

Walking Wounded

Mediating self-cutting through images and texts

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Introduction

“When I cut myself for the first time I knew [...] this is me!” These words were spoken by Sem,¹ whose images and writings on self-cutting are examined in the study presented in this article. The quote captures the focus of the study: self-cutting can define a person. Self-cutting and other methods of harming oneself can be effective methods for handling affects, like inner turmoil and chaos (see e.g. Babiker and Arnold 1997: 77–80; Brown and Kimball 2013: 201).² These methods have also been understood as ways of communicating these inner experiences (see for example Steggals et al. 2020). The research interest of this study lies in the intersection between these two perspectives on self-cutting. However, here a central aspect is how mediation through images and texts created meaning for Sem.

By considering Sem’s visual and textual accounts of self-cutting and its consequences, this study explores how media can be used by people who harm themselves and how these mediations relate to questions about self-awareness and change. The purpose of “Walking Wounded” is to examine the role of media for a person who needs to explore and make sense of what he is doing. This examination will also give an insight into how Sem came to understand why he started to cut himself and why he continued doing so over the years. There are three operative questions for this study. The first two are as follows: What can the images and texts created by Sem tell us about how he perceived his first self-cutting experience? What can the images and texts created by Sem tell us about how he perceived and his repeated cutting over the subsequent years? The focus is on how mediations done through different media create meaning, not on media as a communicative tool. This gives rise to the third question: is there is a difference between the meaning expressed in Sem’s images and texts that is based on their different media characteristics?

The theoretical bases for the study are that self-cutting is a medium and it is a medium that has performative potential. Both of these premises emphasize the capacity of media to make meaning for us and the world we live in and their capacity to change the foundation for self-recognition and our worldview.

¹ Sem is used here as a pseudonym to ensure that the person behind the study remains anonymous.

² See Mayrhofer (2011: 48–49) for a literature overview of the “functions and meanings of self-injurious behavior.”

This study is a follow-up to my previous intermedial analysis of self-cutting as a medium, “The Logic of Cutting Yourself” (Sternudd 2019). That study showed that initially self-cutting can be hard to make sense of, but mediating it through texts and images can make it become more meaningful for the person involved—especially if this is done while communicating with online peers. In “Walking Wounded,” these outcomes will be presented through a concrete example—the images and texts produced by Sem. Self-cutting is a self-explanatory term, but it is also part of a repertoire that is connected to concepts like self-mutilation, self-induced violence, self-harm, self-injury, and Non-Suicidal Self-injury.³ What these concepts have in common is that the harmful act is understood as not being suicidal. They create a pre-understanding for Sem, but they are not essential for the analysis—its focus is on media and meaning-making.

Media is defined here as something material that links one “thing” to another (Peters 2015: 46), for example a thought that is mediated through words or, in this study, a self-cutting experience that is mediated through images and words. This means that when self-cutting is defined as a medium, it is understood as something that mediates inner experiences or thoughts. When self-cutting appears in social settings it can also become part of a culturally accepted repertoire (see, for example, Adler and Adler 2007). However, this study does not examine the act itself; instead, it analyzes how self-cutting and its consequences are mediated. The study is based on the sociocultural concept of mediation being a way to achieve knowledge of the thing that is being mediated (Säljö 2000: 66–67), for instance, describing something in words makes it become more concrete and thus easier to deal with.

Different media have different characteristics, which means that they convey meaning in different ways, for example images have synchronic qualities—all of the visual elements are present at the same time—whereas a text is sequential in that it moves from one word to another. Accordingly, each has medium-specific possibilities for and limits to conveying meaning, that is, affordances. One example is that words can be ambiguous while images are usually more precise and specific. An example of an ambiguous word (borrowed from Kress 2004) is “family,” which can allude to a wide range of possible social formations, while an image of a family could show a specific constellation, for example a nuclear family. The use of the word *media* in this study does not allude to mass media (Peters 2015: 48), like newspapers, websites or computer games.

³ A wide range of terms for behaviors that include self-induced harm has been suggested over the years: self-mutilation (Menninger 1938; Favazza 1996), self-injury and self-harm, or deliberate self-harm (the differences are discussed in Mayrhofer 2011, 27–29). Non-suicidal self-injury is quite common (American Psychiatric Association 2012), whereas self-inflicted violence (Alderman 1997) is seldom used.

A performative perspective has a focus on the transformational aspect of self-cutting and how repeating the act can maintain the change. Performativity theory focuses on utterances that do something with the world rather than describe or comment on it (Austin 1962), and in this study performativity is extended to another medium—self-cutting. *Thetic performatives* are especially interesting in relation to this study; these are utterances that constitute a “new state of things” (Preite 2012: 49). Butler’s example of the “initiator performative, ‘It’s a girl!’” (1993: 232) is an illustration of a thetic performative that constitutes a gendered subject. Like all performatives, a thetic performative is successful only if necessary conditions are fulfilled: it needs to be uttered in a particular context, by an accepted person, and under the right circumstances (Austin 1962: 14–15). The initiator act must often be followed by repetitive performatives to maintain the change (cf. Butler 1990: 33).

This study relates to previous studies that use media as a source for understanding self-harm and studies about how media construct and constitute self-awareness and identification. Numerous studies of texts produced by persons who harm themselves have been produced over the years (see overview in Edmondson et al. 2016). For this study, work that examined textual accounts on internet forums has been an important reference (see, for example, Whitlock et al. 2006; Adler and Adler 2011; Johansson 2010; Sutherland, Breen and Lewis 2013). However, a tendency in these studies to focus only on textual and verbal data in psychological research has been identified and questioned (see, for example, Johnson 2011: 175). As Reavey and others argue, studies that also use visual material can “create a richer picture of the topic” (2011: 5). People’s experiences of emotion have been seen as especially difficult to grasp by using only language (written or verbal) (Reavey and Johnson 2008: 299; Reavey 2011: 5). An example of this is how a visual artist has been used to capture people’s pain experiences in the work of Padfield et al. (2018). Studies on images of self-harm on different internet platforms have been carried out before; see, for example, Seko (2013) on Flickr, Baker and Lewis about photographs on an e-community (2013), and Brown et al. (2020) on Instagram.

Participant-generated visual material is used in PhotoVoice to explore social or psychological experiences (see Frith et al. 2005: 189; Reavey and Johnson, 2008: 300). In research contexts, photographs are often used in photo-elicitation sessions (see Harper 2002 for overview). In relation to self-harm, Edmondson (2013) used photographs produced by the participants as a starting point for photo-elicitation. In my research, I have previously carried out studies on how self-harmers use photographs (Sternudd 2012), but I have also analyzed the visual formal qualities of the photographic documentations created by self-harmers of their activities (Sternudd 2011; 2014), which is an overlooked aspect in previous studies.

Communicative aspects of self-injury have been highlighted in several studies (cf. Strong 2005; Bandalli 2011; Steggals et al. 2020a). Even if the communicative aspects of self-cutting are not a focus for this study, it is possible to see Sem's cutting as self-communication (Babiker and Arnold 1997; Brown et al. 2020; Nock and Prinstein 2004). The socio-cultural perspectives on self-cutting have been emphasized in several studies (see the overview in Mayrhofer 2011: 39–40), who understand the behavior as something that is a contextualized way of expressing mental distress. From a sociological perspective, self-injury internet resources have been studied by scholars like Adler and Adler (2007; 2008; 2011), Johansson (2010; 2011), and Chandler (2014). Mayrhofer concludes that self-injury should be understood not only in medical terms, as individuals' pathologic behavior, but also as a sign in social and cultural settings (2011: 184–185). In a similar way, Steggals et al. argue that self-injury “is a personal act, yet simultaneously a part of a person's relational life and interwoven with the interaction order” (2020: 164). In the analysis of Sem's images and texts, we will see that he fits well into this notion.

