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THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF ABSENCE: DEATH IN POSTMODERN
AMERICA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Photography of Absence: Death in Postmodern America

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It is a paradox that postmodern photographic theory—so thoroughly obsessed with death—rarely addresses intimate scenes of explicit death or mortality. Rather, it applies these themes to photographs of living subjects or empty spaces, laying upon each image a blanket of pain, loss, or critical dissatisfaction. Postmodern theorists such as Rosalind Krauss and Geoffrey Batchen root their work in the writings of Roland Barthes, which privilege a photograph's viewer over its subject or maker. To Barthes' followers in the 1980s and 1990s, the experiences depicted within the photograph were not as important as our own relationships with it, in the present. The photographers of the Pictures Generation produced groundbreaking imagery that encouraged the viewer to question authority, and even originality itself. Little was said, though, about intimacy, beauty, the actual fact of death, or the author's individual experience.

However, a significant group of American art photographers at the end of the twentieth century began making works directly featuring their own personal experiences with mortality. This dissertation examines the motivations and strategies of four such photographers: Robert Mapplethorpe, JoAnn Verburg, Nan Goldin, and Sally Mann. Additionally, it addresses the social environment that gave rise to these artists' reflections, such as the AIDS crisis and the aging Baby Boomer population. The

photographers discussed here share not only social context, but also values and aesthetic concerns. Included on this list are the embrace of unironic emotional expression, the co-option of beauty as an aesthetic and emotional tool, emphasis on the photograph as a physical object, and a desire to convey to the viewer what it is like to be them—a unique person existing in a particular space and time, feeling specific joys and losses.

It is impossible to fully understand the subsequent photographic work of the twenty-first century without considering these artists' influence alongside that of the Pictures Generation. Doing so allows a deeper, more subtle analysis of contemporary photography's engagement with time, mortality, intimacy, and beauty, as well as irony, critique, trauma, and appropriation. It enables us to see the true hybrid of influences that have created twenty-first century photography.

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INTRODUCTION: DEATH AND THE POSTMODERN

Our thoughts about photography have long reflected our thoughts on death and distance from it. It is a paradox that postmodern photographic theory—so thoroughly obsessed with death—rarely addresses scenes of explicit death or mortality. Rather, it applies these themes to photographs of living subjects or empty spaces, laying upon each image a blanket of pain, loss, or critical dissatisfaction. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes famously describes how “In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: She is going to die: I shudder...over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.”¹

It is in this intimate passage, and others like it, that a weird little French book about death became what is arguably the most important text in late twentieth-century American photographic theory. Postmodern theorists such as Rosalind Krauss and Geoffrey Batchen frequently focus on Barthes’ absolute privileging of a photograph’s viewer over its subject or maker. Surely neither the little girl in the winter garden nor the person who photographed her was contemplating her future son’s grief. But to Barthes’ followers in the 1980s and 1990s, the experiences depicted within the photograph were not as important as our own relationships with it, in the present. This new stress on the subjectivity of the viewer sought to destroy the longstanding myths of universal meaning and the heroic white male artist. The artist as the locus of meaning seemed a necessary casualty; as Barthes himself wrote, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death

¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Noonday Press, 1981), 96.

of the Author.”² Upon shifting its main point of reference from *then* to *now*, photographic theory became a backwards-looking game.

This has been useful, to some extent. The Pictures Generation, the appointed heirs to the theories of Barthes and Susan Sontag, produced groundbreaking imagery that encouraged the viewer to question everything: authority, gender roles, racial stereotypes, advertising, authenticity, and originality. Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills*, Richard Prince’s cowboys, and Barbara Kruger’s ironic slogans all entered the world with a wink and a little bit of a shove.

Critics still discuss these appropriations of previous imagery as though each artwork is full of ghosts—originality is dead, the inhabitants of photographs are dead, and every landscape is a place of trauma. Indeed, the Guggenheim titled its 2010 survey of photo and video works since 1960 *Haunted*. Featuring works by photographers such as Bernd and Hilla Becher and Sherrie Levine, the exhibition and its catalog rooted recent photography and its criticism in *Camera Lucida*.³ The Pictures Generation and their descendents, such as Walid Raad and Thomas Demand, dominated the show.

But as I tilted my head in front of these works and pondered the constructed nature of much of the world around me, it also seemed that curators had forgotten about photography’s ability to convey deeply felt, individual experiences of life and death—and how significant that has been. The 1980s and 1990s were a time in which death was at the forefront, due to the AIDS crisis, an epidemic of hard drug use, and the entrance of the

² Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Roland Barthes: Image Music Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 148. Note his capitalization choices.

³ Jennifer Blessing and Nat Trotman, “Introduction,” in *Haunted: Contemporary Photography, Video, Performance*, eds. Jennifer Blessing and Nat Trotman (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2010), 11.

Baby Boomer population into middle age. Where were these stories and lives? A huge swath of important photographic works was missing from the Guggenheim's implied definition of the postmodern.

This dissertation attempts to tip the balance by bringing unironic lived experience into the discussion. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, numerous American artists created photographs explicitly addressing their own experiences with mortality. These include Robert Mapplethorpe, Nan Goldin, Hannah Wilke, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Sally Mann, JoAnn Verburg, David Wojnarowicz, and Gary Schneider, among others. There is plenty of stylistic variation among them, yet they all share a commitment to expressing what it is like, as an individual, to confront one's own death or that of others.

Why American artists? It may seem counterintuitive to divide artists in such a way when art and its exhibition have become such international affairs. But twentieth-century Americans' cultural relationship with death was a unique one. In the nineteenth century, death and dying were present in everyday spaces and conversations. However, twentieth-century American culture saw an increased sequestration and sanitization of illness and death.⁴ Medical technology advanced furiously, decreasing instances of early death. During the World Wars, Americans on the home front were also spared from the horrors of battle in a way their European counterparts were not. More so than in other industrialized countries, medicine became shut off inside the hospital, and polite conversation steered clear of illness. In short, the nitty-gritty details of death were taboo in the United States until recently—even in art. It is productive, then, to understand why

⁴ James W. Green, *Beyond the Good Death: The Anthropology of Modern Dying* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 48.

so many artists here began addressing the subject when they did, and to examine the ways in which they chose to do so.

These artists' confrontations with the body's power and fleetingness, and their own emotions, have encouraged a particular aesthetic. While they do not all eschew the appropriation of historical themes and imagery that the Pictures Generation and their descendents are known for, such references are made not with irony in mind, but rather to intensify the aesthetic and emotional experience that is proffered. Thematically, the works are humanist and unironic, which allows the unembarrassed flourishing of formal beauty. Truly, it is a renewed aesthetic photography existing in opposition to the cool advertising aesthetic of many of these photographers' contemporaries. Even Goldin's photographs, taken after dark in under-lit interiors, manage to transform prosaic fluorescent and tungsten lighting into moody, gorgeous greens and oranges that enhance each subject's ecstasy or sadness.

The photographers I discuss frequently focus on the human figure as well, and show an awareness of physical sensation via emphasis on texture, or on objects evoking other intense sensory experiences. An extreme *bodilyness* is often the result. Verburg's *Still Life with Jim* (1991) is not merely a slick, bright surface for the viewer's eyes to skate over, but an exploration of flesh, food, light, and shadow. One can almost feel the velvety blacks in Mann's Virginia soil or the skin of Mapplethorpe's nudes. The point of view in these works is typically close-up, fostering intimacy between the subject and the photographer/viewer, and emotionally involving the viewer in the scene. Emphasis on intimacy and sensory experience also requires an acknowledgment of the passage of time; usually, a work's cropping or framing—or the affirmation of the photographer's physical

presence—implies that people and objects exist outside of the frame. By necessity, time goes on as well, and much of what is present will be changed or absent altogether.

Each of the four chapters focuses on one of the above photographers: first Mapplethorpe, then Verburg, Goldin, and Mann. The Mapplethorpe chapter examines the growing awareness of mortality in his depictions of the male body. While his early nudes embody Classical timelessness, the later self-portraits and flowers are much more subject to the ravages of time, and carry a reluctant morbidity. The discussion of Verburg looks at her intimate, life-sized depictions of her sleeping husband. His passage through middle age, and her use of focus to represent the act of looking, lavishly declares the bittersweet relationship between love and aging. Goldin's chapter discusses the specific ways in which she and other artists have employed art, particularly photography, as a memorial. Rather than trying to keep the dead alive through idealized portraiture and nostalgia, they employ absence to mimic the experience of loss, thus creating works that evoke the viewer's empathy. The final essay focuses on Sally Mann's 2004 exhibition *What Remains*, a comprehensive meditation on death. Her equation of bodies with the Southern landscape, as well as her use of antique photographic processes, emphasizes the absolute fleetingness of life and the constant state of flux in which organic materials exist.

All four necessarily embrace a kind of temporality that mirrors lived experience—and therefore the potential for loss. These are not the frozen-for-all-time “decisive moments” first championed by Henri Cartier-Bresson, and later by John Szarkowski in *The Photographer's Eye* (1966). Nor are they the temporally suspended, cinematic tableaux that Michael Fried holds up as his own definition of postmodernism in 2008's *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*. By emphasizing the body's power and

fleetingness, each of these artists acknowledges that time has passed and more is yet to come.

Key too is something rarely discussed in relation to photography, and that is empathy. The concept has been a part of Western thought since David Hume's and Adam Smith's eighteenth-century discussions of "sympathy," which they understood as the act of taking others' perspectives. The terms *Einfühlung* ("feeling into") and "empathy" arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to refer to the emotional act of stepping into another's feelings and experience.⁵ Since then, empathy has been repeatedly parsed by philosophers, psychologists, and neuroscientists, among others. In discussing empathy and aesthetic works, Murray Smith writes that empathy has an important place in experiencing art, since it is the expressive product of people's feelings and intentions.⁶

I concur, and assert that the practice of empathy is necessary to a full understanding of the works of art discussed here—and perhaps any work of art. Through their elaborations on what it is like to be in a particular place at a particular time, touching particular things and thinking of particular people, all of these photographers draw us in to their points of view. We may exist outside the photograph, but we see the world, just a little bit, as they experience it. This is one of art's incredible powers, and one that reveals the variety of human thought, experience, and emotion. Strangely, by confronting death, these photographers prove to us that the author is not dead, and never has been.

⁵ Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, "Introduction," in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), x. See also Juliet Koss, *Modernism After Wagner* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

⁶ Murray Smith, "Empathy, Expansionism, and the Extended Mind," in Coplan and Goldie, 111.

Chapter 1

**FADE TO BLACK: THE TRANSFORMATION OF ROBERT
MAPPLETHORPE'S MALE BODIES**

What is the good of the strongest heart
 In a body that's falling apart?
 A serious flaw—I hope you know that.

—Tim Rice, “Waltz for Eva and Che”

I. Prelude

In his earliest Polaroids, Robert Mapplethorpe is young, candid, and unimaginably beautiful. He also embodies a carefree timelessness. *Untitled* (1973, Fig. 1.1) juxtaposes four nude self-portraits with two views of Louis-Ernest Barrias's *The Oath of Spartacus* (1869), a Neoclassical, homoerotic sculpture of two entwined male nudes, one supporting the other. Each self-portrait, loosely mimicking the pose of either Spartacus or his companion, soaks up the immortality and eroticism exuded by pristine materials, ancient subject matter, and ideal proportions. Though death is present in the sculpture, it is merely an impetus for the melodramatic entwining of the virile male bodies Mapplethorpe identifies with. His wide eyes, curls, and lithe, flawless body could easily belong to Oscar Wilde's ageless protagonist Dorian Gray. We wonder if, perhaps, there is another photograph of this man, hidden in an attic somewhere and slowly growing old in his place.

If such a secret photograph existed, it might look like the untitled self-portrait Mapplethorpe produced 15 years later in 1988 (Fig. 1.2). His gaunt face and unfaltering gaze grab hold of the viewer immediately; the grip of his fist around the death's head cane is even stronger. The contrast between his pale head and hand, and the vacuum of blackness into which his body fades, presents a startling binary. It is an image of

confrontation, but with what? Most say death,⁷ as this image was taken not long before the artist's death from AIDS-related illnesses. His face and hand show psychological presence and strength of will, even as his body uncontrollably fades away. For him, death is clearly not simply the state of being dead, being gone. The concepts of mortality and absence have become part of lived experience. Rather than suspended time and immortality, the photograph allows awareness and experience of the progression of time; it acknowledges the subject's past, present, and future.

The two works diverge completely in their conceptions of time and portrayals of the artist's *bodilyness*, and are representative of his works produced before, and then during, the last few years of his life. Mapplethorpe is most known for his highly aestheticized, exquisitely printed, classicizing nudes, which fulfill the vision he attempts to express in a few of the early Polaroids.⁸ These include self-portraits, images of participants in the gay S&M scene, and the controversial photographs of black men later collected in the *Black Book*. Though some of his nude portraits (such as those of bodybuilder Lisa Lyon) are of muscular women, the overwhelming majority of them sensitively depict young, desirable men in poses evocative of Greek and Roman sculpture.

⁷ Jennifer Blessing, "Classical Allegory in Photography," in *Robert Mapplethorpe and the Classical Tradition: Photographs and Mannerist Prints*, ed. Germano Celant and Arkady Ippolitov, with Karole Vail (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation), 30; Rob Baker, *The Art of AIDS*, 152.

⁸ Mapplethorpe claimed that his vision was fully formed by the time he began taking photographs; see Sylvia Wolf, *Mapplethorpe: Polaroids* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2007), 65. Scholarly opinions vary on whether or not this is really true; I argue in this chapter that there is a certain amount of change, in both subject matter and formal appearance, as his career progresses.

When viewed in comparison with this broader swath of Mapplethorpe's oeuvre, the 1988 self-portrait presents a shift in his conception of the male body, from the treatment of sculptural, tangible flesh as a manifestation of the spirit, to one in which the mind and spirit are still present and insistent, but the flesh disappears. These changes are deeply felt responses to the artist's social surroundings and personal experience. The way in which he appropriates systems of meaning like Classical imagery and *memento mori* conventions in his work is also tied to the historical moment, one in which many young American artists grappled with the uninvited specter of mortality.

It's no secret that longing and loss were prime obsessions of photographic practitioners and commentators in the 1980s; the Guggenheim's 2010 *Haunted* exhibition, a survey of "recent" photographic and video works,⁹ made that clear with its use of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* as a framing mechanism. The show, inhabiting the whole of the museum's rotunda and spreading into auxiliary galleries, was a bold historiographic move, with the unstated but apparent goal of defining postmodern photography and its canon: Becher, Sherman, Prince, Levine, Wall, Demand, and so on. For all its grandness, it did not stray much from the appropriation-based works long promoted by Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh, and other *October* editors. The accompanying catalogue characterizes the chosen works as embodying a mournful, Barthesian look back at the past, via the appropriation of art-historical or pop-culture imagery, a focus on the archive and the landscape as repositories for memory, and the

⁹ The *Haunted* exhibition, which ran 26 March-6 September 2010, surveyed photographic and video works from the previous 50 years, beginning with Robert Rauschenberg, but the bulk of the show consisted of the medium-critical works of the Pictures Generation, the Dusseldorf School, and the two groups' descendents. Its thematic focus was the sense of longing and loss such works embody.

lingering effects of trauma. For the designated interpreters of the photographs on display—like Sherrie Levine’s *After Rodchenko: 1-12* (1987/1998, Fig. 1.3) and Bernd and Hilla Becher’s series of water towers (Fig. 1.4)—the present and the future exist not as experiences in themselves, but as vantage points from which to look back at what has already been. There is nothing new or authentic under the sun in this rather bleak conception of the postmodern, which is wary of personal experience or any emotion besides a general nostalgic longing. Additionally, the false opposition of Marxist critique and individual feelings promoted by critics like Krauss marginalizes the experiences and intentions of the author. Instead of the personal being political, politics are held up as being as personal as anyone needs to get.

Of the four photographers examined in this dissertation, only Robert Mapplethorpe and Sally Mann appear in *Haunted*.¹⁰ Mapplethorpe is represented by a single work, the 1988 death’s-head self-portrait, about which nothing was written either in the catalog or on the accompanying label. While it was likely included due to the Guggenheim’s extensive holdings of Mapplethorpe works, its placement in the exhibition solicits several assumptions about the meaning and significance of his photographs, namely that he can be considered part of the postmodern canon due to sharing the above-mentioned, mournful focus on imagery and events of the past. This is an interesting move, since while Mapplethorpe has long been famous and admired, his work has usually stood alone in the critical sense, and has never been pointedly labeled postmodern. In a 1988 interview with Gary Indiana, he complained about the lack of contemporary artistic

¹⁰ The catalog’s interpretation of Mann’s landscapes is discussed in Chapter Four of this dissertation. Nan Goldin, despite being one of the most famous photographers of her generation, is passed over altogether.

context granted to his work, and how his most recent four shows hadn't been reviewed in art magazines at all:

Why do people avoid reviewing my work in the context of art?...I don't see it in the context of photography, because of the size and scale of what I've done—I always feel like, you know, Cindy Sherman never had a problem. It was perfect for people to write about. She made it very easy for journalists to take it and go with it. I think when things get complicated, people avoid them.¹¹

His work is typically only discussed in relation to itself; most existing scholarship is monographic and does not focus on the complexity of the work's engagement with the socio-historical moment, the intricacies of the formal and thematic evolution of his oeuvre, or on Mapplethorpe's place in any kind of photographic canon. If it has ever been categorized, it has been as an aesthetic descendent of high modernists like Weston, or, to a lesser extent, under the umbrellas of identity art or "The Art of AIDS." In his essay "Painful Pictures," Douglas Crimp notes his concern over the reaction by *supporters* to conservative criticism of sexual imagery in the 1989 Mapplethorpe retrospective *The Perfect Moment*. Those who supported the expressive freedom of the artist and curators, he states, were strangely evasive when it came to the works' content and message, focusing instead on purely formal qualities.¹² Press releases and museum publicity for the exhibition stress the materials and traditional aspects of his photographs, perhaps to avoid the type of outcry that eventually occurred anyway. The official description of *The Perfect Moment* released by Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art (the show's venue of origin) blandly states:

¹¹ "Robert Mapplethorpe," interview by Gary Indiana, BOMB 22 (winter 1988), np. Accessed online 14 February 2012, <http://bombsite.com/issues/22/articles/1003>.

