The mind is a voice, the voice is blind

Simon Lehner

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Figure 1: Possible Installation draft

Introduction / Artist Statement
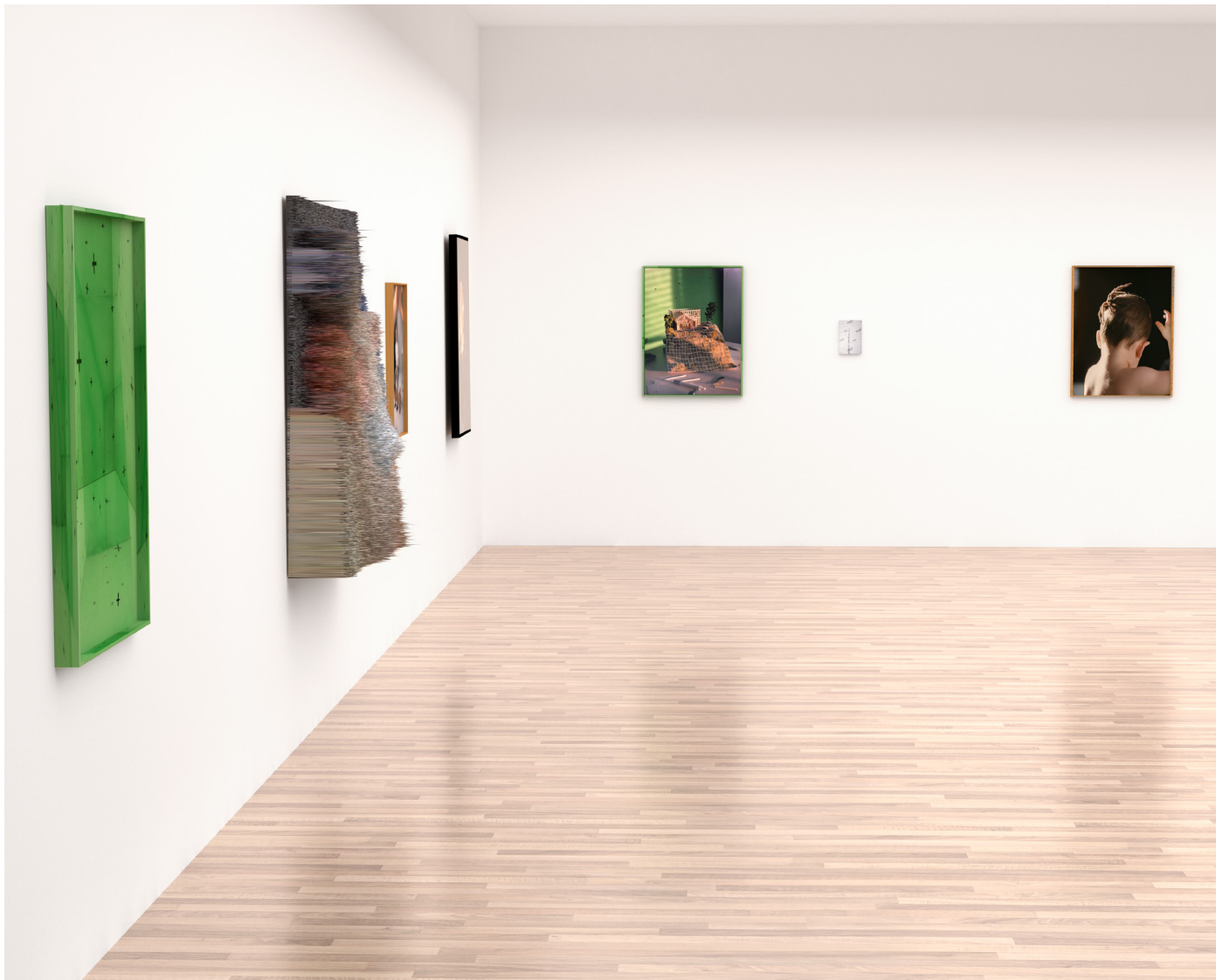
The mind is a voice, the voice is blind (2019 – ongoing) examines the cognitive dialogue between memories and the conscious. Coming from experiences of emotional and domestic violence the series studies how we process experiences through images as it touches themes of childhood, mental health and depicts my attempt to grasp the past through the medium.

Through iterations of the photographic process the work attempts to make lived experiences of domestic violence and memory of trauma tangible as it reflects a search for language and establishes an emotional layer through the medium itself.

The series follows four characters in different stages of life that function as a spatial journey, mapped in time and space, representing a maturation process and the development of identity. The recurring 3D animated image of a boy was generated through a method of reconstructing lens-based images of myself as a ten-year-old. These renderings reference patterns of being stuck in a traumatic stage through physical gestures and fundamental elements of image making.

