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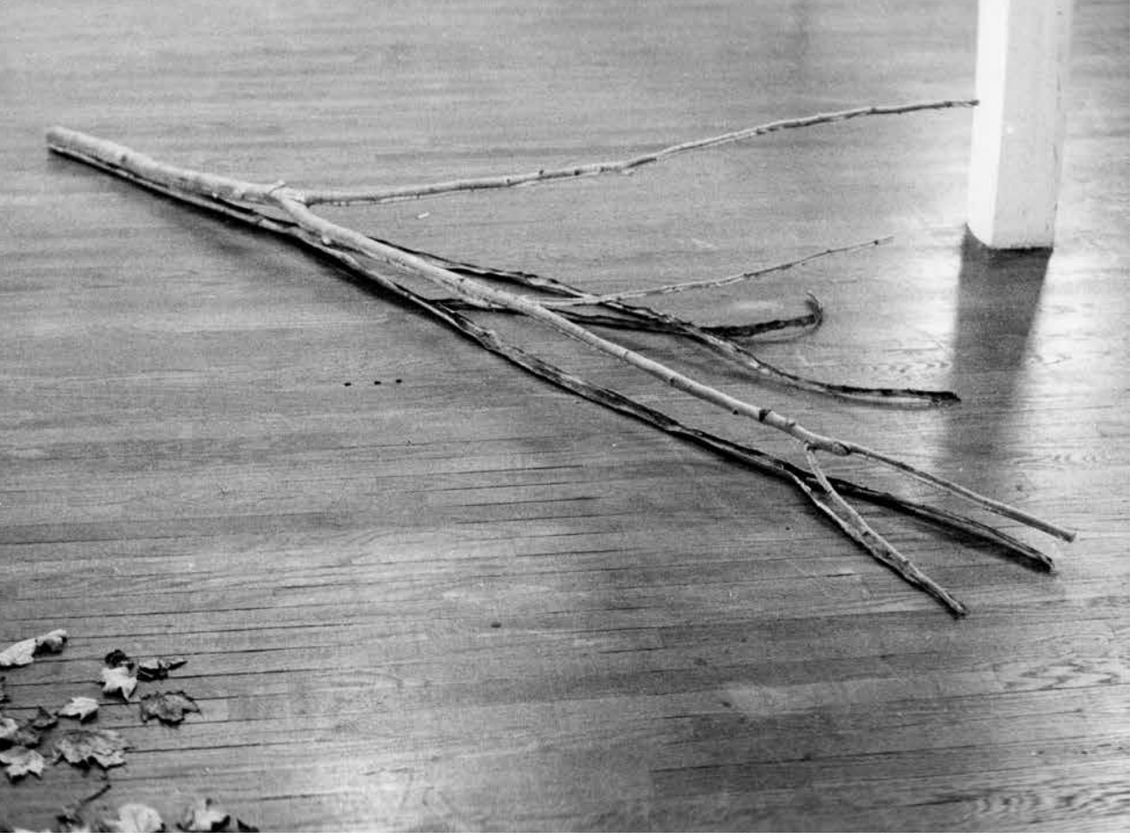
The Fragmentary in the Work of Hannah Villiger: A Reflection in Ten Steps

Madeleine Schuppli

What are fragments? Fragments are parts, remnants; they are piecework in the literal sense: pieces of a work. They refer to a whole that no longer exists as such, or they are part of something that still awaits completion. The term *fragment* was originally applied to objects, stones, or sculptures in the sense of "a piece broken apart".[1] However, a fragment can also be something open, unfinished, a work that has not yet been completed. The term is used with this connotation especially in literature and, since the Romantic period, the fragment has become a true literary genre: the unfinished text is meant to inspire continued intellectual or literary work.[2] Both meanings of the term, which are almost inherently contradictory (unintended versus intended), can be applied to Hannah Villiger's artistic practice and will serve here as a background against which to reflect on her work. The following thoughts refer mainly to the works based on Polaroid photographs, and thus to Villiger's work from 1980 onwards, although references to her earlier works, namely the objects and drawings produced in the 1970s and black-and-white photography, serve to anchor the theme in the beginnings of Villiger's oeuvre.