¹² Douglas Crimp, "Painful Pictures," in *Melancholia and Moralism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 274.

The Perfect Moment features over 1500 silver prints, platinum prints on paper and canvas, recent color photographs, Polaroids, photo-collages that incorporate lush fabrics, and sculptural objects. Subject matter focuses on three traditional genres: still lifes, nudes, and portraits. Included in the show are Mapplethorpe's portraits of such leading visual and performing artists as Cindy Sherman, Andy Warhol, Lucy Ferry, David Hockney, Patti Smith, and Laurie Anderson.¹³

The reality of the creator's life was, for a time, distanced from the work, and admiration for his floral still lifes—detached from the context of the nudes—has made it easy for the general public to pretend that the flowers aren't also dripping with bodily suggestion. Nonetheless, their maker asserted that "My approach to photographing a flower is not much different than photographing a cock. Basically it's the same thing."¹⁴

Mapplethorpe's work is, of course, not pure timeless formalism, nor is it mournfully looking to and mining the past (though it draws from the past nonetheless). Crimp is correct in his assessment that "[Mapplethorpe's] life and his art together would have been inconceivable at any earlier time,"¹⁵ a comment mirroring the artist's own statement that

I'm trying to record the moment I'm living in and where I'm living, which happens to be New York. I'm trying to pick up on that madness and give it some order. As a statement of the times it's not bad in terms of being accurate. These pictures could not have been done at any other time."¹⁶

By bringing the past and present together in his nudes, the artist celebrates both. His interest in the erotic and artistic potential of Classical imagery has been discussed by

¹³ This announcement is currently preserved on the ICA website.
<http://www.icaphila.org/exhibitions/mapplethorpe.php>

¹⁴ Mapplethorpe, quoted in Gerrit Henry, "Robert Mapplethorpe—Collecting Quality: An Interview," *The Print Collector's Newsletter* September-October 1982, 129. This statement has since been often mentioned by scholars in assigning the flowers a certain degree of sexuality, as in Germano Celant, "Mapplethorpe as Neoclassicist," in *Robert Mapplethorpe and the Classical Tradition*, 49.

¹⁵ Crimp, 327-8.

¹⁶ Sarah Kent, "Mapplethorpe," *Time Out* (London) November 1983, 12.

a number of authors, including Jennifer Blessing, who writes that for many gay artists, the classical male nude

represents a notion of the ideal that both embodies and expands on its historical antecedents. Conveying power and perfection, the buttocks in Mapplethorpe's *Derrick Cross* mirror those in the Farnese Hercules...[It] is in keeping with the search for historical homosexual precedents and rationales that has traditionally underlain grecophilia.¹⁷

On its own, *Derrick Cross* (1983, Fig. 1.5), a cropped close-up of a black man's muscular buttocks and thighs, is a traditional semi-abstracted nude in the vein of Weston or Man Ray. In the context of the photographer's oeuvre and the time in which he lived, it is an undeniable declaration of homosexual and interracial attraction. Mapplethorpe's sexual identity is not veiled like that of Walt Whitman, nor hidden away in boxes like the explicit male nudes of George Platt Lynes—whose formerly obscure work Mapplethorpe likely only knew about due to his relationship with curator and collector Sam Wagstaff.¹⁸ One probable reason that curator Jonathan Katz's controversial 2010-12 exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*¹⁹ was weighted toward works in the earlier two-thirds of the twentieth century was the absolute necessity of “passing” and “coding” for gay artists (and gay people in general) at the time. Even in the 1960s, Andy Warhol was socially excluded by Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg—both of whom were closeted—for being too “swish.”²⁰ Johns' and Rauschenberg's works dealing

¹⁷ Blessing, 30.

¹⁸ *Black White + Gray*, dir. James Crump (Arthouse Films and LM Media, 2007). Lynes' nudes were never shown or published in his lifetime, and went mostly unrecognized until 2011.

¹⁹ The exhibition was initially presented at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., 30 October 2010-13 February 2011, and versions of it were also mounted at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and the Tacoma Art Museum in 2011 and 2012.

²⁰ Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol 1960s* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 11-12.

with their attractions to men, such as *Tennyson* (1958, Fig. 1.6) and *Visual Autobiography* (1968, Fig. 1.7), are so thematically obscure and intellectually layered that one could stare at most of them for significant periods of time without considering their authors' sexuality. The four-lobed bloom of Derrick Cross's backside, however, and Mapplethorpe's juxtapositions of himself with homoerotic sculpture, are statements and exclamations, not vague, veiled insinuations. In a 1990 review comparing Mapplethorpe's sexually-themed works with those of Minor White (Fig. 1.8), Ingrid Sischy describes White as fitting "a stereotype that many people are comfortable with—the homosexual artist who feels rotten about his sexuality and agrees not to thrust it in people's faces...Instead of photographing rocks to suggest sex, Mapplethorpe made pictures of men having sex."²¹

II. Life

Mapplethorpe's Polaroids and mid-career prints share the celebratory spirit of the post-Stonewall²² 1970s recalled by Randy Shilts in the opening paragraphs of *And the Band*

²¹ Ingrid Sischy, "Photography White and Black," *The New Yorker* (13 November 1989), 135-36.

²² The Stonewall Inn is a Greenwich Village gay bar that was raided in the early morning of June 27th, 1969. Instead of fleeing and/or reluctantly cooperating, as was the usual response to such raids, patrons and passers-by grew angry, throwing bottles, bricks, and other objects at police making arrests. A full-scale two-hour riot erupted involving almost 1000 protestors and hundreds of police officers. The riot garnered extensive media coverage, and many see it as a tipping point in gay rights organization and visibility. See Vicki L. Eaklor, *Queer America: A GLBT History of the 20th Century* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 123.

Played On, his epic narrative of the earliest years of the AIDS epidemic in the United States²³:

July 4, 1976, New York Harbor: Tall sails scraped the deep purple night as rockets burst, flared and flourished red, white, and blue over the stoic Statue of Liberty. The whole world was watching, it seemed; the whole world was there. Ships from fifty-five nations had poured sailors into Manhattan to join the throngs, counted in the millions, who watched the greatest pyrotechnic extravaganza ever mounted, all for America's 200th birthday party. Deep into the morning, bars all over the city were crammed with sailors. New York City had hosted the greatest party ever known, everybody agreed later. The guests had come from all over the world.

This was the part the epidemiologists would later note, when they stayed up late at night and the conversation drifted toward where it had started and when. They would remember that glorious night in New York Harbor, all those sailors, and recall: From all over the world they came to New York.²⁴

The 1970s were the party before the storm. The decade following the political impetus of the Stonewall riot but preceding the jarring discovery of AIDS is often considered a golden age of gay culture, politics, and visibility.²⁵ Gay men and lesbians flocked to large cities like New York and San Francisco, drawn by the proliferation of gay bars and bathhouses, and the promise of meeting others with whom they could identify. Activist Rodger McFarlane, who grew up on an Alabama farm and moved to New York City as an adult, describes the effects of suddenly being surrounded by acceptance, love, and requited homosexual desire:

All of those 'loves that dare not speak their names,' all of those forbidden sex acts, were there free for the taking. And that was also very liberating. Because it

²³ The book detailed the appearance and spread of the virus, the challenges faced by researchers and medical professionals in the U.S. and Europe, the American government's sluggish response to the epidemic, and the social responses of the gay population.

²⁴ Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 3.

²⁵ Eaklor, 156. See 124-25 for a cogent debate over whether Stonewall itself spurred on the rapid changes of the following years, or whether it was more indicative of a spirit of change that was already in place.

removed shame. It removed shame by the bucketfuls. It replaced shame, in fact, with great joy and self-discovery, of your body and other people's body [sic], and loving each other, I mean all the good stuff about free love.²⁶

The seventies saw the founding of the Gay Rights National Lobby, Lambda Legal, and other political organizations. These service and lobbying groups, as well as the election of openly gay public officials such as Harvey Milk and Allan Spear, contributed to both the visibility of the gay population and real legal changes. Numerous states passed antidiscrimination laws and/or decriminalized sodomy;²⁷ and the American Psychological Association declassified homosexuality as a disease.²⁸ Taking a page from earlier equal rights movements, gay organizations reminded members that the personal is political, and encouraged them to come out to their families, friends, and others. The importance of and opportunities for visibility are apparent in gay-themed cultural production of the 1970s, which gradually went public after existing underground (or not at all) for so long. The mid-1970s saw the founding of Gay Sunshine Press and the commencement of Arno Press's series on homosexuality.²⁹ The field of queer studies began to develop, with the first undergraduate courses in the field taught at several universities in 1970.³⁰ While homophobia was still a constant presence for most gay

²⁶ *Gay Sex in the 70s*, dir. Joseph F. Lovett (Peccadillo Pictures, 2005).

²⁷ Eaklor, 155-59. In several cases, these laws were reversed due to the political sway of the New Right. For instance, Alabama decriminalized sodomy in 1975, only to reverse the decision in 1977.

²⁸ Toni A.H. McNaron, *Poisoned Ivy: Lesbian and Gay Academics Confronting Homophobia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997) 17.

²⁹ Philip Clark, "Come Again: A History of the Reprinting of Gay Novels," in *The Lost Library: Gay Fiction Rediscovered*, ed. Tom Cardamone (New Rochelle, NY: Haiduk Press, 2010), 214.

³⁰ Crompton, Louis, "Politics and Education in Nebraska in 1970," (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Archives, 1994), reproduced in McNaron, 168.

Americans, the necessity of closeting and isolation was slowly loosening its oppressive hold.

On June 28th, 1970, over 5000 gay men and lesbians held the first gay pride march in New York to mark the one-year anniversary of Stonewall. New York's lower west side in 1970 was also the place and time in which Robert Mapplethorpe's veiling of himself ended. His last romantic relationship with a woman, Patti Smith, dissolved; he definitively came out, and he met his first real boyfriends, including model and Factory regular David Croland. It was also the year in which he began taking photographs, documenting his experience of the "greatest party ever known," gay liberation in 1970s New York. First borrowing a camera and then using his own, Mapplethorpe worked almost exclusively in the Polaroid medium from then until 1975, when he received a Hasselblad medium-format camera as a gift from Wagstaff.³¹ Categorically, it would be easy to divide the Polaroids depicting male bodies into images of himself and images of others. But it is more useful to differentiate between (a) those that present the body as a site of physical experimentation, (b) those recording emotional and/or sexual closeness, and (c) those asserting a classical ideal.

The first category records Mapplethorpe's investigation of the plasticity and sexual reactions of his own body and those of others; it is a journey of self-discovery akin to what McFarlane describes. *Made in Canada* (1973, Fig. 1.9) is a triptych of photographs, each a straight-on shot of six Polaroids in an open album. Each of the 18 Polaroids shows a close-up of a white man's crotch or buttocks as he manipulates his

³¹ Patti Smith, *Just Kids* (New York, HarperCollins, 2010), 147-54. Mapplethorpe first borrowed a Polaroid camera from fellow Chelsea Hotel resident Sandy Daley in 1970, then later on used a Graflex with a Polaroid back. His production of Polaroids virtually ceased after Sam Wagstaff gave him a Hasselblad medium-format camera in 1975.

private parts with a g-string, a black cord, or a pair of zippered leather briefs. There is an emphasis on action and reaction, as skin is alternately scrunched, concealed, and revealed, and the tightening of the cord induces varying levels of arousal. It is unclear whether the model is Mapplethorpe or not, but they recall Lucas Samaras's Polaroids of roughly the same era (Fig. 1.10), for which the artist transformed his own image by physically manipulating the photographic dyes; Vito Acconci's bodily experiments (Fig. 1.11); or Bruce Naumann's photographs from the late 1960s in which he pulls and prods at his neck, mouth, and other body parts.³² The clear difference, though, is the Mapplethorpes' overt sexual content and exploration of gay and sadomasochistic acts.

Many of the Polaroids merely show blurry close-ups of his own hands and feet, as though he is just beginning to learn about them, while others are porn-inspired shots of attractive men in bondage gear like *Untitled (David Croland)* (1972, Fig. 1.12). This black-and-white image presents an upper-torso shot of Croland lying on his back on a tiled bathroom floor, mouth gagged and arms stiff at his sides as though bound. Shirtless, he wears a tuxedo vest and bow tie, recalling the costume of an exotic dancer (despite his stillness). His head is thrown back, hair pooling on the tile and Adam's apple protruding, and his eyes gaze directly and libidinally at the camera. Croland's body is tense, responding to the tightness of his bonds, but his gaze shows a trusting response to the photographer's presence and regard, similar to the mood of Mapplethorpe's more platonic images of Smith. Here, physical experimentation overlaps with and augments a moment of emotional and sexual closeness. Most of the Polaroids are, in fact, moments—

³² Richard D. Marshall briefly associates Mapplethorpe's Polaroid self-portraits with the Post-Minimalist embrace of the body as an artistic medium in the late 1960s and early 70s, as exemplified by Nauman, Acconci, and Chris Burden. See Richard D. Marshall, *Robert Mapplethorpe: Autoportrait* (Santa Fe: Arena Editions, 2001), np.

moments in which the photographer's or subject's body responds in a certain way, or moments of particular feeling between two people in a space (or, one person alone with himself). They are active and fleeting, and there is a feeling that the photographs are *records* of what has passed or been learned.

III. Immortality

The Polaroids and prints working with a classical ideal, however, do not act in this way. *Untitled (Manfred)* (1974, Fig. 1.13) presents the s-curve of the subject's backside as he poses with one hand in his hair and the other at his waist. The narrow, alcove-like doorway framing him emphasizes the length of his body, the lean, defined muscles of his back curving into shapely buttocks and legs. The archway is also playfully phallic, its blatant erectness contrasting with the more relaxed and subtle shadow of the man's penis, its downward orientation visible through the gap in his legs.

This is a picture of Manfred, as the title indicates, but it is not so much a moment between him and the photographer as it is a recognition and preservation of ideal beauty. His placement in a niche, like an expensive vase or precious carving, suggests that he does not exist anywhere else; his role as marble sculpture suggests both innate physical power and the longevity and incorruptibility of his beauty. As noted by Blessing, the aesthetic language of Classicism has been co-opted by gay men throughout history—from Michelangelo to Johann Winckelmann to Oscar Wilde—as a precedent of

homosexual power and freedom³³, and as a publicly acceptable, albeit limited, way to express love of the male body. Winckelmann rhapsodizes about the Greeks' homoerotic "eternal monuments,"³⁴ and, describing his encounter with the Apollo Belvedere, he writes: "I am transported to Delos and the sacred groves of Lycia...and the statue seems to come alive like the beautiful creation of Pygmalion."³⁵ The marble figure he encounters facilitates a suspension of time, allowing possession of a beautiful male body and a fantasy of existence in a time in which such possession would be acceptable.

Mapplethorpe desires these same things, but unlike Winckelmann, he actually has them. Like an Academic nude, Manfred inhabits a hermetic space in which neither time nor clothing exists. He does not gaze into the camera, fostering a give-and-take interaction; rather, the viewer (and the photographer, the scene's first viewer) can possess him without any challenge at all. The photograph embodies not wistful desire but High Classical triumph. This is achieved through the pairing of the potent visual languages Mapplethorpe appropriates and the social environment in which he lived, which provided a relatively safe space to use this kind of loaded, historically gay imagery in a more

³³ However, some supporters of gay rights have been wary of the role of ancient Greece as a precedent. Most notably, in *The History of Sexuality* (1984), Michel Foucault argues against the idea that Greek homosexual relationships should specifically be seen as a model for contemporary homosexual relationships. Also, it should be noted that Classicism has been associated with female homosexuality as well, but mostly due to lesbian themes in the poetry of Sappho, and not widespread acceptance of lesbianism or the rights of women.

³⁴ Johann Winckelmann, "Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford/NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 31.

³⁵ Johann Winckelmann, "Apollo Belvedere," *The Classical Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 55-56. We know the Apollo Belvedere as a Roman marble copy of a Greek [bronze] original; though most Greek sculpture was produced in bronze, marble sculpture is consistently associated with ancient Greece in the popular imagination for a variety of reasons.

straightforward way. Manhattan's lower west side was one of the most gay-friendly places on earth in the 1970s, full of liberal artists, musicians, and poets, and home to many of the gay nightclubs Mapplethorpe frequented. Never once in her memoir *Just Kids* (detailing her time with Mapplethorpe) does Patti Smith mention her friend suffering slurs or discrimination.³⁶

Both his sexual and artistic identity were supported by a wide circle of friends, which came to include powerful curators and collectors such as John McKendry of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Mapplethorpe's eventual patron and partner Sam Wagstaff. Wagstaff had seen the photographer's portrait, and his work, in Croland's apartment in 1972 and insisted on having his number. His first words to Mapplethorpe over the phone were "Is this the shy pornographer?"³⁷ It was through these wealthy and educated men that Mapplethorpe began to delve into the history of photography. Smith recalls obsessively combing bookstores with Mapplethorpe and Wagstaff, looking for vintage prints and publications. Wagstaff, unimpeded by monetary concerns, would buy bags full of photographs in a single day.³⁸ Together they learned about photography that ranged from the vernacular to then-little-known homoerotic nudes by Thomas Eakins, George Platt Lynes, and Wilhelm von Gloeden.