Material and Method

The material for this study consists of texts and photographs produced by Sem. I made contact with Sem in 2008 in connection with a study about the production and reception of photographs of self-injury. Participants for the study were recruited from a “self-injurers' Internet community, devoted to receiving and sharing information about [self-injury] and to giving support to self-injurers” (Sternudd 2012: 424). Sem offered me material that he had been producing since he had begun to cut himself. The material consists of four single sheets of paper; copies of seven pages from a notebook; a PDF booklet with the title *Bloody Diary* (see Image 1); and his posts from an online forum for self-injurers. The posts consist of seventy-one single messages produced over seven years, starting with $n=12$ messages in 2001, $n=13$ in 2002, $n=12$ in 2003, $n=8$ in 2004, $n=21$ in 2006, $n=4$ in 2007, and $n=1$ in 2008. The messages were downloaded, with Sem's permission, from the internet forum in 2008. I had further contact with him twice: in 2015, when I was starting to plan for this study, and again in 2019. On both occasions, I obtained his consent to use his material and informed him that he could change his mind and refuse to let me use it at any time.

Ethical review and approval were not required, according to the local legislation and institutional requirements regarding a study involving human participants. However, the study follows ethical considerations that are set out in the relevant Swedish law (2003:460). Ethical considerations are crucial in research relating to sensitive issues like NSSI (e.g., Lloyd-Richardson et al. 2015). The law states that research that involves a method that could have a

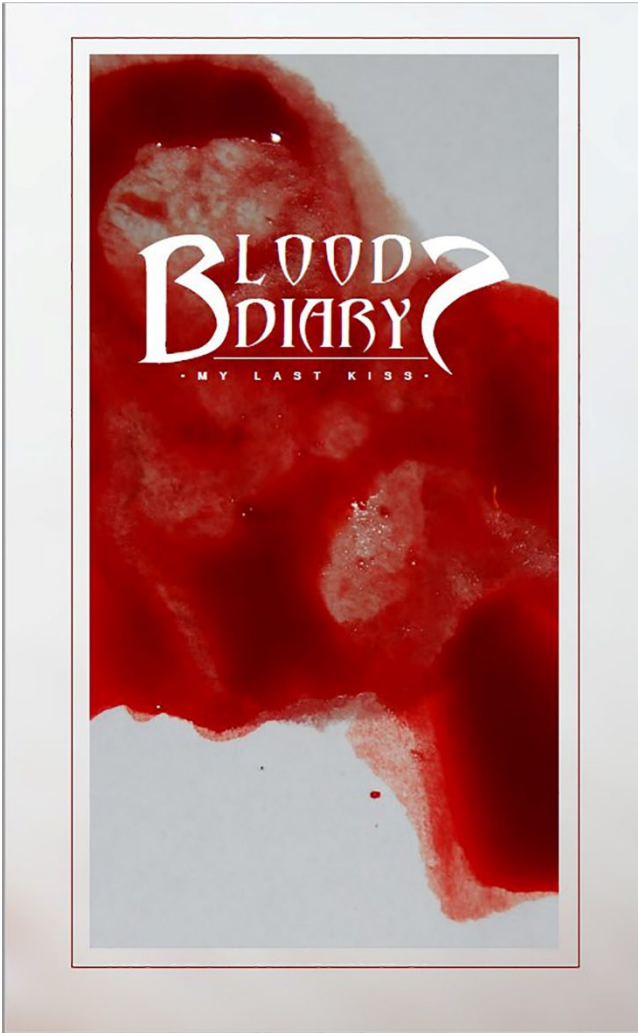


Image 1. Cover of Bloody Diary © Sternudd, printed with permission from the copyright holder.

physical or psychological effect on the person involved or involves an obvious risk for the person must obtain ethical approval. This does not apply to this study. In this case, the material consists of media produced by the sole participant; the study does not involve any analyses of him beyond this media and therefore he is not put at any risk. The contact that I had with Sem concerned factual questions, and the conversation did not involve in-depth questions about sensitive issues. He provided written informed consent regarding participating in the study and the publication of any potentially

identifiable images (including photographs) and data included in this article, the latter achieved by way of a temporary transfer of copyright and immaterial intellectual property rights (Sem by mail 2021). The material has been anonymized and information about Sem has been limited to a need-to-know basis. This has minimized the risk of exposing Sem's identity. Using direct quotes from an internet forum can be problematic because it might be possible to identify someone who made a comment through search engines. However, as the internet community in question was closed down years ago, direct quotes made on its forum are not traceable (not even through search engines like Way Back Machine). Despite this, I have not revealed the name of the community in the article. The design of the study and the measures that have been taken to anonymize the risks of exposure mean that Sem has not been exposed to any "obvious risk" of harm, either physical or psychological (Law 2003:460 2§) in this study and therefore it does not fulfill the prerequisite in the law.

The images and texts were analyzed using a qualitative content method (see, for example, overviews in Rose 2012 and Bryman 2012, and applications in Wilstrand et al. 2007 and in Schneider and Trottier 2011). The first step in the process of analyzing the texts, which was guided by an inductive approach, was counting the frequency of the words used.⁴ The words were then categorized. For instance, words like border, invading, and skinless were categorized under the label "boundary". Next, these categories were sorted into themes; boundary, for instance, was part of the theme "getting something out" through cutting. The fourth stage consisted of constructing concepts that resonated with the categories and themes. In our example, this resulted in the concept "something is hidden on the inside, under the skin." The analysis suggested that the material could be sorted into three groups, called *domains* in the presentation of the result (see section 3.2) The names given to these groups were inspired by a passage in Sem's writings: "cutting has taken me to a wonderful place" (fourth year, August 22). The domains relate to different aspects of self-cutting that stood out in the analyses: Sem's writings about the first time he cut himself, which resulted in calling one domain *the performative act*, and the other two domains capture texts that are about the consequences of the act—*the unstructured domain* and *the new social domain*.

Content analysis was done regarding the representational content of the photographs in the images, that is, what they represent, such as blood and razorblades. The images were also scrutinized regarding both their formal and their representative aspects. The formal analysis focused on elements that was identified as important because they could convey some aspects of how Sem experienced and perceived the situations that are depicted in the images. For example, *balance* and *stability* are present when the object/s is in the middle of the image or when objects of similar size are placed at each side of the

⁴ As is usual in standard textual analysis, so-called stop words were excluded.

image at equal distances from the center. Balance indicates harmony and tranquility, whereas lack of balance relates to disturbance and dynamic activity (cf. Arnheim 1974; Schneider Adams 2018). A horizontal distribution of the visual elements in an image gives it a more stable and calmer character than a vertical one (ibid.). *Flatness* is another formal aspect that is noticed, as, in line with Mulvey (1975) and Pollock (1990), a depiction that does not include representations of depth through perspective makes no opportunity for imagined activity.⁵ A lack of space also decontextualizes the objects in an image, which means that they become more generalizable and therefore possibly relevant for a larger group of viewers. *Isolating* a visual element in an image, for instance through framing, is one way of creating a focus on them, according to Marner (1999). As with de-contextualization, isolation gives an element a more generalized meaning (ibid., 74). In the analysis, the right-hand side of the image is understood to represent the future and the left-hand side the past (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996/2006: 179–185), as in the Latin alphabet.

Result

Sem is a cisgender male who cut himself for the first time when he was around forty. This is quite a late debut, compared to most other people who harm themselves (e.g., Hawton et al. 2002), but he is not unique (cf. Knightsmith Hesmondhalgh 2015; Frithiof 2011). At the time of this study, he was living with his partner and their children. Sem, economically, is middle class; he has a master's degree and is employed as a social worker. In his youth he dreamt of becoming an artist. Through his work he had met young people who harmed themselves through cutting. Sem's fear of being disclosed as a cutter might not only relate to envisaging problems with his family and friends but probably also relates to others' view of whether he could continue to be trusted to work with young people who may be dealing with issues that he himself is suffering from.

