

# Where else to draw from?

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## Start of a question

### A short introduction

*I was just sitting at my table, rainy, sunny Sunday. A typical Dutch autumn day. The window open, fresh but not cold, the kind of weather that makes me daydream. I'm thinking of trying to visualize what the process of my work is. I remember it feels so egocentric, so privileged.*

Where is the viewer, where are you in my story? I am writing, what you might call, an autobiographical story. I, Mirre Yayla Seur, am the main character. The stories I write, and the artworks I make after and during the writing, are stories about my experience. The sources of my practice are questions, situations, and encounters that are intimate to me, my intimate relations with the world around me. I am *confronted with questions*: does inclusion of my intimate relations make my artwork too personal? If so, is my artwork too close to me? In my practice, I attempt to connect the personal and the universal, but how does that come about? When does my artwork leave the realm of the personal and expand into the universal?

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To explore the questions mentioned above, I'm forced to eliminate certain aspects of the autobiographical. The male artist, for example, is not something I go into. To understand my practice better I focus on what relates to me. In my thesis, I focus on the self-identified female who is assigned that gender at birth, mainly working autobiographically in contemporary art and literature. The critique she receives and stereotype and function Autobiography. I'm using this thesis to fill in the gaps and to understand my position as a female artist working autobiographically-personally. As such I have also chosen to not go any

further into the function and importance of autobiographical work and practice of artist identifying with another minority group within our society, gender, sexual preference or race. It is not a decision of unimportance, but necessary due to my time and word limit of this thesis to go into the broad range of topics that fall under the umbrella of autobiography. Besides the female autobiography, I research the relation and influence between fact and fiction as well as how working autobiographically can create a prophesy by layering past and present, and to do this I explore a series of sub-questions and look at the specific group of artists, writers, theorists.

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I feel like I should be clear about the use of my sources, as most of my theoretical sources address the writer and the novel. I believe that the proses of creating autobiographically, what it means and entails to do so, can be about any creation. My theoretical sources mostly talk about the process of creating autobiographically and not the result, be it a novel, geographical research, philosophical writing or visual artwork is not the focus. One could say the outcome is very different therefore the process must be as well; I disagree with that statement. I believe all of my sources use the same autobiographical process in their work. I feel strangely honored to have them all come together on these papers and meet. Writer and video artist Chris Kraus is a good example- be it a video, be it a novel-

her way of creating autobiographically is not different. She responds to the question how her movies and the novels share certain roots. “When I started to write I felt I was doing what I’d learned to do all along in theater and film. Writing a text is really a live performance that’s happening between you and the reader.” Kraus (Princenthal, N., Boucher, B., & Guthrie, K., 2011).

I aim to have a meeting, conversation, written interview, with most of my sources. I find it of a whole different value to directly interact and encounter the person who I’m quoting, who’s inspiring me, or who I disagree with. I can read about my sources and copy-pastes their work to my own questions, but to be in dialogue gives me a much clearer connection between me and my sources. With all this in mind, my research method is auto-ethnographic, autobiographical, empirical and literary. I go outside, meet other artist, writers, philosophers I interview and talk.

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## It’s always nice to know where you're going

A slightly longer introduction

I explore the previous sections by researching a series of sub-questions and look at the following artists, writers, theorists.

In the chapter “Using the ‘In,” I give a brief introduction on what autobiography is and



what it means to create an autobiographical work as well as how self-worth and interest are needed to create autobiographically. Through the works of Professor in the theory of autobiography Barret J. Mandell and Georges Gusdorf proclaimed grandfather of the theory of autobiography (Olney, 1980), I define the term autobiography and investigate its different uses and functions. I clarify what type of autobiographical practice I refer to when using the term as autobiography is a polysemic term. Whereas, Clare Madge, Professor of Human Geography writes (in her essay "Intimate Creativity, Using creative Practice to Express Intimate Worlds" (Donovan, Moss, 2017) about what it means to use a creative practice to express private worlds. Her explanation of how and why she works resonates with what I sense is a core of my practice as well. I look at my own work, one work in particular, where I still question if that work is too personal. What is it I find problematic? Is it the fact that the work has a private autobiographical source? Or is it that autobiography has a strong correlation with reality-facts? Is my work too personal or is the fact that I'm a female artist which places me in the realm of the private? Madges writings on intimate creativity, reflect my motivation for working autobiographically and my decision to focus on the autobiographical private self.

In the chapter "Fact and Fiction" I go further to investigate the dualistic

relationship autobiography has with fact and fiction. I do so to go into depth on how we encounter a work knowing it is autobiographical, knowing it is a fact. In my practice, I have been struggling with the connection between autobiography and reality-facts. Professor Barred J. Mandel writes in his essay "Full of Life Now" (Olney, 1980) about this differentiation and the coexisting function of fact and fiction within autobiographical writings. The importance of the audience/the reader is key in the distinction if a work is autobiographical. You might think I am going off track here if I were to focus on the female artist, but there is a strong connection between the female artist and the Fact and Fiction chapter.

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The two main connections are:

1. How does the audience perceive the work, is the female really private/personal /autobiographical? Or is it the way we position ourselves against the female written work or created artwork?

