

## Chapter 6

# Playing Myself/Selves: The Unknowing of Autobiographical Photographic Self-Portraits

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### ABSTRACT

*For nearly three decades, the author has used photography to develop a personal narrative that tells the story of living with HIV. Now with a normal life expectancy, the author is rewriting the self in the author's project "The Unknowing...X" to think about what the future could hold. This has involved a form of playing previous selves and personas that have been inhabited through the years, by delving into a massive dressing up box collected throughout the author's life. The author introduces examples of previous photography projects to set the foundations of an autoethnographic practice, then indicates the departure in process that led to the new work, developing a methodology based on play and 'not knowing'. This new process is called 'unknowing' and has led to a subconscious act of image making, drawing on previous lives lived, memories, and the influences that have shaped the author's practice and world to produce photographic self-portraits that are the most autobiographical to date.*

This chapter contains concepts and various forms of artistic expression that may be considered profane, offensive, or vulgar to some readers and cultures. Reader discretion is advised.

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter is about exploring different chapters of my life through photography, in which I develop an interwoven autobiographical piece of writing that draws on my photographic practice, family photographs, personal narratives, memories, and previous published writings, including interviews with me about my work. Diagnosed HIV positive in 1994, I have developed a personal narrative in my photography since, one that has resisted the medicalisation of the body but tells the story of living with HIV using myself almost entirely as the sole figure in the images. Initially with a life expectancy prognosis of ten years or less, I am still here documenting the experience through various photographic projects. Twenty-eight years later, I am on medication that means I have a normal life expectancy, undetectable viral load and

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therefore can't pass on the virus, I find myself reviewing and rewriting the self in my most recent photographic project *The Unknowing...X* (2019-present), to think about what the future could hold. A form of playing myself, different selves and personas I have inhabited through the years, by delving into a massive adult dressing up box collected throughout my life. I will introduce my previous work as a way of laying the foundations of my autoethnographic practice, then indicating the departure in process and methodology that led to the new work, a process about both play and 'not knowing'. This new process I call 'unknowing' has led to a subconscious act of image making, drawing on previous lives lived, memories, and the influences that have shaped my practice and my world, to produce photographs that are my most autobiographical yet, telling the story of my life through a series of staged self-portraits.

My photography since 1994 can be split in three major projects, or personas, as I prefer to call them. Each employs an umbrella term for a range of small discrete series of images, although all still speaking about my experience and responding to the world around me to an extent that I can say I have lived my life through photography. Even though my work is autobiographical, experiential, and empirically driven, I have always resisted the label of self-portraits for the earlier work, preferring to see it as an autoethnographic practice. The first *The Damaged Narcissist* (1994-2009) (see figure 1, figure 2), represents the early years of diagnosis. Very much about coming to terms with and trying to establish an identity and a life in response to the virus and in resistance to becoming the medicalised self. The second, *The Anatomical Man* (2009 – 2019) (see figure 1), my tattooed alter ego, where I had images of veins and arteries tattooed onto my body to signify and make visible the constant, repetitive and intrusive trips to the HIV clinic for blood tests, drawing my life on to the skin of my body. It also articulates a time of understanding in which the medication I started taking in 2005 after a diagnosis of the AIDS related cancer, Kaposi's sarcoma (KS), was becoming highly effective in minimising the effects of HIV and KS on the body. The marking of the body, collapsing the internal and the external on the surface of the skin, denotes a coming to terms with the virus, cohabiting the self rather than resisting it.

While I will refer to photographs from these first two personas to contextualise my process, methodology, thinking and the sustained narrative of exploring my life across almost three decades, in this chapter, however, I wish to concentrate on the most recent body of work *The Unknowing...X*. This was originally an attempt to have fun in the studio and move away from the narrative of HIV. I will explore how this process of creating a space of experimentation, of developing a methodology of not knowing, which had no original intention but playfulness, later formed itself into an autobiographical project. I argue that it is in the process of reflection about the outcomes that meaning is formed, rather than any preconceived intentions, at the same time acknowledging the project has built upon and responded to the success of my medication. Having a normal life expectancy has enabled me to imagine a future I didn't think I would have. Following on from the discussion about previous projects and the methodology of the new work I will refer in more detail to groups of images made during *The Unknowing...X* project that respond to certain life experiences and childhood images. Noting how the new photographs can be read as montages of my life that mark a shift from autoethnography to autobiography, with references to previous histories, family photographs and memories, which emerged during the process and allows me to classify the photographs more readily as self-portraits.

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