I. Fragmented Objects

When the twenty-three-year-old Hannah Villiger had her first solo exhibition in Zug in 1974, a reviewer wrote that her pictures were "fragments, hints of an intense preoccupation with objects".[3] A look at her early work reveals that the theme of the fragment was relevant even before her preoccupation with the body and her turn to photography. During her studies, in particular during her sojourn in Canada in 1974, she was preoccupied with fragmentations carried out on plants, especially trees.[4] She used a knife to cut off branches, in larger and smaller pieces, which she then placed in the exhibition space, for example for her show in Toronto.[5] The corresponding installation shots suggest a connection to the later body paintings, based on formal similarities as well as cultural-historical references (fig. 1). From mythology, spirituality, or



1. Work by Hannah Villiger, exhibition at A Space, Toronto, 1974
© Foundation The Estate of Hannah Villiger

psychology we are acquainted with analogies between trees and (human) life and bodies.[6]

Fragmented objects can also be found in her earlier drawings. Villiger focused on the fragment in the literal sense: for example, when she glued broken eggshells onto a paper support. She also dealt with pieces of wood in pen and watercolour drawings of neatly lined up branch forks. She recorded the varying shapes in a kind of alphabet of forms (fig. 2). The serial work was comparable to a research of form, just as she would later examine body parts in photographic series.

II. No Whole

The body in Villiger's photographic panels is never seen as a whole, which is due, from a certain point onwards, to her working method. This is apparent in the period starting from 1983, when the artist worked (almost) entirely with her own body.[7] In the early 1980s, she had created works that were shot in interaction with her girlfriend Susan Wyss – a sensual dialogue between the couple through mutual exploration and approach with the camera eye. In terms of pictorial composition, this collaboration would certainly have allowed for more diversity, but even at this stage the (almost) complete body appeared only as a shadow (*Work*, 1980/81, see p. ##). This was followed by the extensive work phase that would last until Villiger's death: the artist's own body is the central subject of the picture; however, in the Polaroid photographs taken by her own hand, only a part, a fragment, can be depicted. What is missing is, at the very least, the hand guiding the camera. Somewhere, this hand or the whole arm or upper body is cut off by the edge of the picture. The body is thus partly inside and partly outside the pictorial space – and the artist is thus both the invisible subject and the visible object.

The artist "places little emphasis on the unity of the body and creates an index of fragments", David Levi Strauss aptly explained.[8] She often pushed this game so far that the viewer is unable to reconstruct the body as a whole. This makes us wonder, cringe, doubt.[9] But we know that there is a continuum, even if we cannot recognize it. We have this certainty because we sense that the images are of a living body: we see reddened areas of skin, goose bumps, tense muscles, and tendons; and, in some images, we can detect movement. Life pulsates in these limbs. We find a contrast to this in Hans Bellmer, who at the beginning of the twentieth century attracted attention with his surrealist imagery. He arranged and photographed arms, legs, or the torso of a "*poupée*", inanimate body fragments that do not form a whole (fig. 3) but are nevertheless formally quite comparable with Villiger's body elements.

2. Hannah Villiger, drawing, Toronto, 31 August 1974
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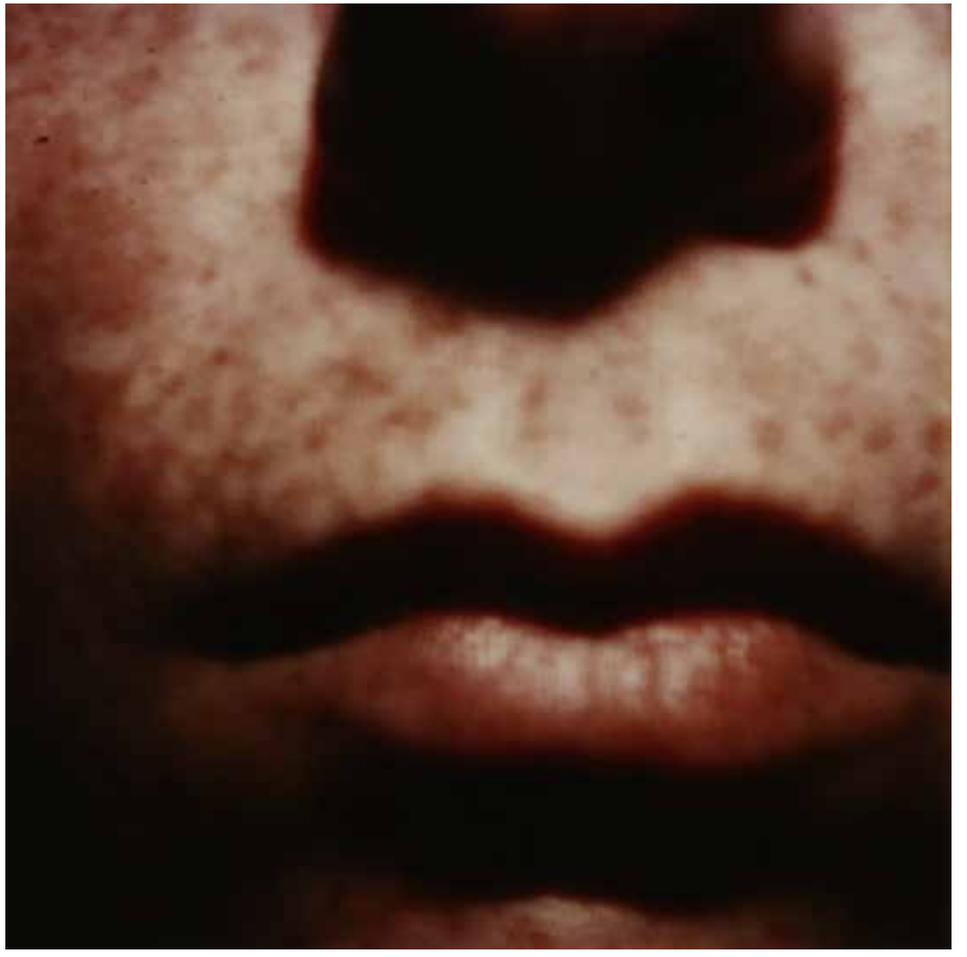
3. Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée*, black-and-white photograph, 1935



