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Captive/Obsessive: Invention and Desire in "Crazy For Vincent"

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Captive/Obsessive:

Invention and Desire In *Crazy for Vincent*

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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But why,

o foolish boy, do you persist? Why try

to grip an image? He does not exist—

the one you love and long for. If you turn

away, he'll fade; the face that you discern

is but a shadow, your reflected form.

That shape has nothing of its own: it comes

with you, with you it stays; it will retreat

when you have gone—if you can ever leave! (Ov. Met.:3.430-438)

Ajar

In the opening pages of the Surrealist classic *Nadja*, André Breton calls for a new type of literature; he writes, “I insist on knowing the names, on being interested only in books left ajar, like doors” (*Nadja* 18). Literature left ajar invites voyeurism, which is to say, reading. Books, like doors, which remain slightly open allow a reader to peer in, to see the thing happening in the private bubble of the writer’s subjectivity as it exists in relation to the world. Their liminality compels the reader to attempt to make sense of the texts. Hervé Guibert, the French writer and photographer, wrote only books where he gives the names, only books left ajar to the world. His most famous work, the work that made his reputation in France, *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* is a brutally open portrayal of his experience of being diagnosed with AIDS at the tail end of the 1980’s and his life with AIDS. Guibert went on to write two additional works dealing with the AIDS crisis and his illness before his death, at the age of 36 by suicide, in 1991. While he is best known for these works, Guibert was an absurdly prolific writer, writing over twenty books in his short lifetime (with upwards of 35 including the works collected after his death).

Crazy for Vincent (Fou de Vincent), a slim text of about 70 pages, was published the year before *To the Friend*. The work is an obsessive examination of Guibert’s relationship to a young boy, Vincent, over the course of seven years, from 1982-1988. The work begins with the death of Vincent from “complications from a ruptured spleen” (*Crazy for Vincent* 24) after he fell, or possibly jumped, from a third-story window and refused medical treatment and works its way back from this point to the moment where Guibert and Vincent first met. The text is composed entirely of entries from Guibert’s journals in which he had written about Vincent. He arranges these entries in reverse sequence, allowing the reader to discover the relationship backwards,

collapsing time into an almost claustrophobic narrative in which Vincent appears as almost the only character in Guibert's life. Like one of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's disappearing candy sculptures, where the viewers of the work removes one piece after another until the work has vanished, Guibert peels back his memories of Vincent until at the conclusion the relationship has dissolved back into nothing, less a death than an anti-birth.

Crazy for Vincent is not considered to be a part of the so-called "AIDS Trilogy" that make up Guibert's final works, yet there is compelling evidence in the text that this designation should be reexamined. Guibert had not yet gone public with his diagnoses when *Crazy for Vincent* was published and the work is somewhat oblique in its references to the illness. Given the benefit of hindsight it is clear that Vincent becomes sick with AIDS sometime in the course of the text, likely around 1986, with Guibert falling ill slightly after. While not addressing the cause of their illness in precise terms, AIDS becomes a phantom in the text, haunting the characters in so many of their interactions. AIDS pushes through the boundaries of the text ajar, forcing the real into the world of the text.

Following the quote on books ajar, Breton writes,

I myself shall continue living in my glass house where you can always see who comes to call; where everything hanging from the ceiling and walls stays where it is as if by magic, where I sleep nights in a glass bed, under glass sheet, where *who I am* will sooner or later appear etched by a diamond (18)

Breton could not know that what he was describing would come to be known as autofiction, it would be almost half a century until Serge Doubrovsky coined the term in his autofictional novel

Fils,¹ yet that is what he is doing.

Dobrovsky describes autofiction as “Fiction, made up of events and facts that are strictly real” (Back cover of *Fils*). The writer and theoretician Philippe Vilain adds to this definition that the protagonist of a work of autofiction must share the name of the author and that the work must be “generically ambiguous” in the sense that it is at once claims to be entirely referential to the world it comes out of, yet at the same time entirely nonreferential in claiming to be fictional.² Guibert’s writing is categorized in the genre of autofiction for its blurring of the boundaries between fiction and reality. Guibert’s writings have a feeling of supreme truth to them, yet some of his works appear with the disclaimer of “fiction” somewhere on them. Autofiction positions itself as ajar to lived reality. The world of the text of autofiction comes from the mind of the writer. It is their world and yet through writing they have transformed their lives into something else, literature. In the glass house of autofictional writing, the writer presents their life as they live it, and through that living “*who they are*” becomes inscribed upon the house, the text. The power of autofiction comes from the etching of the diamond, the writing on the page.

There is a danger to living in a glass house, with that much exposure the bad must come out with the good. Guibert exposes himself in some rather uncomfortable ways in *Crazy for Vincent*. Vincent was fifteen when the pair first met and they became lovers quite quickly. It is not the resident of the glass house, the writer, who throws stones, but the reader who must see the marks left by the diamond etching onto the house and who must cast their stones at the nasty bits

¹ Vilain, Philippe. "AUTOFICTION." In *The Novelist's Lexicon: Writers on the Words That Define Their Work*, edited by Gillet Villa and Le Monde, by Hermna Jeanine, 5-7. Columbia University Press, 2011.

² Vilain. "AUTOFICTION."

exposed in the text. This is not done to destroy the house, it is a precious and remarkable piece of architecture/literature, but to call attention to the real world existence of the problematic behaviors the text exposes. The reader looking in on the ajar world has a greater moral responsibility than the reader looking in on the purely closed world of fiction. What has happened in the text has happened in the world. It is the invention of the author, yet it is reality. A real boy was put in a situation that he could not have been prepared for at his age. No matter how much beauty is present in the work that resulted from this relationship the fact remains that there is something deeply problematic about the foundation of the project.

In the *New Yorker*, Vinson Cunningham writes that “‘autofiction’... tries to make reality, in all its boredom and tragedy, shimmer almost metaphysically”.³ The shimmer of the metaphysical pervades autofiction, a kind of holy transcendence elevating the banal to the level of literature. Even the banality of a crush can be heightened through autofiction. It is somewhat strange that crushes, which feel so powerful to the one with the crush, mean so little to everyone else. Sharing emotional experiences helps us make sense of the world, but how does one make sense of something as personal, as removed from the social, as a crush or an obsession? One can bore one’s friends or analyst by talking about it endlessly, simply stew over it, or perhaps, as Guibert did, keep a journal. A journal can help to keep track of the shifting terrains of the crush, mapping out, in as much detail as one sees fit, the intricacies and nuances of the feelings. Journals aren’t necessarily narrative. Rather than telling the story of the crush a journal will tell how one feels in that moment when one is writing. The journals from which *Crazy for Vincent*

³ Cunningham, Vinson. “A Painting of the Sky Every Sunday, and the Art of Careful Attention.” *The New Yorker*, www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/a-painting-of-the-sky-every-sunday-and-the-art-of-careful-attention.

was culled were recordings of Guibert's life broadly, which from time to time made reference to Vincent. It was from these passages that Guibert composed the text.

In a way, the text of *Crazy for Vincent* is really two projects, based on the same material, used in different ways for different effects. The first project was the journaling; Guibert's personal writing which he used to keep track of his life and make sense of the world. In this project Vincent is one in a larger constellation of friends, family, lovers, and associates who made up Guibert's fascinating life. The journals have been posthumously published as *The Mausoleum of Lovers*, in which one can see the fragments of *Vincent*. As the title suggests, Vincent is not Guibert's only lover or fascination. One gets a sense of the passion Guibert had for Vincent in the journals, though there is something somewhat vague and imprecise about their relationship, seen in this format, which fits in a collection of journals. Journals are not meant to tell a directed story, they lack narrative. Without the narrative structure of *Crazy for Vincent* the full force of Guibert's desire is not felt by a reader of the journals. These journals are a fascinating look at what the obsession actually felt like, in time, to Guibert. Not really the overwhelming constant focus of attention one could imagine from *Vincent* but a serious, intense emotional experience that existed within a larger emotional landscape. This writing was private, a conversation with himself which we have become privy to thanks to the efforts of Guibert's estate.

The second project, is the rediscovery. This is Guibert's journey to "find [Vincent] again in these notes, in reverse" (24). It is in this rediscovery that the work becomes autofictional. Vincent's death was a catalyzing event for Guibert in the fabrication of this project. When Vincent died, it forced Guibert to go through a process of reexamination of his material

and from this process *Crazy for Vincent* was brought into the world. Extracting only the entries related to Vincent, Guibert strips them of their context, elevating them into literature through transubstantiation, or some similar action. The private becomes public, and unlike *The Mausoleum* published by his editors, this was Guibert publicizing the private.

Labels in relationships are derided so often as to have become cliché (while the derision of this derision is nearly as cliché), yet there is something comforting in labels. Guibert struggles to name his relationship to Vincent, “What was it? A passion? A love? An erotic obsession? Or one of my inventions” (24). Vincent seems content to simply label it as a friendship, as Hervé says “he bitches that I’m the only one of his friends who wants to touch him like that, undress him, suck him off” (86). This is not enough for Guibert. As a writer, words matter for him. Guibert knows the power of naming things. In his life post-Vincent, for instance, the power of naming AIDS. To name something is to have a shared understanding of the thing. Lacking shared understanding both parties must grasp at a vague concept of what exists between them.

The unknowability of the relationship, the lack of common ground between himself and Vincent, is both alluring and disheartening to Guibert throughout their relationship. In one entry he writes “From now on, in my datebook, out of superstition, I add a question mark after his first name” (44). While on the surface the question mark is a sign of Vincent’s flakiness other questions lurk beneath the question mark. “Vincent?” can mean so much. Who is Vincent? Who is Vincent to me? Are you Vincent? Which Vincent? Why, Vincent? Why Vincent? What is Vincent? The question mark is a symbol of Vincent’s existential unknowability. All of the difficulty in knowing the other is present through the addition of the question mark, of uncertainty.

While calling it a friendship, or calling it nothing at all, may have been sufficient in life, after Vincent's death the insufficiency of the unnamed became unbearable. Imagine Guibert reaching for the language he needed to explain Vincent and his death. While *ami* is a better word for them than the English *friend*, coming from the Latin *amare*, by way of *amicus*, it still lacks the necessary emotional power to convey the depth of feeling Guibert had for Vincent.

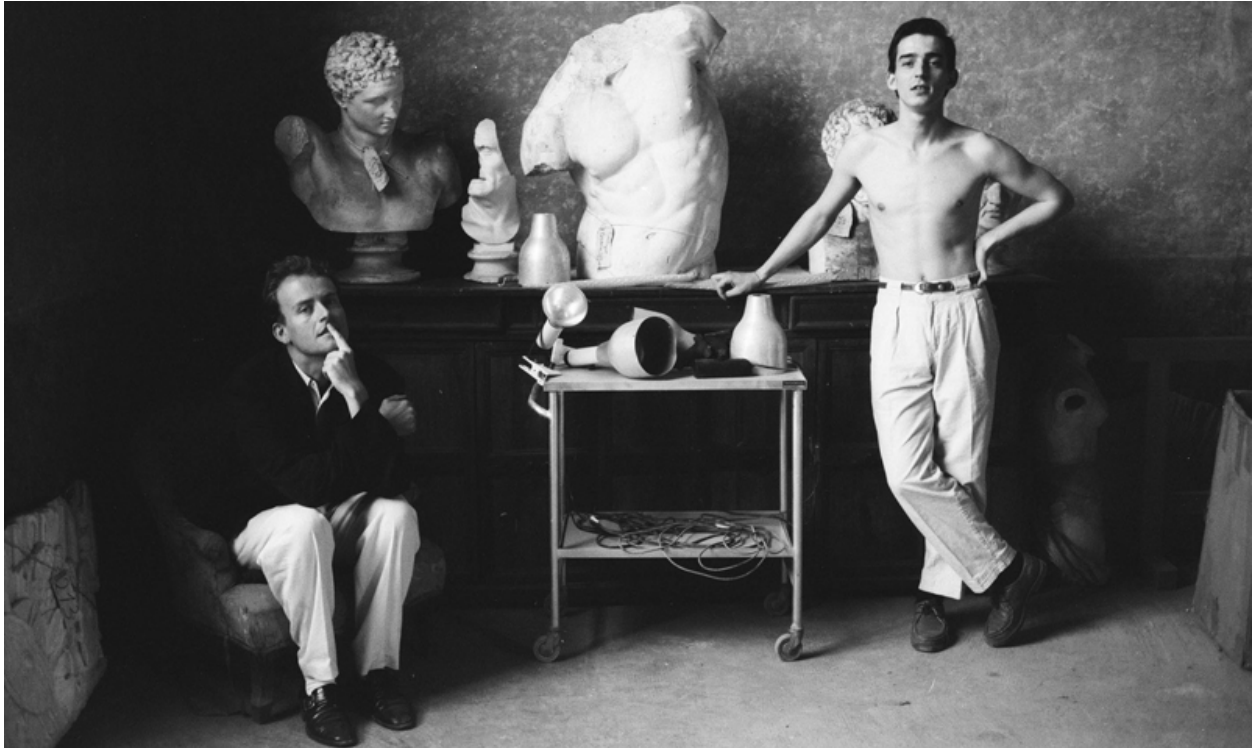
In *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* Guibert experiences the death of one of his closest friends Michel Foucault, referred to as Muzil in the text. While their relationship was closer to a "typical friendship" (whatever that means) than Guibert and Vincent's, in this moment, too, language failed the writer. He is turned away from Foucault's deathbed because he doesn't belong to the right category of relationship to him. After begging to be let in he is rejected by Foucault's physician. The doctor "wasn't contesting the fact that I was one of Muzil's closest friends, but he claimed blood relatives came first, so he refused to allow me to see Muzil again while he was still alive" (*To the Friend* 93). Because he is a "friend" and not "family", as recognized by the French laws of kinship, he doesn't have the right to be present with his loved one in death. While Foucault was famously distant from his blood relations, it was his queer kith, his created family, that was exiled from his final moments. Given Foucault's writings on the failures of medicine to understand the human needs of the individual, the doctor's lack of empathy and understanding would almost be funny if it weren't so tragic. It was the failure of language, the word friend, to adequately describe Foucault and Guibert's relationship, along with a medical system that fails to honor alternative structures of family, that prevented Guibert from saying goodbye to his beloved friend.

