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Sites of Contestation:
Darrel Ellis and the Decipherment of Family Photographs

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Looking at the photographic work of Darrel Ellis, I will examine how photographers use personal family photographs as material in their own work and how the afterlives of these materials trouble or inform personal and political identities through a practice of refusal both inside and outside the home. Darrel Ellis was an artist from the South Bronx who, throughout the late 1970's and 80's, carried out experimentations using photography, drawing and painting. In 1992 he experienced an untimely death after a battle with AIDS leaving behind a short but rich legacy of work. While involved with a variety of art making practices, this project will focus on the photographic works in which he utilizes family photos taken from his father's personal collection. His father, Thomas Ellis, was also a photographer who took snapshots and studio portraits of his family and friends and was tragically killed months before Darrel was born. This sets Ellis up for a complicated relationship to both his family history and larger structures of social authority highlighting his positionality as a gay, HIV positive, African American male living in New York. Ellis's photographic work builds on his father's photographs

and obscures them as a way to explore and understand his personal history as well as trauma. Decolonial frameworks and a practice of refusal will help provide a reconsideration of aesthetics and identity in relation to his father photos, vernacular photography and the afterlives of these images inside the home. Outside the home will provide a space to analyze how these images are then deconstructed and reconstructed as art objects and the processes that are utilized such as repetition, redaction and re-photography.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

Shared spaces have always determined how people become socialized and as such dictate the development of connection and community through expressions of belonging. As they relate to Black life, these expressions occur at sites of collectivity and play an important role often established on the grounds of survival. This is something that I began to think through for a project I did called *Restored/Access* on Allensworth, California. Allensworth is one of the early autonomous Black communities in California, established in 1908, that aimed to follow models of other towns that initially emerged in the South during the Reconstruction. It was started and maintained exclusively by Black people as a symbol of freedom in the West which utilized cooperative economies and was self-sustaining up until 1915 when the town started to experience a general decline. In the 1970's it officially became recognized as a state park however, it continues to be neglected as both a place where people still live but also as a historical narrative. The project combined my own photographs with materials from my late uncle Ted's collection of papers. He was a California State Park ranger who worked closely with Allensworth and kept a related box of books, photos, letters and business documents that I came across while cleaning out his home. This propelled my interest and subsequent pursuit of ideas related to belonging and identity and enabled an exploration of similar art practices that also utilize personal materials and archival practices. The photographic work of Darrel Ellis graciously offers itself to these concepts and is a story that in ways I found myself being able to relate.

Both the photo album as a whole and family photographs individually provide a place to perform, reinforce and trouble expressions of belonging. For Ellis, his regenerated photographs become visualizations to reimagine ways of belonging that challenge normative notions of family. Making work predominantly during the 1980's and early 1990's, he became known for his use of family photos as source material as well as his innovative process of experimental re-photography. Through experimentation in the studio he was able to develop a way of working that led him to become more invested in photography as a medium of self-exploration and situated him within a cohort of other contemporary photographers. For someone who was moving around the same circles as Peter Hujar, Nan Goldin, Robert Mapplethorpe and others associated with the New York downtown art scene in the 80's Ellis's work has been under-appreciated and thus largely absent from conversations around cultural production specific to this era. In fact, he instead became a subject for Hujar and Mapplethorpe making appearances in portraits taken by the two in ways that Ellis claims objectified and sexualized him. It is therefore important to highlight Ellis whose career deserves more space within the "historical record" for his contributions to the field of photography and adjacent relationships with other canonical figures. He provides a different, almost illusive, perspective to this scene which is saturated by more written about and exhibited artists, most of whom are white. Although his career only spans a little over a decade, he had a significant impact across several mediums emphasizing an interdisciplinary approach that I have also attempted to embrace in producing this project.

To that point, I think it is important and generative to apply theories and methodologies from other fields to one's own in order to yield potentially new results. I am interested in using a decolonial framework to explore how ideas of identity and representation have been created and supported by liberal Western ideologies and how art can be used to challenge these ways of thinking by offering critiques and proposing alternatives. I was reminded of the contributions made by Sylvia Wynter after revisiting a further reading list included in a seminar syllabus. This brough me back to an exhibition at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 2021-22 that borrowed the title from one of Wynter's writings which I also reference in this project, "No Humans Involved." The result is an experiment that uses some of Wynter's ways of thinking about the human/nonhuman and systems of classification and value and applies them to the work of Ellis, family photos and vernacular photography more broadly. I believe there needs to be a wider representation of perspectives and voices within the field of art history as well as more intersectional analysis and encouragement to think otherwise within the field and beyond. That is not to say that these voices do not already exist, however I do not think there is enough.

In addition to the individual artist, this project contributes to a contentious debate around family photography and ideology. It refuses, or queers, Western normative understandings of genealogy, family and belonging by discussing alternative structural possibilities and reinforcing that it is ok for these to not always look the same. While I tried to avoid some more obvious citations such as Barthes and Sekula, I did this to again challenge the ways in which the family photograph in the West has been turned into a

market that is largely used to validate and perpetuate liberal ideologies including distributions of labor, gender roles, heteronormativity as well as systems of care, support and value. Ideally, the impacts of this project would encourage a reconsideration of how art can be used for self-exploration and how it can produce collective shifts of consciousness. Shifts in terms of how we approach aesthetics and the potential of photographs to shape one's own perception of themselves and shifts in terms of systems of value and how we determine what is good, bad, normal and human. The photographs made my Ellis are not inherently flashy or eye catching but instead are dark and difficult to discern. The theories and methodologies that I chose to apply help to analyze the images by asking the question of what do the photographs do for the artist and the audience. As Ellis troubles his own personal history, a decolonial framework also troubles Western systems of value and aesthetics. The rupture that was initiated after the death of his father was noticed not only in the life of his original photographs as they were stored away but also the home where his presence was suddenly absent. Ellis used this rupture as the driving force in his work and made it part of the process in which he was reimagining his own family, whether biological or chosen.

Before Darrel Ellis was even born, his father, Thomas Ellis, lived a life that would become the foundation and subject of much of his son's future artistic explorations. It was during the postwar years (1940's) that Thomas Ellis and his family made New York City their new home after migrating from the South. They eventually settled in the Bronx and Harlem which at the time was being influenced by the Harlem Renaissance. It was here that Ellis's father became increasingly interested in photography making images that

ranged from studio portraits and still lives to snapshots of family and friends. He also participated in various camera clubs which offered a place for his work to be seen and supported as opposed to larger cultural institutions which were just beginning to collect photography much less photographs made by people of color. His life ended abruptly when he was tragically killed by the police in 1958 derailing the lives of his son, two daughters and wife Jean. After the death of their father the family struggled financially and emotionally which caused detriment to the relationship between Ellis and his mother. She remarried and had two more children but his new stepfather as he describes was not a good fit and did not stick around which resulted in further distance between him and his mother. Before his death, Thomas Ellis and his family maintained their position within the middle class even owning a car during a time when many Black people were unable to get a car loan. The car becomes a repeated theme in Ellis's work not just because of the affiliations to the scene of his father's death, but also its connotations of social class, modernity and freedom that comes with mobility.

A couple months after his father's death, Darrel Ellis was born on December 5, 1958 making him the third of five children. As a kid he grew up very introspective and isolated from other people in his family and developed early artistic sensibilities from this time spent alone. He graduated from the High School of Fashion Industries where he learned fundamental drawing techniques and strategies, but these became supplemental to the many real-life experiences he had outside the classroom. Growing up in New York City he had access to many different art museums and galleries and would go see and study a range of works in person but was always drawn particularly to Western art and

European painters such as Edouard Vuillard and Marc Chagall. This close study and immersive experience was influential to aspects he adopted in his own approaches some of which he laid out in a series of personal notebooks. After high school he periodically attended classes at both the School of Visual Arts and Cooper Union and later participated in a residency at PS1 as well as the Whitney Independent Study Program. He began by mostly creating figurative paintings and drawings from found photographs and later brought in more personal, family photos as primary subject material. His interest in working with photography was ignited after meeting artist and friend James Wentzy at a gay bar in the West Village. Together they applied and got accepted to the PS1 residency with a proposed experimental photography project. Through this Ellis became progressively more invested in a process of photography that included projecting photographs on to sculptural reliefs and re-photographing them resulting in entirely new compositions.

Outside of the museums and galleries, the cultural and political landscape of New York between the 70's early 90's established an important backdrop for the type of art and discourse that was being created. The South Bronx, where Ellis lived, saw a significant loss of housing in the 70's with more than half of the homes being lost to fires due to discriminatory polices such as redlining, urban renewal, corrupt landlords and the negligence of city and state officials. Soon after, AIDS became an epidemic that first introduced in the early 80's and got increasingly worse into the 90's. By 1993 AIDS was the leading cause of death of men between the ages of 25 and 44 affecting large portions of the young, queer and art communities in New York and beyond. During this time Ellis

became more involved in the downtown art scene meeting new friends and lovers while bouncing around various living situations. In 1989 Nan Goldin invited him to participate in the group exhibition *Witness: Against Our Vanishing* which was a response to the ongoing AIDS crisis and its effect on her artistic community. The exhibition was met with national condemnation over its use of public funding and claims of being too political considering the larger culture wars and debates over social values that were taking place. This was the first time he shared his positive diagnosis with his friends and family at time when his health was beginning to decline. Ellis was eventually found by a friend in a coma alone in his apartment in Greenpoint and shortly after would fall victim to his illness on April 4, 1992. Despite his premature death, he was able to achieve a recognizable body of work that would posthumously continue to gain momentum most recently seen in the publication of two monographs and the mounting of a retrospective exhibition in the Bronx.

Through engaging various fields of study, including Black studies, cultural studies, decolonial theory and an intersectional analysis, an interdisciplinary methodology emerges as a generative way to reimagine some of these concepts and continue the work through a new lens. The disparate texts and narratives cited assert an attempt to challenge the production of knowledge and the idea of normalcy.[1] In the same way Ellis embraced an interdisciplinary art practice through experimentation with various mediums, what becomes most useful is how together they can reinvent ways of knowing.

[1] Katherine McKittrick, "Curiosities (My Heart Makes My Head Swim)," in *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2021), 4-5.

Critical theory, interview transcripts and visual analysis advance a dialectical discourse that seeks to address what family photographs can do both inside and outside of the home. This is used to disrupt dominant systems of value and classification by reimagining how they are constructed personally, politically and culturally. The home provides a space of intimacy and domesticity where these disruptions can first be implemented and tested. It is the place where family photographs are often created, kept and cared for to develop a personal and historical orientation that refuses harmful representations advanced by the state and outside voices. For Ellis, it was a place where he could reconsider his identity and relationships within his own family while also rehabilitating the images and sharing them with an audience. Outside the home the images are deconstructed, reconstructed and circulated to a public that has no connection to the people or places being depicted. It supports the opportunity for a cultural refusal and withholding that addressed the politics of representation and a social reconsideration of the artist's position within the world.

These frameworks provide the structure for the following two chapters. The first chapter looks inside the home by focusing on notions of family and vernacular photography. It begins by providing a background on Thomas Ellis and his relationship to photographs, situating the original source materials within a time and place. This opens the conversation up to a reconsideration of aesthetics through writings by Sylvia Wynter and her theory of decipherment. By countering stereotypical representations and refusing regimes of violence, Thomas Ellis and his photographs, and family photographs more generally, are argued to be a strategy of affirmation and a confrontational practice of

visibility while also establishing a sense of belonging. This is all to propose a challenge to Western aesthetics and encourage a reimagination of systems of value and ways of creating kinship. Family photographs can thus be understood as a practice which contains signifying processes that ask questions like who took the photo, who becomes the subject, where is the photo stored and if it is printed how does it live on? It also looks at how the haptic nature of photographs, photo album and negatives can all evoke an affective response. For Ellis he experiences this growing up around his father's photos in the home but also when he is passed down his father's photography collection by his mother. Coincidentally, he inherits both a treasure of family history and a troubled relationship to state violence. This chapter aims to address what family photos can do for both Ellis and his father within the home and within themselves.

The second chapter adds to the afterlives of family photos by discussing how Ellis engages them by taking them outside of the home and into the studio, gallery and museum. It examines his process of regenerating photographs by deconstructing his father's negatives and then reconstructing them using several different methods all which become re-photographed to create the desired ghostly and enigmatic results. The distortion and manipulation seen in the final prints occur by negatives being projected on sculptural reliefs which create an effect that withholds key pieces of the original image. This kind of intervention is discussed as a gesture of redaction that draws on Christina Sharpe's concept of wake work as to provide Ellis with the agency to determine what is left visible and what becomes invisible to the viewer. Similarly, the work of Romare Bearden is used to discuss not only ideological shifts in approaching an art practice but

also the role of repetition and the cut that Ellis metaphorically often applied to individual photos. As the images were reconstructed, they initiated conversations around how he used them to reconsider his position in a more public and cultural context. This becomes an opportunity to consider the effect of his own identity on how he saw himself in the world and how in turn the world perceived him. This chapter ends by looking into how his process addressed his own trauma and grief and the larger impact of AIDS on himself and his community. Through the work of Darrel Ellis, this project will look at how artists and photographers use personal family photographs as material in their own work and how the afterlives of these materials can trouble and inform both personal and political positions through a performance of refusal both inside and outside the home.

CHAPTER 1: INSIDE THE HOME

In September of 1992 the eighth iteration of the Museum of Modern Art's *New Photography* exhibition opened to the public. Organized by Peter Galassi, this edition included more space in the galleries than previously allocated to support larger images and experiments in installation encouraging a type of aesthetic diversity not typically seen in photographic exhibitions prior. Darrel Ellis was selected as one of the eight artists included and with no overarching theme or concept to tie the exhibition together, was represented by eleven of his framed photographic prints based on family photos taken by his father. His father, Thomas Ellis, was also an avid photographer mainly working within a language of vernacular photography. He was killed by New York City police officers at the age of 33 ultimately denying his youngest son a father by the hands of the state. As a result, Ellis spent his life and a large part of his artistic practice creating a space to respond to and explore his own interpersonal relationships and trauma in addition to his positionality as a Black, gay, PWA (person with HIV/AIDS) living in New York City in the 1980's. Through a process of deconstruction and reconstruction, his father's photographs become prompts to reimagine these systems of classification and value. Unfortunately, he did not live to witness his first exhibition at MoMA due to an untimely AIDS related death, at the same age his father was, just months before the exhibition's opening.