It is clear that these photographers' embrace of Classical perfection directly influenced Mapplethorpe's choices in the late 1970s and first half of the 1980s, the period in which most of his formal, medium-format nudes were produced. *Ajitto* (1981, Fig.

³⁶ Not to say that this never occurred, but it can be inferred that homophobia was not an everyday occurrence for him as it might have been for an openly gay man in most other parts of the U.S.

³⁷ Smith, 203.

³⁸ *Black White + Gray*.

1.14) looks as much to photographic predecessors as it does to sculpture.³⁹ It presents a side view of the beautiful, muscular body of a black man sitting atop a tiny, cloth-draped table or stool. Back hunched and knees drawn into his chest, he wraps his arms around his shins and rests his forehead on his knees. Like Manfred and so many of the mid-career nudes, Ajitto does not meet our gaze. He oscillates between appearing contemplative and coming off as though he is looking away to allow us more comfort and agency in looking at him and constructing his meaning. He is simultaneously active subject and passive object.

The distinctive pose is a quote of two earlier photographs, *Ebony and Ivory* by F. Holland Day (1897, Fig. 1.15) and von Gloeden's *Cain* (1900, Fig. 1.16).⁴⁰ Both photographs endeavor, in different ways, to make the body a sculptural object. Day's studio photograph, like Mapplethorpe's, depicts a young black man perched on a tabletop. However, he showcases the man's race and stereotyped cultural identity by draping the table with a leopard skin and juxtaposing the figure with a tiny tabletop sculpture of a white nude in a stepping or running pose. While the essentialism implied in

³⁹ I am by no means the first scholar to describe Mapplethorpe's nudes as sculptural. Others who have examined this notion in various ways include Germano Celant, Jennifer Blessing, and Jeffrey D. Grove, who writes: "Mapplethorpe tends to isolate these figures, truncating sections of their bodies and presenting them as purely sculptural objects." Jeffrey D. Grove, "Robert Mapplethorpe's Self-Portraits" (Ph.D. diss., Case Western Reserve University, 1999), 47.

⁴⁰ Both images are, in turn, quotes of French painter Jean Hippolyte Flandrin's *Jeune Homme Assis au Bord de la Mer* (Young Man Sitting by the Seashore, 1835-36). However, it's unlikely that Mapplethorpe was familiar with the painting, since it is in Paris, it is by a painter not well-known in the U.S., and Mapplethorpe is not known to have been particularly knowledgeable about the history of painting. See Michael Camille, "The Abject Gaze and the Homosexual Body: Flandrin's *Figure d'Etude*," *Journal of Homosexuality* 27.1-2 (1994) for a discussion of the pose's history, including Mapplethorpe's employ of it. Grove reads *Ajitto*'s pose as a certain descendent of von Gloeden's image, but does not mention any other influences. Otherwise, Mapplethorpe scholarship doesn't appear to discuss precursors for *Ajitto*'s pose.

this comparison is troubling, the sculpture, the table, and the raking light illuminating the scene are intriguing in that they encourage interpretation of the man's body as a sculptural object as well. Von Gloeden seats his nude white model on a cliff or boulder in the foreground of a hilly, rocky landscape. The young man's pose is more hunched-over than that of Day's model; he is almost fetal, and is tonally integrated into the landscape, as though he has just been born from the living rock.

Ajitto appears ready for display in a gallery show. The table supporting him is tiny, unlike Day's, so it more readily acts as a pedestal as well as emphasizing the balance and strength Ajitto would need to stay motionless atop it. His body, pure beauty and solid form, offers an elegant repetition of downward-opening angles: up through his torso and back down along his arm, the bend of his legs, the upside-down V of his relaxed genitals, the corner of his mouth, and even in the photograph's many negative spaces. The complexity of his body parts in space begs the viewer to walk around him and watch as the angles form new relationships and the light shifts on the satin glow of his skin. Indeed, the photograph is part of a series of four—one from each side—that lets us experience this man in the round. Mapplethorpe consciously crafts a sculptural experience for the spectator. Instead of visually comparing the body with materials of the earth or inanimate sculpted objects, however, he displays the body in the manner of a sculpture and encourages viewers to experience and accept it as one.

In looking to earlier photographers' works, Mapplethorpe does not appear to be looking to and valuing their age—their of-the-past-ness—per se. His men are not adorned with trappings of the past, and his photographs aren't antique in appearance. What he takes is a visual language for depicting eternal beauty, homoerotic desire, possession, and

perfection. He made it apparent throughout his career that his interest in photography lay in (a) its potential to capture human intimacy, and (b) its ability to rapidly realize his artistic vision. More than once he described his artistic drive as sculptural,⁴¹ and saw photography as a way to reconcile that drive with his impatience in working:

“Photography is just, like the perfect way to make a sculpture. You can do it in an afternoon, put all this concentration into it and then you’re on to something else.”⁴² The excitement of photography was akin to the excitement of sex, and did not reconcile itself with any kind of drawn-out labor. Once Mapplethorpe began working with a medium-format camera, and was able to retain the services of a professional printer,⁴³ the Polaroid medium was no longer necessary to swiftly realize a work.

The Classical aesthetic and suspended temporality of the mid-career nudes depart from the early experimental Polaroids.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the heavy emphasis on the viewer’s gaze and visual experience is a marked difference from the bodily experimentation and subject-object rapport of the early 1970s. *Ajitto* may well have been a collaborative experience for both parties,⁴⁵ but the resulting image offers up an inequality of power. David Croland is tied up in the untitled 1973 Polaroid of him, and we can potentially touch him, but he challenges us and wants us in return. It is a single

⁴¹ Janet Kardon, “Robert Mapplethorpe Interview,” in Robert Mapplethorpe, *The Perfect Moment* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1989), 27.

⁴² Anne Horton, “Robert Mapplethorpe: Interview January 11, 1987,” in Robert Mapplethorpe, *Robert Mapplethorpe 1986* (Berlin: Raab Galerie, 1987), 12.

⁴³ Tom Baril, first employed by Mapplethorpe in 1979, is the printer most associated with the artist’s works.

⁴⁴ It should be noted that Mapplethorpe produced several S&M-themed silver gelatin prints in the late 1970s that retain the sense of physical experimentation. The most infamous of these is *Helmut and Brooks* (1978), which is often referred to as simply “the fisting picture.” However, production of these all but ceased by 1980.

⁴⁵ And the photographer’s discussion of his work supports this. See Horton, 6-7.

moment of interaction, and the situation could change. Ajitto exists in temporal suspension; he is forever still, there for us to walk around and gaze at, but not to touch. He is sculptural, but less tactile; the perfection of his solid muscles and skin embody something pure, transcendent, and eternal. The only break to be found in this is a crease on his thigh, evidence of a pair of briefs taken off. Still, it is as though he has shed his earthly skin and entered a realm in which clothes do not exist at all, only the physical embodiment of pure spirit. Mapplethorpe has already discovered men as physical and sexual beings; now he aims to identify, possess, and worship perfection in an all-encompassing, spiritual way.

Spirituality always had a strong pull for Mapplethorpe, who was raised Catholic and served as an altar boy. He did not practice later in life, but remained fascinated by the ritual, dualism, transcendence, and decadent imagery of Catholicism.⁴⁶ His fetishistic jewelry and assemblages of the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as *Tie Rack*⁴⁷ (1969, Fig. 1.17) incorporate found devotional imagery. Both these and his photographic prints invest the body with a tremendous amount of spiritual power, particularly as a representation of the eternal. *Tie Rack* incorporates a portrait of the Virgin revealing her glowing heart, as though in a vision, and a crucifix strung from stigmata-like holes in her hands. These two representations together point to unearthly existence and emphasize an everlasting, flawless union of the physical and spiritual; Catholic dogma holds that the bodies of Christ and the Virgin, along with their souls, were assumed whole into heaven, where they live in perfection forever. Mapplethorpe turns away from the also-present

⁴⁶ Grove, 69 and Wolf, 23-25.

⁴⁷ Smith mentions in her memoir that Mapplethorpe made the tie rack for her as a 23rd birthday gift. Smith, 131.

Catholic notion that the body is naturally debased and inherently sinful, and toward an immaculate union of flesh and spirit.

We have no doubt that Ajitto, Derrick Cross, and the other nudes have already entered this state of being, and that the photographer desires, by association, to be there with them. Ajitto's pedestal is also an altar, and the lines and shadows of Derrick Cross's backside compose (appropriately) a cruciform shape.⁴⁸ The light bathing *Ken Moody* (1983, Fig. 1.18) is a state of grace as much as it is sunlight or a photographer's strobe.

IV. Death

It is a state that, in reality, did not last for many. Mapplethorpe never provided a clear explanation for why his production of nudes dropped off after 1985,⁴⁹ but in discussing the ongoing effects of AIDS on the art world in early 1989, he turned his attention to the beautiful men of his *Black Book*, a collection of black male nudes taken between 1977 and 1986. "Most of the blacks don't have health insurance and therefore can't afford AZT," he said. "They all died quickly, the blacks. If I go through my *Black Book*, half of them are dead."⁵⁰ The racial and class implications of this are jarring. In 1987,

⁴⁸ The use of buttocks to make a cross shape may be an homage to Man Ray's *Monument à D.A.F. de Sade* (1933), and could be a reference to the sitter's name as well.

⁴⁹ He produced one series of nudes in 1986, all titled *Thomas*, and one series in 1987, all titled *Livingston*. The Thomas images are fairly typical of his work, but the Livingston photographs all show the subject with his face turned away from the camera, or focus on fragmented parts of his body, such as single nipples.

⁵⁰ Dominick Dunne, "Robert Mapplethorpe's Proud Finale," *Vanity Fair* 342 (February 1989), 185. In "Looking for Trouble," Mercer reads this statement as an acknowledgement of shared marginality.

pharmaceutical company Burroughs Wellcome set a year of AZT at \$10,000,⁵¹ a price that was well out of reach for many people with AIDS (PWAs), including lower-income African-Americans. However, despite access to early versions of AIDS drugs, even the wealthiest PWAs like Mapplethorpe were not promised long lives. Peter F. Cohen sees the early years of the AIDS epidemic as a crisis of consumption for middle- and upper-class gay white men: “Accustomed to having market access to whatever commodities they wanted, middle-class gay men found themselves faced with an epidemic for which no cure could be purchased because none existed.”⁵² Succinctly, he writes, “Money can’t buy you love. It also can’t buy you a cure for AIDS.”⁵³ The mid- to late 1980s were a time of dreadful uncertainty for many gay men, who did not know when or if they would become sick, and for whom funerals became a common element of life. By early 1985 the death toll in the U.S. was 4000,⁵⁴ and by 1987, when tests were finally widely available, it had risen to 20,000.⁵⁵ Dr. Robert M. Wachter recalls a young PWA telling him, “My friends die more often than my grandmother’s friends do. And she’s 86 years old.”⁵⁶

A prevailing sentiment expressed by artists with (or surrounded by) AIDS was anger. Like other activists and supporters, they were frustrated by the snail’s pace at which the Reagan administration mobilized its resources to research and fight the disease,

⁵¹ Peter F. Cohen, *Love and Anger: Essays on AIDS, Activism, and Politics* (New York: Haworth Press, 1998), 16. After a number of mergers, Burroughs Wellcome is now under the umbrella of pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline.

⁵² Cohen, 9.

⁵³ Cohen, 69.

⁵⁴ Dennis Altman, *AIDS and the New Puritanism* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 1.

⁵⁵ Robert M. Wachter, M.D., *The Fragile Coalition: Scientists, Activists, and AIDS* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 60.

⁵⁶ Wachter, 61.

and by pharmaceutical companies' desire to make a profit from it. One of the most outspoken and eloquent artists to respond to the epidemic was David Wojnarowicz, whose activist video work *Silence = Death* (1990, Fig. 1.19) includes the now-famous image of the artist with his lips sewn shut. In the essay "Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell," he remarks that a memorial for a gay PWA had "little reverberation outside the room it was held in. A commercial for handiwipes unfortunately had a higher impact on the society at large."⁵⁷

The Silence = Death slogan used by Wojnarowicz was invented in 1986 by a collective of New York activists, who merged with ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) a year later. Founded by Larry Kramer in 1987,⁵⁸ ACT UP became known for public interventions encouraging personal, political, artistic, and scientific action to fight AIDS. These ranged from a successful protest of Burroughs Wellcome at the New York Stock Exchange⁵⁹ to the controversial disruption of mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral, during which one protestor (subsequently berated by others) destroyed a consecrated host in reaction to Cardinal John O'Connor's anti-gay statements and opposition to condom distribution.⁶⁰ The collective Gran Fury, ACT UP's art and propaganda arm, installed a protest work titled *Let the Record Show* (1987-88, Fig. 1.20) in the window of the New Museum. *Let the Record Show* juxtaposed the Silence=Death logo—the words below a

⁵⁷ David Wojnarowicz, "Postcards from America: X-rays from Hell," in Elizabeth Sussman, *Nan Goldin: I'll Be Your Mirror* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996), 383.

⁵⁸ Wachter, 60.

⁵⁹ ACT UP New York: Capsule History: 1989, <http://www.actupny.org/documents/cron-89.html>. For the NYSE intervention, members chained themselves to the VIP balcony to protest AZT's high price tag of \$10,000 per year. A few days later, Burroughs Wellcome (which was traded on the NYSE) dropped the price to \$6400 per year.

⁶⁰ Cohen, 129.

pink triangle—with images of public figures who had responded to the AIDS crisis with silence or homophobia: Ronald Reagan, New York mayor Ed Koch, and Cardinal O'Connor, among others.⁶¹

Mapplethorpe did not participate in organized dissent,⁶² but he too was angry and uncertain about the future. A rare expression of potentially political anger can be seen in *Roy Cohn* (1987, Fig. 1.21).⁶³ Commissioned to produce a portrait of the conservative lawyer and Eugene McCarthy protégé, Mapplethorpe created an image of evil incarnate. Cohn, later immortalized as an antagonist in the play and film *Angels in America*, was a closeted gay man who had nonetheless spent much of his legal career persecuting homosexuals during the Cold War. He died in 1986 of AIDS complications, though he claimed until his dying day that it was liver cancer he suffered from. The Roy Cohn in Mapplethorpe's portrait is a menacing, disembodied head, shot from above. Instead of softening Cohn's features to flatter his appearance, Mapplethorpe makes every wrinkle and liver spot visible and crisp. The overhead lighting bestows heavy, shadowy brows on the subject, and the relatively high vantage point, unusual in Mapplethorpe's portraiture, allows us to look down on him. The resulting upward glare is vengeful and cold. Whether

⁶¹ New Museum Digital Archive, "Let the Record Show," http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Occurrence/Show/occurrence_id/158, accessed 19 March 2012.

⁶² At least, not throughout most of his life. In 1988 he established the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, which seeks to support photographic art and HIV/AIDS-related research. Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation website, <http://www.mapplethorpe.org/foundation/>, accessed 21 April 2012.

⁶³ Date of printing, not of photographing; Roy Cohn died in 1987.

or not we are familiar with Cohn's story, we know that we are supposed to dislike and distrust him.⁶⁴

Most of Mapplethorpe's anxiety, however, manifested itself in more subtle ways. He and Wagstaff were both hospitalized and diagnosed with AIDS by 1986,⁶⁵ and it has been speculated that Mapplethorpe was probably aware of his illness for some time before receiving official confirmation of it.⁶⁶ During this period, the focus of his work shifted from explicit nudity to portraiture commissions and floral still lifes. When queried about this shift in 1988, he merely stated, "I'm not photographing anything naked these days. That isn't to say I won't again, but I haven't been concentrating on bodies recently."

It shouldn't be assumed that Mapplethorpe's late work says nothing about the body and the photographer's experience of it. His statement that photographing a flower and photographing a cock (and, by extension, a body) are basically the same thing is supported over and over again by compositional similarities between the nudes and still lifes, often in works produced around the same time as each other. *Marty Gibson* (1982 Fig. 1.22) presents the lower half of a man laying on his back with his arms around his thighs, exposing his rear end, his genitals, and the pale soles of his feet. His semi-erect penis tilts gracefully to the side like a pliant stem, with the protuberance of his testicles in

⁶⁴ Michael Cadden interprets the portrait as a homosexual reclamation of Cohn and states that "divorced from either corporeal or community context, Cohn is simply seen, as it were, 'giving good head.'" Michael Cadden, "Strange Angel: The Pinklisting of Roy Cohn" in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, ed. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 82. This seems like a drastic stretch.

⁶⁵ Smith, 265-66. She writes that this is when Mapplethorpe was first hospitalized and diagnosed, and that Wagstaff was even worse off by that time.