What is the responsibility of the audience in the way a work is perceived?

2. Using fiction in autobiography as a tool for the female artist to leave the realm of the private and personal. Chris Kraus and Virginia Woolf helps me link fact and fiction to the female novel/artwork. Woolf as an ancestor of Kraus, as a prophecy, to reclaim their gender through the use of fiction and autobiography. Autobiographical art and literature share the same traits, and Kraus is a great example although the outcome

might be different, between her video work and Woolf's novels (or her novels of that matter), but that the traits are rooted in the same process.

From "Fact+Fiction", I continue into the impact gender has on autobiography in the chapter "Female+Autobiography, Match made in heaven". Why does the female artist work with the notion of the private self? Why is the female is considered as private? Throughout my research, conversations, and interviews with these sources I try to position my practice between the work of the following four women, to understand what it means for my work that I'm a female working with the private self, and where the work becomes public.

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Philosopher Petra van Brabant writes about art and narrative as well as art and pornography. I attended a lecture by her and later met her to talk about the private self and female autobiographical artwork. I investigate the critique and motivation of the female autobiographical artists, and I do so by looking at artist and writers Amalia Ulam, Chris Kraus, and Nina Yuen. With Nina Yuen and geographer Clare Madge, I discuss the topic of female identity and the use of the private self within art and literature. The writings of Madge return in this section on working intimately, and how intimate works can be worldly. Is the female artist reclaiming a specific identity by using the private self in her work, by working autobiographically?

In this last chapter, “Prophesying my self,” I come to the question whether the female artist liberates herself from the given private script as Van Brabant calls it. The idea that by working from a private source the private is transformed into something public. How does that work; what happens in this process of layering the past and present of one’s private life? How does working autobiographically change one’s relationship with oneself, or even change one’s identity, both politically-socially and personally? Both Georges Gusdorf, Clare Madge, and Barret J. Mandel have written about the layering of past, present, and future and the construction of self and prophecy.

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“Babe, do you know where my keys are for universality” is the conclusion of this thesis. Where I explain what the process of researching the private autobiography has brought me, and how it has changed the way I encounter my practice. How the term autobiography gained a world of new meaning to me, and how it became a political tool. And the importance of responsibility in the experience of the audience/reader and the artist in defining a work as fact or fiction. I realize that autobiography is not a perfect distinction between fact and fiction, but it is where fact and fiction merge in both the experience of the artist and the audience. This thesis has given my practice a connection to the outside; it has started a transformation of

claiming ground and being in dialogue. My thesis does not only entail a specific theoretical structure in which my questions are addressed, deconstructed, and answered. I also incorporate my private writings written during the process of “academic” writing and researching. Writing a diary as a part of this thesis embodies what it is I am trying to do in my thesis and my art practice. It shows my question and how private wonderings can have public or universal significance. How I believe, the female especially is pushed into this area of privacy and where these so-called private aspects of her life are stripped from any global or universal significance. Therefore this thesis contains a double structure, an academic, theoretical structure, and my personal writings. You can go back and forth between the two, and switch between the personal and the universal, the private and the public. Hopefully, it makes sense; and will be a dynamic between the two without distracting you. Please read the thesis as something that holds both fact and fiction, and that you feel free to position yourself.

### Using the "I"

What, who and why the 'I'?

I want to look at the private, the things that are not shared, the thoughts that I have when I am home alone, or sitting in the tram and staring out of the window forgetting space and time. *It is the autobiographical practice that revolves around*

*the relationship with the private self that I want to investigate.* From now on, when I use the term autobiography/autobiographical I mean the autobiographical work of the private self, this is the aspect of autobiography that I'm interested in, and it connects to my way of working.

*As a kid, I had boundary issues. Maybe I still do. I don't care so much for boundaries. Maybe because it's hard to detect them. Both those of my own as those of others. I was pushy, still am at times. Intense, direct; for example, in kindergarten, I would bite my friends, out of love. I still see a girl sometimes, with which I was in kindergarten, and she has a small scar just under and above her eyebrow of my bottom and top teeth. I guess I don't care much for privacy, for somethings being private or personal, to begin with.*

The question of why I work autobiographically is one I can answer relatively easy. Gusdorf talks about what happens to the autobiographical artists-writers, they are in contest of being in dialogue with themselves, seeking their innermost fidelity. (Olney, 1980, p 43.) That's the clear motivation in my relation with my work, what in the process of making happens, and what it gives me. In that small quote, I have the answer, encouraging me to be in dialogue with myself, to take my position, to take hold of my surrounding and my becoming. In other words, I have located my motivation. The following question or dilemma is one with a more complex answer. If I look at my practice, I have always wondered why do I make it for an audience, besides my ego which loves the discussions and compliments when putting my work into the public domain. I'm not original in this quest at all; I believe many young artists have this question starting their practice. Dodging the matter with the answer "I make for myself", and that is enough, is not a sufficient answer anymore. I would like to talk to you about a work I have made. It was an autobiographical work; I believe

it felt very intimate. It contained three elements, a video, a glass sculpture and a text. Most of the critique I have received contained aspects of asking if the work was too personal. To this day I wonder if that is the case; I am concerned about the question what my work is to the audience, not in the sense if they like my work or not, that question is irrelevant. No, the problem is about the relevance of the other, about why someone would be interested in my story, about why it is important to show my work to anyone. To answer this question I need this thesis, and to start I have to understand what it means to create autobiographically, not only to know what the term means; this will come later. But to know, what happens in the process and what needs to be present to make an autobiographical work. Maybe it's because I have a bad feeling for personal boundaries... So many times I overstepped my role or position towards someone else. Asking them something too personal, too direct, or I talk about private things of myself not caring about the response of the other around me thinking it is too private and personal. It's important to me, it's important to feel that boundary, but not take it seriously. Is that why I create? To investigate and express the universality of my individual life.

