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Embodied memory

Shadow and index in *Family Ties* by Eulàlia Valldosera

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Abstract

This article explores questions of memory and corporeal trace in the photographic series *Family Ties* (2012) by Catalan visual and performance artist Eulàlia Valldosera. It situates her work in relation to the formal and conceptual shift in art that took place in the international arena in the 1960s, and that was characterized by a disregard for the material art-object and a turn to ephemeral, conceptual, and performative artistic practices. Focusing on the concept of index (as bodily trace) and shadow (as the materialization and/or visualization of the subject's unconscious), the article analyses Valldosera's use of these two recurrent motifs in the visual arts as a means of engaging with the omissions and discontinuities of her most immediate cultural and historical context. In so doing, it shows how traces of past bodily relations in space – past instances in the construction of the self – are activated, performed, and materialized through the body.

Keywords: index, installation art, cultural memory, performance art, photography, shadow, body, and space

Eulàlia Valldosera's photographic series *Family Ties* (2012) consists of a group of seven large plates (111 x 163.2 cm) featuring the same individuals arranged in different interactive groups and two smaller photographs (30 x 40 cm) which provide genealogical data about the people portrayed. From the latter images, we learn that these people are members of two different families whose lives have become inexorably entwined by an extramarital affair. In a manner reminiscent of a series of tableaux, each of the seven large compositions stages a particular moment in the lives of a selection of these characters. Every image is set within what would initially appear to be the same clinical environment, with various

clusters of shadows of different intensities. Closer inspection reveals that each one of the silhouettes corresponds to a member of these families and that the plates incorporate a number of photographs and negatives which have been layered and arranged to produce the illusion of multiple temporalities or an overlay of different moments in one timeline. In this way, Valldosera brings into the same plane a series of past and current events or histories but leaves the viewer to put the narrative together from the expressions and gestures of these characters and the shadows of the other featured individuals. The numbering of the plates is indicative of a chronology of the episodes in the life of these family members while the titles are suggestive of the images' subject matter. The fact that the characters wear the same clothes in each of the photographs facilitates their identification, except in the case of 'Abuse' (plate 7) (Figure 1), where the mother of Family 1 appears with a different hairstyle and clothes. In general, and despite the genealogical and thematic information provided, the photographs demand a high level of involvement on the part of any viewer who wishes to reconstruct the rather complex bonds between these people.

Produced in 2012, *Family Ties* draws on some of the themes and techniques developed by Valldosera in the course of over twenty years of artistic creation. Beginning in the early 1990s with a period of rigorous introspection and in-depth artistic interrogation, the artist eventually comes to question notions of self-representation and to develop an interest in and exploration of the body as a site of memory and culture. Valldosera's re-evaluation of her own artistic heritage entails a rejection of the quasi-mythical status granted to the (male) artist and causes her to veer towards art practices where bodily action and process are integrated into the artwork to become its fundamental constituents. This rupture with her cultural heritage and social context equips her with a new set of tools to explore how human relations are burdened with preconceived and culturally specific ideas about gender, family, society, and identity. In *Family Ties*, these sociocultural residues not only emerge as the physical imprints left by the performing bodies on each of the photographs, but also as immaterial substance configured in the shape of shadows. The physical interactions between the family members, represented in the form of silhouettes alongside their photographed bodily acts, constitute fundamental pieces in the puzzle of the collective history of this group. In these composites, corporeal trace is suggestive of the ephemerality of physical action, whereas shadow is redolent of the fragility and also the inaccessibility of memory. Moreover, the fact that *Family Ties* was staged with Valldosera's real family members – choreographed by the artist – to simulate different stages in their relationships also raises questions about authenticity and spectacle.

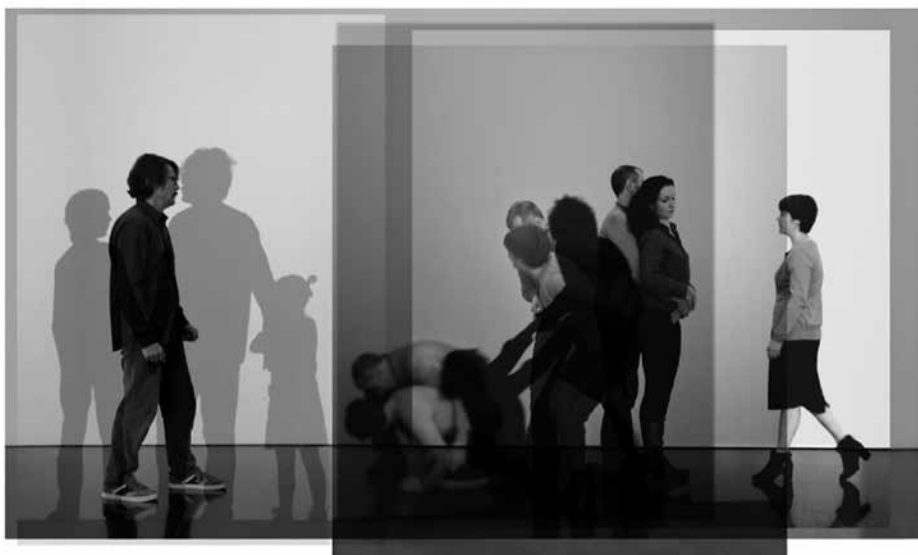


Figure 1. 'Abuse' (plate 7). © Eulàlia Valldosera.