⁶⁶ Dunne, 185. When asked if he suspected he had AIDS before his diagnosis, Mapplethorpe replied, "Every faggot suspects beforehand."

the place of a vase or bulb. *Orchid and Leaf in White Vase* (1982, Fig. 1.23) is visually analogous, showing the swell of the vase and firm bow of the leaf, bending gently in the direction opposite to Gibson's penis. Several other potential pairings from 1982 are even more apparent in their similarities, such as *Marty Gibson (feet)* (Fig. 1.24) and *Orchid* (Fig. 1.25), and, most obviously, *Philip Prioleau* (Fig. 1.26) and *Orchid with Palmetto* (Fig. 1.27). *Stems* (Fig. 1.28) and *Lucinda's Hand* (Fig. 1.29), both from 1985, provide a later example, albeit with the androgynous-looking hand of a woman.

There is something dark and melancholy about the flowers, though, an absence of the celebration that exists in the mid-career nudes. Mapplethorpe was aware of this aspect of his floral still lifes, saying that he found his flower photographs a bit creepy, and that "I don't love flowers and I don't like having them around... Watering them and dripping on the floor... And watching them die and feeling guilty about them."⁶⁷ I will not try to interpret this statement as a metaphor for the artist's guilt at watching his friends and lovers die, but it does represent a clear difference in his understanding of the works produced later in his career. The temporal is present in a way it is not in the nudes, and in a way that is different from the bulk of the Polaroids. Though these natural objects are always perfect specimens, they are nonetheless vulnerable, ephemeral, and crisscrossed with shadows. Their solitude is not a hermetic encapsulation of perfection; instead, each orchid or calla lily (his preferred blooms) is a stark *memento mori*. This effect is especially pronounced in still lifes produced in 1984 or after, whether floral or otherwise.

Three still lifes from the mid-1980s—*Pheasant* (1984, Fig. 1.30), *Grapes* (1985, Fig. 1.31), and *Eggplant* (1985, Fig. 1.32)—all present a rather grim and anxiety-laden

⁶⁷ Horton, 10.

view of perishable natural objects. The pheasant and the voluminous bunch of grapes are both deep in shadow, trussed up against a dark background, and the slender eggplant lies on a dark surface, repeatedly transected by the blunt, linear shadows of a set of Venetian blinds. The pheasant is the only definitively dead object or person Mapplethorpe is known to have photographed, and this makes apparent the uncertain life-status of the fruit and flowers. Are the fresh fruits and flowers we eat and admire dead, or are they alive? At what point do they pass from one to the other? The heavy, fertile-looking grapes and the phallic eggplant are smooth and attractive, but they are also ominous and looming, threatening to be engulfed by darkness. Despite their fresh appearance, they have been cut from their vines and will wrinkle and rot unless consumed. When would we call them dead? They are liminal, in transition; they are on their way to death but still strongly refer to the condition of life. Several figural works from this period also appear to exist in transition, such as *Lucinda's Hand*, *Vibert's Back* (1984, Fig. 33), *Ken Moody* (1984), *Doris Saatchi* (1984, Fig. 34), and *Alice Neel* (1984, Fig. 35). These last three depict the subjects' faces, their eyes closed as in reverie or death, a poignant pose for Neel, who died shortly thereafter.⁶⁸

In humans, the point at which a person is considered dead by society is described as “social death.”⁶⁹ This is a flexible term, since timed medical death is a very recent concept,⁷⁰ and is not one that always accurately describes people's experience and perception of death and dying. For some, death is the moment at which a person's heart stops, or he or she loses consciousness of the world. For others, it is a process: One can

⁶⁸ The Neel image has been referred to as a death mask in purpose and appearance; see Grove, 232.

⁶⁹ James W. Green, 51.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 48.

be alive, but see oneself as actively dying at the same time. James W. Green describes the effects of modern medicine—which often keeps chronically or terminally ill people alive for vast spans of time before their bodies give out—on our constructions of social death: “The stretched-out time of dying is a modern medical miracle that makes death different... This decline generates a preliminary social death, the long period of lingering made possible by ICUs, ventilators, and other medical regimes.”⁷¹

Green’s description is one many PWAs would have identified with, though activists have increasingly sought to be identified with vitality rather than dying, an attitude reflected in numerous cultural works of the 1990s, such as the Tony-winning productions *Angels in America* and *Rent*. “La Vie Bohème,” *Rent*’s cataloguing of liberal-intellectual pop culture, proclaims the importance of “people living with, living with/ living with/ not dying from disease.” This attitude projects a sense of agency on the part of PWAs, and its spread is likely related (at least in part) to the appearance of effective AIDS drugs in the late 1980s, and increased hopes in the 1990s that an HIV diagnosis was not necessarily a death sentence.⁷²

In Mapplethorpe’s time, though, it nearly always seemed to be. He watched Wagstaff and other friends die, and Smith, in her memoir, describes how her friend’s response to illness slowly shifted from the anxious declaration that “I’m going to beat this thing”⁷³ to “Patti, I’m dying. It’s so painful.”⁷⁴ His works produced in the mid- to late

⁷¹ Ibid, 188.

⁷² This attitude existed in the mid-1980s, but was not as accepted or powerful as it later became. For an early example see “Founding Statement of People with AIDS/ARC (The Denver Principles),” *Newsline* 1 (June 1985), reproduced in *October* 43 (winter 1987): 148-9.

⁷³ Smith, 266

⁷⁴ Smith, 275

1980s refer to the pain of the body, and also to the psychological pain of losing absolute control of one's body and fate. *Self-Portrait* (1985, Fig. 1.36) shows a man of about forty, gazing intently to the side, brow furrowed and hairline slightly receding. Beside the artist's face is a blur in the shape of his profile, marking the swift turn of his head at the beginning of the exposure. He shifts from one place to another, marking himself physically and psychologically as a liminal being. Such a man exists in opposition to the exceedingly controlled, stable, and eternal bodies Mapplethorpe envisioned and executed earlier in the decade. Even in 1988 he stated: "My work is about order. I'm a perfectionist. I don't want anything to be questionable. If I'm doing a head, it has to be in the right position, where the nose hits the cheek."⁷⁵ However, cracks in this philosophy begin to show in works like the 1985 self-portrait. He could not have known exactly how this photograph would have turned out; making it would have required relinquishing the total control and exact vision on which he frequently thrived. This questions Jeffrey D. Grove's statement that Mapplethorpe's later work is marked by an obsession with complete control of his subject matter.⁷⁶ A significant portion of the later works, mostly self-portraits, allow the portrayal of anxiety, chance, or both.

Also, in rejecting the eternal, suspended temporality of the nudes, he turns toward an expanded temporality—a depiction of temporal *progression* that reflects lived physical and psychological experience. This is not the same as the experimental Polaroids, which show single instances of in-the-moment bodily awareness, even when they are part of a polyptych. Rather, *Self Portrait* visually refers to the past and present, and as a whole, it

⁷⁵ Mapplethorpe, quoted in Cathleen McGuigan, "Walk on the Wild Side," *Newsweek* (New York) 25 July 1988, 7.

⁷⁶ Grove, 15-16.

represents a psychological *process* of contemplation, one that begins in the past, continues in the present, and has bearing on the future. This photograph's temporal progression is similar to JoAnn Verburg's *3x Jim* (1989, Fig. 1.37), a multi-frame image that conveys the experience of psychological distance from another person. In the first two frames, the photographer's husband—seen life-size and at close range—stares into the distance, seemingly lost in his own thoughts; in the third his eyes meet our gaze. There is a similar process of thought and self-awareness in the Mapplethorpe self-portrait, though he never does look at us in it, which is rare. His images of himself are usually, in contrast, powerful in their directness—even if that directness refers to his own impending mortality. In *Self Portrait*, though, a sense of uncertainty looms; he is perhaps afraid of what we (or he) will see looking into his eyes.⁷⁷

Hand in Fire (1985, Fig. 1.38) is jarringly direct in its representation of painful behavior. Though there is no evidence that Mapplethorpe intended the photograph as a “playing with fire” metaphor for the unforeseen, terrible side effects of 1970s free love, it is undoubtedly a stressful and exceedingly temporal image. The hand, thrust into flames, tensely grasps at nothing, mimicking the curling fingers of the crucified Christ, and also recalling the eerie, disembodied tautness of *Lucinda's Hand*. The pain referred to isn't the exciting, experimental, in-the-moment pain seen in the early S&M photographs. It's not an encapsulated moment, and it's not a sexy picture. It's troubling, and the desire to plunge one's own hand into a fire, or depict it as such, alludes to torment that is present and ongoing, and/or the desire to purge oneself of such agony by destroying the flesh

⁷⁷ Grove sees Mapplethorpe's avoidance of the camera's gaze as an acknowledgment of and attempt at accepting his own HIV-positive status. Grove, 221.

altogether.⁷⁸ The photograph plays with the edge, like many of his images, but it is the edge of mortality and destruction of the body, not the edge of sexual pain. Choices made and consequences to come weigh heavily here.

Mapplethorpe again visits this dangerous edge with *Gun Blast* (1985, Fig. 1.39). Against a black background, a hand on the lower right squeezes the trigger of a revolver pointed toward the upper left corner of the frame. A swift, straight burst of gunpowder emerges from the gun's barrel like a spotlight. If there is a bullet, it has already left the frame. As in *Hand in Fire*, we are faced with mortal substances and an impulsive edge. The hand has been thrust into the fire; the gun has gone off. These dangerous substances have been released and may continue to wreak havoc; everything is liminal, and there is a lack of control that is wildly different from the earlier works. This is true in the sense of both the psychological implications of the subject matter, and the artist's control over his formal vision. Fire and gunpowder are swift, and their appearance on film can only be known after an image is developed, not before—which for so long was Mapplethorpe's *modus operandi*.

All these works exist in the in-between, and represent an expanded temporal experience in which an image is strongly linked with not just the now of its making, but the before and after. They are not isolated moments *or* hermetic worlds of temporal suspension; they mirror or create physical or psychological experiences for the viewer. They acknowledge the passage of time. Germano Celant notes Mapplethorpe's

⁷⁸ I would identify this as Mapplethorpe's hand, based on resemblance, the fact that it is unlike the body of any of his other white models, and that the photo would probably be labeled with an individual's name if it were not his own. As to the nature of the photograph, it is difficult to tell whether it is indeed a hand in a fire, or a double exposure/combination print that makes it appear to be so.

consciousness of time in his essay “Mapplethorpe as Neoclassicist,” but sees this as an effect of the photographer’s confrontation of “the problem of representing the infinity of being and existence.”⁷⁹ I would argue that Mapplethorpe, though aware that his *work* would exist well into the future, neither saw nor represented infinity in his own being near the end of his life.

Nowhere is his acknowledgment and experience of the temporal and fleeting more apparent than in the 1988 self-portrait with the death’s head cane. His face gaunt, lined, and floating in blackness, Mapplethorpe stares frankly out at the viewer. All we see of the rest of his body—once so central to his identity—is his right fist, the skin stretched tight over his knuckles as he firmly grips the cane. The fist and death’s head are photographed and printed in immaculate, focused detail, from the tiny hairs of his hand to the glinting highlight atop the skull. This is an abrupt and three-dimensional contrast with the artist’s flat, matte gray, slightly blurred face. His head is immaterial in its flatness, but his eyes are as wide-open and direct as his grip is strong. There is no looking away; he appears to stare down and grimly accept the specter of death. We must not forget that as the photographer, Mapplethorpe himself was the original viewer of this image. Indeed, it is as though he looks into a mirror, meeting his own eyes and recognizing both the vitality and the mortality that are in him.

The image could be read as a challenge to his mortality, but such an interpretation would ignore that Mapplethorpe visually presents his identification with death. His gaunt face is visually tethered to the skull, each an analogue of the other. The visual gravity of the skull’s sharp focus pulls the dying man’s head toward it. They will become one in the

⁷⁹ Celant, 50.

same, and eventually the hand will go slack and let go. As it is, though, his body and spirit remain in transition. The walking stick suggests that he is on a peregrination from life into death—into the unknown and undefined—as does the cloak-like blackness around him.

Mapplethorpe's head and hand show strength of various kinds, but his body, could we see it, would tell a different story. At this point in his life he was terribly ill, having been in and out of the hospital with AIDS-related conditions, including the Kaposi's sarcoma that left conspicuous lesions on his skin. In the self-portrait, he retreats from his wasted, once-beautiful body, and shifts the locus of his identity to his spiritual and psychological interior. It is a process not unlike the experience of *Angels in America* protagonist Prior Walter, a wealthy, beautiful PWA who, once his symptoms become severe, begins wearing a full-length black cloak everywhere he goes. For Prior Walter, who sees visions of an angel as his body grows weaker, the cloak is a denial of his corporeality and an acknowledgment of his increasingly (though darkly) spiritual experience of life.⁸⁰ It also mirrors his uncertainty about what is to come. Like Mapplethorpe, Prior Walter does not subscribe to any structured religion or belief system, so the passage into death is a murky and mysterious one.

Formally, *Self-Portrait* (1988) can be associated with several earlier portraits that make the body invisible, or nearly invisible: *Doris Saatchi* (1983), *Andy Warhol* (1986, Fig. 1.40), and *Roy Cohn* (1987). The portrait of Cohn, as discussed earlier, is in a disturbing category of its own. The other two have spiritual, even beatific overtones. Collector and art journalist Saatchi peacefully closes her eyes; her hair and skin are

⁸⁰ In an ending that is characteristic of the early 1990s, Prior Walter—unlike Mapplethorpe—continues to live with AIDS, though he does not initially expect to.

rendered in a bright, silvery white that gives the impression of light emanating from within. Warhol's head is framed in a round halo of light, as though Mapplethorpe has canonized him a saint in the history of art. Though the image of Saatchi retains some of the timeless perfection of the early 1980s, both photographs still sit in the liminal space occupied by Mapplethorpe's work later in life; Saatchi's eyes are shut and still, as in a death mask, and Warhol's halo is a round one, a shape traditionally only paired with a holy person who is already dead.⁸¹

Neither, however, implies the kind of fading and eventual absence Mapplethorpe's self-portrait confronts. In this sense, the self-portrait has much more in common with Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (Ross)* (1991, Fig. 1.41) and Wojnarowicz's *Untitled (Face in Dirt)* (1990, Fig. 1.42). *Untitled (Ross)* is an installation of thousands of cellophane-wrapped candies piled in a corner. Created in the year the artist's partner Ross Laycock died of AIDS complications, the pile has an approximate initial weight of 175 pounds: Ross's weight. Visitors are invited to take candies from the pile until it disappears altogether, at which point it is then replenished. The slow disappearance of the pile is a metaphor for Gonzalez-Torres's experience of his partner's body; the sweetness of the candy is cut by an awareness of fragility and immanent loss.⁸²

In an interview, he commented on the constant flux of the piece:

In a way this "letting go" of the work, this refusal to make a static form, a monolithic sculpture, in favor of a disappearing, changing, unstable, and fragile

⁸¹ Holy figures who are alive at the time their image is made are traditionally depicted with square haloes.

⁸² A similar assessment is made in Rainer Fuchs, "The Authorized Observer," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Catalog Raisonnee*, ed. Dietmar Elger (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 1997), 92.

form was an attempt on my part to rehearse my fears of having Ross disappear day by day right in front of my eyes.⁸³

Gonzalez-Torres created several candy spills of varying weights starting in 1990; at least two correspond to Ross's weight, and two more, both known as *Untitled (Lover Boys)* (1991) begin at 355 pounds, the weight of both men together. He acknowledges that Ross's fate will likely be his own, and marks their relationship, in addition to their bodies, as a thing that will change and one day cease to be.

When Wojnarowicz produced *Untitled (Face in Dirt)*, he, like Gonzalez-Torres and Mapplethorpe, had already lost someone and was confronting the eventual loss of his own body. The square black-and-white photograph presents a surface of dry, rocky earth, under which the artist is seemingly buried. Only his nose, mouth, and closed eyes are still visible as the concave surface of crumbling dirt encroaches on his already narrow face. His nostrils flare and his mouth gapes open; we feel the threat to his life and breath as he is buried alive. At this point, Wojnarowicz's lover Peter Hujar has been dead for three years, and he himself has another two years of struggle against disease and homophobia before his own death in 1992. *Untitled (Face in Dirt)* literally lays the full weight of this struggle on Wojnarowicz, and takes his body with it. Urgency and the loss of control are palpable as he hovers between the fervor of his life and, literally, the eventual burial of his death.

An early precursor to Mapplethorpe's representation of such a state exists in Edvard Munch's 1895 lithograph *Self-Portrait with Skeleton Arm* (Fig. 1.43), eerily similar in appearance and mood to the 1988 self-portrait. Munch's pale, disembodied head also stares grimly out at the viewer, and along the bottom of the frame lies a slender

⁸³ Robert Storr, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: An Interview," *Art Press* (January 1995): 13.

skeleton forearm and hand. It is obviously meant to be Munch's, as its position implies that the artist is resting his own forearm on the frame. Munch's self-portraits are as remarkably open and self-aware⁸⁴ as Mapplethorpe's, and as a chronically ill person, he too struggled with the specter of death. Throughout his life, Munch contended with both mental illness and tuberculosis, an affliction that had claimed the lives of his grandmother, aunt, mother, and sister.⁸⁵ In identifying with skeletal forms, both Mapplethorpe and Munch transform themselves into living *memento mori*. While there is no written evidence that Mapplethorpe saw and appropriated the form and theme of *Self-Portrait with Skeleton Arm*, it is certainly possible, since the Museum of Modern Art has had one in its collection since 1959.⁸⁶

The death's head self-portrait evidences how much had changed in Mapplethorpe's oeuvre since the opening of his first exhibition at Light Gallery in 1973. As an invitation for the show, he sent out a facsimile of a Polaroid self-portrait taken in a mirror, which he enclosed in a Tiffany envelope (Fig. 1.44).⁸⁷ The image, reversed in reproduction, shows his naked midsection; in front of his navel, his hands hold the Polaroid Land camera used to take the image. However, his genitals are obscured by a large white paper dot applied to the surface of the print, and cleverly, the camera takes

⁸⁴ These are qualities noted by Kynaston McShine in McShine, ed., *Edvard Munch: The Modern Life of the Soul* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 13.

