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COMPLICATED GRIEF: HOW  
ORPHANHOOD DRIVES PRACTICE-  
BASED RESEARCH OF AN ARTIST-IN-  
MOURNING

A A TRACKIM

PhD

2018

COMPLICATED GRIEF: HOW  
ORPHANHOOD DRIVES PRACTICE-  
BASED RESEARCH OF AN ARTIST-  
IN-MOURNING

ALYSIA ANNE TRACKIM

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements of the University  
of Northumbria at Newcastle for the  
degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Research undertaken in the Faculty of  
Arts, Design & Social Sciences

October 2018

## **ABSTRACT**

This work explores “Grief” and “Orphanhood”. It does so via the use of a practice based artistic exploration of these unfathomable and ongoing dimensions and describes the impact of them on the authors life, in both personal and shared public contexts.

It does this by drawing attention to many complicated facets of both phenomena in order to capture, in whatever way possible, the authorial experience of negotiating the difficult presence of each within their life. The only appropriate term for this concept is that of ‘complicated grief’. A term used by psychologists such as Robert Neimeyer in attempts to understand grief as a greater function.

The thesis includes reflections touching upon therapeutically-inclined models of the grieving process stretching from Sigmund Freud to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Lois Tonkin. Philosophical thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger, and Roland Barthes also greatly influenced the author. These intellectual worlds are then reflected back onto the creative practices of the artists whose work accompanied the author throughout the PhD project: Uta Barth, Jordan Baseman, John Cage, David Dye, Mark Rothko, and Michael Wesely.

The narrative progressively explores concepts that complicate one’s experience of grief. Moving through other widely used descriptors and coining the original notion of ‘absent-presence’ it explores the underlying distinction between two other authorial concepts: ‘aloneness’ and ‘non-aloneness’. These terms carry huge import and greatly influence the author’s ability to ultimately accommodate their understanding of grief.

Appropriately then, this practice-based PhD project takes the form of a sustained photographic project involving the physical complications of Polaroid technology, allied with a ‘stream of consciousness’ narrative that produced a chapterless thesis through which the authorial intent to reflect an actual ebb and flow in the complications that constitute their grieving and orphanhood is realised in the reader.

The thesis cannot be considered separately from the exhibitions, nor the creative journey that underpinned the creation of each, for they are one, separate yet intrinsically linked and indivisible. However, the “absence” of the photographs in their entirety is the point, the authorial intent in including limited Polaroids being to once again use the process of the readers journey through the narrative about their creation as a physical metaphor that invokes the frustrations felt in being forced to rely on incomplete memories that constitute fragments of a presence now absent.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Where do I start? There are so many people that have been with me every step of the way - seen me at my most vulnerable, as well as my most elated. People who cheered me on from the side-lines and pushed me through when I didn't think I could do it anymore.

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Finally, thank you to Darren Shields for constantly and consistently supporting me.

## **DECLARATION**

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee on 29 January 2014.

**I declare the Word Count of this Thesis is 34,240 words**

Name: Alysia Anne Trackim

Signature:

Date: 12 September 2019

## THESIS

In May 1894, Henry James rowed to the middle of a Venetian lagoon in a gondola filled with a dead woman's clothes, intending to sink them beneath the water. He had come to the city to help clear out the apartment of Constance Fenimore Woolson, following her apparent suicide, and to destroy the remaining evidence of their relationship. Yet, though his gondolier pole repeatedly drove the dresses beneath the waves, the effort was futile, and they simply billowed back up. (Wright, 2016: 10)

This is how Tom F. Wright begins his review of Ann Boyd Rioux's biography of the nineteenth century American novelist Constance Fenimore Woolson. What a powerful image of grief. Keep in mind the futile effort of trying to push dresses beneath the surface of a murky Venetian lagoon. This is how I want readers to understand my research. This thesis has been an exercise in learning about myself, others, and the way the world functions around me. I embarked on this project without a specific question in mind, only that I knew that my orphanhood has fundamentally changed who I am as a person and who I am as an artist. I was no longer an artist working with understanding relationships between colour and the world around me – I was an *artist-in-mourning*, attempting to understand the relationships between photographic colour, absence, and this new terrible 'billowing' presence that replaced my parents. In 2013, when I first realised that this transformation had taken place, I could barely speak about the deaths of my parents... it was almost a taboo I had placed upon myself. (Thus, yes, it made choosing this topic all the more difficult.) Now, rounding to the fifth year, I no longer have an issue looking introspectively and pragmatically, but I wholly embrace it. I also embrace my unique position in the world to make tangible change.

I am reporting on a practice-based PhD and, as a result, I have some guiding questions for the reader to consider as they venture onto my murky lagoon. The dresses will be floating around and it will not possible to force them underwater.

Indeed, the efforts I make to do this only result in a futile sequence of complications. I am going to refer to these efforts throughout my thesis as ‘complicated grief’. So, my primary question concerns the relationship between this concept (as you will learn ‘complicated grief’ is a technical term) and the creative practices of an *artist-in-mourning*. How have other creative practitioners related to the issue of grief? Where do these relationships fit within the wider context of grieving communities? Because at any given moment in time lots of people are struggling with the loss of loved ones, how can I facilitate art-based narratives between myself and others? I want to welcome ghosts. I want to invite the residue of past lives to the surface of the lagoon. I want to facilitate spaces where people can confront, explore, and seek understanding of grief in a shared public context. I want to impact positively and raise awareness about grief and its many facets, using my research practice, to provide tools to better understand narrative functions and how they impact upon and motivate us. If the last paragraph sketched out my initial research questions, then this one outlines the aim of my research. My hope is that this thesis will chart how grief has been manifested, not simply as an unfolding historical process (although I will mention some of this because it helps us imagine what ‘uncomplicated grief’ might look like), but as a matter of current urgency in post-embalming America, a social context that has radically changed and complicated everybody’s scope to display grief. We all now wrestle with our pain-denying culture.

All these ambitions, to the degree that they hazard a response to my guiding questions, will be addressed through the relationship between my artistic practices and their expansion into work with bereavement charities and like-minded organisations that can provide social spaces in which to explore these aims.

Grief is a fundamental part of being human – it roots itself in the consciousness of our species as a social animal. Throughout history, guided by the culture in which it

resolves itself, grief and grieving has adapted and formed under the cultural restrictions that we have placed upon it. From death practices that continue to worship the body of their loved ones (e.g. Indonesia, Bolivia and their very tactile expressions of mourning<sup>1</sup>) to those that take a more bury-it-fast-and-never-look-back approach (e.g. United States) the form in which we interact with the body affects the way in which we interact with the nebulous absence of the body's temporary caretaker. Elsewhere and at other historical times, in cultures different from my own, there would have been artists who facilitated the worship of the dead, who turn mourning into a tactile ritualistic - and, yes, uncomplicated - experience. An *artist-in-mourning* is, of course, the opposite of this. This kind of contemporary practitioner has to embrace the complications. The image of Henry James pushing down the dresses comes to mind.

Thus, my narrative can only be a reflective piece of writing that will bring you into an understanding of the underpinnings of this research project: who I am, who I lost, how that affected me, and ultimately, how we got here. I realised very early on in my research that the only way this project is going to make any sense and have a positive impact is by being earnest in my thoughts, experiences, and beliefs. Grief manifests itself in an impossible number of ways for an impossible number of reasons, and my hope is that through this thesis I will find a way of representing this confusion, my ongoing lack of recovery. I have been encouraged by my supervisors to think of my research as the unpacking of a memory box. The concept comes from journalist Joanna Moorhead's model for the process of bringing the dead back into daily awareness. The implications are that I can lay out the residue of my

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<sup>1</sup> In Tana Toraja, the recently deceased are treated with formaldehyde and water and can lay in a state of repose for days, months, or years. They are tended to as a living relative in the house, including meals and conversations. The Torajan believe that death isn't a finality, but another connection. In Bolivia, they celebrate the veneration of skulls with the Fiesta da la Ñatitas. Here, Bolivians will decorate skulls of loved ones and family heirlooms, usually passed down through generations, with hats, sunglasses, cigarettes, flowers, and other accessories and parade them to the cemetery for a celebration. In 2015 there were as many as 12,000 participants.

losses in an orderly fashion for everybody to peruse and understand. Unfortunately, my self-narrative will not work in this way. The image is wrong. The orphanhood I am researching billows on the surface like Constance Fenimore Woolson's clothes. And the surface of my grieving is as confused and complicated as that of the lagoon surrounding Henry James's gondola. Everything is too complicated to unpack and sort out: the billowing dresses cannot sink, nor can they be retrieved from the choppy water. And so, what I mean by complication, as it affects me and as I grieve, will, I hope, emerge within the pages of this thesis as one reads it. That is, the structure of the thesis will be itself 'complicated'. In fact, my only way of proceeding is by abandoning the whole idea of a conventional structure. Much like the 'orderly fashion', it is disingenuous to the integrity of the research. As a result, this will be a chapterless thesis, a sequence of narrated complications that unfold in a similar manner to 'stream of consciousness' writing.

I justify this approach by referring to José-Luis Díaz's 2013 paper *A Narrative Method for Consciousness Research*. He defines first-person narrations and phenomenological accounts, particularly those that take the form of an internal monologue, as the best expressions and representations of human consciousness available. If possible, I would like the reader to engage with my self-narrative in what Díaz calls a think-aloud manner. Imagine what Henry James was saying to himself as he pushed at the billowing dresses. Díaz goes on to cite William Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying* (1930), in which a sequence of stream-of-consciousness monologues turn the psychology of the narrator into the central concern of the reader, presenting them with much more complexity than a conventional novelistic narrative. Furthermore, Díaz's analysis recognises the baffling interplay between clock time and subjective time, between the time it takes to read a piece of discursive theoretical writing and a first-person narrative. In my research this kind of bafflement is the equivalent of the state of complicated grief.

Further, I believe that presenting this thesis in any other structure would be disingenuous, it would endanger the types of feelings and thinking processes which I seek to present. How can something as huge and burdensome as the experience of grief be contained by a sequence of academic chapters that celebrates the workings of an orderly mind? The person writing this thesis is trying to manage disorder first-hand. As the reader will find, the grief I feel has functioned as both a personal and social complication. The latter sense of shared communal complexity and lived difficulties compels me to write this thesis so that readers fully encounter my convoluted self-narrative as a convolution. This conforms, I think, to the ideas of theorists such as Roland Barthes (who will appear later in this thesis). Both argued that the experience of the reader, rather than that of the author, constructs meaningful realities. This thesis attempts to address the reality of complicated grief.

So, here's a baffling complication linked to the self-narrative I am writing. Can one be an orphan at the age of 26? I think technically (in terms of clock time), the answer is surely no. But if you consider what an orphan is, I still fall into most of the definition quite easily: my parents are dead. I am now a woman with no parents. It affects me in profoundly subjective ways, as well as in little everyday (clock time) ways too. Now past a decade since losing both of my parents, I have a hard time remembering what it was like having them. The idea of an authority over me is as farfetched as having to ask permission to leave the house. It also means that I don't have that one person I know won't judge me hold me when I cry. I don't have anyone that remembers me when I was little; tease me with childhood nicknames or remind me of that one time I took a dive off a small ledge headfirst into a pile of leaves because my twelve-year-old brain thought that was a brilliant idea. However, for me, for the most part there's a numb ignorance to the whole social custom of parents. 'Meet the parents' is awkward. General assumptions due to my age is also awkward. Please don't think I still don't have moments of sheer agonising want for

something clearly impossible, those attacks are still there, creeping, and ready to strike when I least expect it to.

In 2004 Helen Marshall published a study in 'Ageing International' called *Midlife Loss of Parents: The Transition from Adult Child to Orphan*. It bears a small UK qualitative study on individuals in their mid-life that have lost their parents and what they experienced. As I was in my mid-to-late twenties when I lost Mom and Dad, I feel that I am probably not entirely the intended target, but the findings coincide in a lot of ways with what I have experienced.

Douglas suggests that the death of a parent is 'an important personal and symbolic event' which is a time of 'upheaval and transition' (1990-1991:134). Her research demonstrates that the death of parents in midlife is not a normative event by any measure, but a major life transition. The consequences of the death of a parent are wide-ranging for the individual, perhaps prompting the adult children to examine their lives more closely, reassessing priorities and considering their own mortality as they move to the eldest generation in the family (Moss & Moss, 1983-1984; Kastenbaum, 1977; Sanders, 1979-1980). Furthermore, the loss can affect the adult child's relationships with colleagues, friends and family (Douglas, 1990-1991). The result is a complex and multi-dimensional life transition which impacts on both sense of self and other areas of the adult child's life. (Marshall, 2004:351)

The complexities I faced after my severance from daughter to orphan played an enormous factor on my wellbeing and the meaning in my life. As touched on just earlier, the social cues for my age-range or bracket have deviated from the norm, so simple, every day conversations and navigation can become tricky. (You don't realise how much your parents impact your day-to-day until they're no longer there.)

Marshall goes on to posit a Two-Stage Life Transition:

The data suggest second and final parent loss is felt differently by adult children precisely because the parent-child relationship is totally lost on the death of the second parent. It is at this stage adult children may consider changes in family structure and their own sense of loss of both first and second loss more strongly. (Marshall, 2004:365)

This final severance, and the complexity within the loss that I experienced with my mother and father, forced an unwilling self to continue existing without them. No longer a daughter, I was (and am) forced to continually reconcile this within a culture that puts heavy emphasis on family. In fact, the experience of 'second loss' is clearly a very important driver for my research. What happened over the forthcoming year after my mother's death was a retreat into my subjective self while concurrently seeking external validation that drove me to apply overseas to an undergraduate course in Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Losing my father in 2007 wasn't a shock because he was ill. What was a shock was trying to understand life at 25 without a father. I still had my mother, and my core family unit was more-or-less still intact. I had friends to take care of me. All in all, and in retrospect, I handled his loss quite well. It was hard, but not impossible.

Then my mother died.

My world changed overnight. As Marshall explains in the quote above, the second loss was the pulled trigger to my inability to cope with my sense of self and personal narrative. Pulling my mother away, taking her from me with very little warning, and severing that last tie to the people that literally made me, spiralled me out of control. Nearly immediately the effects of this loss were made apparent.

My mother, the focal point of our wider family, now out of the picture, and so soon after my father, drove most of my friends and family away. The heavy burden of having to suffer with my sister and I was, understandably, too much for most to cope with. They withdrew.

In grief, I did the only thing I thought I could. I flew to Newcastle-upon-Tyne and enrolled in Northumbria University's Fine Art programme. In my second year of my Bachelor's degree, I had a tutorial with a guest artist. At the time I had learned to

speak less freely about the death of my parents, recent history had taught me that the conversation was uncomfortable to others around me, so it caught me completely off-guard when he asked me about them in no uncertain terms. When I told him, shifting in my seat, his reaction wasn't that of pain or sorrow (as I had come to expect), but rather excitement. He told me that I had to make him cry. He begged me. I immediately refused the idea and internally told myself never to bring it up again. I tell this story because it is a catalyst to a series of events that led me to the writing of this thesis, to having this conversation with you. In that moment, I decided *the last thing I would ever do is make art about my grief*.

I spent the next few years burying what was already symptomatic of complicated grief further inside, covering it so deeply that for a while I couldn't even speak about it. I was stuck in a perpetual cycle of sobbing during the night, crying out for my mother and father, and a stoicism during the day. Perhaps despite this stoicism, the unconscious suffering I was pushing into my gut was expressing itself all over my canvases and photographs. The work's been about the loss, about the grief, and about the overwhelming presence their absence created.

Finally, understanding that this could absolutely not continue in the way it had, I visited a university counsellor. I still remember, in the box on the form asking me what I needed the counselling service for, I put 'delayed bereavement', because I had no other language to which to describe it. When I walked into his office and sat in his chair for the first of many sessions, I remember asking him, *why*. What was 'talking' going to do about any of this? His answer to me that day more-or-less boils down to, 'it just does'. But, perhaps, if I were a fellow colleague he would have brought up Díaz's research. He would have told me that introspective verbal reports are 'genuine renditions':

[S]ince their narration is an ancient and efficient instrument for recognizing and evaluating actual mental states in others indicating that such narrations

communicate several aspects of the form and content of the conscious processes that produced and/or correspond to them. (Diaz, 2013: 2)

It wasn't until after I finished my Masters course, and begun preparing for this PhD, that I found myself in a position that allowed me to look honestly and see my practices as an *artist-in-mourning* for what it was. What is it? Well, this thesis text is an exploration of the 'mental states' that impact upon and motivate my sense of loss – this *absent-presence* – that has, during the course of my research, come to increasingly drive my creative practice.

***Check list: the reader has heard my family story; learnt how I escaped the US; came to Northumbria University and entered the world of British art schools; this led to me undertaking practice-based research as a doctoral student; various ideas have been introduced to suggest why I consider myself a complicated artist-in-mourning; so let's move on to another complication.***

Who was it that I was grieving for. My mother was the parent (my father was the alcoholic.) In a lot of ways I still don't fully recognise her death, because at this point I think it's a coping mechanism. In the short moments I do; the pain drowns me. Her death happened relatively suddenly, only over the course of a few short months. Her decline was profound. The guilt I feel is the guilt that continues to complicate my grief: she died only a little over a year after my father did, and I was not in any condition to watch another parent succumb. The cancer, that was suspected to have started in her lungs from years of smoking, had spread to her bones. Her constant state of agony kept me awake and aware at every point in her demise, I perched myself in the recliner just outside her room in case she needed me - her cries to God perpetuated by whispers and winces twenty-four hours a day and within my range of hearing. After days awake sitting outside her door, I fell asleep. While I slept, my mother, a brittle diabetic, fell into a coma. I woke up to her focused on something I couldn't see above her, her arms and legs writhing. The wait for the ambulance felt like an eternity.

There is a lot of talk about the *bond* in grief literature. To gain some kind of understanding about how grief fundamentally affects us all differently, we look to the relationship the person had with the deceased.

Robert Neimeyer, professor in the department of psychology at the University of Memphis, writes in 'Omega Journal of Death & Dying' that a separation anxiety exists between the bereaved and the deceased in certain relationships, such as that

of parents. When the bond is broken and cannot be re-established, it may be expected that a complication may occur:

...persistent separation distress is activated in the wake of loss of the critical relationship, [and] when the bereaved struggles unsuccessfully to re-establish a continuing bond at more abstract levels. (Neimeyer, 2005: 43)

When cultural acts that are expected of parents, such as walking their daughter down the wedding aisle, greeting grandchildren, acting as guidance, and the burden of old age cannot be fulfilled, the bereaved may experience a dysphoria of reality and a cyclic episode of mourning when reminded of the loss of expected life progressions.

My parents died in succession over the course of a year and a half. While my father's was a long-term illness that gradually ended, albeit quite horrifically, my mother's was relatively sudden. During these events I was transformed from a young adult to a grieving orphan with no access to help or respite. Family ties eroded quickly and without warning, leaving myself and my sibling to handle affairs we were in no way able to emotionally handle.

Guilt and anxiety immediately flooded my personal being. Eating, sleeping, and functioning became impossible. Nightmares of my parents' ravaged bodies haunted me day and night and tragic episodes began to play on a looped repeat in my mind. Most importantly, throughout all of this, there wasn't a way to expel these thoughts, leaving the opportunity for natural grieving radically hindered.

I lost my understanding of events as a linear experience. I'm aware of events that happened in my past, but can no longer put them in any kind of definitive order. Concurrently, I felt a physical breakage in time, fractured at the events of each death. The first few years I started to question whether they ever really existed at all. During this time, in my art practice, I found myself working through

representations and metaphors of borders and ceilings, grappling with visual representations of the otherness that I was experiencing.

Here's a complication. What is my narrative? What are the fundamental instruments to compose grief? What are my tools? The philosophic study of grief, loss, bereavement, and its kith (nothingness, borders, traces, shadows, existentialism, phenomenology, and silence, to name a few) have come under this umbrella to form a kit for my research practice. Most importantly, however, is the embracing of social narratives of people, place, and space. This project is about people, first and foremost. What happens when they die, when they live, and what they do with that.

We will lay down the groundwork for this expansion by discussing the pivotal work on complicated grief undertaken by Neimeyer as well as Jacques Derrida's (1930-2004) paper on the impossibility of death in response to Martin Heidegger's (1889-1976) *Dasein* from *Being and Time* (in particular: *Being-no-longer-in-the-world & No-longer-Dasein*.) This will allow me, legitimately or not, to seek an argument for understanding the nature of complicated grief as catalyst for understanding some very basic and shared ideas about loss and bereavement.

At this point I feel ready to start describing my narration as a tool for understanding grief. Neimeyer spends a lot of time discussing the self-narrative when it comes to addressing complicated grief. He also recognises that the attachments that we bond with during our first years of life will, most times, correlate with the way we grieve when they're gone. This self-narrative is important, it is something that I will continue to continually return to (and complicate) throughout this thesis. For a long time my narrative was disturbed through the actions of myself and those around me.

In his paper on *Grief Therapy and the Reconstruction of Meaning: From Principles to Practice*, Neimeyer isolates that the 'backbone of the self-narrative are core beliefs and assumptions about the world' (Neimeyer, et al: 2009:74). The challenge

of the core of beliefs through the loss of a loved one can 'undermine the coherence of the self-narrative' (Neimeyer, et al: 2009:74). Within the loss two things must occur to begin to create the ideal circumstances: the loss must be recognised, and integrated into the person's self-narrative. If we understand this to be *meaning making*, then we can begin to pursue ways of challenging the existential horror that is a broken, lost, or damaged self-narrative. Meaning making, while it can be gained through understanding of the actual physical death of the individual or object of the bereaved's focus, generally falls under a more meta-existential approach: meaning through life, or recognising the absent's new presence.

Over the course of the PhD I have attempted to understand the functions of grief, mourning, bereavement, and their place in modern society. What I have continually found, however, is that bereavement is an incredibly personal experience that one must confront alone. Paradoxically, it must also be experienced communally. It's within the isolation that grief doesn't have a way to express and be expressed. A key aspect of my narrative will therefore be the confusing tension I feel when shifting between the 'aloneness' of my grief and the 'non-aloneness' of its expression. Expect to hear more about this later, particularly as I continue to explore the motif of *absent-presence*. Time and again in articles on complicated grief, traumatic grief, or any type of grief that has been delineated, the common thread is the isolation. Either through denial of the grief by others, the minimisation, or through deliberate ignorance. The isolation manifested, for me, in an overwhelming yearning for something that doesn't exist, the absence of my parents became an overwhelming presence, practically physical in its existence.

So, here's a complication. It is interesting to engage with, and utilise, the terminology that has been developed in other disciplines. My idea is that my PhD will feel more like an original contribution to knowledge if I make cross-disciplinary imports the goal of my research. But this seems to ignore the inhibition of language

that characterises the aloneness of complicated grief. Before a non-alone interaction is established, the bereaved find themselves bereft of words. Bereavement is silent. People are left isolated. It was, for example, a pact between myself, my mother, and my sister that we wouldn't correct anyone assuming my father died from cancer. The stigmatisation of an alcohol-related death was too much to bear, so, as in life, we pretended it wasn't there. We didn't use the term. This linguistic self-disenfranchisement goes on to further isolate myself (as well as others that witness a death that may not be acceptable) and create a gap between the reality that I face (a father dead from alcohol) from the reality around me (a father dead from cancer). This is disenfranchised grief, a term that was coined by Kenneth Doka in 'Bereavement Care' (1999).

