

Holding Still

Reflections on My Search for the Frozen Moment



Ann Bartges

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Ann Bartges

Bachelor of Fine Arts, Alfred University, 2005

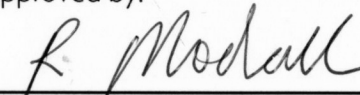
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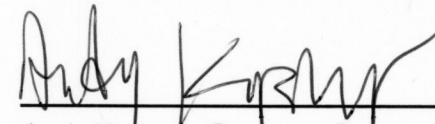
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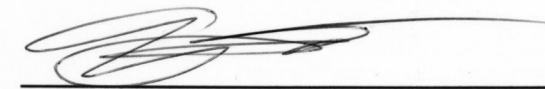
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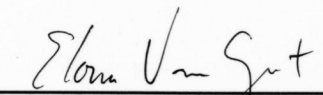
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Dedicated to my father, Jeffrey Bartges



ABSTRACT

Holding Still: Reflections on My Search for the Frozen Moment

Holding Still is a video installation and live performance that explores relationships between memory, photography, time, representation and the separation between self and image. This document presents an accumulation of research, reflections and personal anecdotes that have driven the artwork. Through Bartges' search to understand her relationship with her deceased father's image, she examines her old photos and home videos in the context of historical photography and discussions of transformation, mechanical reproduction and the psychology of the extended self. Bartges also discusses performance experiments of self-representation, labor, repetition and reenactment as methods to resuscitate the media remnants left behind.

Keywords: photography, video installation, performance, mediated image, memory, media remnants

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FORWARD

This thesis is an accumulation of research, reflections and personal anecdotes that inspired the artwork, *Holding Still* . The introduction opens the text with detailed descriptions of each work. I have divided the remainder of the book into two parts: Memory & Media and Performance. In the simplest terms, these parts address, respectively, content and method. However, like memory itself, the topics and stories within each part compose webs of relationships that resist linear structure. I have separated discussions of context and analysis of the artwork from the personal accounts that have shaped and driven my research.

INTRODUCTION

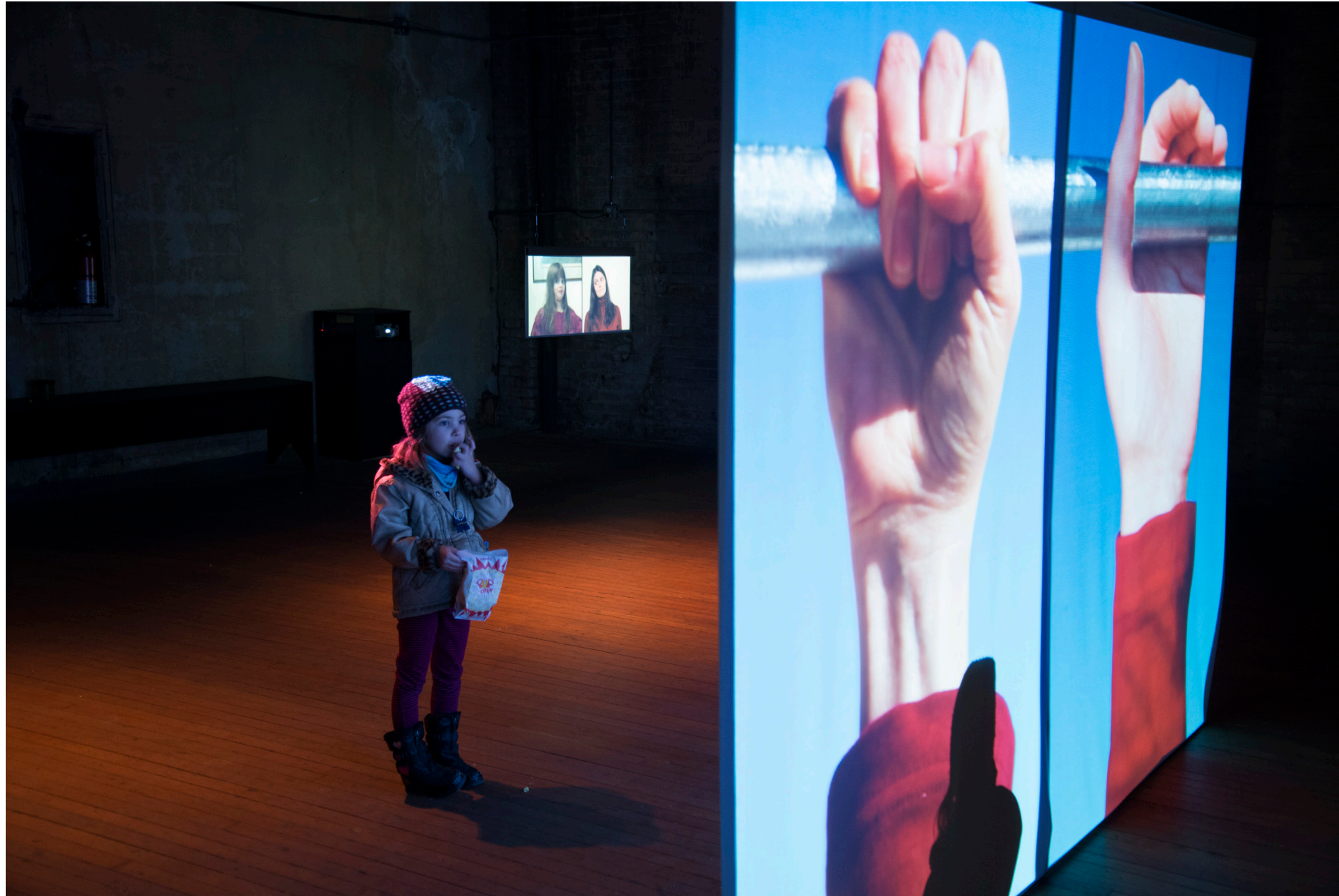
Holding Still is a video installation and performance that explores relationships between memory, photography, time, representation and the separation between self and image. I pull from old family photos and home videos, and consider how they serve our desire to capture time. It is not my intention to present these artifacts as windows into a nostalgia-riddled past; instead, I consider these time-locked images as objects to be reckoned with in the present. I work through gestures that simultaneously challenge and benefit from the possibility of a “frozen moment.” Presenting myself as author and character, I search for ways to resuscitate the media remnants left behind. *Holding Still* is comprised of four parts: *a + A* , *Our Hands* , *Ann & Video Ann* , and *Blink* . Like the parable of six blind men each describing a different part of an elephant, the component works of *Holding Still* approach the subject matter from different perspectives. Each one of the four pieces informs and creates a context for the others, and together they build a larger story.



