Photodeath as Memento Mori - A Contemporary Investigation

by

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Thesis Declaration:

I hereby declare that the work herein, now submitted as a thesis for the degree of Master by Research, is the result of my own investigations, and all references to ideas and work of other researchers have been specifically acknowledged. I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis has not already been accepted in substance for any degree, and is not being currently submitted in candidature for any other degree.

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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the links between the notions exemplified in traditional *memento mori* imagery and the Barthian concept of 'photodeath'. In order to do this I have chosen three contemporary photographers: Christian Boltanski, Joel Peter Witkin and Peter Hujar, in whose work both concepts are manifest in completely different ways.

The concepts of *memento mori* and photodeath are initially discussed separately in some detail. Then, by careful examination of key works in each artist's *oeuvre*, some critical observations about the nature of both concepts are teased out and explored.

The major issues to arise include: what kind of image constitutes a contemporary *memento mori*, the possible role that photodeath plays in filling the void left by the 20th century denial of death and ritual, and inability of 'photodeath as a phenomenon' to be perceived in the vast number of photographs that assail us daily.

These questions are floated throughout the thesis and are not conclusively answered. Certain possibilities are posited however, and their investigation in relation to the work of the three photographers helps to illuminate some of the dark recesses and grey areas that one necessarily encounters when studying the topic of death.
Introduction
All those young photographers who are at work in the world determined upon the capture of actuality do not know that they are agents of death.¹

This statement from Roland Barthes is the perfect place to start this thesis. It expresses clearly the notion of ‘photodeath’, that inherent in the single image photograph of a person lies a depiction of death. By the freezing of a moment in time and the freeing of the subject/object from the continuum of life, the photograph intrinsically speaks of death, transience and immutability.

The thesis examines the representation of death in the work of three photographers: Christian Boltanski, Joel Peter Witkin and Peter Hujar. Each create memento mori by exploring different hidden aspects of the medium of photography. I have chosen these photographers particularly because they do know that ‘they are the agents of death’ and engage fully with the particular dialectic that Barthes is writing about. It is how they do this, in different ways, that forms the body of this thesis.

It is not a reappraisal of Barthes or Sontag’s notions of photodeath, particularly as expressed in Camera Lucida and On Photography, but rather it is a study of how three photographers have taken these ideas and either employed them, illustrated them or subverted and questioned them, knowingly as opposed to indifferently as the quotation suggests most photographers do.

These photographers are therefore creating contemporary memento mori. They are

¹Barthes, R., Camera Lucida, N.Y., 1981 p 92
encouraging us to dwell on our own mortality, however fleetingly. They are a part of a long history of this kind of iconography, one to which photography is the natural heir. The first chapter is an attempt to contextualise the notion of the *memento mori* with a brief historical outline showing how our attitudes to the depiction of death both culturally and historically have changed enormously. This chapter deals with the sign of death, the *memento mori* in art and culture but it also contains a brief outline of the development of some changes in the perception of death in the west. In this context it can be seen that the advent of photography on a massive scale could have filled the void created by our societal denial of death in an unobtrusive, almost unreadable way. This helps to explain the inability of the phenomenon of photodeath to be recognised for what it is as referenced by Barthes in the opening quote.

In chapter two I explore more fully the notion of photodeath as originally posited in the seminal writings of Sontag, Barthes and Berger. These writings suggest that all photographs of people are, in fact *memento mori*, and that the photograph's legacy is necessarily one of absence, that inherently questions assumptions about truth and reality, the real and the trace and the nature of time itself. These writings have been widely commented on and are now accepted as a kind of orthodoxy in photographic theory. It is necessary to look at the main themes again closely in the light of the work of the three photographers as each illuminates a different aspect of these theories.

The artists I have chosen can all be seen in essence as portrait photographers, who understand the implications embedded within the language of the photograph and explore its codes and contradictions fully within their work. I look firstly at the work of
Christian Boltanski, the French photographer and installation artist whose whole body of work is seemingly about absence, memory and death on a massive, almost institutional scale. Because of this it reminds many of the Holocaust. This is a far too simple and misleading reading of his work. On one level Boltanski’s work is can be seen as a ‘virtual exempla’ of the conundrums of the single image photograph and on another, as an investigation of the banality of death. From a Barthian point of view he questions the notion of the referent, the sign of something “that has been there”. He constantly causes us to make assumptions based on context rather than content and plays on ambiguous readings of the work to elicit emotional responses and imagined historical allusions.

Chapter 4 looks at the obvious creator of contemporary memento mori, Joel Peter Witkin, the bete noir of international photography. His powerful, large-scale black and white photographs come closest to the traditional forms of the memento mori, the vanitas painting. They represent a potent merging of the beautiful and the grotesque that fascinates, terrifies and often seduces. They are particularly interesting in relation to notions of photodeath, as the subjects of Witkin’s vanitas are actually dead as opposed to the ‘death in life’ idea of photodeath, the “corpse alive” to quote Barthes. Witkin’s ‘corpse itself’ - actual dead skin, is an interesting counter point with which to compare the death that lurks within the lens.

Finally I look at Peter Hujar. His straight photographic portraits are simple, pure and

\[^{2}\text{Ibid p 76}\]
\[^{3}\text{Ibid p 79}\]
moving. He shuns the theatrical, the ambiguous and the grotesque in his meditations on mortality. His portraits of friends and celebrities from the 70s are classical examples of the aesthetics of photodeath, pure and simple. He is virtually illustrating much of what Susan Sontag would muse on two years later on On Photography. She wrote the introduction to his book and is one of his subjects. His body of work is not large as he died of AIDS in 1987. Although his work is relatively unknown and underrated, it is currently undergoing a reappraisal.

By comparing the depiction and exploration of photodeath in the work of these artists certain key issues of this theory are illuminated in a fresh way. The underlying assumptions of Barthes et al. are in some cases questioned and in others reinforced. It is no accident that many of the contemporary artists who are dealing with issues of mortality are using the medium of photography.
Chapter 1

Memento Mori
To be alive and not inquire into, and be concerned with the problem and fear of death is to miss perhaps the greatest challenge of being alive. To do less, to avoid death, is to deny one's very humanity.

*J.P. Sartre*

Death has been represented as many things in Western art and literature. It has been likened to sleep, to a bride and a lover’s pinch, to darkness and absence, to dust and decay, to a glistening skeleton, and my personal favourite, to an undiscovered country. How is it then that if, as Camus states ‘...the world is shaped by death’, and it is the most persistent and inescapable event in life, that it remains the one we know least about and the one for which we are least prepared?

Epicurus, a Greek stoic philosopher, writing in 80 AD, noted that men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of things. Thus he says death is not terrible. The terror consists in our notion of death. It is our metaphors of death and the language and imagery that we use to describe it that shape our views on it, in both a structuralist and a literal sense. The *memento mori* is one of the oldest of these visual metaphors and one that is little understood and easily dismissed today.

1Schibbles, W., *Death: An Interdisciplinary Study*, Wisconsin, p 165
2ibid p 23
3ibid p 41
At the present time there seems to be a resurgence of interest in, or curiosity about death, the visceral, and the transgressive. There is also a proliferation of imagery that could possibly fit with a vague notion of *memento mori*, however, traditionally the *memento mori* represents a specific attitude to the presentation of death and death-related imagery and in order to understand it and challenge some of the preconceptions associated with this somewhat overused and misunderstood phrase, I would like to look at the nature of the *memento mori* and contextualise it, as a way of thinking, historically.

A *memento mori* is traditionally a motif used in art and elsewhere as a reminder that death is ever present. Literally it derives from the Latin phrase "Remember that you must die". However the idea of the *memento mori* is not just a reminder that death exists but rather, that it is with us from the beginning; illustrated by the traditional ideas of 'the worm at the core', and 'from womb to tomb'. This notion was eloquently expressed by Sir Thomas More in the fifteenth century:

> We joke and believe death to be far removed. It is hidden in the deepest secrets of our organs. For since the moment we came into this world, life and death go forward at the same pace.  

A brief historical overview of changing Western attitudes towards death can help us understand and contextualise the *memento mori* more fully. The concept first appears in the Middle ages and epitomises a whole approach to life. As Philippe Aries states:

> ...the spectacle of the dead, whose bones were always being brought to the

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In the Middle Ages man was preoccupied with death generally, it would seem. The preacher's favourite topic was death. One was taught to constantly think of death. The phrase *memento mori* was inscribed on rings, cups, plates, chimneys, buildings and churches. Pictorially a skull became the symbol for *memento mori* and was often carried as a reminder. Skeletons were brought to banquets as was the practice in Greece and Egypt. Drinking cups were inscribed with "drink for you will die". Prostitutes wore rings with skulls on them, a reminder that the sensual pleasures were always viewed as a double edged sword in those times.

Before the 17th century, this familiarity with death was generally seen as an acceptance of the order of nature. In death man encountered one of the great laws of the species and he had no thought of escaping it or glorifying it. It seems he merely accepted it with just the proper amount of solemnity due any of the other great thresholds which each generation has to cross. Death is seen as familiar and near, evoking no great fear or awe. This traditional attitude to death appears inert and passive to us. Aries states:

The man of the Late Middle Ages was very acutely conscious that he had been granted merely a stay of execution, that this delay would be a brief one and that death was always present with him shattering his ambitions and

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Aries, P., *Western Attitudes Towards Death*, Baltimore, 1975 p 25

ibid. p 28
poisoning his pleasures. But with this man felt a love of life which today we can scarcely understand.\(^7\)

The iconography that best sums up this sentiment is the *vanitas* painting, perhaps the most familiar *memento mori* image. A skull, the most obvious symbol of death is usually surrounded by still-life objects that represent transience and decay, such as flowers, fruit and burning candles. Another familiar *memento mori* is the *danse macabre* in which a skeleton entices the living, from all walks of life and social class, into a dance of death. These were not subtle forms of symbolism and their message was direct and clear: death is ever present and inescapable.

However, at the end of the 16th century themes concerning death begin to take on an erotic meaning. In this new iconography death raped the living. From the 16th to the 18th centuries countless scenes or motifs in art and literature associated death with love: Thanatos with Eros. These erotic-macabre themes reveal extreme acceptance, almost enjoyment in depicting the spectacles of death, suffering and torture, especially in the sadistic portrayal of saints and martyrs. Like the sexual act, death was increasingly thought of as a transgression which tears man from his daily life, work and society in order to plunge him into an irrational, violent and beautiful world. Aries states:

...like the sexual act, death, for the Maquis de Sade, is a break, a rupture.\(^8\)

\(^7\) ibid. p 44-5
\(^8\) Aries, P., op. cit. p 56
This is a completely different way of seeing death - the modern way - as an intrusion and an unnatural one. Instead of it being the quiet and familiar it becomes the important and the irrational.

Many writers have commented on the culmination of this way of thinking which results in the great 20th century refusal to accept death. Death becomes forbidden, shameful and hidden. This change is inextricably linked to the rapid rise of industrialisation in the modern world, but also to another more banal social change. During the early part of this century the site of death was displaced from the home, the familiar, to the hospital, the unfamiliar. One no longer died in the bosom of ones family but alone in the hospital. As a result of these changes the old rituals of death were suppressed, supplanted and sanitised.

Geoffrey Gorer first studied the phenomenon in which death became taboo in the west and he found that in the 20th century it had replaced sex as the principal forbidden subject. Children were denied access to death as if it would infect them in some way. In his ground breaking article, titled "The Pornography of Death"9, he posited that the cause of the 20th century flight from death is linked to our need for happiness and to the search for profit. He suggested that it now was the moral duty and the social obligation of people to contribute to the collective happiness by avoiding any cause for sadness or boredom by appearing always to be happy even if we are in the depths of despair. Now too evident sorrow does not inspire pity but repugnance.

*Gorer, G., Death, Grief and Mourning, N.Y., 1965 p 106
This change varies widely from the death rituals of many tribal cultures where extreme forms of public grief are the norm and a necessary part of the process of dealing with loss. In Western culture solitary, shameful mourning is the only recourse, like a sort of masturbation. Death is an antiseptic, quarantined affair, kept out of sight and put out of mind as soon as possible. This is the consequence of cleaving death from its natural, simple role.

In the late 20th century a massive denial of death still pervades our thinking. It can be seen in the domination of youth culture in the media and the ludicrous lengths those in the public spotlight go to to maintain their youthful looks to hold back the tide of ageing. This glorification of physical immaturity is rampant and suggests that a society which denies ageing also denies the actualities of death. Despite all this however, the statement that the west simply denies death is not only a cliche but is also untrue. At the same time that there has been this separation from the involvement in the actualities of death, there has been, as Peter Bishop suggests,

....an immersion in ficto-death and cyber-death, as we become saturated by media generated, death-related images. 10

It would seem that all this denial has recently unleashed a post modern monster in the form of a love affair with death that has been evident for quite some time now. Metaphorically we have seen the death of meaning, the death of the real, the death of the author and of the metanarrative. Not withstanding this it is the resurgence of the visceral

and an intense interest in the corporeal aspects of the body in death. This has been loosely called 'the new grotesque'. Perhaps it has been the AIDS epidemic and the old link between sex and death that has once again brought death out of the closet and placed it on the agenda again in the 90s.

