

I Am So Afraid Of Words

An Investigative Exploration into the Physicality of the Photograph

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ABSTRACT

At the unique intersection between photography, graphic design and text, the physical aspects of photography and typography are investigated for their capacity to embody ethereal thought. Through multi-faceted research methods engaged over the course of a summer in Berlin and a winter in Toronto, the investigation employs a collection of early 20th century postcards belonging to the author's great-grandmother and namesake—Sophie Rosenbaum. As much of the theoretical discussion on photography can be limited to vision, touch is introduced as a vital element in photography using the writings of Erin Manning. The result of this exploration of vision and touch is a printed object consisting of original texts and photographs.

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to Sophie

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INTRODUCTION

It does not seem to me, Austerlitz added, that we understand the laws governing the return of the past, but I feel more and more as if time doesn't exist at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry, between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like.¹

(W.G Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 2001)

I have been thinking with Sebald's *Austerlitz* for several years now: in my research of the relationship between photography and prose, in my work as a graphic designer, in conversation with other of his readers and as an easy recommendation. Yet, up until very recently, it had been years since I had last read the book.

Austerlitz is not a conventional book on photography though photography plays a vital role in its narrative. The character of Jacques Austerlitz is written as if he is constantly describing a still photograph in great detail. In addition, the book is studded with photos, appearing with no description nor title. This lack of contextualization leads the reader to the false impression that these images are photos that were taken by Austerlitz himself, and thus raising the question of authenticity.

In her photographic essay, *The Address Book* (2012) French photographer and writer Sophie Calle explores similar tensions between text, photography, and authenticity. In the opening of this book, Calle introduces the set of rules she'll be following: she'll randomly contact people appearing in a found address book, arrange a meeting with them and then ask these contacts to describe the owner of the address book, Pierre D., in an attempt to "know this man through his friends and acquaintances" and to "produce a portrait of him" through interviews and photographic images.²

¹ Sebald, W. G, *Austerlitz*, trans. Bell, Anthea (London, England: Penguin Press, 2002).

² Sophie Calle, *The Address Book* (Los Angeles: Siglio, 2012)

Both of these works have served as inspiration and motivation when approaching my own research into photography, literature, and design. As a graphic designer, I am intrigued by the different means by which photography and text can support each other within the realms of design. I was eager to get a better understanding of these relationships and exploring them in my own work.

I had the unique opportunity to deepen and expand my research through an independent study I've conducted in Berlin over the summer months of 2018. This exploration, inspired by Calle and Sebald, followed a 100-year-old collection of postcards handed down to me by my great-grandmother and namesake, Sophie Rosenbaum, who lived in Berlin at the turn of the 20th century. These postcards bare the names and signatures of directors, actors, and singers who were popular in Berlin in the turn of the 20th century. The names and photographs on the postcards are unknown to me, but I can only assume how dear they were to her, considering she saved them all these years (*see figure 1*).

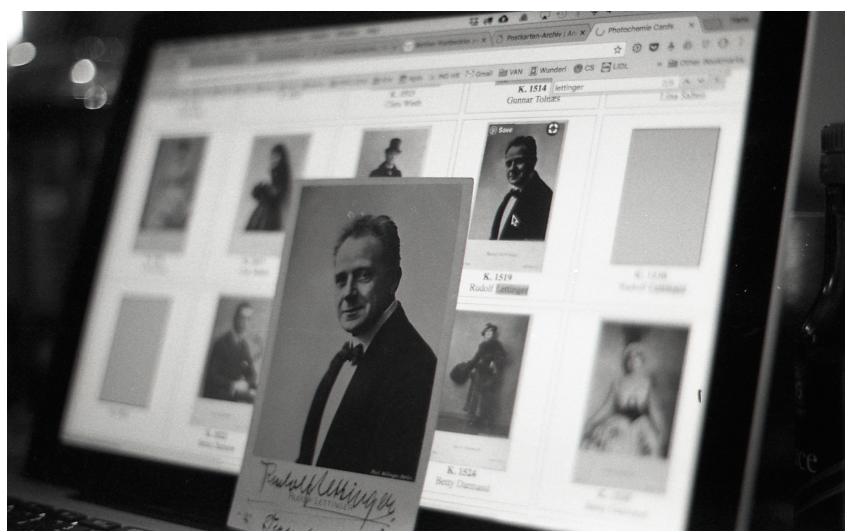


Figure 1: A signed postcard of Rudolf Lettinger—taken from my great-grandmother's collection—leaning on a laptop displaying a similar postcard online for sale.

Film photography, Berlin, 2018

I therefore embarked on a research project hoping to use my great-grandmother's postcard collection as a portal to a better understanding of her and by association my own personal history, while exploring and exploiting photography's relationship with reality. It seemed clear to me that the force that compelled my great-grandmother to collect these postcards one hundred years ago

was, and remains the same force driving me towards photography and graphic design today. By physically inhabiting her lived spaces, I intended to reinforce a connection with my past.

During my time in the Interdisciplinary Art, Media & Design graduate program at OCAD University, I have been examining the physicality of the photograph by using different subject matters, printing techniques and display methods. I have been questioning photography's relationship with our lived reality and exploring different methods of its manipulation. This interest has led me to form the two research questions that will be guiding me throughout this thesis:

- How does a photograph perform as a physical, tactile object? How do we relate to it as such? And how is this relationship changing and evolving over time?
- How are current photography practices affecting our ability to form meaningful connections amongst ourselves and our personal histories?

In the following thesis, I will identify and discuss the forces that tied my great-grandmother to her collection, as well as my relationship with my own history and heritage through this same collection. This research will include theoretical analysis, a unique field research and finally practical research utilising prose, photography and graphic design.

VIEWING AND TOUCHING: A THEORETICAL RESEARCH OF PHOTOGRAPHY

To begin answering this thesis research questions, I must further clarify my scope. I am asking: how does a photograph perform as a physical object? Therefore this thesis seeks to ask a question within the realm of semiotics, the study of meaning-making and sign processing: a philosophical framework in which photography holds a unique position.

In the landmark text, *Camera Lucida* (1980), philosopher/theorist Roland Barthes shares his struggles in defining the certain emotional affect a photograph has on its viewer. He begins by describing photography in the public realm, and differentiating between two affects: the *studium* (the cultural, linguistic, political and somewhat common interpretation of a photograph) and the *punctum* (the unique, personal effect “puncturing” the viewer’s gaze³). Barthes’ book is split into two sections that could be seen as reflecting each other, as the sub-title of the book (*Reflections on Photography*) suggests. In the second half of the book, Barthes looks at an image of his mother as a child and experiences multitudes of emotions concerning the past (both his own and his mother’s), the present (his viewing of the photograph after her death), and the future.⁴ For Barthes, although photographs capture the past, they don’t reflect history. While looking at a photograph of his mother he remarks:

With regard to many of these photographs, it was History which separated me from them. Is History not simply that time when we were not born? [...] Thus the life of someone whose existence has somewhat preceded our own encloses in its particularity the very tension of History, its deviation. History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it—and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it. As a living soul, I am very contrary of History, I am what belies it, destroys it for the sake of my own history.⁵

³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 26.

⁴ Barthes, 27.

⁵ Ibid., 64-65.

In 1933, as the Nazi Party in Germany was gaining power, my paternal great-grandparents, Sophie and Herman, along with their two children, emigrated to Buenos Aires, Argentina. Amongst Sophie's possessions was a stack of nearly fifty autographed postcards she collected as a teenager in Berlin, a collection that was passed on to my aunt and later on to me. My view of my great-grandmother's collection of postcards is different from her view. I have studied these postcards for hours, only capable of placing names to faces, yet it is clear to me that to her, these were more than just names and faces. I try looking at these objects through my great-grandmother's eyes; what did she find in them that drove her to collect and cherish these postcards over the years? What did they mean to her? (*See figure 2*).

American writer and philosopher Susan Sontag breaks down the meaning embedded in photos in her foundational critical text, *On Photography* (1973). According to Sontag, a photograph can carry different meanings and interpretations, even more so than a painting or a prose. Sontag writes: "[E]ven when photographers are most concerned with mirroring reality, they are still haunted by tacit imperatives of taste and conscience [...] In deciding how a picture should look, in preferring one exposure to another, photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects⁶." In other words, a photograph, like a painting, is affected by the view of the person making it, and therefore should be considered a subjective art form.

English critic John Berger, Sontag's contemporary, strongly disagrees with the notion of artistry in photography. In an essay titled *Understanding a Photograph* (1968) he writes:

The formal arrangement of a photograph explains nothing. The events portrayed are in themselves mysterious or explicable according to the spectators' knowledge of them prior to seeing the photograph. What then gives the photograph as photograph meaning? What makes its minimal message — *I have decided that seeing this is worth recording* — large and vibrant?⁷

⁶ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Third (New York: Picador (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 1990), 6.

⁷ John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, ed. Dyer Geoff (England: Penguin Books, 2013), 19.

In a different text, Berger—now addressing Sontag’s *On Photography* directly—discusses another method of meaning-making in photography, done through the act of contextualization. Berger differentiates between two types of photographs, the public and the private, claiming that private photography has a more powerful effect than the photographs found in the public sphere, such as in newspapers and magazines. According to Berger:

The private photograph — the portrait of a mother, a picture of a daughter, a group photo of one’s team — is appreciated and read in a context which is continuous with that from which the camera removes it. (The violence of the removal is sometimes felt as incredulousness: ‘Was that really Dad?’) Nevertheless such a photograph remains surrounded by the meaning from which it was severed [...] The photograph is a memento from a life being lived.⁸

In other words, the context from which the photograph is taken is what makes it meaningful and what separates the private photos from those meant to be shown publicly. For Berger, public photographs “carry no certain meaning in themselves, because they are like images in the memory of a total stranger, that they lend themselves to any use.”⁹ In this sense, both Berger and Sontag agree that, to a certain extent, photographs are open to interpretation, though they disagree on the exact value of this meaning.

