



**MONASH** University

**Using Photography as an Analogy in the Experience of Death and Mourning**

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*For my mother and father, whose absence moulds me  
And for my daughter Lola, whose presence re-frames me*

## Table of contents

<b>Table of contents</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Declaration</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>List of Illustrations</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Preface</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>Photography and Finitude</b> .....	<b>23</b>
Photography and death .....	23
Photography as an analogy.....	25
The photograph as a performance space .....	28
<b>Chapter 2</b> .....	<b>34</b>
<b>The Corpse and Lamentation</b> .....	<b>34</b>
Locating death: what happens at the moment of death .....	34
Staging death.....	46
Reintroducing death: the corpse in photograph .....	53
<b>Chapter 3</b> .....	<b>58</b>
<b>The Death of My Father</b> .....	<b>58</b>
Dead Christ.....	59
Alive Dad: portrait of a dying man.....	65
Constructing death: those loved and dead in the photograph.....	68
Dead Dad .....	72
<b>Chapter 4</b> .....	<b>79</b>
<b>Lamenting My Own Death</b> .....	<b>79</b>
Playing with death: photographers stage their own death .....	80
Return of the dead: spirit photography and headless folk .....	85
Controlling death: staging self-mourning photographs .....	91
Reanimating death: dead Dad's suit.....	98
Holding death: photography and intersection .....	107
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>115</b>
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>121</b>

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## Abstract

Imagery saturates society, yet outside the sensationalist approach of news media, personal images of death still remains a relatively unexplored area. People no longer sit looking at images of their dead loved ones, as with historical post-mortem photographs, talking and lamenting their loss. Culturally in the West, images of the dead have become almost taboo, and being a witness to death often happens only at the bedside of an immediate family member or a very close loved one. It is therefore not surprising that contemporary photographic artists have sought to re-introduce death into a counter-discourse in response to death's denial, generating compelling reflections through creating photographs of corpses and staged deaths.

This research project uses photography as an analogy to look at death and lament from a non-Christian perspective. Where religion sees death as infinite, transcendence from the limits of mortality, in a largely secular society such as Australia, death is the ultimate limit. I examine the arbitrariness of death, and then the personal loss of my father. I then investigate my relationship to death and my mortality, whilst using lamentation in my performative photographs. Rather than a notion of the infinite, this work argues for an understanding of finitude in the experience of death and lament, and an embracing of our limitations and mortality. Paradoxically this acknowledgement of finitude emplaces us within the greater Whole. My studio research seeks to articulate a space through photography to say the unsayable, by producing images of lamentations that articulate new understandings and readings.

## Declaration

I, Paula Mahoney, declare that this thesis, except with the Research Graduate School Committee's approval, contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution and affirm that to the best of my knowledge the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Paula Mahoney

Signed .....

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## List of Illustrations

- Figure 1: An illustration of Terminus, the stone resembling a tombstone.  
<http://www.romeacrosseurope.com/?m=20160903#sthash.PRs5E161.7UlwoxWo.dpbs> (accessed 15/06/16).
- Figure 2: Alexander Gardner, *Washington Navy Yard, D.C. Lewis Payne, in sweater, seated and manacled*, 1865, albumen silver print from a collodion glass plate negative, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.
- Figure 3: Alexander Gardner, *Washington Navy Yard, District of Columbia. Lewis Payne in sweater, seated and manacled* (these 3 photographs of Lewis Payne all share the same title), 1865, albumen silver print from a collodion glass plate negative, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.
- Figure 4: Misha Japaridze, Pussy Riot members, from left, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Yekaterina Samutsevich and Maria Alekhina sit in a glass cage at a court room in Moscow, Russia, August 3, 2012 © Misha Japaridze/ AP.  
<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/putin-punk-band-pussy-riot-punishment-not-severe-article-1.1128307> (accessed 20/12/13).
- Figure 5: Post mortem photograph, the girl at the left is dead and propped up.  
[http://www.ilmessaggero.it/societu00e0/nolimits/foto\\_post\\_mortem\\_vittoriana\\_defunti\\_ritratti\\_ancora\\_vita-697957.html](http://www.ilmessaggero.it/societu00e0/nolimits/foto_post_mortem_vittoriana_defunti_ritratti_ancora_vita-697957.html) (accessed 15/08/16).
- Figure 6: Henry Peach Robinson, *Fading Away*, 1858, composite photograph made from 5 negatives, albumen silver print, 24.4 x 39.3cm, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY., gift of Alden Scott Boyer.
- Figure 7: Peter Paul Rubens, *Lamentation of Christ by the Virgin Mary and St John*, 1614/1615, oil on panel, 107.5 x 115.5cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.
- Figure 8: J. M. Brainard, Photograph of unidentified deceased woman in parlour chair, Rome, N.Y., ca. 1880-1900s, gelatin silver print on cardboard mount cabinet card, 10.8 x 16.5cm, George Eastman Museum, Rochester N.Y.
- Figure 9: Eugene Delacroix, *Massacre at Chios*, 1824, oil on canvas, 419 x 354cm, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris, 1824.
- Figure 10: Jeff Wall, *Dead Troops Talk (A vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)*, 1992, cinematographic photograph, transparency in lightbox, 229 x 417cm, Private collection Mr. David Pincus, NY.
- Figure 11: Berlinde De Bruyckere, *Kreupelbout – Cripplewood*, 2013, wax, epoxy, iron, wood, fabric, blankets, rope, 230 x 1790 x 410cm. Photograph Mirjam Devriendt © Berlinde De Bruyckere / Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

- Figure 12: Niclaus of Haguenau and Matthias Grünewald (sculpted and painted, respectively), *Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1512-1516, oil on wood, (central panel) 2.69 x 3.07m; (wings) 2.32m x 75cm (each); (predella) 76 x 340cm, Unterlinden Museum, Colmar, France.
- Figure 13: Niclaus of Haguenau and Matthias Grünewald (sculpted and painted, respectively), *Isenheim Altarpiece*, detail from middle panel, 1512-1516, oil on wood, (central panel) 2.69 x 3.07m; (wings) 2.32m x 75cm (each); (predella) 76 x 340cm, Unterlinden Museum, Colmar, France.
- Figure 14: Niclaus of Haguenau and Matthias Grünewald (sculpted and painted, respectively), *Isenheim Altarpiece*, detail from lower panel, 1512-1516, oil on wood, (central panel) 2.69 x 3.07m; (wings) 2.32m x 75cm (each); (predella) 76 x 340cm, Unterlinden Museum, Colmar, France.
- Figure 15: Paula Mahoney, *Child Destruction*, 2008, chromira print, 120 x 150cm.
- Figure 16: Salvador Dalí, *Christ of Saint John of the Cross*, 1951, oil on canvas, 205 x 116cm, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow.
- Figure 17: Théodore Géricault, *Raft of the Medusa*, 1818-1819, oil on canvas, 4.91 x 7.16m, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.
- Figure 18: Théodore Géricault, *Studies for Raft of the Medusa*, 1818 -1819, various dimensions,  
 (i) *Head of a Guillotined Man*, 1818/19, oil on panel, 41 x 38cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, IL, USA  
 (ii) *Head Of A Drowned Man*, 1819, oil on canvas, 38.2 x 46.4cm, Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, USA  
 (iii) *Heads Of Torture Victims*, 1818, oil on canvas, 48 x 60cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen, Rouen, France  
 (iv) *Anatomical Pieces*, 1819, oil on canvas, 37 x 46cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen, Rouen, France  
 (v) *After death*, 1818, oil on canvas, 48 x 60cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen, Rouen, France  
 (vi) *Study of Hands and Feet*, 1818-1819, oil on canvas, 52 x 64cm, Musée Fabre, Montpellier, France.
- Figure 19: Joel Peter Witkin, *The Kiss*, 1983, gelatin silver print with ink handwork, 37.1 x 37.5cm, Feldschuh Gallery, NY.
- Figure 20: Andreas Serrano, *Death Unkenown*, 1992, cibachrome, 125.73 x 152.4cm <https://www.boumbang.com/andres-serrano> (accessed 20/3/16).

- Figure 21: Andres Serrano, *Pneumonia drowning II*, 1992, Cibachrome, 125.73 x 152.4cm  
<https://www.boumbang.com/andres-serrano> (accessed 20/03/16).
- Figure 22: Photographer unknown, *Murder of Alice and Morris Anderson, Waverley*, 1944, from black and white negative found in an envelope  
<http://www.blogs.hht.net.au/cityofshadows/tag/glass-plate-negative> (accessed 20/10/14).
- Figure 23: Dario Argento, dir., Still from *Suspiria*, 1977  
<http://www.moviemezzanine.com/blind-love-our-cinematic-infatuations/2>  
(Accessed 27/04/2009)
- Figure 24: Paula Mahoney, *Murder*, 2008, chromira print, 120 x 150cm.
- Figure 25: Paula Mahoney, *Grievous bodily harm*, 2008, chromira print, 120 x 150cm.
- Figure 26: Paula Mahoney, *Intentionally cause serious injury*, 2008, chromira print, 120 x 150cm.
- Figure 27: Paula Mahoney, *Defensive homicide*, 2008, chromira print, 120 x 150cm.
- Figure 28: Photographer unknown, *Bodies of Mr & Mrs Anderson*, 1938, from black and white negative found in an envelope  
<https://www.crimephotography.wordpress.com/category/1930s-1940s> (accessed 30/10/15).
- Figure 29: Paula Mahoney, *Manslaughter*, 2008, chromira print, 120 x 150cm.
- Figure 30: Joel Peter Witkin, *Feast of Fools*, 1990, photogravure, 50.5 x 60.3cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio, USA.
- Figure 31: Sally Mann, *Untitled*, from *Matter Lent* series, 2000 - 2001, digital print from 20.3 x 25.4cm colour negatives  
<http://www.sallymann.com/selected-works/body-farm> (accessed 16/3/15).
- Figure 32: Sally Mann, *Untitled*, from *Matter Lent* series, 2000 -2001, gelatin silver enlargement print from 20.3 x 25.4cm collodion wet-plate negatives, with soluvar matte varnish mixed with diatomaceous  
<http://www.sallymann.com/selected-works/body-farm> (accessed 16/3/15).
- Figure 33: Sally Mann, *Untitled*, from *Matter Lent* series, 2000 - 2001, digital print from 20.3 x 25.4cm colour negatives  
<http://www.sallymann.com/selected-works/body-farm> (accessed 16/3/15).
- Figure 34: Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 1521, oil and tempera on limewood painting, 30.5 x 200cm, Kunstmuseum, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel, Germany.
- Figure 35: Andrea Mantegna, *The Lamentation of Christ*, 1480, Tempera on canvas, 68 x 81cm, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, Italy.

- Figure 36: Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Jan Deyman*, 1656, oil on canvas, 100 x 134cm, Amsterdam Museum, Netherlands.
- Figure 37: Richard Avedon, *Jacob Israel Avedon*, father of Richard Avedon, Sarasota, Florida, 1969-1973, gelatin silver print, 61 x 50.8cm each, The Richard Avedon Foundation.
- Figure 38: Phillip Toledano, *Days with My Father*, 2006–2009  
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2010/may/16/days-with-my-father> (accessed 29/05/2013).
- Figure 39: Paula Mahoney, *My father*, 2009, chromira print, 100 x 100cm.
- Figure 40: Early black and white photograph I found of my father after he died, date unknown, silver gelatin print, 9 x 12.5cm.
- Figure 41: Walker Evans, *Bud Fields with His Wife Ivy, and His Daughter Ellen, Hale County, Alabama*, 1936, gelatin silver print, 19.4 x 24.4cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, USA.
- Figure 42: Sophie Calle, video still from *Couldn't Catch Death*, 2007, dimension variable, Paula Cooper Gallery, NY.
- Figure 43: Paula Mahoney, *Mamma*, 2002, chromira print, 35.51 x 25.4cm.
- Figure 44: Trent Parke, *Cemetery, Adelaide*, from The Black Rose series, 2007, silver gelatin print, 110 x 90cm, Stills Gallery, Sydney.
- Figure 45: Trent Parke, *Cockatoo, Newcastle, New South Wales*, from *The Black Rose* series, 2011, silver gelatin print, 120 x 152cm, Stills Gallery, Sydney.
- Figure 46: Walter Schels and Beate Lakotta, *Wolfgang Kotzahn*, age: 57, 15<sup>th</sup> Jan 2004 and 4<sup>th</sup> Feb 2004  
<http://www.walterschels.com/en/portfolios/portraits/album/8#slide-5> (accessed 31/04/16).
- Figure 47: Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893, oil, tempera, pastel and crayon on cardboard, 91 x 73.5cm, National Gallery of Norway, Oslo.
- Figure 48: Paula Mahoney, *Untitled*, Dad's body fights with death, 2009, chromira print, 25.4 x 35.51cm.
- Figure 49: Trent Parke, *No 376 Candid portrait of a boy on a street corner. Adelaide, 2013*, from *The Camera is God* series, 2013, pigment print, 80 x 60cm, Stills Gallery, Sydney.
- Figure 50: Phillip Toledano, *Days with My Father* (a shot also including the photographer), 2006–2009  
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2010/may/16/days-with-my-father> (accessed 29/05/2013).

- Figure 51: Paula Mahoney, *Diptych of my father*, 2010, archival pigment print, 20 x 46.22cm.
- Figure 52: Paula Mahoney, *The deathbed*, 2009/2010, archival pigment print, 61.37 x 85cm.
- Figure 53: Jeff Wall, *Faking Death* (3rd part of the triptych), 1977, The Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art Database  
[http://www.ccca.concordia.ca/resources/searches/event\\_detail.html?languagePref=en&vk=7306](http://www.ccca.concordia.ca/resources/searches/event_detail.html?languagePref=en&vk=7306) (accessed 17/11/16).
- Figure 54: Janieta Eyre, *Rehearsals #7*, 1993, black and white print, 40.64 x 50.8cm, courtesy of the artist.
- Figure 55: Janieta Eyre, *Rehearsals #12*, 1993, c-print, 40.64 x 50.8cm, Katharine Mulherin Gallery, NY.
- Figure 56: Paula Mahoney, *Waiting for dead dad No.1*, 2014, archival pigment print, 46 x 70cm.
- Figure 57: Paula Mahoney, *Waiting for dead dad No.2*, 2014, archival pigment print, 46 x 70cm.
- Figure 58: Paula Mahoney, *Waiting for dead dad No.3*, 2014, archival pigment print, 46 x 70cm.
- Figure 59: Spirit photograph advertisement, date unknown  
[www.cvltnation.com/an-executioners-photo-album-victorian-headless-portraits](http://www.cvltnation.com/an-executioners-photo-album-victorian-headless-portraits)  
 (accessed 30/11/13).
- Figure 60: Three examples of *Carte de visites* spirit photography, date unknown, each card 6.4 x 10cm  
[www.io9.com/the-creepiest-headless-portraits-from-the-victorian-era-472678985](http://www.io9.com/the-creepiest-headless-portraits-from-the-victorian-era-472678985)  
[www.cvltnation.com/an-executioners-photo-album-victorian-headless-portraits](http://www.cvltnation.com/an-executioners-photo-album-victorian-headless-portraits)  
 (accessed 31/10/13).
- Figure 61: Paula Mahoney, *Without a head No.1*, 2014, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 62: Paula Mahoney, *Without a head No.2*, 2014, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 63: Trent Parke, *No 250 Candid portrait of a man on a street corner. Adelaide, 2013*, from *The Camera is God* series, 2013, pigment print, 80 x 60cm, Stills Gallery, Sydney.
- Figure 64: Trent Parke, *No 731 Candid portrait of a woman on a street corner. Adelaide, 2013*, from *The Camera is God* series, 2013, pigment print, 80 x 60cm, Stills Gallery, Sydney.
- Figure 65: F. M. Parkes (England), *Mrs. Collins & Her Husband's Father, Recognised by Several*, 1875, albumen carte de visite, 5.08 x 9.65cm  
<http://www.photographymuseum.com/parkel.html> (accessed 02/02/14).
- Figure 66: William Hope (Crewe, England), *Rev. Charles L. Tweedale and Mrs. Tweedale with the Spirit Form of the late F. Burnett*, 1919, brown-toned silver print, 7.62 x 8.89cm  
<http://www.photographymuseum.com/tweedale.html> (accessed 02/02/14).

- Figure 67: William H. Mumler, *Mary Todd Lincoln with Abraham Lincoln's "Spirit"*, 1872, albumen carte de visite, 5.08 x 9.65cm, Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection, Indiana.
- Figure 68: Paula Mahoney, *Death rattle No.1*, 2014, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 69: Paula Mahoney, *Death rattle No.2*, 2014, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 70: Paula Mahoney, *Death rattle No.3*, 2014, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 71: Paula Mahoney, *Death rattle No.4*, 2014, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 72: Paula Mahoney, *Death rattle No.5*, 2014, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 73: Paula Mahoney, *Death rattle No.6*, 2014, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 74: Paula Mahoney, *Dressing in dead dad's suit No.1*, 2015, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 75: Paula Mahoney, *Dressing in dead dad's suit No.2*, 2015, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 76: Charles Freger, *0037 Djolomari*, from the Wilder Mann series, 2010-2011, inkjet print, 101 x 77cm, courtesy of the artist.
- Figure 77: Charles Freger, *0042 Babugeri*, from the Wilder Mann series, 2010-2011, inkjet print, 101 x 77cm, courtesy of the artist.
- Figure 78: Paula Mahoney, *Dressing in dead dad's suit No.3*, 2015, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 79: Paula Mahoney, *Dressing in dead dad's suit No.4*, 2015, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 80: Paula Mahoney, *Dressing in dead dad's suit No.5*, 2015, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 81: Phyllis Galembo, *Ngar Ball Traditional Masquerade Dance*, Eshinjok Village, Nigeria, 2004, ilfochrome, 76.2 x 76.2cm, Steven Kasher Gallery, NY.
- Figure 82: Phyllis Galembo, *Ekepyong Edet Dance Group*, Calabar, Nigeria, 2005, ilfochrome, 127 x 127cm, Steven Kasher Gallery, NY.
- Figure 83: Paula Mahoney, *Dressing in dead dad's suit No.8*, 2015, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 84: Paula Mahoney, *Untitled*, 2015, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 85: Paula Mahoney, *Untitled*, 2015, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 86: Paula Mahoney, *Dressing in dead dad's suit No.10*, 2015, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.

- Figure 87: Benvenuto Tisi, *Ascension of Christ*, 1520, oil on panel, 314 x 204.5cm, National Gallery of Ancient Art of Rome, Italy.
- Figure 88: Paula Mahoney, *Free falling No.1*, 2015, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 89: Paula Mahoney, *Free falling No.2*, 2015, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 90: Paula Mahoney, *Free falling No.3*, 2015, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 91: Paula Mahoney, *Free falling No.4*, 2015, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 92: Gottfried Helnwie, *Modern sleep I*, 2003, installation Santa Monica, digital print on vinyl, 6.096 x 18.288m, courtesy of the artist.
- Figure 93: Paula Mahoney, *Free falling No.5*, 2015, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 94: Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled (Ophelia)*, 2000/1, digital chromogenic print, 127 x 152.4cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, IL, USA.
- Figure 95: Paula Mahoney, *Free falling No.6*, 2016, archival pigment print, 70 x 46cm.
- Figure 96: Paula Mahoney, *The deathbed*, 2009/2010, archival pigment print, 61.37 x 85cm.

## Preface

Both of my parents died of cancer, some 26 years apart – my mother was 40 (in 1983) and died of bowel cancer; and my father was 75 (in 2009) and died of prostate cancer. They both died nine months after diagnosis. During this time I cared for them, while their bodies collapsed and the presence of death was amplified. I watched both my parents come to terms with their own death and dying through denial, anger, depression and acceptance. It is the same path that I would also take in grief, both during these nine-month periods of my parents dying, and after their deaths.

On reflection, I found that these personal paths of grief overlapped when spending time with a dying person, at times intermingled and harmonious, this synchronicity arguably proving a strong link across time, contributing to a greater understanding of what it is to die in a human sense.

My father was a staunch Catholic who trained as a priest at Werribee Mansion before deciding the calling was not for him. As a good Catholic man he loved funerals, and so as a child I attended many, and became transfixed by the ceremony and the grief/absence that filled the air. As a result, my life has been haunted by my own mortality. This haunting is re-enforced by the medical profession, who see potential disease with every ailment I present to them, with the word cancer often mentioned.

Whilst looking more broadly at the image of death and act of lamentation, the work made for this research explores control over my own mortality, while also paying homage to the ghosts of my parents, who move with me through time. The father-daughter relationship is also examined, as this work was made in response to my father's death particularly.

These performative works are my memento mori, my lamentations, and a manifestation of my own death.

## Introduction

In this exegesis I explore historical lamentation images and the use of photography in recording and embodying death and loss. Lamentation images are important because they are an expression of grief and loss, a reaction to the horrors of death, a cry out, in traditional Western culture, to God. In the Psalms the laments are directed at God, as a defining poem that can be replayed across time to express the pain of loss, and the pain of being forsaken. However, the acknowledgement of God requires a religious theoretical viewpoint: for people without this viewpoint, laments may fall on deaf ears. The lament does not reach beyond the infinite: death. Rather, it remains contained within the limitations of the finite. The wail of the mourner is thereby lost and at times not even heard, particularly in Australia, an increasingly secular society that has a culture in which emotions are traditionally somewhat suppressed in regards to death and mourning, particularly when compared with other cultures and times. In the Victorian era for instance, there was a particular obsession with death and dying, and customs and practices relating to death were of great importance.<sup>1</sup> “Australians today are still engaged in the slow process of creating new ritual and adapting older practices” in relation to death and mourning, “to suit the needs of a diverse but largely secular society.”<sup>2</sup>

My research in this candidature seeks to articulate a space to say the unsayable, by producing images of lamentations that articulate different understandings of mourning outside of religion.<sup>3</sup> Where religion sees death as infinite, transcendence from the limits of mortality, in a secular society death is the ultimate limit. Death emphasises our shared understanding of our fragility and vulnerability, particularly in mourning, as our finitude is reinforced. These works seek to look intensely at death and mourning in contrast to the current and natural trend to turn away from personal images of death and mourning, as these images remind us of our own mortality and loss. “Images of death are acceptable when they do not cause pain for the living and when they do not evoke thoughts of one’s own death or the death of a loved one.”<sup>4</sup> Mourning, though, is still an essential part of human experience, and we continue to fear death and lament the passing of our loved ones. Death continues to be incomprehensible and mourning a great unsaid. My work relooks at death and

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<sup>1</sup> In the Victorian era from 1837- 1901 there were many more rituals and icons to express mourning and to remember lost loved ones. In 1990 I visited the famous Victorian cemetery, the Highgate cemetery, where it was common for Victorians courting to take a stroll on a Sunday afternoon.

<sup>2</sup> Pat Jalland, *Changing ways of Death in twentieth-century Australia: War, Medicine and the Funeral business* (Sydney, Australia: University of New South Wales Press Book, 2006), 370-371. In this book Jalland discusses the denial of death from the First World War until the 1970s, with death often being avoided, ritual minimized and sorrow being a private matter. From the 1980s a more open approach to death and mourning occurred with public concern and discussion stimulated by the AIDS epidemic, euthanasia and palliative care, and as a reaction to the medicalisation of death. However, despite this move towards a more open expression of grief, the second cultural shift does not represent a return to the Victorian way of death, with its heavily ritualised mourning practice.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Zepke and Simon O’Sullivan, eds., *Deleuze and Contemporary Art* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Marti-Garcia, Celia, M.Paz Garcia-Caro, Francisco Cruz-Quintana, Jacqueline Schmidt-Rio Valle, and Miguel Perez-Garcia. “Emotional Responses to Images of Death: A New Category of Emotional Processing?” *OMEGA- Journal of Death and Dying* 1-19 (2015): 4.

mourning, acknowledging the impossible inconsistencies and incoherence in this experience at the doorway of death.

I discuss how photography analogically reaffirms the impossibility of truly knowing death, yet points to and acknowledges a new understanding of our finitude through acts of lamentation. I argue that the recording of death in contemporary photography and in my own practice is a way to *acknowledge* finitude – our limits, our vulnerability, our mortality. I discuss how my studio research has investigated these concepts by using the performative to explore the space of death and bereavement, extending the possibility of photographic knowing. This performative photography is a means of placing myself within a larger whole, within the universal experience of finitude and mortality. My photography points to the impossibility of death, and the irreconcilable unknowable aspects of death that escape representation and comprehension, but are nonetheless common to all of humanity. It is this experience that we all share. I endeavour to comprehend what is deemed incomprehensible but is essential to understand: mortality and death.

To achieve this, I have used the American theorist Kaja Silverman's theory of photography as an analogy, along with performative photography as defined by English theorist Catherine Grant as a theoretical basis for staged photography as a way to examine death.<sup>5</sup> The theorist Kaja Silverman in *The Miracle of Analogy or The History of Photography* argues that photography originates in what is seen, rather than in the human eye or the camera lens, and that it is the world's primary way of revealing itself to us. Neither an index, representation, nor copy, as conventional studies would have it; the photographic image is an analogy. The theorist Catherine Grant likens performative photography to J. L. Austin's theory of performative speech acts, where speech does something. Citing examples of "speech acts" – *I do, I promise, I bet* and *I apologise* – as performing what is being said, Grant argues that photography can be thought of in the same way, as an approach to how to do things with images; as a performative space.<sup>6</sup> She argues that performative photography, particularly in its framing, always has this act of pointing, the action of viewing and reading: the act of interaction. These theorists are of particular importance as their current approaches bring new readings to photography that are particularly relevant to my work, as I will show. Additionally, I understand lament and the depiction of death to be a profoundly paradoxical process. I draw on the Bulgarian French theorist Julia Kristeva's understanding of the irreconcilable contradictions inherent in mourning, and the impossibility of death from the perspective of the French theorist Maurice Blanchot. I seek through my work and in my writing to approach death, in its impossibility, and in its approach to the question of finitude, to reach some understanding and resolution to my own experience of this subject whilst also pointing to the contradictory, ambivalent emotion of the lamenter.

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<sup>5</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy or the History of Photography, Part 1* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015).