“Because I'm worth it”

Gusdorf writes in his Essay “Conditions and limits of Autobiography” (1956) (Onley,

1980) that the one who is an autobiographer experience themselves as being worthy. I interpret this to mean that someone needs to feel worthy, and of special interest, to create autobiographically. There is a curiosity someone has to have towards themselves. The historian turns to his past instead of something outside of himself, as Gusdorf said: “The artist and the model coincide, the historian tackles himself as the object” (Onley, 1980, p 31).

*How come I feel that those intimate, private, wanderings feel so small, almost worthless, so personal and therefore uninteresting or not enough to make a work of. Why is that? Even now, after my studies at the Rietveld, after getting to know myself and my practice in much greater detail, knowing I work with these intimate and personal encounters, I still feel it's not worth sharing.*

*To become public is to be worthy. It's cultural. Me, I, center, individualism, male, majority. Significant. Special interest. Curiosity about one's self, don't you think that's a little egocentric? Being worthy without having more worth than others is what I mean.*

Tackling yourself as a subject is what geographer Clare Madge writes about: “To this end, rather than looking at creativity as something outside of myself, I write this chapter as a creative agent, as both the subject and maker (...) This is an approach which transcends dualisms of author/object, insider/outsider and public/private” (Donovan, Moss, 2017 p 6). Autobiography brought liberation to men who were considered of lesser intellectual value, but they are worthy of remembrance. Self-worth could not be judged anymore by an intellectual, social standard. One who feels their existence is not significant won't write his-her own story. To create autobiographically two main things need to be present: the initial interest in one's own life, ones past, and the sense of worthiness (Onley, 1980, p 31).

I wonder what it was within my work “Inhabitation” that gave me an unresolved feeling. Was it because it was too personal?



*Or was it worthiness.* Was it the discomfort I felt towards the work itself or towards the process of creating autobiographically? Experiencing myself as being worthy has much more to do with it than I initially thought.

Being worthy, or more that one must feel worthy creates a political layer to the autobiographical work of certain marginalized groups. The pure act of creating autobiographically, the pure act of saying; *«I am worthy» becomes political.*

Tell me what it means

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY

An account of a person's life written by that person.

SYNONYMS FOR AUTOBIOGRAPHY

diary-confession-letters-self-portrayal-reality.

This is the definition of autobiography, and it's synonyms in the Dutch national dictionary "De Dikke van Dale (2015)". The actual term is simple and straightforward; an autobiography is a written account of one's own life.

Any account...

Account...

Account comes up in the dictionary as such:

ACCOUNT

A report or description of an event or experience.

A report, like a historian, a historian of one's own life. The historian wants to tackle it's subject as close as possible to the factual truth. I find it hard to believe that the autobiographer can be a historian. The idea that the autobiographer traces its own life like a historian, I believe to be impossible. Our memories, wishes, emotions are of high influence to the way we perceive our past. One is biased against oneself, and memories are reformed and shaped throughout our life (FERNYHOUGH, C. (2012, January 13)). I want to be clear that I, and maybe you as well, hold a strong correlation between autobiography and fact.

Philosopher Walter Benjamin explains this process of a storyteller or telling stories-creating narratives. It, to me, shows how an autobiographer is much more like a storyteller than a historian. Benjamin writes in his book "Illuminations" (1986) how the storyteller himself is always part of the narrative. Storytelling does "... not aim to convey the pure essence of a thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel." (Benjamin, 1986. p91-92)

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A historian will never cling to what it is he or she is trying to reveal, or aims to have the prints of the finger leave as little marks as possible. The autobiographer takes upon

their own life; it's the historian that turns to their own narrative. It's the storyteller who is not just telling any story.

They find themselves in the middle, in a grey area between fact and fiction. See an autobiographer as a certain kind of storyteller, where the narrative has traces, fingerprints and is drawn out of the autobiographer. Still, autobiography is a term that is, and I find that very difficult to place, very related to truth and fact, it has a much stronger correlation to a historian than to a storyteller. I think most of the time I encounter work or read an autobiographical novel I imagine the artist-writer to be present, and the narrative I receive I label as real. In the following chapter, I go into the fact and fiction relation of the autobiographical narrative, our preconception of the term and the influence of it.

### **Fact + Fiction**

I have a problem with reality.

“...Once you start writing, it all becomes fiction.”

- Mr. Scott, *Storytelling*, 2001.