In this article I argue that Valldosera's series *Family Ties* challenges traditional notions of photographic representation, more specifically, questions of temporality, space, and corporeal materiality, in order to re-evaluate and rewrite the artist's own historical and cultural heritage. I examine Valldosera's approach to visual culture and, in particular, her representation of the body and the shadow – two recurrent tropes in the history of art which are laden with cultural, historical, and social significance – as vessels and carriers of cultural memory. First of all, I should note that it is not my intention to attempt to explain the web of emotional relations and/or family conflicts presented in this series but, instead, to think about what these pieces tell us about the artist's own approach to visual culture and how this relates to her most immediate cultural and historical context. Valldosera began to use photography and video in the early 1990s as a means of keeping a material register or memory of her more ephemeral (performative) work. Here, I am concerned with exploring her principal media, namely, her use of light, shadow, and the performing body, and consider the artist's output as a register of the profound cultural, political, and social changes undergone in the Catalan and Spanish context. I discuss Valldosera's rejection of painting, and her move to Amsterdam, where her

exposure to performance and installation art enabled her to consolidate and integrate into her own practice the formal and conceptual turn that had already taken place in the international context. Returning to *Family Ties*, my analysis draws on Victor Stoichita's (1997) account of the shadow in the history of art to examine its relation to space, the psyche, and the material body. Focusing on the concept of indexicality as developed by Charles Sanders Peirce in the late nineteenth century and recast by Rosalind Krauss in the late 1970s, here I will consider the notion of photography as index and memory of the corporeal, the gendered, and the social. My article also discusses the notion of corporeal trace in relation to Valldosera's early piece, the installation and performance *The Navel of the World* (1991). Attentive to contemporary art movements, my analysis presents a context-sensitive reflection on the location of the body, cultural identity, and collective memory.

The performative turn in context: From visual representation to embodied action

In the early 1990s, Valldosera left Barcelona, the city where she had studied fine arts and practised as an artist for almost a decade, and headed to Amsterdam to do a postgraduate course at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie. The artist had become increasingly dissatisfied with her most immediate cultural landscape, its growing dependence on market forces, and the outdated values that still governed it. In spite of the political reforms introduced after the death of the dictator Francisco Franco in 1975, the realm of the arts in Catalonia and, more generally, in Spain, continued to be a predominantly male-dominated environment, where painting was favoured over any other art form and the figure of the artist was placed at the centre of everything. With the exception of puppet theatre and object art, which experienced a period of growth during the 1980s and up to the mid-1990s (Astles 2012: 197–198), the subversive and experimental artistic practices of the 1960s and 1970s conceptualists had largely not endured into the 1980s. Informed by early twentieth-century avant-garde movements, most significantly Dadaism and Surrealism, this heterogeneous group of Catalan conceptualists had closely followed international tendencies towards the dematerialization of the work of art and embraced art forms that entailed the use of the body, such as actions, happenings, and performance art. As a result, the conceptual artists of these decades rejected painting and sculpture for their rootedness in a tradition they regarded as obsolete and, instead, advocated discursive and politically engaged art forms. In Catalonia, the visual poet Joan Brossa had

been instrumental in ensuring the continuity of avant-garde practices into the 1960s and 1970s. During the dictatorship, these interventions took place ‘en espacios marcados por la censura y la obligatoriedad del silencio’ (Garbayo Maeztu 2016: 21) [‘in spaces marked by censorship and the duress of silence’]. In such a repressive context, the ephemeral actions of these artists were charged with political significance. Furthermore, in Catalonia, where opposition to the Franco regime coincided with the struggle for the central state’s recognition of Catalan national identity, the politicization of art was felt even more acutely (Parcerisas 2007: 41–42). The conceptualists’ emphasis on discourse and on broadening the remit of art led them to repudiate the idea of the artist as genius and to reject the market conditions that regulated the production, exhibition, and commercialization of the artwork. These were some of the ideas that Carles Santos, one of the members of the influential Catalan collective of artists and intellectuals Grup de Treball (1973–1976), expressed in his text ‘Informació d’Art Concepte 1973 a Banyoles’ (Parcerisas 2007: 57).¹ However, as the art critic and independent curator Pilar Parcerisas notes, taking into consideration the sociopolitical conditions in which this art form operated, conceptualism occupied a rather marginal space in the Spanish and Catalan cultural context:

el hecho de que este arte apareciera en una periferia, al margen de los grandes centros de producción y del mercado artístico, en el seno de una dictadura, con una endeble tradición de vanguardia, sin instituciones museísticas contemporáneas y con una sociedad de gustos conservadores como interlocutora, dificultó enormemente la consolidación de las propuestas de estos artistas. (2007: 42)