*Performing Photographs Seminar: Photography, Performance and Affect*, presented by the theorist Catherine Grant at the Tate Modern, London, March 19 2014, accessed April 04 2014, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/audio/performing-photographs-photography-performance-and-affect>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Currently the world is being recorded, in images, at a rapid rate. Imagery saturates society, largely because of social media and the use of phone cameras. Yet, outside the sensationalist approach of news media, images of death still remain a relatively unexplored area. Much has been written about how media images may focus on horrific death caused by manmade or natural disasters<sup>7</sup>. In contrast, this project is concerned with personal images of death and mourning. Facebook newsfeeds do not commonly feature, for example, images of dead grandmothers just after they have died. People no longer sit looking at images of their dead loved ones, lamenting their passing. Culturally in the West, images of the dead have become almost taboo, and being a witness to death often happens only at the bedside of immediate family or very close loved ones, and many people may pass through life without ever being that witness.<sup>8</sup> “One argument put forth over the last few decades is that dying is increasingly alarming in modern societies given the lack of rituals surrounding it. With ever fewer people holding religious beliefs, so the argument goes, there is crisis of meaning around death and dying.”<sup>9</sup> This lack of religious belief is reflected in contemporary Australian life, with the most popular response to questions about religion in the outcome of the 2016 census being predicted as “no religion.”<sup>10</sup>

However, the personal acknowledgement of death is important because it places us within our limits. My work attempts to address this awareness at this moment in our culture. Where once religion offered a dialogue about death, a passage between the finite and the infinite, as a way to connect us to each other and to a greater Whole. This project, through art, relooks at death, and instead attempts to make a shared connection through an assertion of finitude and limitation.

Finitude is the most capacious and enabling of the attributes we share with others, because unlike the particular way in which each of us looks, thinks, walks, and speaks, that connects us to a few other beings, it connects us to every other being. Since finitude marks the point where we end and others begin, spatially and temporally, it is also what makes room for them – and acknowledging these limits allows us to experience the expansiveness for which we yearn, because it gives us a powerful sense of our emplacement within a larger Whole.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Vasterman, C.Joris Yzermans & Anja J. E. Dirkzwager, *The Role of the Media and Media Hypes in the Aftermath of Disasters*, accessed May 19 2015, <http://www.epirev.oxfordjournals.org/content/27/1/107.full>.

<sup>8</sup> It is common practice in the West to have images of stillborn babies taken as it has been found to bring great comfort to the grieving parents, although these stillborn images are not often displayed in the home or shared outside of the family unit.

In Ireland there is a tradition that is still practised today of laying out the dead. These days it is more common in a funeral home than the home where the dead are laid out for viewing in a traditional manner and children and adults are encouraged to touch the body. Thus it is not uncommon to see dead bodies from a young age in this Western country.

I witnessed my father’s last breath on May 5<sup>th</sup> 2009. It is the only death that I have been present at, although I have seen many dead bodies after death has occurred, as my brother was an embalmer and worked in a morgue where I was free to visit. I also travelled in India and Nepal and have seen many funeral pyres with burning bodies.

<sup>9</sup> Alex Broom, *‘Before you go ... are you in denial about death?’* The Conversation, accessed November 10 2016, [www.theconversation.com/before-you-go-are-you-in-denial-about-death-34056](http://www.theconversation.com/before-you-go-are-you-in-denial-about-death-34056).

<sup>10</sup> The Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Australian Social Trends, November 2013”, accessed April 18 2016, [www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features30Nov+2013](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features30Nov+2013).

<sup>11</sup> Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of my flesh* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), 4.

This appreciation of a shared finitude, a limit that is both spatially and temporally common to all of us, paradoxically affirms a belonging within a larger whole at the moment of our death. Denying death and turning away from our “finitude” dislocates our being. The more we turn from death, the greater the grip of fear, and social values reinforce this paradigm: be good, be safe and you will live forever.<sup>12</sup>

Contemporary artists use death imagery to re-introduce death into a counter discourse around death’s denial, generating compelling reflections through creating photographs of corpses and staged deaths which highlight mortality. Recent organisations such as Death Salon and Death Café have also emerged that create public areas in which death can be discussed openly, providing formal and informal forums where people can talk about death.<sup>13</sup> This cultural field of counter discourse is where this project can contribute, producing images of lamentations that articulate different understandings outside of religion, and using art practices to return the image of death and mourning into public consciousness in a way that combines hope and despair.

This openness about death is intrinsically linked analogically to early photography. In the mid-Victorian times, post-mortem photography was used to remember and actively mourn the deceased, displayed in the home for all who came to visit for years to come. It was both common and popular. Theoretically, all photographic images record moments that are forever gone, past and dead, but we live with these images in the present. The photograph, the actual object, often becomes personal; an object that can be held, treasured and caressed, particularly when the person within the frame is not physically there with the viewer, or an image is of someone who is now dead.

In witnessing death, we witness the cessation of being and our limitations in knowing the world, including all that is life and non-life, become evident. We lament over the corpse of a loved one, but death exceeds us, the deceased has moved to a realm that is other and beyond. In contrast to today’s general reluctance to circulate images of death, visual artists throughout history have sought to depict, to capture, death in the corpse. They have painted, sculpted and videoed the corpse in their desire to capture death, and to face mortality, creating works with clear likenesses to the corpse as death, as well as local differences in how death is perceived. But to lock death within the frame appears impossible. By its very polarity, death lies outside of life, it is unknowable, and not locatable. Death is non-presence, and does not exist for the living. As the writings of the French theorist Maurice Blanchot argue, there is an inherent irreducibility of death. “Presence is only presence at a

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<sup>12</sup> Advertisements often promote good health as a certainty for longevity however statistics prove otherwise. These values were flipped in the ‘Be Stupid’ campaign launched by Anomaly New York for the international jeans label Diesel in 2010. The notion of being stupid and taking risks was marketed as creative and compelling for the social good.

<sup>13</sup> Death Salon is an American philosophical organization made up of intellectuals and independent thinkers engaged in the exploration of our shared mortality by sharing knowledge and art, accessed April 14 2014, <https://www.deathsalon.org>. Death café is a social franchise that is open for anyone to sign up and run a Death Café. The objective of a Death Café is to increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives. At a Death Café people, often strangers, gather to eat cake, drink tea and discuss death, accessed April 14 2014, [www.deathcafe.com](http://www.deathcafe.com).

distance, and this distance is absolute – that is, irreducible; that is, infinite.”<sup>14</sup> Our collective finitude, our certainty of death, is what defines our being. In this project I use photography to explore the ways in which the personal loss of loved ones could be approached to extend our comprehension of mortality and death, seeking to find new ways of understanding and means of expression outside of religion.

This project was initially driven by a desire to understand the death of loved ones through the question, “How can the photograph elucidate the understanding of death?” During the early part of the project my father fell ill with terminal cancer and the project took on a more personal and immediate focus. My own mortality became intertwined with the dying and death of my father. It was after making work about my father’s death, that I moved in front of the camera dressed in my father’s suit, in an attempt to experience the intersection of life and death within the frame. These performances, I came to understand, were about lament and mourning in the presence of death that involved private rituals that pointed not only to the finality of death. Other possibilities also arose around the psychological meaning we make of death. Sigmund Freud’s notion of the death drive and Julia Kristeva’s understanding of the ambivalence of the mourner became important themes in this project. In addition to the subject of death and mourning, the work unavoidably explores the father–daughter relationship, as a means to comprehend the irreconcilable experiences of the bereaved female subject.

I investigate these matters in the following chapters organised around particular areas of interest: *Photography and Finitude*, *The Corpse and Lamentation*, *The Death of My Father*, and *Lamenting My Own Death*.

In chapter one, entitled *Photography and Finitude*, I discuss the theories that I am working with in depth. Silverman’s notion of photography as analogy and Catherine Grant’s understanding of the photograph as a performance space are central to my argument. I examine these in the following sections: *Photography and death*, *Photography as an analogy* and *The photograph as a performance space*. I consider these theories in relation to the very origin of photography in order to look at Walter Benjamin’s notion of the disclosive, whilst discussing Geoffrey Batchen’s and Roland Barthes’ further theories about death and photography. The use of Silverman’s and Grant’s theories provide a platform from which I can examine our understanding of finitude, and the idea of the photograph as an ontological calling card by looking at the photograph as an analogy, and at the performative within the frame. I further argue how the creation of new images of lamentation and death can create new readings and open up further possibilities.

In chapter two, entitled *The Corpse and Lamentation*, I explore the analogical relationship between historical and contemporary images of corpses, which attempt to locate death and reconcile us with our mortality. Throughout the exegesis I adopt an analogical methodology, moving between art

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<sup>14</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), 218.

historical examples and examples from contemporary photographic practice. I endeavour to use themes evident in the early examples of paintings to illuminate similarities and differences with recent photography. Both tell stories about death and mourning across time. I use Grant's notion of the performative space and examine the actions contained in the imagery. I investigate these actions in regards to death in the following three sections: *Locating death: what happens at the moment of death*; *Staging death*; and *Reintroducing death: the corpse in photograph*. I examine selected historic images of the corpse and chart the relationships of these images to the contemporary images that inform my work. I discuss the more graphic depictions of death by Romantic artists, Eugène Delacroix and Théodore Géricault, and the depiction of death as a spectacle.<sup>15</sup> I also examine select work of the Spanish artist Salvador Dalí and the image of Christ in the *Isenheim Altar* by the German Renaissance painter Matthias Grünewald. I then discuss the contemporary work of Jeff Wall, Berlinde De Bruyckere, Andreas Serrano, Sally Mann and Joel Peter Witkin, as new readings of the corpse that attempt to bring us closer to seeing death. I discuss my studio research, *Killing Everyone I Know*, in which I frame death as a spectacle, using friends and family in the fabrication of death scenes. These works attempt to locate death and address grief, the binary oppositions of suffering and release, and absence and presence.

In chapter three, entitled *The Death of My Father*, I examine the personal loss of loved ones through photography, through photographing my father dying and dead. I investigate these states of being in the following sections: *Dead Christ*; *Alive Dad: portrait of a dying man*; *Constructing death: those loved and dead in the photograph*; and *Dead Dad*. I discuss death as seen as a spectacle, and focus on the depictions of Christ in paintings *The Lamentation over the Dead* by Andrea Mantegna (1480) and *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521) by Hans Holbein the Younger. These paintings are selected as they also share an iconographic analogical language that informs photography and, like many photographs of death, the positioning of the lamenter is pushed out of the frame and the body locked into the frame respectively. I look at post-mortem photography and the photograph as *memento mori*, and reference Barthes, Batchen and Sontag in my discussion of the latter, as a means of capturing death within the frame. In contemporary art, photographers have photographed loved ones dying and dead, as an acknowledgement of finitude and as a witness to death. I discuss the work of Richard Avedon, Phillip Toledano and Trent Parke who use photography as a means of lamenting a dying or dead parent. I also discuss the work of Sophie Calle in recording her mother's death. Calle places the camera next to her mother's bed, as a substitute for herself, in order to capture death, bringing new readings of the place of the camera as witness/lamenter. I discuss photographing my father during the last 24 hours that I spent with him while he was dying, and with his corpse.

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<sup>15</sup> Delacroix is of particular significance because of his key approach to content, however the eroticism of death that is evident in some of Delacroix's work is acknowledged but will not be the focus of this discussion. The death of Christ epitomises the understanding of death as a spectacle.

In chapter four, entitled *Lamenting My Own Death*, I navigate what I term a “self-mourning image”, as I seek to understand death through my body and gestures, wearing my dead dad’s suits. I investigate in the following sections: *Playing with death: photographers stage their own death*; *Return of the dead: spirit photography and headless folk*; *Controlling death: staging self-mourning photographs*; *Reanimating death: dead dad’s suit*; and *Holding death: photography and intersection*. I discuss the ironic situation of performing death in front of the camera – when the artist is both the lamenter and performing his/her own convening with death. The camera becomes the link that connects life and death in the intersection of the photograph. I also consider the photographers Janieta Ayres and Jeff Wall, who stage their own death for the camera as a way of controlling death.

In this final chapter I also discuss Benvenuto Tisi’s *Ascension of Christ* painting, and some of the photographic work of contemporary artists Charles Freger, Phyllis Galembo and Gottfried Helnwie. My own performative work explores a similar space of intersection by using my father’s suit worn backwards; my body facing away from the camera towards the void (death) as my father’s suit “looks” towards the camera, whilst he – my father – is absent. The performative approach re-animates the suit, as if it is a shroud, allowing breath to enter. In this work I attempt to convene with a death I wish to know, through imagining my own death, and through my body’s yearning and lamenting in the photograph as I instruct and exercise control, both in the taking of the image and the movement of my body. I explore through the psychoanalytical, using Kristeva and Freud, the father-daughter relationship. Blanchot’s idea that suicide is the one true death that you can choose and control is referenced in this work of lamenting, with the performative photography locating death momentarily with the frame separating life from death. I examine the photograph as a space where life and death, control and beyond control, can intersect but never cross.

## Chapter 1

### Photography and Finitude

It's why I wanted to be a photographer,  
to see what I couldn't see and understand  
the impenetrable density of our past.

- Philip Brookman<sup>16</sup>

In this chapter I consider key theoretical positions on photography, with references to the experience of death and mourning. I include Katja Silverman's theory of photography as analogy and Catherine Grant's concept of the performance space of the photograph as these theories resonate with my own approach to studio work and have helped me to articulate what I have been doing in the studio work. These theories provide a platform from which to examine death, our finitude, and extend our understanding of the photograph as an ontological calling card by looking at the performative within the frame.

#### Photography and death

The relationship between photography and death is undeniable and the subject of much discussion. French theorist Roland Barthes theorises that the photograph is a record of something that once was there (a different death), an exchange between the present and the past, of a moment that existed in time, a moment that is lost in the click of a camera. Silverman is less interested in these evidentiary and indexical aspects of photography and, like Benjamin in his first account of photography in "The Little History", is more interested in the disclosive. Benjamin argues that photography is neither a human representation nor a tool but rather what it "reveals is uninformed by human consciousness – not just because it exceeds our optical capacities, but also because nature 'speaks' a different language to the camera than it does to the human eye: one based on analogy."<sup>17</sup> Benjamin attributes this quality of disclosiveness in early photography to the long exposures which "caused the subject to focus his life in the moment rather than hurrying on past."<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey Batchen in *Forget Me Not* also agrees in his discussion of daguerreotypes, where the subject is required to sit for a long time while the shot is taken. He argues that an aura is embedded in the photograph.<sup>19</sup> However this anchoring of the presence in the photograph is arguably not only because of the long exposures.

In 1931, Benjamin also coined the term the "optical unconscious" to capture the realm of the unseen that photography introduced.<sup>20</sup> The optical unconscious occurs when the viewer sees or understands

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<sup>16</sup> Philip Brookman, *Redlands*, (Steidel: Göttingen, Germany, 2015) 120.

<sup>17</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy or the History of Photography, Part 1*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 141.

<sup>18</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography." In *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 1927-1934. Edited by Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007), 67.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, "Little History of Photography."

the mержence of a moment which the photographer or artist has already seen. What are captured are the very machinations of the human psyche. Benjamin is unable to explain why we are so reluctant to acknowledge the similarities that connect us to our predecessors, how we turn away, or what it would mean to turn back, “awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.”<sup>21</sup> Benjamin attributes the whole, as in the world, our being, as central to photography.

Silverman, in *The Miracle of Analogy*, also argues against the idea of photography being evidentiary and presents photography as the “world’s primary way of revealing itself to us – demonstrating that it (the world) exists and that it will forever exceed us.”<sup>22</sup> This exceeding is that which lies outside of us – death – yet in this observation, it is also part of the complete system, “the world.” It is a construct that we exist in, and which stretches beyond our consciousness. It is also important to acknowledge that one’s understanding of the world is inherited from our predecessors, and is formulated by our conditioned sense of reality, our experiences. It is my experience of death that has set the limits on my understanding of the world, and this is what I explore in my practice: how death, which is the ultimate boundary that frames the human experience, reveals that limit.



Figure 1: An illustration of Terminus, the stone resembling a tombstone.

In Roman mythology the God of Limits is the protector of boundaries, Terminus.<sup>23</sup> A stone or a post, which was set in the ground with the following religious ceremonies, represented him. A trench was dug, in which a fire was lit, a victim was sacrificed, and its blood poured into the trench. The body was then adorned with incense, fruits, honey and wine, and then cast into the fire. When it was entirely consumed, the boundary stone, which had been previously anointed and crowned

<sup>21</sup> Silverman, *Flesh of my Flesh*, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy or the History of Photography, Part 1*, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica 1911, “Geographic names, Terminus”, accessed October 4 2016, [www.theodora.com/encyclopedia/t/terminus.html](http://www.theodora.com/encyclopedia/t/terminus.html).

with garlands, was placed upon the hot ashes and fixed in the ground.<sup>24</sup> There are many similarities with this religious ceremony and Christian burials, of which I attended many as the daughter of devout Catholics. Notably though in Christianity Christ is the ultimate sacrifice who died for our sins, redeeming believers from the horrors of mortality. Yet similarly in Christian burials, there is a hole that is dug, a body that is placed and a stone, a plaque or a tombstone traditionally made of stone, which too delineates a boundary that can never be renegotiated. Terminus is also an end point, and the Latin origin of the word Terminal – that is the diagnoses both my parents received.

### Photography as an analogy

In Silverman's earlier book *Flesh of my Flesh* she discusses the effect that our turning away from death has on others. This state began with the removal of the parlour, or drawing room, from the family home, the place where traditionally the dead were laid out, and is echoed in Western society today.<sup>25</sup> "Finitude is the most capacious and enabling of the attributes we share with others," and our refusal to acknowledge our limitations as beings "has devastating and often fatal consequences to others."<sup>26</sup> This turning away from our "finitude," our acknowledgement of death, dislocates our being. Death places us within limits, which "allows us to experience the expansiveness for which we yearn, because it gives us a powerful sense of our emplacement within a larger Whole."<sup>27</sup> In the face of death we are presented with the horror of what will happen to us all: we will cease and the body will decay. It is in these moments that we share in our universal fragility and vulnerability. Stripped of the social accompaniments that frame our life, we are faced with the fact that we're all going to die, alone and unadorned with worldly attributes that so often define us when living. Death, like the photograph as a dead moment, invites us to have empathy for each other and for all things that die.

In Christian mythology it is in the beginning of time that God creates a world without death and pain, in the sanctity of the Garden of Eden.<sup>28</sup> It is here that Adam, Eve, animal and plant life live in harmony, unburdened with the limitations of mortality. Yet within this framework there does exist a forbidden, the tree of knowledge, and an evil, in the manifestation of a serpent, which tempts the female Eve into sin. These oppositions allow for the temptation to take place, and through the eating of an apple a sin to occur from which there is no turning back. Mankind is expelled from the Garden of Eden and immortality is denied. A separation occurs between life and death. Being is no longer contained within the garden. It is in this removing of death from life that Christianity renders us

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> In the 1890s the influential editor of the Ladies Home Journal (New York), Edward Bok, wrote, 'We have what is called a "drawing room". Just whom or what it "draws" I have never been able to see unless it draws attention to too much money and no taste...' Ladies Home Journal 125, no. 6: 12. Bok believed it was foolish to create an expensively furnished room that was rarely used, and promoted the new name, the living room, to encourage families to use the room in their daily lives. This transformation of the parlour/drawing room into the living room also meant that there was no longer a place in the home for the dead to be laid out. Death began its removal from our daily lives.

<sup>26</sup> Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of my flesh*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>28</sup> Bible Gateway, New International Version (NIV), Book of Genesis 2-3, accessed October 7 2016, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+3&version=NIV>.

less definite and less earthy and makes us forget that we are akin to tree, flower and soil.<sup>29</sup> Our being is fractured, and the first limitation is denied – our immortality. However, we know that it is in the presence of death that our finitude is undeniable, and this experience allows for a return, if you like, to a complete state that we yearn for.

There is no getting away from the unfathomable totality of which we are a part; not only is it spatially unbounded, but it also extends backwards and forwards in time. Most of us though are mentally estranged from this aspect of our Being... This will continue to be the case until we allow the angel of death to graze us with his wing because only finitude can teach us how to affirm.<sup>30</sup>

The portrait of Lewis Payne, photographed by Alexander Gardner in 1865, serves as an example in its disclosiveness, and in what it indicates about death. This image was taken on the USS Saugus, not long before Lewis was hung for an attempted assassination of the United States Secretary of State, William H. Seward. The photograph exists so we, the viewer, see that Lewis is pensive, yet young and beautiful, and yet we equally know that he is dead some 152 years ago. This one image reveals this complete system, “the world,” and what it is to be. The image is side lit from the right so that Powell sits in the light. To the left is the darkness. The metaphor of light and dark for life and death are locked in the photograph. The numbers are printed backwards on the top of the image as if it should have been rotated. It is a reversed image, similarly as life is the reversal of death. The diagonal lines from the ship’s mast point upwards, as if to propel Lewis to his fate. Most importantly his eyes, because of the long exposure, appear glassy and unfocused, not unlike post mortem photographs that were popular in this time. In post mortem photographs the dead are depicted in similar ways as the living, propped up looking at the camera, their eyes glassed over, indicating their moment of suffering has passed. But these dead eyes of Lewis Payne, when combined with the relaxed posture and the tilt of his chin, make him appear resigned to his fate, with his imminent death locked in the frame. This look of resignation seems to indicate an acceptance of death, the ultimate limit, with the eyes locked to a place beyond the camera and the viewer. Gardner took four images in total, of which this is the only one to hold these sentiments. If the photograph is the vehicle through which the world can be revealed analogically, then this image emerges, for Gardner, and the invisible is made visible in this the defining shot.

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<sup>29</sup> Silverman, *Flesh of my Flesh*, 28.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

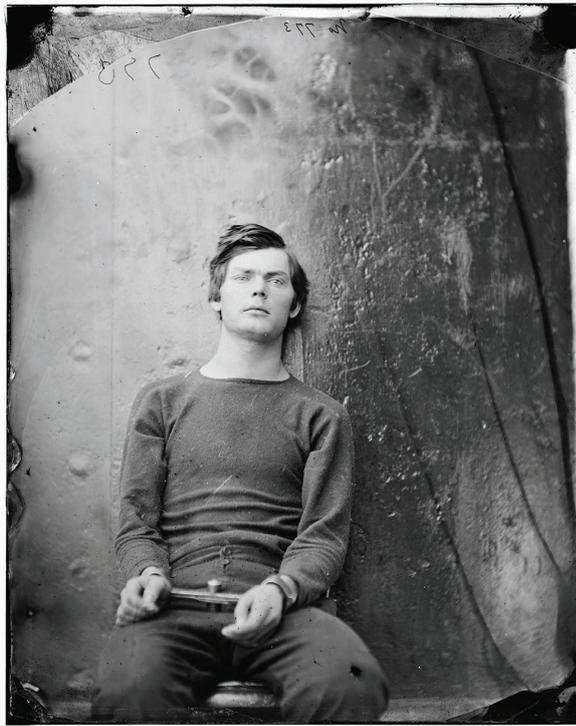


Figure 2: Alexander Gardner, Washington Navy Yard, D.C. Lewis Payne, in sweater, seated and manacled, 1865



Figure 3: Alexander Gardner, Washington Navy Yard, D.C. Lewis Payne, in sweater, seated and manacled (these 3 photographs of Lewis Payne all share the same title), 1865

Here the photograph analogises its referent, presenting similarities and differences that interlock, and it is only through this interlocking that we ourselves exist; the smallest unit of Being is two.<sup>31</sup> “Photography is the vehicle through which these profoundly enabling but unwelcome relationships are revealed to us, and through which we learn to think analogically.”<sup>32</sup> The German artist Gerhard Richter often talks about the use of analogy in his photo paintings. He points to this small marginal difference, and his attempt to make it visible, so that the viewer is also forced “to think differently about other kinds of difference.”<sup>33</sup> These analogical relationships in photography provide a framework and a dialogue that questions and broadens our understanding of Being.

<sup>31</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy or The History of Photography, Part 1*, 11.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

The look of resignation seen on Lewis Payne's face is mimicked in the 2012 image of Nadezhda and Maria, two of the members of the Russian performance group Pussy Riot, although the resignation is in the face of a brute authority, an authority that is political, but potentially deadly. It is the photograph that reveals more than the eye; the media and the weight of the law are overshadowing their trial, reflected in the glass. In this image it is the media that forms a block-like shadow that hovers larger than the presence of the law seen in the two uniformed figures, while the dissidents sit vulnerable but cradled by the shadow of the media. This image reveals, in that media shadowing, that Pussy Riot will through international pressure be saved from execution.



Figure 4: Misha Japaridze, Pussy Riot members, from left, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Yekaterina Samutsevich and Maria Alekhina sit in a glass cage at a courtroom in Moscow, Russia, 2012

### The photograph as a performance space

Photography has long been associated with this idea of performance. Henry M. Sayre, in his essay *The Rhetoric of the Pose: Photography and the Portrait as Performance*, states that “there has always been a sense of the staged in portraiture [photography], a sense that what we see is a *tableau vivant* its characters have chosen to perform.”<sup>34</sup> This is a common observation; that the very presence of the camera lends itself to staginess. However, if the photograph also acts in terms of Roland Barthes' concept of a primitive theatre, a bringing to life of dead moments, moments that have passed, arguably this theatre is also performative, and does more than just describe something: rather it points to something in a revealing and poignant manner.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Henry M. Sayre, “The Rhetoric of the Pose,” in *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 52.

<sup>35</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography* (London: Vintage, 1981), 31-32.

“We know the original relation of the theatre and the cult of the Dead: the first actors separated themselves from the community by playing the role of the Dead: to make oneself up was to designate oneself as a body simultaneously living and dead: the whitened bust of the totemic theatre, the man with the painted face in the Chinese theatre, the rice-paste makeup of the Indian Katha-Kali, the Japanese No mask... Now it is the same relation which I find in the Photograph; however ‘lifelike’ we strive to make it (and this frenzy to be lifelike can only be our mythic denial of an apprehension of death) Photography is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead.”

The theorist Catherine Grant likens performative photography to J. L. Austin's theory of performative speech acts, where speech does something. Citing "speech acts" examples – *I do*, *I promise*, *I bet* and *I apologise* – as performing what is being said, Grant argues that photography can be thought of in the same way, as a performative space.<sup>36</sup> She states that performative photography, particularly in its framing, always includes particular acts – of pointing, the action of viewing and reading, the act of interaction – and so exists as a specific approach to how to do things with images.