Image remnants from my generated childhood bedroom float around, as the simulated sun forms nostalgia. Contents of algorithm-based sculptures are distorted and only visible when looked at from a specific angle.
All these elements spawn from the process of the confabulated memory of the software and reference perception and the unconscious distortions of our memories.

Through the approach of incorporating the pre-existing personal archive it is a way of creating work from memory and forms to a photographic testing ground.

Prelude

I started working on this project in late 2019 but the key moments trace back to my childhood and my late teens as I was inflicted in a cycle of domestic and emotional abuse in my family. Now memories keep reoccurring as I still confuse everyday situations with those that happened in the past.

In 2018 I was selected for my first award and had the chance to exhibit at Paris-Photo.
The sudden spotlight which was new to me along with the pressure that came with it triggered a feeling of anxiety that I associated with the traumatic experiences of my childhood.
I was unconsciously brought back to the time when I was stuck in this violent cycle during my childhood.

I fell into a deep depression which led to two suicide attempts in late 2018. Simultaneously I had immense success with my work for the first time, holding exhibitions from Marrakech to NYC, but it showed me that success was not the key to solve my problems which I always thought of as a gateway to happiness.

The path that I found myself embedded in transformed into my new project, as it reflects the effects of mental health and their connection to society, touches themes of childhood and violence, depicts a maturation process and at the same time opens up the question of what art itself tells us about lived experiences and memory of trauma.

The mind is a voice, the voice is blind in the photographic landscape

My work generally builds on an autobiographical core as it explores psychological aspects of human emotion through direct imbedded photographic observation.

The mind is a voice, the voice is blind is structured as a series and designed as an installation that combines various media with its core circling around iterations of photographic processes, ranging from image-based sculptures to lens-based 3D animations as the work further investigates the ever-blurring line between generated and lens-based images.

The photographic pieces were shot on film using a 4x5 Large format camera and a medium format camera.

Through the approach of incorporating the pre-existing personal archive it is a form of creating work from memory and thus forms an emotional layer through the medium itself.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

First off, it is important to give a quick overview on the definition of PTSD to understand the implications it has on memory and perception, as these effects later form base to my project and define my process of working with and from memory.

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric disorder which can occur in people who have experienced one single specific traumatic event. This can include an accident, violence, such as rape, or as in my case domestic and emotional abuse. [1]

Complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD)

I was diagnosed in 2018 with Complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), which differs from PTSD.

C-PTSD can be developed when traumatic events recur over a long period of time and where the chance of escape is small or simply too far in the future so that no feeling of hope can be attained mentally. [2]

Most commonly, C-PTSD develops during childhood. In my case both parental figures were abusive – either in a physical or an emotional way – over long periods of time. As a child one has no way to escape or distance oneself from the situation. Especially the aspect that the caregiver, who is seen by the child as a figure of trust and dependence, is abusive, can have detrimental effects on the person's later life stages.

Experiences of people who suffer from C-PTSD can include chronic suicidal preoccupation, variations in consciousness, such as amnesia or improved recall for the traumatic events, episodes of dissociation, depersonalization and reliving experiences through intrusive thoughts and body sensations. Problems with self-perception are also common and (can) include shame, guilt, self-blame and a feeling of alienation from other human beings. [3]

1. Torres, Felix: What is Ptsd? psychiatry.org, Accessed on 15.4.2020
2. Cortman, Chris & Walden, Joseph: Keep pain in the past: getting over trauma, grief and the worst that's ever happened to you. [Audio recording] (Blackstone Audio), 2018
3. Herman, Judith Lewis: Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror. New York, Basic Books, 2015

Inner Images

A big part of the series deals with *intrusive memory* and my attempt to rewrite or overwrite memories through photographic methods.
Intrusive memories are non-intentional thoughts and recollections from the past.
These thoughts occur in form of inner images or dreams of past events. Recurring compulsory memories of a traumatic event can include bodily sensations, like smelling or hearing parts of the traumatic situations, which lead the person to relive the experience. [4]

These intrusive memories of inner images and the accompanying bodily sensations are called *flashbacks* and include various emotions, such as anxiety, hypervigilance to possible threats, be it rational or irrational, shortness of breath and even distortion of awareness. [5]
Non-threatening situations, such as loud noises or fast incoming objects, can activate flashbacks by triggering the *amygdala*.

The role of the amygdala with inner images and memory

"The amygdalae are two almond-shaped clusters which are located in the temporal lobes of the brain" (University of Idaho College of Science, 2004). [6]

Each of these two clusters play a role in perceiving and processing emotions. The amygdala attaches emotional significance to memories and plays a major part in forming new memories that are linked to fear. [7]

With C-PTSD, the amygdala often calculates situations as a potential threat even when it is a normal and everyday life occurrence. Situations that are miscalculated by the amygdala and its connecting parts trigger traumatic memories which activate the neural systems that store memories of already experienced situations. This leads to a switch in the persons perception and senses. Inner images or sequences of the traumatic event become more present and can overlap or interfere rather aggressively with the conscious and the active surroundings.

