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Issue 19. Autofiction and/in Image - Autofiction visuelle

## Introduction. The artists formerly known as... or, the loose end of conceptual art and the possibilities of 'visual autofiction'

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**Abstract (E):** This introduction constitutes a first attempt to trace the origins and contexts of 'visual autofiction'. 'Autofiction' has proven to be a particularly productive concept in literary studies. However, taking a closer look at 'autofiction' shows that this notion is closely related to themes and questions raised in other forms of art throughout the 1970's, in particular in conceptual art. The present introduction argues that we may speak of (strategies of) 'visual autofiction'. Far from being the mere transposition of a literary genre to currents in visual art, 'visual autofiction' forms a contemporary aesthetic stratagem that creatively appropriates conceptual art's aporias. In order to gain an understanding of what is at stake in 'visual autofiction', a comparison will be made with important thematic shifts in cultural theory from the 1970's onwards, in particular in the later works of Roland Barthes.

**Abstract (F):** La présente introduction constitue une première tentative d'élucidation pour tracer les origines et les contextes d'une possible 'autofiction visuelle'. 'Autofiction' s'est montrée une notion particulièrement fertile dans les études littéraires. Toutefois, si l'on regarde le concept d' 'autofiction' de plus près, on constate qu'il se rapporte fermement à des questions et thèmes présents dans d'autres formes artistiques dans les années 1970, en particulier à certains procédés de l'art conceptuel. Cette introduction montre que l'on pourrait effectivement parler (de stratégies) d' 'autofiction visuelle'. Loin d'être simplement la transposition d'un genre littéraire à d'autres formes d'art, c'est-à-dire d'art visuel ou plastique, l' 'autofiction visuelle' est un stratagème esthétique contemporain qui s'approprie les apories de l'art conceptuel, afin de les divertir et de les utiliser de façon productive. Pour saisir ce qui est en jeu dans l' 'autofiction visuelle', nous la comparâtrons avec certains changements paradigmatiques dans la théorie esthétique et culturelle au cours des années 1970, en particulier avec les dernières oeuvres de Roland Barthes.

**keywords:** visual autofiction, conceptual art, Roland Barthes, Marcel Broodthaers, Adrian Piper, 'post-medium', Rosalind Krauss, Sophie Calle, Bruce Nauman

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## Article

[1] *there is no proof that the real simpleton isn't the author himself, who thought he was a linguist able to leap over the bar in the signifier/signified formula, but who might in fact have been merely playing the professor.*

*A fiction allows us to grasp reality and at the same time what it hides.*

Marcel Broodthaers

(in Buchloh, 2000: 110-111 and Krauss 1999: 47)

In 2003 Maurizio Cattelan famously send his remote-controlled avatar *Charlie* to the 50 th Venice Biennale. Visitors witnessed the child-like figure, a miniature version of the artist in his signature casual dress, wandering on his blue-and-red tricycle among the other works displayed. Cattelan's wax-like character is a remarkable mixture of self-portraiture and fiction, or rather: it shows *fictionalization* at work, and more precisely the artist's *self-fictionalization*. *Charlie* joins the artist's private history with (a unconventional, post-conceptualist concept of) institutional critique: the work thus expands the notion of the artistic self beyond both autobiographical *and* common institutional concerns. That is to say, if in *Charlie* we recognize the artist's recurrent representations of uneasy childhood as well as his hallmark irreverence towards the increasing media exposure of the artist and the art world, the two intersect precisely in Cattelan's self-fictionalization, which allows Cattelan to displace and challenges commonplaces in autobiographical narcissism and (post-conceptualist) institutional critique alike. Cattelan's 'autofiction' constitutes a new theoretical stratagem as well as it imagines novel and potential artistic subjectivities, the two being irreducibly related.

The work adopts a similar strategy as *We are the Revolution* (2000), which shows a polyester version of Cattelan hanging from a coat rack, dressed in Joseph Beuys' emblematic felt suit. By showing an avatar of himself as Joseph Beuys (which, again, only metonymically resembles Cattelan, the figure having cartoonish proportions), the artist inscribes himself in an art historical narrative that is at the same time diverted: Beuys' aesthetic and political utopianism may be suspended as is Cattelan's figure, yet the imaginary it contains may also be transferred and thus creatively diverted onto a different biography and different artistic practices. It is tempting to consider works such as Cattelan's avatars uniquely in terms of playfulness, however one would fail to spot what is at stake there. If fictionalization, and in particular 'autofiction' represents an important strategy for a large number of contemporary artists, it is because it offers them a productive means of critique in a post-conceptualist or even 'post-medium' context (see Krauss, 1999 and 2006. See also, in this introduction, 'The Marcellisation of Broodthaers'). 'Autofiction' coins no less than the artistic self as an instrument of critique: 'autofiction' makes 'critique' (be it historical or institutional) run parallel to investigations into imaginaries of the self. This issue of *Image and Narrative* seeks to highlight these intersecting genealogies (critical and confidential) in the works of an array of contemporary artists that exceeds national and genre borders. It proposes an investigation into the possibility of 'visual autofiction'.

Since it was launched by writer and literary theorist Serge Doubrovsky in the late 1970's, the

concept of 'autofiction' has been the subject of often heated debate in literary criticism. Yet, the issues addressed in the polemics concerning the (im)possibility of 'autofiction' are by no means limited to the literary or textual domain. In fact, many of Doubrovsky's concerns (and that of his fellow critics-cum-writers such as Roland Barthes) are the subject matter of visual artworks from the same decade and after.

Therefore, this issue of *Image and Narrative* seeks to put the mobility of the concept of 'autofiction' to the test. It does so, not by assuming a smooth and unproblematic transition of an aesthetic fashion from one medium to another, but by considering 'autofiction' as a means of assembling a number of questions that some of the critical work done in literary theory has brought to light. In fact, addressing the question of 'visual autofiction' may, in return, allow unclogging the debate within literary studies. A debate that has, more often than not, led to an urge to taxonomize. Moreover, situating 'autofiction,' and the problematics it brings to light, in a framework that is both visual and textual permits us to expand the concept itself: it exposes its links to current theorizations of the 'post-medium condition' and new critical strategies after conceptual art. Expanding the notion of 'autofiction' serves to bring into contact two critical traditions that address similar questions, but do not necessarily take each other into account. That is to say, coining the possibility of 'visual autofiction' assembles, on the one hand, the French debate concerning almost exclusively the significance of 'literary autofiction'; instigated by the works of Philippe Lejeune and Serge Doubrovsky, this discussion is often confined by its focus on genre problematics. On the other hand, the (largely American) art historical and theoretical debate concerning the (not uncontested) legacy of conceptual art. One of the objectives of this issue of *Image and Narrative* is precisely to expand the horizon within which the concept of 'autofiction' may be situated (again: it holds a number of highly relevant theoretical questions that go beyond mere questions of genre). Finally, the recent publication of Roland Barthes' lectures from the late 1970's provides the expansion of the concept of 'autofiction' with new impulses and an astute vocabulary for investigation. The following introduction gives a rough sketch of a field of enquiry that constitutes one of cultural theory's most promising areas of interdisciplinary study.

## 'Visual Autofiction' as Concept: Between Genealogy and Heuristics

The current issue of *Image and Narrative* has a double interest in the concept of 'autofiction'. On the one hand, a historical and conceptual concern: 'autofiction' has its own genealogy and problematics. On the other hand, a heuristic concern: 'autofiction' is a particularly efficient tool for the analysis of a variety of media and genres. This dual significance implies an expansion on both these fronts of the notion of 'autofiction' outside of the domain of literary studies where it first appeared. The notion of 'autofiction' is, in fact, embedded in and characteristic of a (series of) problematics that is by no means limited to the literary domain (and that may not even have originated there), neither is its analytical value limited to that of literary criticism. As Vincent Colonna, one of its specialists in the field of literary studies, writes *à propos* 'autofiction': it has to be looked at as an *agencement*, as an assemblage of strategies that serve as so many answers to questions that are not confined to one particular

medium or genre (Colonna, 2004: 70).

Historically and conceptually, 'autofiction' is closely related to issues and strategies in contemporary visual art. Even many of Serge Doubrovsky's lines of thought concerning the concept he coined on the *quatrième de couverture* of his 1977 'autobiographical novel' *Fils* are intimately connected to major premises in conceptual art and its wake: the work-of-art-as-theory, the imperative of artistic auto-critique, the appropriation and exploration of theoretical discourses in artistic practice and, vitally, the use of narrative and auto-narrative in aesthetic and theoretical endeavours. Again, it is this double-crossing that assembles the issues central to our focus on 'autofiction': one the one hand, the emergence of 'autofiction' on a crossroads of aesthetic and theoretical concerns (at a moment when this coupling was most productive: roughly from the mid-1960's to the late 1970's); on the other hand, 'autofiction' serves as a tool for assembling a problematic that expands well beyond the 1970's and allows us to highlight a series of topics and concerns still very much present and valuable in contemporary art (expanding, for example, into the 2007 Venice Biennale with Sophie Calle's *Prenez soin de vous* ; see, in this introduction, 'Three Portraits of The Self').

The chiasmic character of the concept of 'visual autofiction' that guides this issue of *Image and Narrative* necessitates an account of the following aspects:

- a rough draft of its genealogy (within contemporary visual art, in particular conceptual art and its aftermath)
- this genealogy has to be considered as a gathering of questions and problems (concerning conceptual art and its blind spots) rather than mere chronology
- an important part of this genealogy is constituted by the theoretical/critical context outside of (visual) art (in particular structuralist and poststructuralist theoretical concerns) which has important repercussions in the aesthetic domain
- it is precisely the fact that artistic practice and theory keep crossing one another that provides 'visual autofiction' as a concept with its heuristic potential

Furthermore, since 'visual autofiction' has not been the object of theoretical and critical digressions by its practitioners (much unlike conceptual art) - it is not explicitly named, rather performed -, close ups of the works are vital. To be more precise: 'autofiction' represents a rethinking of the function, uses and forms of 'critique' within contemporary art. It is the articulation of this tacit definition of 'visual autofiction' that motivates the contributions to this issue.

