

Reflections on a Photographic Exhibition by Alain Soldeville

All of painting, but also literature and all that goes with it, is merely a process of going round and round a black hole or a crater whose center once cannot penetrate. And those things one seizes on as subject matter, they have merely the character of pebbles at the foot of the crater – they mark out a circle which, one hopes, draws ever closer to the center.

Anselm Kiefer

Photography in both the process and the resulting images is often interpreted in terms of its temporal dimensions. Roland Barthes has said that time is the *noeme* of a photograph. But this is a paradoxical temporality. The temporality of a photograph lies in its timelessness. A photograph is said to be a « suspended moment », or a « perfect moment », a moment that was once but shall never be repeated, its singularity now frozen, as it were, as an image. Time comes to a stop in a photograph. This, together with the complementary silence of a photograph, are but two of the links between photography and death. This suspension of time and the silence of a photograph constitute for Christian Metz the essential aspects of a photograph, and links still photography to the Freudian sense of the fetish. Other approaches have added the dimension of memory to their analyses of the roles of time and death in photography. Roland Barthes late work, *Camera Lucida*, for one important example, placed questions of the temporality of photography and its links with memory and death at the heart of a vision of the photographic image. Finally, it would seem that especially the portrait photograph lends itself to these questions and concerns, for in the portrait photograph, the spectator experiences a sometimes mundane but all too often disquieting visual encounter with the face of another human being in all his/her conventionality and individuality. From the other side, from the point of view of the person photographed, a person offers him or herself to the eye of the camera lens and thereby to the gaze and desires of another, offers themselves as something to be seen, a spectacle, and in doing so, they perhaps adopt a new identity in « myself as photographed ». But is the contact between viewer and subject of a photograph ever direct and immediate as it is in life? A portrait photograph obviously cannot be *that* face - in that face of the other -- that might stand before us in a face to face encounter. A photograph is only the analogue of a human face, a way of writing it, recording it, interpreting it, seizing it for a moment by allowing the moment of its manifestation to be traced, inscribed by light and silver onto the photographic media and thereby onto human memory. Hence, when one beholds a portrait photograph, one enters a strange dimension and a strange relationship with another human being. Looking at a photograph, one sees not only the face of another, but also a moment that has passed, a moment now dead and gone; one sees a human face that also now belongs to the past, that also belongs now to silence and death. These dimensions have been well explored by Roland Barthes, in particular.

My themes in the following pages should like to enlarge on these questions of the temporality, the silence, the death, and the semiology of the portrait photographic image by pursuing the links between photography, or should I say, a certain photographic practice, and writing. My reflections in what follows were especially prompted by a stunning suite of black and white portrait photographs by Alain Soldeville, entitled, « Paroles du corps » exhibited in Paris in 2004-2005 at Musée Dapper. I wish to suggest how these photographs address the temporality, silence, and death that lie at the heart of photography.

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That photography can be seen as a kind of writing is obvious even in the name: photo - graphy, literally the « writing of light ». This would be a kind of elemental writing, the « graphism », or inscription that occurs as light strikes silver nitrate particles; this would be a writing event that occurs below the level of perception and consciousness. Charles Sanders Peirce calls this the « indexical level » of the image, that level in which the photograph is not merely similar to its referent (the « subject » of the photograph) nor structured by a social conventions, as in symbolism, but is in actual contact, connection or contiguity with the photographed. We could also call this the materiality of the image, the materiality of the signifier.

But a photograph can be considered as a writing practice at other levels, too. A photograph is more than a perception, more than a natural or purely mechanical process. A photograph is also a sign, in its most elementary sense, a photograph can be a *Niederschrift*, perhaps, a Freudian term Lacan defines as « something that presents itself not simply in terms of Prägung or of impression, but in the sense of something which makes a sign and which is of the order of writing. » (Lacan, *Le Séminaire*, Livre IV, *L'éthique de la psychanalyse*. 1959- 60, English translation 1992, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*). This semiological level of a photograph would lie in the way a photograph points to or is a transformation of the real. A photograph presents itself as an impression, but also as a « record » or « copy », a *Niederschrift*, of reality. Contrary to the aspirations of the early modernists in photography (Stieglitz), a photograph can never be a true « equivalent » of reality, merely denotative and so completely lacking in emotional or connotational levels of meaning. As writing, a photograph is a trans-cription of reality, which a photograph can document but also empty out or revamp (Warhol' s portraits, for example, of Marilyn Monroe, show Americans most prominent film star not as a person in depth but as an image as shallow and as repeated as the label on a soup