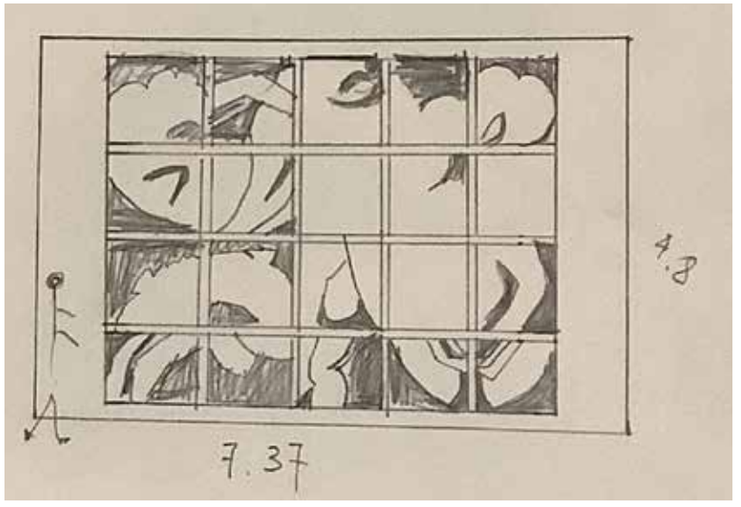
4. Hannah Villiger, *Work*, C-print of a Polaroid, mounted on aluminium, 99.5 x 99.5 cm
© Foundation The Estate of Hannah Villiger

III. The Body of the Viewer

One of the fascinating things about Villiger's body images is that they address far more than just our eyes, but rather the whole body as one large sensory organ. We as viewers are more than intellect; in dialogue with the work of Hannah Villiger, we are above all emotion and body. The images are disturbing; they speak directly to our feelings, as well as through our own physicality. We try to trace the posture of the body depicted, to figure out how the knotting of the limbs is possible; we are even tempted to recreate the positions. In principle, our own body would be capable of adopting the posture of the model. Sometimes we succeed, sometimes it is so complex that we fail. And this failure fascinates and impresses us. But it also leads to alienation when it is not possible to make the connection between the depicted body and one's own body. The complex processes of fragmenting as part of the compositional decisions take the image-body out of the realm of familiar body perception and transfer it into spheres to which we find access through the sensual body perception. The desire, the erotic charge acts like a powerful pull. In Villiger's imagery, we encounter sensuality in all its complexity of attraction and repulsion, pleasure and pain, loneliness and closeness.

IV. The Photographic Image Frame

In the early days of photography, photographers made the endeavour to assimilate their works to painting in order to gain the same recognition as the highly esteemed painters of the time. However, they also introduced new creative elements through their pictorial medium, which in



5. Hannah Villiger, drawing in Workbook no. 50, 26.11.1990
© Foundation The Estate of Hannah Villiger

turn increasingly influenced painting and drawing of the late nineteenth century. Part of the photographic aesthetic was, among other things, the radicality of the cropping of the image, with which one could cut out a piece of visible reality without further ado. This led to a decontextualization of the motif and strengthened awareness that the image always represents a section and thus a fragment of reality.[10]

With regard to Villiger's work, this draws our attention to the edge of the picture, to the fragmenting cut with which the pictorial field is limited. The edges of the image become all the more important because the Polaroid process produces a very specific, almost square image section and thus distinguishes itself in terms of our habits of seeing photography determined by the rectangle. The artist used this format prominently, as can be seen in the first Polaroid works from 1980. Of her own face, for example, the image detail reveals only the mouth and the shadow of the nose (fig. 4). In the photograph of her lover, the décolleté and arms appear within the picture frame, while the head and lower body lie "separated" outside (see p. ##). These examples are representative of a type of image composition that never shows a whole.

