

# “Self-Scoring”

John Rae



*The photograph can only document the pain.....can only prove to us that the atrocity is “real,” but cannot communicate pain because the viewer is unable to understand. We don’t get it. We truly can’t imagine what it was like.*

Susan Sontag (2003)

## **Abstract**

This photographic project consists of portraits of four individuals from diverse regions of the UK (Surrey, Dorset, London and Oxford) who have all previously self-harmed. My interest in this subject area has developed recently out of a wider exploration of identity and consequently so called “identifying marks” on the body. By relating the subject matter to intentional damage of the prints I am also investigating issues around authorship and the ontology of photography.

The subject matter is disturbing though the images produced are not graphic in any gratuitous sense and presented in what I hope is a sensitive light. Though this project’s content potentially impinges on several problematic areas, (e.g. fragmentation, sexualisation, fetishism etc), I am approaching the participants, the developing process and presentation with an open minded, sympathetic and much less naive mindfulness than that I may have done 12 months ago, this with the benefit of new knowledge gained during the theory modules of the MA over the last year or so.

A general project aim may be to raise awareness of the issue of self-harm. Specific objectives include subversion of the power relationship between the person being photographed and the photographer, and experimentation with a technique that may reintroduce the “Aura” of non-photographic art works by physically working with the surface of the print.

I hope to leverage my existing skills in terms of studio lighting and post production retouching to effectively capture and enhance the detail needed.

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## Introduction

Potential research questions for this project;

- How does intentional damage to the print surface engage the viewer?
- How does intentional damage to the print surface change the visual message?
- In photographic collaboration, who is the “author” and is it significant?

I hope to show that the collaboration of the subject of a photographic work can be made visible on the surface of the print, that power can be transferred to the subject as artist and that the creative process can overtly confirm and illustrate the context.

## Self-Injury, Self-harm

Self-harm is disturbingly widespread. Reported figures vary but for example a recent BBC report stated that 1 in 12 teenagers self-harm and over 30,000 individuals contacted Child-Line in 2012 with issues relating to self-harm. Mentalhealth.org claims that the UK has one of the highest rates of self-harm in Europe with 400 per 100,000 affected. Diana Milia (2000) quotes Briere and Gil’s 1998 paper from the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* where they estimate that “4% of the general population [of America] and 21% of clinical patients engage in self-mutilating behaviour, *with an even distribution between the sexes*” (my italics).

Photographically the topic is underrepresented by contemporary artists and actively (and literally) erased by photographers working in the fashion and glamour sector who routinely remove scars in post production with skin smoothing techniques etc. Community self harm support groups, however routinely use artworks and exhibitions (including photography) to display the work of service users.



“Hear me” LCET Luton

In 2008 Japanese documentary photographer Kosuke Okahara completed a body of work on Self-injury in Japan after following six women for four years. His images are presented in a traditional documentary style rendered in black and white with heavy vignetting to darken the final image.



Scars: Okahara

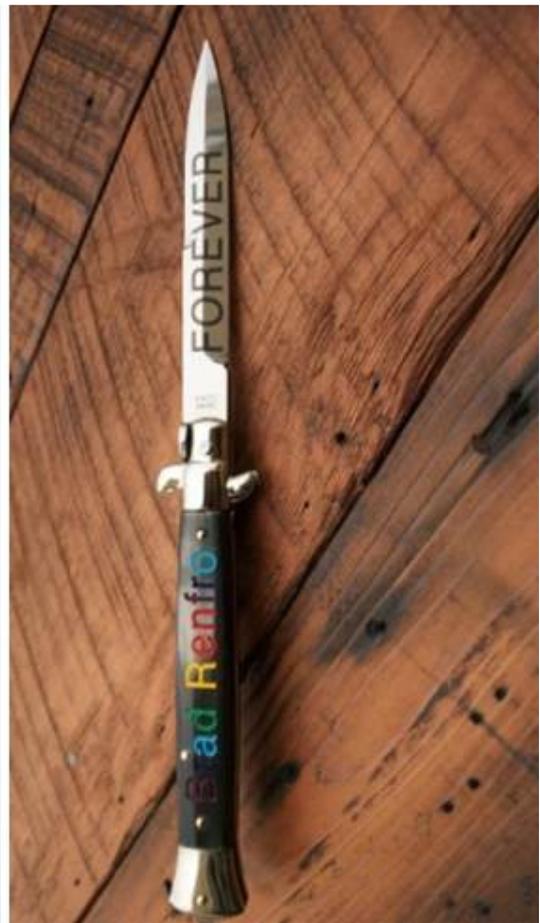
The result is dark, desolate and depressing and speaks readily to the underlying causes of the condition the women are in. Furthermore, though women are by far the larger gender group associated with the condition a growing number of men are also reported to self-harm (in some cases equal numbers- see above) and are clearly underrepresented in the field.