can). A person photographed is a person carried to a new level and inscribed in a different order or matrix. In this sense, photography is a transcription of the visible world, transforming that world into an image, a sign, that survives, that is present when the photographed subject itself is absent. This latter idea seems most crucial in this regard and we will be returning to it. A photograph records and survives the destruction or the falling away of a moment in time. A photograph can be all that remains when the moment itself is lost. As a consequence of being a transcription of the real, a photograph always bears within it a temporal dimension not found in the subject photographed: a photograph can only show and inscribe what once was. A photograph has no future tense, or at best, it is in the aorist tense. The time of the photograph is always a time dead and gone forever and the photograph is in this sense a kind of death. At this level, there is a temporal dimension and a link with finitude and death that is essential to writing more broadly speaking (as in post-structuralisms *écriture*).

Moreover, photography is a writing not only in the sense that both writing and photography can be expressive, but also in the sense that writing and photography share what Roland Barthes calls the same fatality, a fatality of being suspended between absence and presence, between time, memory, and forgetting. Like a word, a sign, or a *Niederschrift*, a photograph, too, is a form that wants to say something, to mean something. Yet, both word and image both seem to withdraw before the real they present. There is a paradox here: in presenting something the photographic image, like the word, or the sign, presents it as absent. Word and the image both somehow save the phenomenon and annihilate it. When the image is there, the real is not. This theme recasts much of the conventional wisdom concerning the relations between writing and images, and between images and « reality », « the real », and « the other ». It situates photography within the symbolic orders that encircle and engender the human world.

So, perhaps photography can be considered a form of writing, that is to say, as a practice of writing. And if so, would this not also entail a different way of seeing a photographic image, one that is closer to a « reading » of images than to a looking at them? In this way, a photograph presents itself as a kind of multi-layered visual text that must be read and that can be taken as a complex message having a sender, a medium of transmission, and a receiver. But, is it, as Roland Barthes has suggested, a message without a code? We shall be returning to this, but for now, it is these linkages between photography and writing practices that point out how a photographic image is inextricably bound not only to the visual and the sensuous, but also to the horizons and the limits of time, death, and memory, both cultural and individual. Would these links not also serve to establish photography's links with art? (A question recast by Walter Benjamin, who wanted to show how all art is first and essentially photography.)

Finally, it is indeed this that links the photographic practice not only with art, but also with the question of a possible ethics of photographic writing. This would be an ethic that not only takes its start from the face to face encounter with the other in and this is especially true in the case of the portrait photograph but also in that a photograph attempts somehow to capture, to sign, that Other beyond all otherness, that thing, that black hole Kiefer speaks of, that « crater whose center once cannot penetrate ». Is this not the « black hole » of death and desire? Such an ethic would essentially consist of the affirmation of the radical finitude not only of human experience itself, but also of writing. Finitude would thus be the limit always summoning desire towards ineluctable but impossible transgressions. It is this limit that marks, opens, and circumscribes the possibility of writing and human experience. This line of inquiry thus broaches on the psychological, social, and historical dimensions of the formation of the « self », or the fundamental importance of images, and of the entire symbolic order, for not only self knowledge, but also for the very formation of a self.

If this seems indeed to broach upon the psychological, then perhaps that is appropriate in view of the specific photographic practice I wish to study in the pages that follow, portrait photography, and especially the portrait photography of Alain Soldeville, from his recent exhibition entitled, « Paroles du corps » (Paris, 2004-2005, Musée Dapper). In this collection of portraits, one encounters an attempt by a photographer to mark a certain limit, to offer a multi-layered photographic-writing practice inspired no doubt by an ethical relation with the other as with the dark holes of death and desire that somehow presents themselves in these images as they withdraw into darkness and silence.

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The subject of the photographs in body modifications, dramatic portraits, nudes, of people who have had their bodies tattooed, branded, perforated, implanted, or scarred in various ways, people who have made their bodies into living works of art, people who had turned their own human skins into the surfaces for a torturous ritual of inscriptions and writings. One man has the words « Art Kor » written across his belly. (Indeed, it seems a bit strange to quote a phrase written on a man's stomach.) These were portraits of human faces and bodies obviously well outside the « main stream ». The human face as « other », we are tempted to say, as strange, uncanny, both attractive and repulsive. We shall be talking a closer look at some of these images shortly. The photographs immediately fill the eye of the beholder with a kind of visceral shock and violence that subsides only to be replaced by questions that communicate a certain dark curiosity: « who are these people ? » and « why did they do these things to their bodies? » These were also Alain Soldeville's questions and, he says, they are the very questions that prompted him to take these photographs over a long three-year period.