[the fact that this art emerged on the periphery, at the margin of the great centres of production and the art market, in the midst of a dictatorship, with a weak avant-garde tradition, without museums of contemporary art, and with only a society with conservative tastes as its interlocutor, made the consolidation of these artists’ projects very difficult]

Unable to exhibit in art galleries or sell their work because of the art market’s proclivity for traditional painting and sculpture, this generation of artists was forced into alternative spaces. The adverse cultural landscape of the 1960s and 1970s prompted artists such as Angels Ribé and Francesc Torres, among others, to move to urban environments that were more favourable to artistic production, in particular Paris and New York (Parcerisas 1994).

The democratic Transition and re-establishment of the Catalan Generalitat in 1977 brought about a period of reconstruction and normalization of culture. As a consequence, during the 1980s, the innovative art practices that had been introduced by the conceptualists would be pushed further into the periphery. The efforts to build an adequate infrastructure for the arts resulted in the creation of a number of cultural institutions and arts centres, such as the Centre Arts Santa Mònica in the mid-1980s and the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) and the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB) in the early to mid-1990s. This exercise in the institutionalization of culture took place shortly after the preparation for the hosting of the 1992 Olympic Games and the implementation of the urbanization plans to regenerate the city of Barcelona which began in the 1980s. In his study of the process of normalization of Catalan culture, Josep-Anton Fernández notes:

En un context mundial en què la cultura ha esdevingut una mercaderia, i en un context local en què la indústria cultural espanyola colonitza el mercat català, l'única possibilitat de supervivència de la cultura catalana és l'adopció d'estratègies que li permetin competir en els mateixos termes. (2008: 40)

[In a global context where culture has become a merchandise and in a local context where the Spanish cultural industry is colonizing the Catalan market, the only possibility for Catalan culture to survive is to adopt strategies that enable it to compete on the same terms]

In this context of rapid economic growth and emphasis on the recovery and assertion of national identity, the world of art continued to be more partial to traditional forms of expression, more specifically, painting and sculpture. Valldosera, who had specialized in painting at university, began to question not only her chosen medium but also the increasing commodification of the artwork and the undisputed status of the artist as a genius and producer of commercial objects. The homemade paints that she had used due to financial hardship in the 1980s had not withstood the passage of time and her paintings had begun to deteriorate. With the experience of losing her own work came the realization of art's ephemerality, which would concomitantly give rise to an interest in the notion of process rather than in the finished product and marketable artefact. This would be the focus of her attention in her next project, the interdisciplinary installation and performance *The Navel of the World* shown at Barcelona's Galeria Antoni Estrany in 1991.²

Valldosera left Barcelona in search of alternative means of artistic expression, and the cultural arena of Amsterdam was to have a profound impact on her work. The artist has spoken of her experience abroad as a means to rid herself of 'cultural baggage', to 'learn to work all over again' (Enguita Mayo, Bartomeu Marí, and Valldosera 2000: 23–24). In Amsterdam, she came into contact with an international group of art practitioners, including the performance artist Ulay, who 'embrace[d] the experience of the everyday and the use of ordinary materials, and whose work encompassed video, performance, action art and process-based practices' (Rodríguez Muñoz 2012: 11). Their work epitomized the dramatic shift in the art world that had taken place in the 1960s and was famously labelled 'the end of art' by Arthur C. Danto in the mid-1980s (1997: 3). With this term, the philosopher and art critic principally referred to the collapse of master narratives, a claim that was also propounded by the German art historian Hans Belting at roughly the same time. Aware of the assertions by many art theorists that 'painting seemed to show all the signs of internal exhaustion, or at least marked the limits beyond which it was not possible to press', Danto observed that in the displacement of painting and the art world's favouring of a new 'complex of practices' (4), the boundary between modern and contemporary art had been drawn. He described this concept as 'the enfranchisement of what had lain beyond the pale, where the very idea of a pale – a wall – is exclusionary' (9). According to Danto, art after modernism neither had a common and distinguishable aesthetics or style nor needed to be object-based exclusively. This idea of the pale is relevant to understanding Valldosera's engagement with history and culture, insofar as it situates questions of aesthetics in relation to a temporal continuum.