Figure 2

4. Debiec, Jacek: Memories of trauma are unique because of how brains and bodies respond to threat, theconversation.com, 2018, Accessed on 15.4.2020
5. Torres, Felix: What is Ptsd? psychiatry.org, Accessed on 15.4.2020
6. U. o. I. C. o. Science, Internet archive way back machine; 2004, Accessed on 16.4.2020
7. University of Queensland: Where are memories stored in the brain?, qbi.uq.edu.au, Accessed on 19.4.2020
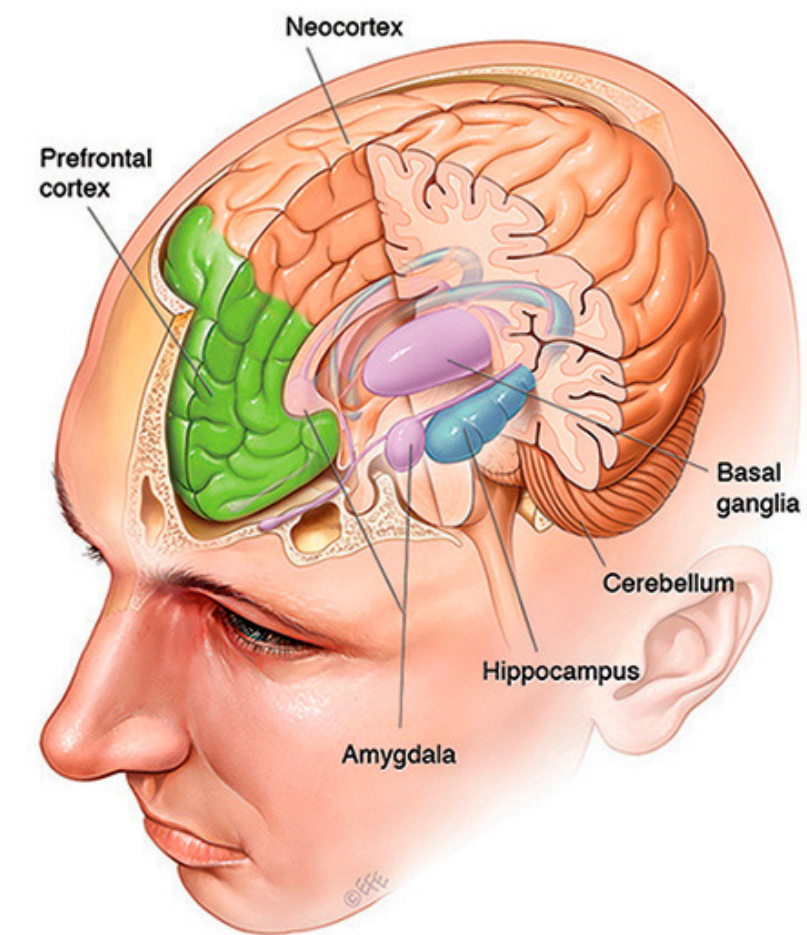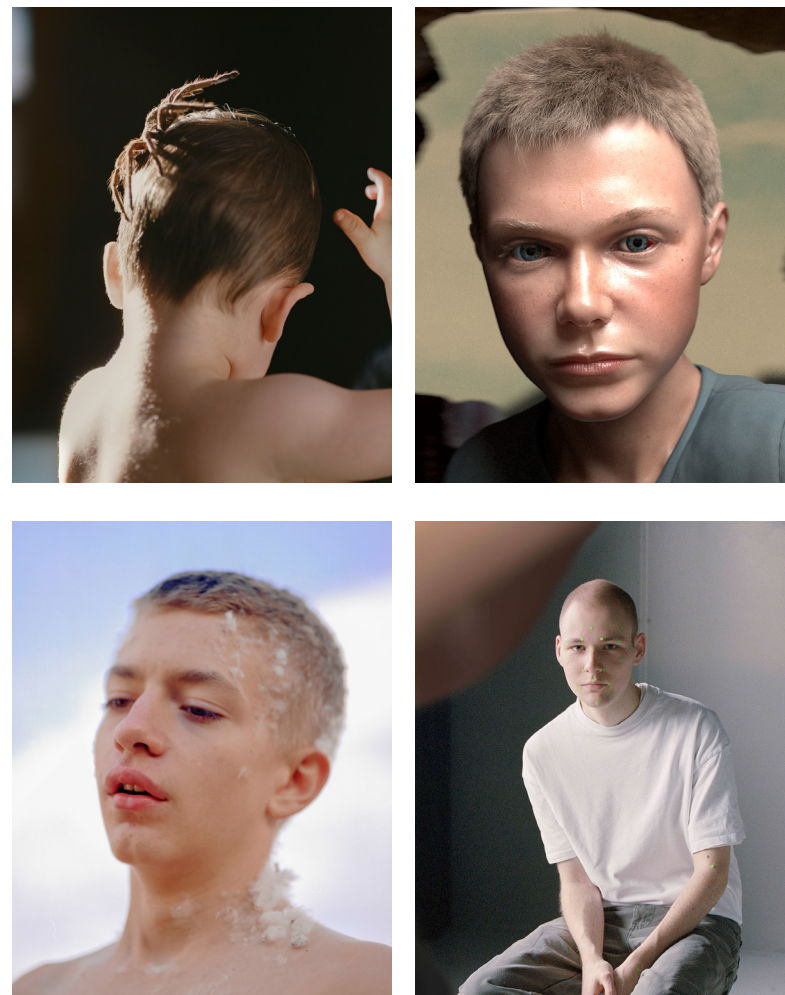
"What if I give my trauma a voice, a face, a pair of eyes and look into them?"