Alain's series has been exhibited in Paris, France, at the Musée Dapper, (September 2004 to July 2005), not only as art, but as contributions to an ethnological study of tattooing and scarification of the skin as practiced in both traditional, non-European societies as well as in contemporary Europe. The exhibition and its catalog were entitled, *Signes du corps*. One of Alain Soldeville's photographs appeared on the cover of the museum catalog.

It was this powerful shock effect of the photographs that interested me. I was wondering if that shock effect had to do with the raw and powerful way these photographs connected with life and with the human face in all its striking individuality, here so powerfully « re-written », or whether it had more to do with their art, the starkly artistic black and white style affected in these photographs. I thought of how much contemporary art depends on the shock effect for its success. In a world increasingly flooded with and defined by images, the power of any individual image is greatly tamed, domesticated and reduced. An audience of spectators and consumers of images, long ago jaded with the idea that they've « seen everything », needs to have its attention occasionally jarred as though by electric shock before they will turn and take notice of anything, let alone a portrait photograph. But I wondered if one could look beyond these initial reactions, the initial shock one might feel upon seeing these images for the first time, and reflect not only on the deeper questions they pose for the « art scene » today, but also on the deeper affect they can have on the spectator and on their cultural context more generally. What leaps forth in these images to so fill my eyes? I sensed a deeper wound in these images, a deeper pathos, something Other at the edge of the visible itself.

But power and violence of these photographs is not to be found in any scene they present. The photos are posed, static; pervaded by stillness, nothing really happens in them except for the pose. The violence of these images is not the violent activities and incidents one sees documented, for example, in press photographs, photos of grisly murders, deaths, tortures and the like. In the press photograph, the subject, the signified of the photograph is violence. It is as though the photograph says, here, look at this horror. But there is no violence that is the being of such a purely documentary photograph.

Alain Soldeville's photographs, on the other hand, are not *about* violence; violence is not their signified. Alain's concern is not to document these people in the same way the ethnologist documents ritual tattooing in Thailand, for example. Rather, the photographs themselves are violent; their violence is in the way these photographs literally strip their subjects naked; theirs is a controlled, calculated, cool kind violence exercised in the dark privacy of the photographic studio and in the distance and objectivity these photographs maintain with regards to her subjects. It is also a violence that leaps from the gap opened and maintained between the static beauty and composure of the people in the images and the graphically painful things they have been done to their own bodies. One woman calmly poses, her arms held up so that the naked and tender skin of her torso, now literally stitched with a series of long needles, can be contemplated by the camera-viewer. Such an image somehow stabs the very eyes of the viewer. But, again, the subjects of these photographs are all serenely composed; they have nothing to hide; they have obviously enjoyed having these things done to their bodies. « How could they bear it », one might ask. « Why did they do it ? » « What hidden desires motivated them to mark their skin in these permanent ways? » All questions of the outsider, the viewer, the voyeur, perhaps, but questions that are important for the way they lead us to a deeper reflection on these photographs, to a deeper level of affect, a deeper pathos of the images.

As if to further explore such questions, Alain Soldeville requested that the subjects of the photographs write statements, personal reflections on how they felt about their bodies and their body modifications, and what provoked, prompted, or inspired them to undergo such modifications. The subjects of the photographs thus also became authors. Text and image thus perform what one could call a « double exposure » of the subject. What came out of this was a series of autobiographical statements, texts, meditations, and confessions. These writings constitute a poetic, written extension of the photographs. They are not mere appendages or parasites of the photographs; they are not intended as secondary supplements to them. They neither explain them nor document them. Far from satisfying our curiosity about the identities and personalities of the subjects photographed, these accompanying statements only deepen and intensify a feeling of uncertainty and unease that embraces the spectator/reader of these images. So, although these photographs could well find their place in the tradition of portrait photography, (there are apparent quotations of Man Ray, for example), the real subject of this exhibition lies elsewhere: not in the images taken by themselves, but in their complex relation to this series of written statements that accompany each image: poetic, confessional intimate statements written by the very persons who are the subjects of the photographs. "Why am I doing these things to my body", asks one such statement that accompanies the portrait-photograph of a woman with a row of needles inserted through her skin. "It is because of Hitler", she writes. "My education overwhelmed me with sexual taboos and the fear of my own body. Later I had to exorcise that fear by doing body modifications".

