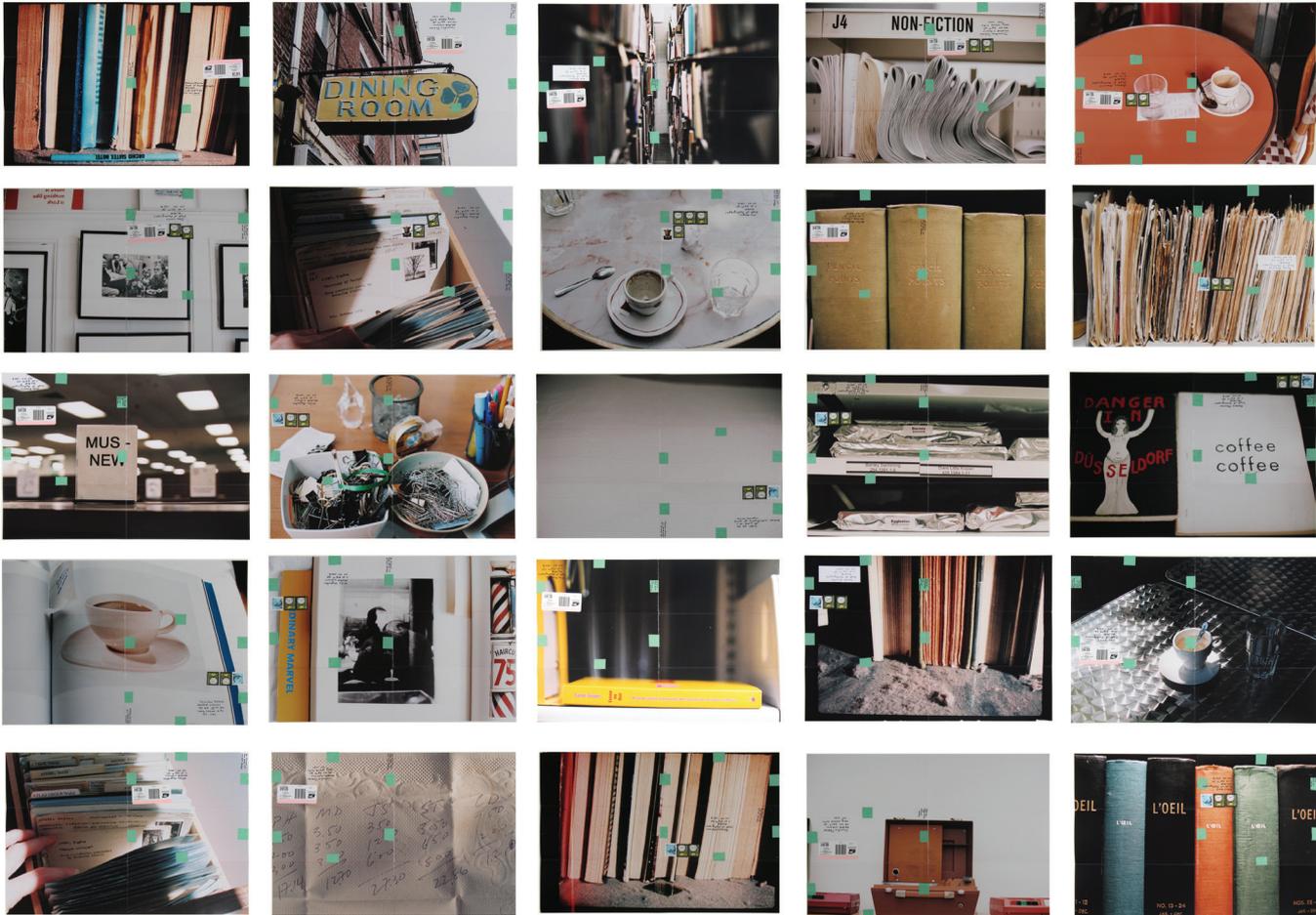


Moyra Davey

by Elisabeth Lebovici

THE COFFEE SHOP,
THE LIBRARY, 2011,
25 C-prints, tape,
postage, ink, each
12 x 17.5 inches.
Commissioned by The
Museum of Modern
Art, New York.
Images courtesy of
the artist and Murray
Guy, New York.