His first experience with self-cutting happened just after an incident that threatened the life of one of his children. He explained that the fear caused by this incident made him panic and that this brought up painful childhood memories. One of them was his twin sister's death from anorexia, when they were fifteen years old. He was quite affected by the loss of his sister, but he "buried it" deep inside as he did not want to trouble his parents.

Sem's first language is not English, which affects how he expressed himself on the forum, where the main language was English. I have translated the texts from his notebook myself.

⁵ This follows the logic that a third dimension is required for activities to take place.

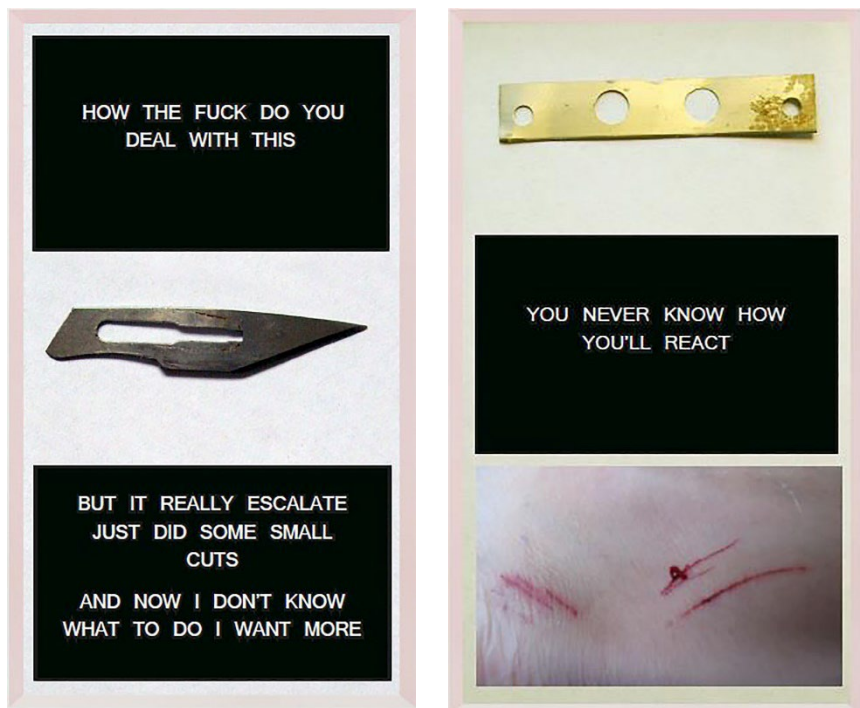


Image 2. *Bloody Diary*, p. 7. Montage made by Sem, based on photographs and forum post from 4 October the first year that he cut himself.

Image 3. *Bloody Diary*, p. 11. Montage made by Sem, based on photographs and forum post from 20 October the first year that he cut himself. © Sternudd, printed with permission from the copyright holder.

Bloody Diary

Bloody Diary includes twenty-seven montages, including fifty-one photographs and twenty-eight text panels. The majority of the photographs ($n=47$) relate to Sem's self-cutting activities.⁶ Blood is the most frequent element ($n=16$) in the photographs, followed by scars and wounds. Tools, like razorblades, are depicted quite frequently ($n=12$). Judging from the details that can be seen in the photographs, it was common to do this activity in bathrooms ($n=8$). Tools for dealing with blood and wounds, like wipes, tourniquets, and Band-Aids, appear in nine photographs. The montages in *Bloody Diary* are divided into three fields, consisting of texts, white sans serif capital letters on a black background, and photographs. Each panel is 115.1 x

⁶ Four photographs depict pins stuck through Sem's skin. They will not be analyzed in this study because doing this is a different self-harming medium. Mayrhofer shows that different self-injuring methods have different function (2011: 121–122).

69.6 mm (4.531 x 2.74 inches), and in total each montage is 115.1 x 211.7 mm (4.53 x 8.33 inches). Sem has explained that his intention was that the proportions of both the panels and the montages should correspond with the proportions of a classic razorblade.

The use of the word diary in the title refers to a genre that relates to secrecy and confessions, and narration and narratives. This narrative aspect is strengthened by the style of the text panels, which are reminiscent of dialogue intertitles in a silent movie that includes texts that explain what is happening in the scenes.⁷ The capital letters could signify shouting (as used in internet lingo). Just like in a diary, the texts and photographs that document the act were produced in one day (even if the montage was made later). Most of the tools and bandages were not photographed during the act but were kept and documented later.

Six montages have been selected as examples to be analyzed; they represent the act from the start to the end. In the analysis, the montages will be analyzed as micro narratives that are read from top to bottom.

Image 2 consists of two text panels and one photograph. A close look shows that the photograph is a background on which the text panels have been placed. This structure is repeated in all of the montages except for those in Image 4. The text on the first panel is formulated as a question that runs across two lines: “HOW THE FUCK DO YOU / DEAL WITH THIS.” Nevertheless, because the second line does not end with a question mark, it can be read as an exhortation. The meaning of the text and its relation to the content of the other panels are not obvious, and this is often the case in the diary. If the text relates to the blade of a scalpel, for example, the word “THIS” in the text panel possibly does not just refer to the depicted blade. It is more likely to be a synecdoche that is referring to the act of cutting yourself. The blade, which is lying on a blue-toned white surface, casting a small shadow on the surface, is out of context, just like the texts are. The point of the blade, which is pointing to the right, can be interpreted as an index for a future that is approaching. The first sentence below the blade confirms that the subject is cutting: “BUT IT REALLY ESCALATE / JUST DID SOME SMALL / CUTS.” It seems as if Sem started to cut himself just to try it out and then he suddenly began doing more and more cutting. “THIS” in the panel above the photograph might refer to an act that he lost control over. This interpretation is confirmed by the following lines: “AND NOW I DON’T KNOW / WHAT TO DO I WANT MORE.” This is an example of how Sem was intrigued by the act from the beginning. The last words indicate that he will continue cutting himself—which is in line with the interpretation of the position of the blade.

⁷ In a study on YouTube videos on self-injury that I did with Anna Johansson, intertitles were used in a similar way (Johansson and Sternudd 2015).

The top panel of **Image 3** depicts a blade from a disposable razor. It is creased and discolored, with something that, in this context, could be dried blood. With its warm yellow color, the blade stands out in contrast to the light blue background. The almost horizontal position of the blade makes the composition stable. The text on the middle panel, “YOU NEVER KNOW HOW / YOU’LL REACT,” could be read as Sem’s comment on his own experience or a warning to others. Both interpretations are probably possible. The text in Image 3 is part of the same thread as the texts in Image 2. The bottom panel consists of a photograph showing some blue-toned skin with two scars on the left lower side that correspond to two fresher scars on the right. The light is soft, which makes the skin look smooth. Image 3 is a narrative that shows cutting before and after, with a middle panel that represents a reflection of the experience of self-cutting. The montage is the fourth in the diary; it is early days for Sem as a cutter, and his texts reveal his uncertainty about what is happening to him. His cuts are still shallow here—the cuts of a more experienced cutter seem to appear in the next montage.