For some years now, I have used the performative within the photography space, as a platform for constructed ideas. These performative constructions instruct the viewer and *point to* particular meanings, often beyond the frame. In my own research this idea of performative photography also informs my reading of photographers who use death in their images. Additionally, the photograph acts like a skin, a layer that holds death as other, with the surface being likened to a point of intersection between life and death. In photography it is the use of light and how it interacts with the surface, specifically in terms of the vicissitudinary interruption, that somehow indirectly reaffirms the immutability of death.



Figure 5: Post mortem photograph, the girl at the left is dead and propped up.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century *memento mori* photographs, bodies were positioned to appear upright and alive, the dead often a part of the family group, pointing to the mergence of life and death in that moment captured on film. However, later photographs of the dead did not include the dead in familiar family scenes, but rather suggested feelings of horror and shame as to what happens to us when we die, instructing us to look away from the corpse, the abject, as it is all that remains after death. As Kristeva theorises, there is ambivalence towards death, the abject is repelled and it is impossible to understand what remains as part of us. However, it is in this viewing of the dead that lamentation occurs and

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<sup>36</sup> Catherine Grant, "Performing Photographs Photography, Performance and Affect", (lecture, presented at the Tate Modern, London, March 19, 2014), J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 2nd Edition, ed. J.O. Urmson and M. Sbisá (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

the presence of death is heightened. Although this viewing is fraught with ambivalence and an impossibility of knowing death, the performative allows for new readings in the pointing to and in the instructions that arise, in exploring death and mourning.

In Henry Peach Robinson's *Fading Away* (1858) we see a young girl dying of consumption (tuberculosis) and the despair of other members of the family. The image was produced from the combination printing process with the use of five negatives. Long exposures are used, but more is also revealed through the photograph analogically, surpassing just the technological aspects of photography. What is revealed is a space within the image that reflects rest, or a beyond. The image is classically posed with the girl seated in white in the right of the frame with a standing female also in white and grey tones, leaning above her head. The standing female gazes at the girl, as does the seated female to the right of the frame who is dressed in dark colours. The intradiegetic looks emphasise that the subject is the sick girl while also allowing the viewer voyeuristic access to the scene where no one returns their gaze.



Figure 6: Henry Peach Robinson, *Fading Away*, 1858

A man stands behind them between the draping of curtains looking out the window, which is open to the contrasting light sky, his face unseen, his clothes black and funeral ready. The window shape forms a space in which the body of the girl can invert and move towards the heavens, with the right curtain pointing down into an arrow to the girl, creating a rhythmic effect. This “rising to the heavens” mimics Christian mythology where the soul leaves the body and moves from the darkness on earth to the light of heaven; it is the inevitable cycle of life.<sup>37</sup> The girl's gaze is contained within the frame and directed to the bottom left of the frame, staring into a metaphoric void. Her expression is muted with her mouth closed and eyes nearly closed, not unlike the Old Masters' paintings of Christ at his death. In Peter Paul Rubens' *Lamentation of Christ by the Virgin Mary and St John*, Christ is also flanked by the woman on his right, his mother who caresses his head. His eyes are slightly open, also

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<sup>37</sup> Contrary to the soul leaving the body is the Assumption of Mary, the mother of God who is depicted in the bible and traditional paintings as being taken by cherubs to heaven. In this photograph the girl is like Mary, in that she is an innocent. Her place in heaven is set.

looking into a metaphoric void. He too is draped in white cloth although his broad chest is laid bare and fills the middle third of the frame: the hallmark of a strong man, or god in this instance. In this painting it is the presence of the blood that suggests great suffering, and there is no room in the frame to rise to the heavens but rather the body seems imbued with life from within, beginning with the heart on display. The resurrection is inferred.



Figure 7: Peter Paul Rubens, *Lamentation of Christ by the Virgin Mary and St John*, 1614/1615

These comparisons with the early paintings begin also to create a dialogue about death, with each depiction in its difference and similarity revealing our social understandings of mortality. “The present discovers itself within the past, and the past is realised within the present.”<sup>38</sup> The shared aesthetic language in relationship to death transcends time, with the painting mimicking our perception of nature, and the camera used (in this case) two hundred years later, revealing our relationship to death as beings outside of our autonomy, agency and unity, with two the smallest unit of Being.<sup>39</sup>

According to Silverman, photography is an “ontological calling card” that helps us see “that each of us is a node in a vast constellation of analogies.”<sup>40</sup> We position ourselves through analogy, through photography, so we see our similarities in the face of death, our shared finitude. In *Fading Away* the family surrounds the young girl, and visually a place waits for her to rise to after death, a place where she can remain a part of the frame but be free from the constraints of illness and pain. Her finitude is acknowledged and we all share in the experience of desiring a peaceful passing for loved ones. This is a universal wish on the deathbed of a loved one: that the loved one leaves, but stays in our world.

<sup>38</sup> Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy or the History of Photography, Part 1*, 7.

<sup>39</sup> Being – as defined by Walt Whitman: “A vast similitude interlocks all/ ...all souls all bodies though they be ever so different, or in different worlds...All identities have existed or may exist on this globe, or any globe/ All lives and deaths, all of the past, present, future.” *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Richard Maurice Bucke, Thomas R. Harned, and Horace L. Traubel (New York: Doubleday, 1902), 2:22

<sup>40</sup> Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy or the History of Photography, Part 1*, 10.

Different cultures and understandings use different religions and belief systems to explain how that person stays in the world (depending on how death and afterlife is theorised) but this photograph reminds us that there is a place. In a similar way the cabinet card shot of a deceased young woman in her parlour in a New York photography studio (1890s) also features the same space that the body can fold into. Both images, of Christ and of the young woman, perform an action, which across time acts as a beautiful and reflective image of loss and death.



Figure 8: J. M. Brainard, Photograph of unidentified deceased woman in parlour chair, Rome, N.Y., ca. 1880-1900s

Our experience of death, though, has universal aspects with ramifications that are both socially and politically relevant, with mourning existing as a powerful thread or stream that connects us through time. The photographer, as artist, positions him or her self through the photograph and showing back to us a greater understanding of being, and what it means to be human. And in photographing death and mourning, the photographer offers an individual perspective of a collective vision.<sup>41</sup> As Merleau-Ponty theorises in *The Visible and the Invisible*, “it is not I who sees,” or “he who sees,” but rather a “vision in general” that sees, and that inhabits both of us.<sup>42</sup> And it is this vision of death that broadens our understanding of death and determines our ontology, our worldview. If death is no longer a fear and mortality a threat, then the world is forced socially and politically to structure itself in a completely different way.

Further to the experience of death, Silverman’s theory that all photography is an analogy raises questions, particularly when associated with death imagery, around how and what photographic images mean when exploring death and mourning. For there is no denying that death and mourning

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<sup>41</sup> I have always been fascinated in teaching photography about the ability of photography to reveal individual perspective. On taking students to the same place over many years no one shoots the same photograph even though everyone shoots the same subject. Our perspective is like the sound of our voice: very particular, reflecting variance within a common language.

<sup>42</sup> Merleau Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible, Followed by Working Notes*, translated by Alphonso Lingus, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 132-133.

Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy or the History of Photography, Part 1* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 126.

happen to all and our experience has universal aspects. We have all existed and we will all die. The body breathes and then it stops breathing. But how we understand that photograph is important because the photograph reveals more, analogically, about our understanding of and relationship to death and mourning and most importantly prompts the question, what is the world showing back to us, again and again? Does death, as Blanchot theorises, become a haunting lived experience that lives next to us, with mourning an “eternal return of the same?” Death is giving the mourner a sense that she/he is next in line, and this sharing in the same fate, creates a deep compassion for each other, because of our fragility when facing mortality.

## Chapter 2

### The Corpse and Lamentation

Everyone wears a corpse around their wrist.  
Just a bit of twine, but a corpse all the same  
A dead thing proclaiming: I have you & you  
Patti Smith<sup>43</sup>

Visual art has a defined history of depicting death in all manner of mediums and disciplines. In this chapter I explore historical and contemporary images of corpses, which “frame” death in an attempt to comprehend it and reconcile us with our mortality. I will examine both paintings and photographs that contain scenes of violence to which the artists chose to bring attention as having both political and social importance. The works contain the artists’ lament, “Why is this happening?” These images resonate across time and point to the unacceptable arbitrariness of death. I analyse these images analogically, and as a means of communicating an innate link with death. I look at the performance space of these photographs to discover where they contain actions, instructions and points of intentional direction that question our understanding of death and mourning.

In this section I also examine the more graphic and sensual depictions of death from the Romantics, in the paintings of the French artists Eugène Delacroix and Théodore Géricault.<sup>44</sup> I will also examine select work of the Spanish artist Salvador Dalí and the image of Christ in the *Isenheim Altar* by the German Renaissance painter Matthias Grünewald. These paintings have been selected as they share an iconographic language that relates strongly to photography, and analogically relate to the first series I made in this project, *Killing Everyone I Know* (2008). In Delacroix’s paintings he endeavours, like many of the Romantics, to put man inside nature, in contrast to the more religious works of the Renaissance. In my series I fabricate death scenes using friends and family as a preliminary exploration into death, and the loss of loved ones. I will also discuss some contemporary works of Jeff Wall, Berlinde De Bruyckere, Andreas Serrano, Sally Mann and Joel Peter Witkin, as new readings of the corpse that attempt to bring us closer to *seeing* death.

#### Locating death: what happens at the moment of death

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century the Romantic Movement originated in Europe and Britain. The Romantics developed an interest in spiritual consciousness that was counter to the Enlightenment.<sup>45</sup> The movement included a focus on art as a form of social documentary, particularly in the placing of

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<sup>43</sup> Patti Smith, “A poem about Rimbaud - *Une saison en enfer*”, accessed May 15 2016, [www.jellybean6541dte.blogspot.com.au/2013/04/a-poem-about-rimbaud-une-saison-en.html/](http://www.jellybean6541dte.blogspot.com.au/2013/04/a-poem-about-rimbaud-une-saison-en.html/).

<sup>44</sup> Delacroix is of particular significance because of his key approach to content, however the eroticism of death that is evident in some of Delacroix’s work is acknowledged but will not be the focus of this discussion.

<sup>45</sup> The Enlightenment: a movement of the 18th century that stressed the belief that science and logic give people more knowledge and understanding than tradition and religion, as defined by Merriam Webster Dictionary, accessed May 07 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enlightenment>.

a new emphasis on emotions, such as apprehension, horror and terror, in depictions of both man-made and natural occurrences.

For the Romantics the focus on death was often as a spectacle, as a monumental act; to view, to watch, with the paintings standing as testaments to what happens at the end of life. In Romantic paintings, deaths were often the result of social horror and paintings document scenes of battles or great loss. On the surface they may resemble contemporary media images but the intention is quite different. These paintings attempt to explain what happens to us when we die, when man is faced with the void: death. Yet seldom are these renditions of a “good death,” the kind of death that we all hope for, surrounded by loved ones in our own bed, after a long happy life.<sup>46</sup> My mother and father both wanted to stay at home to die, however, due to necessary medical intervention they died in a hospital and in a hospice respectively.

I focus on two paintings that offer social commentary by the Romantic painters Delacroix and Géricault. The richness of colour and the rhythm in these works are compelling, and the performance points to death being random yet inevitable. In both paintings the artist laments the loss of lives in seemingly uncontrollable tragedies. Delacroix’s *Massacre at Chios* depicts several figures moments before their death. The painting, a representation of sick and dying Greek civilians about to be slaughtered by the Turks at Chios, was controversial at the time because of its absence of a victor, forcing the viewer to see death without an accompanying “good” outcome. Death is imminent and purposeless and the figures, for the most part, accept their end or are pleading for mercy. Delacroix has painted the faces expressing no illusion of hope at the moment before the end. A sense of surrender and acceptance is seen across the face of the old woman in the bottom right of the frame and she gazes outside the frame to her unforeseeable destiny with an almost Christ-like gaze.<sup>47</sup> A couple in the far left of the bottom of the frame kiss goodbye to each other and to life, with a look of resignation.

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<sup>46</sup> Good death as defined in Medspeak. A term that reflects individual preferences for how a person wants to die. For many people, factors that constitute a good death include dying at home, with family and friends and without stressful physical symptoms (nausea and vomiting, pain, dyspnoea, respiratory tract secretions, pain, and agitation). “Good Death”, accessed June 20 2015, <http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Good+death>.

The Grattan Institute prepared an independent report, “Dying Well”, in 2014 about how, where and with whom we die. “The baby boomers are growing old, and in the next 25 years the number of Australians who die each year will double. People want to die comfortably at home, supported by family and friends and effective services. But dying in Australia is more institutionalised than in the rest of the world. Community and medical attitudes plus a lack of funds for formal community care mean that about half of Australians die in hospital, and about a third in residential care. Often they have impersonal, lingering and lonely deaths; many feel disempowered. Seventy per cent of people want to die at home, yet only about 14 per cent do so. People are twice as likely to die at home in countries such as New Zealand, the United States, Ireland and France.”

Swerissen, Hal, Stephen Duckett. “Dying Well.” Grattan Institute, accessed December 12 2015, <https://grattan.edu.au/report/dying-well>.

<sup>47</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The making and unmaking of the world*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).



Figure 9: Eugene Delacroix, *Massacre at Chios*, 1824



Figure 10: Jeff Wall, *Dead Troops Talk (A vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)*, 1992

In a similar fashion the Canadian contemporary photographer Jeff Wall's *Dead Troops Talk (A vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)* contains people, in this case soldiers, in the act of dying, the act of torturing and the dead, all placed in a crater seemingly with no

escape.<sup>48</sup> The image is monochromatic, with the mostly brown tones of the dirt and rocks reflected in the uniforms of the soldiers, in a uniformity that adheres to the idea of death being equalising and colourless, and the golden tones are similar to those employed by Delacroix. We are all men and women when we die.

In *Dead Troops Talk* (*A vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986*) the most notable colour that pops from the frame is the red of the blood, smeared on the faces of men and oozing from wounds. This image is a fictionalisation of an actual event, yet it adheres to no truth in its depiction but rather uses the re-telling to comment on the horrors of war, and the return of the body to the earth. The crater appears like a group coffin, a pit which moments later will be covered with dirt, and the men all buried together. The soldiers' skin is mottled green and white, with the blood drained or draining from their wounds. *Dead Troops* "has a broken rhythm, something like a modern music. It has a grotesque aspect. The intervals and shapes are all about break-off and collapse, with sudden openings and gaps and then something again, something fractured."<sup>49</sup>

In *Massacre at Chios* the senseless massacre portrayed in the painting is rendered even more tragic with the inclusion of the foreseeable death of the truly innocent, the cherub-like infant held to its dead mother's breast. It is a painting that reflects on the ruin and despair of the inhabitants of the island of Chios, a community where death nearly annihilated the people, and changed the economic position and heritage of the island's remaining people forever.<sup>50</sup> The painting was a political statement against the inhumanity of the massacre, and shocked Western Europe into increasing support for Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire.

In both the painting and the photograph the performance points to the arbitrariness of death, and to the inability of the viewer to really comprehend and see this scene of death, and the acts of dying, within the frame. The space created, in both the painting and the photograph above, draws the attention of the viewer away from the horror and provides a moment's peace within the frame. The

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<sup>48</sup> Photographically it also resembles the civil war photograph by Timothy O'Sullivan, *The home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg*, 1863, with the figures all placed below the 2/3 horizontal line, seemingly below humanity and in a metaphoric hell, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA, accessed May 17 2015, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>.



<sup>49</sup> Craig Burnett, *Jeff Wall*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2000), 63.

<sup>50</sup> The attack on the inhabitants of Chios by Ottoman forces commenced on 11 April, 1822 and continued for several months into the summer of the same year. The campaign resulted in the deaths of twenty thousand citizens, and the forced deportation into slavery of almost all the surviving seventy thousand inhabitants.

lament of the artist is heard: “Why does this happen?” Yet death befalls all. Interestingly, Wall’s only living and clearly visible figure in this image is the man in the left of the frame who is dressed in white Middle Eastern clothing. He is the sole witness to the action yet he peers into a bag searching naively for an unrevealed desire, a way out of there, and a way out of this place of death. His attire reveals a sense of spirituality, yet it is not to God he looks but into a paper bag.

Delacroix’s interest in documenting deaths that were given no voice at the time was reflected in the painting.<sup>51</sup> But the painting also works to locate death and lament against the needless loss of life. He depicts the bottom two thirds of the painting as repetitive scenes of death, layered as far as the eye can see and the top third as a clouded sky seemingly allowing space for the dead to rise up. Notably though, there is no hand of God reaching down to lift the souls or save them, but there is a space within the frame of great tranquillity. The skies are open and gold. *The Massacre at Chios* became an object to hold up to the Western world as a horror, with death here seemingly cruel and unrelenting, but the painting also talks about death with loved ones, of holding and acceptance, and of a place in the world beyond life.

The male figure left of the centre appears languid and is leaning gently on the female next to him in a pose resembling the Pieta. There is no denying that Christian iconography then, and now in the West, accounts for the most familiar representations of a man dying, and the mourning of that loss. Scott Stephens argues that these images of Christ are venerated because these “images of the suffering Christ and of the martyrs thereby become objects of veneration, and invitations to discover the peace of God in the midst of inhumanity, humiliation and death.”<sup>52</sup> Paul Griffiths captures this critical point:

A human nature in this calamitously damaged world could not be hypostatically unified with the divine unless it underwent damage of just this sort. This is why Christians venerate Christ’s wounds; it is also why the sufferings of the martyrs and saints, and of the groaning mass of humanity in general, constantly tortured, eviscerated, raped, burned, and consumed by painful disease as it is, can be, according to the extent of their participation in Christ’s sufferings, iconic arrays for Christians. Depicting and ruminating the wounds of Christ, or the arrows piercing St. Sebastian’s body, or the death of St. Catherine on the wheel, or the consuming of Perpetua and Felicity by the beasts of the arena, or the execution of Maximilien Kolbe in Auschwitz, is not, then, an exercise in morbidity but rather an accurate perception simultaneously of what is wrong with the world (that it is a place where such things happen) and what is right with it (that it is a place where such things happen).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Delacroix’s painting was removed from the salon at the time because of the horror.

<sup>52</sup> Scott Stephens “‘This is My Body, Given for You’: At the Foot of the Cross with Thomas Hirschhorn”, *ABC Religion and Ethics Blog*, accessed June 20 2016, [www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2013/12/20/3915769.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2013/12/20/3915769.htm).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

In 2013's Venice Biennale Berlinde De Bruyckere represented Belgium. In Berlinde De Bruyckere's work it is also this connection or communion with the viewer that brings her organic sculptures, that she constructs from various materials, to resemble human life. As the writer J.M. Coetzee, with whom she collaborated on *Kreupelhout – Cripplewood*, states, “her sculptures explore life and death – death in life, life in death, life before life, death before death – in the most intimate and most disturbing way.”<sup>54</sup> This work is haunting in its ability to explore binary oppositions such as suffering and release. Like in the depictions of Christ in the middle panel of Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, Bruyckere's “figure” is neither dead nor alive, however suffering is evident in the folding of the wood, the stitching and cutting, and the flesh-coloured wax smoothed onto the sculpture like a thin skin, barely capable of holding anything together. Similarly the Christ in the middle panel of Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* is heavy with flesh, the arms stretched long with the weight of the hanging body, till the fingers bend grotesquely.



Figure 11: Berlinde De Bruyckere, *Kreupelhout – Cripplewood*, 2013



Figure 12: Niclaus of Hagenau and Matthias Grünewald (sculpted and painted by respectively), *Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1512-1516

<sup>54</sup> *Kreupelhout – Cripplewood*, 2013 is constructed from a mixture of wood, wax epoxy, iron, blankets and rope. Belgian Pavilion, “Berlinde De Bruyckere, *Kreupelhout – Cripplewood*”, accessed June 30 2016, [www.belgianpavilion.be/en/2013/artists/berlinde-de-bruyckere](http://www.belgianpavilion.be/en/2013/artists/berlinde-de-bruyckere).



Figure 13: Niclaus of Haguenau and Matthias Grünewald (sculpted and painted by respectively), *Isenheim Altarpiece*, detail from middle panel, 1512-1516



Figure 14: Niclaus of Haguenau and Matthias Grünewald (sculpted and painted by respectively), *Isenheim Altarpiece*, detail from lower panel, 1512-1516

In Grunewald's work Christ's body is cut, punctured, pierced and suspended crudely from the beam, with the suffering inviting communion. This piece was hung in a hospital in The Order of Hospitalers of St Anthony, where the sick and dying could share in Christ's suffering, thus reaffirming the hope that they too will also be resurrected. De Bruyckere's work offers no such redemption, however the poetic nature of the display invites the same reconciliation with mortality. De Bruyckere's work was displayed in a large dark space (figure 11), similarly to Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* where the figure appears locked into the space, but in this case, in the fall of the limbs there is hope as De Bruyckere's figure seemingly arches its back towards the heavens and the limbs stretch towards the two small doorways, where the light beckons. The sculpture when viewed whole depicts death here languid and fluid, offering an idea of resurrection in the space through the doorways.<sup>55</sup> In Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* lower panel, the predella, the close proximity of St John to dead Christ, shows the true sharers in Christ's suffering are not the sufferers of illness and dying but the carers, the Antonites. Analogically this is reflected in De Bruckyere's viewers who come to hold her sculpture, giving it form before it collapses.

<sup>55</sup> This resurrection is reflected in the Bible in Matthew 19:24 – "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Bible Gateway, New International Version (NIV), Book of Matthew 19:24, accessed October 7 2016, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+19&version=NIV>.

Years ago I started collecting newspaper headings that were visual and distinct, about murders that had happened in Australia. I drew from this collection of phrases about crimes or crime scenes in the initial phase of this project, and staged scenes using my friends and family as models, often with family paired directly in the images (e.g. a father with the murder of his son). In this work, *Killing Everyone I Know*, I sought to explore that moment just after death – when the presence of death is most felt, before rigor mortis sets in – in an attempt to locate death and comprehend finitude, as in the paintings of Delacroix, and to explore the arbitrariness of death through violent depictions, made all the more horrific by using friends and family as models.

In Sigmund Freud’s seminal article *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud introduced the idea of the death drive, Thanatos. With the arrival of World War I Freud could no longer deny there was a counter force to Eros, the life force. Thanatos appears in opposition and balance to Eros and pushes a person towards extinction and an inanimate state. “The aim of all life is death...inanimate things existed before living ones.”<sup>56</sup> The aggressiveness of the death drive when turned on oneself is often associated with the annihilation of the self, whereas the death drive turned outward is associated with the desire to annihilate everything else, and is often associated with sadism and murder. This desire to annihilate and kill was central to my work. For while the construction of the images pointed always to the performative and to fabrication, particularly with the use of explicitly cinematic lighting, the psychoanalytical aspect of this work involved toying with the notion of killing those close to you, in the staging of scenes of family loss.



Figure 15: Paula Mahoney, *Child Destruction*, 2008

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<sup>56</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, translated by C. J. M. Hubback, (London: International Psycho-Analytical, 1920).

In making *Child Destruction* from the *Killing Everyone I Know* series I staged the scene between a father and son in my backyard. I was fascinated with the outdoor tap and large sink and proposed the father sit there as if washing blood from his hands.<sup>57</sup> Yet I wanted no action in the frame, i.e. no water running. I set up the scene with a blue gel and several other lights to direct the viewer's eye, and then the subjects arrived and we shot ten shots. The intention was to capture a still moment, that replicates that time after death, and I asked the subjects to be as still as possible as I was shooting large format with long exposures. A certain physical engagement by the subjects was therefore required. The photograph performs the instruction that after death, there is momentarily nothing to do. Silence and stillness is the desired response regardless of how the death occurs. Just as in Delacroix's *The Massacre of Chios*, where there is no action in the frame except for around the horseman, all the other subjects are already gazing elsewhere. Ironically, because the shooting was only ten frames and the back of the large format camera very dark, I was unaware of how Jesus-like the pose the boy held was until I saw the transparency on the lightbox. The moment where Jesus dies on the cross had emerged from the photograph, shot from an unusual angle, which reflects Salvador Dalí's *Christ of Saint John of the Cross*, an image that I had on my diary as a child. Dalí's depiction is taken from a dream and is also based on a drawing by the 16th-century Spanish friar John of the Cross.<sup>58</sup> The cross points towards water in the tranquil bay scene, as an almost inverted sense of heaven. In *Child Destruction* the tap is positioned to the back left of the frame, and the blue light also gives reference to the redemption of water. The suffering in Dalí's hanging figure and my bloodied child invites feelings of pain, however the visual unity in both images prevents the images being only records of suffering and death. Dalí, in a metaphysical sense, came to consider the position of the head, at a point with the triangular arms, as "the very unity of the universe," with this aspect of the image signifying the "nucleus of the atom."<sup>59</sup> Dalí saw the image as a containing a complete "world" of all that we know and beyond. In *Child Destruction* a father and a son are shown with the boy seemingly dead, however the heavenly blue light that bathes the father, the water pipe and the tap offers an image like sky or sea, an endlessness depth and calmness, completing the "world" in the frame: a Freudian return to the state that was before life.

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<sup>57</sup> William Shakespeare, "Macbeth," in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* by William Shakespeare (Middlesex: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd, 1968) 940. Lady Macbeth Act V, Scene 1 – "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!—One, two. Why, then, 'tis time to do 't."

<sup>58</sup> Crucifixion sketch by St. John of the Cross, c. 1550, which inspired Dalí, accessed March 3 2015, [http://4.bp.blogspot.com/\\_MnfoBh8M\\_gA/TQac2nC1X4I/AAAAAAAAAQI/jnSbVDIPwW8/s1600/drawing-by-st-john-of-the-cross.jpg](http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_MnfoBh8M_gA/TQac2nC1X4I/AAAAAAAAAQI/jnSbVDIPwW8/s1600/drawing-by-st-john-of-the-cross.jpg)



<sup>59</sup> Robert Descharnes, *Dalí*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003).

