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Family Photographs: A Discussion on How Identity
Has Been Portrayed in Staged Photography of
Family Photographs and Memories

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Fine Art

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Abstract

The family album remains to be one of the most prized possessions. The pages are filled with the memories and key moments of lives lived. The aim of this dissertation is to closely examine how identity has been portrayed in staged photography of family photographs and memories. This dissertation will argue that staged photography of family photographs and memories are a highly effective way expressing identity in art. It will however, address reasons that photography may not be considered as an art form.

Chapter one will discuss the text '*Camera Lucida*' (Barthes, 1980) whose book discusses the effects photography has on the viewer, and the impacts it has on memories, as well as visually analyse the works '*Hull Under Water*' (Fig 1.1, 1991), and '*Over the Hill and Far Away*' (Fig 1.2, 1994) by Colin Gray.

Chapter two will analyse the book '*Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*' (2002) by Annette Kuhn and will discuss the theory of family photographs as a genre. '*Self Portrait as my Sister Jane Wearing*' (Fig 2.1, 2003) and '*Self Portrait as my Brother Richard Wearing*' (Fig 2.2, 2003) are photographs which will be visually examined.

Chapter three will reference the text '*On Photography*' (1977) by Susan Sontag, which discusses photography as a medium, and the barriers it has between fiction and reality. It will also discuss the work '*Haley Coles*' (Fig 3.1, 2006) from Trish Morrissey's series '*Front*' (2006), Hans Eijkelboom's photograph '*With my Family*' (Fig 3.2, 1973), and the text '*Performing for the Camera*' (Baker, et al. 2016) which discusses what it means to perform for the camera. Examining these artists' work will allow the dissertation to understand the techniques used to achieve successful themes of identity within photography art practice.

This dissertation arrives at the eventual conclusion that staged photography of family photographs and memories are a highly effective way of portraying identity in art and should be viewed as an art form.

Acknowledgments

In loving memory of Margaret, Amelia, Jim, Gordon, and Dougie.

A special thanks to my parents and grandparents, for helping me become the person I am today. Thank you for always supporting me throughout life. I am forever grateful I get to call you, my family.

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Introduction

“To take a photograph is to partake in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt.” (Sontag, p.15)

The first successful, long-lasting photograph was created in 1826 by Nicéphore Niépce and was an image monochromatically outlining the roofs of buildings in a city. “The earliest photographers talked as if the camera were a copying machine, as if, while people operate cameras, it is the camera that sees.” (Sontag, p.87-88). The camera would come to be seen as one of the most cherished forms of capturing an exact moment in time for decades to come.

There were many ways in which photography was used initially. Family photography was not popular at first but would soon become prominent in everyday life. It started out as available only to the rich due to the expense. As time passed however, family photography became more affordable, and people of lower social status realised they wanted these memories and key moments in their lives to be preserved. These photos have, and are still to this day, carrying memories through generations.

This dissertation is formed of three chapters with the overall aim of closely examining how identity has been portrayed in staged photography of family photographs and memories. In order to achieve this, it is important that the following claims are considered:

1. Staged photography of family photographs and memories are a highly effective way of expressing identity in art.
2. Photography is not considered an art form.

I will be arguing that staged photography of family photographs and memories are a highly effective way of expressing identity in art. It is important however, to address that despite this, some do not see or consider photography as an art form.

I will investigate the influence family photographs have had on certain artists work and will visually analyse what tactics they have used within their practice. I am conducting this research because as a photographer who focuses on themes of nostalgia and family photographs within my art practice, I find it most important to express the importance family photographs have within the art world. They express not only themes of memory but have an impactful way of expressing emotion and identity. Family photographs also contain themes which are expressed

in paintings, sculptures and other forms of art. So why should they not be considered as art? It is in my opinion however, that they should be classed as a form of art.

Chapter one will analyse the text '*Camera Lucida*' (Barthes, 1980) whose book discusses the effects photography has on the viewer, and the impacts it has on memories. Barthes is central to my dissertation research and I will respond to his theoretical claims and how they are in relation to my research. Chapter one will also address the series '*The Parents*' (1980) by Colin Gray and it will visually analyse two key works from the series and how they have been influenced by memories. The works in question are '*Hull Under Water*' (Fig 1.1, 1991), and '*Over the Hill and Far Away*' (Fig 1.2, 1994).

Chapter two will discuss the text '*Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*' (2002) by Annette Kuh. I will address her text as she introduces and discusses the theory of family photographs as a genre and how they can be used to help understand elements of the past. I will also visually examine two pieces of work from Gillian Wearing's series '*Album*' (2003). The pieces in question are '*Self Portrait as my Sister Jane Wearing*' (Fig 2.1, 2003) and '*Self Portrait as my Brother Richard Wearing*' (Fig 2.2, 2003) where she creates masks to become members of her family, and I will discuss how her process and work are effective in conveying themes of identity in family photography.

