Autoportrait à la chaise, n.d. © Christine Seemuller-Guibert. Courtesy: Les Douches la Galerie, Paris

How to Dissect God?

BY
Pierre-Alexandre Mateos
and Charles Teyssou

HERVÉ GUIBERT

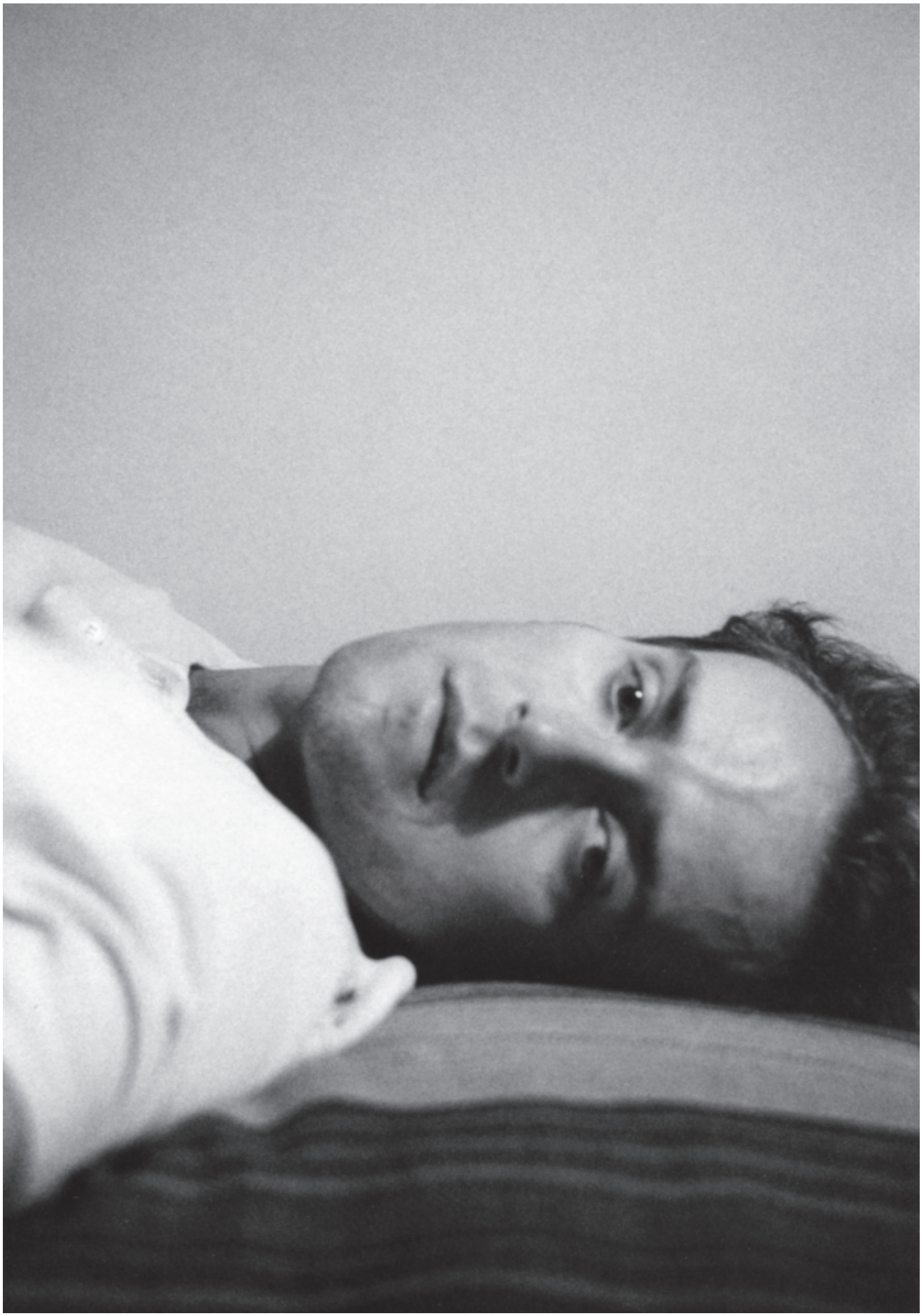
Agneaudoux, 1981. © Christine Seemuller-Guibert. Courtesy: Callicoon Fine Arts, New York