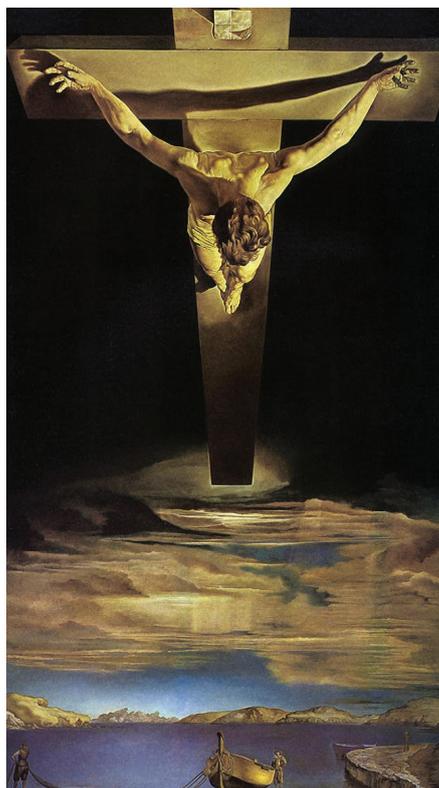


Figure 16: Salvador Dalí, *Christ of Saint John of the Cross*, 1951

In *Killing Everyone I Know* the lighting and composition instruct the viewer that this is not real, it is a construction, at times an idealisation of death, for although there is blood there are no knives cutting or bodies displayed crudely. This idealisation of death is also evident in Theodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, considered to be the painting that launched the Romantic Movement, as it dealt with current events rather than a classical subject. The painting was simply named *Shipwreck Scene* when first exhibited; yet all who viewed it knew immediately what the painting was about because the disaster of the frigate, Medusa, had caused great political scandal and captured public attention. Amongst Géricault's studies for the paintings were sketches and paintings of drowned cadavers from the morgue, which when compared with the final painting are far less idealised depictions of death.<sup>60</sup> The final painting is stylised with figures exotic and classical in their composition. The bodies are arched, muscles flexed with the strong use of the diagonal contributing to the movement and placement of the bodies as they reach for salvation. However, the sea appears cruel and unrelenting in its power with the raft's future implied: its cargo will be surrendered. It is the golden empty space of the sky that offers a folded space of hope; a utopian space that the dead can fold into, where the tension and drama of both the storm and the physicality of the bodies can be still.

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<sup>60</sup> A series of relatively unknown preparatory paintings for Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* that were based on human remains that he could take home, checking the pieces out like in a library, from the Paris Morgue. Paul Koudounaris, "Théodore Géricault's Morgue-Based Preparatory Paintings for 'Raft of the Medusa.'" *Morbid Anatomy*, accessed August 16 2015, [www.morbidanatomy.blogspot.com.au/2012/02/theodore-gericaults-morgue-based.html](http://www.morbidanatomy.blogspot.com.au/2012/02/theodore-gericaults-morgue-based.html).



Figure 17: Théodore Géricault, Raft of the Medusa, 1818-1819



(i)



(ii)



(iii)



(iv)



(v)



(vi)

Figure 18: Théodore Géricault, Studies for Raft of the Medusa, 1818-1819

(i) *Head of a Guillotined Man*, 1818/19, oil on panel, 41 x 38cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, IL, USA

(ii) *Head Of A Drowned Man*, 1819, oil on canvas, 38.2 x 46.4cm, Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, USA

(iii) *Heads Of Torture Victims*, 1818, oil on canvas, 48 x 60cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen, Rouen, France

(iv) *Anatomical Pieces*, 1819, oil on canvas, 37 x 46cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen, Rouen, France

(v) *After death*, 1818, oil on canvas, 48 x 60cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen, Rouen, France

(vi) *Study of Hands and Feet*, 1818-1819, oil on canvas, 52 x 64cm, Musée Fabre, Montpellier, France

This series of paintings by Géricault of various bodies' parts was made for the *Raft of the Medusa*. It includes severed heads and depicts death as distressed and other. Out of context, these parts are more horrific, when placed on a table or folded into cloth, mimicking Joel Peter Witkin's still life *The Kiss*. Andreas Serrano's photographic series taken in a Mexican morgue, titled *The Morgue*, also mirrors Géricault's work. Death is framed in these works with a black background forming a void. The bodies are raw, fleshy and still; here there are no arched backs or flexed bodies. In removing the context through the fold of cloth or the black void, death is depicted as unavoidable and, equally, incomprehensible. It is both familiar and disgusting. The corpse's mouth in *Pneumonia drowning II* is agape, in a cry not a scream, freezing that last draw of breath that bridges life to death. Unlike in the *Raft of the Medusa* where death is framed in an attempt to comprehend it, here death is locked into the frame, naked for viewing; the object reflected in a mirror – I have an arm: that is an arm, which is dead – I will die.



Figure 19: Joel Peter Witkin, *The Kiss*, 1982



Figure 20: Andreas Serrano, *Death Unknown*, 1992



Figure 21: Andres Serrano, *Pneumonia drowning II*, 1992

## Staging death

I have always been fascinated with death. When I was seven years old my neighbour's rabbit died while I was looking after it. I remember finding it with its head stuck between the wires of the cage. I cried and wished I had been able to save it. My mother held me close and asked me to imagine all the factors that had to come together for such a thing to happen: the rabbit had to be bought at the shop, go to that house, be kept in this cage; the owners had to then go on holidays and so on. In my family the death was explained as being neither chance nor within our control, but as God's work. It was my first glimpse into understanding my lack of control in the world, as I clutched the poor dead thing, now rigid with death, to my chest.

In *Killing Everyone I Know* the settings were constructed to appear neither modern nor dated. I examined the exhibition *City of Shadows: inner city crime and mayhem 1912-1948*, which was held at the Justice and Police Museum in Sydney during 2005–6. The exhibition was curated by Peter Doyle, the renowned author, researcher and curator, in conjunction with the curator of the museum, Caleb Williams. These images were striking in their simplicity and, as Doyle explained, had a “homicide vibe – a feeling that something really bad has happened there even though you don’t know what it was.”<sup>61</sup> Interestingly, most of the images appeared as if enclosed in an intimate silence, rather than in grotesqueness as would be expected in the case of murder victims. They were classically composed, with small details revealing themselves, such as the peek of the leg and shoe from behind the door in the bottom left of the frame and the recently set table in *Murder of Alice and Morris Anderson, Waverley*.

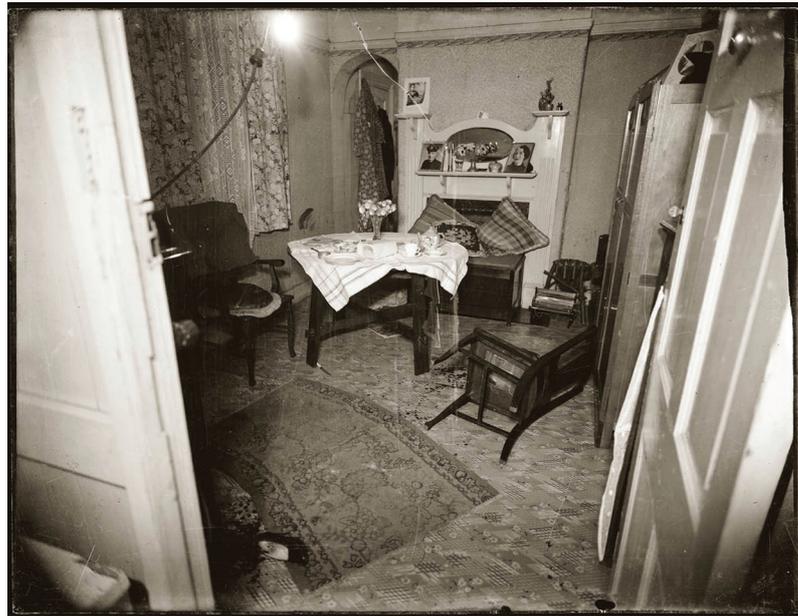


Figure 22: Photographer unknown, Murder of Alice and Morris Anderson, Waverley, from the City of Shadows, 1944



Figure 23: Dario Argento, Still from *Suspiria*, 1977

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<sup>61</sup> Paula Grunseit, “The True Face of Crime – City of shadows: Sydney police photographs 1912 – 1948 by Peter Doyle with Caleb Williams,” Wordsville: reading writing editing, March 4, 2011, accessed December 20 2011, <http://www.paulagrunseit.com/the-true-face-of-crime-%E2%80%93-city-of-shadows-sydney-police-photographs-1912-%E2%80%93-1948-by-peter-doyle-with-caleb-williams>.

Parallel to this interest in early Australian crime photography is an interest in the horror films of Italian filmmaker Dario Argento, particularly the classic supernatural horror *Suspria*, which is visually saturated in primary colours, especially red.<sup>62</sup> This theatrical lighting is further enhanced by the use of Technicolor, which was more commonly used in musicals. Both this unrealistic use of colour and the operatic soundtrack by *Goblin*, the 1970s Italian progressive rock band, serve to remove the viewer from a conventional sense of horror, with the film becoming a surreal kaleidoscope in which aesthetics are seemingly more important than the narrative. Notably, the director Argento also used his family in several films and killed off the characters played by his daughter and then wife several times. This personal connection heightens an understanding of these films and adds to the psychology of horror that Argento explores. In the same way, I also use family and friends in my images so a personal connection is always present.

Unlike Argento though I constructed the *Killing Everyone I Know* images partially as an exploration of my fear of the death of loved ones, with the photographs being the jettisoned object, the abject. Kristeva, in the “Powers of Horror,” defines the abject as the other, that which is part of ‘me’ but from which I must separate in order to gain my identity.<sup>63</sup> It is “what lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the ego’s [latter’s] rules of the game.”<sup>64</sup> The abject is not clearly defined but is what I create as other, in the process of creating my own identity before language. The abject lies in the sublime space, in the space of separation from the parent but before language, and entrance into the symbolic order.<sup>65</sup> In this series *Killing Everyone I Know* the abject is the object of primal repression to annihilate all loved ones, in some narcissistic desire to face death and mortality. Kristeva differentiates between the knowledge of death and the meaning of death, both of which can exist within the symbolic order, and the traumatic experience of being actually confronted with the sort of materiality that traumatically shows you your own death:

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Suspria*, directed by Argento, Dario (Seda Spettacoli, 1977).

<sup>63</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982 (1980)), 1-4.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 2

<sup>65</sup> “Symbolic order” is a Lacanian term - The social world of linguistic communication, intersubjective relations, knowledge of ideological conventions, and the acceptance of the law. Once a child enters into language and accepts the rules and dictates of society, it is able to deal with others. The acceptance of language’s rules is aligned with the Oedipus complex, according to Lacan. The symbolic is made possible because of your acceptance of the Name-of-the-Father, those laws and restrictions that control both your desire and the rules of communication. Through recognition of the Name-of-the-Father, you are able to enter into a community of others. The symbolic, through language, is “the pact which links... subjects together in one action. The symbolic order works in tension with the imaginary order and the Real,” accessed July 16 2015, <https://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/psychoanalysis/definitions/symbolicorder.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 3.

In this aestheticisation of violence there is also undeniably a strong link to gothic fiction, which combined violence and eroticism and was a precursor to slasher films. In Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forrest*, the protagonist Adeline resists temptation and waits to be rescued from the castle. In this she is the archetype of the Gothic heroine, the passive female, a damsel in distress, desired by every man she encounters and pursued and persecuted by the ones she spurns. For the friends and family I photographed in the *Killing Everyone I Know* series, submission and compliance was necessary. The subjects in the resulting photographs are passive and still, pawns in my vain attempt, as the artist, at controlling death through playing out scenes of loved ones' deaths, with these photographs instructing us that death is silence, it is other, regardless of the passivity or activity of the subjects.



Figure 24: Paula Mahoney, *Murder*, 2008

In *Killing Everyone I Know* I used similar classic compositions as found in the *City of Shadows*, to create a stillness in the frame, and theatrical green and blue lighting to remove the viewer from an immersive experience. This series included images such as *Murder*, which draws from the infamous and unsolved Easey Street Murders that occurred around the corner from my house: “they were found with only their night dresses on.” The titles of the works also came from a conversation with a police officer at Collingwood police station who listed the many euphemistic phrases that are used by the legal system to describe murder and charge offenders, such as *Manslaughter*, *Grievous bodily harm*, *Intentionally cause serious injury*, *Recklessly cause serious injury*, *Defensive homicide* and *Child destruction*. In *Killing Everybody I Know* the viewer has access to the horror of the moment after an alleged crime, but the image is knowingly a construct, staged for the viewer. In these works the fabricated image is a stage on which notions of fear and fantasy can play a part and be explored.



Figure 25: Paula Mahoney, *Grievous bodily harm*, 2008



Figure 26: Paula Mahoney, *Intentionally cause serious injury*, 2008



Figure 27: Paula Mahoney, *Defensive homicide*, 2008

In *Killing Everyone I Know* the images play with this notion of the spectacle as the dead victims in frame appear, although covered with blood, with their eyes open in a cold stare out of frame. Viewers often comment that these victims appear bored or detached. This construction frees the viewer from any compassion fatigue and affirms the images as staged, inviting the viewer to look and question. From the *City of Shadows* exhibition, *Bodies of Mr & Mrs Anderson* is a crime photo where the viewer is asked to unravel the mystery of these two deaths. In this case Mr Anderson shot his wife and then himself for a reason unknown, although it was thought to be an affair or an infidelity. Interestingly the photograph holds the letter L (as in love) in the way the couple fell, in the shape of the woman's arm. Interesting also is the *pointing to* that occurs within the frame: the cloth on the table and the chair and the end of the bed point towards Mr Anderson as the one. Strangely too I find Mr Anderson is the name given to Neo in the Matrix films as the one that brings peace. In this photograph it is Mr Anderson who brings the end.



Figure 28: Photographer unknown, *Bodies of Mr & Mrs Anderson*, 1938

In *Killing Everyone I Know* the representation of the aftermath of a violent act is frozen, yet there are no knives cutting or guns firing, so the viewer is forced to look for any missed clues, inside and outside the frame, to reveal an undefined narrative; to look analogically to what is happening in the frames. In this series crime photography and film references are evident, as is an interest in the act of looking. I sought to explore the spectacle of death and finitude, and to direct the viewer to question the undetermined actions that went into constructing the scene. However, in exhibiting the work I found the blood in the scenes distracted the viewer, drawing attention to the gruesomeness of the act and raising other metaphorical references, such as blood-related illness.



Figure 29: Paula Mahoney, *Manslaughter*, 2008

## Reintroducing death: the corpse in photograph

Photography and death have a deeply interconnected relationship. Photographic images record moments that are forever gone, past, dead. The photograph, the actual object, often becomes personal, an object that can be held, treasured and caressed, particularly when the person within the frame is not physically there with the viewer. This relationship between the photograph and the viewer is principally applicable with post mortem photography, where the photograph directly becomes an object to hold the loss of a loved one. In the very framing of an image absence is referenced and, in the case of images of the dead, there is an inherently interesting relationship between image and absence. However, the photograph can then be seen as *memento mori* when photographing both the living and the dead. A photograph can be a way, socially and culturally, to give loved ones and society a place where “souls” lie protected in the frame, where grief and mourning can be placed in an honourable and meaningful way, and where the afterlife is always presented as a favourable place. This is not the same as looking at photographs as dead moments, passed moments, as this lived moment actually entails death.

In photographing the dead, the corpse is given life. In dialogue with the viewer, it says I am here and you are there. In a non-religious context, it allows the dead a safe place to be and acts almost as a mirror of our own death that can sit beside us in our lives. If for a moment time is suspended, as Batchen argues, by that photograph, then through photography our death can sit beside us, rather than be a linear construct that we move toward, the photograph acting analogically as a reflection of our death.<sup>67</sup> These poetic implications remind me of the last line of the French artist Chris Marker’s film *La Jetée*, “that this moment he had been granted to watch as a child, which had never ceased to obsess him, was the moment of his own death.”<sup>68</sup>

We can use this understanding of the space of the photograph as an actual performance; where the action takes place, where the body or the dead, which are innate, perform, as would a leaf or a tree in a landscape, holding meaning within the frame, in relation to what else is in the frame. The decaying body sits as a contradiction, as flesh performing and encapsulating, a horror that shuns the viewer. The instructions are clear – you will die, and your body will decay, just as you see within this frame – for we are but mere mortals and photography our grim reaper, the witness of our own mortality.

As Batchen states, all photographs are “indexical trace(s) of the presence of its subject, a trace that both confirms the reality of existence and remembers it, potentially surviving as a fragile talisman” of that existence even after its subject has passed on.<sup>69</sup> The discussion of the photograph functioning as a talisman is particularly important when looking at photographs of death. It functions ambiguously with the photograph certifying, “so to speak, that the corpse is alive, as corpse: it is the living image of

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<sup>67</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, *Suspending Time: Life – Photography – Death*, (Shizuoka, Japan: Izo Photo Museum, 2010).

<sup>68</sup> *La Jetée*, directed by Chris Marker (Arte Video, 1962). This is the last line in the film.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

the dead.”<sup>70</sup> So if the photograph is, as Batchen theorises, a talisman, when a corpse is photographed, the photograph functions to keep the dead safe from evil, protected in the afterlife in the same way that a photograph of the living frames that person eternally. The photograph becomes a “get out of jail free” card, a safe pass for corpses lying within the frame. A magical image, that assures the loved ones left behind of the safe passage of the dead, in an almost religious way.

Catherine Grant’s notion of performative photography, which contextually performs on viewers and producers, can be used in association with Barthes’ references to death. It is an established photographic understanding that the very presence of the camera alters its subject and lends itself to the “staginess” of the photograph. However, if we start to look at how the performative is located within the photograph itself, and in the relationship of the image to the viewer, these images of death are active, and contain actions, instructions and points of intentional direction. In an examination of Witkin’s *Feast of Fools* (1990) and Sally Mann’s series *What Remains* (2000–2), I look at how the body is displayed, both as the remains of death and how that body is used in an associative way for those left behind, as a remembrance, as a *memento mori*. Both American photographers Joel Peter Witkin and Sally Mann deal with the body in their images, in varying and different ways, with Witkin creating macabre complex tableaux, and Mann creating nostalgic reflections on death. In both cases the results are confrontational.

In *Feast of Fools* Witkin uses body parts that he found in a Mexican morgue drawer. The drawer contained bodily fluids with severed arms, legs, eyes, penises and little children floating around. The artist talks about the horror that this discovery brought him, as no one had thought to address these remains as meaningful, and therefore dispose of them respectfully. Witkin elected to use these bodies and body parts, which included a dead baby, with fruits and food in a macabre painterly still life that at first glance is beautiful in its totality. In this still life Witkin places the body back in the domestic, with the body parts displayed with a 19<sup>th</sup> century aesthetic, similar to post-mortem photographs from the late 1800s to early 1900s. Witkin attempts to create within the frame the reverence that such body parts should have been accredited under normal circumstances, and at the same time makes direct reference to the body as flesh. Like the fruit and food, the body rots and decays, growing and attracting moulds, microbes and insects that will break it down over time, thereby allowing new life to emerge from old.

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<sup>70</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on photography*, (New York, Hill and Wang, 1981), 78-79.



Figure 30: Joel Peter Witkin, *Feast of Fools*, 1990

The image reaffirms the materiality of the body, and aligns the decay process as one of natural transformation. Each part in the frame will, to all intents and purposes, develop mould collectively and give rise to the by-products of decay. Witkin has also scraped, scuffed, and inscribed the film negative, and visibly retouched the trims, in much the same way as early pictorialists engaged with photography. This further physical engagement with the photograph is most often seen as a reflection on the body, but it also operates to reveal the physicality of the photographic medium. It is an intersection with the photograph in the similar way that death is an intersection with life, a polarity that permeates throughout life.

As a contrast, in Sally Mann's images from *What Remains* (2000–2010), the dead body is openly displayed in the photograph. *What Remains* is a photographic series of images made of three parts, one taken of Mann's dead dog decaying, one taken at the University of Tennessee Forensic Anthropology Centre – where bodies are donated to science and left outside in the woods so that forensic scientists can study the process of organic decomposition, titled *Matter Lent* – and lastly, close-up portraits of her children. The images from the University of Tennessee Forensic Anthropology Centre graphically depict rotting corpses, with the body very much a part of the landscape, as in *Untitled* (figure 31). Viewers' frequent comment on the corpse in this image is "looks like chicken", with the desire to remove the body from being human, to something like chicken that is more palatable and comprehensible for the viewer's consciousness. Mann has also knowingly contextualized the image with the placement of the rubbish bin, in the right-hand side of the image, at a diagonal line to the body, visually pointing to the disposability of the body and, like Joel Peter Witkin, re-affirming the body as flesh.



Figure 31: Sally Mann, *Untitled*, from *Matter Lent* series, 2000/2010

In this series Mann has used an old-fashioned chemical method called the wet-plate collodion process, so that the images have a Victorian feel, resembling paintings. This process removes the viewer from the graphic nature of the subject because of the old world aesthetic, yet at the same time, this process produces a very fine detailed image, drawing the viewer back towards the subject. This technical manipulation reveals both a history of photography, particularly in the black and white shots, and a history of death in photography reminiscent of the Civil War photographs that all used the same technique. In *Untitled* (figure 33) there is a high saturation of yellow and a large depth of field. Again the placement of the body in this frame runs at a strong diagonal from the left-hand side of the frame, back to the woods. In a sense it is the body returning to nature, with echoes of the Christian Easter lament, “ashes to ashes, dust to dust”, and from where the subtitled *Matter Lent* came for Mann’s 2004 exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery, Washington D.C.



Figure 32: Sally Mann, *Untitled*, from *Matter Lent* series, 2000/2010



Figure 33: Sally Mann, *Untitled*, from *Matter Lent* series, 2000/2010

Mann's series captures, through her twelve months of visiting the facility, various stages of decay of different bodies, recording the time it takes for the body to disappear. This performance of death on the body mirrors the ritualised period of grieving time that exists in many cultures. Roland Barthes' notion of the primitive theatre in *Camera Lucida* aligns photography as death's revelation. However in Mann's photographs the dead are explicit, and the performance of death is not revealed, but shockingly displayed. Mann instructs us that we too will die and our body will decay, returning to the earth, like a leaf that has fallen from the tree. The performance interrupts, and erupts, within Mann's framing.

## Chapter 3

### The Death of My Father

There's a part of me that thinks perhaps we  
go on existing in a place even after we've left it.

- Colum McCann<sup>71</sup>

Here I examine the personal loss of loved ones through photography and, in particular, photographing my father dying and dead. I also examine historical paintings of dead Christ as early depictions of death and as precursors to contemporary practices of depicting death. I look at post-mortem photography and the photograph as *memento mori*, as a means of capturing death within the frame, and reference Barthes, Batchen and Sontag in my discussion of the latter. In contemporary art, photographers have photographed loved ones dying and dead, as an acknowledgement of finitude and as a witness to death. In particular, I discuss the work of photographers who have used photography and the photograph in varied ways as a means of lamenting a dying or dead parent, including American photographer Richard Avedon, English photographer Phillip Toledano and Australian photographer Trent Parke. I also discuss the work of Sophie Calle in recording her mother's death. Calle placed the camera next to her mother's bed, as a substitute for her, in order to capture death, and to create new readings of the place of the camera as witness/lamenter. This work of Calle's is included in this discussion as it is photographic in nature, as the camera, the subject and the framing never alters. The only movement in the frame is Calle's mother breathing and the movement of the nurse and Calle at the end.

I discuss my own work, in which I photographed my father during the last 24 hours that I spent with him. In making these images my intention differs from the artists mentioned above, as it was not to capture death but rather to record what I knew I would not remember, in order to create a memento. In my life across times of great emotion, such as birth and death, I have found that memory lacks, it is unreliable, that we are subject to being in the moment in the truest sense of the word, each moment too loaded to contain. In taking these photographs I knew that what I saw through the lens would become my memories. In future I would view these images, and reflect on them to see my father's death. The photographs, as Silverman theorises, would analogue my father's death, revealing a particular look. The photographs would also become a personal record of the nine months of watching my father die, as during this time I had felt there was no place for my camera amongst the over-recording and imaging of the body that occurs, in a medical sense, with terminal cancer. I also realised, after the fact, that in photographing my father I was facing my own mortality, because as I saw him through my lens, I saw myself.

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<sup>71</sup> Colum McCann, *Let the Great World Spin*, (London: Random House, 2009), 195.

## Dead Christ

This section will examine two paintings from the High Renaissance (1490s–1527), as this period is known as a genesis in visual arts, both technically and in design, that continues to the present day. Notably, at this time social interest in the workings of the interior of the body became more widespread, so concurrently there was a rising interest in mortality.<sup>72</sup> I will focus on the depictions of Christ in two paintings, *The Lamentation over the Dead* (1480) by Andrea Mantegna, and *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521) by Hans Holbein the Younger. These paintings were selected as they share an iconographic language that strongly influenced subsequent photography and they inform my work, because as metaphysical constructions they offer a philosophical approach to death.

They also depict Christ as a man, with a material body facing the same physical suffering that plagues humanity. Yet as the body of Christ it provides a divine dimension to human suffering. The body of Christ suffers and is horrific and dies, even if only for the three days before rising again in resurrection. Much confusion abounded at this time about how Christ can simultaneously be man and God, in the incarnation of Christ, which is considered the second greatest work of God.<sup>73</sup> In Christian mythology this is pivotal, as it is this second act of incarnation that redeems man from corruption, allowing mankind salvation from his sins. These selected paintings point to the humanity of Christ, and arguably to the divinity of the corpse. In both these paintings the corpse of Christ is displayed crudely, yet several aspects point to its divinity.

These religious paintings depict the death of Christ, a death that came after much suffering. The paintings remind me of the images I took of my father in the last 24 hours that I spent with him, from dying to death and before his body was removed by the undertakers. He had also suffered, not like being crucified but maybe a comparable degree of suffering. In the last nine months of his illness with cancer, his body had become slowly depleted until there was almost no oxygen in his blood.