The 'new grotesque' apparently represents a reflexive recoil from the deodorisation of death that we have just noted. Mark Dery, in "Lost in the Fun House" suggests we are yearning for

.... a re-sacrilised world in which our sense of our own mortality weaves the threads of our lives into the web of all that lives and dies and connects us.11

Certain of the historical manifestations of memento mori certainly fulfilled this desire. Extraordinary examples of could be seen in the wunderkammer, the wondrous cabinets popular in Victorian times filled with collections of the rare, the exotic, the hideous and the just plain fraudulent, like the unicorns horns. Other strange items included preserved babies heads, skeletons of co-joined twins and the remnants of equally disturbing anatomical mutations. But the strangest of all were the phantasmagorical tableaux

...constructed by arranging human foetal skeletons in landscapes fashioned from preserved organs and other anatomical remnants. ...Veins and arteries injected with preservatives afforded a convincing facsimile of trees and bushes. These dioramas treated allegorical themes familiar from the memento mori; skulls lamented the transience of mortal existence, weeping into 'handkerchiefs' of brain meninges or mesentery; a foetal skeleton played a violin with a bow fashioned

11Dery, M., op cit. p 51
from a dried artery, commenting, "Ah fate, ah bitter fate". 12

Today this sort of 'play' with human remains would generally be viewed as completely unacceptable and totally disgusting, (as J.P. Witkin found out when he was sued for recreating a much milder tableau out of a human foetus in New Mexico). This sort of tableau is a perfect example of how far our thought processes about this subject matter have diverged from those of the preceding centuries. It reveals just how far our attitude to the manifestation of our mortality has been sanitised and censored.

Dery thinks the new grotesque imagery, of which Witkin is a prime example, resonates truly with the zeitgeist and gives a twisted shape to the pervasive freakishness of the wunderkammer we now live in; the post modern media culture with its pathological search for the ever more freakish and sensational. A world whose richest celebrity, Michael Jackson, was once a small black boy who has progressively transformed himself into a vampirish, white, sexually neutered creation with his own personal wunderkammer, which includes the Elephant Man's skeleton.

The new grotesque can be read as the return of the repressed side-show. 13

It can be seen in the fascination with the mutilated body - scarified, pierced and tattooed - and in the sado-masochistic dance so much in vogue. It also could relate to a collective body loathing in the age of AIDS, flesh-eating bacteria and Ebola virus. This faddish

12 Dery, M., ☘️ Lost in the Fun House ☘️, World Art, 2/95 p50
13 Idem.
flailing about with the pseudo-tribal is one of many possible reactions to a need for connection to ritual. It could also simply be seen as fin de siecle decadence.

However, if we do accept that in the 20th century in the west there has been a massive denial of death, this new interest in fictive representations of death and its more shocking actualities can be seen as productions of simulacra of death rather than an engagement with the banality and more everyday nature of the real thing. The attitudes of the new grotesque certainly have little to do with traditional forms of memento mori, as they are generally only representations of the sensational and lurid. They generally inspire revulsion rather than contemplation or acceptance of the nature of things, which real ritual behaviour usually affirms.

Which brings us back to the issue of photography. Since its invention in the early 19th century nothing has had a more profound effect on our visual culture. Photographs not only portrayed literal images of death in a much more immediate way than painting or sculpture ever could, but something else was different about the photographic image. Something more than its supposed ability to capture the 'real', it also captured time and spoke of transience and death. This aspect of photography was not lost on its earlier practitioners, but it has only been in the last fourty years that these attributes of the photographic medium were thoroughly investigated, particularly by Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, as discussed in the next chapter.

Barthes suggests a very strong link between this centuries denial of death, the phenomenon of photodeath and contemporary memento mori in the following
...Death must be somewhere in a society; if it is no longer in religion, it must be elsewhere: perhaps it is in this image which produces death while trying to preserve life. Contemporary with the withdrawal of rites, Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death outside religion, outside of a ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death. Life/Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print. 

This is crucial as Barthes seems to be suggesting that it is the photograph’s hidden message of mortality that fills the gap that Dery and others yearn to be filled. The connection that we all once had to death. If this is the case, then this gap has been filled by a most unobtrusive and almost unreadable presence: death in the mass of photographs we see of people every day. It is certainly not something most people would recognise as there and yet it is the perfect reference to the banality and ubiquity of death in the 20th century. It is everywhere and nowhere visible, unless one contemplates the hidden meaning of the photograph itself.

2 Barthes, R., Camera Lucida, N.Y., 1981 p 92
Chapter 2

Photodeath
Undoubtedly it is the knowledge of death...that gives the strongest impulse to philosophical reflection and metaphysical explanations of the world.

Arthur Schopenhauer

The links between photography and death have been well documented, particularly in the landmark writings of Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes. These writers have lucidly investigated the hidden agenda of the photograph and decoded some of its language and paradox, particularly in relation to its status as an involuntary memento mori. However, a re-acquaintence with the full implications of these investigations and de-codings is important in understanding the way in which the artists in the following chapters manipulate both the photograph itself and the viewing audience with this knowledge in mind.

The photograph is now a ubiquitous part of our everyday existence and yet, in essence, it remains an enigma. Generally, we tend to take photographs for granted and to look at them only at face value. We tend to see them merely as copies of the real world and simple reminders of ourselves and others.

The photographic image exists as the result of a mechanical process and its primary raw

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1Davidson, K., Photodeath, Canberra, 1991 p 2
3Barthes, R., Camera Lucida, NY, 1981
materials are light and time. Intangibility rather than reality is at its core. One inherent paradox of the single image photograph lies in its relationship to the real world; its supposed actuality; its status as documentary evidence. The other important paradox to arise, is in our reading of the photograph in relation to time and the implications this has with regard to notions of death and transience; its status as an 'involuntary' *memento mori*. I say involuntary because it is an inherent quality that the photograph expresses rather than a devised one. As Barthes has pointed out, photographs of people speak to us of death, whether we want them to or not.

This is a phenomenon that many art/photography theorists have commented on and that some artists, like Boltanski, Hujar and Hensen have knowingly exploited. At a basic level this happens because of a mistake in reading what photographs really deal with. They deal not with tangibility, reality or place, but in fact with time. As Berger states in "Understanding a Photograph" -

> The true context of a photograph is invisible, for it derives from a play, not with form, but with time......The choice is not between photographing X and Y but between photographing at X moment or Y moment. What varies is the intensity with which we are made aware of the poles of absence and presence. Between these two poles photography finds its true meaning."  

In photographs of people the mobility of life is transformed into the immobility of death, sometimes in 1/1000th of a second, by what has been called the 'necrophiliac click' of


*Brereton, K., Photodiscourse, Sydney, 1981
the camera. The most popular and widespread use of the photograph is as a memento of the absent. Photograph albums are in many ways like herbariums or insect collections. The old photographs contained within them are no longer traditional family portraits but rather the disturbing presence of lives halted at a set moment in time.

When I look into my old album there is no escaping the fact that all the 'moments' encapsulated in it are in fact dead, as are some of the people. Not just people, but loved ones and fellow travellers on the continuum. There is no escaping the fact that when we look into any family album we confront death.... be it of a father or a neighbour or a friendship or a love. It was this kind of musing on the photo of his mother in the Wintergarden that led Barthes to write *Camera Lucida*.

It is important not to confuse this notion with the ability of the photograph to portray literal images of death. We are all aware, especially those who watched the unfolding of the Vietnam or Gulf wars, that the photograph and the news film can present death to us in our lounge rooms over diner in a way that has never happened before. These images have no doubt had a terrific impact on many people as individuals and on our cultural psyche. But it is not this literal depiction of death that interests me. Barthes writes that

*The photograph is violent not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed...*\(^6\)

*This statement expresses the notion of immutability which lies at the heart of the concept*

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\(^6\)Barthes, R., op.cit. p 91
of photodeath. The image is frozen, unchanging, not subject to the rules of nature. It is the idea that the photograph, by freezing time and recording transience presents us with a reminder that we are going to die. It is a memento mori.

Most people innocently take photos of their friends and their various rites of passage and then look back on them probably without even giving Death a second thought. It is the very ubiquity of the photographic image today, on billboards, in print, in the home and in the office that dulls us to its many profound implications. As Barthes notes we seem to experience this aspect of photographs with indifference. Barthes describes the notion that photography sets up not the perception of being-there but of having-been-there. He states:

Photography produces an illogical conjunction of the here and the formerly. It is thus at the level of the denoted message or message without a code, that one can plainly understand the real unreality of the photograph, its true paradox.\(^7\)

What he is saying is that by their very nature, all photographs are of the past. When looking at photographs we sense in some way the actual experience event or situation depicted, whereas all we actually possess is an image, that, necessarily, is of another time, past, frozen, dead. Despite the fact that this seems to be a well documented and fairly obvious phenomenon, it does not seem to be one that most people are aware of. To repeat the quote:

\[^7\text{ibid. p 43}\]
All those young photographers who are at work in the world determined upon the capture of actuality, do not know that they are agents of Death.¹

In "On Photography" Susan Sontag notes that with a camera in our hands, as we load it, aim and shoot, we turn a subject into an object, a life into a frozen moment. She says:

...to take a photograph is to participate in another's mortality, mutability, pathos...and...the link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people. ²

The photo image embodies both presence and absence. It is as if it has, somehow, a power, as the extension or trace of the subject, its index. Just as certain native cultures have always perceived photographs to have power over people to capture their souls. It seems their fears may not have been so far fetched. Perhaps also children are aware of this phenomenon. A colleague told me about his young children looking through their family photograph album and being fascinated with the images of themselves and of their parents. But at the same time the child had perceived that they were all changing and, for the first time, asked his father when they were all going to die.

As we have noted, the photograph’s reality is established by an awareness of the subject’s "having-been-there", its unreality being that of the "here-now", for the photograph is never experienced as the illusion it is. When looking at photos of ourselves we can often feel that sense of loss and illusion most acutely, ("No, that wasn’t me...") even to the point of denial. This is when we, as individuals, may most be able to connect with the

¹Ibid. p 92
²Sontag, S., op. cit. p 15
idea of the illusion reality in photographs. We know that was us at one time but the photo does not represent or even look like us any more. We may not have any recollection of ourselves or our circumstances at the time when it was taken. It is a record of a past that we may not remember as real but it is an undeniable reminder that we were there, that we are aging and that we are going to die. The photograph does not copy being. It records transience.\textsuperscript{10}

The photograph, therefore, because of its unique dialectic between reality and unreality, presence and absence and life and death, is a very potent form of \textit{memento mori}, even if this intention is not deliberate. The 'necrophiliac click' of the camera instantly transforms the subject into a frozen image. The image remains while the actual body captured there may have turned to dust and rotted away.

Each of the following photographers call up this knowledge in one way or another. They mine this deep intellectual vein for their own purposes. Peter Hujar offers the most simple and direct way as his photographs are straightforward portraits, where the sitters contemplate mortality. Christian Boltanski's work relies entirely on our conditioned responses to anonymous photographs of people to call up an emotional response. He once observed that photography ....seises a moment in life and is its death .\textsuperscript{11}

He does it en masse, finding and re-printing existing images that powerfully work as

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\textsuperscript{10}Brereton, K., op. cit. p 35
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*memento mori*, that surround us and overwhelm us with the presence of death despite the fact that we know nothing of the subjects or their fate.

The other main conundrum of the photographic paradox, exploited by these artists is the photograph's supposed objective relationship to the real world and the complex role that contextualisation, or more appropriately de-contextualisation has in assigning meaning or readability to the photograph. This is a different issue to that of photodeath, but one that it is necessary to understand as it is also crucial in decoding the work of the three photographers. Boltanski, in particular uses this paradox. It is the backbone of his manipulations and at the core of his perceived ambivalence.

Because photography is perceived as a science and mechanical process photographs were originally thought of as being relatively objective renderings of reality. Photographs have been used as evidence for surveillance and control since their inception. They have always been used to document events and to capture moments as evidence of actuality, but often, as we are now fully aware, it is constructed evidence and tainted documentary. More often than not the photograph has been used to construct our view of the world rather than to actually instruct us on what it is really like.

We must therefore ask of a photograph: was the real person captured, understood or revealed in any way or is our understanding moulded by the photographer and our own concerns as the observer? There is almost never enough information with regard to the single image photograph to make those judgements. The single image photograph
always hides more than it discloses.\textsuperscript{12}

Kracauer gives a good example of this problem of context taken from the writings of Proust.

Proust imagines the photograph of an Academician leaving the institute. What the photograph shows us, he observes, 'will be, instead of the dignified emergence of an Academician who is going to hail a cab, is his staggering gait, his precautions to avoid tumbling on his back, the parabola of his fall, as though he were drunk, or the ground frozen over.' The photograph Proust has in mind does not intimate that the Academician must be thought of as being undignified; it simply fails to tell us anything about his behaviour in general or his typical attitudes. It so radically isolates a momentary pose...that the function of this pose within the total structure of his personality remains anybody's guess. The pose relates to the context which is not given. Photographs, implies Proust, transmit raw material without defining it.\textsuperscript{13}

It is inevitable that photographs should be surrounded with a fringe of indistinct and multiple meanings. What they show invokes what is not shown and more often than not, this is what is necessary to fully interpret the image, to render the image meaningful. Rosalind Krauss calls this 'the message without a code', an idea which she derives from the writings of Roland Barthes and the language of semiotics. If we accept that photographs are necessarily of a past, it is one which we cannot, as viewers rather than participants, know anything about. The photograph offers irrefutable evidence that the subject existed at one point in time but it does not give us enough information to make any other judgements about the reality or meaning of that subject's life or circumstances.

\textsuperscript{12}Brereton, K., op. cit. p 19

\textsuperscript{13}Tractenberg, A., op. cit. p 265
We often think that it does but the truth is that it does not.

Meaning is found only in those connections between one image or action and another. The passing of time is necessarily associated with the creation of meaning and understanding. That is, without a story or an 'unfolding' of events, there is no meaning.

A photograph severs these connections and preserves a moment in time isolated from the flow of moments before and after it. It creates a disjointed instant without a code and without a context. Berger notes that ...when we find a photograph meaningful we are lending it a past and a future.¹⁴ This is one of the fundamental differences between cinema and photography.