I'm reading "I LOVE DICK" from Chris Kraus, I'm in my bed, it's a struggle to get through the book. I have hoped it might become better at a certain point; I keep reading. Weeks later I realize I have stopped my attempt altogether. I wonder if it was just a bad book, it might have been; I'm still

not sure. But something stayed with me; the question if my knowing the book was an autobiographical novel made it impossible for me to enter the narrative. Now how does that hold itself against the autobiographical work of art?

We always engage any presented narrative with a particular sense of reality, with a specific notion of truth but I wonder if I knowing something is real, or happened does something to our perception of the narrative. Knowing it is an autobiography, am I trying to relate to the story out of my reality; reacting, judging, thinking as I would if this scenario presented itself to me right now. Do autobiographical works seem to translate fact and therefore receive a factual response from me? Would I be so judgmental, ready with a reaction if I would have been blissfully unaware of its autobiographical nature? While reading the book, I kept thinking “These people are so annoying, can’t this woman just shut the fuck up?”

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Professor of the Theory of Autobiography Barret J. Mandel has written a lot about this question I have in his essay “Full of Life Now (1968)” (Onley, 1980), on how fact and fiction cater to different needs of the audience and what is the precise difference. Is reality is a big part of the meaning, or of my association of autobiography? How can a narrative that is created be real? Mandel would state that both fiction and fact are

*It's up to me to engage with a narrative, either fictional or autobiographical, and it is as easy as saying: ok what I need right now out of the story is either fictive, fact or a combination of both. Was it my doing that I couldn't accept Kris Krauss her story, forcing my self to just read the facts?*

present in novels and autobiographies, but that there are two major influences-differences (Olney, 1980. p 49-72). The autobiographical creator uses fiction as a tool to create a narrative, but the intention is to transmit fact. It is the other way around with the novelist, they use autobiographical facts to create and support the fictional narrative, but the intention of the novelist is to create a fictional narrative. Mandel states that because I am aware that both fictive novels and autobiographies hold fact and fiction, I, as the reader-audience become, empowered to choose and satisfy the need, I have at that moment. "I, as the reader, am empowered to give them each room enough to change to what they need to become so that I can experience satisfaction with each" (Olney, 1980. p 56). By saying autobiography is real and fictive novels are fake, I undermine the power, function, and experience of the viewer entirely. These terms are entirely fluid, and adaptable to the need of the audience.

Much of what Mandell says I agree with, the fluidity of the distinction, the power of the audience. I find it tricky, however, without wanting to underestimate the audience, that saying the power is entirely in the eye of the beholder. For me, he might go a bit too far, and excludes the fact that previously knowing something is "real" might work unconsciously that it is not so simple to just say "Hey, It's up to you, audience". I also have a difficulty with how Mandel

follows this section in his essay; he says that fiction is “...the created thing that lives apart from the real experience of the author..” and “that it has it’s own reality and is not connected to the reality of the writer...” Autobiography is doomed to do the opposite, “..it pretends to be the whole world of the author.”(Olney, 1980. p 57.)

I stumble over the distinction that fiction is created and autobiography isn’t. I completely disagree with this; I believe autobiography is as much as a factual narrative as a fictive one. Furthermore, I am confused about this statement, as Mandel said before that both genres hold fact and fiction. I realize I did not pay attention to one, very significant word in the quote I used from Mandel.

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#### PRETEND

To behave as if something is true when you know that it is not, especially in order to deceive people (Cambridge Dictionary, 2017).

Autobiography *pretends* to be real. Pretending is imagination, pretending is fiction. Mandel is saying that whatever kind of narrative one creates both fiction and fact are used in the tools of the aim of the artist, as a way of communicating. On the other hand, the need and the ability of the audience becomes the key in the question when something is fact or fiction.

I am the key as the reader.

I am the key as the maker.

“I can create the autobiographical to be as true or false, It requires my presence..” (the one of the reader-audience) ..“to reflect reality”(Olney, 1980. p 56). Mandel has changed the way I look at my statement at the beginning of the chapter:

“Because of my relation to the reality of the narrative. Of course, we always engage with any presented narrative with a particular kind of reality, with a specific notion of truth but knowing something is real, or really happened does something to our perception of the narrative I believe.”

In this statement I have excluded the power of the audience. I did not hold myself accountable for making it fact or fiction, I was merely focused on the intention of the artist-writer and forgot my ability to influence. So if a big part of the distinction of the genre lays with the power of the audience, I wonder if that is the “problem” with the female creating works from a private-autobiographical source. It is not that fact that she is too personal, it is my lack of viewing the work, reading the novel, engaging with the narrative any other way. Chris Kraus’s response to the question why her work is always addressed as personal, private is: “It’s still impossible to conceive a female life that might extend outside itself. [...]”. Women have been denied all access to the a-personal, “and that it seems the “straight female ‘I’ can only be

narcissistic, confidential, confessional.” She uses the materials of her life to seeking this “a-personal” meaning—something larger, more universal” (Kraus, Jamison, 2017, p 11).

Somehow the use of fiction seems to be of importance in the use of the female autobiographical writer-maker. Thinking about Kraus and what it is she accomplished and aimed for with her novel, I envision it as a grey area where fact and fiction meet, where fiction is used as a tool to express fact. What Kraus did in 1997 Virginia Woolf did in 1929 in her book “A Room of Ones Own.” Woolf addresses social and political issues of the female in her fictional narrative. She uses the autobiographical and the fictional narrative to express. She researches through the fictional narratives how a double standard towards the female is upheld. Kraus and Woolf bridge the private female with the fictional, maybe to create a universal narrative?