Image 4 consists of two photographs and a text panel in between them. The photograph at the top depicts a classic razorblade lying on a piece of whitish cloth with red stains on it. Behind the object, a gray-greenish surface covered with tiny dark dots is visible. This gives the photograph a three-field structure. In the center of the upper field (the razorblade) a dark red elongated mirror symmetrical shape appears. This shape, which is formed by the cut-out part in the middle of the razorblade, is visually emphasized by the surrounding fields, and the dark red color stands out and contrasts with the rest of the image. Through this formal display, the razorblade is isolated and becomes the center of attention. It is notable that the blade is lying on top of the blood that cutting with it has produced. Even though the razorblade is positioned to the left, which makes the photograph a bit unbalanced, the composition is quite static and is dominated by horizontal, fairly straight lines. A background story, written down in Sem’s notebook, reveals that the cutting took place in a public toilet at an airport (nb p. 4). With this in mind, the cloth becomes a form of protection against the dirty floor, a setup that allows both a hygienic and a symbolic meaning. The photograph at the bottom is an extreme close-up of six bleeding wounds that form more or less straight lines that are angled down toward the bottom right of the image. From all of the lines, the blood creates amorphous organic red forms; their color connects them to the inner field of the razorblade in the photograph at the top. In between these photographs is a text panel. The first two lines say “IT’S NOT BLEEDING ENOUGH / MORE CUTS.” This thought possibly led to more cuts, until he was satisfied with the effect, and then he was “WALKING AWAY WOUNDED.” A bloodstained cloth and a clean, sharp tool are left behind. The association between the photographs and the intertitle suggests that the images should be read in a nonlinear way. The story starts in the middle, with



From left to right:

Image 4. Bloody Diary, p. 57. Montage made by Sem, based on photographs and forum post from 13 February the second year that he cut himself.

Image 5. Bloody Diary, p. 37. Montage made by Sem, based on photographs and forum post from 18 November the first year that he cut himself.

Image 6. Bloody Diary p. 23. Montage made by Sem, based on photographs and forum post from 27 October the first year that he cut himself. © Sternudd, printed with permission from the copyright holder.

the evaluation of the cuts and the solution, and then moves down to the bottom photograph, with the bleeding wounds, and ends with the blade put down in the photograph at the top. Like the walking wounded who emerge from a battlefield, Sem is leaving his own battle. From the notebook, we know that Sem left the toilet and got on a flight.

Image 5 consists of three photographs; those at the top and the bottom both depict close-up photographs of a body part with scars and bleeding wounds. They seem to have been photographed in a sequence on the same occasion. The drop of blood that is bulging out of the wound in the top photograph has trickled its way along the skin by the time the photograph at the bottom was taken. The pale skin emerging from complete darkness is reminiscent of chiaroscuro, a technique popular in seventeenth century art, which often aimed to induce intense feelings. The dark red, nearly black, color of the blood and the blurriness of the photographs emphasize this conception. A faint light is reflected in the drops of blood in both photographs, and, with the brighter parts of the skin, these create contrasts in the photographs. With its dark, gloomy, and quite indistinct character, this triptych differs from the previous ones in the series. The upper and lower panels are lying on top of a third photograph, which depicts a folded and bloodstained disposable wipe against a blue-gray background. The way in which the wipe is folded makes the blood and shadows create the form of a cross. As in Image 4, the photographs in Image 5 are constructed to form a nonlinear narrative, which begins with the photograph at the top, jumps down to the bottom photograph, and then ends with the background photograph. The blood on the wipe seems to come from the blood in the photographs that are lying on top of the middle one. In this conception, the end represents the aftermath: cleaning up after the activity has taken place but also a cross, a symbolic representation of death and sacrifice.

The montage in **Image 6** consists of one text panel and a photo that is placed on another photograph so that it slightly overlaps it. The first panel displays the following text: “AND YOU DON’T HAVE TO / TELL ME THE PROBLEMS / THIS WILL GIVE ME.” This text is part of a forum conversation in which Sem states that he is not taking the consequences of cutting lightly (forum post first year, October 27). This montage is based on material that was produced soon after his first experience with self-cutting. The text may therefore also indicate that Sem was not familiar with the culture on the forum. On the forum, written texts about the experiences of self-injury were seen as unproblematic, as long as they were not too “graphic” and thus understood as triggering. Sem had probably not calibrated his posts to fit the discourse on the forum yet.

Below the text panel, there is a photograph of a roughly triangular brown shape, reminding of a Rorschach inkblot, on a light-yellow background. A closer look reveals that the yellow background is possibly a Post-it note. The

bottom photograph depicts something that looks like an ankle, with fifteen more or less vertical cuts and two plasters lying upside down, possibly having been removed from the wounds. Bloodstains are visible on the plasters. The composition is quite unbalanced: the plasters are at an oblique angle to the scars, the cuts on the skin in the bottom photograph look haphazard, and there is a blurred blob of blood to the far right. The photographs are also a bit unclear and have a low contrast. Set against this are the highly contrasting black background with white text and the bright-yellow paper of the Post-it note. These could be interpreted as meaning that the text is a reminder (like text on a Post-it note) that the activities that are being executed by Sem are problematic and will get him into trouble. As a narrative, the content of the text is illustrated by the photographs, which depict the immediate and real problems with self-cutting—it creates wounds that need to be taken care of.

Bloody Diary, discussion

The most striking feature of the montages is that they are indices of activities. This aspect is most prominent in the photographs of Sem's wounds and scars. A photograph as a medium has a specific quality that it is important to consider here: it is an index of the things it depicts (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 155; Sonesson 1989) and therefore often understood as proof of what has happened. However, photographs do not explain what has happened—they just show what is in front of the camera. For Sem, the photographs are important because they are indices of an act that gives him a fixed point. He writes that the “wound[s] and scars [are] nearly all I feel sure about, all that's real for me” (first year, September 9). He states that even if it is possible to relativize or diminish everything he has done in his life, it is not possible to question the cutting (first year, December 9).

During the period that Sem was cutting, he constantly took photographs of his cuts; it became part of his routine. This documenting seems to have been quite obsessive. He has over two thousand photographs in his archive (conversation with Sem 2019), which includes snapshots of nearly all of his self-cutting. Through these photographs, he has evidence that the cutting really happened. They show what he is capable of and that he has done something undisputable. In a previous study on self-injurers' use of photographic documentation, notions of evidence were important factors—especially when fading scars triggered more self-cutting (Sternudd 2012). It is also tempting to see the indexical feature of photographs as a way of fighting against feelings of emptiness—photographs give Sem proof that he is real.

In some religious contexts, relics, whose meaning rests on indices, are powerful objects that are based on the notion that a holy person has touched them or that they are part of their bodies. In *Bloody Diary*, the tools and bandages in the photographs are reminiscent of relics. These objects are decontextualized by being photographed against a neutral background. The

relics get their meaning through the context; the photographs of the act and the text get theirs in the montage. As the texts were produced on the same day that the act took place, the texts also become a kind of indices. However, the texts do not function as captions that explain the content of the photographs. Instead, they are detached from the context, just like the depictions of the tools.

As representations of self-cutting, the montages are vague and puzzling. This impression is strengthened by the often tranquil composition in the montages. In contrast to the dramatic and violent content, the often soft light, low contrast, and stable composition give the images a calm and harmonic atmosphere. One example of this is where light comes from above (e.g., Image 2) and therefore depicts the objects without shadows—as floating in the air, separated from any context. A sense of emptiness and meaninglessness follows this detachment. The structure of the montages with three panels suggests that they could be read like a vertical comic strip. If so, how do they narrate the act? The analysis shows that Sem's montages do not follow the order of the activity—before and after the cut. Instead they often break this causality by changing the order of the panels, as in Image 4. He often creates a circular montage, with a panel that refers to other panels in the image—the meaning stays inside the montage, so to speak. The detached character and illogical order of the montages gives them a sense of estrangement, an effect that has often been used in fine art since the 18th century.⁸

Forum posts and other writings

“Shit, I really do this!” (first year, October 4) was the first forum post that Sem published. He wrote it on a discussion thread entitled “The I’m having An Urge Thread. *SI*.”⁹ In this thread, members talked about how they craved harming themselves. In context, “this” refers to injuring yourself. Judging from the wording and the exclamation mark, Sem was quite affected by the act. It seems to have been a moment of panic and astonishment, and something that was hard to handle.