Finally, chapter three will reference the text '*On Photography*' (1977) by Susan Sontag, which discusses photography as a medium, and the barriers it has between fiction and reality. I will analyse her views on family photographs as a genre within photographic practice to support my dissertation research. I will also discuss the work '*Haley Coles*' (Fig 3.1, 2006) from Trish Morrissey's series '*Front*' (2006) and how she infiltrated a family and replaced the mother in the image. I will conduct comparative analysis of both Morrissey's work, and Hans Eijkelboom's photograph '*With my Family*' (Fig 3.2, 1973). I will discuss the tactics they used to create their work, and how their pieces, although similar, have key differences to highlight. I will further reference the text '*Performing for the Camera*' (Baker, et al. 2016) which discusses what it means to perform for the camera.

Chapter One: Memory Re-enactment and the Truth of Reality

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (1980)

Barthes '*Camera Lucida*' (1980) investigates and tries to understand what photography is and further looks at the effects it has on the viewer. He discusses family photographs as a genre within photographic practice and how family photographs have been theorised. Barthes details his own experiences of reflecting on old photographs of his mother after she had passed and declares in the text that he is the viewer, or the subject within photography: he is not the operator, which is the photographer.

He implies that photography is a way to prove existence. It is a material that can capture and freeze a moment in time. In the chapter 'He who is Photographed' (p.12-18), he discusses how the photographer can grasp a hold of reality with the camera. He states, "No doubt it is metaphorically that I derive my existence from the photographer" (p.12). This is a highly effective piece of writing in the words of Roland Barthes as it suggests that there would be no evidence of your existence without the photograph. There would be no evidence of family heritage and history.

Barthes declares that "Photography can tell me this much better than painted portraits" (pp.36) in his book, *Camera Lucida* (1980). This suggests that Barthes believes that photography captures the reality of things. Yes, photography can be manipulated but overall, it is a way of capturing the present and the truth.

He further discusses how he feels when reflecting on images of his late mother, and how her identity is portrayed through an image. He discusses how the colour in an image helps remind him of her personality. He comments "the light was already a kind of mediation which led me towards an essential identity, the genius of the beloved face" (p.79). He further states that his mother "'lent' herself to the photograph" (p.79-80). This implies that the camera has caught a glimpse of her true identity in that exact moment and has frozen it in time. This has allowed Barthes to reflect on his mother and remember elements of what she was like.

Photographs act as a trigger. In this case, the photograph of Barthes mother has allowed him to reminisce and grieve her. The image in question has Barthes' mother positioned directly in front of the camera, staring into the lens. By doing this, she is making herself known to the camera. The stare allows the viewer to feel an emotional connection to the subject in the photograph. It

creates emotional value within the work. His mother appears to be calm and collected. And by offering herself to the camera, she allows us to get a glimpse of who she really was.

When Barthes discusses identity in photography, he explains that photography can transform “the subject into object, and even, one might say, into a museum object.” (Barthes, p.15-16). When we think about family photographs, there is a subject or a person in the image. Barthes explains here that family photographs which contain the identities of families are deserving enough to be stored in a museum. If we think of museum objects, they are there to be shared, valued and appreciated forever.

‘Hull Under Water,’ 1991

Colin Gray: a photography artist who was born in Hull, England, in 1956. He studied at the Royal College of Art in London, 1982 and graduated with a BA (HONS) degree in graphic design, as well as obtaining an MA in photography. As time went on after his years of studying in London, he moved from the big city and is now based in Glasgow, Scotland.

Gray’s work consists of photography and focuses on the memories of his childhood as well as his childhood fantasies. A series created by Gray titled *‘The Parents’* is one of his most recognisable works which began in the 1980’s, inspired by Arthur Trees and Bill Owens. The series is extremely specific as it demonstrates the relationship that Gray’s parents had with each other, as well as that of the relationship that he himself had with them. The artist uses his own individual experiences in his work, as well as his parents. His parents are the subjects in his body of work, who he manipulates to his pleasing.

‘Hull Under Water’, (1991) (see fig. 1.1) is one of the many photographs produced by Gray in his series *‘The Parents’* (1980). The photograph displays a detailed thought which Gray had as a child. When he was younger, he explained that he wondered what would happen if his living room were to fill up with water and flood. The scene Gray has staged, and brought to life involves Gray’s mother poised in the centre of the living room, floating in *water* contently whilst his father is under the surface snorkelling and exploring the sea. When discussing Gray’s work, it is important to highlight that some of his photographs that he is staging, have not actually happened in real life. *‘Hull Under Water’* (see Fig 1.1, 1991), is based off a fantasy he had as a child. This encounter with the subconscious of his mind has only been accounted by

Gray himself. Yet, he places his parents in the midst of one of his recreated childhood fantasies, making them embody the identity of him as a child.

The room in question, that he has used to bring this fantasy to life, is the living room within his childhood home. It has remained unchanged. In *'The Parents'* (Gray, 1995), a book discussing his series, comments on the living room where he recreated this childhood thought. It states that the living room has “become something strange and absurd.” (Gray, p.3).