With her move to the Netherlands, Valldosera was to partake fully in this paradigm shift in the arts described by Danto and to develop further the ideas on process that she had already put into practice in Barcelona with her groundbreaking *The Navel of the World*, where she first integrated bodily action and video recordings into the artwork to explore questions of the habitual, the mundane, and the ephemeral. With this installation and performance, the artist revisited one of art's simplest forms: the point. In so doing, she travelled back to the place whence Kandinsky had departed in the early decades of the twentieth century when he had set about liberating art from the constraints of artistic convention. Kandinsky's move to abstraction earned him the status of modernist master, whereas Valldosera's exploration of the point was illustrative of her own break with the modernist tradition and its reliance on painting. It was the point that would allow Valldosera to break free from the extant formalist

approaches to figurative art predominant in Spain at the time and, instead, to treat the body-in-action as an integral part of the work of art. In the face of her own inability to stop smoking, Valldosera began to collect and accumulate cigarette butts, which she would later use to construct a female form. In her first *Navel* performance/installation of 1991, she painstakingly places these body residues or, as she calls them, this 'impersonal waste' (Enguita Mayo et al. 2000: 21), onto a large canvas that has been laid on the gallery's floor: 'like a spider secreting its web from its substance' (Enguita Mayo et al. 2000: 22). The first installation departs from a very symbolic and central part of the body, the navel, and from this point, the cigarette butts spiral out in four directions to create a dotted network in the shape of a woman's trunk. The following installations focused on other parts of the female body, such as the breasts or chest area (where the lungs are located), the buttocks, and the sex, while the head and limbs were never represented. The work was finalized with an action that entailed the sweeping up of the cigarette butts. Dragged by the twigs of a besom, the cigarette ash smudged the canvas, joining the points together and weaving a fine and powdery skin over the torso. The action was filmed and the recording exhibited as part of the installation. The completion of the piece entails its own undoing by means of a cleansing action, and these final bodily gestures leave their own traces on the canvas, incorporating an everyday and rather mundane activity, mainly associated with womanhood and the domestic space, into the art gallery and as part of the artwork.

The inclusion of the video recording in the installation is significant, not only for its function as memory and trace of an ephemeral action but also because it signals the beginning of Valldosera's experimentation with and manipulation of light. In Amsterdam, she embraced the medium of photography and became the subject matter of her own art; yet the artist was not interested in exploring the self-portrait as a genre in itself but rather in presenting an archetype of femininity. Acutely aware of her location as female subject and artist, photography enabled her to both inhabit and move freely between the roles of observer and observed. In her performance *Bandages* (1992), for example, there is a moment when the artist's head turns towards a screened recording of her own shadow and she reaches out to caress her silhouette. As Valldosera puts it, in her work she is representing 'the vision that a woman has of herself, without going through another's gaze' (Enguita Mayo et al. 2000: 26). In this gesture, the Catalan artist shows her concern with Western art's objectification of the woman's body, a male gaze which, for her, is epitomized in Picasso's 1960s series of paintings *El pintor y la modelo* [*Painter and Model*],³ and the need to

reappraise and reconfigure its influence. Going back to her gesture in *Bandages*, and taking into account the importance she grants to the shadow, which she understands as a residue of embodied practice, this instance of self-contemplation and physical proximity encapsulates an endeavour to recover the memory and history of woman. In addition to this, for Valldosera, the use of light has a spiritual as well as an anthropological dimension that needs to be accounted for. Firstly, she regards light and shadow as metaphors of spiritual transformation, related to the individual's mystical journey towards self-knowledge and inner growth. Secondly, she also recognizes a sociocultural aspect to light, which for her harks back to the emergence and consolidation of the collective following the discovery and mastery of fire by early humans.⁴

There are many aspects of *The Navel* that are relevant to the reading and understanding of the imagery and techniques deployed in *Family Ties*; these include the use of body residues (shadow and index or corporeal imprint); the importance granted to process and to displaying the mechanisms of artistic production (the inclusion of documentary evidence of the ephemeral action); and the focus on the body as the locus of art practice and historical record. More than this, Valldosera has noted that *The Navel* challenged the spectator's gaze because s/he was forced 'to fill those empty spaces created by the "net" of points on a plane' (Enguita Mayo et al. 2000: 22). The viewer thus had to become actively involved in the mental reconstruction of the insinuated form or volume. This interest in drawing the spectator's attention to the shadowy areas of a work of art is of utmost importance in *Family Ties*, where the spectator is constantly confronted with a sense of absence. In this series, the remnants of past times, embodied experiences, and emotions are configured or merely suggested through superimposed negatives and take the form of shadows. Shared past events and family or individual memories emerge from the dynamics and tensions that are established between the various staggered images and negatives; however, the difficulty that the spectator faces in the process of piecing together a coherent narrative is indicative of the fragility and malleability of memory and history.