In the following introduction, we will first of all take a closer look at the question of genre and medium in the French-American autofiction debate. Secondly, we will argue that the problematization of genre and medium in autofiction is rooted in the notion of 'auto-critique' (recurrent in both autobiographical practice and conceptual art). Thirdly, we will sketch certain contexts for '(visual) autofiction'. Contexts that, on the one hand, relate to

questions concerning authorship and the renewal of the narrating voice in the later Barthes; and, on the other hand, to some of the loose ends of conceptual art. We will argue that 'visual autofiction', to a large extent, constitutes a response to important aporias within conceptual art concerning the concept of artistic 'authorship'. Following this, we will examine a limited number of strategies already present (yet not fully articulated) within conceptual art that are significant for the development of 'visual autofiction'. In particular, we will focus on works by Marcel Broodthaers and Adrian Piper that, already within conceptualism, indicate certain lines of flight, which will prove to be crucial for the very possibility of 'visual autofiction'. In addition, we will highlight the extent to which conceptual art's use of documentary photography, in relation to performance, announces autofictional strategies, as well as the importance of the notion of the 'indexical trace' (already present in conceptual art) for the dominant stratagems in 'visual autofiction'. Finally, we will give two examples of possible readings of contemporary artworks (by Bruce Nauman and Sophie Calle) in terms of 'autofiction'.

## The Empty Box: 'Autofiction' and The Impracticalities of Genre

To say that 'autofiction' (literary or visual) is a hybrid genre is hardly surprising. What is surprising however, is that, in literary studies, despite its evident hybrid character, the notion of 'autofiction' has fuelled a series of debates concerning and condemning its impossible taxonomy. 'Autofiction' has proven to be a particularly itchy concept for structuralist critics such as Gerard Genette and the aforementioned Philippe Lejeune. In 'Autobiographie/ vérité/ psychanalyse', Serge Doubrovsky clearly states that for him the very possibility of 'autofiction' lies in the infamous 'empty box' in Lejeune's structuralist diagram representing the possible nominal functions of autobiography. (see Lejeune, 1975: 28) Doubrovsky's project, in a sense, constitutes, to paraphrase Gilles Deleuze, a 'line of flight' in Lejeune. It is born from a blind spot that is acknowledged by Lejeune, but the consequences of which (or rather: the potential of which) he refuses to elaborate. Lejeune's 'empty box' occupies a peculiar liminal position within his taxonomy of autobiography: it's there for all to see, yet it remains unfilled. However, if it were to be filled it would, from within, knock off-balance Lejeune's system in its entirety (and this is of course exactly what Doubrovsky does). In particular in the French debate regarding literary autofiction, Lejeune's *malaise* has long dominated the character and quality of the discussions: critics felt compelled to take sides in the rewarding or withholding of autofiction's genre credentials (a discussion that runs throughout the works of, for instance Marie Darrieussecq and Philippe Gasparini).

Apart from Doubrovsky's remarkable auto-commentary, it is only recently, with the publication of critical studies such as Vincent Colonna's *Autofictions et autres mythomanies littéraires* that 'autofiction' has become something different than a subject to generic taxonomies. Precisely because, as Doubrovsky already asserted, 'autofiction' complicates if not exposes what Jacques Derrida calls 'the law of genre', it may serve as an 'instrument for reading' or heuristic tool. (Colonna, 2004: 13) Colonna compares the concept of 'autofiction' to a nebula: neither exclusively an instrument of literary historiography, nor of formal

classification, it assembles a (series of) problematics, some of them touching the very heart of the question of 'genre'. (16) 'Autofiction' causes and exposes the dissemination of the notion of genre and thus forms a critical procedure that is by no means limited to literary autofiction. The possibility of an expansion outside of the domain of literature and literary studies is in fact already present in Colonna, but remains underdeveloped. (13-16)

Nevertheless, Colonna succeeds in highlighting the essential factor of autofiction's capacity to question genre: its eccentric use of *meta-narrative*. (119) That is to say: according to Colonna, autofiction's main rhetorical figure is *metalepsis* or the 'transgression between real world and narrated world' - the constant intrusion of a narrator who is both present in his (fictional) narrative and claims to be identifiable (in a world outside of the literary text). What Colonna implies but only tacitly argues is that thus, in autofiction, narrative has a predominantly metonymic or indexical character: it proceeds from a (presupposed) proximity between the narrator and his/her fictional avatar (which may or may not be his/her proper name). Yet such a systematic metalepsis is endless: it shows that there is no given end to meta-narrative. In other words: fictionalization by means of the indexical trace works both ways: the narrator's proper name might just as well by an index among other properties he/she has subjected to fictionalization (such as his/her silhouette, his/her patented colours, his/her email messages, his/her child-like avatar etc etc). As we have said earlier, a similar mise-en-abyme takes place in 'visual autofiction': it demonstrates the impossibility of a pure and circumscribed meta-narrative that is crucial to the conceptualist idea of authorship.

In his essay 'The Law of Genre', Jacques Derrida painstakingly explores the aporias of genre circumscription. "As soon as the word genre is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn", Derrida writes, and it is precisely the impossible location of this act of delineating (that takes place at the limit) that is important to him. (Derrida, 1992: 224) As Derrida argues, this act

does not [>] take part in the corpus whose denomination it nonetheless imparts. Nor is it simply extraneous to the corpus. But this singular *topos* places within and without the work, along its boundary, an inclusion and exclusion with regard to genre in general, as to an identifiable class in general. It gathers together the corpus and, at the same time, in the same blinking of an eye, keeps it from closing, from identifying itself with itself. (231)

Marking a 'genre' is essential to the genre ('genre' as such results from this circumscription, no more no less), yet it exceeds the very genre it belongs to and in fact constitutes. It is at the same time intrinsic and extrinsic to the corpus it designates as a 'genre': it consequently infinitely defers its closure. In particular, Derrida is interested in acts of circumscription that take place within the corpus itself. Akin to Lejeune's empty box, such 'remarks of belonging', for being part of the work while remaining outside of it, are potentially disturbing. (231) Taking the example of Maurice Blanchot's story *La folie du jour*, Derrida argues that these 'remarks of belonging' proceeds from an impossible logic (a 'madness', as he calls it): they are

made from within the work *and* at the same time from the strange liminal *topos* Derrida has described. They only apparently result from the narrator's meta-position; in fact, they underline the sheer impossibility of such a position that can only end in an endless back-and-forth between inside and outside. They result in what Derrida calls an 'invagination': that is to say that this principle of uncertainty affects the narrating voice in such a manner that we are left with a relentless folding of narratives, voices and points of view (an endless 're-marking', as Derrida puts it).

'Visual autofiction' proceeds from a comparable 'invagination'. It exposes the impossibility of genre by its inherent resistance to genre closure: there is no tipping point of the auto/fiction divide (see also Rosalind Krauss' remarks on Calle in Krauss, 2006). What Doubrovsky has aptly named autofiction's 'strategy of genre', in contemporary visual art, will principally be directed against the conceptualist notion of the artist as 'self curator': the conceptualist artist tries to incorporate the impossible inside/outside Derrida points at, since he/she is both partaking in the corpus he/she tries to critically circumscribe. 'Visual autofiction' does not abandon this conception, rather it acknowledges its ruse and tries to productively engage with the inevitable folding of narratives, voices and points of view. It accepts the inevitability of metonymy as its principal aesthetic strategy. It knows that the artist as meta-commentator can only lead to a proliferation of artistic selves, genres and media; it conceives of the artist not as impossible self-curator, but - metonymically - as a remainder, a palimpsest (as we will see throughout this issue: as a silhouette, a patented colour, a forwarded message etc etc).

## Ghostwriting: Autofiction as Auto-Critique

For Doubrovsky, traditional autobiographies fail since the veracity of their narcissistic auto-representation, their inherent and self-justified truth, can only be asserted by an external instance. In other words: self-identification paradoxically needs the other's hallmark. In traditional autobiography Doubrovsky thus recognizes the constitutive principle of the psychoanalytic cure: the truth of the subject is transferred unto the other who acts as therapist. In particular, Doubrovsky's autofictions compose an (impossible yet peculiarly successful) attempt to overcome this constitutive split within the self that is subject to the type of analysis Doubrovsky experienced himself during his years in psychoanalytic therapy. In a sense, his autofictions represent a running commentary on his deliberations on the analyst's couch. For Doubrovsky, situating himself in the wake of modern diarists such as Michel Leiris, 'autofiction' acts as a 'beyond of the spoken word' central to psychoanalysis: as auto-commentary, it is directed at the subconscious whose words are extracted by the therapist. (Doubrovsky, 1988: 66) His autofictions perform a re-appropriation of the truth of the subject by the subject, yet this re-appropriation can only be phantasmagorical since it cannot but repeat the split it tries to overcome. It is precisely this impossible, phantasmagorical unison, this sustained split, that, for Doubrovsky, provides autofiction's *jouissance*.