Under which heading will this conversation be published—art, literature, film, theory? All fit. Indeed, Moyra Davey has been producing all of the above. But her creative economy has nothing to do with a Taylorist drive converting each event or every object touched into a piece of cultural goods. On the contrary, her rhythm is one of the interval and fragment, the kind of fragment that the philosopher and poet Friedrich Schlegel compared to a “hedgehog”—closed in itself, but also interminably open to circulation, that is, to intertextuality and to citation.

To close and open doors, books, letters, files, computers, fridges, diaries, subway turnstiles, mouths,

ears, shelves, the self. Opening nights and eyes wide shut. With Moyra Davey’s work, these actions are never set apart. Sometimes, use is diverted into performance: a book can become a hiding place for a couple of banknotes; a fridge can become a text; a bed becomes a dust-breeding device, etcetera. But their commerce is linked to their interdependence—similar to the operations of what the writer and scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called “the closet”: again, an interminable process in which being “out” always produces an “in” to depend on and be freed from.

ELISABETH LEBOVICI

ELISABETH LEBOVICI: Let's start with your latest book, which is called *Burn the Diaries*. Why "burn the diaries"—is that the condition allowing autobiography to begin?

MOYRA DAVEY: It's a line that I came across when reading Hermione Lee. She was writing about writers at the ends of their lives, and the whole dilemma concerning private papers. She was describing the British poet Philip Larkin, and that line, "burn the diaries," resonated with me as an extreme anxiety—here's a man who's dying, being taken away in an ambulance, and his main concern is his diaries, that they should be burned. He's yelling this to his wife.

It's very hard for me to start writing anything, so I always begin with the thing that's at the forefront of my consciousness. But to address the second part of your question: autobiography is highly crafted and edited, hence a kind of fiction, and yes, in that sense, the "truth" of the diary may need to be elided.

EL: Meaning that something had been written, never to be read? In your work reading and writing are activities that are not so different, correct? So this sentence "burn the diaries" sounds like an interruption of this flux of reading and writing that you are immersed in, like an accident, a false or true start.

MD: In my case it's more of a fantasy—to have a tabula rasa. In fact, I rely heavily on journals and notebooks in order to write *anything*. The text in that little book *Burn the Diaries* starts with a moment when Zoe Leonard, Lynne Tillman, and I are talking about our journals at a public panel, and my friend Pradeep Dalal interrupted us in a great way and brought up this question of privacy. I'm always struck by the dilemmas that artists and writers who rely on autobiography or autofiction have—what are you "allowed" to use and what crosses a line and becomes inappropriate or awkward or cheating, you know?

EL: Cheating? Do you have an example?

MD: About eight years ago, I went to a therapist who actually had MS and we talked about the idea of revealing a medical condition in one's work.

And she said there's a whole school of people who consider that cheating and playing on people's sympathies. In Hervé Guibert's book *The Compassion Protocol*, his friend Vincent says, "It's obvious why your book's a success, people love the misfortunes of others." That's the angle I'm thinking of. The video *My Saints* and the book *Burn the Diaries* are very closely related. While shooting *My Saints*, Alison Strayer surprised me with her comment about money and shit. I just blurted something out, but then I decided to keep it in the video. That whole theme of money and scatology and the psychoanalysis of money was a big preoccupation of mine in the early '90s, and Alison was taking me back to that. It was not the direction I thought I was headed for in *My Saints*, and perhaps I skewed the reading by agreeing so readily to Alison's interpretation. It was an impulsive decision to leave something a little embarrassing and shameful about myself in the video.

EL: I think here about the link between Hervé Guibert and Michel Foucault—the fact that Foucault wished not to disclose his HIV condition and that he paradoxically became the impetus for AIDS activism. Guibert cheated on Foucault's wish. But then, Foucault's work shed light on the genealogies of "truth telling" and "avowal" in relation to shame and the practice of self-examination.

MD: I have a quote on the back of my Camden Arts Centre pamphlet *File Notes*—it's by Fassbinder, where he says, "...the more 'honestly' you put yourself into the story, the more that story will concern others as well." Maybe it's another way to think about it, this paradox or slightly counter-intuitive notion that the more "personal" or subjective or individuated you are as a writer or artist, the greater will be the number of readers or viewers who might be touched by, or spoken to, or interpolated by what you say.

EL: Would you say that making public what you read and how you read it is very personal and intimate?