Corporeal trace and memory: Index and shadow in *Family Ties*

Valldosera often speaks of *The Navel* as a form of 'cleansing' or as an act of undoing, reconstructing, and rewriting one's cultural heritage. References to cleaning and to cleaning products abound in her work; the latter are used in systems of representation either in place of the female form or to cast shadows that are evocative of it. The artist's use of the shadow is grounded in the writings of

Carl Jung in *Aion* (1959), where the psychiatrist speaks of the shadow as the dark and non-assimilated aspects of the self; in other words, those personal features that cannot be incorporated in a conscious way for they lie beyond social mores and normative ideas about identity. As such, the shadow may be considered a manifestation of difference, since it makes visible those rejected traits or residues which gather beyond the limits of one's identity and threaten to destabilize it. According to Jung, '[t]o become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real' (1959: 8). This sense of facing up to the aspects of one's identity which remain hidden or suppressed is essential to the understanding of Valldosera's theatre of shadows. In making the shadow(s) visible to the spectator and present in the context of family relations, the artist performs an act of cleansing, undoing the social customs and conventions that serve to regulate and categorize individuals and social interactions. As Laia Manonelles has noted, there is a wider social scope to the narratives staged in the *Family Ties* series that renders the personal political (2016: 259).

In Valldosera's *Bandages* performance of 1992, the body-shadow relationship is explored in a three-dimensional space, where the real and the virtual realms are brought into contact. On the large screen, the projected silhouette meets with the shadow cast by the bodily presence of the artist, creating the illusion of a shared space between the two figures. However, the dim light source that reveals Valldosera's 'real body' on the far right draws attention to the actual distance that exists between the two spatial dimensions (the material and the figurative). This tension between body and shadow and the distinct (meta)physical realms that each occupy is also explored in *Family Ties*. In this photographic series, Valldosera challenges the two-dimensionality of the photograph by combining overlapping negatives and photographs that never quite fit together. Rendering the lines that separate each one of these dimensions visible, the artist draws attention to the disconnections and ruptures that threaten interpersonal and/or family relations. Tom Morton has spoken of *Family Ties* as the staging of 'a therapeutic psychodrama' (2012: 11) and refers to the influence of Bert Hellinger's method of therapy on Valldosera's work. Hellinger's 'Family Constellations' provide a means to map out extended family networks in order to identify the sources of present problems in traumas suffered by past generations. In the words of the artist, Hellinger 'recognises the brute facts of family life without the filter of political correctness' (Rodríguez Muñoz 2012: 47). With *Family Ties* Valldosera creates the conditions to initiate a similar healing (or cleansing) process. Here, the artist – as the photographer and main observer of this social drama – is the one casting light on the residues of her own life, for

the actors in this performance are members of her own family. Yet there is more to *Family Ties* than the staging of a series of family crises. In terms of aesthetics and form, Valldosera's choice of the photographic medium and the incorporation of negatives into the image are clearly related to her interest in light and shadow as a means to represent bodily trace and memory and how these are connected to the collective. In what follows, I focus on questions of aesthetics and form to read Valldosera's *Family Ties* as an index and trace of the wider sociocultural body. Consistent with the terminology used by the artist and critics alike, I will refer to the photographic negatives as 'shadows', even though, technically, the represented shapes are self-contained and undistorted black silhouettes that are not attached to a body.

In the field of Spanish cultural studies, the trope of the shadow (also figured as phantom, spectre, and/or ghost) has mostly been interpreted as a means to articulate historical fissures and narratives of absence and loss.⁵ In contrast, this article approaches the issue more in terms of the transgenerational work that has been conducted in performance studies, interested less in uncovering the presence of the 'ghosts' of the past than in showing how these pasts are transmitted through the body (Taylor 2003). The focus on the performative and material body allows me to move beyond memory studies' concern with the recovery and reconstruction of absent narratives, and to place an emphasis on how redolent social conventions and mores are activated corporeally and in relation to space and the mind. Attention to the history of shadow in the visual arts is also helpful to examine the correspondence between body, space, and the mind. The shadow has played a key role in the history of Western thought and visual representation. Used figuratively by Plato in his Allegory of the Cave to distinguish between illusion and the real, the shadow is laden with cultural and philosophical significance. In visual culture, it features as the enabler of artistic representation in Pliny the Elder's (AD 23–79) fable about the origin of art (Stoichita 1997: 11). If Pliny located the birth of painting in the tracing of the shadow, the painters of the Renaissance would subject it to the laws of perspective in order to create the illusion of spatial depth. With these artists, the cast shadow also established itself as 'evidence of the "reality" of all bodies obstructing a source of light' (Stoichita 1997: 67); in other words, it affirmed the presence of the body and stood as proof of its physicality, volume, and flesh (Stoichita 1997: 127). In the course of the seventeenth century the shadow would be invested with a sense of the demonic, and from this moment onwards it began to be used symbolically as the externalization of one's most monstrous and obscure traits. Freud's theory of the unconscious and ensuing developments in the field of psychoanalysis in the