Trauma is normally defined as beyond language and representation which corresponds to the fact that images of trauma are abstract and do not match logic representation. The work uses different processes that are used as a formal language in an attempt to materialize trauma and memories to confront them.

Figure 3: Four characters from the series *The mind is a voice, the voice is blind*

Characters

The viewer follows four characters throughout the series. They can be seen as a representation of different stages in life and reference the development of conscious understanding. This structure of storytelling is influenced by folklore tales as the depicted characters function as four spatial journeys, mapped in space and time, representing a maturation process and the development of identity.
From being stuck in a situation in the infant stage up to the current self-portrait with the accompanying ten-year-old 3D self.

The maturation process in the characters is a metaphorical process and draws from Lakoff and Johnson's note that *"most of our understanding of time is a metaphorical version of our understanding of motion in space."* Furthermore, the series draws from time-orientation of the tales as they often depict "*an observer at the present who is facing toward the future, with the past behind the observer".*
Space is another factor in the concept of the characters as *"each location in the observer's path is a time,"* so that *"time is a path on the ground the observer moves over"* [8] (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999)

The mind is a voice, the voice is blind combines space and time as the series depicts characters struggling along the path of their own future.

8.George, Lakoff & Mark, Johnson: Philosophy In The Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought. New York, Basic Books, 1999

A generated self

A majority of the severe traumatic events happened around the time of 6 to 12 years old, or at least that's what I recall. Through therapy I discovered that I'm still stuck in these traumatic events and often fall back into a feeling of being a younger version of myself again.

The images and videos of the 3D character in the work, were generated through a method of digitally repiecing and reconstructing myself out of multiple lens-based archive images as a ten-year-old. (This method is described in more detail in chapter: Working from memory)
The character represents the inner trauma into which I fall back. It embodies a cluster of traumatic memories and images in which current perceptions cannot be distinguished from the past as current events get confused with traumatic past memories.

