is said to leave an ‘impression’ or is ‘impressive.’<sup>3</sup> Brollo further claims that the motif of the impression has an extended cultural influence that “is evident in the privileging of those objects, such as the photograph, which appear to embody this metaphor” (Brollo, 2013: 81). A modified version of this

3 In German one would say that an event leaves an *Eindruck* (imprint) or is *beeindruckend* (impressive).

analogy, in which memories are likened to photographs, may be even more seductive than that of the wax impression, as we can easily draw comparisons between our physiology – the mechanism by which we ‘capture’ an event as a memory – and the mechanisms of a camera: light is filtered through the lens of our eye and exposed as an image on the photosensitive surface of our retina, which is subsequently filed away and stored in our mind, as a photograph might be in an album. With digital photography, the retention and recall of memories has found a contemporary analogy in digital storage, and digital storage an analogy in neurology through terms like *random-access memory* (RAM) and *read-only memory* (ROM). The photographic and the digital analogy would fall under the *preservationist* view of memory, which considers “remembering to be essentially a matter of encoding, storing, and retrieving information”, a concept that has its roots in Plato’s metaphor (Michaelian & Sutton, 2017). The memory-as-impression analogy may be seductive, but it is also problematic (Bollo, 2013: 81), as it suggests that memories have indexical properties similar to an impression or a photograph.

Photographs and memories differ substantially when considering what might be a *true* or *accurate* representation. Memories offer no guarantee that what was perceived and what is remembered will coincide (Michaelian & Sutton, 2017), whereas photographs, possessing indexical properties, guarantee that representation coincides with the referent. Rosalind Krauss writes that the photograph’s indexical properties are due to the material changes that occur as light hits the photo emulsion: “Every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface. The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object” (1977: 75). Barthes also classed the photograph as an index of its subject, as it is “literally an emanation of the referent” (Barthes, 1981: 80). This makes its subject “necessarily true” and undeniable (Barthes, 1981: 76). Plato’s metaphor of memory as a wax impression, an index of an event, reduces memory’s function to purely preservative, but most contemporary views on memory accept that memories include, and even guarantee, divergences and variations (Michaelian & Sutton, 2017). In the generative view of memory –

in which memories are considered actively constructed representations of events that need not accurately reflect the event – memories can be described as possessing what are termed ‘authentic’ and ‘true’ properties.

[A]*uthenticity* refers to the correspondence between the memory representation and the subject’s experience of the past event, while *truth* refers to the correspondence between the memory representation and the past event itself. Crucially, neither sort of accuracy entails the other. (Michaelian & Sutton, 2017)

The memory-as-impression analogy has not gone unchallenged in memory art. In fact, it has been employed in print and photography by several artists “to both undermine it and to offer alternative conceptualisations of memory and forgetting” (Brollo, 2013: 81).<sup>4</sup>

Plato’s metaphor focuses on print’s indexicality to present a preservative view of the processes of memory. Prints are, however, also constructed images that require imagination to create and to read, and that deviate from each other and their matrix.<sup>5</sup> As Brollo notes, print is able to create alternate or modified versions of the impression analogy that acknowledge memory’s generative properties, such as its fluidity, the interplay of forgetting and remembering and its inclusion of fiction. The latter understanding is supported by current scientific models of memory that regard imagination and fiction as inherent elements of memories.

[I]n the constructive view of memory all memories contain some degree of fiction. For example, all memories are time-compressed and, therefore, do not literally represent the experience from which they derive. Similarly, all memories contain details that are both consciously and non-consciously inferred. (Akhtar et al., 2018: 16–17)

Christian Boltanski relied heavily on fiction as a conceptual approach in his memory art. Throughout his career, Boltanski shied away from documentary

4 Brollo refers specifically to Christian Boltanski, Tacita Dean and Paul Ogier as examples of artists who have worked in this manner.

5 See glossary.

representations of memories, instead “insert[ing] distance and deception into his earlier work, fictionalizing his own history and biography as well as that of other people” (Beil, 2006a: 10). Boltanski chose to focus on the ‘authentic’ over the ‘true’: “Alongside the accumulated relics of his childhood and youth [...] these new variations of a fictitious autobiography represent an ‘authentic’ false childhood” (Kemme, 2006: 128).

In 1972, Boltanski produced a series of ten photographs called *10 portraits photographiques de Christian Boltanski 1946–1964*. The title leads us to believe that each photograph shows the artist at a different age, from toddler to adult, in front of the same outdoor background. However, it is very apparent that these photographs are not of the same person, and in fact only the final



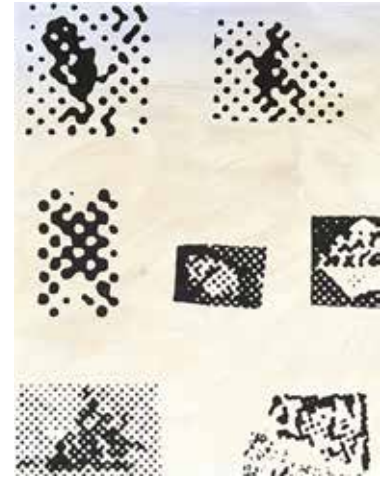
Christian Boltanski  
*10 Portraits Photographiques de  
Christian Boltanski 1946-1964*  
1972  
Photographic and text  
installation

photograph is of Boltanski himself (Assmann, 2006). Boltanski presents his memories as independent from their originating events and presents this fictitious account as documentary. We cannot assume it to be purely fictitious, however; it may not be a ‘true’ depiction of Boltanski’s childhood, but it may be an ‘authentic’ depiction.

The analogy of memory as an imprint equates the event (the signet ring) to a matrix, and the resultant memory (the impression in wax) to a print. In the same way that Boltanski separates event and memory, a close analysis of the relationship between matrix and print reveals a degree of separation. Matrix and print are not the same, being both materially and spatially different. The print is divorced from the matrix and made independent at the point of its creation. The three-dimensionality of the relief cut<sup>6</sup> is reduced to two dimensions. Parts of the matrix that go unnoticed by the eye are suddenly visible. Furthermore, every act of printing introduces changes. No matter how the artist attempts to produce identical copies, each print will differ from the others – even if only on close inspection. A print that presents a perfect replica of the matrix is impossible.

Sigmar Polke illustrates this relationship between print and matrix in *Druckfehler* (*Printing mistakes*) (2000). Polke searched for small printing errors in newspapers, which he then meticulously reproduced on a large scale (Tate, n.d.). These errors are “signs of the unique within a process of standardised repetition; the printed source can be said to be unique when it displays such accidents” (Haxthausen, 1997: 191). By exposing and focusing on these errors, Polke presents the print as independent from the matrix.

In his *Gymnasium Chases* portfolio (1991), Boltanski created photogravures from a series of photographic portraits of Jewish high school students in Vienna in 1931. Boltanski enlarged and repeatedly re-photographed and copied the images, eroding all identifiable features in the process and “remov[ing] any lingering vestiges of indexicality” (Brollo, 2013: 85). Like Polke’s *Druckfehler*, changes introduced through the process of reproduction are brought to the fore. As Brollo (2013: 85) notes, “[w]here the repeated copying of the image dismantled our ignorance of the intervention of the camera, the press, the photocopier, the medium of photogravure brings to



Sigmar Polke  
*Druckfehler* (detail)  
2000  
Acrylic on canvas  
90 cm x 110 cm

6 See glossary.



Christian Boltanski  
*Gymnasium Chases*  
 1991  
 Photogravure  
 31.8 cm x 46 cm

- 7 See glossary.  
 8 See glossary for a detailed description of the process.  
 9 See glossary.  
 10 See glossary.

our awareness further processes, further change”. All that is left are approximations of the original image. Boltanski’s photogravures “[reactivate] memory, reminding us of what was forgotten” (Brollo, 2013: 85).

My own work includes a series of prints that acknowledge the separation of matrix and print and require a similar “reactivation of memory” to Boltanski’s photogravures to read. *The value of forgetting*<sup>8</sup> is a series of three CMYK<sup>7</sup> prints on repurposed offset lithograph aluminium plates created through a printing technique I call toner-serigraphy<sup>8</sup>, through which I create a screen-print<sup>9</sup> with toner powder<sup>10</sup>. The printing process is almost identical to conventional screen-printing, except that toner powder is used instead of ink. The resultant image does not read as a screen-print and has a more painterly feel. Though the traditional screen-printing process is employed – a “process of standardised repetition” (Haxthausen, 1997: 191) – toner-serigraphy lacks the accuracy of conventional screen-printing and is not capable of creating identical reproductions. The print can never be true to the matrix, and thus print and matrix are essentially divorced. If the reproduction of an image is the essential function of print, then toner-serigraphs as a whole can be considered *Druckfehler*, or printing mistakes.

Each of the three prints presents the same cropped image of a man sitting at a table, partially obscured by a bouquet of flowers and his face cropped just below his eyes. The identity of the man is unknown to me,

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*The value of forgetting (triptych)*

2021

Screenprint, toner powder on aluminium

103 cm x 77 cm (left)

103 cm x 79.5 cm (middle)

103 cm x 77 cm (right)





and the cropped image further anonymises him to represent his forgotten identity. The flower bouquet and his suit and tie suggest that the original photograph was taken at a special occasion. The visible details highlight those that are absent. Printed on reused plates, the earlier image on the aluminium substrate is now hidden under layers of toner powder, but its existence has not been erased. It is both absent and present, forgotten and remembered.

The image in a CMYK print is composed of four separate colour layers: the original photograph is split into cyan, magenta, yellow and black channels that are screened with a dot halftone<sup>11</sup> and are then printed one on top of the other. Other perceived colours are the result of an optical illusion caused by optical colour mixing, which leads the mind to perceive the image as full colour. Most printing systems rely on optical illusions to create continuous tone and colour gradation.<sup>12</sup> Thus, not only does the matrix differ from the print, but the print differs from the perceived image. The eye and brain fill in the gaps in the halftone to read the image as full colour, just as the mind engages the imagination to connect the disparate parts of a memory and fill in forgotten elements.

Toner-serigraphy is slightly different from the conventional CMYK process. While the image is still separated into the four colour channels and is printed in four passes, the colours are not constrained to the individual dots of the halftone. One could argue that each colour is still binary as it relies on individual granules, but these are so microscopic that they are invisible. The colour gradation in the toner prints thus does not rely on optical colour mixing but can be considered continuous. Screen-printing with toner powder is an imperfect process, as each deposit of the cyan, magenta, yellow or black powder varies in density, and the powder is extremely fine and can easily bleed beyond the limits of the photographic stencil in unexpected ways. The overall colour mixing is thus different in each printed instance, where one image may be more red, the other more blue and the third more yellow, depending on the deposit.

11 See glossary

12 Described in more detail later in the text.



Detail of a toner-serigraph showing the halftone and the blurry deposit of toner powder.