⁸⁵ Sue Prideaux, *Edvard Munch: Behind the Scream* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 5, 13, 24, 31.

⁸⁶ Museum of Modern Art online database, http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A4164&page_number=11&template_id=1&sort_order=1, accessed 30 March 2012.

Mapplethorpe was also an avid museum-goer. In her memoir Smith describes how they would often go to museums when they were first a couple, but due to their poverty had to take turns actually going inside. One of them would get a ticket, and the other would wait outside to hear about the exhibitions the other saw. See Smith, 48.

⁸⁷ Wolf, 233.

their place, ready to eject the next photograph. He is shooting from his penis, and each invitation is a seduction of the viewer.⁸⁸ Like so many of his early images, this one exposes him physically, but his sexual confidence prevents any actual emotional exposure.

It has been suggested that Mapplethorpe's last three self-portraits—all titled *Self-Portrait* and produced in 1988—"did more to expose the artist's vulnerabilities than any images he had created previously."⁸⁹ This category includes a seated image of him in silk pajamas (Fig. 1.45), the death's-head self-portrait, and a horizontal close-up of his eyes and furrowed brow (Fig. 1.46). The first presents a man with unkempt hair and pale lips; though we see his fine paisley pajamas, his body shrinks into them and becomes lost in the folds of fabric. The Arts and Crafts chair he rests in is solid, and the clothing looks expensive and new; each of his velvet slippers has a crown embroidered on its toe. Mapplethorpe was notoriously attached to his things, which he saw as a marker of his success.⁹⁰ Certainly he is a far cry from the poverty-stricken art student who split hot dogs with Patti Smith for dinner, because there was only ever enough money for one.⁹¹ Still, like the exquisite glassware in a Dutch still life, Mapplethorpe's splendid things do more than mark his accomplishments. Their solidity and dark, rich textures provide a stark contrast to his increasingly frail body and papery skin. One wonders if the artist has gone back on his statement from a few years prior that "I would never take a self-portrait when I was depressed, for example, I don't want to see that part of me."⁹²

⁸⁸ Smith describes the invitations as a "seductive gift," 215.

⁸⁹ Grove, 226.

⁹⁰ Smith, 267.

⁹¹ Smith, 64.

⁹² Horton, 10.

If considered in the order of their making (pajamas, death's-head, eyes), the final three self-portraits illustrate an increasing reduction of Mapplethorpe's physical sense of self and a shrinking psychological self-location. First we see an ailing body surrounded by possessions, then selected body parts showing a strength of will in the absence of a reliable body. Finally, Mapplethorpe's representation of self is reduced to nothing but an anxious, penetrating gaze. Absence—of strength, of body, of beauty, of certainty—becomes increasingly present as a marker of time and of the balance of life and death. Mapplethorpe and his desires are shifting entities, no longer locatable in one single place, and thus no longer able to be fully encapsulated in a single, perfect, and whole body. Absence and flux render the ideal, and the suspension of time, impossible.

V. Humanity

Since Mapplethorpe's earlier appropriations of Classical visual language and the properties of sculpture produced visions of timeless perfection, it is curious that the photographs he made of actual sculpture during the last few years of his life thoroughly lack this effect. That no one knows what to make of these may be why so little attention has been accorded them. The otherwise excellent *Robert Mapplethorpe and the Classical Tradition* exhibition, mounted in 2004, included several late images of sculptures, but did not address them in the catalog's 27 pages of essays.⁹³ The sad, fragile beauty of these

⁹³ The one exception is three sentences on *Sleeping Cupid* (1989) at the end of Celant, 50. The exhibition *Robert Mapplethorpe and the Classical Tradition: Photographs and Mannerist Prints* was first presented by Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin, 24 July-17 October 2004, then traveled to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York 1 July-24 August 2005.

photographs, such as *Sleeping Cupid* (1989, Fig. 1.47), is poignant in its difference from the carefree, tactile experimentation of *Made in Canada* and the solid gorgeousness of *Ajitto*.

In that we exist in human form, we identify with the protagonist of the sculpture Mapplethorpe depicts in *Sleeping Cupid*—a sculpture from the artist's own collection.⁹⁴ With his head turned away from the viewer and bow hanging loosely from his hand, Cupid reclines in languid sleep atop a lion skin. In the upper left corner of the frame is a white square, inserted into the image by the photographer and his printer. The square is a mystery until one learns that the image was initially titled *Icarus*⁹⁵—Icarus the young mortal, who built wings for himself out of feathers and wax, which then melted when he flew too close to the sun. Icarus plummeted to his death, and remains a metaphor for those whose desire brings about terrible consequences.⁹⁶ The white square becomes the sun, and indeed, its position roughly corresponds with the direction of the light falling on the marble figure. It is uncertain why the title changed, or if it was Mapplethorpe who changed it, but it is easy to be moved by the human loss it potentially references.

As objects referencing bodies, the late sculpture images share something with the flowers. However, they do not at all have the perishability of the flowers or the bodies they allude to; the sculptures are durable and inorganic. Mapplethorpe seems to identify with the figures depicted, but also to have a keen awareness of his ultimate separation from them. The figure in this image is distanced from us by his disregard, the black abyss

⁹⁴ Smith, 267.

⁹⁵ Celant, 50.

⁹⁶ It is unclear why Mapplethorpe changed the title, though the sculpture is clearly Cupid, who is often depicted with a bow and accompanied by a lion. It is possible that he did not initially realize this when he acquired it, and later changed the title upon discovering the figure's true identity; or, the shift could have occurred for any number of other reasons.

surrounding him, and the literal distance of the camera, which is not intimately placed. The bloodless, pale translucence of the cool marble—rendered in exquisite, silvery detail—reminds us that despite any emotional reaction to the subject, this is just an object, an inanimate thing that will remain cold and unmoving as the rest of us pass on. Nowhere in Mapplethorpe's oeuvre has the division between things and people been so apparent. Though the photographer is absent from the frame, we are intensely aware of the instability and impermanence involved in possessing an organic body—or, perhaps, in being possessed by one. Death is a process, not a sudden occurrence. It does not allow infinite presence or static existence; it encourages experience.

Chapter 2

STILL LIFE WITH HUSBAND:

JOANN VERBURG AND THE EXPERIENCE OF MIDDLE AGE

My question is, “Where do I go from here? What do you want of me?”
 ...And you’ll want to know what does “beloved” mean, if not that. I don’t know. I
 only breathe
 one breath at a time.

—Jim Moore, “What it’s Like Here”

JoAnn Verburg works in the most traditional photographic categories: Landscape. Portrait. Still life. The figure. Her photographs, carefully composed and expertly printed, possess a formal rigor and quiet beauty that one assumes must be rooted in the modernist sensibilities of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. While this is not *untrue*, her lush, intimate works like *Still Life with Jim* (1991, Figure 2.1) and *Thanksgiving* (2001, Figure 2.2) are far from throwbacks, and are as grounded in the aesthetic experimentation and cultural concerns of the late twentieth century as are Cindy Sherman’s masquerades. Furthermore, her humanist drive to represent the physicality and emotion of individual experience complicates assumptions about what a postmodern photograph can be. More than almost any other photographer of her generation, Verburg has attended to the medium’s ability to express not frozen slices of time, but humans’ gradual, temporal experience of the world.

It is almost certainly no coincidence that Verburg, an American photographer living in Minnesota and Italy, and the other artists whose explorations of mortality are discussed in this volume, are of the Baby Boom generation. Born after the Second World War, between 1945 and 1964,⁹⁷ their vast cohort engendered a radical new cultural ideology that was permissive in its attitudes toward the body and the self. While none of these characterizations applies to every single Boomer, the cultural differences between

⁹⁷ These dates are debated among scholars, but don’t vary by more than about five years.

them and previous generations is apparent. Many wore miniskirts, experimented with drugs, protested war and segregation, and examined the constraints of gender roles. Critics' marginalization of the individual author, and individual experience, could not be accepted by all members of a generation that, according to columnist Maureen Dowd, "has noisily demanded to be the center of attention since conception."⁹⁸ Boomer photographers like David Armstrong, Tina Barney, and Larry Clark took the documentary mode with which their early- and mid-twentieth century predecessors had recorded streets, mountains, and circus performers, and instead recorded themselves. Not just themselves, but what it was like to inhabit their specific lives and subject positions, which were—and still are—so markedly different from those of their parents.

In their confrontation of the taboo, Baby Boomers⁹⁹ are most known for the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, which in the art world spawned explicit, personal works like Robert Mapplethorpe's S&M nudes, Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972), and most of the oeuvre of Judy Chicago. But the late-twentieth century explosion of works acknowledging or confronting artists' own mortality points to a broader venture into familiarity with taboo subjects. This may seem counterintuitive, given the media's repeated assertions that Baby Boomers are not saving enough for retirement because they refuse to admit that one day they will be too old to work.¹⁰⁰ J. Walker Smith and Ann

⁹⁸ Maureen Dowd, "Liberties; A Comedy Of Terrors," *The New York Times* 7 July 1996. Accessed 8 October 2012 at <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/07/07/opinion/liberties-a-comedy-of-terrors.html>

⁹⁹ Particularly those of the middle class.

¹⁰⁰ Matt Krantz, "Many have little to no savings as retirement looms," *USA Today* (online) 4 December 2011, <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/money/perfi/retirement/story/2011-12-02/retirement-not-saving-enough/51642848/1>

Clurman describe the generation as wanting to be “middle age-less,”¹⁰¹ observing that Boomers don’t plan to age at all.¹⁰² But the authors’ subsequent statement is telling in its characterization: “It is this *continuing, emphatic engagement with life* that is the future of Boomers.”¹⁰³

As a generation, they have by and large rejected the path of quiet suffering—the path of living in the closet, conforming to gendered expectations, or slipping into pain and irrelevance later in life. Their parents, the children of the Great Depression who later fought in WWII, were forced to accept life and its disappointments with a stiff upper lip, hence their designation as “The Greatest Generation.”¹⁰⁴ This has not been a popular course among Boomers¹⁰⁵, who have shown more of a desire to understand themselves than to be “great.” The desire to problem-solve and make a better world for themselves (a drive sometimes described by others as selfishness) has fostered real confrontation with their own bodies, and the vulnerability inherent in having a body. The triptych *3 x Jim* (1989, Figure 2.3) presents Verburg’s husband, the poet Jim Moore, at his most vulnerable. In the first two head-and-shoulders images, he stares off into the distance to his left. Naked and emotionally unguarded, he seems to look inward towards his own thoughts. Finally, in the third frame, he turns and looks straight at the viewer—his wife, in this case—with a steady gaze and relaxed, somber face. It is a moment of incredible intimacy in which one person allows another to encounter him with no defenses raised. In

¹⁰¹ Original emphasis. J. Walker Smith and Ann Clurman, *Generation Ageless: How Baby Boomers are Changing the Way We Live Today...and They’re Just Getting Started* (New York: Collins, 2007), xv.

¹⁰² Smith and Clurman, xiii.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ A term first coined by Tom Brokaw in his 1998 book of the same name.

¹⁰⁵ Landon Y. Jones, *Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation*, 283.

fact, both parties seek out this physical and emotional nakedness, and the knowledge it can give each about the self and the other.

There is nothing of propriety or self-denial in these photographs, which instead reveal desire, self-awareness, and strength of will. The participants, after all, are of the generation that invented consciousness-raising, produced *Our Bodies, Ourselves*¹⁰⁶, and gravitated toward the body-mind harmony fostered by yoga. They fought for control of their bodies and lives with *Roe v. Wade* and, eventually, AZT and Prozac. In the 1960s and 70s, men like Moore lived under the threat of being drafted for service in Vietnam. Many went; some didn't return. Others actively protested by burning draft cards or, as Moore did, choosing prison over risking their bodies and minds in a war they didn't believe in.¹⁰⁷ His poems written during this period focus on physical and psychological responses to prison life: physical frustration, contemplation of principles, platonic love for his fellow inmates, and plans for the future. He learns about himself and what he wants, and is unembarrassed about striving for it.

Increasingly introspective and solution-oriented, Boomers gave greater support than their predecessors to new approaches in medicine and psychology in the 1970s and 1980s. These included hospice (or palliative care) and the Kübler-Ross Model of understanding grief.¹⁰⁸ These methods have served Boomers' desire for comfort,

¹⁰⁶ The book was initially the product of a seminar at Emmanuel College in 1969, and was first published as *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in 1973 by the Boston Women's Health Collective, an organization now existing as Our Bodies, Ourselves.

¹⁰⁷ Weston Cutter, "Jim Moore's Reasonable Gorgeousness," *Corduroy Books* (online) 10 March 2011, <http://corduroybooks.wordpress.com/2011/03/10/jim-moores-reasonable-gorgeousness/>.

¹⁰⁸ This is also known as the Five Stages of Grief, and is named after its developer, Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Her model is set forth in *On Death and Dying* (1969) and *Death:*

knowledge, and control far more than the hushed, private manner many of their parents previously clung to when dealing with illness and death.¹⁰⁹ Such things were embarrassing, and had a place only in the cemetery, the hospital, and perhaps the church.¹¹⁰

It is significant that one must go back to postmortem photography of the nineteenth century in order to find an abundance of American photographic works linking everyday life with individual mortality.¹¹¹ Death and mourning were familiar, polite topics in nineteenth-century America, and postmortem portraiture was so commonplace and accepted that many photographers advertised their ability to make house calls to photograph the dead.¹¹² However, declining death rates, the institutionalization of medical care, the funeral industry, and the resulting alienation of daily life from the processes of dying made death the ultimate taboo in the twentieth century.¹¹³ Discussing the remnants of this taboo, Jay Ruby explains how “[f]or some Americans, the very mention of the word *death* is considered unhealthy and all public displays of grief are

The Final Stage of Growth (1975). It has become increasingly common in the 21st century for practitioners to challenge this five-stage structure.

¹⁰⁹ James W. Green, 3. Another good source for Boomer attitudes on death and dying is the PBS series *On Our Own Terms* (2000), hosted by Bill Moyers.

¹¹⁰ Here I think of my grandfather, who was so emotionally reserved, and so embarrassed by discussion of my grandmother’s illness, that he refused to tell any of us what type of cancer she died from.

¹¹¹ There are arguments against this statement, of course, which I address in my introduction.

¹¹² Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999), 52.

¹¹³ Levy, David C. “Introduction,” *Hospice: A Photographic Inquiry*, ed. Jim Goldberg (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1996).

regarded as pathological.”¹¹⁴ However, he also notes that in recent decades, “public evidence of mourning has made a resurgence.”¹¹⁵

The revolution in death and dying in the United States in the late twentieth century is an important factor to consider in understanding works made by Boomer photographers such as Verburg. In some cases, their engagement with the new, more open culture surrounding the body and mortality has been utterly direct. Both Nan Goldin and Sally Mann, for instance, have produced photographic studies of hospice care (Figure 2.4) that characterize this relatively new field of medicine as a personalized, humane approach to improving the quality of life for those closest to death.¹¹⁶ Goldin and Annie Leibovitz (Figure 2.5) have made moving works documenting the illnesses and deaths of loved ones. Others, such as Hannah Wilke, Deborah Willis, and Robert Mapplethorpe, turned the camera on themselves as their bodies and experiences changed.

* * *

Still Life with Jim exemplifies this sea change. While Verburg’s response to her generation’s attitudes about death and the body has been a subtle one, her focus on the fragility and fleetingness of the body, and that of the time in which it exists, plainly reveal and consider death’s insinuations into life. This is especially apparent in her photographic adaptations of traditional painted still life, like this one, which appropriate the bodiliness and implications of mortality that today are so thoroughly linked with the

¹¹⁴ Ruby, 51-52.

¹¹⁵ Ruby, 109. The author attributes this resurgence to AIDS, gang-related deaths, and other social causes.

¹¹⁶ Goldberg, Jim, ed., *Hospice: A Photographic Inquiry*.

Dutch Baroque period. Still lifes are commonly understood as references to the human body—its former presence as the objects were made, harvested, or arranged; its sensuous qualities; the body's appetite for the food displayed; or the symbolized ephemerality of the body. The tangible presence of the body, though, is traditionally considered contradictory to the genre. In *Looking at the Overlooked*, his volume on still-life painting, Norman Bryson posits the removal of the body as *the* foundation of still life: "Still life negates the whole process of constructing and asserting human beings as the primary focus of depiction."¹¹⁷

However, Verburg has been breaking this assumed rule for decades, producing still lifes incorporating her husband's body in poses evoking sleep or death. These are not merely still bodies, but intense dialogues with the historical conventions of still life and *memento mori*. The resulting works are records of lived experience and desire that defy critical assumptions about the relationships between the photograph, time, and mortality. In doing so, they provide insight into one woman's personal relationship with mortality throughout middle age.