The camera moves in close and, as a result, much disappears from view, which could be a symbol of the intimacy between the women, the physical closeness between the two lovers. Here, the camera is also passed back and forth; in some cases, Villiger is only a model, leaving the role of the photographer to her partner. Their state of togetherness is also emphasized by a formal alignment that almost makes them twins. For instance, two photos each show their tanned bodies in bikini bottoms; with a cigarette in their right hand, they lie on the bed, heads and legs missing (fig. 5). The fragmentation not only makes them confusingly similar, but also elevates the anecdotal nature of the intimate moment to a broader scope. A work created around the same time, also in two parts, even leads to a merging of the two bodies across the picture panels, since one leg of each of the two women is in one and the same pair of green trousers, as if they belonged to the same body (fig. 6). Each body fragment finds its counterpart in the other, is completed by it. It is a game of ambiguity, of showing and omitting, seducing and concealing.

In the later works as well, the edge of the picture cuts into the motif, divides the foot in two, separates the shoulder, decapitates the torso. This somewhat martial terminology is in keeping with the intense effect that Villiger's photo-aesthetic settings can exert. She makes it clear to where she wishes to direct the viewer's gaze and that the (her own) body is the material with which she can work in all freedom and radicality.

V. Image Next to Image

In 1988, Villiger assembled Polaroid images into groups for the first time which she called "blocks".[11] The following year, she had the opportunity to show *Block I* (see p. ##) in the legendary large-scale exhibition *Bilderstreit* in Cologne.[12] By cutting the photographic edge of the picture, open margins emerge that can connect with the adjoining pictorial space. With the blocks, the artist was concerned with "forming a new unity".[13] In her workbooks, there are numerous drawings with possible compositions and variants for their composition, which she played through (fig. 7). In


xx. Hannah Villiger, *Work*, 1981, two C-prints of Polaroids mounted on aluminium, 38 x 38 cm each
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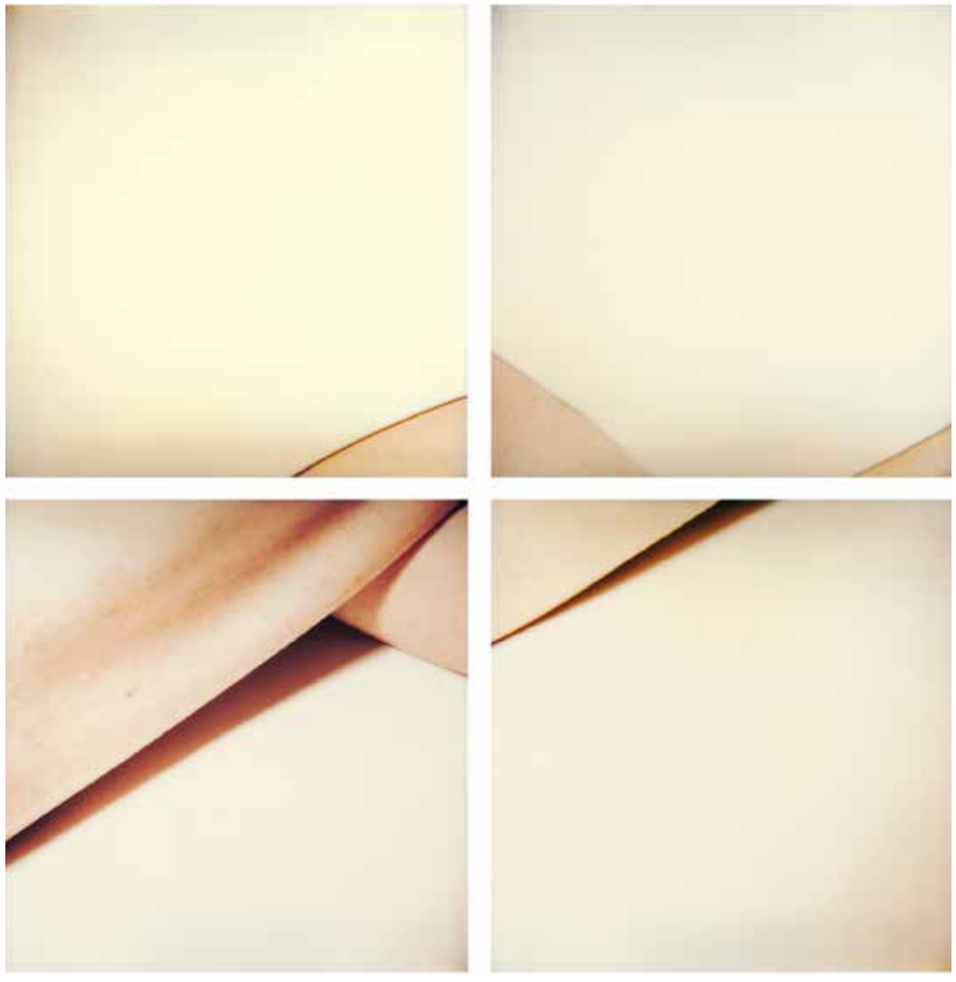
6. Georges Braque, *Woman with Mandolin*, 1910, oil on canvas, 80.5 x 54 cm
Courtesy of Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