The same year, 1992, Caribbean writer Sylvia Wynter authored a widely circulated letter titled "No Humans Involved" in addition to publishing her essay

"Rethinking 'Aesthetics': Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice". The former is written in response to the police beating of Rodney King, introducing a larger call to action around systemic violence and discrimination against Black people. The acronym N.H.I. (no humans involved) was used by public officials and police officers involved with the King trial as a classification term referring to young Black men expressing a dehumanization and justification for the incitement of violence against this collective group.[2] In the letter, Wynter implicates Western academia as providing the environment not only for the phrase to be developed, but also producing the people who engage with its classificatory logic. In both writings, she proposes a reconfiguration of current systems of classification (race, nationality, class, gender, etc.) as a reaction to certain cultural traumas that have historically worked to support the state as an imperialist project, denying others like Ellis certain opportunities of being. Her deciphering practice applies a similar framework to aesthetics and the ways in which they reinforce universal, colonial and anti-Black modalities of value and taste.[3] It asks what do aesthetics do instead of what do they mean which, for both Darrel Ellis and his father, involves creating ruptures in an experience of the visual by refusing racial and cultural subjectivities as well as state representations of Black people. Inside the home, as this chapter will argue, family photographs and their signifying processes become a practice of refusal and reimagination of a historical orientation which, like in the work of Ellis, continues to be reconsidered in their afterlives.

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[2] Sylvia Wynter, "'No Humans Involved': An Open Letter to My Colleagues," *Voices of the African Diaspora* 8, no. 2 (1992): 1-17.
[3] Sylvia Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics': Notes towards a Deciphering Practice," in *Ex-iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, ed. Mbye Cham (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992), 237-279.

Family Photographs as a Practice: Thomas Ellis

Thomas Ellis was born in 1925 and spent the early years of his life in Baton Rouge and New Orleans among his immediate and extended family. In the mid 1940's, they took part in one of the earlier waves of migration to the North making New York City their home and the place where Thomas Ellis would come of age during the postwar period. After serving in the marines, he married Jean Ellis, Darrel Ellis's mother, and the two along with Jean's brother would go on to open a photo studio in Harlem with Jean working as the re-toucher. Also in Harlem, Thomas Ellis was a member of the Pine Room Camera Club which advanced his interest in photography providing him with a community and exhibition opportunities. His most notable work consisted of studio portraits, genre photographs and snapshots of family and friends. In an interview with David Hirsh for the *New York Native*, Darrel Ellis describes his father's relationship to photography stating "He was very involved with photography. He knew the history of photography and he had an enormous amount of equipment. He left literally hundreds and hundreds of negatives and pictures behind…he was an expert, you know…he was serious."[4] In order to support his family, he also worked as a post office clerk in addition to training at the police academy. Sadly, he was fatally beaten by the police over a parking dispute in 1958, the day before he was to report for duty as an officer.

The 1950's postwar period marked a particular time in United States history leaving some with a sense of hope and optimism for the future. For others, the material

[4] Darrel Ellis, Interviewed by David Hirsh, January 21, 1991, Visual AIDS Archive Project, New York, 6.

conditions continued to indicate evidence of struggle coming out of Jim Crow segregation. As such, cultural production for Black people continued to be confined to limited access and resources as artist and author Romare Bearden historically situates in his essay "The Negro Artist's Dilemma".[5] Even after the landmark decision of Brown v. Board of Education, integration and assimilation prompted new obstacles to self-expression and survival. Harlem however served as a cultural sanctuary amidst an evolving sociopolitical landscape where people could refuse certain conditions of subjection. Through his photographs, Thomas Ellis attempted to visualize this period of promise which is reflected through his intentionality with his subjects and composition. In the same interview with Hirsh, Darrel Ellis continues to discuss his father saying "[He], from everything I can determine from stories…and what I feel in my heart and what I see in his large body of work that he left, was a good, honest, hard working, responsible, idealistic, optimistic…He was a good, what we consider a good man, right?"[6] Thomas Ellis and other photographers from Harlem played an important role in establishing a visual culture specific to them that was about more than just their subjects, but about the spaces—the Black spaces—where they all felt safe.[7] His gravitation towards the mundane yet pensive moments recall a similar intentionality as another Harlem contemporary, Roy DeCarava. As access and resources proved limited, so too

[5] Romare Bearden, "The Negro Artist's Dilemma," in *The Romare Bearden Reader,* ed. Robert G. O'Meally (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 92.
[6] Ellis, Interview, 5.
[7] Makeda Best, "Touch, Feel: Darrel Ellis's Regenerative Photography," in *Darrel Ellis: Regeneration*, ed. Antonio Sergio Bessa and Leslie Cozzi (Milan: Skira, 2022), 55.

was any conception of safety permitting the death of Thomas Ellis to occur without redress.

In part, cultural production and the role of photography facilitated a historical orientation that led to a wider racial othering. According to Ellis, his father was aware of the history of photography which provided a context to how he approached his practice considering its early technologies and their impact on the Western world. In his essay "Art History and the Dialogics of Diaspora" Kobena Mercer describes how visual studies of representation support the ways in which "Blackness-as-otherness" is a central part of the West's understanding of itself in relation to an implied boundary that reinforces marginality and the spectacularization of Black bodies.[8] As a result, the relationship between race and photography, or more simply aesthetics, becomes essential in the organization of power relations. Within these relations, hierarchies are established in order to maintain the boundary through the perpetuation of inequitable social values. Tina Post furthers this claim in her book *Deadpan: The Aesthetics of Black Inexpression* when she references Paul Gilroy and the connection he makes between science, hegemonic visual aesthetics and objectification.[9] She claims that aesthetics has abetted science which is a similar and central point that helps to understand Wynter's concept of decipherment. The development of any form of racial subjectivity first leads to a kind of invisibility which evolves into hypervisibility eventually becoming violent as was the case in the death of Thomas Ellis. Before his death, his focus on family photographs could be

[8] Kobena Mercer, "Art History and the Dialogics of Diaspora," *Small* Axe 16, no. 2 (July 2012): 223.
[9] Tina Post, *Deadpan: The Aesthetics of Black Inexpression* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 38.

understood as a response to and a refusal of this kind of invisibility and subjectivity unto the familial.

This is illustrated in a scanned black and white negative strip which reveals three positive images oriented in a vertical column (Figure 1). The images are from a roll of film taken by Thomas Ellis in his photography studio in 1953. In addition to himself, the caption indicates that the other two sitters are Jean and Laure proving these to be family portraits. The top image in particular appears to be the first in the sequence portraying what most would identify as a traditional family photo with all three of the sitters smiling against a blank interior backdrop allowing them to become the central focus. Both the mother on the left and the father in the center look directly at the camera while the daughter on the right gazes to her side in admiration of her parents. The daughter is being gently held by her mother's arm who is holding her close and proudly showing her off. The photograph emulates a sense of clarity and confidence explicitly opposing Western notions of the broken African American family that other photographers and studios during the Harlem Renaissance were also adopting including Marvin and Morgan Smith of Smith Studio of Harlem. Clarity is reinforced by a careful consideration of lighting which prevents any minor details to be lost down to the texture of the mother's sheen dress. The people in this photo become anything but invisible reclaiming a space for themselves and their story. The nature of respectability within the photograph is supported through the idyllic expressions and self-fashioning, acting as a performance of assimilation and rejection of dispossession while providing insight into the family's

dreams and desires.[10] Although Thomas Ellis had opportunities to publicly exhibit his photographs, many of them remained within the privacy of the home quietly creating a past and waiting to be recovered.

Recovery provides an opportunity that allows for a reinterpretation of original materials. Wynter's deciphering practice similarly calls for a reinterpretation of "original materials" in that the "rethinking of aesthetics provides the 'ground' that can make 'decipherable' the systems of meaning (or signaling systems), by which those always culture-specific 'purposes' have been hitherto instituted by our cultural Imaginaries (outside the conscious awareness of their bearer-subjects) and, thereby, make those 'purposes', now consciously and consensually alterable."[11] In other words, a deciphering practice helps uncover Western systems of value established during the succession of political with economic categories as well as the mobilization of science and aesthetics in order to reinforce an authoritative hierarchy of classification. To support her claims, she introduces what she calls the sociogenic principle building on Frantz Fanon's theory of sociogeny arguing that the social and cultural influence the biological and challenging the ways in which certain people are positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy based on genetics.[12] Fanon's demand to not be a "prisoner of history" includes a reimagination of the human which Wynter expands on as to disrupt the perpetuation of colonial logics and develop a reimagined conception of what it means to be human. In an edited anthology acknowledging the legacy of Wynter, Katherine McKittrick's essay "Axis,

[10] Jordache A. Ellapen, "The Brown Photo Album: An Archive of Feminist Futurity," *Kronos*, no. 46 (2020): 46.
[11] Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics'," 239-240.
[12] Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics'," 270.

Bold as Love" helps articulate these concepts describing how people's consciousness and experiences are determined by social systems as opposed to genetics and laws of naturalism.[13] She continues by explaining that science as a system of knowledge provides the foundation through which racial essentialism is supported and maintained which works to subjugate marginalized communities.[14]

Through his photography, the father explored quotidian moments of the everyday that reimagined and affirmed his family's relationship to each other as well as their position within a larger social and historical context. These snapshots can be situated within a more general field of vernacular photography which Tina Campt defines as "a genre of everyday image-making most often created by amateur photographers and intended as documents of personal history."[15] It was not until photographic technologies advanced enough in the late 19th century that an increase in access to cameras would popularize the genre. To a large extent, vernacular photography has been known to be overlooked by a critical gaze because of the way it refuses to abide by certain art historical progressions lacking any formal aesthetic ambition. However, Geoffrey Batchen describes them as important to understand, not only because they constitute the majority of photographs made, but also because they help decide what "proper" photography is *not*.[16] Vernacular photographies consist of family photographs, studio

[13] Katherine McKittrick, "Axis, Bold as Love: On Sylvia Wynter, Jimi Hendrix, and the Promise of Science," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2015), 145.
[14] McKittrick, "Axis, Bold as Love," 148-149.
[15] Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2012), 7.
[16] Geoffrey Batchen, "Vernacular Photographies" in *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 59.

portraits, photos taken by parents, photos taken by children and other casually executed snapshots often made using a portable or automatic camera. They are the sentimental photographs found in frames on the mantel or deep within the pages of photo albums and scrapbooks affirming a time, a place and a people. Most often, in their original state they serve as private objects that only a select few can access however, a reminder from Campt acknowledges the afterlives of these photos and the ways in which their physical and material life continue to circulate spatially and temporally existing in ways that transcend both the photographer and their sitters.[17]

Vernacular photography can be an example of a method of making in which aesthetics are reimagined and refused, reflecting a demand to also recognize and reconsider their associated histories. By neglecting to comply with certain progressions of style and technical innovations their spontaneity and affective nature disrupt any linear narrative of history, value and formalism and become resistant to certain kinds of classification often asserted by Western knowledge.[18] Batchen goes on to explain that what is needed is not just an expansion of the canon itself, but rather a rethinking of the whole value system that canonization represents, including different types of vernacular photographs and objects, granting them the same level of critical potential as more privileged forms.[19] Wynter's deciphering practice provides a framework that naturally supports this kind of reimagining advocated by Batchen, extending it further to prevent a regeneration of the harmful and violent ways aesthetics and systems of classification are

[17] Campt, *Image Matters*, 18.
[18] Batchen, "Vernacular Photographies," 57.
[19] Batchen, "Vernacular Photographies," 76.

socially applied. This genre of photography encourages an investigation of how aesthetics can participate in a transformation of values through a material analysis using photographs from the past to question the conditions of the present.[20] For the Black community in particular, vernacular photographs remain critical to social, cultural and historical formations, while also demystifying the homogenization of Blackness and stereotypes.

Domestic and intimate spaces are often the first exposure these images have to a public encounter. Before any moment of cultural recovery or exhibition, the Black home fosters a space for refusing conditions of living as well as supporting a reimagination of the possibilities associated with representation and kinship. In her essay on photography and Black life, bell hooks highlights the role of the snapshot within these spaces calling them sites of contestation. She claims all subjugated people who create opposition to frameworks of domination understand representation as a site of ongoing struggle and that vernacular photographs rebel against other photographic practices which seek to reinscribe colonial ways of seeing and capturing.[21] She goes on to say "The place where I could see myself, beyond imposed images, was in the realm of the snapshot. I am most real to myself in snapshots—there I see an image I can love."[22] In these spaces of domesticity what is being contested for hooks, in addition to genre, is a sense of desire rooted in Western logic. Early marketing of portable cameras used the snapshot to promote a lifestyle that was synonymous with American values, familial stability and

[20] Batchen, "Vernacular Photographies*,"* 78.
[21] bell hooks, "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 57.
[22] hooks, "In Our Glory," 56.

national pride. By embracing these rigid conventions of Western imperialism, vernacular photographs were seen as perpetuating a desire for hegemonic values illustrating how cultural citizenship became a condition of social membership most clearly in the context of the family.[23] Black vernacular photographs have the ability to define new ways of being and provide visual examples of alternatives to traditional forms of community and kinship.

Another black and white photograph by Thomas Ellis depicts his family at a park in the Bronx during the early 1950's (Figure 2). A young Laure is seen joyfully making her way toward the camera enjoying the freedom of mobility that comes with learning to walk. Using her arms for balance, she spreads them out as her left foot begins to take a step while her gaze focuses on her father who perhaps is encouraging her to walk in his direction. Also in the foreground, next to her sits her mother on the grass with her legs both laying to one side. Caught off guard she looks down at the ground but stays seated close to her daughter with an arm prepared to extend additional support if needed. Just behind Laure is another figure who is almost entirely blocked from recognition but given the caption it can be assumed to be the grandmother. In the background a man sits up alone a few yards away from an unattended baby stroller. Based on the proximity it can be assumed to be belong to Laure and her mother. This quotidian moment of family and leisure raises the question as to why Thomas Ellis decided to take this snapshot in the first place. In the interview with David Hirsh, Darrel Ellis describes these photos from his father as telling a truth—portraying picnic scenes on nice days and people having a good

[23] Catherine Zuromskis, *Snapshot Photography: The Lives of Images* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 6.

time and being happy, that does not exist anymore he says.[24] The photograph in the park, as well as Thomas Ellis's larger body of work, articulates a version of ordinary Black life and the vernacular photograph as a site of cultural production of the everyday which becomes crucial to the lives of the dispossessed and the possibilities of futurity.