Yet, it seems to me that my great-grandmother’s collection exists in the space in between the public and the private, as the photographs on these postcards were taken from the public sphere and charged with meaning that had made them items of personal significance. When my great-grandmother looked at her collection, she was not searching for truthfulness, nor finding a personal connection, these were not treated as evidence nor traces of memories, yet they were not meaningless to her. The significance of these photos lies elsewhere, not in who is portrayed in them or where they were displayed, but in the means of their production.

⁸ Berger, 52-53.

⁹ Ibid, 53.



Figure 2: Looking through my great-grandmother's collection.

Film photography, Berlin, 2018

In his text *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility* (1939), Jewish-German philosopher Walter Benjamin introduces his interpretation of “the aura,” or rather, its decay in the age of mechanical reproduction. According to Benjamin, reproduced photographs, such as my great-grandmother’s collection of postcards, lack a sense of greatness associated with original art. A greatness Benjamin defines as the aura, “the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.”¹⁰ For Benjamin, reproducible art distorts the sense of distance one feels while standing in front of a natural phenomena or an original work of art. Benjamin compares the effects of this sense of closeness to the effects of a surgery on the body: it changes the person from the inside.¹¹

This idea is further explored by Sontag, as she writes, “[T]o collect photographs is to collect the world. Movies and television programs light up walls, flicker, and go out; but with still photographs, the image is also an object, light-weight, cheap to produce, easy to carry about, accumulate, store.”¹² For Sontag, photographs are unique in the fact that they take up space in our lived world, they are both image and object. In this sense, photographs—especially those that are “cheap to produce, easy to carry about”—are charged with the potential of movement and mobility.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4 (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 255.

¹¹ Benjamin, 263.

¹² Sontag, 3

In other words, not only has the potential of reproduction affected the view of photography, but it has made photography readily accessible, common and ephemeral. Therefore, the advances in the technology of photo-production in the early 20th century introduced a new and complex relation to visual arts: these new objects could be carried around, touched with bare hands, written on, thrown away, and precisely this sense of mobility is what makes the emotional connection to photos so profound.

A different form of movement contained in a photograph was explored by Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser. In the opening pages of his book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1984), Flusser writes:

Images are significant surfaces. In most cases, they signify something “out there” and are meant to render that thing imaginable for us, by attracting it, by reducing its four dimensions of space-plus-time to the two dimensions of the plane [...] The significance — the meaning — of images rests on their surfaces. It may be seized in a glance. However, in this case the meaning seized is superficial. If we want to give meaning any depth, we have to permit our glance to travel over the surface, and thus to reconstruct abstracted dimensions.¹³

Later in this essay, Flusser describes images as “surfaces on which the eye circulates, to return again and again to the point of departure. [...] Any philosophy of photography must take into account the unhistorical, post historical character of the phenomenon it has for a subject.¹⁴” In other words, an image is a flat-surfaced object that is visually scanned, with the potentiality to be scanned over and over again, each view constructing a new and evolving meaning. These multiple views of a still object introduce duration to photography, yet this duration isn’t in sync with the historical/linear time as we know it. This is a distortion of the perceived sense of time similar to that described by Barthes and Sebald.

¹³ Vilém Flusser, *Toward a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (Reaktion, 1983), 16.

¹⁴ Flusser, 55-56.

Photographs are therefore still objects that contain within them the potential for movement, which affects the relationship between the object and its viewer. Once a photograph exists beyond Benjamin's aura, not only can it be carried about, but it can be viewed over and over again, accumulating meaning over time. Even more so, a photograph can potentially change the perception of time and therefore reality itself.

According to Sontag:

The mainstream photographic activity has shown that a Surrealist manipulation or theatricalization of the real is unnecessary, if not actually redundant. Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by the natural vision. [...] What could be more surreal than an object which virtually produces itself with a minimum of effort?¹⁵

While Berger adds:

What makes photography a strange invention — with unforeseeable consequences — is that its primary raw materials are light and time. [...] A photograph arrests the flow of time in which the event photographed once existed. All photographs are of the past, yet in them an instant of the past is arrested so that, unlike a lived past, it can never lead to the present. Every photograph presents to us with two messages: a message concerning the event photographed and another concerning a shock of discontinuity.¹⁶

Thus, a photograph is a unique phenomenon that creates a divergence in time and space—it freezes times by creating an exact copy of it. But by being an exact copy of reality, it reveals itself to being anything but reality itself, its realistic illusion is broken by a simple touch. It is this unique position that elicits an emotional response—holding an image is holding a fragment of time that exists beyond time itself.

I have thus far described different forms of interactions that could be related to my great-grandmother's interaction with her collection. This understanding shifts my view from *Studium* to

¹⁵ Sontag, 52.

¹⁶ Berger, 62.



Figure 3: The time outside the Pankow Archive in Prenzlauer-berg

Film photography, Berlin, 2018

Punctum as I no longer study these photos in search for information but rather in search of a connection with my great-grandmother. The added element of contextuality affects my viewing and it is this effect that I'll be exploring in these works. Yet, as I am holding my great-grandmother's collection of photographs I realize that I am holding something that she herself held. My study isn't limited to vision, nor space—I realize that I've been searching for my great-grandmother through touch.

A photograph, any photograph, even if presented on a screen, is a physical object. As mentioned, it is a still object that contains and arrests the fluidity of time, but a physical object nonetheless. Again I ask: how does a photograph perform as a physical object? To address this I turn to trying to unfold the phrase “physical object”, more specifically—what are the methods of consuming or understanding a photograph and the relation it evokes between vision and touch?

At this point in the thesis, I would like to draw attention to the fact that English is not my first language. This may not be relevant to the writing of the thesis itself, but it may serve as an explanation to the way I perceive the relationship between touch and knowledge and subsequently between touch and language. In my first language, the verb “to understand” is לתפוס, which means “to hold” or “to grab.” In Hebrew, when we've understood something we say that we have caught

or grabbed the idea; when something is beyond our understanding, we say that it can not be grabbed. In my language, ideas and knowledges are grounded and physical, collectible, destructible. As it will be described in the next section, my goal while rummaging through Berlin's archives was to find proof of my great-grandmother's existence, but I was simultaneously searching for something deeper—a connection between us. I wanted to “touch” her in order to understand her.

Canadian philosopher Erin Manning discusses the profound power of touch in her text *Engenderings: Gender, Politics, Individuation* (2006). From Manning's point of view, touch is not an end of a process but is a process of itself. This is what Manning describes as *Engendering*, which she links to the term “to generate” that is, to produce, to make, to potentialize. Touch is a form of engendering in the sense that it is constantly in motion—touching is a movement never finalized. One of the unique characteristics of touch—the one that makes it so satisfying and dangerous—is that it is constantly fleeting, like the present. Manning writes: “If we want a touch to last, we must touch again. In this sense, touch is always already a process of reaching towards.¹⁷” In the same way, touching a photograph is a physical reaching towards its past.

Touching not only draws attention to space and time but actively manipulates both. Understanding this movement is the true essence of resistance, a body in motion, on every level (cellular, physical, spatial, etc...) is a body in resistance, defying the limitations of language. Defining a body by gender or by name is setting its limits; by the process of engendering we are able to resist these processes and see beyond them¹⁸. In other words, holding a photograph is an act of “reaching towards” the past; but as opposed to vision, touch has no memory, and thus each touching of a photograph is a new one, charged with the sensation of discovery. By touching my great-

¹⁷ Erin Manning, “Engenderings: Gender, Politics, Individuation,” in *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 85

¹⁸ Manning, 87

grandmother's collection I am reaching out to touch her, over and over again, defying the limitations of history and space.

During my time in Berlin, I explored the linearity of time and movements in space by visiting the city my great-grandmother grew up in. I was moving through space she inhabited and even reached the doorstep of her building, though I never dared enter. By doing so, I was disrupting history, or in the words of Manning, I was “timing space and spacing time,”¹⁹ sharing moments and movements with my great-grandmother that defy what we understand as the terminability of history. Through this wandering, this dancing in the streets, I was defying the finality of her death.

I have so far discussed methods of consuming a photograph according to different theories and philosophies: from view to movement, to movement in vision and finally to movement in touch. I have described a photograph as a unique phenomenon that has the potential to elicit a myriad of connections that not only affected my great-grandmother but also my connection to her through these seemingly ephemeral “cheap to produce, easy to carry about” objects. In this sense, I have described photography as a form of research — a means to acquire knowledge. These types of knowledges are varied and unique in their own way, from “formal” or objective understanding (Barthes' *Studium*), to highly subjective interpretations that depend on individual understanding of time, sensation, history and space. In the next section, I will attempt to describe how these concepts affected my own means of research.

¹⁹ Ibid., 101

PHOTOGRAPHY AS RESEARCH

In the previous section, I have identified two forms of research, one that is similar to Barthes' *Studium*, i.e the scanning of photographs in search for information (in other words, a scanning from side to side), and the personal interaction with photography through touch (a deep dive into the photograph from top to bottom). These are not oppositional processes, as they often overlap and share characteristics such as spatial and temporal movements. However these definitions are applicable when describing my methods of research.

My field research in Berlin could be seen as fitting into Barthes' understanding of the "studium". During this time, I've conducted mostly formal research: in archives, interviews and other forms of documentation. Although tactility plays a role in each of these forms of research, its importance will become clearer as I describe my practical research in the studio in the following section.

1. Archival Research

My initial intentions, prior to my arrival in Berlin, were strictly studious. I was hoping to collect as much historical information as possible, not only on my great-grandmother but on the people she admired as well. In order to do so, I planned to visit some of Berlin's numerous archives. My plan was to visit two archives in particular: the Performing Arts Archives at the *Akademie der Künste* to learn more about the people appearing in my great-grandmother's collection of postcards; and the archive of *The Jewish Museum* in Berlin to learn specifically about her and her family.