fig. 7
Wolfgang Tillmans



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total, Villiger created roughly one hundred blocks consisting of two to twenty individual images. In order to find a coherent transition between the shots, the artist turned the Polaroid shots in all directions and laid them out in a geometric grid with a small distance between them. In this way, new bodies emerge from the body fragments; what had been amputated is supplemented by another body part on the adjacent panel. This is masterfully achieved in *Block XXX* (see p. ##), where, for example, a severed shoulder section is continued in arms and legs on the adjacent photograph. All six panels combine to form something new. Here, body parts explicitly become sculptural material and part of a larger whole. In this work, the fragments of the woman's body become a new being – during our work on the exhibition at the Muzeum Susch, we called this work "the animal". A strange animal with an energetic body that moves in a crouching posture in black space. Through the block of pictures, the body experiences an expansion, new possibilities present themselves. Formulated here are perhaps longings for a new whole, for a permeability of ideas of the female body and of traditional demands on its representation.

VI. Closeness – Distance – Space

The fragmentation in Villiger's Polaroid photographs is – as mentioned above – linked to the close-up view. The eye of the camera is always so close that we only see a fragment. The photographer cannot step back at a distance; there is no more than an arm's length between the camera and the subject. This closeness is paired with spatial narrowness, with a concentration of the body to be depicted in a very tight portion of space. The photographer seems to squeeze the body into a geometric frame – the almost square picture format of the Polaroid. The frame opens onto the pictorial space, which often seems to be no more than one or two cubic metres. It is cramped: the photos were taken in a small space, in a corner of the workroom.[14] We feel this confinement of the body even more drastically when we juxtapose them with the early photographic works from the 1970s. Flying objects in front of a wide sky: everything

is in motion and in flux; there is smoke, splashes, and burns. Water, air, and fire break open boundaries and the space (see pp. ##). One might see a young woman's attitude to life, marked by passion, energy, and departure, glowing in these images. Arguably, these pictures with their view of the sky are also fragments of a great, indeed infinitely great whole and invite us to experience the feeling that "the sky is the limit".

VII. Body – Landscape – Environment

The artist was dedicated to the representation of the outside world not only with her early works, but also, selectively, in her later Polaroid pieces. When she turned her camera outwards, she did so with a pan shot, moving away from the corner where she worked and towards the window and the city in front of the house. She photographed the view from her studio rooms in Paris and Basel, where she mainly lived. Villiger did not immerse herself in the city but remained in the position of an observer. Once again, she used a serial approach, working on individual motifs, such as the immense treetop that unfolds its splendour in front of her window in Basel, close enough to touch. Like her own freckled skin, she scanned the surface of the speckled ball of leaves with her camera; and, as with her own body, we never see the crown of the tree in its entirety. The mystery of this sensual natural phenomenon remains; the artist did not want to tell the story to its end (see pp. ##).

The cityscapes also include sweeping views upwards over the Paris rooftop landscape or the steep view downwards to the urban rear courtyard (fig. 8). Villiger created cityscapes that are not oriented to the horizontal; she turned the image (or camera) in all directions, thwarting certainties of above and below or of the laws of gravity. The built urban fabric tilts, slides, and becomes a moving body. "City body body city", the artist noted in her workbook in 1990.