MD: It can be, but in my case I think I avoid being too exhibitionistic or confessional by tapping into literary texts and literary histories—it's a way to project

my experience into a broader frame of reference. When I'm talking about the personal, I mean the nitty gritty—it can be super interesting but I also think it's a very fine line. It really depends on the voice and the distance you take. Violette Leduc wrote like a blogger before her time. In *La Bâtarde* she uploads *everything*, but even when she writes about masochistic and humiliating behavior, for instance, her relationship with Genet, it's still not embarrassing, which is a testimony to her brilliance as a writer. She does complain a lot but it's never pathetic.

EL: I've always been struck by Louis Marin's writing about the paradoxes of autobiography, which starts with two impossible iterations of "I"—"I was born" and "I died." Your work is also a reflection on how beginnings need to be fictionalized, even with a citation of something read. How do the videos start?

MD: They always start with something I've written, but in the case of *My Saints*, I deviated from the script almost immediately and decided that I needed to involve other people and more spontaneity. It can be slightly sickening to start a video with your own voice, and it quickly became apparent that I wasn't ready to narrate a text again, as I'd done in *Les Goddesses*, so I returned to the style of *My Necropolis*, a video I shot mostly in Paris. I can't tell you what a pleasure it is to involve other people after having done a very, very introspective work—to shoot footage of people thinking and talking. I became fascinated by how they responded, hesitated, chose their words, by the cadences of their speech.

EL: You don't create any kind of hierarchy between the speakers, they each bring their own knowledge to the discussion. Their interpretations and comments are all valuable. I like that very much.

MD: Although, it's funny, Gregg Bordowitz said to me after seeing the video, "You betrayed us!" I think he felt that I had established a hierarchy by agreeing so readily to Alison's interpretation. He later added, "But it's okay because you betrayed us in the spirit of Genet." (*laughter*)

EL: Well, a performative spontaneity is indeed given a presence by your remark after listening to Alison's comment: "You're absolutely right! It *is* all about money and shit." In *My Necropolis*, you also keep this kind of spontaneity in the process of editing.

MD: When I made *Fifty Minutes* in 2006, I learned that the parts where I forgot my lines, or repeated something, or made a slip, were by far the most interesting. So yes, I try as much as possible to hold onto the spontaneous irruptions.

EL: There are at least two "dramas" that are happening in *My Saints*, which are like little slapstick comedies—the routine of hiding the dollar bills in books. Then there is a rather awkward intrusion of a penis being set on a table . . .

MD: The slapstick money scenes are reenactments from Éric Rohmer's film *Suzanne's Career*. And the penis was a *cadeau* from Alison! I had the very good fortune of having a wonderful intern, Karolina Krassouli, from Athens via Lyon, who just happened to also have a *nouvelle vague* look. I immediately asked her, "Do you want to shoot some scenes?" I had been wanting to get this video off the ground and I thought, No better way than to just pull out the camera and start shooting. And that's how it happened, in a Chantal Akerman kind of way—repetition of one scene, you know, like in Akerman's *The Golden Eighties*, or in the videos where she's auditioning a young woman for a dance part. I find that stuff mesmerizing—rhythmic repetition of something mundane, like walking across a room, and Akerman's soft voice coaching her in the background.

EL: It is a trope of cinema, where the scene that is filmed accounts for the scene of shooting. In your Camden show, I felt, too, that the exhibition shared multiple temporalities with its "readers," its spectators. The editing of the show was very subtle and brilliant, your way of proposing displacement—through changing mediums, for instance—and recurring images, and thereby lending the exhibition its own rhythm.

MD: Adding those black-and-white photos of my sisters was a last-minute

decision that came out of working on *I'm Your Fan* (also kind of last-minute), a small collection of casual writings, in which I discuss those early photographs a lot and the whole question of representations of women. It made me realize I really wanted the actual photos in the show, and yes, they do alter the temporality of the exhibition, taking us back to the early 1980s.

EL: Some critics have said that there was an early renunciation of portraiture in your work, and that since then you have been trying to rethink this impossible rejection of figuration.

MD: It happened through video. I ended up working with the figure almost out of expediency, because there's a narration, and I became the delivery system for it. It's very different from freezing the figure in a photograph, which leaves so many questions unanswered, at least when the photograph isn't anchored within a text.

EL: Were your writings another way to deal with this question?

MD: Yes, writing did become a solution to that kind of intractable problem of "imaging women." Or at least for my generation who were taught in a particular way, following John Berger, Laura Mulvey, and Martha Rosler and the whole late '70s, early '80s school of appropriation. When you write about these questions you can embed the "problematic" photographs in the writing and that became a solution.