The image created by a toner print can be difficult to visually resolve, as the way the powder is deposited blurs the image and removes detail, effectively forgetting details of the original image. The resultant image requires the viewer's active, creative engagement to resolve it – more in line with contemporary models of memory that consider them as dynamic, fluid and distributed (Brollo, 2013). Recall is an active process that engages imagination: “The act of remembering is now seen as a creative, not reproductive, process” (Sutton in Brollo, 2013: 82). Presenting different instances of the same print next to each other proposes that memories evolve with each recall. A memory is not a single imprint – as the classical metaphor would imply – but a series of unique instances, each bearing a trace of the original event but none being an accurate representation of it. They are simultaneously both ‘true’ and ‘authentic’ to their referent.

# Photographs and objects

*“Although photography’s material base is a mechanical and chemical process, the medium offers a melancholy poetics – traces of things and places that-have-been, a capturing of time lost, a spectre of our imminent death – imparting an element of romantic mourning to this very banal object.”*  
(Kriebel, 2007: 20)

Christian Boltanski presents memory as unstable, unreliable and disorientating in his work. “One of the central themes in [his] work is the intrinsic relationship between remembering and forgetting” (Assmann, 2006: 89). Boltanski’s installation *Menschlich (Human)* (1994) consists of 1200 found portrait photographs used by Boltanski in previous works. The photographs are displayed anonymously and without descriptions or context. Boltanski described *Menschlich* as a work that confronts us with the inevitability of being forgotten (Beil, 2006b: 57). As the photographs are no longer in the possession of a person who remembers their subject, they have lost their function as mnemonic objects. As Aleida Assmann (2006: 89) observes:

The photographing of an individual is a central medium of autobiography and of family memory. However, this mnemonic function only remains active as long as the photograph is in the possession of either the person photographed or their family.

Assmann (2006) describes family memory as having a temporal horizon of 80 to 100 years; a span of three generations. These three generations are linked through direct contact and thus share memories, and beyond this horizon, family memory starts to dissolve. Objects such as photographs are all that is left, though they are



Christian Boltanski  
*Menschlich*  
1994  
Photographic installation  
1200 photographs,  
50 cm x 60 cm each

imbued with certain mnemonic properties that can extend beyond the three-generation limit. The photographs I reference in my work are at the rim of this horizon. I do not recognise most of the people in them, but enough family memory remains that I can make inferences. The memories held by them are fragmented but not completely lost.

Nonetheless, the photographs evoke a sense of nostalgia within me and trigger a mnemonic response, which I attribute to the objects rather than the people. The objects on the table are inviting and familiar, and that familiarity creates



Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin  
*Basket of Peaches, with Walnuts,  
Knife and Glass of Wine*

1768

Oil on canvas

32 cm x 39 cm

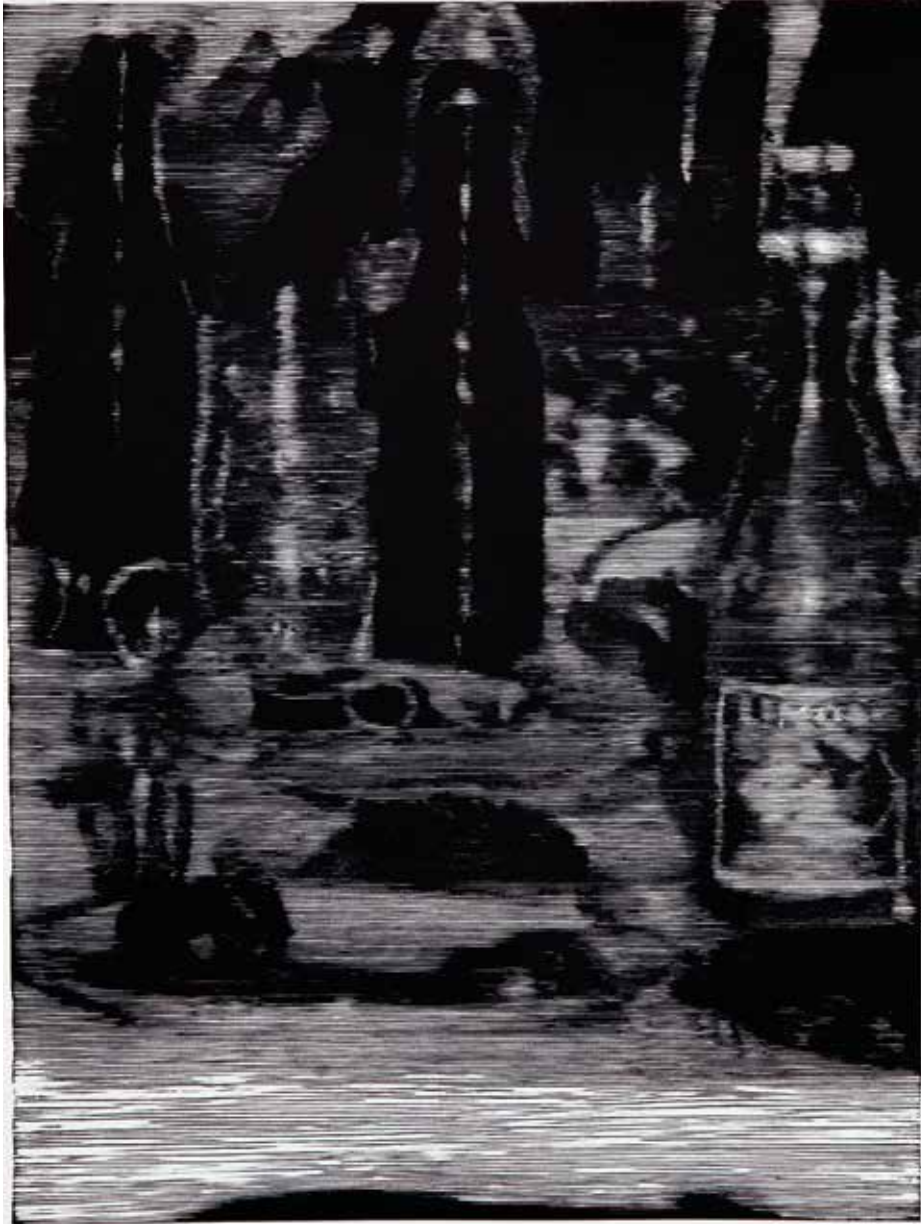
an affinity with the people who used them. Their familiarity allows the viewer to superimpose their own identity onto the image, a property also possessed by still lifes. Describing a still life by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin painted in 1768, Siri Hustvedt (2005: 45) writes:

The man or woman who was eating has left the table, but the food, the utensil, the glass are still charged by an unseen human presence. And because the missing person cannot be reduced to a particular sex, to a unique face and body, the spectator who peers into the space and the one who has left it share the table more completely. The fact is I do not imagine the absent person as a painted image, but as a living person.

13 Reflected through the things they have consumed, such as the type of drink in front of them or the presence of a cigarette or cigar.

The objects in my family photographs are similar to, if not the very same, objects I grew up with, giving them an intergenerational connection that links those who were present around the table to those who were (and are) absent (Hustvedt, 2005). Through their interaction with the objects, the people in the photograph have left a narrative trace of the event on the table, one that often echoes my (and perhaps the viewer's) own experiences. The objects can be seen to function as a language, a syntax, that enables the viewer to read the occasion, atmosphere and time. A half-empty bottle of champagne and partially drained glasses or a fine china coffee set and untouched cakes suggests a specific narrative about what has happened and what will happen. Part of the event and specific elements of the participants' identity are encoded into the table setting,<sup>13</sup> and the arrangement of the objects on the table is the result of physical interactions throughout the event. One could consider the table to be an impression or a print of the event.

In my work, especially my series of linocuts, I have privileged the table and the objects over the people present. Though my works have their origin in family photographs, they are more like still lifes. *Table with lemonade bottle* shows a close crop of a table, cut in a fine linear halftone. Objects are depicted but not clearly delineated or easily identified; some suggest bottles, plates of food or glasses. On the right is a bottle with the word '*Limonade*' barely legible on its label. Tacita Dean has "always believed that art works best when it responds to the autobiography of the viewer" (in Godfrey, 2005: 115), and the quotidian objects on the table stimulate an autobiographical response in the same way that Chardin's still life does. Like Boltanski's art, there are no identifiable faces in my works; they are almost always cropped just below the eyes or obscured by high contrast or blurriness. Most of the people in my photographs are unknown to me. Their anonymisation acknowledges my inability to recover their identity and embraces their becoming forgotten, creating a mnemonic vacuum waiting to be filled by the viewer's autobiography. Boltanski anonymised the people in his work to create a biographical response in the viewer, often blurring or covering the faces of his subjects so that "the faces become mirrors, they become interchangeable, allowing each viewer to see his own reflection" (Beil, 2006b: 47)