a + A

video projection played on loop
video duration: 00:11:25
projection: 36" x 19"

a + A is a video diptych projected at the height of a nine-year-old girl. On one side of the screen is an expressive 15-second looping clip of my nine-year-old self. The clip was extracted from a VHS home video that my Gramps made during my ninth birthday. On the other side is an 11-minute video of my current self, age 31, working to re-enact younger Ann's expressions from the adjacent video.



Our Hands

video projection played on loop
video duration: 00:02:00
projection: 84" x 110"

Our Hands is a video diptych of two hands reaching for and holding onto a metal bar. One hand is live, and the other hand is a life-size photographic print. The live hand undergoes great effort to hold the bar, fighting both gravity and the weight of an unseen body. Meanwhile, the photo hand's grasp appears light, effortless and static. The live hand loses its grip and falls out of the screen, the photo hand remains hanging on the bar.



Ann & Video Ann

video projection played on loop with live performance
video duration: 00:12:12
performance space: 72" x 96", projection screen: 52" x 84"

Ann & Video Ann is a video projection and live performance. On the left, a waist-high white pedestal stands in front of a black backdrop. A white tablecloth with a colorful grapevine pattern covers the pedestal. A vase with fresh white and yellow flowers sits on top. On the right, a video projection presents a scene identical to the set on the left, with the addition of a framed photograph of my deceased father (the frame is three-dimensional, and hangs on the projection screen).

Video Ann, my life-sized video double, prepares to take a portrait with my Dad's framed photo. She arranges the set and poses for the portrait, but no picture is taken. Video Ann is left to hold her position for several minutes. Eventually, she gives up and tries another pose.

I enter the scene during Video Ann's second pose. I attempt to stand in the beam of her projection and visually merge myself with Video Ann. After failing to do so, I step back and interact with her from the left side of the set. We move through a sequence of mirroring. I break our synchronization and steal Dad's framed picture from her screen. The conflict is left unresolved with the mysterious disappearance of my Dad's face from his photograph.



Blink

zoetrope, live feed video projection and looping performance

The centerpiece of *Blink* is a black zoetrope, 33-inches in diameter. I crouch down and spin the zoetrope. The motion of the device animates a strip of sequential photographs, activating my Dad's portrait so that his eyes appear to blink. A video camera, set close to the zoetrope, records the animation of the blink, and sends a live feed video of my Dad's head to the projector. The image is projected at a life-like scale onto a 14" x 14" screen, positioned at my father's height of 6' 2". After seven minutes, I stand up, straighten out my skirt, and walk over to the Ann & Video Ann set. Inevitably, without my being there to maintain the zoetrope, the machine comes to a stop, revealing the image as lifeless without an operator.

FOR POSTERITY

An Interview with My Dad on My 9th Birthday
(Transcribed from VHS)

Dad: Here we are at channel 5430 in Emmaus, PA, interviewing the famous Ann Margaret Bartges on the occasion of her ninth birthday. Now, you regular viewers may recall some other birthdays, birthdays where Ann Margaret had jumped into her cake and rubbed it all over herself, birthdays when she was 2 years old or birthdays where she was 3 years old. This, however, is the first time that we have had an opportunity to interview her at 9 years old. Now, Miss Bartges, what is it like to be a 9-year-old?

Ann: I hate to say it, but I've only been 9 years old for five or six or more hours so I really don't know. I haven't even been 9 years old for a day yet.

Dad: Well, how was the first hour of being 9 years old? Could you tell, like, at the time you were born? Did you tingle all over and just poof! turn 9? Or did it happen slowly over the first several hours?

Ann: Apparently slowly over the first several hours.

Dad: I see, so you're still in shock. . .

(several minutes later)

Dad: Well, as we wrap up this interview for this evening, are there any final words you'd like to pass on to posterity?

Ann: Umm, yes, once you get into 3rd grade. . .you don't do anything but work. Head over heels work work work. I mean, it's fun work, but you're always doing more work. There's never any time that you're bored.

Dad: Isn't it awful being a grown-up?

Ann: I don't know.

Dad: Alright, well do you want to say goodbye to yourself?