EL: Could you talk more about your use of what I call the "aerogram"? It's actually the proper name for the light pieces of foldable paper, in which the letter and envelope are one and the same. When I was younger I actually sent a lot of aerograms abroad—

MD: —I did too. They were made of thin, blue paper, almost transparent.

EL: Most of your recent photographic work is folded and mailed, through the postal service, like the old aerograms. But the address, in this case, is written on the side of the photograph—writing and image are on the same side. Why is this arrangement so important to you?

MD: I started to do it not as art; it was just something expedient. My friend John Goodwin asked me to fold up some photographs and mail them to him so he could make a small poster. When I was living in Paris two years later I was asked to be in a show at Murray Guy in New York, and thought, Oh, it would be so simple to take some photos in Paris, fold them up, and mail them to the gallery. That's how it started, and then I realized all the formal potential in this—the folds, stamps, the addressee, and the colored tape creating an abstract pattern on the surface of the photograph. And then of course there's the whole epistolary idea, which is, for obvious reasons, very seductive to me. Turning a photograph into a letter, into a kind of aerogram, a giant postcard, as the novelist and filmmaker Chris Kraus called it—all of those ideas are in the photographs unfolded and displayed.

EL: It's also immediately making an archive of the image.

MD: Yeah, and I'm actually doing that more and more. I'm re-photographing very old photographs and repurposing them. I recently used a portrait of my siblings and myself taken in Ottawa in 1971. It appeals to my sense of frugality, making use of things that already exist, bringing them back into circulation. Photography comes with this anxiety of overproduction; you can just keep shooting and shooting and you end up with so much material (Garry Winogrand, for instance). Pulling something out of the so-called archive is a way to mitigate that anxiety.

EL: Since your exhibition *Speaker Receiver* at the Kunsthalle Basel, I am struck by the variety of ways you position yourself, not only as somebody who makes images and who "writes them," but also as someone who actually receives images and writing. To me, it positions you as one of us.

MD: I would like to be "one of you" more of the time! I have not written a statement or essay in a while. . . . But yes,

opposite:
CLAIRE, MARY,
MARY (detail),
2012, 12 C-prints,
tape, postage,
ink, each 12 x 17.5
inches.

the notion of a receiver, someone who collects, who has things fall into her lap, accidents, all of which I try to filter, has become a useful device. I take the most salient aspects, the things that speak to me most strongly.

I've been reading Hervé Guibert's *The Mausoleum of Lovers*, his recently translated diaries, and they actually reminded me of Roland Barthes's diary—not so much the content, but the epigrammatic and elliptical style. At one point Guibert says he only wants to make erotic photographs. And that reminded me of Barthes in *Camera Lucida* talking about a man who bought a camera so he could take pictures of his son. It's this idea of taking photographs for love or for lust. Do you know if Barthes knew Guibert's photographs?

EL: I don't know. There are no photographs of Guibert's in Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. Barthes wrote on Daniel Boudinet's night scenes, which look like sets for cruising. They're empty, there's nobody in them, just the light of the street lamps, all set up for fantasy. But Barthes's writings were a reference for Guibert's and they had this famous epistolary relationship. I haven't read much, though, about the relations between Barthes's writings on photography and Guibert's.

MD: Guibert writes about the difference between photography and writing, and I think he absolutely puts his finger on what that difference is. When you take a photograph (and I'm paraphrasing Guibert here) you end up with an image, but all of the emotion that was present when you were taking it is kind of transmuted into something else. It's become an object, and it could be a very beautiful object and a successful photograph, but in a lot of ways it eclipses the original feeling. He says it will have become *foreign* to him. Whereas if he writes it (the scene, the desire, the failure), he actually retains the emotional trace. He says that writing is melancholic, and that's why it can preserve the feeling, the loss, in a way the image can't.

EL: I would totally agree with that. Isn't that also because photography—at least in its analog history—involved a chemical process, which was not reversible? When the process was over, you couldn't go back, whereas in writing,

like in painting, you can always add or take out. It's like in psychoanalysis—terminable or interminable. A photographic print, once it's made, is readymade. You take pictures of various kinds of writings and different written objects. Are you on the side of the made, or are you on the side of the making?