Oliver Hamsch

*Table with lemonade bottle*

2021

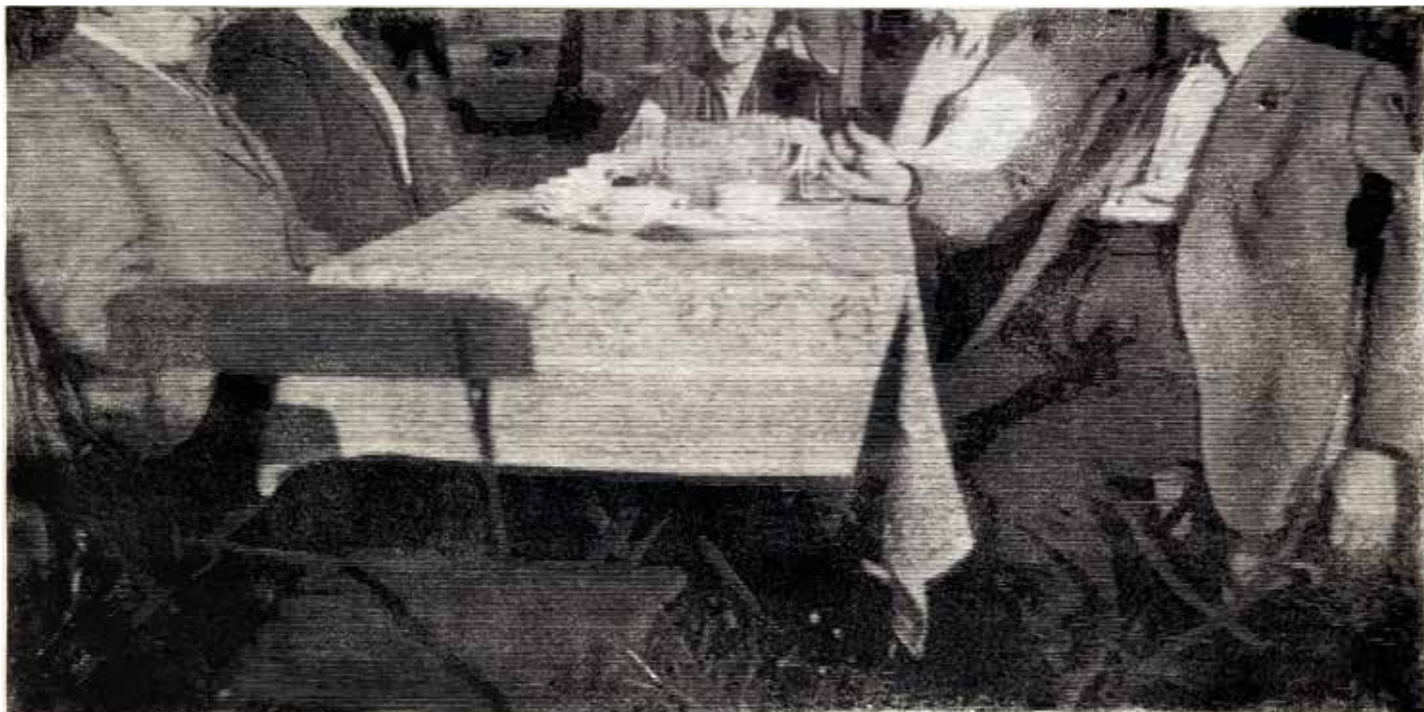
Linocut, ink on etching paper

40 cm x 30 cm

Edition of 6

Similarly, both *The summer garden* and *A chair, empty by necessity* feature the image of a table, this time in an outdoor scene. Several people sit around the table, their faces cropped. Unlike most of my works, both images contain an empty chair, inviting the viewer to take part in the scene. The prints are large, measuring 1800 cm x 90 cm, rendering the chairs almost life-size and further helping the viewer imagine themselves taking a seat. On further consideration, a viewer might surmise that the photographer sat in the now-empty chair before getting up to snap the photograph. This creates a unique biographical entry point into the image, with the viewer literally able to see the scene through the eyes of the photographer as they looked through the camera's viewfinder. The empty chair not only invites the viewer into the scene but allows them to embody someone present at the event, imagining themselves as the "unseen human presence" found in a still life (Hustvedt, 2005: 45).

While also a still life, the diptych *Christmas Tree after Boltanski* is one of my only pieces not to overtly feature a table. Searching through my grandparents' family photographs, I came across two photos of a Christmas tree that immediately reminded me of a particular diptych by Boltanski. Both of my photos show the same Christmas tree from the same angle, taken seconds apart, and *Christmas Tree after Boltanski* is composed of two woodcuts that measure 80 cm x 90 cm, each based on one of the two found photographs. The photographic images were translated into a digitally generated linear halftone, transferred onto the woodblock via a photocopy transfer print and then cut accordingly, retaining the images' photographic quality. Both feature a Christmas tree cut in a linear halftone and printed in black ink on cream-coloured Japanese paper. The images are almost identical, differing only slightly in crop and brightness. Boltanski's artwork – simply titled *Christmas Tree* (1996) – is a photographic diptych that shows the same Christmas tree in two different states, one with its candles unlit and the other with the candles lit (in mine, the candles are lit in both images). Boltanski's diptych suggests the flow of an event – the *lighting* of the tree – instead of a discrete slice of time – a *lit* tree. The lighting of the candles on Christmas Eve was a very impactful event for me, one that still resonates deeply to this day; the photographs in Boltanski's *Christmas Tree* could have been taken at one of my own Christmas celebrations. His work responds to my autobiography (Dean in Godfrey, 2005: 115).



Oliver Hamsch

*The summer garden*

2022

Woodcut, ink on washi paper

90 cm x 120 cm

Edition of 5



Oliver Hamsch

*A chair, empty by necessity*

2022

Woodcut, ink on washi paper

90 cm x 120 cm

Edition of 5



Oliver Hamsch

*Christmas Tree after Boltanski*  
(diptych)

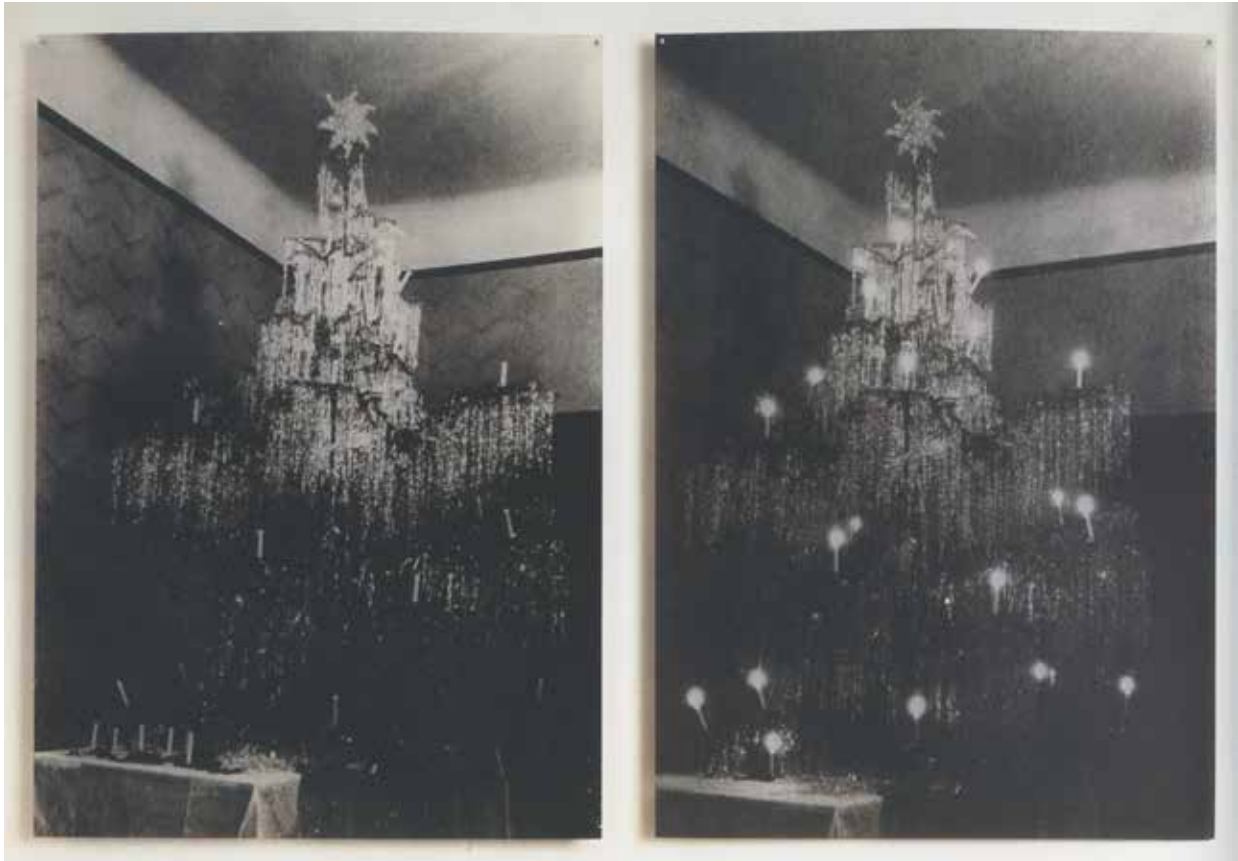
2022

Woodcut, ink on washi paper

90 cm x 80 cm each

Edition of 5





Christian Boltanski

*Christmas Tree*

1996

Diptych, photograph

Dimensions unavailable

While *Christmas Tree after Boltanski* is composed of two distinct woodcuts, their strict adherence to the reference photographs and their linear halftone cause them to be read as photographic rather than autographic. Photographs are inherently imbued with time, which Barthes calls the noeme, seeing it as “the very essence” of photography (1981: 76–77). Katsutoshi Yuasa, an artist who works primarily with woodcuts, similarly ascribes specific temporal properties to print through its staged system of production. He suggests that printing brings the image on the matrix, created in the past, into the present, superimposing past and present. He equates this to remembering:

The printing plate is an image of the past when I drew and painted. The past is adapted to the present. The printmaking is in fact visualizing a process of our memory, and it is a medium related with the past and present. (Yuasa, n.d.)

Yuasa’s woodcuts are very similar to mine in their process of creation, scale and form. Yuasa generates a fine linear halftone image from digital photographs taken by himself, cutting meticulously according only to that image, taking no artistic liberties. The resultant prints read more as photographs than woodcuts. Despite using prints, Yuasa thinks of himself more as a photographer than a printmaker (Saxonythebrand, 2013; Yuasa, n.d.). Yuasa’s very mechanical, almost automatic process is another way of printing a photograph and can be equated to the photographic development process.

Katsutoshi Yuasa

*The Celtic Twilight*

2020

Oil-based woodcut on paper

65 cm x 122 cm



# Materiality and physiology

*“In attempting to understand and articulate the complexities of memory, we often turn to metaphorical language. Words such as ‘imprint’ and ‘impression’, terms reminiscent of the fundamental language of printmaking, create a sense of the past remaining visible in traces left behind, of experience literally leaving its mark upon us.”*  
(Brollo, 2013: 81)

The creation, retention and recall of a memory is first and foremost a physiological process. To speak about the processes of memory or invoke an analogy to describe memory, the physiological aspect of memory must be acknowledged. The idea of a *memory trace* is present in most philosophical theories of memory, though its precise role may still be contested (Michaelian & Sutton, 2017). Contemporary neuroscience postulates the existence of memory traces: in order to form a memory or “for learning to occur, an experience must result in enduring changes in anatomical connections and physiological processes within the brain” (Miry, Li & Chen, 2021: 1). To create art that responds adequately to my concerns about the nuances of memory, my work must take its physiological aspects into account. In this respect, I would like to consider printmaking’s connection with the human body.

Reeves (1999: 70) writes “That printmakers equate the print with the body is not in doubt” and is evidenced in printmakers’ technical language. A print may *bleed* over the margins, and acid *bites* into copper, expressed in the terms *spitbite* or *open bite*. The word *matrix* – a term ubiquitous throughout almost all academic fields and by no means constrained to printmaking alone – has especially strong associations with the body. As used in late Latin, *matrix*

14 An engram is defined by the APA Dictionary of Psychology as a “hypothetical memory trace that is stored in the brain” (“Engram”, n.d.)

means womb: “the matrilineage of [the word] matrix resonates, and the link between matrix, reproduction, and printing is unmistakable” (Reeves, 1999: 71). Richard Harding identifies female qualities of print in the *reproductive* nature of the printing process (2011). The metaphorical nature of the printmaker’s language is not only a linguistic quirk but is firmly rooted in the processes of print. Extending the metaphor of the matrix further, we can say that the print – the child – is an image inherited from a previous generation – the mother. This, in turn, imbues printing with familial properties. We can draw parallels between the printmaker’s metaphorical language and memory as both physiological and capable of being passed down through generations.