Disenfranchised grief can be defined as the grief experienced by those who incur a loss that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported. Isolated in bereavement, it can be much more difficult to mourn and reactions are often complicated. (Doka, 1999:37)

Disenfranchised grief affects any of those who may not be able to grieve relative to reality. Much like losing my father twice, it can affect anyone that isn't given the opportunity for an honest bereavement and a bereavement validated by those around them.

In 2007 Lauren Breen and Moria O'Conner published a paper in the 'Omega Journal of Death and Dying' titled *The fundamental paradox in the grief literature: a critical reflection*.

A key theme in the bereavement literature is the recognition that every grief experience is unique and dependent on many variables, such as the circumstances of the death, characteristics of the bereaved individual, their relationship with the deceased, the provision and availability of support, and a myriad of sociocultural factors. Concurrently, there are corresponding efforts to define "normal" grief and delineate it from "complicated" grief experiences. The discord between these two potentially opposing statements remains a paradox evident within the three major tensions within the thanatological literature--the dominance of grief theories, the medicalization of grief, and the efficacy of grief interventions. (Breen & O'Connor, 2007:abstract)

Already we see a troubling concoction of pulling apart grief and assigning it categories: the overwhelmingly personal nature of grief easily resists this. That's not to say that literature and studies on bereavement is inherently bad or wrong, quite the opposite, as we have come so far learning about the fundamental structures of humanity and society through such research, but the presentation of lists distract from the actuality of grief and imply something wrong from the very start. Breen and O'Connor cover this by offering a new way to cope with grief: 'improved grief education for service providers, the bereaved, and the wider community; the conduct of research that emphasises the context of grief and is relevant to service provision; and the examination of current grief interventions' (Breen & O'Connor, 2007:abstract). So we begin to see a pattern of gaps within dealing with loss. With few bereavement after-care options (or a miseducation *on those options*) we may see the bereaved person with little help, or, at worst, help that may end up being harmful to the grief experience. I'd also like to note that these models and literature still play an important role in our understanding of grief, as is evident within the confines of this body of research.

As mentioned, my father died from alcoholism. It was a slow and painful death, not only for himself, but for his family: for me. My father died in a hospice attached to a Catholic hospital in New Jersey. As such, there was a reverend, priest, or some other religious authority figure that would roam around and offer prayers and condolences for the dying and their families. One afternoon I was getting myself a cup of coffee in the little kitchen alcove, that didn't provide much room for more than one person... so when he approached I was literally trapped in the room.

'How does it feel knowing your father drank himself to death?'

He was still alive at this point. Albeit barely.

There is an awkwardness dealing with death, especially within a society that hides it behind so many closed doors. I don't know if this particular gentleman had a chip on his shoulder, but I do know that this was the absolutely wrong thing to say to me. Trapped, I panicked, said I didn't want to talk about it, and eventually was able to dart out and back to my father's room.

One of the largest problems I had to deal with when dealing with the death of my father was the wild mis-information aplenty studded throughout my family, friends, and wider community.

***Check list: the reader has now learnt that I cannot sustain a linear narrative; that my complicated narrative is intellectually informed by Robert Neimeyer, Jacques Derrida and Martin Heidegger; that there is such a thing as disenfranchised grief; that the type of grief I am narrating divides into the divided conditions of 'aloneness' and 'non-aloneness'; and, as we begin to survey some more theoretical literature on grief, I introduce for the first time a key term - absent-presence; here's another complication.***

Now, I'm about to focus my narrative on a particularly brilliant woman, but not because of the seminal works she has created in the quest for understanding death and dying. No, I'm isolating her because it became so ingrained and misconstrued in popular culture that it has (and still does) permeate every aspect of my bereavement (regardless of whether or not I want it to.) I am, of course, talking about Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1926-2004) and her '5 stages of grief'. I'm just going to get the problematic aspect of this famous system out of the way immediately: the stages are misapplied to the wrong side of the dying process. In 1969, Kübler-Ross published her renowned *On Death and Dying* and forever changed the landscape of popular culture's understanding of grief. Never intended as a book for the bereaved, but rather for the voice of the dying in that University of Chicago hospital, it broke down barriers to allow for those in their deathbeds to explore their experience through recorded interactions with Kübler-Ross. The invaluable nature of the book, and the discussions within, give insight to the mind of the dying in a way that wasn't possible before. What she found was that there were certain key emotions that were felt throughout the vast majority of cases, and the famous five-stage model was created.

I hesitate to consider Kübler-Ross's profound investigation into the dying in a Chicagoan university hospital to be *pop*-psychology, but her influence was so enormous that the grief stages have saturated modern society in such a way that it

seems that we've solved the whole grief problem. A perfect linear plan that easily describes exactly what you're feeling and becomes another hindrance to traverse. Most of all because it was never really meant for the bereaved, but for the dying.

I've been critical of the Kübler-Ross grief stages mostly because it's been detrimental to my recovery from the loss of my parents. I didn't really pay much attention to the stages personally, but those around me expected me to follow this strict guide of when and how to feel. I know this is a gross misapplication of the grief model, but the misapplication is societal. In both deaths, when I wasn't following the pre-scripted stages I was questioned over it (What do you mean you're depressed again? We've already been through this!) What this ended up causing was for me to retreat further within, thinking I was experiencing death the wrong way. Eventually I just shut it out entirely and it festered like an infected wound for years while I consciously tried to bury it deeper. My whole issue comes from the way grief models are presented. They're usually listed, and even with warnings (don't use this as a list). We still do.

A need for a real, tangible, and predictable course of death and dying solidified the book in America and the UK, one whose references are still used today in therapy and counselling studies. Anecdotally, I can say that it was this model that hindered my own understanding of my father's death, with friends and family alike vehemently guarding their understanding of me when he died. I delineated from my grief quite frequently, and in this itself, found that not only did it anger them, but confuse me. Am I doing it wrong? This, along with a divorce (caused in part by this inability to predictably move through my grief), a mother in her own deathbed, and no support system, crippled my ability to explore my own feelings in relation to death, dying, and bereavement. I quickly closed in on myself and, overwhelmed by grief, ceased to function.

Years later, in October 2015, I found myself in the middle of an empty gallery, armed with over 300 photographs (I can't help but think of these Polaroids as objects rather than images) that needed to be on the walls in less than four days for the opening of my first solo exhibition. Through a very slow process during the intervening years, I've been able to learn about myself, about grief, and about what that means to my practice as an artist. Fundamentally, I explore and try to understand the unresolved nature of complicated grief, a dysfunctional grieving disorder that arrests a person's ability to grieve properly. This in itself has been argued as paradox, in that paper called *The fundamental paradox in the grief literature: a critical reflection* (2007) and acted as the part of catalyst for this research.

In that paper, Breen and O'Connor noted the fundamental structure of grief through psychological analysis also fails to consider grief doesn't always align to specific functions. They posited that this creates a paradox for complicated grief: a cyclic interference in what may actually be healthy grieving following a delineated path. By medicalising grief, and assigning a diagnostic category, we create a self-fulfilling prophesy of damaged individuals. This does not, in fact, prove that complicated grief isn't a thing, rather, it proves its existence by default. Until a society can understand death, we will not have the correct capacity to deal with it.

The nature of my work was never to answer, or attempt to answer, grief. Rather, it's been a sometimes quiet and sometimes loud attempt at questioning what grief is. Why grief is the way it is. How it has managed to become the most natural and unnatural experience one can have. We seem so radically removed from the event that it almost seems as though it's not even real. But then we're left with the lasting effect that it is, in fact, very real: when we go to ring them, or see their favourite chair, or get into bed at night. Between this, a wanted predictability in the way grievers function from the death onward, funeral homes descending on bodies and

hiding them away to filter chemicals through them even before they've begun to cool, we have created an experience for people bereaved that rarely aligns with reality.

So how do we reconcile this? How do we attempt to articulate this messy and crumbly experience of grief in a way that is integral to our own experience, but perhaps quiet enough to listen to the experiences of others? My thesis can only recognise and debate the sticky mess that grief is while looking at the profound emotional moments and how we may manage co-existing in a death-shy cultural space. How do we create 'safe-spaces', spaces that people feel free to explore their bereavement without fear of hurting or otherwise making others uncomfortable? My exhibition practice utilises space through installation to try to create this, however small, bubble of reprieve in a public, that is non-alone, space. Through photographic objects and events surrounding grief, the work is made as an offer as a platform that is filled with the conversation of grief.

I've found, throughout the exhibition, and in my daily life, that giving people the opportunity to reflect, people do really like talking about death and their loved ones gone. But this formula to create that 'safe-space' still seems so elusive. What are these spaces? How do we create them and where do they go when they're gone?

Grief is a profound adjustment to a reality we don't consent ourselves to. A serious shift takes place. It presents us with a series of conflicted and inconsistent questions, and perhaps, we can make enough room to try to understand the unfocused and often blurry and misplaced memories. Grief models make an attempt at reconciling these, in charts and words that so often get misconstrued. We need to know something of the intellectual history of bereavement, starting with Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) and ending with some of the latest attempts at explaining grief: specifically, why they're both relevant and irrelevant at the same time. I realise that at some point I really must describe

how artists, philosophers, and writers have reconciled their grief through use of their medium. In 1960, under the pseudonym Dimidius (Latin, 'cut in half'), C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) submitted *A Grief Observed* (1961) to Faber & Faber publishing. In it he explores the profound presence of his wife's absence after she passes away. Derrida gives an emotional essay about his friend and colleague Roland Barthes (1915-1980) after his life was cut tragically short in *The Work of Mourning* (2001). Sir Terry Pratchett (1948-2015) considers his right to die in a 2010 BBC broadcast, made into a book titled *Shaking Hands with Death* in 2014. The works of Mark Rothko (1903-1970) in his later years are considered pieces of visualised grief. His final series, titled *Black on Grey* (1970), are desolate scapes of black and grey, a testament to death and depression. Edvard Munch's (1863-1944) tragic grief early in life<sup>2</sup> set a tone for his paintings. Grief is one of the most profoundly personal experiences one will go through, despite it also being one of the most universally shared. Let's learn how to talk about it.

Here's a complication again. Now that a context has been provided (complicated grief, self-narrative, clock time, subjective time, and separation anxiety), I find myself wanting to confuse things further by mentioning that, within my Mother's absence, a strong sense of presence emerged. I need to explore this *absent-presence* as a concept. I cannot continue with writing the thesis without it. It certainly relates to my photographic practice: the exploration and questioning of an absent presence and the overwhelming presence of absence, through trace, memory, and grief.

Perhaps it sounds complicated - to confuse an absence with a presence. It reflects the complicated array of arrested grief development that I associate with my lack of

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<sup>2</sup> Edvard Munch lost his mother prematurely to tuberculosis when he was only five. Eight years later, at thirteen, he would also lose his older sister Sophie. These compounded losses pained Munch and stayed with him for the rest of his life (Warick & Warick, 2014).

recovery. In my experience it became an overwhelming constant in my life. An oppressive presence brought about by the absence of my parents. Within this context, I have endeavoured to investigate this *absent-presence* within my art, first unconsciously, and then consciously as I took on this project. These pages contain the theoretical, psychological, and personal understanding of how this affects and effects my creative production.

The tensions of public and private reception of my work result in ambiguities symptomatic of my response to the alone/not-alone dimensions of complicated grief. The handling of my bereavement has been tentative at best, completely non-existent at worst. This has led to a repressive shut-down of my response mechanisms that didn't allow for me to make decisions consciously. Due to the unconscious nature of decisions in my art practice, *absent-presence* is a continuous force, a flow that I have very little control over. It can only be a trickle for months until a torrent is seemingly unleashed. Perhaps something in my environment triggered a memory, or a response, or an opportunity. Much like the billowing dress, I have little control over how or when it will arise; I only know that it will.

As a family, we were called to the nursing home to view my mother's body, hours after she had died. I'm still unsure who's custom this is, but we did the same with my father. I don't even know if I was allowed to refuse (or if, had I been more self-aware, I would have chosen to do so.) It felt unnatural to me. My mother, as my father, is gone. All that's left is an uncanny simulacrum. Maybe because of this, I found myself time and time again miss-stepping these unwritten rules and further alienating myself from my peers and family, removing any form of support without ever realising that was what I was doing.

***Check list: the reader has now encountered Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's influential '5 stages of grief' and heard my concerns about the available therapeutic theories; I have now also begun to discuss the key exhibition that makes this research practice-based; I also continue to describe the ebb and flow of the 'absent-present' in both my theoretical and practical research; here's another complication - I realise that I need to say bit more about the concept of complicated grief.***

Niemeyer's term has come to replace, or be an alternative for, the notion of traumatic grief. As I said above, in *Grief Therapy and the Reconstruction of Meaning* (2010), he talks a lot about the importance of the self-narrative. Niemeyer posits that without a coherent self-narrative (like one disrupted by the death of a close attachment), we will falter and our grief work may be inhibited. He calls into focus core beliefs such as control, nature, mortality, and existence itself as what can, at the core, be disturbed (Niemeyer, 2010:74). He breaks it down into two general meaning-making processes: assimilation and accommodation. In assimilation, 'the loss experience [attempts to assimilate] into their pre-loss beliefs and self-narratives, in effect maintaining consistency with who they previously were.' (Niemeyer, 2010:74). In accommodation, 'the loss [is accommodated by] reorganising, deepening, or expanding their beliefs and self-narrative to embrace the reality of the loss, often seeking validation for a changed identity in connection with a new field or social relationships' (Niemeyer, 2010:74). This is, in effect, a structural proposition for a thesis writer like myself - the complicated interplay between coherence and self-narrative is what I want my readers to experience.

Regardless of what way the bereaved behaves, each of these are an attempt to re-establish a coherent self-narrative. If a bereavement could be termed 'successful' it would be when meaning is made from the loss. Niemeyer notes that there is evidence that they fare better than those that are unable to re-establish their

narrative (Niemeyer, 2010:75). Complicated grief doesn't have to be about bereavement, when used descriptively. Through experience working with vulnerably housed and homeless, I have expanded my understanding of the concept to include anyone who's life is so disrupted by loss that they have no coherent self-narrative. The work that I do, and continue to do, discussed later on, defines this.

For the purposes of this thesis, complicated grief is a gross disruption of the self-narrative that permeates the existence of the person. By using this definition, it allows me to more freely work with complicated grief in terms of *loss* rather than focus particularly on *bereavement*.

Throughout my work as an artist, I have found that complicated grief exists outside of the borders of bereavement literature and within the borders of fringe society, in particular the vulnerably housed and homeless. As you will see from the work reported on in this thesis, my research began as a personal exploration of complicated grief and how other people reacted to my private experiences and then expanded into a utilisation of complicated grief in non-alone spaces. There was, it follows, a fostering of community, understanding, and belonging which is an outcome of my research. It did impact positively on people and places around me. But the point I want to draw attention to is that my engagement with these spaces was a method of operating as a non-alone artist.

In 2012, this culminated in my undergraduate degree show piece, *A Crack* (2012), that tested limits of function through refractions of light and glass. Two projections played simultaneously, recording the weavings of light scattered through glass, simulating stories of boundaries and borders that we cannot pass. By erasing the actual source, I focused on its output: this was, perhaps, without fully understanding it at the time, my first proposal of *absent-presence* presented to viewer.

I continued this trend throughout 2013 during my MA, utilising photography to understand the effects of loss and erasure by obscuring the lens of instant cameras. This allowed me to express feelings of loss without fully acknowledging as such, a fundamental lack of structure that allowed me to seize moments and memories.

It was during this time that I finally had my first opportunity to speak with a counsellor, and through sessions with him I began to become aware of the extent at which my grief had warped, and its effects on my artistic practice. The non-structure I had engaged with (avoidance, repression, and suppression) fed into my work, manifesting as a series of minimal photographs and installations.

Now that I found myself aware of the structure, I can deconstruct and understand the questions it raises: how does complicated grief structure my art practice decisions?

What I've learnt through experience, as well as what I've learnt through my photographic practice, as well as my work with charities, is that complicated grief extends its lines further past the boundaries of bereavement. What we will see is how I've applied it to my work as an artist and facilitator.

I've worked closely with charities, hosted a solo exhibition at the Laing Art Gallery (*Shift*, 2015/16) that helped create opportunities to open dialogue within non-alone spaces about what grief and loss mean socially, critically, and personally.

Overwhelmingly people have reacted positively to having a listener in a safe environment where they didn't feel pressured to behave in any particular way. I will discuss this in more detail later.

Continually I will impress upon the way that I have constructed a narrative around the absence of my parents, and within this construct I began to realise that therein lies a presence. This presence, much like spectres or ghosts (the former of which Derrida speaks about in *Aporias* (1993), which, I will also reference within these

pages) begins to take shape and become, in a way, almost tangible. Time deviates from what has felt like a linear course into multitudes of memories and shifts of space.

But what about the ghosts?

I've been capturing ghosts in my photography for half a decade now, little indices of travelling light blurred by the liminal space between my lens and the film. Blurring the lines between focus allows for impossibilities to begin to emerge through the process, taking advantage of the relationship between the light, the frame, and the chemicals. Photographer Uta Barth focused on what can't be in focus. Artist David Dye (1945-2015) explored the impossible. John Cage (1912-1992) found silence in 1951. And Michael Wesely continues to capture time.

In *Aporias*, Derrida points to ghosts as the spectres of absence. If you can imagine that the absence of the deceased as a physical, or at least, *tangible* thing, then we start to approach the overwhelming sense of loss within that absence, which becomes its presence. Through this I endeavour to capture that *absent-presence* through colour, space, and place.

Let us for a moment discuss again what grief is. Everyone knows what it is... right? You have to! It's a reactive part of your conscious that you have very little control over. However, my rudimentary understanding of grief during the first death was detrimental to the whole of the process. Grief *is a process*. It is an experiential wound that cuts through your conscious, not entirely unlike a physical cut or graze. According to Freud, in one of the first pieces of literature based on understanding grief, '[m]ourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.' (Freud, 2001:243) For the purposes of this thesis, we will only be concentrating on the former: loss of a loved person. In my case two.

So, that's what it is. But what does that mean?

This is hugely anecdotal, but it can't be helped: trying to understand *another's* grief is problematic.

Despite there being similarities (Cruse Bereavement Care, a national bereavement charity, can list a few repeat offenders for you, if you want: shock, pain, anger, guilt, depression, and longing), everyone is ultimately facing the bereavement alone.

Because of this, the feelings of that person can be particularly chaotic in the eyes of another, even amongst close family members that have lost the same person. What that person doesn't need (without pointing fingers) is someone with a watch on, shunting them along the imaginary 'road of bereavement'.

*Right! You're done with Depression, now off you go to Acceptance! What do you mean you're back at Anger? We've already been through this! You're wasting my time now.*

Caitlin Doughty has pointed out in 2014 that the commercial development of embalming in the 1950s created an understanding of the human body as an organic entity that doesn't rot, that no longer conforms to the nature of death in all its putrid majesty. A vast industry was born that could keep our dead mothers, fathers, friends, and family available for days in a semi-cooled environment. With advances in medicine and science, death became increasingly difficult to encounter first-hand. We became a death-shy and death-scared society staring at plasticised bodies in dimly lit funeral homes.

Now that we have begun to discuss the societal situation in which complicated grief occurs, let us continue to construct a socio-cultural context for the effect it has on us intellectually and existentially. Grief, unsurprisingly, has affected the arts and sciences for uncountable years – I say this because, through the course of my research, I noticed something fairly quickly when it came to establishing where I am

positioned as an artist within the context of a practice-based research project about grief, and I came away rather empty handed.<sup>3</sup> What I am, however, suggesting, is that there aren't as many artists willing (or needing) to pitch their practice within the realms of grief. We have books and books about artists that examine the role of death as a subject-matter in artworks.

We do have major artists and major works that are expressions of grief, to say otherwise would be a lie. As stated earlier in this text, Edvard Munch is a prime example of an artist that produces art through grief. *The Sick Child*, a series of paintings, lithographs, drypoints and etchings between 1885 and 1926, shows a memory of his sister on her death bed. He wrote that '[i]t was a breakthrough in my art. Most of what I have done since had its birth in this picture' (Chilvers & Graves-Smith, 2009:487.) However, Munch himself said that '[i]llness, madness, and death were the black angels that kept watch over my cradle' (Chilvers & Graves-Smith, 2009:487), indicating that it was death and not necessarily grief that he explored.

Even I, when first researching this PhD, continued along the same lines. I researched the relationship between death and the artist (and was quickly overwhelmed.) I think it wasn't until a year into my research that something triggered a flip in my outlook on my work, when I realised that I shouldn't be focusing on death, but, rather, life. The life that continues after the death, in the wake of the disaster. Artists have certainly responded to, and thought deeply about, the concept of grief - to say otherwise would be a lie - but what I am saying is that it is less common for an artist to do so (perhaps for similar reasons I had at the opening of this thesis: fear of exploiting the memory of the dead).

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<sup>3</sup> That isn't to say that artists haven't been driven by grief throughout their careers, this is without uncertainty probably a fact.

***Check list: the reader should now have a fuller picture of the complicatedness of complicated grief; I have also begun to write about my own art school experiences and the appearance of counsellors in my life; 'ghosts' were mentioned; a bit of history; also some dead artists; I now want to complicate things again.***

What does it mean to think deeply about grief? There have been updates to bereavement models as we continually attempt to profoundly engage with the experience of grief. Unfortunately, they're still not widely known. I explore two in particular: Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut's Dual Process Model and Lois Tonkin's Growing Around Grief as ways to explore how cultural misunderstandings of a person in grief creates isolation and complicates the process.

We're getting better at it, though. Unfortunately, unless you're privy to the information, the likelihood of you learning about it is quite slim. It wasn't until I attended Cruse Bereavement Care's Awareness in Bereavement Course (henceforth referred to as the 'ABC course') that I learnt that there was more than just Kübler-Ross out there. The Dual Process model, for example, makes it clear that grief is a never-ending cycle by providing a visual of two bubbles side by side with two factors: loss and restoration. Stroebe and Schut wrote this is response to 'the shortcomings in traditional theorising about effective ways of coping with bereavement' (Stroebe & Schut: 1999:197).

According to Bowlby, working through grief is important for the purpose of rearranging representations of the lost person and, relatedly, of the self. Although this enabled detachment (labelled reorganisation in his most recent work) or the breaking of affectional bonds (Bowlby, 1979), at the same time, it also furthered the continuation of the bond, a relocation of the deceased so that adjustment can gradually be made to the physical absence of the person in ongoing life (see Fraley & Shaver, in press, for a recent appraisal of Bowlby's ideas about loss and bereavement). (Stroebe & Schut: 1999:198)

They establish the importance of these bonds early in their text, and identify key factors within two orientations: loss and restoration. Through their study they have defined key characteristics of each and placed them in opposing bubbles.