Michel, 1981. © Christine Seemuller-Guibert. Courtesy: Callicoon Fine Arts, New York and Les Douches la Galerie, Paris

It has been thirty years since the French poet HERVÉ GUIBERT died. The recent translation of three of his books for an English-speaking readership[1] is a unique occasion to look back at this literary and artistic icon of the 1980s, who died of AIDS at age thirty-six. He was an icon of a then-invisible community linked by the disease. The latter will force the collective and solitary destiny of each of its members to fit into one and the same oxymoron: *my epidemic*. In a constant oscillation between photography, literature, and cinema, he never ceased to dissect the relationship between the self and the image, situating his work between the principle of desire and the aesthetics of its disintegration.

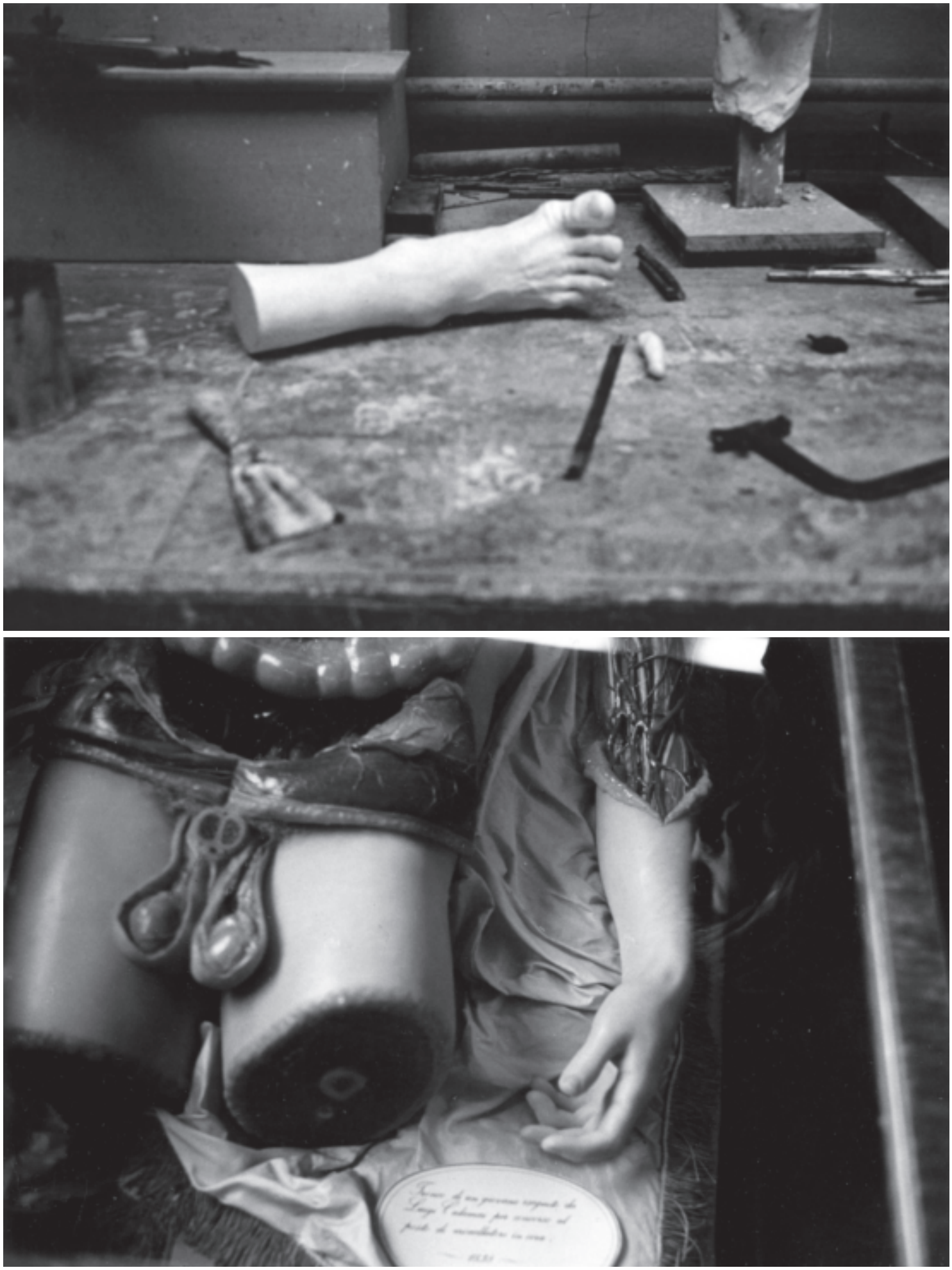
Le film porno, 1987–88. © Christine Seemuller-Guibert. Courtesy: Callicoon Fine Arts, New York