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*Male Professor: “Keep in mind that the work doesn’t become too personal.”*

*Female professor: “Work can never be, too personal.”*

Is it to expand their influence, to reclaim their position? Or is it, so we accept it, we accept women to write fictional stories, not to have them address anything, to want to change anything, to be part of a universal discourse.

I want to know how we categorize and criticize the gender and the genre autobiography.

How and why the female works are autobiographical, and how come the female autobiographer is considered confessional, narcissistic, and private.



## Female + Autobiography

"Match made in heaven", why?

After attending the lecture, Een Ander Licht, in De Brakke Grond in Amsterdam in 2017, I contacted Petra van Brabant and asked if we could meet to discuss the subject of *the female autobiographical artist*. Why do many female artists work autobiographically and within that autobiographical narrative work a lot from the private? Van Brabant says one of the reasons is because women are given the private as their domain. The female is home, inside, focussed on the interior (Van Brabant, personal communication, 2017). To be clear, she doesn't say there are no women trying to break out of this script; she is well aware we don't live in the 50's anymore. But still, after decades of giving women the private as their domain, we have become somewhat experts of the private. Van Brabant called it a script that is assigned to the female and made to be theirs. If we listen to Gusdorf, one creates from "I am", so I could say that the female creates from the private. I am not claiming male artist never work from the private, I am wondering why it is much less frequent, and when it happens, the critique of being too personal, too private is less mentioned. Van Brabant says that when the male artist or writer works privately-autobiographically, it is accepted as rebellious, adventurous, eccentric, idiocentric, a genius (Van Brabant, 2017). So there are two slightly counter-operating points:

Firstly, women do work a lot from this notion of the private self. Secondly, men do as well, but somehow it is received with entirely different content. The female work of art is quickly to be considered as autobiographical, diary-like, realistic for the viewer, inaccessible at times and highly personal. Whereas the male works are grand, mythical, and symbolic of nature, carrying a social/cultural propose, universal.

I see a connection between Van Brabant and visual artist Amalia Ulman. Ulman is an L.A based artist, working with new media and most of her work revolves around the notion of self, self-representation, social media, individualism and identity. She works in the first person, blurring the borders between subject and maker. In her video essay *Annals of Private History* (2015), Ulman highlights the diary as a medium to keep the female from expressing publicly. To maintain the private self of the female, to write it down, lock it up and put it away. This corresponds to what Van Brabant has to say about the given private script the female is given.

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“Her screams were loud, piercing, and annoyed everyone else in the villa, making Alessandro, the head of the family, run towards her chambers angrily. But firstly stopping by his studio on the ground floor to grab all his writing tools. Alessandro stormed into Lisebette’s room overwhelming

the crying girl, with a rain of stacked papers and writing feathers screaming: “I don’t care, I don’t want to hear about it, you are crazy, just write it down, leave me alone, I want to sleep.” “Finally women will now stop contaminating public discourse with their inner ramblings” (Ulman, *Annals Of Private History*, 2015).

Boys are given notebooks and are challenged to take part in a global discourse and girls were given diaries where they can keep their secrets, to be quiet and to stay private. The diary is something that holds her dearest secrets and thoughts; it’s not meant to see the light of day. It’s a place where she can wonder and express herself without consideration; she can reveal what is not to be shown in broad daylight. I find it a statement about the value, importance, and acceptance of her wandering mind and the experiences she has had throughout her life. Is it because of that the female artist makes autobiographical works of their private self (sex, pain, the female body, judgment, rejection, objectification, uncertainty and doubt, sensitivity)? To reclaim the private as the domain, as to not be the forced expert of the private but to re-own the notions of “inner ramblings”? Is that what Kraus aims for and Woolf? And you, what about the work that you were making?

*If I don't take myself seriously,  
If I don't see the importance  
of the , so felt, private  
wanderings in my work I don't  
take the other seriously. As my  
wonderings can be yours, and  
probably are yours.*

Video and performance artist Nina Yuen is both narrator and subject in her work. Her videos are mysterious tellings of personal

*My work is intimate, feels intimate, at least when I'm in the process of making. Intimacy is private, feels private; it's mine.*

experiences, blending fiction and fact. Her work is described as to bind the *universal with the ultra-personal*. On her website it says the following about her work: “As a queer, Hispanic, actress and director, Yuen is often making a film about the marginalized character in the attempt to offer that character a place in the world.”

Her videos feel intimate, a strong personal feeling. It is intimate, either in addressing me as a viewer in her monologue, where it feels like she is talking to me or in conversation with her father, where I feel like a visitor, allowed to peak on them. On the other hand, the topics that Yuen tackles are universal, political in nature. I realize it would be easy to conclude the work is personal, which was the first imprint it gives me. I forgot my responsibility in my encounter with the work. I think it has never been more evident to me that as a viewer one has to do the work as well and the danger of the attitude towards art as a passive form.