VIII. Mirrors

In the tradition of self-portraiture, the mirror has served as a tool for the most lifelike self-portrait possible. Painters positioned a mirror next to their easel, with the reflection serving as a model.[15] In contrast, Villiger used the mirror with the opposite intention. In her work, mirrors are compositional elements *within* the pictorial space and do not serve as a reproduction that is as close to nature as possible, but rather a

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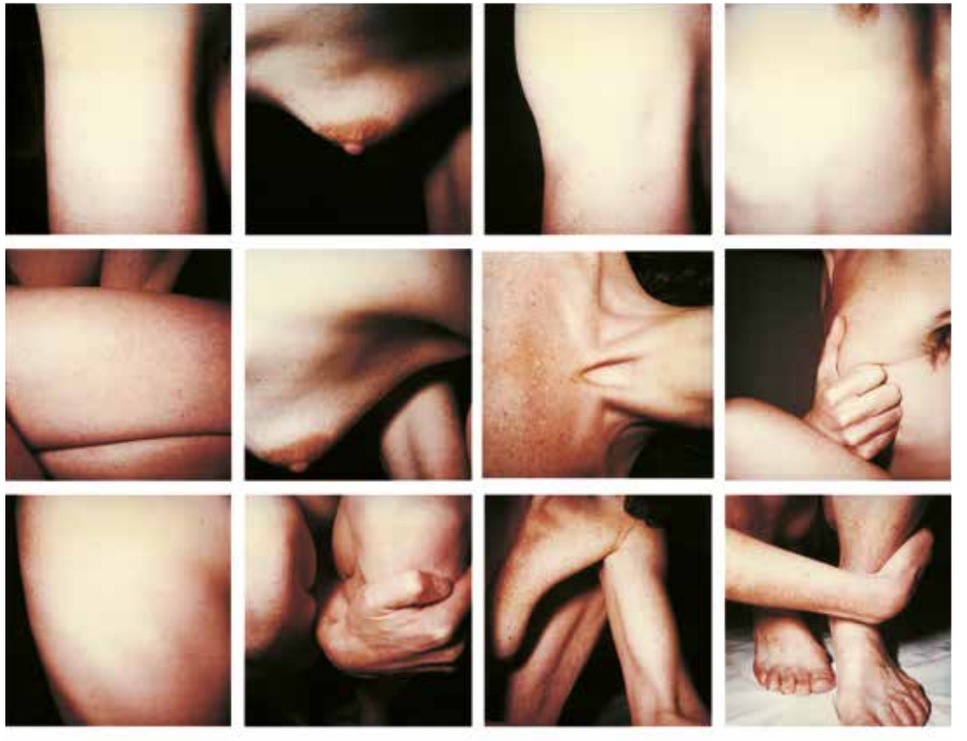
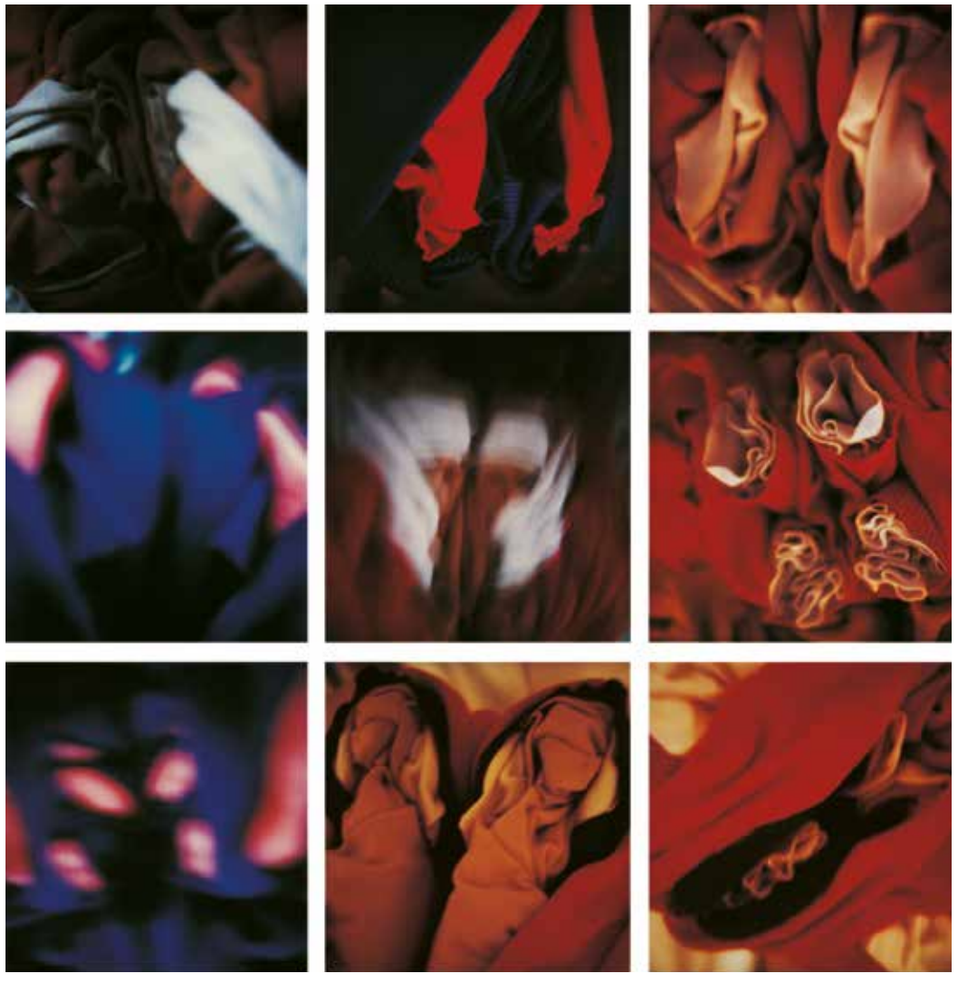
5. Hannah Villiger, *Courtyard*, 1987, C-print of a Polaroid, mounted on aluminium, 125 x 123 cm © Foundation The Estate of Hannah Villiger