It is my hope that my project focuses on the strength of character of survivors and so extends the current practice which mostly revolves around cause and living the experience of mental ill health rather than recovery or life after self-harm.

With a wide network of friends in the modelling arena and access to a variety of fora where I can contact young people in confidence, the logistics of casting for potential subjects is a relatively straight forward process. I have a strong motivation to raise awareness in this area with a teen age daughter and an emerging social conscience developed extensively over the last six years while working in a health and social care context for a Local Authority.

A report commissioned by Action for Children in 2002 (Bywater and Rolfe) identified the first step towards understanding and responding to self-injury and self-harm is to “look it in the face”. Driven by this powerful message I have decided to use commercially available photo canvas colour prints coupled with a pleasing and hence accessible aesthetic such that might hang on the walls in the homes of people in the wider vernacular community in an effort to introduce an unsettling juxtaposition of familiarity with what is indisputably a difficult subject matter.

Public interest in the topic of self-harm has increased in recent years (Milia 2000) though not always in a constructive light. Concerns have been highlighted in the wider media for example in relation to main stream actor James Franco (Spiderman, Spiderman 2, 127 hours, Rise of the Planet of the Apes) who had himself filmed carving the name of his recently deceased heroin addict actor friend Brad Renfro into his arm. Franco controversially had the quarterly Art magazine “the Thing” <http://www.thethingquarterly.com> sent out with a switchblade knife included for every subscriber, presumably to follow suit, effectively promoting the act of self-injury.



## 1. Relevant Conceptual Frameworks;

- Power relationship, photographer and subject
- Auteur theory
- “Aura” (Benjamin, 1936)
- “Transparency” (Walton, 2008)

There is an ongoing debate about the power relationship between the portrait artist and the subject, famously highlighted by photographers such as Cindy Sherman, Jo Spence and others who became their own photographic model. Richard Brilliant (1991) states that in general “portraits reflect social reality” intimating that a collaborative relationship between artist and model is necessary to reveal more than just a “recognisable appearance” and hint at the subjects real “essence”.

Steve Edwards (in Lowrey's essay {Durden (2000)}) suggests that a studio context gives mastery to the photographer and that the subject cannot answer back, this project confronts that premise by using a studio process but then offering a visible, tangible overt voice to the participant in the form of obvious marks on the print.

The necessary collaboration described above is the subject of Joanna Lowrey's essay *Negotiating Power in Face On* Edited by Mark Durden (2000) where she discusses at length the complexity of collaboration and ongoing struggle for power. She describes the photograph image as providing a:

“Heterogeneous space in which the different voices of the photographer and the subject are intertwined and it is difficult to extricate one from the other”.

She provides examples of photographers who she believes subvert this complexity and it is my intent to advance this further by handing as much power as possible to my participants and even handing over authorship. For this reason all images will be credited as produced by the individual in the frame.

Auteur Theory, borrowed from film theory, (and influenced by Foucault) gives significance to the intention of the producer of images at the site of production as opposed to the viewer or even the image itself. Gillian Rose (2011) states that “recent work on visual matters is uninterested in the intentionality of an image's maker” for photography I would interpret image maker to normatively

mean the photographer. I hope to question this by handing authorship to my participants and including visible tangible evidence of their mediation in the form of cuts to the canvas.