These early paintings of the witnessing of Christ's suffering and death potentially served to remind the viewer to live a moral life. They show death in its certainty, and address the acknowledgement

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<sup>72</sup> Leonardo da Vinci, the famous Italian Renaissance painter, began his book entitled *On the Human Figure* on the 2nd day of April 1489 while working for Ludovico Maria Sforza, the ruling duke of Milan. Da Vinci compiled hundreds of anatomical drawings of the body and by the end of his life he claimed that he had cut up more than 30 corpses, accessed on September 5 2016, [www.bbc.com/culture/story/20130828-leonardo-da-vinci-the-anatomist](http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20130828-leonardo-da-vinci-the-anatomist).

Also in Florence, Italy during the Renaissance, the Medici family started the largest and best-known wax anatomical collection from the Renaissance. This work is now housed in the oldest public museum in Europe, La Specola, which is part of the Museum of Natural History. It was started as the personal collection of the Medici family and opened to the public in 1775. Atlas Obscura, "La Specola" accessed September 5 2016, [www.atlasobscura.com/places/la-specola](http://www.atlasobscura.com/places/la-specola).

<sup>73</sup> The Doctrine of Incarnation is the founding leap of faith in Christian belief in the New Testament. It is the hypostatic union, the union of Christ's humanity and divinity, and places these two natures in one person.

Incarnation means "the act of being made flesh." It is derived from the Latin version of John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and he lived amongst us." Catholic Online, "John Chapters", accessed November 18 2016, [www.catholic.org/bible/book.php?id=50](http://www.catholic.org/bible/book.php?id=50).

What Christians praise most about God is his works and deeds. The first greatest work is the creation of the world, which is corrupted by man, recounted in the Genesis 1-3: the story of the fall from grace of Adam and Eve, and their banishment from the Garden of Eden. Bible Gateway, New International Version (NIV), Book of Genesis 1-3, accessed October 7 2016, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+3&version=NIV>.

of our finitude. Ironically it is finitude that connects us to each other, through a shared presence of death and the unavailability of mortality. Also they represent the most familiar dead body to me, having grown up in a strict Christian family. As is common with many religious depictions, in both these paintings the body is locked into the frame and the lamenter is positioned out of the frame. The focus is on the body shortly after death, on the brute physicality of the body as mortal flesh, lonely and isolated and subject to decay. The paintings depict a time of intersection, the body decaying or falling away, when as the lamenter you feel death's presence; a time in which "the world" could potentially be locked into a frame.

These works are also significant as they depict death in an unsentimental way. In Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, the corpse is shown just before the onset of rigor mortis and it fills the crypt it is painted in, forcing the viewer to see only the body, which seemingly epitomises death: isolated, white and cold, and with no room for redemption or resurrection. Death appears in this painting as a place of alienation of the individual from every other being. The cuts to Christ's side and the holes in his hand are clearly displayed, and his face is etched in suffering. It raises the question, "If death is so horrible and if the laws of nature so powerful, then how can they be overcome? How can they be overcome when even Christ [He] did not conquer them."<sup>74</sup>



Figure 34: Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 1521

This idea of death as alienation is often coupled with loss, and in this case, it is the cold white body, devoid of any sense of life, that remains as the object representing that loss. The objectification of the body as loss follows the earlier representations seen in paintings, etchings and drawings, particularly from the Medieval period and early Modern period, with the traditional use of *memento mori* (skulls, candelabras, hourglasses and so on). *Memento mori* gained acceptance as approved moral images in the religious iconoclasm after the reformation (16<sup>th</sup> century), symbolising two important aspects of death: confronting individuals with their own mortality by working to remind society to "remember death" or "remember you must die", and serving as a personal object, where one's sense of loss can be placed.<sup>75</sup>

This object, be it a painting, a skull or a photograph, is meant to replace the dead body; a body that in truth decays and cannot be held onto. This object is a complicated machination of grief. The

<sup>74</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 109.

<sup>75</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Picador USA, 1977), 15.

Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva, in *On the Melancholic Imaginary*, notes that the loss of a loved one creates an absence that hides aggressivity on the part of the mourner with respect to the object of his/her mourning.

I hate him/her: because I love him/her, in order to not lose him/her, I install him/her in myself; but because I hate him/her, this other in myself is a bad ego... I am destroying myself... self-annihilation the tragic disguising of another's massacre.<sup>76</sup>

Kristeva's article draws on Freud's text, *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, where Freud examines the melancholic response to loss. Freud distinguishes melancholy and mourning by the fact that the object is lost in the former. This ambivalence that melancholia gives rise to, love and hate for the lost object, produces both a sadness where there is no end to the loss, and a happiness in the recollection or contemplation of a memory and/or a fantasy of what loss is. In Kristeva's further discussion of Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, in *Black Sun*, she suggests that the act of painting for Holbein is a confrontation to the separation and emptiness of death.<sup>77</sup> This severance of death that is so clearly depicted by the body in this painting conveys a symptomatic melancholia, between life and death, meaning and non-meaning.<sup>78</sup> However it is the artist that sees the body, and the viewer, who both momentarily convene in a heartfelt lament.

Kristeva finds an excessive force pertaining to suffering, that at times can be a sensual pleasure that drives melancholy. This marriage of suffering and sensual pleasure comes together most notably in Mantegna's *Lamentation of Christ*, with the cuts to the hands and feet and prominence in the frame with the large phallus loosely covered by the cloth. These common Christian notions of suffering and sensuality are also revisited in the Good Friday ritual of kissing the bloodied feet of the crucified Christ.

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<sup>76</sup> Julie Kristeva, "On the Melancholic Imaginary", *New formation*, no. 3, (Winter 1987): 6.

<sup>77</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 130.

<sup>78</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 137.



Figure 35: Andrea Mantegna, *Lamentation of Christ*, 1480

In Leo Steinberg's *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art*, Steinberg examines imagery of the overtly sexed Christ in infancy and again after death.<sup>79</sup> He highlights sexuality and erotic union in gestures such as the caress of the chin, the pointing and touching with Mary's finger to the erect phallus of the infant, and the focus on the groin after Christ is taken from the cross. This overt sexual Christ reaffirms God as human flesh, but also, particularly in Mantegna's *Lamentation of Christ*, the groin points to the fact that Christ is man, an idealised man. "At once the viewer is closer to Christ but still understands his position of authority."<sup>80</sup> In the positioning of the body Mantegna allows an accessibility to relate to a vulnerable Christ, permitting the viewer to move closer to God: to the divine. Thus, in art, *memento mori*, and in these paintings the body of Christ was used as a two-edged sword. Firstly, it enabled individuals to externalise their grief, and to avoid self-harm, to move away from Freud's notion of the death drive; and secondly it served as a social reminder that "we all will die" so we must act nobly in society in order to achieve what in modern terms has become seen as a "good death", and in Christian mythology, a heavenly afterlife.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art* (New York: Random House, 1983).

<sup>80</sup> Dan Starling, *Knowledge and Identity: Andrea Mantegna's Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, accessed November 16 2015, <http://www.danstarling.com/page39.html>.

<sup>81</sup> Self-harm at this time was considered most immoral by Christians and would result in a soul lost in limbo forever in the afterlife.

Death drive or death instinct, Thanatos, as postulated by Sigmund Freud: a primitive impulse for destruction, decay, and death, coexisting with and opposing the life instinct, Eros, accessed August 15 2016, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Death+drive>.

In Christian belief systems if you live a good life and repent your sins, you will in benefit in eternal life in Heaven, a place defined by the eternal presence of God and all your deceased loved ones. "2 My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. 4 You know the way to the place where I am going", Bible Gateway, New International Version (NIV), Book of John 14:2-4, accessed October 7 2016, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john+14+&version=NIV>. This passage defining heaven was read at my father's funeral.

In contrast to this understanding of the spectator's anxiety is the notion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century French literary and cultural critic, Maurice Blanchot, that artists, through emulating death in art, embrace a freedom born out of contentment with their own death, thereby escaping the hold that death has on their own life.<sup>82</sup> The death depictions, or *memento mori*, thereby act as both objects of mourning and loss, and as direct acknowledgement that death, and more truly our own death, is everywhere, and that only in this acknowledgement is the fear and anxiety of the unknown dispersed. Blanchot, in *Literature and the Right to Death*, defines that fear and anxiety:

There is no question that we are preoccupied by dying. But why? It is because when we die, we leave behind not only the world but also death. That is the paradox of the last hour. Death works with us in the world; it is a power that humanises nature, that raises existence to being, and it is within each one of us as our most human quality; it is death only in the world – man only knows death because he is man, and he is only man because he is death in the process of becoming. But to die is to shatter the world; it is the loss of person, the annihilation of the being; and so it is also the loss of death, the loss of what in it and for me made it death. As long as I live, I am a mortal man, but when I die, by ceasing to be man I also cease to be mortal, I am no longer capable of dying, and my impending death horrifies me because I see it as it is: no longer death, but the impossibility of dying.<sup>83</sup>

This impossibility of dying is central to the lamenter, for the corpse is seen as an abject object. The moment of dying represents the moment when you can no longer die anymore and therefore when you are no longer able to be human. In these early paintings of Christ the corpse is viewed as that of the incarnate, allowing, if only momentarily, the viewer to see their own death in its humanising nature.

Mantegna's *Lamentation of Christ* sits in contrast to Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*. Unlike Holbein's emancipated and trapped corpse, Mantegna's Jesus appears robust and masculine and the perspective of the image offers a strong focus on the groin. In Mantegna's painting, at first glance, Jesus' body appears restful and peaceful, with a pillow cradling his head. However on further examination, we see that the bed is a marble slab and the weeping mourners, referenced in the title, are pushed almost out of the top left hand side of the frame, with only their faces and hands visible. The perspective is unusual with the cadaver foreshortened drastically and draped tightly from the waist down: a perspective that is shared some years later with Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Jan Deyman* and is also "suitable for the dissection of a corpse."<sup>84</sup> In both paintings the body is cut. Mantegna's Christ has a spear wound on his right side and the skull of

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<sup>82</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock, (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).

<sup>83</sup> Maurice Blanchot "Literature and the Right to Death" in *The Work of Fire*, translated by C. Mandell (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press): 300.

<sup>84</sup> Starling, *Knowledge and Identity: Andrea Mantegna's Lamentation over Dead Christ*.

Rembrandt's figure is cut open. "The surgeon was akin to the artist in that both could go beyond the surface of the body."<sup>85</sup> I shot an image of my father after he died from a similar perspective, his head furthest from my camera. His head and his face are what I identified as him. Before anatomical explorations (that began in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century) revealed that the body housed more than the known mind and body, the head represented mind, soul or essence, and it was this that moved furthest away from me.



Figure 36: Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Jan Deyman*, 1656

In Mantegna's *Lamentation of Christ* the holes in the hands and feet are unsentimentally portrayed and the skin is taut and drawn, adding to the dramatic depiction of the corpse. However the foreshortening perspective directs the viewer to the groin area, indicating sexuality, virility and masculinity. This figure of Christ will overcome death; the large phallus seemingly reinforces his divinity.

There are, however, similarities in Mantegna's *Lamentation of Christ* and Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* in the way the corpses, in both paintings, are locked into the frame. In Mantegna's painting, because of the perspective, the corpse appears almost squashed into the frame from top to bottom, with the feet appearing unnaturally small. There is, in both paintings, little space, both physically and metaphysically, for grief or mourning or for the living. These corpses are singular, and the paintings offer no place for loved ones. A boundary is established visually with both the corpse and the frame containing an acknowledgement of death and its otherness.

Blanchot writes:

The cadaver is its own image. It no longer entertains any relation with the world, where it still appears, except that of an image, an obscure possibility, a shadow ever present

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<sup>85</sup> Starling, *Knowledge and Identity: Andrea Mantegna's Lamentation over Dead Christ*.

behind the living form from which now, far from separating itself from this form, transforms entirely into shadow.<sup>86</sup>

It is a shadow that is neutral and unlike the living, as in the above two depictions of Christ, that in both cases represents different aspects of the death of Jesus, rather than a man. In both depictions the body is “other”, Christ’s double, a form that resembles and reflects that which was once living. In both representations that body is seemingly forced into the frame, an attempt by the painter to trap death in the corpse. However, Mantegna’s Christ is virile and robust, the focus of the groin offering space in the image from which life can spring, whereas Holbein’s Christ is brutal in its depiction and opposes the Christian notion that Christ will triumph over death. Holbein’s Christ, with its claustrophobic isolation and deterioration of the body, instructs the audience that death unknowably traps Christ, so as mere mortals we have no hope. In contrast Mantegna points to the hope of resurrection and redemption from the horrors of death. The objectifying of the corpse as a place of death belies the neutrality of death and posits that like life, which permeates everywhere, death strays outside of the body and outside of the frame.

### Alive Dad: portrait of a dying man

I also photographed my father dying and dead with the intention of creating a *memento mori*, a personal memory of my father. All these photographs, save one, were taken in the last 24 hours that I spent with him. Unlike the photographers Richard Avedon and Phillip Toledano, who shot their fathers dying over seven and three years respectively, I photographed only one portrait of my father during the last nine months that he was dying. Notably both of these photographers’ fathers died of age-related illness, as distinct from my father who had terminal cancer. Avedon admits his images of his father are invasive and disturbing. In a documentary about his work Avedon states that he was “telling himself that these photographs were about love and connection but really they were a murder.”<sup>87</sup> He is describing the camera as a weapon that not only records the dying but also propels those same figures to their death. In photographing my father, I too find the camera cuts away at my father, weapon-like, ambiguous like Kristeva’s theory of the love/hate ambiguity in loss. This ambiguity is integral in photography as it both reveals and denies the presence of that which is being shot. In every image presence and absence are referenced. Blanchot’s notion of the cadaver as shadow and as revealing the impossibility of death also reflects this ambivalence. In photographing my father, I love my father but I hate the pain I am witness to, and the loss that he seemingly inflicts on me.

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<sup>86</sup> Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 258.

<sup>87</sup> Richard Avedon, *Darkness and Light* video excerpt, accessed April 07 2016, <http://prisonphotography.org/2010/06/20/avedon-photographed-his-dying-father>.



Figure 37: Richard Avedon, *Jacob Israel Avedon*, father of Richard Avedon, Sarasota, Florida, 1969-1973

Avedon, in true Avedon style, uses the camera to strip away at his father, with every line on his father's face etched into the aging body, with direct harsh light and shot in black and white. The camera is unflinching with every detail of the face evident against the stark white background. The composition is, for the most part, a bust in the frame so the viewer can compare the wear of age on the skin and on the eyes directly. The focus is on the head, both compositionally and technically, emphasising anxiousness on the father's face. The photographs reveal a disconnection between the body and the head/mind, pointing to the ultimate disconnect that will occur in death. In contrast, Toledano uses light and varying composition to create a beautiful aesthetic and rhythm in the work. The lighting is soft with yellow and green colours, and the focus is kept shallow. However, similarly in some images he has framed his father as a bust shape, and this too allows the body to seemingly slowly fall out of the frame. These photographic images, as Benjamin states, are "propelled by a mysterious kind of intentionality toward a particular look – one that has the capacity to recognise it, and thereby redeem it."<sup>88</sup>



Figure 38: Philipp Toledano, *Days with My Father*, 2006 - 2009

<sup>88</sup> Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy or the History of Photography, Part 1*, 9.

The only portrait I shot of my father during his illness, aside from in the last 24 hours, was shot in the Monash Oncology Hospital in Bentleigh, during his first lengthy period spent in hospital. I brought my camera and tripod, and my father and I walked around until I found a suitable room we could use. We both knew the cancer would kill him, but spoke lightly about it. This image is shot on film. My father sat down and then I shot four images. He looked directly at me with a relaxed dignity that reflected an earlier portrait I found of my father after his death. It had the same strong diagonal lines in the background.

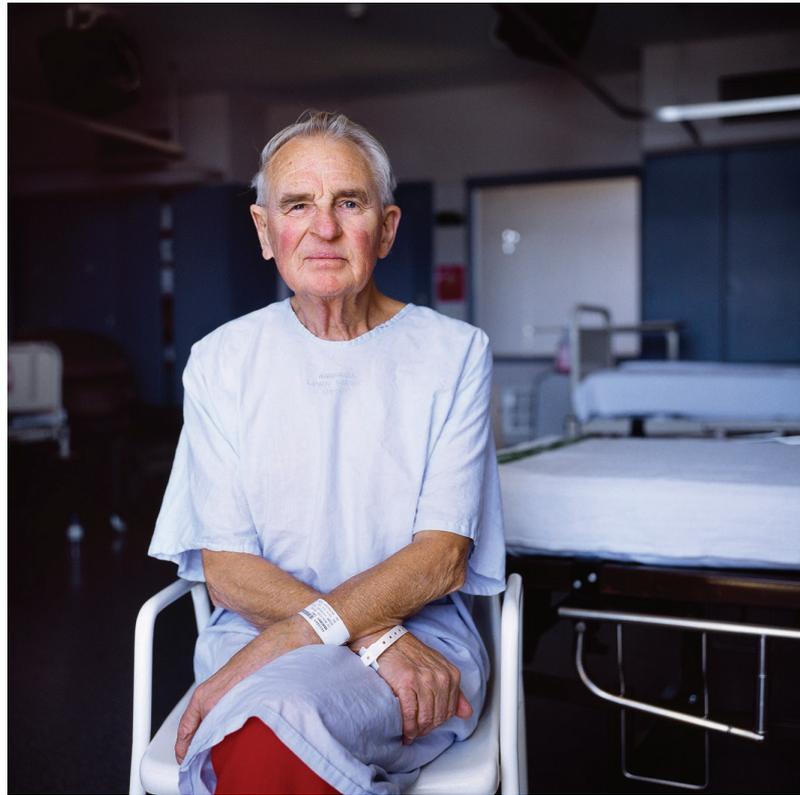


Figure 39: Paula Mahoney, *My father*, 2009

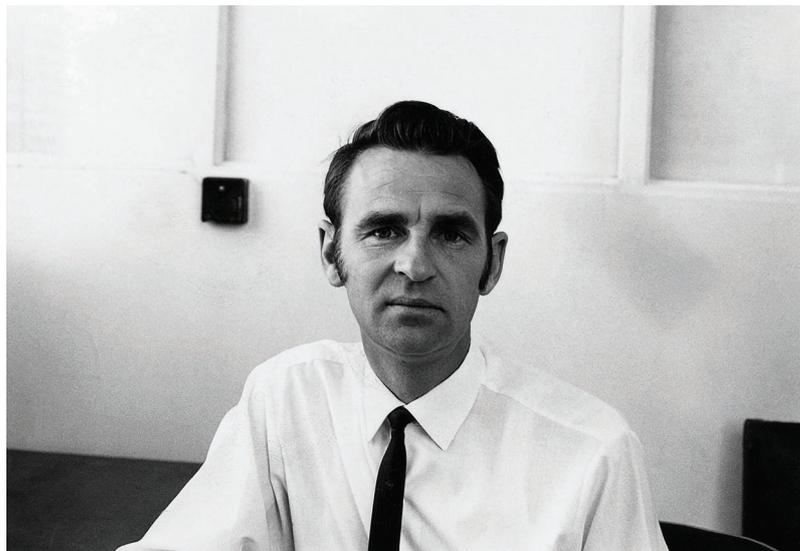


Figure 40: Early Black and White photograph I found of my father after he died, date unknown.



Figure 41: Walker Evans, *Bud Fields with His Wife Ivy, and His Daughter Ellen, Hale County, Alabama, 1936*

I did not direct my father in this portrait, and on seeing the photograph I was struck by the likeness to Bud Fields in the Walker Evans photograph *Bud Fields with His Wife Ivy, and His Daughter Ellen, Hale County, Alabama*. Bud Fields' pose, arms and legs loosely crossed, the dignity in Fields' face, and the ease and directness of his gaze oppose the backdrop, his home, which shows clear signs of abject poverty. I saw this same dignity, ease and directness in my father staring at me, from the photograph, and in the time he spent in and out of hospital facing terminal cancer. In this photograph there is a door just behind him, similar to Walker Evans' shot, a place of exit from the frame. The analogical relationships in these three images are striking. It is as if, in the midst of uncertainty and change, accepted by many patients daily, mortality is the one truth and all that it is "to be human" is laid bare.

### Constructing death: those loved and dead in the photograph

Visual artists across time have sought to image the time when the corpse lies in front of loved ones as rigor mortis sets in. They have painted, sculpted and videoed the corpse in a desire to capture death, to visually represent their thoughts on death. In language, analogies of death such as *passed away*, *passed on*, *pushing up the daisies*, *snuffed it*, *kicked the bucket*, et cetera, are commonplace. There appears to be impossibility in writing about death, or in locking death within a frame. By its very polarity, death lies outside of life, and is unknowable, and not recordable. It is often the witnesses of death – those lamenting, presented in the frame or referenced in the frame as if as witnesses of death – who give validity to death's presence.

In 2007 artist Sophie Calle recorded 80 hours of moving image in order to capture the moment of her mother's death. She extracted from this film footage a video lasting some 11 minutes and titled it *Couldn't Catch Death*. In this work, Calle uses the camera to mediate the process of her mother's death, with the camera fulfilling a witnessing role. Calle states in an interview in *Art and America*, "I just wanted to film her death because I feared not being there at the very last moment, or missing a final

word from her to me. Apparently people always choose to die the minute you look away, so I wanted to be there.”<sup>89</sup> Calle uses the camera as a replacement for herself, knowing that the camera is there with her mother even if she falls asleep. This knowledge allows the artist calmness in the midst of her anxiety. The camera is creating both a distance between the artist and the subject of the film – her mother’s death – whilst also giving Calle a focus outside of the emotional: “Instead of counting the minutes she had left to live, I counted the minutes left on the tape.”<sup>90</sup>

As it happened Calle’s mother died peacefully, and part of the final piece, which was shown at the Venice Biennale 2007, shows a nurse, Calle, and Calle’s cousin looking for a pulse, as they are not sure whether Calle’s mother is alive or dead. The camera becomes the only true witness to the actual moment of death, revealing on film that which Calle could not see, even though she was awake and next to her mother. The images on film seemingly formulate a memory, a reality that was never seen by the accompanying flesh and blood witnesses, the lamenters. The lamenters at the side of the bed know the ambiguity of loss, yet it is the camera that reveals the loss of humanity, and the paradoxical acknowledgement of the impossibility of dying, as formulated by Blanchot.



Figure 42: Sophie Calle, video still from *Couldn't Catch Death*, 2007

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<sup>89</sup> Alice Pfeiffer, “All About Her Mother: Sophie Calle,” in *Art in America*, accessed March 13 2014, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/sophie-calle-palais-de-tokyo>.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.



Figure 43: Paula Mahoney, *Mamma*, 2002

On October 19th 2002 my Mamma, Maree Mahoney, died aged 100, and I photographed her in her coffin at the rosary prayer service the night before her funeral, while my father watched the door just in case family rushed in and were upset by the camera.<sup>91</sup> I am struck by how similar these images are, or maybe it is just because both are photographs of a dead old lady. The image of Mamma is one of the first photographs of death I took and, like Calle, my intention was to see how death looked, to capture it, to give it materiality in the frame. The photograph reveals not death but a still body that has no movement. It is frozen, and the proximity of the flowers to the body is touching and ritualistic. It points to death as other, the light for a moment revealing a stillness we associate with the dead, but it is fleeting and somehow illusive. The photograph instructs us that this is how you will look dead. It points to death in the corpse but, as in Calle's shot from the reel of film, the viewer searches outside the frame in the hope of understanding more, or for the revelation that death is not really there.

Australian photographer Trent Parke also explores the loss of his mother in a series of images, *The Black Rose*, shot over seven years. He is particularly haunted by the memory of watching her struggle during the asthma attack that killed her when he was 14 years old, and he repeats this memory analogically in his work throughout his life, using different interpretations and processes. He uses the process of photographing to remember. The photographs emerge for him like memory machinations. This emergence is in line with Silverman's notion of the photograph being an emerging image, "one that approaches us from the future, and that arrives in the past."<sup>92</sup> In this case Parke is inverting this notion and looking for the emergence of an image from the past. He likens this process of remembering to the basic photographic process, light recorded as image. As this process is reliant on light, and light is constantly in a state of flux, always moving and altering, these memories also change. The resulting photographs in *The Black Rose* bring Parke closer to an understanding of himself and his relationship to death, but ultimately fail to reunite him with his mother at her death, or to understand his undefined memory of her death.

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<sup>91</sup> Mamma was the name I called my grandmother, as did all her twenty-three grandchildren.

<sup>92</sup> Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy or the History of Photography, Part 1*, 10.



Figure 44: Trent Parke, *Cemetery, Adelaide*, from *The Black Rose* series, 2007



Figure 45: Trent Parke, *Cockatoo, Newcastle, New South Wales*, from *The Black Rose* series, 2011

In making the images of the last 24 hours that I spent with my father dying and dead, my intention is different from the artists discussed here, as it is not to capture death but rather to record what I know I will not remember. The photographs also become a personal record of the nine months of watching my father die. During this time, I had felt that there was not a place for my camera amongst the over-recording and imaging of the body that occurs with terminal cancer. I also realise that in photographing my father I am facing my own mortality, because as I see him through my lens I see myself.

## Dead Dad

There is no denying that there is a deeply interconnected relationship between photography and death. Photographic images record moments that are forever gone, past, dead, and the photograph, the actual object, often becomes personal, an object that can be held, treasured and caressed, particularly when the person within the frame is not physically there with the viewer. In the very framing of an image, absence is referenced and in the case of images of the dead, there is an inherently interesting relationship between viewer and photograph.

The photograph can then be seen as *memento mori* when photographing both the living and the dead; a way of socially and culturally giving loved ones and society a place where souls lay protected in the frame, where grief and mourning can be placed in an honourable and meaningful way, and where the afterlife is always presented as a favourable place.<sup>93</sup> Avedon argues against this notion with the photographs of his father, and acknowledges that his grief and loss are haunted and reflected in the troublesome love/hate relationship he had with his father.

In the historical post mortem photographs often referred to as *memento mori* photographs of the dead, the corpse is given life. The dead are depicted in a similar way as living figures, propped up looking at the camera, their eyes glassed over indicating their moment of suffering has passed. In dialogue with the viewer, the image says “I am here and you are there”. In a non-religious context, it allows the dead a safe place to be and acts almost as a mirror of our own death that can sit beside us in our lives. If, as Batchen argues, time is suspended for a moment by the photograph, then through photography our death can sit beside us, rather than death being only a linear construct that we move towards.<sup>94</sup> These poetic implications remind me of the last line of the French artist Chris Marker’s short science fiction film *La Jetée*, “that this moment he had been granted to watch as a child, which had never ceased to obsess him, was the moment of his own death.”<sup>95</sup> This film is composed mostly of photographs rather than the moving image, and yet it conjures up the idea of time travel through careful editing, with cuts, dissolves, fade-ins and fade-outs. The hero’s lasting image from his childhood haunts him and is an unclear memory, which he sees clearly at the end of the film though travelling back to that time. Ironically it is this image of his death that keeps him alive and reaffirms his place in life.