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condensation of the composition and a heightening of the pictorial effect. The artist sat on mirrors, stood in front of mirrored surfaces, or used fragments of mirrors which she positioned within the pictorial space or aligned by hand (see pp. ##). The complexity of these compositions can almost cause the viewer to feel dizzy. Spatial orientation is prevented by the multiplication of lines of sight; the continuum of spatial depth is fragmented. The pictorial elements break on sharp edges; the body parts can hardly be mentally brought back together again. As in cubist painting in the 1910s, the result is a poly-perspectival and fragmented view of the pictorial elements, of body parts or props such as fabrics, jewellery, and glasses. A comparison with *Woman with a Mandolin* (1910) by Georges Braque (fig. 9) reveals clear parallels. However, the painter pushed

the crystalline pictorial elements even further towards abstraction with the help of a neutralising colour scheme. Villiger also experimented in this direction in an extraordinary work from 1994 (see p. ##), where she achieved an almost abstract image through radical reduction and geometrization, as well as through the unification of the colour scale.

IX. The Artist and Her Model

Villiger was simultaneously a model and a photographer; therefore, her works are in fact self-portraits. On a content level, however, they cannot be understood as such. Too much in Villiger's work deviates from the canon of the self-portrait. There is no eye contact with the viewer,[16] no psychological self-exploration, no will to self-presentation. The artist worked as a researcher on her own body, which was the object of investigation, the tool, and the material available to her on a daily basis. She dealt with her material relentlessly, she "used" it and "squeezed something out of it".[17] There is not a glimpse of exploration of her own personality either. Although in 1990 she wrote in her workbook: "One strives to express a sense of one's inner self",[18] the impression remains that she avoided telling us about herself as a person. This may seem surprising, since she depicted herself in hundreds of pictures, almost always naked; and, in front of the large-format works, the viewer comes very close to this exposed body. For her, however, nudity does not seem to be necessarily linked to intimacy, for example when she says that she perceives her skin like a dress, and that she did not feel as if she was exposed or naked.[19] Nor does the artist convey hypothetical insights into her inner self by slipping into roles. This is also the decisive difference to Cindy Sherman and her "staged photography". Villiger's pictures do not create a reproduction of an extra-pictorial reality. Staging, composition, lighting, and fragmentation result in a construction and not an "objectifying" image.

X. An Unfinished Oeuvre

If we consider Villiger's oeuvre as a whole and focus in particular on its end, we must conclude that it, too, is inherently fragmentary, if only because of her untimely death. Her work came to an abrupt end, it was not completed. It is a fragment in the literary sense, a kind of torso that could be thought further without knowing in which direction it might have developed. The only thing that seems difficult to imagine is that Villiger would not have continued to work with her own body. For despite the fact that she had turned away from it over the years, she always returned to it. In 1991, for instance, she had decided not to use her body, which had changed as a result of her pregnancy, for her artistic work; and her later decision not to show her own body in 1996 could be read as a reaction to

her fragile physical condition. Something new entered the picture at that time, so that one could perhaps speak of a turning point that might have led to a different phase in her work.