The equivalence of print and body is not only found in language and etymology but can be drawn between the physical properties of the matrix and the structure of our brain. On a physiological level, a memory is stored in our brains as a “sparse ensemble of neurons across multiple brain regions [...] called an *engram*” (Miry, Li & Chen, 2021).<sup>14</sup> These neurons are connected through synapses, junctions that consist of very narrow gaps (synaptic clefts) through which a signal is transferred via neurotransmitters. A memory or engram is thus partially held in the literal gaps between neurons. This connective structure that holds information within negative and positive space can be seen to mirror a relief cut, where the information of the image is similarly held in both the absence and presence of matter, in the relationship between raised and sunken sections of the block. Print conceptually and materially evokes human physiology in varied forms.

However, caution must be exercised when drawing correspondences between the materiality of the matrix and print and the physiology of memory, as there is an inherent risk of becoming reductive. The analogies of memory as imprint or photograph are built on the materiality of an impression or a photograph, which characterises memories as static and fixed, rendering these analogies simultaneously seductive and problematic. In such instances, ‘forgetting’ is presented as a linear process that occurs only through the decay

of the substrate itself (Brollo, 2013). Fluidity, instability, malleability and the entwinement of forgetting and remembering are not accounted for.

The process and materiality I employ in my toner-serigraphy series seeks to address some of these aspects. Toner-serigraphy is an unpredictable printing process split into several stages, and the print undergoes a cycle of instability and fixity before it is finalised. In its raw form, toner powder is an extremely unstable substance to work with, a quality I associate with the unstable nature of memory; any breeze or a direct breath will disturb it. As the toner is intended for laser photostatic reproduction, it also responds to slight static charges, such as those caused by friction on the polyester mesh of a silkscreen. The image is thus not finalised when the squeegee pulls the toner through the screen mesh, as it would be with conventional screen-printing. The statically charged screen lifts the paper off the table, which must be carefully peeled back so that the powder is not smeared too much. The print must then be carried to a fume box,<sup>15</sup> which could further disturb the powder, especially as the studio must be well ventilated to redistribute the numerous VOC solvents I work with<sup>16</sup>. The chemical fixing process itself introduces additional changes: as the powder granules melt, the surface texture changes and previously matt areas become glossy. Each step affects the image and changes it. Only once the last layer – black, after the cyan, yellow and magenta – is completely fixed is the image finalised. The prints maintain an appearance of fragility even in their fixed state, their appearance suggesting the image may yet shift and erode with the faintest touch or breeze.

The constant sense of instability and mutability throughout the process reflects the instability of memory. Where the classical memory-as-imprint analogy supposes that a memory is created and solidified as an event is experienced – just as the print is created when the matrix separates from the substrate – this is not the case for toner-serigraphy. While the toner-serigraphy image eventually becomes fixed, the process to reach that point is much more aligned with the actual fluidity of memory: elements shift, change and disappear after the meeting of matrix and substrate.

- 15 As used here, a fume box is a wooden box with an open bottom and low sides. The inside is covered in felt soaked with a mixture of acetone and lacquer thinners. The box is placed over the printed paper, and as the solvent mixture evaporates, the box is filled with a fume that melts and fixes the toner.
- 16 VOCs refers to volatile organic compounds, which produce vapours that are harmful if inhaled.



Oliver Hambsch

*Gasthaus entrance*

2020

Screenprint, toner powder on paper

64 cm x 45 cm

Variable edition of 6

# Original and reproduction

*“Prints have always carried with them the instability of authenticity and the implicit critique of affiliated concepts which we only now have come to acknowledge.”* (Pelzer-Montada, 2008: 3)

The analogy of memory as imprint supposes that event and memory are in an equivalent relationship as matrix and print, making little allowance for variations between event and memory or between individual recalls. This suggests that the genuineness of a memory lies in its adherence to the event (Michaelian & Sutton, 2017). Similarly, the authenticity of a print lies in its adherence to the matrix, and each copy in the numbered and signed edition is thus deemed to be an original. However, as Pelzer-Montada (2008) notes, this complex issue is more nuanced than it appears at face value.

Richard Harding writes that “The basis of all print mediums is its facility to reproduce itself from an original matrix such as a plate or block” (2011: 1). To create identical reproductions, print relies on very particular systems that enable the encoding of the image, as well as on conventions that determine which prints can be classed as *identical*. To produce an edition, for example, the image must be translated into a specific syntax that is then coded into the matrix. A mechanical printing system, usually a press of some kind, is then used to reproduce that image as identically as possible. Afterwards, the final prints are selected and edited, as per convention, into an edition. *The instability of authenticity and truth* is a 4.5 m x 2.56 m installation of 40 toner-serigraphs installed in a grid pattern. The installation is comprised of a full edition – though it is a variable rather than conventional one.<sup>17</sup>

- 17 The full edition is actually 48 prints, but the number of prints in the installation is dependent on the available space. Ideally all 48 prints would be exhibited at the same time, but the chosen wall in the Michaelis Gallery only supports a 4 x 10 grid rather than a 6 x 8 grid. Nevertheless, the full edition is unedited and includes each produced print.

18 See glossary.

19 See glossary.

[A]n edition of prints is made to be the same, though through the production of multiples differences inevitably occur. The artist-printer is discerning towards any difference that is not predetermined. The difference within the traditional edition is usually rejected or used for another purpose. (Harding, 2011: 2)

Although the same process was used to produce each one, the prints in *The instability of authenticity and truth* are not intended to be identical. There was no predetermined outcome, no artist proof or *bon à tirer*<sup>18</sup> against which the edition was measured. The edition was not edited, and each print was embraced regardless of whether it aligned with the other prints or not. It is important to note that any differences are the result of the production process and not of intentional personal intervention. Differences vary in magnitude, with some prints differing only slightly from each other in colour balance or registration,<sup>19</sup> while others appear quite unique. The individual prints are not *pars pro toto* of the edition. Toner-serigraphy is not as consistent as conventional screen-printing, as the print cannot be pulled with the single sweep of a squeegee. I used a combination of squeegees and rags to press the powder through the screen, thus recording the movement of my hand and adding facture, lending the prints a distinctly painterly look. The inclusion of facture shows that the printing process was not purely mechanical.

If the printing process, a process of replication, is analogous to remembering, then remembering must accordingly require active involvement, which inevitably introduces variances and renders each recall unique. This contrasts the analogy of memories as photographs, where “The photographic ideal of a purely pictorial memory brings the tradition of passivism to an extreme point. For it suggests that the reproduction of the past at work in secondary memory or recollection is sheerly mechanical in operation” (Casey, 2000: 270).

I tried to be as consistent as possible during the printing process, but identical reproduction was impossible. *The instability of authenticity and truth* engages with the notion of imperfect remembering by highlighting the variation



Oliver Hambsch

*The instability of authenticity and truth*

2022

Installation, toner powder on paper

Dimension vary



between the individual prints. Imperfections and divergences are introduced in the act of remembering, just as they are in the toner prints in the act of printing. Each recall of an event is a variation of the original event (Bridge, 2012). The unique appearance of each print challenges the notion of the print as a *reproduction* incapable of original status or authenticity. As discussed earlier, the meaning of 'authentic' in the philosophy of memory differs from – though does not exclude – the word 'true' (Michaelian & Sutton, 2017). In conventional usage, though, *authentic* is synonymous with *true*. It means real, genuine or unique; the opposite of being fake or imitative.

This notion of authenticity as a factor of originality is a common point of contention in the discourse of art and printmaking. In this respect, Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* is often invoked despite being written in 1935, when the notion of originality and mechanical reproduction was radically different to the concerns of our digital age. Nonetheless, his words resonate in the assumptions about originality that continue in art discourse and the art market. Benjamin wrote: "The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (1969: 3). This established a hierarchical structure in which the reproduction is dependent on the original. Richard Harding identifies such a hierarchy in what he terms "the 'painting-normative' art world", which "operates in the realm of the 'original' that is authenticated via uniqueness" (2011: 2), while printmaking challenges this rule of the *original* and *authentic*. What constitutes an original or unique in print is undefined – is it the matrix, is it the edition, or is each print authentic as *pars pro toto* a limited edition (raising the question of where open editions fit in)? Additionally, if prints are *reproductions*, what is it they reproduce? Do they reproduce the matrix or are they reproductions of each other, without a unique original?

I address this question in my work by presenting the matrix and the print in the same installation space, challenging the meaning of uniqueness, authenticity and reproduction in print. In the installation of both *The summer garden* and *A chair, empty by necessity* I have chosen to display the print and



Oliver Hambsch  
*The summer garden (matrix)*  
2021  
Woodblock  
90 cm x 120 cm

woodblock together. The viewer is encouraged to compare the two and seek out similarities and differences. A comparison of the two reveals that the matrix and print are not identical and that elements in one are not present in the other. The installation also reveals the hidden printing process; one can imagine the walls moving towards each other and the block meeting the paper as it did during printing.

In the installation *Line Reflection* (1987), Friedhard Kiekeben displayed 12 etchings and their zinc plates. Commenting on Kiekeben's work, Ruth Pelzer-Montada (2008: 4-5) writes that:

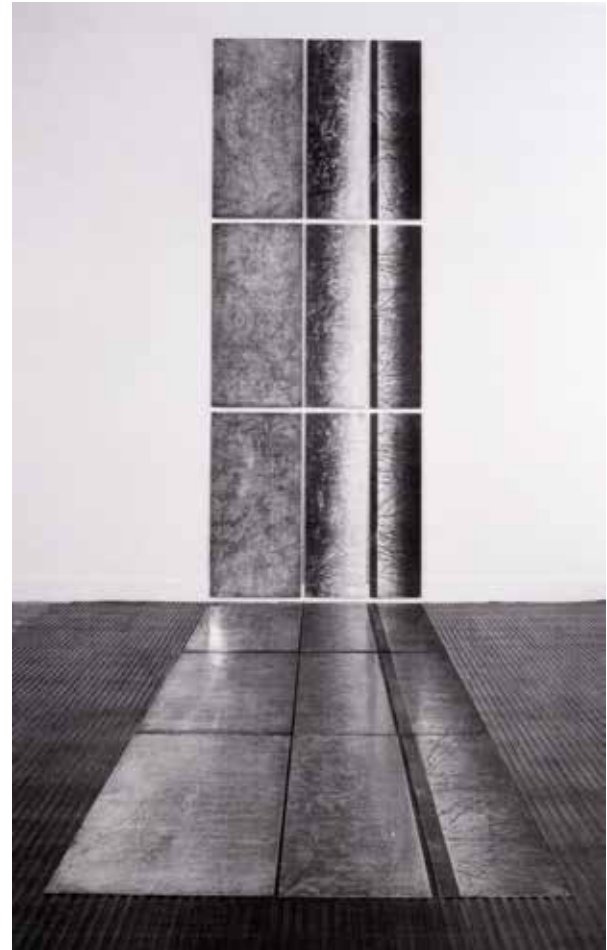
the presence of plate and print together performs an "outing" of that big taboo, the hidden generative principle of the print, the plate. It is a taboo because [...] the presence of the plate confirms the

suspicion that forms the invisible subtext of every printed image: that its roots are elsewhere, that it is the product of another, hence not original, unique and so on. Presence and absence, original and copy, similarity and difference are laid open but not resolved.