In the next section, the presentation of the results from the analysis of Sem's texts is structured like a walk through different domains that appeared through the performative act. The presentation begins with *the performative act*, an act that “opens” two other domains: the unstructured and the *new social domains*, roughly referring to chaos and order respectively. In these domains, different “rooms” are located. They represent the themes and concepts derived from the analysis. Even though the analysis forms a linear

⁸ Cf. Kant's concept of disinterested judgment in relation to aesthetics and art. Sternudd (2011) discusses the formal similarities and fine art (as defined in Kress and van Leeuwen 2006).

⁹ On the forum, *SI* indicated a trigger warning, in this case Self-Injury. *SU* was used to warn for content related to suicide and so forth.

narrative, it is important to have in mind that for Sem the notions and experiences of the rooms often occurred simultaneously.

The performative act

Two events in Sem's personal history became central to his understanding of what made him cut himself for the first time. Both of these events relate to emptiness, which is a reoccurring theme in his texts. In Sem's history, *emptiness* is connected to being left and losing important others. Key episodes for him are the death of his sister and being left alone at a hospital when he was a small child.

I've been thinking that it all started with the death of my sister – it could explain my death anxiety and my self-destructive behaviour. But now I start to think that it all started long before that, when I was left at hospital as an infant (at that time parent[s] didn't stay with their children). (Third year, April 18)

These events seem to have created a sense of emptiness, which he has carried with him over the years. This conclusion is strengthened by his experience of having a sense of losing his parents (again) while they were grieving for their daughter. The tragic event involving his sister becomes part of the themes that can be described as *being left alone* and being *unable to control* the situation. *Being helpless* becomes, through this event, related to emptiness. With this in mind, it is logical that Sem needed a way to cope with his feelings when he thought he might lose his own child.

Why he chooses self-cutting as a coping method probably has to do with becoming familiar with the method through his work. However, other explanations also appear in his writing: the character of the method puts the body at the center of the act—something that is also the case with anorexia nervosa, which his sister suffered from. Sem sometimes explains his cutting as a way of remembering her and keeping her alive: “she's not really dead as long as someone remembers her” (second year, November 4). Self-cutting, then, relates to his sister and maybe to sharing her pain. Sem's understanding of his cutting as rooted in his childhood fits with the concept that mental distress is established during a person's childhood. In line with this, Sem sometimes expresses frustration at how his sister's death controls his life (nb p. 6).

Sem seems to understand his self-cutting as something existential. In a fragmented passage from his notebook, he writes about an inner void and an emptiness. However, an existing “core” inside him conquers the darkness (single sheet #1). On the other hand, he sometimes expresses a death wish by denying his body “life-sustaining” means such as food and sleep (single sheet #4). It seems as if Sem, through his writings, tries to understand himself and why he cuts himself. His texts are characterized by an exploratory attitude; he fumbles around, suggesting different explanations that frame his activities in

different, sometimes contradicting, statements. As in the montages, his writings explore the act and the experience that comes out of it.

Sem frequently addresses different aspects of feelings and emotions in his texts, as well as his ambiguous relationship with them. In his notebook, he writes about the experience of cutting himself in a way that involves emotions and physical reactions. He writes about a “rush” that is released through the cutting and how his body is “starting to shake” (nb p. 4) after the cut. In a forum post, he writes that he is not cutting to experience the pain (in the meaning of a nociceptive sensation). For Sem, the sight of his blood is more important, and he also likes “the tickling feeling when it runs down [his] arm” (fifth year, June 19). Even if the sensations involved in self-cutting are not always described with such lightness, in general his self-cutting generates feelings that are manageable. For Sem, seeing blood temporarily removes his anxiety and similar emotions and feelings. On a conceptual level, he often uses the so-called humoral and mechanical understandings of feelings (cf. Sternudd 2014: 16). Like the steam in a steam engine, feelings that are not expressed create power that is captured and remains trapped under an armor of strength. Through self-cutting, these feelings are released, but in a controlled way. However, Sem’s relations to feelings are ambiguous. He writes about how good it feels afterwards, when he is relieved “from all bad emotions” (second year, November 25), but he also asks whether he uses it as “a strategy to avoid dealing with the true hard feelings?” (fourth year, November 7). Notably, the idea that self-cutting is done to deal with intense feelings does not differentiate between negative or positive feelings. Sem writes that maybe he has problems with *intense* feelings (third year, November 30). In these texts, he appears to use cutting as a way of *escaping* intense experiences, no matter what they stand for. Even though the intensity of feelings is problematic for Sem, he is also scared when he is not feeling anything (third year, November 4).

As in the previous section, we can see that Sem’s statements give diverse impressions. He describes that having strong feelings is a problem to the extent that experiencing a traumatic situation led to his first cut. After that, self-cutting became a way of coping with these feelings; on the other hand, he also states that feeling something is better than feeling nothing. The statement that cutting “makes me cry and feel, [it] releases tensions and emotions” (fifth year, November 7) relates to the metaphor that is quite commonly used by self-injurers on the internet: my blood is my tears (cf. Sternudd 2014, 18). This is an example of how Sem is probably influenced by how others express themselves on the forum.

The act. As we have seen in the *Bloody Diary*, in his writings Sem describes over and over again how he cut himself. He often returns to the sight of blood and how it feels to see blood: “I get excited when I see the dark red blood coming out” (nb p. 4). The visual impact is important for him. Looking at the

words and the themes he uses in his texts conveys something about what the act entails and how Sem experiences it. He seldom confirms where the act takes place, but from the montages, we know that he sometimes cuts himself in bathrooms (on bathrooms and self-cutting, Sternudd 2014, 24–26). Different types of blades are mentioned, but other tools like needles and pins also appear in his texts. The word cut and various forms of it are by far the most common words in Sem’s texts. Apart from cut, the words blood, control, and feeling are most common. The results of the act are referred to as wounds or damage. Descriptions of the aftermath of the act include words relating to taking care of the wounds, for example with disinfectant and Band-Aids.

One month after his first cut, Sem writes in the notebook about his fears concerning cutting himself with a razorblade as it can result in cuts that are unintentionally too deep and dangerous: “I’m afraid of the razorblade—it cuts so smoothly through the skin” (nb p. 2). However, he has mixed feelings toward the tool. In one section, Sem describes the act of cutting as a “romance” with the razorblade: “it’s so precise, so smooth—quickly making so much damage, so easily. [First] you see nothing and then the drops of blood [...] it’s really so frighteningly beautiful” (ibid.). In this quote, his mixed feelings about the act appear, but again the visual impact of cutting seems tempting.

In a forum thread, Sem writes: “I can get very emotional when I see the wound open, maybe it’s because I get a glimpse of something that’s really me, on the inside” (fourth year, February 17). In this quote, the importance of releasing something from inside himself appears again. From his texts, it is also clear that the visual impression of the physical inside is important. Seeing the blood caused by cutting seems to reassure Sem that inside his body there is not just a void. Blood becomes, then, a symbolic sign that an inside exists and indexical proof that there really is something there. We can also see that the theme of emptiness reoccurs here.

The visual impact of cutting dominates Sem’s experience of it. He often writes that he likes to see the blood flowing, but when he loses control over the act it can be quite frightening. On one occasion, he describes the aftermath of self-cutting looking the same as after a “car accident” (second year, November 25). Nevertheless, the sight of blood and wounds is usually quite pleasing and essential to him. However, as the following quote, written after he had cut himself again after a break, shows, several sensory modes are involved in self-cutting: “it all comes back to me/the smell/the intensesness [...] a new blade/old blood/and the smell” (sixth year, January 12). The quote is also interesting as it indicates that it is important to consider self-cutting as a total experience, which can involve all of a person’s senses.