In the Walter Schels and Beate Lakotta series *Noch mal leben vor dem Tod (Life before death)*, the couple photographed 26 people in hospices in Berlin, when they were alive and just after their death. The portraits are striking in their comparative placement next to each other, forming a diptych. The couple was motivated to take the images because of their fear of death, particularly as Beate is thirty years younger than Walter so statistically it is likely Walter will die much earlier than Beate. It is she

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<sup>93</sup> Soul in this context refers to the Merriam Webster definition: a person’s deeply felt moral and emotional nature. It is also in many religions believed to be the spiritual part of a person that gives life to the body and is believed to live forever, accessed May 26 2016, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/soul](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/soul).

<sup>94</sup> Batchen, *Suspending Time: Life – Photography – Death*.

<sup>95</sup> *La Jetée*, directed by Chris Marker (Arte Video, 1962). This is the last line in the film.

who will sit at his bedside and watch his last breath; it is she who will lament his loss. In the *Wolfgang Kotzahn* diptych the shadowing under the eyes and nose reveal that there is no breath in the body, with the interplay between light and dark, differing greatly from the first image in the diptych. The skin falls towards the bottom of the frame. There also seems to be a falling towards the camera, to the space between the camera and the subject that analogically seems to be the space of death.

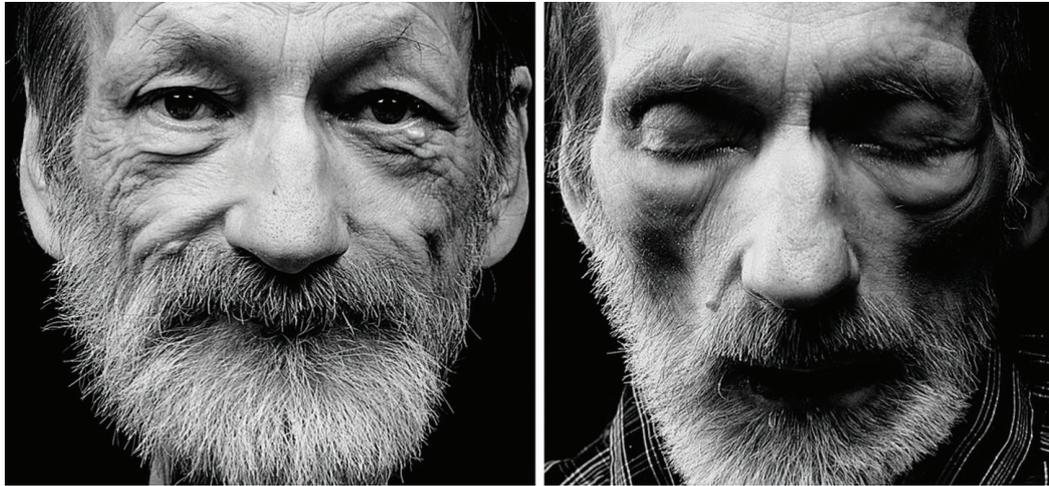


Figure 46: Walter Schels and Beate Lakotta, *Wolfgang Kotzahn*, age: 57, 15<sup>th</sup> Jan 2004 and 4th Feb 2004

I also shot one series of images of my father during the last 24 hours that I spent with him as his body fought to survive and when he was dead. In opposition to the cliché, “the body is willing but the flesh is weak,” that stems from the bible account of Christ’s last night in Gethsemane, my father’s body appears to refuse to die. He had earlier in the day rejected any further treatment or hospital intervention, essentially choosing death, but his body struggled on, gasping and thrashing from side to side. In these photographs this is what emerges, in much the same way as Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*: the horror of mortality is etched in the skin, the mouth and the rigidity of the body. This same scream is also found in Trent Parke’s images from his *The Camera is God* series. After several hours my brother, sister and I made the decision to increase my father’s dose of morphine to quicken the process.

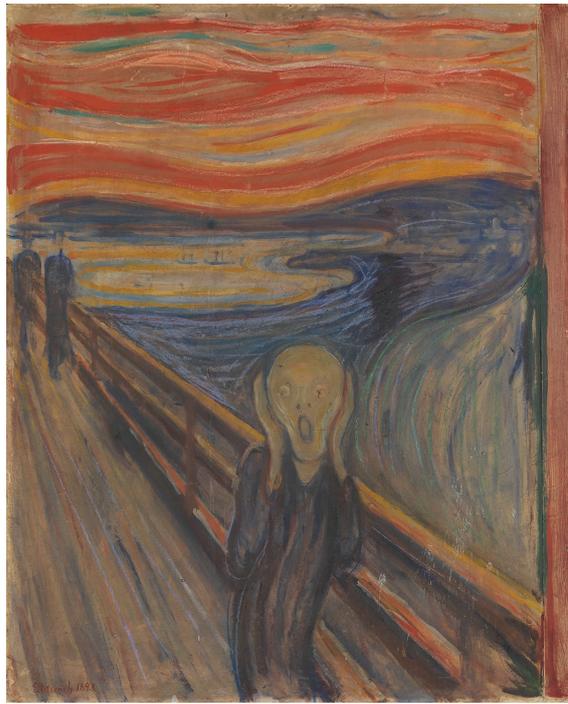


Figure 47: Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893



Figure 48: Paula Mahoney, *Untitled, Dad's body fights with death*, 2009



Figure 49: Trent Parke, *No 376 Candid portrait of a boy on a street corner. Adelaide, 2013*,  
from *The Camera is God* series, 2013

My shots of my father dying are taken from my position beside the bed. I hold his hand and stroke his forehead and shoot. The hospital lights dictate the lighting. These images are in Avedon's way "true" and unflinching, but they are also a record that I am there with him, by his bed, also waiting for death. With each click of the camera my father moves a step closer to death, a death I acknowledge I want more than I want him to live, as the brutality of his physical suffering is all that I witness. I often joked with my father about suffocating him if his body failed him and his conscious life was devoid of meaning.<sup>96</sup> It is as if with my camera I am able to hasten his decline. In contrast Toledano gives his father his camera to photograph him, as a sign of his love, and includes himself in several shots. The camera in this situation is likened to a caress, a witness to the inclusion in life. In the shots of my father my camera is not only a witness; it cuts away at the body. By the camera's presence I am there, slowly clicking my father to his death.

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<sup>96</sup> Because of my father's Christian beliefs this is a fantasy, which brought momentary comfort, but also represents an impossible act that would never occur.



Figure 50: Phillip Toledano, *Days with My Father* (a shot also including the photographer), 2006 - 2009

After my father's death I photographed his body before the onset of rigor mortis. This time before rigor mortis is important, as it is the time when the intersection between life and death is strongest. And as often happens, it is also the time that corresponds with lamenting. When a person dies in hospital or at home this is the time before the body is removed from its loved ones and taken to the morgue. The personal nature and sentimentality of these images is evident. In the diptych of my father the placement of rosary beads in his hands, as he was a deeply religious man, adds the close proximity of loved ones to the frame.<sup>97</sup> My sister, brother and I lamented as we washed my father's body on the bed where he died, and his body was propped up with two pillows that cradled his head in care. In the photograph the sheets appear crisp and clean. He is dressed in the only clean T-shirt of his that was available, which ironically has *Diablo* across the chest.<sup>98</sup> I made the images of each side view of my father into a diptych in 2010, reflecting the traditional religious diptychs that listed the living and the dead. In revealing both side views of my father there is no escaping death, particularly as the photographs show the recognisable purple bruising on the hands as evidence of drips and medical intervention, which is no longer required. On reviewing these images I notice that in the first image of the diptych, the mirror in the background does not reflect my image. It is as if my position as lamenter is being pushed from the frame, and I am no longer required to hold my father in his death. I also wanted this work to be an object that could be folded up for travel, so the viewer was free to carry it with them and open it as required. I made the work smaller in size than the work I had made earlier, due to the personal nature of the work and the desire to be able to hold and fold it. An intimacy is created because of the small scale, and the ritual of folding together, like a card, the two views of my father's body: a view often witnessed in church on altar mantelpieces.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>97</sup> My father was a devout Catholic, who trained as a priest for many years before deciding to leave the order and have a family. He attended mass most days in his later life for morning service.

<sup>98</sup> *Diablo* means devil in Spanish.

<sup>99</sup> Many altarpieces in Catholic churches and cathedrals across Europe were adorned with diptychs and triptychs during the Gothic and Renaissance periods. "The Catholic Company: because faith matters," accessed June 9 2016, <https://www.catholiccompany.com/diptychs-and-triptychs-c409>.



Figure 51: Paula Mahoney, *Diptych of my father*, 2010

I also mirror another image of my father in bed shot earlier than the *Diptych of my father*, alone in the frame, in *The deathbed*. This shot is of my father's corpse lying in bed. The image was shot standing on the bed with my tripod above my father's corpse, which felt small between my legs. I mirrored the image, and in doing this was able to place emphasis on the folds of the sheets. This space disclosed within the sheets came to represent the metaphysical longing, which loved ones have, to go with their loved ones when they die. It offered me a place to lay with my father, forever cradled by his death, a space where grief can entwine with the dead. As well, in doubling the figure I created a sense of comfort, that in death my father is not alone and isolated, strangely suggesting a reaffirming of the Christian mythology that I was raised with, that the afterlife is a utopian place where you are reunited with all those you have loved and lost. Here death's face has uniformity, with the face of my father dead looking very similar to the many others I have seen. So my father, at his death, looks just like his mother at her death and just, I imagine, as I will look at my own, and in this image we all lie together in a beige heaven.



Figure 52: Paula Mahoney, *The deathbed*, 2009

I feel like the camera acts as a portal into the future reflecting back the image of my inevitable future, these photographs of my dead dad analogically linking to myself dead. The image of myself converges with my dead dad: images of self-mourning. The lamenter is me (the camera, the portal across time), death is in the corpse of my father, and death's presence is in the lighting and the iconography that, in reflection, is overtly Christian at times.

The photograph mimics Mantegna's *The Lamentation over the Dead* (1480), analogically in the composition but also in the idea that death can be overthrown, that our virility lives on, if only momentarily, through an idealised construction within the frame, instructing the viewer that there is potentially a spiritual haven that lives outside the frame. I as viewer and taker of this image also realise that in photographing my father I am facing my own mortality, because as I see him through my lens, I see myself, if only momentarily, triumphant over death, a figure at peace.

## Chapter 4

### Lamenting My Own Death

Cameras were invented by the dead -  
Perhaps so they can remember the living  
who came after them.

- John Berger<sup>100</sup>

In this essay I have discussed photography as an analogy in relation to images of death and mourning, using the idea of the performative space of photography to understand the relationship between death and myself. In this chapter I turn the camera on myself and explore this intersection in photographs, with myself as the lamenter, photographer and subject. This body of work differs from my earlier work in that it does not attempt to depict death, or the corpse, but rather attempts to understand death, and to come to know my own death through my own body and its gestures. Death is depicted in absence, constructed as a metaphysical presence both within and outside the frame. This paper has so far concentrated on the horror of death, death as a spectacle, as an abject part of human experience, that which belongs to the order of figuration.<sup>101</sup> In this chapter I use my body and its gestures to explore death as a sensation, a cry, a lament, where the figure abandons narration and representation. I attempt to make death visible, “when like a wrestler, the visible body confronts the powers of the invisible.”<sup>102</sup>

Other contemporary artists have also used the performance space of the photograph to explore death, with interesting outcomes. It is an established photographic understanding that the very presence of the camera alters its subject and may introduce “staginess” into the photograph. If we start to look at how the performative is located within the photograph itself and in the relationship of the image to the viewer, images of death are active, and contain actions, instructions and points of intentional direction.

The space of the photograph is where the performative takes place, where the body (or the dead) although inert, performs in a similar way as leaf or a tree in a landscape, holding meaning within the frame in relation to what else is in the frame. The instructions are clear – you will die, and your body will decay, just as you see within this frame. When the subject is also the artist the work may become a self-mourning, a direct intersection with one’s own death, and a lament: an attempt to acknowledge finitude. The early Christian paintings discussed in chapter three point to a space outside of the frame as representing finitude, while photographs such as Henry Peach Robinson’s *Fading Away*, discussed in chapter one, adhere to a notion of transcendence within the frame: death sits with the living in the

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<sup>100</sup> Fiona Tan, *Scenario*, (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2000), 75.

<sup>101</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. D. Smith, (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 62.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

frame, compositionally mirrored. When the artist themselves steps in front of his or her own camera, the notion of finitude becomes allusive, variously shifting from within the frame to outside of the frame, and creating different readings and understandings.

### Playing with death: photographers stage their own death

Canadian artists Janieta Eyre and Jeff Wall both staged their own death in the *Rehearsals* series and *Faking Death*, respectively. Eyre, in *Rehearsals*, placed herself in several poses of death, performing (or emulating) the aftermath of her own death for the camera. Jeff Wall, in his *Faking Death* triptych, created two images of himself in bed as if he is dead, while the third image shows the lighting and make up crew preparing Wall for this tableau.



Figure 53: Jeff Wall, *Faking Death* (3rd part of the triptych), 1977

In visual art, artists have often shot, painted, or drawn self-portraits, but it is in photography that the artist attempts to imagine him or herself dead. The intricate relationship that the photograph and photography have with death allows for this exploration to have resonance beyond the simple idea “I am dead”. The photographic performance of death is directed and enabled by the artist’s self. As the French theorist Maurice Blanchot has observed, taking place in literature it is as if control of one’s own death, or the knowledge of it, frees the artist from the constraints and fears that govern social norms.<sup>103</sup> The artist acts upon the space of the photograph, which is so intrinsically connected to reality. The rehearsing or imaging of one’s own death is also a form of narcissism. Sigmund Freud, in *Instincts and their Vicissitudes*, discusses the connection between the pleasurable narcissistic stage and the development of hatred and destruction towards an external object, when the object begins to impose on the individual.<sup>104</sup> So the artist, in seeking annihilation within the frame, responds to death

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<sup>103</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock, (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982). Maurice Blanchot’s notion is that artists, through emulating death in art, embrace a freedom born out of contentment with their own death, thereby escaping the hold that death has on their own life.

<sup>104</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*. Encyclopedia.com, accessed December 25 2016, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/psychology/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/instincts-and-their-vicissitudes>.

– or the dead – impinging psychologically on the individual. The artist is inadvertently looking for a return to un-life.



Figure 54: Janieta Eyre, *Rehearsals #7*, 1993

Equally apparent in Wall's *Faking Death* is his interest in the making of images and his reflections on death as another dimension, one that seems to exist parallel to life. Eyre's multiple staging of her own death features a variety of images, such as Eyre propped with her head on an open oven door and lying on derelict stairs with blood dripping down her jumper. These repeated acts of death, happening to the same person in a violent fashion, also directly reflect the act of making, especially as the work is theatrical in its construction – lighting and props prevent the image from reflecting a realistic depiction. The artist's act of repetition may also be seen as an aspect of the death drive, where the psyche is compelled to repeat in "an urge in organic life to restore an earlier state of things" and "whose function is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death."<sup>105</sup> In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud introduces the notion of the death drive, in opposition to "Eros", the life drive. The death drive compels the human psyche to repeat painfully repressed content: to re-live this content. This repetition, when turned inwards, becomes a self-violence, where suicidal tendencies are idealised. Ironically, Blanchot argues in *The Space of Literature*, suicide is the ultimate control of death; a divine intervention.

He who kills himself is the greater affirmer of the *present*. I want to kill myself in an 'absolute' instant, the only one which will not pass and will not be surpassed. Death, if it arrived at the time we choose, would be an apotheosis of the instant; the instant in it would be that very flash of brilliance which mystics speak of, and surely because of this, suicide retains the power of an exceptional affirmation.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", in *On Metapsychology*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1987), 308-311.

<sup>106</sup> Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 103.

In Eyre's series these staged constructions of death seem to psychologically short-circuit a violent action, as in *Rehearsals #7*, where there is an inferred violence by a man towards a woman. It is as if Eyre seeks through this series to control that fear of a violent death by "getting there first", using the photograph as an object that can operate as a manifestation of the death drive. To understand the death drive one must make conscious the repressed content and view it with aloofness.<sup>107</sup> The series also references the ritualistic symbolic death that adolescents undergo, and has some common literary connections. In *Rehearsals #12*, Eyre, like the poet and writer Sylvia Plath, is positioned as if she has gassed herself to death.



Figure 55: Janieta Eyre, *Rehearsals #12*, 1993

Wall, in comparison, stages a simple death with himself in bed, his eyes closed. The camera pans in cinematically, with the third part of the triptych revealing to the viewer the stage, with all the appropriate technical accompaniments. The titling of this work also alerts the viewer that what they are seeing is a Fake[ing] of death. Wall performs his own death, which by its very nature is a definitive future truth, yet the scene is made for the viewer as a blatant fabrication. It is not a re-enactment but rather a staging of a future performance, for Wall may not die in this bed, but he will die, although in all probability not in the same setting.

This "playing with one's own death" opens the artist up to certain vulnerabilities; yet it also allows the photograph to act like a mirror to the future, giving the artist the freedom to confront his or her own mortality. In Wall's case death is a peaceful event – he is dying the good death in bed – whereas Eyre depicts a violent death, a portrayal of her greatest fear, either at her own hand or another's. In this staging, death is re-framed by the artist and reflects his or her own understanding of, and relationship to, death. Eyre's *Rehearsals* opens up the idea that once encapsulated in a photograph, an event cannot re-occur in exactly the same manner. As with theatre, each performance is slightly different. In staging a brutal death, Eyre frees herself from that particular outcome. In contrast, Wall proposes through

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<sup>107</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", in *On Metapsychology*.

*Faking Death* a fantasy of dying at home in bed with the camera as witness. However, as the triptych reveals the technical accompaniments, so Wall alerts the viewer to the most common intrusion in the West on death: technology. Most often we die in hospital, not with lights and make-up but with drips and monitors framing us as our final witnesses.

Furthermore, in Wall's *Faking Death* the viewer is placed in the privileged position of witnessing death from a distance, with the photographic technology adding a layer that further disconnects the personal from the figure in the frame. The dead man in this frame is not "I", but rather a person acting dead. This added layer to isolate death in the frame removes death from the viewer in much the same way that we seek to remove death from everyday life in the West.

This connection between the photograph and the dead can be likened to Maurice Blanchot's conceptualisation of textuality, where the metaphor of the text as a cast or death mask connects to an understanding of reading as a form of resuscitation or resurrection. The viewer in photography gives life to that which died, like a dead man's skin holding and giving form to a body which has already started to decay, to a body that is the opposite of life. The performative photograph instructs the viewer in this frame that you can hold death, that you give it "life", as such, in the viewing and consuming, but that the frame separates you, it divides the space of life and the space of the photograph so they intersect but never cross.

When my father died I held onto his suits sentimentally, as they represented him to me. My father seldom wore anything but a suit when he was in the city. He wore it at work, at church, and to the races. For relaxation – at the beach, or on holiday – he donned shorts and a t-shirt with the obligatory long socks. I decided to use his suits in self-portraits as a vehicle for revisiting the time of lamenting, using the suits as shrouds, resuscitated or resurrected. In this position I am in a metaphorical embrace with my father. I face away from the camera and the suit faces towards the camera. I simulate the space that is folded in the sheets of *The deathbed* image, awash with the presence of death and an urgent need to see my own death. "The forces of life become visible, the forces of the body that resist death: 'life screams at death.' The scream concentrates all those forces into one action that is the sign of the struggle."<sup>108</sup>

In this performative series *Dis/Appear* I attempt to try and locate some trace of my father. Using my body in his suits, I try to simultaneously mimic him, and to merge my body with his lingering presence, so I can somehow – if only momentarily – inhabit his skin. I placed my body backwards in the suit, so I am in a permanent metaphorical embrace with my father, reaching across to him in death. The resulting images, which are shot in front of stage curtains, map this attempt at connection, while I only momentarily locate him. The gestures of my body range from grief stricken, more evident later in the series, to wistful yearning.

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<sup>108</sup> Stephen Zepke and Simon O'Sullivan, "The politics of the scream in a threnody", in *Deleuze and Contemporary Art*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 21.



Figure 56: Paula Mahoney, *Waiting for dead dad No.1*, from the series *Dis/Appear*, 2014



Figure 57: Paula Mahoney, *Waiting for dead dad No.2*, from the series *Dis/Appear*, 2014



Figure 58: Paula Mahoney, *Waiting for dead dad No.3*, from the series *Dis/Appear*, 2014

### Return of the dead: spirit photography and headless folk

In the early Victorian era, photographic images of the spirit world became quite popular and the headless figure was often constructed in illusion or novelty portraits. These images were created with analogue photographic montage techniques, often as *Carte de visites*, playing on black humour, and fun. This was also the time in which post-mortem photography flourished. Fascination with death was a Victorian pastime and a Sunday afternoon stroll would often be taken in a cemetery, such as in Highgate in London where a special boardwalk was built. Notably though, it is in these headless images that we locate an instant visual reference to death, as *no head* equates to *death*.

**NEW DISCOVERIES IN PHOTOGRAPHY.**  
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Ladies and Gentleman taken floating in the air - in company  
with tables, chairs and musical instruments

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Ladies and Gentleman taken showing their heads floating  
in the air or in their laps.

**DWARF AND GIANT PHOTOGRAPHS**  
The former being very ludicrous

**Rembrandt, Vignette or Cameo Cartes**  
In two positions, 6s for fourteen  
**Photographs of all descriptions**  
copied carte size - 2s 8d per dozen

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BRIGHTON SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Figure 59: Spirit photograph advertisement, date unknown



Figure 60: Three examples of *Carte de visites* spirit photography, date unknown

The figures in the photographs perform their own death for the camera, staging an absurd future in which they carry their own head on a plate or hold it in their hand. The performance in many cases involves either the figure looking into their own eyes, or holding their head in one hand and a knife in another, as if they had systematically removed their own head in a violent act. In these depictions the figure actively engages with their own death, either through “looking death in the face”, literally or visually being their own killer: the one responsible for removing their own head. Both depictions play with the idea of death and seek to break the social norm of fearing mortality. The photographs jar the viewer with their explicit comic representations. They both play with and reveal death within their specific construction, and use humour as a lever to explore death’s fascination and inaccessibility. The photograph is not referential; it is, rather, a direct performance that in its primitiveness reveals the impossibility of knowing one’s own death, and the difficulty in seeing death, except in this almost diagrammatical way. If we again liken the photograph to the translucent skin of the dead that holds

but a shadow of life (a lifeless, unknowable form) then these images comically and directly reference death, asking the viewer to join the dots: my head is here and my body is there, we are apart and I am holding my head like a trophy of death. These photographs attempt to transverse this intersection between life and death, asking acceptance of the figure as non-alive, the shadow of ourselves that our bodies will inevitably become, while at the same time they protest this inevitability, challenge it, and attempt to defy it. The photographs also, like the red clothes of a bullfighter, beckon death – “come find me, come take me, if you can find me.”

In *Without a head No.1* and *Without a head No.2*, from the *Dis/Appear* series, I place my body in Dad's suit so that it appears as if my head is cut off. However, unlike the early 1800s depictions, my head is not included in the frame. My body is there – seemingly moving, like a headless chicken struggling to find out if it is dead or alive – but without a head I am dead. As my body moves in the images there is a realisation of my own mortality. However, the performance of this intersection of life and death that plays out in these images also embodies a search for my father, with myself disappearing into my father's suit. By masquerading as my dead Dad, I explore the relationship of grief between myself the daughter, and my father. The images are an ambivalent gesture of mourning that contains the opposites that Kristeva explores: a love/hate relationship experienced by a mourning daughter left behind. In creating these photographs, I become more aware that I am also looking for the absence that plagued my father and my relationship as a girl. I have few memories or photographs of my father and me together from my childhood. For reasons that I will never know, my father cradled a sorrow so great that it separated him from our family. His absence was overwhelming even before he left the family home when I was ten years old. He left home to go to work before I woke and most nights returned after I was asleep, stopping at the pub on the way home, as was common in the 1970s. His weekends were taken up with football, races or adult activities that I was not privy to. The authoritarian figure of the father was only momentarily glimpsed, in outbursts of anger so few that I could count them on one hand, but this meant that his absence, for the most part, was welcome.



Figure 61: Paula Mahoney, *Without a head No.1*, 2014



Figure 62: Paula Mahoney, *Without a head No.2*, 2014

In Freudian terms the authoritarian father also embodies the caring and protective father, who guides the daughter into adulthood.<sup>109</sup> While my father was an absence, I must acknowledge that he was also a presence, notably at the beach; a place I still align with freedom, knowledge and tranquillity.

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<sup>109</sup> Freud's case study of Dora (Ida Bauer) points to the failure of the father to protect and care for his daughter. It is this failure of the father to act in his daughter's best interests that leads to a variety of hysterical symptoms in Dora's later life. Sigmund Freud and Philip Rieff, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, (New York: Collier Books, 1993).

My father loved the ocean and summers were spent in Fairhaven, a small town on the Great Ocean Road in Victoria. The Australian cliché held true in my family: we could swim before we could walk. My father taught me to swim in an ocean with huge waves, to understand rips, and to body surf at a young age.<sup>110</sup> He was present on the beach, watching over my siblings and me, and I remember his eyes boring down on me when I spluttered for air after being disastrously dumped by a wave, always watching to act if necessary. But away from the beach he barely existed.

In these images there is a comedic aspect but there is also a blunt search for the ultimate authority figure, beyond the father figure, *death*. But while I look towards death, I am also more frankly looking at life, asking, “Can I fit into these clothes, how do I fit into these clothes?” The suit acts as an analogy or a representative for, and of, the symbolic order of the father. I am also asking: “How do I fit within the world wearing the pants?” In donning the suit I am assuming the dress of adulthood and authority, and with my parents both dead, I am aware that I am next in line for the role of responsibility and mortality.