Thus, autofiction's far-reaching novelty, Doubrovsky argues, is its 'radical alteration of

autobiography's romantic solitude'. (73) Autofiction replaces the subject's isolation by the subjects multiplication and, more importantly, its inherent self-justification by a multiplication of instances of *auto-critique*. Doubrovsky's autofictions present a conflation between therapeutic auto-analysis, aesthetic auto-critique and theoretical auto-critique. Consequently, they problematize genre distinctions (essay, novel, autobiography, therapeutic notes), which subsequently become the object of scrutiny by Doubrovsky himself. The insurmountable division of the authorial subject is related to a reflection of the medium and genre(s) wherein this division is enacted. Much like its literary counterpart, 'visual autofiction' does not try to 'resolve' the logical inconsistencies it exposes, but rather productively puts them to use - as in Doubrovsky, the endorsement of fractured subjectivity, in a practice of writing that defies genres, gives way to the subject's antithetical and impossible desires. (70)

Doubrovsky's practice of writing responds to what Lejeune provisionally names 'the autobiographical novel' as 'a generic space', rather than a novel genre (Lejeune in Gasparini, 2004: 14). Crucial to the formation of such a 'generic space' is the process of (self-) fictionalization. In his *Est-il je? Roman autobiographique et autofiction* Philippe Gasparini argues that the identification of the author in textual autofiction is not exclusively related to his/her proper name, that is to say: to the author as the traceable origin of his/her signature. For Gasparini, 'identification' in autofiction cannot be reduced to the assertion of the 'factual' presence of the author (as Lejeune has it): 'autofiction' appropriates the principle of identification, uses it instruments (proper name, signature, biographical elements etc) in a process of fictionalisation. (25-45) As Gasparini writes, an important part of this fictionalization is the appropriation of 'documentary evidence'. 'Autofiction' uses a vast array of similar identifying markers that are by no means limited to a particular medium or genre. In his enquiry into 'autofiction' as a literary genre, Gasparini shows that this 'documentary evidence' in literary autofiction is irreducible to textual evidence alone. Textual autofiction makes use of photography, objects and drawings, oral testimonies (i.e. the works of Roland Barthes, André Breton or Michel Leiris) - therefore a narrowly 'textual' origin of autofiction is problematized from the start. (105)

According to another participant in the French debate, Jean-Luc Pagès, autocritique is the dominant characteristic of contemporary autobiography. In *Le jeu de l'autocritique littéraire à l'autofiction*, he defines autocritique as '(auto)reflection on a certain [aesthetic] practice and genre' (Pagès, 1997: 9). Crucially, autocritique's reflection *on* genre results in a hybridisation *of* genre (not only concerning literature and criticism, but it also leads to a proliferation of genres within these two - i.e. in the work of Barthes, Doubrovsky and even Proust). Moreover, autocritique places the author (the name of the author and the function of the author) in between a rock and hard place: as both author and critic he/she only seemingly constitutes an all-encompassing figure determining the signification of his/her own work. Interestingly, for Pagès contemporary auto-critique is closely related to the mediatization of the figure of the artist. The mandatory media exposure of contemporary artists proceeds from a similar split in the artist's persona as the one we have seen to be constitutive of auto-critique and autofiction. The artist is summoned to appear as self-critic or self-explicator, albeit that he/she is mostly summoned to locate the true signification of his/her work in his/her personal trajectory. This demand made by the contemporary mass media engages the artist in the same abysmal logic of self-proliferation that underlies autofiction as autocritique.

Dobrovsky's many TV appearances in which he is invited to auto-comment his auto-commentaries testify of this potentially infinite multiplication.

In fact, as we have seen in our brief evocation of Derrida's 'law of genre', for being both part of the work and outside of the work, the author becomes engaged in a potentially infinite back-and-forth between a *topos* at once inside and outside of the work (as soon as he/she posits himself/herself outside of the work as critic, he/she is drawn is back into it as its author). For Pagès, autocritique thus becomes 'a discourse on discourse' which makes use of all of the meta- and intertextual tools and concepts available in both criticism and literature, it explores the generic space opened up by this peculiar simultaneity between literary creation and criticism. (16-314) From Dobrovsky's literary autofictions to Barthes's auto-critical essays to Hervé Guibert's photo-novels, auto-critique by definition exceeds genres. (82)

As Pagès argues, this close encounter between artist and critic (in one and the same instance) could only have been made fully productive under the influence of structuralist and poststructuralist criticism within the humanities, that is to say from the 1960's onwards. In particular, its proclamation of the 'death of the author' surprisingly has provided the condition for the emergence of a new hybrid type of authorship that has proven to be especially industrious (42/43 and 275). In a sense, auto-critique constitutes a search for a, narrative and artistic, identity after the death of the author - it constitutes a kind of ghostwriting or *prosopopeia* in which the dead speak out.

## Resonating Voices: The Later Barthes and The Possibilities of 'Visual Autofiction'

Roland Barthes' later works and lectures delivered at the Collège de France not only are contemporary of Dobrovsky's premiere of 'autofiction' and the heated debates in and around conceptual art, they also closely resonate with strategies that will be adopted by 'visual autofiction', and that allow to tackle many of visual autofiction's problematics. Works of criticism published by Barthes in the last decade of his life, such as *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* or *Camera Lucida*, willingly transgress boundaries between genres and even media. Having a closer look them, however brief, allows to grasp the broader conceptual field in which 'visual autofiction' emerges. 'Visual autofiction' pursues conceptual art's interest in cultural theory and philosophy, yet its interests are not narrowly reduced to linguistic theory or formalism, but echoes theoretical hybrids between criticism and autobiography in works as that of the later Barthes (or, for example, the 'sentimentalist' critique we encounter in *A Lover's Discourse*).

In *Voyage at the North Sea* Rosalind Krauss equally stresses "the resonance between the post-medium position and poststructuralism". (Krauss, 1999: 32) That is to say, many of the critical stances of conceptual artists are informed if not fuelled academic and theoretical debates, that, as Peter Osborne writes, allows them to bypass or overcome some of the

impasses in dominant modes of art criticism in the 1960's and 1970's. However, it would be too narrow a conception of this 'resonance' to state that poststructuralist critical discourse merely provided "a glittering theoretical pedigree to practices of rampant impurity" in the art world since the early 1960's. (Krauss, 1999: 33) If the intersections between, on the one hand, conceptual art and its offspring and, on the other, academic theorizing have proven to be particularly fecund, it is because they constitute anything but a one-way traffic. 'Visual autofiction' shows that theoretical discourse and artistic practice share a (series of) problematics. In fact, a closer look at these parallel concerns rather than echoes (or worse, blueprints) allows us to grasp the critical and aesthetic stakes of 'visual autofiction'. Particularly revealing, in this respect, are the projects on which Roland Barthes embarked during the last ten years of his life. They largely exceed mere theoretical predicaments; in them, Barthes adopts aesthetic strategies in order to articulate theoretical concerns and systematically explores the porosity of the boundaries between theoretical prose, fiction and autobiographical (if not, therapeutic) problematics.

*Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, *Camera Lucida* and Barthes' lectures at the Collège de France from the late 1970's all are part of the discovery of, and a subsequent investigation into a new genre that willingly confuses criticism, fiction (or rather: processes of fictionalization) and autobiography. In reference to Dante's poetic auto-commentary, Barthes coins this project his 'vita nova'. In his writings and teachings, Barthes makes use of a hybrid of critical and aesthetic strategies (posing both as critic and literary character), of genres (autobiography, commentary and therapeutic discourse) and media (from the haiku to photography). Not only Barthes' project is intrinsically concerned with visual media such as photography, its key word is that of the 'imaginary' - as well as it presents similar shifts in subject positions we encounter in visual arts since the late 1960's. In other words, along partly the same lines, Barthes' final oeuvre, in a particularly revealing manner, addresses the questions that form the conceptual nebula this issue of *Image and Narrative* refers to as 'visual autofiction'.

Barthes' handwritten incipit to *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* is perhaps best described as a perversion of Lejeune's 'autobiographical pact' (it reads: "The following has to be considered as if it were uttered by a character from a novel"). Imperatively, Barthes' extraordinary text, which was originally published in a book series that consists of critical commentaries on excerpts of modern classics such as Proust or Rimbaud, urges to abandon the very distinctions on which the institutionalized and even common experience of reading is based (Barthes is all at once author, reader, critic and character; and one may even wonder if Barthes' incipit is not some a sort of 'note to self'). The author Roland Barthes subjects himself to fiction (whilst nevertheless identifying himself throughout his text). The celebrated critic Roland Barthes simultaneously uses auto-commentary to sketch his academic career and the trajectory of his thought, as well as a means of conferring himself a new voice, through a surprising gesture of 'auto-expropriation' - a third or 'neutral' voice, that is neither that of traditional autobiography, nor the voice that asserts the authority of the novelist or critic. Barthes' notion of the 'third' (voice or 'language', even 'meaning') or 'neutral' does not constitute a blank space that would equalize those voices, but a vital, generic space.

As Barthes writes in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (addressing his own oeuvre as if it were that of one of the many authors he has commented), this third term, that exceeds the polarizing logic of dialectics, is not to be thought of in terms of synthesis but as 'Fiction'. (Barthes, 2002: 647) The elements of a given dialectical opposition (such as author/critic, discursive/private self) may be granted a renewed signification outside of their mutual clench: they may be granted a 'vita nova' as subject to/of Fiction. Or, as Barthes specifies: Fiction thus becomes the denomination of "a new intellectual art" wherein "theory, critical struggles and pleasure" are inextricably and productively bound up with one another, because "objects of knowledge" (concepts, ideas, names, selves) are no longer subjected to "an instance of truth" but "to a thinking of *effects*" (667); to what they may, fictionally, generate.

As Barthes writes in one of the many fragments that constitute *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, writing begins 'by mistaking oneself for the other'. (677) The origins of a work of art are *metonymical*: before performing its own creative acts, the artistic 'I' first reproduces an *image* of the author; it adopts the artistic posture it supposes to be productive. It is precisely by means of metonymy (and the intrinsic possibility of fictionalization it includes) that Barthes attempts to realize his novel project.