I want to begin my inquiry into these relationships with a question posed by Meyer Schapiro as he contemplated Paul Cezanne's apples: What desires do these objects satisfy? The significance of Verburg's images partially lies in the answer to this simple, yet incisive question. It is one that could be productively asked of any still life. As stated by Bryson, still life is the least theorized of genres, and the label of *vanitas* is sometimes the sole critical act that occurs in the reading of a still life.¹¹⁸ Such a reading, in line with

¹¹⁷ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 60.

¹¹⁸ Bryson, 8.

the early and mid-twentieth century mania for iconography, is rather limiting. Dutch still lifes in particular frequently exist not so much as warnings of the fleetingness of life, but as simulated collections of luxury objects identifying their owners as part of a prosperous elite.¹¹⁹ In seventeenth-century Calvinist culture, wealth could be a reward for virtue and a mode of individuation as well as a warning against vanity and avarice.¹²⁰ In this way, a still life painting, such as Jan Davidsz. de Heem's *Still Life with Fruit, Flowers, Glasses, and Lobster* (Figure 2.6) can represent the desires and values of a culture.

The images I'll examine employ this historical genre to express both cultural and individual desires and values, which were closely bound up with each other at the end of the twentieth century. Strangely, the individual is commonly ignored in discussions of still life, even though the artist him- or herself usually selects and arranges the objects shown. These objects also exist in what are presumably the artists' private spaces, but little is ever discussed or concluded about de Heem or Willem Kalf, or about their unique experiences of the world—their desires and their interactions with the tart fruits, rotting meats, and petrified skulls they gathered and painted. It has generally been the market and its anonymous viewer-consumers that have been privileged in the most recent critical writings on still life.¹²¹

Something similar could be said about photographic production and criticism in the 1980s and early 1990s. The now-canonical American photographic works from that

¹¹⁹ Jochen Sander, "By Way of Introduction," in *The Magic of Things: Still-Life Painting 1500-1800*, ed. Jochen Sander (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 14.

¹²⁰ 16.129-30 (Bryson)

¹²¹ Authors like Bryson, Sander, and Svetlana Alpers have gone beyond iconography and begun to examine Dutch still life through the lens of social history, looking at market trends, religious values, and social norms regarding work and ownership, but have not yet focused on the unique experiences of individual artists or patrons.

period belong to the Pictures Generation, the label applied to appropriation-based, medium-critical artists such as Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince. Sherman appears in all of her photographs from that era, but always in the guise of a Hollywood archetype, a centerfold, or an artistic figure from the past. Prince photographed already-existing photos of cowboys and motorcycle gangs found in advertisements and magazine spreads. They, their cohort, and the critics who championed them announced that all imagery was appropriated from somewhere and that each person's identity was a pastiche of social expectations and media imagery.¹²² Needless to say, the idea of a photograph representing anything like an authentic emotional or sensory experience was one to be skeptical of, values reflected by the popularity of impersonal points of view and a slick, advertising-inspired aesthetic. Prince rejected sincerity and formal beauty as blasé, famously stating, "When you don't have any training in a particular medium you can bring something to it that hasn't been brung. I 'brung' the sheriff and I shot him. I killed photography."¹²³

Prince's bald (and overreaching) assertion has as much to do with a squeamishness about or lack of interest in conveying a singular physical and emotional experience of the world as it does with conceptual experimentation and "low-art" aesthetics. Though also Baby Boomers, the Pictures Generation artists enacted their desires for change and control with less personal strategies than those employed by contemporaries like Mapplethorpe, Verburg, Goldin, and Mann. The Pictures Generation

¹²² See, for instance, two of Douglas Crimp's foundational essays: "Pictures," *October* 8 (Spring 1979), 75-88, and "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October* 15 (Winter 1980), 91-101.

¹²³ Philip M. Kayal, *Bearing Witness: Gay Men's Health Crisis and the Politics of AIDS* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1993), 408

and the critics promoting them found the technical precision and spiritual aspirations of Harry Callahan, or even Robert Frank,¹²⁴ complacent and mawkish, their navel-gazing beauty distracting viewers from a more political inquiry into the world.¹²⁵ The characteristics of art photography changed as critical skepticism, in many cases, became synonymous with “postmodernism,” and beauty, sincerity, and intimacy were overshadowed by Marxist identity politics.

Spurred on by the groundbreaking criticism of Barthes and Susan Sontag at the end of the 1970s, critics and artists designated the viewer-consumer—not the artist—as the key player in any given artwork. The viewer-consumer, in receiving the critique of society or art presented in the work, was asked to be critical about his or her own place in the web of imagery surrounding the postmodern subject, and the ulterior motives behind each message sent by advertising, film, or modern art. Barbara Kruger’s text works speak directly to the viewer, proclaiming “Repeat After Me” (1982) and “You Make History When You Do Business,” (1985/94), effectively spurring the viewer’s critical examination of social messages and their senders’ intentions. Brilliantly, though—since the works take the role of commands, and because a speaker is never identified—we are never encouraged to examine *Kruger*’s motives or experiences. The average viewer, in fact, seems not to consider this information relevant, and knows nothing about the

¹²⁴ Frank was by no means a master printer, and is known to most as a disillusioned skeptic, but like the photographers of f/64 and the Chicago School, he devoted his career to presenting his own sincere and personalized experience of the people and places around him.

¹²⁵ Though rarely stated outright, this is a common implication in late twentieth-century writings on postmodern photography.

artist.¹²⁶ The marginalization of the author conveniently ensured that few people criticized the artists canonized by critics such as Rosalind Krauss and Douglas Crimp. Just as most of us fail to wonder what de Heem's feelings about lobsters or Chinese porcelain were, the question of Prince's personal experiences with cowboys or cigarettes is not deemed as important as whether or not the viewer feels manipulated by Marlboro ads.

* * *

With the artist's intent rendered suspect, or outright ignored, the emotional candor and visual lushness created by Verburg, Goldin, and others made it easy to overlook the social relevance of the intimacy they depict, and the various aesthetic innovations of their work at the time of its creation. What we encounter in Verburg's photographs of her husband, a professional poet, is the interaction between one particular woman and her environment. *Still Life with Jim* gives us a nearly life-size, multi-frame composition of the artist's sleeping, seminude husband and a selection of fresh fruit, both bathed in warm light and swaddled in bedclothes. It is appropriate that we begin with a pair of discarded glasses on the far left of the scene, since what Verburg provides us with is a representation of visual experience, directed by the camera's focus. Jim's¹²⁷ head and lower legs are sharp in the side panels, but in the center, the blurry curve of his torso and

¹²⁶ Which, on another note, only highlights the lack of diversity among these artists. It is unlikely that artists of color would have had the same privilege of generalized, anonymous speech that is now associated with the Pictures Generation.

¹²⁷ When discussing Jim Moore as the subject of a photograph, I refer to him by his first name, as the photograph titles do. When discussing him as a poet, I refer to him by his last name.

thighs yields to the crisp detail of the fruit in the foreground. Our eyes move along his body, almost skipping over the central portion before being pulled down by the visual gravity of the fruit and back up through his arm to the softness of the figure. While most of us would consider the subject to be a very average-looking man, this is still an intimate and erotic image equating the abundance of nature with the flesh of a lover. The photographer frankly and adoringly acknowledges her husband's body, with all its flaws and attractions. Sight is a physical and emotional activity for Verburg; recognizing this, critic Vince Aletti describes how "the bright summer sun that falls on so many of her subjects vies with the intense glow of her regard."¹²⁸ *Still Life with Jim* is not only a representation of vision, but other senses as well: the scent and flavor of tomatoes, apples, and pears; the softness of blankets against the skin of a peach or a man; the texture of curly hair. The work's human scale, typical of Verburg, allows the viewer to more directly bond with the space and imagine these sensations. We could just as easily be sitting in a seventeenth-century Dutch parlor, breathing in the scent of lobster and freshly peeled oranges.

Like his wife's pictures, Moore's poetry and that of his contemporaries reflect a desire to describe, in the first person, the bodily sensations and temporal experiences of moving through the world. Words like *I, me, am, you, to, from*, and *across* proliferate in poems like "Giving Away Love," which begins:

Since morning it's been raining on the sea,
since morning it's been graying. Herons
scrape slow shadows across the flats.

There are eyelashes in the morning, little feathers

¹²⁸ Vince Aletti. "Critic's Notebook: Domestic Import," *The New Yorker Online* (6 Aug. 2007). <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/08/06/domestic-import>

of seagrass caught between rain and the saltier rain
of the sea. I am darker than the rest, and dry.¹²⁹

In fact, poetry preceded photography in its emphasis on the author's spatial, temporal, and sensory perception, having by the 1960s mostly given up the brooding, impersonal voice of the first half of the century.¹³⁰ Late-twentieth-century American poetry is awash in first-person, present-tense, concrete description that combats the aimless anonymity of postwar mass culture and carves a space for an emotionally unfettered subject who is in touch with his or her environment. Even though much American poetry of the 1970s through the 1990s, such as that of Mark Strand (U.S. Poet Laureate 1990-1991) shows a return of Surrealist elements, it retains the plain language and informal structure of preceding Beat poets like Allen Ginsburg. In this mode, writers introspectively describe intimate personal relationships with the physical and temporal world. Strand's poem "Keeping Things Whole" literally follows the poet's body through space and time:

In a field
I am the absence
of field.
This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.

When I walk
I part the air
and always
the air moves in
to fill the spaces
where my body's been.

¹²⁹ Jim Moore, "Giving Away Love," *The Freedom of History* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1988), 78.

¹³⁰ J.D. McClatchy. "Introduction," *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. J.D. McClatchy (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), xxv.

We all have reasons
for moving.
I move
to keep things whole.¹³¹

The vision represented in Verburg's photograph, as in the poems by Strand and Moore, is a caressing and individualized one, anchored in the artist's own intimate experience, and like the breaks and stanzas of a poem, the multi-frame nature of her photograph stresses the temporal aspect of this experience.¹³² Unlike most single-frame works, *Still Life with Jim* doesn't represent a single, enclosed instance of looking. We encounter multiple points of view and shifting depths of field, created by subtle manipulations of Verburg's view camera bellows. These visual shifts, and the sensory banquet they illuminate, defy the assumption that photography is inherently about the stoppage of time.

Though Cartier-Bresson's *The Decisive Moment* was not published until 1952, the principle of "capturing" a scene or subject at its most expressive moment was embraced by photographers both before and after, from Stieglitz and Adams to Arbus and Winogrand. Stieglitz famously claimed to have waited for hours in the snow for the "moment" depicted in *Winter—Fifth Avenue* (1893, Figure 2.7), in which each hoof and snowflake was at its most visually eloquent point in time and space.¹³³ Arbus's contact sheets reveal a search to pull momentary slips of bizarre or effervescent expression from

¹³¹ Mark Strand, "Keeping Things Whole," *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. J.D. McClatchy (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 393-394.

¹³² In the case of Verburg and Moore, these similarities of course reflect a close personal and aesthetic partnership, in addition to a shared generational vision of life.

¹³³ Katherine Hoffman, *Stieglitz: A Beginning Light* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 112.

each of her (often unwitting) subjects.¹³⁴ In *The Photographer's Eye*, John Szarkowski's 1966 attempt to define modern photography, he admits that no photograph is literally instantaneous, but still invokes Cartier-Bresson and notes how "immobilizing these thin slices of time has been a source of continuing fascination for the photographer."¹³⁵

The 1980s presented several challenges to this notion of the relationship between the photograph and immobilized, linear time. According to Joshua P. Smith, the 1980s were marked by a tendency "to see real life as unreal and to view official public truth as fiction"¹³⁶—a sensible reaction in the wake of second-wave feminism, the secrecy and terror of Vietnam, and the Reagan administration's refusal to acknowledge the social effects of AIDS. In conjunction with the conceptual experimentations with photography that had occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, this presumption of unreality brought about a preoccupation in the 1980s with photography that was explicitly *made* rather than *taken*¹³⁷—works carefully envisioned, set up, and styled prior to the opening of the shutter. It would be naïve to assume that documentary photographers working earlier in the twentieth century never manipulated the scenes they recorded,¹³⁸ but such interventions were done quietly, not as a defining characteristic of the photographs. With blatant proclamations of the photograph's constructed nature in the 1980s, photographic

¹³⁴ An example is the sheet for *Child with a Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park, N.Y.C. 1962*, printed in Diane Arbus, *Diane Arbus Revelations*, New York: Random House, 164.

¹³⁵ John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*, second printing. New York: The Museum of Modern Art: 1966, 1980, 2007, np. Note too how even the book's title (in addition to its contents) references the photograph's maker, not its viewer.

¹³⁶ Joshua P. Smith: "The Photography of Invention: American Pictures of the 1980s," in *The Photography of Invention*, ed. Joshua P. Smith, 1989, 14.

¹³⁷ Smith, 9.

¹³⁸ Take, for instance, the oft-repeated legend of Weegee occasionally adding his own flourishes to crime scene photos, or the skull Arthur Rothstein inserted into *Cattle Skull, Badlands* (1936).

works were able to espouse the unreality, the unspontaneous inauthenticity, of the world around us. Alongside this lies the implicit assumption that this was not always the case—that somewhere along the line, an authentic reality was lost, and that recognition of this loss is a mourning of it. Indeed, Smith describes appropriated imagery as capable of “creating a real sense of loss and memory.”¹³⁹

In many cases, such as Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* and Sherrie Levine’s *After Rodchenko: 1-12* (1987/98, Figure 8), there is a self-conscious mock-repetition of the decisive moment. *Untitled Film Still # 53* (1980, Figure 2.9) presents a well-coiffed young woman in a high-necked blouse shooting a sidelong glance at someone or something outside of the frame. She has been caught reacting to the unknown stimulus with skepticism and disapproval. But this is not a “real” moment—we are meant to know that Sherman has dressed up as this character and constructed the scene, and to wonder how long she posed in this manner (though we don’t ask whom for, as the cinematic format precludes the identification of a *specific* individual viewer). Furthermore, the film stills that the photograph is based on are not “real” moments either. They are also mock-moments, repeated many times over by actors pretending to be candid. Levine’s photographic copies of other photographers’ works share the *Film Stills*’ layers of construction and implied critique of their own candid appearance. Viewing a print from *After Rodchenko*, we may at first feel like we are looking at a moment of dynamic visual punch experienced by the photographer, when in fact Levine, to make the photograph, trained her camera on a flat piece of paper that looked exactly as it had the day before. Levine and her cohort may indeed be creating “a real sense of loss and memory,” but in

¹³⁹ Smith, 14.

their case, only the viewer exists in time, looking back at a photograph that is static.

Verburg and her contingent create a sense of loss by making photographs that in themselves evoke the passage of time. The world cannot be captured; its extension beyond the time and space of the photographic frame is outside the photographer's control.

Still Life with Jim is a "made" photograph; one can assume that the subject does not regularly take naps with the contents of his fruit bowl.¹⁴⁰ However, Verburg avoids inquiring into the constructed nature of imagery or language. Instead of employing the made photograph to explore the forces that manipulate our actions and identities, she uses it as a tool to represent—and therefore elucidate—what it is like to be a human interacting with space, time, and other humans via her own body. She shows us that the life and feelings of an individual have value and significance, much of which stems from the passage of time and the resulting potential for change.

Jim, existing in a particular place and at a particular time, is her most common counterpart in this. It is not a coincidence that in *Still Life with Jim* he wears a digital watch and has a newspaper at his feet; surely these symbols are Verburg's clever acknowledgments of the intersection between time and the photographic. The watch's precise and dispassionate calculations of time clash with the unfolding splendor of the artist's experience of it. The newspaper, a record of past and current events, is not even

¹⁴⁰ These photographs do, though, sometimes originate in spontaneous occurrences, which are then arranged to suit the photographer. Recounting one particular instance, Verburg says: "I was looking at the way light was bouncing off the mirror in a room where Jim was asleep on the bed. I turned around to look at him, and without moving or even opening his eyes he said, 'Don't even think about it.'" Philip Geft, "Moments in Time, Yet Somehow in Motion," *The New York Times* 15 July 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/15/arts/design/15geft.html?_r=1&oref=slogin.

there to be read; it is an acknowledgment of how past and ongoing events fluidly inform our experience and characterization of the present and future. And like the newspapers held up by the subjects of hostage photographs, Verburg's papers reveal death's insinuations into life, and vice versa.

"West Weighs Arms Embargo," the paper proclaims (Figure 2.10). "Baker Says Yugoslavia Near Full Fledged [obscured]." The headline forces us to acknowledge the existence of events outside this arena of bedsheets and warm light. It is known that Verburg only uses the same day's paper in her photographs,¹⁴¹ so the breakup of the former Yugoslavia—the death, destruction, political machinations, and renewal involved—was still occurring as this man lay peacefully in a nest of sheets and blankets, his wife looking on. Discussing another Verburg still life that includes a newspaper, curator Susan Kismaric points out how "[i]n its seductive way, the photograph is a provocation, meant to urge us to consider not only the qualities of its divergent subject matter but also their relation to each other, reminding us, once again, that there are worlds outside our world, outside the world of the photograph."¹⁴² Verburg's experience of life is not only her vision of Jim and a few peaches; her awareness and knowledge also—always—include the balance of destruction, creation, and the purely mundane that exists in the world. Jim and his newspapers are also a world outside someone else's world, the life and serenity another man or woman might crucially be aware of, even in the midst of war. She may not welcome the presence of death in the world, but she accepts it and seeks to understand it.

¹⁴¹ Susan Kismaric, *Present Tense: Photographs by JoAnn Verburg* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 28.