Alain Soldeville strongly insists that the interrelationship between the visual images and these written statements is the true subject of his exhibition. Photograph and writing stand side-by-side in a striking inter-textuality. One could conceptualize them as two levels of writing in the exhibition: the first is that of the *photo-graph* itself, the second, that of the *auto-bio-graph*. Hence, Alain Soldeville insisted that the photographs must be exhibited alongside these texts; text and photographic image should be seen and read as standing side by side, comprising a lateral syntax without vertical hierarchy: side-by-side, they are equally

shocking, equally attractive and horrifying, equally compelling and repulsive, equally legible and illegible. So, where a photograph conventionally can only *show* its referent and cannot say what it shows, Alain Soldeville's photographic portraits have a strange voice. But this is not a « voice » that lurks behind the written word and that would be the ultimate presence or referent for the written word. Rather, this is a « voice » that comes alive from across the writing and that is constituted by writing. These photographs speak to us through these accompanying texts that are the written voices of the faces one sees in the photographs. Thus, these photographs seem to overcome or to break the « silence » usually said to be an essential characteristic of photographs. Silence is both maintained and interrupted by these photographs.

But, in fact, there seems to be not just two but at least three levels of writing in the exhibition: First, there is the writing on the human flesh, the very physical and personal act of tattooing or of modifying the surfaces of the body. Secondly, there is the intimate level of the autobiographical writing in and through which the persons in the photographs reflect upon their sessions and experiences, where they explain, meditate upon, and confess all that might have motivated them to undergo such body modifications. Finally, there is the photographic writing practice, the writing of light, the photo-graph itself that creates and presents an image of these persons and their inscribed and modified bodies. Do these levels of writing from tattoo to photograph not constitute a body of art (*corps d'art* in *art kor*) and a « work of art? » And, if, as Blanchot has written, it is the essence of an image, be it tattoo or photograph, to be altogether outside, without intimacy, and yet more inaccessible and mysterious than the thought of the inner most being (quoted by Barthes, *Camera Lucida*), then there are also levels of intimacy and, to speak with Blanchot, of « extimacy », the « outside, without intimacy », in this exhibition. It is the tension and the intensity of the intimate and the « extimate » dimensions of the interrelationship between these levels of writing that that is at the heart of this exhibition.

At all three levels of writing, Alain Soldeville's exhibition both participates in and is disruptive of the stock of conventions and, codes of reading and what could be called the « spectral » gaze. It might even seem if not to put into question the symbolic order itself, to at least question the inscription of a subject in that symbolic order. Is it this transgressive activity at the limits of the visible and the legible that makes them works of art rather than documentary photographs? But as works of art, what sets itself to work in them? What is it that shows itself, presents itself and violently fills our eyes as it withdraws and conceals itself in these images? Is it not the violence, the wound of truth? The violence of a truth in which a group of people, distinguished from all others by what they have done to their bodies, attempt, whether poignantly or proudly, to show themselves for what they truly are: individualities, personalities in an age of mass society in which individuality and personality seem lost. Is this not the most fundamental way in which these portrait photographs seem so striking? And insofar as these bodies, the bodies of the persons photographed, the bodies of the subjects of the photographs as well as the photographs themselves, in so far as all bodies are works of art, do they not have an essential relation to truth, a relation which is more than being merely the representation and the image of a truth?

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Let us begin with the first level of writing: the writing on the human body. One of Alain Soldeville's subjects, a man named Lukas, has his head tattooed with Chinese calligrams, making the theme of body writing quite emphatic in his case. Because of this level of writing, Alain Soldeville's photographs were exhibited as part of an ethnographic exhibition of images showing various European and non-European instances of tattooing and body scarification. Several essays explaining the rituals and practices for this, especially in their non-European and pre-industrial contexts are part of the exhibition catalog. This would seem to situate Alain Soldeville's work at the level of sociology or even anthropology, but in truth, it goes beyond this.

Although the relation between writing and the formation of concepts, if not of philosophy and truth itself, has been much questioned and explored in the twentieth century thought, there is a much older, could we say, *use* of writing, that would seem literally to dig a little deeper: the writing on the human body in the form of tattooing, scarification, insertions, and other forms of body modification. This would be writing in its relation not to a pellucid ideality, in other words, a writing *about* the human body, in other words, but a writing *on* the human body, a writing that embraces the passion, the pleasure, the pleading density of human flesh. This would be the writing of human flesh, writing on and across human skin, across even the tenderest and most sensitive surfaces of the human body, making that body a *corps d'art*, a body of art, a body that is both sign and signified at the same time. But this would be a writing that does not inscribe so as to idealize, not a writing that universalizes, but one that touches, tantalizes, torments, and delights individually; one that scars, marks, and modifies a particular body, without conceptualizing it. It is this kind of « writing » and it is particular human bodies that have endured and have been delighted by the physical pain and physical beauty of body tattooing and scarifications that would seem to be the subjects of these black and white photographs. One senses that somehow these photographs pursue and approach something that offers itself to be seen as it withdraws and retreats from our gaze. Behind the faces that gaze back at the spectator in these stunning black and images and in the texts that accompany them, there seems a greater darkness that looms at the edge of the visible, approached and distanced by these detours of writing and photography, desired, but never