Barthes, in fact, describes his *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* as "an attempt at *staging an imaginary*". (681, my emphasis) That is to say, as an attempt to grasp, yet not to unify, the different levels of a singular imaginary: the choreography of the different personae that constitute 'Roland Barthes'. He thus sketches the uncertain boundaries between autobiographical imaginary, critical imaginary and authorial imaginary. Instead of seeking for a unifying (narrative) instance, Barthes insists that such a subjective instance may or *may not* subscribe to its imaginary: he states that such a form of appropriation, always already, depends on an imaginary of objectification of the self. Lejeune's criteria of identification are thus fundamentally questioned by Barthes. The result is a text full of 'floating parentheses' and 'uncertain quotation marks'; a work of fiction that is nonetheless irreducible to mere novelistic concerns (682). Moreover, a work that, in its exploration of that singular imaginary, abandons medium- or genre-specific compartmentalisations (Barthes' imaginary is visual - photographic - as well as textual or affective). As Barthes writes, the substance of his critical text is in fact fictional; it is an essay that is almost a novel: 'a novel without proper names' (695).

Barthes' exploration of his imaginary necessitates renewed conceptions and uses of (auto-) narrative. That is to say, it asks for a versatile, fragmented narrative, closely related to visual imagery (in particular photography). It is this particular type of narrative that we may see at work in 'visual autofiction'. In *Camera Lucida* Barthes writes that "photography has the same relation to history that the biographeme has to biography". (Barthes, 2000: 30) In his *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* Barthes had invented the neologism 'biographeme' to refer to minute biographical features (a detail, a private obsession - mostly having an affective or corporeal character) that nonetheless disclose much more than the mere ornamental. Crucially, 'biographemes', while undoubtedly circumscribing a singular fate, they are mobile and hold the possibility of affective transference. Against mere 'bio-chronography', that proceeds from traditional teleological narrative, the biographeme does not forclude its transference toward the other, toward a future reception or incorporation that may be fictional (Barthes, 2003: 278). In his lectures on 'The Preparation of the Novel', Barthes detects a similar semantic nucleus in the Japanese haiku that he baptises 'narreme': a jolt of narrative, an embryonic story, "a

nebula of causes and effects". (131)

In his lectures at the Collège de France, Barthes takes Marcel Proust as his guide. Barthes argues that, while abandoning himself to the phantasm of literary writing (and putting his subjectivity at stake in this phantasm), Proust has in fact created an oeuvre that is no longer coded along traditional genre lineages *and* that results in a singular subjective stance. Proust's 'marcellisation' represents a complex layering of voices by means of which Proust provides one for a subject that is dispersed among autobiographical, (auto-)critical and novelistic concerns. (Barthes 2003, 36) Or, as Barthes argues, Proust's life's work could only be properly initiated when Proust found "his proper form of saying I". (155) It is this 'third form' that finally resists meta-language, and thus does not allow for a meta-stance of the subject either; and adorns Proust with the exemplary value his work has for Barthes own 'vita nova'.

In a similar 'as if' endorsement of the phantasm of writing, Barthes finds his own 'method of production', that is to say a means of staging subjectivity as both critical and creative. (49) In particular, it is this peculiar phantasm that results in a creative practice that responds to a widely proclaimed 'death of literature' (ironically, an extended version of Barthes' 'death of the author'). In presenting a potentially endless preparation of the novel, Barthes in fact produces an innovative 'ghostly' writing that represents the very possibility of writing *after* the dead of literature. Barthes continuation and adaptation of Proust's 'third form' traces a line of flight from a general problematic in both literary theory and writing (and that has partly resulted from their intersection, not in the least in the work of ) Roland Barthes himself). A productive 'return' that is not a synthesis of already existing problems: precisely what Barthes coins to be 'fiction'.

Barthes closeness to Proust foremost lies in what he calls 'the invention of a certain I'. (331) Both Proust's *Recherche* and Barthes lectures at the Collège de France seek and explore a new subject that is situated at the crossroads of 'narrative, biographical and symbolic' enunciation. (331) A non-egotistic 'I' that responds to the anachronistic desire to create 'literature', and creates something wholly contemporary that defies genre boundaries. (353) If the notion of 'work' or 'oeuvre' (as "personal monument" or even "crazy object of total investment") is on the threshold of disappearance, Barthes own lectures, and the singular artistic-critical and above all performative subject they imply, constitute a vital contemporary alternative to it.

In a sense, we might say that Barthes' interrupted project of a 'vita nova' is pursued outside of the amphitheatres of the Collège de France, in the works of many contemporary artists and their many avatars. It is this disseminated but no less essential 'vita nova' that the essays collected in this issue of *Image and Narrative* seek to bring to light.

## The Artist as Self-Curator: The Loose Ends of Conceptual art

Crucially, 'autofiction' (both textual and visual) is closely related to fundamental issues in conceptual art, in particular issues concerning the position of the artist. 'Autofiction' creatively engages with the aporias in which conceptual art's notion of the artist and artistic self had manoeuvred contemporary art in the 1970's. In 'autofiction', the impossible (meta-)stance of the artist as critic/author, that characterizes conceptual art, is paradoxically sustained by displacing it by means of fictionalization. Some of autofiction's processes of (self-) fictionalization were already present in conceptual art (i.e. the works of Robert Morris or Vito Acconci), yet not emphasized as such. In particular, conceptual art's fondness of role-playing, its use of photography and other types of documentary evidence, as well as the choice of language as its privileged medium already hint towards (the possibility of) 'visual autofiction'. In fact, as we will see, artists such as Marcel Broodthaers or Adrian Piper bring to light the aporias intrinsic to conceptual art *and* trace lines of flight that lead towards 'fiction' as an aesthetic and critical strategy.

In their introduction to *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, Michael Newman and Jon Bird argue that a crucial objective of conceptual art is "to demolish the distinction between art and practice, theory and criticism". (Newman and Bird, 1999: 2) Because of this intrinsic auto-critique, conceptual art has been particularly sensitive to its political and institutional embedment and history. As Jeff Wall states in his account of conceptualism in 'Dan Graham's Kammerspiel', institutional (auto)critique is inextricably intertwined with the critical use and proliferation of different media and genres: it "interrogates modern art as a *complex of institutions* which *produce* styles, types of object and discourses rather than questioning art in terms of works of art first and foremost, as the academics taught". (Wall, 2007: 33, my emphasis) Conceptual art's (auto)critique has thus led it to vehemently question medium-specificity. For Newman and Bird, conceptual art shows "a tendency or critical attitude towards the object as materially constituted and visually privileged". (Newman and Bird, 1999: 5) This critical stance, *at the same time*, leads to a proliferation of mixed media in conceptualist works (i.e. the case of Marcel Broodthaers) and the sublimation of the artwork into the concept of art as such (the latter being hyperbolically represented by a conceptualist such as Joseph Kosuth). Or more precisely, as Peter Osborne argues, it is by its very conceptualizing of 'art' that artistic practice can no longer allow itself to privilege vision. Instead of preaching an aesthetic asceticism, conceptual art constitutes a generic space in which media, genres and strategies may collide freely. "[It] is the *infinite plurality of media* that the idea of conceptual art opens up which is the point". (54) The 'dematerialization' of the artwork (as Lucy Lippard has designated conceptual art's determining gesture) is not so much an idealisation as the condition of "the *infinity* of its possible realisations". (Osborne, 2002: 22)

In particular, the privilege of auto-critique in conceptual art (and, by extension, its questioning of 'art'), has led to conceptual art's 'linguistic turn': the propagation of mixed media goes hand in hand with (and is even sublimated by) the predominance of language as medium (for example, for Jeff Wall "[t]his transformation from *emblematics* to a directly critical and discursive form of expression is the central achievement of conceptual art" - Wall, 2007: 34, Wall's emphasis). The critical writings of conceptual artists such as Robert Morris, Robert Smithson or Adrian Piper set the example: the essays and other textual explorations that accompany their works (and sometimes are barely distinguishable from them) serve to

legitimize their artistic practice. They posit the artists as "guarantors and guardians of their right to nomination". (Osborne, 2002: 42) In other words, through the non-visual medium of 'text' conceptualists provide themselves with a critical distance that allows for institutional critique and affects the very medium with which they engage. Conceptual art obviously shares its concerns with the possibilities of language with contemporary theoretical movements in the humanities (such as semiotics, structuralism and poststructuralism), and is partly informed by them. According to Peter Osborne this appropriation of theories and philosophies forms a "usurpation of critical power" in order to bypass prevalent modes of art criticism. (Newman and Bird, 1999: 49) It is this gesture that gives birth to what Lucy Lippard famously coined as "the artist as self-curator". (Lippard, 1973) By its emphasis on language as medium, conceptual art sets out to explore the potentialities of signification of different linguistic means and systems.

However, as Derrida's 'law of genre' demonstrates, it is also this use of 'text' as a new medium in the expanded field of art that draws the artist-as-critic back into art as an author who manipulates yet another aesthetic medium. It asserts the impossibility of the artist to abandon the field in which he/she is one of the key players; if only because this supposed transgression drags the artist into an bottomless *mise-en-abyme*. Furthermore, as we will see, this new medium introduces in the expanded field of art the problematics of fiction that is only partly developed by conceptual art; that is to say, exclusively in terms of 'performance' (see, in this introduction, 'Impersonations: Photography and Expropriation in Conceptual art').