Florence, 1978. © Christine Seemuller-Guibert. Courtesy: Callicoon Fine Arts, New York



Autoportrait, 1989. © Christine Seemuller-Guibert. Courtesy: Callicoon Fine Arts, New York and Les Douches la Galerie, Paris

Thierry Profil à la cigarette, n.d. © Christine Seemuller-Guibert. Courtesy: Callicoon Fine Arts, New York and Les Douches la Galerie, Paris



(Top) *Musée Grévin, Paris*, 1977–78. © Christine Seemuller-Guibert. Courtesy: Les Douches la Galerie, Paris
(Bottom) *Florence*, 1978. © Christine Seemuller-Guibert. Courtesy: Callicoon Fine Arts, New York

While attending a conference in Prague in 1981 in the presence of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Guibert photographed a face isolated in the crowd, the only one standing out in a magma of silhouettes in black suits (*The Only Face* [1981]). "This face," he said, "will trigger an act of love, a thunderbolt: instantly I loved this face madly. It was for me a truly photographic moment: programmed by chance and the configuration of space, a photographic love at first sight."[2]

His entire photographic enterprise responded to a manufacture of desire—a desire for his loved ones but also for himself, even when approaching death. Guibert primarily focused on his circle of friends, whom he also depicted in his literary production. They were fictional resources that became portraits or fragments of a love speech. There was his lover, Thierry; his wife and the right owner, Christine Seemuller-Guibert; and his gallerist, Agathe Gaillard. His friends also included public figures such as Michel Foucault.

In one of his most famous portraits, the latter appears in a *yukata* in his modern and impeccably kept apartment at 285 rue de Vaugirard, Paris. We see the reflection of the philosopher of *The Order of Things* (1966) multiply along the surface of a long corridor. This apartment was a site for meetings, intellectual training, transmission, and learning, as described in Mathieu Lindon's book *Learning What Love Means* (2011).[3]

Guibert encountered Foucault between his classes at the Collège de France, his seminars at Berkeley, and his sexual experiences in the saunas of San Francisco's Castro Street, which the "samurai" spoke about as a school of delicacy. Foucault, who died of AIDS in 1984, when the disease was still poorly known, would become the antihero of Guibert's *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (1990). In this novel, Foucault appears under the guise of Muzil, learns that he is sick, and thus prefigures the death of Guibert. The description of Muzil often passes through the prism of his skin. It is either metaphorical and reveals his secret rituals, or tragically factual and signifies the inexorable progression of the disease. In the first case, Muzil is leaving his apartment to take part in savage orgies with his secret second skin (a black leather jacket replete with chains and metal rings), while in the second, his epidermis gradually starts to be marbled by zona and red spots. The writer-photographer will sit at the philosopher's bedside until the hospital forbids him to do so. This was the first novel to treat Michel Foucault as fictional material. The death of the professor and his burial at Vendeuvre-du-Poitou are also evoked in a short story by Guibert entitled "The Secrets of a Man" (1988).[4] These photographs of friends and lovers were part of a retrospective at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris in 2011, the first milestone in a wave of institutional recognition that has not yet dissipated.

A principle of love, and above all an obsession for the body in all its states, was explored even in his first photographs: He was offered a camera at the age of seventeen, a Rollei 35, which he described as "a small autonomous body, with its diaphragm, its opening and retraction times, its casing like a carcass, but it is a mutilated body, you have to carry it with you like a child, it is heavy, it gets noticed, you also love it like a crippled child who will never walk alone but whose infirmity makes him see the world with a slightly crazy acuity."[5] In *Vice, Photographs by the Author*, a three-chapter book published in 1991 containing photos from the late 1970s and early 1980s, his obsession with anatomy is palpable.[6] He focuses on theatricalized bodies as well as broken, dislocated, and dismembered ones from the Musée Grévin, a wax museum in Paris, and places where inanimate bodies are exhibited, such as the Musée de l'Homme, Paris, or La Specola, Florence.