¹⁴² Kismaric, 29. This habit was perhaps a provocation for the title of her 2007 MoMA retrospective, *Present Tense*.

Half Life (Scenes from the Inferno) (1995, Figure 2.11) deftly illustrates the layers of Verburg's awareness. This interior scene is abruptly split into upper and lower rectangles of almost exactly the same size by a shift in the background wall's color. A field of deep taupe creates the artificial boundaries of the frame's lower half, which is almost entirely filled by the back of an open newspaper. The *International Herald-Tribune*, the international edition of the *New York Times*,¹⁴³ features the headline "In Refugee Camps, Scenes from the *Inferno*." One can just barely make out, under a black-and-white photo of an emaciated body lying on the ground, part of a caption: "In refugee camps near Goma, Zaire, Rwandan refugees are dying of disease and exhaustion [blurred]." Jim's hands, legs, and the very top of his balding head frame the expanse of the paper, which obscures the rest of his body as he reclines in bed against the wall. Three framed pictures hang on the upper half of the wall, which is painted a light peach tone. While the picture on the right is discernible as a black-and-white print, the other two, to the left, are obscured by vivid reflections in their protective glass; instead of the frames' contents, we are treated to a view of an open door and the rolling green hills beyond it.

The crisp bottom edge of the peach wall meets the lower expanse of taupe a hair's breadth above the top of Jim's pillow. The shift is so razor-sharp, and the line so straight, as to make one wonder if the image isn't two separate photographs, vertically stacked. And, in fact, it is. Though the center division is straight across, the line of Jim's headboard recedes to the left, while the three framed pictures on the peach wall above

¹⁴³ This is the international, Paris-based edition of the *New York Times*.
<http://global.nytimes.com/?iht>

(and the white molding above them) recede to the right.¹⁴⁴ What are we to make of this stealthy manipulation of space and place?

For many years, the couple has kept an apartment in the central Italian town of Spoleto.¹⁴⁵ The international newspaper and the reflected scenery identify this as the most likely location for both *Half Life* images. Since her other multi-frame works synthesize photographs taken from different points of view within the same space, it is also probable that despite the presence of multiple images, Jim is indeed reading in a bedroom with two-toned walls. The image's significance, though, lies in the variety of locations and occurrences visible in this one single space. The safety of Jim's bedroom is interrupted by the blunt tragedy carried by the paper in front of him, which visually consumes his body; he is only identifiable by his distinctive curly hair and balding scalp. Beyond the newspaper is the open door, implied by its reflection, and beyond that the Umbrian countryside. Each rectangle within this image—the top and bottom frames with their differing points of view, the newspaper, its photographs, the framed prints, the open door—is a portal to another occurrence. And Verburg stands at the center, the unseen locus of this episode. Neither the top frame nor the bottom frame is a complete representation of her existence in the world, but together they manage to form something a little more complete. Each space or event we are part of is only half our experience, a half life, the title tells us—that which is absent makes up the rest. In a way, that which is absent makes things whole. There is always a green hillside, a refugee camp, or a man

¹⁴⁴ This is so cleanly done that I owned the exhibition catalog in which this image is printed for 4 ½ years before noticing that this could not be one continuous picture.

¹⁴⁵ Kismaric, 29.

with a wedding ring somewhere else. They never exist independently, and their meanings and magnitudes are always in flux depending on where we're standing and who we are.

* * *

Verburg's hyper-awareness of her own subjectivity facilitates a frank acknowledgement of her passage through time and space. She has also noted that her re-visitation of the same subjects "implies the passage of time but also includes a sense of absence—the unrecorded moments between pictures."¹⁴⁶ Her work has always attended to, even obsessed over, how absent spans of time assert their presence in the photographic image.

Her first well-known project, the Rephotographic Survey Project (1977-1979), engaged with absent spans of time in order to create new ways of understanding historical survey photographs. Along with photographer Mark Klett, photo historian Ellen Manchester, and a team of auxiliary photographers, Verburg sought out and re-photographed the sites depicted in nineteenth-century geological survey photographs by William Henry Jackson, Timothy O'Sullivan, and others. The RSP labored to produce their own images using the same (or similar) equipment as their forebears, as well as the same framing, vantage points, and shooting conditions. The physical result was over 120 pairs of photographs, each taken over 100 years apart, such as *Eroded Sandstones* (1873 and 1977, Figures 2.12-2.13). What were most significant, though, were the changes in the originals' meanings. "Like paintings of the period," writes Verburg, "photographs made on military and geological survey parties between 1860 and 1880 were complete

¹⁴⁶ Kismaric, 24.

and self-contained pictures. Seen in tandem with their RSP counterparts, though, they *become* open ended.”¹⁴⁷ Changes in the landscape, caused by wind, water, humans, and other forces, become the main interest, as opposed to hermetic description. Occasionally it is shocking how little has changed. The cracks and vegetation patches on the foreground rock shelf in *White House Mountain, Elk Lake* and *Snowmass Mountain and Geneva Lake, Colo.* (1873 and 1977, Figures 2.14-2.15) are virtually the same, despite a span of 104 years separating the two.¹⁴⁸ But the boulder to the left has disappeared, and in the middle ground one can see the re-growth of spindly, possibly fire-damaged evergreens. Much has occurred in this space while the camera was absent, but even a dedicated geologist or botanist wouldn’t be able to interpret all of it.

Yet these photographs do not represent a beginning and an end. Despite having the appearance of bookends, their placement in time is almost arbitrary. To Kismaric, these act as “indicators pointing to the before and after, thresholds to a future and a past.”¹⁴⁹ Each also shows a particular person’s present; the second image marks Verburg’s and Klett’s self-aware subjectivity. Each of their photographs was made at a particular time, not because of some significant trauma or change at the site, but because that was the point in time at which the photographers happened to be at that point in space. The seriality of the Rephotographic images foregrounds the passage of time, a theme that was unintended by the original photographers but seized upon and explored by Verburg and her colleagues. A few other artists working in the late 1960s and 1970s,

¹⁴⁷ JoAnn Verburg, “Between Exposures” in *Second View: The Rephotographic Survey Project*, ed. JoAnn Verburg (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 5.

¹⁴⁸ According to Verburg, however, most viewers’ first question is “What happened to the boulder?” She explains that in the second photograph, it was merely too far to the left to be included in the frame. Verburg, “Between Exposures,” 5-8.

¹⁴⁹ Kismaric, 19.

most notably Duane Michals, Francesca Woodman, and Adrian Piper, created serial photographic works alluding to the passage of time, but these are marked by a heavy current of Surrealism that alienates the scenes depicted from concrete experience.¹⁵⁰

Michals' *The Fallen Angel* (1968, Figure 2.16) describes a sexual encounter between a woman and an angel; though it comprises eight chronological images, each one has the appearance of a hermetic box outside of which nothing exists; the woman and the angel exist more as metaphors in the mind of the artist than as anything he might actually share a contiguous space with.

The photographs of Jim exist more fully in the world, exhibiting the effects of time. Similarly to the Rephotographic pairings, they arbitrarily record his progression through middle age, each one implying a span of gradual change before and after. The man asleep in a chair in the middle ground of *First Day Back in Italy (Pisa)* (1998, Figure 2.17) is slightly grayer, balder, and more freckled than the one who appears in *Still Life With Jim* and *Half Life*. The fruit and bread gathered in the foreground are not whole, but bitten into, half-eaten, and torn away. The food spills outward in front of his face, as opposed to being gathered in a stable cluster. They are casually impulsive, just like the extemporaneous nap the man has fallen into at his table. Here the sleeping body and its edible analogues imply not ripe, sensuous potential, but pleasures already taken, and the decline into rest that follows.

The *memento mori* implications of this still life composition are apparent.

Whether it is historically accurate to do so or not, artists, critics, and other present-day viewers so easily make the connection between a still life and *memento mori* that the

¹⁵⁰ Other examples include Michal's *Alice's Mirror* (1974) and Piper's *Food for the Spirit* (1971).

concept attaches itself to almost any still life produced today comprising fruit or other perishable objects. Verburg uses this association to her advantage to weave a complex interaction between mortality and desire. This is clear in both the ruptured state of the fruit and how it overlaps and mirrors the slant of Jim's body. Verburg's masterful use of focus¹⁵¹ creates a cascading narrative of desire and consumption. The sharp focus of the image's center draws the viewer's eye to a brown fig¹⁵², its skin yet to be broken, nestled in a crisp paper bag. Both overlap the side of Jim's face and body, acting almost as an extension of it. In front of the fig is a round, red peach with only a small, tentative bite taken out of the top, and in the foreground, next to a crust of bread, are the remains of a second peach, three-fourths of it already consumed. This second, partially eaten peach is shown in semi-focus, its dripping, ravished insides bared to the viewer. Wouter Kloek, in his essay "The Magic of Still Life," points out how, for the seventeenth-century viewer or artist, "the difference between the inside and outside of a fruit or an object is an important factor," and cites open pomegranates, melon wedges, and peeled lemons as common motifs used by Dutch painters at the time.¹⁵³ As an analog for the body, Verburg's peach carcass connotes both physical intimacy and the prospect of physical diminishment. To his wife, Jim is a sexualized being who has seized the day; his sapped energy and potential vitality mutually highlight each other rather than cancelling each other out.

¹⁵¹ Verburg's complex manipulation of focus was likely developed while working with the Rephotographic Survey Project's antique view cameras, which allow asymmetrical adjustments to an image's focus via movements of the camera bellows. She has continued to use a view camera frequently ever since. For more on her technique, see Gefter.

¹⁵² It is possible this is a pear.

¹⁵³ Wouter Kloek, "The Magic of Still Life," in Alan Chong and Wouter Kloek, *Still Life Paintings from the Netherlands 1550-1720*, 43.

Her use of these motifs in the late 20th century, to represent both sensuous abundance and its eventual loss, is shared by artist Zoe Leonard, among others. Leonard's 1995 book *Strange Fruit* intersperses photographs of sewn-up oranges and bananas with images of real or artificial human bodies, highlighting the physical dangers of inhabiting a human body and the questions of identity, desire, and loss that might follow. The carefully composed bodies and fruit show signs of wear and tear, which speak of their lives outside the picture frame. Leonard first constructed the sewn fruit for an installation at the Philadelphia Museum of Art titled *Strange Fruit (for David)* (1992-97, Figure 2.18), which acted as a memorial for her friend, the artist David Wojnarowicz, who died of AIDS complications in 1992.¹⁵⁴ In 1987, Wojnarowicz famously depicted himself sewing his own mouth shut in his video work *A Fire in My Belly*. This has frequently been read as an expression of the AIDS activist slogan "Silence=Death," but it can also allude to the struggle to hold the body together in the face of debilitation and decay. The oranges and bananas are opened and closed, but never fully made whole again—a condition emphasized by the book's poignant juxtaposition of the fruit with an image of Leonard's mother's scar-laden torso (Figure 2.19). It is a vulnerable body that has been invaded and roughly repaired, and is also the source of Leonard's own life. The fruit seen in *First Day Back in Italy* just as vividly refers to the ripe body, its mutability, and the eventual absence of the tangible things we value and desire.

This is telling, since the progression of time and the possibility of absence here are key preconditions for desire. Unlike with traditional figure studies or nudes—classifications that can also be applied to Verburg's images of her husband—the temporal

¹⁵⁴ John B. Ravenal, *Vanitas: Meditations on Life and Death in Contemporary Art*, Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2000, 17.

shifts implied in her work readily acknowledge that Jim does not exist in a complete and enclosed photographic space in which he can be fully possessed by the viewer. For the same reasons, he is not part of a traditional still life showing a collection of objects to be owned. Instead, the work is an interface between two people—the photographer and her husband—and their experience.

In his poem “The Portrait,” Moore expresses the different ways in which he and Verburg experience the making of these photographs, only rarely sharing the same thought or emotion. “For me it’s just another nap,” he remarks in the middle, but then closes by saying “I wake to see myself as you do, a calm one/ at rest, a little dazed, still posing from his sleep, as if/ first comes the letting go of life; and only then, the wakefulness.”¹⁵⁵ This is a remarkable moment to him; generally the two of them do not meld together, and despite Jim’s passive pose, Verburg does not control him. As Kismaric says of *3 x Jim*, “The work’s gravity lies in the sorrow of our struggle and ultimate inability to transcend our fundamental aloneness...The spiritual experience of an encounter with another person has been made visible and tangible.”¹⁵⁶ This inability, the condition of not fully having, *despite* the presence of a body, brings on a melancholy pang of desire, made even more acute by the photographer’s constant pictorial acknowledgments that the camera does not halt the progression of time.

* * *

¹⁵⁵ Jim Moore, *The Long Experience of Love* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1995), 26.

¹⁵⁶ Kismaric, 26

Revisitation of Meyer Schapiro's question, posed at the beginning of this chapter, is long overdue. What desires do these objects satisfy? In one sense, the photographs of Jim at rest represent the desire for an Other who will eventually be lost to age and death. However, the photos and the absences between them are also a poignant record of Verburg's *own* aging and desire for life—a "continuing, emphatic engagement with life," as Smith and Clurman describe it. Only rarely does she photograph herself directly,¹⁵⁷ preferring instead to constitute her identity by visually embracing the spaces and people around her, which in their mutability act as counterparts for a changing and non-hermetic sense of self.

She is not the first photographer to reveal her own physical vulnerability through repeated photographing of a partner. Alfred Stieglitz did much the same with his countless images of Georgia O'Keeffe. However, Stieglitz's formal experiments with fragmentation of the body overwhelm the wholeness and temporal existence of his subject.¹⁵⁸ Nicholas Nixon's series *The Brown Sisters* (1975-ongoing, Figure 2.20) rejects formal beauty and embraces the temporal, revisiting a standard portrait arrangement of the photographer's wife and her three sisters each year as they, and implicitly he, age. He marks the aging of bodies, as Verburg does, but does not appear to share her goal of conveying emotional and sensory experience. The point of view from which we see the

¹⁵⁷ Exceptions include *Ti Amo Jimmy* (1985), *Power at the Borders* (1986), and *Untitled (JHV)* (1990).

¹⁵⁸ One might also think of Harry Callahan's beautiful midcentury nudes of his wife Eleanor; though intimate, these photographs are so ethereal and spare as to render them timeless.

sisters is impersonal and somewhat distant, and their impassive gazes could just as easily be directed at a friendly stranger as they could at a husband or brother-in-law.¹⁵⁹

Verburg's acknowledgement of her own body's mortality via that of someone she loves is a marker of her generational identity. While earlier twentieth-century artists such as Weegee, Eddie Adams, or Andy Warhol photographed or employed imagery of death and disaster, their works inevitably showed the death and suffering of *someone else*—usually a stranger, who for viewers was then further abstracted by media reproduction and sensationalism. As discussed by Hal Foster in “Death in America,” Warhol's works incorporating pictures of electric chairs, car crashes, and shootings do not act as *memento mori* but rather allow the viewer to sequester and extinguish the specter of death by confirming his or her absolute physical vitality in comparison.¹⁶⁰ In an image like *Red Car Crash* (1963, Figure 2.21), Warhol's physical and temporal experiences are absent, and there is no emotional intimacy with death. His slick advertising-inspired surfaces, and appropriation of spatially distant news photographs, discourage the empathy that is promoted by Verburg, Leonard, Goldin, and other Boomer artists who confront the presence of death in their own lives.

The physical vulnerability that Verburg explores was thrown in the faces of her generation, though, whether they wanted to attend to it or not. Unlike Warhol, they had no choice; so many of those they knew were dying en masse. Feminism and a more sexually open society made those born after WWII more body-conscious, as did the late-twentieth century epidemic of hard drug use and the AIDS crisis, which wiped out

¹⁵⁹ This is a marked difference from Nixon's other photographs of his family, which are spatially intimate and full of texture and fleeting expression.

¹⁶⁰ Hal Foster, “Death in America,” *October* 75 (winter 1996), 54.

millions of Boomers and drastically affected the lives of those who survived. The first chapter of this volume discusses how Robert Mapplethorpe's works show a recognition of his own imminent death; here, Verburg gauges her mortality through the intimate and tenuous connection her life and body have with the life and body of her partner.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, contemporary to Verburg, is known for doing the same. Many of Gonzalez-Torres's most moving works were created following the death of his partner Ross Laycock in 1991, but rather than isolating and de-personalizing the concepts of death and mourning, as many in the Pictures Generation (and Pop artists like Andy Warhol) had done, he explored the emotional symptoms caused by the interaction of life with the specter of mortality. *Perfect Lovers* (1991, Figure 2.22) is composed of two identical white plastic clocks hung on a field of light blue, with their edges just barely touching. The clocks are set to the exact same time, down to the second, with the understanding that one clock will run out of battery power and stop before the other—but we don't know which one. This simple arrangement of plastic and batteries acutely mimics the stability and comfort that can be gained from a partnership—as well as the uncertainty and fear. Gonzalez-Torres's own words show an awareness of these seemingly opposing aspects of love. In a 1988 letter to Laycock, he draws a picture of two synchronized clocks with their edges touching, and under them writes:

Don't be afraid of the clocks, they are our time, time has been so generous to us... We conquered fate by meeting at a certain TIME in a certain space. We are a product of the time, therefore we give back credit were [sic] it is due: time. We are synchronized, now and forever. I love you."¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Letter from Felix Gonzalez-Torres to Ross Laycock, dated 1988. From Jennie Hirsh, "Double-Take, or Theorizing Reflection in Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Contemporary Art and Classical Myth*, eds. Isabelle Loring Wallace and Jennie Hirsh (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2011), 143.