attained. There is both, then, an intimacy in these portrait photographs and an « extimacy » to invent a word (Lacan's *Lextimite*, « external intimacy », in Žižek's translation of the term), a centripetal movement toward the outside, toward an indefinable otherness, a « beyond-of-the-signified » which these photographs approach but cannot penetrate. To revert again to the quotation from Anselm Kiefer, we shall ask, how do these black and white photographs « go round and round a black-hole or a crater whose center one cannot penetrate? » It is here in this strange movement and in these disturbing relationships that one will find the *corps d'art*.

"Bright blade, sharp and terrifying", writes one of Alain Soldeville's subjects, a man whose naked, pierced and tattooed body sits in full frontal nudity in one of the portrait photographs from the series. « The fragile and sensitive surface of the skin is kissed by its bevel. "The needle is crossing over the intimacy of the flesh, screaming his messages of pain. A wave of heat is rolling all over the pain, the pleasure and the fear". Another, Clement, writes of his beautifully scarred, studded, and tattooed body, "all my modifications are thought and done in a concern for coherence with my body. I consider this as a medium of art, a work of art". Stéphane: "Tattoo art gives me the possibility to be the architect of my own body's rebirth. The pleasure of the spiritual control of pain, the buzzing of the needles, the smell of the disinfectant, the friendship with the tattoo artist, the irreversible act of tattooing give me intense sensations".

However essential this level of writing may be to this exhibition, as far as the photograph is concerned, it is precisely this level of the actual cutting, pricking, and staining of the human skin that is not and cannot be present in Alain Soldeville's photographs. In a sense, this is the blind spot of his photographs, that around which they are organized, their core, the hard core of trauma and « jouissance » that yet can never appear within their frame. Outside the frame, beyond the frame, this moment of inscription can never be transcribed into a play of light and shadow and can never be registered by any lens for it is pure physical pain and delight.

But there is more that is outside the frame here: the whole world of the tattoo parlor, the world of needles, rituals, and sessions, all this that does not appear in the image. Outside or beyond the frame of the photographic image, it is still somehow present but only as a suggestion, a shadow, an implied context. Its presence is supplied by the spectators background knowledge, or even his/her fantasies about the actual situation and the process of tattooing and body scarification. This constitutes a level of culture in the photographs, the "studium", in Barthes terms. Indeed, in the early stages of taking these photographs, Alain Soldeville said that he frequented and photographed this world. But the crucial moment, the moment of searing pain, the moment of inscription can be neither seen nor heard, a monstrous, « ob-scene » pain, a cut that cannot appear in any image, even though it would be what Barthes calls the very « punctum » of the image, that point or element in a photographic image that pricks my sight (*Camera Lucida*). We might say that for Alain Soldeville's images, the "punctum" is present only as the shadow, trace, or scar of itself, for in these images, the « punctum » is outside the frame of the photograph. The intolerable to see moment of pain, the meeting of needles on human flesh, is here literally an « ob-scene » punctum.

This moment, so delicious to some of those portrayed in these photographs, is also necessarily prior to the time, the moment of the photograph. At best, the photograph records the results of the initial ordeal, which are here « frozen » in time, as it were, frozen in the amber of light, film, and photographic papers. Here, the photographic owl of Minerva « takes wing at dusk ». These are portraits of the finished works, and the scars and marks on the bodies are not to be seen as torture victims, but reborn from the ashes of conventionalism and anonymity as singular works of « body art » (*art kor*), works locked in finitude, works that will die with the body that bears them. For now, even the genital piercings and implants, which must have been horribly painful to attach to the human body, here appear to have acquired a somewhat organic aura about them, so healed their pain and so integrated they have become to the bodies that bear them. This initial level of writing, the cutting and marking of signs or images on the human body, is thus an unimaginable interpenetrative union of the organic and the metallic, of tissue, image, and metal, of body and « spirit ». According to its bearer, the tattooed phrase, « art kor », is to be understood in this sense.