Lacking a term to describe his relationship to Vincent in death must have been infuriating to Guibert. How could he explain the grief he felt over Vincent's death without having words to describe their relationship? Telling the world, "my friend has died" hardly conveys what Guibert would have meant by such a statement. He could have said "my lover has died", but this too feels false and imprecise. The death of a lover is tragic, and probably the closest thing to what Guibert was experiencing, but lover has its own set of associations which fail in this case to capture the whole of Guibert's. Options such as boyfriend or partner are simply incorrect, so he is left without the tools of language. Instead what Guibert is forced to do is to "find" Vincent. There is no way to describe their relationship other than by presenting it as it happened, so that is what he does. The second project of the text, the rediscovery, is an attempt to find the language that describes their relationship, through the language he used to describe the relationship as he lived it.

Rather than finding a term to describe their relationship he discovers in his writings an aesthetic and erotic language. This was the language of his desire, his obsession. He did not discover a common ground, a place where he and Vincent could share in their understanding of what transpired between them, not least because Vincent was already dead, because what is evident in the text is that there was no common ground. The search for Vincent in the journals does not discover Vincent, it discovers Hervé's relationship to Vincent. Vincent is impossibly distant, there can be no shared understanding with him, but that does not mean there cannot be shared understanding. In an entry from 1987 Guibert writes "I love Vincent, that's the problem and my actual solitude? Bernard says it's impossible to share having a mad crush on someone" (48) and Bernard is right, sort of. The common ground discovered is between Guibert

and his reader, it is the experience of the obsessive (mad) crush. One can't share the crush with the person one has the crush on, that experience is internal and beyond their comprehension, what one can do, and what Guibert has done, is share the experience with his readers, through literature.

On *L'atelier de Balthus*



L'atelier de Balthus, Hans Georg Berger, published 1992.

In verso of the copyright page of *Crazy for Vincent* there is an illustration, a black and white photograph by Hans Georg Berger, a collaborator of Joseph Beuys and friend to Hervé Guibert (in fact Berger has an entire book dedicated to his photos of Guibert). The photograph (above), titled *L'atelier de Balthus*⁴, shows Guibert and his teen lover, Vincent, in Balthus's cluttered studio. The quality of the print in the book is poor, so some detail is lost and the overall effect is slightly muddy, however it is printed on the same paper as the rest of the text with the same standard printing ink, giving it the impression of being a necessary part of the text, rather than an art work apart from the text. The left side of the photo is dark and shadowy. Guibert

⁴ The name of the photograph appears misspelled in most contexts, including the semiotext(e) edition of *Crazy for Vincent*, as *L'at elier de Balthus*. This has been corrected in this essay for clarity.

emerges from the shadows, seated in an almost cliché writerly pose, reminiscent of Rodin's *Thinker*. His face is coy, seductive. He wears white pants, dark shoes, and a dark shirt which disappears into shadowy background, leaving his head cut off from his body, like the busts that fill the studio. He looks into the camera though his posture orients him not forward towards the camera but slightly to the right, towards Vincent. Above him, on a cabinet, sits a marble bust of a youth with curly hair, not unlike Guibert himself. The bust seems to ignore the camera casting its gaze directly at Vincent. Floating above Guibert's head it is an extension of him. The eyes of the bust seem to fall somewhere on the naked chest of Vincent, a part of his body that Guibert obsesses over through the text that follows. Next to the bust, in its line of sight, between it and Vincent sits the phallic remnants of another bust and a marble torso, which rests dead center in the photograph.

Vincent stands on the right of the photograph face, chest, and hips all oriented towards the camera bathed in natural light. He too is wearing high waisted white pants and dark shoes, though he is shirtless, highlighting his torso. His left arm (on the right side in the photo) is on hip, while he leans on the cabinet with his right, extending towards the center of the photograph and towards Guibert. His legs are crossed below the knee in a pose that is both casual and guarded, as if he is attempting to make himself slightly less open, less vulnerable. He is not quite smiling but there is a confidence, a swagger in his expression. His pale, almost ghostly, chest is mimicked by the bright white of the marble torso that sits on the cabinet behind the two figures, in the wide gulf that exists between them. The torso and Vincent are by far the brightest objects in the composition. The torso is headless and armless, ending just above the hips, almost exactly the place where Vincent's belt holds his pants. It is contorted, bending towards Guibert, causing

the muscles beneath the flesh to ripple and bulge. The position isn't quite unnatural, though it appears uncomfortable. In the text we learn that Vincent loves his torso. It is quite possibly the only part of his body that he actually enjoys. Guibert rhapsodized at length throughout the book about a number of Vincent's features, yet his torso is the only one of his features Vincent ever describes positively. The entry in the text in which Vincent describes it, notably the only entry in the entire text that is a complete quote from Vincent presented without any commentary from Guibert, reads "When I come home at night, I strip down in front of the mirror, all day long I have to deal with my ugly face, but at least I have this, a beautiful torso, I especially like that one muscle, under my arm, do you like it too?" (33) Behind Vincent, almost hidden from view is another bust with curly hair, its face hidden by his shoulder. Peeking out from the crook of his left arm (possibly the location of this favored muscle) is a third bust of which the viewer can only see a part of the face. Vincent is surrounded by the heads of men, all Guibert in one way or another, though he appears as though he is indifferent to them all. The identification between the torso and Vincent suggests his objectification in the eyes of Guibert. The difference between the busts and the torso are clear, there are the thinkers, who are also the gazers, and there are the objects which are gazed upon.

It is significant that the photograph was taken in Balthus's studio. Balthus is famously the painter of erotic portraits of pubescent girls. Balthus's girls are young and delicate but each has a power and strength to her that seems to suggest a hidden knowledge, kept from both Balthus and the viewer. It requires no mental leap to bring one from Balthus's girls to Vincent. Vincent's pose is in fact almost a recreation of the pose of Dolores in Balthus's *Joan Miro and his daughter Dolores*. In the painting Dolores, who would have been seven at the time the painting was made

(though she appears younger), stands in front of her father, one of her hands on his hand on his knee, the other on his other knee. Her hands are delicate and beautifully rendered. The hand resting on her father's seems to almost hover above the picture plane, the most dimensional aspect of the painting. Miro's hands meanwhile are stubby and illformed. Her legs are uncrossed, with all that that implies, knees slightly bent. Her expression is sedate, not quite glassy. It is almost as if she is looking down on the painter, and by extension the viewer, feeling slightly sorry for him. While Miro's gaze is cast at the painter's eyes, Dolores gaze is slightly lower, she was watching Balthus paint. Her mouth is pinched, tight. Her lips form a very small heart, bisected through the middle.



Joan Miro and his daughter Dolores, Balthus, 1937-38, in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art.

Miro resembles less a great artist than he does an accountant. He sits, though his posture is wildly different from that of the sitting Guibert. Where Guibert is relaxed, leaning into the photograph, Miro is stiff, almost neckless, shoulders both too high and sloped. His too tight suit pulls along the buttons giving him the appearance of a gut and bunches at the armpits. His hand rests just below Dolores's breast, or rather the location where her breasts will be, in a possessive fashion, suggesting a desire for control over her. His face betrays nothing of his genius. The wit and pathos one sees in his eyes in photographs is notably absent. They are clear but lifeless. He

appears almost embarrassed, his face slightly ruddy drawing the viewer to the only other red, the only real other color in the painting, Miro's tie (tight around his neck, short and stubby, cut off by the crewneck sweater that he wears under the suit jacket) and the single line of trim on Dolores's dress (running from her shoulder, down her chest, across her waist, and then down to the hem of her skirt, flowing fluid while ebbing around Miro's hand). Both faces have a shine to them, a gleam of sweat, whether from heat or discomfort it is difficult to judge. The overwhelming palette of the painting is brown. The floor is a true brown, the wall is a light blue-brown with splotches and a border of a more neutral brown, Miro's suit grey-blue-brown, Dolores's dress striped brown and white (though the white is brownish), the chair brown, their shoes (and her socks) brown. Their skin is mainly a yellow-beige with bursts of red, he all over in the face and on his knuckles, she on her rosy cheeks and knees. Her skin also has shades of blue, particularly her right forearm and brow ridge. The pair resemble each other, the same large forehead, round chin, and parted hair. Dolores appears more comfortable with her father than he is with her. Perhaps Miro regretted his decision to sit for the painting and that is the discomfort he displays. Perhaps he was second-guessing his decision to allow this painter of erotic young girls to paint him with his daughter.

Like Dolores and all of Balthus's girls, Vincent is young, too young many of us would say now, yet one gets the sense he knows exactly what he is doing, both from the photograph and the text. The Balthus connection raises not a few uncomfortable questions about the text. As our entire world reconfigures itself in the wake of the MeToo movement Balthus's place in art history is beginning to be reevaluated. Thankfully calls to have his work removed from institutions have as yet gone unanswered, though as we reconsider the politics of sex and consent

in the world and art particularly, one can't help but feel something of an "ick" factor when looking at his paintings. Questions arise; who are these girls, why is he so fascinated by them, why are they so obviously sexual, why should we devote precious institutional space and support to showcasing this kind of work? Guibert's oeuvre as a whole is not tainted by such suspicions in the same way, though particularly *Crazy for Vincent* seems to transgress many contemporary sexual mores. In this moment, Guibert too must be examined through new eyes.

Hervé met Vincent when when he was 27 and Vincent was 15 and his sexualizing of him began immediately. He wrote in his journal the night they met "Of all of the children, I'll go towards the one whose charm is least evident and I will kiss the freckles on his face, all the beauty marks on his hips and on the nape of his neck" (27). The two met in 1982, the year that France lowered the age at which gay sex acts became consensual from 18 to 15⁵, so the relationship was legal, though this seems trite and beside the point. For the entirety of their relationship both heavily used drugs and alcohol, often during sexual encounters. At the time Guibert was a journalist and author, though not yet widely known. Educated and thoroughly bourgeois, he possessed considerably more social capital than the uneducated and working-class Vincent. Describing their relationship from the current moment is difficult. From our vantage point in the U.S. where the period of adolescence has so recently been expanded, such a large age gap where one of the participants in the relationship is so young is clearly verboten. France and the 1980's, and particularly France in the 1980's had a different structure of sexual mores than the U.S. in 2018 and to attempt to apply contemporary American morals onto the text is

⁵ Patrice Corriveau, *Judging Homosexuals: A History of Gay Persecution in Quebec and France*, UBC Press, Vancouver, 2011.

misguided. This is not to say that such relationships do not require serious consideration and critique nor that events that occurred in this period which are now being revealed and discussed are not problematic. Any situation where one partner has significantly more power than the other has the potential to become fraught and any case where the agency of one of the partners is limited by the other is dangerous.

Ultimately this text is the document that remains of the relationship between Hervé and Vincent. Judgements must be made based on the evidence that exists. Vincent chose to be in a relationship of some sort with Guibert for seven years and, at least from Guibert's descriptions in the text, there seemed to be a great deal of affection, perhaps even love between them at times. There are moments in the text where Vincent accuses Hervé of taking advantage of him, "he bitches that I'm the only one of his friends who wants to touch him like that, undress him, suck him off. He threatens to knock me unconscious with the telephone and steal the cocaine I had wanted to do with him. He leaves, calling me a whore" (86-86). This moment comes relatively early in their relationship, 1985. Though the passage is upsetting, verging on frightening, it seems to suggest that Vincent was able to take control of the situation when he was unhappy with it. He disliked the way Hervé was treating him in that moment so he left. The next encounter of theirs is peaceful and loving, so Vincent chose to return to Hervé. While victims of assault or abuse often remain in relationships with their abusers are myriad reason, there seems to be little that would keep Vincent attached to Hervé if he did not desire to be there.

Vincent's moments of protest could hint at an imbalance in the relationship, though it seems perhaps more likely that they are an attempt to hurt Hervé and to protect Vincent's status as heterosexual. There seems to be an ever present undercurrent to Vincent's actions: so long as

he displays these occasional signs of disgust with Hervé he is not the same as him, he maintains the superiority of the heterosexual man. While Hervé controls some aspects of the relationship, Vincent has plenty of power over Hervé and the relationship as well. In 1984, when Vincent would have been 17, Hervé writes, “The sexual control of an implacable but definable and languishing refusal: the child is the master of this game; he presents himself innocently but imperiously, as an expert in my gratification” (89) This is the sort of power Vincent wields over Hervé. The impulse to deny the agency of adolescents, both sexually and in other matters, comes from a desire to protect those who may not yet be able to make fully informed decisions. It is also an outgrowth of the desire of parents to control their children. While often a social good, taken too far it limits the freedom of young people who have not yet reached the age of majority. Here seems to be a case where two people formed a bond that was legally sanctioned, the parents of the youth were aware of the relationship, and there was, if not equality, an ebb and flow of power relations between the lovers.

Returning again to Berger’s photograph, certain other details become apparent. The chair Hervé sits in is tiny like the child of a chair, or, perhaps for Balthus, the chair of a model. It forces him to collapse his body on itself. His position is defensive, arms protecting his chest, legs close together. The inwardness suggested by the writerly pose in fact looks rather awkward. The effect is that Hervé, who was in reality rather tall, looks small next to the open, bright Vincent, who spent so much time concerned with his small stature. The spreading of his arms and even the crossing of his legs make him larger. He is attempting to take up the space of the photograph. Vincent’s confidence comes from this way of occupying space, wielding power over the room. The look Hervé carries suggests power is operating slightly differently than Vincent’s casual

swagger might imply. While both Vincent and Hervé are looking into the camera it is Hervé who the viewer makes eye contact with. His look is knowing, slightly bemused with almost the hint of a smile concealed behind his finger. He is making himself small because he knows it will make Vincent happy to appear large. Guibert's power is not the power of taking control of the photograph or whatever space he is occupying but rather it is the power of orchestration. He hides himself behind the spectacle of Vincent, both in the photograph and in his writing.