In the year before Villiger's death, three blocks were created (pp. ##), in which one cannot recognize any body parts.[20] Instead, we look into an apparent jumble of brightly coloured fabrics: gathered, rolled, cast off, folded. The body withdraws while simultaneously colour emerges. This happens with a force that overwhelms. There are colour explosions, dominated by strong red and complemented by shades of yellow, blue, and white. Although the body itself is not depicted, it is indirectly present: in red, the colour of blood and flesh. The view seems to penetrate the inside of the body, and openings lead our gaze into the depths of the "fabric of the body". At the same time, the vibrating shades of red speak of eroticism, and the textiles are arranged into shapes reminiscent of the female sex. The fabrics are at least partially recognisable as articles of clothing. We see sleeves from which the absent body has slipped out, stripped off its warming protection. This motif of undressing also leads back to eroticism and makes us think of Wolfgang Tillmans's photographs of stripped garments (fig. 10). Yet we cannot avoid looking at this group of works under the aspect of transience, the vanishing of the body.

For her last large work, a nine-part block of images (cat. rais. no. 480, see p. ##), Villiger combined the theme of fabrics with her own body. She slipped into and under the coloured textiles; fragments of an arm or leg emerge. Red is the spatial bracket that frames the body with the red background and the corresponding headscarf – the latter a new element in her imagery. Villiger's work broke off prematurely, albeit with something new.

[1] From the Latin *fragmentum*, derived from *frangere*, "to break".
[2] See Manfred Frank, "Über Stil und Bedeutung. Wittgenstein und die Frühromantik", in idem, *Stil in der Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1992), 86–115.
[3] [roc.], "Villiger in der Buchhandlung Balmer: Auseinandersetzung mit Objekten", *Luzerner Neuste Nachrichten*, 19 February 1974.
[4] In her essay, Aïcha Revellat discusses Villiger's preoccupation with tree bark, how she removes it and thus – in the terminology of the body – "skins" the plant. See **p. xxx** in this book.
[5] *Hanna Villiger with Juerg Staeuble*, A Space, Toronto, 10–21 September 1974.
[6] Due to its wide-ranging symbolism and deep roots in human consciousness, the tree is perfectly suited as an object of identification. C. G. Jung, for example, "repeatedly used the image of a tree in connection with the process of individuation"; Verena Kast, *Die Dynamik der Symbole. Grundlagen der Jung'schen Psychotherapie* (Ostfildern: Patmos Verlag, 2019), **p. xxx**. First published 1990.
[7] Exceptions are cat. rais. nos. 264, 265, 266, each of which depict a male torso, and *Block VIII*, cat. rais. nos. 297, with photographs of a male body; according to a note in one of Villiger's workbooks, for this work she photographed her husband Joe Kébé.
[8] David Levi Strauss, "Ich werde selber zum Meissel", in Jolanda Bucher and Eric Hattan (eds.), *Hannah Villiger* (Zurich: Scalo, 2001), 107.
[9] See, for example, cat. rais. nos. 361, 390, 401.
[10] See Erika Billeter, *Malerei und Photographie im Dialog. Von 1840 bis heute*, exhibition catalogue, Kunsthaus Zürich, Zurich, 1977 (Bern: Benteli, 1977).
[11] In 1980/81, Villiger was already assembling image panels into ensembles, but she did not yet call them blocks and repeatedly exhibited pictures within an ensemble as well as individually. It therefore seems to have been a case of loosely assembling the photos, in contrast to the 100 or so blocks that were created between 1988 and 1997, which were largely conceived as a unit.
[12] *Bilderstreit: Widerspruch, Einheit und Fragment*, Museum Ludwig in the Rheinhallen of the Kölnmesse, Cologne, 1989.
[13] Verbal statement by HV in the film *ich & ich* (I and I) by Edith Jud, 1997.
[14] See photos in "Life in Images" depicting Villiger's workroom in Paris, **page xxx**. She only had an actual studio for a short time. Otherwise, she worked in her flat, where she used a room or area as her workspace.
[15] Since the introduction of photography, the mirror is usually replaced by a photograph that serves as a model for the painted self-portrait.
[16] Except for what is presumably her first Polaroid from 1980 (cat. rais. no. 89, 1980).
[17] *Ich Hannah Villiger*, a film by Edith Jud, 2001.
[18] Workbook no. 49, 1990.
[19] Ibid.
[20] In *Block 476* (1996), blurred bright spots could be the artist's hands; and in *Block 474* (1996), body parts might also be visible, barely discernible, at the edge of one panel.