The use of colour in Gray's work is a key component in many of his staged photographs from his series, *'The Parents'* (1991) especially as seen in *'Hull Under Water'* (see fig. 1.1). In the book *'Colin Gray: The Parents'* it states that “The memory of colour is a deeply affecting, physical presence in Colin Gray's work, filled with emotional significance.” (Gray, p.4). It is also said that his “choice of technicolour has its roots in childhood memories and casts a quality of splendour over the banal and extraordinary alike” (Gray, p.5). For example, as seen in the work, the yellow duck poised on the sheet of plastic is a key aspect within the photograph. The colour yellow has connotations of innocence, happiness, and hope. It can however be argued that yellow also has connotations of jealousy, lying and deception. This is effective as it highlights his childhood innocence, and his identity in a familiar setting, yet it has been changed to something absurd. The duck floating on the plastic again emphasises how fake this set up is. It could also be seen as a marker to provoke the viewer into thinking that Gray is concealing the truth. Could the duck also be indicating or representing Gray as a child in another form? His mother seems oddly aware of this duck

Blue is another key colour in this piece of work. Perhaps this is because it is a water setting. The colour blue symbolises sadness, loneliness, and distance. This again is effective as it prompts the viewer into questioning if Gray was somewhat alone in his childhood. It also highlights the sadness that this is a fragmented memory, and not actually real. This scene is all staged.

Additionally, when discussing this work, it is important to remember that all of Colin Gray's work, especially *'The Parents'* (1980) is based on memories of the past, never scenes that are anticipating the future. Camera Lucida (Barthes, 1980) reads: “the thought of origins soothes us, whereas that of the future disturbs us, agonizes us” (Barthes, p.125). His parents created him, therefore it is comforting for the artist to have those who have watched him and helped him grow into the person he is today involved in a piece of work personal to him.

The Editorial Team in an article called *'Is Photography Considered an art?'* (Team, 2022) discusses both sides of the argument as to whether photography is classified as an art form or not. The article states that “photography captures reality rather than creating a subjective reality, which is what ‘real art’ does” (Team, 2022). The Editorial Team are saying that some viewers see photography as an easy form of art. It does not take the same length of time it does to create in comparison to painting or sculpture. It is an easier process and requires less work. It does counter this by suggesting that photography has “been developed specially for creative expression, not for commercial brief. They are rare and collectible and can be exhibited like other forms of art” (Teams, 2022). When discussing Gray’s *'Hull Under Water'* (1991, see figure 1.1) it is vital to remember that Gray is creating his own art based on personal memories and experiences. This is not something anyone else can do. His memories are specific to him, making his photography unique.



Fig 1.1, Colin Gray, *Hull Under Water* (1991) Photograph. Image courtesy of Colin Gray.

'Over the Hill and Far Away', 1994

'Over the Hill and Far Away' (Gray, 1994) (see fig. 1.2) is another photograph created by the artist in his series *'The Parents'*. The image details his mother and father playing in the bath in the back garden of their family home. The composition of this image is very interesting as he has created this scene to appear like a live action shot. Gray’s use of leading lines is also an effective addition to the work. For example, his parents are seen to be sledging down a white slope made from nothing but a large-scale sheet. There is also a washing line of clothes hanging

above both their heads. Both lines start in the background of the image and then travel to the front of the piece. This is effective as the lines act as a tool to lead the viewer from the back of the image to the front, allowing them to cast their eyes on the focal points of the work; Gray's Mother and Father.

Gray's image overall is an unusual and exciting piece. There are themes of fun, and elements of play. Gray's use of physical items help achieve this. The fact that his mother and father are sledging in a bathtub in the garden for starters suggests that this is link to a memory from Gray's childhood. Imagination takes hold when you are younger, and you believe that anything is possible. Could Gray have been thinking what else could be used as a sledge? The garden gnomes positioned to the left of his parents is also an interesting feature. Gnomes symbolise protection and luck, perhaps symbolising protectors of the garden. Whether the Gnomes were there in the first place, or whether Gray has included them in the image to act as guards, not only for his parents, but the memory also.



Fig 1.2, Colin Gray, *Over the Hill and Far Away*, (1994), Photograph. Image courtesy of Colin Gray.

The time and effort Gray has dedicated into his photography, suggest that this is more than simply taking a photograph. Overall, the work of Colin Gray and his photographs support the argument for staged photograph of family photographs being a highly effective way of expressing identity because of the careful execution of contemporary ideas by using personal narratives within his photographic practice.

Chapter Two: The Photographer and the Subject: Reality and Fiction

Annette Kuhn *'Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination'* (2002)

“Although we take stories of childhood and family literally, I think our recourse to this past is a way of reaching for myth, for the story that is deep enough to express the profound feelings we have in the present” (Kuhn, 2002, p.1). Annette Kuhn opens with this statement in *'Family Secrets'* (Kuhn, 2002). It introduces the concept of family photographs not only as a medium, but as a genre and how they can be used to help understand elements of the past. It discusses themes of identity, how they are portrayed through family photographs and how photographs themselves have been influenced by social and cultural factors.