Kristeva looks at the space of madness and the absurd, particularly exploring the *Chora*, the semiotic and earliest stage of psychosexual development (0-6 months). In this pre-lingual phase you are dominated by a chaotic mix of feelings, perceptions and needs, and do not distinguish yourself from your mother or the world around you. Rather, you spend your time taking into yourself everything that you experience as pleasurable without any acknowledgment of boundaries. This is the stage, then, when you were closest to the pure materiality of existence, or what Lacan terms “the Real.”<sup>111</sup> At this stage, you were, according to Kristeva, purely dominated by your drives, both life drives and death drives. I think it is important to note here that I had delayed language, speaking later than most children.<sup>112</sup> The Chora stage, therefore, was extended for me, and in the absence of a father figure, symbolic order was ambiguously represented; the borders blurred. This usurping of the authoritarian figure through the object of the suit is what I have been replaying throughout my life. And in the presence of death I find a return to the pleasurable, the Chora, where repression is released. The illusion of understanding and controlling death in the photograph allows for a place of intersection, where the frame is fluid and I am able to find pleasure in the non-limits.

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<sup>110</sup> As a result I love and respect the ocean with a religious fanaticism, teaching my daughter to swim at Gunnamatta at three years of age, thus following in my father’s footsteps. Gunnamatta is a beach located on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria about an hour and a half southeast from Melbourne. It is a highly hazardous beach with a wide, rip-dominated surf zone.

<sup>111</sup> “The Real” refers to the state of nature from which our entrance into language has forever severed us. Only as neonatal children were we close to this state of nature, a state in which there is nothing but need. A baby needs and seeks to satisfy those needs with no sense for any separation between itself and the external world or the world of others. It is often referred to as a time of fullness or completeness that is subsequently lost through the entrance into language. As far as humans are concerned, however, “the real is impossible,” as Lacan was fond of saying. It is impossible in so far as we cannot express it in language, because the very entrance into language marks our irrevocable separation from the real. Still, the real continues to exert its influence throughout our adult lives since it is the rock against which all our fantasies and linguistic structures ultimately fail. The Real works in tension with the symbolic order, accessed July 9 2016, [www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/psychoanalysis/definitions/real.html](http://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/psychoanalysis/definitions/real.html).

<sup>112</sup> I had a phonological disorder, which causes speech delay, and as a result had difficulties reading and writing, and was not to read effectively until I was 9 years old.

The abject is not defined and yet the corpse, and its analogies, brings me comfort both near and in the frame, because death exists as the ultimate limit, and although it is incomprehensible, its presence is clear. The ambiguous is momentarily laid to rest. “Kristeva usefully deploys the concept of the border to delineate the ambiguous area between life/death, repression/release, and control/disruption. This may be seen within the framework of doubles and dualities (i.e. The Uncanny), which represent the tension between the human subject and the monster.”<sup>113</sup> In the *Dis/Appear* series there is a doubling of myself and my dead father’s suit (life/death), the female and the male (repression/release), and the daughter and the father (control/disruption). Like Freud, who sees the human psyche as in conflict, Kristeva further suggests that the human subject has a fragmentary, unstable ego that is always partially formed.<sup>114</sup> “This unstable ego is fundamentally undermined by the recognition of the consistent collapse of the perceived ideal because of a detrimental repulsion to the functional aspects of the body.”<sup>115</sup> However, it is in the limits that symbolic order is established, and I must define these limits to exist as an artist. When I use art to explore the tensions and dualities in death, there is a release, and it is because of this that I return, again and again, to explore death in my work. The liminal period before language, that in my case was extended, requires emotions and desires to be sublimated internally, producing a heightened intensity. The absence of the father as an authority figure produced a search for unknown limits, which I have found in the presence of death: the ultimate limit. In this discovery the ego is momentarily stable in a Freudian sense.

These headless images also reflect what I felt when looking at my father dead through the lens on his deathbed. In these headless images I am momentarily both my father and myself and, like *The deathbed*, I am reminded that I am momentarily looking at myself. The suits are worn almost like a shroud with my body disappearing into my dead father’s suit. In these images the body without a head is like a puppet without strings, and appears to slowly fall, bending over into itself. This is an analogy revisited by myself throughout my life: the female child struggling to enter the symbolic order, to understand and be understood beyond the Chora without the strong presence of a father figure.

Performative photography, as defined by Grant, allows this staged performance in the photograph to have a broader context in regards to death: with the photograph functioning to reaffirm our own mortality, and more importantly as a witness, both personally and culturally, to the act of dying. It allows the artist a space to be free from the social norms that govern social understandings of death, often in confrontational ways. The surface of the photograph may act like a skin, containing the unknowable. The photograph instructs the viewer on what happens when you die, both physically and conceptually locating death, representing the intersection of life and death. It reveals traces of presence and absence, of death and loss, framing both the fiction and the reality of death as a construction, and allowing for considerable ambiguity.

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<sup>113</sup> Paul Wells, *The Horror Genre*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2001), 16.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

## Controlling death: staging self-mourning photographs

In Trent Parke's series *The Camera is God*, Parke stood on a street corner in his hometown Adelaide, at rush hour, and faced his camera to the other side of the road. He put the shutter release onto hold, and then took about twenty continuous frames, using 35mm film, before the lights changed. What emerged when he honed in on the faces was a security-like still with form and shape but little detail.



Figure 63: Trent Parke, *No 376 Candid portrait of a boy on a street corner. Adelaide, 2013*, from *The Camera is God* series, 2013



Figure 64: Trent Parke, *No 731 Candid portrait of a woman on a street corner. Adelaide, 2013*, from *The Camera is God* series, 2013

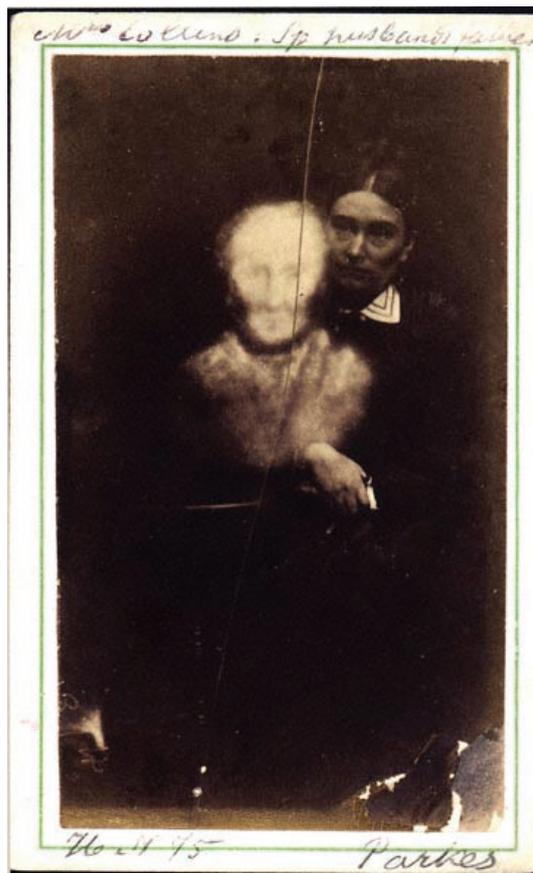


Figure 65: F. M. Parkes, *Mrs. Collins & Her Husband's Father, Recognised by Several*, 1875

These images emerge, revealing the transient nature of life, with the final images appearing as traces of the original people. Similar to the images of dead bodies discussed in chapter three, there is also an innate similarity between the disclosive forms captured in the frame. The movement echoes the work of Victorian spirit photography, which often relied on the double exposure technique, and offered the bereaved an illusion of communication with lost loved ones through images. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century spiritualism in America was very much a religion, practised by many who had lost loved ones to disease or the Civil War, with this type of image often bringing great comfort to the grieving.



Figure 66: William Hope, *Rev. Charles L. Tweedale and Mrs. Tweedale with the Spirit Form of the late F. Burnett, 1919*

The infamous spirit photographer William H. Mumler took the most famous of these images, of Mary Todd Lincoln, in 1872. The photograph showed the president's ghost standing behind his wife with his hands on her shoulders, classically watching over her, seven years after her husband's assassination. These types of photographs instruct the viewer "I am dead but I am here with you", a very commonly held Christian belief.

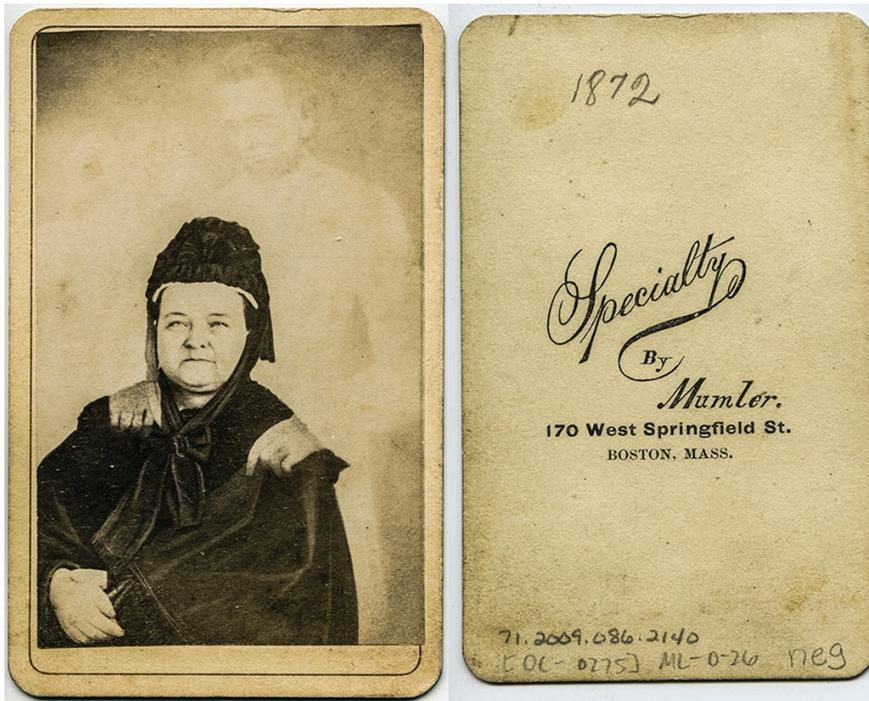


Figure 67: William H. Mumler, *Mary Todd Lincoln with Abraham Lincoln's "Spirit"*, (front and back), 1872

Trent Parke's *The Camera is God* images also point to the impermanence of the body, a slipping away of the subject that analogically refers to death. In these images the subject is unable to be held within the frame. Parke's choice to use a low resolution in contemporary times dictates the message that this is a person, portraiture of a person, but I cannot see or hold them in totality, similar to a security camera image. Parke's title also reaffirms the disclosiveness of photography, with the camera being referred to as seeing differently from the human eye: it sees like God, all knowing.

I made a set of images that drew on Victorian spirit photographs, to see what I could capture on film when I was not in direct control of the click of the shutter. These images are self-portraits and are shot in front of red stage curtains with my father's suit on inside out. My body moves frantically as if my spirit is leaving my body, a struggle with my own mortality that mimics the moment before my father died, commonly referred to as the "death rattle". I made these photographs by setting the timer on the camera and moving until I heard the familiar click of the shutter. The camera records my struggle.



Figure 68: Paula Mahoney, *Death rattle No.1*, 2014



Figure 69: Paula Mahoney, *Death rattle No.2*, 2014



Figure 70: Paula Mahoney, *Death rattle No.3*, 2014



Figure 71: Paula Mahoney, *Death rattle No.4*, 2014



Figure 72: Paula Mahoney, *Death rattle No.5*, 2014

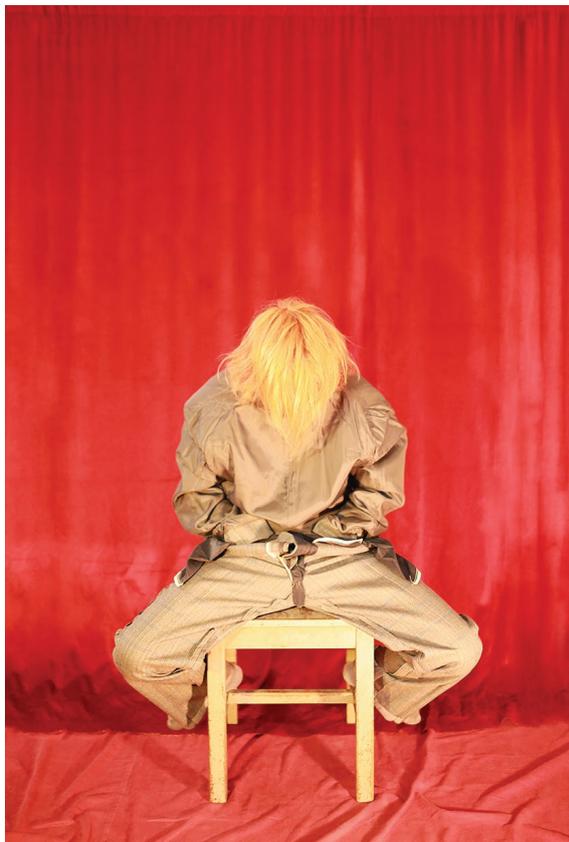


Figure 73: Paula Mahoney, *Death rattle No.6*, 2014

The photographs disclose a moving figure that appears in a strange garment, a combination that resembles madness, not unlike the space of madness and the absurd that Kristeva refers in the idea of the Chora; the semiotic that subverts the symbolic order of the Father. The inverted suit zip line forms a strong white line that cuts through the genital area like a phallus, drawing attention to the space of gender, with me as the female mourner usurping the phallus. In this combination of the space of gender and the irreverence shown to the suit by its reversal, the image expresses ambivalence towards grief, gender, and power, particularly the power of the father figure.

The placement of the hands in *Death rattle No.3*, *Death rattle No.4* and *Death rattle No.5* is notable for the gentle hanging of the long hand with the pinkie finger pointing to the ground, in a similar fashion to my early self-portraits, *A touch of death No.7 with skull* and *A touch of death No.7*.<sup>116</sup> Meanwhile, in *Death rattle No.1* and *Death rattle No.2* the hands are thick and manly like those of the Christ in Andrea Mantegna's *The Lamentation over the Dead*, or the hand in Joel Peter Witkin's *Feast of Fools*. These hands appear dead, swollen, as if rigor mortis has set in. What emerges from the hands, particularly, is an attempt to hold death, to capture and control that moment when I will move from here to beyond, when everything that I know about my body is turned inside out like my father's suit. But it is in the last image from the set, *Death rattle No.6*, where the hands are hidden behind the back, that I surrender to the impossibility of knowing death. The image is over exposed, I am blown out, with the body slumped; all that is familiar becomes unfamiliar, similar but different.

### Reanimating death: dead Dad's suit

Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror*, defines the abject as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions or rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."<sup>117</sup> We define ourselves by what we are not: I am not a skull, I am not a corpse. The abject is what comes from the body, but is out of the body, that is I but not I. It is what separates us from the father figure and the mother figure. Abjection rests within the liminal space, which is the space just before we have order, where one fits into the group.

I decide to make more self-portraits in a series called *Reanimation*, to illustrate this bringing together in the frame of the abject and the self. The photographs I have made have all been interested in the intersection of death and life and revisiting the time of lamentation. This time, when the mourner acknowledges their mortality, is also an in-between time, an ambiguous time where the presence

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<sup>116</sup> Earlier self portraits, *A touch of death No.7 with skull*, *A touch of death No.7*.



<sup>117</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982 (1980)), 4.

of death is heightened, and separation is difficult. The portraits are a call to my father's spirit, via a reanimation of his suit. In these self-portraits I dress my body in a black body suit so I am totally covered and my identity is undefined. I, too, am in an ambiguous space, as my face is covered, it is difficult to breathe with the zip completely closed, and I cannot see through the fabric. I recognise in the resulting photographs the eroticism of the black body suit that resembles a gimp suit.<sup>118</sup> I am sexually contained, with my body female but shapeless, and I again wear my dad's suit reversed. The breakdown of the binaries of subject and object, female and male, and my father and me are present. In the first image, *Dressing in dead dad's suit No.1*, I curl my body in grief in the corner of a suburban Melbourne garden which mirrors where I grew up. The Peace Lily plants to the right are the flowers of funerals. They are sent to the grieving as a symbol of "the innocence and rebirth of the departed's soul from the complex physical world to a greater place."<sup>119</sup> My father's coffin was adorned with these flowers.



Figure 74: Paula Mahoney, *Dressing in dead dad's suit No.1*, 2015

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<sup>118</sup> A gimp suit is a garment designed to use in bondage practices, it covers the whole body including the head, hands and feet, turning the wearer into an objectified sexual toy. It often has several anchor points, metal rings, belts, and laces to fasten it and to attach ropes or chains, so as to lift and hang the wearer from the ceiling.

<sup>119</sup> Everplans, "The meaning behind 8 different types of popular funeral flowers", accessed July 29 2016, <https://www.everplans.com/articles/the-meaning-behind-8-different-types-of-popular-funeral-flowers>.



Figure 75: Paula Mahoney, *Dressing in dead dad's suit No.2*, 2015

This covering of the body fascinates me, particularly with the feeling of being contained in the suit, analogically linking to the French artist Charles Freger's *Wilder Mann* series and the work of American photographer Phyllis Galembo, who documents masquerading rituals in Africa and the Caribbean. In the *Wilder Mann* series Freger photographs the wild man at winter festivals across Europe, where men put on costumes that hide their face and body.<sup>120</sup> "Then they take to the streets, where their disguises allow them to cross the line between human and animal, real and spiritual, civilization and wilderness, death and rebirth. A man assumes a dual personality."<sup>121</sup> In *0037 Djolomari*, taken in Macedonia, the face is covered with a grey piece of fabric with the imprint of a skull. The angle of the staff falls in line with the bare trees in the background, locking the figure into the earth momentarily. The house that frames the figure appears fallen down and derelict, as if the deathlike figure rose from it like a monster, dressed only in blacks and greys; a stark contrast with the rich greens of the grass. The death figure is alien and other, and neither overtly female nor male in body, as in *0042 Babugeri*, from Bansko, in Bulgaria, where the Kukeri (those dressed in costume) perform traditional rituals to ward away evil spirits, the bringers of death. These moving performers dance through the streets and visit houses, often in a terrifying manner in order to scare evil away. Their costumes are made from animal skins and fur with often only a slit for the performer to peer through.

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<sup>120</sup> Traditionally men only wore the costumes, although in recent times women have also participated.

<sup>121</sup> "Europe's Wild Men", accessed August 12 2014, <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2013/04/europes-wild-men/shear-text>.



Figure 76: Charles Freger, 0037 *Djolomari*, form the Wilder Mann series, 2010-2011



Figure 77: Charles Freger, 0042 *Babugeri*, form the Wilder Mann series, 2010-2011

In *Reanimation* I am also signalling to death and to grief. With my dad's suit forming part of a costume with the black bodysuit, a tension between death and life is acted out, and in this action is the pushing of my father away. The body moves and bends awkwardly in many of the images in an attempt to remove the pain of loss of my father in death and of the overwhelming absence of my father in my early life.



Figure 78: Paula Mahoney, *Dressing in dead dad's suit No.3*, 2015



Figure 79: Paula Mahoney, *Dressing in dead dad's suit No.4*, 2015

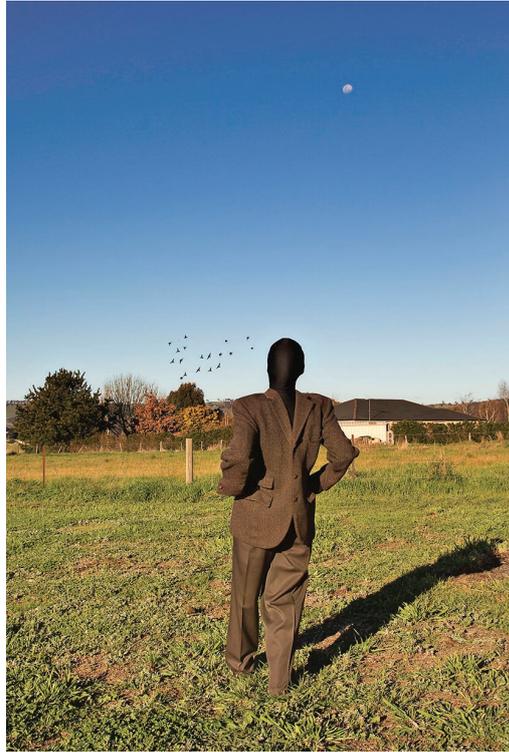


Figure 80: Paula Mahoney, *Dressing in dead dad's suit No.5*, 2015

The ritual of masking the body in death/rebirth is reflected also in Galembo's work from Africa. I spent time in Africa in 1989 and 1998 and fell in love with the masks used in these areas. The masks are worn during festivals and have a strong religious meaning. The masks themselves have often been seen as embodied spirits and ancestral beings who return to the world of the living at specific occasions. They are part of a cosmological complex within which life exists as a continuous cycle, perpetually mediated by the action of deities, nature spirits, ancestors and other human beings. Masking entails the donning of the physical mask/costume by (mostly) men, which equally implies the ritual transformation of carrier and mask into an ancestral or metaphysical being. When fully activated, masks become "spirits made tangible."<sup>122</sup> Many masks hide the performer within them, similar to the masks of the wild men of Europe. The performance is transformative, and is often a call for the ancestral spirit to revisit the living through the performance.

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<sup>122</sup> Chika Okeke-Agulu, "Introduction", in *Maske*, written by Phyllis Galembo, (London: Chris Boot, 2010).



Figure 81: Phyllis Galemba, *Ngar Ball Traditional Masquerade Dance*, Eshinjok Village, Nigeria, 2004



Figure 82: Phyllis Galemba, *Ekpeyong Edet Dance Group*, Calabar, Nigeria, 2005

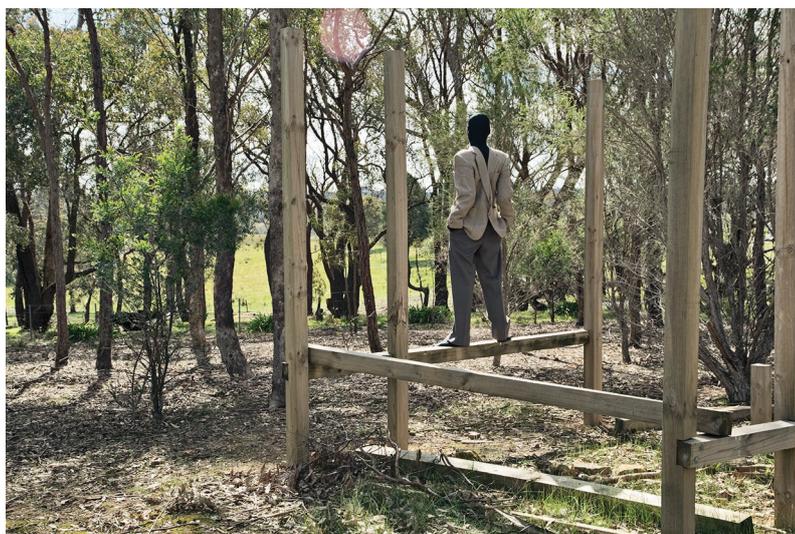


Figure 83: Paula Mahoney, *Dressing in dead dad's suit No.8*, 2015

In *Reanimation* I also made two images that speak momentarily about my mother, titled *Untitled*. In the first image *Untitled No.1* I wrap my head in a sewing pattern of my mother's, a dressmaker who died in 1983. I shot the image without the suit in the driveway of a suburban weatherboard home with the afternoon sun warm on my body. Without the suit it is as if the body is laid bare; in just the black bodysuit, the shackles of the suit are cast off. However, what is left is doubly suffocating, as the pattern on top of the black bodysuit makes it very difficult to breathe. It is a doubling of death: there is no escape. Finitude is acknowledged in the long stretch of the diagonal of the house and the two windows that offer a different view beyond, a pointing to death. I remove the pattern and open the zip slightly so I can breathe and shoot again in *Untitled No.2*. I am cocooned in the suit but the flash of red hair alludes to a rebirth, a shedding of the black skin, the hands raised like a monster to scare away death.



Figure 84: Paula Mahoney, *Untitled No.1*, 2015



Figure 85: Paula Mahoney, *Untitled No.2*, 2015

In contrast with the suffocation in these images, in *Dressing in dead dad's suit No.10* there is a sense of freedom as the body falls back, resigning itself to the vastness of the landscape as a manifestation of

finitude, and I, the figure, look out to the beyond, both in the frame and outside of the frame. I lean back, a small figure marooned on the iron structure in the dam, floating in the reflection of the clouds, sandwiched between the two strips of green land. I perform the act of ascension without leaving the earthly world; it is a yearning, a pointing to, of a desire unrealised. Above me the space in the clouds also offers a place that I can further move towards and metaphorically ascend to. The photograph instructs that we are of this earth but finitude surrounds us, that wholeness is achieved only when the acknowledgement of finitude occurs. This photograph is a lamentation, an extension of the space in the middle of *The deathbed*, that represented the bereaved person's desire to lie down and follow loved ones in their death. The message is similar to the *Ascension of Christ*, by Italian Renaissance painter Benvenuto Tisi (or Il Garofalo), where Christ is taken up to heaven forty days after the resurrection in the presence of his eleven apostles, his most beloved followers. In this painting Christ appears as a man in the bottom left of the frame, holding his golden robe casually around his body, and he also appears as Christ the God in the sky looking down at his lamenting followers. The colours are rich, and the gold fabric folds around the men, leading the eye in a loose diagonal to the sky and Christ the God. Up above, a space opens in the clouds and a chorus of angels peer towards Christ. Death, here, is a space filled with eager onlookers. Christ as God is sandwiched between earth and the heavens, both of which are depicted in greenish tones. The lamenters gaze in several different directions in confusion: how is it the Christ may be seen on earth and rising to the heavens simultaneously? Here the complexity of the world is contained within the frame. The man in the middle, to the right in the green jacket, tilts his head towards the heavens; he can see finitude, it is there, yet his hands rise in astonishment: the incomprehensible, although materialised, is bewildering. Christ as God points up to the outside of the frame, towards death, the ultimate destination, here depicted in the heavens beyond. The richness of the colours and the balanced composition instruct the viewer that in loss and death, there is a hopeful understanding – without belying the difficulty of truly understanding death, because it must always lie outside the frame as *other*.