During my time in the city, I consulted friend and historian Hans Boers who directed me to the *Pankow Archive*, where I found an extensive collection documenting the history of the Prenzlauer-Berg district where my great-grandmother resided. In my first visit to the *Pankow Archive*, I was in search of historical proof that my great-grandmother existed in the city. I wanted to learn more

about her and her family, and I was hoping to find her or her parents' names in school records, real-estate documents or wedding contracts.



Figure 4: The back of one of Sophie Rosenbaum's postcards, on which her name, district and address could be seen, as well as the date (December, 1917) and the stamp indicating the location from which the postcard was sent back.

Sophie Rosenbaum wrote by hand her address on every postcard (*see figure 4*), yet her writing was indecipherable, not only to me but to native German speakers as well (the German writing system has changed tremendously over the course of the century). Nonetheless, the native German speakers I consulted with all agreed that there is a high chance that the address scribbled on the postcards is *19-20 Kastanienallee*, and this is the assumption I was looking to prove through archival research. This turned out to be a relatively easy task. In my second visit to the *Pankow Archive*, I found a phonebook from 1917 in which, under the address of *19-20 Kastanienallee*, the Rosenbaum family was listed (*see figure 5*). Since this is a unique method of numbering a building, a simple stroll through the street of *Kastanienallee* provided further proof that this was, in fact, her address (*see figure 6*).

Another intention in the archival research was to deepen my understanding of the postcards and their contents. With the assistance of Hans Boers and his partner Eli Kitzerow, I created an Excel spreadsheet with every possible scrap of information we could find on the postcards: where they were printed, where they were sent from, who was the photographer, who is depicted on them and what their relationship with was with my great-grandmother, among other details.

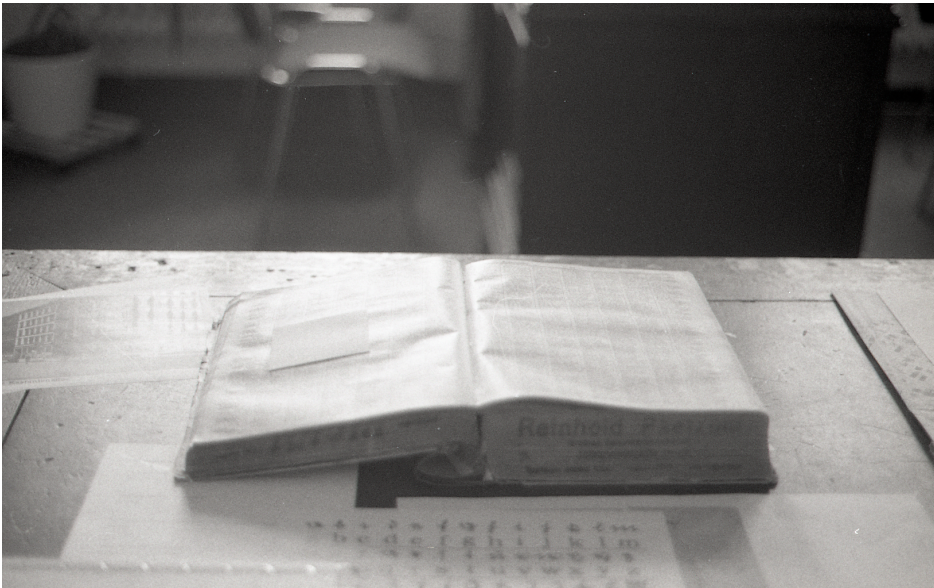


Figure 5: The 1917 phonebook in which the family name Rosenbaum is listed under "Kastanienallee 19-20"

Film photography, Berlin, 2018



Figure 6: The sign on top of the 19-20 building in Kastanienallee, in where my great-grandmother resided

Film photography, Berlin, 2018

Most of the postcards had autographs on them, but a few had a written dedication as well. As with Sophie Rosenbaum's address, these dedications were written in a writing system that was indecipherable. Luckily, the archivist in the *Pankow Archive* was fluent in this writing style and provided me with a greater understanding of my great-grandmother and her life. I spent many hours in this archive, looking through historical books and images. As my German is very rudimentary, I couldn't read the texts, and what I did manage to read or to translate later ended up being irrelevant to my research. I did, however, enjoy the physical aspect of this research; touching historical

materials, specifically photographs, it was thrilling and further deepened my understanding of the type of sensation a photograph can elicit.

My visits to the two other archives proved less successful. *The Jewish Museum*, although fascinating and emotional, could not provide me with any specific information on my great-grandmother as she left Germany before the Holocaust. My visit to the archive in the *Akademie der Künste* was equally frustrating. Due to language barriers, I did not come to my scheduled appointment with a specific list of items to research. In addition, the archive's strict policies regarding electronics (I was not allowed to enter the archive with a phone or camera and thus was unable to document any of the material) prevented me from doing the deep research I was planning.

2. Nomadic Inquiries

“There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera,”²⁰ Sontag writes in the opening pages of *On Photography*, and a few pages later goes on to compare photographers to hunters, writing that, “The hunters have Hasselblads instead of Winchesters; instead of looking through a telescopic sight to aim a rifle, they look through a viewfinder to frame a picture.”²¹ Flusser further explores this idea by adding that:

Stalking their way through these objects, avoiding the intention concealed within them, photographers wish to liberate themselves from their cultural condition and to snap their prey unconditionally. For this reason, the photographic tracks through the jungle of Western culture take a different route from those through the jungle of Japan or those through an underdeveloped country.²²

In a text titled *Sophie Calle's Art of Following and Seduction* (2005), Dr. Janet Hand, of the Department of Visual Arts in the University of London, analyses Calle's work in relation to the act of following. Hand describes Calle's photographs as equating “‘chasing’ and ‘clicking’ a camera as

²⁰ Sontag, 5.

²¹ Ibid., 15.

²² Flusser, 33.

an instantaneous form of critique” and continues with “this mode of critique objectifies its subjective expressions without accountability. Moreover, it is bound to ‘encounters’ that are usually the antagonistic kind.”²³ Calle’s works challenge the concept of physical distance as she injects herself into her case-study. Her research subject is never detached from her, nor is her research method. According to Dr. Hand, Calle’s work “departs from familiar ideas of literalism and circular tautology in conceptual art, from the indexical orthodoxy of documentary photography, and from pedestrianism understood as a flight from regulated patterns of social containment or prohibition.”²⁴

Inspired by Calle, I engaged in an alternative research practice that relied heavily on my movement through Berlin’s streets, my own form of hunting. As a result of this movement, I encountered many people, some were strangers and some were acquaintances. Through my conversations with these people, I gained knowledge not only of my subjects of research (my great-grandmother and her collection) but also of the city, and of myself in the city. The topics of memory and history would come up organically in conversation, it seemed that almost everyone I talked to had an interesting perspective on the topics in question. I found that my research was not limited to the archival space, and thus recollected conversations I had in my journal, later adjusting and adapting them into short stories.

Apart from conversations that emerged organically, I also attempted to initiate conversations with people in the street of Kastanienallee. Armed with a camera, I approached a handful of strangers and questioned them about their sense of home and then took their portrait. I was hoping to find people who lived on that street and could tell me more about it, but as it was spring and the height of the tourist season and I only ran into people who were from outside Berlin and Germany. Perhaps my questions were too vague, or the situation too intimidating, but the answers I received were mostly dull and curt, and I couldn’t find a way to incorporate this into my writing.

²³ Janet Hand, “Sophie Calle’s Art of Following and Seduction,” *Cultural Geographies* 12, no. 4 (October 1, 2005): 464.

²⁴ Hand, 469

I did, however, have one encounter that provided some insight and inspiration. An Ice-cream vendor from a corner-store on Kastanienallee shared with me an anecdote from the street's recent history. According to him, the street of Kastanienallee was known in the 1920s and '30s as "Casting-Ally"; a big production studio was located nearby and unemployed actors would walk the street, hoping to be cast in a movie or run into Greta Garbo, who roamed this street as well. I couldn't find any evidence of this tale—though it may be commemorated in a mural located outside the local S-Bahn station (*see figure 7*)—but it inspired my writing and informed my perception of Sophie Rosenbaum. I pictured her being a teenager on the cusp of adulthood and obsessed with cinema, music and movie stars, roaming the street of "Casting-Ally," hoping to be spotted or to encounter one of her favourite performers. While she collected images of movies stars, I made her into the star of her own story.



Figure 7: A mural dedicated to Greta Garbo outside of Eberswalder Straße U-bahn station in Prenzlauer-Berg.

Film photography, Berlin, 2018

3. Photographic Research

As discussed in previous sections, photography is a form of research with different relationships to the reality its documenting. I knew I wanted the the photographs I was using to form a relationship with the texts I was writing. Since the processes of writing and documenting were happening simultaneously, and since my time in Berlin was limited, I decided to document as much as possible in order to have a wide pool of selection to chose from later. I do not see digital and analogue

photography as being in opposition—there are digital and analogue processes involved in both techniques—nonetheless, I chose to focus on film photography for this project as I see it having a better relationship to the concepts of temporality and touch discussed in the theory section. I arrived in Berlin with three film cameras, as well as ten rolls of film. In addition to the film cameras, I had my phone and its camera with me at all times. In Berlin, I spent some time in a local photography lab to develop four rolls of film, and the remaining six were developed back at OCAD University’s photography lab.

In hindsight, I was using film photography as another way of connecting with my great-grandmother. As there was no possible way of me capturing her portrait, I was searching for alternative ways to capture her image, to connect with her through the fabrication of common memories. By documenting my walks through Berlin’s streets, and specifically the building she lived in, I was simultaneously forming my own memories and sharing some of hers. In other words, I was using photography to research the life of my great-grandmother, to form a connection with her. In a way, I was “touching” her and her existence, and through this lineage, through this roundabout way, touching myself. Returning to what was described earlier—touching something is linked, at least in my mind, to understanding it—I am using this research practice to reach towards an understanding while acknowledging that it is an impossible task.