Examination of the phenomena of bereavement suggests that people undertake, in varying proportions (according to individual and cultural variations), what we call loss- and restoration- oriented coping. These refer to two categories of stressor, each of which requires coping efforts during bereavement. It is evident that coping does not occupy all of a bereaved person's time: **coping is embedded in everyday life experience**, which involves taking time off from grieving, as when watching and engrossing TV programme, reading, talking with friends about some other topic, or sleeping. (Stroebe & Schut: 1999:212, emphasis mine)

Presented as visual, it shows the oscillation of grief, working through a series of events that take place during the bereaved's lifetime. The exciting thing about this model is that it in no way indicates any sort of time-line. It shows that this is a life-long experience, one that we will be ticking through as time goes on. There's no 'backwards' or 'forwards' to attend with. Loss and restoration live in balance.

There's a hole that we will all need to eventually fill. Some fill it with anger, others with sadness. Then there are those that fill it with silence. I fill mine with the static of silence and then called it everything but what it needs to be: grief, guilt, hopelessness, endless rushes of blankness that leave my body ravaged and defenceless, unable to move without screams of protest against the agony of facing another day. This is grief: raw, primal, and overpowering.

My parents left me all too soon. I had just finished watching my father finish his fight when I rushed my mother to the hospital to kick-start the last three months of hers. The profound effects of sitting helpless while those I loved died all around me continue to follow me as I try to navigate my art practice, as well as, my life.

Another complication. Is death possible? Referring to Derrida's essay, *Aporias*, I found my answer in his writing that clearly defined my intent: *absent-presence*. Derrida alludes to this when describing the spectre of the dead – their absence is

noted by their presence (in that their absence *becomes* their presence.) This important distinction joins well with what my practice has already done: through obscuring, damaging, moving, transferring, and otherwise distorting: I have already been creating a kind of *absent-presence*. Indeed, this concept is not new to Derrida, in *Writing and Difference* (1967) and *Of Grammatology* (1967), speaks of Trace as ‘a mark of the absence of a presence, an always-already absent present.’ (Spivak, 1967:xvii).

*Aporias* was written in 1993 for a conference held in Cerisy-la-Salle. This book, to my way of thinking an analysis of the possibility of impossibilities using Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* (which translates into English as ‘being there’), will reveal itself to be integral to my postgraduate research activities and my current practices as an artist, it has provided the foundations for the thoughts and purposes that have motivated this thesis. In it, Derrida posits the question: ‘is [my] death possible?’. (Derrida, 1993:21) His concern lies in the precise moment of death, where one will cease to exist in any rational, medical, or metaphysical form. He considers this border and boundary as a pinnacle moment of post-consciousness: your death is experienced by those around you, fully as one can experience through another vessel, but ourselves; our bodies, no longer hold the capacity or consciousness to witness death.

The concept of *possibility* will allow me, legitimately or not, to weave a certain number of motifs into the existential analysis of death, as it is carried out in *Being and Time*. The only rule would be that of a title and what accompanies it (*Aporias*, Dying – awaiting (one another at) “the limits of truth” [S’attendre aux “limites da la vérité”]) at the point where it subscribes to the contract of this conference. (Derrida, 1993:62)

This is the *Aporias*, or, literally, without-passage. Derrida later indicates the hesitation that we have when we talk about death: ‘...it leaves undecided (*unentscheidet*) the theoretico-speculative questions that could impose themselves, the questions that would make one hesitate between decision and non-decision, as

between the two poles of one alternative' (Derrida, 1993:56). He goes on to describe that 'death would have no border' (Derrida, 1993:56).

Derrida considers the psychological implications of death as mourning, spectres, and ghosts. If there is a 'life' after death, then death isn't final... life isn't destroyed by death, only changed. It's within this frame that Derrida defines life after death as an *absent-presence* for those still living. Within these borders are where I operate as an artist, defining and highlighting these questions through the deliberate use of destruction and obfuscation in my photographic practice. As with *Aporias*, the *Work of Mourning* is a collection of writings that Derrida has written about the loss of friends and colleagues. I will use his texts to reflect on my own grief and practice, notably using his entry on Barthes.

When I say Roland Barthes it is certainly him whom I name, him beyond the name. But since he himself is now inaccessible to this appellation, since this nomination cannot become ovation, address, or apostrophe...it is him in me that I name, toward him in me, in you, in us that I pass through his name. (Derrida, 2001:46)

Derrida reflects on the person who was Roland Barthes and the severance of the name from the vessel. What he describes is the acute loss of Self Barthes possessed whilst alive: he is no longer alive, so he can no longer bear the name. The Roland Barthes that Derrida speaks of is a spectre, existing within the space that the deceased Roland Barthes operated. This understanding of death as *aporia*: a liminal space that is created formed from the absence of Barthes. 'When we say "in us", when we speak so easily and so painfully of inside and outside, we are naming space, we are speaking of a visibility of the body, a geometry of gazes, an orientation of perspectives. *We are speaking of images...*' (Derrida, 2001:159). The visualisations within my mind of my parents are the only evidence of their continued and transformed existence. This provokes the question about how we perceive the anxiety of death through the use of memory: fear is had

when someone speaks about how they may no longer be able to see a loved one passed away within their mind. According to Derrida, Roland Barthes lives simultaneously through all of us, he is resurrected every time he is named.

For a more modern approach, after Sir Terry Pratchett passed away, a Clacks Overhead GNU: Terry Pratchett began to circulate the internet. For fans of Pratchett's seminal series, *Discworld* (1983–2015), this was an homage to the author: Clacks are described as a form of primitive messaging over a long distance using a rudimentary binary to pass messages along. The reason given is from a quote in *Going Postal* (2004), '[a] man is not dead while his name is still spoken' (Pratchett, 2004:105). According to the lore of *Discworld*, GNU stands for:

G: send the message on

N: do not log the message

U: turn the message around at the end of the line and send it back again

Thus perpetuating the message *ad infinitum*. In a way, this symbolic gesture allows Pratchett to continue to exist, through this new image (Derrida, 2001:159). For a lot of fans this created a solace in that, as long as they have a presence on the internet, they can participate in the gesture. This *meaning making* is a subset of the self-narrative discussed in in relation to Neimeyer.

In "each death" there is an end of the world, and yet the rhetoric of mourning allows us to speak of this end and multiply it, both to anticipate it and repeat it -- with regard not only to one friend, one proper name, but many, one death after another. (Brault & Naas, 2001:15)

Derrida suffered many losses within a short period of time, at least three alone in 1990. This onslaught of catastrophe reeled Derrida, 'death takes from us not only some particular life within the world...but, each time, without limit, someone through whom the world, and first of all our own world, will have opened up in a

both finite and infinite—mortally infinite—way' (Derrida, 2001:107). He describes how each death shattered its own universe, regardless of the singular one in which we seem to navigate. It doesn't matter how many times it happens, it doesn't matter who it happens to: each death is a unique existence forcefully changing for the bereaved. It's another present absence that must be dealt with. In the introduction to *The Work of Mourning*, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, translators mention:

But what does it mean to say that the dead are "in" us? Reflecting on Louis Marin's final book on the powers of the image, Derrida describes the topology and orientation of this supposed interiority of the mourning self before demonstrating their limits in the very assumption of a limit. "When we say 'in us,' when we speak so easily and so painfully of inside and outside, we are naming space, we are speaking of a visibility of the body, a geometry of gazes, an orientation of perspectives. We are speaking of images. . . [The other' appears only as the one who has disappeared or passed away, as the one who, having passed away, leaves 'in us' only images" (Derrida, 2001:159). Mourning consists in recognizing that the dead are now only "in us," now only images "for us." And yet there is a limit to this interiorization, one that comes not from some impermeability of a boundary between two homogeneous spaces but from a different organization of space. (Brault & Naas, 2001:10)

Derrida writes about loss when speaking of friends. In it, he describes the feeling of losing Roland Barthes. He says:

These thoughts are for him, for Roland Barthes, meaning that I think of him and about him, not only of or about his work. "For him" also suggests that I would like to dedicate these thoughts to him, give them to him, and destine them for him. Yet they will no longer reach him, and this must be the starting point of my reflection; they can no longer reach him, reach all the way to him, assuming they ever could have while he was still living. So where do they go? To whom and for whom? Only for him in me? In you? In us? For these are not the same thing, already so many different instances, and as soon as he is in another the other is no longer the same, I mean the same as himself. And yet Barthes himself is no longer there. We must hold fast to this evidence, to its excessive clarity, and continually return to it as if to the simplest thing, to that alone which, while withdrawing into the impossible, still leaves us to think and gives us occasion for thought. (Derrida, 2001:35)

Derrida's feelings of loss are already complicated, but to make things even more difficult I want to point out that Heidegger's *Being and Time* dedicates a whole

chapter to death. This is the point at which I should explore the importance of Heidegger to our engagement with the phenomenology of death. This is, I think, a way of absorbing the implications of the above quote from *Aporias*. Heidegger notes that '[d]eath, in the widest sense, is a phenomenon of life' (Heidegger, 2012: 290). Death is for the living. For a very long time I didn't really believe that. When I first took on this project, I focused a lot of my attention on death literature (of which there are an abundance.) It wasn't until a particular moment had happened, where a sudden shift took place during an evening conversation with a fellow research student, that I adjusted to the fundamental non-structure of bereavement: you mourn because you live. You mourn because they do not.

Yet when someone has died, his Being-no-longer-in-the-world (if we understand in an extreme way) is still a Being, but in the sense of the Being-just-present-at-hand-and-no-more of a corporeal Thing which we encounter. In the dying of the Other we can experience that remarkable phenomenon of Being which may be defined as the change-over of an entity from Dasein's kind of Being (or life) to no-longer-Dasein. The *end* of the entity *qua* Dasein is the *beginning* of the same entity *qua* something present-at-hand. (Heidegger, 2012: 281)

John Russon identifies that the *Dasein* in Heidegger's *Being in Time* cannot be defined by the simple terms of the *who*, rather, the authenticity of the character of *Dasein* is that the self is self-appropriated. We define ourselves by ourselves by our understanding of the world around us (Russon, 2008:90). Without the world's reflection, we may as well not exist. Luckily for us, the world's reflection of our being happens whether we want it to or not, we do exist. This is most notable when we lose someone – the world around us has radically shifted and we have to redefine our entity. This provocation forces us to face ourselves.

We provoke an understanding of this thesis through three main channels: Neimeyer's self-narrative, Heidegger's *Dasein*, Derrida's *Aporias*. These manifest as *absent-presence* through which I will explain the fundamental nature of our being

is intrinsically linked to our understanding of the world, our personal narratives, and the absolute border that separates the bereaved from the deceased.

Heidegger speaks of *Dasein* and (im)possibilities.

The ownmost possibility, however, non-relational and not to be out-stripped, is not one which *Dasein* procures for itself subsequently and occasionally in the course of its Being. On the contrary, if *Dasein* exists, it has already been *thrown* into this possibility. *Dasein* does not, proximally and for the most part, have any explicit or even any theoretical knowledge of the fact that it has been delivered over to its death, and that death thus belongs to Being-in-the-world. (Heidegger, 2012:252)

Heidegger posits the anxiety we feel when faced with death is the state-of-mind of *Dasein*, the fact that *Dasein* exists as thrown Being *towards* end; we have little control. This is not to be confused with the anxiety of facing death, however. The difference is the fundamental experience of Being; it is a part of *Dasein*. The existential concept of 'dying' is only just that: a concept. Being will not experience death. I will expand on this with Derrida when I talk about *Aporias*, but there is a pinnacle point between death/life that our consciousness, as far as we understand it, will forfeit.

Death, however, is encountered and perpetually occurring within-the-world.

Heidegger goes on to note that 'Being-towards-the-end has been defined as Being towards one's ownmost potentiality-for-Being, which is non-relational and is not to be outstripped. Being towards this possibility, is a Being which exists, is brought face to face with the absolute impossibility of existence' (Heidegger,2012:255). In other words, its death is evaded as the person is never considered own, but, however, 'they'. 'They' is perpetual. This understanding of Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* is essential to understanding our reactive force to bereavement and the death of those around us. Our own irreconcilability with our own death manifests as anxiety and grief over the ones that do face demise. Our foundation as conscious

Beings ingrain an inherent anxiety that interprets the death of a loved one as conceding to the certainty of our own deaths.

In *Aporias* Derrida posits that *Being and Time* belongs neither to science, philosophy, or poetics. 'The work exceeds itself, it surpasses the limits of the concept of itself that it claims to have properly while presenting itself. But if the event of this work thus exceeds its own borders, the borders that its discourse seems to give to itself (for example, 'those of an existential analysis of *Dasein* in the transcendental horizon of time'), then it would be so precisely at this locus where it *experiences the aporia* – and perhaps its premature interruption, its very prematurity' (Derrida, 1993:32).

What Derrida is explaining here is that the bordered mystery of the *Dasein*, Being-towards-death, are fundamentally bordered by an impossible paradox.

This is very complicated. Derrida and Heidegger make me think that there cannot ever have been anything other than complicated grief. Once again, I am wondering what uncomplicated grief would be like. Would it ever have existed? It would certainly make this thesis easier to navigate if I could contrast and compare the two conditions. The uncomplicated version first, and its complicated descendent second. But, unfortunately, I cannot find a way to do this. It seems that complicated residues of bereavement are proof of our own personal existence, proof of *Dasein*. According to Heidegger, *Dasein* reaches wholeness in death, as it will simultaneously lose the Being of its 'there' (Heidegger, 2012:281). Due to this, no-longer-*Dasein* is in the sense of Being-no-longer-in-this-world. In this dying of the Other we can experience our phenomenon of Being. The deceased becomes an object of concern. 'Death does indeed reveal itself as a loss, but a loss such as is experienced by those who remain. In suffering this loss, however, we have no way of access to the loss-of-Being as such which the dying man "suffers"' (Heidegger, 2012:282). Taking this into consideration, this anxiety and possibility of experiencing

death through another is represented in the grief that we experience when faced with the death of a loved one. In the context of the work of this thesis, these considerations of myself as Being-in-the-world and my parents no-longer-Being correlate in *Aporias*.

I like this idea because it seems to corroborate my own socially-oriented model for the continuing experience of grief. As an artist practitioner who builds non-alone versions of complicated grief through workshops and exhibits work in galleries, the cultural, as opposed to intellectual, environment in which the work is received shapes the context in which it is both formed and received: in other words, I don't live in a vacuum. The reception of the work and the conversations it sparks is directly correlated to our understanding of grief, culturally as well as academically. The complication, of course, is that my aloneness as an artist is fuelled by a powerful resistance to non-aloneness. This thesis records my negotiation of this 'fact of life' that sits problematically at the heart of my creative activities.

In 1915 Freud wrote *Mourning and Melancholia*. This has been considered the first attempt at psychoanalysing grief, and grief literature up until today still bear marks from this essay. In it, Freud defines mourning as a grief for loss of specific love object and melancholia: a loss unable to be fully comprehended, a process that takes place in the unconscious mind. He considers mourning to be a healthy way of expressing the loss of the object, whilst melancholia is an exhibition of complicated grief.

In mourning we found that the inhibition and loss of interest are fully accounted for by the work of mourning in which the ego is absorbed. In melancholia, the unknown loss will result in a similar internal work and will therefore be responsible for the melancholic inhibition. The difference is that the inhibition of the melancholic seems puzzling to us because we cannot see what it is that is absorbing him so entirely (Freud, 2001: 245-46).

Here Freud identifies the internal dialogue and struggle that can be seen when grief complicates. An absorption, as he has posited, places the bereaved in a state of arrest.

After this essay, the next time we would see an impact in grief literature would be with Kübler-Ross' book, *On Death and Dying*, which I have already mapped out earlier. Kübler-Ross' essay, while still making a definitive impact on cultural understanding of grief has been updated within counsellors and academics working within grief by the Dual Process Model.

The Dual Process Model written in 1999 by Stroebe and Schut responded to the shortcomings in traditional theorising about effective ways of coping with bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 1999:abstract). The model identifies two types of 'stressors' that oscillate: loss and restorative. This allows for a less linear approach to grief, which de-emphasises the hierarchy found in other literature and fosters an understanding that grief is an adjustment to a new reality.

Lacking in grief work formulations in general is specification of precisely what has been lost and what has changed through bereavement. There has been a lack of recognition of the range of stressors, the multiplicity of losses, integral to the bereavement experience. Not only is there the loss of the person, but adjustments have to be made with respect to many aspects of life (cf. Worden, 1991). Such secondary stressors also need to be dealt with and (re)appraised, just as meaning associated with the death of the valued person per se needs repeatedly to be thought through, even "pained through" (Lindemann, 1979). As Neimeyer (1998) noted, adaptation to loss involves the restoration of coherence to the narrative of our lives. We return to consider the two types of stressor later on (Stroebe & Schut, 1999:201-02).

So Stroebe and Schut attempt to correct the gaps in the literature. They want to create a new understanding of grief and how we behave when grieving. One encounters the Dual Process Model on self-help bereavement websites in a number of ways that boil down to telling the griever that, whatever they are feeling, it's probably okay. Complicated grief, however, understandably slips past this optimism

by its nature of excess. It is excessively damaging to the sufferer. It requires intervention. Nevertheless, there is a term in the quote above that interests me a great deal. It is 'adjustment', a word that I can use to describe the experience of writing a thesis that is, in itself, a complication of the research methodology I intended to employ in the first place. At present I am considering the text you are reading as a 'thesis of adjustment'.

After Stroebe and Schut comes our final model, Lois Tonkin's 1996 visual model, *Growing Around Grief*. This model is favoured by the charity Cruse Bereavement Care in the UK for its ease of access and ease of understanding. It's probably my favourite, too. In her essay for 'Bereavement Care', *Growing around grief—another way of looking at grief and recovery*, Tonkin's expresses how 'in an Elisabeth Kübler-Ross workshop some years ago, an unknown woman described a model of grief which fitted her experience. I am indebted to this woman because her model made sense of grief for me in a way that others had not, and has comforted many clients to whom I have shown it sense' (Tonkin, 1996:10). She goes on to describe:

The woman's child had died some years before. At this time, she said, grief consumed her totally, filling every part of her life, awake and asleep. She drew a picture with a circle to represent her life and shading to indicate her grief. She had imagined that as time went by the grief would shrink and become neatly encapsulated in her life, in a small and manageable way; she was realistic enough to assume that it would not go away completely. But what happened was different. The grief stayed just as big, but her life grew around it. There were times, anniversaries, or moments which reminded her of her child, when she operated entirely from out of the shaded circle in her life and her grief felt just as intense as it ever had. But, increasingly, she was able to experience life in the larger circle. (Tonkin, 1996:10)

This visualisation of grief, without the need for text within oscillating circles, hierarchical lists, or language from over a century ago, helps create a new understanding of grief without pretext. Within my creative practice I introduce this model as a way of sharing information: it is built into the very methodology of my practice-based activities as I respond to the personal and social complications

generated by grief. Anecdotally, I have not yet met someone who dislikes this model (and I have yet to meet someone who was already aware of it.) The break-down in form of context (self vs object) encapsulates both what Heidegger discusses when we discuss the anxiety of the 'they' and what Derrida describes when he outlines the acute loss of the deceased Self.

***Check list: the reader has now been told much more about the theoretical modelling of grief; this has allowed me to continue my discussion of 'absent-presence'; Derrida and Heidegger are considered at length again which, in turn, leads to a further discussion of grief models stretching from Sigmund Freud to Lois Tonkin; here's an interesting complication.***

The image of Tonkin's model stays with me as I begin, as promised earlier, to write about the creative practices of David Dye, John Cage, Uta Barth, Michael Wesely, and Mark Rothko. For David Dye, I will account my personal proximity and his seminal works in exploring space. John Cage's experiments with silence and absence will be explored more in depth here, referring to anechoic chambers and epiphanies. Uta Barth, a German-American photographer, utilises space in her photographs, to photograph what is not there. Michael Wesely uses his own created pinhole cameras to capture years within a single frame. Finally, a look at Mark Rothko's works, especially his later paintings.

It is an important step to understanding the context of *absent-presence* within creative production presented by artists: how they have evolved their own practices within this understanding. Throughout this research project I have found that, while they do exist, the number of artists working particularly with *grief* in the same frame as I am has been very few and far between. Thus, the artists I am presenting below, work within the same contexts that I have done and continue to do. What is important for me isn't necessarily whether the artist clarifies their work through a place of grief, but rather an experimentation and probing into gossamer borders like we found with Derrida's *Aporias*. This tempting of caressing the boundary of infinity help weave tangible understandings of death, and concurrently, bereavement.

Here's a possible complication. What happens to my narrative if I write about various creative contributions to the visual, written, and aural understanding of grief. I will begin with historic mourning practices. Perhaps these are significant

antecedents to contemporary explorations of grief as an artistic practice. Kathleen Oliver notes in *With My Hair in Crystal: Mourning Clarissa*, that as far back as the 14th century we were creating locket and jewellery to commemorate the death of loved ones (Oliver, 2010:37).

In the will, the decedent designated the recipients of the rings, which were most often distributed during funeral services, for wear immediately and during subsequent months of mourning. Often several levels of mourning rings were distributed, determined by the social status of the mourner and the relationship between mourner and decedent. Inexpensive mourning rings might be inscribed with the decedent's initials, date of death, age at death, and some simple design elements. (Oliver, 2010:35)

Mourning jewellery worked from hair became highly fashionable only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (Oliver, 2010:39)

The most poignant use of hair was when a loved one died. For a mother, a lock clipped from the head of a newly deceased child preserved the love between child and mother long after the child had been buried. For friends, lovers, and family members, hair from the decedent, carefully stored in a crystal-covered locket or ring bezel, also preserved remembrance, love, and grief. (Oliver, 2010:38)

There is obviously a driving need to memorialise evident throughout history. The fact that in post-embalming America one can turn a deceased person into a diamond reinforces the historical relationship between death and bodily adornment. I am rather uncomfortable with this idea even though I can see that the routine use of memorial jewellery is potentially very meaningful. Indeed, in the abundant literature on grieving, the notion of meaning-making is a central proposition. A death will remain unresolved until some sort of meaning can be made from it. As I've mentioned above, Neimeyer talks about it in his article. He strongly suggests that without a coherent self-narrative (the kind of internal monologue that is suddenly disrupted by the death of a person to whom one is closely attached) grief-work may be seriously inhibited. He breaks down meaning making into two processes: assimilation and accommodation.

In assimilation the experience is assimilated into pre-loss beliefs, in effect maintaining consistency.

In accommodation the grief reorganises the self-narrative. New meaning can be derived.

This isn't the same as devising a reason behind the death. This is personal reflection of a person's life before and after the death and understanding the differences and what they mean in terms of the new reality.

Jordan Baseman's exhibition *Flat Death* (2016) is a spooling reel of found photographs taken of wakes and funerals, portraits of the dead from what is to be assumed family members or friends in attendance. His work looks at contemporary embalming measures and the process of reconstructing and making beautiful the corpses of those deceased for viewing. The job of the embalmer is to make gone traces of disease and death, and to present a body peacefully composed.