With Guibert, we enter a vacant universe, a chamber of relics. The atmosphere is muddled; he speaks of the museum as a "palace of desirable monsters," which was the title of the exhibition organized in March 2020 at Les Douches la Galerie in Paris. Those photos are dated 1978, the year he submitted his manuscript of *Propaganda Death*—his first novel—to editor Régine Deforges.[7] He was only twenty-one-years-old. *Propaganda Death* is composed of twelve short stories lingering on the interiority of his body and can be seen as the literary matrix of his museum photographs. It's about his viscera, an ass on a dissection table, multiple penises, shit, solid and stinking snot, or the membrane of the foreskin covering a pink acorn. It is violently organic, barbaric, and delicate. One of the questions that arises when encountering this book as well as his photos is: If nudity is outrageous, what about what is behind the skin? As he himself says in his *Intrepid Articles*, "If God created man in his own image, how can we dissect God?"[8]

His photographs did not appear in *Propaganda Death*, but they did in *Vice*, fourteen years later in 1991, the year of his death. The cover of the latter features a dramatic self-portrait in a wax museum, and the first chapter opens with a systematic description of twenty-one everyday objects, all related to bodily functions (ivory comb, cotton swabs, horsehair gloves) or to functions of the dead, lethal Bachelor Machine: vacuum cleaner, fly-killing paper. When reading it, one thinks of an encounter between Francis Ponge's *The Voice of Things* (1972) and Octave Mirbeau's *The Torture Garden* (1899).[9] In chapter two there are photographs of the Musée Grévin, but also of stuffed birds, blood vessels, tendons, veins, bones. Where the text takes a turn as baroque as it is surgical, the photography takes on a sepulchral mystery, a form of sacredness. The pictures are vaults projecting their shadows over ten years of funereal poetry. We can identify Jacques Henri Lartigue and André Kertész as inspirations, but lately it is Peter Hujar and David Wojnarowicz who come to mind. Guibert would chronicle Hujar in his "derivative criticism" published in *Le Monde*, for which he worked until 1985.

This attraction to interiority, to an unveiling from within, evokes Vesalius and his anatomical treatise *De humani corporis fabrica* (1542). Perhaps it was Guibert's father, a veterinarian and slaughterhouse inspector returning home from work with his bloody blouse on, who gave him this book of art and science. Biographical accounts of Guibert's childhood tell us that his father used to staple on the walls of their houses in Saint-Cloud and La Rochelle morbid masterpieces of Italian painting. When we see a certain number of covers of Guibert's books, we readily imagine them: Andrea Mantegna's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (ca. 1483), Bernardo Zenale's *The Martyrdom of San Sebastian* (ca. 1485–1505), or *The Martyrdom of Saint Tarcisius*, of unknown authorship, which adorns Guibert's *The Compassion Protocol* (1991).[10] In *My Parents* (1986), where Guibert describes his paintings in a factual way, he evokes the memory of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1839): "The images have diabolical insinuations. The irradiation of these

two images on my child's body is so violent that I have practiced becoming blind when I pass them." [11] As he himself says, the image is cancerous.

In the third and final chapter of *Vice*, Guibert revisits places where he made previous pilgrimages: the Musée de l'Homme in Paris and the Musée Fragonard in Maison-Alfort, where the flayed horse of the apocalypse according to Albrecht Dürer awaits. The animal bodies are there as if mummified, and have porcelain eyes. The lying meats become his flesh crucified. There is Capuchin Crypt in Vienna, the cemeteries in Palermo, the monsters of the Villa Palagonia in Bagheria, and above all the wax collection of La Specola in Florence, which will trouble him for a long time. What fascinated him so much in that last anatomical collection is the power of illusion of wax imitating the body, wax as a material of all metamorphoses, showing the inside and the outside, making one see what cannot be seen otherwise. Its greasy and wet dimension gives this lifelike aspect, as in moments of ecstasy or extreme pain, by restoring the consistency of the organs, their softness, their temperatures. Ultimately, wax, like photography and writing, claims a haptic power, hence reaching a higher form of truth. Guibert's approach was both sensualist and metaphysical. The body is the source of visceral contemplation, as with the *Anatomic Angel* (1752) of Jacques Fabien Gautier d'Agoty, but also orphic musing: if one disembowels a man, it is to probe the presence of death. So, behind these body fragments stored in glass cabinets or in marquetry, we can retrospectively perceive the eros of AIDS and disease.