Now, the second level of writing, the autobiographical statement adds an important voice, as was said, to the photographs. It also contributes a narrative, rhetorical and temporal density to the photographs. The suspended moment of the images is here, in these accompanying writings, opened up, pulled out, telescoped more deeply into the past. Indeed, the photographer Alain Soldeville himself has added a text narrating his initial experiences of this shocking subject matter. He was in India some twenty years ago and witnessed Hindus mortifying their bodies in rituals of fire-walking, piercing with needles and spears, or hanging themselves from trees by attaching hooks in their own skins, or even attaching pendulous weights to their genitals, and so on. All would seem attempts to emulate a divine, Shivaite asceticism, and a form of detachment from and reduction of the body. Back in Europe, he began frequenting tattoo parlors and photographed the sessions. He notes how a fashion, no doubt generated from photographic images in magazines and movies or music videos has stimulated interest in body modifications. He also notes the « special physical sensations » often appreciated by many among the practitioners. But he also notes how the tattoos and scarifications were « signs of provocation » in that the modifications - unlike an erring - inane here permanent modifications. These tattoos transform « bodies into works of art ».

But the writings perform another crucial task in Alain Soldeville's view: Due to the « hardness » of these images, the writings, he says, help create a sense of distance. Where the photographs present a direct and intimate contact with a human face or with the entirety of a human body - however tattooed or scarred it

may be- the writings tend to help introduce an element of distance, as if the images by themselves would be too raw, too direct, too immediate. The writings help by answering the questions pressing against the lips of every viewer of these images: Who are these people? Why did they do these things to their bodies? The writings seem to take the viewer behind the images to the personalities manifest in the faces we see in them, thereby contributing to the psychological depths of Alain Soldeville's photographs.

In this way, the writings contribute levels of confession, avowal, memory, and signature to the photographs. Forbidden pleasures, only suggested by the images themselves, are here fully confessed, indeed celebrated in many of the personal statements that accompany the photographs: One of the subjects, a woman named Georgia, writes, "I had my first piercing when I was seventeen. I also shaved my head. It was so nice. I tried later putting needles in my body. It was pure trance, better than having sex". This is my body, they write, which has been broken by the pain and grief of families, society, and memory, broken by history, by Hitler, but now « modified », born again, created anew. Now it rises phoenix-like from the ashes of conformity and anonymity into a new life of individuality and singularity, a weapon of resistance to all that would silence and destroy that pain, that grief, that memory, a work of art. Emma speaks in her text of "a desire to have a body that must be mine".

Through body modifications alegible her body becomes, readable to herself; she makes her body a body manuscript and in the process, becomes herself, becomes what she is. In another text, a woman named Lza writes of a childhood memory of hospitals and surgical processes she suffered as a little girl. An ugly scar resulted that later seems to have inspired a desire to alter her body herself by inflicting new, more beautiful scars on her body, as those these supplements would somehow distance and negate the ugliness left by medical surgery. Such memories add a temporal depth that goes beyond that already inscribed in the portraits themselves. Others court the opinions of the viewers in their writings, as though confessing to a need to provoke others and to thereby be noticed by them: I have to assume being different and assume the questioning look of other people on my body. Mailli writes, "My modifications are a fight against the mediocrity of our lives, options added to the machine". Such avowals amount to a declaration of war in a society dominated by images. Such writings point out how people are defined by appearances. More generally, such writings pose the question of who we are in our roles as members of families, societies, and histories. Who is the « I » that speaks and writes in these passages? What unavowable dimensions do these writings both approach and distance? Do the writings not play this double role of both naming and distancing the desires, passions, memories, and traumas that seem to have compelled these people to so radically modify their bodies ?

The third level of writing, that of the photographic image itself, has several dimensions. First, there is the elemental level of the action of light on photo-sensitive films and papers, which makes of every photograph an analogue or an « index », (Peirce), of the visible. One might think of this as a denotative level of the image. The image points to a thing or a human face as something to be seen. At this level photographic image is a mode of contact with the visible; the visible inscribes itself onto the photographic film and paper. Thus, a photographic image, in Bhartesian terms, is a « message without a code », for a photograph does not first translate the visible into another code, a digital code, for example, but is the actual writing of light on photo-sensitive film and paper. But a photograph is thus not merely a representation of the real. Rather, it is the way in which light reflected from an object or from a human face or a human body was actually written on film. The face is « there » in a portrait photograph in a way it is not there in a painting. It is for this reason that these photographs literally pierce and fill a spectators eyes. They provoke a visual and visceral shock in the viewer; it is as though the images tattoo themselves onto our memory. This challenge lies in the truth of photograph, or in the relation between photography and truth. Perhaps because of this elemental, level of writing in a photographic image, many critics of photography point out how a photograph only reports what is there to be seen. This is its only truth, a purely denotative and mimetic one. A painting, on the other hand, can look beneath the surface and probe the mystery of the human face. Yet, in a photograph, the person who is the subject of the photograph is in some sense really *there*; this is the level of truth in photography. (As a test of this, consider which would be more valuable as an index of William Shakespeare: a painting of the real William Shakespeare, or a photograph?) The truth of the photographic image is a correspondence of the image and the visible. The visible is there. The truth of the image is closer to truth in the sense of *altheia*, as developed in the early writings of Martin Heidegger. In the light, in the frame of the image, existence gives itself as something to be seen. Yet, at the same time, the visible withdraws, and one sees, as was discussed above, that what is to be seen in a photograph is both there, present, and absent. There is thus both contact and distance in every photograph that adds a level of finitude and, indeed, poignancy to the photographic portrait image.