Baseman's work probes questions about death, dying, and bereavement through this exhibition and his practice. This is also brought up purely because the phenomena of the *Memento Mori* photograph, the death photograph is still a thing that's practiced today.

We began as a memorialising people through photography in Victorian England, as this was probably the only photograph people would have of their loved ones. It was a way of coping with bereavement, and, much in the way we use photographs of the living today to memorialise our loved ones at our funerals, a remembrance.

We cope in different ways. We coped in different ways. We will cope in new ways, too. My parents died before social media really became the juggernaut it is today so I missed out on Facebook memorial pages... missed out on how I feel about them, too. But I will be bereaved again and this time everyone I know is on Facebook so I have no idea how I will cope when that happens.

Sir Terry Pratchett talked about how the meaning of words are powerful tools in creating an understanding around personal self-narrative. In his 2015 essay *Shaking Hands with Death* he speaks about the terms 'assisted death' (his preferred) and assisted suicide. He talks about how when people were faced with these terms they were disturbed, but when he mentioned not wanting to live supported by pipes and tubes those same people were right there with him... *Oh, yes, I don't have a problem with that.*

It's about reframing and restructuring information in a way that allows for people to question and ponder and receive the information. Projects such as Baseman's, books like those of Barthes and Lewis, as well as workshops, talks, and social media engagement with bereavement and grief, can all help dismantle the problems I spoke about at the beginning of this talk: this idea that grief is structured.

It's about allowing for all the complicated messiness... for every person that can understand the way you've chosen to express your bereavement and for every person who doesn't, a fundamental understanding that it's okay: we're all doing this the way we are. I was able to have a very understanding conversation with a lot of people about my work, either in person or through the photographs on the walls. Not everyone, though, and that's okay. If everyone felt the same way about grief this thesis, these papers, these books and art wouldn't exist; there would be no need for it. We need to socially memorialise, either through diamonds or through hair. Or through Facebook status updates or tweets. We cry publicly, privately, and somewhere in that quasi-privacy the internet offers. They're all as unique as people are because people are unique. Just like Breen and O'Connor posit:

Grief is 'dependent on many variables, such as the circumstances of the death, characteristics of the bereaved individual, their relationship with the deceased, the provision and availability of support, and a myriad of sociocultural factors' (Breen & O'Connor, 1999: abstract).

We have great resources already and hopefully these will help to penetrate public consciousness that grief, as uncomfortable as it is, is something that happens all around us. We don't need to suffer alone.

I still must call notice to the design of the system that I hail from. My former office in New Jersey gave me three days leave to tend to the affairs of my parents. If your loved one was kind, they'd die on a Tuesday (preferably at the end of the day). It's this systematic erasure of grief that strikes the complication. This inability to move naturally through the grieving process, social expectations and obligations to quickly recover, and, in my case, losing both so soon after one another, didn't allow for any respite.

I revolve around that initial erasure. My practice revolves around it too, because this is the first step that I took after my father died. When we were all forced to push it away and carry on, when we were forced to return to work so soon after it happened. This dance of what is and isn't acceptable behaviour has informed the way I work. This has been accomplished literally and abstractly through the methodology I employ, carefully and deliberately removing or obscuring information, and my exhibition practice, the deliberate and careful choosing of the arrangement and wells of silent space highlighted within the installation. Much like we hid the real cause of death from those around us, I deliberately choose what to show and what to hide.

Following on from this point, I return to Barthes and his own unresolved grief of his mother, through the works of *Camera Lucida* (1993) and *Mourning Journal* (2010). I have reflected on his questions and his probing nature. His way of making meaning through loss, particularly his choice not to include the photograph he refers to throughout this famous book. I apply this to the unresolved nature of my own practice, and the understanding of absence through presence traced inside photographs. I follow Barthes's example and have deliberately excluded

reproductions in this thesis, instead relying on descriptions, memory, and my own narrative. However, I do realise that this is a bit of a complication that needs not to be. Barthes reasoning is not the same as my own.

While Barthes chose not to include the photograph because he knows that we would not have the same personal response to its importance (to him), I've chosen not to include photographs or illustrations in order to try to evoke the sense of seeming endlessness of complicated grief: trying to recall, over and over, who my parents were, what they were like. Things that will never again occur: their smell, their voice, the way they felt when they hugged me. These indescribable things are kept away from me, locked in a place that no longer exists. So, in a way, while you move through this text with me, I want you to feel that frustration. I want you to have to rely on your own memory. As I am forced to rely on my own.

*Camera Lucida* is certainly, I suppose, the key text if one is researching the role of photography and memory in engaging with loss and grief. The book itself exists because of the death of his mother. Barthes offers the reader the material presence of the past within a present moment of reading. We seem to be confronting the past and facing up to mortality.

By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What *pricks* me is the discovery of this equivalence. In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder, like Winnicott's psychotic patient, *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*. (Barthes, 1993:96)

He then goes on to write, 'Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe' (Barthes, 1993:96). Clearly, to Barthes, photographs stand in a time outside of time. In a space that occupies past-present-future as a singular moment. The presence pronounces the absence in a painful collapse of time. In the terms set out in this thesis it is the inexpressible dimensions of a temporal experience that has been 'complicated'. It's within these realms of study

that I find grief transfixed within photographic practice. The camera's (and as extension, photography's) democratic lens, reduces its subject(s) to a 2D plane. This reduction is fundamental to its function as an object of bereavement, a metaphor to the indiscernible and exhausting experience of complicated grief. The 2D plane within the confines of photography theory is the 2D plane of my life.

On 24 October 1977 Henriette Barthes died. The next day, armed with paper cut in quarters, Roland Barthes began to journal his grief. Spanning the next three years, and falling short of his own tragic death, Barthes recorded the awkward, wretched, and debilitating experience of mourning. He alludes to the suffering, the broken and sharp destruction of time, and the seemingly endless array of overwhelming guilt: guilt to live, guilt to die, guilt to breathe each breath.

July 18, 1978

Each of us has his own rhythm of suffering. (Barthes, 2010:162)

The impossible reconciliation of space and time ceasing for those we love creates a gap in reality. A gap that begs to be filled with anything but the enormous amount of pain that the loss creates. Or it begs to be filled with overwhelming senses, some of which may manifest as guilt, regret, anxiety, depression, anger. The sheer overload of emotion that attaches itself to the pain of loss is never-ending and nearly impossible to quantify.

In the case of Barthes, he shared an incredible attachment to his mother. For sixty years he lived with her, cared for her, enjoyed her company. Although Madame Barthes passed away after an illness that in no small part was because of her age, the devastation Roland felt was unimaginable.

Nearly every day he wrote – short, poignant words about the grief he felt. He uses words like 'limp' having called into question his contemporary grieving practices, while deconstructing and teasing apart everything he felt (Barthes, 2010: 40).

He battles with feeling trivial, with feeling moody. With feeling anguish and anger and loneliness and his loss of purpose.

On June 21, 1978, three days shy of eight months, he rereads his diary. In his words:

Reread for the first time this mourning diary. Tears each time there was any question of her – of her person – not of me.

So emotivity returns

Fresh as on the first day of mourning. (Barthes, 2010:151)

As I have mentioned throughout the length of this thesis, grief isn't a prescribed course that you come out of on the other end, back to 'normal' ('normal' here meaning 'before the death'). Grief fundamentally changes who you are as a person. You are no longer living within the same reality you were before. Until you assimilate or accommodate this fundamental change to your surroundings, you will continue to be stuck grieving in a world that no longer exists.

This reflects the manifestation of that broken bond that shattered after death: in many ways it's the same as a physical severance: it hurts. This physical relationship you've had (flesh and bone) doesn't exist anymore. But the relationship is still there. Your love, or hatred, or complicated attachment, for them is still there. It's navigating that within this new *absent-presence* of the person.

In the beginning of *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes wrote:

And I realised then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: 'I am looking at the eyes that looked at the Emperor.' (Barthes, 2000:3)

Gazing into that photograph taken in 1852 of Napoleon's youngest brother, he realised that he was a time traveler, and perhaps the study of photography was never the same.

During the second year of my undergraduate degree, Dr John Lavell, a part-time lecturer at Northumbria University, introduced me to the concept of time-travel through photography. At the time, a fledgling analogue photographer in the painting department, I was trying to make sense of the broad discourse of photography for my dissertation. I went out that day and bought *Camera Lucida*. Thereafter I never looked at photography, or time for that matter, the same way again.

He explained to me in the hall that afternoon that the shift of our environment multiplies when we gaze into a photograph. Despite seconds, days, months, or years between when the light burned itself into the frame and our gaze meeting it, time becomes immaterial.

In a lot of ways this reflects how grief, and in particular, grief *complicated*, function – in a liminal space that operates just outside of the borders of time. Its presence is certain and in a way tangible, just as the presence of Napoleon's brother was when Barthes looked upon it, but its essence is subject to the shadows of the past. Again, we are not privy to Napoleon's brother, we're only seeing a fraction of the flesh and blood that was the man. We cannot hear his voice or feel his presence. We can only see what has been photographed; a flimsy simulacrum in what makes a human, human.

Here is an important complication. This thesis has undergone an adjustment. It has morphed, shifted, inverted, averted, and subverted my understanding of photography, complicated grief, loss, myself, artists, philosophers, people, and composers (to name only a few). The fundamental nature of humankind's ability for kindness, selfishness, vulnerability, and drive has helped shape what started off as a very personal reflection on the chaotic state of my being into something that looks outward into the very space with which we inhabit.

Complicated grief, as you will hopefully know intimately by the end of this ‘thesis of adjustment’, affects about 7% of all bereaved individuals, according to a paper by Nicolas Ghesquiere in 2013.

Consider what grief is: a physical and emotional reaction to the loss of someone, or, in some cases, something. We usually see it through a very particular lens, and that is usually Kübler-Ross’s 1969 sequential list: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Sometimes, however, the grief manifests itself more acutely. This is called *complicated grief*. It overwhelms and takes over, becomes chronic, prolongs suffering of the afflicted, and interferes negatively on their life.

Research in neuropsychology have indicated our natural need to create story schemas, integrating our autobiographical memory that imparts order and meaning to our experiences (Neimeyer, 2005:43). Complicated grief radically disorganises the coherence – sense-making is dulled, as the disorder challenges the understanding of the individual’s self-narrative.

Stories and self-narratives play a large part, as well, in this thesis. Without these internal stories, we are lost and vulnerable. Our focus is shifted, unclear, and hidden. In a lot of ways, this PhD, in and of itself, is a realignment of my own story schema.

Dye’s work explored (im)possible spaces, influencing and affirming the presence of absence. In particular, like Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), he executed his understanding of the spectator’s act of viewing, considering the interrogation of the nature of representation, according to Jean Fisher in 2003<sup>4</sup>. He blurred the lines

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<sup>4</sup> In her introduction to *Devices and Desires*, Fisher talks about how Dye’s work was part of a rejection of the New Generation, going on to say, ‘[t]he revival of interest in a performative mode of address introduced real time and space into artistic practice and its reception, a new physicality, blurring, in David Dye’s case, conventional distinctions between author and spectator, object and process, art and film (in what came to be known as “expanded cinema”) (Fisher, 2003).’ She recalls

between physicality, spatiality, authorship, and object, working within what would eventually be known as expanded cinema. This will explore Dye's work, as well as his absence and what they mean in their interpretation.

I'm in the back of the tiny church, awkwardly sitting, unsure about the protocol of an English funeral. *Surely*, I thought to myself, *close family and friends would be at the front, right?* I watched as the church slowly filled up with people, some I knew, many I did not. I shuffled in my seat as people began to fill my row, a nod and hello to the stranger that would be my mourning partner for the interim.

David Dye died on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January, 2015. As an undergraduate student I stood in awe of his work, a poignant display of nothingness teasing the void within installation and celluloid. And yet, when he came to teach me at Northumbria University he always treated me with extraordinary kindness and empathy. I was awestruck when I learned of his death, through a mass email delivered by Professor Keith McIntyre, Head of Fine Art at Northumbria. It was titled 'David Dye...a much-loved artist, colleague and teacher'.

I can't remember what the weather was like that day. It was the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February, in the afternoon, and across the street from the sea, so I imagine it to be probably rather cold. The church, however, was warmed with the bodies of the mourners who came to pay their respects to Dye. There were so many of us gathered, it was impossible not to feel the sickly-sweet humidity in the air caused by so many tears shed in such a small space. David moved many people, either through his art, his compassion, or, well, his life.

The funeral programme tells me in bold black letters to live in my head. It follows with the order of service, and a grainy black and white photograph of David hard at

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this to the way Marcel Duchamp's work is appreciated, 'that an artwork only comes to completion in The Spectators act of viewing' (Fisher, 2003).

work in his studio. What happens next in the booklet needs to be explained another way, because the words on the page mean nothing without Helen Baker's trembling voice as she carefully and beautifully cut through the silence in shaking timbre reading *The Unnamable* by Samuel Beckett.

*You must go on.*

I can't read these lines without having to pause this writing, because I can no longer see what I'm doing. Having this book beside me, the memory of that church, Helen's voice clearly speaking in my head, brings time and space crashing together in a kaleidoscope of sensations. The loss I felt the day I learned Dye had died, the anxiety of walking into that church, being surrounded by so many people, and having to move on afterwards are all felt in one single moment.

*I can't go on.*

In 1975 Dye created *Frameline*, a site-specific installation at the Lisson Gallery in London. It exemplifies the space between frames of film, the unexposed gap between frames that you cannot go into.

I am standing in a doorway without a door between two rooms that mirror each other in their stark white emptiness. Lining one vertical side of this opening and extending its length is a long, thin photographic image. A seductive mist of pixilated yellows and greens gives it the semblance of a pointillist painting; but this coloured field is interrupted by a thin wavy line, pressured at irregular intervals by halations of light. The title of the work, *Frameline*, identifies the object depicted. It is a blow-up of the almost imperceptible gap – the unexposed strip of emulsion – that both unites and separates two frames of a Super 8 film: a gap that remains invisible to the eye during the normal course of a film's projection. As the accompanying text informs us, the frame fragments are from a film of sunlight on water – an arrested flow punctuated by discrete particles of light. (Fisher, 2003)

The endlessness of *Frameline* in its conceptual basis and its visual representation allow us to see, in no uncertain terms, that between the gaps that fall in each moment, I think that there is a vast universe of infinite things. Much like how I can

be drawn back into that pew, feel the hard wood beneath me as I sat allowing Helen's voice to wash over me, Dye's work uncovers these invisible paradoxical discrepancies, proving all and nothing exist simultaneously. I *am* sitting in that pew right now, just as I'm sitting at my desk later trying to collect my grief for Dye within these words.

I need to pause before I continue. Please pause with me.

All right.

Cage's work on silence and absence has been a useful tool in reflecting the questions that I ask when I practice, I now want to turn to Cage and his work on silence in order to further contextualise my practice within a frame-work of *absent-presence*. The notoriously silent composition *4'33"* came about through an experience within an anechoic chamber. In 1948 Cage visited Harvard University's anechoic chamber, expecting to hear only silence. Instead he was deafened by the sound of his own body, realising that no matter how we try to block out sound, it will never be possible as long as we are alive. In his words, 'I heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system operation, the low one my blood in circulation' (Cage, 2010:8). Later, Robert Rauschenberg's (1925-2008) *White Paintings* (1951), would finally provoke Cage to compose one of his most famous pieces, *4'33"* (1952). I would only like to bring this to attention because it is an example of Derrida's *Aporias*' irreconcilable contradiction; the impossibility he speaks about. Cage's piece is a phenomenon. It exists in formal measures. It has movements. It is performed. These all correlate into a piece of music: a piece that significantly represents Derrida and *absent-presence*. By creating existence through absence, through nothingness, it highlights and draws attention to the invisible, our unconscious structures.

I didn't know Cage personally, but I can relate my experience within an anechoic chamber to what he famously experienced. At this point I want to write about anechoic chambers, what I understand of Cage's thinking on these very special environments from his writings and my own personal reflections on Cage's engagement with the notion of silence. This is applied to my theory of *absent-presence* and the experience of complicated grief.

In May 2015 I was able to finally visit Northumbria University's anechoic chamber. This is important because I wanted to experience the same as what Cage experienced that led him to write 4'33". Our chamber isn't fully sound-proof (its function is for microwaves, not for acoustics), but it was able to lend itself to a pocket of research in and around silence. Because of this, I was able to marry Cage's work with my own and make an important distinction with what I had been struggling with during my research: erasure.

Inside the chamber I gave myself over to the thought of silence, the act of it, and the presence within it. These key points, as well as some works that I made in response, helped distinguish the importance of the difference between erasure (an active event) and absence (a passive event). I was never actively erasing my parents, although at times it felt like it. What I was, was present to their absence.

I listened to my breathing and felt the tight pressure around my ears, straining a bit to hear the sounds Cage did. The striking event, soundproofed or not, was the lack of an echo. It started when the technician still had the door open, intensified as a feeling of pressure on my shoulders and the back of my ears. The pressure seemed to release itself when he shut the door. Closing myself in felt like a release, almost as though I was enveloped, and therefore, no longer, able to experience it.

It wasn't unlike when my earbuds are planted firmly within my ear, but I'm not listening to anything. A forceful presence within the absence.

There is no such thing as silence. get thee to an anechoic chamber and hear there thy nervous system in operation and hear there thy blood in circulation. (Cage, 2011:51)

What he heard instead was the high-pitched hum of his nervous system and the low bass of his blood circulation. I will never tire of telling this story. It provides an emblematic image of the aloneness of grief.

I'm interested in this powerfully absent musician because of how he treated all sounds (and un-sounds) equally. There was something within his particular version of nothing. And beauty in the banal. Much in the same way he utilised sounds and manipulated waves from any source, I explore ebbs and flows within the boundaries of photographic representation; treating all parts as equal measures of aesthetic art.

Furthermore, following my own visit to an anechoic chamber, I have an idea of what silence actually looks like. Using a recording I made inside the chamber and pulling it through software called Photosounder, I converted for visualisation purposes (See *Key Visuals*.) I found myself looking at a surface covered in small lines, something like an EKG that had seriously malfunctioned. There is, then, *something* there, *something* hidden (a spike occurs two minutes in - I shifted in my seat). If one compared this visualisation to one made of me speaking, the difference between the two becomes immediately apparent. Nevertheless, the tiny lines, an underlying static, that manifest themselves in the absence of any tangible sound confirms Cage's experience within the anechoic chamber. 'There is no such thing' he writes, 'as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot' (Cage, 2011:8).

Throughout Cage's oeuvre, he utilises, manipulates, makes absence present, and pushes against borders of the conventional. In *Composition as Process* (1961), he remarks, 'For nothing about the structure was determined by the materials which

were to occur in it; it was conceived, in fact, so that it could be as well expressed by the absence of those materials as by their presence' (Cage, 2011:20).

In *Forerunners of Modern Music* (1961), Cage notes that '[a]ny attempt to exclude the "irrational" is irrational. Any composing strategy which is wholly "rational" is irrational in the extreme' (Cage, 2011:62). This is of particular interest because, over the course of my research, I used to be especially fussy about how my images came out. Any works that I felt were out of place, I would reject, careful to only choose works that I felt were representational to the series at hand. It wasn't until I began to construct what will ultimately be my exhibition installation that I realised that it is irrational of me to continue to decide which works were correct and which were incorrect: they are all correct. I don't get to choose when my grief will pull me underneath the lagoon. I don't get to choose when those dresses will surface. Therefore, I do not choose which objects I produce are 'good enough' to be considered appropriate.

Cage met Rauschenberg in 1951 at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. The political climate at the time had radically changed American art: repression and censorship dominated as McCarthyism and his hearings paralysed creativity. Born from this, '...in the early 1950s, a growing number of intellectuals consciously espoused indifference as a virtue, as a correct way to deal with an uncertain world.' writes Moira Roth in 1998. This indifference encapsulated not only how artists operated within their practice, but the importance of passivity and irony were used to pivot intellectual response.

Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951) de-emphasised the ego: the paintings were created to provoke the absence of the painting itself. This can be seen as Cage's catalyst to his celebrated *4'33"* (1952).

Simon Shaw-Miller writes in *Visible deeds of music: art and music from Wagner to*

*Cage:*

Given this centralisation of the visual elements of the performance of 4'33", it is significant that the origins of the work are in part derived from the visual field: the all-white paintings Cage's friend Robert Rauschenberg produced in 1949. As Cage himself noted, these paintings are no more empty or blank than his own piece was silent, for they act as environmental surfaces, in which motes of ambient dust or shadows may settle. They are a field of focus for the spaces they occupy. (Shaw-Miller, 2002: 215)

Cage described these paintings as '...airports for the lights, shadows, and particles' and saw them as an experience (Cage: 2011:103). Within 'the empty canvases (A canvas is never empty.)' Cage saw a presence (Cage: 2011:103). 'Where does beauty begin and where does it end? Where it ends is where the artist begins' (Cage: 2011:108). The intervention that the artist plays in creating the opportunity for absence to be present promotes his enquiry into what would eventually become 4'33" (1952).

To Whom It May Concern:

The white paintings came  
first; my silent piece  
came later.

--J. C. (Cage, 2011:98)

This is a talk about something and naturally also a talk about nothing. About how something and nothing are not opposed to each other but need each other to keep on going. (Cage, 2011:129)

Uta Barth, a German photographer, concerns herself with challenging conventional focal points. If Dye and Cage are my best examples of the power of absence, Barth is a good example of the *absent-presence* of a poorly focused camera lens. In an interview with Cameron Turner for *Precipitate* (2012), she remarks:

These works are usually referred to as 'the out of focus' or 'blurry' images. I always counter that they are perfectly focused, but focused on a point in space that is not occupied by any subject. What we are left with to look at is the blurry container, the background to this empty plane in space. These images attempt to render the volume of a space and not the walls that contain it. (Barh, 2012)

Barth is occupied with entrusting the camera with capturing the space between the space without. It occurred to me long ago that this is my approach too. We differ with our intentions, but not with our methods. While Barth focuses on the middle-space, I focus on an obstruction of the lens. The obstruction embodies the invisible, impossible force that encompasses the field one suffering from complicated grief occupies: somewhere in between, the 'blurry container'. Consider my reluctance to shed any importance on the subject matter as attestation of my conviction that the importance lies not in what the camera is pointed at, but what it invokes. I take this further when I begin to explore other ways of transferring and evidencing the photograph (or what photography is) within other materials.

Michael Wesely, born in Munich in 1963, is another German photographer specialising in absurdly long exposure pinhole photography. Through his practice he brings into focus incredibly long periods of time within a single frame: capturing years worth of footage in haunting stills. He focusses on questioning what photography is and what it is capable of. In *Time Travel: Remarks on the Works of Michael Wesely* writer Philippe van Cauteren remarks that Wesely work is a 'continuum taken from a continuum' (Cauteren, 2004:84). This notation of the nature of the photographic process creates an impossible paradox of light, time, and image. Time travel seemingly becomes the indexical trace. William Firebrace talks about Wesely's first experiment with this kind of long exposure photography in his essay *Slow Spaces*:

In the summer of 1996 the German photographer Michael Wesley installed a self-constructed camera, with a fixed aperture and loaded with a

conventional slide film, in a room in Frankfurt. He used this apparatus to take a photo with a one year exposure, titled – the time of the operation preceding the space – *29 July 1996 – 29 July 1997, Office of Helmut Friedel*. (Firebrace, 2012:247)

The importance that Firebrace is sure to touch on is the cinematic experience that the photograph has on the viewer. In a dance of time we see the frame: the stage in which is set out to support the performance of the photograph.