Ann: No.

Dad: Because maybe on your 12th birthday whenever you go back and watch this from your 9th birthday you'll want to say "hello" to yourself even though you're not there yet, kind of like a hello forward into the past?

Ann: Hello to myself, forward in the past.

Dad: And thank you. That's all the time we have right now from station 5430 here in. . . (video fades out).



MEMORY & MEDIA

Memory is a small word that contains entire worlds. With a minimal exertion of will, anyone can conjure up a vision of places and people long since destroyed by the passage of time, whose impressions remain encoded along winding synaptic paths.

Lewis, Amini & Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*

Photography was invented so that Westerners could record and represent the world. The technology offers a unique way to redeem the past—a highly realistic pictorial record of that which is no more. It provides us with a mechanical memory. While photography is able to “permanently” record any place or event deemed memorable, it is Americans’ virtually unlimited and insatiable need for human likeness that accounts for the enormous popularity of photography in the United States. In a world where metaphysical hope for immortality is questioned by many, photographs promise a materialist realization of eternity.

Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America*

I grew up in the era of the “Kodak moment” when any event worth remembering was worth taking a picture of. For my seventh birthday, I received my first point and shoot film camera. Soon after, my mother taught me the ritual of arranging my prints in an album the way that she and my grandmother always did. Now, years later, it is difficult for me to separate the first-person memories of my experiences as a child from the third-person moments depicted in those freeze-frames. At the heart of my confusion is a conflict between internal and external modes of memory.

Last summer, my cousin’s wedding photographer delivered a DVD with 1200 images from the day’s events. Grandpa scoffed at the excess, grumbling that when he photographed weddings back in the 1940’s, the expectation was “10 or 12 good shots, and every one of them was worth putting up on the wall.”



THE MEDIATED IMAGE

I am interested in the photographic metamorphosis of a person from being to image. Whether through live video chat or old family photos, we increasingly rely on mediated versions of loved ones when absence, via distance or death, prevents physical presence. Roland Barthes discusses this moment of transformation in *Camera Lucida*. He writes, “In terms of image-repertoire, the Photograph (the one that I intend) represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a spectator” (14). But what, exactly, is carried through from the physical body to the copy? In the hands of a loved one, the media is at once cold and unresponsive, but also a proxy for a relationship filled with history, memory and emotion.

Walter Benjamin examines the value of the copy in his essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. He considers issues about the authenticity of an original artwork compared to its reproduction. He argues that the critical element missing from a reproduction is “its presence in time and space” (221). This divide between the source and its copy may come across as understated when comparing a person to their photograph, but Benjamin’s argument strikes true to the photographic portrait as he observes that “. . . technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway. . .” (222). The beholder of a family portrait or home video views the image through the lens of personal relationship. Absent person meets viewer halfway via reproduced image; the viewer then consumes the image through his or her own subjective memories and emotional needs.

My grandfather videotaped all of my birthday celebrations, from the age of one to eighteen. At the end of each tape, he would ask me what I had to say for posterity. I interpreted the exercise as a

joke. I didn’t understand, the way that he did, that everyone in those tapes would one day be dead, unless he preserved them to exist in the VCR.

Watching these old tapes now stirs emotion. Recently, I found one from my 9th birthday. When I put the tape into the VCR, I had hoped to time travel and relive the party. But my experience turns out to be quite limited, nothing more than looking in through a window. I have no first-person memory of the birthday party unfolding before me on the screen. I find it easier to analyze my younger self than to relate to her. Twenty-two years has transformed me from this 9-year-old character into an omniscient narrator. I am like Alice and the chess pieces just after she passes through the looking glass: she can see them, but they have no knowledge of her presence.

In a + A, I attempt to reunite with 9-year-old Ann through mimesis. In the studio, I watch the video clip on repeat and use a mirror to try and re-learn the facial expressions of my former self. After several hours of working to retrace my own steps, I am still unable to achieve perfect synchronization, and I have not gotten any closer to 9-year-old Ann.

I play out my desire to merge into my media again during the performance of *Ann & Video Ann*. At the point where I enter the scene, Video Ann is posing to get her picture taken. I observe Video Ann for a moment, and then step in front of the screen and into the beam of her video projection. I attempt to become her, and struggle to fit my body into her exact position. My hope is that by merging into her image, I will gain new access into the image world. I can see in the mirror that her eyes are landing on my cheeks, and my hands are not quite in the right place. For two minutes, I make continuous adjustments to my position, trying hard to disappear into her image. There are moments of brief success when our mouths, eyes and ears all come into perfect alignment, but the slightest movement destroys the fragile illusion of unity between self and image.



This image has become my lasting reference of my father. I took the picture during an afternoon out together. We took a tandem kayak up north to the lake. As we paddled, I took my camera and leaned back to take a picture of Dad, sitting directly behind me. It turned out to be my last snapshot of him. After he died, I found the print and framed. It has been sitting on my dresser for six years. I was behind the camera, so I know his eyes are looking at me.