Manning writes that, “to reach toward skin through touch is to reach toward that which is in a continued state of (dis)integration and (dis)appearance. Skin gives us a clue to the untouchability of the body.”²⁵ It is clear to me that I was reaching towards my great-grandmother in a similar fashion. I would never be able to speak, see nor touch my great-grandmother in the common linear sense—by this timeline she has lived her life and died before I was even born. But if I look at her life, not as a straight line but as multiple ones, I can see our connections existing beyond space and time.

²⁵ Manning, 85

As I was standing in front of her doorstep, staring at the doorknobs she may have touched herself, I raised my camera and snapped a photo. I felt the mechanical movement of the camera's inside. A billion particles of light were set on a roll of film that will interact with chemicals that will generate an image—a duplication of reality. Looking at these closed doors, printed as a photograph in my hands, I feel everything but stillness.

TOUCH AS PRACTICE

In order to translate my research into practice, I've decided to create a physical object that will serve as a visual interpretation of my research questions regarding the physicality of the photograph. This eventually manifested in the form of a booklet containing original texts and photos that are inspired by the different aspects of tactility in photography. In this section, I describe how the two building blocks of this booklet—texts and photographs—function within the larger context of graphic design, and how the unique interactions between these elements provide a greater understanding of the physicality of photography.

1. Writing and Design Processes

Graphic design is—at its base—a means to visually communicate information. One of the common methods of doing so is by designing textual information. As a designer, I've been drawn to typography, the art of visually arranging textual information on a page, wall or screen. For this particular project, it was not enough to simply design a text; it was crucial to ensure that I am using a text that is specific and appropriate to my research questions. In order to do so, I challenged myself to write the text I'll be designing.

My goal was to design an object that could form a relationship with the reader similar to the relationship both my great-grandmother and myself had to her collection of postcards. I wanted the text to address elements in photography taken directly from my research, such as repetition and reproduction, as well as the manipulation of time, history and memory through the prism of touch and contact. I decided to explore and reinterpret the structure of the standard booklet and subsequently the concept of linearity within graphic design.

Therefore, I've written two texts that appear side-by-side, each addressing these concepts from different angles (*See figure 8*). In the following sub-sections, I'll provide a detailed explanation of

the writing and designing process of each text. For the sake of clarity, I'll be referring to the text presented in the larger, sans-serif font written on the left side of the spread as *Sophie Rosenbaum's Moment* (1918) (See: Appendix A) and to the second text, written in a serif font on the right side as *The Berlin Vignettes* (2018) (See: Appendix B). I will also be referring to the combination of both texts under the title *I Will Never be as Close to You as I was Tonight / Ich werde dir nie so nah sein wie heute Nacht*.

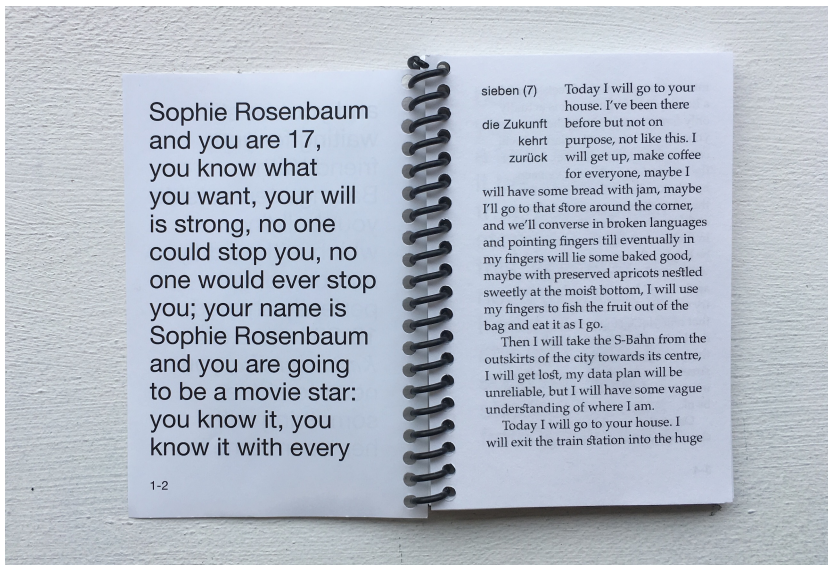


Figure 8: A spread from the booklet titled "I will Never be as close to You as I was Tonight / Ich werde dir nie so nah sein wie heute Nacht"

The full texts can be found in the appendices of this thesis.

a) Sophie Rosenbaum's Moment (1918)

In the concluding paragraphs of his essay, Benjamin addresses the common conception by which film is—and has always been—considered to be a method of distracting the masses, preventing the masses from a deeper understanding of reality. He writes:

Reception in distraction—the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception—finds in film its true training ground. Film, by virtue of its shock effects, is predisposed to this form of reception. It makes cult value recede into the background, not only because it encourages an evaluating attitude in the audience but also because, at the movies, the evaluating attitude requires no attention. The audience is an examiner, but a distracted one.²⁶

²⁶ Benjamin, 269

Benjamin thus addresses the unique features of photography and film that grant us an “insight into the necessities governing our lives,” such as close-ups that reveal hidden details and slow-motion that extends movement.²⁷ As previously discussed, this new relationship with the visual world alters the distance between object and viewer, allowing the creation of a critical distance that visual art was lacking. In other words, for Benjamin, the direct outcome of the disappearance of the aura is the emergence of critical examination. This is similar to the concept of the *defamiliarization effect* (*Verfremdungseffekt*), associated with German theatre practitioner and Benjamin’s contemporary, Bertolt Brecht.²⁸ According to Brecht, defamiliarization is the “stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them.”²⁹

Sophie Rosenbaum’s Moment depicts an elongated present moment that is being narrated in the second person by the imagined character of my great-grandmother, Sophie Rosenbaum. Writing in the second person was a technique chosen for its ability to evoke a sense of Brechtian defamiliarization. I wanted to draw attention to the act of reading and subsequently to the act of touching and holding a physical object. By altering the common relationship between the reader and the narrator, I am echoing Benjamin’s understanding of the aura, thus creating a critical distance based on unfamiliarity. In addition, writing in the second person provides me the opportunity of raising questions regarding the narrator of this essay. There is no one correct answer to this question and thus this text simultaneously performs as a discussion between myself and Sophie Rosenbaum, a monologue Sophie is having with herself and a dialogue between her and the reader. These multiple forms of relationships serve as the backbone of the entire text and of the work as a whole.

²⁷ Ibid., 265-266.

²⁸ Brecht was a close friend and intellectual partner of Benjamin, leading to Benjamin writing a collection of essays dedicated to Brecht’s work titled “Understanding Brecht”.

²⁹ Peter Brooker, “Key Words in Brecht’s Theory and Practice of Theatre,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, ed. P. Thomson & G. Sacks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 191.

The writing process of this essay was similarly experimental and required many iterations. I wanted to push these questions as far as possible without making the text nonsensical. Some of my decisions and conclusions of this process were a direct outcome of the design process that took place simultaneously. My goal was to design a non-conventional and disorienting experience in which different narratives appear simultaneously, thus altering the perception of time, similar to the effects of viewing or holding a photo. In order to do so, I had to create two visual experiences that worked cohesively and harmoniously.

The booklet's measurements are five over thirteen centimetres (roughly 3"×5"), the exact size of the postcards, and for *Sophie Rosenbaum's Moment*, I chose a large, sans-serif font (Helvetica) that contrasted the booklet's small size. By doing so, I was able to create a visual tension that I found to be both challenging and engaging. Any attempt to create a graphic distinction between paragraphs (by line-breaks or indents) proved to be futile as the page size limited these options. As a result of the visual need and literary experimentation, I resolved to fit the entire text into one paragraph. This created an intensified stream of consciousness experience that I didn't know was lacking. I therefore re-edited the text to amplify this tension in words. Still not satisfied, I challenged myself to edit the text so it would fit into one long sentence.

When I came to the realization that I was writing a text with no distinct ending—signified by a period at the end of the sentence—it occurred to me that the final push the text needed was for it to have no beginning either. The text, therefore, became circular and repetitive; the sentence on the last page merges with that on the first page, and could therefore potentially be read endlessly. Yet again I returned to the text and edited it according to these new understandings. As I was editing the text to work in a circular motion, I needed to find a way for the design to allow a circular reading. This led to the decision to bind the booklet in a spiral binding. This decision solved some conceptual

problems as well as technical issues: I was no longer restricted to the limitations of conventional saddle-stitch binding.

Both texts were written simultaneously during my stay in Berlin and edited simultaneously; every change made to the design of one text immediately affected the other, both in design and in content. It was crucial that both texts performed seamlessly side by side, supporting and reflecting each other. Though *The Berlin Vignettes* are not as experimental as their counterpart, they still came with their own set of challenges.

b) The Berlin Vignettes (2018)

In his novel, *Invitation of a Memory* (1951) Russian writer Vladimir Nabokov retells—through memories and photographs—his personal and familial history in pre-war Russia. In the first chapter of this book, Nabokov addresses the unique relationship between photography and history, similar to that described by Roland Barthes. Nabokov writes:

I know, however, of a young choronophobic who experienced something like panic when looking for the first time at homemade movies that had been taken a few weeks before his birth. He saw a world that was practically unchanged—the same house, the same people—and then realized that he did not exist there at all and that nobody mourned his absence.³⁰

Nabokov then continues to explore the unique relationships between time, history and memory, while using photography to seemingly authenticate his recollections and as a metaphor for memory itself. The eighth chapter in this book is dedicated to the numerous tutors Nabokov and his brother had while growing up; Nabokov opens with the statement that he is “going to show a few slides,” a statement that seems at first unclear but reveals itself later in the chapter. “In choosing our tutors,” Nabokov continues, “my father seems to have a hit upon the ingenious idea of engaging each time a representative of another class or race, so as to expose us to all the winds that swept over the

³⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Vintage Books (A division of Random House, INC.), 1947), 19

Russian Empire [...] in looking back I find the pattern curiously clear, and the image of those tutors appear within memory's luminous disc as so many magic-lantern projections."³¹ For Nabokov, the act of remembering is similar to viewing slides on magic-lantern projections. Similarly, while writing *The Berlin Vignettes*, I was imagining the act of leafing through a photographic album, in which each photograph is associated with a different memory.