The room itself – the office of Helmut Friedel – is a little unusual: curved on the right hand side, with a series of windows barred by Jugendstil style grills, one curious oval window at the far end, timber shutters to the windows, old-fashioned radiators, a parquet floor, the left hand wall covered with bookshelves. During the span of the year it belonged to the art director and scholar Helmut Friedel, who has published books on Wassily Kandinsky and on Gerhard Richter, the German artist who has often produced work located between painting and photography. Why photograph this particular room? Perhaps because Wesely needed an undisturbed environment with low light, for his extended experiment, but also because he wanted a connection to the world of the arts. Why use such a long exposure? This photograph was to be an experiment with time, its result would be uncertain. There was always a risk of failure in such an experiment – a previous attempt had been abandoned because the camera had moved. (Firebrace, 2012:247)

Those elements within the room which do not move remain unchanged and in focus – the position of the windows, books which nobody touches, the pattern on the wooden floor. What remain in the room for longer periods, but slightly change position, such as the table and chairs, appear as a blur, or rather as a sequence of individual registrations, each created by a specific period of time, laid over one another. We see all the positions of the table, some clearer, others fainter, according to how long it remained in any one position. (Firebrace. 2012:274-248)

Indeed, as Firebrace clearly demonstrates, this experiment of the first of many photographs of its type help establish the performative role Wesely's photographic practice plays in the understanding of the liminal space between the Real and *Aporias*. The Real established through the objects that have entered within the frame of the cameras focus: the room, its object, the people, and events that took place over the course of the year. These left their traces along the emulsion of the slide film, evidence of existence burned and dodged by light and shadow. The *Aporial* is registered through the faint lines and shifts throughout the year that leave

the viewer with an experience of the otherness of the objects in use. The life recorded as evidence of its existence as it shifts and changes the light pattern recognised by the camera.

In the summer of 2001, Wesely was commissioned by New York's Museum of Modern Art to use his cameras to capture the reconstruction of the MoMA. What concluded in 2004 made up what was exhibited as *Michael Wesely: Open Shutter at The Museum of Modern Art* from 20 October 2004 – 27 June 2005. From their press release:

The photographs were made from three vantage points along 54th Street between Fifth Avenue and Avenue of the Americas: from the University Club at the east end of the block, looking southwest; from 1330 Avenue of the Americas at the west end of the block, looking southeast; and from the former City Athletic Club on the south side of the street, looking northeast. Wesely mounted two cameras—one for black and white, one for color—at each site. (MoMA, 2004)

These strategic areas allowed for a much larger scale from what we see in *29 July 1996 – 29 July 1997, Office of Helmut Friedel*. Suddenly our sturdy frame, the actual architecture of the city is called into question as it too shifts and changes. We're able to witness the temporal quality of what we understand to be permanent structures which renders them unstable.

If we apply this to the concepts of story schemas, as mentioned numerously throughout this thesis, Neimeyer isolates that the 'backbone of the self-narrative are core beliefs and assumptions about the world' (Neimeyer, et al: 2009:74). These core beliefs and assumptions are based on the tangible universe in which we operate – usually following something on a linear pathway. We expect the day to start with the sun rising and ending when it sets, much the same way we expect coherence through our daily lives. Displacing the time narrative in the way that Wesely had done with his long exposure pinhole photography lends example to how

fragile the world – and, conversely, how fragile our state of being becomes when it is arrested and the frame exposed for the fragility that it imposes.

In German the word for photographic exposure is *Belichtung*, literally be-lighting. Almost all photography is reliant on the interaction of time and light, long exposures generally being used when necessitated by low light levels. The interaction between time and light can have unexpected effects. A normal image of this room, produced say by an architectural photographer, would simply show it as a particular moment, all the elements in place, with a certain kind of lighting. This is the type of photo usually preferred by architects, showing an empty space, a piece of pure architecture undisturbed by the messy activities of the occupants. However Wesely's long exposure takes the recording away from being simply an image of a space at a particular moment, providing a cinematic as much as a photographic quality, since a registration of the effects of extended time begins to have some of the qualities of a film. (Firebrace, 2012:247)

Firebrace frames the fundamental difference between the contextual photography of Wesely and that of a usual architectural photograph here. Capturing a frame of a room in which the point is to discover the elements only captures a minuscule fraction of the room's narrative. If we apply this to the complicated grief model in which I am using throughout this thesis, this appears to attend to an act of realism: what we see is what we get. Wesely returns this by utilising the space of time as a tangible and capture-able entity. We also saw this with Uta Barth's photographs. Suddenly space is a thing present in and of itself – something a photograph can capture and present to a viewer. For me the earliest sense I had of this pictorial experience was in the paintings of Mark Rothko. Espen Dahl writes in *Towards a Phenomenology of Painting: Husserl's Horizon and Rothko's Abstraction*:

Rothko's abstract pictorial language was undoubtedly challenging to his contemporary audience in the late 1940s, 50s and 60s. According to Jeffrey Weiss, very soon a quite widespread opinion emerged that these huge and powerful canvases remained somehow depictions of landscapes, produced according to a novel understanding of the media of painting. It was not only the division of the canvas into an upper and lower zone, divided by something like a horizon line, that suggested landscapes, but also that the emotional qualities of his paintings seemed to echo romantic landscapes, in the tradition of Friedrich and Turner. (Dahl, 2010:229)

When discussing *absent-presence*, especially within creative production, no other artist comes close as cited for gripping terrible nothingness in the way that Mark Rothko has. Natalie Kosoi writes, in *Nothingness Made Visible: The Case of Rothko's Paintings* that,

James E. B. Breslin, in his biography of Rothko, writes, "Rothko's artistic enterprise was, after all, a something that was dangerously close to nothing." Barbara Novak and Brian O'Doherty, in their essay "Rothko's Dark Paintings: Tragedy and Void," also assert that Rothko's work is "very close to nothing" and that nothing is indeed its very content. Robert Rosenblum described Rothko's paintings as "images of something near to nothingness." These are only a few examples among many. (Kosoi, 2005:21)

Toward the end of his life, Rothko delved into a series of black paintings in which is explored the concept of the void. Within the language that Rothko spent his artistic career mastering, he used deep blacks to create a sense of unease and infinity with the viewer. Indeed, even in the comments book from my exhibition *Shift* grief was likened to Rothko's series of black paintings: 'Complicated grief is COMPLICATED. BLACK IS WHAT IT IS. Remember Mark Rothko's last painting? That is complicated grief.' Besides calling for exploration into the meaning of colour and what constitutes the colour of grief (and why), it bears witness to an understanding that Rothko is a formable example of grief in artistic practice.

Rothko started out as a figurative painter and was in the 1940s particularly fascinated with biomorphic structures, but he gradually developed an abstract language during the late 1940s. In opposition to Greenberg's formalism, he never understood his art merely as a testing of the conditions of his medium, nor as expressions of his private experiences. In 1958 he emphasised that his art was 'communication about the world to someone else'. But how, then, can a picture in which all figural elements have been removed still be 'about the world'? How does mimesis survive abstraction? (Dahl, 2010:230)

Dahl poses this question in *Towards a Phenomenology of Painting: Husserl's Horizon and Rothko's Abstraction*. He responds as follows:

The answer depends, at least in part, on how one understands abstraction. What is the origin and end of the production of emphatically non-figurative, non-illusionist paintings? One way to understand abstraction is simply in terms of removal: all familiar elements with reference to a common world are removed, and what we are left with is precisely the void itself. (Dahl, 2010:230)

We are left with constructs that represent objects, either tangible or intangible, within a visual language that offers creation of a new presence. *In Nothingness Made Visible: The Case of Rothko's Paintings*, Natalie Kosoi attributes '[t]he apprehension of death and nothingness must be distinguished from the sublime, as Rothko's paintings, in particular, were often associated with the tradition of the sublime painting' (Kosoi, 2005:25).

Both nothingness and the sublime relate to finitude and both evoke a similar feeling. Nothingness evokes anxiety and the sublime horror mixed with pleasure. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two. The sublime, whether it is a quality of an object (in Edmund Burke's sense of the word) or a feeling (in Immanuel Kant's sense), is contingent on nothingness, as it is the apprehension of our finitude and fragility, of the fact that there are forces in nature that can destroy us. At the same time, the sublime is also a withdrawal from such a realization, because we know that there is no real or immediate threat to our existence, according to Burke, or because we discover our superiority over our finite nature, according to Kant. The encounter with nothingness offers us no such redemption. On the contrary, it points to the impossibility of any salvation, as our impending nothingness is also what constitutes us. (Kosoi, 2005:25)

The fear and anxiety of loss equate to a nothingness, and inability to move forward or backward through a process: an arrest within the narrative function. This is exemplified in Rothko's paintings throughout his career and his careful consideration of colour, tone, shadow, medium, size, and framing.

The conventional reading of pictorial space is deliberately confused in this and many others of Rothko's paintings. The ability to measure distances between forms in the pictorial space, to distinguish between what is distant and what is near, between depth and flatness, all these are rendered dubious. Rothko, then, was not interested in representing spatial illusion in his paintings. On the contrary, it is evident in many of his paintings that he strove to undermine any attempt at a conventional reading of space and to eliminate any coherent spatial sensation from his paintings. (Kosoi, 2005:28)

This anxiety, much like the anxiety of the commenter of my exhibition, provokes a need to understand and carry on with the narrative, with the anxiousness of deviating from a known understanding of a path through grief. Rothko circumvented this, as Kosoi explained, through his refusal to add coherence to his paintings. After Rothko, however, I find a new precedence for understanding grief through subliminal language; colour becomes a focal point. This adjustment into a new viewpoint of Rothko and grief has underpinned my practice. As I will later see, with my exhibition at the Laing Art Gallery, linking colour with grief results in some powerful responses (and in the book of comments, Rothko in particular is mentioned.)

The evocative nature of colour: its absence or its presence within an installation of photography begs a language to be created to understand the representation of the voided nature of capturing a space-time of what is seemingly nothingness.

Heidegger's understanding of grief, as mentioned above, he identifies that our fundamental understanding of death as *with-others*, is formulated through a basic state of *Being-in-the-world*. Our potential and interconnectedness manifests in the possibilities we seek through our projecting.

There is no evidence to suggest that Rothko had read Heidegger. Nevertheless, Heidegger's account of the encounter with nothingness and in particular his notion of the "slipping away of the whole" perfectly describes Rothko's paintings. As already noted, for Heidegger, anxiety reveals nothingness, which is experienced "with beings and in beings expressly as a slipping away of the whole," meaning that in anxiety the entities in the world recede from us and we cannot get hold of them, leaving us with only our own being, which is being-toward-death. Rothko's way of representing the human drama, which for him was constituted by the fact that we are born to die, resembles Heidegger's thinking of nothingness. (Kosoi, 2005:30)

In the above examples I have described the artists who have had a profound effect on my own creative practices and the theoretical enquiries explored in the writing of

this thesis. The artists chosen were those that explored spatiality throughout their medium and explored a commonality of inviting the viewer to interact with a subject that is otherwise invisible. For example, Dye's work invited the spectator to the interrogate of the nature of representation through his installation works. His influence on my own practice was two-fold: personal and professional. His tutorage helped foster an understanding of nothingness as something-ness and his professional practice as an artist inspired me to continue to explore liminal spaces in which I can navigate as an *artist-in-mourning*.

Cage is also important. His influence on modern artistic practices is paramount to our understanding of what we consider practice. Given the topic of my research, how could I leave him out. His continuous playful prodding and experimentations throughout his life led to discoveries of the importance of the spectator plays within the role of the artist's work. As he has stated, 'every something is an echo of nothing' (Cage, 2011:131). There isn't any such thing as empty space or time. It's the narrative thread that unites our own story schemas with the thread of those around us. We create our somethings.

Barth's focusing of the space that we cannot see expresses exactly what I have tried to do within my own photographs; the desire to focus on something more than what we are. We transfer this concept to the concept of *grief, complicated* and see that it designs itself in a way that seeks to understand the new reality: the new narrative of Being-in-the-world. In relation to my research another name for this new reality is orphanhood. We are provoked into experiencing an adjustment to a new reality with no recourse to what was before. Much in the way memory serves to continue to weave a thread to help us walk into the future, Barth's works draw out and manifest a presence that is borne from an absence.

Of all the artists I have used to contextualise my practices, Wesely has simply achieved what I have over-complicated. He has captured space-time with specially

built pinhole cameras that allow him to extend exposures for years. His work disrupts our understanding of the 'frame' by introducing its inherent instability. What we consider to be foundational to our existence is directly experienced as an extended temporal event through the vehicle of his lens, adjusting shifts in time are laid bare for the spectator to see and understand.

Finally, Rothko's paintings, particularly those of his final years, add a powerfully non-linguistic dimension to the conceptual frameworks on which I based my photographic work and the *absent-presence* theme that emerged through practicing as a grieving artist. His understanding and ultimate rejection of explanatory frames does seem to adjust our sense of what grief is. I think his achievements as an artist represent a paradigmatic shift in Western visual culture that accommodates complicated grief. The kinds of feelings one has before a late Rothko painting are the deeply embedded source of my practices and methods in my PhD project.

***Check list: the reader has gained some understanding of memorialising processes from Victorian mourning jewellery to the contemporary photographic projects of Jordan Baseman; the current role of the internet has been mentioned; I then describe the development of my own photographic practice and, citing Roland Barthes, explain why my artworks are not illustrated in the thesis; a range of creative practitioners are used to extend my formulation of 'absent-presence'; now another complication.***

I am worried about drawing attention to the role of practice-based methods at this point. Is there such a thing as a definable methodology when the aim is to complicate my practices as a researcher? I have set out to describe the photographic aloneness of *absent-presence* and the space-generating non-aloneness of charities as complicated. If there are methodological strategies that make sense of this kind of practice-based research (for example, developing photograph-based conversations within the context of a bereavement charity), then my research will seem damagingly uncomplicated and less faithful to the topic I am researching. My project requires me to fully operate as an artist struggling within an actual experience of grief. Throughout this thesis I have pointed to ways in which our culture determines the handling of grief as a comprehensible and manageable topic. The accuracy or efficacy of this point of view was certainly not evident during my solo exhibition at the Laing Art Gallery in the winter of 2015-16. A collection of stories told to me, and the messages written in the comments book, provide something of a snapshot of the reception of an exhibition about grief. I would summarise what was said as 'complicated'.

We've already discussed Heidegger's *Dasein* as *Being-towards-death* and the impossible reconciliation of the deceased person as anything but an object, which is endeavoured through my photographic practice as a way of capturing an impossible and intangible presence.

As became apparent when I discussed artists working within the field of the spectator, frame, and time, my work begs questions of personal reflective practice.

The work that has been created for this PhD project isn't a resolution to grief (mine, or otherwise.) It was never supposed to be resolved. I don't think grief can be resolved. The nature of my work and the nature of the installation weren't ever supposed to be a clear indication of what grief was, but rather a place to experiment with the profound emotions and memories that grief is unable to reconcile. I think that if I thought that I had answers, this would have never been a thing and I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing right now.

I remember the way my mother's brow furrowed when she concentrated, but I can't remember the shade of brown her eyes were. However, I remember my father's deep-set blue eyes, but not what his hands looked like. I can still hear their voices, but only certain phrases. My mother beckons, 'Lee?' and my father sings, with an obnoxiously large grin on his face – 'don't worry, be happy!' (I hated it then. I miss it something incredible now.)

If I've learnt anything about grief, it's that it's fussy and it's messy. It doesn't package up nicely in a neat bow ready to be placed with all the other packages with neat little bows that line the curio cabinet of my mind ('Alysia learns Santa Claus doesn't exist', 'Alysia's first kiss', ...'Alysia's first death?'). I suppose that's what makes death and bereavement so truly complicated, regardless of circumstance. Someone very important to you is no longer there. Someone who shaped your reality is missing. It's a profound adjustment into a new existence and whether you're dragged kicking and screaming (like I was) or march resolutely forward (like I most certainly did not), it's universally the same: we've shifted. This move has taken place without my consent and whether or not I like it, this is how things are now.

It's sticky and crumbly. The exhibition *Shift* wasn't an expression of answers, it was a series of conflicted questions, some asked timidly while others boldly, and made room enough to try to understand the unfocussed and often blurry and misplaced memories. The ones that fling far then suddenly snap back in front of you. The ones that nick you when you're at a café and Janis Joplin starts playing over the loudspeaker. The ones that inhabit the sun glinting off the window on the Metro car, tricking your eyes into seeing your father.

It's moments like this, the memories visualised, the absent made present, that I interrogate through the lens of my camera. To describe what is going on here I will discuss Mikael Pettersson's *Depictive Traces on the Phenomenology of Photography* (2011) as well as Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1993) as contextualising the photography practice particularly. I will then summarise *absent-presence*, complicated grief, silence, narrative, and meaning making to introduce the methods I used in this thesis project.

Within these pages I consider the role that photography has played, theoretically, as well as practically, within my practice. As a medium, photography has been used as a witness, as a truth-sayer, as a method for breaking down of identity and politics. Indeed, as James Elkins writes in *What Photography Is* (2011), 'photography is centrally about representation, time, memory, duration, presence, love, loss, mourning, and nostalgia' (Elkins, 2011:viii). Within the confines of the photograph, I seek to deconstruct its construction and use it as a catalyst for grief: within and without the confines of the lens, I discover impossible moments.

Like Barth's focused camera, the question that I seek to ask with the lens of my camera is the possibility of photographing the impossible. I never assumed, nor would I, that I am actually capturing portraiture of my parents: this isn't about them; it's about the *grief, complicated* that I am arrested with. It is the memories that I cling on to, dream about, and allow to repeat over and over within my mind that

creates the tender frame from which I draw attention to through an obscured lens. We cannot see the dead: their existence, the 'they' Heidegger refers to, no longer walks the earth in the way that I do. In order to readdress my cracked narrative, this madness allows me to capture their otherness. Emotion, thoughts, feelings, become a tangible object for those viewing my installations. The non-alone conversations these installations and colour-focused workshops generate, in confusing differences and similarities, bears witness to just how infinite our universes are: in the room of four, one of whom had lost both parents, one of whom had lost a sister, one of whom had lost a mother, and one of whom had lost a friend, suddenly becomes a room of nine. The photographs become a new vessel for the bodies of my mother and father.

Does it complicate my thesis if I call this 'compromised photography'? Within the context of this thesis it is the aversion to some of the conventions of photography. My practice is defined through a light based medium, but is not confined. I tend to refer to it as damaged or broken to elucidate grief as a tool within my methodology, but I also consider it as an understanding that camera is Latin for chamber. I work within a room of light; I work within the material of space. Suddenly, the camera as a tool becomes less important. What is now important is that I am able to capture light on a surface that will retain it.

In *Six Stories from the End of Representation* (2008), Elkins describes Marco Breuer's photographic practice thusly:

Marco Breuer's photographic practice is an exemplary case of this mixed — superficial and deeper — lineage. It is founded on a mistrust of the means of photographic representation — the camera, the negative, and the enlarger — and a complementary interest in discovering what photography can be when it gives up its habitual optical representation of the world. (Elkins, 2008:74)

Indeed, Breuer has a history of playing with the conventions of photography. In his most prolific pieces, he creates photographs by eschewing the light and camera

completely, using heat, pressure, and the misuse of objects within the confines of the darkroom.

Working within the conventions of photography, I compromise its usual function by modifying and extending its parameters. In the same way that Breuer burns and distorts his photographs within the darkroom, I extend the definition of the photograph to its waste - a extension that chimes with my commitment to complication in this research. Using primarily Fujifilm peel-apart film, I use nearly all parts of the film as image-objects, alluding to a kind of impartial aesthetic. I treat both negative and positive as parts to a whole – a precarious balance that pulls and pushes against one another in an attempt to overwhelm and undertake. Like many facets of grief, this links to the dichotomised elements of living after death.

Does it complicate my thesis even more if I call this 'absent photography'? Within my theoretical framework, my intention as an artist and researcher is to understand and encapsulate complicated grief within a photographic practice. Much like a metaphor for losing my parents, if I use photography in a way that draws attention to its absence, then one may argue that the photograph isn't a photograph. However, much like complicated grief, and bereavement, we're wont to expect certain attitudes and functions to happen to the bereaved. First, and foremost, they must be present. Their grief, however, should not. For example, Pettersson, states:

That traces provide evidence is a commonplace, as is the idea that photographs give epistemic access to what they are of. Indeed, the fact that the epistemic access provided by photographs has a counterpart in the case of traces gives some extra plausibility to the idea that photographs are traces of the kind described above. More importantly, however, some uncontroversial facts about how traces in general, and photographs in particular, provide epistemic access seem likely to add to the sense of closeness already embodied in the idea that photographs are traces. (Pettersson, 2011: 190)

It's within this discussion of the photograph as trace, as evidence that I am able to operate. Much like Breuer's works utilise aspects of photography, all and none, I am able to extend the belief within a photographic context.

Two facts have already been brought up, namely (i) that photographs are traces and (ii) that they typically allow for a greater epistemic access than do other kinds of image (and other non-natural representations in general). What needs to be added here is (iii) that photographs typically depict what they are photographs of. In a word, photographs are depictive traces. (Pettersson, 2011:191)

You don't need a camera to take a photograph. I've experimented with numerous ways to create photography without the use of a camera, although in the end I do like the poetic nature of the lens. The important part, however, is the notion of an indexical trace, the concept familiar from photographic theories derived from the semiotic speculations of the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce.<sup>5</sup>

The photographs that are created through this context come in two ways: the first of which is a voice recording that is then visualised and then digitally printed; the trace of the shadow of my voice blocking out the ambient noise acts as the light that burns photographic emulsion. These are called *memory:wave*. A series of these were created to present oral memories of my parents through a means that would obfuscate their true nature. The sound waves are impossible to decode as words. The meaning is embedded within the image.

The second of this series is titled *memory:transfer* and is a further obscuration of the *memory:void* and *memory:spectre* series. With *:transfer* I further distort the emulsion from the peel-apart film by applying it to moistened, rolled up, paper. This interrupts the image further by distorting and interweaving the narrative photograph: when unraveled it breaks the emulsion apart. For every one *:void* or *:malfunction*

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<sup>5</sup> There are many examples that could be cited. Perhaps the key theoretical application of indexicality to photography is Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America', *October*, Vol. 3 (Spring, 1977), pp. 68-81

photograph I create 5 *:transfer* series photographs. This violence on the photographic methods are a response to the violence that grief plays. The forceful removal of a loved one from my life is an act of violence to my spirit. As mentioned earlier, Derrida remarks that '[w]hen we say "in us", when we speak so easily and so painfully of inside and outside, we are naming space, we are speaking of a visibility of the body, a geometry of gazes, an orientation of perspectives. *We are speaking of images...*' (Derrida, 2001:159).