When discussing memory, it is important to consider that as time passes, memories become hazier and not as prominent as they once were. Thanks to the invention of the camera however, memories can be retained much easier. Kuhn states in her book “Memory work has a great deal in common with forms of enquiry which – like detective work and archaeology, say – involve working backwards – searching for clues, deciphering signs and traces, making deductions, patching together reconstructions out of fragments of evidence.” (Kuhn, p.4) Kuhn is suggesting here that family photographs are a way of retaining proof of the past. The photograph documents accurate information for what happens in the split second that it was taken, however it cannot just be solely relied on to retain information of the past. It is important to remember that the mind is still actively involved in recreating these memories and stitching them together as there will be elements and emotions that the camera cannot capture. Memory enactment is a waltz; you need two partners (in this case the photograph and the mind) to be able to dance. It is in Kuhn’s words that it is implied that family photography should be considered as a genre within art.

An article written by Michael Prodger (Prodger, 2012) however discusses whether photography as a medium should be classed as art or not. It states that photography was seen as “too literal to compete with works of art.” (Prodger, 2012). This supports the counter argument by explaining that photography is somewhat only seen as a way of documenting. Some critics still believe that photography has no contemporary ideas, thoughts, or initiative behind it. It’s perceived as a quick and easy process that does not take the same time as a painting or sculpture. The article overall states that historically, and still, some to this day, view photography as a form of science, and not as a form of fine art.

Photographs act as a catalyst for triggering memories and emotions. When discussing the photograph as a medium, Kuhn states that “The Photograph is a prop, a prompt, a pre-text: it sets the scene for recollection.” (Kuhn, p.13). In my view this implies that the photograph is an object that can be manipulated with your mind. I agree with the statement Kuhn is expressing; however, I feel that she is implying that the photograph is only there for this purpose. They are there to be collected and hold so much history and emotion, especially family photographs. These images are archives which contain evidence of heritage and identities of those who lived before you. When we look at a photograph, we naturally analyse it. We look to be greeted with memories and then pleasantly surprised by hidden details that have been encapsulated by the image and that may have not been seen before. Photographs allow this surge of emotions and memories to wash over you. Overall, Kuhn’s theoretical reasons for why family photographs require their own genre is strong and effective because it is such a big subject that is portrayed in many ways.

Gillian Wearing, ‘Self Portrait as My Sister Jane Wearing’, (2003)

Gillian Wearing is a contemporary photography artist, born in Birmingham in 1963 and now resides in London. She graduated with a degree in technology in art and design from the London Chelsea School of Art in 1987 and a BFA from Goldsmith’s College, University of London in 1990. She has also received the Turner Prize in 1997.

Wearing’s practice mainly focuses on themes of identity, as well as her family being a main inspiration within her art practice. Her work has also been heavily influenced by family photographs. Her series ‘*Album*’ (2003) consists of her posing and staging herself as members of her family. She does this by creating silicone masks of these relatives and then posing herself as them in her series. Wearing takes the art of family photographs to the next level in this series. Her series is one of the most powerful ways of expressing identity in family photography that I have seen, and her work helps to strengthen the argument for staged photography being the most effective way of expressing identity in art. What is interesting about Wearing’s images, is that in every photograph that she has created, she has made it obvious that she is not who she appears to be. There is something odd, off and unsettling about her images.

Wearing is not only the photographer in her series, ‘*Album*’ (2003), she is also the main subject of the images she produces. ‘*Self Portrait as My Sister Jane Wearing*’ (See fig 2.1) is a piece

made by Wearing where she created a silicone mask, and staged herself as her sister, Jane Wearing.



Gig. 2.1, Gillian Wearing, “*Self Portrait of my Sister Jane Wearing from the series Album*” (2003) Photograph.

Image courtesy of Gillian Wearing.