The presence of the matrix jeopardises the print's status, seeming to undermine the notion of authenticity in print by making us aware that the print is just one of several – and that, as the plate still exists, more prints can be produced. Given this, can the print be considered authentic? The answer seems to be that the print is both original and reproduction, authentic and inauthentic at the same time:

There is no way around the crucial fact that for any edition one print is as authentic or inauthentic as the other. Each print is authentic in the sense that it derives from the same 'original', and each print is inauthentic in the sense that there are multiple copies – however much they may vary. Hence none is a unique original. (Pelzer-Montada, 2008: 3)

Authenticity and originality in print seem to be artificial notions, the result of the 'painting-normative' paradigm that attempts to impose uniqueness onto the multiple "through a system of



Friedhard Kiekeben

*Line Reflection*

1987

Zinc plates (floor installation), and etchings (wall installation)

approx. 280 cm x 105 cm

authentication via the signing and archiving of ‘limited’ numbered editions” (Harding, 2011: 2). As Benjamin suggests, “by making many reproductions [the technique of reproduction] substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (1969: 4). It quickly becomes apparent that printmaking does not comply with an authentic/inauthentic binary. Pelzer-Montada observes that, given this inability, “The resultant re-definition of authenticity is no longer in terms of a dichotomy between the real, unique and the false, but is rather seen as embracing both” (2008: 2).

This echoes the previous definition of ‘true’ and ‘authentic’ in the philosophy of memory, where both ‘truth’ and ‘authenticity’ are able to exist simultaneously, and neither excludes the other. Memories are continually being reproduced, and when we remember something, we only recall the last time we remembered it (Casey, 2000). The memory that is held in the present is the latest copy in a long sequential series of copies, with each reproduction diverting slightly from the previous. The sense of a consistent, singular memory is thus an illusion, and memory is instead better conceptualised as a “plurality of copies” rather than as a “unique existence”.

# Syntax, code and systems

*“The codes (or ‘syntax’) of prints can modify or over-modulate the message so that the codes become the message.” (Field, 1994: 171)*

The dominant view in philosophy and neuroscience is that memories exist as distributed entities, as a series of connected traces that, upon recall, form a singular representation of an event (Michaelian & Sutton, 2017). Accepting this, the sense of a unified, continuous memory is illusory. A single memory would be composed of a network of information, a code of sorts, that the mind would read as one continuous representation. Partial forgetting disrupts this network of information and breaks the illusion of a unified, continuous memory. This notion finds a parallel in the code and syntax of the printed image, which in most cases is not continuous.<sup>20</sup>

In the early history of western print, uniform systems of crosshatching and mark making allowed printmakers to translate the tonal subtleties of chiaroscuro into the limited range of marks that could be cut or engraved into a matrix (Ivins, 1953; Weisberg, 1986). William M. Ivins (1953) compares this system to a written language, as both writing and print rely on a consistent syntax of lines drawn in specific directions to translate one type of information – the phonetics of a spoken language and the continuous tone of paintings and drawings – into another, more limited one. German Renaissance artists such as Albrecht Dürer and Martin Schongauer produced very fine woodcuts capable of suggesting continuous tone. Metal engraving began to replace woodcuts as printmakers reached the limits of detail that could be carved into wood (Ivins, 1953). The quality and density of linework possible in engraving was able to produce an unprecedented optical illusion of



<sup>20</sup> Specifically the printed image that results from a process of reproduction. A monotype would not fall into this category.

Albrecht Dürer  
*Ecce Homo (detail)*  
1996  
Woodcut, ink on paper  
39 cm x 28.5 cm

Gustave Doré  
*Ephialtes (detail)*  
1857  
Engraving, ink on paper  
Dimensions unavailable

tone in a monochromatic print, an illusion created by the spacing of areas of black that mix optically. As Richard S. Field (1994) writes, “The information in many prints is encoded in binary systems of ‘on’ and ‘off’, of black and white. Grey does not exist.” Various forms of halftone almost invisible to the naked eye were developed in modern times that can be photographically screened and later digitally rendered. For a halftone to produce the optical illusion of continuous tone, it must be viewed at a “practical distance”, where the eye is unable to distinguish between the individual dots or lines (Stulik, 2013: 5).

A disruption of the print’s syntax frustrates our ability to visually resolve the image and thereby breaks the illusion of its continuity. Sigmar Polke had a particular interest in the syntax of print and how its disruption affects the way we read the image. In his series of so-called *Rasterbilder*,<sup>21</sup> Polke used printed images sourced from newspapers and magazines, enlarged them, and then meticulously repainted the image’s halftone at several magnitudes its original size. The resultant image dissolves into a network of dots and only resolves again when viewed at a distance (Haxthausen, 1997). We can observe this effect quite clearly in *Bunnies* (Polke, 1966), where the women in the image are only recognisable through their silhouettes. When viewed up close, there is no clear delineation between their faces and the wall behind them – foreground and background melt together and specificity is eroded. At this distance, the resolution of the halftone exceeds the approximate resolution of the human eye and becomes invisible. In enlarging the printed images, Polke also enlarged the practical distance of the images from one suited to magazines and newspapers (normally viewed at about arm’s length) to one that could not be achieved in a gallery. The image is thus obscured by the very same code – CMYK optical colour mixing via a dot-screen halftone – meant to accurately reproduce it. “The reproductive medium itself is thereby gradually isolated from the object that it signifies, and ultimately thwarts our perception of it” (Haxthausen, 1997: 189).

As noted by Haxthausen, Barthes claimed that the photograph and its referent are inseparably bound together: “The photograph belongs to that class of

21 See glossary.

laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both” (Barthes, 1981: 6).<sup>22</sup> However, Haxthausen observes that this is not the case for autotype<sup>23</sup> reproductions of photographs. According to Barthes, a photograph transmits a literal reality. While certain properties such as proportion, scale and colour are reduced, at no point are these “reduction[s] a transformation (in the mathematical sense of the term)” (Barthes in Haxthausen, 1997: 189).<sup>24</sup> Autotype reproductions, on the other hand, necessitate such a transformation. The information on the photographic image is quantified and codified. The continuous analogue<sup>25</sup> tone and colour of the photograph is reduced to dot screens and colour separations. Polke “pries [Barthes’] leaves apart, until the object dissolves and only one layer, that of the signifying system itself, remains” (Haxthausen, 1997: 189). As this object dissolves, we are made aware that we are looking not at a representation of Barthes’ “literal reality” but at the medium by which it was translated. The object usually holds authority over the signifying system, but by splitting the two leaves, Polke’s *Rasterbilder* erase that privilege – the signifying system is elevated to the same level as, if not above, the object.

The two laminated leaves can be separated because a photographic image is made up of a double index, with each leaf containing its own, distinct indexical trace. In photography, the first index is the light reflected from Barthes’ “literal reality” and captured by the lens to react with the film.<sup>26</sup> The second index is in the development process, where the light from the exposure unit – filtered through the film negative – hits and reacts with the photo paper. Indeed, by its very nature of being an impression from a matrix, every printing process is indexical. This index, usually invisible by design, will reveal itself – on close inspection – through faults and imperfections introduced in the reproduction process. Any technological system that facilitates a flow of information<sup>27</sup> – and all printing systems are of such a class – aims to make itself transparent so as not to interfere with the clarity of the information. In other words, for the information to be transmitted with the least amount of noise the presence of the system cannot distract the recipient. When the system fails to function perfectly, however, it becomes visible (Menkman & Lye,



- 22 Another way of looking at this is to consider that the photograph is always an index of its referent and thus cannot exist without it.
- 23 See glossary.
- 24 Original appearance of quote in (Barthes, 1977: 17)
- 25 See glossary.
- 26 Or, in the case of digital photography, electronic photodetectors.
- 27 For example speakers, telephones, screens, computer programs and cameras amongst others.

Sigmar Polke

*Bunnies*

1966

Acrylic on canvas

150 cm x 100 cm

2011). Toner-serigraphy remains situated within the confines of the printing system even as it breaks the rules of print. The combination of two seemingly incompatible printing systems – screen-printing and toner powder – disrupts the reproduction process to such a point that the resultant print is separated from its photographic original. The distribution of the powder deposits is unpredictable, and identical copies through the same matrix are impossible. Put in another way, the mixing of two distinctly different languages – while remaining faithful to their own syntax – creates an unexpected result that cannot communicate clearly.