Therefore a photograph's 'reality' and 'meaning' can change according to the context in which it is seen. Even well known, powerful and easily understood photographs such as Weegee's tenement fire shots will look different in a dark room, a gallery, a police file, a coffee table book, a court room, a living room wall or a political demonstration. In each of these situations the photograph is or can be used differently, but which contains the photograph's real meaning? Sontag uses Wittgenstein's argument about words to state that the meaning is the use and that therefore the context defines the photograph's meaning, that is, the way it is read.

This particular paradox is one that is used and explored by Christian Boltanski. He uses the problems of context and evidence to full advantage in creating the "histories and

¹⁴ Berger, J., op.cit. p 280
myths' of his own childhood and that of his photographic subjects and 'victims'. This lack of contextual information has been used by a number of artists to exploit ambiguities and to explore notions of power and control. It is used by Boltanski to evoke emotion and elicit responses from the viewer. It is integral to his work that we make assumptions based on context rather than content; that we create a story to surround his photographs of children. He also knows that it is not possible to look at certain photographs without the history and accumulated weight of similar images crushing down and being emotionally associated with them. Sontag alludes to Roman Vishniac's photographs of daily life in the Polish Ghettos, taken in 1938. She comments that our reaction to these images is overwhelmingly affected by our knowledge of the imminent death and suffering of all those people. Similarly huge slabs of history are inextricably linked to certain types of images and a photograph, if it is archetypal enough, or contrived to look that way, can invoke much of that history as well. It is that Barthian notion of having-been-there, and the fact that we tend to accept photographs as factual evidence, uncoded and without context, that Boltanski plays with. Hence the double impact of a wall weighted down with faces. Not only do they speak to us of death/rupture, but we also have the urge to contextualise them, to give them meaning.....the reason that the Holocaust is always associated with these installations, whether Boltanski wants it to be or not.

Joel Peter Witkin does not deal with issues of context so much as with fantasy. He creates photographic images or tableaux that question our notions of the real or of the possible. He uses our acceptance of the photograph as evidence, as trace of the 'real' to play on our fears and anxieties. He transcribes the language of painting and the iconography of the sacred and juxtaposes both with the science of the lens. One reason
his images resonate is because of the disjunction between the iconography and the medium. His work pushes at the boundaries of photography as record.

Each of the artists discussed in the following chapters uses the medium of photography in a unique and different way. They explore both the boundaries of photography and the notions at its core. Their work speaks about their preoccupations with different aspects and concepts of death as they each create contemporary memento mori in totally divergent ways.
Chapter 3

Christian Boltanski
What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance.

Roland Barthes

When asked in a recent interview, why there was such a "delectation of the dead" in his work, Christian Boltanski answered that he really did not know. He has been called 'an artist of uncertainty' and this ambivalent attitude pervades his work almost as thoroughly as the pall of death.

Death in Boltanski's work is not the rotting, sensual, corporeal death that lingers around the photographs of J.P. Witkin. Boltanski presents death as absence, loss of innocence, and the collective awareness of mortality. These themes and the elusiveness of memory are his obsession. The recycled photograph, the biscuit tin, the desk lamp and, more recently, old clothes are his arsenal of objects, his signature. Old photographs are the perfect tools for him to express these themes. He uses them not only to explore the concept of *memento mori* in a Barthian sense but also to induce a tension between reality and illusion in his work.

Boltanski has always used photographs in a sculptural way, almost as readymades. He appropriates recycled photographs which he treats as objects or signs that can be

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1Barthes, R., *Camera Lucida*, N.Y. 1981 p 51


manipulated and arranged in a formalistic way. He uses photographs of people, but always in large numbers, never singly. They are never seen as straight portraits because they are juxtaposed either with other photographs, or with the biscuit tins, lamps or clothes. The photographs are used indexically, as a trace or record of a person or, more accurately, of an absence. Photographs, for Boltanski always carry Barthian connotations and he uses them in this context to speak of the larger issues of death, transience and identity.

Boltanski is also entranced by the notion of repetition and the everyday. The recycled photographs, the tins and the lamps are all unprepossessing objects in their own right, but his arrangement of them, as his work progressed, became ever more dramatic and evocative of religious ritual and the sacred.

His installations elicit very strong responses from the audience, especially in Germany and New York where his work has always been seen to be about the Holocaust. This is something he neither confirms nor denies. He does say, however, that he wants his art to be emotional and to make people cry and that he likes to manipulate audience response whilst maintaining an air of ambiguity and uncertainty at all times⁴. He is both a showman and a charlatan by his own admission. He is also a man without a manifesto, or if he does have one, its only maxim is that nothing is certain except death.

Throughout his career Boltanski has played with and explored the notions of truth and

⁴Marsh, G., op. cit. p 38
reality, not only in relation to his work, but also in relation to his own life 'story'. His earliest works in the 60s were about archaelogising his own past so as to preserve it, collecting the little everyday relics of existence and collating them in boxes. These consisted of photo albums, reconstructions of his childhood toys in plasticine, articles of clothing and other allegedly historical traces. At one time he said that these earlier works were about rediscovering his childhood and his past. His interest in the idea of the elusiveness of memory has always been present in his work.

However, around 1974, he started on the totally different task of reconstituting or re-inventing a new past, a fiction of his own making with little or no connection to reality.

It is very hard to pin down his actual, authentic biographical details because they have been so clouded by his attempts to constantly manipulate them. Simple things like his birth date and his parents' nationalities have been changed in different stories into ever more exotic and meaningful 'signs'. For example, he maintains his birth date fell on the day that Paris was liberated from the Nazis. Actually, as far as I can ascertain, he was born on Sept 6, 1944, two weeks after the liberation. He has maintained at different times that he is Russian, Polish, Romanian and French. He has also invented a story about his father hiding, Anne Frank-like, in a basement for a substantial part of the war and also that his middle name is Liberte. He states:

I have recounted so many invented memories about my childhood that I now
What he is saying is that our vision/version of the past is always a reconstruction, and that 'truth' is a variable, rather than a static principle. This, of course is true. All of our memories are edited in some way and often our recollection of a past event can vary wildly from that of someone else who was also there. It is a fact though, that he is the child of a Catholic mother and a Jewish father, born at the end of the war.

Boltanski started his artistic career as a would-be film maker but soon became more entranced by the single image of the still photograph. A strange anecdote from his time as a film maker however, illustrates his ambiguous relationship with the truth even at this early stage of his career. Apparently he admired the work of Roman Polanski and was at a premier of one of Polanski's early films. Probably because of the similarity of their names Boltanski, was confused with the director, who was not there. At the end of the film he was asked to speak about the movie. Boltanski, of course obliged and never let on that he was not Polanski or that there had been any mistake.

In 1970 he invented the character "C.B." as a continuing presence in his images. He denied that C.B. was himself and developed a myth to surround this new character. Typical work of the mid seventies is "10 Portraits: Photographies de Christian

\[5\] Marmer, N., "Boltanski: The Uses of Contradiction", Art in America, Oct, 1987 p 175

\[6\] Marmer, N., op. cit p 173
Boltanski, 1946-64", a work that claims to show portraits of C.B. at different ages but which is inescapably composed of images of different people. Despite the obvious humour, many of these works can be seen as exercises in narcissism or nostalgia for a lost childhood with about as much interest for the general viewer as other people's holiday snaps.

However, even in these simple pieces Boltanski engaged in a discourse not only about the big questions of photography, but also about the nature of identity. These works are a 'virtual exempla' of the problematic of photographic evidence and context dealt with in chapter 2. It was this exploration from his early career that he continued to use and play with in ever more sophisticated ways. By 1975 he had dispensed with C.B. altogether.

Boltanski's next major set of works was initiated after he sent 62 hand-written proposals to curators of Art, History and Ethnography museums asking them to buy, acquire or borrow all the belongings of a single deceased individual to be displayed in their various institutions. He told them he was looking for traces of people and "...objects which after his or her death gave witness to that person's existence".

He got many rejections but five of the institutions including the C.N.A.C. in Paris agreed to do it. He asked that these objects be displayed together in one of the museum's rooms. The collections consisted primarily of ordinary household items

Marmer, N., op. cit. p 177
displayed in vitrines, quite unaltered, mediocre furniture, tea sets, used clothing, half-consumed bottles of pharmaceuticals and the like. Also there were photographs of the entire inventory that Boltanski had taken. They were exhibited anonymously and with no explanation. He had always been a compulsive collector and spent much time in his youth at the Musee de l'Homme, besotted by the bizarre artefacts and fragments from other cultures and times. He states:

It was there that I saw large metal vitrines containing small, fragile and meaningless objects. Often, in one corner of the vitrine, there was a yellowed photograph of a "savage" represented in the act of using one of these objects. Each vitrine represented an extinct world: the "savage" of the photograph was no doubt dead, the objects had become useless... The Musee de l'Homme seemed like a great morgue to me... There, too, I discovered the "weight of time" that impresses itself on artists.  

In the light of his other works they must be seen as evidence of lives halted instantly, in mid stream. They attest, by their very ordinariness, to absence and enigma. But most of all they speak of mortality. Because they are so banal and haphazard they give the impression that they could be objects left in the middle of the night after one has been herded off somewhere or else they could be seen as forensic exhibits. These ordinary objects function almost in the same way that photographs do, as uncoded messages that excite our curiosity about a subject but fail to satisfy it yet unconsciously speak of death.

There are many different readings that a work such as this can have. The objects looked like conceptual pieces and had echoes of pop readymades but they were,

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*Marmer, N., op. cit. p 176*
ideologically very different. Boltanski, as always, takes an ambiguous and anonymous stance on the myriad of questions opened up by a piece such as this. Is he commenting on the nature of the commodity, or on the ethnography debate, or is he creating modern memento mori? All of the above, perhaps. They certainly functioned as a comment on the nature of the Museum itself and the collecting of "interesting" and culturally significant objects whilst creating a terrible feeling of absence and enigma. A space for collecting ‘dead’ things.

By 1972 Boltanski had already begun to compile his photographic archive. This consisted of an almost obsessive study of bourgeoisie existence from the 30s to the 70s in France. He used found photos from junk shops, amateur snaps borrowed from friends, crime story images and portraits from schools and clubs. The most famous of these, which he has virtually immortalised in works, are of children from a secondary school in Dijon and the 62 members of the French Mickey Mouse Club in 1955. These photographs were his access into the everyday, the banal.

So much of Boltanski’s work springs from the discourse of the mundane. As stated earlier there were influences from Pop, the early Conceptualists, Arte Povera, Minimalism (his boxes have been likened to down-at-heel Donald Judds) and Fluxus. All these groups and philosophies were active in France at around the time of his first works. He remained un-aligned to any of them in particular but he was influenced by the writings of Henri Lefebvre, who wrote:

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9Kuspit, D., "Boltanski at Marion Goodman", Artforum, 27, 1989 p 186
The character of the everyday has always been repetitive and veiled by obsession and fear. The everyday implies on the one hand cycles, nights and days, seasons and harvests, activity and rest, hunger and satisfaction and life and death, and it implies on the other hand the repetitive gestures of work and consumption.10

Boltanski has taken the notions of repetition: repeated images, repeated forms, ritual-like mimicry. But he has not taken Lefebvre’s passionate revolutionary message or his ambition to change the world. Instead, for Boltanski the everyday has a fascination, a strangeness, ‘the extraordinary in the ordinary’, and this interest infects all his work, poeticising the banal. His arsenal of constantly repeated objects, the biscuit tins, the old photographs, cheap lamps, extension wires, and used clothing all speak of the commonplace.

At the end of the 70s he started to present groups of his collected photographs, often of the same family, jumbled up and undifferentiated from one another in any way. He framed them simply in black and assembled them regularly in very large numbers, wallpapering a room, floor to ceiling. No perceptible effort was made to give these images a particular order. They were uncaptioned, unidentified and cannot be interpreted in any genuinely meaningful way. Their juxtaposition seems only to reinforce our idea that we really do not know anything about these people or their links to one another. Are they dead or alive; are they mothers or children; are they criminals or victims? We cannot help but ask these questions when presented with this magnitude of uncoded signs and their unrelated juxtapositions.

10Marmer, N., loc.cit
There are also other almost inescapable reactions or associations elicited by these earlier works. Both the huge number and indiscriminate nature of the images evoke images of Holocaust survivors, as did the earlier museum pieces. Boltanski always rejects this easy interpretation of his work, saying that there is nothing explicit in these works to identify them as Holocaust pieces. Is it just that any old European photographs presented in this way and in this magnitude are going to remind us of the greatest collective historical horror of the century? Whether or not they do these images record the passage of time and disconnected lives. Old and young faces caught in very ordinary moments starting out at us, shot, embalmed and frozen in time. It is like one huge mortuary photo.

There is a certain purity about these works. A simplicity and grace that the later, more dramatic works lack. It is as if the very theatricality of the later pieces takes away a measure of sincerity and only serves to obstruct the view of death that is simply there. The overlay of the imagery of the sacrament, of saints and of mock formal religiosity is not always necessary in order to speak of the ineffable.

From this point on, in Boltanski's work, there is a marked change. Not so much in subject matter, but in the way it is presented. Boltanski had discovered theatre! Elements from the earlier works combine to form the basis of Boltanski's work in the eighties, however, they have an added theatrical and pseudo-religious dimension that takes them out of the realm of the ordinary, where they had resided for so long.
His work now combines the familiar recycled photograph with a formalistic arrangement and the addition of rustic-looking biscuit tins and lights to suggest a shrine. The photographs that Boltanski uses in these works come from his collection of archival material. The biscuit tins seem to function as reliquaries. We do not see what is inside them but can only assume they contain the effects of the people represented in the photographs. The boxes themselves are quite beautiful. They are made of tin but have been allowed to rust in parts and each has its own patina, ranging from dull grey to rust coloured. They recall the boxes that children use when they lovingly collect the stuff of their lives, the small everyday items that may have no real monetary value but are immensely symbolic and mysterious to children. These arranged boxes were to become a staple in Boltanski's work for the next decade.