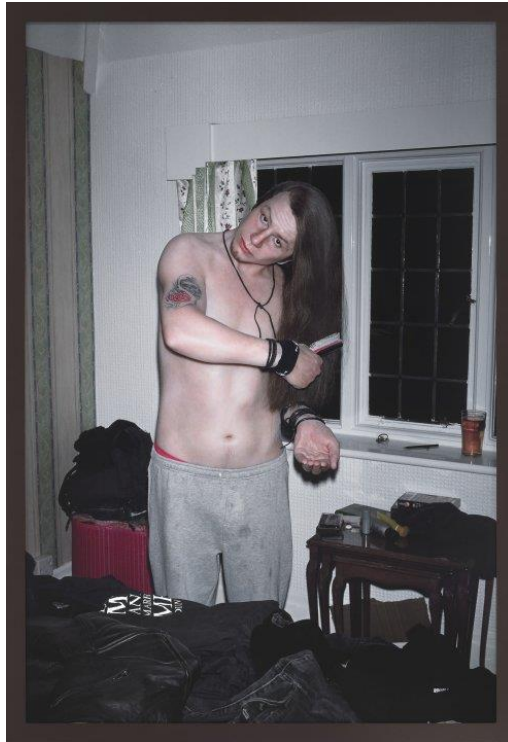
Barthes comments on resemblance in his book, *Camera Lucida* (1980). He states: “Resemblance is a conformity, but to what? to an identity. Now this identity is imprecise, even imaginary...” (Barthes, p.122). Wearing’s work investigates family resemblance and looks at how she herself is different from other members of her family yet explores how they are all connected. Something which is interesting in the image here, is that you can see parts of the artist’s own face through the mask (her eyes and teeth). These features are what make Wearing, *Wearing*. These are key aspects of her identity. These facial features can be the most unique aspects on the human face and are inherited, a link to family. Leaving these features visible in the image makes the work more powerful and symbolic when discussing family photographs. Not only is Wearing embodying her sister, she is also showing the similarities she and her sister inherited from their parents. This strengthens the argument for staged photography of family photographs being the most effective way of expressing identity because it shows the traits of multiple people and relatives in one singular image.

Wearing fills the photograph with life. As mentioned previously, Wearing’s eyes and teeth are the only aspects of Wearing’s face visible in the image. Without either of these being present, the mask would simply be a lifeless shell.

In an article written by the guardian, Wearing discusses the obstacle of older photographs when it comes to creating her masks. She states that she “tried to make each member around the same age, late teens to early twenties, so we are equals in a way, regardless of the roles we had within the family. The exception has been my grandparents, as I did not have good enough images to work from when they were younger” (theguardian.com, 2012). This expresses a harsh truth that the older the images, the harder they are to interpret. Wearing creates the masks of her relatives with the reliance on family photographs. This may let her imagine what her grandparents looked like when they were younger. Further in the article written by The Guardian (theguardian.com, 2012), Wearing discusses why she wanted to create masks in the first place. She explains that “people tried to direct me to use prosthetics, but I was adamant it had to be a mask, something that transforms me entirely, something that was not grotesque but real, like a trompe l’oeil” (theguardian.com, 2012). As mentioned before, when we look at Wearing’s series ‘Album’, it is apparent almost immediately that there is something unique with the work. She wants to make us aware that she is posing as someone else, to embody and become someone she is inspired by and idolises. To strengthen Wearing becoming her sister in this work, Sontag explains, “A beautiful subject can be the object of rueful feelings, because it has aged or decayed or no longer exists.” (Sontag, p.15) This version of wearing’s sister no longer exists. Wearing has taken a photograph of her sister to see what she looked like in her twenties and used this as a main source of inspiration. Wearing is reminiscing over the person her sister was in that moment in time.

Gillian Wearing ‘Self Portrait as my Brother Richard Wearing’, 2003

This is another image in which Wearing has taken it upon herself to embody that of one of her relatives. This time, her brother Richard Wearing. Rather than it being a headshot of the person she is embodying, she has created an upper torso and silicone mask, as well as creating a scene for the photograph to take place. She has not only inserted herself into his skin, but also his space. His environment.



(Fig. 2.2) Gillian Wearing, *Self Portrait as my Brother Richard Wearing from the series Album*, (2003)
Photograph. Image courtesy Gillian Wearing.

Wearing states that the image she has made of her brother is based on a photograph that their mother took of him. An article discussing her ideas and thinking behind this image mentions how some people were in disbelief that it was Wearing that was the subject in the image posing as her brother. She states, “If you look closely at this you can see tell-tale signs, but from a distance it’s not the first thing that jumps out at you, although I do believe it holds a sense of the uncanny that makes you think there’s something more going on” (the guardian.com, 2012).

Eye contact is one of the most prominent features in any of Wearing’s work, however it is more obvious in this image and causes uneasiness when drawn to them. It makes the viewer question whether there is more happening in the work than what is initially observed. The artist has positioned herself in the centre of the frame, staring into the camera lens and making direct eye contact with the viewer. The stare is one of the most emotive and intimate ways to build a connection with the viewer, and this is an intense stare. In my opinion this is also implying authority. Wearing wants the viewers to know that she has power and control over this whole image: not only as the photographer, but also as the subject.

Although, the work I have analysed in this dissertation clearly shows the planning, preparation and creative input to execute that one photograph.

Overall, the images wearing has created are complex and represent themes of family identity effectively. Her images are thought provoking and prove that photographs can become true pieces of art. Although staged, there has been careful thought, and they have been well prepared. She has taken family photography to a whole new artistic level. Previous images of her family have sparked her inspiration for her pieces, and this has resulted in her embracing past identities, family history and finding new family connections.