MD: Great question! I have never heard it phrased that way, but it's something I thought about a lot when I was preparing a talk on Louise Bourgeois, reading about her inexorable need to keep working in order to find formal and psychic solutions. She helped me identify that I am definitely on the side of the making. For better or worse, I truly care only about what I'm working on now or next, the thing that's embryonic. By 2003 I'd reached an end point with a certain style of photography. I felt blocked and that's when I decided to work in video. I started writing, which generated ideas for photographs. It became this back-and-forth process, one thing feeding and setting off the other. The writing actually made it possible for me to make photographs again.

EL: It appears to me that when you're making photographs of shelves, books, covers, insides, including the intimate, material alterations of books, you make them "interminable" in a way, like the psychoanalytic process...

MD: In the video, I repair the Genet book that belonged to my friend Susan. It had gotten a bit beaten up in the filming, and I indeed thought of it as a form of "reparation" in the Kleinian sense. I do feel somewhat over-identified with the book and I'm kind of shying away from photographs of books at the moment, but I still cannot resist taking pictures of writing and paper! I love Guibert's photographs of his desk and his pens and his manuscripts and so on. It's a subject that's still utterly seductive to me.

EL: The disorder of the desk—yours seems to be overcrowded. You like dust.

MD: I love it and I hate it! (laughter) There is the cliché of the artist's or writer's studio or worktable. But I still find it a challenge to try and take those kinds of pictures.

EL: A series that actually came after this

over-identification you just mentioned is the subway riders who are also the subway *writers*. Was that a way to move away, or at least to move?

MD: Yes, indeed. *Subway Writers* took me completely outside of my living space and onto subway cars and platforms. That kind of underground "street" photography is something I've long admired in the work of Walker Evans or Bruce Davidson. Recently Chris Marker did that amazing series—*Passengers*. Or Chantal Akerman's *News from Home*, which has one of the most incredible shots of the subway—down the center of the car with the connecting doors open so it's this endless view of a subway train. Because I'm shy and not quick, this kind of work is difficult for me. I have to train myself to be that incredibly fast, decisive-moment-type photographer. I was very nervous shooting *Subway Writers*, but I forced myself to do it. I expected to have people say, "Hey, what are you doing?" but it didn't happen once in hundreds of pictures. It was amazing. People who are writing are looking down, but even those sitting beside them, watching me, didn't say anything. Cameras and phones are so ubiquitous now it's hard to get objections.

EL: Right. So you're not repeating Walker Evans's take of the subway.

MD: Or even Chris Marker, because he had a hidden camera also. He started with a camera in his watch—and he wrote that, in his mind, he called the series "What Time is She?" (laughter)

EL: That's very queer. Going back to shit, I wanted to add a little note—I've been going to the movies these past weeks, so many films about shit.

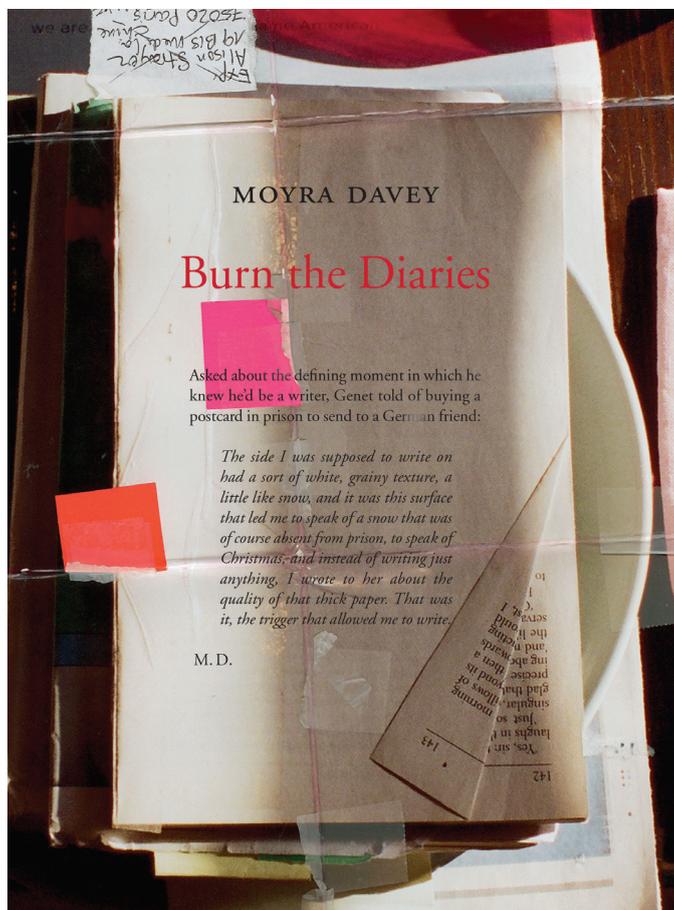
MD: Uh huh.