As Benjamin Buchloh argues, the 'erosion' of vision that conceptual art has brought about, has not merely effectively deconstructed "the hegemony of the visual, but [I] the possibility of *any other agent* of the aesthetic experience being autonomous and self-sufficient " (Buchloh in Krauss, 1997: 130, my emphasis). Paraphrasing Adorno, Buchloh shows that that reduction of aesthetic means to linguistic convention and institutional discourse exposes the crucial interdependence between artistic practice and authorship, and the former instances. Or, as Buchloh argues relating to conceptualist Lawrence Wiener, the matrix statement of conceptual art "defines the parameters of a work of art as those on the conditions of authorship and production, and their interdependence with those of ownership and use [I]". (148) This definition provided the possibility of a critique of the conditions of authorship - that is to say, of the institutions of which it is co-extensive. Conceptual art thus distances itself from the idea of authorial skills and the 'acquired competence of reception' that serve to perpetuate the institutional surroundings of the artwork. (152) Instead, as Sol LeWitt proposed, it attempts to challenge that 'structural relationship' by, presenting the artist as a provider of 'information', their correlation being conceived of as a correlation of *positions* rather than subjectivities. (LeWitt in Krauss, 1997: 152) One may argue that this formalization leads in fact to immobilization of existing positions, and, moreover, elevates the author-as-critic, from being one end of the 'structural relationship', to an encompassing, hyperbolic figure that inaugurates this relationship and manipulates it. Buchloh draws a similar, harsh, conclusion when writing:

Paradoxically then, it would appear that conceptual art truly became the most significant paradigmatic change of postwar artistic production at the very moment that it mimed the operative logic of late capitalism and its positivist instrumentality in an effort to plan its auto-

critical investigation at the service of liquidating even the last remnants of traditional aesthetic experience. (154-155)

Conceptual art effectively annuls representation, individual skills and style as ingredients of the aesthetic experience, leaving little more to (a redefined and expanded notion of) 'art' than a hyperbolic imitation of late-capitalist objectivism and administration - auto-critique thus becomes indistinguishable from the affirmation of existing socio-political structures.

Similarly, for Jeff Wall, one of the major limitations of the project of conceptual art was the equally historically determined critical discourse by means of which it meant to expose the historical and socio-political institutions it was embedded in, and that Wall qualifies as "midway between *The Dialectics of Enlightenment* and *The Society of Spectacle*". (Wall, 2007: 33) The radical deconstruction of the work of art - its medium-specificity - was also (and, according to Wall, principally) directed against the artwork as commodity, a paradigm increasingly dominant in the post-Pop 1960's and 1970's. However, it is this paradigm that eventually will tackle conceptual art. Rather than operating the Herculean breakdown of institutions, conceptual art (and more precisely: the artist that had set himself/herself this task) found itself confined by an ever greater imperative, that of the globalized art market. For Wall, an artist such as Dan Graham diagnoses conceptual art's rampant and eventually suicidal self-overestimation: "[Graham] shows that the conceptualist strategy of intervention, carried out as art's own ideal, is pure defeatism, defeatism almost raised to a higher power by its self-consciousness". (72) Paradoxically, conceptualist auto-critique could only occur when the institutional grip, now boosted by economic imperative, was firmly closing.

Among other things, 'visual autofiction' performs the "ironically self-conscious but nonetheless compulsive submission to marketing" Wall sees becoming pervasive since the mid 1970's (37), and of which Cattelan's work testifies. Yet, it refuses to do so exclusively in terms of the defeat of conceptualist (auto)critique. In 'visual autofiction' fictionalization becomes a strategy of (unconventional) institutional critique (albeit a less overt one, and one that is certainly not unproblematic - but it certainly proceeds from conceptual art's pivotal interest in critique; see also Welchman, 2006).

## The Marcellisation of Broodthaers

According to Buchloh and Krauss, conceptual art has found its very own 'mythoclast' in Marcel Broodthaers (Buchloh, 2000: 95). In "Marcel Broodthaers: Open Letters, Industrial Poems", Buchloh writes that the former's work foregrounds the "disavowed conditions" of conceptual art. (109) Broodthaers' oeuvre thus not only underlines the intrinsic dead ends of conceptual art, but, at the same and *without* abandoning many of conceptual art's criticisms, hints at different conceptions of conceptual art, in particular through the use of fiction and self-fictionalization. Broodthaers' work in fact announces the dominant strategies of 'visual autofiction'.

The idea of the artist as manipulator and creator of the *discourse sustaining art* (the artist as guarantor of his/her own self-sufficiency typical for conceptual art) is taken *literally* by Broodthaers, in creating his own imaginary museum and posing as its director (and in particular as curator of its *Department of Eagles*). In a burlesque 'negation of negation', he asserts the inescapable containment of art by generalized bureaucracy; and, moreover, the subterfuges of those artists pretending to have successfully escaped it (by sublimating the materiality of the artwork into the discourses or texts that supplement it). That is to say, Broodthaers' critique relies on (self-) *fictionalization*; Rosalind Krauss even refers to fiction as Broodthaers' "master medium". (Krauss, 1999: 46) Simultaneously author, critic and character, Broodthaers subjects himself to what Barthes calls 'marcellisation', in reference to Proust's protagonist. (see Barthes, 2003) Broodthaers highlights conceptual art's dead ends by repeating them while assuming the role of a fictional character (a fictional or even stereotypical self-curator), with whom he nonetheless shares his name, and without whom Marcel Broodthaers the author-artist would be left unemployed. Broodthaers thus uses metonymy, as proximity without coincidence, as an efficient tool of critique, that transforms (conceptualist) auto-critique into a critique of conceptual art, however without fully abandoning conceptual art's attack on institutions. Broodthaers does not so much contest the (political) validity of the conceptualist project, as its *modi operandi* and in particular the authorial illusions that sustain them. In his 'museum fictions' he performs a repetition that makes conceptual art's critique productive in a new manner - *as fiction*. In the *Department of Eagles*, and especially in the correspondence and faux administrative paperwork that accompany it, conceptual art's emphasis on the discursive becomes subject to fictionalization: in a series of open letters that contain reflections on the museum, on the circulation of the pieces that it consists of, on the department's possible participation in major exhibitions, on the future liquidation of the museum etc etc, Broodthaers systematically blurs the distinction between Marcel-the-director, Marcel-the-author and the 'real' Marcel. In fact, the voice that resounds in these written pieces seems situated somewhere in between all these selves (as is the case in Proust's masterpiece), and is never made fully present as the metonymical difference is perpetually maintained.

In *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Krauss argues that Broodthaers interest in fiction as his 'master medium' is above all motivated by this principle of (self-) deferral that "empties out the very notion of simultaneity" between selves, and that, moreover, accentuates the impossibility of a simultaneity of sorts to be brought about in a particular *medium*. (Krauss, 1999: 47) Broodthaers's pivotal contribution to the development of contemporary art, according to Krauss, is that he theorizes "the image into the self-deferring and displacing status of fiction". (51) The proliferation of media and genres in Broodthaers' oeuvre takes places as part of this process of fictionalization, of the 'marcellisation' of Broodthaers. The latter is not so much concerned with the annihilation of media and genres (only to be sublimated in/by discourse, as was the case of conceptual art), but with the intrinsic split within them that fictionalization exposes (Broodthaers oeuvre demonstrates that no particular medium can ever fully be at the service of critique). Broodthaers eclectic oeuvre, by adopting fiction as its condition of possibility, 'realizes' both the impossible yet sustained position of post-conceptualist artist and emphasizes the inherent shortcomings of the medium. Broodthaers thus becomes exemplary of what Krauss coins as art in its 'post-medium condition'. That is, an art that is not so much iconoclastic, but productive through the self-deferral of medium. For Krauss, Broodthaers anticipates a

different type of recognition of " the contemporary obsolescence of the traditional mediums" (Krauss, 2006: 57), that is to say: an obsolescence that does not imply the illusionary transcendence of the medium as such (and that results in a faux de-skilling, that in fact elevates the artist as auto-critic through the medium of text). Rather, it " force[s] to do something as counterintuitive as inventing a new medium" (58): a medium that is productively used in its self-deferral. In other words: in Broodthaers' wake, contemporary 'visual autofiction' is in search of "a new set of aesthetic conventions" (58) - not: of a new medium that holds an essence to be brought about by the artist, but a new medium that creatively uses its obsolescence.

Broodthaers fiction is an acknowledgment of the impasses of conceptual art but refuses to abandon its socio-political exigency. As fiction, Broodthaers' works are less directly aggressive and perhaps less immediately effective - yet, they open up a generic space wherein new authorial positions and a new engagement with the medium are possible (for instance, Broodthaers allows for a questioning of the artistic self outside of the identification of the author-artist with 'general social subjects', as is the case in Cindy Sherman's early works, for example). Furthermore, Broodthaers' *Department of Eagles* pretends to represent an (anthropological) account of art history. In his displays, narratives about the end of art (prevalent in late 1960s) thus become subject to fiction and by consequence deferred (the end of art is postponed by having been made the fictional object of art). As a result, Broodthaers' autofictions also represent a refusal of closure, and therefore openness to a future for 'art' (albeit in the form of proliferation of fictions).