Chapter Three: Family photographs

Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (1977)

Susan Sontag's '*On Photography*' (1977) discusses photography as a medium, and the barriers it has between fiction and reality. She also discusses family photographs as a genre within photographic practice. Sontag discusses the history of photography and the issues it first faced. "For about a century the defence of photography was identical with the struggle to establish it as a fine art. Against the charge that photography was a soulless, mechanical coping of reality, photographers asserted that it was a vanguard revolt against ordinary standards of seeing, no less worthy an art than painting." (Sontag, p.126). This gives us some background knowledge to the issues and challenges photography first faced when it tried to become a form of art. However, some still saw this as a science rather than an artistic method.

Sontag discusses in her novel the importance of the family album and the feelings it triggers. She states, "Photographs actively promote nostalgia" (Sontag, p.15). It is vital that this statement is discussed to allow a deeper understanding as to why it plays a massive role in family photography. Nostalgia is the term which is used to refer to someone who has a longing for the past. When reflecting on family photographs, it is important that the term nostalgia is discussed, alongside the feelings experienced. There are two elements: firstly, you are met with feelings of joy and wistfully longing to return to that moment. However, you are then hit with the wave of sadness, and the slow realisation that things have changed, and you are unable to return to the moment. Family photographs are a form of evidence and a way of retaining memory. They can be seen as a "token of absence" (Sontag, p.16). Family photographs are a way of retaining the memory of those not here anymore. Sontag later explains that "Photographs are, of course, artifacts" (Sontag, p.69). This is an important statement as Sontag is suggesting that family photographs are like artifacts, which are typically stored in a museum. Using family photographs in art is effective as they convey themes of identity and are a way of bridging together the past and present, which can be common themes seen within contemporary art practice. The family album is a family's own personal exhibition catalogue of moments of life to gaze and reflect upon. It triggers so many feelings, such as nostalgia, sadness, joy, and that is what contemporary art is supposed to do. It is there to evoke emotion.

Sontag also addresses connections in which family photography has other themes linked to contemporary art practice. Family photographs not only convey themes of nostalgia, but themes of identity, and Memento Mori which Sontag suggests in her novel. However, it leaves

mind to wonder why some might not view family photography as art. Sontag explains that “Photography is the inventory of mortality” (p.70) which suggests its link to Memento Mori. The term Memento Mori, comes from the “Latin phrase meaning “remember you must die.” (Ostberg, 2023). Although family photography is not the stereotypical still life paintings which involve the symbolic tropes found in Memento Mori art, such as, candles, clocks, skulls etc. Sontag comments that “Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction” (p.70). This is an effective statement as it suggests that photographs have a lot in common with Memento Mori. Family photographs are a way of capturing moments as they happen and a way of documenting key moments which happen in lives. They start from when you are born and follow you throughout life. Photographs are an accurate documentation of identities and the “reality of how people age” (Sontag, p.70). She further details that photographs are there to function as “a reminder of death” (p.71). Photographs can meet you with the uncomfortable, yet kind presence of grief. For example, reflecting on photographs of family members who no longer have a physical presence in the world. Sontag supports the reader and casts a positive note on an upsetting reality by stating that “Each still photograph is a privileged moment, turned into a slim object that one can keep and look at again” (p.18). Photographs of your family are yours to keep. Your memories, and your stories. Do not take them for granted.

Finally, Sontag states something in her novel which I have found to diminish the counter argument significantly which is the argument that photography is not classed as an art form. Sontag states, “Photographs may be more memorable than moving images, because they are a neat slice of time, not a flow.” (Sontag, p.17). Moving pictures and acting are classed as a form of art, so why is there the argument to suggest that photography is not? As mentioned, Sontag suggests that family photographs have links to many themes found within contemporary art practice, so why should they not be considered as art. They capture history, evoke emotion, and create a visual narrative of identity, and further provoke memories. Nostalgia and memory are interlinked and are predominant themes found within family photographs. Nostalgia is a source which can drive artists’ inspiration, like me. It is an emotional subject which triggers emotions with audiences, making it an effective element in the art world.

Trish Morrissey, 'Haley Coles' (2006)

Trish Morrissey is an Irish artist from Dublin, who now resides in London. Her art practice focuses on photography and performance. Her work consists of “themes of identity, family, motherhood, and history.” (Art Net Gallery, 2024) Her work investigates the importance of the family portrait in her work and majority of her work focuses on women and the roles they play in families.

Her series 'Front' (2006) contains an image where she infiltrates and positions herself as the mother in family settings, creating *family* photographs, and this image is said to be her “best photograph” (Phillips, 2013) Her process for capturing this photograph was firstly by approaching a random family and asking their permission to input herself into their clan, and makes herself a part of their story, only for a brief moment. This has similar connotations and links to the way the water reaches the sandy shores of the beach. The waves of water approach and absorb into the sand, similarly like Morrissey does by infiltrating a family. Then, the water recedes and heads back out to sea again. This is comparable to Morrissey leaving this family, after only being there for a brief period. Her process has a deeper symbolic meaning that is not as apparent to the eye. She can 'remove' herself from this family as she is not tied to them by blood or any other commitment.