The themes from *Sophie Rosenbaum's Moment* are similarly presented in this text. As mentioned, my goal was to write two texts that appear side by side, and thus reflect and contrast with each other, similar to the reflections that are part of photography. Nonetheless, *The Berlin Vignettes*, in many ways, is more classically structured than *Sophie Rosenbaum's Moment*. The text is broken down into seven distinct chapters (or vignettes/images), each describing one event or interaction with a clear beginning and a conclusion. Consequently, the text is written in the more familiar first person and is set in a font commonly associated with printed books (Palatino).

As both the texts and the structure of the booklet are fairly complex, I consciously decided to use extremely legible fonts. I wanted the reader to possess all the tools to decipher the layers of the texts presented. I did, however, engage with experimental typography for the booklet's title and in other elements presented in the accommodating exhibition, which is described in greater detail later in this section.

Inspired by the writings of Nabokov and Sebald, I used my knowledge of German and Hebrew to insert words and phrases in foreign languages throughout the text and specifically in the titles of the vignettes, that are all in German. By doing so, I was able to create a sense of disorientation, similar to the one present in *Sophie Rosenbaum's Moment*. In earlier iterations of this work, I provided the translation of each title on the back cover of the booklet, but since I decided to eliminate the beginning and end of the *Sophie Rosenbaum's Moment* text, the need for front and back covers was

³¹ Nabokov, 153-154

eliminated as well. I, therefore, decided to create a gap between the text its translation, allowing a reader who isn't fluent in the German, Hebrew (and later, Japanese) to enjoy the forging typography and the visual word play. This is also reflective of my own experience in Berlin, surrounded by a language that was foreign enough for me to feel distant from, and familiar enough for me to find the humour and playfulness within it.

The translations for each chapter appear as follows:

7. *Die Zukunft kehrt zurück* - The Future Returns

Vorwort - Forward

1. *Da ist Wasser zwischen uns* - There is Water Between Us

2. *Die Geister unseres Zeitgeists* - The Ghosts of Our Time

3. *Die Leidenschaften der Vergangenheit sind nicht vergessen* - The Passions of the Past are not Forgotten

4. *Wahrheit, Wahrhaftigkeit, Aufrichtigkeit* - Truth, Truthfulness, Sincerity

5. *Ich weiß nicht* - I Don't Know

6. *Unser Weg ist weg* - Our Way is Lost

Beyond linguistic manipulation, each title reflects a different manipulation of time and resonates with the disorienting experience of time, history and memory that is at the root of every still photo. The seventh chapter, appearing at the beginning of the text, was a late addition and a direct consequence of the decision to create a circular motion in *Sophie Rosenbaum's Moment*. The narrative's flow follows a circular motion as well, moving from stability and instability and finally back to stability. The text begins in the future, which is linked in content to the last chapter, emanating the movement in *Sophie Rosenbaum's Moment*.

The second chapter, technically the first and officially the forward (a "non-chapter"), is a description of the common incident of being a victim of theft. As the text progresses, the directness

and simplicity begin to unravel as the narrator seems to lose connection with time and reality. This unravelling is most evident in the second vignette (“*Die Geister unseres Zeitgeists*”) in which the narrator breaks both grammatical standards (by repeating the grammatically incorrect phrase: “I am was so afraid of words,” which is also reflected in the title of the exhibition) and the “fourth wall” (by addressing the reader directly). This spiraling towards the nonsensical continues, as we are lost with the narrator in a dungeon of words, appearing in more and more languages (English, German, Japanese and Hebrew). We finally emerge in the last chapter back to seemingly stable ground, thus completing the circular route.

The numbering system of the pages operates in a similar fashion. In earlier stages of the design process, I had a different numbering system for each text, but as my work and my research progressed, so did the realization that this method does not reflect the core questions of this research. The idea of creating a unique numbering system appearing only on the corner of left page was actually inspired by the building my great-grandmother lived in. As mentioned before and in the written text itself, this building is signified by two numbers with a hyphen between them: 19-20. It is a curious case in which one building performs as two, creating de-facto a liminal zone of in-betweeness. This arbitrary fact provided the inspiration to the numbering the pages. To emphasize the connection between the building number and the page number, I placed the image of my great-grandmother’s building signage on the 19-20 spread.

As with *Sophie Rosenbaum’s Moment*, this text continues the exploration into fluidity and motion in design as well. I chose to have the text flow from one chapter to another by using an “in text” titling method, in which the title of every chapter is visually incorporated into the the text. It is also worth mentioning that the titles are written in the same font as *Sophie Rosenbaum’s Moment*, and are identical in style to that of the page numbers appearing at the bottom left of each spread.

Core themes of defamiliarization and repetition appear throughout both of the texts, in the narration and on every level of the design, from fonts, languages, page numbering, and binding method. This defamiliarization is aimed to draw the reader's attention to the act of reading and thus to the act of holding and touching. Both the writing and the design of the object were inspired by my investigation of the unique features of a photograph as a material object. The subject of materiality is further explored when positioning the two texts side by side under one title.

c) I Will Never be as Close to You as I was Tonight

In both of texts appearing in the booklet, language is seen as being material, which reflects my understanding of the relation between language and matter. Words in the world I created are feared; they are a materialization of thought that creates a sense of de-materializing, of becoming air. Ironically, in order to face this fear, words must be used, over and over again. Both characters in these texts are burdened by things they have said and both immediately feel like air once they voice their thoughts and desires, as if the materialization of words caused the characters to lose their sense of being. This understanding is further explored in the title of the exhibition—"I am so afraid of words"—which will be addressed later in this thesis.

Beyond being a research tool, touch to me is an affirmation of existence, and both characters in these texts experience the effects of a lack of touch. Young Sophie Rosenbaum feels like a ghost of herself, a fictional character in a story (which of course, to a certain extent she is). She struggles with the idea that her emotions are taking over and longs for her friend to show up and affirm her physical existence by words and by touch. Similarly, the narrator in *The Berlin Vignettes* is terrified of words and yet she is only words. This character will not be touched throughout her narrative. She replaces physical contact with excess musing on language and touch. Language here replaces materiality and therefore is filled with material descriptions. Objects and feelings in this narrative are often described as being fluid, frozen or air-like.

The booklet's title "I Will Never be as Close to You As I was Tonight" (and in German: "Ich werde dir nie so nah sein wie heute Nacht"), creates a diversion in the perception of time, as well as a sense of disorientation regarding the subject and object of the statement. For the printing of the title, I've used silk-screening process, one of the more tactile methods of print existing today. In order to draw attention to this materiality, I decided to touch the ink before it dries and thus to create a new and unique form of typography.

The process of silk-screening is designed to create multiple copies. This echoes the process of reproducing photographs and therefore possesses similar characteristics to those described by Benjamin in previous chapters. By repeating the title of the booklet over and over again, each time in a slightly different manner (due to the different position of my fingers) I was able to create an eerie sense of urgency and distress that ties together graphic design, photography, and prose. By touching the text before the ink dries I am manifesting both my strongest will throughout the thesis (to touch) and the destructive outcome of this passion. As mentioned by Barthes and by Nabokov, the act of remembering includes the act of destruction, a violence that is present in touch and photography as well. This research into experimental typography continued in other elements that were displayed alongside the booklet in the final exhibition of the work.

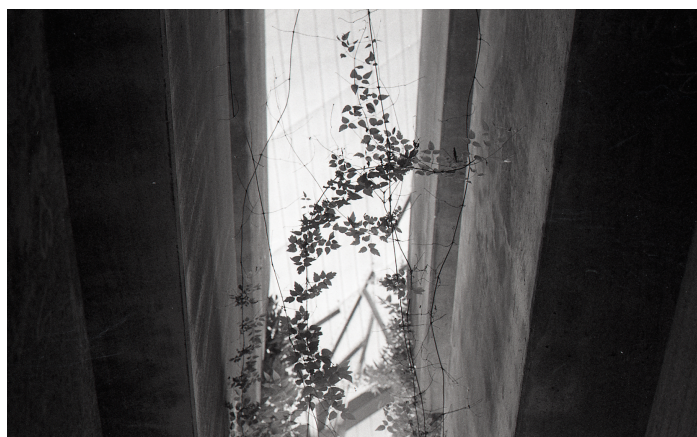
2. Photography and Design Process

Up until now, I've discussed the means through which photography has informed my research methods and inspired my writing and designing processes, yet one of my biggest challenges was to understand how exactly photography as a research method could inspire photography as an art form. In other words, I was struggling to answer the questions of what exactly am I taking photographs of and how to present these photographs in a method that will reflect my research in an interesting, non-literal way? While reading Sontag's *On Photography* I was introduced to another

unique feature of photography—nostalgia—this helped me in addressing some of the challenges I was facing. According to Sontag:

It is a nostalgic time right now, and photographs actively promote nostalgia. Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos. [...] All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate 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 melt³².