Does it really complicate my thesis if I call this 'complicated photography'? Consider *memory:spectre* for a moment. This series, borne from a desire to treat all parts of my film packs in equal aesthetic, uses the to-be-discarded developing fluid from creating my other *memory:* series. Still reactive to light, I have a window of opportunity to take advantage, where I am able to manipulate the extra fluid using sunlight and heat to create impressions on the backing paper. This performative action, the rescuing of the tool that helped forge the positive, harkens Derrida's words about Barthes: naming a space, visualising the body as a spectre was the last introduction to my photographic methodology and came with a maturation of my understanding of grief and my own spectres. The invisible nature of the process for which photography is presented (the camera, the lens, the negatives, chemicals, production, and final print) is usually hidden from view. The process has always been just as important to me as the actual end product: each step is a work of art in and of itself.

Because of this, for the beginning half of this project, the backing of the peel-apart film ended up where it was suggested it go: in the bin. It wasn't until I started experimenting with the idea of narrative through photographic media that I decided that the narrative would remain chipped until I utilised all of the various parts. Inspired by John Cage's democracy of sound, I began to present all parts equally. This allows for an enrichment of the visual narrative of the photographic

installations, as well as deepen the understanding of what is usually absent for the spectator.

This brings me into my exhibition practice and how I utilise the above complications in a non-alone context. Throughout the entirety of the thesis I explore complicated grief, absent-presence, death, orphanhood, photography, narrative, and meaning making. This culminated in an exhibition event at the Laing Art Gallery as a solo exhibition *Shift*. I now want to explore *Shift* reflectively, using the events created and the comments book to reflect on complicated grief and how it fundamentally changed my practice – a practice that is uniquely part of a larger community of people unable to talk about grief. I will discuss my findings through the experience here, including how complicated grief, calling back to the paradox from an earlier stage in this thesis, exists in a gap that is created by a need to resolve it and how through this understanding it still remains unresolved: but that's okay.

Through exploration of colour as a baseline for conversation, the project looks at how people perceive colour differently, especially within the context of grief. Colour allows for a personal conversation regardless of a person's life experience and level of articulation: to help foster conversation.

During the extent of the exhibition, two things were made very apparent: the design, set-up, and execution of the concept of grief within a public art gallery polarised visitors. It was within this particular context, when my art is outside of my immediate reach, that I began to understand the complexities of grief and colour from an experiential point of view. This, along with events that had been created for the exhibition within the space helped foster a development in social sculpture, grief, and colour within other contexts, which I will talk about shortly.

What was so devastatingly obvious from the beginning, during the installation week, is that most people really want to talk about their grief. They want to share their

experiences. They just don't always have the capacity to do so. I've been given so many stories of losses over the time that humbles me, and also shows me that we need platforms for this kind of non-alone conversation. Conversation with people who may not have felt loss like others, giving them tools to know that you probably shouldn't say things like that priest said to me so many years ago.

The exhibition formed a large installation that utilised the gallery's walls and windows (See *Key Visuals*.) My work is created through using instant photography with a camera that I manipulate in a way that distorts the final image completely, leaving only a colourfield. The single-shot analogue nature of this kind of photography is what draws me to it, there is only one. 'Pack film', the film I use, creates a lot of waste – but that waste is as fundamental to the process as the finished photograph, so I use all of it. I use the backing film that transposes the image, and I use the chemicals to manipulate and draw out the subtle flecks of imperfections alongside them. This usage of everything gives me a feeling of completeness.

I decorated all four walls with over 300 photographs and their backing paper, keeping them in a grid-like format. Careful to keep them along the invisible grid, as to make them disappear into the walls and become part of the space, I spent days deciding on the right arrangement of the batches. Each wall was installed as it was a set piece. I purposely avoided the conventional sight-lines of a gallery 'hang' and, instead, placed photographs far above (requiring a ladder to reach them) and below comfortable viewing. Blues, greens, purples, and the deep brown of the backing paper were juxtaposed indiscriminately. In the middle of the room, if one chose to sit and reflect on the exhibition, there was an ottoman seat, probably the only comfortable location from which to peruse the whole show.

Later, before my counsellor retired from the University, he told me that a colleague of his had mentioned my exhibition to him. She remembered seeing an exhibition

about grief at the Laing Art Gallery and was so taken by it that she sat in the room for hours watching people come and go, and exploring the work in detail. In fact, I received a lot of feedback but won't quote what people told me in person, because more or less everything that was reported to me was relayed in confidence.

However, the comments book is entirely public and thus I feel confident in sharing some of the responses left. People related to the exhibition in a myriad of different ways. After I wade through all the 'giz a ring luv' (of which there was an uncomfortable amount) responses, I come across stories such as this:

This exhibition really spoke to me and expresses so well my own experience of grieving and also of depression...

...perhaps because I'm still grieving and have thought and felt so much about loss over recent years. Understanding is a process that reflects the...process of grieving.

It just made me think of dementia (my mother has this condition.)

It was hampered by the bright open space. It reminded me less of despair and dissociation from life than transcendence, ascension past the gossamer, pale shades of life. In a darker, more oppressive, claustrophobic room I feel the emotion could be transmitted better.

Unfortunately, the variety of colours have no affect or meaning for me. They are just colourful except for the black rectangles. Complicated grief is COMPLICATED. BLACK IS WHAT IT IS.

None of these are necessarily right or wrong. There is this idea that grief needs to be felt in a particular way and if it isn't being expressed in such a way then it isn't real, or correct. Black, oppressive, claustrophobic. Bright and airy. I'm not denying the anguish that grief causes, trust me, I've very acutely aware of what it did to me

(and I've seen what it's done to others.) But grief always presented in this very specific way doesn't allow for an expression of all the facets that grief has. Part of this is cultural, part of this is individual. It was an interesting unintentional side effect of having an exhibition in an art gallery whose audience is usually not of the contemporary 'modern art' crowd. But because of this it gave me the opportunity to engage with people: those whom I would otherwise I would not have been able to reach.

My point of view has continued to change. I remember talking about the wrongness of some of the comments when I presented a paper, *The Dos and Don'ts of Grieving Properly: Or, how to have a conversation about grief*, in the 2016 *Death & Culture* conference at York University. This paper covered the progress of my research thus far, including the exhibition that had just ended. I was describing the 'not Rothko' complaint about my work to explain that grief should not automatically be associated with the dark and claustrophobic world of that artist's 'killed' colours. My view that this was a stereotype, a very old-fashioned view of what grief is. Then I realised what I was saying. I was making this assumption because I chose light colours to describe my grief. This seemed somehow more correct to me. But, then, how can anyone decide 'properly'. I reflected and rang a friend: *Quick! What colour is grief?* Without a second thought they answered: *grey, of course*. Interesting.

Early on in the exhibition I held an event called *Grief in Conversation* where I invited the public to join myself as well as a bereavement counsellor to discuss grief in an open space. This gave an opportunity for individuals to learn more about grief literature (something that I've noticed that I've had to do quite a lot of digging for when I first began researching complicated grief) and new models. As evidenced in my own experience, most were aware of the stage models, but only a few were aware of the Dual Process Model (and those were bereavement specialists.) This gave an opportunity for discussion around grief and the effects on a person and

how constricting it felt following the denial, anger, bargaining etc etc etc routine. Some found it physically exhausting. Hopefully some went home and told their friends.

So we have a few ways that we can go about this (and many more past my sphere of understanding): Grief support groups are great, and important. They offer the bereaved an opportunity to speak to others they know have lost before, and to be in a room that offers the safety and comfort of confidentiality. These are needed, these are important. There should be more of them.

But what about creating a culture that allows for the bereaved to navigate in their community and know that they are protected and understood, even if it means not saying anything at all?

Where do we start?

In both October 2015 and February, 2016 I held artist talks within the gallery space of my exhibition, *Shift*. The purpose of these talks were to discuss the process, thoughts, methodology, and considerations that took place during the run up to my exhibition and installation. This gave me an opportunity to discuss the concepts of my work with viewers with immediate effect. During both instances the questions that arose were about the choices that I made in regard to the positioning and contents of my photography. After a tour of the works on the walls, viewers felt compelled to point out particular pieces and comment on them, usually with memories that they had stirred through the composition of colour within them. In some instances, viewers wanted to know more about the negatives. The white walls coupled by the natural light through the windows put special emphasis on the negatives, particular because of their matte nature. The light wasn't reflecting in the same way it reflects off the gloss positives, so the dimension of the space was slightly askew.

By opening such a personal narrative I was able to have conversations with the viewers and used this opportunity to learn more about their ideas of visual metaphors for grief. In all instances, I was warmly welcomed into a personal story of something or someone lost. The installation acted as catalyst to understanding and questioning our own personal narratives. These prove beneficial because they work two-fold: they allow me to interact with other people and their own narratives, which then enriches and broadens my understanding of the society in which I am local to. I am able to then reflect on my own understanding of my practice as an artist and person, which feeds directly back into my work.

In October 2015, I contacted Catherine Gatt, a former bereavement support worker at Cruse Bereavement Care, and current director of Access Counselling and Mediation Services. What I had wanted from her was someone with an intimate understanding from a counselling point of view to help me bring bereavement conversation into the space of my exhibition and to engage gallery visitors in a discussion around its myths, legends, taboos, and current grief theory work. The conversation was promoted through Facebook, Twitter, Laing Art Gallery's website, and Dying Matters, an e-newsletter and bulletin board for events related to death, dying, and bereavement. Our audience totalled thirteen people.

The presentation included information and examples of Victorian Memento Mori photography, mourning jewellery, and historic and contemporary grief models (including Freud's 1917 *Mourning and Melancholia*, Kübler-Ross' *5 Stage Model*, Stroebe & Schut's *Dual Process Model*, and Tonkin's *Growing Around Grief*.) Finally, it posed a number of questions for the participants, as well as ourselves, to posit answers to, including:

- ❖ Why do we not talk about it?
- ❖ Why do we feel the need to tuck it away?

❖ What changes can we make? Should we make those changes?

All of these questions were considered, as well as personal insight into grief that members of the conversation have encountered over their years. I chose with purpose not to record any of these answers for want to keep the integrity of the confidence of the participants. It is important that we have these discussions, but without fear of repercussions outside of the environment created by the Conversation. Instead what I have reported on and will report on here is the generality of the discussion.

I realise that this is a very odd choice to make when confronting a research project, but these weren't interviews or qualitative or quantitative studies – I wanted the opportunity to open a dialogue about grief in a space that usually isn't for that. The experience and knowledge that I gained from it far better suits my overall understanding of my place in the world as an artist and academic than a recording device sat in the middle of the group would. Of course, this means that I have very little visual and material proof, and why this thesis is lacking in usual illustrations. I will discuss these choices more in the addendum.

But I digress. As a whole, the participants felt that there wasn't room or space within contemporary living to grieve publicly. The discussion of grief and bereavement outside of close family and friends felt like a burdening of emotion on another person. People felt that they had to carry on as best they could without actually calling attention to the feelings they would be feeling throughout the days, weeks, and months following a bereavement.

In particular, the Grief Models that Catherine and I showed during the presentation weren't known by any of the participants not already in the field of study. The '5 stages of grief' model, however, was (as I have pointed out multiple times already in this text.)

To close, Catherine and I included the Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* chart. We decided to show this as a way of generating one last bit of conversation around whether grief, and bereavement such as I have described throughout this thesis, was a luxury rather than a need. We discussed how death and attitudes towards death have changed drastically over the years, in particular the lowering of infant deaths and advancements in medicine keeping us alive for much longer. Perhaps we have only grown used to living life where not many people around us died as often? Could that create an intolerance and fear of death that perhaps didn't exist 100, 200 years ago? No answers to given to conclude any evidence that this is the case.

In February 2016, right before the end of the exhibition, I hosted a Death Café within the confines of the gallery space. I was able to do this thanks to The Stand Comedy Club, who kindly loaned their café tables and chairs from their comedy club for me to use. With the assistance of Eileen Ridley, the unofficial North East Death Café facilitator, I created a space for discussion around death, dying, and bereavement in the context, and literal location of my exhibition.

Death Café is a social franchise, utilising the celebrated World Café method<sup>6</sup>, founded by Jon Underwood (1973-2017) from Hackney in London. As a social franchise, Death Café allows anyone with an interest in death, dying, or bereavement to host a Death Café in any particular way they see fit, following a few rules. Jon Underwood modelled the café on the ideas of sociologist Bernard Crettaz, whom started a similar *Café mortel* after the death of his wife.

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<sup>6</sup> World Café is a concept by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, but the idea of people meeting in a café or other social space is a concept as old as cafés and other social spaces. World Café is a method that utilises this and sets basic structures, such as table hosts and themes to tease out discussion and keep it flowing.

Crettaz found, as is much of what I have written about in the context of this thesis, that he felt ostracised by the community around him and that he couldn't speak frankly with anyone regarding her death. Due to this he began to feel isolated, and, finally, decided in order to combat this, he would set up spaces to discuss death in an open forum.

According to Death Café's website, at the time of writing (September 2018), there have been '6988 Death Cafes in 58 countries since September 2011'. Because of the success of this model, I decided that this would be a welcome addition to the exhibition programme. While not particularly about grief, it does encompass the growing fears around dying and death in a way that is comforting and familiar (a café setting along with refreshments offers a relaxed atmosphere that doesn't demand anything particular from their participants.)

The Death Café was fully booked and supposed to have 25 participants. I set out 8 tables with 4 chairs, each table had scrap paper, pens, and famous death quotes spread across them. A catered area offering hot water and coffee, as well as cakes, was available along one side. The plan for the two-hour session was as follows:

- ❖ Invite participants in to find a seat;
- ❖ Invite participants to help themselves to tea, cake, or coffee;
- ❖ After fifteen minutes, ask everyone to take a seat and begin the Death Café proper by introducing the concept of the Death Café, Jon Underwood, myself, the facilitators, and the purpose of the afternoon;
- ❖ Attend to each table to hear and contribute to discussions until there is only twenty minutes left;
- ❖ When twenty minutes are left call attention to the participants and ask each table to talk a little bit about one thing they discussed.

The purpose of the afternoon is to have an open dialogue about death, dying, and bereavement, within the context of the exhibition and gallery space. This isn't to mean that the work or myself should be discussed, however, the space was meant as a catalyst for discussion about death. Due to the limits of the Death Café model, in particular, they ask that there are no themes, the work wouldn't be required for discussion, but rather the space acting as a vessel.

Again, as with the Conversation, I purposely decided not to interfere with the integrity of the process and forewent recording the event. What follows is a reflection of the conversation that we had.

The Death Café opened with an apology for lack of numbers. Instead of the expected 25 we had 5 participants excluding the 2 facilitators (and myself.)<sup>7</sup> As such, a lot of what I had planned had to be realigned. The first thing we did was reshuffle the tables so that we can have a large discussion around one table.

After introductions we were immediately drawn into a conversation about death by suicide. This topic was suggested by one of the participants. What is important about this conversation, while not directly related to the context within my PhD thesis, is that it does encompass many of the same triggers as complicated grief: the profoundness of a bereavement from suicide has a very particular toll on the narrative of the bereaved. This is why I am particularly interested and honoured to be working directly with Samaritans in the future to offer creative workshops and spaces through their banner. Death by suicide is treated, whether rightly or wrongly, differently within grief counselling. As a new Bereavement Care Volunteer with Cruse Bereavement Care, I had to attend special training for Death by Suicide, as well as warned not to take any clients that are bereaved by suicide. This is because, as was discussed during the Death Café, there are unique factors to the

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<sup>7</sup> [A mistake on the tickets had the wrong start time.](#)

bereavement. We discussed the taboo and societal rejection of those that have died by suicide, as well as those bereaved by those that have died by suicide. Just like complicated grief, this can be attributed to the nature of the disenfranchised grief that they may discover they are experiencing: they are not allowed to grieve openly. The bereaved is also more likely to experience feelings of anger, guilt, shame, and confusion. As well as having a higher chance for family and social network breakdowns. Without a support network in place the likelihood of grief becoming complicated rises (this goes without saying for any type of bereavement.)

Within the context of this PhD project and my practice as an artist, the sensitivity of conversations about death, dying, and bereavement are paramount to my practice and methodology as an artist. The Death Café was an opportunity to discuss grief in a safe and open environment: this is one of the main research aims. My work acts as a vessel for information to be carried: either through the lens of my camera capturing a present absence or through the words discussed during an event or workshop: they all have equal weight.

Here I am going to pursue the final complication of my research: the workshops, talks, and conversations that allowed me to envisage processes of change and adjustment in relation to the non-alone context of charities such as Depaul UK and Samaritans. The spaces in which these activities took place included a conventional art gallery space (Laing Art Gallery), as I have already highlighted and a charity environments (Recovery College Collective, Crisis UK). I would also like to flag up the possibilities of future spaces, yet to be decided.

Complicated grief, for the exploration of this research project encompasses the profound state of loss/grief which negatively impacts on a person's wellbeing. This does include grief (in the personal context of the loss of my parents), as well as profound loss of habitable life (I argue the loss of home to be within the context of complicated grief for this project.)

Through exploration of colour as a baseline for this workshop, the project looks at how people perceive colour differently, especially within the context of grief. Colour allows for a personal conversation regardless of a person's life experience and level of articulation: to help foster conversation the social sculpture projects begin with an exercise in personal colour understanding through use of a colour swatch book and flat service. Participants choose swatches of colour over the spectrum and order them from negative to positive in value.

In December 2016 I was invited to offer a two-part workshop on creativity and grief. The Recovery College Collective, an independent organisation supported by Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust, provides peer-led and delivered support to promote recovery and a sense of belonging. The workshop was derived from my exploration of colour as a visualisation of grief. I noticed from the comments in the guestbook of my exhibition the polarisation of the use of light and colour within the space. This enriched my research practice to look more closely at the way colour reflects our memories and experiences individually. I purchased a book of colour swatches that range from muted to neon and invited colleagues of mine to choose of their own accord colours that represent a spectrum of feelings from positive to negative. In every instance, including the beginning part of the workshop at Recovery College, each participant chose a completely different array of colours. This small test reflects the comments in the guestbook and promotes questions about why we react to colour the way we do, especially when assigning it emotion. (For the record: grief, to me, is the violet that appears in a lot of my *memory: void* photographs.) Much like grief, there is no right answers. We're all so very complicated, our stories are all so very unique, that we all seem to find our comfort in what is familiar. At least, that's what I'm taking away from the activity.

After a discussion around grief with the participants of the workshop, using a Powerpoint presentation to talk about and promote modern grief literature, we

discussed and talked about our own experiences with grief and the losses that we have felt over the years. Confidentiality was confirmed before the start of the workshop and a reminder that at any time we can stop or they can leave if the atmosphere weighed too heavily. I have found with the Conversation and subsequent events, that giving people the opportunity to explore a space in a way that makes them feel safe helps facilitate a successful workshop. Even with the Death Café's extreme topic; everyone stayed and participated until the end. This workshop concluded with the participants using materials I provided (books, paper, acrylic paint, pencils, and brushes) to use the conversation and space to create a piece of art. Reflecting on this first workshop with the Recovery College, I felt that the broadness of the topic of grief is over-large for a short two-hour workshop. In the future, I will be putting on a series of creative grief workshops with more focused topics, to elucidate a focused creative response.

In early 2017 Christina Thatcher, an American poet and doctoral researcher in creative writing at Cardiff University, contacted me about a possible collaboration. At the time I was developing a workshop on grief for Crisis, but it was still very soon in the planning stages. Thatcher was looking for an artist to assist her while she was in Newcastle for a conference. After talking, we decided to combine our practices to create a workshop around the use of words and visual language to discuss grief. I recommended Crisis as a possible venue, as the people that are involved in the services (homeless and vulnerably housed) have a deep understanding of loss and grief. At the time I was working as a sessional tutor in their art studio, so approaching the Arts Coordinator was easy to do. I was given access to their café after hours for free, as well as refreshments courtesy of the director. As this was a chance to offer an opportunity to their clients, I also was able to sign up 5 people to help facilitate the evening. Through two workshops, I gave them a 'crash-course' in

bereavement models and listening strategies, as well as worked with them to finalise the structure of the event.

The event took place in the evening and was open to the public. Much like the Death Café and Conversation, we promoted the event online through Death Matters, as well as Facebook. Crisis wrapped it into their programme and promoted it for us through their stakeholders and publicity list and used their Twitter account to gain exposure.

The event happened in two parts. First, we would sit with Christina and learn about using language to structure poetry. All participants (a total of 11, including Christina and I, as well as our facilitators) took time to write down their feelings, using Christina's prompts. After we had a discussion about the words that we used, we then moved on to the arts-based part of the workshop. The facilitators and I had decided that we would utilise the concept of 'exquisite corpse'. A surrealist game that was invented in 1925 in Paris by surrealists, modelled to be similar to the parlor game 'consequences'. It allowed us to introduce a seemingly innocent way of working with partners. The idea behind it, whilst fun, also roots itself in the invisible visibility that I have discussed throughout the course of this thesis. For those that aren't familiar, an exquisite corpse is a party game that takes a paper and folds it over lengthwise in three parts. Each part represents part of a body: the head, torso, legs. The first participant draws the head and gives a hint to where it ends and folds it over so that the next participant can see the starting lines but not the drawing. The second participant does the same and hands it off to the third. Once all participants finish, the drawing is then unveiled, usually to merriment. What's nice about this approach is that it is a community project, so fears around personal abilities are usually dulled as the emphasis is on the odd-looking creations rather than individuals drawing prowess.

Four exquisite corpses were completed that evening. The first appeared to be a little octopus girl with branches for arms, the second a cat wearing a skirt. Third in line was another cat, interestingly enough, but this one boasted three legs. Finally, the fourth was an interesting man in profile in a blue shirt on frog legs. I'm describing them to you because I'd like you to see how we each interpreted the idea. After we posted the four up for review, we talked a little bit about the project. Here we were given the opportunity to reflect on our choices. As the workshop was light-hearted, we easily discussed how each of us wanted to draw something creative and how that when they matched up with the rest of them we realise how different our ideas of creativity were. However, despite this, we were able to work together to make an image that functioned in much the same way as building a person. This practice of giving ourselves over to our neighbour and giving them the opportunity to build on our work could be seen as analogous to giving yourself over to your community to allow yourself the opportunity to grieve with them.

At the time of this writing, I am currently the programme coordinator for Depaul UK, a youth homelessness charity that operates across a number of areas of social and cultural support, including creative practice with the users of its services. According to the Childcare and Recreation Information Service, bereavement consistently makes the top ten causes of homelessness cited by homeless people themselves and by those working in the sector (CARIS, 2010). Due to a lack of care, mental health options, social networks, and other factors, people already vulnerable can find themselves without a home due to the breakdown of factors from a bereavement. This compounded loss, much like the complexities of losing a person to suicide, can trigger a complicated grief-like reaction. Because of this, the service user-group that I am acquainted with, as well as the charity, have given me a unique opportunity to utilise my expertise in creating an enriching experience for their clients. The aim is to generate a positive change in the young adults accessing

Depaul UK services. I also do similar work with Helix Arts, a visionary group that treats participation in creative activity as a fundamental part of the well-being. With support from these organisations I have begun facilitating, in partnership with VODA and Changing Lives, a series of workshops that explore the visual dimensions of self-narrative. This project will culminate in a professionally produced graphic novel that will be presented to a discussion panel of the artists and writers at *Thought Bubble*, the annual comic convention in Leeds.