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I always talk about the encounter, my work is about encounter most of the time, about going back and forth of interaction. I didn't do my part in reading “I LOVE DICK.” Most of my work is in installation form, mixed media, I aim to ask my audience to move around. Try to read a text, walk through drawings, find a spot to watch a video. I try to capture a multitude of aspects through different media and materials. I try to have my work be active, in the hope the audience becomes *active in the encounter* as

well. Seeing different sides of a story, of the work is important; therefore I love to work with glass, plastic sheets or giant blown up clear bags for example. Many times my body is present, either physically, in a video, in drawing. I never thought of the possibility of my work to be political. As for me, my work is not. After talking to Yuen, I realized my practice might be much more political than I thought, or that one might see at first glance. Yuen said:

*Why does someone else want to see this, why would they care, why may it be of importance where is the relevance.*

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In “all the lives I want,” writer Alana Massey says that it’s quite radical for women to assert that their own stories are worth telling. There has been a sidelining of the female experience as being secondary to the male experience (in support of it, as a nurturer) rather than women honoring their narratives. So using the autobiographical material as the core subject matter for work is a political statement. It’s a political statement to say: “my story is worth being told.” (Yuen, 2017)

Yuen brings me back to Gusdorf and when he wrote that the autobiography could only be written if one feel certain self-worth, that same self-worth becomes political as soon as a female creates an autobiographical work. Gusdorf wrote his essay in 1956, and Yuen answered my question in 2017; written in different times and from different positions both come together. Gusdorf’s essay also shows that Yuen’s answer is not just that of a feminist point of view, it gives it

*Against the natural direction of attention. Another self. Doubling is a sign of death they say. Getting lost in the deep swirl of what we call in Dutch navel staren "staring at one own belly bottom". But where else to start? Then from the little hole in my belly from where it all started. Where else to draw from? To start to imagine is to start with what is, with what I am, I do, I experience, I tried. My narrative, adding myself to myself to myself to myself. Not as a mathematical add up, becoming more and more, expanding myself to become bigger than the other. But to alter, reflect, adapt, exchange. Boomerang, ping pong, games between my different selves.*

bedding into the core of what autobiography is for the maker. It shows the power of using autobiography as a social and political tool; the one who creates autobiographically (re) claims to be worthy and to take place in a social, *not only private, context. I think this statement makes Gusdorf more of a feminist* than he ever thought to be.

A female artist making work from an autobiographical source is dealing with shame and secrecy, somehow. For me, it has felt like confessions at many points in my practice, a confession of private experience that, for whatever reason, felt was not to be shared, like the diary. Kraus said in an interview, "The word confession is so odd... As if any discussion of female experience, because it is so inherently shameful, would have to be a confession rather than a description." (2016, p. 7) I wonder what these two statements of Yuen and Kraus mean together translated to the female artist. I could almost conclude that there is no other way than to work privately. *I have to start with the «I,» now, to begin to create* and by doing so I make myself worthy. Is it there where the female artist breaks out of the "script" as Van Brabant puts it? Is it in this very act of making work from the private self where it becomes public, universal? In the very act of making it?

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## Prophesying my self all-round time travel

Gusdorf says we should give up objectivity so that the autobiography lets us see

*If my work changes my perception or my understanding, it changes me. If it changes me, it re-creates me. If it re-creates me... Is that why many female artists work with the private, so they re-create their relationship with their private self? To address the universality of our private self. It becomes so political; minorities are reclaiming their public position by owning, reshaping and using their private. Everything I write sounds so incredibly cheesy, like my thoughts, are pieces of bread and I'm dipping them into the stringiest fondue you can imagine.*

beyond the limits of our external attention and shows us the individual from the inside out. Gusdorf uses a quote from Lequire that says: "To create and in creating to be created" (Olney. 1980. p 44). Here I enter a certain triangle; where Gusdorf says the past can only be created in the present and within that creation, the present becomes a pledge or a prophesy for the future. By doing so, men are forever adding themselves. As a certain boomerang autobiography goes back and forth, "...it is a work or an event of life, and yet it turns it's back on the life and comes back to affect it" (Olney, 1980. p 47). I find it highly poetic the way Gusdorf writes that "...autobiography is condemned to substitute endlessly the completely formed for that which is in the process of being formed. With its burden of insecurity, the living present finds itself caught in that necessary movement that, along the thread of the narrative, binds the past to the future" (Olney, 1980. p 47). What Gusdorf is talking about may be what I referred to all the way at the beginning of this thesis that "my work is being in dialogue with myself, my position, my surrounding, my becoming." I wondered what I meant with becoming; I just wrote it down without really understanding what it means. I realized that what Gusdorf here explains as binding past and present and how that turns into a pledge or a prophesy is what I meant with becoming. Creating autobiographically is forever being in the place of reality and fiction, of past and future of what has happened and of everything that can happen.

*I think that here Van Brabant, Yuen, Ulman and I all meet.* Through working with the private self, for Van Brabant a female can claim the script, for Yuen, there is light being shed on the underdog, Ulman's diary becomes public, I can re-order what I think is 'me'. I guess that what we all do here is binding past and present and by doing so we might create a new prophesy.

Babe, do you know where my keys are for universality?