Self Control

In *"Self-portrait I"* the generated character simulates to press the wire shutter of the camera. The control that trauma has over self-perception and mental health are represented through physical gestures of image making. Several marker points are attached to my face, which I use to control the expressions of the 3D generated self, and yet the 3D self in the image seems to have the control in this situation, as the gesture of pressing the shutter displays a photographic dominance.
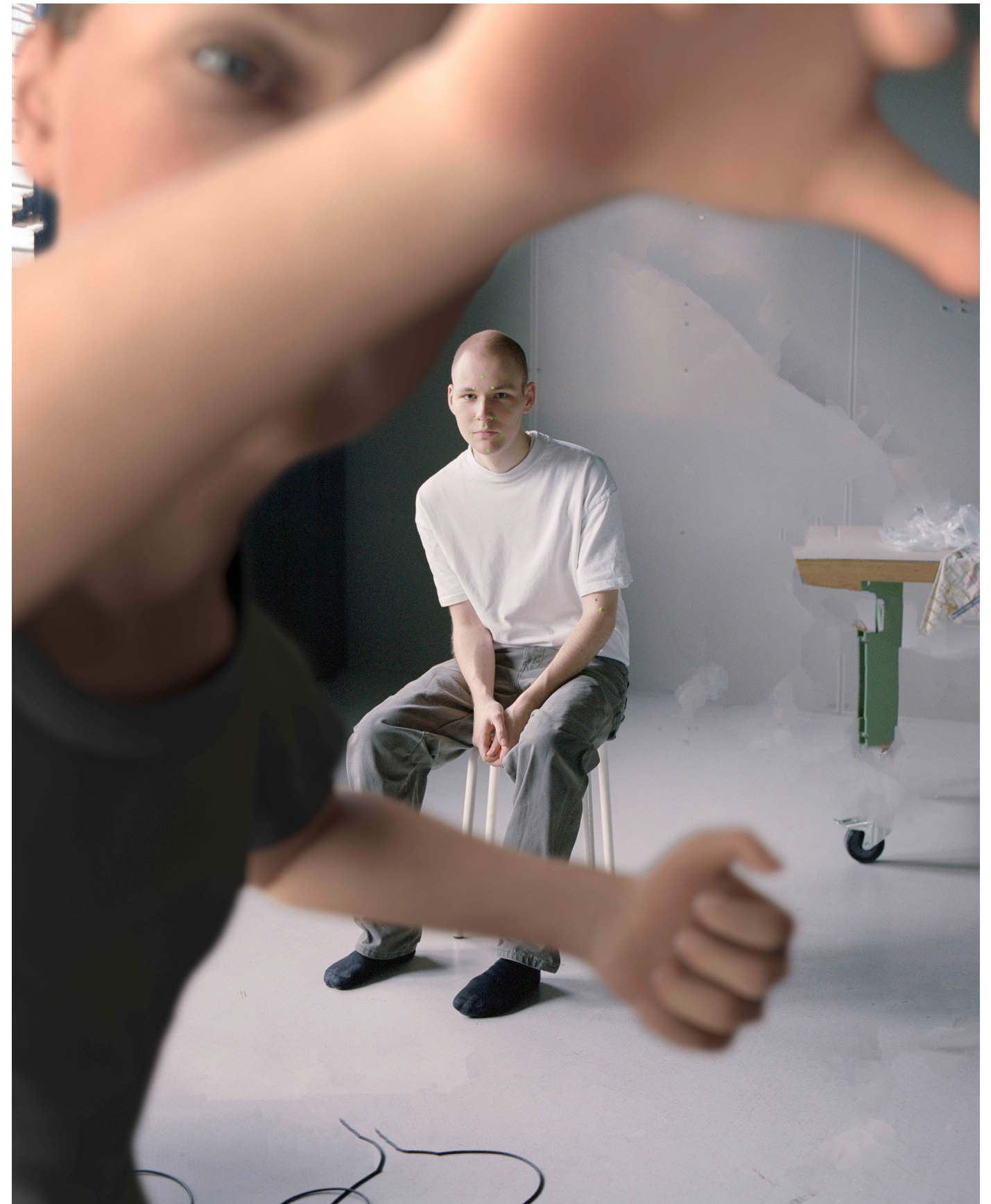

Figure 4: Self-portrait I, 2020 from the series *The mind is a voice, the voice is blind*
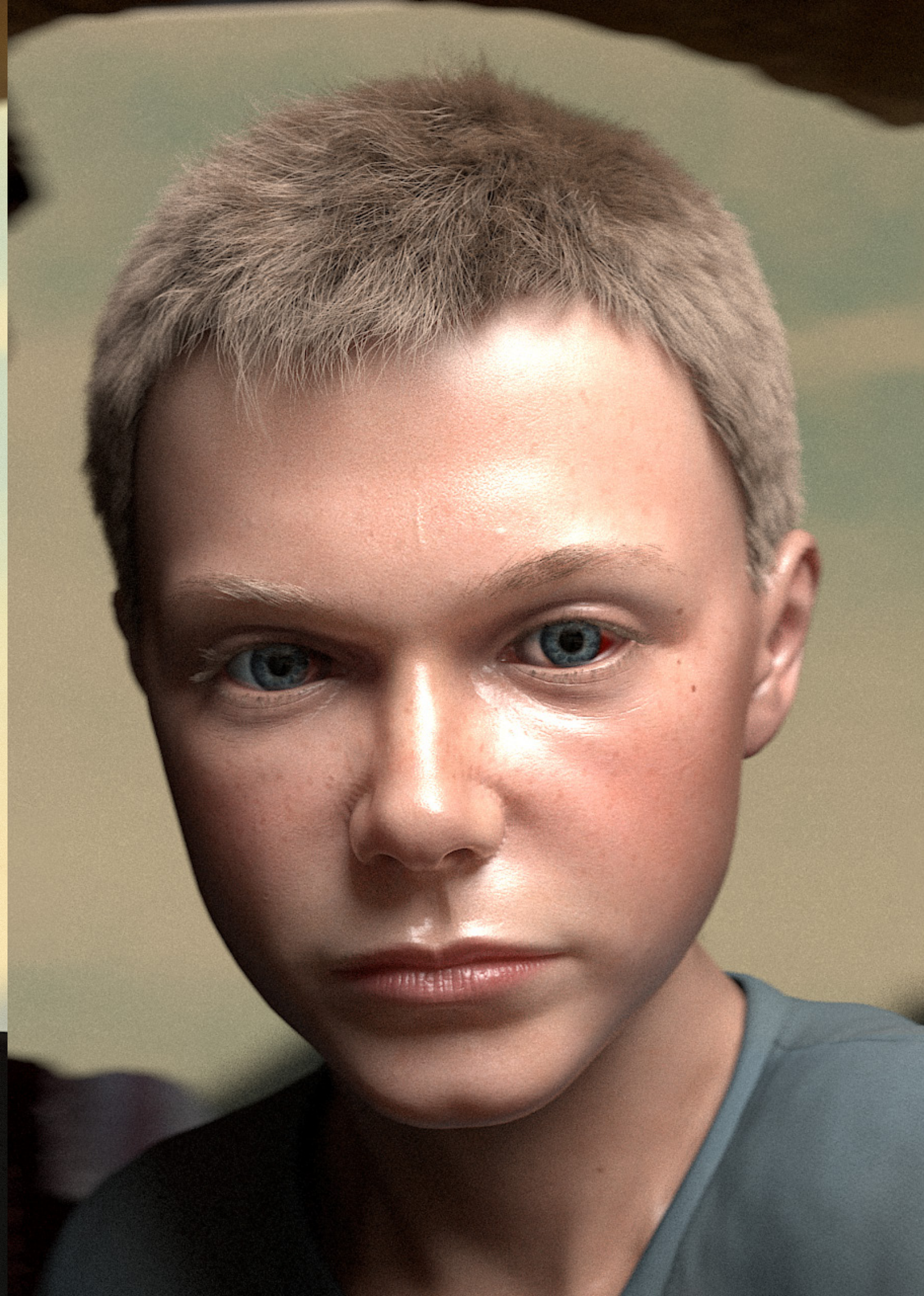
Figure 6: Safespace study II (Palms Springs), 2020 from the series *The mind is a voice, the voice is blind*