## Suspensions of the Self: Adrian Piper's 'Mythic Being'

In 'Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object' (1970-1973), Adrian Piper underlines her recurrent use of 'autobiography' as an investigative tool. In her work from the early 1970's, and in particular in her performances and textual/visual work concerning her alter-ego the "Mythic Being", Piper explores the merging of autobiography and self-fictionalization in an analysis of what she describes as 'artistic objecthood'. Piper's works from the early 1970's are perhaps best described as the conscious confusion between subject and object; in them, she emphatically stages herself as "performing object". (Piper, 1996: 89) The notion of 'performing object' is rooted in Piper's refusal of the alienation between the artwork (as supposedly autonomous 'end product') and the artistic process: the artist is in fact seen by Piper as the (literal) embodiment of the artistic process and is, as such, an intrinsic part of the work. Therefore, Piper's oeuvre, especially in the first half of the 1970's, consists of a variety of explorations of the artistic subject as object; mostly, these explorations take place by documenting allegedly 'subjective' processes, such as the artists reaction to the presence of (and reactions by) a particular audience (which, in the case of Piper, predominantly does not consist of gallery visitors, but rather of subway travellers, passers-by and other 'non-artistic' gatherings of people). As Piper herself writes: the performances and ongoing auto-commentaries thus trace "the history of myself as self-conscious object". (91)

The dissolution of the subject-object dichotomy in Piper's works thus takes place in a continuous registration of seemingly subjective experiences: it is - at first sight - their rigorous documenting that transforms the artistic subject into an object of investigation. However, as we will see, Piper's performances radically differ from traditional forms of autobiography *and* of dominant documentary strategies within conceptual art. Yet, her works remains rigorously conceptual: in it, the 'dematerialization of the artwork' concerns the artistic subject itself. What Piper is ultimately searching for, is a state of objectivity *through self-consciousness* (a *topos* wherefrom de-subjectivation may be realized). Nonetheless, the audacity of Piper's earlier works consists precisely in this search taking place not so much through the more ascetic forms of de-skilling and invading use of meta-theoretical discourse we encounter in conceptual art, but through role-playing (as Mythic Being) and the use of autobiographical procedures (such as her recurrent use of fragments from her own diary). For Piper, the state of absolute objecthood she seeks to evoke through her performances by no means excludes her engagement with the outside world: "[...] the possibility of assimilating as much of [the] external world, as other, into my sense of self. The more I assimilate, the more easily I am able to see myself as 'an object in the world among others'," she writes. (51)

Her 1972-1976 performance of the 'Mythic Being' shows Piper as a moustached man, wearing dark sunglasses and long hair. As she announces in her preparatory notes to the Mythic Being, her aim is to fully adapt herself in behaviour to her masculine disguise and the contexts in which she makes use of it. Thus, Piper hopes to obtain the simultaneous consciousness of an object (the Mythical Being) and the internal consciousness of 'self' (that, in turn, becomes object). External public behaviour and internal experiences and observations will supposedly result in 'self-conscious objectivity'. Interestingly however, Piper's Mythic Being generates a plurality of subjectivities, an offspring that is only hesitantly recognized by Piper, whose primary concern with objectivity withholds her from the very lines of flight (out of her concerns with objecthood) that unfold in her performance.

The performance, next to Piper publicly assuming the role of the male alter-ego (whom she also calls The Persona), additionally consists of (the real) Adrian Piper's regular reciting of her own diary entries as if they were mantras. These fragments equally appear in the form of cartoonish thought-balloons coming from the Mythic Being's head in images of the Mythic Being that are publicized in the Village Voice (and that are in fact altered photographs of Piper as a teenager, showing the gradual transformation of Adrian Piper into the Mythic Being). What makes Piper's Mythic Being interesting is that the desired de-subjectivation takes on different forms. First of all, the chanting of the autobiographical fragments as mantras and their appearance as thought emanating from the Mythic Being, strongly depersonalizes Piper's past experiences and expressions:

As autobiography, my words are completely familiar and transparent, infused with the intimacy of my own past. As chanted mantra they become meaningless sounds, depersonalized expressions of my own past. As self-expressing utterances of the Mythic Being, they regain their specificity, their significance, their mystery for me: they are signs of someone else's experience, to which I have only partial access. My understanding of his utterances are determined by the extent to which I can transcend my identity, my sex, my personality, my limitations, and achieve in general those generalized, fictional qualities of

which my own - as portrayed and designated by entries in my journal - are the negation. (112-113)

Far from being either a mere support for the artist's self-image or the artist's quest for objectivity, the Mythic Being gains an existence of its/his own, at the threshold of fiction and autobiography. The objectivation and diminishing of Piper's subjective and determining experiences as described in her diary paradoxically fuels the increasing individuation of the Mythic Being. That is to say: for Piper, it is as if the Mythic Being shows her that the life of 'Adrian Piper' as it was lived up to the creation of the Mythic Being, is only one of the many possibilities that the autobiography of Adrian Piper contains. "The Mythical Being as an alternative of myself. One of the many possible products of my experiences and history, though I myself am the only actual one", Piper notes. (109) The expressions and experiences of the Mythic Being, while being parasitic on her own, increasingly influence and alter the course of Piper's life and personality. The Mythic Being both coincides with and is separated from Piper's biography. It is from this strange *trait-d'union* that divides and joins that the Mythic Being holds Piper in its grip. "The overt material existence of the Mythic Being has given way to a personality, *partly abstract and fictional*, which manifests its influence on me by imbuing my perceptions and my memories with a self-conscious awareness of my own intrinsic masculinity. My androgyny is a source of joy and confusion to me", Piper writes, seemingly being both anxious and delighted about her engagement in this process of self-fictionalization. (123, my emphasis)

Ultimately, Piper puts a halt to the proliferation of fictions (of the self) by turning the Mythic Being into "a static emblem of alien confrontation". (138) Piper's quest for objectivity has resulted in the suspensions of the self that the Mythic Being fictionally operates, and that Piper finally does not uphold. The Mythic Being is, in a sense, sublimated by Piper into a figure of the collective unconscious (and thus, again, objectified) by being made public in yet another way; by reproducing the image of the Mythic Being onto (an unlimited series of) commercial posters, he/it, rather than involving Adrian Piper in a potentially bottomless mise-en-abyme of self-fictionalization, becomes a static and general image of collective anxiety, offered to all by the artist. As the embodiment of generalized paranoia and mistrust, the Mythic Being "is a catalyst for the violences of our world", Piper says. (138) The poster entitled "The Mythic Being: I Embody" (1975) shows him/it looking intimidatingly and mockingly at the viewer, drawing on a cigarette, while a text balloon escapes from its/his lips that reads "I embody everything you most hate and fear". Transformed into a Mythic Being in the sense of an archetypal embodiment of collective fears, he/it finally interrupts the line of flight out of conceptual art's dead ends (concerning the artist's meta-position or 'objective self-consciousness'), a line of flight lodged within the practice of conceptualist performance itself.

## Impersonations: Photography and Expropriation in Conceptual art

As we have seen in the case of Broodthaers and Piper, conceptual art's appropriation of

strategies and means of identification also traces lines of flight that will allow 'visual autofiction', not so much to escape, as to creatively uphold conceptual art's aporias (especially concerning the figure of the artist). An important one of conceptual art's instruments and objects of *détournement* is photography - and more precisely photography as *documentary evidence*. Conceptual art's use of photography as indexical trace (of the artist's unmediated presence at his/her performance) not only serves documentary purposes (the paradox of documenting performance is in fact central to a lot of conceptual works), but it also emphasizes the possibilities of an ironic *performative* use of documentary photography. 'Visual autofiction' such as that of Sophie Calle, Sarah Lucas or Sam Taylor-Wood uses the photographic image as indexical trace in all its performative potential.

Michael Newman underlines the double bind that is intrinsic to conceptual art's use of photography: the uniqueness of the performance is simultaneously attested and expropriated by the use of photography as documentary evidence. (Newman and Bird, 1999: 214-215). For Jeff Wall, this expropriation relates photography to a novel conception, or possible conceptions, of performance. In particular, photojournalistic 'reportage' becomes the object of fictionalization: "reportage is being introduced and parodied, manneristically, in aspects of photo-conceptual art [].]. The gesture of reportage is withdrawn from the social field and attached to a pure theatrical event. [.]". (Wall, 2007: 150) Thus the "subjectivation of reportage" has introduced in photography a "problematics of the staged, or pose, picture, through new concepts of performance". (150) According to Wall, this 'subjectivation of reportage' foremost has a critical motive: it questions the use of 'reportage' as a possible genre in art photography (an idea sustaining photographic practices from Brassai to Robert Frank). In 'visual autofiction,' the emphasis remains on the possibilities for subjectivation.

Wall argues that, in posing as 'amateur' (that is to say, as merely interested in a pure and rudimentary documentary use of photography), the conceptualist photographer distances himself/herself from the criteria of art photography he/she is thus allowed to expose in social and institutional attachments. Wall shows how, as a consequence, the critical stance and dissociation adapted by conceptual artists (in particular through their use of photography) is, from the outset, supported by *impersonation*. (167) In 'visual autofiction' impersonation will remain an important stratagem, albeit no longer exclusively related to institutional critique. 'Impersonation' transforms the artist in an amateur practitioner of different aesthetic means of expression (from silhouette-cutting to stripping) - not as mere role-playing, but as a manner of situating the artistic self by means of a fictional expansion of his/her operative field. The use of impersonation in autofiction has a double objective: on the one hand, it exposes the impossible liaison of artistic agency and critique (rather than establishing it, as conceptual photography desired); on the other hand, it seeks the productive endorsement of the same impossibility. 'Visual autofiction' thus offers what can be described as a participatory critique through role-playing (i.e. the photographic works of Cindy Sherman or Tracey Moffatt).

## Auto/fiction

What, then, sets the works of art that may be related to 'visual autofiction' apart from traditional auto-representations and, on the other hand, of narrowly conceptualist works? What are the components of a definition of 'autofiction' particular to contemporary visual art?

In his attempt to theorize his own autofictions, in the influential "Autobiographie/ vérité/ psychanalyse", Doubrovsky describes this practice as a "strategy of genres". (Doubrovsky, 1988: 74) This is perhaps best described as a 'strategy of tension' in which the (apparent) impossible reconciliation of genres fulfils a particularly effective critical function. By reuniting autobiography and fiction, by bringing together narratives of intimacy and difference in one and the same practice of writing, Doubrovsky contests existing critical models insofar as his new practice resists interpretative closure (in Doubrovsky's case: that of psychoanalysis). At the same time, on another level, Doubrovsky's writing fulfils the (impossible hence phantasmagorical) reconciliation of opposing imaginaries of the self. (71) We may perceive these two inextricably related strategies equally at work in 'visual autofiction'. However, there is no point in defining 'visual autofiction' as the mere continuation of Doubrovsky's literary project by other means. If we are to grasp the significance and the effectiveness of 'visual autofiction' within contemporary visual art, we should carefully take into account both the contextual differences and the differences in aesthetic means regarding 'visual autofiction'. Perhaps the most important dissimilarity between visual and literary autofiction is the different accent placed on 'critique': whereas Doubrovsky (and in his wake an entire generation of French authors) maintains the emphasis on a variety of phantasms of the self, 'visual autofiction' highlights auto-critique and the embedment of auto-critique in institutional critique (albeit in a unconventional form).