After failing to become my own image, the focus of my performance with Video Ann shifts to the framed photograph of my Dad. I steal the photograph from her projection screen, hoping that if I take him out of the image world, I could have a piece of him back. The look on Video Ann's face shows her distress. To make matters worse, the image of my Dad's face on the stolen photograph has mysteriously disappeared. Video Ann and I have both lost access to the picture. As I developed this scene, I wanted to visualize how one re-experiences the loss of a loved one vicariously through the loss of their mediated image. The missing image itself causes emotional pain, suggesting that the photograph is more than just its material. In his article, *Possessions and the Extended Self*,

Russell Belk discusses the ways in which our possessions become part of our own extended sense of self. Belk's definition of possessions extends to people, in the context of, for example, *my father*. Hence, "mourning for dead loved ones may also be interpreted as grieving for a loss of self" (144). Possessions that trigger happy memories, such as photographs of family and friends, are particularly valuable (148). Belk explains that, "If possessions are viewed as part of self, it follows that an unintentional loss of possessions should be regarded as a loss or lessening of self" (142). Following Belk's argument, the loss of a photograph can trigger grief, not only for the loss of what the portrait image represented, but also for the loss of self that the image maintained.



Gramps set up his camcorder in the front row pew to record Dad's funeral. I remember feeling disgusted. Not only did the idea of re-experiencing the event seem perverse, but also the legs of the tripod took up too much space in the crowded sanctuary. I resented that Gramps's camcorder had a better view of Dad's casket than I did.



DEATH, MEDIA, AND LIVENESS

In the Victorian era, due to the expense of the technology, many people had only one photograph taken during their lifetime, if at all. Sometimes, a photograph was not taken until after death. Some photographers specialized in post-mortem photography and wrote articles sharing the tricks of the trade, including helpful tips for positioning the body and keeping the eyes and mouth closed, and techniques to manipulate the light in the room to cast a life-like glow on the face of the deceased (Ruby 62). Families often posed for a final group picture with the lifeless body, especially in the case of deceased children (Ruby 44).



Figure 1:
Unidentified
mother with
dead child,
Unknown, ca.
1840-60s.

During this early era of photography, Spiritualists embraced the technology as a way to show evidence of the existence of spirit beings. In his essay *Haunted History, Uncanny Modernity*, Tom Gunning discusses how spirit photography relied on the relationship between the sensitivity of a medium to pick up signals from the spirit world and the sensitized plate used in the photographic process. He goes on to explain that “If these two sensitive mediums were

combined—the photographic plate and the Spiritualist seer—then an image of the spirit might be produced” (11). As the photographic process and techniques of double exposure became common knowledge, faith in spirit photography dwindled. The magic of the photograph remains in the immortality of the image itself.

The immortality of the photographic image is bittersweet. One finds comfort in the stasis of a photo, but it seems unfair that the copy outlives the source. The condition of the copy outlasting its source is a recurring theme in *Holding Still*. In *Our Hands*, the photographic hand is a mere shadow of the hand it depicts. Yet the corporal hand falls under its own weight. The photographic hand foils the live hand, causing it to seem heavy, weak, and finite. The act of reaching, gripping, and holding onto the metal bar shows the desire to hold onto something concrete, and, in this case, the impossibility of doing so. In *Ann & Video Ann*, Video Ann wants to take a portrait with Dad's photograph. She hopes to capture a new moment with him. She poses and smiles, but the moment never freezes. She works to mimic the still picture by trying not to move. The photograph of her father holds strong and unchanging. But Video Ann's smile grows stale and tired, and her eyes begin to cross. Eventually, she gives up.



Figure 2: Alexander Martin,
Lotta Heiskill with her Child, 1915.



Figure 3: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Last Breath*, 2012

My Dad passed away unexpectedly in 2008 when an aneurism burst in his brain. He spent the last two weeks of his life in a medically induced coma in the Neuro-ICU. I stood by his side and practiced a desperate hope that the machines maintaining his vital organs would keep him not dead. About a year after his death, I had a disturbing dream. In the dream, I learned that he was still in a coma and had been moved to the basement of the hospital. For months the hospital had let my family believe he was dead. I was regretful for all of the time that we had missed with him, that he had been alone, forgotten. But worse was that he was still stuck there in life support purgatory—not able to live, but not able to die.

As a character, Video Ann exists as both a mediated version of me, and also as an independent presence. When I'm not in the scene, she seems to live in contrast to my Dad's photograph. However, when I approach, I disrupt the illusion of her liveness. I foil her virtual image with my physical presence. But she foils my physicality with her effortless loop and her image immortality. Throughout the piece, Video Ann shifts from a seemingly independent character, to my mirror image, to a looping video of a captured moment. This fluid transformation from presence to mirror to image encapsulates the role of a photographic portrait in the mind's eye.

I see a relationship between the medically induced coma and the photographic portrait, two forms of life support offering the comfort of partial presence. Whether ventilator or camera, technology holds the body in a static state of the existing self. On life support, the body is mechanically preserved: functioning via machine, caught between the states of here and not here. On both a technical and emotional level, induced coma saves the body from death, as does the photograph.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Last Breath* addresses life support as preservation, while revealing the conspicuous absence of being. The artwork is a machine made from a pump and repurposed ventilator parts. It maintains a captured breath from Cuban singer and cultural legend, Omara Portuondo. The exhaled air was transported to Lozano-Hemmer's studio in a paper bag. The bag was then fastened carefully to the *Last Breath* machine. The machine pumps and circulates the breath through a series of hoses, causing the bag to rhythmically inflate and deflate, like a lung. When Portuondo passes away, the breath from her body will live on in this machine. The gesture of preservation here is poetic but limited. Like a ventilator in the ICU, the machine facilitates body-like function. The breath, the body, is preserved through automated motion. Conscious presence, however, has gone missing.