In an article written by Sarah Phillips (The.Guardian.com, 2013) where she conducted an interview with Trisha Morrissey, they discuss the process in which Morrissey undertook to achieve one of the most successful photographs in her career. The photograph itself comes from a series titled '*Front*' (2006). Morrissey states in the article that she had been "researching family photographs and was interested in how the shoreline acts as a border between land, which represents culture and order; and sea, which is nature and chaos." She comments on how the beach "is a great place for being observed" (Phillips, 2013). The title of the series is something interesting to comment on. She has titled the work 'Front' and it appears as if she is titling the series after herself, as she is ultimately putting a front on for the image.

The article further discusses how she uses personal items of the women she replaces in the photographs to help channel their inner energy. In this case, she has replaced the mother in the image. Morrissey would take a piece of clothing or jewellery from the mother she was replacing in the image and would wear it as a "talisman" (Phillips, 2013). In this image, it is the wedding ring of the mother she chooses to wear demonstrating this is the character she is embodying

and becoming. This is a very effective item Morrissey has chosen to use as a wedding band is a symbol of unity, love and commitment. The vows and promises that were made to this woman when the ring was given to her at her wedding are strong and symbolic. Morrissey taking this ring and using it in the image makes it seem like she is trying to take on the commitment of the mother in the image, and it appears as if she is trying to temporarily tie herself to the family. This technique and ritual that Morrissey has used in her work is remarkably effective at portraying themes of identity and she is using physical items to channel this women's inner energy and hence trying to become her.



(Fig. 3.1) Trish Morrissey, *Haley Coles* from the series 'Front' (2006) Photograph. Image courtesy of Trish Morrissey.

Performing for the Camera (2016)

What does it mean to perform for the camera? Well, '*Performing for the Camera*' (Baker, et al. 2016) questions this exactly. The text states that "the camera has not only been used to document both theatrical and artistic actions, but also to create images that question dominant modes of representation, and the nature of identity." (Baker, et al. 2016). This text I have referenced for not only the dissertation, but my studio practice also. "The documentary role of photography forms only part of the story." (Baker, et al., p.7) This is an effective statement as it implies that there is more to just taking the photograph, an element of performance is required. For example, a gaze into the lens, a smile, a pose. This diminishes the counter argument for photography not being classed as art, because as soon as you stare into the lens of the camera, you are naturally performing for the camera. Photography cannot be thoughtless,

as you must think about what you are photographing in the first instance before finally taking the photograph.

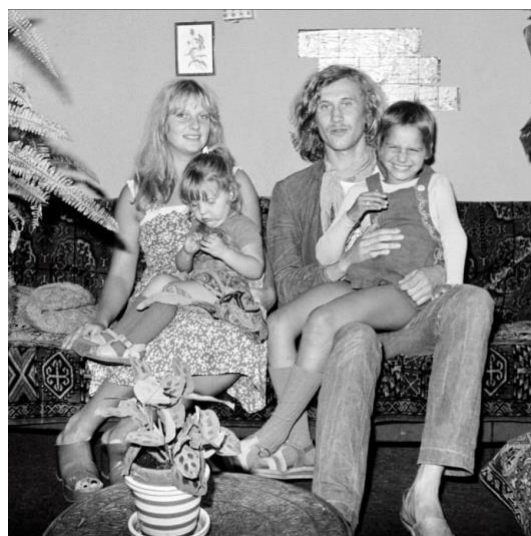
The chapter, *'Performing for real life'* reads "The notion of performing real life reflects upon the ubiquitous use of the camera to document people's lives." (p.197) This suggests that the camera is a way of documentation and a way to retain evidence. The book further comments on artist's approaches on photographic moments "such as the holiday snapshot, the family portrait and more recently, the 'selfie' to deconstruct an idea of reality and the unconscious performances in everyday life." (p.197) This suggests that every day is a performance, and without realising it, you are a performer to the camera. It follows up on this by suggesting that this is becoming more common, and performance art is not being seen as contemporary anymore, which supports the counter argument. The text states that this is "blurring the lines between art and document, reality and fiction." (p.197) This is an effective piece of writing as it supports both sides of the debate. On one hand, it implies that photography is a way of accounting for a performance, therefore it can be viewed as contemporary. However, it suggests photography is seen as more of a documentary style, rather than being seen as contemporary or imaginative. Sontag concurs that "The camera is indeed the instrument of "fast seeing" ..." (Sontag, p.124).

Hans Eijkelboom is an artist whose work was mentioned in the text *'Performing for the Camera'* (2016). Eijkelboom is a "conceptual artist" (O'Hagan, 2014) and his work explores the themes of identity and investigates the family portrait. His series *'With my Family'* (1973) consists of him "Photobombing" (O'Hagan, 2014) family portraits of random families. His process for his work involves him knocking on the doors of random families and acting as a "surrogate dad" (O'Hagan, 2014) after waiting for the actual father of the family to leave the premises for work.