Shaping and transforming. Performative and transformative aspects of the act of self-cutting are identified in Sem’s texts by words related to notions like change and shifts, reconfiguration, and formation. These examples of

words related to a thetic performative are expressed in writings that compare the first time with “coming home” (fifth year, November 7). However, the act also changes, or, as Sem puts it, reconfigures him in a physical, concrete way. Sem writes that, apart from obvious marks on his skin, cutting also “reconfigures [his] body” (fifth year, September 11). The scars change his “way of moving and [his] body posture” (ibid.). The constant need to hide the scars gives him a special awareness of his body, and in relation to the gaze of others he needs to “constantly think about what body parts [that] can be visible” (p. 49). Even though the scars fade over time, Sem has to live with some of them forever. Thus, the performative change that is caused to his body through the scars is permanent. Sem also relates cutting to making the body more real for him. For instance, when he describes the day after he has cut himself, he states that it feels “as [if] the skin is thinner”, that he is “feeling more sensitive, skinless, and vulnerable but also present” (fifth year, October 9).

Cutting can also create something that Sem calls a place: “The last time cutting has taken me to a wonderful place, a place without worries and emotion, being totally blank and empty for a while. Like being dead, that I fear so much—but now I’m in control” (fourth year August 22). It is a good place where he can control things he fears, like death. It is also place where he finds his sister (nb p. 4). In a passage in which Sem explains how he prepares himself for cutting, he says that he needs to “get over the threshold” (fourth year, January 19) to get to the other side—from a “brand new frightening world” (ibid.) to something real. It is notable that although self-cutting is usually regarded as destructive, in these statements it becomes a creative force. It creates a sensitive body: “It make me as something that is real, it defines me. It makes me cry and feel, releases tensions and emotions” (fifth year, November 7).

The unstructured domain

Sem’s first text in his notebook begins with the word “invaded”; on the following line the word “porous” is used, and the section ends with the comment that “keeping the borders” is important as “inside there is nothing” (single sheet #1). His later writing suggests that he has a fear of being invaded by others and that he needs protection. During this early period of self-cutting, Sem felt as if he was trapped by relations that limited his bodily independence; “in a relation your body isn’t only yours anymore” (first year, October 25). In this perspective, self-cutting could be a way of reclaiming his body.

Many of Sem’s writings seem to allude to protests. He is often a bit edgy, stating that “my cutting does not harm anyone else—I can do whatever I like with my body, it is mine.” He exclaims “NO” several times, for instance when he gives an answer in a fake interview he conducts with himself, he says: “When I talk about resistance, I stress the active NO that cutting is for me.

[Cutting] is something active and in a way also an aggressive act” (nb p. 5). His uses of the words *active* and *aggressive* could reflect a reaction to the notion that self-cutting is often linked to the idea of victims. Instead, self-cutting, to him, is a strong statement meaning “I draw a line” (first year, December 12). In my previous work, I have developed the notion that cutting can be seen as drawing a contour around the body (Sternudd 2011: 86–88). Just like in a drawing in which a contour made by a pencil defines a shape and lifts it up from the background, Sem is cutting himself out of (or into) the world. In his texts he frequently uses words that connect the skin to a border; a border that needs to be protected and that is also a place for reclaiming the body. Without the skin, the body becomes vulnerable, but at the same time, cutting is described as a type of protection, which is a contra-intuitive concept as cutting yourself literary means that your bodily border is opened.

Deviancy. On several occasions, Sem relates his self-cutting to drugs.

For me cutting is both handling emotions and also something that is something like a drug, I can actually long for the “good” extreme feeling (like falling down down for ever in a dream—a feeling beyond description with words). (Second year November 25)

On other occasions, he compares the self-cutting experiences with a kick (third year, March 3). Sem uses terms that often relate to drug addiction; he writes about the urges he has to cut and when he cannot resist his cravings, he calls it a relapse. In Sem’s descriptions of himself, an addictive body appears, a body that is shaped through repeated cutting and that yearns for its “drug”—and like an addict, it seems harder and harder for him to stop cutting. By describing self-cutting as an addiction, he positions the act as socially unaccepted and himself as deviant. It should be said that Sem’s statements could be influenced by the conversations in his internet community, where comparing self-cutting to drug abuse was quite common.

A dominating theme is that self-cutting excludes Sem from a “normal” social context. In Sem’s writings there is a tendency to argue against common notions of self-cutting as something negative, for instance in the provocative statement mentioned earlier that claimed that self-cutting is something enjoyable and that argues against the victimization of self-cutters. Being strange or different can be related to notions of deviancy and social exclusion, especially as cutting yourself is not generally accepted in society. In this logic, becoming strange is not entirely negative—it has some benefits, such as understanding something that others do not. To make yourself special, you need to constitute something outside—outside of ignorance—with people who do not understand. This follows a logic that says that those who exist outside the world of self-cutting cannot fully understand, because they are unable to see beyond the wounds and scars and the notion that someone can

deliberately hurt themselves. It follows from this that Sem becomes constantly fearful that his cutting will be revealed by his nearest and dearest (nb p. 4). His family is not the only thing at stake; his job and social position are also threatened.

Romanticism. In his writings, Sem often uses wordings that relate to vulnerability, sometimes describing himself as someone who is walking wounded. This relates to actual situations, where he literally walks around among people with fresh and sometimes still-bleeding cuts, but it also relates to victims of war (see Farlex Dictionary of Idioms 2015). The trope can constitute a self-cutter as someone who fights a battle with their feelings and gets hurt by the act. They are somebody who has survived and who has scars; they walk around in solitude with no one to comfort them. Sem often uses such romantic notions and vocabulary. His texts often allude to the notion of the sublime, where fear and beauty become two sides of the same coin. Sublimity is also present when he tries to address the experience of self-cutting by using words like intense and flow, and he relates the state he reaches to death and annihilation.¹⁰

Sem often highlights the control aspects of cutting and that it is not connected to suicide. Nevertheless, it is important that he also notes the potential danger of self-cutting:

Immediately I felt that this was bad, it hurt like hell and it was deeper than I use[d] to cut (usually it has been quite superficial cuts). And I panicked [...] Thought now I blow it, this time it is over the line [...] No good feeling after SI this time, only panic and I ran around dripping and pouring blood all over the place. [...] I flipped out, got severe anxiety attacks that stayed with me the rest of the night. (Second year, November 25)

In this quote, Sem acknowledges the destructive aspects of self-cutting and what happens when it gets out of hand. However, like a Romantic artist, he is balancing on a dangerous edge, an edge that seems both frightening and tempting for him. In other texts this romantic trait appears in descriptions like being out of control, having a sense of emptiness, and being in the moment.

Death is, for Sem, the ultimate loss of control, but losing control also relates to his aging body—with a blade in his hand, he can take control over death and aging. Just like his attitude toward control, Sem seems to vacillate between having uncomfortable feelings that he has nothing inside him and trying to archive emptiness. Chaos and emptiness trigger self-cutting, but it is also a desirable place to be. It is a state that seems to be connected to a wish to be in the moment; as he says, being empty can be great if it is self-induced—all feelings are gone and you just exist. It is a state of being callous, being insensible.

¹⁰ On the sublime, see Lyotard (1991).

However, there is also a component of self-contempt in the Romantic position. Sem sometimes relates it to notions of being pathetic and weak (third year, January 14). When he states that he is someone who deserves to be cut, he contradicts the notion of self-cutting as an act creating a good place. Instead, he seems to be punishing himself because he thinks he is worthless, using words related to self-blaming and self-loathing.