He titled these pieces "Monuments". They are small, discreet works that consist of a large number of different permutations of the formally arranged biscuit tins, either as a triangle, or as a column, or as a shelf or a square, with an illuminated portrait on top. There seems to be an endless permutation of the configurations of the component parts.

In these works there are also lights suspended above each portrait. These are not the goose neck lamps of the later works but little, non-threatening fairy lights. There is no attempt to hide their long extension wires and a forest of electrical leads can be seen protruding from the bottom of some of these works. They are often the only lights in the gallery space and help create the ambience of a sacred space. There are connotations of the devotional candles around the portraits of saints. The formal
arrangement of the boxes, their attendant photographs and the symmetry of the whole suggest altars and shrines. He has deliberately created in the gallery space an aura of reverence and meditation usually reserved for a holy place.

There is no doubt that is what Boltanski was trying to do. He says time and again that he thinks that "...the function of Art is very close to the function of religion". In this context he sees himself as somewhat of a "dubious messiah", a preacher and a teacher. But both Donald Kuspit and Nancy Marmer have trouble with these pieces and with Boltanski's inflated claims. Marmer states:

...these demotic icons suggest an art production line. One suspects that an infinite number of self-imitative variations on their pietistic motif is possible. The mock-religiosity and mock-formalism of these pieces presumably exemplify Boltanski's necessarily ambivalent attempt to produce a contemporary sacred art.

Perhaps Kuspit and Marmer are right about the small monuments, but in the same show and also under the title of "Monuments" was a large installation about which all critics seem to agree. "Les Enfants De Dijon" fills one vast, high ceileded wall from top to bottom with small head shots of children. Tiny lights votively surround each of the images and provide the only light in the vast space, giving a warm, but very subdued glow. It has been aptly described as a "...a galaxy of pinpoint lights, dripping electrical cords and children's faces".

11Marsh, G., op. cit. p 38

12Marmer, N., op. cit. p 233

All who have shared this experience seem to have been awed by it and felt moved by its pious tone and it's undeniably heart-felt message. Boltanski states that he wants to elicit emotions and so he tries to manipulate the viewer. This work, because of its scale, its simplicity and its theatricality works on a visceral and emotional level.

The piece was made for the Catholic festival of All Saints Day, which is about the idea that every human being is different. He says, about this piece:

I had a couple of hundred photographs of young adolescents, all fairly ugly, and yet each one is different from the others and each one is holy... There is something interesting about the idea of the herd, that becomes dust, identical rotting objects. And yet each one had different hopes and desires.\textsuperscript{14}

However, as stated earlier, all is not what it seems with Boltanski. When this piece was seen in Germany at "Documenta 7" and in New York as part of the "Lessons of Darkness" show it was unanimously thought of, yet again, as a piece about the Holocaust. Nowhere is it suggested that these children are actually Holocaust victims or even dead. If these pieces are not about that then, what is it about them that makes people think of mortality and mass death? The 'elegiac note' is struck not by any knowledge of the children's untimely death, but by the knowledge that they are no longer children and in that sense the people in the pictures no longer exist, at least not as innocent children. This is pure Barthes. Only the photograph can conjure up these feelings of nostalgia and loss, but how does the sacralising of the motifs affect the simple reading of the photograph as \textit{memento mori}? Do they work more effectively?

\textsuperscript{14}Marsh, G., op. cit. p 37
on that level as images that conjure up the everyday and the banal rather than the sacred?

The next series of work is called "Les Archives" (1987) and it is also a departure from the previous pieces, while being made up of familiar components. This piece is an installation and is usually housed in a small, badly lit space, filled with wire screen dividers. The wire dividers are crammed with hundreds of black framed photos, mostly head shots of children again, but also including some family groups and adults. It is possible to move up and down the tightly packed rows and walk among this huge gallery of uncaptioned photographs staring back in the dim light. The faces are behind screens of wire mesh, with goose-neck desk lamps bent close over the surface of the photos, so close that they are more like third degree lights than anything else.

According to Marmer, the piece was originally constructed for Germany's "Documenta 8", and again elicited the same response. She wrote

... it reverberated with the suppressed memories of WW II. ...Without text, without sanctimony and without direct Holocaust imagery Les Archives yet manages to evoke the worst horror story of our times.13

The "Lycee Chases Altarpieces"(1987), the next major group, grew directly out of the "Monument" series but seem to go much closer to a successful combination of the sacred and the meaningful. Again Boltanski uses the same elements, the biscuit tins, the electric lights (but this time the harsh lamps), and the photographs of children.

13Marmer, N., op. cit. p 233
They are all from a pre-war Jewish High School in Vienna from a class picture dated 1931. However just the words "Jewish", "Vienna" and "1931" in themselves carry the weight of history. A photograph like this, as Susan Sontag notes, cannot escape this import. We know what happened. But do we really? In the catalogue Boltanski states

They are gathered together for the last time. It is the end of the year, they are students at the Gymnasium Chases, the Jewish High School in Vienna, we are in 1931. What have they become after so many years, what sort of life have they had. One of them recognised himself in this photograph, he escaped the horror and lives today in New York, of the others I know nothing. 16

This is Boltanski again making sure there is an air of ambivalence. I am sure he would not have told us that this was Vienna, 1931 unless he could also have said - "Don't be sure, don't assume. You don't know". He always wants us to make the obvious assumptions. They are necessary and they create the context for the power of the works. But he does not want us ever to be completely sure. To quote Marmer again:

Having adopted a persona of "one who seems to take pleasure in self opposition", he moves ahead by combining repetition with contradiction.17

However, in the Lycee Chases pieces, one main feature is different. Boltanski manipulated the portraits of the children. He blew them up many times and leached

16Tallman, S., op.cit. p 19
17Marmer, N., op. cit. p 235
out all extraneous detail so that they have an ethereal, almost spectral quality, without substance. They are generalised images and only have hollows for eyes with no explicit detail. The grins have turned to grimaces and almost no trace of individuality remains. There is a strong chiaroscuro and each photo becomes a fuzzy semblance of what was once a person. These are the images that bear the weight of history, that cannot be looked at without connotations. The otherwise unremarkable portraits are transformed into masks of death.

This treatment de-emphasises the photograph's role as a legible representation of someone we know and love, whilst stressing its status as a physical trace or index and creating an enigmatic generalised quality. Many observers have noted the anonymity imposed by Boltanski's art, the way in which the artist has reduced people to 'simulacra'. Kim Levin wrote that the faces were "...dissolving into an oblivion of anonymity. Identity vanishes".18

These images are much larger than those in the Monument series. Each image is illuminated by a single, goose neck lamp. They do not give a gentle saintly glow, but are harsh and close to the surface of the photos. They have a sinister feel and could be seen as the single globe of the prison cell or the interrogator's relentless spot. Also the biscuit tins have a more formal and less decorative structure. These aged and damaged containers seem to function as repositories for the last remaining possessions or documents of the presence in the image. The weight and pathos of these images

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18 Tallman, S., op. cit. p 20
give this work a darker presence and more obvious content not seen in previous works. These pieces are about the Holocaust despite what he may say. His generalised treatment of the photographs, paradoxically has enabled a more specific reading, as has the information about the source of the original photographs in the title.

In 1988 Boltanski added a new and potent accessory to his arsenal of tools: collections of old clothes. The clothes function in a similar way to the photographs. They represent the trace, the negative of their last occupant but they also have an added physicality that the photos do not have: they smell. The first work in which Boltanski used clothes was "Reserve Canada", the centre piece of the "Lessons of Darkness" retrospective in 1988. In this the clothes make up a solid wall, multi coloured and hanging. Boltanski describes them as bodies fraught with pathos.

In "Monument Canada" from the same exhibition Boltanski combines three rows of his manipulated photographs, each illuminated by an individual lamp, formally arranged above a solid wall of clothes. These are neatly folded and stacked about a metre high against the wall under the images. The combination is formally satisfying but as always, ambiguous. It would seem that Boltanski sees the clothes again in the context of bodies. In the Basel Museum he did a piece in which he layed half a ton of old clothing on the floor of one of the rooms and invited/insisted that people walk on them. Boltanski said:

For the spectators it was a very painful thing to do because you sank into them.
and it was like walking on bodies. So I turned them all (the viewers) into murderers... They were implicated.\textsuperscript{19}

Walking on clothes adds a deeply transgressive element. This of all his pieces seems intentionally about the Holocaust. He saw the act of walking on the clothing as a kind of parallel about the slim distinctions between people who are victims and people who are murderers. He notes with delight that whilst the adults had a hard time with this one, the children loved playing in it. For Boltanski this was a piece about guilt and also about the Holocaust.

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It is, however, in Boltanski's last major series of works that we really get into an authentic exploration of the \textit{memento mori} and photodeath rather than just a general investigation of memory, melancholy and the Holocaust. These pieces are called the "Dead Swiss" (1990) and are different from the other pieces, not in style but in essence.

Boltanski explained that he stopped using images of Jews and children because 'dead' and 'Jew' go too well together. He turned to the Swiss because....

There is nothing more neutral than a dead Swiss... There is nothing more normal than the Swiss. There is no reason for them to die, so they are more

\textsuperscript{19}Marsh, G., op. cit. p 37
terrifying in a way. They are us.  

Obituaries in the local paper in the Canton of Valais, Switzerland, are published with a small, passport-sized photograph of the deceased. This gave Boltanski an endless source of images of unrelated and totally ordinary people, linked only by the common fact of their deaths and their nationality.

The work is titled "The Reserve of Dead Swiss" and it consists of a huge U-shaped structure made out of 3000 biscuit tins stacked up to six feet high with a thin curving corridor in the middle, which it is possible to move through. On each tin is a tiny photograph of a person. The standard lamps are hanging over the top of the installation but provide only a gloomy, inadequate illumination.

On entering this confined corridor with its mass of ordinary faces staring down, the feeling is overwhelming, totally surrounded by such a magnitude of death. All these presences and all these absences testifying to lives once lived but that are no more. It is like being in a catacomb or some "repository of visual data in a seldom visited obscure archive". There is no indication in the photographs that the subjects are dead and as Boltanski reminds us,

..the thing about pictures of dead people is that they are always taken when the subject is alive, tanned, muscular and smiling.  

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20 Marsh, G., op.cit. p 36

21 Ibid.
But we know, of course, that they are dead because Boltanski has told us. He never gives away this kind of information for no reason. What would it be like if he had not told us that they were dead and Swiss? Would the connotations of the Holocaust still be there? I think so. For these pieces to have their power and their different meaning they have to be Swiss (or some other innocuous, white, first world group) and he has to tell us that they are dead. This is precisely why these pieces truly function as memento mori: it is exactly that juxtaposition of the alive, the ordinary, and the dead.

It is precisely because we can identify with these people that there is no easy emotional response. Instead of being confronted by a horrible historical tragedy we are confronted by the everyday banality and inevitability of death itself.

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Some critics have been negative about Boltanski's endless prevaricating and ambiguity and his necessity not to be pinned down to a definitive reading of his work. Donald Kuspit is particularly scathing and finds that his work is not successful. He says

...his death-infected memories, reeking with absence, ready one for a nothingness that never truly appears...He offers us neither absolute nothingness nor its imitation. Neither the purity of absence nor the panic that occurs as it's possibility becomes actuality. Rather it shows a certain hostile emptiness. 22

22Kuspit, D., op. cit. p 107
What he seems to be saying is that Boltanski's work is ultimately nihilist. He never gives us an answer. No direct point is made, no politics are entered into, no resolution attempted. But the metaphysics of death is hard ground to scratch around in. By necessity it is an area where everything is open to speculation and there are no definite answers. If one is talking about the Holocaust, or history, then one has to take sides and make judgements but if one is talking about the nature of death itself it is a much more understandable position.

Boltanski sees himself as somewhat of a Rasputin figure: a fake and a true believer at the same time. Is he an illusionist, a ringmaster and a charlatan manipulating his viewers into meaningless waves of emotion or is he a misunderstood artist reviving a long dead tradition of metaphysical contemplation on mortality. I think he is somewhere in between. Didier Semin sees him as

...a moral artist... but one who mocks morality because he sees in art no other value but absolute uncertainty.23

In answer to the question about the 'delectation of the dead' in his work that started this chapter, Boltanski actually answered with this explanation:

We are a subject one day, with our vanities, our loves, our worries, and then one day, abruptly we become nothing but an object, an absolutely disgusting pile of shit... Suddenly we become an object you can handle like a stone, but

23Semin, D., op. cit. p 27
There is no doubt that Boltanski's work is about death and that he uses the phenomenon of photodeath to express his ideas about the universality of death, but can his work be said to be memento mori? It only seems to work in this context if we can personally identify with those nameless faces in some way, if it is seen to be about death as a philosophical statement, rather than about the holocaust or about some specific form of death. It works when 'the body' is there, or 'we' are there, reflected in his mirror in some way. If not, the phrase memento mori in relation to Boltanski's work becomes "remember that these people once died", rather than "remember that you must die".

24Marsh. G., op. cit. p 37

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Chapter 4

Joel Peter Witkin
We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds. My stories are a way of shutting my eyes.

Kafka

Joel Peter Witkin has become an infamous celebrity. He has achieved the enviable status of having an eight-page article about his life and work printed in the popular but definitely not populist magazine Vanity Fair. The article and a full page glossy reproduction of one of his photographs, "Still Life, Marseilles" (1992), produced the following response entitled "Shudderbug":

I work in the medical field and I find your photo of the cadaver head - complete with flowers sticking out of it the most revolting thing I have ever seen. I have not been able to read the rest of this issue for fear of viewing once again this dreadful page. Description of this as art of 'sublime beauty' is absurd....