This past January, I had the opportunity to speak with Lozano-Hemmer about *Last Breath*. In his lecture, he had talked about the cultural significance of preserving Portuondo's breath.

When I asked him about the piece, he said that the first version circulated his mother's breath. "But," he said, "then she died and it became very problematic." He shared that her passing complicated the piece too much for him, and he had to let her breath go. He said that he had not considered exhibiting the piece with his mother's breath. Lozano-Hemmer felt that in order for the artwork to be relevant, it had to preserve a cultural icon, someone the public already knew. But I disagree. Everyone knows mother. I feel the piece would have been even more relatable as *Mother's Last Breath*. I believe in the power of the transitive property.



In *Blink*, I become a life-support machine by spinning a zoetrope, which animates my Dad's photograph. I altered his photo to make the animation strip. Photoshopping my Dad's portrait, making his eyes more visible by upping the brightness/contrast levels, felt strange. I forced him to close his eyes with my crude use of the stamp tool. By creating a series of images and altering his eye-lids differently in each, I made him blink. It was thrilling to see this image, static for so long, have new life. For a fleeting moment, I felt as though I had resuscitated him. I maintain this illusion by playing

It has been two years since my Gramps passed away, and a year since my Gram's death, but the piles and boxes of handwritten letters, photographs, newspaper clippings and other such memorabilia remain stubborn and unsorted in my mother's basement. This past October, my Mom was going through some envelopes of pictures from Gram and Gramps's house. Without the warning of a label or notation, she found herself holding prints of my deceased father in his open casket. She phoned me, shaken by an image she had tried to forget, and enraged by the posthumous inconsideration of my grandparents to leave them carelessly where she would find them. "Throw them away!" I said. "You don't want to look at them—it's not how you remember him." "I can't," she said, "How can I part with any images of him, no matter how horrible, when I know there will never be any more?" She said she hid them away in a file where we, the kids, wouldn't find them. But someday, I suspect that we will.

the strip on the zoetrope. I have to constantly spin the zoetrope to keep Dad's eyes blinking. His image is caught by the video camera and sent through to a projector. The ghost-like face projects at my father's scale and height. It is the most Dad-like presence I've seen in six years. I stare at him, and he blinks back at me. I stand up to get closer, but as I walk away from the zoetrope, the device slows to a halt, and the image is once again lifeless.



PERFORMANCE

“[Happenings] were real events rather than representations of events. This was important for two reasons. First. . . this segued with the polemics of avant-garde theater, which gave rise to performance art. And, secondly, it corresponded to the anti-illusionist bias of gallery aesthetics.”

Noel Carroll, *Performance*

Topic	Notes
1. loop position Location * straighten fingers	w/ 1 hand - not 2
2. Flowers * vixen ab	
3. dust plinth	
4. notice stain / spitshin cloth	→ Butt out of frame
5. fuss w/ drapery → look at other...	* look at photo...
Actions 1:33	
6. get photo → foot out of frame...	* less exaggerated → faster grab
7. blow yo / put clean	* get the little specs...
8. admire photo 2:08	
9. place photo	* keep thumb out of frame
10. Chair	
11. lipstick	
12. mascara → make more hollow face → more chadpan	→ eyes wider open
13. Shirt	
14. prepare for pose (Chair to one side) → tilt pose - head turned slightly → chin down → turn in / look out - HOLD 5:3 MIN - → to fill 5 minutes → drag it out...	
15. 2nd pose → hair behind ears - mouth closed	
← PART II	

PERFORMING MYSELF

Performance is a form I have wrestled with in graduate school. I do not enjoy being 'on stage.' However, my work relies on contrast, and my interests in simulation and the material and psychological boundaries of virtual space have demanded I use the physical body to complicate illusions of mediated presence and captured time. In *Holding Still*, I explore personal narrative by performing in the work myself.

In earlier versions of *Ann & Video Ann*, I struggled with acting. The problem, I realized, was that I was *trying* to act, self-conscious about performance. In *First Kiss*, by Tatia Pilieva, Pilieva records strangers sharing their first kiss together. Acting does not matter in this piece because there are no criteria for a successful response; any outcome is acceptable, whether it is awkward or sweet or forced. Janine Antoni plays with this 'composed real' scenario as well. In *Slumber*, Antoni sleeps in the gallery and then weaves her REM data into a long tapestry over the course of 28 days. She balances the composed use of tools and props (bed, electroencephalograph, loom, tapestry) and her actions (sleeping and weaving) with the unfolding experience of living in the space and working through her task. Through repetition and consistent dress, she exists in the work as both artist and character. Throughout the performance, she interacts candidly with the audience. She asks visitors about their own dreams, using conversation to avoid becoming another object within the piece (Spector 14).

As *Video Ann's* character, I found myself working somewhere between Pilieva and Antoni, wanting to direct my story while keeping the performance fresh and in the moment. My earlier performance attempts in *Ann & Video Ann* failed because I was trying too hard to perform myself, resulting in a forced and unnatural self-representation. I learned to construct a score made up of a sequence of familiar prompts, such as straightening out a tablecloth, or applying mascara. Unlike a script, a score pairs a choreographed composition with an unfolding, unscripted experience. I composed

the sequence of prompts, but the prompts themselves allowed me to simply fulfill a task. I designed my performance to work within well-known emotional territories of longing and determination, trusting my face and body language to reveal something honest.