First of all, the 'auto' in 'visual autofiction' does not exclusively refer to a necessarily identifiable 'I' or biography of the artist; it is certainly no matter of conventional auto-portraiture or auto-representation. Rather, they show to what extent the 'private' and artistic self cannot be dissociated, to what extent the former is inevitably subjected to a narrative (fiction) of sorts by the latter.

In his seminal *Le pacte autobiographique* (English translation: Lejeune, 1989), Philippe Lejeune argues that textual autobiographies imply what he names 'the referential pact'. This unspoken agreement between author and reader safeguards the veracity of the text insofar as it circumscribes the reality it seeks to render as well as the degree of resemblance it aspires to; and according to which it wants to be judged by the reader. (Lejeune, 1975: 36) According to Lejeune, it is this fundamental 'referential pact' that separates autobiographical texts from fiction: it alerts the reader to the fact that the reality referred to in the text he/she is about to read is not the result of what Roland Barthes famously coined as 'l'effet de réel' (the 'reality effect', or the illusion of truthfulness by the strategic use of seemingly referential signs), but of what he calls himself "l'image du réel" (the image of the real, or the photo-realistic capturing of a pre-existing reality). In *Le pacte autobiographique*, albeit hastily, Lejeune concedes that this distinction is to a very large extent artificial: there is no definitive guarantee that any written sign can function exclusively as 'image du réel' (in fact it can only do so if it has first been baptised as solely referential in a 'referential pact'). It is telling that

Lejeune can only provide this assurance by turning the written sign (in all its unreliability) into an *image* (of which he apparently uses a very restricted definition: the image not as a sign but a picture-perfect copy of reality). Doubrovsky's notion of 'autofiction' derives from this intrinsic tension between the text as both the result of the reality effect and a hypothetical image of reality. Although on its own visual terms and within its visual genealogy, 'visual autofiction' exploits a similar anxiety.

In fact, Lejeune's conception of the image as a safeguard of reality against the unreliability of the sign is reversed if not perverted in 'visual autofiction': here, the artistic self is *coined as sign*. More precisely: as *index* or *indexical trace*; that is to say, as 'a sign that has a metonymic relation to what it represents'. In 'Surrealist Precipitates: Shadows Don't Cast Shadows', Denis Hollier argues that the indexical trace thus defined, far from being reducible to its referential function, is a most effective tool for fictionalization. Hollier's essay elaborates on Rosalind Krauss' seminal 'Notes on the Index Parts 1 + 2'; Krauss' texts addresses the importance of the index as "that type of sign which arises as the physical manifestation of a cause, of which traces, imprints and clues are examples" for the study of art from the 1970's, and thus highlights some stratagems within (conceptual) art from the 1970's that are closely related to the concerns of 'visual autofiction'. (Krauss, 1986: 211) In turn, Hollier shows that, as indexical traces, existing selves such as the protagonists of André Breton's *Nadja* are anything but posthumous biographical subjects; in fact, they inform and disturbingly partake in a narrative fiction that is not the exclusive result of the author's agency. (Hollier, 1994: 129) Rather, 'authorship' becomes problematized because of the insistent use of the indexical trace. When put to use in aesthetic projects such as that of Breton, metonymy, as a relation of proximity (but not coincidence), generates a highly productive zone of indistinction between reality and image, history and fiction. The simultaneous proximity *and* difference of the referent in the indexical sign subjects it to fictionalization. It is this duplicity that will be used as an instrument of critique in 'visual autofiction', in particular of the (conceptualist) notion of authorship.

Whereas Breton coins the proper name of others, in 'visual autofiction' the artistic self is manipulated as indexical trace: it is metonymically made present. In 'visual autofiction' we encounter the artistic self as an emblematic object from art history (Nauman's body trading places with Duchamp's urinal), as silhouette (in Kara Walker's cut-outs), through Calle's personal email messages and the affects that surround it, through Tracey Emin's habitats (her tent, bed and quilts), through Yves Klein's monochromes in patented bleu that bears his name.

The artistic self as indexical trace has a tripartite significance, its metonymic character assembles, without reducing their differences: 1. the artistic self as index (as reference to the function of the artist in the broader socio-political field of contemporary art); 2. the artistic self as private self; 3. the artistic self as susceptible to fictionalization (by means of metonymic transference). This multiplication of selves gives way to *auto-critique* that is essential to 'visual autofiction': it continues yet displaces the institutional critique conceptual art embarked on (above all the function of the artist and 'authorship' within the art world). The artist-as-theorist in conceptual art (that is still related to the omniscient artist in

modernism it in part decried), becomes the fictionalized artistic self in 'visual autofiction'. Whereas in conceptual art the artist served as an indexical sign of the broader socio-political field that is the art world (and that occupies a particular function in it), 'visual autofiction' emphasizes the susceptibility to produce fiction inherent to the indexical sign in a critique of conceptualist premises. Artists such as Calle in this way follow a different line of thought concerning the artistic self that remained unarticulated in conceptual art. They propose an auto-critique that is both institutional and confidential. As we will see, this auto-critique takes place through an exploration of aesthetic means (of different media, even 'post-media').

## Two Portraits of the Self

Finally, as a means of situating the double-edged notion of 'autofiction' in relation to its (conceptual) genealogy and heuristic value, we will take a closer look at two images of the self, spanning several decades in the development of contemporary visual art. As works of 'autofiction', these two works are part of a series of stratagems within contemporary art that address the questions of biography/autobiography and possible narratives of the self. At the same time, they also form and make use of a constellation of genres and media (conceptual art and post-conceptual art; installation art, mixed media, post-medium art, etc: the two works are indeed hard to categorize). By casting a refracted light on the self, that is to say: by means of a fictionalization of the self, these two pieces install a lasting relation between praxis and theory. In them, the tracing of a problematic of narrating the self is inextricably intertwined with aesthetic auto-critique as well as the problematization of artistic means. It is precisely this shibboleth that is at the core of the rethinking of 'autofiction' that is central to the current issue of *Imagine and Narrative*.

1. Bruce Nauman's emblematic *Self Portrait as a Fountain* (1966) shows the artist's naked torso and head spouting water. A clear reference to Marcel Duchamp's mythic *Fountain* (1917) signed R.Mutt, Nauman's piece obviously plays with the notions of 'readymade' and 'signature,' two pivotal and debated notions of 20 th century art. *Self Portrait as a Fountain* presents the artist-signatory as being himself a readymade of sorts.

Duchamp's work famously consists of a found object that renders the artist's signature useless; however, the latter is still, and quite ostentatiously, present; albeit that of a fictional character (more precisely: an allegorical character called R.Mutt). Even if the artist Marcel Duchamp is a master of disguise (i.e. Man Ray's portrait of Duchamp as Rose Selavey), for all his assaults on artistic skilfulness and the artist as authority figure, he nevertheless remains a master: a master in vanishing acts. *Self Portrait as a Fountain* shows Duchamp's readymade to stubbornly proceed from a classical gesture: the mastery and hence presence of the artist is visible in his/her vanishing from the object, which is ratified by his/her signature. In Nauman's work, on the other hand, the artist becomes object. That is to say, if the signature is replaced by the unmediated presence of the artist, the artist is foremost a passive *object* (and not agent). Nauman's presence is affirmed yet immediately displaced.

Thus the question of authorship central to Duchamp's grandiose gesture of signing a urinal is posed differently. Nauman's work shows a refusal of the withdrawal of the artist behind the work that all the more foregrounds him/her. However, his work does not consist of mere auto-exposure or the assertion of a supposed artistic genius, not even of the playfully acerbic disappearance of the artist as was the case for Duchamp: Nauman's fountain remains a plain ornamental object (the fountain as a source - of vital artistic production - is ironically dismissed in its objectivation). At the same time, the foregrounding of the artist as his/her own critic or the historian of his/her artistic practice is exposed as yet another avatar of artistic mastery. Again: in Nauman's work, the artist appears as ready-made object; in it, the passivity of object annuls the agency of the artistic subject.

Nauman appropriates the idea of the vanishing artist as a means of foregrounding him/her in order to tell a different story of the artistic self. That is, of the self as object, of the self as a remainder in a complex game of appearance and disappearance: dislocated but not absent, much like Duchamp's prosaic 'fountain' with which Nauman is switching roles. *Self Portrait as a Fountain* shows the (contemporary) artist's impossible position between being both the object of critique and the critic. In being his/her own critic, the artist manoeuvres himself/herself in an aporia: the artist tries at once to be inside and outside the field of artistic practice.

Crucially, Nauman's work situates the artistic self in an art historical narrative, by assuming the role of art history's most significant of objects. The artistic self is only metonymically present (but present nevertheless): it is coined and immediately made subject to fiction. Nauman assumes neither the character of the modern artist-signatory, nor the critical stance of, for example, the conceptual art his work relates to (the artist as his/her own critic hyperbolically turns the artist into his/her own counter-signatory) or, for that matter, the immediate presence of the artist's body in performance or actionist art. *Self Portrait as a Fountain* paradoxically asserts and subverts the presence of the artistic self by making it subject to fiction; thus, the self as critical remainder creates a tension between fictionalizing the self and aesthetic auto-critique that will prove to be productive throughout (post) conceptualist art, and that we may define as 'autofiction'.