Family photographs and vernacular photography cannot be separated from a signifying practice of social engagement which poses a series of questions informing the object's relationship to the viewer. When considering semiotics, Wynter's decipherment suggests an interrogation of these photograph's signifying practices as the object of analysis highlighting process over meaning—or more accurately, meaning within process.[25] Thus, rather than making sense of the individual object or photograph, it becomes more productive to understand family photos as something people *do,* asking questions such as who took the photo, who is the subject, how is it stored and how is it circulated. In her book *Doing Family Photography,* Gillian Rose also adopts a framework of family photographs as a practice in opposition to a singular object of study. She writes "most photography criticism almost entirely ignores the social practices in which the taking, making and circulation of photographs are embedded. Instead, it focuses on exploring the semiotic significance of specific photographs, treating them only as 'dematerialized images, loci of meanings.'"[26] Rose defines a practice as a consistent behavior or way of doing something through a sequence of objects, knowledge, gestures,

[24] Ellis, interview, 10.
[25] Post, *Deadpan*, 8.
[26] Gillian Rose, *Doing Family Photography: The Domestic, the Public, and the Politics of Sentiment* (London: Routledge, 2010), 14.

and emotions.[27] Decipherment then reconsiders the methods that structure a signifying practice as a way to uphold certain systems of value and classification. In other words, instead of trying to demystify, a deciphering practice seeks to analyze the process of mystification in which objects are embedded.[28]

Cultural production has the potential to guide human behavior and perception both supporting and challenging the status quo. The role of aesthetics in this process produces a universal standard and system of meaning in which hierarchies normalize existing orders of value. Decipherment works against criticism of aesthetics in an effort to rescue the present cultural imaginary from the trap of Western logic through interactions and analysis of objects such as family photographs and their signifying processes. In another essay by Katherine McKittrick, she simply states "reading anticolonially is a deciphering practice."[29] Family photographs can push their viewers to think differently about how and why people gather photos, knowledge and history and how these can participate in a reimagining of positionality and identity. In the same essay McKittrick discusses the "Black creative text" and the ways in which it demands a different analytical frame illuminating narratives of visibility and humanism while also creating conditions for relationality, conversation, disobedience and rebellion to unveil the limits of portraying Black knowledge only as a product of the violated body.[30] Reading the work of Thomas Ellis as a Black creative text reimagines cultural production

[27] Rose, *Doing Family Photography*, 18.
[28] Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics'," 266.
[29] Katherine McKittrick, "The Smallest Cell Remembers a Sound," in *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2021), 44.
[30] McKittrick, "The Smallest Cell," 51.

and gathering of historical knowledge placing it aesthetically and intellectually on par with other genres of making. His family photographs and their signifying processes illustrate an example of ways to visualize race otherwise, drawing attention to an affective familiarity that reveals how Black liberation can feel, quietly refusing a denial of humanity.[31]

In addition to reimagining aesthetics through a deciphering practice, Thomas Ellis and his family photographs open additional opportunities to challenge subjectivity. From the moment the image is conceived to their resurfacing and afterlives, his photos refuse regimes of violence which are not often made visible within the frame of the image. Even amidst the quotidian moments caught on camera, Thomas Ellis's photos carry a sense of precariousness in relation to the transformation from hypervisibility to violence which lurks just beyond the confines of the photograph and actualizes itself unexpectedly, something he would come to realize too soon. Jordache A. Ellapen investigates similar issues when looking at an archive of photographs from his Indian mother born in South Africa during the colonial apartheid of the 1950's and 1960's. He poses the questions "What do her photographs reveal about 'the nature of the conditions under which [she] lived' and about her labour of *imagining freedom* in a context where black, brown and [other women of color's] lives were curtailed by the violence of the apartheid state and the heteropatriarchal family?"[32] He provides a variety of suggestions to these hypothetical questions drawing connections to similar experiences of Thomas Ellis

[31] Katherine McKittrick, "Respite. Quiet. A House of Dreams," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 22, no. 3 (Winter, 2022): 43.
[32] Ellapen, "The Brown Photo Album," 96.

growing up during Jim Crow segregation. Along with prompting challenges to systems of classification and visualizing race otherwise, his vernacular photographs become a strategy of affirmation and a confrontational practice of visibility forcing a closer look beyond just what is made visible in the object.[33] Moreover, in the Latinx home, family photographs and domestic arrangement's echo hook's sites of contestation as countering stereotypical representations, establishing a sense of belonging, bringing together kin dispersed by transnational migration and honoring alternative kinship formations.[34]

The quietness that accompanies the quotidian is still profoundly present even in moments of joy and celebration. The kind of hopefulness that is often preserved by representations of Blackness extends essentialized assumptions of it as loud, happy and joyous to represent natural or true Black expression and sociality which, for example, has been historically depicted in minstrelsy and blackface. As a result, quotidian photographs of the everyday that resist these criteria become cues to seek out that which is disrupting the "naturally expressive", isolating the realities of expression and funneling a performance of racial subjectivity through a lens of affect and aesthetics.[35] The quotidian then provides a foundation for the dispossessed to reimagine and create possibilities within the everyday. Tina Campt identifies these quiet and quotidian moments as everyday practices of refusal—a refusal to be refused and a refusal to stay in one's proper place. She continues by writing "The quotidian practice of refusal I am describing is defined less by opposition or 'resistance' and more by a refusal of the very premises that

[33] Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2017), 7.
[34] Deanna Ledezma, "Regarding Family Photography in Contemporary Latinx Art," *Art Journal* 79, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 82.
[35] Post, *Deadpan*, 15.

have reduced the lived experience of blackness to pathology and irreconcilability in the logic of white supremacy."[36] Refusal as a performance of disruption is a humanizing strategy which calls for a reimagination of the dominant categories of value and visibility. The potentiality of power in the vernacular photograph in this case is that it can both give back and take away, that it can bind.[37] Thomas Ellis and other members of his Harlem camera club understood their positions as photographers and while they continued to show up and participate in creative cultural production, they refused the terms that deemed them less than human.

Thus far, the analysis of the work by Thomas Ellis has been an intimate and closed consideration of family photographs as a social practice within the home. Within this practice, the signifying processes again pose a series of questions, one of which is how these images will continue to live in the world and how they are able to inform or trouble a future. Batchen refers to cultural theorist Stuart Hall when discussing identity's relationship to vernacular photography as something that belongs to the future as much as to the past and that cultural identities have histories which undergo constant transformation and are far from being fixed.[38] The future of these photos is not known to the photographer as to how they will continue to circulate and communicate a past that they are no longer contextualized within. Therefore, futurity becomes another arena in which refusal can be performed as a reimagining of a future that has not yet happened granting agency to think beyond current systems of being and a desire for otherwise.[39]

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[36] Campt, *Listening to Images*, 32.
[37] hooks, "In Our Glory," 56.
[38] Batchen, "Vernacular Photographies," 79.
[39] Ellapen, "The Brown Photo Album,"

This becomes clearer when positioning Thomas Ellis's photos alongside other images of racial subjection within his family and community. Futurity supports a humanism that counters survivalism as an ideology perpetuated by Western imperialists. McKittrick articulates this further writing "given our origin narratives of the biological survival of the fittest—which secure a normative worldview that is inhabited by the logically fallen indigenous / nonwhite / black / African—we replicate our present world order, ensconce our selfhood in that order and governing logics, because it appears to be the *natural* thing to do."[40] Domestic spaces of contestation allow for these "natural" orders to be deciphered and debated, nurturing a grammar of futurity that encourages a reimagination of conditions not yet been seen.

Afterlives of Family Photographs: Darrel Ellis

Although not much has been written regarding Darrel Ellis's subject matter and source material prior to working with his father's photographs, he always felt a need to draw as a way to understand the world around him. He became specifically invested in figurative illustration, using his friends and family as subjects and taking influence from classical traditions within the Western art history canon. His engagement with these materials informed his formal and technical evolution further mediated by his frequent visits to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum. He began to articulate these interests in his *New York Native* interview stating "There's a certain amount, like Malcolm Morley paintings, especially the early

[40] McKittrick, "Axis, Bold as Love," 147.

paintings, very mechanical, they're so precise. I can identify so, so much this way of making something real, real look real. So there's always been that sense of making something real, whatever that means. Wanting to make things real."[41] This desire to make things real continued to become a central focus for Ellis as he got more serious and intentional with his art practice. After finishing high school in 1976 he entered a summer art program at Cooper Union and would go on to do a residency at PS1 in Queens followed by the Whitney Independent Study Program. Prior to his residency at PS1, he first started using images of street scenes and everyday life by creating realistic and figurative drawings based on a selection of available photos. It was not until later when his mother gifted him with his father's negatives in 1981that he began experimenting with re-photographing as a way to explore the precariousness of his father's life and history which at times was reflected back onto his own.

Upon receiving these inherited materials from his father's photography collection, Darrel Ellis also inherited a complicated relationship to state violence. He lived knowing his father was killed by the New York City police but at home his mother did not discuss race. His father's family photos and the stories that they carry continue to hold a weight that is still felt even in their afterlives. These images, in addition to other countless archives of Black social, material and psychic death, engage a history of domination and dispossession as part of the labor necessary to process the precariousness of Black life in the wake of enslavement, or what Christina Sharpe refers to as the "orthography of the

[41] Ellis, Interview, 17.

wake".[42] The alternative formations of kinship established through these family photographs present a challenge to the average domestic image in that they offer a counter to the romanticized renders of family and belonging by alluding to stories of pain, suffering and ecstasy.[43] It becomes hard to look at these photographs without feelings of family trauma and history being evoked, causing a reflection on other ways in which state violence and systems of classification continue to have negative impacts and if things have really changed at all. Despite internal attempts to distance himself from certain parts of his identity, he is left to experience his own subjection as a HIV positive Black male and the levels in which these contribute to his own precarity. To Wynter's point, the NHI acronym produced social effects which supported a hierarchy of care that positioned young Black men on the periphery, ultimately producing genocidal effects through incarceration and elimination by ostensibly normal and everyday means.[44] Regardless of their identifiers, Ellis and his father both were failed by the state in terms of the care they in fact did not receive.

Instead, care was issued by Ellis when he received his father's archive of materials from his mother in the early 1980's. Despite most of the images existing as negatives, they seemed to unlock a similar potential for Ellis as would images found in a photo album or framed hanging in a family home. When asked by Hirsh how he came to start using his father's photographs as material he responded saying, "in order to make work meaningful, I feel that an artist has to really feel something about the subject.

[42] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 20
[43] Tina Campt, "The Visual Frequency of Black Life," 40
[44] Wynter, "No Humans Involved," 2.

Something to give the work life. I use images of my family because they affect me so strongly."[45] Within a practice of family photographs, this signifying process of inheritance becomes a key moment for both Ellis and the contents of the photographs. An early drawing by Ellis dated sometime between 1981 and 1985 illustrates a scene from his Aunt Lena's wedding (Figure 3). Based on a photograph made by his father, this snapshot captures an internal family memory during a time of joy and celebration as well as offers insight into the ways in which Ellis is thinking about this material. Dressed in all white, the bride and groom are framed in the center cutting into their wedding cake while the surrounding guests watch with smiles. Made on paper with gouache and ink, Ellis's monochromatic color palette mimics the original black and white photograph becoming the standard for many of his future drawings. There is noticeable motivation to make things real, particularly in the details seen in the faces signifying the resonance of the images facial expressions and desire to be made clearly legible. The rest of the drawing feels incomplete as if it were a sketch or draft which is similarly felt through quick brush strokes and fragmented lines with just enough stylization to decipher the scene.

While the previously sourced photograph is from a world before Ellis, his reencounter provides an example of what can be possible for the afterlives of family photographs. The process of drawing *Untitled* (Group at Aunt Lena's Wedding) allowed him time to study the image and the people in it indirectly acknowledging their relationship and incentivizing him to proceed with care. In their afterlives, the photographs and negatives continue to be cared for by Ellis in a more active way than his

[45] Ellis, Interview, 3.

mother who simply maintained their boxes for decades. When she gifted him these boxes he opened them to find something similar to what artist Zun Lee describes as a "poetics of shared dispossession through dislocated images."[46] The photographs are reimagined in a new context and serve an affirming purpose recognizing Black life and memory that refuses to be abandoned even if actual life itself falls casualty. Ellis restores value and life into the photographs by making use of their haptic nature, picking them up handling them and eventually sharing them with a wider public. Campt defines hapticity as "the labor of feeling across difference and precarity; the effort of feeling implicated and affected in ways that create restorative intimacy; how we feel with and through another in the absence of touch."[47] The process of inheritance and the act of opening the box and touching the photos is an important step in the signifying process because of the multisensorial opportunity of impression and re-encounter. The hapticity of inheritance informs the way Ellis handles the physical materials and their reimagined iterations through a process of preservation and care as a way to sustain the lives of the images beyond and otherwise.

A haptic relationship coincides with an affective response which becomes inevitable particularly with old family photographs. When using his father's photos Ellis was able to acknowledge the events and people being depicted and imagine what might be taking place outside the frame. Part of Campt's reason for engaging with the haptic materiality of the images is that it supports a practice of looking beyond what can be seen

[46] Zun Lee, "A Whole Mess and a Half: The Matter of Most," in *What Matters Most: Photographs of Black* Life, ed. Zun Lee and Sophie Hackett (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2022), 177.
[47] Campt, "The Visual Frequency of Black Life", 72.

and touched, tapping into affective registers through which these photos provoke.[48] She further notes that affect connects the viewer to a particular image and makes their response matter.[49] In the case of Ellis, memories become material because of their affective relationship to the artist as a strategy of confronting his own historical orientation. Talking about the materials that he works with, Ellis claims "It's a distancing mechanism that is automatic…I have a lot of love and compassion for people and things, but there's a great deal of, I guess, detachment, in order to make things, in order to see what's really going on."[50] Supporting his urge to make things real, his response of detachment is significant in that he begins to trouble what exactly is taking place in the photos, reimagining his own family history, relationship to the subjects and position in the present. Cultural dispossession results in the damaging of communal identities and social structures interrupting the process of developing legacies of kinship and belonging.[51] Because Ellis never knew his father and utilized a method of detachment within his work, the precarity of his father's life in addition to his own not only deprives him of a certain familial past but also troubles his desire to reimagine certain possibilities of family and affective belonging.