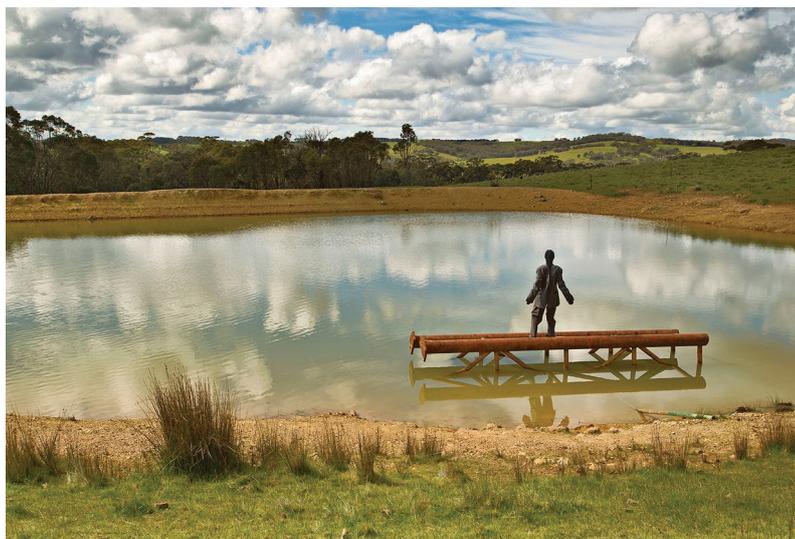


Figure 86: Paula Mahoney, *Dressing in dead dad's suit No.10*, 2015



Figure 87: Benvenuto Tisi, *Ascension of Christ*, 1520

### Holding death: photography and intersection

Laurie Anderson states in her farewell to Lou Reed (her lover, collaborator, friend and husband), “I believe that the purpose of death is the release of love.”<sup>123</sup> The falling of my body that was contained in some of the shots from *Reanimation* was an attempt to achieve that release, a search for that border between those binaries life and death, and release and repression. The photograph is instructing us of that finitude, and although it is overwhelming it does become acknowledgeable. I also revisit an earlier work shot in the *Dis/Appear* series, *Free falling No.1*, that contains a similar body movement and further extend on this falling figure. I shot myself upright in *Free falling No.1* with my body leaning back again in front of the red curtain. The suit appears upright on a reversed figure, which is easily recognisable as me, because of my orange-red hair. In these images there is an ambiguity in the result created by the suit on backwards and the body falling. I choose to further extend this process, this time devoid of the black suit used in *Reanimation* that had hidden me from immediate identification. This further work with the suit is again a performance of lament and mourning in the presence of death. It is a private/personal ritual of lamenting my father that points to the finality of death and the psychological state of the mourner.

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<sup>123</sup> “Laurie Anderson’s farewell to Lou Reed,” *Rolling Stone*, accessed March 21 2014, [www.rollingstone.com/music/news/laurie-andersons-farewell-to-lou-reed-a-rolling-stone-exclusive-20131106](http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/laurie-andersons-farewell-to-lou-reed-a-rolling-stone-exclusive-20131106).



Figure 88: Paula Mahoney, *Free falling No.1*, 2014

I then decided to take the work all outside where the colour, blues and greens dominate, and the context pointed to a vastness both within the frame and beyond. I begin shooting a series that I title *Behold (Death)*. In *Free falling No.2*, I shot amongst Peace Lilies, the flower of funerals, with the light muted and the sky the blue of my father's suit. The three bunches of lilies create a triangular shape: I am positioned in the middle, with my arm extending in the same direction of the twisted dead branches of the tree in the background. There is a stark contrast between the rich blues and greens, the blues mirroring the blue of many Christian depictions of heaven, and the green representing the vibrancy of life. The figure is positioned so that it could flip upright and sit within the space in the sky, a metaphoric place of afterlife within the frame. The head is tilted to the sky, yearning for beyond.

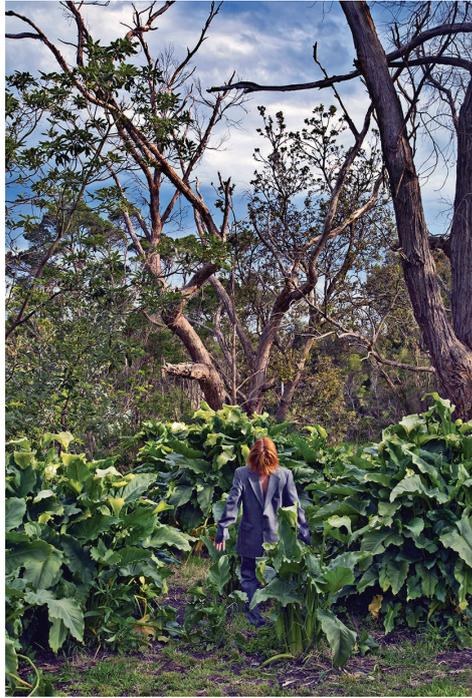


Figure 89: Paula Mahoney, *Free falling No.2*, 2015



Figure 90: Paula Mahoney, *Free falling No.3*, 2015



Figure 91: Paula Mahoney, *Free falling No.4*, 2015

I then shot some images in a suburban street where one of my oldest friends lives, not far from where I grew up. I shot these images, *Free falling No.3* and *Free falling No.4*, in the late afternoon, a time termed the “golden hour” in photography, when the light is warmer in tone, and the shadows are dramatic, long and dark, bringing a melancholic nature to the image. In *Free falling No.3* the light warms my back but I look out towards the darkness of the shadows in front of me, and towards a house engulfed by trees. The house resembles the classic horror house, where even the hedge is, in parts, barren. Polarities arise again between the warmth of the light and the coolness of the shadows; the suit is alive with light while I gaze into the void.

The Austrian artist Gottfried Helnwein, in his series *Modern Sleep* 2002-2003, photographs a young girl lying down and looking up into the sky with a vacant stare on her face, also wearing a suit of sorts, a military uniform, that connects us directly to notions of death and the fallen. The work was installed in various locations across Santa Monica in 2003 and, thematically, explores psychological and sociological anxiety through the depiction of the female child. In *Modern Sleep I* the pale skin of the girl contrasts dramatically with the red lips of her agape mouth, mirroring the fairy tale images of Snow White. The girl is locked within the frame, lying in a position that reflects Snow White in her glass coffin. Her gaze is towards the sky, staring at the wonder that only she can see. Photography has always held meaning beyond the frame, with often what is outside the frame as significant as what is inside the frame. However, here, the frame forms her glass coffin, with an edge that only she, seemingly, can see beyond. Finitude is glanced.



Figure 92: Gottfried Helnwig, *Modern sleep I*, 2003

I decided to flip my body over further; as the suit already once reverses my body, I then photograph myself lying on the ground, my face pressed into the soil. My face is down and I am still looking outside of the frame but now it is to a more particular nothingness, at what lies below the photograph. In the earth I find a correlation with death, as I have seen many coffins lowered to their grave.<sup>124</sup> Traditionally only family and close friends are witness to this, as it is an intimate time: the moment of a Christian funeral where grief reaches a peak. The mourners are expected to throw a bit of soil onto the coffin in the grave to begin the burial process. This is the final goodbye.



Figure 93: Paula Mahoney, *Free falling No.5*, 2015

In this image, *Free falling No.5*, my body is flayed, in a position of surrender. For a moment I surrender to death and my face is buried in the soil among the richness of the green plants that appear destined to engulf me. However, no matter how much I bury my face into the soil, I do not see death. The ambiguity of the mourner is realised. In the sadness of my grief I long for death but “sadness is a sin and the wretched citizens of the ‘abode of woe’ are placed by Dante in the circles of hell.”<sup>125</sup> In this image my face sees only the blackness of the soil, while my dead father’s suit looks up towards

<sup>124</sup> For devout Catholics cremation is not an option, so burial is in the ground.

<sup>125</sup> Kristeva, Julia. “On the Melancholic Imaginary,” *New Formation*, No. 3, (Winter 1987): 5.

life: I am trapped by my inability to know death. My body lies like a corpse on the ground analogically linked to Sally Mann's images from the University of Tennessee Anthropological Research Facility discussed in chapter two. In Sally Mann's images the decaying body sits as a contradiction, as flesh performing and encapsulating, a horror that eschews the viewer. The instructions are varied but point to our material mortality – you will die, and your body will decay, just as you see within this frame. The photograph is a witness to our own mortality. Here, my body instructs the viewer “I will die, and the earth will swallow me too.” But the image also offers hope beyond the sadness because I can rise from the grave. In those minutes that I lay there, my eyes closed and the soil squashed against my face, I imagined being buried and never leaving this spot. I hold death momentarily, my body as the abject cast aside – it is only I that can glimpse the lingering death below the photograph, which is unseen and unimaginable to the viewer. This moment of “abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off me [the subject] from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.”<sup>126</sup>

The fragility of life is reaffirmed, with the abject serving as a process of regulating myself in the world. I have looked at and moved towards death, driven by my own unconscious desires: towards an annihilation of firstly myself and then of those around me. My life has been marred by extreme behaviour and by coping with overwhelming circumstances through escape, rather than by turning or tuning in creatively as an artist. I have internalised my annihilation desire to wipe myself out, sublimating my desires and emotions internally. When my mother died in 1983, I stopped practising art. I felt I was not good enough and I lost all confidence in my ability to express myself. This denial of my self has repeated itself again and again, destroying me a little every time I face a death. I thought I had mastered an acknowledgment of finitude but in truth what happened was the opposite; I still put myself forward to suffer every time a death happened. While I reached for life and change, I struggled against the repeated patterns of my life, and my inability to control death and my own self. In photographing my father dead I changed the way I interacted with death. I washed him, kissed him, and held his cold hand, before using the camera as a way to record what I knew I would not remember and as a way to see death. I allowed myself to lament, to hold death and my fragility in grief. In using my father's suits I repeated this act of lamentation, this cry of being forsaken. I photograph death in life again and again analogically to reveal to myself the world, and to express the internal intensity that swirls inside me.

In the final image, *Free falling No.6*, I lay on the ground again, my face is pressed to the soil in my father's suit, and the sun is nearly set. My left leg is pressed so much into the ground that it appears

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<sup>126</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9-10.

as if the suit pant is empty. I am beginning to disappear: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.<sup>127</sup> However, to the right of the body there is a lake. I imagine my death but this time it is not just the void I see, but also water and my body floating. I am reminded of my father watching me swim in the ocean and the American photographer Gregory Crewdson's *Untitled (Ophelia)*. In *Untitled (Ophelia)* a woman seems to float on water that has mysteriously filled her living room. The water, a common psychoanalytical symbol for the unconscious, is a murky green-grey colour, still and reflective. Like the setting of most of Crewdson's work, the place is a non-specific, small American town or suburb. Crewdson references William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in which Ophelia, a young victim of unrequited love who becomes mentally unbalanced, drowns herself. Similarly, Crewdson's female figure is dressed only in a nightgown and underwear and stares out to the left of the frame, seemingly serene, either in death or in a catatonic state, not unlike Snow White. The female "captured at [a] point of liminal anticipation – perched between the 'before' and 'after.'"<sup>128</sup>



Figure 94: Gregory Crewdson's *Untitled (Ophelia)* (2001) from the Twilight series

The living room in *Untitled (Ophelia)* displays the normality of middle class suburban life with indistinguishable photographic portraits of the family on the mantelpiece and leading up the stairs, a blanket thrown on the couch, and a book and drink on the coffee table. The scene is set as if the woman just came down the stairs with her slippers mysteriously, yet neatly, left on the second and third bottom stair. The room is flooded with golden light streaming in through the unusual number of windows for which Crewdson is renowned; suggesting that someone is always watching. The windows and doorway act "as framing devices, creating a layer of separation; inviting, yet ultimately

<sup>127</sup> Ashes to ashes, dust to dust: this phrase comes from the funeral service in the Book of Common Prayer, and it is based on Genesis 3:19, Genesis 18:27, Job 30:19, and Ecclesiastes 3:20. It is recited at the grave at the moment of burial. "In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother Leo Mahoney; and we commit his body to the ground; earth to earth; ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless him and keep him, the Lord make his face to shine upon him and be gracious unto him and give him peace. Amen." From my father's funeral booklet.

<sup>128</sup> "Gregory Crewdson," Exhibition Media Release, accessed March 21 2009, [www.luhningaugustine.com/exhibitions/gregory-crewdson](http://www.luhningaugustine.com/exhibitions/gregory-crewdson).

inaccessible.”<sup>129</sup> The light is surreal, as if a spaceship hovers above the house, transforming the room into a capsule that will transport the female figure to a place far from the American dream. The anxiety and fear of this unknown underpins the illogical scenarios that Crewdson creates. In *Untitled (Ophelia)* the water, the placement of the female floating in her nightgown, her serene gaze and the streaming light are the foreign objects that infuse this image with the “uncanny”.

In *Free falling No.6* I am no longer constrained by the internal, both metaphorically and literally, as I am photographed near still water and I am outdoors. Finitude is acknowledged as the suit looks up to life and I look down towards death, performing that intersection between life and death. The presence of the water reflects the presence of my father but it is still, unlike the ocean I associate with him. The ambivalence of the figure and the water seems counterbalanced by the reflection of the trees in the top left of the image, which indicates transcendence and hope from outside the frame. I, as artist, frame the photograph, and see myself no longer constrained by my father’s hold. Death, in this image, includes resurrection, as the trunk of the tree seemingly pushes the body to the water to float away peacefully to the void outside the frame. It is not a Christian resurrection of rising to the heavens, but it is a revival of my story. It is no longer the grave I move towards in grief but to the water, to myself, to mediate my limits. I, the artist, can mediate my grief and loss through the camera, analogically confirming the incomprehensibility of death and the impossibility of knowing death. I now understand the importance of placing myself in the frame in these times of grief, so that I can momentarily see below and above the frame, feel the presence of death and my parents, and renounce the hold that these have had on me. The dead may well have invented the camera so we can see ourselves, reflected in all our fragility, and to allow ourselves the power to reframe our limitations, in order to change the nature of our being (our ontology).



Figure 95: Paula Mahoney, *Free falling No.6*, 2015

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<sup>129</sup> “Gregory Crewdson,” Exhibition Media Release, accessed March 21 2009, [www.luhringaugustine.com/exhibitions/gregory-crewdson](http://www.luhringaugustine.com/exhibitions/gregory-crewdson).

## Conclusion

My research in this candidature sought to articulate a space to say the unsayable, by producing images of lamentation that articulated different understandings outside of religion. The resulting work looks at death and lament from a non-Christian perspective, albeit informed by my Catholic upbringing. These images of lamentation sought to affirm finitude in place of the infinite. In contrast to the current trend to turn away from personal images of death and mourning – a denying of death – this work relooks at death and mourning, acknowledging the impossible inconsistencies and incoherence in this experience at the doorway of death, and in an embrace of our limitations and mortality. Rather than a notion of the infinite, this work argues for an understanding of finitude in the experience of death and lament, which paradoxically places us within the greater Whole.

I used the American theorist Kaja Silverman's theory of photography as an analogy, along with performative photography as defined by English theorist Catherine Grant, as a theoretical basis for staged photography as a way to examine death.<sup>130</sup> These theorists were of particular importance as their current approaches bring new readings to photography that were particularly relevant to my work. Additionally, I drew on the Bulgarian French theorist Julia Kristeva's understanding of the irreconcilable contradictions inherent in mourning, and the impossibility of death from the perspective of the French theorist Maurice Blanchot. I sought through my work and in my writing to approach death, in its impossibility, and to gain a broader understanding of my own experience of this subject, in the question of finitude, whilst also pointing to the contradictory, ambivalent emotion of the lamenter.

This project began with the question, "How can the photograph elucidate the understanding of death?" However, further to this initial desire to understand and explore death through photography, during the early stages of the project my father fell ill with terminal cancer. The project then took on a more personal and immediate focus. My own mortality became intertwined with the dying and death of my father. I photographed my father dying and dead, and revisited and manipulated these images, as an exploration of lamentation, using the period in which the body dies, and before rigor mortis sets in, as a reference point. The metaphysical longing that I had, to go with my father when he died, became folded in the sheets between his mirrored bodies in *The deathbed*. This period of time became central to my work, the time of lamentation.

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<sup>130</sup> Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy or the History of Photography, Part 1*.  
Grant, *Performing Photographs Seminar: Photography, Performance and Affect*.



Figure 96: Paula Mahoney, *The deathbed*, 2011

I realised that the act of standing on his bed, as his body started to go cold and photographing him with my feet touching that space, was an acknowledgement of finitude. I wanted to revisit this act of acknowledging finitude and see if it was possible to point to the act of lamentation, and the lamenting my own death, through performative photography. It was then that I moved in front of the camera, dressed backwards in my dad's suits, in an attempt to intersect life and death within the frame.

I made four distinct series in this project: *Killing Everyone I Know*, *Dis/Appear*, *Reanimation* and *Behold (Death)*. There is a dramatic difference between the early *Killing Everyone I Know* series, which explored the loss of loved ones and the arbitrariness of death, to the *Dis/Appear* and *Reanimation* series that sought to reconcile my lament for my father. The final series *Behold (Death)* is a final coming to terms with our finitude, an acceptance of the comfort of death as a reaffirming of our fragility and vulnerability with all people and all things that live. There is also a reconciliation of gender roles in the work, to which the father and daughter relationship is central.

In chapter one, entitled *Photography and the Finitude*, I considered Silverman's and Grant's theories in relation to the very origin of photography in order to look at Walter Benjamin's notion of the disclosive, whilst discussing Geoffrey Batchen's and Roland Barthes' further theories about death and photography. I used Silverman's and Grant's theories as a platform to broaden our understanding of finitude, using the photograph as an analogy and the performative in the frame in my analysis.

In chapter two, entitled *The Corpse and Lamentation*, I explored historical and contemporary images of corpses as a spectacle, which attempted to locate death and reconcile us with our mortality whilst also pointing to the unacceptable arbitrariness of death. This led to an increasing awareness of the importance of Christian iconography in this project, as I am from a deeply religious family and images of Christ suffering and dead are strongly familiar as both representations of death and dying, and as objects of veneration. In Christianity these images of Christ dead and dying have little to

do with the horror of death, but rather seek to bring peace and connection in the midst of life's inhumanity. I then examined the relationship between the early Romantic French painters Eugène Delacroix's and Théodore Géricault's depictions of death, and the contemporary works of Jeff Wall, Berlinde De Bruyckere, Andreas Serrano, Sally Mann and Joel Peter Witkin. These contemporary depictions offered new readings of the corpse, attempting in different ways to bring us closer to seeing death. I looked at the performance space of these contemporary photographic works, of Wall, Serrano, Mann and Witkin, and considered how they contained actions, instructions and points of intentional direction that questioned our understanding of death and mourning. In my studio research I made a body of work using friends and family in fabricated death scenes, framing death as a spectacle, and called it *Killing Everyone I Know*. Through these resulting photographs I attempted to locate death, bringing together the binary oppositions of suffering and release, and absence and presence, but in very deliberate fabricated scenes. I wanted to address personal grief, with particular acknowledgement of the inevitable future, where loved ones will die. I used cinematic lighting, which placed the death scenes outside of reality, and fake blood to point to a moment of death. However, the fake blood became distracting and created new associations that I had not foreseen.

In chapter three, entitled *The Death of My Father*, I further discussed death as seen as a spectacle in the depictions of Christ in paintings *The Lamentation over the Dead* by Andrea Mantegna (1480) and *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521) by Hans Holbein the Younger, and how Christ's body both reveals a humanity and a momentary union with death. I became very interested in the positioning of the lamenter in these works, as they are pushed out of the frame while the corpse remains locked into the frame, in a most photographic way. I discuss photographing my father dying and dead, with me the lamenter, and become even more interested in depiction of personal loss of loved ones through photography and how grief is pointed to ambiguously, and how instructions are contained within the frame about death. I then revisited post-mortem photography and the photograph as *memento mori*, as referenced by Barthes, Batchen and Sontag, in my discussion of the latter, as a means of capturing death within the frame and how these readings of the photograph functioned as personal objects of grief. I found in contemporary art, the photographic work of Richard Avedon, Phillip Toledano and Trent Parke that used photography as a means of lamenting a dying or dead parent. I analysed this work to see how finitude is acknowledged and how death is witnessed. The actions contained in the photographs differ with Avedon using the camera to murder, Toledano to caress and Parke to remember. The use of the camera reveals different readings of death, and the ambivalent relationship of the mourner to the dead. A love and hate relationship for the lost loved one is illustrated, and reflects the writings of Julia Kristeva, as a sadness where there is no end to the loss, and a happiness in the recollection or contemplation of a memory and/or fantasy of what is lost. Again these binaries are revisited – absence and presence, suffering and release – in the resulting photographs' work. I also discussed the video work of Sophie Calle in recording her mother's death. Calle provided further new readings of the place of the camera as witness/lamenter as she placed the camera next to her mother's bed, as a substitute for herself, in order to capture death. I related these new understanding

to the images that I photographed of my father during the last 24 hours that I spent with him while he was dying, and with his corpse. Analysing these photographs created a greater understanding of myself as the artist, and the changing position of the lamenter and my relationship with death. This relationship, between me and my father dead and dying, and the camera, and me as the lamenter opened up new possibilities for further work.

In chapter four, entitled *Lamenting My Own Death*, I further explored the relationship between me and my father dead and dying, my mortality, and the camera and me as the lamenter. I decided to move in front of the camera and perform a death through my gestures, using my father's suits worn backwards. I performed a communion with death in front of the camera – with me the artist as both the lamenter and performing a convening with death. My body was facing away from the camera towards the void (death), and my father's suit "looked" towards the camera, whilst he – my father – was absent; dead, gone. The camera became the link that connected life and death in the intersection of the photograph. I performed this convening with death for myself, while I watched. I termed these images "self-mourning images". I sought to understand death through my body and gestures, with the performative approach re-animating the suit, as if it is a shroud, allowing breath to enter. I also analysed the work of photographers Janieta Ayres and Jeff Wall, who staged their own deaths as a way of controlling death, as the relationship with death and the camera had similarities. Although I was not acting like a corpse: I was giving the corpse life by allowing it to resurrect and move, with death an invisible presence in the frame. I also reviewed the similarities that this work had to the contemporary artists Charles Freger and Phylliss Galembo, in whose work death is depicted as an intersection with dead ancestors, a personal revisiting in the photograph and performance. My resulting images instructed the viewer that you could hold death; you could give it "life" as such, in the viewing and consuming, despite the frame that separated you from death; and they divided the space of life and the space of the photograph.

This work allowed me to photograph my imagined convening with a death I wished to know, through imagining my own death, and through my body's yearning and lamenting in the photograph as I instructed and exercised control, both in the taking of the image and the movement of my body. This work of lamenting seemed to directly reflect Maurice Blanchot's idea that suicide is the one true death that you can choose and control, with the performative photography pointing to the locating of death momentarily within the frame that separated life from death. I discovered that the photograph is a space where life and death can be referenced, control and beyond control can intersect but never cross. I also explored through the psychoanalytical, using Kristeva and Freud, the father-daughter relationship, as I am the bereaved subject, and what it meant to examine my lament for my father, given the nature of this relationship.

I used performative photography as a means of emplacing myself within a larger whole, pointing to the impossibility of death, and the irreconcilable aspects of death, which escape representation and comprehension. Through the performative photography I have been able to look back at life (myself

behind the camera), whilst also manifesting an image of death in my body and mind (moving in front of the camera). Dressed in my father's suit I smelled him in the fabric, and it felt like he and death were just beyond, like one more stop on the camera. The ambivalence of the mourner lamenting in this performative work was explored.

In endeavouring to capture death I found the photograph could be death's stage, and although I could use it as a means of expanding my comprehension, I could never cross and capture death, even though the photograph, analogically, could point to my mortality and instruct me about death. I found that the photograph acts like a skin, a layer that holds death as other, with the surface being a point of intersection between life and death. I used this exploration to understand my lament for my father, and myself as an artist who uses photography to define myself within the "world", and to understand my limits.

So, through these performances, I could point to death and the surface of the photograph. I could both merge and blur the space between self and other, control and beyond control, and I and my imagined convening with death, because I was both the photographer and the performer. What remained was the incomprehensibility of mortality. The performative gesture extended and pushed the limitations in a larger context, and allowed for a fraction of a second an expansive "world" view, where death is shared. The mourner in these performative works, me, reflects Julia Kristeva's ambivalence in the lamenting. This ambivalence that melancholia gives rise to, love and hate for the lost object, my father, is momentarily framed in the photograph, with a knowing happiness in the recollection or contemplation of a memory of him in his suit, and a fantasy of what is loss.

And while this work has been personal, this project has a broader social context. The project informs Western concepts of death and dying by raising questions about how Western society deals with death and personal loss; and it provides evidence of the importance of photography in revealing our similarities and offering an analogical understanding. A shared sense of finitude is acknowledged, and as Silverman states, "it connects us to every other being."<sup>131</sup> Finitude indicates a felt experience of interconnectedness, embedding us with all aspects of the world, all creatures, and all others, through an acceptance of mortality, a facing of death. Ironically it is the facing of death, our finitude, that brings comfort and connection. It also is what gives us compassion and empathy for the fragile, mortal creatures with whom we share the planet, and has helped me come to terms with the absence and death of my father.

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<sup>131</sup> Silverman, *Flesh of my flesh*, 4.

Let us banish the strangeness of death: let us practice it, accustom ourselves to it, never having anything so often present in our minds than death: let us always keep the image of death...in full view.

– Michel de Montaigne<sup>132</sup>

Let go of the spirit of the departed and continue your life's celebration.

– Allen Ginsberg told Patti Smith upon the death  
of her husband Fred 'Sonic' Smith<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Montaigne, Michel de. "Essais" (1580) in *The Complete Essays*, Trans. and ed. by M.A. Screech. (Hammondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1991), Book 1, Section 29, 96.

<sup>133</sup> *Patti Smith: Dream of Life*, directed by Steven Sebring, aired December 30, 2009 on PBS, accessed May 10, 2016, <http://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/video/411974723969/patti-smith-dream-of-life>.

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