Now let us consider another level of the photographic image: its connotational level. This involves not only the way a meaning of a photograph is established but also the various elements of style in a photograph. In this respect, Roland Barthes thought of style as a supplementary message, something in addition to the analogical level of a photograph, a certain way of treating its subject matter. (*Image, Music, Text*) Here, we find a level that is inflected both aesthetically and ideologically, and that also refers to a certain culture receiving the image, a culture that accepts, that understands, or that rejects, or even ignores photographic images. Among the elements of style in a portrait photograph one would list the pose of the subject, the lighting of the face, the choices of exposure time, depth of field, the use of a studio and studio

effects as opposed to so-called « street photography », and so on. These would be what Roland Barthes calls the level of « photogenia » and aesthetics in an image (*Image, Music, Text*). Finally, there is the syntax of photographic images. This is also an important dimension to their connotational level. The syntax would be the relation between photographs, whereby several photographs would form a sequence or an exhibition. In the case of Alain Soldeville's images, one would also have to take into account the important syntactical interrelationships between the autobiographical writings and the portrait images. Their syntax would be the way they must be placed alongside one another in relations of reference and reflective tensions. What is important here is to see that a photograph, as a writing practice, essentially involves elements of style and that because of this, a photograph is always more than a mere analogue, more than just a reproduction of the visible. Rather, it is a transformation, a transcription of the visible. The visible is carried by all of these elements of the style and syntax of a photographic image to a new and different level. This makes photographic practice a writing practice (See Alessandro Carrera on Carlo Sini, « The Rise and Fall of Reality », in *Between Philosophy and Poetry*, Continuum, 2002: 32).

What are the effects of these elements of style in Alain Soldeville's portraits? First, in having chosen to make portrait photographs of body modifications, these images certainly do emphasize the individuality and personality of their subjects. As has been pointed out by Andy Grundberg, photography critic for *The New York Times*, by asserting the individuality of the person, portrait photography is the « last frontier of the genuine » and seems thereby to resist both the loss of individuality and the « deprivations of the *deja-vu* in post-modernist thinking » (*Crisis of the Real*, 1999- 2000). This would certainly be true of Alain Soldeville's images. His portrait photographs offer transcriptions of the irreducible individuality of his subjects. His subjects stand-forth from a surrounding darkness in pools of studio lighting, isolated, serene, naked. His stark black and white portraits offer what would seem to be genuine contact with them. But, as a function or consequence of his photographic style, is there also a distancing of both photographer and viewer from this « hard core » of individuality? In other terms, are there not levels of both intimacy and « extimacy » in these images? Are they not a mode of contact at a distance ? Perhaps a contact that distances ?

Even the essay by Christiane Falgayrettes-Leveau that accompanies Alain Soldeville's photographs in the exhibition catalog, "Signes du corps", touches on this. She notes a « refusal of the common » in his work. She notes how his photographs give his subjects a particular look and how he « translates the privileged moment » of a *mise-en-scene* to which each of his subjects has voluntarily submitted themselves. The photographer introduces us, the viewers, to an order of social subversion and he affirms in his photographs a freedom of the individual to make or re-create his/her own bodies in an age and a time that increasingly enforces conformity and a generalized leveling of differences. We could say that it is in these ways that Alain Soldeville's images, by offering the viewer contact with such individuality and such personal liberty, affirm their own power and violence as images and thereby resist cultural tendencies towards the taming or domestication of the violence and madness of a photographic image. Yet, in making his images « works of art » does Alain Soldeville not also bring about the very taming and domestication his images would otherwise want to resist ? Such taming or domestication of the photographic image can actually work in two ways, according to Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida*: by the excessive repetition and banalization of images, and by making them « art », for, as he writes, « no art is mad ». As « art photography », then, as studio images in striking black and white, in images in which everything is under control and where the technique is so accomplished, do Alain Soldeville's portraits not promote a kind of freedom, violence, and even a kind of madness but only so as to reduce it, to cool it, to contain and to distance madness ?