The trick of *Crazy for Vincent* is that Guibert spends the text trying to convince himself and the reader that the book is about Vincent when every indicator suggests it is about himself. The story is structured around Vincent's time in Guibert's life and it's his name that is in the title. Yet even the title itself exposes where the true center lies. The title is Guibert's first attempt at self-erasure in the text. Vincent is the object in the title, the subject is the implied *I*, "I am *Crazy for Vincent*". Without the *I*, the title is pointing the reader towards Vincent, though it is a description of the emotional state of Guibert. Each time the book attempts to orient the reader towards Vincent it becomes more clear that the subject of the book is Guibert's emotional state. Autofiction is about the self, the vast all consuming world of one's own perspective. To write about anything while so deeply involved in the presentation of the experience of being, is writing about the self.

The photograph manages to capture the real concept of the book by presenting Vincent but representing Guibert. Berger has understood his friend's project in the book, perhaps with more clarity than Guibert himself, as outsiders so often do, and renders it visible in the photograph. He has recognized in Hervé the desire to create a mythological space around Vincent and to hide himself in it. He sees in Guibert's attempt to lose himself in his world of obsession

the truth that the obsession is entirely Guibert's and entirely about Guibert. He constructed the tableau of the photograph to show off Vincent, as Hervé does in the novel, yet also to show the whole world of desire and obsession that surrounds Vincent through the presence of Guibert, the busts, the torso, and the ghost of Balthus. The rather tragic fact of Vincent's life is that he is almost wholly uninteresting without the layers of meaning that Guibert has draped him in. A book that was actually about Vincent might have made for some fun reading and perhaps there are deep truths hidden in Vincent's interiority that remain invisible to us as readers of Guibert's version of Vincent, which would have also made them invisible to Guibert, but in the text that exists the powerful truths the text contain do not come from the presentation of Vincent. They are in the representation of the interiority of Guibert.

Berger's photo book, *L' image de soi, ou, L'injonction de son beau moment?*(which roughly translates to *The Self Image, or, the Injunction of the Beautiful Moment?*), is made up entirely of photos of Guibert. Guibert writes in the introduction about becoming a vessel for Berger's artistic invention. Yes, these are photographs of Guibert yet they speak to the interiority of Berger not Guibert. The self-image, *l'image de soi*, is interrupted by "the injunction of the beautiful moment" (a line lifted from one of Whitman's diaries). The photograph creates a momentary dispossession, dissociation of Guibert's self from his body as Berger uses him as the object of his photographic gaze. The self-image, Guibert's conceptualization of himself, is written over by Berger's artistic intent with photograph. Guibert describes his inability to associate the images Berger creates of him from his own understanding of himself. This alienation that arises from seeing oneself through another's eyes is what it feels like to be looked at, to be gazed at with real purpose and intent, that of the artist. Objectification is dangerous

because it reduces the complexity of the person being objectified, yet it is also freeing, to be an object in these photographs Guibert is able to exist in the altered state of separation of self and body, or self and being.

In the essay Guibert writes on “assiduité” or attendance. He writes that it is the job of the photographer to be constantly attendant to their subject. In this attendance the photographer can capture the beautiful moment where the self is lost to the photograph. In an interview Berger said that Guibert “had decided, long before our encounter, that with his art (literature, photography, cinema) he could create an image of himself that only he alone would control”⁶. This was true and is surely a deeply relevant detail to understanding Guibert’s work. Control over his self image allowed Guibert to control himself and control his world. What this project with Berger did was to take away Guibert’s ability to control his image. Through Berger’s attendance to Guibert he was able to create images of Guibert that were outside of his realm of creation. In the introduction Guibert writes:

Je suis vis-à-vis des photos de Hans Georg Berger comme vis-à-vis de ma propre écriture: à la fois plus près d'elle-même, et déjà si lointain. Et si je puis faire un vœu en les dévoilant, ce n'est pas l'espoir buté d'une adoration anonyme ou la résistance glorieuse au ricanement, c'est que ces moments beaux ou tout comme pourront être des modèles d'une liberté et d'un certain goût de la vie. [I stand before Hans Georg Berger's photos as I would before my own writing: at once closer to it and already distant. And if I make on wish as I unveil them, it is not for the stubborn hope of anonymous adoration

⁶ Bianca Laura Petretto: “What remains from art?” Interview with Hans Georg Berger in *Town of Waters. The photographic work of Hans Georg Berger*. Edited by F P Campione and A M Montaldo, Aisthesis, Milan, 2001.

or the glorious resistance to derision; it is rather that these beautiful moments — or what appears as such — will provide a model of freedom and a certain taste for life.]⁷

(L' image de soi, ou, L'injonction de son beau moment? 7)

Here the connection between the writing and photography is made most apparent. Coming face to face with Berger's photos is like coming face to face with his writing. Both are about distance and proximity, the processes of bringing the self into conversation with the elements of ourselves that are not our selves. The models of freedom the portraits present are the same models of freedom that writing offers. The objectification Guibert is subject to under Berger's attendance is the same that Vincent is subject to in Guibert's writing. In Berger's photograph of the two men, they occupy many spaces simultaneously. The world of the photograph, the world of the text, and the lived world are all crashing together. Gazes are headed in every direction freeing selves from their bodies and persons from their subjectivities. This image is the only image in the text. It gives one a "taste" of the life of these characters, holding the door to the text ajar to reality.

⁷ Translated into the English by Éric Trudel.

Controlling Images

Ghost Image, Guibert's 1982 collection of essays on photography, returns again and again to the question of what is represented in the photograph. As a young person, Guibert's first attempt at photography (photography that attempted to be photography rather than photos) was to photograph his mother. The desire to photograph her came out of the knowledge that, despite the deep love and affection he felt for her, the photos he had taken of her previously didn't show her as he saw her. He realizes that up to this point, his father has controlled both the images of his mother that were allowed to exist in the world and her very presence in the world. He writes, "My father forbade my mother to wear makeup or dye her hair, and when he photographed her he ordered her to smile, or he took the picture against her will while pretending to adjust the camera, so that she had no control over her image" (*Ghost Image* 11). Like Berger's photograph's of Guibert and his own representation of Vincent in *Crazy for Vincent* Hervé's father imposes his own intent, though one would hardly call it artistic, onto the images of his mother.

His father had a conception of his wife that informed the representations of her that he created and allowed to exist in the world. M. Guibert used photography to reify this image of his wife and to assert his patriarchal domination over her. Makeup and hair dye are assertions of femininity but more importantly of agency. To apply makeup and dye ones hair is to take control of ones appearance. They are used to make the wearer more attractive, a concept that terrifies M. Guibert. Mme. Guibert's image in the world was controlled by her husband, as one is forced to imagine her entire life must have been. In this sense there is likely truth in the photos he made of her. The photos capture his control over her, reifying it, and present it through the bourgeois

medium of the family photo, easy to take out at family gatherings or display at funerals. These are photos that captured her as she lived, a particular strength of vernacular photography. They showed the way she dressed, how she wore her hair, the things she did, the people she was around.

Hervé was not interested in recording her life in his photograph of her. Instead what he wished to capture was his relationship to her. He wanted to photograph her as she felt to him, with little interest in representing her life. Like his father he wanted to control the image of his mother, though the intent of this control was very different. He washed out her bourgeois hairstyle, brushing it until it was straight, hanging formlessly around her face. He put her in a white slip. Certainly this was the first time she had ever been photographed in an undergarment. Finally he powdered her face with “very pale powder, almost white” (*GI 12*). In short he transformed her. The first two acts of transformation gesture towards an attempt to remove the artifice from her appearance. To rid her of the middle-class curls and clothes was an attempt to make her blank by Hervé. By freeing her from this artifice he was attempting to show her in a raw state, a state in which she was her being and not the accouterments that she carried. It was in this state that Hervé felt his relationship to his mother could best be encapsulated. Interestingly, the addition of powder is an addition of artifice, though one that was never available to her in her daily life. He rearranged the furniture in the living room so that the houseplants and the chair she was sitting in would be the only things visible, hiding the “plexiglass table where the TV guides lay” (*GI 12*), an act which again removes the aspects of her lived existence, to create the space in which her transformed body would appear. He softened the light in the room. Soft light is used in portraiture because the features are all rendered evenly, while blemishes and imperfections in the

skin become less perceptible. Soft light is considered to be the most flattering light for portraits and with older subjects has the tendency to make them look younger. These transformations gesture towards a neutral state; brushed out hair, white slip, white powder, uncluttered background, unwrinkled skin. These suggest nothing, while at the same time suggesting everything. Though he strips away the ideological structures that dominate his father's photos of his mother, the image of his mother that he attempts to create is far from ideologically neutral. The vision of a woman "minimal styling" is a long tradition in photography and the arts broadly. By placing her in a state of semi-undress, hair freshly washed, in the intimate setting of her home he recalls the history of boudoir photography.

Each of the acts of transformation Hervé used with his mother was a movement towards freeing her from her bourgeois, subservient existence. The oedipal overtones of this act are not the least bit lost on Hervé, who acknowledges the destruction of his father's authority over his mother, while he creates her anew in a style that suggests an intimacy that seems to go beyond that of mother and child. He takes momentary possession of her for the duration of the photographic session. While in the act of taking control of her appearance he, in many ways, mirrors the control his father asserts over the mother, though the intent behind the change is entirely different. While his father uses the photographs he takes of Mme. Guibert to reaffirm her status as wife and mother, Hervé attempts to free her from her social position to capture her in an almost utopian state of dislocation, to make her a fugitive from his father. The photograph would have been utopian in the sense that this is an ideal version of his mother, a mother that isn't trapped by her husband or her class or even her age, an impossible mother. As much as Hervé would like this to be the mother he has, she is not.

In the moment of the photoshoot Mme. Guibert aged in reverse. Hervé describes her face relaxing to a state he had never before witnessed, “there was an imperceptible smile on her lips, undefinable, of peace, of happiness, as if she were being bathed by the light, as if this whirlwind circling slowly around her, at a distance, were the most gentle caress” (*GI* 13). The distance between this state of joy and the extreme discomfort and anxiety she displays when the father attempts to photograph her is almost indescribably tragic. Hervé describes the potential photograph saying, “it’s that: the image of a woman who has always been criticized by her husband, enjoying what she could never have, a forbidden image, and the pleasure between us was greater as the forbidden moment burst into pieces. It was a suspended moment, a moment of peace, serene” (*GI* 13). Briefly, through the representation, or the situation of representation, of Mme. Guibert Hervé created, she was freed from her existence and allowed herself simply to be. What Guibert is describing here is what he called the “injunction of the beautiful moment” (*L’image de soi, ou, L’injonction de son beau moment?* 3) in the introduction to Berger’s book of photographs, the moment where the photographer is able to capture their subject not for who they present as but as the person the photographer sees. This lesson on the power of representation came early to Guibert, at eighteen.

The power of showing people, not necessarily for the lives they live but for an essence of themselves, a thing about them that shows a part of themselves, maybe even a thing they like about themselves, permeates Guibert’s writing. What is *Crazy for Vincent* if not an extended portrait session? Though Vincent, and Hervé for that matter, were not aware of the portrait that was slowly being drawn of him through their time together, their relationship existed in a state not unlike the photoshoot. The (mostly) straight Vincent existed in a world which controlled him

as much as M. Guibert controlled his wife. As a punk, a skater, a working-class boy growing up under in sexist, homophobic France Vincent's behavior, both sexual and not, was heavily policed by his family, friends, girlfriends, and coworkers, everyone he knew, other than Hervé. With Hervé he could, sometimes and often with a great deal of difficulty, let down the "tough guy" mask which he was forced to use in his life. To be soft, tender, gay, even loving and compassionate was an impossibility in day-to-day life, but with Hervé he entered a space in which he could access these modes of being. This space was created by the gaze Hervé enacted upon him. Just as his photographic gaze allowed his mother achieve her state of peace, it was Hervé's looking at Vincent and seeing not what was there but what could be there that Vincent's facade was able to crumble. This is not to say that these were states that were easy or even comfortable for Vincent to occupy.

There is a constant negotiation throughout the book between allowing himself to be soft and keeping up the "tough guy" persona he was forced to inhabit. Hervé recounts two nights in particular where this is apparent. On the first night Vincent is drugged up, unable to eat the food that Hervé buys for him. Hervé leaves him, unwilling to deal with his moods when suddenly,

He pops up at a crosspoint in the hallway, tells me that we can't leave each other like that...I tell him that I accept that our relationship is a disaster, but that it surpasses an acceptable minimum. Our backs are against either side of the tunnel, groups of commuters are passing between us. Vincent leaves again. I suddenly have the desire to be kind. I go looking for him: there are three corridors to choose from, he isn't in the first two, I find him walking in front of me in the third, I wondered if he recognizes my

gait, he doesn't turn around, I say to him: "Vincent?" and find his face covered in tears.

(75)

There is no other point in the text where Vincent gives this much of himself to Hervé and it is notable that this encounter is where Hervé has the least interest in Vincent in the entire text.

Vincent rarely chased Hervé, though in this section they chase each other. Vincent crying comes as something of a relief to the reader, given the many moments of his callousness and disinterest in Hervé. In the next encounter between them, however, Vincent claims to have forgotten everything that had happened in their last episode and tells Hervé he has to leave to go to a party.