early decades of the twentieth century strengthened the association between the shadow and the mind. With this extensive and multidisciplinary history which traverses the fields of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and visual representation, the shadow can be rendered a point of intersection where the corporeal (as proof of the presence of bodily matter), the spatial (as a way to create the illusion of depth), and the mental (as a metaphor – or externalization – of the inner self) converge.⁶ All of these qualities of the shadow are useful to analyse Valldosera's staging of family relations, insofar as they enable us to locate the analysis of these photographic series in relation to questions of habit, place, and memory.

Physically detached from any corporeal substance, the shadows in *Family Ties* are bounded and self-contained; it is this separateness from the subject's material body that renders them displaced. In terms of composition and form, the dislocation of the shadow is achieved in the layering of the images and negatives, which might initially cause the optical illusion of a shared terrain. With this technique Valldosera is able to situate the shadows and bodies in distinct spatio-temporal dimensions, and this separation is significant, not only because it signals the divisions and the fractures but also because of the way in which it points to the absences in the narratives of these family members. These disconnections operate at several levels: emotionally, spatially, temporally, and narratologically. In 'Abuse' (plate 7) (111 x 163.2 cm) (Figure 1), despite the high degree of visual information provided in the form of overlapping shots and negatives and the proximity between the bodies of the family members, the gazes of these individuals (and their shadows) never meet.⁷ Here, the clusters of bodies and shadows are situated in discrete spatial spheres that are visually recognizable by the faint borders around each of the images and negatives. The inability of these individuals to see beyond their most immediate, and in this case enclosed, environment is indicative of the difficulties in traversing physical, mental, and/or emotional boundaries. The everlasting sense of disconnection and inaccessibility performed by these bodies is heightened by the severance of matter from shadow and is suggestive of the omissions and/or discontinuities in their shared history. Furthermore, there are several instances where the presence of the shadows creates an effect of the uncanny, understood in the Freudian sense, as that which is both familiar and strange. In these compositions the shadows materialize as a threat to or burden on the individual. This is the case of 'Maternal Bond' (plate 1) (Figure 2), a plate dominated by groups of shadows of different densities, where the large heap of grey silhouettes cloud over and enclose the also ghostly figure of a girl. In the same vein, in 'Gender Confusion' (plate 5) (Figure 3), a slightly smaller mound of silhouettes overshadows the



Figure 2. 'Maternal Bond' (plate 1). © Eulàlia Valldosera.



Figure 3. 'Gender Confusion' (plate 5). © Eulàlia Valldosera.

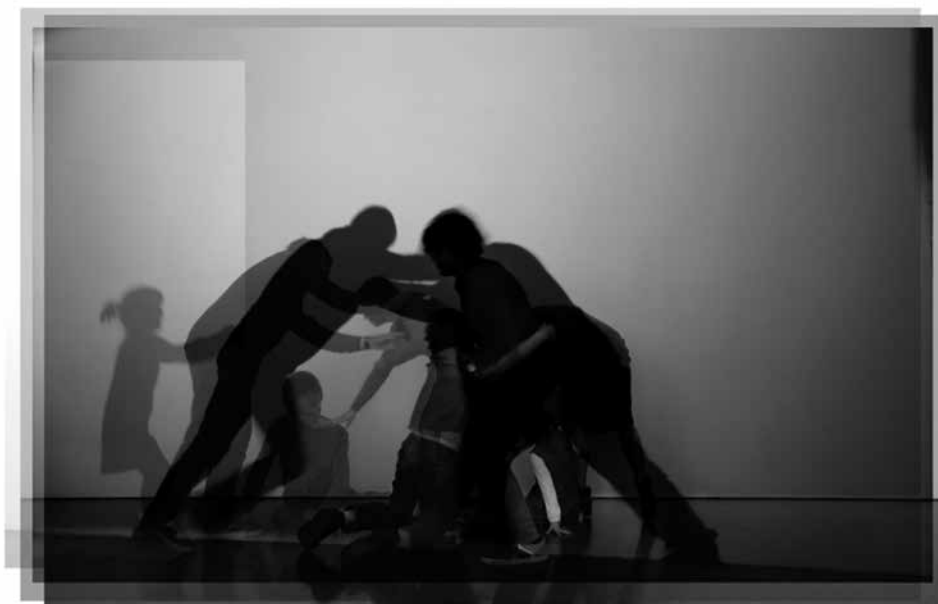


Figure 4. 'Father and Son' (plate 6). © Eulàlia Valldosera.

young boy while the nearby family members have their heads turned in another direction. Similarly, 'Father and Son' (plate 6) (Figure 4), creates a comparable and overwhelming effect of encasement as a group of shadows enfolds some of the young family members who appear to have fallen on the floor. The sense of claustrophobia and entrapment in this plate is intensified by the inherent violence that emerges from the push and pull of the interacting shadows. The corporeal force employed by some of the shadows contrasts with the helping hand of other adult individuals, masking their physical gestures of comfort, and almost erasing any act of kindness with their display of physical power.

