

So Close, Far Away

HERVÉ GUIBERT
**"... OF LOVERS, TIME,
 AND DEATH"**
FELIX GAUDLITZ
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Not that long ago, in analogue times, much of the discussion about photography was dominated by the theory of indexicality, according to which the photographic image derives from the technical production process itself. As such, a photo can never be distinguished from its referent – from what it represents – as it inevitably carries with it a trace of its subject that offers proof of the latter's existence in front of the camera at the time a picture was taken. Roland Barthes's famous dictum of the essence of photography as "that has been" gets to the core of this indexical shaping.

Hervé Guibert – writer, journalist, photographer and activist – published his book on the medium, *Ghost Image*, in 1981 as a kind of response to Barthes' canonical 1980 *Camera Lucida*. Barthes was both his friend and frequent interlocutor, and the concept of indexicality haunted Guibert in theory and practice. The influence of Barthes's obsession with the idea that every photograph contains a sign of death is also writ large in Guibert's work. Like Barthes's, Guibert's writing on photography is intimate, and so are his pictures of his friends and lovers, his family, his bed, his workplace. They provide a kind of visual autobiography, and similar to Guibert's novels, which many have called forerunners of the now booming autofiction genre, photography for him worked as a means to emphasize the relationship he had with someone. But with his focus on personal desires and mortality as well as his emphasis on

subjectivity, Guibert also defined his relationship with the photographic in terms of absences: pointing to the medium's contingencies and voids instead of insisting on its factuality.

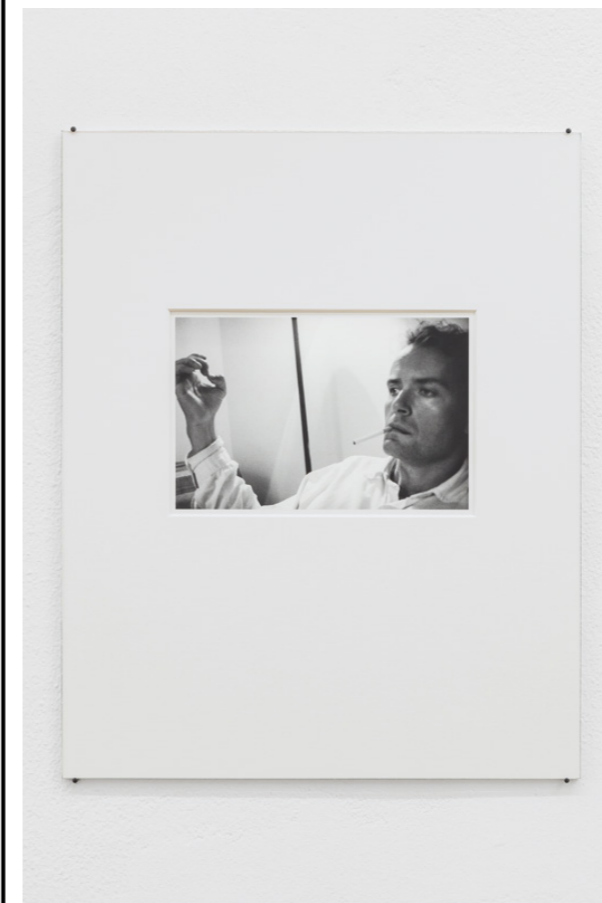
In the small, excellently curated show "... of lovers, time, and death", we see Guibert taking a self-portrait in front of a mirror (one of several selfies

affirming his presence across various settings), we see his naked lover Vincent reclining on a bed at the Roman Villa Medici, a still-life assembling Franz Kafka's diaries, a notebook, a fountain pen, and a wristwatch on a bed (*Kafka*, 1980). There are friends reduced to shadows, *Ombre de C. et main de H.G., Santa Caterina* (Shadow



Ombre de C. et main de H.G., Santa Caterina, 1983, Gelatin silver print, vintage
 Edition of 25, 23 × 30.5 cm

Photo: kunst-dokumentation.com; courtesy Christine Guibert/Éstate of Hervé Guibert, Les Douches la Galerie, Paris and Felix Gaudlitz, Vienna



Autoportrait à la cigarette, 1989, Gelatin silver print, vintage, edition of 25, 23 × 30.5 cm



Hans Georg Berger, Villa Médicis, 1988–89, Gelatin silver print, vintage, edition of 25, 23 × 30.5 cm

of C. and hand of H.G., Santa Caterina), 1983. There are photos of the famous mummies from the catacombs in Palermo that already attracted Paul Thek and Peter Hujar on their visit to Sicily in 1963. The Italian actress and photojournalist Gina Lollobrigida is shown in a garden, framed by ancient columns and reflected in a mirror – the theatrical staging could be a film still from a never-realised Pasolini film. Most images are meticulously composed, using internal frames, mirrors, and devices of perspective to emphasise the constructedness of the image as opposed to any illusion of the photograph as a mere depiction of the real.

Fading light is a dominant feature, too, and reminds us what it means to lead a life always on the verge of dissolving. AIDS, that brutal disease, already casts its shadow, even though it hasn't darkened these images completely, yet.

The small Gelatin silver prints in the exhibition are mainly from the 80s, and it is striking how deeply rooted they are, both in terms of their motives and their aesthetic, in the analogue world: hand-written notes, books everywhere, and a feeling of ennui that would soon turn into a restless fight against time and illness. In his *Autoportrait couché* (Self-portrait reclining) from 1989, Guibert lies in bed under white sheets,

looking at the viewer with a gaze that already knows too much.

"... of lovers, time, and death" presents images from the days when photography could still pretend to be an enigmatic proof of someone's presence. In our copy-paste-photoshop world, this insistence on a proximate reference to reality seems at best nostalgic. Looking at Guibert's visual memorabilia of loss and love can be extremely touching – as his advice in *Ghost Image* mandates: "Photograph only those closest to you, your parents, your brothers and sisters, your lover. The emotional antecedent will carry the picture along with it."

Vanessa Joan-Müller