This is not an unusual reaction to the photographs of Joel Peter Witkin. They are so disturbing, even harrowing, the first time they are encountered, that they can make us recoil in shock. Yet nestled between the horror is a strange beauty and a dark seductive vision of a nether world we no longer often encounter.

The particular photograph that so outraged the reader in the letter above is typical of Witkin and is a sublime modern-day reworking of a vanitas still life. It has all the

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1 Barthes, R., Camera Lucida N.Y., 1981 p 35

elements of the 15th and 16th century *vanitas* paintings as well as recalling the work of Archimboldo. There are pieces of fruit, lush, exotic and just at the point of ripening and spilling their seeds; there are pomegranates, grapes, cherries, apples, radishes with their sinuous tails; and the luscious head of a strange and peculiarly modern vegetable, a hybrid of the broccoli and the cauliflower, its intricate, almost geometric arrangement of coral-like heads, beautifully caught in deep chiaroscuro, as is the whole scene. There are wide-eyed fish and crustaceans arranged next to stalks of celery; an exotic cornucopia set in a dish on a marble-top table, partially draped with a cloth that resembles perhaps religious robes, or a surplice.

Yet when we first glance at this photograph, we do not even notice this aesthetically beautiful combination of objects. What we cannot help but notice is a face - not a skull, but the rotund face of a middle-aged man, grimacing, tight lipped and fleshy, stubble still visible, eyes squashed tight shut as if deflecting a blow, sitting on the table.

The top of the face stops, cut just at the eyebrows and under this fleshy envelope is revealed a portion of his skull, half of which extends another ten centimetres above the face. The other half is cut away just above the face. Out of the skull protrudes the most elegant arrangement of two tiger lilies and three perfect white roses and a few strands of 'babies breath'. The skull is a vase.

The image is so striking because it counter balances great formal beauty with the most banal ugliness and grotesqueness. There is also an element of black humour that is perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the photograph. This particular face, no doubt
chosen very carefully, resembles one of the Three Stooges more than the sombre portraits one would normally associate with images of this sort. The grimace could easily be a snicker, even a laugh. It is such an expressive face, reduced to an envelope of flesh whose rough-cut edges we can plainly see.

There are a number of important differences between Witkin's photograph and conventional vanitas images. The first is that this is a photograph and not a painting. This seems at first an obvious point and yet it goes to the heart of what makes Witkin so shocking. In his photographic assemblages he constantly imitates not only just the formal language of painting but the same pictorial space, lighting, and sometimes even the same subject matter, reworking the old and new masters. He also often scratches and draws on his negatives, giving them a decidedly painterly quality.

The subjects in all his paintings are arranged as still lifes in the most tightly controlled and manipulated environments. There is nothing even remotely candid or 'photographically' real about the way they are created. And so it comes as a jolt, when we note that these intricately arranged and fantastic tableaux are, in fact, photographs, and the often unbelievable objects and creatures contained within them are real and not painted.

How differently would we view these images if they were painted? How shocking that he has been allowed to manipulate reality in that way! These are images that most of us could only imagine in our minds and yet Witkin has been allowed to create them out of real living and dead flesh.
The power of Witkin's photographs lies in his manipulation of the way that we view photographs as evidence of actuality and recordings of reality. If it is a photograph it must be real. Witkin's manipulations of reality rely on this knowledge and understanding. He uses a photograph as a painting and then relies on our conditioned reading of the photograph to elicit our disbelief and shock at what we see before our eyes. He is skirting around boundaries, just as Boltanski does, but in a different way.

If this picture "Still Life, Marseilles", were a conventional memento mori or vanitas, it would have all the same elements and not jolt us in the same way. It would have the fruit, the flowers, the fish, the table, the drapery and the skull. What distinguishes this vanitas image from all others I have ever seen is what is left on the skull. It is the face, the flesh, the expression, the particular! This is not just a generic memento mori. This one has a person in it. The way the flesh on the face has been sliced away to reveal the skull emphasises the juncture between the generic and the specific, the symbol and the actual and reveals the truly transgressive nature of Witkin's work. It is not possible to give this work just a casual glance. It commands our attention and asks us to dwell lingeringly on the cut edge of the flesh, the protruding asymmetrical skull as well as the exquisite fruits and flowers.

All our senses are assailed. We can almost smell the formaldehyde and the decay as it mixes with the perfume of the roses. It is this counterbalance of the grotesque with the sublime, the sensuous with the revolting that gives this work its sting. It is also not surprising that photographs such as this have caused outrage and revulsion in the wider community. Naturally Witkin has had his detractors. One anatomist at the University
of New Mexico School of Medicine, where Witkin collects some of his raw material, called him another Jeffrey Dahmer, accusing him of "...degrading human life by accessorising a cadaver with costume jewelry".²

Reverend Pat Robertson has labelled him a Satanist and the wife of a British MP tried to close down his show in London last year because of the dead baby used in the "Feast of Fools" photograph, which I discuss later. ⁴

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When one first encounters a selection of J.P. Witkin's photographs it is natural to wonder what kind of man he is. His work covers the complete repertoire of the demi-monde, the forbidden and the deeply transgressive. He uses bits and pieces of cadavers, animal and human, and all manner of other freakish, sexual eccentrics as the raw material for his Art. His photographs deal with voyeurism, sado masochism, necrophilia, bestiality and extreme forms of homosexual sex. He appears, more than any other photographer to be 'touristing (sic) in another's reality', to quote Susan Sontag.⁵

Sontag coined this quote in reference to the work of Dianne Arbus, who along with Robert Mapplethorpe, Helmut Newton and even Bill Henson have been accused of this voyeuristic 'touristing'. However the truth about Witkin is that he seems to be a permanent resident in this world and judging by his life story, always has been. His work


⁴Ibid

⁵Sontag, S., On Photography N.Y. 1987 p 193
has the ring of authenticity.

At the end of a long article by Max Kosloff, in which he debates in a rhetorical fashion the philosophical, moral and aesthetic problems posed by Witkin’s work, comes some interesting biographical information and this revelation:

...a further final note; he’s married and has a child.6

This information is both a surprise and a conundrum. After studying his work one is led to surmise that Joel Peter Witkin must be a homosexual sadist rather than a suburban family man. The truth is somewhere in between. It could be never be said that Witkin is in any way suburban, in the normal sense of the word. R Woodward writes:

Members of his unconventional clan include his wife Cynthia Bency, a raven haired tattoo artist 18 years his junior, their blond 14 year old son Kersen, and Barbara Gilbert a pale redhead who joined the family six years ago as Cynthia’s lover. Despite the irregularity of such an adult triangle the sides have proven so complementary that Joel, Cynthia and Barbara sleep in the same bed, Kersen has his own room down the hall.7

This may seem like salacious trivia except that the nature of Witkin’s work seems to demand some kind of understanding of his personality or motives and his unusual lifestyle seems to be relevant in positioning him in relation to his subjects.

6Kozloff, M., "Contention Between Two Critics About a Disagreeable Beauty", Art Forum, Feb. 1984 p 53

7Woodward, R., op.cit. p 103
Also there are some unusual biographical details that Witkin shares with Christian Boltanski, not the least of which is the fact that they both shared a Russian Jewish father and a Catholic mother. The other thing they have in common is a propensity to mythologise incidents from their childhoods, as Woodward shows in the following passage:

As an autobiographical key for his gory proclivities, Witkin has often told a story about witnessing a traumatic event at the age of six. It took place in Brooklyn while he was walking down the steps of the family tenement with his mother and brother. From up the street came the metallic screech of a three-car smash up. In the confusion he lost hold of his mother's hand and, ...(he continues), at the place where I stood at the curb, I could see something rolling from out of the overturned cars. It stopped at the curb where I stood. It was the head of a little girl. I bent down to touch the face, but someone carried me away.... A tragic story, says his family, that never happened.

This story is recounted in nearly all articles about Witkin as if it were true. It is obviously an image he cherishes. This is strange as there are enough bizarre incidents in Witkin's real life as it is.

Joel and his brother Jerome are identical twins who were brought up strictly as Catholics by their mother after their father left when they were three, citing religious differences as the reason for the divorce. Both sons were budding artists and their work, even from an early age, had religious overtones. Richard Woodward says

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8Kozloff, M., op.cit. p 53

9Woodward, R., op.cit. p 117
...violent Catholic and Judaic themes were there and that, the vivid imagery of sin deeply affected the art of both of them.\textsuperscript{10}

In the mid fifties Witkin obtained a twin reflex Rollicord camera which he learned how to use from books. His first serious photographic effort was to make studies for his brother Jerome's paintings of circus freaks at Coney Island. The pictures Witkin took were of a three-legged man, a dwarf called 'The Chicken Lady' and a hermaphrodite, with whom he apparently had his first sexual experience.\textsuperscript{11}

These, his first subjects, are the people with whom he feels at home and they have stayed with him for his entire career. He then moved to art history for inspiration, reworking many old masters. Rembrandt was his favourite source, followed by late nineteenth century Symbolists such as Gustav Klimt and Felicien Rops, whose works are overtly erotic and also deal with death.

In the late 60s Witkin was drafted into the Army to serve in Vietnam during which time he was a combat photographer. One of his assignments was to document forms of death. He photographed suicides and deaths resulting from accidents on manoeuvres\textsuperscript{12}

After the war Witkin left the Army. At this time he said his ambition was to make

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid

\textsuperscript{11}Coke, V.D., \textit{Joel Peter Witkin - 40 Photographs} San Francisco, 1987 p 7

\textsuperscript{12}Coke, V.D., op. cit. p 9
photographs that would help him better understand himself. This is when his quest began. He says he was looking for God, but it seems he was looking for himself and in order to do that he has had to push at the very boundaries of his own psyche.

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Witkin's mature body of work seems to fall roughly into three not so neat, but nonetheless distinct, thematic areas. The style and his treatment of these themes unites them and defines the particular form of photography that has become his trademark.

The photographs are all of tableaux, that is complex and carefully created settings that often take weeks to assemble. They always have a dank, airless, dungeon-like feel that is dark and yet theatrical. Witkin always works in black and white.

There is almost always a number of accessories used either as symbols or purely visual tropes. His human subjects, usually masked, or with closed eyes, perform the same function as props. They are not alive as such but have been extensively modelled, propped, taped, cut, hung, bound and otherwise arranged. Whether they are dead or alive, abled or disabled, in couples or alone, they are largely stripped of their real-life personas and used as still-life objects in Witkin's photographic passion plays. There is an element of sexual sadomasochism in the creation of these tableaux and the manipulation and control of the subjects that I am sure gives these photographs some

13Ibid

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of their power and authenticity. Witkin actually admits offhandedly one time that he is a sadist.

The next step in creating one of Witkin's photographs is the treatment of the negative. They are usually scratched, smudged, splashed with selenium solution and other chemicals, drawn onto or otherwise artificially aged. Generally the shots are refracted through tissue paper or hand-rubbed glass.\(^\text{14}\)

These techniques have two interesting effects. One is to make the photograph more like a painting, to show the hand of the author more clearly. They also add a more pictorial treatment and more muted surface quality. This effect reinforces our confusion about reading the works as paintings or photographs. The second effect is to make the models or objects appear even less alive, as these techniques lend the photographs the beautiful elegance of Victorian daguerreotypes and the quality of age. Many of these photographs look as if they are old and perhaps uncovered from a hidden trunk. They are laden with feelings of secrecy and revelation, of things concealed and furtively shown.

Witkin's three thematic areas start with his reworking of old masters, as already noted. These reinterpretations are peopled with amputees, hermaphrodites, fat and bearded ladies and other anatomically interesting subjects. These complex tableaux are clever and beautifully realised, yet they remain curiously meaningless. He has not really added much to the originals by simply introducing characters with deformities or of a different gender.

\(^{14}\)Woodward, R., op.cit. p 117
into the same visual space.

In the second area Witkin moves from art history as his main source of reference into the homosexual and sado-maschocistic sphere. He constantly pushed the imagery further, freely borrowing from the history of Christian iconography thereby adding the sacred to the profane. Photographs such as "Penitent" (1982) and "Choice of Outfits for the Agonies of Mary" (1984) also exemplify this period. Here he created startling, horrific and powerful images of pain, perversion and mutilation. "Mandan" (1981) is one of his most fearsome pieces in this vein. This shows a man hanging from the ceiling in a dungeon-like space, large hooks actually piercing his chest, creating a terrible tension.

Hal Fischer says about this work...

... The search for new subject matter has moved Witkin further into the sexual demi-monde, and more clearly into the position of metaphysical pornographer... In contrast to Robert Mapplethorpe, who is one of the biggest collectors of his work, Witkin looks beyond surface formalism. His images are not high fashion renditions of sexual fetishes but intense meditations on the psychological impulses and ritualistic instincts which stimulate extreme forms of sexual behaviour.\(^{15}\)

I would have to agree with Fischer on this point as it seems that Witkin's main interest is in portraying states of being rather than actual scenes. The comparison with Mapplethorpe is one that constantly comes up both with Witkin and with Peter Hujar as well. His formalism is an interesting counterbalance to their overwhelming interest in psychological content.

\(^{15}\)Fischer, H., "Divine Revolt", *Aperture*, No 100, 198 p 40
Witkin's same body of work has been described as the "aesthetics of excess and grand Guignol theatricality".16 It can also be seen as self indulgent exploitation as well as an extreme form of voyeurism. It is all of these things but much more.