Photographs can be understood as fragments of the past leaving it up to the viewer to piece together what is available to construct a coherent story or narrative. More specifically, fragments of a family's past can be collated to fabricate a version of a family

[48] Campt, *Listening to Images*, 9.
[49] Campt, Listening to Images, 67.
[50] Ellis, Interview, 4.
[51] Jean Fisher, "Diaspora, Trauma and the Poetics of Remembrance" in *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers,* ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge/London: The MIT Press/Institute of International Visual Arts, 2008), 193.

history not without its own gaps and holes. In her book *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory,* Marianne Hirsch defines familiality as a process of exchanging looks that structures a complicated genre of photography and reveals the self as relational and familial as well as fragmented and dispersed.[52] She mentions that from its inception, Kodak's intended audience has been not professional photographers but ordinary people navigating and documenting domestic spaces. As a result of their slogan "You push the button, we do the rest" and other marketing tactics, photography became a primary tool for families by which memory, representation and self-knowledge would be produced and perpetuated.[53] This is exemplified in Thomas Ellis's scanned negative strip from Figure 1 where although it is unclear what camera he was using, the left side confirms that the film was in fact Kodak. Furthermore, the content of the images reinforces a memory and representation of the photographer's family providing his son with fragments that he could then use to reconstruct his own narrative. As the market for photography grew, Kodak began to make more globally ambitious claims ascribing its contribution to the medium with a new universal language. This highlights photography's support for expanding previous notions of the human family as a dominant liberal ideology of universalism as seen in Edwards Steichen's 1955 *The Family of Man* exhibition.[54]

Upon its opening, this exhibition was acknowledged for its innovative approach to installation, however it also relied on conceptions of universal idealized familiality as a

[52] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 83.
[53] Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 6.
[54] Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 48.

diversion from global politics and war. Discussing "family" through photography underlines it contingency and helps to determine its boundaries beyond biology including relational, cultural and institutional processes that reinforce its power as an ideology.[55] Steichen's exhibition was ambitious in its efforts to combine cultural, economic and racial differences as an essentializing method that encouraged a sense of familiality needed to override potential feelings of alienation between the viewer and the photographs.[56] For Ellis, the familial look was operating in a different type of way. Instead of working to support an idealized sense of family, safety and system of support, the photographs that Ellis's father left together tell a story of precarity, subjection and grief in contrast to Steichen's exhibition goals. Although Ellis was eventually able to organize his own community which were able to provide him with necessary support and care, this was most often found outside of his immediate blood family and was not in line with dominant ideologies of what a family should be according to certain Western standards. Like many others who identify as part of the LGBTQ community, he felt a need to distance himself from his relatives despite them not making a big deal about his sexuality. As a result, he spent much of his adult years creating his own queer family at gay bars, night clubs and art events eventually finding solace in a different spiritual family as he became more consumed by his terminal illness.[57]

Ellis's desire to seek a sense of belonging and connection on his own terms motivated him to look beyond his immediate family to fill in for what he felt he was

[55] Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 10.
[56] Hirsch, *Family Frames,* 54.
[57] David Hirsch, "Darrel Ellis: On the Border of Family and Tribe," in *Disrupted Borders: An Intervention in Definitions of Boundaries*, ed. Sunil Gupta (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1993), 120-124.

lacking. In a similar way that his father's archive left him with holes and gaps of uncertainty, he also felt his own family left him with similar fragmented feelings growing up as a child and later into adulthood. He discusses this in his own words saying:

> Because in a way, of course, all families are distorted, all families have these disruptions, this lack of unity, and these holes, as it were, in them. But I guess the Black family, somehow is such a big issue today and, you know, I mean it's like there is no Black family anymore, and in a way, it's part of my reverie I guess, is that I know that, I grew up with that, right? There is no Black family anymore, there was none in my family. My family doesn't exist anymore, as a family. And all the reasons there are for that, which they always say is what, the absence of a Black male in the family. Well, I have a perfect example of that, you know. And in a way, I guess those photos kind of, with all those distortions and all those holes…Because when I look at those photographs, sometimes all I see are holes, you know.[58]

The Black family dynamic becomes a major point of contention and eventually the predominant subject matter in his work. As he began to explore these ruptures in the latter part of the 1980's, American literary critic Hortense Spillers also was taking issue with the certain ideological formations of the Black family as it relates to gender. In her seminal essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" she builds her argument based on a legacy of state violence and Black precarity addressing the ways in which bloodlines and familial kinship have been disrupted during and in the aftermath of enslavement.[59] Similar to Wynter's critique of Western systems of value and the classificatory logics associated with N.H.I, Spillers also comments on a language of Othering, which she calls American Grammar, describing how the captivating party becomes entitled to name the captive body in ways that demonstrate the powers of

[58] Ellis, Interview, 10.
[59] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 74-75.

distortion seized by the dominant forces.[60] This in turn impacts how the captive or formerly captive subject forms ideas of self, imposing false narratives of Black women, mothers and families.

In response to the imposition of Western notions associated with family, Spillers finds in her concept of American Grammar an opportunity to subvert and break free from these dogmatic structures. In effect she is choosing to embrace the forced "patterns of dispersal" and ruptures within families writing how instead of being held to rhetoric and symbolic language, it is the resilience of Black connectivity that is inherently different from the way family has been used by those in power to maintain the supremacy of race.[61] Although Ellis might not have been reading Spillers, she provides a framework that helps analyze his different self-determined communities of support and navigate the gaps and holes within them. One of his photographic reproductions highlights his way of thinking through these gaps depicting a scene not much different from his father's photograph at the park in Figure 2. This silver gelatin print illustrates Ellis's signature style of re-photographing using one of his father's snapshots of his mother and sister at Crotona Park in the Bronx (Figure 4). In this version, the faces of the two main subjects have been intentionally obstructed in addition to other details lost in the center and edges of the frame. The unaltered portions of the image show his mother in the foreground seated on the grass to the right of the other figures with her legs tucked to the side. Next to her in the center, there is a child who has been almost completely distorted with both

[60] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 69
[61] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 75.

their arms outstretched and appearing to be walking toward the camera. While the faces appear to be physically torn out of the image, the other rectangular portion that is missing from the center looks as if it was cut out and replaced by an enlarged detail of that which was removed almost completely obscuring the child.

Another iteration by Ellis of the same photograph portrays a different set of manipulations and ruptures needing to be resolved. This print that shares the same caption and timeline as the one prior, provides some additional insight into the content of the original photograph being used (Figure 5). In this version, the faces are much more intact clearly showing each of the two main subjects' facial expressions. There is also more sense of depth in terms of what is going on in the background where a stroller appears in addition to the two other figures. The appearance of a tear in this version occurs on the left-hand side which does not seem to intentionally obstruct anything but rather contributes a sense of fragility emphasizing the original photographs haptic nature. The mother on the right appears to not be paying attention to the camera while it also can be confirmed that the child is in fact walking toward the camera looking directly into it with a smile. In her previously mentioned book *Deadpan* Tina Post states "Whether live or in photography, film, or painting, the face is generally the first place one looks for the emotional information that informs the affective charge of an encounter."[62] This becomes a key strategy for Ellis's work and the ways in which he chooses to either emphasize or eliminate the subject's faces. When searching for the affective charge, the viewer is forced to comparatively look at the series of images and different iterations to decipher

[62] Post, *Deadpan*, 4.

certain figures and fill in certain gaps. Without any caption and other versions to compare it with, the subjects in Figure 4 becomes lost to the photographic distortions made by Ellis. In order to fill in the gaps of what is missing it becomes crucial that the fragments are pieced together mimicking a process that Ellis also had to engage to create a larger family narrative based on his father's photos.

Filling in the gaps is only part of what his father's work enabled Ellis to achieve. In acknowledging Wynter's pursuit of decipherment, for him the work did more than just create a family narrative but provided a way to express his desire to refuse the limitations often imposed on him based on his identity granting him both a sense of control and freedom. The photographs continue to exist in their afterlives because Ellis chose to explore these desires not for the sake of survival or self-preservation, but to give meaning and determine his own ways of being and potentially affect others in the process. Campt states "For what if black futurity and the possibility of nonsovereign forms of freedom were achievable not only through struggle and resistance but, perhaps, more profoundly, through reparative and restorative intimacies."[63] The photos ask him to work through difficult pasts and investigate the sensibilities and perceptions of his father which he never got to experience but instead became projected onto his perception of the present.[64] The sequence of photographs from the park together illustrate these projections through a transformation of memory and a reconfiguring of family history by withholding major details. Beyond even the present, futurity becomes a signifying process in the afterlives

[63] Campt, "The Visual Frequency of Black Life," 35.
[64] Antonio Sergio Bessa, "'A Hole in the Picture': Darrel Ellis Was Here," in *Darrel Ellis: Regeneration*, ed. Antonio Sergio Bessa and Leslie Cozzi (Milan: Skira, 2022), 112.

of family photos which now continue to exist through the reoriented works made my Ellis. The photographic strategies employed by him and his father at different stages aspire to visual narratives outside modes of subjectivity and perform a future of reimagination located within these quotidian intimacies Campt mentions.

As a whole, his series of family photographs work together to decipher systems of meaning on a cultural level as well as personal. Through his practice and engagement with these materials, Ellis claims he was able to resolve his relationship with family and that he was considering moving away from this body of work.[65] He instead mentions wanting to look more internally and focus on taking care of himself which is later reflected in a saturation of self-portraiture in the later years of his life. Even as he was experimenting with images of himself, he continued to implement the same techniques of manipulation and distortion that he was already familiar with. In a print from 1990 Ellis is shown posing on a couch, facing the camera, and holding his head up using the support of his right arm (Figure 6). He wears a dark colored long sleeve button up shirt with the top button left undone barely revealing another layer worn underneath. He sits in front of a wall that is bare all but for a piece of art that appears to peek in from the top right corner while the high contrast of the image disappears any other background details. The entire frame is colored with bright orange ink that works with the original black and white image to produce a duotone effect accentuating the dark shadows. In the center, a gesture similar to others works of his show a soft gray square positioned at an angle overlaid in front his face and completely obscures it. Just outside the boundaries of the

[65] Ellis, Interview, 16.

square, traces of Ellis's head can be noticed from the top and left side. While simultaneously drawing attention to the face, Ellis again withholds any opportunity to represent the individual and troubles his own conceptions of self.

As he began to explore other avenues of inquiring through this artistic process his work began to receive more public attention. His first solo exhibition was in December of 1983 at Fashion Moda, an art space in the South Bronx, and was appropriately titled *Drawings from My Father's Photographs.* This exhibition helped position him closer towards achieving success as an artist which he struggled with while he was alive in comparison to his contemporaries like Peter Hujar, Nan Goldin, Joe Lewis, Allen Frame and Robert Mapplethorpe. Nonetheless, this also marked a point in which his family photographs were placed into new, public contexts marking another stage in their signifying processes. His exhibition at Moda occurred during a time he was still making drawings based on the photographs themselves working towards establishing his own intimate relationship with the photographs. As such, the deeper he got into the process and more public the images became, the more protective he was of the subjects in the photographs. Gestures of withholding and obscuring act as a method of redaction commenting on the nature of the gaze upon intimacies of others.[66] This is certainly the case in his reproduction of photographs taken at the park where the faces and subjects are difficult to determine. Because family photographs often rely on their haptic nature to evoke an affective response, Deanna Ledezma writes "when detached, whether

[66] Derek Conrad Murray, "Darrel Ellis and the Poetics of Opacity," in *Darrel Ellis*, ed. Lara Mimosa Montes and Kyle Croft (New York: Visual AIDS, 2021), 13.

deliberately or involuntarily, from their domestic context and relocated into the public realm, family photographs are subject to a multitude of ways of looking and feeling."[67]

Whereas within the home, a public display of family snapshots becomes sites of contestation and critical mediation, outside of the home and outside of the familial, they circulate through consumption by strangers. Often when these images are taken out of their original context and away from their communities their functions become liable to mishandling. Rose introduces an example given by Deborah Poole in their book *Vision, Race and Modernity* of Peruvian photographers creating *cartes de visite* of native Andeans to sell in Western settlements exemplifying what Poole terms "visual economy".[68] In a similar way that an economy is organized through systems of classification and value, the *cartes de visite* as a visual economy also utilize these systems working with social constructs of identity to perpetuate selective subjectivity and hierarchy through consumption of images. This facilitation of what American Studies professor Laura Wexler calls colonial gestures, risks the viewer presuming to understand more than they can comprehend by producing a false sense of intimacy that in its own way obscures and distorts any socio-cultural significance.[69] Alternately, Hirsch's framework of an "affiliative look" seeks to create a hypothetical space of shared understanding by inserting the viewer into the image through which they come to accept it as part of their own familial narrative.[70] These two contrasting approaches to family

[67] Ledezma, "Regarding Family Photography," 80.
[68] Rose, *Doing Family Photography*, 61.
[69] Ledezma, "Regarding Family Photography," 81.
[70] Hirsch, *Family Frames,* 93.

photography are ultimately out of the hands of the artist who can only present the materials and situate them in way that will be received responsibly.

The challenge of decipherment and responsibility to images are up to both the viewer and the artist and determined by the context in which they are encountered. By allowing vernacular photography into museums and galleries during the mid-twentieth century, a new kind of cultural production was beginning to be embraced and acknowledged. Douglas Crimp writes "the very ubiquity of a new mode of cultural production does underscore the fact that there has been an important cultural shift…a shift that I still want to designate between modernism and postmodernism."[71] In his essay "Appropriating Appropriation" Crimp's claims can be interpreted in another way—as a confrontation of tradition with experimentation. Coincidentally, Ellis participated in the Whitney Independent Study Program from 1981-1982 while Crimp was a seminar guest critic. He appears to have embraced some of Crimp's thinking implementing appropriation as a strategy of reconfiguration posing a challenge to the original material from a present perspective. The artistic interventions applied by Ellis use these methods to reimagine the value of this father's photographs making no claims to initial notions of artistic creativity but rather using them to develop his own style by inserting a new process. Once placed into the public arena, and more specifically into the museum or gallery, the work is further elevated to be positioned as art, which historically has not been the case for vernacular photography. As a result, exhibitions undermine the cultural

[71] Douglas Crimp, "Appropriating Appropriation," in *Image Scavengers: Photography*, (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1982), 27.

role and historical narratives associated with the image and instead concentrate on composition and form neutralizing the potential of affective and political possibilities.[72] This risks what Rosalind Krauss terms an incoherence, or a visible disjuncture, between a photo's contingent social meaning and its designation as art.[73]

The *New Photography* exhibition in 1992 that Ellis was invited to participate in was at the time the most exposure his father's work by way of his reimagined prints had to a public. The works chosen were all based on family photos and highlight Ellis as a proficient artist who was able to in achieve substantial strides both internally and externally during the time he was alive. Stuart Hall writes "it is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are."[74]

[72] Zuromskis, "Snapshot Photography," 118.
[73] Zuromskis, "Snapshot Photography," 118.
[74] Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," *Social Justice* 20, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 1993): 111.

CHAPTER 2: OUTSIDE THE HOME

Up until his death in the spring of 1992 Ellis maintained a consistent relationship to his art practice. According to accounts from his close friend Allen Frame, when he was found unresponsive in his Greenpoint apartment the last painting he had been working on could still be found positioned on the easel beside his bed. Frame described the painting as a self-portrait of Ellis with his eyes closed, lying in bed in a position eerily similar to how he was found.[75] In addition to his relentless desire to create, he also maintained traces of these desires in a series of fifty-two notebooks currently housed in the archive of his estate. A look inside the marbled cover composition books provides an intimate glimpse into his thought process and justifications for the specific gestures and artistic interventions he began implementing. A photograph of one spread from a notebook dated 1988 shows Ellis working through some of these key ideas (Figure 7). Because he is writing for himself the notes are at times difficult to decode complete with sentence fragments, crossed out words and misplaced punctuation. The page on the left reads "Behind all immediate experiences, are the underlying, hidden reality, an archetypal reality—juxtaposing basic, geometrical or elemental shapes into the scene the ~~subjection~~ mood or quality of the image is heightened." On the next page, below what appears to be a to-do list for Wednesday, his train of thought carries over from the previous page. He offers a basic sketch with few annotations revealing how he conceptualizes his process of

[75] Allen Frame, "One Family Legacy: Variations in Black and White," in *Darrel Ellis,* (New York: Art in General, 1996), 21.

re-photography and abstract distortions and how they work together to emphasize the materiality and tactility of a photograph.