EL: In David Cronenberg's *Maps to the Stars*, Julianne Moore is on the toilet and she makes a lot of noises farting. It automatically makes me laugh, so I had a big laugh when I went to see the new Godard movie, shot in 3D, *Adieu au Langage* ("Farewell to Language"). The longest scene is in the bathroom, where this guy is actually taking a shit.

MD: Farting makes me laugh too.

below:
BIO, 2013, C-print,
12 x 17.5 inches.

right:
BURN THE
DIARIES, 2014,
published by
Dancing Foxes/
MuMok/ICA
Philadelphia.



ORANGE GLOVES,
2012, From the
series SUBWAY
WRITERS, C-print,
12 x 17.5 inches,
tape, postage, ink.



Still from MY SAINTS, 2014, HD video with sound, 31 minutes.

The side I was supposed to write on had a sort of white, grainy texture, a little like snow... and instead of writing anything, I wrote to her about the quality of that thick paper. That was it, the trigger that allowed me to write.

Sometimes uncontrollably. I took a lot of pictures of my dog shitting and, in 1996, just before my son, Barney, was born, I photographed myself in bed with my pregnant belly and my dog looking like she's sucking on my tit. Then I surrounded it with little photographs of her arching and taking a shit. The arch of her back perfectly mirrors the arch of my belly.

EL: Oh.

MD: I showed it to Colin De Land and he was horrified. I re-photographed that piece and I just made a brand new work with it. I'll send you a photo of it.

EL: So shit and shame do not only stick to the agenda of *My Saints*, they continue their way into your new work?

MD: I started to read Anne Sexton, who along with Sylvia Plath, was often referred to as a confessional poet. There is a great line in one of Sexton's poems, "Why else keep a journal, if not to examine your own filth?" I wanted to use that line, and then I thought of my 1996 montage of the pregnant belly and the shitting dog. So I combined the line from the Sexton poem with the photographs. It's this very circuitous arrival at a place via reading—I can't get away from it!

EL: I have another example of that type of scatological confessionalism. The

two last years of his life, Pontormo, the Italian Mannerist painter, kept a diary where he listed in detail the progress of his work, what exactly he had to eat, his waiting for his caretaker, and most probably, his lover, and his bowel movements—the number of feces he produced, or not.

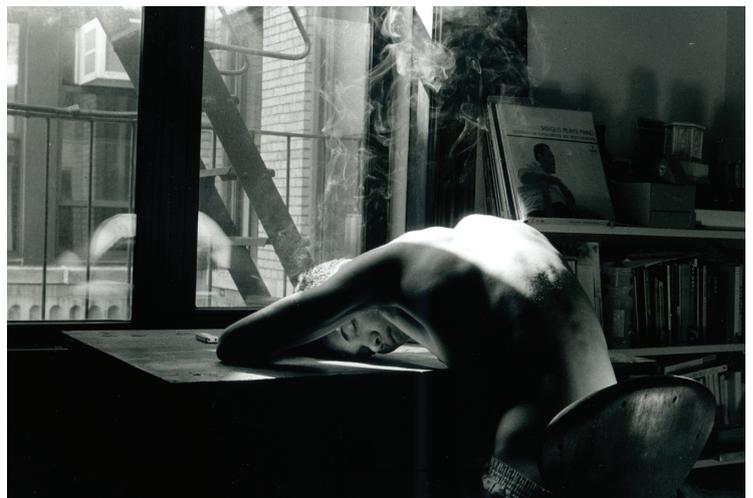
MD: It's interesting you should mention that kind of cataloging, because the original inspiration for my shitting-dog-pregnant-belly piece was Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*, in which she catalogs everything that goes in and comes out—the famous, stained nappies. When I was pregnant, I was thinking—as a kind of joke—that I was going to make an *ante-partum* document about shitting, of feeling

enormous and stuffed, and wanting to vacate my insides. (*laughter*)

EL: So it also had to do with the production of a woman's discourse, a woman's voice.