It is, however, the third thematic area running through Witkin's work that is of most interest to me and that is his treatment of death. Death and decay, as an aside or as a prop, have been present in many of Witkin's earlier photographs: the stuffed monkeys, the cradled foetuses, the severed heads held by masked goddesses. The whole ambience has always been very dark. However, half way through the eighties, Witkin started making photographs that were solely about death and were, in essence memento mori.

These have proven to be his most controversial works because they so graphically depict our greatest fears about bodily death and also because his liberal use of cadavers is viewed as unhealthy and sacrilegious. It is Witkin's use of real, actual body parts, beautifully and sensuously aestheticised, that causes us to recoil when we see these images and stare in disbelief. We are only used to seeing this type of gore in documentary form on the news or in association with tragedies and wars.

It is in this way that his memento mori are likened to objects of the wunderkammer. It is the aestheticisation of the body parts that today we find so repugnant, as if they were not being treated with due respect. Witkin sees what he does as deeply respectful. He states

16 "Towards a Moral Photography", Creative Camera, No.6, 1986 p 34
I believe there's a paradox in photographing fearful things and making them beautiful.¹⁷

This paradox is at the heart of the *memento mori* and is one of my major concerns.

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Two works seem to illustrate this paradox with particular intensity, the first is "The Baiser" (1982) and the second is "Feast of Fools" (1991). Both works are still lives with body parts whose internal workings are left to no one's imagination. They have resulted in law suits, allegations of blasphemy and calls for censorship. It is surprising that these, more than any of his works, have outraged the 'moral minority'. I think that this is because his portrayal of death is not only relentlessly lurid but also sensuous and in some measure erotic. This is one of the greatest taboos.

These works hit upon one disturbing aspect of the *memento mori* which is about the junction between birth, the spilling of seed (sex) and death; the continuum and the circle.

George Bataille states in *Eroticism*:

> And then, beyond the intoxication of youth, we achieve the power to look death in the face and to perceive in death the pathway to the unknowable and incomprehensible continuity. The path is the secret of eroticism and eroticism alone can reveal it.¹⁸

¹⁷Woodward, R., *op.cit.* p 117

"The Baiser" (1982) is an extraordinary photograph. It consists of the severed face of an unkempt old man that has been slit down the centre and wound back on itself so that the face is kissing its other half. The eyes are shut, the mouth is open. The hair and the entrails at the bottom of the neck are sinuously extended. The face is brightly lit and all the pores, wrinkles, veins and arteries stand out in stark contrast. As always the space is constricted as if it is in a dark box.

The image is one of macabre auto-eroticism which is ghastly not only because of the juxtaposition of sex and death but also because the face is that of a little old man. Yet there are elements of transformation and religious transfiguration. There is also the metaphor of the circle and the continuum that Bataille alludes to because of the way the head has been turned in on itself.

The picture caused a scandal in 1982 when a janitor, who happened to be a "born-again" Christian, discovered prints of it (along with some actual foetuses) in a darkroom at the university of New Mexico. The police were called and the pictures confiscated. Witkin was not actually arrested, but voluntarily destroyed the negatives keeping only the nineteen prints that now exist.

This image and others such as "Head of a Dead Man" (1990), the John the Baptist-like severed head set on a plain pewter plate, are uncompromising and stark. They are free

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19 Woodward, R., op.cit. p 116
of many of Witkin's scratchings, scourings and props and they are much more powerful for it. This is one of the stylistic variations that differentiate the works about death from his other subjects. The works about death seem to have strong allusions to religious events or states but they lack much of the titillation of the other works.

"Feast of Fools" is Witkin's first real vanitas. Its composition and subject matter, like "Still Life Marseilles", are faithful and elegant reworking of the opulent seventeenth century Dutch still lifes of Heda or De Heem, except that in the place of a pheasant we now have a dead baby.

Again what shocks is the linkage of the corporeal and the sensuous. The tableau is lovingly created and perhaps too obvious. It is a dense scene of luscious bunches of grapes, raspberries, figs and bursting pomegranates, their seeds literally spilling from their skins. Amidst this obviously sexual riot of fecundity are arranged a severed foot, leg and hand whose skin is also split open to reveal 'the worm at the core' of ripeness and sexuality: decay.

There is an octopus, its tentacles caressing dead fingers whose skin has lost all elasticity from being emersed in formaldehyde for too long. However, the most alarming addition to this tableau is the post-mortem cadaver of a small child, slouched and bent as though cast worthlessly aside. The baby is masked and its slit abdomen has been crudely stitched together. It is nestled among the grapes and guarded by another dead hand, whose fingers are clenched in the rictus of death.
Again the dialectic between the photograph and the historical language of painting is brought into play. "Feast of Fools" has been scoured and scratched and given the less threatening veneer of time. The rich patina of stains defines the space of the image tightly within its bounds.

The Dutch still lifes that this image is based on were originally painted as a celebration of the material wealth of the newly powerful bourgeoisie. They were also reminders of the transience of worldly goods and the pleasures of the flesh. It is fitting in these most materialistic and narcissistic of times that we should also be reminded of the things that haunt us the most and those which we fear to face.

It is a beautiful image that contains a truly disturbing reality. Here Witkin postulates a direct affinity between the spirit and the flesh. He creates an image that evokes an intellectual as well as a purely visceral response, one that shears away our society's prudish horror at addressing the look, the feel, the pain, the very reality and ubiquity of death.

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Flesh, skin and the weight of the body are at the essence of Witkin's iconographic attitude to death. With him it is the particular, the specific and, in fact, the more traditional attitude of the memento mori. That is the 'worm at the core', but Witkin also adds the sexual and the perverse into the equation. This is a very different treatment to that of Boltanski, whose iconography deals with absence, memory and the removed historical
death en masse. The universal rather than the particular.

I think Witkin's attitude can be summed up by Bataille when he says

In death, the rupture of the discontinuous individualities to which we cleave in terror, stands there before us more real than life itself. 20

In confronting death, all our illusions are finally shattered. The aesthetics of repulsion and attraction, exemplified by Witkin's "Still Life: Marseilles", and other photographs like it, bring up Edmund Burke's notion of the sublime: that which defies rational understanding by evoking a mixture of pleasure and terror in the viewer. It also relates to Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject: that which calls into question the accepted order of things by occupying an ambiguous position between two opposites. 21

Witkin's memento mori inhabit this space between good and evil which finds beauty in a flower and a severed limb and by their combination into one unarguably beautiful and terrible image makes us question our assumptions and our easy, socially conditioned responses. His work is about the particularity of flesh and bone and yet his memento mori are created using a long standing traditional language and form. Like Boltanski, he is also challenging the sphere of the photograph and questioning its boundaries.

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20 Bataille, G., op.cit. p 19

21 Dery, M., "Lost in the Fun House", World Art, 2, 1995 p 51
Chapter 5

Peter Hujar
Ultimately photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels or even stigmatises, but when it is pensive, when it thinks.

Roland Barthes

If Christian Boltanski uses photographs as sculpture, and Joel Peter Witkin uses photographs as paintings, then Peter Hujar uses photographs as photographs.

When we look at Hujar's work we see the single image photograph in its raw state, unadorned, uncomplicated, just there. His body of work is deceptively simple and yet of all the photographers looked at he is the one who understands that the photograph of the person is, in itself, a memento mori. Nothing more is necessary if one really understands this phenomenon.

It would not be possible to find two photographers more different in style than Hujar and Witkin. Witkin's environments constitute the art work. His props, his exotic subjects, his manipulations of the surface in the printing process and his grand Guignol approach contrast sharply with Hujar's simplicity.

Yet there are some similarities. Both were studio photographers who worked with subjects, often friends or acquaintances, in the confines of the small studio space. Hujar's studio was in fact his small loft bedroom. He never had the money to rent another space or to buy expensive props. Thomas Sokolowski states

Barthes, R., Camera Lucida, NY, 1981 p 38
Hujar was a brilliant studio photographer non pareil. In the horsus conclusus of his studio, the only prop was the standard issue wooden chair upon which the majority of his sitters were placed. There was also his bed. While these two pieces of furniture are hardly exotic, Hujar adapts them in such a manner that they are simultaneously transparent and egregiously functional.

Of course his studio is the exact opposite to Witkin's which is like an overstuffed Victorian drawing room, filled to the hilt with exotic props and strange hybrid objects. Everything about Peter Hujar is sparse and minimal and parred down to the bare bones.

Hujar simply took photographs, mostly portraits and nudes but also some remarkably anthropomorphic shots of animals and a few landscapes. His work could be seen as objectively realistic, not laden with metaphor and allusion, certainly not conventionally aesthetic. There is a superficial 'ordinariness' about his work at first reading. However there is another level.

In 1976 Hujar published his first and only book of photographs. It is called Portraits in Life and Death and contains two bodies of work in juxtaposition. The first consists of a series of portraits of friends, some of whom are famous, and the second is an earlier body of work comprising the mummified remains and relics of long dead saints taken in the catacombs of Palermo.

In the introduction, Susan Sontag, who is also one of the subjects, crystallises some of the thoughts on the nature of photography that she was to expand two years later in her

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Sokolowski, T., Peter Hujar, NY, 1990 p 13
landmark book *On Photography*. She notes how the faces of the sitters, living and "moist-eyed" are transformed by the instantaneous click of the camera and removed from the continuum of life, frozen into the immobility of death. She says

Photographs turn the present into the past and make contingency into reality... Photographers, connoisseurs of beauty, are also unwittingly the recording angels of death. The photograph, as photograph, shows death. More than that it shows the sex appeal of death.3

In the first part of this book the friends and acquaintances stand, sit, slouch but mostly lie in the studio on his bed. While they were sitting they were asked to contemplate their own mortality. Whether this was going through their minds at the precise time that each particular shot was taken, is completely immaterial. The portraits unmistakenly convey the gravitas of the occasion. In some portraits the subjects are looking at the lens, in some, their eyes are cast downwards or are staring into the distance. In some the eyes are closed as in meditation. All the portraits have the same deeply pensive mood.

The portrait of Susan Sontag is one of the strongest. In it she lies horizontally on the bed. The cover is a plain blanket. There is utmost simplicity as the horizon line created by the bed cuts across the middle of the photo. Sontag lies with her hands behind her head. Her hair is loose and she wears a plain ribbed jumper. It is a stark black and white shot. So where lies its strength and power? Sontag has thought a lot about death. In the introduction she muses:

We no longer study the art of dying, a regular discipline and hygiene in older

3Sontag, S., *Portraits in Life and Death*, NY, 1976 intro
cultures, but all eyes at rest contain that knowledge. The body knows and the camera shows, inexorably.  

Sontag casts her eyes down towards the right hand corner of the frame but it is obvious that she is deep in thought. She is completely self-contained, totally relaxed and resigned.

All the portraits have this pensive quality, even the one of Devine, a middle aged, podgy drag queen with no eyebrows. He leans on a couch, his paunch protruding and echoing the roundness of his almost bald head. He also stares off into the corner of the frame, contemplating, lost. And yet this portrait carries with it a tremendous air of dignity, solemnity and power. There is no Dianne Arbus treatment here. We see the man not the drag queen, alone and vulnerable, yet at ease. Hujar was always more interested in the persona than the mask.

With Hujar, as opposed to Dianne Arbus, for example, there is no need to spell out the obvious tragedy. The are no costumes, no trashy makeup or self parody, in fact no context at all. And yet there is pathos and empathy emanating from this photograph.

There is an overwhelming sense in many of these portraits that the person has been captured at their most alone, as we are in death. He often uses the prone position. It allows him to come in close and affords the unfamiliar pleasure of seeing the face more

4ibid
or less horizontally. This creates a sense of intimacy in some shots and abandon in others. Hujar is never the voyeur. Sokolowski says

He inevitably established a special rapport with each of his subjects which allowed, even encouraged, both spontaneity and vulnerability on the part of the sitter and resulted in wondrously comfortable images from the photographer. 5

This intimacy is the antithesis of the cool detachment seen in the photographs of Witkin and Boltanski, where the subject/object at the other end of the lens is not revealed in any way. For both the former photographers the identity of their subjects is not only ignored, but actively suppressed. Boltanski deals with universality, Witkin deals with the physical and corporeal details while Hujar deals with the psyche. Kozloff says he needed a 'person' to be there so he could foster an act of revelation. 6 It is obvious that he knows his sitters. Their ease and naturalness is palpable. This is commented on by many critics who also seem to agree on another score, which is the sense of alienation and aloneness that is visible in his work.

By all accounts Hujar was himself a very isolated and difficult individual. Fran Lebowitz, a friend of many years, calls him a profoundly alienated person. "The most I've ever known- a prisoner. There was no way out for him". 7 He had a very difficult and disturbed childhood. He was abandoned by his parents and never knew his father. He was raised by his grandparents who never really incorporated him into the family. He

5Sokolowski, T., op.cit. p 7
6Kozloff, M., Hujar, Artforum, Oct, 1990 p 162
7Sokolowski, T., op.cit. p 22
later went back to his mother, an alcoholic, and was abused by his new stepfather. He escaped at sixteen and there after fended for himself. He never learnt how to deal with money and was sorely plagued by the lack of it for the rest of his life.8

Hujar was legendary for his difficult and demanding personality and his inability to get on with gallery owners and clients alike. He was also a homosexual whose relationships were characterised by anonymous promiscuity and enormous frequency. His relations with his friends were also similarly strained yet some were deep and long lasting despite his notorious difficulty.9

In his photographs he embraced an austere purity and a contemplative classicism. There is no attempt to seduce or tempt. His photographs have a distinct and unique look, which is unusual for a classical photographer who neither uses props, trickery nor any other outwardly identifiable stylistic idiosyncrasies. Some have described it as a cold photographic space,10 an isolating space or the stamp of separateness.11 All agree that there is a quality of alienation and solitude evident in the portraits that is Hujar's alone. This raises the strange conundrum that is inherent in his work. That is, that the alienation is most apparent when there is the greatest rapport with the sitters.