Figure 4: Janine Antoni, *Slumber*, 1993



LABOR

As I developed my use of scores to guide my performances, I began to understand labor as a critical element within my artwork. I researched the early performance work of Marina Abramovic and Ulay (Frank Uwe Laysiepen). In their *Relation Works* series, 1976-79, Abramovic and Ulay determine a gesture and a set of rules as the score for each performance. They commit to the task of working through the experience of the gesture. Within each performance, the labor of their bodies dispels artifice. Traditional theater relies on the skilled representations of emotion and action to build a narrative arc. Abramovic and Ulay present intrinsic narrative: they are woman and man, they are partners, and they work together to complete a known task with an unknown outcome.



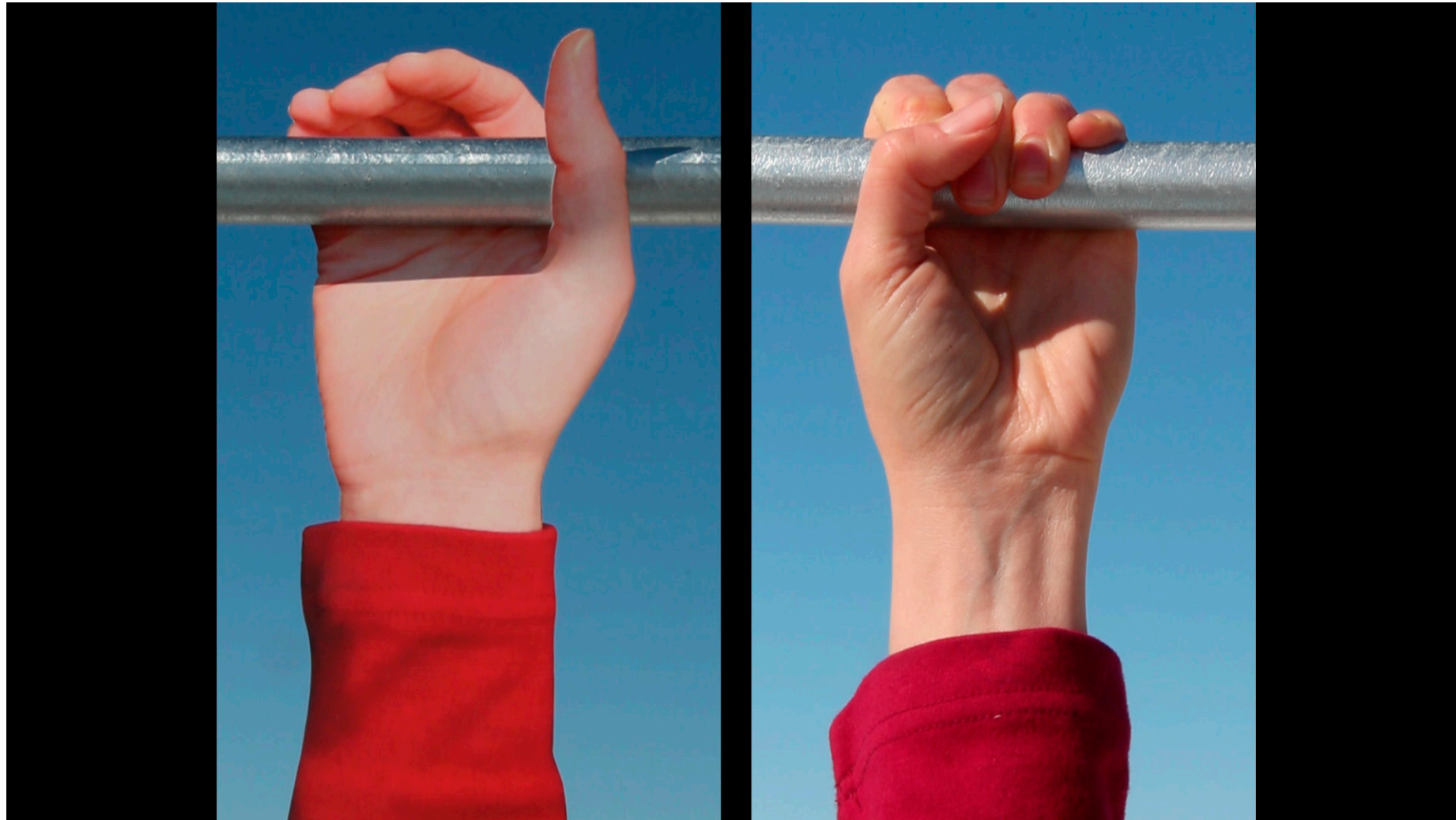
Figure 5: Marina Abramovic and Ulay, *Relation in Time*, 1977

The score for *Relation in Time*, one of the best known works from the *Relation Works* series, reads: “Without Audience: We are sitting back to back, tied together by our hair without any movement. Time: 16 hours. Then the audience [comes] in. We continue sitting for one more hour.” (Abramovic 168). This performance appears at first passive, but the task of sitting still fatigues the body. For seventeen hours, Abramovic and Ulay worked to remain static. When the audience arrived, they saw the marks of passed time on

the performers through their posture, their expressions, and tangles in their hair from hours of slight movements. One has no need to feign exhaustion when the body is tired.