In such complex systems of representation, where a variety of past experiences seemingly coalesce in the same field and are expressed through the body and its shadows, the physical and affective association between the image and the represented subject, as denoted by the notion of the index, is worthy of attention. It is necessary to understand this concept and how it connects the photographic image to the body prior to the analysis of questions of memory and corporeal trace in *Family Ties*. In his late nineteenth-century theory of signs, the American philosopher and mathematician Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) provided an account of systems of signification and distinguished between the symbol,

the icon, and the index. Peirce defined the relationship between a symbol and what it represents as an arbitrary, albeit accepted, social rule that is comparable to Saussure's notion of the sign. Number systems and the alphabet, for example, would be typical symbols of representation. He described the icon, on the other hand, as a type of sign that resembles or imitates its signified object. Finally, the American philosopher differentiated the index from the symbol and the icon because the index uses 'some existential or physical connection between it and its object' (Atkin 2010), and acknowledged the indexical quality of photography. Peirce's conceptualization of signs has been influential in the fields of semiotics as well as visual imagery, in particular the notion of the index and the idea that it has a physical contiguity with the represented object. In her influential essay of 1977, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America', Rosalind Krauss revisited the concept and emphasized its association with corporeal trace. With regards to photography, she observed:

every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface. The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object. Its separation from true icons is felt through the absoluteness of this physical genesis. (Krauss 1977: 75)

In the same vein, Roland Barthes wrote of the relationship between photograph and body in *Camera Lucida* (1982) as the certainty 'of having been there' (40), and delved further into the physical and affective dimension of viewing photography with the term *punctum*, which he described as 'that accident that pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)' (27). In this way, Barthes not only introduced the subject-viewer as part of the system of representation but he also established a somatic as well as an emotional line of continuity between the three elements in systems of representation: the object (or subject) represented, the sign (or photographic image), and the spectator.

The writings of Peirce, Krauss, and Barthes add new physical and/or affective dimensions to the concept of indexicality, enabling a more complex and bodily reading of photography that accounts for notions of mood, corporeality, physical presence, and disembodiment. It is precisely this transversal quality of the index alongside the polysemic facet of the shadow that enables an analysis of Valldosera's engagement with questions of corporeal iteration, memory, and trace in *Family Ties*. Titles such as 'Absence of the Father' (plate 2) (Figure 5) or 'Unresolved Mourning' (plate 4) (Figure 6) speak of psychological traumas



Figure 5. 'Absence of the Father' (plate 2). © Eulàlia Valldosera.

that are then rendered visible, present, and tangible by means of the incorporeal shadow. In the same way as the undoing of the artwork in the *Navel's* performance serves Valldosera as a means to redraft her own cultural heritage, here the artist engages in a symbolic process of 'cleansing', which can also be read in relation to the wider socio-historical context. The theatre of bodies and shadows in this photographic series brings together the ephemeral (mind, memory, and the unconscious) with the physical (embodiment, matter, and corporeal trace). Because of this, each plate subtly alludes to the hidden aspects of a shared history. If the notions of shadow and index enable the reading of these images in terms of recovery or reconfiguration, Barthes's acknowledgement of the presence of the material subject viewer and its affective reach in scopic economies – as implied in his notion of the *punctum* – implicates the spectator emotionally and physically in this process of reconstruction.

The Spanish art critic and curator José Luis Brea has argued that a common feature among many of the artists of the 1990s is that they organize their work structurally around a blind spot, which he defines as the place of that which is unrepresentable (in Brea and Alvarez Reyes 1999: 14). Brea notes that the use of this point of blindness harks back to the Spanish baroque tradition and



Figure 6. ‘Unresolved Mourning’ (plate 4). © Eulàlia Valldosera.