(PS: At the 2007 Biennale, Nauman's *Venice Fountains* showed two mirroring plaster casts of a male head (resembling that of the older Nauman) spouting water into two separate plain white kitchen sinks where the water was collected to be re-circulated through the cast's mouth. Referring to both traditional ornamental fountains (abundantly present in Venice) and his own *Self Portrait as a Fountain*, Nauman's work raises poignant questions about the (self) mythologization of contemporary art. The two mirroring casts, reminiscent of the water-pouring sculptures of mythological characters that decorate Baroque fountains, (not without irony) address the problematic insertion of contemporary art into a self-referential historical narrative. Turning oneself into myth (into the object of fiction and art-historical narrative) may lead to a proliferation of roles, but equally to static monumentality. 'Autofiction', precisely, may serve as an alternative to mythology that is reduced to obligatory reference.)

2. Sophie Calle's work *Prenez soin de vous* ('Take Care of Yourself'), also presented at the 2007 Venice Biennale, deals with the reception of an email announcing the end of a relationship between the artist and a man that remains unknown. For *Prenez soin de vous* Calle has invited over a hundred women to act as interpreters of this ominous missive; the women come from a variety of social strata (Calle's list includes a philosopher, an actress, a dancer, a psychoanalyst, a teenager etc etc) and interpret the email message accordingly (at least, at first sight): some give a scholarly *explication de texte*, others sing, dance, act or reply by texting their own messages. Calle operates a complex move: on the one hand, she displaces the affect (in this case, a personal tragedy) to the public sphere or community (mimicking a familiar and imperative move of the mass media), thus expanding the exploration of fictional identities that runs throughout her oeuvre. On the other hand, by this very move, she also delegates the role of the conceptual artist as 'self curator' to the interpreting subjects, thus being herself subject to fictionalization (thereby avoiding a pitfall in conceptual art wherein the involvement of the audience intends to raise awareness of its imposed role in the art-world and broader society, and consequently faces the danger of reducing the audience to a social stereotype. Calle's women are not spectators but 'interpreters' in the broadest sense of the word).

Calle's work precisely evolves around the notions of 'reception' and 'interpretation': it is through the latter that the former (in particular as a supposedly passive thus female category) is questioned by means of fictionalization. *Prenez soin de vous* presents portraits and moving images of the women that are made part of the work as well as transcripts of their interpretations. The portraits and video footage constitute a hybrid between social and individual portraiture: we see a philosopher pictured at table of a café, a scholar seated in front of her library, a teenager lying on her bed texting messages, etc etc; yet, on the level of affect, they are - or rather: seem to be - addressed to as women (that is to say as the potential addressees of this type of email). Far from reducing social stratification of women to the uncomplicated category 'woman' (that on top of that is associated with affect and more precisely: heartbreak), Calle's work in fact turns the differences between the social and the private, the professional and the supposedly feminine in to an effective strategy of female agency. The different roles embodied by the women, and more importantly the different analytical skills that go with them, enable a propagation of interpretations that shatter the unified notion of reception, especially in its relation to femininity.

One might however object that Calle thus sticks to a classical *topos* in conceptual art: she seems to present 'theory' - more precisely: interpretation - as the very object of her art, and by consequence simply make use of the women in an archetypically conceptualist self-curating or self-theorizing of the artist. Here, however, Calle makes her surprising move. Obviously, Calle delegates the theoretical work of interpretation to the women, but this transference affects both parties. In promotional interviews surrounding the Venice Biennale, Calle asserts that *Prenez soin de vous* is a 'therapeutic' work. It is perhaps foremost the ambiguity of the adjective 'therapeutic' that provides Calle's installation with its density. The handing over of interpretation to the women forces them in the position of the analyst: their responses to the email message, in return, offer the artist (the possibility of) a catharsis. In fact, the public display of the work stresses that this catharsis, as it was already the case in her earlier work *Exquisite Pain*, has effectively been a remedy for Calle's amorous trauma and has allowed for

the continuation of Calle's biography (interestingly, in 2007, Calle simultaneously exposed *Exquisite Pain* and *Takes Care of Yourself* in Luxembourg and Venice; for a detailed analysis of *Exquisite Pain*, see Anneleen Masschelein's essay in this issue). But here's the catch: the crucial difference between *Prenez soin de vous* and *Exquisite Pain* lies in the *transference* that takes place in Calle's most recent work. In *Exquisite Pain*, we are presented with a variety of personal narratives that are triggered by events from Calle's biography (in a sense, it is Calle who poses as therapist here). In *Prenez soin de vous*, on the contrary, the correlation between self and other seems complete. Certainly, role-playing (be it of social roles such as that of a stripper or, on the other hand, in the sense of the exploration of the biographies of strangers) is central to Calle's oeuvre; however, *Prenez soin de vous* transfers acting and/as interpreting to the women portrayed. The work turns Calle into the object of interpretation - without there being a simple reversal of roles. That is to say, Calle's conceptualist stance of the artist as medium in her earlier role playing work shows, much like Bruce Nauman's self portrait, the artistic subject on the threshold of vanishing.

It is this stance of the artist as near-invisible remainder that allows Calle to enact the biographies of others while maintaining a (again, typically conceptualist) critical distance, partly provided by the presence and readability of her own biography that prevents her from being fully identified with her objects (like Bruce Nauman, Calle represents the artist-as-medium not so much as a blank slate, but as a palimpsest). The women in *Prenez soin de vous*, with one or two possible exceptions, do not occupy an artistic position of Calle's kind. Their social stratifications (and the different interpretative skills that these have given them) are constantly foregrounded and contrasted with their subjective and affective means of interpretation. By means of this foregrounding *Prenez soin de vous* emphasises Calle's presence as palimpsest, but this time in order to demonstrate the limitations of the conceptualist's critical distance. Calle is in fact denied access to most of these attitudes and interpretations the women give of the object of her suffering because of social, professional, cultural and age borders. If Calle refers to *Prenez soin de vous* as 'therapeutic' it is first of all in the sense that 'therapeutic' means a handing over of the significance of one's life events to the interpretation of others (already in Calle's *Appointment with dr. Freud* the figure of the therapist as specialist is the object of ironic investigation). Calle's forwarding of the email message to other women, despite appearances, does not imply or illustrate a common denominator among 'women', but shatters it: *Prenez soin de vous* offers Calle multiple interpretations (irreducible to her own possible interpretations) and thus offers her multiple catharsis. In other words: it turns Calle's possible reply to her suffering into the subject matter of over a hundred *fictions* - yet these fictions may constitute, or in fact are already part of, her biography (the very presence of the work at the Biennale is there to prove it), and in any case have sparked off from it. Moreover, the possible plural in the French 'vous' in *Prenez soin de vous*, also turns the work into an address to the women in the work: by forwarding them her ex-lover's email message, Calle equally offers her addressees a moment of possible catharsis in their biographies, a moment that Calle cannot anticipate and that thus constitute the subject matter of the work as much as Calle's.

The works represent several crucial steps in the determination of 'visual autofiction' (that is to say, not so much a series of chronological steps as the key components of 'visual autofiction'). First of all, Nauman's work demonstrates that the artist as subject to fiction allows for a

stance that is not reducible to either that of the artist as theorist or to autobiographical concerns. Through this fictionalization, *Self Portrait as a Fountain* operates a subtle displacement of aesthetic commonplaces within modernism and conceptual art (regarding the function and the responsibility of the artistic self) that in fact permit a renewed reflection on them. Significantly, in Nauman's work, this fictionalization is not exclusively a matter of trading places with another position (that of the readymade object), but takes place within a narrative: that of the history of contemporary art.

This mise-en-abyme of (auto)biographical, art historical and fictional narratives is fully explored in Calle's *Prenez soin de vous*. Calle's personal trajectory becomes the object of her own work, yet Calle immediately transfers her artistic agency to the women she addresses through affect. However, the women in *Prenez soin de vous* are involved in the work not as an empty or reductive category: the abundant differences in professional and personal curricula result in a multiplicity of interpretations of the event that has upset Calle's private life. By making use of interpretation as a type of agency, Calle explores, by intermediary of the variety of roles offered by and incorporated by the women, the many possibilities of diverting the course of one's life. By relinquishing her artistic agency and (auto)biography, Calle as well as the women that appropriate them become subject to fiction that nonetheless has strong repercussions in their biographies. In addition, Calle's 'role-playing by proxy' constitutes a profound reflection on the position of the artistic subject after conceptual art and the means left to it for addressing the spectator.

It has hopefully become clear that Calle's work engages with the consequences and possibilities of the subtle displacement of the artistic self through its subjection to fiction that has taken place in Nauman four decades earlier. Nauman's shift within conceptualist paradigms (regarding the no less than pivotal role of the artistic self) allows for an expansion of conceptual art's range of action. To paraphrase Gilles Deleuze once more: it forms a 'line of light' from within conceptual art, that has formed the condition of possibility for the works of an impressive array of artists ranging from Nauman to Young British Artists such as Sam Taylor-Wood and Tracey Emin, to currents in contemporary *cinéma d'auteur* (Agnès Varda, Atom Egoyan).

The current issue of *Image and Narrative* obviously does not pretend to write a new chapter in the history of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century art. Much rather, it would like to indicate a set of recurrent strategies within the practice of contemporary art, which may contain a renewed understanding of its stakes and ventures. Coining the concept of 'visual autofiction', as an assemblage of such stratagems and conceptual focal points, does not entail yet another effort to categorize or taxonomize. It may fail to convince, it may be rapidly replaced by more apt notions; in any case, as a catalyst, 'visual autofiction' succeeds in shifting accents within current readings of contemporary artworks, especially when these are all too easily interpreted in terms of exhibitionism and facile media exposure - as the essays collected in this issue of *Image and Narrative* convincingly show.

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