



ANDREW DURBIN

Peer Review

Andrew Durbin, editor of frieze magazine, on the magnetic allure of writer and photographer Hervé Guibert.

Who first warned me about Hervé Guibert? It must have been a good friend, someone who knew what would happen to me when I read this French novelist and photographer, whose books offer such frank analyses of ambition, love, desire, sex, disease and decay. His essays on photography, collected in *Ghost Image* (1981), and his late autobiographical novels, like *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (1990), extend a firm grip once you find yourself within their reach, and never let you go.

Guibert portrays his experience as a gay man in Mitterand’s France with an arresting, almost cinematic quality, developing characters in densely symbolic and richly layered narratives reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958). Like Hitchcock, Guibert masterfully weaves deception and revelation, death and resurrection in stories of lovers, family, his friends, his mentor Michel Foucault, and himself. Not

always factual, necessarily, since he deliberately fudges events to construct a more compelling portrait of why we live the way we live, Guibert made of his circle a secular book of saints. (I wonder what he would think of such a metaphor; the religious power that lies under the surface of modernity never seemed to captivate him as it had Foucault.)

Guibert is impossible to put down. Each time I return to him I am on entirely new ground. Reading him, I find myself suspended, like Jimmy Stewart in *Vertigo*, between dream and reality, desire and horror. His description in *Ghost Image*, of a favorite Diane Arbus photograph summarizes the effect: “I found in this picture an emotion similar to madness, or happiness, I was never able to determine which, and it was this disturbance, something between horror and freedom, that fascinated me. Was I supposed to enjoy this image, and was my enjoyment legitimate?”

TO THE FRIEND WHO DID NOT SAVE MY LIFE by Andrew Durbin

To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life is Hervé Guibert’s most famous book. Released in France in 1990, its publication caused a stir when it revealed, in a lightly fictionalized sequence, that Guibert’s mentor, Michel Foucault (named Muzil in the book), had died from complications due to AIDS. Previously, the press had reported Foucault’s death from cancer. Here, in 100 brief and brutal chapters, Guibert methodically dispenses with the fiction, as it were, by revealing the true cause and course of the philosopher’s decline—which would soon be his own.

Photograph: Courtesy of Christine Guibert

KATIE CALAUTTI

Object Matters

It’s safe to presume that for as long as humans have existed, they’ve grappled with the inevitability of death. For much of that existence, they have found ways to immortalize the struggle via memento mori. Roughly translating from Latin as “Remember that you must die,” memento mori are symbolic reminders of death in art, literature, philosophy, fashion, and architecture. The common symbols associated with them—skulls, fruit, flowers, snuffed candles, and clocks—serve to remind us that life is fleeting and fragile; they’re the morbid yin to carpe diem’s yang.

The phrase as a philosophy is believed to have taken root in ancient Roman times, when victorious generals paraded through the streets, followed closely by a slave who whispered continuous reminders of mortality to the worshipped war hero. As the Black Death swept through Europe in the 13th century and the Catholic church solidified its views on purgatory, a theological framing of memento mori was widely adapted. Christianity focused memento mori’s appeal through a hyper-religious lens that boiled human

existence down to a preparation for the afterlife.

With the opening up of global trade roots, there was a memento mori boom during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. From the 1500s to 1700s, artisan-made ivory prayer beads, sculptures, and other talismans depicting death and decay were coveted by wealthy collectors and royalty. Ironically, these items—meant to underscore the impermanence of status and wealth—were quite costly. Dutch artists in the veritas movement of the 17th century painted still lifes depicting hourglasses, destroyed books, wilted flowers, and rotting food to underscore the transient nature of earthly existence. And later, Victorian rings depicting skulls and skeletons were worn by everyone from the queen to her poorest subjects.

Today, memento mori are interwoven in the collective unconscious—from the skull iconography used by fashion brands to *Game of Thrones’* oft-quoted “Valar Morghulis” (“All men must die”). Our time may be limited, but the knowledge that death rules us all is immortal.



A macabre history of memento mori.