Simulation of Imagination

"Since the future is not an exact repetition of the past, simulation of future episodes requires a complex system that can draw on the past in a manner that flexibly extracts and recombines elements of previous experiences." [9] *(Tzofit, 2014)*

The work uses various symbols that are iconographical based in postproduction processes of film and image making. I use these symbols for postproduction, which ranges from greenscreens to marker points for motion capturing, as a parallel for the processes of imagination and the simulation of fantasies in our mind as they symbolize something yet to be imagined or later formed. Simultaneously these symbols are a placeholder for longings and fantasies as they form a bridge to connect the real world to the cognitive realm of imagination through the medium of photography.

The image *"Safespace study II (Palms Springs)"* forms an analogy between the construction of longings in our mind and the construction of imagination through the medium.

Explicit images of memory have been following me until today as I still search and long, now more consciously than before, for a space far away. This in itself is a naïve thought, as you can't escape your past. But the fantasy and longing for what this space could have looked like persists.

In my case it is somewhere in the countryside right before Palms Springs. This idea to disappear into the dessert of the US stems from a psychological aspect which I can trace back to my father's fantasy. When I still was in contact with him, he used to tell me how he wanted to go to the US and start a new life. This fantasy of his unconsciously manifested itself in me. This psychological phenomenon is called a *perpetrator introjection*, which means that certain ideas, longings or emotions of the perpetrator are adopted by the victim but are so deeply hidden in the subconscious that they become part of the self. [10]

Previous two pages
Figure 5: Videostills from Archive material selfportait, 2020
3D animation video, loop

9. Tzofit, Ofengenden: Crossing dialogues, crossingdialogues.com, Accessed on 26.4.2020
10. Stangl, Werner: Online Lexikon für Psychologie und Pädagogik, lexikon.stangl.eu, 2020, Accessed on 5.5.2020

Marker Points and Green screens

Throughout the series marker points are used to track and capture movements to enable controlling them in postproduction. These points belong to the primary applications for transferring movements of humans or objects, be it facial expressions or full body performances, into 3D realms. They can have every shape, form or color. Commonly this method is used for tracking facial or bodily performances by actors.

Figure 7

Green screens are primarily used to exchange a scenery. This means that an object of any color not otherwise used in the scene is later exchanged for a new motif in the postproduction.

In my series green screens hint at the construction of longings in our mind and the construction of imagination through the medium.
At the same time they are a gateway to face the 3D renderings which represent inner trauma memories. Thus the green screen is a tool to connect the real world with the 3D world and to confront inner images.

Figure 8: Videostill from *The mind is a voice, the voice is blind*
Archive material 3D animation Video, 1996-2020
loop

Working from memory

„Memory can serve as object and tool. It is treated as an object when speaking of it or when we recall it. The focus lies on the past when you describe and inspect memory." [11] *(Jacoby & Kelley, 1987)*

But it can be used as a tool to define contemporary or future situations. We unconsciously use past memories to evaluate current and future events. This means that the future is always supported by a past memory unconsciously.