The new social domain

The new social domain differs from the previous domains as it is characterized by control, not by chaos. Like the unstructured domain, its origin is the first performative act, but it is constituted to a higher degree by the repetition of the act. In this section we address Sem's writings that refer to social aspects of the act, like rules and rituals. He says that he needs "a principle to rule my actions, to tell me what's right and wrong" (fourth year, February 17). One way to achieve this is for his self-cutting to become more like a habit or ritual than a single experience. We have seen earlier that the use of a drug, as a deviant habit, became connected to cutting. However, drinking also became part of the ritual (fifth year, September 17). He also writes that self-cutting that is "done regularly [with the] same routine" (fifth year, February 27) has possibly become a habit. After five years, self-cutting has changed from something exceptional to something that Sem describes as a trivial habit: "Got up at six, the cut started to bleed again during morning washing, went to work" (fifth year, June 10). A reference to machines and robots emphasizes the detached view of cutting. Sem writes about how his cutting has become something that he does automatically but that it is not necessarily safer: he says that he "went for the blade like a robot and did a worse cut than I've done since one year ago" (third year, November 5).

Sem sometimes puts the act in a religious context. In an early text from his notebook, he uses expressions that refer to the passion of Christ—"to be reconciled with the cross/wordlessness/death" (nb 6)—and five years later he writes: "I don't want the flow to stop/let it bleed, let it bleed/my cross/and the tears" (fifth year, December 9). In line with this symbolic conceptualization of the blood that is released by a cut, a communicative aspect of the act is articulated. In a fake interview with himself, Sem relates the act to communication:

Q: Do I use [self-cutting] as a means to express my feelings in a physical way?

A: I see my cutting [...] as a symbolic way of expressing something that I do not know what it is. (nb p. 5)

Sem's answer reveals an interesting notion—the need to communicate something that is impossible to understand and express.¹¹ Another remark that is important in relation to this is that it seems as if self-cutting is significant as a medium in itself: that the powerful expression it articulates is more important than the content of the expression.

Belonging. We can see how Sem's notion of cutting changes over time; some of the tension associated with it lessens, possibly through the repetition of the act. The cutting becomes something unintentional, automatized. But it is relevant that he writes on a forum whose members are all familiar with the act and its consequences, so his writing there is part of his socialization into the community. His normalization of cutting himself and minimizing the consequences (of the act) might make the affective aspects seem less important. However, this strengthens his constitution as a self-cutter. Many of his statements that are connected to the deviancy of the act are the same as the ones that make a person who cuts him/herself part of a group: “as a cutter you're definitely part of the gang, you're one who cuts, this [gang] can be lame, pathetic, and immature but if you cut [...] then you are a person who cuts” (nb p. 2). Five years after he started cutting, Sem states that it is “what I do, and it's the only real identity I have left – my fixed point” (fifth year, October 15). In this respect, Sem differs from other people who cut themselves. For him, self-cutting has turned into a way of becoming someone. The act in itself has the potential to define someone, which makes the act performative on a social level too.

Through his ongoing cutting and his participation in the activities of the online community, Sem became part of a social context. He became a member of this community because he needed a safe place in which to communicate the way he felt about his cutting and he needed to understand the meaning of it. Even though he understands the act as reflecting an incapacity to express himself, he thoroughly explored the act and thus attracted others' interest in him through his self-cutting. The internet community became important for him as a nonjudgmental group, with members that had personal experience of self-injury. This was important to Sem: to be accepted, you had to be someone with personal experience of deliberately harming yourself. But even though the community was supportive, this did not mean that self-injury was understood as something good or acceptable. Sem struggled quite a lot at the beginning to fit into the social norms of the community, but being part of the community meant being included, and he could find people that he could easily identify with there.

¹¹ See Tomkins' concept of affective experiences of a newborn child, who without a language can only express their experience through an unarticulated scream (Tomkins 1995, 54).

Control. Sem describes cutting as something that gives a point a view, a perspective that is exclusive. Control is, as discussed above, one of the most frequently used words in Sem's texts. It can relate to things that control his life, such as the memory of his sister or his partner's influence, or to how cutting is a way of taking control of an emotional pain—if he controlled the pain, he “controlle[d] death” (nb p. 6). This importance placed on being in control spills over to being in control of the act of cutting—an act that should be planned and prepared for, and executed with medical equipment. Sem describes himself as a responsible cutter who plans well and keeps his cutting within limits, that is, he is not suicidal. He stresses the difference between intentional cuts and accidental ones. Being in control equals exposing the body to harmful acts. Self-cutting is a creative and repetitive performative act that results in the forming of a new social body.

The importance of control relates to different notions. Sem is in need of a fixed point and self-cutting gives him a structure. Cutting becomes a way of handling a new situation and it releases inner feelings. It also reveals something and gives some meaning to the world. In his notebook, Sem tries to make sense of the cutting and wonders if it is a way of fooling himself with feelings that are controllable. He sees cutting as an act that can move someone from being broken to being healed (nb p. 3).

Discussion

In the introduction, three questions were posed. First question What can the images and texts created by Sem tell us about how he perceived his first self-cutting experience? The results show that even from the beginning, he seemed puzzled by what he had done. In the montages from *Bloody Diary*, this uncertainty is quite conspicuous; the photographs and text panels are placed side by side but the connections between them are often unclear. In his notebook and forum posts, some aspects of his texts are prominent—Sem understood that something important had happened, something that could result in a dramatic shift in his life. But at the same time, he was very confused and needed help, which is why the discussion with his peers became so important for him. From the first cut, he understood that those around him who had no experience of self-cutting would not understand, so he turned to the internet community for help and support to sort himself out. In this respect, Sem is representative of many self-cutters and self-harmers who searched for help and support from peers on the internet during the first decade of the new millennium.¹²

¹² These years were the heydays for the self-help communities described exhaustively in the work of Adler and Adler (2007; 2008; 2011). These communities seem to have been replaced by other internet resources during the last decade. On the decline of self-injury forums, see Adler and Adler 2011: 49–50.

The second question read: What can the images and texts created by Sem tell us about how he perceived and his repeated cutting over the subsequent years? Being someone who cuts himself seems to have given Sem a fixed position. He refers to this as a “real identity” or a “core.” Conceptually, these words follow a notion about the difference between people’s interior existence and their exterior existence—the superficial outside in contrast to the real inside. However, judging from his texts, it was not until Sem understood himself as a full member of the community that he took on the identity of someone who cut himself. This phenomenon, transforming an activity into an identity, is not unique to Sem. For instance, in research by Adler and Adler (2008: 41), an informant describes how the “habit” of doing “it” [harming herself] becomes a self-abuser identity (see also Johansson 2011). Sem’s identity as a cutter seemed to have been established first when self-cutting had become a habit. This stresses the importance of repetition as a performative ground—even if the performative force is present during the first act, it needs repeating to establish the change (Butler 1993: 33). Sem uses the metaphor “walking wounded” to describe how he sees himself after cutting, a trope that makes an analogical comparison between the self-cutting and injured soldiers who walk around during a battle. It also refers to a solidarity among those who have experienced the same battle: “many of the walking wounded helped with the more seriously injured cases” (Farlex Dictionary of Idioms 2015). The communication that took place on the forum could be seen as a way of getting help, but it could also be viewed as a method of helping others in the same situation—those who are fighting on the same battlefield.

Sem often uses formulations that animate or transform objects and activities. For instance, the act of cutting can be referred to as a place where emotions are released and concretized. One way of understanding this is to consider that when Sem cuts, his focus on the act becomes so intense that he shuts out the world around him: “I’ve noticed that after I’ve cut all of my focus, my attention is directed towards it” (fourth year, November 7). This dissociation experience can last for quite a long time. However, cutting is not just transformed into a physical entity; Sem also describes self-cutting as someone who comes to visit, as a friend. He writes, “When he’s done his job I have to deal with the consequences and [that] sucks (but it’s nice to have a friend)” (fourth year, January 19). It appears as if Sem, by describing self-cutting as the property of someone/-thing else he removed his own response for cutting himself.