Although the sketch has been essentially reduced to a line drawing, the basic framework is eventually realized as a reoccurring visual element in many of Ellis's reproductions. The floating geometric shapes often found in the middle of his prints distort the perspective of the original photograph, "obliterating the face" as he puts it. These ruptures in visibility can be seen as redactions, omitting important information from the viewer while supporting the artist's journey of self-exploration and further complicating the relationships and narratives attached to the source images. Here Christina Sharpe's "wake work" analytic helps to consider these gestures as reimagined ways of living in the wake of racial dispossession and subjectivity. Placing his art practice within this framework highlights his participation in this wake work as a mode of inhabiting and rupturing the positionality put forth by Sharpe with his known lived and un/imaginable life.[76] He did this as he set up an enlarger in his studio and experimented with sculpture, photography, perception and materiality through the initial lens of his father, both imagining a different kind of generational otherwise. The personal notebooks further help to decipher this kind of wake work visualizing and imagining responses to variations of trauma and harm echoed in his photographs. An example can be seen on another page in a notebook from 1983 where he writes in all caps at the top of the page "DO I HAVE AIDS?" Through experimentation, the photographic process of reconfiguration and redaction takes Ellis and the photographs outside of the home and

[76] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 18.

into more visible spaces such as the studio and gallery where they embody a refusal to be fully known or clearly seen by an audience reclaiming elements of invisibility as an artistic strategy.

Deconstruction

Being a photographer and composing images was not something that Ellis had initially set out to do as an artist. After growing up and gravitating towards drawing, painting and other two-dimensional forms he eventually developed an interest in dimensionality and perspective which lead him to experiment with sculpture, projection and photography. In the late 1970's Ellis met artist James Wentzy at the Ninth circle, a gay bar in the West Village. Wentzy introduced him to the potentials of photography as a tool and taught him about many of the fundamentals including depth of field, darkroom processing and printing. Together in 1979, they applied and got accepted for a residency at PS1 which would secure them access to a studio space for a year in Long Island City. Prior to being accepted, it was Ellis who initiated the idea of playing with dimensionality of photography as the proposed project for their residency. Part of their application included a warped image of Ellis sitting slouched in a red chair presumably taken by Wentzy (Figure 8). In an interview Wentzy describes their process explaining how they would take the original photograph and project the slide onto "mounds" before photographing them again.[77] These mounds were sculptural reliefs made from plaster and other malleable materials created by Ellis for the purpose of projection. A closer look at

[77] James Wentzy, Interview by Kyle Croft, January 22, 2021, Visual AIDS Archive Project, New York, 6.

the final print reveals the lines and details becoming soft and fuzzy due to the texture created by the plaster evoking a similar illusion seen in the photorealistic paintings of Gerhard Richter. This image also provides a visual reference underscoring his commitment to a physical, sequential process and interest in illegibility.

After extending his residency at PS1 by another year, Ellis went on to participate in the Whitney Independent Study Program (ISP) where he was able to continue experimenting with new work. Because he did not have access to a darkroom or other photographic equipment, his studio at PS1 and the resources available to him at the ISP were crucial to the evolution of his practice and relationship to photography. It wasn't until 1987 when he moved into his own apartment in Greenpoint that he was able to invest in a photographic enlarger and began creating many of the iterative and redacted works that later established his recognizable style. Within the span of five years, he was able to generate a significant body of work based on an original process of re-photographing negatives that took the initial image out of its original context. This process began with creating sculptural reliefs similar to the mounds he was making at PS1 and positioning them beneath the enlarger. He would then place one of the negatives into the enlarger and adjust the reliefs to create different projected compositions often extending onto objects close by and exposing details such as the enlarger stand and tripod.[78] The third element of intervention after the enlarger and relief was the camera itself requiring careful consideration as to which position and angle worked best with the

[78] Linda Owen and Scott Homolka, "Observations on Darrel Ellis's Materials and Process," in *Darrel Ellis: Regeneration*, ed. Antonio Sergio Bessa and Leslie Cozzi (Milan: Skira, 2022), 147.

other elements (Figure 9). The decipherment happens during this sequential process of manipulation in which the legibility of each image was determined by how the three elements work together to either expose or withhold certain subjects. This sets him apart from his father's approach to vernacular photography as mostly documentary versus the formal artistic gestures made by Ellis intended to be seen by an audience as an external expression of internal intimacies.

Whether the images were working to increase clarity or opacity, they both present a rupture to the initial negatives and the stories attached to them. Gestures of redaction are historically associated with power and control and are commonly found in legal and otherwise sensitive documents. Sharpe asserts that so much of Black life has been and still is being redacted or made invisible to the present and future that these violent impositions encourage a space for wake work through disruption and resistance.[79] The work of both Ellis and his father can be approached as disruptions refusing in their own rights to concede to optics and ideologies of subjectivity. For Ellis more specifically, redactions allow him to deny the public complete access to his family history shielding them from forces that could potentially seek to coopt and control a narrative of their own. Although he offers up moments of vulnerability he holds back from handing over too much agency to the viewer. He went about this using two generally different methods of manipulation: organic and geometric. The organic reliefs created warped effects that gave the image a heightened sense of life whereas the reliefs that were more geometric produced shadows and holes that functioned as invitations into the two-dimensionality of

[79] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 114.

the photograph.[80] Despite an illusion of destruction in many of the final prints via tears, wrinkles and holes, the process was intended not to destroy any original negatives but rather deconstruct them. These illusions all took place outside of the negative itself reiterating a labor of care that Ellis took in maintaining his father's archive. It therefore becomes just as important to consider not only how the images are seen but also how they are made.

In a silver gelatin print dated 1990 Ellis appears to be taking the geometric route using squares and circles to redact key elements of the original image (Figure 10). In place of where the faces should be are instead hollow indentations that look as if they were strategically torn out. The process he employs has created a generous white border around the concentrated figures in the center and uses a reverse vignette effect to complicate where the image actually begins and ends. The break found half an inch from the bottom connotes feelings of precarity and can come across as destructive when in actuality it is just the inverted shadow of the ragged edge of the projection surface. The details that he leaves legible helps the viewer trace this photo back to one of the images seen in Figure 1. This comparison confirms that this is in fact a portrait of his mother, father and sister Laure. From left to right the subjects appear in this order although without the original photo this would not be so clear. The vague evidence including the right eye and updo of his mother and the side gaze and smile of his sister help to identify these two figures while the subject in the center, who we know is his father, has been

[80] "Process," in *Darrel Ellis*, ed. Lara Mimosa Montes and Kyle Croft (New York: Visual AIDS, 2021), 142.

almost completely omitted. There is a refusal through these gestures to completely make available the vulnerabilities of his family's history to the audience. This version in which his father has been made essentially invisible is an example of how he uses his process to complicate his own positionality in addition to his relationship to the viewer—a process that Ralph Ellison calls "creative aggressiveness".[81] The redactions create a new perspective, one that might provide additional insight into the ways Ellis thought about himself and his family on his own terms.

Returning to the clash between tradition and experimentation of the photographic medium helps to situate Ellis's process within a larger art historical context. In his essay "Pictures" that accompanied an exhibition by the same name advocating for a new kind of image based conceptualism, Douglas Crimp writes "If postmodernism is to have theoretical value, it cannot be used merely as another chronological term; rather it must disclose the particular nature of a breach with modernism."[82] This highlights the significance of Ellis's new approach to his process of photography and how his work exemplifies this clash that Crimp was initially writing about in 1977. The category referred to as postmodernism poses a challenge to Western narratives by opening it up to historically marginalized modes of cultural production, giving more space to concealed narratives and providing opportunities to reimagine personal and political positions.[83] Redaction could then also be understood as a form of abstraction destabilizing legibility and rejecting clarity in ways that counter modernists embrace of simplicity and

[81] Ralph Ellison, "The Art of Romare Bearden," *The Massachusetts Review* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1977): 675.
[82] Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8, (Spring 1979): 87.
[83] Fisher, "Diaspora, Trauma and the Poetics of Remembrance," 192.

coherence. This is echoed through the ways in which modernity can be seen as a product of the Enlightenment, rooted in Western pursuits of knowledge thus setting up the inevitable struggle around race, class and gender dynamics that consequently become the subjects for a lot of artists during this time. In other words, as Stuart Hall succinctly summarizes, a shift becomes noticeable from representation of politics to a politics of representation and with it fosters a new language of artistic agency.[84]

This new language had already begun to be developed in tandem with the cultural shift that was ignited in response to the Civil Rights Movement. More specifically, in 1963 the New York based art collective Spiral was formed with the intentions of investigating and questioning the social responsibility of the African American artist in response to the actively evolving political context. As a group they made attempts to emphasize elements of Blackness by deconstructing traditional Western ideas of aesthetics and form, reexamining history to see what alternatives were possible.[85] Kobena Mercer adds "The problem was not simply that cultural difference was regarded… as something that has to be subordinated to modernism's core values of originality, individuality, and complexity…but that the visual index of 'race' was itself based, as Franz Fanon revealed, on a symbolic code that made the optical realm of the gaze central to the politics of social recognition."[86] This recentering of politics supported by weekly discussions helped them to organize their first exhibition *Black and White* in 1965 which

[84] Fisher, "Diaspora, Trauma and the Poetics of Remembrance," 197.
[85] Jeanne Siegel, "Why Spiral?" *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African* Art, no. 29 (November 2011): 79-80.
[86] Kobena Mercer, "Romare Bearden: African American Modernism at Mid-Century," in *The Romare Bearden* Reader, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2019), 219.

called attention to some of their socio-political concerns. One of the founding members of the group was Romare Bearden who would later become known for his work making collages. Early in his career he was inspired by the Mexican muralists and would continue to weave threads of social consciousness throughout his later work. Being a cofounder, he encouraged collective action and introduced the idea of collage as a potential group project. Despite a lack of consensus amongst the group, for Bearden it was a breakthrough moment that exposed him to new processes which could be argued utilized similar aesthetic strategies that Ellis would later adopt.

Ellis and Bearden both tried to make sense of larger historical narratives by using and reimagining the fragments and frameworks that were made available to them. While Ellis found these within his father's photographic archive, for Bearden it was in magazines such as *Jet* and *Ebony*. Each artist initiated their process by deconstructing the original images creating disorienting effects that challenged the viewers perception and understanding of history. Mercer associates this with "the cut", or a tear in the paper, which he says demands close attention if there is to be an understanding of how the images are made and received.[87] The works become commentary on dimensionality but also offer a modified experience of reality that evoke rather than describe sentiments of concealed histories and stories. In Bearden's work, the cut sheds light on different modes of representation and informs how he used collage as a dialectical process of deconstruction and reconstruction—a dialectic that can also be noticed in Ellis's

[87] Kobena Mercer, "Romare Bearden, 1964: Collage as Kunstwollen," in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge/London: The MIT Press/Institute of International Visual Arts, 2005), 126.

photographs. Writer and critic James A. Snead understood the cut as an abrupt and unmotivated break from something in progress and a deliberate return to something prior. In terms of Black culture, he claims the cut builds accidents into its coverage, or sense of security, as a way to control unpredictability, while also becoming a kind of cultural coverage that attempts to confront ruptures by embracing them and making space for them.[88] In this case, deconstruction acted as a controlled and intentional intervention that created powerful assertions out of the horrible fragmentation which the subjects and landscapes in Bearden's work have undergone.[89]

The cut prompts further investigation into methods of abstraction and how they work in relationship to form, material and other processes. One of these additional methods thoroughly articulated by Snead is repetition. Part of Bearden's additive reconstructions were "patterns of generative repetition" that were emphasized when he combined older images with the new and rural landscapes with the urban. Similarly, Ellis's subtractive reconstructions used repetition as a tool to evaluate how many ways he could possibly see himself and how many levels of self he could explore. In his interview he says "it can also be a metaphor for the idea of generations, which is another idea that I've heard. That, you know, the photos, they're like regeneration, regenerated, you know, from one you get many. And that's like a family. I think that's one of the ideas that are important in the work."[90] Thinking about Ellis's iterative process as a way to generate a family highlights a desire for growth and support wherein, he uses cuts as well as

[88] James A. Snead, "On Repetition in Black Culture," *Black American Literature Forum* 15, no. 4 (Winter 1981) 150.
[89] Ralph Ellison, "The Art of Romare Bearden," 679.
[90] Ellis, Interview, 4.

redactions to experiment with what those possibilities could look like. Snead appropriately uses the analogy of music when talking about characteristics of the cut and repetition in the context of Black culture. He argues that by confronting and embracing ruptures, repetition negates a Western logic of growth and accumulation thus barring any attempt at improvisation.[91] It instead encourages a rhythm of rupture that increases circulation and flow as well as regenerative systems that supports accidents and surprises over illusions of progress.

Many of the images that Ellis worked with are connected through a sequence of repetitive and experimental gestures of abstraction with some receiving more attention and iterations than others. An image of his sister Laure for example, seemed to have really resonated with him and allowed for an exploration of a childhood experience that was different than his own. In the original image taken by his father on Easter Sunday his sister is again seen in Crotona Park wearing her Sunday best and holding tightly on to a toy bunny in her left hand while the right is kept at her side (Figure 11). The black and white snapshot appears to be taken from a low angle coordinating with Laure's eye level as she stands stoic and centered, squarely facing the camera. The contrast of light entering in from the right side indicates a sunny and bright spring afternoon in the park all which seem to put a big smile on her face. The negative was later reconstructed by Ellis at least six times with additional iterations repeating the new compositions of the distorted prints returning to his foundational methods of drawing and painting. In one of the photographic reproductions again the face has been entirely redacted through an

[91] Snead, "On Repetition," 150.

implementation of a single circular relief creating a stark and empty rupture not far from the image's center (Figure 12). The position and angle of the camera create the irregular white border reconfiguring the original image into a trapezoidal shape common in many of his other works. These visual elements along with the break at the bottom and the texture from the plaster relief create a final photograph in a visual language of his own.

Another version illustrates his repetitive process depicting the same original image but regenerated to produce a different result (Figure 13). In this iteration the print as a whole is overexposed washing out much of the background details. While there appears to be no aggressive cuts or breaks, the face has been redacted once again by a dark square covering his sisters face with another, lighter colored rectangle inside the square reinforcing a withholding of her gaze. There was also a decision made to include color using a faint blue ink to fill in her figure, being careful not to exceed any boundaries. The use of color is repeated once again in another print with orange ink however less meticulously (Figure 14). It is unclear as to the significance of his sporadic use of color however he is quoted writing in one of his notebooks "our feelings and ideas of the subject are colored by our past experiences and recollections of the person or event photographed."[92] Although literal in translation, the use of color could be seen as another way of imposing or projecting his own feelings and perceptions on to these moments in history. Using the same negative, he furthers his exploration yet again finally revealing fragments of his sister's face and permitting access to her gaze (Figure 15). The "cuts" in this print have eliminated the mouth making it difficult to discern the affective registers

[92] Bessa, "A Hole in the Picture," 112.

of the original however, the squint in her eyes and the raised cheeks indicate the potential of a smile. One last iteration in the sequence shows how Ellis transferred the previous composition from Figure 15 onto a drawing (Figure 16). Using just a black ballpoint pen on paper, he uses quick and at times careless pen strokes that help better understand the lines and shadows in the photographic reference. Coincidentally, the most care and detail seem to be paid to the portion of her face that is left still refusing complete access to the image but providing the viewer with enough fragments to piece together.