So how did he achieve the extraordinary intimacy and rapport with his sitters? It could

8ibid
9ibid
10ibid
11Sokolowski, T., op.cit. p 18
be postulated that it was the buffer of the camera between him and the subject that enabled this to occur.

Behind the camera Hujar becomes the void, nonexistent. He becomes like a mirror. The sitters see themselves in him, he becomes invisible.¹²

Is it Hujar's blankness that enables his subjects to reveal so much, to be so vulnerable in their solitude? Hujar's solitude is that of one who knows he is truly alone and one who is deeply aware of his own mortality and failings. It may be this that locates these portraits in their distinct space. The loneliness of death is the inescapable message of these photographs.

They make manifest the notions of presence and absence even more so than the overt images of the relics of the saints in the second half of the book. These remain encased, still dressed and lying in state, even whilst their skin pulls tightly against the plainly visible skulls and eye sockets. These subjects are also largely horizontally presented as if asleep. They echo the poses of the living friends and serve as flagrant reminders of the frailty of the flesh. They are adorned with finery in their cases, mutely staring, looking at nothing.

This rather medieval approach to memento mori, with the visible rotting flesh and the 'dust to dust' aura is not necessary to make the point. Hujar's approach is generally so subtle and unpretentious that these literal images of the dead saints and martyrs seem like

¹²Moufarrege, N., Tic Tac Toe, Artsmag, Feb\May, 1983 p 117
overkill. It is as if he did not totally trust that the phenomenon of photodeath would be enough to make the point. As if he forgot for a moment what Sontag reminds us of in the introduction: portraits in life are always also portraits in death.\(^\text{13}\)

In Hujar's work death is not always the only theme. His enigmatic photographs of animals and erotica do not automatically instil those thoughts. He also did quite a lot of work among the homosexual demi-monde of New York and like so many other photographers was drawn to the drag queens. His portraits of them are unique as he was not an outsider or a voyeur, but rather a participant in their dance. In these works the rapport is there, even some flirtation. And yet, because of AIDS, death is never far away.

One of his most beautiful later photographs is of Candy Darling on her death bed in hospital. Candy was a youngish and quite beautiful drag queen who was stricken with bone cancer. In this last photograph of her she is lying horizontally on her side, one arm over her head and staring, in full make-up, straight at the camera. There is a bunch of huge, overblown chrysanthemums behind her and one single rose lying on the sheet in front of her.

She had made the effort to dress even though she was so ill, and yet again it is not really the queen we see. She is dressed in a very dignified and restrained way. Not trashy at all. It is obvious that Hujar collaborated with her on the photograph. There is the familiar relaxation and the total giving of herself up to the camera. Fran Lebowitz said

\(^{13}\text{Sontag, S., op.cit., intro}\)
It would be awful if someone else had tried to do it. It would be empty, maudlin or criminal. Peter was the only photographer she knew well. She loved it.\textsuperscript{14}

The same contemplation and solitude haunts this photo as it did the others. Not more so in this shot because we know she is dying and facing her mortality, but because we feel that an essence has been captured. Her cosmetic mask of denial is poignant, seen for what it is by both subject and photographer in collusion as the surface that reveals the depth, not the mask that obscures it.

I first came across Peter Hujar's work because the title of his book had the word "Death" in it and it came up on the subject search on the library computer. He does not have a high profile except among other photographers. This is now just starting to be redressed and his work is being seen as a distinctive and highly individual body worthy of critical consideration. There are the obvious comparisons with Robert Mapplethorpe, not so much because their work is similar but because they were both openly gay and both died of AIDS.

Max Kozloff, in comparing their respective treatment of the human form notes

Mapplethorpe's form could never extend itself to the human subjecthood of its figures. He treats them decoratively, that is as no more than fleshy embodiments of that same studied bloom that he repeated in his flower pictures.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14}Sokolowski, T., op.cit. p 29
\textsuperscript{15}Kozloff, M., op.cit. p 162
He sees Mapplethorpe's work as shallow, designy, iconic and flat. In contrast he sees
Hujar's work as an art in which important truths about life and death are communicated
honestly and unpretentiously. He finally states

The position of Mapplethorpe and Hujar in American Photography is the reverse
of what it should be.\(^{16}\)

Peter Hujar died of AIDS in 1987 on Thanksgiving day. He had made himself one of his
subjects in the portraits book of 1976. It can be seen in his own portrait, as he lies on his
bed, white sheets and pillow, hands above his head, staring into the distance, that he was
a man of great loneliness who used the camera to bridge the gap between himself and the
world. His separateness he saw as our universal fate and as our end. He understood that
as we live we die. As Stephen Koch states

'Famous or anonymous, his sitters are alone with themselves alone with
their inner lives, alone with their flesh. That solitude restates their
splendour and allure... He is a poet of mortality.'\(^{17}\)

\(^{16}\)ibid

\(^{17}\)Koch, S., *Peter Hujar and his Secret Fame*, NY, 1990 p 16
Conclusion
If a free human being can afford to think of nothing less than death, then these memento mori can exorcise morbidity as effectively as they evoke its sweet poetry and its panic.

Susan Sontag

On starting to think about this thesis four years ago I seemed to be working in a vacuum. During its compilation when people would ask about the topic, I was loath to discuss it. A theme dealing with "death" would sound too pretentious, too morbid or merely too 'heavy' to be dropped in casual conversation. An interest in death is seen as unhealthy and a need to work with this subject matter is looked upon as morbidity. My personal experience when being interviewed for a local radio show about the "Denial" exhibition would suggest that general public perceptions of this subject still engender distaste and suspicion. It is only by dispassionate and unsensational analysis and investigations of this subject that our negative attitudes to the subject of death can hope to change.

The phenomenon of photodeath, as dealt with in this thesis, is both complex and enigmatic and there are no simple answers. The photograph's ability to halt time and isolate its subject from the flow of time should necessarily lead to thoughts of transience and death. It is obvious that this phenomenon appears in the work of two of the artists I have studied. And yet it is not obvious on an every day level when we encounter a vast number of photographs every day in newspapers, advertising and personal snapshots. Should not all photographs of people embody this notion? If they do then hardly any one

1Hujar, P., Images in Life and Death, NY, 1976. Introduction
can see it. Do the luscious shots of supermodels or mums in kitchens in contemporary advertising lead one to contemplate mortality? It would totally subvert the purpose of advertising, the fetishising of the commodity, if images of death and contemplation were associated with them. So if the theory of photodeath is universal, as it must surely be, then this aspect of the single image photograph would be manifest even in these advertising images. If this message is there, it is obviously unreadable or invisible to the vast majority of people, for the vast majority of the time. This is the conundrum at the core of the photodeath question: why is it only visible in some instances?

If Barthes is right in his assumption that death must reside somewhere in our society it must be hidden in the plethora of photographs that now pervade our lives. Our inability to see death in them is necessary for our continued ability to use them at all and also tied in with the fact that the photograph is in some measure undialectical as we have noted. In some senses a photograph can never be read at all, at least not in any meaningful way. Yet death can obviously be sensed in certain photographs or in certain photographic contexts on a quite visceral and identifiable way.

Christian Boltanski’s work with its mass of unidentified, de-contextualised, poor quality, head-shots always reminds its viewers of death. The phenomenon of photodeath is definitely at work here. It is present, surprisingly, in works like “Les Archives” which use the massed photographs, even more so than in works like the “Lycee Chases”, with the small number of manipulated photographs where the subjects actually look like spectral traces, where Boltanski is virtually creating the deaths-head in the images of the children. The implication here is clear but the former work calls on the sheer weight of
the number of portraits to speak even more inescapably of the ubiquity, the randomness and ultimately the banality of death. Boltanski uses photographs as indexes of a person's existence, as referent. His objects, particularly the clothes, can also be seen in the same way, and therefore also necessarily speak of absence. However for his work to actually function as *memento mori* as he hopes it will, it must be freed of its association with the Holocaust. This reading of his work undermines a personal association with it, historicises it, and makes it a remote, albeit more emotional experience. It is only his later works like the "The Reserve of Dead Swiss" that could actually be called *memento mori*.

Joel Peter Witkin's more traditional, though grotesque *memento mori* images use the beautifully aestheticised body/portrait as object within the still-life 'vanitas' oeuvre. He is an obvious choice of a photographer if one is just looking into the subject of *memento mori*. He is an odd choice, however, if one is interested in *memento mori* through photodeath. But by looking at some of the ways in which his photographs actually subvert the notion of photodeath, we are able understand it even more clearly.

The first major point is that for photodeath to work the image must obviously look like a photograph. Witkin's constant imitation of the language of painting cleverly undermines our reading of his work. It is not only his compositions, or his subject matter but also his actual treatment of the negatives and prints, and the creation of a veneer of time that combine to alter our perception of his photographs.

Secondly the extreme objectification of his live subjects almost to the point of props or
curiosities hinders our ability to see them as people. Witkin does this by his arrangement of them in the elaborate tableaux but also by his habitual use of masks, blindfolds and closure of their eyes. We cannot connect with their gaze or in fact their personality at all. Perhaps it is the degree of objectification of photographic subjects that really hinders our ability to see photodeath in portraits of people. This would explain why we cannot see it in advertisements any more than we can see it in the slick formalist photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe.

However it was his use of dead ‘subjects’ or body parts that I concentrated on as his creation of contemporary vanitas intrigued me. Photodeath is not an issue here because the concept necessarily requires a live model. It is the camera’s click that creates the tension between life and death and calls up issues of transience. This dialectic cannot possibly exist if the subject is obviously dead. Nonetheless Witkin’s vanitas are interesting in their particularity. It is “Still Life Marseilles” that is most successful as it adds to the genre with its marvellous specificity and actuality. In “Feast of Fools” he copies the conventions of vanitas painting too carefully, and even though this photographic tableaux contains the cadaver of a dead baby, it merely shocks on the level of transgression of custom, rather than jolts us out of our complacency.

It is Peter Hujar’s work, the most simple and straightforward, which for me, is the most compelling and where we see the notion of photodeath virtually illustrated. His early portraits were completed before Barthes wrote Camera Lucida and yet they exemplify much of what interests him. Hujar’s photographs in Portraits in Life and Death are possibly the best examples of the concept of photodeath that I have seen. Is this because
his sitters were asked to contemplate mortality during their photo sessions? I do not think so, because what people are thinking should have no bearing on the issue unless we believe that this could be conveyed in some way through the lens. Obviously from a structuralist point of view this, and other coherent readings, are not possible as I have suggested earlier. I think rather it is Peter Hujar’s ability as a photographer to act as a blank mirror for his subjects and his complete refusal to objectify them in any way.

It is his images which have stayed with me the longest. It is their solitude, made manifest, that ultimately says more about the fundamental nature of death and our relationship to it as humans. With his work, we do not ask questions as we do with Boltanski’s or Witkin’s. Hujar presents us with that moment when we are alone and our thoughts take us to the final realisation that we, the centre of the universe, are mortal and are going to die. So simple and so profound. This is the essence of the memento mori and in Peter Hujar’s portraits it is presented clearly and inescapably to us through no other means than the phenomenon of photodeath.

Photodeath can clearly be a powerful spur to the contemplation of mortality in its simplest sense. Whether or not most people are able to perceive it for what it is may mirror our societal desire to avoid thinking of death and mortality. We obviously do not desire to avoid seeing, even immersing ourselves in images of death and destruction. It is the thinking about it, the contemplation on a personal level that we try to avoid at all costs. This is why we cannot see the portrait photograph for what it is, a simple memento mori.

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My time spent contemplating this subject has been useful but it is necessarily over for the time being. As a final comment I have found that dwelling on the healthy Medieval knowledge that death is part of the order of things and is a completely natural and necessary part of us, has been quite revealing and different. We do tend to dwell on the negative, lurid and sensational aspects of death. The idea that from the moment of our conception is sewn our destruction is ultimately a levelling and humanising way of thinking in our age of individual obsession and hubris and one that may help to dispel the fear and panic which is so endemic in our cultural notions of death.
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DENIAL

Darwin and Alice Springs - 1994, 1996

Artists Statement

Photographs & Sculpture by Catherine Bowdler

Darwin Performing Arts Centre Exhibition Gallery

Opening 21st March 6–8:30

Gallery Hrs: 10–4 Mon–Sat til March 30th
To be alive and not inquire into, and be concerned with the problem and fear of death is to miss perhaps the greatest challenge of being alive. To do less, to avoid death, is to deny one’s very humanity.  

J.P. Sartre

I have been working on this series "Denial" intermittently for three years and when people would ask me what the work was about, I would sometimes have difficulty saying the word. Often it would sound too pretentious or too morbid.

An interest in death is still seen as unhealthy and my personal experience, whilst being interviewed on local radio about the exhibition, would suggest that general-public perceptions of this subject still engender distaste and suspicion.