In the series there are works in which I reuse pre-existing lens-based images that stem from my personal archive to generate new images and 3D surroundings. Through this approach of incorporating the pre-existing personal archive, it is a form of creating **work from memory**, and further investigates the intersection between 3D generated and lens-based images.

I used this method to create the video animation of my childhood bedroom which is generated entirely through pre-existing archive images of my room that were taken in the period 1996-2020. Similarly the 3D animated self was generated from images of myself, ranging from the age of 6-12, from the personal archive.

To create new work from pre-existing images, the input images have to go through a method of multiple manual and algorithmic iterations. This method allows me to digitally reconstruct my memory from already existing images. The process consists of restitching, remapping, realigning and cutting 250 or more archive images with a similar image content.

These processes, of course, leave gaps *(memory gaps)* and are obviously not a complete accurate representation of the past, as the algorithms of the software create a slightly altered version of the original input and leaves gaps. Exactly this factor of slight iteration on images from the software reconstructs the patterns of human recollection perfectly and forms a fitting analogy.

11. Jacoby, L. Larry & Kelley, Colleen M.: Unconscious influences of memory for a prior event, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 1987, 13/3, p. 314–336

Sequence

"Memory never stops, it cannot be silenced, memory continues even if we don't talk about it so we might as well talk about it." [12] *(Langer, 2004)*

Our memory functions as a patchwork consisting of different clusters of re-collection.
There can be a memory of yourself playing in the garden when you were five years old and next to it could be a memory of your first day in high school. These patches of memory are very fragmentary and hop from one recollection to the other, leaving spaces/gaps in-between.

The sequence of my work, *The mind is a voice, the voice is blind*, uses the same structure of our fragmentary memory patterns in order to try and make the viewer fill in those gaps. This leads to the viewer's own implantation of personal memory and through that a more collective and ambiguous perception of the images forms. As we humans are not always recollecting situations correctly, the viewer does not have to be informed about the specific formalities of the work. The recipients fill in the gaps when confronted by the work with their subjective opinion and impressions.

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12. Langer, L. Lawrence: Memory's Time: Chronology & Duration in Holocaust Testimonies, 2004, Accessed on 15.4. 2020

Plato's Cave and the shadows of images

The method of being stuck with the same images or working with the same images to create my 3D world leads me to an analogy to Plato's Cave.

„In the tale of Plato's cave prisoners are chained, facing the wall and unable to turn their heads. Behind them is a light source and some puppeteers, who are behind the prisoners, they hold up puppets that cast shadows on the wall of the cave. The prisoners are unable to see these puppets, the real objects, that pass behind them. What the prisoners see and hear are shadows and echoes cast by objects that they do not see. Such prisoners would mistake appearance for reality. They would think the things they see on the wall (the shadows) were real; they would know nothing of the real causes of the shadows.

Supposing that one prisoner was freed, he would look around and see the fire. The light would hurt his eyes and make it difficult for him to see the objects casting the shadows. If he were told that what he is seeing is real instead of the other version of reality he sees on the wall, he would not believe it, his eyes would hurt and he would go back to the things which he was able to look at, and these he would believe to be clearer than what was being shown to him." [13]
(University of Washington, 2015)

Figure 9

For my analogy I will call the shadows that are on the wall 'images'.
The prisoners are represented by the video and image of the 3D character in my case.