This of course brings near obscene joy to Hervé who can only stomach the relationship when he is the pursuer. After begging him to come home with him, Vincent agrees to join Hervé but, as Hervé describes it,

he tells me not to touch his sex, but that he'll jerk me off, on the condition that I don't look at him, I close my eyes, then sneak them open: his outstretched palm, several millimeters away from my eyelids without touching them, obscures them... When he leaves, he kneels down to rub my cock against the fur collar of his vest, he tells me that he stole it from Florence, and that from now on, without knowing it, she'll be buried in the scent of my prick. (75)

He is back to his "tough" ways; creating strange sexual rules for Hervé, doing things only for spite and laughter at someone else's expense. These rules have something to do with maintaining his heterosexual status, though the logic behind them is entirely unclear. By making himself into an asshole Vincent moves to reject the intimacy and honesty that had occurred in the prior experience and negating it through the destruction of his memory of the night. This is the

oscillation he exists within, between accepting the comfort of Hervé's affection and rejecting it in favor of the social capital necessary for him to live his life.

There is, however, something incredibly fragile about the altered state Hervé is able to put people in through his artistic gaze, at least if the photoshoot with his mother and his relationship with Vincent are representative. When Hervé is finished taking his mother's photograph she doesn't keep her hair down, leave the makeup on, etc. instead she "put her dress back on and quickly redid her hair...She became once again her husband's wife, the woman of forty-five⁸, while the photograph, instantaneously, as if by magic, had suspended age, had made it only an absurd social convention" (*GI* 14). The freedom she found in the moment of the photograph dissipated as the trappings of her normal life came back, first the clothes and hair then her husband. The true artifice of the photograph is revealed through the return to normality. As happy and at peace as she was in that moment, it had to remain a moment. Her life was bound by convention and the brief glimpse of another life had to fade. So too must Vincent's freedom have disappeared when he exited the space of his relationship with Hervé for his other life. Without Hervé's obsessive, loving gaze Vincent was made to perform his masculinity, likely to an even greater extent than he would have without the relationship, a compensation. He tells Hervé about the secret they are to his world and one can't quite tell if this is a point of pride or shame for him.

There seems to be a deeper question about these states lurking in Vincent's ambivalence toward it. Are these states worth it if one has to return to the other state when the moment ends?

⁸ The absurdity of Guibert's conception of his mother as aged at forty-five is as ridiculous as it is beside the point.

Vincent is exposed to Hervé's artistic gaze for much longer than Mme. Guibert and certainly reacts to it very differently than her. For Mme. Guibert the peace she achieved is metaphysical, and yet she is forced to return to her quotidian life immediately. Would she have been better off never knowing the pleasure of this freedom than to have it ripped away from her so soon after she discovered it? It certainly tainted her relationship to Hervé. After she puts her costume back on he writes "I no longer recognized her, I wanted to forget her, to stop seeing her, to remain forever with the image we were going to extract from the developer" (*GI* 14) From the end of the photographic session onward it became difficult for Hervé to look at his mother. The knowledge of who she could have been poisoned the reality of who she was for him. Did it poison life for her as well? From that moment on Hervé describes the processes of aging occurring faster and faster for her, "In one year ten years passed" (*GI* 15). It seems like a leap to imagine that the knowledge of this other state would have caused her aging to advance so rapidly but by failing to report other details of her life, Hervé makes the sly suggestion that this is the case. Vincent certainly found the transition between these states of being difficult and not entirely desirable as he shows again and again throughout the text. Though unlike with his mother, Hervé shows a desire for Vincent in all of his states. The heterosexual Vincent is just as attractive and provoking as the tender Vincent. It is almost as if it is the movement between these states which Hervé finds so compelling.

For part of the photographic session Hervé has his mother wear one of his hats, one which he describes as "for me the young boy's hat in *Death in Venice*" (*GI* 13). It is difficult to read any mention of *Death in Venice* in Guibert's work without immediately returning to Vincent, though *Ghost Image* was published the year Hervé met Vincent which almost certainly precludes

the possibility that this essay could have been written after Hervé met Vincent. At eighteen, when the photos were taken, Hervé was much closer to Tadzio than von Aschenbach though the desire and love he felt for his mother, wearing that hat, looking more beautiful than she ever had in her life, must have imbued the text with an even deeper meaning than Hervé had already applied to it. It seems silly to suggest that his desire for boys would have arisen strictly from this moment of seeing his mother, ageless, in the hat of Tadzio but it hardly seems inconsequential either.

There is one important detail from the story of the photoshoot that shouldn't be left out, even if it isn't exactly important to this argument. The photographs didn't come out. The film wasn't loaded into the camera correctly and so there was no photograph. There was only the photographic session. In a way the lack of the photograph makes it all the more important, the experience is what affected the two so deeply, yet one can't help but feel a tragedy in this. Perhaps it saved Mme. Guibert that she was not forced to have that image of herself, that version of her that wasn't her but could have been in a better world. Perhaps it would have crushed her. Perhaps it would have been the singular object in her life that made her feel free. Instead what exists is the ghost image, the story of the photograph, made tangible through Guibert's writing.

The Captive

On December 27th, 1991, Hervé Guibert, the writer, the character, the fiction, and the fact, died. Seven days later, while his ashes were being scattered on Elba, his friend and co-conspirator, the artist Sophie Calle, set out on a road trip across the United States armed with two camcorders, a man she wanted to love, and a wish to “bury” Hervé by the sea. The results of the trip were a (potentially) unconsummated arranged marriage (between Calle and her partner on the trip, Greg Sheppard), performed at a drive-in wedding venue in Las Vegas, and the film *Double Blind (No Sex Last Night)*. The film, which is dedicated to Guibert, tracks the pair’s anxious travels, documenting the failure of communication and understanding to make these two people mutually understandable. They each train their cameras on the road, that great figure of the American consciousness, and yet see radically different worlds. The first part of the title is a reference to double blind experiments, those wherein neither the subject nor the researcher is aware whether the subject is in the control or experiment group. Such double blind experiments are considered, in the scientific community, to have greater scientific rigor than unblinded or single blind texts, because they purport to eliminate a great deal of the subjective biases that can interfere with results. As the title suggests there is an interest in stripping away the subjective, at finding a place of objectivity from which the viewers or artists might see things as they really are. As the film progresses, a multiplicity of truths make themselves felt. The audience feels the simple, straight-forward truths which make up the world of Sheppard, that stability is desirable, that love should be noncomplex, that his Cadillac mustn’t break down. These are real and genuine, they make up his life and give him meaning. The audience also sees the truths that

construct Calle's understanding of reality: the trip must be completed, the work must be tended to, it is better to languish in ambiguity than to strip things down to their basic components.

Despite Calle's desire for Sheppard, he remains both physically and emotionally distant from her. His otherness creates an uncrossable boundary between them, making him alien to her. The burden of attempting to bridge these divides falls on the shoulders of the one seeking the other, the Calles and Guiberts of the world. Calle, in the film, plays a similar role to the one Guibert plays in *Crazy for Vincent*. They both seek closeness and desire knowledge of their respective others. They seek to narrow the gap between experience and art by creating *while* experiencing. Editing, the process of filtering and reducing the content to its most elemental forms, is key to both of their practices. In the film, she rather quickly discovers Sheppard's interest in another woman and, while never understanding what drives him, at least gains the ability to predict Sheppard's actions (though this may ultimately say more about the differences between Sheppard and Vincent than Calle and Guibert).

There is something wonderfully mischievous in Calle's dedication of the film to Guibert. Guibert's ghost, seemingly discontent both on the shores of Elba and Delaware, is a constant presence in the film. The film begins with a monolog from Calle in English, delivered over a black screen with a glimmering white rectangle, a screen, in the center. She briefly describes the project and then describes Guibert's death, the funeral she has chosen not to attend on Elba, and her desire to bury him in America. During this description the small screen grows to take over the whole of the screen of the film, followed by a brief shot of Calle and then a shot of what appears to be the ceiling of the Lincoln tunnel. This wipes to a still image of Calle with her eyes closed which fades into an almost identical image with her eyes open. The screen fades to grey



Still from *Double Blind (No Sex Last Night)*, Sophie Calle (in collaboration with Greg Sheppard), 1992.

and then the viewer is presented with a montage of still images of Calle by the shore in Delaware, dressed funereally in a long dark coat. The monolog shifts from English to French, as if Calle is no longer addressing her

audience but instead speaking to Guibert.

There are seventeen still images in the montage. Their quality is rather poor, almost poorer than the moving images, giving the shots a strange, haunted quality. The first few images show Calle, holding a bouquet of pink roses. The point of view then appears to jump into Calle's perspective. This image is a shot of the pier, reaching towards the horizon. The image has a greater vitality than the stills that precede it. It is a more artfully constructed image, yes, but more than that it suggests a solipsism that speaks to the isolation of grief and loss that others Calle from the world she is attempting to inhabit. The images that follows show Calle casting the bouquet of roses into the frigid January waters of the North Atlantic, "burying", in her words, Guibert. The first shots are again from Sheppard's perspective, Calle approaching the end of the pier, sitting on the bench, and then going to the edge and casting them into the sea. Her figure is difficult to discern, the dark of her coat and hair are so poorly rendered that no distinction or shadow can be perceived. The viewer sees her from behind, a mass more than a silhouette. She is a foreign object, unseeable through the lens of this camera. The images that follow are again of



Stills from *Double Blind (No Sex Last Night)*, Sophie Calle (in collaboration with Greg Sheppard), 1992.

Calle's perspective, looking down at the flowers, floating clumped and pathetic on the sea's surface. It is as if she is alone, one has no sense of Sheppard's presence in her images. The dialog that exists in these images is between the viewer (both the photographer who took the image and the viewer of the film) and the roses on the water. They exist as fact, a statement declaring Guibert's death. Occupying Calle's perspective, after having witnessed her only as a shape, the viewer enters Calle's subjectivity. They are forced to see the roses as a memorial to Guibert. The flowers are his body, formless and beautiful, still so full of the potential for life. With this private ceremony, held on the shores of a distant land, unknown to Guibert, Calle calls upon the viewer to reflect on the funeral being held for him concurrently on his beloved Elba where his people were gathered.

After this point, Guibert's presence, insofar as he is mentioned by name, seems to leave the film, however Guibertian modes of thought continue to guide Calle throughout. While she examines the intricacies of her desire for Sheppard, she remains fully aware of the gap between them. That zone of the unsayable, the gulf running between them that is the central focus of film, is pure Guibert. Calle, however, takes a different direction in exploring the gulf than Guibert.

Guibert conveys the isolation of the experience of desire by the relaying solely of his own subjective experience, creating the world of the text wherein the reader is so deep in Guibert's thoughts anything beyond them seems almost impossible. Calle, on the other hand, calls attention to the distance by including the thoughts, writings, and declarations of her love object, Sheppard. There is a shocking truth of this isolation, which exists as an undercurrent in *Vincent*, though is made obvious in *Double Blind*. It is that, even when two people attempt to communicate as honestly and faithfully as they can conceptualize, even through the medium of artistic expression, the distance between them remains. Calle is held captive by her desire for Sheppard, even as she hears him describe the ways in which he does not feel the same way about her, because of the gap between them. Calle is obsessed by the impossibility of communication. She is hopelessly drawn to Sheppard's impenetrability out of a desire to understand the other. His resistance to her attempts at knowledge serve only to increase the attrition.

Guibert and Calle were both friends and collaborators. They share an abiding interest in how love can be felt so strongly by the self (the writer or artist for them), while the other (the object of love) can feel almost nothing in return. Calle explores this theme to an even greater extent in her works *Exquisite Pain* (2003) and *Take Care of Yourself* (2007), both of which exist as books, photographs, and installations. In these projects, Calle casts her artistic and critical gaze on the rejection she faces from men who for one reason or another can't handle her. *Take Care of Yourself*, which was shown first in 2007 in the French Pavilion of the Venice Biennale and then again in 2009 at Paula Cooper Gallery, particularly is an attempt to understand the other through the cryptic signals they give. Calle describes the work in a poem at the beginning of the book and exhibition which reads:

I received an email telling me it was over.

I didn't know how to respond.

It was almost as if it hadn't been meant for me.

It ended with the words, "Take care of yourself."

And so I did.

*I asked 107 women (including two made from wood and one with feathers),
chosen for their profession or skills, to interpret this letter.*

To analyze it, comment on it, dance it, sing it.

Dissect it. Exhaust it. Understand it for me.

Answer for me.

It was a way of taking the time to break up.

A way of taking care of myself. (Take Care of Yourself)

These 107 collaborators, many friends of the artist, form a chorus of voices attempting to give reason and logic to the inexplicable. Through almost every mode of analysis, performance, and thought these women break down each possible interpretation, meaning, and nuance of the (rather uninteresting) letter. This kind of community is a seeming outgrowth of the community from which Guibert and Calle first came together.

These various experts are in many ways analogous to the many friends who populate Guibert's works, the voices of those who, while never able to fully explain things him, help Guibert develop a something closer to understanding of Vincent's interiority. There are several choice encounters with friends on the topic of Vincent which Hervé relates: on solitude, "Bernard says that its impossible to share having a mad crush on someone" (48), on meeting Vincent's

friends “T. says they’re going to knock me unconscious with the paddle” (36), and on Vincent’s feelings for Hervé,

When I saw Isabelle [Adjani] again, I confessed my plan that she pay back the debt of her betrayal by offering herself to the person I’m in love with, to Vincent, since he fantasizes about her. She asked me, “Is he handsome?” “No, he’s a monster.” “And does he love you?” My lips forced a burbled response, an onomatopoeia somewhere between “Bah!” and “Beuh!” (35)

While each interaction is on its surface mainly humorous, there is also real concern and advice being given in them. Bernard’s quip about sharing a mad crush is actually a rather important point which Hervé has not been able to writing in his own words, despite circling around the position for the majority of the text. T., Thierry Juno Guibert’s other major lover, cautions Hervé about the not unreal threat of violence from Vincent’s often virulently homophobic friends. Adjani’s question “does he love you?” is the only time in the book Guibert is prompted to explain Vincent’s feelings for him, which he is only able to respond to with a guttural noise. Calle takes this casual gesture of intimacy and formalizes it, giving these sorts of friendly pieces of advice an intellectual and artistic heft through *Take Care of Yourself*.