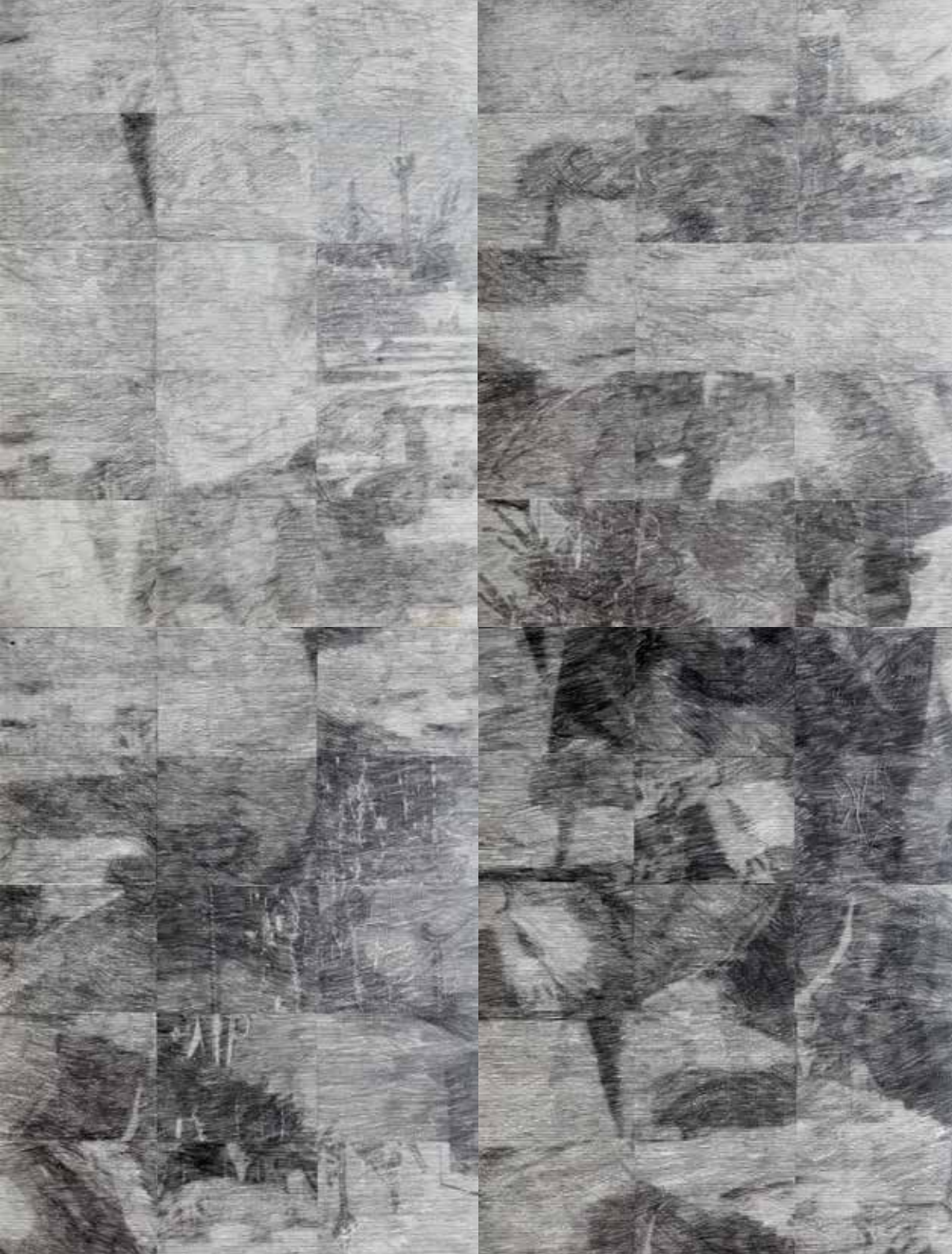
I also explore indexicality through a process of frottage. *Loss of contact, contact with loss* is an installation of graphite rubbings on tissue paper glued onto panels of museum board. There are ten 120 cm x 90 cm panels, and the whole installation is 2.4 m high and 4.5 m wide, covering almost the entire gallery wall opposite the entrance. Each panel has fifteen 24 cm x 30 cm horizontal rectangles of graphite rubbings taken from details of the four woodblocks of *The summer garden, A chair, empty by necessity* and *Christmas Tree after Boltanski*, arranged in a 3 x 5 grid. The rubbings are scrambled and rearranged, and some parts are repeated – not randomly but not in an obvious pattern. In some places, details such as hands are identifiable. The sections are placed to allow for the continuation of the halftone lines where possible. The overall effect is such that, through pareidolia<sup>28</sup>, familiar forms such as body parts are suggested, but overwhelmingly one is confronted with pure halftone, the print code used to form the image but rendered visually unresolvable. The panels depict nothing but the syntax of print, which on its own is meaningless.

Thus while there is very definitely a syntax in the putting together, the making, of visual images, once they are put together there is no syntax for the reading of their meaning. With rare exceptions, we see a picture first as a whole, and only after having seen it as a whole do we analyse it into its component parts. We can begin this analysis at any place in the picture and proceed in any direction, and the final result is the same in every case. (Ivins, 1953: 61)

28 Pareidolia is the mind's tendency to see familiar images, especially faces, in random patterns or arrangements of shapes.

As the viewer navigates the exhibition, they are confronted with the installation before they have a chance to view the full woodblocks and their prints. This parallels the process of remembering, the stitching together of disparate parts to form a full memory. When viewing the work, pareidolia interferes as the mind tries to find reason and missing parts are imagined, in much the same manner as missing elements in a memory are filled through imagination. As the viewer leaves the exhibition, the images of the woodblock print disintegrate again. Just as the viewer “remembers” the image upon entering, they “forget” it again on exit.

There are key differences between the syntax of the rubbings and that of the prints. Unlike the relief prints, the rubbings are not mirrored. They are not reflected impressions but untransformed representations of the matrix. Like screen-prints, they are truer to the matrix and more indexical than other print forms (Pelzer-Montada, 2008). The thin tissue paper and graphite render the rubbings very sensitive and much more capable of picking up the textural subtleties of the matrix. The artist’s hand is made visible through marks in graphite that show the direction, pressure and speed at which the rubbings were made. By embracing facture in the printing process, the works can be considered simultaneously both drawing and print. This element of facture may also cause the viewer to consider the significant duration of labour required to create the rubbings, referencing time in the frottage.



Oliver Hambsch

*Loss of contact, contact  
with loss*

2022

Frottage, graphite on tissue  
paper and museum board

120 cm x 90 cm per panel,  
2.4 m x 4.5 m installation

# Motion and narrative

*“Artists have developed two basic methods of depicting time in two-dimensional images. One is to depict motion and make a reference to time in the image; the other is to make a reference to time outside the image by visual traces of motion contained in the genesis of the image itself.”*

(Kettner, 2007: 21)

Memories are usually experienced in some sort of narrative form, so that even when singular, discrete moments are remembered, the mind organises them into a timeline. Autobiographical memories, the memories by which we understand our own history, are generally understood to be a constructed sequence of episodic memories, memories of particular events, that form a cohesive narrative (Michaelian & Sutton, 2017). Several of my works reference time, sequence and motion to express the *construction* of narrative, the search for cohesion and the fluidity and instability of memory

My collection of 16 linocuts use a linear halftone to translate the reference photograph and its tonal variation into the binary syntax of a relief print. Ten of the prints measure 40 cm x 30 cm and the other six 30 cm x 20 cm. Each is printed with black ink on white cotton paper. Due to their size, the halftone had to be significantly denser to resolve the image than that of the woodcuts. Technically, my linework was not able to achieve the precision of the much larger woodcuts, which created a slight



Gerhard Richter

*Onkel Rudi*

1965

Oil on canvas

87 cm x 50 cm

29 In my work I attempt to represent my familial tie with unrepresentable history through absence. My works are all based on small crops of larger photographs, implying a hidden and purposefully ignored narrative outside of the frame. This suggests the unspoken guilt, complicity, shame and trauma of World War II that have been cropped out of memory. Even the act of cutting the matrix reflects an active, voluntary forgetting – a purposeful excision of guilt and trauma.

30 Buchloh makes the broader point that Richter used the historical legacies, functions and theoretical implications of painting and photography – in particular as they pertain to Nazi Germany – to approach Germany's unrepresentable history:

In linking the bankrupt conventions of history painting with the banality of the family photograph, Richter succeeds in challenging both the aesthetic of official history painting that he had acquired in the East and the aesthetic of abstraction by which any commemorative function whatever was voluntarily renounced, an aesthetic that governed West Germany at the moment of his arrival from the East. (Buchloh, 1996: 64)

inconsistency in the halftone and gave the images a distinctly horizontally blurred appearance, not unlike Gerhard Richter's early, blurred paintings.

My work's similarity to Richter's starts with the use of photographs as reference images. As mentioned earlier, Barthes (1981) describes the very essence of photography as *time*; its ability to conflate past and present. Richter used reference images from a variety of sources, such as newspapers or books, but also created several based on private or family photographs. *Onkel Rudi (Uncle Rudi)* (1965a) is an 87 x 50 cm greyscale oil painting that shows the artist's uncle standing in a German *Wehrmacht* uniform, smiling at the viewer. The painting has the distinct aesthetic of a family photograph, partially by "retain[ing] the naive central composition typical of a family photograph" (Buchloh, 1996: 64). Particularly striking is that Richter's rendition of his uncle as a soldier in Nazi uniform appears non-judgemental and matter-of-fact, true to the aesthetic of a family photograph. It thereby tackles the difficulties of pictorial representations of unrepresentable history and memory in post-Fascist Germany, in particular "the pictorial prohibition of the unrepresentable subject [of] the familial tie to the Fascist legacy" (Buchloh, 1996: 64).<sup>29, 30</sup> By retaining the photographic aesthetic, Richter suggests the temporal essence of the reference photograph, but he plays with the clarity of the image to distinguish his painting from the photograph.

One of the most interesting and recognisable aspects of *Onkel Rudi* and other early photographic paintings by Richter is the artist's signature 'blur'. The loss of detail caused by the blur stops us from *looking through* the image at the subject and makes us aware that the image is mediated through the artist. Richter has taken a photograph, an object imbued with Barthes' "necessary" reality, and turned it into what Barthes calls an "optionally real" painting, where the painter's subjective input can "feign reality" through imagination (1981: 76). The 'photographic' image can no longer be trusted.

Remarking on a similarly horizontally blurred offset lithograph by Richter titled *Hund (Dog)* (1965b), John Paoletti suggests that the blur "perhaps refer[s]

to the accidents of amateur photographers who move the camera as they snap the picture” (1988: 2).

Not only does the blur remind one of a long-exposure snapshot, it also creates the optical illusion that the image or our eyes are in motion. Richter’s use of the horizontal blur introduces a dimension of time and movement into the temporally frozen photographic image so that it is no longer representative of a discrete, static moment of time, but of the passage of time. The image is transformed from simply photographic to filmic.

A very similar effect is present in the linocut *Table with accordion player*, which is cut with a very fine knife. As the image was created through slight variations in the thickness of the horizontal lines, the shapes are not defined by contours and there is no clear delineation between the different visual planes or the subjects. The linear halftone thus conveys the impression of a horizontal motion blur, a passing of time. The cut halftone destabilises the image and imbues it with fluidity.

Christiane Baumgartner, a German printmaker whose most well-known works are large woodcuts of photographs cut in a linear halftone, often references motion and time in her work. Describing her work, Jasper Kettner (2007: 29) writes that:

The line pattern itself seems to assist in the representation of motion. The swelling and tapering of a line that does not describe an object by its shape or form, but by its differing thickness in relation to other lines, is almost a basic principle for creating three-dimensionality on the two-dimensional picture plane.