I am currently finalising a series of talks, conversations, and workshops with the Tyneside Branch of the Samaritans with permission from the director. I am working with the Deputy Director to apply and further test the practices and aims of the Samaritans to the research I have described in this thesis. It follows that there will be academic-style conversations around philosophical implications of suicide. What does suicide mean? What is its impact socially/philosophically? Special notice will be taken of the notion of a 'suicidal artist' paying special attention to the issues of mental health and the romanticism of suicide. Here's a future complication. What can I bring to the special kind of grief experienced by those lives are continuing in the wake of a suicide, given that I have committed myself to a research vehicle that operates through practical workshops involving photography, exhibition tours, walking tours, and writing workshops.

In the beginning of 2018 I shifted my focus away from the analogue and started to develop a series of photographs using the camera on my phone. Part of the reason why I had done this is because Fujifilm, who had been supplying my Polaroid camera with pack film for years had decided to stop production. Immediately after the announcement myself, and what I assume were dozens of other photographers, began to scour the internet to bulk buy. Already the price of film sky-rocketing to £25 a pack (it was £12). I had three packs left, which I had hoped to save for a good day... but that good day refused to come.

So why not my phone? I spent months prior to that in such a state that I couldn't even get out of bed, contemplating how best to remove myself from the world (razor? Rope?) and needed to do something about it before I burst. So I resolved to take a photograph a day.

In recent years with the rise in social media we've seen time-lapse photographs of children growing into teenagers so I know that the one-a-day concept is not anything exciting or new. I immediately call to mind Jamie Livingston (1956-1997) who continued to take a Polaroid a day from 1979 until his death. His photographs included subjects such as his friends and events that happened in his life.

Except what I wanted to do was capture the little bits of my life that, through the lens, couldn't necessarily be transcribed into subject. This is a step forward from the traditional film project and, as it is entirely handled digitally, a step removed from the tangibility of reality. However, as we have already discussed time and again, the reality of loss and the ability to recognise relies in part on the subjectivity of reality.

Much like I recalled when talking about Derrida and Heidegger and how we can argue the very nature of death and its realness, or how the genuineness of recalled renditions, this series of photographs (aptly titled *Microcosm*) is the next step in my practice as an *artist-in-mourning*. Virtually, it sits in the same realm that you and I are sitting in while you read these words in the voice you've chosen to read them in. It sits in the same realm as my parents and those that I have lost and loved over the years.

***Check list: the reader has been offered more thoughts on what I mean by self-narrative; I also relate the phenomenology of photography to my own practices; the aesthetic and social dimensions of exhibition 'Shift' are contrasted with particular emphasis on the colour of grief; I describe how I use the entire Polaroid photograph, including the parts that are usually thrown away and, therefore, absent; I then continue with a discussion of the important role of talking in the non-alone dimension of my research, surveying useful encounters with other people's narratives from my exhibition comments book to debates at academic conferences; now a final complication - probably the nearest thing I have to a conclusion.***

This might be a good moment to return to the image of grief with which I began. Henry James's futile attempts to push the billowing dresses of Constance Fenimore Woolson beneath the surface of a murky Venetian lagoon. She was a 'suicidal artist' (she actually wrote a short story entitled 'Miss Grief') and James was an American artist who had committed himself to operating creatively in a European cultural environment. I cannot help associating myself with this situation as I contemplate the image evoked by Wright's description. I feel James's desperation as I think about it. He cannot suppress or submerge his grief. The fact that I can return my thoughts to this starting point recognises the slow accommodation of the grieving process that has gone on as I wrote this complicated 'thesis of adjustment'. You will recall the unknown woman who outlined a circular model of grief for Lois Tonkin. I have been consumed by the difficulties of writing this text. The experience has been totally overwhelming. It has filled every part of my life, whether I was awake or asleep. If I drew a circle to represent the writing up process, shading in all the areas that have been complicated by the grief of my orphanhood, I imagine most people would hope that, by this stage in the research journey, the complications would have diminished to such an extent that they would have disappeared under the

surface of my research. As with the unknown women in Tonkin's account, this is not what has happened. The complications have stayed just as big and it is my research that has grown around them. The time-tabled events that mark out the progress of a PhD, the supervision meeting, the annual reviews, etc. did not submerge the shaded parts of the circle, my complicated grief felt just as intense as it ever had, but, increasingly, - and this is the point of the thesis you have just read - I have been able to operate in a circle that is substantially larger than the area covered by my sense of bereavement.

## **AFTERWARD**

Thank you for reading my thesis. My hope is that you were able to take something personal away from it, that you could perhaps see yourself in my situation, or, at least, relate. Even if you didn't relate, the lack of relation is also something I feel can be looked upon positively.

I want to take the time now to really delve into how my practice has been shaped by my research, and how, in turn my research has been shaped by my practice.

Throughout the years that I underwent this research project, I have considered the use of photography as a means of translating and understanding the world around me. By obscuring, shifting, changing, and distorting the focus and the lens I have managed to create a liminal space – a place that exists nowhere but in the moment that I snap the shutter. The use of light and objects; city spaces and intimate rooms meld and mesh together through a chemical reaction to create the majority of the work from 2013-2018, and all of the work that was included in my solo exhibition at the Laing Art Gallery.

This afterward serves as an overview and a meta-understanding of the process of the thesis, and to supplement it with more in depth conversations around the development of my art practice and the guiding inspiration for the format of the text.

This has been a thesis of adjustment. I found myself murmuring those words over and over again over the frantic end months where everything really started to take shape. It's fought with me, I've fought with it, and generally we didn't really get along. Why is that?

Well, for one, grief hates boxes. I'm sure you're well versed now in why that is – grief doesn't like to do what its told. It follows no linear path, and, in a lot of ways, you're just swept along for the ride.

I felt like that much of the time I was writing my thesis. Because, it did actually start off with a usual structure. I had a literature review section, a methodology section, a section dedicated to Neimeyer and a section dedicated to Heidegger. The problem was, and continues to be, that you can't neatly package these ideas in separate sections and expect it to behave. The sections invade one another, Neimeyer's talking about narrative rears up again when we talk about Derrida and his paper about Barthes. How do I reconcile that into a cohesive doctoral thesis? I don't. What I do instead is remove the structure and allow the grief to manifest and work its way through as it needs to. Instead of fighting the dresses in the lagoon, I should appreciate them for what they are.

I digress.

This was a thesis of adjustment. In order to understand its persistent nature, I'm writing this companion guide to hopefully cover anything I was unable to cover in the main body text.

First, however, I'd like to talk about how I was inspired to write the thesis in the way that I did. I read a lot of Japanese literature, and one style in particular has really resonated with me, especially in my need for re-establishing my own personal narrative post-grief. The Japanese I-Novel (私小説 – *Shishōsetsu*) is a type of confessional literature and is noted for its looser methods. It uses the author's life to create a fictional narrative. One prominent Japanese author in particular, Osamu Dazai (太宰 治 – *Dazai Osamu*) (1909-1948) caught my attention in early 2015, right in the middle of what would end up being my thesis of adjustment and had profound influence not only on myself, but on the way that I approached my writing. His work, *No Longer Human* (1948) (人間失格 – *Ningen Shikkaku*), is the story of a young man that has trouble adapting within his surroundings. It follows Yōzō Ōba (大庭葉 蔵 – *Ōba Yōzō*) from when he was small, throughout his life, until finally his

committal into a mental institution. It deals with themes of depression, suicide, addiction, and isolation. The title, *No Longer Human* (or its literal translation 'Human Disqualified' or 'Disqualified as a Human Being') carries weight of those that find themselves unable to understand or feel like what makes humans, human. And boy, in the process of my grief, and in the process of my academic research, did I feel *unhuman*.

The way the book is presented, and the raw nature in which it is written, reminds me so much of trying to navigate a world whilst suffering from complicated grief.

‘I thought, “As long as I can make them laugh, it doesn’t matter how, I’ll be alright. If I succeed in that, the human beings probably won’t mind it too much if I remain outside their lives. The one thing I must avoid is becoming offensive in their eyes: I shall be nothing, the wind, the sky.” (Dazai, 1948:28)

The novel is divided into five parts: an introduction, three notebooks (written in first person, by the main character himself), and an afterward. Throughout the notebooks the main character talks repeatedly of masks, and how he needs to wear one in order to function within society, lest he be outed as an imposter of humanity.

Does this sound familiar? In more than one occasion I found during the writing of my thesis and in moments of reflection that I felt like an imposter of humanity. I felt as though my grief somehow othered me and learned to adapt by wearing masks.

I think very poignantly, however, the novel is bookended by two chapters written outside of the first-person narrative of Yōzō. And, much like the introspective nature of this thesis, and the continual focus of pushing down those dresses in the lagoon – forever obsessed within the personal, selfish moment of my own grief, it reminds the reader that Yōzō does not live in a vacuum. His universe, his world where he sees himself as something other is not the world that sees him.

In the final chapter, however, this changes. The final paragraph, ten years later, sees two people discussing Yōzō:

“The Yōzō we knew was so easy-going and amusing, and if only he hadn’t drunk—no, even though he did drink—he was a good boy, an angel.”  
(Dazai, 1928:177)

Which is true? Does it matter? Was Yōzō’s masks really that incredible, or did people see through them and still gain an understanding of the essence of who Yōzō was? I’m not about to answer these questions, but they are reminiscent of my own questions and the points I hazard when I work with community organisations and deliver workshops or events. Or when I’m sat at home with a cup of tea.

I believe it is worth noting, and especially worth noting when describing how this story in particular (and the confessional nature of the I-Novel in a broader sense), that Dazai took his own life in 1948. Much like his fictional protagonist, Yōzō, he ended his life with a lover called Tomie Yamazaki (山崎富栄 – *Yamazaki Tomie*), drowned along the riverbed of the Tamagawa Aqueduct (玉川上水 – *Tamagawa Jōsui*) in Tokyo (東京 – *Tōkyō*). Sadly, unlike his fictional protagonist, he didn’t survive.

As the translator of the novel, Donal Keene states, ‘...[d]etail after detail clearly is derived from the individual experience of Osamu Dazai himself’ (Keene, 1973:9), we see the confessional nature of the literature shine through, and in this interest of this thesis, the reason why I am so focused on this type of writing as a means to relay emotional information.

The nature of this novel shows a vulnerability. The words are written into one another in a relatively coherent order and no one but the author (or the narrator) can release you from enthrallment. I find this kind of integrity to the nature of vulnerability apt when discussing the shape that this thesis has eventually taken;

especially how it has grown from its initial project approval, through two extensions, to the viva in February 2019. This has not been an easy task. I don't intend to pretend it was. The enormity of the painful experience this has been has also been integral to the charted experience.

I'm going to go back a little bit to start you off where I did.

The idea of obscuring photographs started at the end of my undergraduate, after I purchased a Polaroid Colorpack II. I picked up one of those plastic magnifying glasses (see *Key Visuals*.) I don't recall exactly what made me stick it in front of the lens, but I did, and, the rest is history.

My degree show included two very large prints of two of the photographs. At the time I didn't consider my work in any kind of grief context, but I did see it as a sort of 'erasing' or 'blurring' of reality.

I continued on this trend through the Masters degree and again showed a selection of photographs at the degree show (this time in their original form.) Unfortunately I don't have a photograph of this.

At the end of the Masters we were tasked with submitting works under Contextual Practice that underpinned our research. The title of my submission was "Absence of meaning: photographing amnesia" and included a copy of my initial research proposal to the 2013 AHRC grant, titled the same.

An excerpt:

My research and art practice has always involved an absence of some form: I spent a lot of time exploring the perception of Death and Silence. First inspired by Derrida's essay, *Aporias*, and later by Cage's *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, I began a personal research project on their impossibilities that spanned two years. In practice, both concepts don't exist: one cannot be conscious of one's own death, and one can't reach a state of perfect silence whilst alive. I came to realise that these concepts linked together in their absence, thus creating an internal dissonance. We are compelled to assign

meaning, and when that is absent, the simple structure collapses. We can no longer function.

Already I'm so very close to what it is at the core of my research, but my focus is slightly off, even if only by millimetres. It was until my first project approval meeting that resulted in a resubmission that I really had a moment to sit and reflect on what I actually wanted to do.

However, now I knew it is about grief – in particular my grief, and even more particularly my complicated grief. I'm still a bit amiss back then, as I'm assigning the act of removing focus as an active event, referring to it as erasure. It wasn't until much later in the project that I realise that I'm not an active participant, I'm a passive one. And it isn't erasing that I'm doing, but refocusing my lens on something that can't be focused on.

Let's come back to present day and talk about my art practice. My art practice is *absent-presence*. Currently it sits in two major boxes: photography and community involvement. They take shape in a few forms, but the underpinning is always about that need to push through and create something physical in place of something absent.

I consider myself to be an *artist-in-mourning* and I work within the sense of loss that I feel.

During the thesis journey, however, I tried to find how best to represent that sense of loss. A few strands of practice that I talked about in my thesis helped me define what I would eventually come to realise, that I need to consider the journey, not just the end result. I need to transmute this unending feeling into something visual, something I can see.

The works that I created with *Photosounder* helped me realise that there is a way to change, to move media across boundaries and present information in a form that also couldn't be refocused (see *Key Visuals*.) What I mean is, *Photosounder* took recording of my own voice and created a visualisation – my words became a casualty, there is no way to reverse the image to learn what I said. And if I destroyed the recordings (which I did), the valuable information is lost forever. Here I am purposefully trying to recreate a sense of loss and grief by creating a scenario akin to losing my parents.

I do this again with a series of recordings that you can listen to on *Soundcloud*<sup>8</sup> (see *Key Visuals*.) Similarly to the image created with *Photosounder*, you're only given a tiny fragment of information – in this case, the sound of me writing down memories of my parents. Again, the original writings are destroyed, the information can no longer be accessed. In the same way I can still hear the sound of both my parents voices in my head, I can still see them, but their voices will never again vibrate in my ears; their bodies will never again be recorded by my eyes.

Presently, I am working entirely digitally and using social media to create conversations around grief and loss. My work has taken form in an image a day uploaded to *Instagram*<sup>9</sup> and takes shape much the same way as the Polaroids do (see *Key Visuals*.) As I consider every action I take to be the result of the grief I experience, the work presents itself under the title *Microcosm* – a small glimpse of the audacity of day to day life to continue regardless of whether or not I want it to. Much like those dresses in the lagoon, regardless of how many times I push my grief down, it is still there. As an *artist-in-mourning* I need to transform it, understand it, and codify it. The Instagram application allows me to do just that.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/limnides>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/limnides/>

I started volunteering with Crisis UK, a homeless charity, in the summer of 2014 as an art room assistant. This ended up being integral to my growth as an artist and researcher, in that it gave me a meaningfulness that I lacked before. Suddenly the project that was all about me wasn't all about me anymore. While I had always wanted part of my future to include awareness campaigns for better understanding of grief, I did this through solitary efforts. Now I had a classroom of fifteen service users that I was assisting twice a week in their creative endeavours.

From Crisis UK came other opportunities and I suddenly found myself a world of creative development organisations and charities around Newcastle and Tyneside. These organisations worked with vulnerable people to give them the visual and emotional language they need to empower themselves and better their own sense of self.

Almost naturally, I began to work with a lot of the charities with creative workshops and projects, and found myself wanting to do more. The research and work that I had done up to that point for my thesis fueled my understanding of how I could approach people creatively, and the experience I had approaching people creatively fuelled my understanding of the thesis. This cycle of perpetuity has continued to inform my research and practice as an artist and professional.

So, where do I go from here?

What I've compiled through this research project is an understanding of working in ambiguity and the fragile nature of grief and loss. Like being in that lagoon, we can continually push those dresses down and fight it, but fight it with the understanding that the futility is almost comical.

Let us not get lost in futility, though. Instead of fighting those dresses, let us know them for what they are. Representations of the life of Constance Fenimore Woolson. Her absence now billows as a new presence.

But now I have one more important thing I must address: my work. Throughout the body of the thesis I consider the ramifications of showing you the Polaroids. Earlier, I argue that “I’ve chosen not to include photographs or illustrations in order to try to evoke the sense of seeming endlessness of complicated grief: trying to recall, over and over, who my parents were, what they were like. Things that will never again occur: their smell, their voice, the way they felt when they hugged me. These indescribable things are kept away from me, locked in a place that no longer exists. So, in a way, while you move through this text with me, I want you to feel that frustration. I want you to have to rely on your own memory. As I am forced to rely on my own.”

But the photographs aren’t dead. They still exist in this world.

My answer to that was to sprinkle between ten and fifteen Polaroids, both positives and negatives throughout the bound copy of the theses sent to each examiner. I wanted them to feel the presence of the photograph, to touch them, to smell them, to regard them as precious objects.

That’s all well and good, but what about you, reader? You’re not going to be able to flip through this copy and have an original Polaroid fall into your lap. I don’t have enough photographs to cover that eventuality. So I find myself faced with one last complication: what to do.

The only thing that I think I can do.

You will need to imagine these Polaroids the way that I need to imagine the touch of my parents; it’s the adjustment of their absence, just as much as the body of text is. Just as much as the Key Visuals in following section. I hope that, at least, these will

invoke something more tangible than a memory, and their presence with you will be like the billowing dresses floating to the surface unhindered.

## KEY VISUALS

Please allow me to show you visuals from some of the projects that I have done over the course of the research project. They weren't included in the body of the thesis due to being unable to gather them in time for the submission date.

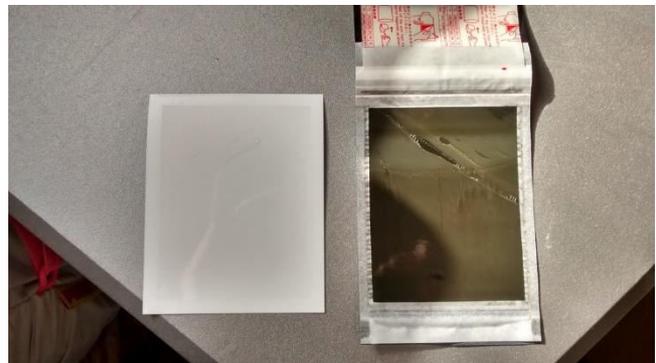
Firstly, I talk a lot about my Polaroid Colorpack II. For reference, this is it:



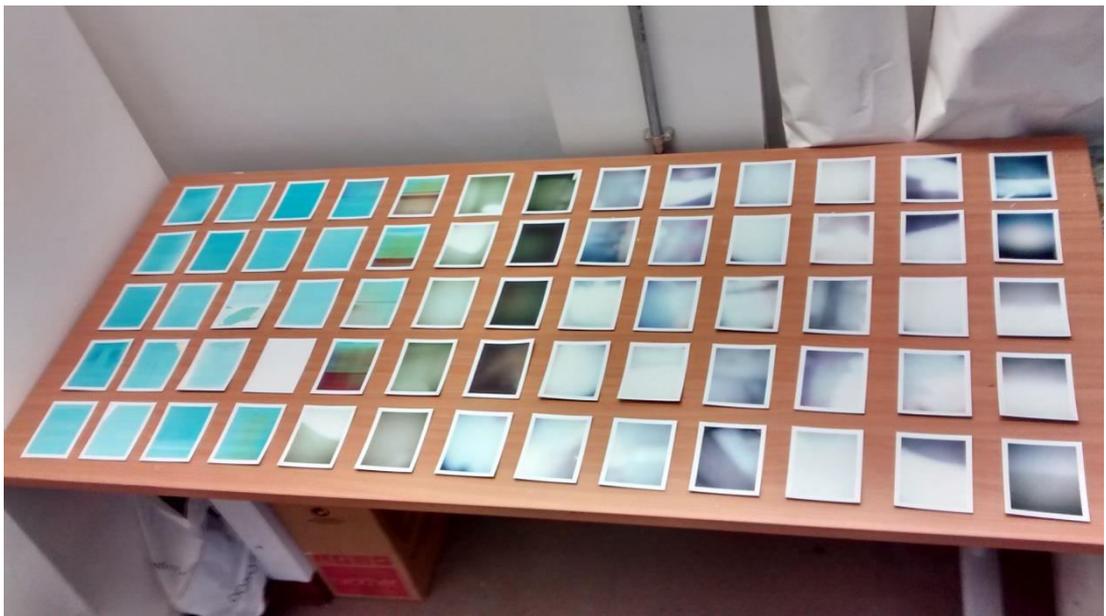
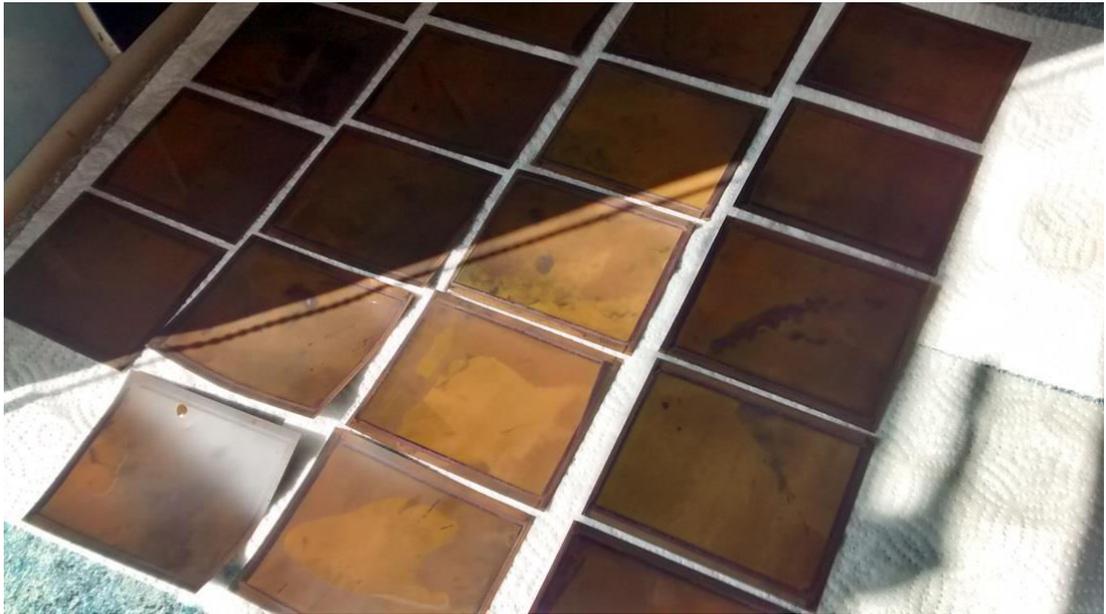
The camera uses Polaroid peel-apart film, but since Polaroid ceased making instant film, I used Fujifilm. The pack, as well as the magnifying glass that I used to obscure the lens are here:



After the photograph is taken and the film released, it peels apart like this:

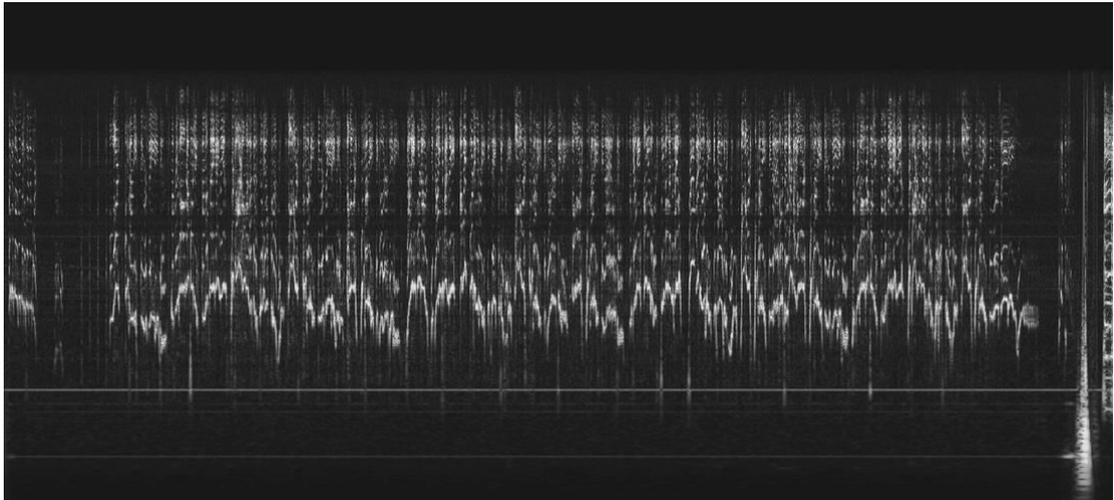


Here are some studio shots of the instant film work as it progressed.