I realize without knowing in advance that my thesis has become somewhat of a social-political statement. I think autobiography is showing us who is trying to become worthy and the response on the different artist /works shows us who is thought of being worthy of being seen and heard. The question I ask myself since day one I stepped into this grey building, or maybe even before that, maybe I asked it when I bit my friend in her eyebrow or when I share over personal information. Anyway, the question "Babe, do you know where my keys are for universality?" has been present within me and within my practice throughout. My insecurity is that my work is too personal and how to make my work universal. Somehow I was looking for a kind of formula, something I could always do. Never have I thought of my work as political, or the act of making my work the way I do as a political act. I see both fiction and fact and public and private as fluid terms, that



shift from one to the other, go into each other, bounce back oppose and merge again. “Babe, do you know where my keys are for universality?” is both a private and a public dilemma. To not be able to read Kraus’s novel as a universal story is my limitation, it was my unawareness of an active attitude towards what it is I want, what it is I need, from the narrative. I was lazy, not engaging just consuming, and I did not like the taste, not realizing I was very much in charge what the taste would taste like. Autobiography became something with value beyond exploring the personal for me. It can be a tool to empower marginalized groups in our society. The political power it has as a medium. The preconception I had that it wasn’t up to me, acknowledging my position as a maker and as an audience to judge a work as private/personal. The autobiographical has expanded its meaning beyond fact and fiction; it is the perfect meeting between the public and the private.

*I am the key as the reader.  
I am the key as the maker.  
My audience is the key as the  
viewer.*

Now if I look at my practice and to Ulman, Kraus, and Yuen; I see the responsibility of the intention of the maker and the activation of the viewer. And as I said in the introduction; the relation between fact and fiction, at least for me personally, creates a certain narrative in which I can enter and position myself as an audience.

*The others: with-out you there is nothing.*

Maybe it is polite to come back to my work and not leave it hanging in the first chapter

of this thesis. I must say I neglected the work though writing this thesis a little bit. The questions became more about my general practice and not so much about what happened in that specific piece. But now at the end of this thesis, it's questions come back to me. I realize now, it might not have been the personal aspect of the work I found troublesome, I wonder now if it was its literacy, it's directness which was confused with privateness. Creating a completely different question here. I must agree that again here, just like I didn't hold myself responsible for experiencing Krauss her novel as private, I did not hold my audience, my teachers responsible for thinking, addressing, questioning if the work was too personal. If I'd known then what I do now, It would have made a good discussion or interesting conversation.

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I began with one of my works as a point of departure, with a triggering question, which is a pressure point for my practice overall. By pressing down further into this question, it made me realize I have the right to tell the stories. There was more to be discussed than one person opinion, one singular work I made. By doing so, I brought my work, my practice outward and made it join a conversation, connecting it to philosophers, geographers, writers, and artists. That entering into this dialogue is a new stage in my practice and as a research practice, to explore beyond myself and in that I am stepping out of the personal

private art practice and I am putting my work and my practice onto a public stage. I don't just make my work for myself anymore, and it is not a sufficient answer to the question why I make art. Gaining this inside happened in the direct connections I made with my sources. I am very grateful for their time, generosity and honest interest. Without them, this thesis, my research and the gained perspective in my practice would not have been the same.

*The stranger continuous. Hi there, how you doing? No reply. I'm standing right in front. I felt droopy before, sleepy, slightly unaware. Time to get real. No more joking around. Stillness. Eyes glaze over me. Searching, it feels like there is a reach for a certain something. Do you know what you're looking for? Do you even know how important you are to me? What you do to me, how you make me. Alive? No not alive as I wasn't dead or can't be alive in the first place. No, it's more a sense of purpose. Do you even feel what is happening, what the potential is of us sharing this space? I wonder if you have a previous expectation of our meeting here. Did you look me up online, browsed my page, looked at my pictures? Or is it a blind date, where every step is unknown and the encounter new, fragile. Do you misunderstand me, can I even be misunderstood? It's ok; I don't have any expectations I think. Just come in, I will open the windows, let the wind breeze. Our shoulders slightly touch, no it's like we are walking without eyes closed, and I don't touch you, but I feel the presence of your shoulder next to mine. We are walking, taking off.*



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## Appendices

### Interview with Nina Yuen

M: Why is it considered that most female artists work autobiographically? Is that actually the case, if so, why do most female artist then work autobiographically?

N: In “all the lives I want”, Alana Massey says that it’s actually quite radical for women to assert that their own stories are worth telling. There has been a sidelining of the female experience as being secondary to the male experience (in support of it, as a nurturer) rather than women honoring their own narratives. So using autobiographical material as the core subject matter for work is a political statement. It’s a political statement to say: “my story is worth being told.”

M: When does the autobiographical practice/work becomes ‘universal’?

N: I think that we find the universal through the narrow. When an experience is told with a certain specificity, it gains a vividness that allows it to be experienced by an audience. That visceral experience allows the artist’s experiences and emotions to stand next to the watcher’s own sensations and memories. The two experiences might mix. The audience might then identify with the artist. The one experience is then linked to things that are experienced by many.

M: When is the personal just the personal, just individual, can that even be the case?