MD: I edited a book collection, *Mother Reader*, just after Barney was born, and that pitched me back into this incredible literature of motherhood and maternal ambivalence—the intersection of motherhood and creative life. I didn't actually read Sexton then, but I read Adrienne Rich, who was incredibly angry about motherhood, and Tillie Olsen. The process of editing that book totally revived my feminism. I had been an ardent feminist in the '80s and early '90s. I never stopped identifying as a feminist,

Barney Simon-Davey, ERIC, 2014, silver gelatin print, 8 x 10 inches.



The parts where I forgot my lines, or repeated something, or made a slip, were by far the most interesting. So yes, I try as much as possible to hold onto the spontaneous irruptions.

but in the late '90s, having a baby and the process of reading all that literature and of editing that book renewed me as a feminist. These themes of autobiography and shame are very relevant to women's discourse, I think.

EL: And we are going back to the start of our conversation

MD: We were talking about Violette Leduc and Jean Genet and the concept of shame. I was trying to put my finger on why—while they're both writing about shameful experiences—it comes across so differently. I think Genet is not afraid to put it in your face and to even be sadistic with his shame. With Leduc, perhaps there was more of a masochistic tendency that made it hard for her to own her shame in the way Genet did.

EL: Do you think about Genet telling his shameful stories as a re-iteration of excitement, of his own arousal, through writing? I don't see that in Leduc's stream of complaints—*unless* you take into account exactly what you were saying—the masochistic pleasure of being spat at.

MD: Yeah . . . the pleasure of being abject.

EL: Since you bring up the word *abject*, I'd like to speculate on the fine line between constructing a subject for autobiography and constructing an "abject" in autobiography. I see that you look at this fine line with interest.

MD: Mhm . . . Did you think I said "object"?

EL: No, you said "abject." In the cases of Leduc and Genet it is about constructing a narrative and the subject for this narrative while taking the abjection into account. That reminds me of your earlier thoughts about the personal, for instance the disclosure of medical information—well, again, if one takes medical information as a narrative that actually constructs a subject with the possible

prospect of it deteriorating, there is a way of approaching more closely the line between abject and subject.

MD: I like the way you define it.

EL: This conversation goes a bit as your exhibition does, in a spiral. The schema of the spiral applies to the materials, allowing you to describe the circular torsion you imprint on the movement of the photographs, the writings, the videos which repeat themselves within each other. It also applies to temporality. The spiral has been identified, truly or falsely, with feminist time. You rearrange its chronology, which doesn't follow the patriarchal temporality and sense of accumulation.

MD: That image of the spiral is very apt. The idea of returning to things. The idea of consciousness holding all these temporalities and having them all kind of swimming around and circulating at the same time.

The most accurate imaging of consciousness I can think of now is in the books by the Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgård. Also, I find Virginia Woolf's essay "A Sketch of the Past" incredible, the way she talks about the impossibility of fully representing a life and consciousness—everything that gets lost when someone dies, you know, all of the interior life.

EL: Including the death of the author?

MD: The question of the death of the author—I have to hold onto that as a means of restraint. (*laughter*) It's a reminder that there has to be restraint because you can't just vomit things. Genet really pushed the limits but still he shaped his narratives so carefully. Knausgård talks a lot about shame as a prime motivator, he said, "Self-loathing is the engine; fame is the fuel." His book is actually called *Min Kamp—My Struggle!* There are three volumes that have been translated into English. It took me one hundred pages to get into it, but then I was hooked. I wonder how someone can do so much writing and

living simultaneously. I wondered that about David Wojnarowicz as well.

EL: Again, a spiral goes by.

MD: In Knausgård's book, there's a very long passage about cleaning up after a person who's drunk himself to death. I don't have the book here, but I'm guessing it's about a hundred pages long. He's very controversial in Scandinavia because he's one of these auto-fiction people who writes about his family and close circle of friends. In the United States (and elsewhere), every major writer is lining up to anoint him. It's kind of incredible. I frankly don't read a lot of contemporary fiction, but the praise that's being heaped on him makes me happy because I truly agree that he deserves it. He manages to keep the reader captivated with the most banal and mundane details of his life. It's like a drug. I read of only one negative review, and the title is pretty funny and revealing—"Each Cornflake." (*laughter*)

Before we end I want to show you something. (*Holds up a black-and-white picture*) It's a re-staging of a Hervé Guibert photograph my son, Barney, made for a photo class.