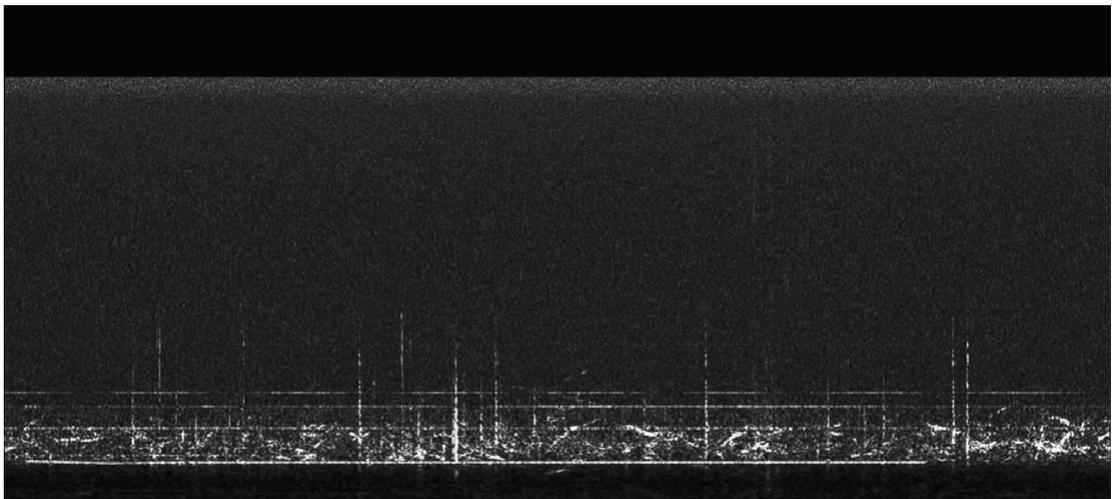


I briefly talked about Photosounder and how I changed voice recordings into visual images, here is an example of that:



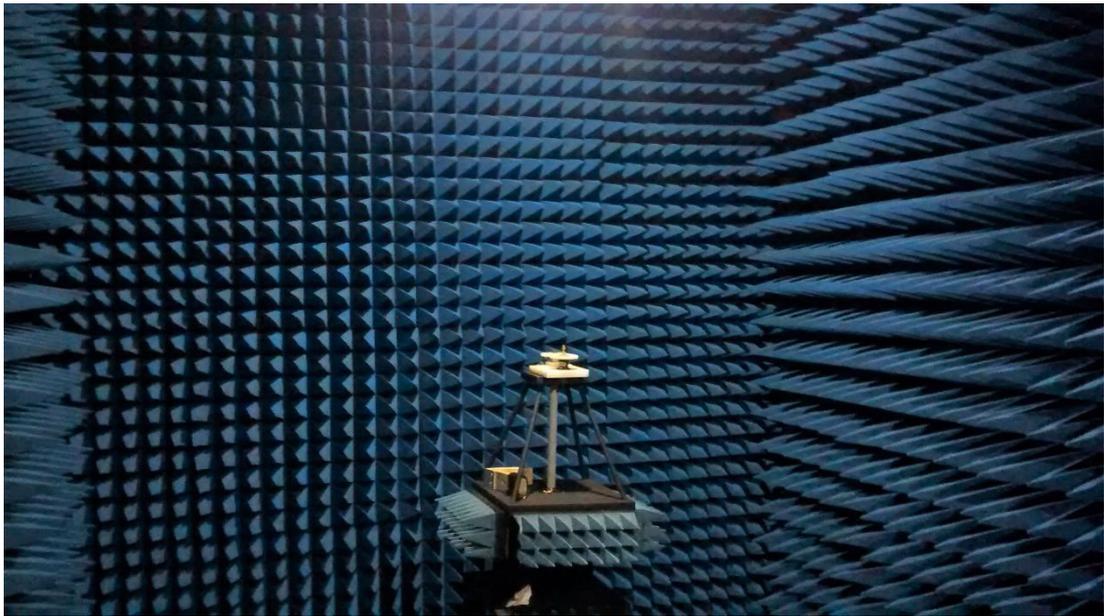
As you can see from the lines, there is a lot of movement.

Here is *After 4'33"* (2015), the recording and visualisation that I took in the anechoic chamber at Northumbria University:

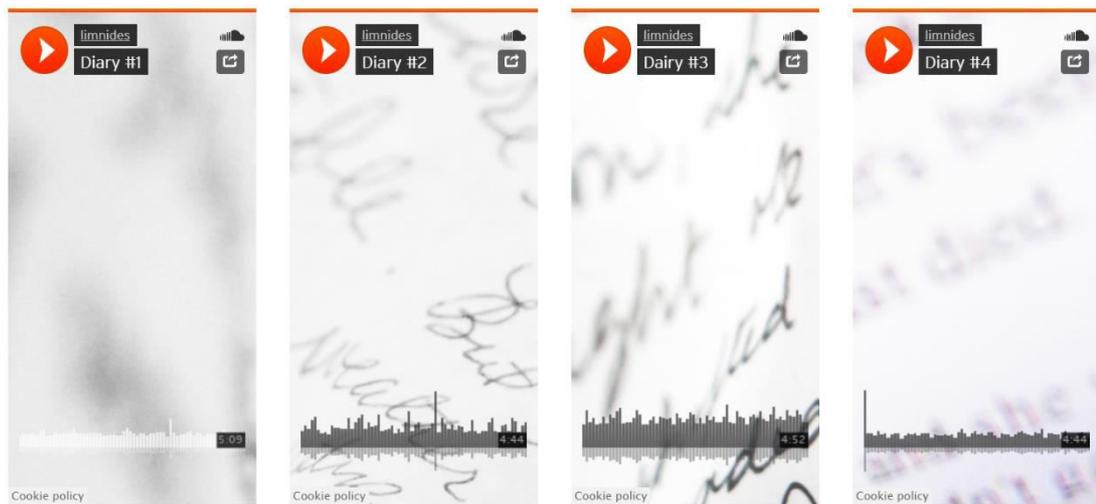


As you can see there is a clear difference between a recording of my voice and the recording of 'silence'.

For reference, this is the anechoic chamber at Northumbria University:

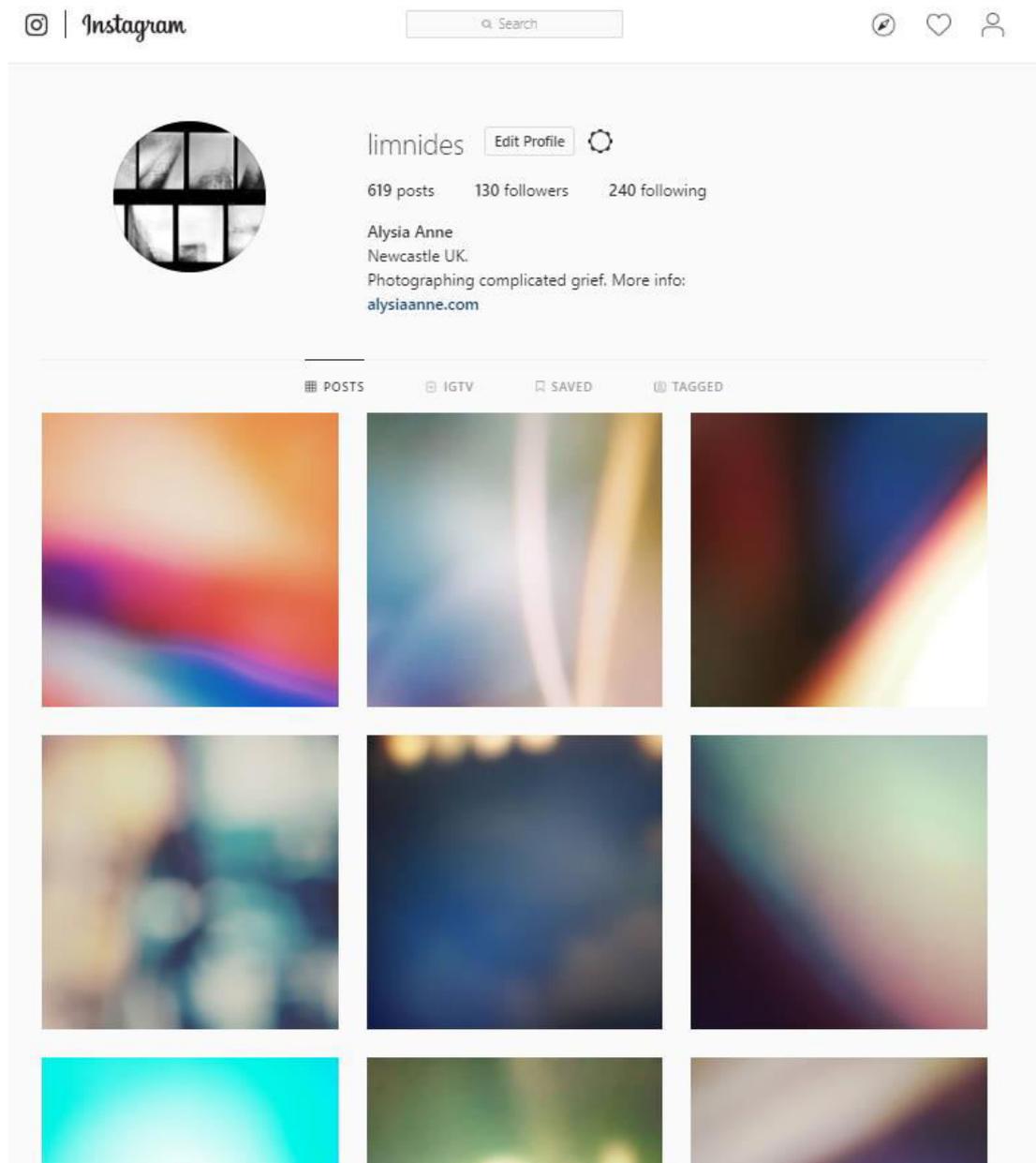


My Soundcloud recordings appear like this:

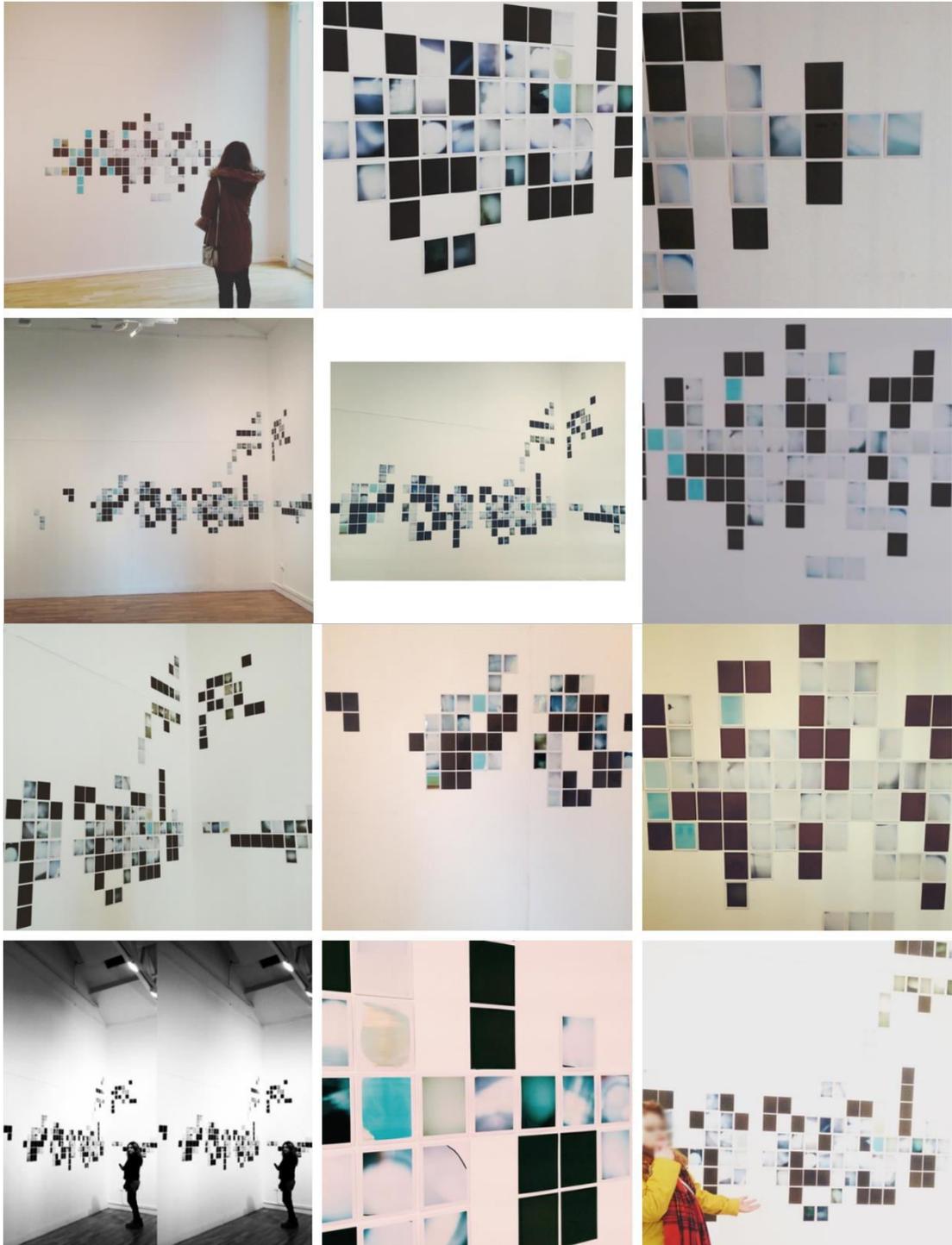


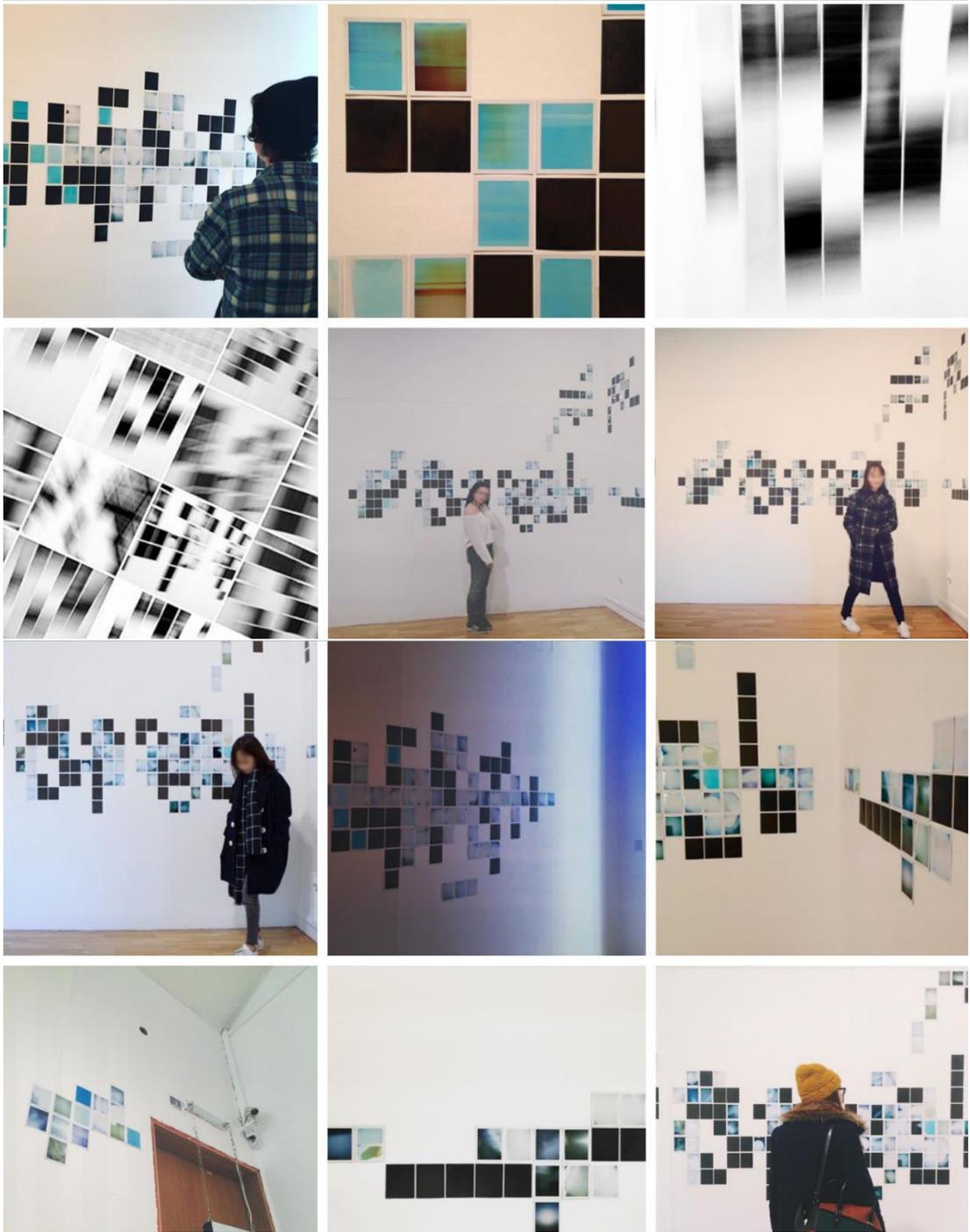
Each has a blurred and distorted version of the writing that was recorded.

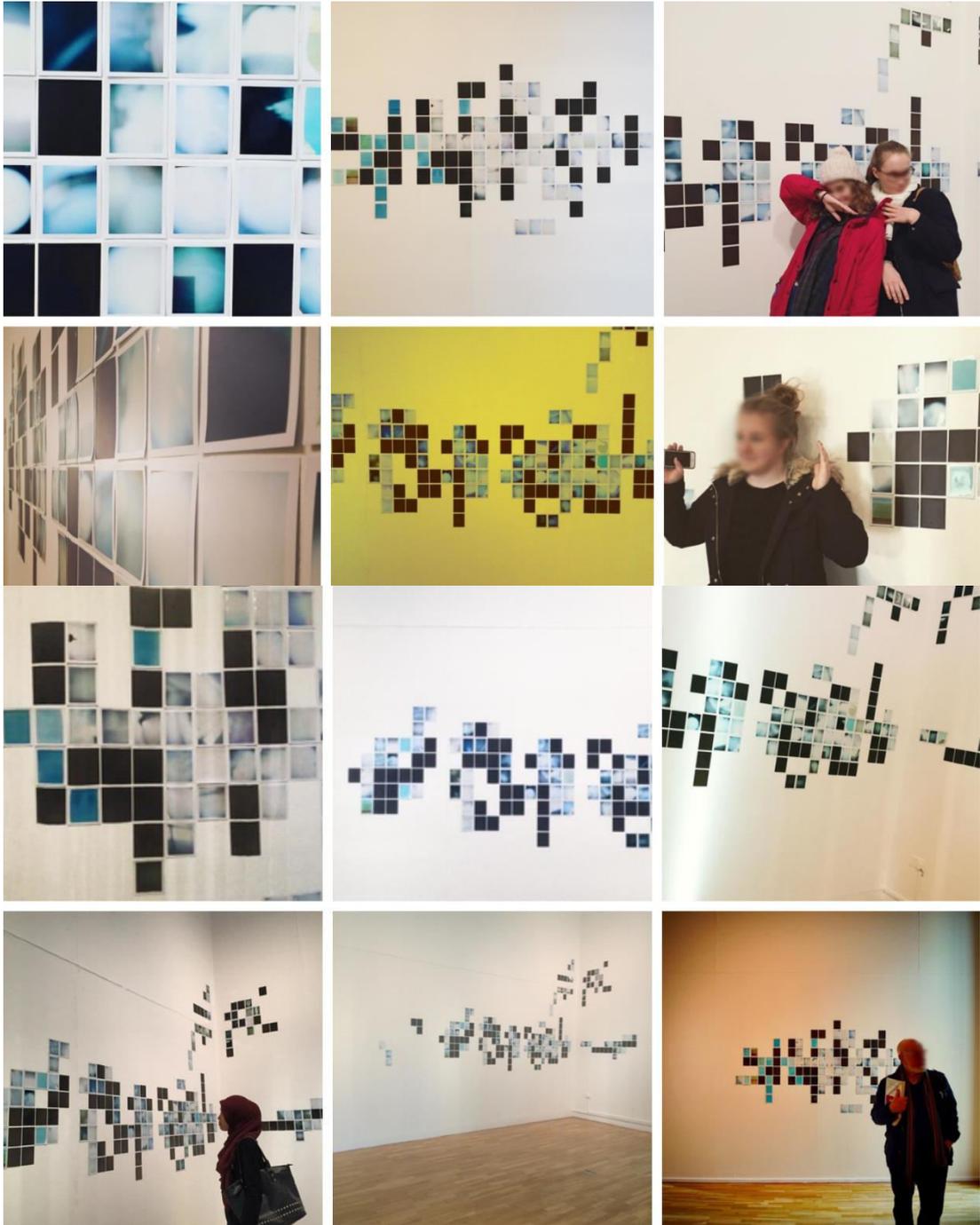
I started the image a day with Instagram on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, 2018. There are currently over 600 photographs. I have no plans to finish the project as of now.



Finally, while I do not have any professional photographs of the *Shift* exhibition at the Laing Art Gallery, I did collect images that I found online of other people taking photographs of my exhibition. Here are the images that I found:







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