Guibert discovered that he had AIDS during his residency at Villa Medici in Rome in 1988. He was then in a two-year residency with his writing peers, Mathieu Lindon and Eugène Savitzkaya, the latter a poet with anemic blond hair whom he admired and with whom he began a correspondence. Guibert then wrote *Incognito* (1989), a fiction featuring an alter ego in Roman adventures and a sordid crime affair.[12] The tone of the novel borrows from pastiche, the black novel, and makes fun of the Villa Medici—that city within the city—and its residents. The incognito is threefold: it is a gay bar, the assassin, but it is also the disease, still in a state of stasis, dormant. This disease appears several times in the novel, incognito.

In 1992, *Modesty and Shame*, a sixty-two-minute film in which Guibert stages himself in the form of an autofiction, was broadcast in France posthumously on channel TF1. He is the author and the subject. Pascale Breugnot, a leading producer of the 1980s and 1990s, a key figure in French reality TV, initiated this project in which Guibert stages his own death. One thinks of Chantal Akerman filming her sick mother in her Brussels apartment (*No Home Movie* [2015]) or her first short film, *Saute ma ville* (1968), in which she commits suicide in her suffocating kitchen. In both of them, there is the same experience of self-destruction, up to the blackness of the image, up to suicide. One also thinks of Nanni Moretti and his diary (*Caro Diario* [1983]), in which he alternates between autobiographical scenes involving hospital visits and exile to the Aeolian Islands. But while Akerman and Moretti attempted a form of survival through the act of filming, Guibert sought absolution through the Warholian streamliner: he offered himself to the crowd of divine TV viewers as an absolute sacrifice.

Between autofiction and documentary, the film focuses on describing the patient's daily life. It begins with Guibert sitting in a hospital subjected to a needle prick; then we see the writer in the living room of his apartment in the fourteenth district, disordered, haggard; then he is on his bicycle. A Dmitri Shostakovich sonata resounds; the atmosphere is both strangely luminous and restless. He films with a small Panasonic camera, and the image is trembling, badly mastered. This effect, though involuntary, contributes to a dramatization of the truth effect, a latent mannerism. Added to this are shots of the organic reality of the disease. Through its sense of cut (partially edited by Maureen Mazurek), the film handles hot and cold, moving from hard sequences to soft moments.

This diary, a chronicle of a death foretold, continues on the island of Elba, the place of all secrets and of his tomb, but also the place where he wrote in the sacristy of Santa Caterina. In a few minutes, we switch to existential questions: What am I going to see for the last time? He answers in voice-over: "The last exquisite moments of a life: listening to the wind in the branches, reading a few pages of a memoir, daydreaming about my work in progress, observing a lizard perched on an apple I bit into last night, waiting for T and C to come back from the market with delicious and abundant food, taking a cool shower in the sun, putting on a clean shirt, appeasing his hunger, everything is delightful." It looks like moments taken from an antic happiness; the air is warm and bathed in alacrity. Later, the disease imposes itself with stigmas that he can no longer hide: modesty and shame. The film takes an autophagic turn. Scans, endoscopies, perfusions, and radioscopies alternate: a medical martyrology. Pain becomes an instrument of self-knowledge—a self-vivisection, an oblation, a Eucharist. By looking at it, we eat his body.

1 Hervé Guibert, *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2020), originally published as *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990); Hervé Guibert, *Written in Invisible Ink: Selected Stories* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2020), originally published as *La Mort propagande* (Paris: R. Deforges, 1977); Hervé Guibert, *Arthur's Whims* (Sacramento: Spurl Editions, forthcoming), originally published as *Les Lubies d'Arthur* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1983).

2 Hervé Guibert, "Derniers textes sur la photographie" *Etudes Françaises* 21, no. 1 (1985), translated by the author.

3 Mathieu Lindon, *Ce qu 'aimer veut dire* (Paris: Édition P.O.L., 2011), published in English as *Learning what Love Means* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) / Native Agents, 2017).

4 Hervé Guibert, "Les secrets d'un homme," in *Mauve le Vierge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), published in English as "The Secrets of a Man," in *Written in Invisible Ink*, translated by the author.