During my time in Berlin, I was searching for ways to “participate in another person’s mortality,” in other words, to take part in the life of my great-grandmother, though she has long been deceased. I was therefore in search of photographic images that could metonymically capture an essence that related both to the life of Sophie Rosenbaum and to the themes of the booklet. The use of black and white film photography actively channels Sontag’s “elegiac art,” and many of the photographs I’ve taken created a sense of non-specific longing and nostalgia (*see figures 9-11*). Though I felt that these photographs could create an interesting relationship with the text, there were three photographs that seemed to be uniquely fitting.



Figures 9-11: Some of the photos taken in Berlin and considered to be featured in the final work.

Film photography, Berlin, 2018

These photographs depict three views of the building on Kastanienallee 19-20 (see figures 12-14).

Beyond being nostalgic, these photographs reflect and authenticate the text, specifically *Sophie Rosenbaum's Moment*, a text that is purely fictional. The building on Kastanienallee 19-20 is the physical meeting point between myself and my great-grandmother. As both texts refer to this address specifically and on multiple occasions, this address could also be seen as the physical point of interaction between the two texts.



Figures 12-14: Three views of the building on Kastanienallee 19-20.

Film photography, Berlin, 2018



Buildings—and this one in particular—function similar to photos: both are physical monuments signifying the lives of the people who interacted with them. By using photographs of the building, I am drawing attention to my search for connection with my past while addressing the fact that this connection could never happen in actuality, only through photography, prose, and design. In other words, the building as a physical location is another form of inspecting materiality in photography. As mentioned, a photograph possesses the power of solidifying time and space and transforming it into a stable object that can be held and touched. I challenged myself to find a way to ‘visualize’

this touch without damaging its unique characteristics. In order to do so, I have utilized three different printing methods, unique in style and appearance: risography, digital printing and silk-screening. Each method produces a visually distinct product that invokes a different tactile reaction from the reader.

The Berlin Vignettes are printed using a Risograph printer³³ on Mohawk VIA Vellum White paper. *Sophie Rosenbaum's Moment*, on the other hand, is printed using a Xerox digital printer on glossy paper, producing a deeper shade of black that is shiny and reflective. The Risograph ink is oil-based and produces a powder that stains the reader's fingers and the rest of the pages in the booklet, creating the notion as if the paper is "touching back".

The position of the photographs in the booklet further problematizes the concept of touch and photography. I decided to use the physical distance between each page, created by the method of binding, to explore the means in which the photographs "touch" themselves and the text. None of the photographs in the booklet appear in their "complete" state but rather are sliced in half and separated. Only by positioning two or more copies of the booklet side by side are the images seen in their entirety. By creating a dialogue between copies of an inanimate object, I was able to further manipulate the physical limitations of materiality. This physical research expanded into the presentation of the booklet in the gallery space.

To conclude, in this section and sub-sections I have described the means in which my research is reflected in my practice. By creating a physical object that refers to its own materiality, I was able to further my understanding of touch in design and photography, as well as communicate these conclusions to the reader in a complex and multi-layered fashion. In the following section, I will describe the process of designing the space in which the booklet was displayed.

³³ Risography is a printing method combining the efficiency of photocopying and the precision of silk-screening.

3. Exhibition Design

As a graphic designer specializing mostly in printed matter, displaying booklets in a gallery setting has always been a personal challenge to me. My intention was to design a space that will serve as an extension of the booklet as well as to create the ideal environment in which the work should be consumed. Through feedback received from my cohort and advisors, I've concluded that the works presented in the space should not duplicate the contents of the booklet, but further broaden and deepen its themes. The works that were chosen to appear alongside the booklet are thematically categorized by materiality and subject matter (*See figure 15*) and are as follows:

1. Large Format Architectural Photography:

- *Today I will go to your house*, 2019, inkjet print, archival paper, 42"×27"
- רק בכי שמבעבע פה כבר שבועיים, מתחת לכל מה שרגיל ונורמלי ונעים, זפת שחורה והרסנית המפעפעת מארובות, כשמגיעים למוזיאון למשל, 2019, inkjet print, archival paper³⁴, 24"×36"

2. Large Format Xerox Prints

- *I was hanging in mid air looking from the outside, as this vague ghost of a self becomes nothing but the air leaving the warmth of the lungs forming sounds* (2019), Xerox print, bond paper, 35"×50"
- *I am a victim of my passions, I am a victim of my passions, I am a victim of my passions* (2019), Xerox print, bond paper, 35"×50"

3. Audio-Visual Installations

- *Hold me? I am falling apart* (2019), video installation
- *Shape this shapeless being from a puddle of repeating words and spiriling images back to a real person with a name and history echoed in reality* 2019, sound installation

4. Booklets and Explorations into Experimental Typography

- *It was just last night but it feels like ages ago when those words left your throat and made you feel like you were floating, but also becoming air* (2019), ink and fingers on paper, 3"×5"

³⁴ Translation: Just tears bubbling here for two weeks now, under everything that's alright and normal and nice, black destructive tar bubbling from the eye-sockets in irregular times, like right now outside this museum.

- *Ich werde dir nie so nah sein wie heute Nacht* (2019), booklet, various methods, spiral bound, 3”*5”

Two images, printed on high quality photographic paper and presented in two different display modes form the first category. The images in this category are linked to those appearing in the booklet, reflecting their materiality, subject matter and graphic presentation. A photo of the doorknobs of the building on Kastanienallee 19-20 was cut in half and displayed bare, hanging from the wall using clips, while another photo, in which a view of the building from its entrance can be seen, was framed and left leaning against the wall.



Figure 15: An overall view of the exhibition as it was reinstalled at OCAD University's Graduate Gallery. The booklets are displayed on the right, the postcards on the left while two of the large format photographs are at the centre of this image.

Digital photography,
Toronto, 2019



Figure 16: Two large format images exploring different printing and display methods within a gallery setting.

Digital photography,
Toronto, 2019

The second category consists of two different images of a hand holding a postcard bearing the phrase “I am so afraid of words.” In order to create a material contrast between the two first categories, these images were printed using low-quality bond paper and cheap Xerox printers. Through this

method and concept, I was able to explore notions of touch while simultaneously reflecting the different papers used in the booklet (*See figure 16*).

The audio-visual installation—displayed in the back room of Ignite Gallery—included an audio recording of the two texts read out loud by different people and played simultaneously. In addition, video footage of fingers covered in typographic stains was screened in the backroom as well.

Fifty identical copies of the booklet, alongside twelve unique hand-made postcards form the fourth and final category. The booklets were displayed on a bespoke shelving system that was inspired by the appearance of photographs on a roll of film. This display mode draws attention to the fact that the images in the booklet could only be seen in their complete form when two booklet are set next to each other. Across from the booklets, twelve postcards were displayed on a similar shelving system. On these postcards the title of the exhibition, “I am so afraid of words,” was silk-screened and disrupted using touch (*See figure 17*).

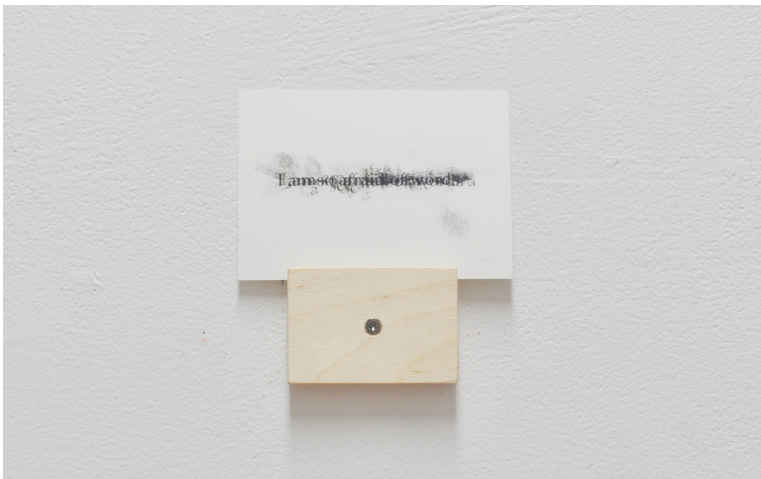


Figure 17: A 3”x5” postcard on which the phrase “I am so afraid of words” was printed and then obscured using touch.

Digital photography,
Toronto, 2019

All elements displayed in the exhibition relate to each other in an intricate fashion: the text from the booklet is read out loud in an audio installation, while the technique used on the title of the booklet is repeated on the postcards and documented in video. Additionally, the postcards exist in the gallery space both in their original form and as in their photographic representation. By creating a complex network of connections, I was able to establish a fragmented spatial experience in which

the entire exhibition could be seen as forming one cohesive artwork. In addition, by producing works that constantly reflect each other, I was able to refer to the apparatus of the camera (in which mirrors play a vital part) as well as to create a sense of disorientation and defamiliarization.

The exhibition's title— consisting of a phrase repeated several times throughout the booklet— relates to the contents of the exhibition in several fashions. The fear of words, as discussed previously, stems from their material characteristics. Words—spoken out loud or written down— materialize thoughts into reality, making them seem more intimidating. By using the word “words” in the title, I am drawing attention not only to their physicality but to their importance to the work itself. As mentioned, my intention was to translate my research of photography into the mediums of graphic design and prose, mediums in which words play a significant role. Ironically, the only way to face the fear of words is by materialising words into physical reality. These material thoughts could then be carried, held, touched and subsequently, faced.

CONCLUSIONS

Focusing is a reoccurring process in photography. By adjusting the camera's lens, an indistinguishable blur becomes a recognizable shape. Similarly, a unique interaction between light particles, paper, and chemicals allow crisp images to emerge from what was once a blank, white paper. This thesis operates in a similar manner. I began my research with two questions: how does a photograph perform as a physical object? And: how is that physicality affecting the way we communicate? Throughout this thesis, I used different techniques and approaches to focus on possible answers.

In my theoretical research, I articulated different methods of consuming a photograph, centring on vision (mostly passive) and touch (mostly active), and moving between layers of physicality.