In *Holding Still*, I, too, use labor to bridge scripted gestures with unscripted experience. Gestures of work and labor visualize emotional efforts of desire and determination to achieve or maintain stasis. In *Ann & Video Ann, a + A* and *Our Hands*, the simple tasks of holding a pose, replicating a short loop of action, and hanging from a bar are aggravated by duration. Gesture becomes struggle and test of strength as time passes, challenging my will and endurance to follow through with the score. In this way, actions of labor in my work illustrate the experiential suffering of the mind and body during phases of mourning and grief.

In *Blink*, the role of labor is a bit more complex. As I spin the zoetrope, I implicate myself in the construction of my own delusion. The zoetrope, a 19th-century pre-cinematic device, relies on the manual participation of the viewer to create the illusion of a moving image. In his book, *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Crary points out the significance of the “operational structure” of optical toys such as the zoetrope, thaumatrope, and stereoscope. Although the components of these Victorian devices were mass-produced, they required the physical participation of the viewer to fulfill the promise of the mechanism, activating the visual effect of “real” motion or depth (132). Crary argues, “Even though [these devices] provide access to “the real,” they make no claim that the real is anything other than mechanical production” (132). In *Blink*, the manual gesture of spinning the zoetrope invokes a signal of vitality in Dad’s photograph. Over the three-hour performance, maintaining my Dad’s blink gets harder. The zoetrope becomes heavy and my arm grows tired. When kneeling becomes too uncomfortable, I rearrange my body and crouch on my feet. When my feet tingle and fall asleep, I move back to my knees. The visual effect of the repetition reveals my emotional motivation to maintain the living image, while my body becomes just another component to the machine sustaining the illusion of life.



THE LOOP

In 2001, Klaus Biesenbach, chief curator of the KW Institute for Contemporary Art, curated the group exhibition *Loop* at MoMA PS1. The introduction to the exhibition discusses the psychological weight of the loop:

“Continuous return keeps everything in an agitated stillness, which leads nowhere and which raises the question of life’s purpose. Here time appears as the antithesis of the traditional notion of vanitas (the linear image of the candle that burns out). It no longer leads inevitably to an end, to death; rather, it seems to have been disempowered due to the fact that it is recyclable, as in the myth of Sisyphus.” (MoMA PS1).

This indefinite suspension of linear time is akin to the effect of a photograph, even with the significant addition of performed action. One of the works included in *Loop* was *Schwimmerin*, by Heike Baranowsky. In Baranowsky’s video, a swimmer in a pool completes one revolution of the freestyle stroke on repeat, never moving forward. Here, the looping repetition of the single stroke takes an ordinary act of labor and transforms it into a mythological story of perpetual work without gain. Despite her efforts, the swimmer is stuck in place, never even coming up to take a breath.

In *Holding Still*, I work with repetition and looping to mirror the continuity and stasis of the photograph, and to reference the emotional experience of a recurring memory. *Our Hands* loops indefinitely. The close-up shot of each hand is intended to focus the viewer on the live hand’s effort to hold onto the bar. On loop, the outcome of the video becomes quickly predictable, but one also begins to notice the reckless persistence of the live hand. Through repetition, the corporeal hand takes on the character of the underdog, and the photographic hand, the returning champion. My hope is that, over time, viewers begin to identify with the determination of the live hand, secretly cheering for it to hold on a little longer this time.

In *a + A*, two video loops play at once: 9-year-old Ann runs on a 15-second loop, and my reenactment plays on an 11 1/2-minute loop. The dual loops show an endless game of mimicry between the two of us. At times it is hard to tell who is imitating who, creating a confusing blurring between source and copy. Twice throughout the loop, 9-year-old Ann disappears, disrupting the illusion that young Ann and I can exist in the same space together. The absence is striking, leaving me to carry on alone. I appear to lose motivation for my repeated action, having lost a part of my extended self.

I first explored looping through live performance as a way to merge mediated and physical worlds. I wanted to show the weakness of the body in comparison to the resilience and immortality of the video clip. During the performance segment of *Ann & Video Ann*, I bring a mediated loop and a live loop together in the form of a confrontation between Video Ann and myself. My goal is to build the illusion that Video Ann and I are responding to each other candidly, in real time, despite the obvious hitches that the video has been pre-recorded, and the performance has already been performed. By performing my role over and over, keeping time with the video loop, I, too, appear to be automated. I take on this media-like quality to confuse the separation between actual and virtual worlds in pursuit of my yearning to suspend time.

At the end of my performance with Video Ann, I loop back to my post at the zoetrope. I remain the same character but change roles as I move between these two performance spaces. At the zoetrope, I am a caretaker, bedside watcher, and life support mechanism. With Video Ann, I am both peer and mirror. I have to keep up with Video Ann, or I will break the illusion of presence that we build together. A viewer who stays with the piece long enough will perhaps understand my character as less alive and more media-like with each 12-minute replay of the piece.

I use the visual repetition of a costume to build another loop and to maintain my consistent character throughout *Holding Still*. The costume helps to connect each piece to the next, and reveals depth to my relationships with my mediated selves. I appear on and



off the screen in the same magenta turtleneck, yellow linen skirt and gray pumps. The color of my magenta top matches the one worn by 9-year-old Ann. The consistency of our outfits encourages the illusion of fluid metamorphosis from child to adult. The addition of the skirt and heels for Ann & Video Ann and Blink presents “business casual” attire—the kind of outfit my mom would wear to church or to get her picture taken. I make a visible effort at my appearance without crossing into the realm of glamour. I want to look like an average adult who is trying to look nice. The uniformity of my outfit plays with ‘duplicate image,’ pointing back to my interests in source and copy.