N: There is a sacredness to some information that is not shared, when you say that something is “too personal”, it actually means that it means too much to you to let other people know about it, like our darkest thoughts, our sexual fantasies, our memories that haunt us. Not all experiences and sensations are shared by all: there are spaces where a communication fails, and someone’s experience cannot be translated in ways that connect to broad, relatable universal themes. A lot of artists work in this gap, and make work about the failure of this communication.

M: What is it or what happens when I work from the dualistic source where the author is the object, the insider is the outsider, the public is private?

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N: I think that when the author is both from the inside looking out of a work and from the outside looking in it allows the artist to “have their cake and eat it too”: they can have it both ways. The artist can embody paradoxical contradictions of vulnerability-control, actor-director, performer-spectator, male gaze-female gaze.

M: To what extent is the Autobiographical; practice responding to multiple ‘voices’, and how and why might it become a tool for privileging my own worldviews?

N: Joan Acocella says that the work of Dorothy Parker never really lived up to its full potential because she kept falling into the “tunnel of the self”. In other words, Parker was never able to feel what others feel and this smallness of mind that was a constraint on her work. The identity of the artist (their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, origin etc.) becomes important here. Are they presenting an already-dominant worldview that is already taking up too much space in the culture? Or, is the artist giving a marginalized idea a place in the world that it needs and deserves?

M: How does knowing a work has an autobiographical source influence the way we approach it. *Visa versa* with the fictional narrative of a work. Does this distinction even exist?

N: An artist’s lived experience can lend a work authenticity. For example, if a work is about a traumatic event, it is perceived differently depending on whether the artist has or hasn’t actually experienced that event. If the work is autobiographical, the artist is forced into the vulnerability of sharing delicate or personal information. If the work is not autobiographical, the artist is trying on other people’s lives like costumes, fetishizing something they know nothing about.

Details that aren’t true have more eloquence

than lived experiences. For example, sometimes when we were children and we would tell our friends stories, we embellished them with lies, and even though those details might be false, they conveyed the feeling more clearly. People can tell the difference between fiction and non-fiction immediately, but we are also living in the in-between, in spaces where fiction is truer than truth.

## Interview with Petra van Braband

Total conversation 1:16:00, extracts transcribed and translated from recordings of the original conversation.

P: Women, or within the stereotype of the female in which we are all brought up, are more inclined or feel more inclined to concentrate on their private lives within the autobiographical. By that I mean; love, feelings, their inner world, the life which is not shown in the public domain, hysteria, longing. They stay very close to their own skin so to say, and not so much focus on what one does, what one represents in the public political opinions. Of course, this is not always the case, but it is striking that the autobiographical for the female is interpreted as personal and intimate as the private life.

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M: The autobiographical is considered equal to the private?

P: yes, and especially in the consideration

towards female work of art; may it be novels or visual art, it is the expectation of women that work autobiographically to do so in a private manner.

...

P: The male artist his work is as autobiographical, but we have established a blind spot, through our patriarchal history and culture. It's much less notable. When the female does the same it is considered as we say in dutch "navel staren" \* or hysteria and the male are considered, idiosyncratic, eccentric, a lone wolf a genius. Andy Warhol his work is very Autobiographical, Jeff Coons is very autobiographical, the connection between successful male artists and the autobiographical is hardly ever made.

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M: Do you think that has a relation to what you mentioned in the introduction of the lecture at the Brakke Grond, in which you mention that the female operates out of the personal because that is her given domain? It is her expertise, that is meant for her, she is allowed to move within the realm of the personal.

P: Yes, I think that it all bedded within our culture, that we make a distinction and stereotype we have between the male as an outwards being and the female as an inwards being.

...

P: I believe it is important to find the link

between what is my inner private world and is public. And to be aware that these are different domains but are both autobiographical, and to explore what happens when the borders between the two are crossed, both for the fame and the male.

M: A male writer publishing his diary, or even having one...

...

P: Sometimes it is problematic, or it is not always the solution to work with the private as a female. When is it liberating, questioning, and when does it merely stay as repetition and confirmation of that stereotype?

M: That is a dangerous and fine line between the two I think.

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P: (Being private/personal) It's a script, a written script for the female not made by the female. And it needs to be reappropriated by women reclaimed in a way, to transfer the given/forced. Women relive this script, that the most valuable, most dear to the female is their private lives, and what is considered their private life? Their inner ramblings, feelings, emotions, and longing. It's a cultural script, not a script that is written by women, decided by women. Men have written and repeated the script time after time, and by doing so condemned the female to only their personal domain. Hollywood movie and scripts almost never

are these narratives created by women, but it is about women and their space, and their occupation is time and time again pinned down and kept limited. It's a cultural archive that is repeated throughout history.

M: Barrett Mandel states that one can only create an autobiographical work when one is critically aware of one's own position, and I believe that when doing so the hyper-personal can transform into something that finds a space within the public domain. That when, whatever it may be, a novel and work of art, if it is kept only in this personal domain, in this bubble of only me and that there is no link to your surroundings, it is hard for the work to relate to something else then only you.

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\*Being completely consumed with one's own, most likely small, concerns. When is it liberating, questioning, and when does it merely stay as repetition and confirmation of that stereotype?