Is this why, as Christiane Falgayrettes-Leveau observes, that Alain Soldeville maintains and protects the distance he opens between himself and his subjects - in a practice that perhaps stems from his years as a photo-journalist ? But in this case, as Christiane Falgayrettes-Leveau herself notes, the distance the photographer maintains with regard to his subjects allows the photographer may have another function namely, to show his subjects in a world or a realm that is uniquely their own, one they have fought for and won through their body modifications; he gives them this place no one else can enter or colonize. These are men and women who a strong sense, created their own identities. These are individuals who have set themselves apart, and Alain Soldeville's photographs seem to wish to maintain this distance his subjects have opened between themselves and their pasts and their prevailing social milieu.

But, at the same time, in photographing these body modifications, in getting so heroically close to such personal, self-inflicted violence do Alain Soldeville's photographs not just continue a kind of dark romanticism and moribund modernity that for too long in 20th century art and photography has been « obsessed », in the words of Alain Badiou, with finitude, body, cruelty, suffering, and death (Badiou, « Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art »)? Is Alain Soldeville right in returning to these themes in his images, or has the time for such obsessions not already come and gone ? Should we not be moving on to something else?

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To conclude, I should like to answer these last questions in the negative.

There is an undeniable element of randomness and contingency in every photograph. A camera can feasibly be pointed at most anything and at any moment any number of possible pictures can be made. The possibilities seem limitless. So, one might ask of any picture, « why this scene, why this moment, why this picture » ? In a sense, every photograph, in being a selection of but one perspective, one angle, one choice of lens and lighting from a great number of possibilities, is not just a way of finding images, but of constructing them or even inventing them. And one can see in such inventions the signatures of their « operators » (Barthes). Yet, just because of the strong role of contingency in every photograph, this does not mean that photography has only a tangential relation to truth ? While the contingency and particularity of a photograph would be identical with its sensible, material presence as an object, this does not mean it has no role to play in the question(s) of art and truth. For it is said that every photograph tells the truth, the truth about what there was to see from a particular situation at a particular time, in particular conditions of light and shadow. Every photograph can be a way of telling a story, but it is also first a way of tell the truth by letting things show themselves in the light as what they truly are; the photographed subject stands forth from the shadows, but never leaves the shadows entirely behind. The photograph is the signature of this light, the traces and surfaces it left behind in its passing. And what it recorded and what it transformed from light into silver crystals on that day and in those circumstances is transformed again into an image that endures the falling away of time. A photograph can show this truth, this miraculous and fragile standing forth of light from darkness, but it cannot say what it shows. This remains for us, the spectator to say: looking at a photograph, it is for us to say, « indeed, I may not understand all that I see here but this has happened »: There is thus a contingency and a violence to the portrait photograph that shows this man and this woman who have followed their desires almost to the limits of the possible and who have stuck with their desires and have not given up on them. Such a photograph would seem a happening of truth, not just « self expression ». That is far too weak and senile a notion for this. Rather, the truth of a photograph must be the somewhat darker truth of those of those who want to show themselves as they truly are, who want to step forth into the light but who cannot leave the shadows entirely behind. There can be a violence to this: such photographs would seem indeed to get too close to their subject. The violence of a photograph would be in the way it thus seems to leap forth and fill our eyes, leaving us almost speechless. We want to look away, but the power of the photograph draws our eyes back to see again what really should not be seen: not just a face transformed, a hand or a backside wounded and scarred, but deeper than that into the wounds of a wounded life. In all of its contingency and sensibility, especially a portrait photograph, although irreducible to any universal system or concept of « photography », or even of art, can nonetheless seem to have a universal dimension insofar as it presents an image of humanity itself in its particularity. In that a photograph comes about as a result of choices made by the photographer, perhaps there is an ethics to photography here. However a photograph, the fragile, paper body of a photograph, is but the transcribed vision of a particular photographer, it also presents an image of the human face, and offers us, the spectator, an encounter with that face. Thus, there is something of the universal within its particularity. In this respect the singularity of a photograph is essentially an act, an ethical and political act of memory. From its silence, it sings out against the forgetting of the past, against the silencing of what was possible for an individual human being to desire. There could be portrait photographs that would be all of this, and that would be astonishing affirmations of the individuality of a human life radiant amongst the dark trident of finitude, death, and desire. Perhaps such photographs are only possibilities, only ideals. Is their time is yet to come ? And when they do, they will come about not only as a result of the minute and multiple choices made by the photographer from among a million possibilities; they will also come to be by all that sets itself to work in images; what desires, what hopes for a miracle of light and shadow to emerge from the developing tray of life. But taking such photographs and taking such risks is what Alain Soldeville has already done in this remarkable series of portrait photographs he entitles « Paroles du corps ».

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