Writing in the 1930's Walter Benjamin identified the contemporary decay of an art objects "Aura" (associated with its uniqueness) due to mechanical reproduction. Photography, as the "first truly revolutionary means of reproduction", is credited with (or blamed for) this decay, transforming artistic practice from ritualistic to political. My project seeks to disrupt this by having the artist/participant make unique marks on the print which cannot be easily reproduced and return the artefact to a ritualistic object which links again to the ritual behaviour associated with self-harm.

Walton's concept of transparency relating to a photographic image is used to explain the phenomenon whereby the viewer sees the subject of a photograph as real rather than the photograph itself as an object. In a portrait for example one may think that one has been in the presence of the person and that look to camera is in fact a look directly at the viewer. This is of course a fiction, a lie...freezing time and motion in any photograph creates a false representation. (or simply put, as in the title of Goldstien's paper in Stanczak (2007) ... *All Photos Lie*)

Wilful manipulation of (in this case damage to) the surface of the print destroys the illusion of transparency and reminds the viewer that they are in the presence of a photographic representation only, in seeking more information about the artist/participant the viewer is invited to interoperate the cuts on the canvas. Are they ordered, random, violent, destructive, creative? What does this tell us about the person that made these marks. Marking the print in this way is by no means new, in the early days of photography the Pictorialists manipulated print products in an effort to emulate painted pieces and gain acceptance as artisanal works (e.g. Frank Eugene, Robert Demachy)



Robert Demachy: Struggle, 1904

Pultz (1995) describes an “expressiveness” in related work from the 1970s, i.e. *Photo-Transformations* by Lucas Samaras and *Two Flames* by Arnulf Rainer. Samaras and Rainer mark the print surface with pressure, heat process and/or pigments.



Arnulf Rainer: Two Flames, 1973

Pultz claims that these acts “transgress modern tenets of the separation of Art and Photography”

## 2. Process

My initial work on identity, identifying marks and gender representation provided a context for discussion with potential subjects regarding their personal history in particular with reference to scarification. Further investigation revealed a large number of young people in the modelling arena who previously self-harmed. Candidates identified through these routes, and subsequent additional specific castings, were then corresponded with and interviewed informally at length prior to sitting for a photograph.

The interview process is important in terms of developing trust, getting the participants on-side, relaxed and open to the collaborative nature of the engagement, bringing the “different voices” into some semblance harmony, perhaps.

Photographic sessions were arranged on an individual basis either in the persons own home or in one case a hotel suite using a simple one light studio flash set up, generally side lit to emphasise skin textures. One image was produced in a studio environment with two studio flash units.

Inspired by the writings of Art Therapist Diana Milia and in particular *Self-Mutilation and Art Therapy* (2000) I had a breakthrough in terms of the development of the final work with the introduction of wilful damage to the canvas. Post photo-shoot meetings were arranged where practicable. During this follow-up session I invited participants to review their completed image on canvas and to mark the canvas in the same manner that they previously marked their bodies, i.e. by cutting. This sacrifice on my part is informed in part by Milia’s reference to sacrifice and symbolism in her explanation of the rationale for self-harming behaviour.

This advanced the conceptual practice by revealing avenues to explore ontological issues in particular aura, authorship, and transparency. It also highlighted how similar the choice of medium (canvas) is to human skin.

### 3. Conclusions

To analyse this project's effectiveness in terms of the research questions posed in the introduction and to gain a measure of success in relation to intentionality I would like to develop and use a questionnaire with a representative sample of participants, mental health and other professionals, academics and a wider prospective audience

I am confident that the cutting of the canvas has an element of originality and insight and extends the ontological debate around the conceptual frameworks listed in 1. above.

The aim of raising awareness of self-harm has already borne fruit in terms of the increased awareness of colleagues, friends and family who have engaged with the project on different levels. The manipulation of the print refers back to photographic art historical canon and remains significant to my practice moving forward, there may be applications for example in the use of tattoo ink or sutures on the canvas, or prints from pigment on body parts.

The work produced may also open up new directions for future research in terms of photography as therapy. Dialogue via email between myself and author Diana Milia hints at therapeutic use of similar imagery (or at least the participants stories) and I have some interest from a the co-founder of [www.isurvive.org](http://www.isurvive.org) "A Non-Profit Organization for Abuse Survivors Learning to Thrive" who deals with support for people who self-harm within her remit.

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