5 Hervé Guibert, *L'image fantôme* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1981).

6 Hervé Guibert, *Vice, photographies de l'auteur* (Paris: J. Bertoin, 1991), reprinted in *Written in Invisible Ink*.

7 Guibert, *La Mort propagande*.

8 Hervé Guibert, *Articles intrépides (1977–1985)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008).

9 Francis Ponge, *The Voice of Things* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972); Octave Mirbeau, *Le Jardin des supplices* (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1899).

10 Hervé Guibert, *Le Protocole compassionnel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), published in English as *The Compassion Protocol*, trans. James Kirkup (New York: Braziller, 1994).

11 Hervé Guibert, *My Parents*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Serpent's Tail, 1994), originally published as *Mes parents* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).

12 Hervé Guibert, *L'Incognito: roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

Les cheveux des Louise, 1978. © Christine Seemuller-Guibert. Courtesy: Callicoon Fine Arts, New York

Autoportrait, devant la glace/Christ, n.d. © Christine Seemuller-Guibert. Courtesy: FELIX GAUDLITZ, Vienna

Message incompréhensible, 1990. © Christine Seemuller-Guibert. Courtesy: Callicoon Fine Arts, New York

(Top) *Hans Georg Berger, fesses*, n.d. © Christine Guibert. Courtesy: Callicoon Fine Arts, New York; FELIX GAUDLITZ, Vienna
(Bottom) *Thierry Do*, n.d. © Christine Seemuller-Guibert. Courtesy: Callicoon Fine Arts, New York

(Top) *Torse du poète*, ca. 1989–90. © Christine Seemuller-Guibert. Courtesy: Callicoon Fine Arts, New York
(Bottom) *Le Poète dos / sieste*, 1987–88.© Christine Seemuller-Guibert. Courtesy: Callicoon Fine Arts, New York

Rome, 1981. © Christine Guibert. Courtesy: FELIX GAUDLITZ, Vienna

HERVÉ GUIBERT (1955–1991) was a French writer and photographer. Born in Saint-Cloud, Hauts-de-Seine, he spent his early years in Paris and La Rochelle. His mother—a former teacher—and his father—a veterinary inspector who worked at a slaughterhouse—were conservative, middle class, and disconcertingly obsessed with their son's hygiene, for which he later repaid them with a shockingly granular tell-all novel, *My Parents* (1986). A critic for *Le Monde*, he's been the author of some thirty books, most notably *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (1990), which presents an intimate portrait of Michel Foucault, and played a significant role in changing public attitudes in France toward HIV and AIDS. After working as a filmmaker and actor, he turned to journalism and photography, producing an important body of photographs, which was the subject of a retrospective at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris (2011). In *Ghost Image* (1981), a book whose subject is photography and in which no photographs appear, Guibert offers a singular look at this art form. *La pudeur ou l'impudeur* (1990–91), Guibert's only film, follows the last months of his life in plenary detail. Almost blind as a result of the disease, he attempted to end his life just before his thirty-sixth birthday, and died two weeks later in Paris. … *of lovers, time, and death*, organized with Attilia Fattori Franchini will be on view till the end of November at Felix Gaudlitz in Vienna. A publication with contributions by Estelle Hoy, Drew Sawyer, Attilia Fattori Franchini, and the text *Enquête autour d'un portrait (sur Balthus)* (1983) by Guibert, translated for the first time in English, will be published on the occasion of this show.

PIERRE-ALEXANDRE MATEOS and CHARLES TEYSSOU are a duo of curators and writers based in Paris. They recently curated *GOREGEOUS*, a survey of Darja Bajagić's work, at Le Confort Moderne, Poitiers, which will remain on view through December 2020. In October 2020 they opened an exhibition of Jacques de Bascher as part of *No Dandy No Fun* (curated by Valerie Knoll and Hans-Christian Denny) at Kunsthalle Bern. Recent shows include *Cruising Pavilion* (2018), an exhibition exploring the link between architecture and gay sex, co-organized by Rasmus Myrup and Octave Perrault, which traveled from Spazio Punch, 16th Architecture Venice Biennale to Ludlow 38, New York, and ArkDes, Stockholm.

Le martyre de saint Tarcisius, 1990. © Christine Seemuller-Guibert. Courtesy: Callicoon Fine Arts, New York

Munich, 1983. © Christine Seemuller-Guibert. Courtesy: Callicoon Fine Arts, New York