Baumgartner’s reference images are not photographs but stills taken from videos filmed by her. Baumgartner’s work establishes a link



Gerhard Richter  
*Hund*  
1965  
Offset lithograph  
45.5 cm x 57 cm



Oliver Hambsch

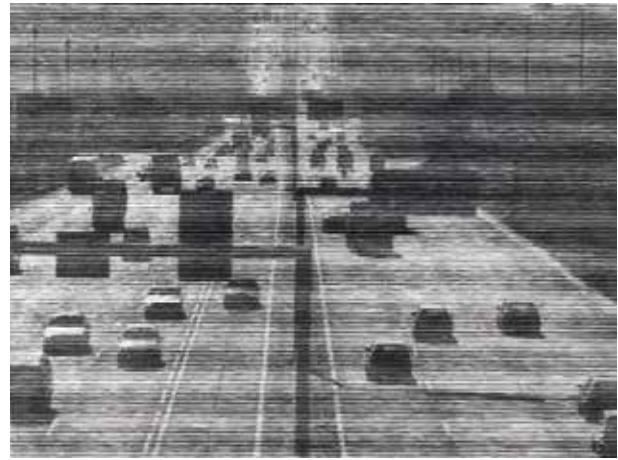
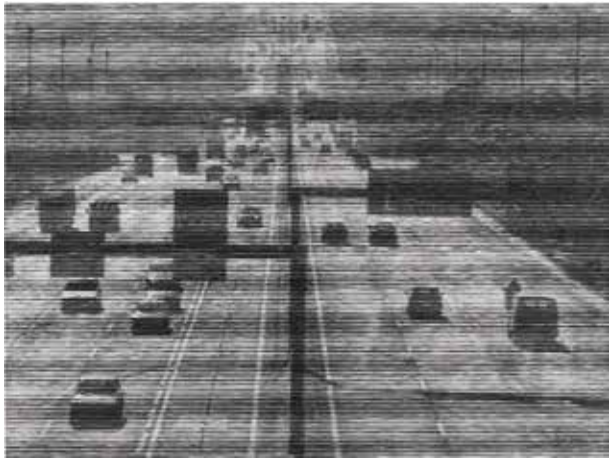
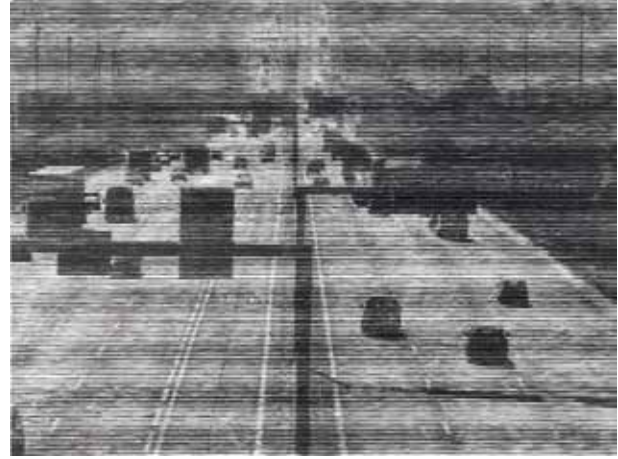
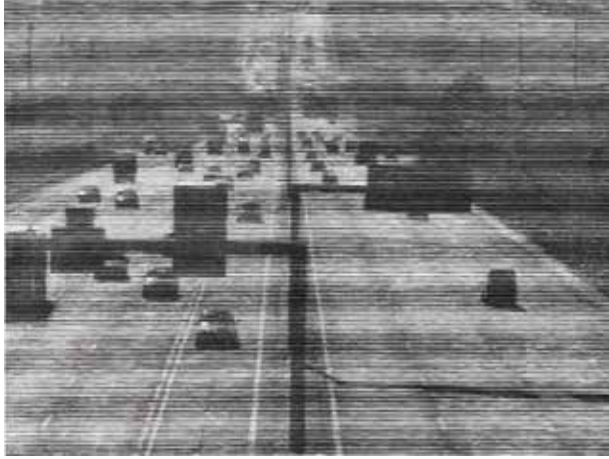
*Table with accordion player*

2021

Linocut, ink on  
etching paper

40 cm x 30 cm

Edition of 6



between print syntax and video syntax: the use of linear halftone alludes to the horizontal, interlaced movement of an electron beam used in old cathode-ray tube televisions and monitors (Kettner, 2007). In *Lisbon I-IV* (2001), Baumgartner introduces time into her printed work using several sequential stills from video footage of a highway in Lisbon. The prints are almost identical save for the cars, which indicates the time that has passed between each frame (Kettner, 2007).

Christiane Baumgartner  
*Lisbon I-IV*  
2001  
Woodcut on Japanese paper  
Image 90 × 120 cm,  
Paper 98 × 128 cm  
Edition of 3 + III

31 The colour balance of films and photographs also functions as an indicator of time. Different film stocks have very specific and identifiable colour properties that date them to specific decades, a property I used to roughly date and group my family photographs. The specific film colourations are due to the film chemistry being calibrated to Caucasian skin tones through the use of norm reference cards, so called “Shirley Cards”, which featured a portrait of a white-skinned woman. This specific colour and dynamic range bias was only addressed by Kodak when increased demand for advertising featuring brown and dark products like chocolate and wooden furniture led to a demand for subtle brown tones. The colouration of the photographs are thus not only indicators of time but also reflect the social and racial issues of their time (Roth, 2009).

Similarly, *Christmas Tree after Boltanski* consists of two near-identical images – one with lights, one without – displayed next to each other, reminiscent of two frames from a film.

Though the images are mostly unrelated, displaying my series of linocuts in a sequence, like stills from the same roll of film, suggests the existence of a narrative. The similar elements that exist across them – some perhaps even from the same event – add to the illusion of a narrative. The series is disconnected and distributed, a bricolage of moments intended to evoke the fragmented experience of remembering, which – unlike film – is not a unidirectional sequence of evenly spaced events.

I also brought this disconnected and fragmented illusion of narrative into *The melancholy poetics of the family table*, a 2 minute and 57 second film edited together from several Super 8mm films shot by my late grandfather, with sound added separately. I sourced scenes from several reels that show different but similar family gatherings and edited them together to suggest a narrative, with similar elements connecting the disparate events. For example, in one shot we see a woman’s hand grabbing a bottle and glass from a table, and in the next we see a bottle on a table in front of a woman in a similarly coloured blouse. While this suggests a continuation, the different colourations of the two shots clearly indicate that they are from different reels.<sup>31</sup> As with memory, similarity conflates the events. The borders between the scenes/memories become porous and the viewer is unsure how they fit together. Each shot is a tight, zoomed-in crop of the full footage, showing only small details – hands, bottles, glasses, never full faces – and furthering the sense of fragmentation. We become aware that more is happening outside the frame, that the cropping has omitted information. The zooming in significantly lowers the resolution and blurs the image, and the footage is also slowed down by as much as 300 percent. All of these elements create a slightly unreal, dreamlike effect. The blur, time dilation and claustrophobic crop evoke a sense of something half remembered, of fragmented memory.

As the source material is from Super 8mm film, it did not record the environmental sound. I added the sounds of glasses, cups and plates being moved around the table as an overarching soundscape that is not synchronised with the events shown. No voices are heard, reflecting the cropping out of faces. There are no identifying elements, and everyone is anonymised. When exhibited in a gallery with the printed work, the film's sound spills over into the other rooms. As it is not bound to the images in the film, it can exist on its own. As the soundscape of the table fills the other rooms, it connects the prints and creates continuity between the family tables in my works as the viewer moves through the gallery.

Oliver Hambsch

*The melancholy poetics of the  
family table*

2022

Video

2 min 57 sec



# Conclusion

The presented work is the result of an adapted approach to my family's photographic archive, wherein I treat the photographs as mnemonic stimuli that regenerate my active, creative engagement rather than as vessels for memory that affect passively.

The extraordinarily complex nature of memory makes it resistant to simplification and reduction. Metaphor and analogy can only represent select aspects and almost always contradict or ignore other aspects of equal importance. The metaphors of memory-as-imprint and memory-as-photograph have become ubiquitous in how we think of memory: as 'imprinted', 'captured', 'recorded' and 'etched' in our minds, terms derived from photography and printmaking. The idea of a photographic memory remains prevalent despite mounting evidence that perfect recall is impossible (Adams, 2006). Memory is amorphous, fluid and porous and resists any attempt to fix it. That which is remembered and that which is forgotten are inseparable, tightly woven into a fabric that forms what we perceive as memory.

Absence and presence are as inextricably entwined in printmaking as they are in memory. The binary nature of the information etched or carved into a plate means that the image is constructed of 'on' and 'off', of absence and presence. The matrix is almost always created through some form of deletion: wood and linoleum are excised, the stencil on a silkscreen is washed out and the metal of an etching plate is eaten away by acid. Even stone lithography, a planographic process, relies on etching and the porosity of the limestone to retain its image. The final print itself is the product of absence – the loss of its matrix. Print can

32 Originally “*empreinte*”.

demonstrate and be viewed as a dialectic between absence and presence. As Georges Didi-Huberman (2018: 188) writes:

I would say that an [imprint]<sup>32</sup> is a “dialectical image” [...] something that is as related to contact (a foot sinking into sand) as it is to loss (the absence of the foot in its impression); it is as related to contact with loss as it is to loss of contact.

Seen from this perspective, the metaphor of memory-as-imprint can be adapted – or at least re-viewed – to include forgetting. Throughout my work, I have attempted to identify and address crucial areas of memory that escape common analogy, and I have teased out, exposed and used theoretical parallels between them to adapt these metaphors to present memory as unstable, fragmented, imaginative and responsive to the viewer’s autobiography.

# Glossary of terms

**Analogue:** Used here to refer to an analogue signal; as in a signal of continuous rather than discrete variables. The visual light spectrum, for example, is an analogue signal, as the wavelength frequency varies continuously. Halftone, however, relies on a pattern of discrete dots or lines to create the illusion of continuous tone. Almost all printing systems rely on a code of discrete, quantified values to reproduce an image and thus cannot create analogue tone.

**Autotype:** Used in this document to refer to any printing process that relies on halftone. (Note: Autotype can also refer to a specific photographic printing process developed by the Autotype Printing and Publishing Company.)

**Bon à tirer:** A French term (literally ‘good to pull’) used to refer to the first perfect proof by which the printmaker measures all other prints in an edition. Commonly abbreviated to B.A.T.

**CMYK:** An acronym for *cyan*, *magenta*, *yellow* and *black* (*K* is derived from *key plate*, which is the plate used to add detail to an image and is usually printed in black). Cyan, magenta and yellow form a subtractive colour model that allows for the approximation of almost all other visible colours and are thus the fewest colours required in a non-photographic printing process to create a full colour image.

**Halftone:** A printing technique in which binary information is used to create an optical illusion of continuous tone. Several different geometric shapes can be used to create halftone. A dot halftone relies on dots of varying sizes and spacing arranged in a grid-like pattern to create tone. By increasing or decreasing the dot size, the density of the colour on the page is varied, and, as the dots are usually too small to be seen with the naked eye, they are perceived as a smooth tone. By using dots of different colours, such as cyan, magenta, yellow and black, the colours are optically mixed, giving the illusion of a variety of colours. Similarly, linear halftone uses parallel lines that vary in thickness to create tone. The ratio of black and white in any portion of the image can be changed by varying the thickness of the lines, creating the appearance of different shades of grey.

**Matrix:** The object responsible for transferring the image to the substrate through the application of a medium, such as ink, in a printing process. For a woodcut it is the carved block, for etching a metal plate, and for screen-printing a stencilled silkscreen.