The process of deconstruction was essential to Ellis's practice allowing him to explore his desire to better understand himself and his interpersonal relationships from an outside perspective exemplifying how the social and cultural influence the biological. Through methods of redaction, cuts and repetition he was able to regenerate images of his family in ways that addressed the ruptures that he felt in his personal life. This underscores his process and the importance of understanding his artistic interventions to further decipher his series of family photos. Although he did not set out to complicate a larger socio-historical narrative, the way in which he explores his own history provides insight to how process can be a way to engage the personal as political. In contrast, Romare Bearden was in fact attempting to reveal a world of false narratives by making larger cultural statements. Nonetheless, Ellis and Bearden share similarities when it comes to process despite their differences in material and subjects. They both perform a disarticulation of photographic realism in their quest to subvert and implicate social reality or family history respectively.[93] Deconstructing an image and breaking it down

[93] Mercer, "African American Modernism at Mid-Century," 228.

becomes a critique of photography as an embodiment of social truths and objectivity. For Ellis, these double as wake work in that there is a refusal to succumb to an audience as well as to liberal ideologies of family, belonging and futurity.

Reconstruction

Following deconstruction, reconstruction is the part in the process that helps to layout and reimagine the different possibilities and otherwise ways of being through the piecing together of fragments both for the artist and the viewer. While deconstruction consists of materials and their relationship to artistic interventions, reconstruction is more conceptual in its approach and contributes to an understanding of what the image can do. In his interview with David Hirsh, Ellis addresses reconstruction describing it as important mental work—soulful work.[94] He too was thinking about it from a conceptual perspective and used it as a way to discuss progress and to build on what has been deconstructed. This way of linear thinking is contradictory to his engagement with repetition which embraces the nonlinearity of rupture and process thus laying bare a desire to better himself medically, socially and personally while still refusing normative structures of support and belonging. In his writing on Romare Bearden, Mercer refers to this rearticulation as synthetic moments of re-assemblage that uses photographic fragments to preserve signs of a humanity that struggle to survive the precarity of repressive conditions.[95] The process of repetition therefore generates the fragments that

[94] Ellis, Interview, 5.
[95] Mercer, "African American Modernism at Mid-Century," 230.

Ellis uses to re-assemble and explore the difficulty of his positionality and historical orientation. The different iterations for his images each reveal different parts of the original leaving it up to the viewer to piece together and speculate on their own.

This also informed his preference for displaying the work which he liked to see presented in clusters based on original image. Not only does this highlight the process but also allows for a broader reconstruction of image and narrative. A recent exhibition in his hometown at the Bronx Museum in 2023 marked his first major museum retrospective where careful attention was paid to the installation of the works. Overall, the exhibition was hung in a semi-salon style where certain pieces were grouped together based on the source image. For example, the sequence of images based on the photo of his sister Laure on Easter Sunday were all hung within the same wall space and have been placed in a row consistently presented using thin black frames paired with white matte (Figure 17). Reading from left to right, the first of this set is the drawing he made based on one of his iterations followed by the two prints with color and two more without ending with two other larger prints all which display different strategies of reliefs and redactions. Each unique version contributes different pieces of the original image, but none make it easy for the viewer to decipher on their own. It then becomes necessary to consider them as a sequence which he develops into a visual system that he applies to certain relationship such as his mother and other family members. By placing them all together they signify a sense of experimentation as well as meditation on the figure and their experience at the time the initial image was taken. What might be omitted from one can potentially be found in another, allowing the viewer to also meditate on the series and the role it plays

materially and conceptually. The process focused installation facilitates a reconstruction of the image and what capabilities they hold to reimagine a relationship to their subject.

The reliance of a single photograph by Ellis on the context of its sequence or the original image make it difficult to reconstruct on its own. Often viewers are able to rely on semiotics to develop meaning, however family photographs produce a different set of visual barriers. Without any personal connection to the time, place or people in the images, viewers are left to other elements to grasp any sense of signification. Poet and theorist Fred Moten poses a challenge to this theory of the nature of photography suggesting that instead of relying on semiotic objectification and inquiry that privileges an excess of meaning, to instead turn to what he refers to as the phonic substance to discuss Black social life as it relates to suffering.[96] This substance or materiality he describes is what is lost when images are reduced to an analytic-interpretative gaze. The interventions applied by Ellis disrupt most of the semiotic potential and reconstruct a new version absent of certain signifiers that might have proved useful. Moten's approach becomes helpful as it alternatively draws attention to the sounds perceived in, around and outside the image before, after and during the moment it was taken. He uses this to animate photographs and to think through a false universality making sure to not negate the relationship between life and death or celebration and suffering.[97] In an early monograph of Ellis, Deborah Willis writes "Through his photography and through the layering and isolation of his subjects, Ellis creates a sense of disorientation in the viewer,

[96] Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 197.
[97] Moten, *In the Break*, 209.

as his manipulated surfaces and images challenge the 'truth' of their photographic origins."[98] By using deconstruction and reconstruction, the sounds of Ellis's injury are revealed as they relate to his father, family and sense of self making a personal context no longer requiered.

Without the original negative for comparison, another one of his reproductions can be better seen through its phonic substance. In this print two people, a man and a woman, pose for the camera performing an act of innocent intimacy (Figure 18). Based on the provided caption they have been identified as Aunt Connie and Uncle Richard and are shown in a typical arrangement of embrace. As she sits on his lap, her arms are wrapped around his neck with his around her waist, drawing her closer in. She positions herself at an angle and her face looks directly at the camera, while his face is turned toward hers, eyes closed, kissing her check. She appears full of joy showing off her teeth in a smile as he appears caught up in the moment. At the top right corner, a framed image indicates an interior setting reinforced by the casted shadow behind the woman's figure. For this version, Ellis applies his organic method of abstraction to create a warped effect employing a variety of cuts, breaks and ruptures to the original photo and thus, re-animating the subjects. The positive sentiment on display gets called into question by the artistic interventions that transform the image into a fading memory from an undetermined past. The image holds sounds of laughter and romantic whispers which gets overshadowed by resentment, grief and aggression. What is heard is a sound of

[98] Deborah Willis, "Darrel Ellis and the Manipulated Family Photograph" in *Darrel Ellis,* (New York: Art in General, 1996), 27.

refusal and withholding in light of the echoes of vulnerability. Even without knowing the identities subjects, a conflict of interest is established between Ellis and his father through the ways in which they relate to and represent the figures in the photograph. Just as Moten equates Black art to Black life to Black death, Ellis's reconstructions similarly straddle these spaces complicating the image as it relates to him.[99]

Eventually Ellis decided to venture into the realm of his own image by introducing photographs of himself to his catalog of source material. In particular, he was drawn to a specific identification portrait taken for his job at the Museum of Modern Art where he started working as a security guard in the late 1980's. The original photograph he obstructed is a standard, straight-on black and white portrait taken from the shoulders up (Figure 19). He is photographed wearing a suit jacket and tie and is positioned in the center of a white backdrop which places the focus exclusively on his face and its utilitarian function. By employing geometric redactions, he abstracts the intended focal point and as a result creates a white void in the center where the face once was. These ruptures are simultaneously compounded and elongated in a way that reduces the overall legibility of the figures and creates additional emphasis through distortion. The intentional gestures made by Ellis become a tool of anti-representation or an anti-subject troubling the initial purpose and context of the photo. While his eyes are both left untouched, the nose has shifted down blending into the mouth which has been stacked on top of the neck eliminating most, if not all the identifying elements of the face. Even if he wanted to speak the opportunity has been removed forcing this version of himself to exist

[99] Moten, *In the Break*, 209.

in his self-imposed silence. Although this reproduction implies a withholding of freedom, the reality of his job at MoMA was that it afforded him to move into his own apartment and buy the photo enlarger he used to make his projections on the reliefs. Therefore, this photograph and its sequence reconstruct an image of Ellis as a composite, exploring the different versions of how he saw himself.

Even though the identification photo falls outside of the genre of the family snapshot, it is still situated within a vernacular of the everyday image and by reconstructing it Ellis was able to bring into question misguided social assertions. He used these in addition to other portraits friends and contemporaries took of him such as Allen Frame, Peter Hujar and Robert Mapplethorpe. In her essay "Darrel Ellis: The Haunting" Leslie Cozzi writes "Ellis, interpreting Marx, would come to understand that everyone is an object outside themselves and his portraits enabled him to critically embody that notion while pushing back against received stereotypes of black masculinity."[100] He became aware of the political impact that using his own image as a Black male had in addressing stereotypes and issues around visibility and representation. In his reconstructed identification photo, he illustrates a version of himself being subjected to invisibility which leads to hypervisibility and ultimately results in violence. The redacted face alludes to this final stage of violence in its inability to make a sound and be heard. This initiates a conversation around the developement of dehumanization using methods of identification and surveillance. People's identities remain contingent on

[100] Leslie Cozzi, "Darrel Ellis: The Haunting," in *Darrel Ellis: Regeneration*, ed. Antonio Sergio Bessa and Leslie Cozzi (Milan: Skira, 2022), 28.

powers and forces that often transcend personal agency creating difficult disjunctions between a version of self that is desired and the one that must be occupied.[101] By engaging with photos of himself Ellis builds on his process of reconstruction implicating himself and his confrontation with his own identity. He was grateful for the opportunity to work at MoMA and sustain a life of his own with the time that he had left to continue his journey of self-exploration.

Because he was not indebted to any collectors, galleries or sources of funding Ellis was at liberty to create and construct the type of work that he wanted to make. Nonetheless, he was aware and felt the pressures of having to make work that addressed his own positionality as a young Black gay male. In his interview he states:

> But it's a big issue, it's a big issue, you know? And it's one that I guess I don't really think about often, Black, the race thing. Even though I know it's there…but it's one that…Maybe I should look at in more, probably I should, I should really look at that more. Because I have to see myself in a context, in another reality, my social context, which I never do. I don't, you know. But it's very naïve of me to be that way because it's affected my whole life and it continues to, you know?"[102]

By looking at and working with images of himself, this moment of realization manifests in these

preproduced portraits as he beings to understand himself as a composite. While he made efforts to distance himself from his gay identity, which explains why he kept his HIV status a secret for so long, he found it increasingly difficult to do so in terms of race. Because he was working with family photographs much of his work was able to dodge explicit gay undertones but became increasingly challenging again to avoid his and his

[101] Lily Cho, "Capture and Captivation: Identifying Migrancy and the Making of Non-Citizens," in *Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography*, ed. Tina Campt, et al., (New York: The Walther Collection, 2020), 126.
[102] Ellis, Interview, 10.

family's Blackness. Mercer refers to Alain Locke who was a philosopher he associates with the merging of American and Black identities in modernity into a hybrid or what he calls "distinctly composite."[103] Part of what makes this sequence of portraits so effective is that they are so personal and intimate in a way that is not concerned with fitting into a specific category or style.

The desire that Ellis had to explore and reconstruct his identity and historical orientation has been a shared desire that artists before and after his time used to similarly navigate their own plurality of selves. Muriel Hasbun was born in El Salvador in 1961 to a Salvadoran Palestinian Christian father and a Polish French Jewish mother. She is a multidisciplinary artist who uses her intersectional identity as a central theme in her work to understand memory, migration and family. In her series *Santos y sombras/Saints and Shadows* (1990-97) she combines old family photographs and documents with newer images that collapse the past into the present creating results that are often obscured and hard to read. She describes them as a "refuge against silence" and forgetting as a way to transcend generational amnesia.[104] The images in the series are composites of a variety of materials that reflect the nature of her own identity and reconcile historical narratives. Albert Chong is another artist who started to make work in the late 1980's using family photographs as the foundation for his still lives. Both his series *Monochromatic Still Lives* and *Color Still Lives* construct images that function as altars and shrines embellishing the original images with ordinary objects such as shells, flowers, fabric,

[103] Mercer, "African American Modernism at Mid-Century," 222.
[104] Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 68.

stones and documents which are then rephotographed. He approaches his process as a sacred ritual intended to represent and reanimate his family history assembling tributes to the lives and memories of those pictured. Similar ideas were being toyed with around the same time as Ellis by Carrie Mae Weems and her *Family Pictures and Stories* (1978-1984) series as well as Kathy Vargas's *Este Recuerdo* (2003).

In a more contemporary context, artists continue to use family photographs and snapshots as material in their work as a surge in archival practices continue to grow. Lebohang Kganye is a South African photographer whose series *Ke Lefa Laka/Her-story* (2012-2013) uses photographs of her mother while living her life under apartheid and inserts herself making similar poses and wearing the same outfits. These composite images were created in response to her mother's death helping her to focus more on visual elements of everyday life such as photos and clothes that she had previously ignored. Another artist, Zun Lee, began collecting found polaroid photos in 2012 of quotidian moments such family get togethers, special occasions and important memories. Since he started the project which he calls *Fade Resistance* (2012-2018) he's amassed more than 4,000 images together forming an important record of Black visual self-representation. Art historian Sophie Hackett describes the project as "a collection formed against Black invisibility; formed to enshrine Black joy and kinship, to emphasize 'Black life mattering'."[105] By resurfacing and recontextualizing these images without any direct artistic intervention they serve a purpose of providing a counter to dominant narratives

[105] Sophie Hackett, "What Outlasts," in *What Matters Most: Photographs of Black* Life, ed. Zun Lee and Sophie Hackett (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2022), 167.

within visual history. The deconstruction and reconstruction occur on an ideological level through a collected "otherwise" against systemic oppression. He continues to use this project as an entry to conversations around communities defining and telling their own stories on their own terms. Similar projects include Yvonne Venegas's *Venegas Percevault Archive* and Alejandro Cartagena's *Mexican Olvidados*. For Cartagena, this collection of found family photographs becomes a way to think about what is deemed valuable and important while Venegas uses her own family's archive to examine the vulnerability of the Mexico border experience and identity.

There are a variety of ways in which reconstruction can be conceptually applied to family photographs and snapshot photography situating Ellis's work within an ongoing genre and practice. His iterative and experimental process serves as a metaphor for regeneration illustrating a desire to explore different ways of knowing and connecting to the people in his life both past and present. Through this process he draws on different artistic strategies that complicate this desire and for the viewer it becomes a performance of refusal. He utilizes a kind of unknowability and opacity in the images he creates which mirrors the ambivalent attitudes he also held towards his own identity. Not only did he refuse and withhold legibility from the viewer but he also resisted limitations that were so often imposed on him based on his identity as a Black gay male. He refused to essentialize any of his identifying characteristics as well as reduce himself to his race or sexuality in part because of the implicit failures of representation to actually see all of everyone. The reconstruction is therefore something that takes places both internally and externally. The original photographs move outside of the home and into a more

accessible realm where they absorb new possibilities of interpretation. These interpretations then inform Ellis and how he sees himself in relation to the photos as well as to the audience. Reconstruction gives him some sense of agency and control over how the images circulate and what they reveal but also how he is able to reconstruct his own sense of self as it relates to the world more largely.