Through this theoretical review, I established photography to be a multi-layered research device, through which complex interpretations of reality are captured and analyzed. I've concluded that photography is a fragment of time that can be held, touched, cherished, moved and disposed.

Therefore, I have argued that holding a photograph is a form of reaching across space and time using vision and touch. I then employed these new understanding of photography and conducted research using the tools of graphic design, photography, writing, and production. These explorations concluded in a printed object and an accommodating exhibition set to evoke defamiliarization and disorientation that I have linked to photography.

Through this process, I have been seeking a better understanding of the present through diving into the past, and in order to do so, I have mixed texts and devices from different eras, allowing my modern understanding to affect their past intentions. In other words, film photography, Risograph printing, Barthes, Benjamin, Sontag, and Berger are all loaded with a new meaning today, different

from that they once had. In his essay *Socialism: A Life Cycle* (2007), dedicated to modern graphic design, French philosopher Régis Debray further articulates that:

The greatest modernizers inaugurate their career with a backward leap, and a renaissance proceeds through a return to the past, a recycling, and hence a revolution. (...) Behind the 're' of reformation, republic or revolution, there is a hand flicking through the pages of a book, from the end back to the beginning. Whereas the finger that pushes a button, fast-forwarding a tape or disc, will never pose a danger to the establishment.³⁵

For me, this research was an opportunity not only to gain further knowledge of my own personal history but a gateway to understanding the present by dismantling the past. This is not a historical research through a contemporary view, nor is it claiming to be historically accurate or truthful. Instead, this is an investigation of modern photographic practices through the mediums of graphic design, prose and spatial gallery design.

Current photographic practices are taking over increasingly larger aspects of our daily lives, in news reports, social media, in technology and in law enforcement. Simultaneously, the authenticity of these photographic images is constantly being questioned and undermined through the use of advanced technological manipulations. In my work, I aim to activate two seemingly opposite reactions to reality: one affirming reality through physical touch, and the other inviting the use of imagination and interpretation of reality through multiple narratives and imagined histories.

Nonetheless, these two approaches serve one purpose: undermining the authenticity of the photograph, encouraging critical thought and shattering the notion of a one, correct, absolute truth.

In retrospect, I realize now that throughout my work I have been actively searching for new means of interaction. In the work presented here, I was forming relationships with my great-grandmother, my immediate social circle, my viewers, my readers and my community by designing objects and spaces that encourage touch and connection. Looking forward, I will continue to explore these interactions by expanding my scope of research. In the future, I would like to consult queer and

³⁵ Régis Debray, "Socialism, a Life Cycle," *New Left Review*, no. 46 (August 2007). 9

feminist theoreticians such as Sarah Ahmed and José Esteban Muñoz in order to further explore concepts of defamiliarization and disorientation in graphic design. Additionally, I would like to continue my exploration of images and texts by venturing into the world of video art.

I dedicated this thesis to my great-grandmother Sophie, and though I may not ever know her, I know now of her, and I will continue to carry her image with me in explorations and adventures to come.

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All photos were taken by Tal Sofia Braniss.

APPENDIX A - SOPHIE ROSENBAUM'S MOMENT

and you are still waiting for your friend Käthe Baumgarten outside your building, which is the oddly numbered, yet perfectly shaped, 19-20 house on *Kastanienallee*; you need to share something with her, your name is Sophie Rosenbaum and you are 17, you know what you want, your will is strong, no one could stop you, no one would ever stop you; your name is Sophie Rosenbaum and you are going to be a movie star: you know it, you know it with every bone in your body, you know this as a fact, you know it because it is true; nothing can stop you, not even this, whatever, you need to speak to Käthe, as soon as she gets here, as soon her heavy shadow appears from the corner of *Kastanienallee* and *Oderbergerstraße*, marching towards you, with that all knowing face, she'll know, (although, you've been friends forever yet now you must admit that you feel that you are drifting apart), she might get married soon, but you'll never get married, you are going to be a movie star, movie stars are too busy to get married, everyone says you are acting like one, anyway, you'll probably move to *America*, when the war ends; they say that soon actors would be able to talk on a screen—you hate this idea, you love the music, limitations lead to creation and creation is art, there's no point of hearing words—you can hear people talk all the time anyways, too much and too often (and mostly regrettable words), and then there's the old piano player who sits in the *Lichblick-Kino* down the road (his faded face only lights up when he plays), you can fix this, you are going to star in a movie and then you'll be a producer, or a director, because no one can tell you what to do, and women can be directors now and like your father always says: "Sophia" (he is the only one who is allowed to call you that) "you never do as you're told," (but you can see that he is proud); no one is going to stop you, ever; some day they will see that your strong will, your dedication and devotion, are what make you you, and they won't shy away from it, like they do now, and you won't feel so overwhelmed by your own will anymore (maybe when you're older you'll introduce yourself as Sophia at parties, Sophie is a little girl's name, Sophia Rosenbaum is a

good name for a star); Käthe is still late, as always but it's June and the days are so long right now you feel they would never end, the brisk June air feels tight around you, you probably shouldn't have said anything, that much is now frighteningly clear, words often fail you, but you have no fear of them, because you are a star, and stars say the truth, people like you say what they feel, they will not be bound by what society expects from them; you probably shouldn't have had that one extra drink at the *Pratergarten* before going to the theatre, you shouldn't have left the house at all, maybe you should've listened to Käthe, she hates that Biergarten, she hates everything that's fun and noisy and full of life, she warned you not to go there, she told you you'll get in trouble, but stars love trouble, and that is exactly what happened, when you talked to him outside the *Deutsches Theatre*, the one on *Schumannstraße*, how could you have missed him, his powerful aura, there he was standing on the corner smoking, and you approached cautiously and handed him a postcard—the one you just bought—holding it delicately by the edges, he said that he appreciates your support, (you were swallowed by his voice), you smiled and he looked at you (in this you are sure, that he saw you, that is a fact you are not doubting), but then, your mouth went dry and your voice cracked as you confessed; it was just last night but it feels like ages ago when those words left your throat and made you feel like you were floating, but also becoming air; everything was spinning, he was disappearing too, (were your eyes open?) he said that it is ok, just take care of yourself and don't worry, just try to have fun and don't worry; he held your hand and in that moment all you were those fingers in his big hand, all the words were gone, then he placed the postcard (now with his fresh signature) into your hands, trembling, echoing the blood pulsing at your fingertips, (when did you place the postcard under your pillow, kissing it good night, running your finger on the edges of his stern beard, memorising the shape of his pressed lips, tracing the scribble forming his name?) his image looks nothing like you remember him, you live that moment again and again, all night, until this exact moment, still waiting to see Käthe walking down this street, to be embraced by her and to hear her smart remarks to ground you down, shape this shapeless being from a puddle of

repeating words and spiralling images back to a real person with a name and history echoed in reality, Sophie, no more fictional characters or confused histories, just you, and now you are here, your name is Sophie Rosenbaum

APPENDIX B: THE BERLIN VIGNETTESsieben (7) die Zukunft kehrt zurück

Today I will go to your house. I've been there before but not on purpose, not like this. I will get up, make coffee for everyone, maybe I will have some bread with jam, maybe I'll go to that store around the corner, and we'll converse in broken languages and pointing fingers till eventually in my fingers will lie some baked good, maybe with preserved apricots nestled sweetly at the moist bottom, I will use my fingers to fish the fruit out of the bag and eat it as I go. Then I will take the S-Bahn from the outskirts of the city towards its centre, I will get lost, my data plan will be unreliable, but I will have some vague understanding of where I am.

Today I will go to your house. I will exit the train station into the huge intersection where six streets meet, in a horrid star-shape (but it is actually only five streets, none of them are yours, I will soon understand). I will cross one way then another, look for the name of your street. I've been here before but then we came from the other direction and ended here, at this train station, last time it was in the dead of night and now it'll be bright afternoon. I will squint. I will cross the intersection again and again. I will look at my phone and try to be the blue dot in it, where is that blue dot facing? What is the blue dot looking for? Finally, I will realize that your street emerges from another street, just a few steps southwest of the intersection. All will be good and I'll be ok.

On my left would be the highest street number and on my right the lowest, so as I will go forward I will go back. I will cross two blocks to get to you. Last time I was here you came as a surprise but now I will know what to expect. I will walk up to your doors, will I dare open them or will I stare at the doorknobs? Who lives here and who will enter or exit the building, oddly numbered 19-20? Could I put my foot in the door the way they do in movies or will I be still? Will I walk in? Or will I sit across the street and look up until the sun goes down?

Vorwort

On the last day, my camera is stolen. It is an object, I tell myself, an object to produce objects, collectible, precious objects, yes, but a replaceable object nonetheless.

Of course it was stolen on the last day, things are always gone on the last day, how else would you know that it is over? As this was happening my perception was already tinted, I was viewing the present through the spectacles of the past. I was walking through the city's centre and found myself in front of the university, classic-like statues were situated on its top. Glaring. It was as if I was walking through a greater moment, a moment of immense and profound knowledge, a history, a history from the time history had meaning. This is the place where all streets converge, past, present and future, I am walking through all of the times.

In the shadows of my memory another city emerges, it is Florence, but ten years ago and I am just discovering the excitement of photography, as photography itself was self-discovering, advancing technologically, analogically to digitally, in small steps that'll soon become huge strides. I point, I click, and there it was, the past in front of me, clear, immediate and gratifying. I remember myself scrolling through photos from the recent past, as if studying them, memorizing them, creating visual, photographic images burnt to my retina. The fountains, the orchards, the bridges, stoic statues, feeling weakness in my knees while looking at the *Battistero di San Giovanni* that was built to make me feel weak in the knees.

The camera was stolen on that day in *Florence*, but those photographic memories are still there. The orange lights emerging from the dark blue of the old city, the feeling of the cold stone under my belly as I hunted for better angles in the *Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore*. Images that reemerged, again and again, today still.