**Rasterbilder:** Used here to refer to a collection of technically similar paintings by Sigmar Polke. The German word *Raster* refers to the grid pattern of dots (halftone) that Polke painted in enlarged form. I chose to use the German term rather than ‘dot-screen paintings’ or ‘halftone paintings’ to refer specifically to Polke’s paintings.

**Registration/register:** The accuracy of the colour layering when several matrices are used. During a CMYK process, for example, each of the four colours must be placed perfectly on top of each other to recreate a full colour image such as a photograph. If the placement is inaccurate, the image is referred to as being out of register.

**Relief print(ing):** A printing technique that uses a carved block as its matrix. The ink is applied to the raised surfaces (areas that are not carved) and transferred onto paper through the application of pressure. Carved areas will not transfer ink and appear the same colour as the paper, while uncarved areas transfer ink to the paper.

**Screen-print/silkscreen print/serigraph:** A stencil printing technique in which ink is pushed through a fine polyester mesh (the silkscreen). The screen is coated in a photosensitive emulsion that is exposed to UV light through a negative film. The exposed areas harden and the unexposed areas are washed clean, leaving a stencil on the screen. Ink is then pushed through the stencil onto a substrate.

**Toner (powder):** An extremely fine powder of microscopic plastic granules used by laser printers and photocopier machines to print an image. In laser printers and photostat machines, the powder is deposited onto the paper using an electrostatic process and is fixed with heat, which melts the plastic granules and fuses them to the paper. Toner can also be chemically molten and fixed using acetone and/or paint thinner in a fume box.

**Toner-serigraph:** In toner-serigraphy, ink is replaced with toner powder in the screen-printing process. I first separate the referent photograph into CMYK channels and expose those onto a screen, as per the conventional screen-printing process. CMYK toner powder is pressed through the stencil to print the image, which is then chemically fixed to the substrate. This process is difficult to control, and the resulting prints can differ drastically from each other. Toner powder is designed for use in a mechanical, photo-static process and is not well suited to manual printing. The powder is thus deposited unpredictably, making identical copies through the same matrix impossible.

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Oliver Hamsch

*Table with ashtray*

2021

Linocut, ink on etching paper

40 cm x 30 cm

Edition of 6



Oliver Hamsch

*Childhood at the adult table*

2021

Linocut, ink on etching paper

40 cm x 30 cm

Edition of 6



Oliver Hamsch

*Table with beer bottles*

2021

Linocut, ink on etching paper

40 cm x 30 cm

Edition of 6



Oliver Hamsch

*A cigarette after dinner*

2021

Linocut, ink on etching paper

40 cm x 30 cm

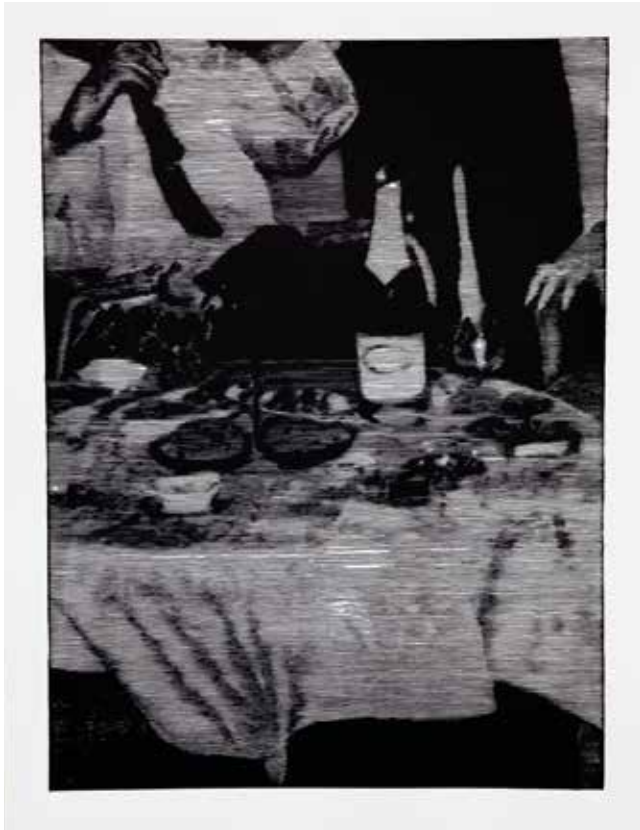
Edition of 6



Oliver Hambsch  
*Sunday afternoon table setting*  
2021  
Linocut, ink on etching paper  
40 cm x 30 cm  
Edition of 6



Oliver Hambsch  
*Evening with the radio playing*  
2021  
Linocut, ink on etching paper  
40 cm x 30 cm  
Edition of 6



Oliver Hamsch

*Table with champagne bottle*

2021

Linocut, ink on etching paper

40 cm x 30 cm

Edition of 6



Oliver Hamsch

*White tablecloth*

2021

Linocut, ink on etching paper

40 cm x 30 cm

Edition of 6



Oliver Hamsch

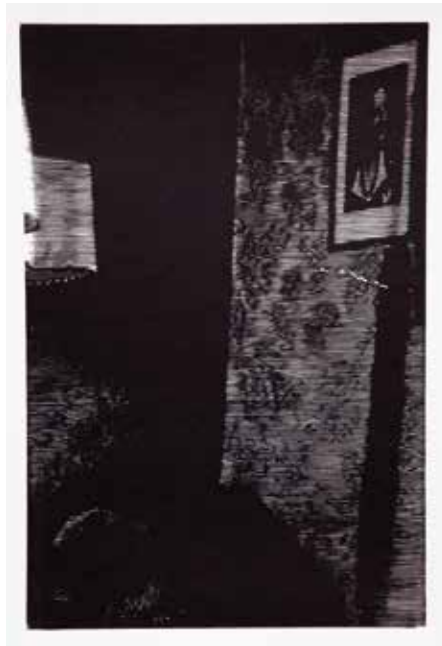
*Married couple*

2021

Linocut, ink on etching paper

30 cm x 20 cm

Edition of 6



Oliver Hamsch

*Woman sitting outside the frame*

2021

Linocut, ink on etching paper

30 cm x 20 cm

Edition of 6



Oliver Hamsch

*Photograph of a mother with child*

2021

Linocut, ink on etching paper

30 cm x 20 cm

Edition of 6



Oliver Hambsch

*Table with tray of glasses*

2021

Linocut, ink on etching paper

30 cm x 20 cm

Edition of 6



Oliver Hambsch

*Table with coffee set*

2021

Linocut, ink on etching paper

30 cm x 20 cm

Edition of 6



Oliver Hambsch

*Two siblings at the table*

2021

Linocut, ink on etching paper

30 cm x 20 cm

Edition of 6





Oliver Hamsch

*The value of remembering*

2021

Screenprint, toner powder on paper

64 cm x 45 cm

Variable edition of 45

Oliver Hambsch  
*Evening at the driving school*  
2020  
Screenprint, toner powder on paper  
64 cm x 45 cm  
Variable edition of 8





Oliver Hamsch

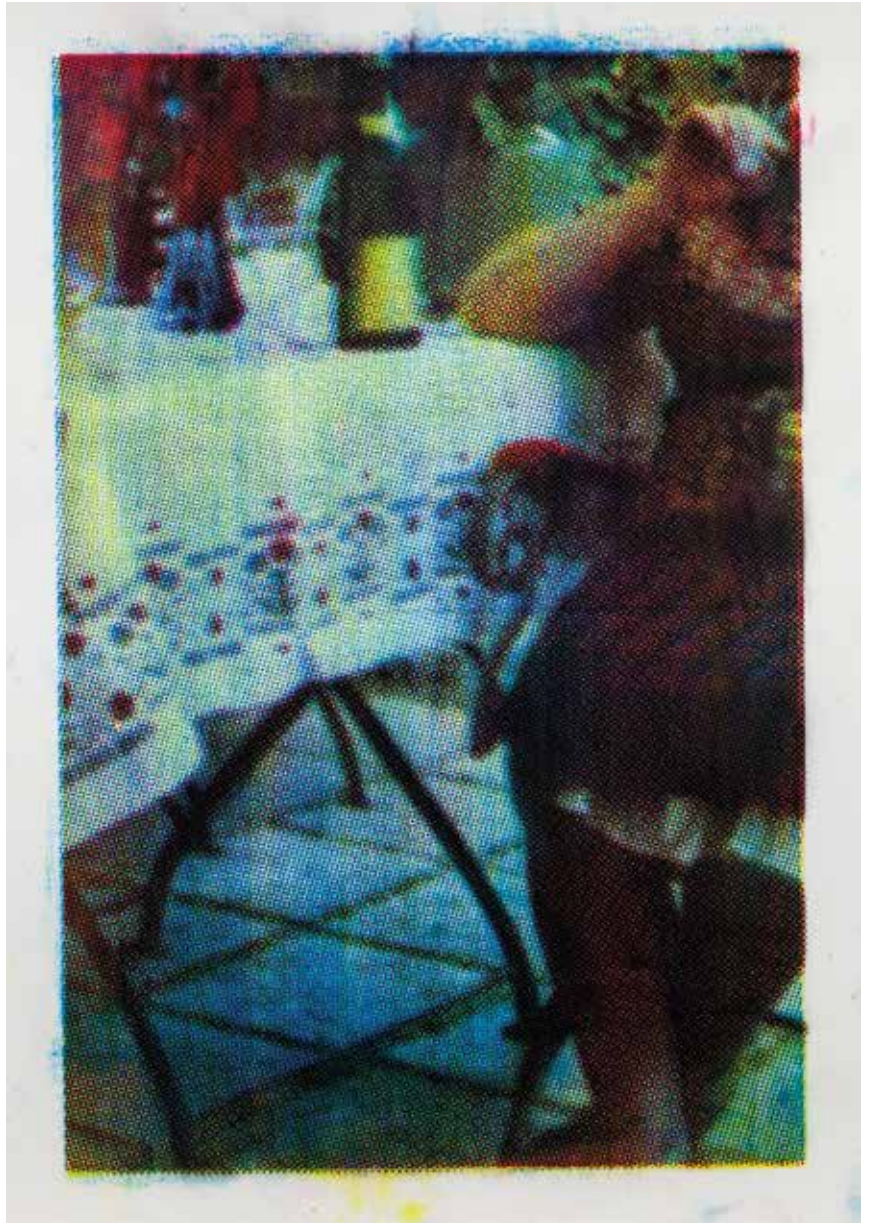
*Table with baby bottle*

2020

Screenprint, toner powder on paper

64 cm x 45 cm

Variable edition of 8



Oliver Hambsch

*Flowers for her birthday*

2022

Screenprint, toner powder on paper

64 cm x 45 cm

Variable edition of 20



Oliver Hamsch

*A camera photographed*

2022

Screenprint, toner powder on paper

64 cm x 45 cm

Variable edition of 20