In his writing, Sem uses an approach to cutting that relates not only to Romanticism but also to certain alternative cultures. For instance, by choosing to photograph a razorblade for *Bloody Diary* he connects the diary to the emblematic status the razorblade has had over the years in alternative cultures like punk, goth, black metal, and emo. A razorblade is the prototypical tool of self-cutting, and even if overviews of photographs of self-cutting show that

other tools are used, the classic razorblade has become almost a fetishized object. Connecting goth and other alternative cultures with self-harm is quite common in the literature (see, for example Rutledge, Rimer and Scott 2008). Sem's writings also fit into a Christian tradition of wounds that heal, and the possibility that through cutting, death can be defeated—cutting makes the emptiness inside bearable. We can assume that the activity and a cultural recognition of it as a culture with Romantic features influenced and inspired Sem. Even if there were other reasons why he chose to cut himself, such as the physical/bodily character of the act, he was also intrigued by the style of the act.

The last research question concerned whether there is a difference between the meaning expressed in Sem's images and texts that is based on their different media characteristics. The results indicate that the photographs in the montages, through their ability to be indices, proved that he cut himself. As his self-cutting became an important way of defining himself, because it was undisputable, these media products also became important, even more so since most scars fade over time (cf. Sternudd 2011). It is possible that the religious aspect of relics influenced the creation of the montages. Sem's photographs also fit well with the visual accounts of self-cutting that are uploaded to online platforms. They also correspond well with the results from my previous studies. Like many photographs of self-injury, they are close-ups that document cuts or scars on an arm or a leg, and they reveal little information about the context (Sternudd 2011; 2014). Just like for many self-injurers in my studies, Sem's documentation of his injuries became an obsession over the years, as if every moment that he was carrying them out was important. What makes the photographs in Sem's *Bloody Diary* special is their relation to his textual comments on the internet forum. The analysis showed that the images' formal and representational qualities are reminiscent of fine art. The combination of photographs and texts in the montages decontextualized them and the record of Sem's self-cutting experience became quite vague. This ambiguity is deepened through the nonlinear narrative in the images that creates a sense of circularity: the panels seem to refer to each other in a way that is reminiscent of a feedback loop. This movement connects with how Sem captures the experience in words, using words like emptiness and void. However, Sem might have found this static configuration unsatisfying—his last montage relating to cutting is in June in the second year, and after that, there is only text.

Even though Sem argues that the experience of cutting oneself is impossible to describe in words, he does in fact keep describing it in various ways. The notion that self-harm is a way of expressing something inexpressible is quite common in the literature and in the relevant research; see, for example, Bandalli (2011: 51), who writes that self-harm expresses and communicates "inexpressible emotions and issues." In a review of young people's experiences of self-harm, Lindgren et al. (2021) develop this

common communicative aspect, defining it as “speaking without words” (7). Steggals et al. conclude that when the normal language it is not working, it is replaced by self-injury an “alternative semiotics of communicative body” (2020a: 167). Sem tries to answer the what, why, and how questions by using different words that could establish a coherent logic that explains what he was doing to himself. Nevertheless, his statements are often contradictory. For example, he says that he feels as though he is being invaded, but to defend himself he opens up his skin by purposely cutting it. Sem’s thoughts are often all over the place. Just like for many of Sem’s peers (cf. Lindgren et al. 2021: 3), control is a concept that is at the center of his articulation of his cutting—no matter which domain they appear in.

Sem’s writings about his experience have at least two purposes. They are a communicative practice that addresses his peers and himself and are also self-reflective acts in which he tries to put his experiences into words and, through this, to understand them. Writing to his peers on a community forum was also a way of being “seen” by others and thus confirmed as someone who belongs to the community and who is recognized as a legitimate member of that group (cf. Johansson 2011).

Different media based on written texts are used by Sem to explore and come to terms with his self-cutting. The texts in the montages stand out as snapshots that capture a moment, but there is no context. In contrast to these, the writings in the notebook and on the internet forum are media that made an introspective and interpersonal exploration of the act possible. A clear example of the former is the fake interview he had with himself; the question-and-answer format of the genre forced him to describe his experience in words. The discussion with his peers and how they described their experiences gave Sem’s self-cutting a context. When Sem describes the act of cutting, he does not state that he is frightened of the possible dangers involved in the act. When he does express any concern about his wounds, it relates to how they may expose what he has done, although this fear of exposure to some degree involves the possibility that his cutting could hurt significant others emotionally (cf. Moyer and Nelson, 2007; Tillman, Prazak and Obert 2018). However, Sem does not seem ashamed (as described by Lesniak 2010; McAndrew and Warne, 2014; Tan et al., 2019); instead he often uses expressions that allude to pride and bravery.

Self-cutting as a medium has some striking features for Sem. Seeing blood triggers him; it represents an inner state and is also a powerful aesthetic visual element. It is beautiful and frightening at the same time, and also comforting and possible lethal. Self-cutting is a strategy that can be understood as a way of comprehending something through the body—a medium that makes the practitioner special. It mediates inner experiences and painful memories from Sem’s history. Through this mediation, these inner entities get a visual form, a material aspect (the body), and a nociceptive or tactile experience. Through a mediation to a social meaning, the self-cutting is connected with others and

given (sub)cultural recognition. For Sem, the internet forum fulfilled the requirements for being a successful performative act; the context and circumstances were right and he was accepted as a self-injurer. Sem's images and texts describe self-cutting "as both a personal and a social practice" (Steggals et al. 2020b: 271).

On numerous occasions, Sem states what the act does, so it is often given performative qualities, but it can often have other purposes and effects. A list of words that Sem uses to describe the outcome of self-cutting in his writing is quite long: self-cutting is healing; it deals with or creates feeling and it visualizes inner experiences. The act also makes meaning and communicates. Self-cutting, for better and worse, closes some social contexts and opens up others. Self-cutting is like a drug or a punishment. On a personal level, self-cutting brings Sem closer to his memories. The complexity of the act is manifested in the inconsistent character of the list.

In the analysis, the performative character of self-cutting becomes clear. The results showed the dramatic effect that the first episode of cutting had on Sem. The act—as a thetic performative act—seems to have the power to immediately change Sem's perception of himself and of his body. Through cutting, Sem reached a stronger sense of being able to define himself. Notions that were probably important for Sem's identification as a cutter were the solid and undeniable character of the act and the consequences of it. Nobody can dispute that you have cut yourself because the scars are there.

For Sem, self-cutting has two, seemingly contradictory, major outcomes: the act excludes the executor from having what is perceived as a normal life, but at the same time it defines the person, and they become part of the community of people who cut themselves. These transitions signify, simultaneously, a corporeal change and an abstract, social change that joins people together through the thetic act. As we have seen, Sem's writings establish a logic that helps him to understand his self-cutting. This logic is constituted around some significant themes and concepts. Childhood and painful memories are two of them, together with being left behind and emptiness (cf. Babiker and Arnold 1997: 62). Hence, Sem's self-cutting involves feeling as if he is making his body move closer to his sister by mimicking the experience of her body being in pain. Filling in the emptiness, the void he has inside relates cutting to let the inner flood out.

Control and chaos and being out of control are concepts that self-cutting relates to in different ways: it can involve accepting the chaos and letting yourself fall into the void, but it can also involve taking control of the chaos and conquering death by controlling the potential means of achieving death, creating a powerful new identity, and walking away wounded.

This study has shown how visual and textual mediations of self-cutting highlights different aspects of the act—images easily capture the experience

itself, while in contrast, text can be more reflective. Further studies could confirm whether the results of this study could be generalizable. Nevertheless, this study has shown how meaningful images and texts produced by persons with experience of self-cutting can be for understanding the meaning of the act. This could be important in the treatment of people who suffer from self-harmful behavior.

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¹³ First name is not stated in the article.