The conclusion of the road trip at the heart of *Double Blind*, leaves Calle in California, teaching at an art school. The graduate programs of southern California art schools in the 1990s were a vibrant and dynamic environment where many of the great artists of the 60s, 70s, and 80s came to teach a new generation of artists who went on to become some of the most important figures of their day. Calle’s methods of art production and social practices became hugely influential in this artistic scene. In her autofiction novel, *I Love Dick* widely credited as one of

the first literary works in the U.S. to bring attention to autofiction, Chris Kraus makes direct reference to the influence of Calle's practice on her writing. The novel describes Kraus's obsessive infatuation with the sociologist and social critic Dick Hebdige, who displays limited interest in her in return. Early in the text, before the project has crystalized into a novel in Kraus's mind, she conceptualizes a film (up to this point she has been working mainly as a filmmaker) in which she posts all of the unsent love letters she has written to Dick on his house, his car, and the cacti on his property and films his reaction. She described the work to Dick, in an unsent fax, as "kind of like, Calle Art" (*I Love Dick* 44). The double entendre of Calle, often mispronounced in the U.S. as Cal-lay, and Cal and Cali is certainly intentional. Calle's brand of obsessive conceptualism here becomes a stand in for the scene as a whole, as is emphasized with the capitalization of "Art", as if Calle's art had already inspired a movement which took her name for its title. Calle art is Cali art. Kraus goes on in the same fax to say "I guess the piece is all about obsession... What do you think? Are you game?" (*I Love Dick* 44). Dick is not game. He has essentially no interest in being in a "Calle Art" project with Kraus. Dick exists as the love object for her and, like both Vincent and Sheppard, he oscillates between relishing the power he has over Chirs and resenting the position she has put him in, though he spends much more time doing the latter.

At one point in the novel, Kraus goes on a road trip from California to New York, making Calle's journey in reverse. Instead of having her love object physically with her, like Calle, she internalizes Dick, turning him into a phantasmagoric figure. She writes letters to him and, by the end of the text, seems to have killed off any part of Dick that may have related to the actual figure, instead using him simply as a point of reflection, a mirror to talk at, a way to make sense

of the world. She notes this transition in the postscript of her first letter in the second section of the text, “Every Letter is a Love Letter”, writing “I’m torn between maintaining you as an entity to write to and talking with you as a person. Perhaps I’ll let it go” (*I Love Dick* 129-130). As “an entity to write to” Dick is no longer a “person” she can talk to. The entity enables her to produce the text of the project as a foil for her to cast her thoughts against, while the person he actually is fails to produce such interesting effects. The “letting go” is ambiguous, not pointing directly at either the entity or the person of Dick. Kraus may be suggesting she will give up the distinction between the two, though how she would accomplish this remains unknown. In the end what is forced to let go of is the person of Dick. Dick, the man, must give way to Dick, the idea, because the idea is so much more powerful than the man. Though the idea of Dick, Kraus is able to create the text, while the man causes only pain and confusion. This work, which has spurred so much new work and thought in response, is a direct descendant of Guibert and Calle’s earlier works on desire and obsession. Dick, Vincent, Sheppard, and the numerous other love objects of Calle’s works each are turned into characters by the desire of the writer/artist who love them. They remain elusive to their lovers, while the lovers put more and more effort into attempting to grasp them. They are fugitives from those who seek to know them.

The great fugitive of western literature is Albertine, lover to Marcel in *In Search of Lost Time*, Proust’s masterwork. Marcel first encounters her in Balbec with a coterie of friends by the shore. Albertine comes from a middle-class background, though she desires a loftier place for herself in society. At first his desire is not located specifically in any of the girls but generalized upon all of them, though in time this crystalizes into an infatuation solely for Albertine.

Albertine’s own interest in Marcel is less clear. She displays a fondness for him, though she

keeps her distance, allowing him to sometimes play the part of a friend, sometimes that of a suitor, and, at others, that of a lover. It is this apparent disinterest in him that drives Marcel hopelessly towards her. Albertine possesses a mainly sapphic disposition, which terrifies Marcel, even as he fails to comprehend it. He hates her being around her friends, though he often fails to locate what he hates about it. In one passage he writes, "I asked her to excuse me from going out with herself and Andrée. I shall mention only one of my reasons, which was dictated by prudence. Whenever I went out with Albertine, if she left my side for a moment I became anxious, began to imagine that she had spoken to somebody" (*The Captive* 22). His fears about Albertine and Andrée have not yet crystalized into a fear of their sharing a sexual relationship, though he has an unlocalized, general fear of her absence when he is in public with her and Andrée. He gives the readers "only one of [his] reasons" leaving the reader to prod at the unsaid fears which keep him from going with them.

Albertine's lesbianism is both obvious and invisible to Marcel due to his inability to see Albertine for who she is. Albertine, like Vincent, is the object of desire only because her desire constantly remains outside of boundaries of Marcel's knowledge. He knows her to be desirous but cannot grasp what she desires. Her desire is fugitive so Marcel must construct an Albertine for himself. The constructed "Albertine" of Marcel's imagination is so much more real to him than Albertine as she exists in the world that the nature of her being, as she conceptualizes it and performs as in her life, is utterly unreachable. Albertine eventually moves into Marcel's family apartment, where he monitors her every action. The volume of the novel recounting this period, *The Captive*, is in many ways the most difficult to read in *In Search of Lost Time*. The reader is confronted in almost every sentence with the vileness of Marcel's "love" for Albertine.

Once they are living together he hardly allows her to leave and questioning her about every person she meets, thought that crosses her mind, and thing she does while she is out of his sight. He is only ever content with her in this period is when she is asleep. In this state he believes that she can't do anything he might find objectionable. He writes of watching her:

she would be asleep and I saw before me the other woman that she became whenever one saw her full-face. But her personality quickly changed when I lay down beside her and saw her again in profile. I could take her head, lift it up, press her face to my lips, put her arms round my neck, and she would continue to sleep, like a watch that never stops, like an animal that stays in whatever position you put it in, like a climbing plant, a convolvulus which continues to thrust out its tendrils whatever support you give it...my jealousy subsided, for I felt that Albertine had become a creature that breathes and is nothing else besides...that breath, truly paradisiacal to me who at such moments felt Albertine to be withdrawn from everything, not only physically but morally, was the pure song of angels" (The Captive 143).

In sleep Albertine loses her mystery. Marcel believes she can't be betraying him while in sleep. The progression of similes in this excerpt is telling. When he first sees her from the front, Albertine is another woman. In sleep she loses the spark of life that animates her face into a recognizable state for Marcel. It is only when he sees her in profile that she changes back to another state. This sidelong view is not a view that comes from looking at the love object in conversation, not the view of two people looking at each other, but instead is a jealous angle. This is the view of one casting furtive glances, tracking what the other is doing when she doesn't think she is being watched. She is next described as an unstoppable watch. An impossible object,

she is defined as immortal, beyond the limits of time. This prefigures her death, calling attention to Marcel's inability to see her as she is. He treats her like a doll, yet describes her "like an animal that stays in whatever position you put it in". This is a rather baffling construction, no animal comes to mind when searching for one that stays in "whatever position you put it in", though the image is obviously evocative. For Marcel the animal is a step below the human, it is a being with needs, though it is under the dominion of man. Albertine is like this semi-mythic animal because she is subject to his whims. Yet quickly he move on to saying she is "like a climbing plant, a convolvulus which continues to thrust out its tendrils whatever support you give it". The plant is a further step down from the animal, lacking any perceptible agency, a machine of life that continues to seek even as it has its needs met. Finally she becomes a being that's only life process is breath. The breathing being is capable of nothing, and therefore anything can be projected onto it. While Marcel is here describing Albertine in sleep, he is also describing how he sees her in life. She is the screen on which he casts his obsessions. She is at her best when she is least capable of disrupting the projection.

Vincent asleep holds sway over Hervé as well, though their context is markedly different from Proust's. In an entry from 1987 Guibert writes, "I know how he sleeps, I know the position of his hand, folded on top of his torso, I know every inch of his body, better than the person who might actually be sleeping next to him" (60). Where Marcel positions Albertine's sleeping body, Hervé relishes in knowing the position Vincent falls into of his own accord. Vincent's bodily presence is noticeably absent from the passage. Rather than taking possession of Vincent by watching him sleep, the way Marcel does, Hervé's possession is the knowledge of *how* he sleeps. This knowledge implies whole histories of watching Vincent sleep, a nightly drama which Hervé

must have subjected himself to repeatedly in some distant unrecounted encounters. This is a kind of possession that is rooted in time and memory, a built up possession. The precision of this knowledge, the “every inch of his body”, is what makes this possession true and powerful. Marcel can’t get beyond the idea that the object of his love, Albertine, might be sleeping with other men, or worse still other women, and so he feels the need to take possession of her entirely. Hervé doesn’t have to care about “the person who might be sleeping next to” Vincent because he possesses Vincent in a way that they cannot. It is the knowledge of Vincent that matters to Hervé, making other men, women, girls, and boys just unfortunate sucks on Vincent’s time, rather than true rivals in his quest for Vincent. Like the phantom Dick Kraus carries with her, Vincent exists for Hervé as a being in his mind. The knowledge of “every inch of his body” is the mental figure of Vincent which he possesses. The absurdity of such a statement is most obvious when considering the fluid nature of Vincent’s body. Vincent’s body is not a static object which Hervé could have perfect knowledge of, but rather a constantly changing, shifting site which no being, especially not Hervé or Vincent, has perfect knowledge of.

Marcel is able to hold Albertine captive for only so long. Soon she flees him and becomes fugitive again. Her period of freedom is not long however, for she soon dies. In death she becomes the ultimate fugitive, the truly unreachable love object. Upon learning of her death the narrator writes,

a suffering until then unimagined, that of realising that she would not come back. But had I not told myself many times that she might not come back? I had indeed done so, but now I saw that I had never believed it for a moment. As I needed her presence, her kisses, to enable me to endure the pain that my suspicions caused me, I had formed,

since Balbec, the habit of being always with her. Even when she had gone out, when I was alone, I was kissing her still. (*The Fugitive* 642)

The captive Albertine of Marcel's imagination had always been present for him. He could possess her even when she was away from him, because he had constructed her so completely. The rupture of her death made her fugitive from him both because of the newly expanded gulf separating them and the new knowledge that he could now never know her. Vincent's death makes him unreachable as well, though, Vincent never allowed himself to be taken captive by Hervé in the first place, complicating the situation. Because of this, the change is less extreme and more subtle for Hervé. Because Marcel's possession of Albertine was primarily corporeal, her death meant the absolute end to his ability to hold her captive. Physically, Hervé could never (nor would be likely have desired to) hold Vincent captive. Vincent slips beyond him constantly. He withholds his presence from Hervé, appearing in Hervé's life only when he sees fit, popping up in theaters or subway stations unannounced, then going weeks without contacting Hervé. There are numerous reasons why Vincent withholds himself from Hervé, most of which he never relates to him making it impossible to pinpoint them from Guibert's text, yet at least at one point, Hervé believes "He must be afraid to face me: stage fright of becoming my character again" (47). This "stage fright", as Hervé names it, is a fear of losing agency over himself, a fear of becoming captive. Hervé himself, as Berger noted in the interview with Petretto (quoted in "On *L'atelier de Balthus*"), attempted to "create an image of himself that only he alone would control" in his art. He recognized, at least personally the discomfort of becoming a character in someone else's story, of losing control over the image of oneself in that exists in the world. When Hervé writes Vincent he writes his Vincent. He writes about their experiences together, the things

Vincent says around him, his actions. What he writes about is the Vincent he is able to know from the time they share together, the Vincent that Vincent allows Hervé to see, the Vincent that Hervé has created in his mind, in short Hervé's Vincent.

The other is a construction of the desirer. It is a being which exists solely in the mind of its creator, built from the accumulation of experience with the love object. Fearing becoming a character, Vincent fears the image of himself that Hervé has created. A book of Hervé's in which Vincent appears, *Voyage avec deux enfants*, displays the disconnect Vincent feels between himself and Hervé's conception of him. After reading it, Vincent tells Hervé that "it showed him how disgraceful his character is" (46). Vincent's character as he imagines it, his disposition, does not align with his character, the figure representing him, in the text. The realization that Hervé's version of him is disgraceful, in his own eyes, is the realization that Hervé does not see him as he sees himself. He attempts to reconcile these two versions of himself by absorbing Hervé's characterization of him ("it showed him"), yet the process is impossible. He cannot merge these versions of himself because he cannot see himself as Hervé sees him, cannot see only the Vincent which has grown in the mind of Hervé through their interactions. Instead he withholds himself, and by withholding himself from Hervé, he resists characterization, resists the flattening effect of writing that makes him only Hervé's Vincent. To face Hervé is to face dissolution. The self that Vincent inhabits cannot stand up to the version of him that Hervé sees. This is not to say that Vincent himself possesses some self knowledge that goes beyond the knowledge of him that Hervé has. Just as Hervé's Vincent is incomplete Vincent's Vincent is not an accurate reflection of his being but a myth he has created to give order to the world.

The other is inaccessible, in their being, yet totally accessible, as the created version that exists in the mind of the desirer. The other, as they truly exist in the world and as they conceptualize themselves, cannot be reached, they are fugitive. Each person contains a multitudes of selves; who they are to their family, their friends, at work, alone, in a cafe or dog park, to lovers, to themselves. The other can never express all of these versions of themselves to a single person. There is an obvious selfishness in the desire to capture or know the other, though there is a less obvious selflessness to it as well. When Calle tries to capture Sheppard she desires him and she desires knowledge of him. She wants to know how he can experience the world with her and come out with such a different understanding of it. Kraus holds the fugitive Dick captive in her mind by recognizing that Dick, the person, will never be the other, the love object, that she needs him to be and so abstracts him into an other beyond otherness, a being completely detached from the original character/person/idea of Dick. Marcel holds Albertine captive because he is unable to accept the possibility of her otherness from him. His inability to see beyond his conception of her forced her to make herself fugitive.