Provocative Mourning

Despite feeling that his whole life had been dictated by identity, Ellis remained committed to his spiritual journey both internally and externally. In his interview he states, "what I believe to be the goal of my life, the goal of human life, is to try to work on eliminating, as much as possible, those things which keep me attached to the world."[106] Particularly in the later years of his life, this becomes more apparent as he begins to detach from his sexuality and develop a new interest in self-portraiture and images of himself. Part of this shift in focus was due to his declining health and the impact his illness was having on his physical appearance. In 1991 his mother passed away and later that same year he was admitted to the hospital for the first time. His close friend Allen Frame recalls this time as marking the moment in which Ellis finally shared with friends and family that he had AIDS issuing relief to everyone who not actively provide necessary support and care and no longer be left to speculate. While in the hospital he received psychotherapy which helped deal with some of the family issues that had always disturbed him and up until this point were primarily explored through his

[106] Ellis, Interview, 21.

art.[107] As his aesthetic focus was shifting more towards himself, so was his conception of family and belonging. The spiritual path that he found himself on facilitated a new sense of connection, or lack thereof. David Hirsh writes "He had developed, after intense struggle, a primary self-love which becomes the most prized possession of many people with terminal illness."[108] This new phase in his life could be seen as a third and final regeneration of a version of family, a spiritual family, that was often alienating.

In many of his reworked photographs there are remnants illustrating the impact of trauma interwoven through each stage of regeneration. The visual language that he created through his process contributes to the affective quality and creates an imaginary space of "provocative mourning." In an interview, artist and friend Susan Spencer Crowe says about his work with his father's photographs "he told me, when he talked about that work, he said it terrified him."[109] Ellis's search for completeness was difficult and at times quite dark as he grew up in a family that struggled to stay intact in the wake of a major unexpected familial disruption. Moreover, he faced the added struggles of navigating the world from a particular position that often did not make things easier. The process of mourning typically has an end goal of acceptance and a return to some version of normality prior to the traumatic experience. Crimp pushes back on this objective in his essay "Mourning and Militancy" where he argues that under this trajectory mourning looks different for people facing different types of oppression, more specifically he was

[107] Frame, "One Family Legacy," 21.
[108] Hirsh, "On the Border of Family and Tribe," 118.
[109] Susan Spencer Crowe, Interview by Kyle Croft, January 14, 2021, Visual AIDS Archive Project, New York, 10.

referring to those who identify with being gay.[110] For Ellis and his community, a return to normalcy has never been on the table to begin with and have rather been actively excluded from these essentializing assumptions. He was forced to enter a world where he never knew his father and had to continuously imagine what could have been had the police not initiated an altercation. If trauma resembles the inaccessibility of the past itself, then regenerating family photographs offered him an entry into the unstable and unclear.

This can perhaps be seen more directly in a photograph made by Ellis of a car (Figure 20). Cars were one of the things that he liked to draw and paint when he was not working from his father's family photographs. This print shows a car in a mostly empty parking lot with a selection of parking spots occupied in the background. There is no indication as to whether or not the car is moving although the photograph shows it in the foreground in an opposing position to the others that are stationed. In this reconstruction Ellis projects the original image onto an organic sculptural relief resulting in an absence of geometric redactions and instead relies on warped distortions to create the illegibility. As a result, the car appears as if it were hit from the back and compressed at a point in the center. There is no front seat, only a back seat that has been transposed practically joining the rear window with the windshield. The ruptures caused by the relief in this case do not seem to withhold any important details attributing a painterly effect that washes out certain parts of the foreground and edges of the frame. There is not a noticeable figure in the driver's seat which itself appears to be hard to locate nor are there any figures elsewhere in the image. Given the circumstances of his father's death and its association

[110] Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51, (Winter 1989): 6.

with cars, perhaps the significance of this subject matter, whether conscious or unconscious, refers to an inciting element to his father's homicide.[111] Despite attempts to detach and forget the unforgettable, stories of the past continue to find their way into the work.

The historically and personally informed nature of Ellis's subject material bestows a political potentiality onto the work that is central to how it is used to process his own experiences with trauma. When his work moves outside the home this potential becomes engaged through his process which requires him to think about his position in relation to his family and his audience. Although he did not set out to create politically charged work, his photographs are inherently personal and thus political because of their ability to realize how his own experiences and relationships are informed by his intersectional subjectivity which is part of a longer, larger legacy of oppression. His interest in recreating scenes of cars provides an example for how the personal is political highlighting the ways in which his own struggles and questions around identity were shaped by the direct result of family history and collective memory. The racial violence that led to the premature death of his father evidently had a lasting impact and was even replicated to some degree generationally. Although Ellis did not directly witness the death of his father, the residual effects he witnessed was something that he carried with him despite attempts made to "eliminate attachments." Fisher would qualify his task then as a witness to the "zone of indistinction" between speechlessness and speaking—it is less an invitation to share and re-live his trauma but instead an invitation for the viewer to

[111] Allen Frame, "A Pietà for the 80s," *Public (Toronto)* 33, no. 65 (2022): 69.

self-reflect on their own.[112] Deborah Willis supports this claim when she writes "For the viewer, the art of Darrel Ellis succeeds in part as an invitation to self-examination, for in attempting to fill in mentally the personal voids he addresses in his work, we also encounter our own."[113] The innate self-reflexivity introduces the political potential his photographs have not just for himself but his viewers too.

After assessing his own positionality and being critical of how he represented himself through his work, his motivations maintained a desire to be seen. When noting the intentions of his artistic strategies applied to his father's photographs, the redactions and withholdings appear in a way which implies they were prepared to be seen and circulated outside of the home. Despite the opportunities he had to participate in the PS1 residency, the Whitney ISP and later the NYFA Fellowship for his photography he still never saw a level of recognition or success as an artist that he noticed was being afforded to others around him. Crowe touches on his internal struggles as an artist stating how he never really felt like he had the resources that would allow him to have an artistic career that others had.[114] She continues to describe how opportunities that many artists had such as a BFA or MFA were not necessarily an option due to his and his family's financial circumstances. Although these were obstacles that many artists at the time faced and continue to confront, it discourages many talented people from pursuing art as an option at all. This resurfaces the question around access and visibility and its relationship to identity (gender, sexuality, race, class). Writer and cultural critic Michele Wallace better

[112] Fisher, "Diaspora, Trauma and the Poetics of Remembrance," 210.
[113] Willis, "Darrel Ellis", 29.
[114] Crowe, Interview, 11.

articulates this problem around visibility and invisibility as it relates to Black artists in her essay "What Are There No Great Black Artists? The Problem of Visuality in African American Culture". She says that the problematic has much to do with these elements of intersectional identities alluding to Mercer's burden of representation and evoking Howardena Pindell's critic of the art world as a closed circle.[115] Not only does this further politicize the personal, but it also sets up a call for a reimagination of aesthetic criteria. It raises the question then of what qualifications are needed to obtain visibility, recognition, support and belonging—questions that Ellis was also asking himself.

Wallace's call to reimagine aesthetics also recalls Wynter's proposed reevaluation of systems of classification and value. While the acronym NHI is specific to a certain collective identity and set of material conditions, it can be used as a point of departure to think about how people who identify as gay or have been diagnosed with HIV are also dehumanized and made invisible. Without equating NHI to HIV, there are certain parallels that can be noticed and built upon once an intersectional analysis is proposed. Before her essay concludes, Wallace offers an anecdote about a headline announcing the death of Kimberly Bergalis in 1991 as someone who provided a face to the AIDS epidemic.[116] Bergalis was a white middle-class woman who allegedly contracted HIV from her dentist implying that all the queer people of color with HIV were not human and therefore not worth mentioning. What Wallace calls a "crisis of mind" should encourage self-reflexivity and a visual reconstruction of people who are marginalized and

[115] Michele Wallace, "Why Are There No Great Black Artists? The Problem of Visuality in African American Culture," in *Dark Designs and Visual Culture* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2004) 186-187.
[116] Wallace, "No Great Black Artists," 192-193.

disenfranchised. Making art during the peak of the epidemic, Ellis found himself physically being pulled away from the work he wanted to create because of his illness. This is echoed in the ways historians are also pulled away from the work of artists with AIDS, particularly if their work is not related, by clinging to the despair of their biography as opposed to their practice. Ellis was not known to be an advocate for the health crisis but rather tried to disassociate from these realities himself as previously mentioned. Nevertheless, Crowe claims that he felt many people and politicians were not taking AIDS seriously of doing anything about the crisis.[117] In fact, people with AIDS were further criminalized and stigmatized people like Kimberly Bergalis and the Regan administration which had larger, harmful societal repercussions.

Even with all the intentions and attempts to detach himself from certain parts of his identity, these qualities ultimately grew to work in his favor as he began to gain recognition as an artist. In 1991 he had his first solo exhibition in over ten years at Baron/Boisanté Editions in New York marking the first major presentation of his reconstructed family photographs. This exhibition led to his only published interview with David Hirsh in the *New York Native*, a biweekly gay newspaper published in New York City between 1980 and 1997. Being that it was a gay newspaper Hirsh naturally asked questions that were more personal and difficult than most touching on Ellis's sexuality, race and family history. Just a few years prior he also was asked to participate in the now notorious *Witness: Against Our Vanishing* exhibition organized by Nan Goldin at Artists Space. This exhibition gained national attention before it even opened

[117] Crowe, Interview, 16.

due to a conflict surrounding its public funding from the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) after the grant that was being used to fund the project was taken back. Goldin had set out to organize a group show that was in response to the major impact of AIDS on her community, but it was deemed too political to be supported by the NEA. At the time, Ellis had still not been openly discussing his health status but rather took the opportunity to signal his support for his friends and bring more attention to the issue. Crowe describes the exhibition as a "really important show" for him and shared that he was very excited about it. She continues to state, "It was the first time I really saw him reveal his political stance on the AIDS crisis."[118] This marks a turning point for Ellis emphasizing a shift not only in his career and how people perceived him but also how he positioned himself politically based on his identity.

For his contribution to the exhibition Ellis shared two paintings of himself based on photographs taken of him by Peter Hujar and Robert Mapplethorpe. Both paintings veer away from the sexualized and fetishized depictions observed in the original photographs problematizing representations of Black masculinity and instead redirecting the focus toward the psychological and internal. The catalog for the exhibition quotes Ellis saying "I struggle to resist the frozen images of myself taken by Robert Mapplethorpe and Peter Hujar. They haunt me."[119] In the painting *Self portrait after photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe* made in 1989 Ellis is seen captured as himself from an outsider's perspective (Figure 21). With a monochromatic palette he stands out against

[118] Crowe, Interview, 12.
[119] Nan Goldin, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, (New York: Artists Space, 1989), 20.

a solid black background shown from the mid-torso up. His elbows are resting on a circular surface and come to a point as he clasps his hands together on the left side of his face using them as support to keep his head upright. With a slight tilt he gazes directly out to the viewer with a blank face showing little expression if any. His body is portrayed using a lighter shade of gray which creates a clear differentiation between the subject and the background expect for where his hair meets the background and the distinguished lines become less clear. He uses a variety of greys to emphazie the shadows and highlights that could reflect a direct and straight on light source. Like his other paintings, the figure has been abstracted but not to a point of illegibility. He uses short and fast gestures to chisel out his physique, a nod to the chiaroscuro reminiscent of a Baroque sense of psychological intensity, while also talking back to the original photo speaking his own truth and reclaiming the images.[120] Again, another act of political positioning this time against the use of his image as seen through the lens of two white photographers.

The afterlives of the portraits taken by Mapplethorpe and Hujar will forever circulate outside of the home carrying with them a dissatisfaction from Ellis. By replicating these photos as paintings, he inserted himself into the record and directly dismissed the tropes that he claims were leveraged by the photographers. This commentary on imposed dispossessions is a microcosm of larger systems and structures which he attempted to question in other photographic works dealing with family and identity. Growing up without a father and hearing the stories of how he lived and died inevitably informed the construction of his worldview. Precarity as it related to Blackness

[120] Cozzi, "The Haunting," 28.

was therefore something instilled in him from a young age and would find its way into his work. Even after his own death, as images of him continue to exist in the world it calls for a renegotiation with these social impositions. Poet and writer Essex Hemphill also explores these impositions as a Black person with AIDS. In a long format poem titled "Vital Signs" he writes:

> "Some of the T cells I am without are not here through my own fault. I didn't lose all of them foolishly, and I didn't lose all of them erotically. Some of the missing T cells were lost to racism, a well-known transmittable disease. Some were lost to poverty because there was no money to do something about the plumbing before the pipes burst and the room flooded. Homophobia killed quite a few, but so did my rage and my pointed furies, so did the wars at home and the wars within, so did the drugs I took to remain calm, cool, collected."[121]

Rather than claiming personal responsibility, Hemphill redirects the blame of his advancing illness on a precarity that is both socially and culturally imposed. Although Ellis is not putting the blame on anyone, his work can be understood as making similar claims that reorient the viewer or reader in their own construction of a worldview. Earlier in the poem he adds "I should learn / to dance with death, / so when my turn comes / I won't stumble."[122]

[121] Essex Hemphill, "Vital Signs," in *Life Sentences: Writers, Artists and AIDS*, ed. Thomas Avena (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1994), 54-55.
[122] Hemphill, "Vital Signs," 32.

CONCLUSION

Within Ellis's photographs lies the impossibility to ever experience life with his father—to be seated next to him in a family portrait, spend time together in the studio or simply have his photo taken at the park. At the same time, and as a result, he also experienced an impossibility of what he understood a family to be and look like. His perceptions were based on other photos he came across of his family before he was born at a time when his father was still alive. Through his art he acted on these impossibilities, embracing them as he engaged with his father's collection of negatives in an attempt to piece together a version of "what could have been." For Ellis, the present was deeply determined by the precarity of the past and his reconstructed photographs highlight his struggle with the impossibility to fully know. Saidiya Hartman, in her essay "Venus in Two Acts," also embraces the impossibilities of the past writing, "By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account and to imagine what might have happened."[123] Ellis applies a similar method to his art practice troubling and informing his personal and political positions by rearranging, or regenerating, basic elements of these photograph. As Hartman strategically refuses to fill in gaps within the historical narrative, Ellis also emphasizes these gaps as a refusal to completely see or know his own family history through a series of abstractions.

[123] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 11.