its distrust of representation. Thus the blind spot consists of ‘dejar ver que el funcionamiento de la visión o la representación se hace siempre a costa de ocultar que algo en ella es siempre “sustraído”, algo que está siempre ausente, siempre “en falta”, *cegado*’ (Brea and Alvarez Reyes 1999: 15) [‘showing how the function of vision or representation is achieved by hiding the fact that something in it is always “subtracted”, something is always absent, always lacking, *blinded*’]. This interest in drawing the viewer’s attention to the shadowy areas of a work of art is of utmost importance in *Family Ties*, where the spectator is constantly confronted with the sense of absence – the remnants of past, embodied experiences, and emotions that are configured or merely suggested through the superimposed negatives. If Franco’s long dictatorship silenced the voices and histories of those located beyond the pale – to recall Danto’s use of the term – of the regime’s master narratives, the restoration of the democratic system in Spain was to be built on a pact of forgetting, namely, a formal agreement between the left and the right to suppress the history of the country’s violent past. In the arts, the enforced obliteration of past memories appears to have suited a whole generation of emerging artists who somehow became intoxicated by the period’s feeling of euphoria, cultural effervescence, and urban renewal (Brea and

Alvarez Reyes 1999: 12). However, at a time when art was being emptied of any historical and political value, Valldosera had already begun to produce a range of artworks that addressed questions of embodiment and memory. The spatial and temporal discontinuities in *Family Ties* can be read as those narratives that have been made invisible – or *blinded*, as art critic José Luis Brea would put it – to the eyes of the collective. The affective charge in these images pricks the viewer and forces them to reconstruct the histories in the same way as the brain reconstructs that which the retina cannot reproduce visually.

Without a doubt, *Family Ties* also explores the expansion and reconfiguration of the traditional family unit as it adapts to present-day social structures and incorporates new values into its own internal system. It is suggestive of the profound changes that Spanish and Catalan society had undergone in the previous four decades, wherein notions about the family – one of the symbols of national cohesion and integrity which were key to the programme of national cohesion and integrity promoted by the Catalan Generalitat under Jordi Pujol (1980–2003) – were continuously being redrawn. For example, despite the introduction of divorce in Spain in 1981, Catalan society remained largely based on the nuclear family. As Andrew Dowling has noted, the social structure in Catalonia proved to be remarkably stable and did not experience ‘social and political dislocation in spite of rapid and often abrupt change’ (2014: 126). The sense of disconnection between the family members in ‘Gender Confusion’ (plate 5) (Figure 3) is suggestive of unspoken fears and anxieties about alternative forms of sexuality, as suggested by the title of the plate. However, this feeling of unease is also extended to traditional (heterosexual) practices, for the silhouettes of the couple lying to the left of the main group are ensnared in an embrace that could be either passionate or violent, or both. Past and present, memory and matter, lived experience and expectation, stillness and movement, violence and affect; all of these seemingly coexist on the same plane and create multiple layers of tension that point both to the burden of historical and cultural heritage and to the necessity of confronting it. There is a certain degree of fragility in each of these images, an intimation of the difficulties to open up to and accept both the present and the past. The series reflect on the need to look back to the disavowed aspects of our culture and society, to deal with the individual and collective traumas, and to fill in any omissions and gaps. In many ways, these photographs are reminiscent of the artist’s sweeping performance in the *Navel* series where, by means of a cleansing action, the residues of her body are gathered and used in the process of reconfiguration of one’s identity. With the metaphor of the family, this photographic series performs and actualizes many of

the themes and methodologies that Valldosera has been exploring since the early 1990s. In *Family Ties* she injects movement into the stillness of the photograph, collapses time, emphasizes process, represents matter and soul; most importantly, she engages critically with her historical and cultural context.

Notes

- 1 Formed in the years prior to the transition to democracy, the Grup de Treball consisted of a group of intellectuals, visual, and plastic artists who defended the political involvement of the artist and intellectual.
- 2 Interview with Eulàlia Valldosera, July 2014.
- 3 Interview with Eulàlia Valldosera, July 2014.
- 4 Interview with Eulàlia Valldosera, July 2014.
- 5 Debates on cultural and historical memory in the 1990s and 2000s drew on Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* to analyse the presence of ghosts in Spanish visual culture and literature. See Joan Ramon Resina's *Disremembering the Dictatorship: The Politics in Memory in the Spanish Transition to Democracy* (2000); Jo Labanyi's 'Coming to Terms with the Ghosts of the Past: History and Spectrality in Contemporary Spanish Culture' and *Constructing Identity in Contemporary Spain: Theoretical Debate and Cultural Practice* (2002); José Colmeiro's 'A Nation of Ghosts? Haunting, Historical Memory and Forgetting in Post-Franco Spain' (2011); and Patricia Keller's *Ghostly Landscapes: Film, Photography, and the Aesthetics of Haunting in Contemporary Spanish Culture* (2016).
- 6 This aspect of the shadow is characteristic of Expressionist film. See *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Robert Wiene and Willy Hameister, 1920) and *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror* (Friedrich Murnau, 1922).
- 7 All seven large plates have the same dimensions.

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