Hervé is held captive by his obsessions with Vincent, while he holds his Vincent captive himself. Vincent uses physical distance to make fugitive his body from Hervé, which only draws Hervé deeper into his obsessions with him. After a period where Vincent refused to see Hervé he writes "I miss Vincent, his little prick, his little smile" (70). He knows that the longer he keeps himself from Hervé, the more Hervé will desire him. This captivity that Hervé experiences is not a captivity like Albertine's, or even like Vincent's, the captive has no captor. It is not that Vincent holds Hervé captive to him, quite the opposite in fact. Rather Hervé's uncontrollable obsession controls him, captivates him. This captivity, the captivity of the obsessive is the more powerful

one, because it comes from within. After all who are the others but, as Proust says, “only themselves, that is to say next to nothing” (The Captive 116). It is in the creation of the other, the mythologizing that the other moves from nothing into everything. Once the other has become the sole focus of the desirer they have become the obsession and the desirer has been made captive. Guibert writes from a place of captivity, in fact, it is he who is the true captive. He is held captive to the idea of Vincent, the boy lover who doesn’t love him back. Hervé invents a metaphysical structure of desire as a justification, a way to explain his captivity. The holy/profane language Guibert uses to describe Hervé is a way to justify how a person as intelligent, thoughtful, and in control as Hervé Guibert, the writer, could lose himself so entirely to a young boy. This is easier for Hervé than being forced to admit that he is held captive by his own imagination, by a figure he’s created that though has come to occupy such a central place in his thoughts. With Hervé and Vincent both desirer and object of desire are held captive. Neither has chosen this path yet it is thrust upon them by desire and their inability to understand each other.

Ganymede

Ganymede was “the most beautiful mortal” (Ill 20.240). Born to Tros, founder of Troy, and Callirhoe, the daughter of the river god Scamander, he caught Zeus’s eye and was brought to Olympus to serve as cupbearer to the gods, where he was given eternal youth and life. While the belief was not universal among ancient sources (See Xenophon’s *Symposium* 8.29–30) most accounts of Ganymede’s story describe him as a lover to Zeus. The word catamite, boy-lover, comes from the latinized *Catamitus*, from the Greek *Γανυμήδης*, or Ganymedes. Ganymede did not only give his name to the concept of boy-love, but served as the mythological precedent to the practice of *paiderastia*.

Some depictions of Ganymede, such as Rembrandt’s *The Abduction* (or sometimes *Rape*)



Abduction of Ganymede, Rembrandt, 1635, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Dresden.

of Ganymede, which is echoed in Rauschenberg’s *Canyon*, depict Ganymede as a young child. Rembrandt’s Ganymede is a hideous child of perhaps two or three, face screwed up in a wail, being dragged to heaven, his arm in the powerful beak of Zeus as eagle, urinating out of fear. He grips a sprig of cherries, symbolic of fertility, new life, and virginity and wears a luxurious tunic, trimmed in gold, with a bright red tassel off the front, fit for the princeling. The background is ominous, stormy. The eagle dark, nearly melting into the background, with the exception of its eye, cold and unfeeling, ringed in yellow, in the very center of the painting, about two-thirds up from the

bottom, holding the gaze of the viewer. Rembrandt's Ganymede bears a similarity to the Ganymede depicted in book three of *the Argonautica*. Apollonius shows Ganymede, playing dice with Eros on Olympus. In this story, Ganymede is cheated by Eros:

Little Eros

stood clutching greedily against his breast
 fists full of winnings. An impassioned flush
 seethed on his cheeks. His playmate [Ganyemede], though, sat silent
 and grimaced as he sent his two last dice
 tumbling, one by one, into the dirt.

Ganymede frowned, Love cackled, and indeed
 the last were lost as quickly as the rest.

The loser stalked off, cleaned out, empty-fisted,
 failing to notice Cypris on the path.

She strode across the play ground, chucked her son
 under the chin and gently scolded him:

“Mischievous little imp, why are you smirking?

Have you been bad and tricked a toddler? (Apollon. 3.159-72)

In this version, Ganymede is cheated by the god of erotic love, which causes him to fail to see Venus, the goddess of love and the most beautiful being in the Roman Pantheon. Eros's cheating relieves Ganyemede of his “two last dice”, a crude joke alluding to Ganymede's perpetual pubescent state, his lack of masculinity. Ganymede is removed of any identifiers by Venus who

refers to him simply as “a toddler” as though love no longer needs to name him. “Cleaned out, empty-fisted”, Ganymede is shown to be deficient, missing key elements of what makes him worthy of love. This representation of Ganymede as tricked, cheated, and emasculated reflect Apollonius’s Roman values, which were much less tolerant of males having sex with males than the Greek system, despite its the practices prevalence⁹. Rembrandt’s Ganymede, coming out of another period where sex between men was treated with contempt, also reflects a cultural distaste for the practices which Ganymede had come to represent.

The 1950’s in America was so great time in the history of acceptance towards men who had sex with men, however Rauschenberg’s personal predilections for men makes him a somewhat special case, likely informing his representation of the myth. Rauschenberg’s Ganymede, a photograph of his son Christopher, smiles and reaches his arm upward, as if asking to be taken by the eagle. His expression recalls the Goethe poem, “Ganymed”, particularly the lines “Daß ich dich fassen möcht’/ In diesen Arm! (Could I but embrace you/ In this arm)” (9-10). Rauschenberg’s Ganymede, like Goethe’s seems not only



Canyon, Robert Rauschenberg, 1959, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

⁹ Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999.



Detail of *Canyon*.

accepting of his fate, but rather thrilled to be receiving the attention of a god. The eagle, in stark contrast to Rembrandt's disappearing eagle, stands quite literally apart from the background of the painting, a taxidermy eagle attached to the canvas. Where Rembrandt's eagle captures his Ganymede, facing him and pointing his eye at the viewer of the painting, Rauschenberg's eagle faces away from his Ganymede, his eye hardly visible at all, cloudy and the same dull brown of the feathers.

While Rembrandt's eagle's wings are so massive they expand beyond the frame of the painting, Zeus, as eagle, is dwarfed by scale of Rauschenberg's painting. The dark, luster of the eagle's feathers in Rembrandt's depiction have been washed out and appear shabby, perhaps even dusty, in taxidermy form.

The piss of Ganymede in the former painting presents the pre-sexual use of the penis. While the child is dominated by Zeus's masculine force urination occurs unprompted, a loss of control of the sexual, or pre-sexual, organ in the face of the powerful Zeus. In the latter painting Christopher, as Ganymede, wears pants, though he opens his legs and points towards his crotch. The urinating penis of the child is perhaps replaced in Rauschenberg's painting by the testicles, in the form of a filled sack held from the middle with string producing the appearance of two lobes, hanging from the right side of the painting, below the eagle. While the child's pissing penis in Rembrandt's painting calls attention to the pre-sexual, unmanly genitals of Ganymede, the glaring masculinity of Rauschenberg's testes hangs from the painting, like fact. Situated, as

they are, near the eagle, one first associates them to Zeus, unyielding force of masculinity that he is. Yet then one sees them as an omen (birds and omens, always together) of what must come for Christopher and what can't come for Ganymede. The truth of all catamitic relationships, is that, save Ganymede caught in Zeus's immortalizing spell, the catamite can only ever occupy a liminal state, between boyhood and manhood. Once he achieves full manhood and citizenship, it would be improper for the relationship to continue.¹⁰ The descended testicles predict the maturation of the catamite and the eventual threat the catamite poses to the dominant man in the relationship. They are the usurpation of his power. We can see in these two works, three hundred years apart, and both thousands of years older than the original myth of Ganymede, the enduring fascination and continuous renegotiation of the position of Ganymede, the constant nagging question of Ganymede's agency.

Depictions of Ganymede as young as these are in the minority however. Ganymede is depicted throughout art history, with rather incredible frequency, typically as an older youth, with a fully formed body, though slightly smaller than other figures, both gods and men. Throughout classical, renaissance, and neoclassical art Ganymede is a common reference point. He also occurs numerous times in canonical western literature. One particularly touching depiction of Ganymede comes from the Danish neoclassical sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen. Thorvaldsen's Ganymede appears to be a youth approaching maturity. His body is lithe, but powerful. Zeus, as the eagle, appears quite tame as he drinks from a cup held forth by Ganymede with both hands. The gesture is compassionate but reverential, fearless and unforced. Facing each other, heads

¹⁰ David Halprin., "Is there a History of Sexuality", *Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader*, Routledge, New York, 1993.

bent forward, the two are a pair, simply and clearly. What is striking in this sculpture is the equality of Ganymede and Zeus. Ganymede is slightly larger but there is a balance between them. Their symmetrical postures draws attention to their sameness, despite the mortal/immortal, man/beast differences. The cup bearing Ganymede is performing for Zeus does not appear like servitude, rather it seems more like help, voluntary, based on love. While admittedly



Ganymede Waters Zeus as an Eagle, Bertel Thorvaldsen, 1817, Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen.

Thorvalsen's sculpture is further from the myth than many other depictions it suggests a symbiosis between the two figures that is startlingly moving in its quietude.

The specter of Ganymede haunts *Crazy for Vincent*. The physical beauty of Vincent, like the beauty of Ganymede, is overwhelming and is addressed constantly in the text. Hervé, the writer, creator of worlds, swoops down from his lofty perch and plucks the beautiful mortal out from his earthly confines and brings him into a world occupied by the highest figures, intellectuals, artists, actors, gods. There, in this other world, Vincent/Ganymede mainly exists to act as lover to the man, though as with Leda, putting on Zeus's knowledge with his power, Vincent gains from the relationship. Hervé's real power, which is Zeus's power, is the gift of immortality he grants Vincent. Immortalized forever in text, he shall live forever. Even in death he cannot die. Like the great heroes of epics, Vincent's life were important enough to capture the attention of the writer (poet). His *kleos*, his glory, will give him eternal life on the tongue of the poet and in the minds of the readers. While we can draw countless parallels between the stories

of Vincent and Hervé and Ganymede and Zeus the stranger truths lie in exploring the ways in which their relationship differed from and in many ways existed in opposition to the traditional catamitic relationship.

In Zeus and Ganymede's relationship it was taken as a given in all classical sources¹¹ (or at least all those that recognized the relationship) that Zeus played the active penetrative role, while Ganymede was the receptive partner. As the myth became explanation for the practice of sex between men in classical Greece, the divide between the *erastês*, the active, older partner, who plays the role of Zeus, and *erômenos*, the passive, younger partner, acting as Ganymede, was reified through their sexual practices. Such a divide lives on today as some gay men take on identities of "tops" and "bottoms". In the classical era the maintenance of the boundary between the penetrative and receptive partners was necessary for the institution of pederasty. While Hervé plays the role of *erastês* and Vincent of the *erômenos* in their social practices, sexually there is an inversion of the roles. Guibert write in one entry "His ass is forbidden to me; he says it's made for caca" (32). In creating this rule for their relationship, Vincent asserts his own agency in the structure of the relationship. As a result he takes on more power than any *erômenos* ever could.

In *Greek Homosexuality* Kenneth Dover argues that the Ganymede myth was accepted as the origin of homosexuality in the minds of the Greek (Dover 145). It can be tempting for us moderns to attempt to understand classical sexuality through the lens of contemporary sexual practices. In his essay "Is There a History of Sexuality?", David Halprin explains the fallacy of such thinking. He clarifies that when we see a sexual relationship between two males, certain words (homosexual, gay, queer) become activated in our minds. Yet these are dangerous pitfalls

¹¹ Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*.

to allow oneself to fall into. These words describe both acts and identities. When a person declares themselves gay it is only partially a statement of the types of sex acts one cares for. For each individual the identity has a different meaning, though for most it is a statement about who they are. Having sex with men is one element to this identity, though it is far from the only one. As more and more research shows, sex acts between men are hardly limited to those who identify as gay, queer, or homosexual.¹² For the Greeks there was absolutely no conception that the *erastês* and *erômenos* shared a sexual identity, in the way that both penetrative and receptive partners in the modern sexual system could both identify as gay, because there wasn't a conception of individuals possessing sexual identities as such. *Erastês* and *Erômenos* represents roles not fixed identities. To be an *erômenos* was a stage in life and said nothing about one's future sexual actions. All of this is to say, sexual discourses arise historically and they shape both sexual practices and identities.

Vincent's own complex sexuality (the straight boy with male lovers) obviously does not fit into the classical mold of the Greeks, though it also cannot be adequately described using the prescriptive modern conception of sexuality. Instead Guibert describes a sexuality that is a rejection of both sexual discourses, while acknowledging the role internalized homophobia plays in Vincent's self-conception. What is transgressive about Vincent's sexuality is its liminality. Between the poles of gay and straight (though surely not bisexual), between classical sexuality and modern, between boy and man, he does not fit. He is neither the weeping Ganymede being abducted by Zeus in Rembrandt's depiction nor the willing Ganymede of Rauschenberg's work.

¹² Tony J. Silva and Rachel Bridges Whaley, "Bud-sex, Dude-sex, and Heteroflexible Men: The Relationship between Straight Identification and Social Attitudes in a Nationally Representative Sample of Men with Same-sex Attractions or Sexual Practices", *Sociological Perspectives*, 2017.

At times he can appear like one, at times the other, though, in actuality, he does not exist within such a binary. The near ambivalence he displays towards Hervé at points in the text makes him a Ganymede with power over his Zeus. Hervé, as Zeus, is hopelessly under the spell of Vincent. While Zeus is always infatuated by Ganymede's good looks, he traditionally uses his power to control Ganymede, to make him a captive on Olympus, to make him a captive to his age. Vincent's fugitive youth prevents Guibert from keeping him young forever in life, leaving him with no choice but to immortalize him in the text. His refusal to be spacially contained by Guibert, his need to pull himself away from Guibert, prevents this Olympian captivity as well. Vincent doesn't really care for Hervé's world in the stars, he likes his own friends, his skateboarders and punks. The center of power in their relationship does not reside clearly in one of them or the other. They participated in a constant negotiation of boundaries, testing each others limits and the limits of their relationship.