Then again, there were three cities I was walking through today, I've been here, exactly here, years ago, and never again since. It was only for a day or two, and though I do now know for a fact that all my idle walks are intertwined and that the city moves as I move within it, I can say, with a certain amount of assurance, that on my first visit I walked exactly here. Images of street corners and roadsigns flicker through my memory.

Did I have a camera back then? How can I explain this vivid imagery? Were these memories ever stored other than here? (I am pointing towards the temple of your head).

As I walk across the city's *Natural History Museum* towards the *Central Station* I know exactly that the shadows of the massive entrance will feel cool against my skin and that the language will feel unfamiliar in my mouth. I was so afraid of words.

eins (1) Da ist Wasser zwischen uns

A. joins his thumbs and index fingers to create a circle. He says: this is the ring that forms the city, and in each corner, there is a cross, *ein Kreuz*: *Ostkreuz* to the east, *Südkreuz* in the south, *Westkreuz* in the west and *Gesundbrunnen*, the health fountain, up north. That's where I met you. There, he says pointing down at the big shopping centre below us. We're on a hill, outside *Flakturm Humboldthain*, a defunct bunker, they tried destroying it but that's what bunkers do, survive. This was supposed to be a health resort.

We're making our way down the hill and through the neighbourhood of Wedding, A. says he wants to show me something, a little river, no, not a river, just a small stream of water. I'm standing on a bridge over running waters and I laugh.

Down in the water, I spot a LIDL-bike and a shopping cart, gathering seaweed and trash. *Ja*, he says, all the people living in Neukölln think they're living in this super cool city, oh, it's so dirty and rustic, it's the real thing.

I am drowning in the running murky waters of my thoughts as I say that there are no real things. I say: I left my home because I was fed up with it, but I think I'm just fed up with myself. He says there is something in this city that makes people project themselves onto it, it is what you want it to be.

We share a bed that night, we lay facing up, making sure no physical boundaries are disrupted. I fight every bone in my body urging me to roll on to my side and whisper: hold me? I am falling apart.

eins (1) Da ist Wasser zwischen uns

The act of photography is an extended present, I point my camera and he looks at me, time stops, we pose, the camera snaps, we go back to time. He never looks the way I remember him. This is late May.

On June eleventh, seventeen days after that day she and I are sitting on the doorstep, in the exact same location as that day, I'm even wearing that same dress, I am covered by this recent past like in a scabies-ridden bedcover, I am struggling to suppress it, surpass it, don't let it show, don't let anything show, swallow it down, smoke it out, don't fall down that shaft again, a victim of my passions, half-truths, I was so weak then, I was hanging in mid-air looking from the outside as this vague ghost of a self becomes nothing but the air leaving the warmth of the lungs, forming sounds. June's evening air is tightening, cold and brisk, around my thighs, exposed by that dress and my emotions, shattered and composed like a cracked screen. I sit stiff, I can't move, I can't move. I am was so afraid. I am was so afraid of words.

Sitting here now again, seventeen days later, air is air-tight in my lungs, I won't say anything, all the words will be right, I shall not repeat to her what I told him, I shall not repeat, it was wrong then as it is now. It was true, but only at that exact moment then. I am fluid, flexible, I lose control, I lose

sight. It is ok, you say, again and again, it is ok, just take care and don't worry. Just try to have fun and don't worry, you say.

But is this too complicated for you, attentive listener? I am building barricades to keep you away.

drei (3) Die Leidenschaften der Vergangenheit sind nicht vergessen

The past is a passive passing of the present towards the past. It requires no energy, it is practically impossible to stop. But here the past, *Die Vergangenheit*, shares its root with the verb to forget, *vergessen*. Moving forward requires the active obliteration of the past. The past is constantly being forgotten.

I learn this from S., an immigrant who is living here now. Back home he is a theatre actor and performer who received minor notoriety for appearing in a popular reality TV show, presently here he flows in anonymity, forgotten.

He asks: do you remember that time you came over and took a photo of my tattoo? This was ten years ago.

His tattoo is a translation of a poem by 18th century Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa, it reads:

露の世は露の世ながらさりながら*

Here *Geschichte* is both history and story. The past as we retell it in the future, it is feeble, liquid, unreliable, fitting to our needs.

E. now adds that in *Geschichte* one could find the word *Schichte*, meaning levels or layers, a pile. I ask, do you know why תל-אביב is called תל-אביב? (Nodding no) Tel means an archaeological pile, and Aviv means spring, this is an interaction between old and new, a poetic reinterpretation of Theodor Herzl's quintessential book marrying his views of the past and future, *Altneuland*, the old-new country.

S. adds another layer, a story of the word for passion - *Leidenschaften*, constructed of the words *Schaft* (shaft) and *Leiden* (suffering). Passion here is a path to suffering, inseparable from pain. To desire is to hurt, to lose a part of you. I spend the rest of the evening repeating to him, I am a victim of my passions, I am a victim of my passions, I am a victim of my passions.

* This dewdrop world —

Is a dewdrop world,

And yet, and yet...

vier (4) Wahrheit, Wahrhaftigkeit, Aufrichtigkeit

We are both partly clothed and we're surrounded by dancing naked bodies, someone is on a swing behind us over a swimming pool full of people. At my feet, a man in a sheer bodysuit has one hand in my pocket and the other hand is smoking a cigarette.

K., sitting next to me, is describing his imagined future in which VR experiences would tap into our thoughts and desires via electrodes, projecting them into vision. A terrifying reality created by the mind. I say, that'll be a terrifying reality created by the mind.

But I also tell him about the godly creation. You see, I say, the verb *ברא* in Hebrew specifically applies to God. We can't associate that action with any other, so we settle for understanding it as speech. It's like magic. We say, God said let there be light, and then there was light. But it's not speech as we know it, God, in this story, has no mouth, voice nor tongue, it's a celestial being, beyond our human scope of understanding. Yet in our physical realm, words create reality, I am so afraid of words.

North Americans use language as tool of oppression. In order to reverse oppression, we delete words from our reality, replacing offensive words with coded letters. N-words, R-words, F-words.

There's a known, unwritten set of rules deciding who can and who absolutely cannot use these words, and whoever chooses to break these rules does it knowingly, aware of repercussions.

In Hebrew, words are too few and too precious to obliterate. Even more so, it is the highest honour to be censored, worthy only of God. God's name cannot be spoken or written outside of holy scriptures. His name is feared, never written.

S., (the former reality star and a man in a sheer bodysuit sprawled now at my feet) chimes in and says that in the world of reality, when they want to be sure that a conversation stays off the air, off record, they add God's literal name throughout the unholy discussions, coded. Coded languages are terrifying. It is where we hide our secrets.

fünf (5) Ich weiß nicht

אני* לא יודעת איכן למקם את כל העצב הזה המבעבע, עמוק מלמטה, הכל בסדר, הכל ממש בסדר, רק שבא לי לבכות, על הבושה והאשמה, על הנחיתות והכשלון, רק בכי שמבעבע פה כבר שבועיים, מתחת לכל מה שרגיל ונורמלי ונעים, זפת שחורה והרסנית המפעפעת מאורכות העיניים ברגעים לא צפויים, כשמגיעים למוזיאון למשל. אני לא יודעת, היא לא יודעת, הוא לא יודע.

* Would you trust me as your translator? Would you trust me to lead your way? I speak many languages but not the one you need. I say: I don't know where to place all this sadness bubbling within, deep down, everything's ok, everything's really ok, it's just that I feel like crying, for the humiliation and regret, just tears bubbling here for two weeks now, under everything that's alright and normal and nice, black destructive tar bubbling from the eye-sockets in irregular times, like right now outside this museum. I don't know, she doesn't know, he doesn't know.

sechs (6) Unser Weg ist weg

On the train back from the forest, he'll ask me whether I've ever been to his favourite coffee shop, the one with the books? He takes all his visitors there but can't remember if he was ever there with me. I say no, we hadn't, and turn my gaze outwards, concealing my disappointment. I am one of many.

Before we leave (it's noon and the sun is in the middle of the skies, his gaze is bursting like bright frozen emerald from the deep dark shadows of his face), we talk of Sophie Rosenbaum and being lost in the forest, he was just there, he texted me a photo, remember? (It was my birthday, in this photo his bare-chested body is splayed on a rock, I look at him through the eyes of his photographer, his face foreshortened, a sharp mound of a nose emerges from a fleshy forehead, eyeless. The setting sun is casting orange and pink spells all over). I ask—who did you go with? (I ask—who took this photo?) and there is a pregnant pause before he births her name and his apology into the air. My heart is numb, I don't care, I can't care, I am not afraid of words but he looks at me as if I should be. We both fall silent. I look away, fill my lungs with cold new air and suggest we go to the forest.

And this is where we are now, on the train back from the forest, where he's asking me about this coffee shop and I say I've never been, but as we exit the station and walk under the bridge I recognise the light reflecting from the dark, murky waters beneath us, an image floats into memory, I took a photo of it, last year, and sent it to you, remember? We're in the darkness of shadows but I sense his quiet disappointed gaze. He takes a deep breath and suggests we go somewhere else. Soon all will be ok.

We walk next to *Reichsbahn bunker*, here I took his photo, his navy-blue T-shirt served as a humorous contrast to a drawing of a yellow banana sprayed on the concrete wall. In a few weeks I'll walk here again, the day my camera was stolen, the theatre is right behind me, I didn't know this

yet. In the future I'll know the walking distance between the streets she has probably walked so often, now my vision is tainted only by the past.

Actually, he says suddenly, the street Sophie Rosenbaum lived on is right here, do you want to go there instead? (Nodding yes). We turn from *Zionkirche* right to *Kastanienallee*, the numbers are growing and diminishing, and now we are here, right here.