Yet in recent years I found I was part of a growing number of artists interested in the subject of mortality. Needless to say the AIDS epidemic has spawned an avalanche of such art, (most recently, "Don't Leave Me This Way", at the National Gallery in Canberra). In a recent issue of Artlink devoted solely to the topic of death, Peter Bishop states:

It has become commonplace to call an awareness of death a universal human concern. Such an expansive view can obscure it as an intimate experience which is given specific meanings through class, gender, ethnicity, age, religion and other cultural circumstances. It has also become a cliche to speak of the West’s denial of death, a simultaneous separation from it’s actualities and yet at the same time, an immersion in ficto-death, as we become saturated by media-generated death related images.¹

Yet death is the one thing that ultimately we all do have in common. This notion is summed up by the medieval exhortation memento mori, which literally translates as ‘Remember You Will Die’. The purpose of memento mori is to spur the viewer, however fleetingly, to contemplate their own mortality. As Peter Bishop states it is too simplistic to say that our culture simply denies death, but as individuals we no longer see death as a natural and inevitable part of our lives. Centuries ago Sir Thomas More wrote

We joke and believe death to be far removed. It is hidden in the deepest secrets of our organs. For since the time we came into the world, life and death go forward at the same pace.²

I came to this subject through personal experience, as many do, and found that attitudes to death in general and in particular were totally unsatisfactory in any real sense. I needed

¹Bishop, P., “Art and Death”, Artlink, Vol 14, No. 4, 1994 p 9

²Becker, E., Denial of Death, N.Y., 1973 p 82
a time of immersion and then closure to fully realise these issues in my mind and in my work. This naturally led me to the cemetery where the outward signs of our recognition of mortality, the small homage we pay, results in the piles of silk flowers at the grave site.

The few plastic flowers of the 50s and 60s, though now valued as items of nostalgia with their own kitsch charm, are now brittle and blanched. It is the silk flowers which, vastly out numbering all other kinds of offerings, remain as the indelible impression of the modern cemetry. Whether they be a riot of bright, clashing, almost luminous colour, or, if they have been there long enough, as clumps of faded, mouldy blooms that have curiously taken on the cast of the real thing they so poorly mimic when new. There is a melancholic beauty in the subtle character that silk flowers acquire with age and it is in this way that they ironically mimic the body and its absence even more closely than the real flowers with their brief record of the passing of time.

However there are many layers of irony, as the leaving of plastic and silk flowers on the modern grave represents, in some measure, our societal denial of death more succinctly than any other act. The role of real flowers as symbols and even embodiments of transience is archetypal. Flowers are not only a tribute but an emblem of the acceptance of transience and beauty in the natural world and an obvious reminder of mortality. The long history of the iconography of flowers as metaphors in both art and literature is testament to this tradition. But the symbolism of the real flower has been subverted as we impose our own deep seated fear of vanishing and fading onto the graves of our loved ones. Hence, the substitution of the cut flower with a simulacra, that by its very nature denies the ritual meaning and symbolic purpose of the original, represents a sharp juncture in our cultural understanding.

The attraction and repulsion that I felt at the sight of the silk flowers left a deep impression. This led to the body of work "Denial", in which I hoped to explore the irony inherent in this cultural phenomenon of subverted symbolism. The ambivalent attitude which I felt towards the subject is the mainstay of the work and sets up the binary oppositions of repulsion/seduction, beauty/kitsch, sterility/decay, and presence/absence.

The exhibition consists of a series of large cibachrome images of silk flowers taken at grave sites a local cemetery in Darwin, NT. The photos were taken at very close range and contain no other information. The images were arranged formally in sets of two or three with a black mirror-like void or threshold as the central panel. Usually the iconography of roses and apples is one of femaleness and fecundity so there is a faint air of sensuality and sexuality as the conjunction of images speak of the corruptibility of the flesh as well as the plastic/silk denial of death. A small installation of rotting apple cores under perspex is allied with one group of photographs. As M.A. Lee states:

The rosette apples echo the fleshy tints of the rose petals, but show the ravages of time which the plastic and porcelain roses try to evade.3

There is no body, nor any repellent, disturbing imagery here. The body is supplied by the viewer as he/she is reflected in each piece as they approach. In the lush, glossy surfaces of the cibachromes, in the black perspex, in the shiny field of skin between the two plastic blooms and mirrored in the doorway itself. The absence is filled by the viewer thereby implicating them.

The exhibition "Denial" is both an immersion into the realm of death and a denial of death at the same time. The absence of the body and the inability to connect with a base feeling through the formal, ordered approach and the distancing, reflective surfaces creates a juncture. In this way the pieces act as memento mori as they encourage contemplation of mortality and yet reflect our cultural inability to deal with the actualities of death, mourning and grief. In some ways this show represents or is a mirror of a Western, antiseptic, intellectualised and formalised attitude to death as well as acting as a pensive space for meditation on mortality.
List of Works

1 Trophy 1 and 2  
   Cibachrome prints

2 Transitus  
   Wood and Bronze

3 Prick  
   Clay, oxides and plastic flowers

4 Oddessy  
   Cibachromes and perspex

5 Bouquet  
   Cibachromes and perspex

6 Corpus  
   Cibachromes and apple cores

7 Epiphany  
   Velvet, wax, plastic flowers

8 Untitled  
   Wooden doorway

P.O.A.
Denial

To be alive and not inquire into, and be concerned with the problem and fear of death is to miss perhaps the greatest challenge of being alive. To do less, to avoid death, is to deny one's very humanity.

J. P. Sartre

The exhibition consists of a series of large cibachrome images of silk flowers taken at grave sites in a local cemetery in Darwin. The images are arranged formally in sets of two or three with a black void or threshold in the middle. There are also some sculptural works.

The pieces are meant to seduce as much as to repel. They refer to the feminine, to time and its passing, to sensuality and beauty as well as to mortality.

This exhibition is both an immersion into the realm of death and a denial of death at the same time. The pieces act as 'memento mori' as they encourage contemplation, but the cold, distancing surfaces and formal arrangement reflect our western cultural inability to deal with death and mourning as a natural part of life.
Denial Exhibition - Slide Notes

The Denial Exhibition has been shown twice. Once in 1995 at the Darwin Entertainment centre (DPAC) again in Alice Springs in 1996 at Watch This Space. These notes refer to the second showing in 1996 as the space was much more conducive to the work as I hoped it would be.

When I first saw the space I knew I wanted to show Denial there. The space has been converted from an iceworks into an artists run co-operative. It has a rough, industrial ambience which I hoped would contrast with the slickness of the objects. It is a space with great potential to be used sculpturally, with discrete spaces and beautiful natural light that filters through the ceiling.

The text is:

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"It has become commonplace to call an awareness of death a universal human concern. Such an expansive view can obscure it as an intimate experience which is given specific meanings through class, gender, ethnicity, age, religion and other cultural circumstances ... it has also become a cliche to speak of the West's denial of death, a simultaneous separation from it's actualities and yet at the same time an immersion in ficto-death, or cyber-death as we become saturated by media-generated death related images.'

Peter Bishop
Denial Exhibition - Slide Notes

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This introduction to an Artlink issue on the subject of art and death seemed an appropriate means of breaking the ice around the subject of the works in this exhibition. It highlights some of the feelings we all have when confronted with the all too common and yet still discomfiting topic of death.

I have been working on this series intermittently for three years and when people would ask me what my work was about, I would sometimes have difficulty saying the word. Often it would sound too heavy, too morbid or just too pretentious. And yet I found I was a part of a growing number of artists interested in the subject of mortality. Needless to say the Aids epidemic has spawned an avalanche of such art, most notably in the recent and wonderful exhibitions 'Don't Leave Me This Way' at the National Gallery. It is also, surprisingly, a hot topic at the moment in the Territory.

Death is the one thing we all truly have in common. This idea is summed up by the Medieval exhortation, Memento Mori, which roughly translates as, 'Remember You Will Die'. The purpose of Memento Mori is to spur or encourage the viewer, however fleetingly, to contemplate their own mortality. As stated earlier, it is too simplistic to say that our culture simply denies death. In fact it relishes it, as long as it is fiction or news. But as individuals we no longer seem to see death as a natural and inevitable part of our lives. Centuries ago Thomas More stated: "We joke and believe death to be far removed. It is hidden in the deepest secrets of our organs. For since the moment we came into this world life and death go forward at the same pace."

Dr Mary Alice Lee has written about some of these works:

"Each of the pieces by Cath Bowdler represent different responses to her current interest in the ancient idea of Memento Mori. Her central triptych, comprising two Cibachrome photographs flanking a rectangle of black perspex, at once evokes the European cemetery, with its extravagant floral wreaths and the sensual body which time turns to dust. The final realisation becomes unavoidable when we e main space.

5-6. The text islation is:

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e corner from

water source alled another y of descent."
gaze into the black mirror and see ourselves entombed. The small installation of apple cores take up this theme by presenting the image of physical decay through another symbol which, like the rose, is associated with beauty, health and womanhood. The roseate apples echo the fleshy tints of the rose petals, but show the ravages of time which plastic and porcelain roses try to evade."

All these works are Memento Mori, but things are not always as they seem. These pieces are meant to seduce as much as to encourage contemplation. They refer to the feminine, to time and its passing, to sensuality, to beauty, to me and to you, the viewer, as you will find yourself reflected in most of the pieces.

"To be alive and not enquire into, and be concerned with, the problem and fear of death is to miss perhaps the greatest challenge of being alive. To do less, to avoid death is to deny one's very humanity."

JP Sartre
Denial Exhibition - Slide Notes

The Denial Exhibition has been shown twice. Once in 1995 at the Darwin Entertainment centre (DPAC) again in Alice Springs in 1996 at Watch This Space. These notes refer to the second showing in 1996 as the space was much more conducive to the work as I hoped it would be.

When I first saw the space I knew I wanted to show Denial there. The space has been converted from an iceworks into an artists run co-operative. It has a rough, industrial ambience which I hoped would contrast with the slickness of the objects. It is a space with great potential to be used sculpturally, with discrete spaces and beautiful natural light that filters through the ceiling.

List of Works

1. Trophy
   Cibachrome prints
   $1 500.00
2. Epiphany
   Wood, perspex and apple cores
   NFS
3. Bouquet
   Cibachrome prints and perspex
   $1 800.00
4. Corpus
   Cibachrome prints, wood
   $1 800.00
5. Odyssey
   Cibachrome prints, perspex and wax
   $1 500.00
6. Transitus
   Wood, bronze and apple
   $600.00
7. Untitled
   Cibachrome print
   $100.00
8. Untitled
   Cibachrome print
   $100.00
9. Untitled
   Cibachrome print
   $100.00
10. Untitled
    Cibachrome print
    $100.00
11. Prick
    Clay, oxides and plastic
    $700.00
Qualifications

1973 - 1975  BA, University of Sydney, Fine Arts
1975        Dip Ed, Sydney Teachers College
1986 - 1987  B Vis Art, Sydney College of the Arts
1990        Grad Dip, Sydney College of the Arts (Ceramics Major)
1992 - 1995  Master of Fine Arts, Northern Territory University (ongoing)

Professional Experience

1978 - 1985  Secondary Art and English Teacher, NSW
1988 - 1989  Secondary Art Teacher, NSW (part time)
1990        Adult Education Teacher
1991        Computer Teacher, Down Syndrome Assoc, NT
1992        Ceramics Lecturer, Northern Territory University (part time)
1993        Malak Park Project, Community Art Project, Darwin
1993        Drawing Lecturer, Northern Territory University (part time)
1994 - 1995  Drawing and Art History Lecturer (part time)

Selected Exhibitions

1986        'The Body In Question', SCA Upstairs Gallery
1987        'Sec EX SCA Go', Pier 3 Sydney
1988        'Walkers Ceramic Award', Victorian Arts Centre
1988        'Image, Symbol, Jest', Balmain Loft, Sydney
1989        'Into the Red', Solo Show, Artlet, Sydney
1990        'mass x', Spacebase, Glebe, Sydney
1992        'The Dog Show', 24 Hr Art, Darwin
1992        'Contemporary Sculpture Show', NTU, Darwin
1992        'Camera Obscura', 24 Hr Art, Darwin
1992        'National Craft Award', NT Museum, Darwin
1992        'The Christmas Show', 24 Hr Art, Darwin
1993        'Boxed Answers', Northern Territory University
1993        'Small Contemporary Sculpture', Northern Territory University
1994        'Never Never, Never Never', Darwin, Alice Springs, Sydney

Special thanks to

24 Hr Art
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Slides 1-3 give some indication of the space as a whole and exhibition views of the main space.

Slides 4-11 are of particular pieces and should need no explanation, except slides 5-6. The text on the perspex overlay in 'Odessy', (slides 5-6) is from Virgil's Aeneid. The translation is:

He but loved his hapless friend too well. Thus he was pleading; but the sword, driven with force, has passed through the ribs and rends the snowy breast. Euryalus rolls over in death; athwart his lovely limbs runs the blood, and his drooping neck sinks on his shoulder; as when the purple flower, severed by the plough, droops in death, or as poppies, with weary neck, bow the head, when weighted by some chance shower.

Aeneid Book IX

This work is a specific reference to my father, who was a Latin teacher for most of his life. This body of work was ultimately inspired by his death and is dedicated to him.

Slides 12-17 are of the piece titled Bouquet. This was housed in a crypt-like room which was once the ice room or coolroom. It is basically a concrete box, a totally enclosed space with walls at least 2 foot thick and a solid functioning door. It is dark and cool and trail of bitumen has oozed naturally out of a pit in the wall pooled on the floor. It is not actually viscose but it is also not totally static. It references and mirrors the coolness of the black perspex. This space is extremely claustrophobic and resonant and was actually the reason that I wanted to show in this particular gallery. I hung one bare bulb about 1m from the ceiling and erected a small platform with a slowly ticking metronome on one wall. The room also contained another object, an ambiguous, black polygon on the floor, visible in slide 17. This room was an uncomfortable experience for some people. Their claustrophobic feelings exacerbated by the amplified ticking of the metronome going on and on.

Slides 18-21 Corpus was installed in another discrete space which was around the corner from the cold room. It was often beautifully lit by a moving shaft of light.

Slides 22-23 Epiphany was installed above a 25 foot well that once provided the water source for the iceworks. The foot is sitting on a grate which covers the well hole. I installed another globe inside the well to illuminate the subterranean space and invoke the possibility of descent.