In an era of shifting sexual norms, Vincent existed at the center of many crossroads. His undefinable sexuality and boyish looks, as well as the similarities of their stories, places him in a lineage of Ganymede figures in the arts, though he perverts many of the simplistic representations through his own inscrutability. His being is a rejection of facile categorization. Guibert casts Vincent as a kind of late-20th century Ganymede, not denying his antecedents but providing nuance and adding complexity to the subject.

The Revolting Body

The human body is a messy, often disgusting, site. Of course it is frequently beautiful, but all bodies fail, break down, become unusable with time. Much of Hervé's obsession with Vincent is an obsession with his body. Certain parts of Vincent's body, his chest, his face, armpits, cock, feet, legs, skin, ass, mouth are particularly sacred to him. These body parts are markers of Vincent's boyish beauty, yet as time moves forward they begin to oscillate between the sacred and the profane. Vincent is not well for most of their relationship. The causes of Vincent's illness are never stated directly, at least not in a way where the reader is sure if the statement is meant to be taken seriously, though, with the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to see the progression of his illness. Guibert emphasizes this progression in through the form of the text, by beginning with the end and showing his illness in reverse. The reader must conclude Vincent develops AIDS at some point in the text, which fits into Guibert's life story, though one can hardly blame Vincent or Hervé for not seeing the signs earlier. They were living in a different paradigm. In era in which the journal entries that became *Crazy for Vincent* were written, AIDS had only recently begun to enter the public consciousness and the damage that lay on the horizon remained unknowable, at least at the beginning of their relationship. In examining Hervé's morphing relationship with Vincent's body, the anxieties surrounding health and illness, cleanliness and filth, sacredness and profanity, are laid bare, while these seeming dichotomies are troubled and categories reimagined.

At points, the glory and youth of Vincent's body seems to overwhelm Hervé. In one entry he writes, "I find his skin again, splendid... marvelously soft and perfumed, with those beauty marks on his shoulders; I hardly dare to kiss it, I caress it shyly, as if I were getting it for the first

time” (36). To kiss the sacred body would be an act of defilement. Hervé can hardly stand to touch the body which vibrates with so much intensity before him. He anoints the body, “In those days I had very little money, but always a flask of expensive perfume. Before he left, he would order me to spread it on his torso until the last drop of it was gone” (31). This ritual imbues their parting with a kind of holy significance. Vincent’s chest acts as a kind of fetish, an object weighted with supernatural significance, carrying the spirits of beauty and youth. This practice involves more creative thinking than may see evident. Vincent’s adolescent boyhood flees from them. At the very beginning of the relationship, such as in the photograph *Vincent, 1982*, Vincent seems to remain, at least partially, a child. Taken the year they met, the photograph is the first in Guibert’s published body of work to include Vincent.



Vincent 1982, Hervé Guibert, Callicoon Fine Arts.

The tenderness of Vincent’s youth is the subject of the photograph. His unshaven, hairless jawline speaks to a specific moment of liminality, the strange moment between boyhood and manhood. He has begun to develop the facial features of adulthood, yet his skin remains unmarred by the blade of a razor. He is shot from just above, his small stature still a measure of his youth, rather than the symbol of failed masculinity that he came to see it as. In the fifth to last entry, chronologically the fifth entry from the beginning of their relationship, already the boyhood became was more illusion than reality, “The child, again (but he’s almost no longer a child: his body has grown, hairs have appeared on his pubis)” (92). His fugitive youth must be

made to seem present through their interactions, their rituals, to ensure the narrative of the relationship, that of Hervé's obsession and Vincent's disinterest, remains intact, all while his body revolts against the constraints of childhood and purity Hervé attempts to place on it. In another entry he writes, "His coarse, shriveled palms, crazed by mycosis and detergent, passed gently over my shoulders; my heart made them soft as silk" (30). Here he calls out directly the mental work he is putting in to transform Vincent into an object of purity.

Hervé is not blind to this. He writes, "I had wanted to slip so many skins on Vincent: that of a whore, that of a child, that of a thug, that of a sadist, that of just anyone" (48). While Vincent remains unknowable to Hervé, Hervé must create identities for him. These "skins" are ideas of who Vincent could be, who Vincent was, and it is no accident that he uses the metonym of skin to describe them. Along with the sprouting hair and growth closer to a man's body, Vincent's skin changes in other ways. He develops sores, rashes, and infections. The fictionality of the "pure" boy is obvious in his body's complexity. Purity has always been an illusion projected onto the one's deemed "pure", an attempt to corral the body into an unattainable ideal. What is novel about Guibert's approach is to accept the impure body, to be utterly repulsed by the fleshy, failing body and yet inescapably drawn to it, and to still consider it holy.

The sick body is abject because it forces those looking at it to face their own mortality. The truth of the biological failures that await us all cannot be ignored when one is confronted with the failing body. Hervé writes that after a sexual encounter

I fall asleep against him, suddenly wakes up, gets out at the end of the bed to turn off the lights, he undresses completely, stays on top of the covers, I ask him why he doesn't want to slide underneath, he says that he's sweating, later a coughing fit overtakes him...

When I wake up, hemmed in by the traces of that body I worshiped, that disappeared, I'm ready to rinse out my mouth with ammonia and powder the sheets and his pillow with sulphur (38).

The brutal reality of Vincent's failing health is inescapable. His illness erases him from the text. The missing "he", before "suddenly wakes up", is unnerving, a prefiguration of his absence in death. Hervé, ever the neurotic, is impelled to cleanse himself of the "traces" of illness. He is forced to confront that the object of his obsession, "the body [he] worshiped", is dangerous to him. The sweating and coughing are signs of life, but also signs of impending doom. The exaggerated response, the desire to "rinse out my mouth with ammonia and powder the sheets and his pillow with sulphur", is a desire to escape the inescapable, to take back the act already done. To be poisoned with chemicals is preferable to being infected with disease because the bodily, biological components of the disease relate to dirtiness and filth, in the western mind, while the chemicals are associated with cleaning and the removal of impurity.

Yet these feelings don't last. Vincent, aware of Hervé's health anxieties, uses them against him. To push Hervé away, or to test the limits of his devotion, Vincent would push Hervé. He writes, "Vincent said to me, I have a fungus, he said, I have scabies, he said, I have a sore, he said, I have lice, and I pulled his body against mine" (43). There are times where Hervé is able to overcome his anxieties, as he does here, because he is not simply repulsed by the failing body, he is also enticed by it. While at the beginning of their relationship it seems that Vincent's purity was the source of Hervé's obsession, by the time Vincent is sick, it is his impurity, those diametric poles of attraction and repulsion, which obsesses Hervé.

Early in their relationship Hervé writes, “I say that maybe he can sodomize me one day with a condom, he says, “Are you afraid of AIDS?” (85) Hervé makes a (racist) joke of it and they move on without him answering Vincent. After that Hervé writes,

I see him lift one of his feet in the shower, it looks from a distance like the arch of his foot is stained red. I remember that the doctor has asked me to show him the bottoms of my feet when we had talked about AIDS. Vincent is sitting on the bed, I tell him, “Show me the bottoms of your feet,” he refuses, he says, “I’m hiding something from you.” I say, “What?” He says, “I have AIDS.” I say at least it’s a good way to get exempt from service (80)

It is important to keep in mind both Vincent’s and Hervé’s senses of humor and interest in irony when reading this passage. Given Hervé’s joking response and the ease with which Vincent announces to Hervé, what was at that time, his death sentence, it seems fair to imagine that Vincent did not say “I have AIDS” in full earnestness. In all likelihood, he was messing with Hervé, knowing of his fear of the disease. While he may have suspected that he had become infected, it seems unlikely that he would have been tested or would know with certainty that he had the disease, especially considering that, earlier in the book, several years after this encounter, Vincent says to Hervé “You’re really scared of catching AIDS, huh?” (28). This seems like an unlikely statement to make to a partner who was aware that he was living with AIDS, given their sexual practices.

Additionally, before this joking interaction in the book, after in their lived time Hervé describes this interaction between them:

He adds vodka to his champagne, he says that he's taking antibiotics, he's exhausted, and plus he has something nasty, that thing on the bottom of his feet that he hid from me the other time; he went to see a dermatologist in the neighborhood, it's a fungus that he waited too long to take care of, I shouldn't touch it, it isn't really contagious, but it would be better to be careful. He asks me if I want to see his sores, I say yes, he takes off his shoes, he says, 'Do you want to see the more disgusting foot, or the other one?' I reply, 'The more disgusting one.' He takes off his sock, grips his foot to show me the arch, studded with little red marks, glistening with ointment. Then he turns around and takes off his sweater to show me this patch he has in the middle of his back. He says that if it's AIDS, he'll rob a bank, or maybe he'll shoot himself during the hold-up, or else take the money and blow it all... On my bed, he curls up against me in my arms, I stroke his torso a little, he's all warm. In the morning, I wake up with a feeling of deep disgust. I change all the sheets. I spray myself with anti-fungal powder. I make an appointment with the dermatologist in the afternoon, I lie to him, I say that by accident I slept with a young man who I'll definitely never see again, whom I have no way of contacting, and I describe Vincent's sores, he assures me that no fungus in the world ever took a form like that" (76-78)

Vincent's joking about AIDS previously was masking his fear of the disease. He gives off the air that he lives his life in fear of nothing and yet here Vincent makes clear that he couldn't face a life with AIDS. Hervé, for his part, must exist within his oscillation between attraction and repulsion. He wants to see the more disgusting foot because he can't help himself. He loves the fear he has for the disease, because it calls attention to his own lack of symptoms, his freedom

from illness. The foot is “studded with little red marks, glistening with ointment”. There is a beauty, a transcendence, to his description of the “disgusting foot”. The glistening ointment, that medicinal, healing salve, is another kind of anointment. A ritual not of the relationship, but a private ritual of Vincent’s which Hervé is not party to. This anointment is a protection against the unknown, the mystery “fungus”, and an acknowledgement of Vincent’s transformation. New rituals such as these must now enter into his life. In this new state, between knowing and unknowing, Vincent imagines new possibilities for his life, bank robbery, or bank robbery leading to suicide, or bank robbery followed by the destruction of the money. This imagined nonsensical violence and criminality is a reaction to the nonsensical nature of the disease. The randomness of the possible illness can only be met with an equally random act. A type of violence that’s only purpose is chaos reflects the unfairness of illness.

Hervé goes to bed with Vincent after seeing the “disgusting foot”, while Vincent “curls up against [him] in [his] arms”. This is one of the moments in the text where Vincent needs Hervé more than Hervé needs Vincent and in the moment Hervé relishes it. Despite his brave airs, Vincent is scared. Scared of the disease he doesn’t know if he has, scared of being ill, even scared of losing Hervé. Hervé stews in the pleasure of the moment, however in the morning his fear returns. The hyperbole of the ammonia and sulfur are replaced with real anti-fungal spray, a kind of spell to ward off danger, ineffectual though comforting. He goes to his own doctor to receive reassurance. Lying to the doctor about his relationship to Vincent, Hervé is not forced to admit the truth, the willful exposure (and almost certain future exposure). To be honest would give away his recklessness, expose his willingness to put himself in danger. The doctor’s “assurance” that Vincent’s skin condition couldn’t be a fungus is quite possibly the least assuring

thing imaginable, though rather than the accepting the seemingly concrete truth Vincent provides, of his own doctor's diagnosis, it is the ambiguity of the second doctor's verdict in which Hervé finds reassurance. In *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, Hervé's relationship to doctors becomes less trusting. He becomes less willing to accept the wisdom of the medicine men, as their own incompetence in the treatment of AIDS becomes apparent. At this early stage however, he still finds solace in the authority of the white coat. Vincent's stained red foot moves out of the realm of the known and into the realm of the unknown where it can be everything or nothing. This known unknown is a much more comfortable place for Hervé to find himself.

In his later work, particularly the book made his literary fame *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* and his only work on film *Modesty or Immodesty*, this kind of scrutiny of the sick body is cast back at himself. In a passage that appears near the beginnings both in the text and in the film¹³, Guibert writes:

Long before the tests confirmed that my illness was a certainty, I felt that my blood had suddenly become exposed, laid bare, as if a garment had been protecting it without my being aware of it before. I had to live from then on with this exposed, naked blood, at every hour of the day, on public transportation, while walking down the street, constantly on guard against an arrow aimed at me at all times. Does it show in my eyes? (Modesty or Immodesty)

While examining Vincent's body for signs of illness and decay, Guibert focuses on the outward bodily manifestations of sickness. Once he classifies himself as sick, "before the tests confirmed

¹³ I quote the translation of the film, from Christine Pichini, (also the translator of *Crazy for Vincent*) found in the exhibition booklet for *L'impudeur: Hervé Guibert, Moyra Davey* at the Hessel Museum of Art, 2018.

that [his] illness was a certainty”, he projects his gaze inward, not on his flesh but on his blood. He no longer allows himself the comfort of ambiguity. The outward symptoms of the illness are less important now that Guibert has decided the illness is already inside of him. The feeling of being exposed, of being known or knowing what he is, is how he fears the illness. The “garment”, which had previously protected his blood from his gaze, from knowing himself, and from the gaze of others, has vanished, leaving him “naked”. His blood had existed in the unknown state at this point. It was simply a part of his body, not yet classified as healthy or sick. Once the blood has been removed for the tests it is no longer a part of him but instead, a piece of information to be decoded by the doctors and then relayed back to him. This information is meant to change how he lives his life, to cause him to see himself as sick and to live like a sick person. This is the how he has been laid bare. The nakedness is public for Guibert, as is emphasized by its being felt in the public spaces of public transportation and on the street, though nothing has outwardly changed about his appearance. He asks if it is visible in his eyes because there is a sense that something this monumental must somehow be visible. He could see it in Vincent, on his feet, so how could others not see it in him?