In the allegory of Plato's cave, the prisoners are held in a cave which is inter-preted in my series as a cluster of traumatic memories and referenced by the process of reconstructing my childhood bedroom through archive images – thus a cave of pre-existing images. While in the allegory's storyline one pri-soner gets out and comes to the conclusion that what he had seen on the wall is in fact not reality but rather the reflection of it, the 3D generated character in my series is only surrounded by reused images and hasn't had this realization yet. The character represents a stage of still being stuck in inner traumatic memories which make you blind for new recollections.
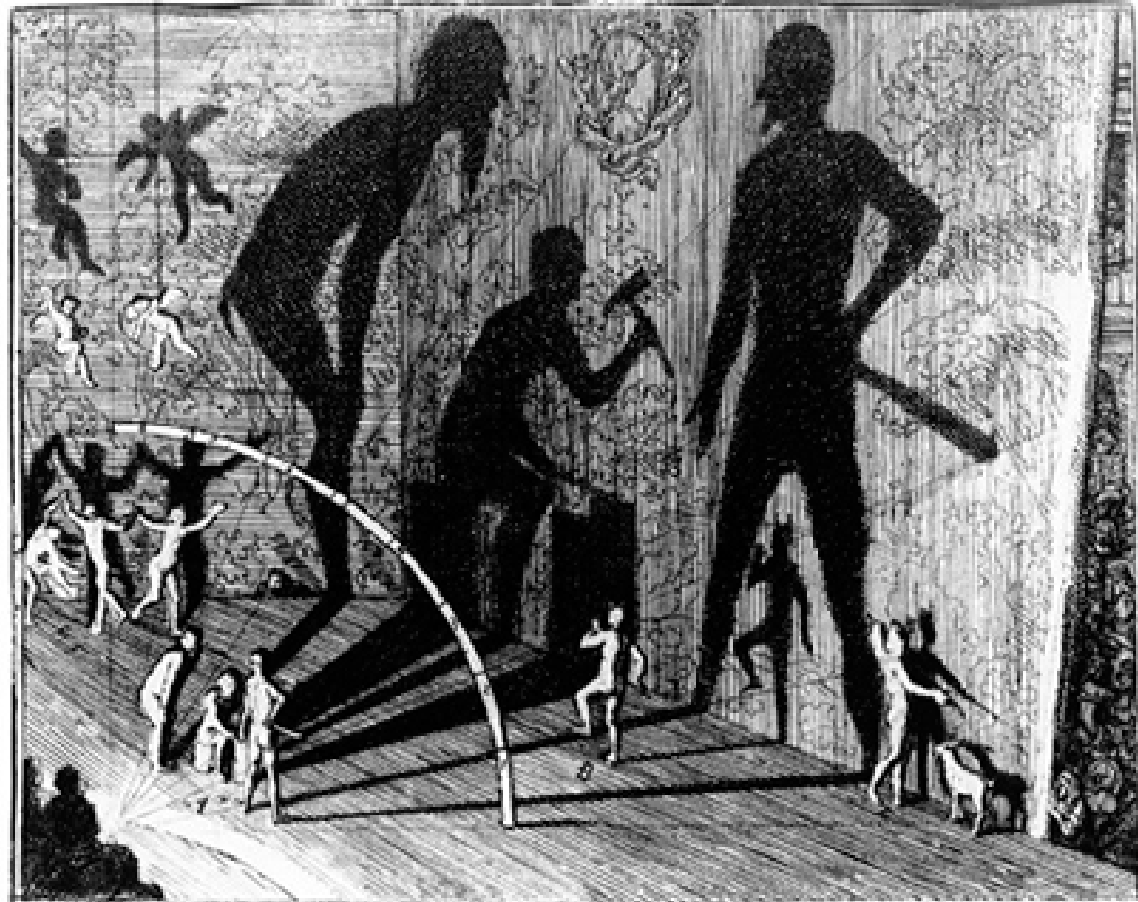
13 University of Washington: The Allegory of the Cave, properproof.com, 2015, Accessed on 19.4.2020

Figure 10: First ever, (Mom and me), 2020 from the series *The mind is a voice, the voice is blind*
Archive Material 3D point cloud sculpture
Polypropylene print with urethane coating
150 x 150 cm x 30cm in max. depht

Overcoming through photography

If the prisoner decided to stay outside of the cave, his eyes would slowly adjust to the light of the sun. At first, he can only see shadows. Gradually he starts seeing the reflections of people and later the people and objects themselves. Eventually, he is able to look at the stars and moon at night, until he can finally look at the sun itself. Only after he can look straight at the sun, he is able to reason about it and what it is. [14]

My approach of trying to step out of a cycle of bad memories through iterations of the photographic process reflects the last segment of the original text and its meaning of breaking out of a superficial physical reality.

Algorithmic memory

The series features three sculptural works which are based on archive images. The sculptures are mounted on the wall and function like a print or photograph.

Based on an algorithmic process, the extended pixel data calculated from the archive image plays with the perception of the viewer and reflects the re-forming and recollection processes of memories.
The sculptures' content and their signs of domestic violence are only visible when viewed from a specific angle.

14 Plato, Plato: The Republic, London, Penguin Classics. 2007 (Translated by Desmond Lee; The Republic, Ancient Greek, c. 375 BC

Conclusion

"Trauma itself is classically defined as beyond the scope of language and repre-sentation; hence, and imagery of trauma might not readily conform to the logic of representation. But it also has to do with the interests of the primary subjects of trauma. If art purports to register the true experience of violence or devastating loss – to be about a particular event – then it lays claim to an experience that is fundamentally owned by someone. Moreover it invites a wider audience to partake of this experience in some way." [15] *(Bennett, 2005)*

The mind is a voice, the voice is blind is structured as a series and designed as an installation that combines various media.

With the core of the work circling around iterations of photographic processes, it depicts a search for a visual language and forms to a photographic testing field that aims to convey lived experiences and tries to create an emotional layer through the medium itself.

Through the vulnerability of openly showcasing a search for mental sustaina-bility it examines the cognitive dialogue between traumatic memories and the conscious. The work reflects on domestic violence and mental health issues and its effects as it depicts a maturation process through characters that struggle along the path of their own future.

It opens up the question of what art itself tells us about lived experiences and memory of trauma as it turns towards concerns beyond the disciplinary boundaries of fine arts.

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