Similarly to Trish Morrissey's work *'Haley Coles'* (2006), Eijkelboom infiltrates a family's and takes a family portrait with them. If we compare the work of Morrissey and Eijkelboom, although they both have similar elements and themes within their work, there are differences to highlight. For example, Morrissey asks the mother who she is replacing in her photographs to take the image, whereas Eijkelboom waits for the father who he is planning on replacing in the image to leave the premises. A stranger has come into this gentleman's home and taken his place without him even knowing. Morrissey makes the subject she is replacing aware she is doing so, however Eijkelboom does not. This is fraudulent. Sontag explains in her book *'On*

Photography' (Sontag, 1977) that "The ethical content of photographs is fragile." (Sontag, p.21) Sontag further discusses the implications of lying in her novel. She states, "The consequences of lying have to be more central for photography than they ever can be for painting, because the flat, usually rectangular images which are photographs make a claim to be true that paintings can never make." (Sontag, p.87) This is an effective statement as it is telling us that photographs capture an accurate reality of what is happening in the moment the image was taken. This statement also allows us to think about the photograph Eijkelboom has taken. Is infiltrating family homes and posing as someone you are not, without their knowledge ethical? Although there may have been comedic intent behind the photograph, it is not entirely ethical.

Another similarity, yet a difference, is the way Eijkelboom and Morrissey both try to embody and symbolise the individuals they're replacing in the photographs. They are trying to embody their personalities and identities in different ways. For example, as already discussed Morrissey uses items of the mother who she is replacing in her photograph to act as a talisman to channel the mother's energy. She does not make any physical contact with the other subjects in her photographs. Whereas Eijkelboom makes physical contact by having his hand placed on the young boy, cradling him on his lap. It appears that Eijkelboom is trying to channel energy from a living being, whereas Morrissey doesn't need that physical connection by touch, only the use of an inanimate object. Yet the item she is using in her image is something which holds so much emotional value, a wedding band. Eijkelboom: an imposter, is channelling this child's identity and family ideologies through physical touch.



(Fig. 3.2) Hans Eijkelboom, *'With My Family'* (1973) Photograph. Image courtesy of Hans Eijkelboom, Performing for the Camera.

Overall, the ways in which both artists are trying to channel energy from families they are infiltrating is very effective. The ways in which they do this makes the photographs more successful. These portraits demonstrate family unity and identity very effectively, because if the artists never explained that these were staged, would we have ever been made aware that they were imposters? These images are not necessarily photographs to display or demonstrate a performance; they are there to underpin the importance of identity within family photographs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the aim of this dissertation was to closely examine how identity has been portrayed through staged photography of family photographs and memories. To be able to have achieved this, it was important these claims were considered:

3. Staged photography of family photographs and memories are a highly effective way of expressing identity in art.
4. Photography is not considered an art form.

Chapter one discussed the text '*Camera Lucida*' (Barthes, 1980) which communicates the effects photography has on the viewer and its impact on memories. It addressed the works '*Hull Under Water*' (Fig 1.1, 1991) and '*Over the Hill and Far Away*' (Fig 1.2, 1994) by Colin Gray. This chapter discussed ways in which identity has been explored by using personal narratives within family photography. For example, Colin Gray used his own childhood fantasies to create his work and used his parents as subjects within his photographs. His careful execution of contemporary ideas by using personal experiences within his photographic practice makes his work very effective in expressing themes of identity.

Chapter two discussed the importance of family photography within art practice by analysing the text '*Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*' (Kuhn, 2002) and visually examining two photographs from Gillian Wearing's series '*Album*' (2003): '*Self Portrait as my Sister Jane Wearing*' (Fig 2.1, 2003) and '*Self Portrait as my Brother Richard Wearing*' (Fig 2.2, 2003). This chapter thoroughly analysed specific techniques used to achieve themes of identity within Wearing's practice. It also discusses Michael Prodger's article (Prodger, 2012) debating whether photography should be an art or not.

Finally, chapter three investigated what it means to perform for the camera by analysing the text '*Performing for the Camera*' (Baker, et al. 2016). It also discussed '*On Photography*' (Sontag, 1977) and compared the works of Trish Morrissey and Hans Eijkelboom. The visual analysis of these images concluded that the photographs were not necessarily created to display a performance; but to underpin the importance of identity within family photographs which is the key aim I am discussing within my dissertation.

Overall, this dissertation has found that staged photography of family photographs and memories are a highly effective way of expressing identity in art. This conclusion has been reached after carefully discussing texts which support the theory of family photographs, as well

as discussing the influence they have had on artist's work. Staging family photographs are an excellent way of expressing identity in art because they hold emotional value and conduct a personal narrative within work. As a photographer who focuses on family photographs and nostalgia within their art practice, it is my personal hope that this dissertation raises awareness of the importance these objects have within a contemporary art world.

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