The sick body is a body in revolt. It revolts against itself and against what a body is meant to do, to be. Healthy bodies make productive workers and so new regimes are invented to address the health of the social body. Foucault, Muzil to Guibert in *To the Friend*, developed a theory of biopower to explain the “numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies” (History of Sexuality 140) used by modern nation-states. While the concept of “getting tested” is no doubt a social good, it is also without a doubt a form of social control, an attempt to preserve the health of the body of the nation. Vincent’s refusal to get

tested, his refusal to position himself either in the camp of the sick or of the healthy is a revolt against the social body. It is a radical choice to maintain his personal freedom from knowledge over the collective right to stay healthy. The fear of AIDS, especially in the first years of the epidemic, was a fear of uncertainty, a fear of the unknown. To purposefully choose to exist in a state of unknowing is as radical and powerful as it is stupid. Hervé did not allow himself this unknowing, a choice that without a doubt added years to his life, though placed him in a dehumanizing medical system and changed essentially every element of his life.

Central to the fear of AIDS is a fear of fluids. Bodily fluids and secretions are almost always seen as taboo in the west. While shit and vomit are the traditional loci of the abject, blood, cum, piss, and spit are not far behind. The problematic notion of “being clean”, meaning HIV/

AIDS free, with its not so subtle implication that an infected person is dirty, likely arises from the fact that HIV is transmitted via fluid exchange which is of course, tied up in conceptions of moral hygiene. The American artist Barton Lidice Beneš explores the fears of infected fluids in his series *Lethal Weapons*. By combining banal everyday objects associated with bourgeois culture, such as a toy gun or perfume bottle, with his own HIV positive blood, he called attention to the fear of contamination that gripped the public in the height of the AIDS crisis. The



Lidice Beneš's, *Lethal Weapon: Silencer*, 1992, Courtesy of the estate of Barton Lidice Benes and Pavel Zoubok Gallery

works, mounted behind shatterproof glass, were considered so dangerous by the Swedish government, that, before they were allowed to be shown, they had to be disinfected with heat at a

hospital.¹⁴ The elevation of HIV positive blood to art, protected in their enclosures, reflects its the dual repulsive/attractive quality. The (healthy) viewer of the work can examine the blood from the safety of the outside. Its potential harm, made obvious by the tools of dispersal that contain it, is nullified by the presentation. This dangerous blood is made safe, inert, by the art context, freeing the viewer to explore their desire to see, to know, the blood, without the risk of contamination or having to deal with the sick body. Their gaze is redirected from the sick body to the blood out of context of the body. Like the nakedness of Guibert's blood, this blood is on view for public consumption.

Hervé, meanwhile, is fascinated by Vincent's fluids. His desire for Vincent's secretions overpowers his fear of contamination, while being informed by it. The fluids are traces of Vincent that he leaves behind or gives to Hervé. In one entry he writes, "He kissed me a second time, his mouth was dry, he drenched me with saliva, his precious commodity, what he spits on the street" (28). The saliva appears from nowhere. The dryness of Vincent's mouth gives way to his drenching of Hervé as if by some mystical force. While the contrast between the "precious commodity" and "what he spits on the street" may seem to be contradictory it is really a form a blessing, a blessing for Hervé and a blessing for the street. Hervé receives it with joy because it comes from the beloved, a part of him, apart from him, something his body has produced which could satiate his dry mouth, but instead he puts on Hervé. One night Hervé says, Vincent "leaves, I stagger, I go pick up some drugs that I dropped by mistake, I pick up cum in my fingers" (53). Vincent's cum is so precious it is a drug. It gives Hervé a high he can't find anywhere else, but it

¹⁴ "Barton Lidicé Beneš, artist page", On Pavel Zoubok Gallery website, <http://pavelzoubok.com/artist/barton-lidice-benes/>, (4/21/2018).

also has danger in it. Contained in Vincent's bodily fluids is Hervé's doom. The wretched virus that has taken and takes so many lives lurks in those precious commodities. Notably, the entry following the drugs/cum thought, (meaning the entry he wrote prior to it) reads "This evening with Vincent, something new: I vomited" (53). Hervé's secretion doesn't have the holiness to it that Vincent's do, though it is important nonetheless. According to Kristeva, the abject is where meaning collapses and the distinction between the subject and the object is lost.¹⁵ Hervé leaves out the details of the interaction, leaving the reader to wonder what new type of intimacy could have occurred between Vincent and himself to break down the distinction between them and cause this expression of abjection. The sharing of illness, especially of an illness resulting from fluid exchange and penetration of the body, is a quite literal way in which the boundaries of self and other fall apart. A piece of one has entered the other and now threatens both lives. Vincent's often revolting body is a reminder of the illness Hervé now suspects Vincent of carrying and of sharing with him.

At one point Hervé imagine photographing Vincent's "prick surrounded by fragrant, pale pink peonies: I would have loved that splash of blood at the moment of stabbing him, to feel disgusted and pleased when those warm pieces of his brain hit me just as I shatter his skull; yes, I would really love to touch his brain" (56). One shouldn't read this as an actual desire to harm Vincent, but rather as an interest in the internal workings of his body. The "splash of blood" is not about causing him pain, but rather the beauty of the bright crimson contrasted against the pale pink of the peonies. A desire to touch Vincent's brain is about the physical experience of feeling that squishy organ that contains Vincent's identity, but also a desire for a new kind of

¹⁵ Kristeva, Julia, and Leon S. Roudiez, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 1982.

intimacy with him, true honest communication. “How could Vincent remain unknowable with my hand on his brain?” is the question that sits just slightly below the surface of this fantasy.

Ultimately Vincent isn't murdered by Hervé nor does he die from AIDS. Instead he “died of complications from a ruptured spleen” (24). This carries more weight in the translation as, in English, we have both spleen, the organ, and spleen, the bad mood, both coming from the Old French *esplen*.¹⁶ In French, Vincent ruptured his *rate*, which, while also an ugly word, doesn't carry the same double entendre (instead he, secondarily, ruptures his female rat). *Spleen*, in French, refers to the mood, (think of *Le Spleen de Paris*) which funnily enough made its way back into French by way of English.¹⁷ The spleen is an organ, a large lymph node, part of the lymphatic system. Splens of people with AIDS are known to become enlarged, which would put them at a greater risk for rupture, though there is no mention of Vincent's spleen being enlarged at the time of death and he did fall (or jump) from a third floor window so to become too concerned about the particularities of situation can be something of a fool's errand. This death was another kind of revolt. A person living with AIDS is expected to become a person who has died from AIDS. A team of firefighters came to Vincent after he had fallen (or jumped) and tried to force him to go to the hospital. His refusal of them, while again being stupid, was a revolt. It may be dangerous to attempt to apply motives to Vincent's actions, but given his statements about what he would do if he were to have AIDS and the apparent progression of his illness over the course of the text (or is it a regression? reverse time is complicated), it doesn't seem entirely

¹⁶ “spleen”, Oxford English Dictionary, 2018, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/187104?rskey=GuOOfX&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid> (4/21/2018).

¹⁷ “spleen, Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales, 2012, <http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/spleen> (4/21/2018).

impossible that Vincent's death wasn't in some way planned. Vincent refused to die from AIDS, and so he didn't.

Guibert's death followed Vincent's by only three years, which can be hard to grasp, given how much he accomplished in those three years. He was always a prolific writer but the amount that he was able to produce in his last years, and the importance of that work, is staggering. Less than a month after Vincent's death, Hervé found himself in Rome and began working on *To the Friend*. It would be absurd to say that Guibert embraced AIDS, of course he rejected it with the full force of his being, though he made AIDS the center of his life and work in his final years. While Vincent's personal refusal to accept an AIDS diagnosis left him free to exist in a state of ambiguity, his act was one that allowed for only a personal freedom. His refusal of knowledge undoubtedly put his loved ones at risk and his wanton disregard for safe sex practices verges on immoral. Guibert, for his part, took up the mantle of illness. He subjected himself to the medical gaze, to countless procedures, endless doctors appointments, horrible treatments that only made him sicker. He did this in an attempt to save his life. Beyond this, he wrote about his illness, first in *To the Friend*, then again in *The Compassion Protocol* (1991), *The Man In The Red Hat*, *CytomégaloVirus*, and *Le Paradis* (all published posthumously in 1992). As a result of these works he went on national television shows and provided countless interviews where he spoke about AIDS in great detail, becomes one of the first in France to do so with such force and power. His film, *Modesty or Immodesty*, was also filmed during this period and was subsequently aired on the French television channel TF1¹⁸. His willingness to discuss his illness prompted a national conversation which forced the French public to confront AIDS in a way they had, up to

¹⁸ *L'impudeur: Hervé Guibert, Moyra Davey* at the Hessel Museum of Art, 2018.

that point, refused to do. His body was in revolt and it wasn't just him, the bodies of hundreds of thousands of men and women from all walks of life, though especially the bodies of gay men, were revolting all over the world and Guibert wanted someone to do something about it. He produced a body of work in this period that drew attention to these revolting bodies, calling them out and naming them. If silence is equal to death, Guibert's wild cries must be life, asserting itself.

On Finding

The last entry in *Crazy for Vincent*, chronologically the first entry Guibert wrote, reads “He said, I had decided not to love men any more, but you I really liked” (93). This final piece of the puzzle that is Vincent is a strangely wonderful realization for the reader to conclude with. There was never the possibility of love for Hervé because Vincent had decided not to love men anymore, but he really liked Hervé. He liked him. He really liked him. He doesn’t say he loves Hervé, he doesn’t say he’s obsessed with him, he doesn’t say he desires him. It is inoffensive “like” that he feels for him. The opposite of love is not hate, hate and love requires energy, force. The opposite of love (or obsession or desire) is something completely inoffensive, something meek and bland, something like like. But this is fine. There was no need for Vincent to ever feel anything.

In fact his emotions often got in the way of the real emotions of the text, of the relationship, Hervé’s emotions. As addendum to the one entry in the text where Vincent cries, that moment all the way back in the subway station where he let’s down the “tough guy” facade while high or drunk or both, crying because Hervé’s desire for him has ebbed, Hervé writes

Forgot to note, in the episode of Vincent in tears, the most important thing: while walking with him at the end of the Champs-Élysées, without turning towards him, within the certitude of no longer loving him, I’m suddenly overtaken by an extraordinary surge of love that makes me take him in my arms, without daring to look at him, and hold him tight. But right then I have the impression that what I’m holding on to has no consistency; it isn’t, assuredly, someone other than Vincent that I’m holding in my arms, it isn’t even myself, but rather the symbol or phantom of love that I had for Vincent, so

wasted that I can no longer control it, that it melts in my arms while thinking it holds itself up. (71-72)

Vincent's emotionality first convinces Hervé that he no longer loves him. The impossibility of loving Vincent, with all of his complicated liminality (amplified by the liminal state of consciousness he found himself in), was finally apparent to Hervé. Several hours before this whole encounter, Hervé spoke to a psychiatrist, whom had previously spoken to Vincent at Hervé's request, leading them "to the conclusion that there's nothing to be done" (74). In this state of hopelessness, perhaps a state of clarity, Hervé had given up on Vincent, yet, "suddenly", the "extraordinary surge of love" overtakes him. He is certain that he no longer loves Vincent when he feels the surge. It is not a surge of love *for Vincent* but simply a surge of love, undirected. Taking Vincent into his arms he is confronted with Vincent's lack of "consistency", in the physical sense, his immateriality. Ghostly, Vincent's being has dissolved. Hervé writes that "it isn't, assuredly, someone other than Vincent that [he's] holding in [his] arms, it isn't even [him]self". The mass he holds in his arms isn't someone other than Vincent and it isn't *even* Hervé, leaving only one possibility, it is Vincent.

Hervé disregards this conclusion, locating instead in this mass "the symbol or phantom of love that [he] had for Vincent". This is a fascinating interpretation of his experience of the embrace, though it fails on several levels. He says that the phantom is "so wasted" that he is no longer in control of it, forgetting that he has never had control over his love for Vincent. The lack of consistency that Hervé feels in the embrace is not because Vincent has disappeared, but rather that the Vincent Hervé embraces is Vincent qua Vincent. Exposing himself, Vincent lets down the guard which keeps Hervé from knowing him. Hervé's Vincent evanesces in the presence of

the emotional Vincent, as Hervé finds himself unable to reconcile the Vincent he has constructed in his head with the being whose presence he finds himself in. Thus, the melting is not the melting of Hervé's love for Vincent, but the melting of identification. When Hervé realizes he is not holding himself in the embrace, he is realizing that he is not holding the Vincent he has created, his projection of Vincent.

Vincent remains unknowable to Hervé, through all of his writing, all of his searching for Vincent. In the single moment of the text where the facade crumbles Hervé is presented with a Vincent, close to whatever the true Vincent (if such a thing exists) might be, a Vincent beyond his understanding. The only understandable Vincent is the constructed Vincent of Guibert's imagining. Hervé's gaze subjects Vincent to a transfiguration. He makes Vincent into the Vincent he imagines him to be, which occurs both in his mind and, at times, in reality.

So no, Hervé didn't "find" Vincent in the way he intended to at the outset of the project. While the work may fail on this level, its success is so much greater than the discovery of one being. Instead what Guibert has managed to accomplish in the work is a discovery of the poetics of obsession. Through his invention of Vincent, Hervé explores the relationship between the self and the other, uncovering the vast gulf that exists between all beings. Trying to hold Vincent captive, Hervé managed only to make himself captive to his obsessions. The fugitive boy escapes the author, through age and through death. What Hervé has accomplished is the etching of himself upon the text. Like Breton on his glass house, in *Crazy for Vincent* Hervé has inscribed *who he is*, the terrifying or awe-inspiring truth of the power of his sentiments, his obsession.

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