I miss the long conversations I used to have with my Grandmother, back when I lived just up the hill. One afternoon, we were talking about feeling young. She said, “You always feel the same, you know—you never feel any older on the inside. Sometimes I catch myself in the mirror unexpectedly and am surprised by my own face. How did I become such an old woman?”

Figure 6: Google image search for “re-create childhood photo,” 2014



REENACTMENT

“A reenactment is the ultimate photographic act, the process of reproducing a living representation.”

Rebekah Modrak, *Reframing Photography*

A Google image search for “re-create childhood photo” yields many homemade side-by-side diptychs of adults dressed up as their childhood selves and posing to re-make an old photograph. But restaging an old family photo does more than confirm the effects of time on the body; it allows the reenactor to revive the image by reanimating the frozen gesture and expression. As Jennifer Allen writes, “. . . the body remains the vehicle that can carry the past into the present, that can give the past presence. After all, the reenactment is much closer to the zookeeper’s living charges than the taxidermist’s stilted creatures,” (181). Perhaps body language is the rosetta stone with which to translate the image and former self into the present moment.



Figure 7:
Jo Spence,
*Early Mother and
Late Mother*

Jo Spence uses reenactment as a form of photo therapy. By re-performing photographs of her deceased mother, she reckons with their difficult relationship. Spence explains, “In photo therapy we can dredge [memories] up, reconstruct them, even reinvent them, so that they can work in our interests, rather than remaining the mythologies of others who have told us about that ‘self’ which

appears to be visible in various photographs” (172). This form of therapy helps Spence dispel painful memories and find peace through newfound speculative understandings of her mother’s struggles. What interests me most about Spence’s photo therapy work is the way that she resuscitates the image via reenactment, changing her existing relationship to the person in the picture.

In *a + A*, I reenact my younger self. This exercise was my solution to overcome the distance between 9-year-old Ann and my present self. The resulting video diptych combines the two clips in an urgent but futile attempt to reunite with my mediated self. Although there are short-lived moments of synchronization, my tendency to race ahead or lag behind substantiates the impossibility of retracing my own steps. To my surprise, my experience in making this piece connected me more with my grandfather than with my former self. Like Spence’s reenactments of her mother, this experience opened my speculative mind to the issues surrounding the moment that I was oblivious to as a child. Through the presence of her media, 9-year-old Ann remained locked in time and unapproachable. Gramps, however, was absent from the image but present as both photographer and viewer. I related to him as a fellow viewer of younger Ann, which led me to consider his emotional response to this captured moment. I considered his mild frustration with an obstinate granddaughter, and his practice of making these videotapes as a form of preservation, and perhaps memorial.



ONWARD

At the beginning of this project, I saw working with my personal experiences and archives as working with the facts. But as the piece progressed, I began to understand autobiography as another form of fiction. Phoebe Gloeckner prefaced a recent presentation of her autobiographical work by saying, “Any kind of narrative is artifice, whether or not it’s based on experience. . . .we only remember what’s important to us.” The longer I chased the absoluteness of a vivid memory, and the promise of a frozen moment, the further away I fell. The narrative goal in *Holding Still* is, first, to freeze the moment, and then, to resuscitate it—cryonic preservation through mediated image. In my next project, I must deal with my realizations of ever-present fiction in memory and retold personal stories. As in *Holding Still* , I will enter the ring as a believer, an idealist. I will work against what is already known to be impossible: to locate truth, to find something concrete. I construct my projects to move through the process of proving myself wrong. I take on the task of visualizing a void not with expectations of success, but with the hope that, by putting up a good fight, my failure will help me understand my emotional resistance to letting go.

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CREDITS

Pages 4, 8, 10, 12, 14, 20, 23, 29, 34 and 42: Ann Bartges, *Holding Still*, 2014.
Photographs by Alex Mandrila

Page 16: Ann Bartges, *Holding Still*, 2014. Photograph by Andrew Hanna.

Pages 18 and 38: Stills from Ann's 9th Birthday video, 1991. Video by
John Bartges.

Pages 22: Ann Bartges, photograph of Jeffrey Bartges, 2007.

Pages 24, 34, 36 and 38: Ann Bartges, stills from *Holding Still* source video, 2014.

Pages 27, 32 and 39: Ann Bartges, work in progress, 2014.

FIGURES

Figure 1: Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America*
(Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995) 91. Print.

Figure 2: Alison Ferris and Tom Gunning, *The Disembodied Spirit* (Brunswick:
Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 2003) 33. Print.

Figure 3: Shannon Christine Mattern, *Tracks + Traces: More Art, Words in Space*,
8 Jan. 2014, Web, 23 April 2014.

Figure 4: Janine Antoni, Ed., *Janine Antoni* (Küsnacht, Switzerland: Ink Tree,
2000) 18. Print.

Figure 5: Marina Abramović and Velimir Abramović, *Marina Abramović: Artist
Body : Performances 1969-1998* (Milano: Charta, 1998) 169. Print.

Figure 6: Images for "re-create childhood photo," *Google Images*, Web, 17 April
2014.

Figure 7: Jo Spence, *Putting Myself In the Picture: a Political, Personal, and
Photographic Autobiography* (London: Camden Press, 1986).
189 and 191. Print.