One last photograph made in 1990 stands out from the rest of the photos he produced during his time. For the most part, he remained consistent working from older family photographs and more current self-portraits or portraits of himself taken by others. What differentiates this image is its social and familial nature. Ellis is seen in the center of the image surrounded by a circle of presumed friends who are all standing closely together and smiling. The person on the far left is holding what looks like a beer can suggesting a party or a celebration of some kind. Based on the photograph alone, it is unclear the relationship between the figures aside from what is suggested by the title. The organic relief that the negative was projected on to causes most of the faces in the frame to be obscured however not to the point of illegibility. The photograph itself is a bit overexposed causing the details in the background to become washed out. While they most likely are standing together inside, it is also unclear as to where exactly they have gathered. Compositionally, this image is reminiscent of *Untitled* (Group at Aunt Lena's Wedding) (Figure 3) however, instead of standing around a cake surrounded by family these people are standing around Ellis. A minor detail, but this comparison is telling of his own evolution in coming to terms with what a family could be. With his health declining, the precarity of the present in this instance informs the impossibilities of the future—instead of thinking about what could have been the question becomes what will be? He holds on to a refusal to fully reveal the people's faces contributing to an impossibility of knowing despite, for possibly the first time, leaving his own face essentially unscathed.

The photographs made by Darrel Ellis leave many questions unanswered about him and his family in the eyes of the viewer, however it provides vulnerable insight into his thought process as he tries to confront these questions himself. More broadly, his work provides a good example of how artists can include personal photographs as material in their own work and how this approach can trouble and inform their political and personal positions. By analyzing this type of art practice, it becomes clearer the significant role family photographs and snapshot play and how they can be used and studied to explore certain impossibilities about historical narratives. Although this genre of photography is contested as to its role within fine art, these are exactly the systems of values that are in part being questioned throughout this project. Ellis's life was informed from the start by the death of his father leaving much to be desired. He was always aware of the conditions he lived under and the precarity that came with being Black because these were the conditions that he grew up knowing. His process looked different inside of the home and outside of the home, each providing an important and generative space for him to explore. Within the home, his father's photographs consisted of vernacular photographs—images depicting everyday moments with family and friends—in addition to studio portraits and other more thoughtful compositions. For him and his immediate family, these images were important for the moments and memories they symbolized and not for their aesthetic or cultural value. Collectively they functioned as sites of contestation that indirectly sought to refuse systems of classification and value that provided the police the language to justify killing his father in the first place.

Outside of the home, Ellis was able to think more critically about these photographs and considered how he could use them as source material in his work as a tool to work through some of his own trauma and grief. Unlike his father, the reconstructions that he made were in a sense "critically vernacular" in that he made them with the intention of expressing something other than just an important memory from the past. After applying gestures of redaction and withholding, the photographs took on new meaning and function as they related to the artist. Not only was he refusing aspects of his own personal history and identity, but he also was denying the viewer an opportunity to see and know the people in the original photographs and as a result the stories that were attached to them. This process helped him to come to terms with his own positionality and created a compelling intergenerational conversation between father and son. Both of their lives (and deaths) were so overdetermined and predictable in many ways but the legacy of both of their work continues to generate discourse even in their afterlives. Ellis's work continues to be equally as fascinating through the ways in which he disrupts regimes of representation forcing a reimagination of belonging, aesthetics and systems of classification.

FIGURES

Figure 1 Thomas Ellis, *Untitled (*Thomas Ellis with his wife Jean and daughter Laure), ca. 1953

Figure 2 Thomas Ellis, *Untitled* (Laure with Mother and Grandmother in Crotona Park), ca. 1954

Figure 3 Darrel Ellis, *Untitled* (Group at Aunt Lena's Wedding), ca. 1981-85

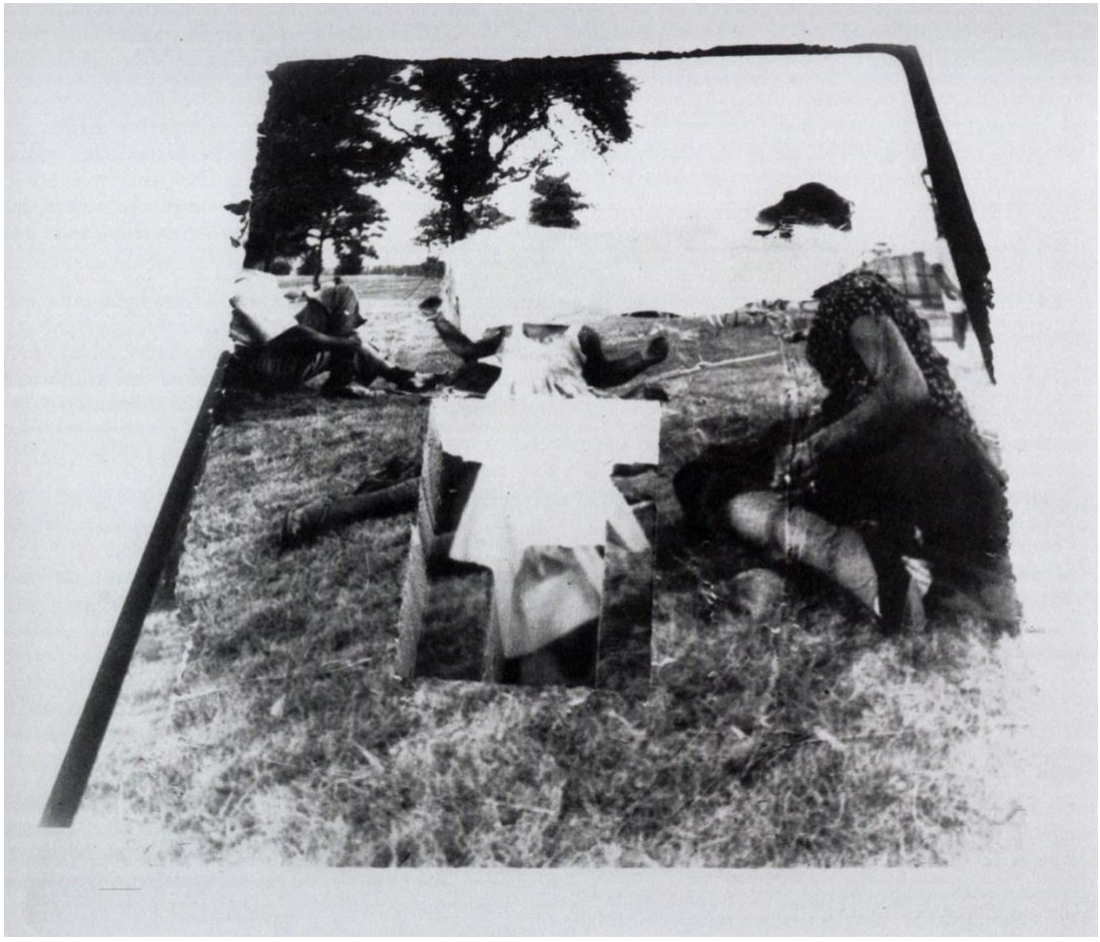

Figure 4 Darrel Ellis, *Untitled* (Laure and Mother in Crotona Park), ca. 1988-92

Figure 5 Darrel Ellis, *Untitled* (Laure and Mother in Crotona Park), ca. 1988-92

Figure 6 Darrel Ellis, *Untitled* (Self-Portrait after Allen Frame Photograph), ca. 1990

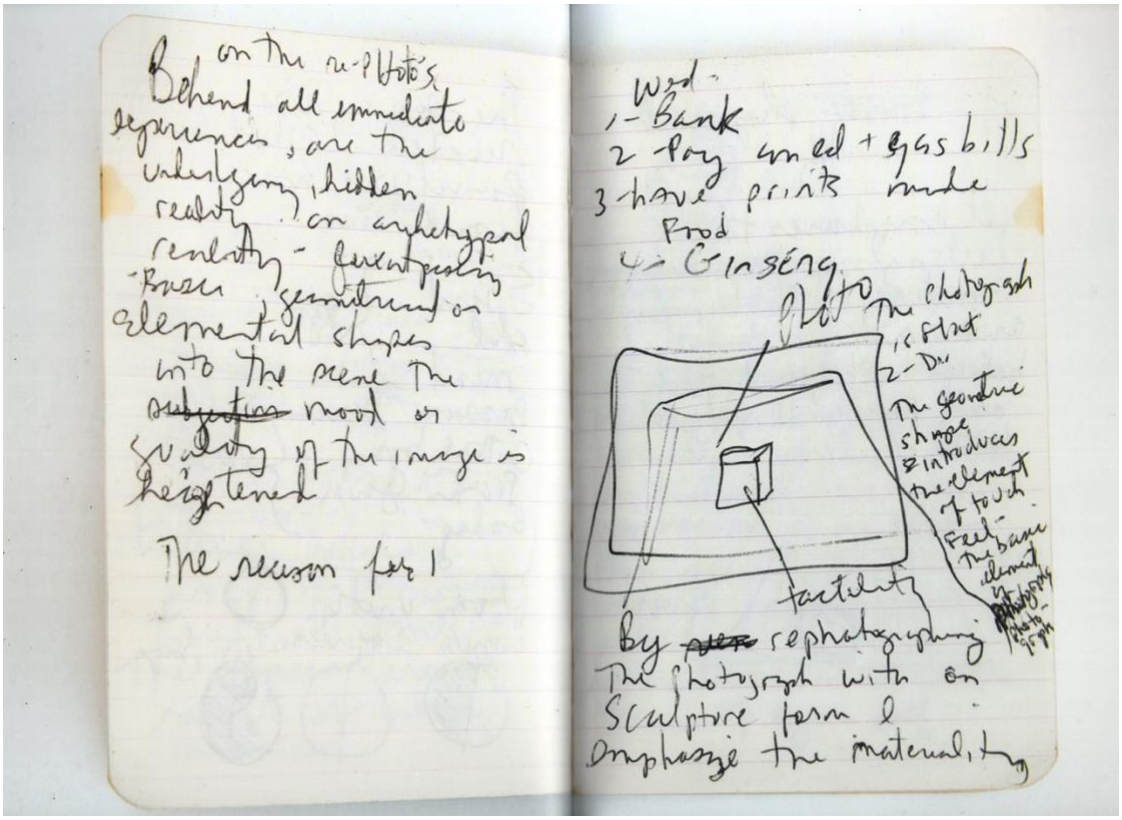

Figure 7 Darrel Ellis, Spread from personal notebook, 1988

Figure 8 Darrel Ellis and James Wentzy, *Untitled* (Produced collaboratively for their PS1 residency application), 1979

Figure 9 Camera, relief and enlarger set up at *Darrel Ellis: Regeneration*, Bronx Museum, 2023

Figure 10 Darrel Ellis, *Untitled* (Mother, Father, Laure), ca. 1990

Figure 11 Thomas Ellis, *Untitled* (Ellis's sister Laure in Crotona Park on Easter Sunday), ca. 1953

Figure 12 Darrel Ellis, *Untitled* (Laure on Easter Sunday), ca. 1990

Figure 13 Darrel Ellis, *Untitled* (Laure on Easter Sunday), ca. 1990

Figure 14 Darrel Ellis, *Untitled* (Laure on Easter Sunday), ca. 1990

Figure 15 Darrel Ellis, *Untitled* (Laure on Easter Sunday), ca. 1990

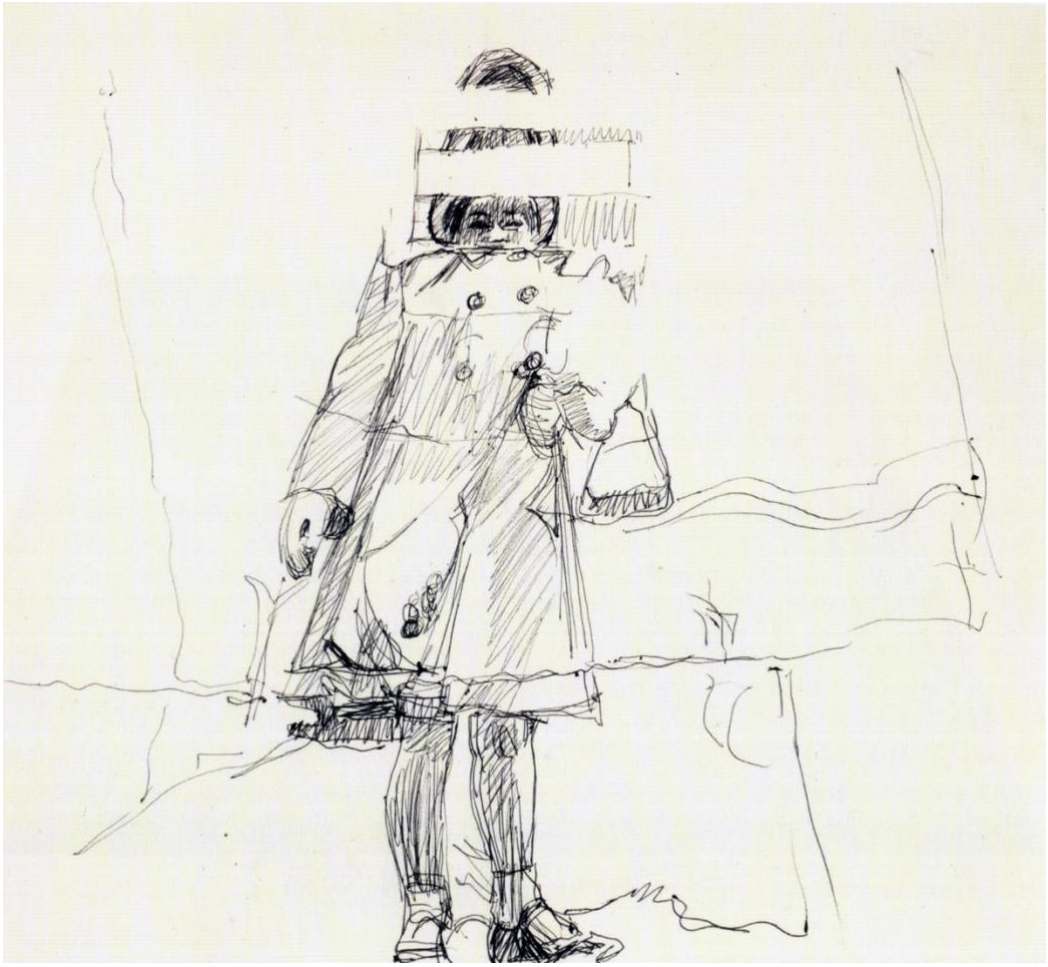

Figure 16 Darrel Ellis, *Untitled* (Laure on Easter Sunday), ca. 1990

Figure 17 Installation view of *Darrel Ellis: Regeneration*, Bronx Museum, 2023

Figure 18 Darrel Ellis, *Untitled* (Aunt Connie and Uncle Richard), ca. 1989-91

Figure 19 Darrel Ellis, *Untitled* (Self-Portrait after Museum Guard Photograph), ca. 1990

Figure 20 Darrel Ellis, *Untitled* (Car in Street), ca. 1988-91

Figure 21 Darrel Ellis, *Self-Portrait after photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe*, 1989

Figure 22 Darrel Ellis, *Untitled* (Friends), ca. 1990

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