Three years later, after Laycock's death, he reflected on how "love is very peculiar because it gives a reason to live but it's also a great reason to be afraid, to be extremely afraid, to be terrified of losing that love."¹⁶² For Gonzalez-Torres, fear and sadness are things to openly acknowledge and learn from rather than emotions to be mastered.

Jim Moore poignantly acknowledges this aspect of his wife's work, saying in an interview how "I believe that one of the reasons she so often photographs me asleep is that she is 'practicing' for the day I die."¹⁶³ It is a casual comment, but no less astonishing. He does the same for her in his own work. In *At Fifty*, a sequence of a dozen short prose pieces, he effectively weaves together the presence of death with the living of life, and acknowledges the strength that each concept gives to the other. The fifth piece, which includes a description of Verburg's life-threatening bout with pneumonia the previous year, ends with a meditation on an evening in Venice:

You can look down from your window and see Giorgio inspecting the sea bass one by one, rejecting many, letting only those pass into his kitchen that are the right shade of silver, their deaths so fresh that later, as you and JoAnn eat them with parsley and a little oil, you will look across the table at each other, knowing how lucky you are to count yourselves among those who live to die.¹⁶⁴

JoAnn Verburg's exploration of the beloved but mortal body has continued into the twenty-first century, most notably in the six-panel work *Underground* (2005, Figure 2.23). It is a vertical composition divided into three horizontal registers of two panels each. At the very bottom is Jim, lying across a worn wooden bench and clothed for

¹⁶² Interview of Felix Gonzalez-Torres by Tim Rollins in Tim Rollins et al, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 1993) 14.

¹⁶³ Cutter.

¹⁶⁴ Jim Moore, "5," *The Long Experience of Love* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1995), 88.

autumn in jeans and a beige jacket. Ostensibly asleep, he clutches a newspaper in his left hand; the headline reads “In one village, halting progress.” Behind the bench appears to be a low stone retaining wall, and it is the raised lawn behind this that appears in the middle register. All we see is an expanse of ground thickly carpeted in fallen golden leaves. The top left frame encloses a few molting, shadowy trees with occasional brilliant patches of backlit leaves. Behind them runs a high wall, and in the upper right is a cluster of narrow-windowed stone buildings.

In the top two-thirds of this image, Verburg’s complex, fluctuating focus pulls the viewer’s eye around to various focal points and luminous blurs, simulating the experience of standing among the trees and rustling leaves on a bright, cold autumn day. The lowest register provides a contrast; its shallow depth of field and the relative sharpness of Jim’s figure bestow gravity and importance upon him.

Although shared elements across the frames point to a continuous landscape stretching back from Jim’s still body on the bench, these focal shifts give *Underground* the appearance of separate scenes stacked one on top the other. Jim is buried beneath the weight of the ground, the fallen leaves, the trees, and the buildings—beneath natural cycles, beneath history, beneath so many things that are older than he is and will continue to exist long after he is gone. The elegant but decaying leaves tell us that winter is coming, and the newspaper headline drapes over the subject’s torso like a label or a shroud, alluding to the progress of a life that one day must halt. The partially legible subheading beneath it, containing the words “new grief and grievances,” strengthens this reading.

It is a more sober scene than the earlier images of Jim, and its *memento mori* roots lie as much in the grand religious scenes of the early Italian Renaissance as in the sensuous works of Dutch Baroque artists. The heavy separation of the bottom register, and the prone horizontal body within it, suggest a predecessor in Masaccio's fresco *The Holy Trinity* (1425, Figure 2.24) at the Church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. Verburg would almost certainly be aware of this canonical fresco, presented in nearly every art history survey course and situated just a few hours from her home in Spoleto. She has also quoted early Renaissance paintings in earlier photographs, such as *After Giotto* (1983), in which figures in a swimming pool roughly echo those in a painting attributed to the artist.¹⁶⁵ *The Holy Trinity* is a dramatic vertical composition depicting the crucified Christ and God the Father in a church interior, with the Virgin, St. John, and two donors looking on. Below this scene is a lower register consisting of a trompe l'oeil rendering of a tomb with a skeleton lying atop it. In the imagined recess above the skeleton is the inscription "IO FU[I] G[I]A QUEL CHE VOI S[I]ETE E QUEL CH['] IO SONO VO[I] A[N]C[OR] SARETE." (I once was what you are, and what I am, you also will be).¹⁶⁶

Underground manages to embrace many types of temporal experience at once: an awareness of the landscape's expansive past, an individual bodily experience of the present, and a painful view ahead to a perceived decline in and eventual loss of life or love. The title, in itself, acknowledges the eventual resting place of the mortal body

¹⁶⁵ Attributed to Giotto di Bondone, *Isaac Rejecting Esau*. Fresco, circa 1290. Basilica di San Francesco, Assisi.

¹⁶⁶ Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall and New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003), 240.

beneath the ground. The photograph also reaches back to fifteenth-century motifs to represent twentieth- and twenty-first century cares and anxieties.

* * *

It has been said about Cezanne that each careful dab of paint in each of his works is a record of the painter *touching* the landscape, still life, or portrait subject with his eyes.¹⁶⁷ This extraordinary description of the artist's sensory intimacy with his surroundings, and temporal experience of them, can also be applied to Verburg and her photographs. Each manipulation of her camera bellows and shift in her point of view is a new coordinate in the temporal and spatial record of her experience of life and of her husband. Unlike the landscape, though, which has an indefinite life span, Jim and his wife do not. Her photographic confrontation of this certainty, so different from the attitudes of previous generations—ancestral and artistic—allows her to represent a particular complexity of experience. Her sincere acknowledgement of the passage of time cannot escape a certain element of melancholy, but it is not a critical, regretful melancholy. It is one that recognizes and celebrates beauty, love, and desire. In doing this, Verburg has opened the door for younger artists to participate in a more humanist postmodernism that allows for sincere communion with the world. “Do not feel lonely,” writes Moore in a haiku on which he collaborated with Verburg. “The disappearing world longs / for you to touch it.”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Richard Shiff, “Cezanne’s Physicality: The Politics of Touch,” 129.

¹⁶⁸ Jim Moore, “Haiku / Touch,” *The Long Experience of Love* (Minneapolis, Milkweed Editions, 1995), 30.

Chapter 3

NAN GOLDIN, LEFT BEHIND: HOW ABSENCE MADE LOSS VISIBLE

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe...I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

I'll Be Your Mirror, Nan Goldin's first major retrospective, opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1996. Thirty-four blocks south, Jonathan Larson's first and only musical, *Rent*, premiered at Broadway's Nederlander Theater. Though Larson's was a fictional tale and Goldin's ostensibly featured real life, each told the story of a "chosen family" of artists and bohemians on the Lower East Side, all struggling to live full lives in the face of AIDS, poverty, addiction, and discrimination. Each also featured a mashup of HIV-positive and -negative individuals, their health constantly in flux. Grief is ever-present. *Rent*'s most beloved character, Angel, dies in the middle of the second act, and many of Goldin's friends didn't live to see their likenesses and personal spaces hanging on the Whitney's pristine white walls. After a decade and a half of fear and suffering, Cookie, Vittorio, Gilles, and Greer were gone. So were Goldin's fellow Manhattan artists Peter Hujar, David Wojnarowicz, Keith Haring, Robert Mapplethorpe, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal¹⁶⁹, among others.

At the dawn of the 1980s, Goldin had already settled into a documentarian role within her social circle, producing early versions of her now-famous slide show *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. In the years that followed, though, AIDS exponentially increased the responsibilities inherent in that role. Like *Rent*'s narrator character Mark Cohen, a filmmaker documenting his social group's triumphs, breakups, addictions, and

¹⁶⁹ Partz and Zontal, along with A.A. Bronson, comprised the collective General Idea.

illnesses, Goldin felt compelled not just to bear witness to the full lives of those who would later be lost. She also wanted to convey what it was like to lose someone.

This chapter will examine the visual vocabulary created by photographers and other artists who lost loved ones to AIDS-related illnesses in the 1980s and 1990s. Particular stress on the physical absence of the other mimics the experience of loss, resulting in memorial works that encourage viewers' empathy. As a result, a much more intimate relationship develops between artist and viewer than is typical for other photographic art associated with the period. Additionally, these artists' focus on their subjects' belongings and personal spaces—especially the space of the bedroom—stresses each one's individuality, combating social invisibility and the monolithic stereotype of The Very Sick Generic AIDS Victim.¹⁷⁰ Together, these strategies facilitate memorials that both acknowledge the pain of illness and loss *and* celebrate the lives of unique, irreplaceable individuals.

* * *

Much of the art created by PWAs (People with AIDS) about their own illnesses focuses on the liminality of the body and the emotional struggle against change: the feeling that one's body is uncontrollably breaking down and fading into oblivion, despite the will to live.¹⁷¹ Robert Mapplethorpe's late self-portraits (Fig. 3.1), in which he reduces his body into shadow and cropped facial expressions, are a prime example, as is

¹⁷⁰ My own terminology for a familiar stereotype.

¹⁷¹ Hannah Wilke's *Intra-Venus* (1992-93), documenting her struggle with cancer, could fit in this category as well.

Mark Morrisroe's *My Diary*, a list of words and phrases (such as body parts) that, in the words of critic Norman Bryson, preemptively states "*I can reduce myself faster than death can.*"¹⁷² But the art of those left behind (at least left behind for a little while) regularly zeroes in on experiencing the absence of the other—the aching emptiness of where they once lay, as well as the scramble to keep a cohesive sense of who they were and what their presence was like.

The tangible human body becomes less and less vital—in several senses of the word—as one nears the end of Goldin's *Cookie Portfolio*, a series of seventeen photographs chronicling the personality and death of her closest friend. We begin with Cookie, swathed in black and silver stripes, arms clasped around her young son Max in 1976 (Fig. 3.2). She is present, aware, and direct, her kohl-lined eyes unabashedly staring right into the camera. "Cookie was a social light, a diva, a beauty, my idol," writes Goldin. "Over the years she became a writer, a critic, my best friend, my sister. We lived through the peaks and the dread together..."¹⁷³

As the series progresses and Cookie grows ill, the sense of who she is does not disappear, but the spaces and people around her bear more of the responsibility of describing her. Every object in *Sharon nursing Cookie on her bed, Provincetown, Massachusetts 1989* (Fig. 3.3) is so very *Cookie*, a marker of the passionate, sparkling woman who starred in *Pink Flamingoes* and wore too much eyeliner. The fringed bohemian lamp, the wedding photo, the devoted ex-girlfriend, and the flamboyantly

¹⁷² Norman Bryson, "Boston School," in *Boston School*, ed. Lia Gangitano (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996), 33. Original emphasis. I don't currently have this book but am waiting for it so that I can better describe the work.

¹⁷³ Nan Goldin, *I'll Be Your Mirror* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996), 256.

coordinated wallpaper and bedroom linens radiate from Cookie's mute form, saying what her body literally no longer can: according to Goldin, Cookie lost the ability to speak in the last few months of her life.¹⁷⁴ The culminating scene in the portfolio is *Cookie and Vittorio's living room, NYC, Christmas 1989* (Fig. 3.4). It is a plain image of Cookie's extravagant secondhand sofa, its satin stripes mimicking the pattern of her outfit in the first photograph. The couch is the backdrop for several of the photographer's well-known images, such as another one in the portfolio showing Cookie and Max together, but here it gapes emptily, shouldering the responsibility of evoking the woman who once lay on it. One might wonder if it still smells of her perfume or coffee, and if it still holds the indentations of her body.

Because of its focus on absence, the photograph, on its surface, shares some of the qualities that characterize what Geoffrey Batchen calls "elliptical" representation. The term refers to a pictorial engagement with the site of a traumatic event (or with related materials) that purposely tells us nothing about what the event was like. He discusses the works of Australian artist Anne Ferran and Lebanese photographer Walid Raad, both of whom resist the portrayal of direct experience in favor of representing empty sites of past trauma. "What's striking about these photographs," says Batchen, "is that they refuse to answer [questions], forcing all decisions about meaning and significance back on the viewer."¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Goldin, *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 256.

¹⁷⁵ Geoffrey Batchen, "Looking Askance," in *Picturing Atrocity*, ed. Geoffrey Batchen et al (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 238.

The *Cookie Portfolio*, however, employs absence to *embrace* direct experience, and to share the artist's emotions with her audience.¹⁷⁶ The pictures are an experience of Cookie's life and death, and even more so of the photographer's uncertain future without her friend. Goldin has long used the lack of bodily presence—in landscapes, empty hallways, and especially beds—as a marker of uncertainty and aloneness (Fig. 3.5). In the context of the *Cookie Portfolio* these spaces gather a more specific memorial quality¹⁷⁷, one that retains the specificity of Cookie's identity, but acknowledges her body's irreversible absence.

The portfolio and works like it are private memorials, but were also made to be publicly exhibited. Artists such as Goldin's fellow Boston School members had been publicly exhibiting their private lives in galleries for years, without much backlash (perhaps because they hadn't had much press). Goldin herself had been showing *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* at bars and clubs since 1978.¹⁷⁸ She'd had her first one-woman show five years before that.¹⁷⁹ When the nation began to take a prejudiced and prurient interest in what went on in the bedrooms of gay PWAs, though, such imagery suddenly became more political. Many in politics and the media were bent on stripping gay intimacy of any of the tenderness and care usually attributed to heterosexual relationships. In 1990 Congress passed a National Endowment for the Arts appropriations

¹⁷⁶ Sally Mann's photographs also do this, which is discussed further in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

¹⁷⁷ Discussing another photograph in the portfolio, Elizabeth Sussman writes that it "functions less as an element in the documentary topology of desire than as a fragment of a memorial to a specific woman, whose life epitomized her era and whose loss is of particular poignancy to her friend, the photographer." Sussman, "In/Of Her Time: Nan Goldin's Photographs," in *I'll Be Your Mirror*.

¹⁷⁸ Goldin, *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 32. It should be noted that the slide show did not acquire its official title until 1981.

¹⁷⁹ Goldin, *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 475.

bill explicitly denying funding for works with homoerotic content, due to their “obscene” character. Conservative evangelical figurehead Reverend Jerry Falwell asserted that “AIDS is not just God’s punishment for homosexuals. It is God’s punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals.”¹⁸⁰

Just as terribly, others attempted to vanish queer and PWA populations altogether, so as to forget that people with consciences, friends, and families were dying and grieving en masse. President Ronald Reagan famously avoided saying the word “AIDS” in public at all until 1987—after 36,058 Americans had been diagnosed. Most had already died.¹⁸¹ In *The Normal Heart*, Larry Kramer’s polemical play about the earliest years of the epidemic in New York and the formation of Gay Men’s Health Crisis, Kramer’s alter ego Ned Weeks screams to his friends:

We’re all going to go crazy, living this epidemic every minute, while the rest of the world goes on out there, all around us, as if nothing is happening, going on with their own lives and not knowing what it’s like, what we’re going through. We’re living through war, but where they’re living it’s peacetime, and we’re all in the same country.”¹⁸²

It is no surprise that Nan Goldin titled the 1989 AIDS-themed exhibition she curated at Artists Space¹⁸³ *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*. Notably *Our*, not *Their*. Goldin’s exhibition title and the show’s accompanying catalog make painfully clear how

¹⁸⁰ Hans Johnson and William Eskridge, “The Legacy of Falwell’s Bully Pulpit,” *The Washington Post*, 19 May 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/18/AR2007051801392.html>

¹⁸¹ Allen White, “Reagan’s AIDS Legacy / Silence equals death,” SFGate.com, 8 June 2004, <http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/openforum/article/Reagan-s-AIDS-Legacy-Silence-equals-death-2751030.php>

¹⁸² I’ll add that this is an accurate description of my own experience. I was born in 1982 but was roughly eight or nine years old before I had ever heard of AIDS.

¹⁸³ To clarify, there is officially no apostrophe in the gallery’s name.

those artists memorializing their friends and lovers often expected that *they* would soon die, too. Goldin writes:

Over the past year four more of my beloved friends have died of AIDS. Two were artists I had selected for this exhibit. One of the writers for this catalogue has become too sick to write. And so the tone of the exhibition has become less theoretical and more personal, from a show about AIDS as an issue to more of a collective memorial.¹⁸⁴

Goldin's strategy was simply to ask a selected group of artists—David Wojnarowicz, Philip-Lorca DiCorcia, Greer Lankton, Mark Morrisroe, Shellburne Thurber, Tabboo!, and others—“to select work that represents their personal responses to AIDS.”¹⁸⁵ Her introductory essay loosely defines three categories of works: memorials for friends who have died (such as DiCorcia's *Vittorio*, 1989, Fig. 3.6), politically angry artworks¹⁸⁶, and works representing daily PWA life.

Each memorial, each protest, and each feeling of helplessness at a friend's passing was wrapped up in what artists feared and hoped for themselves. New York City's art communities—concentrated in Manhattan and including high percentages of people who were gay, bisexual, or used heroin—were especially vulnerable in the early years of AIDS. Prior to 1985, when the Centers for Disease Control finally licensed a commercial HIV test, few could know for sure that they were ill until the first lesion or strange infection arrived. Treatment, at best, comprised a hospital bed and painkillers—AZT, not approved until 1987, was still far off,¹⁸⁷ and in trials seemed to do as much harm as it did

¹⁸⁴ Nan Goldin, “In the Valley of the Shadow,” in *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, ed. Nan Goldin (New York: Artists Space, 1989) 5.

¹⁸⁵ Goldin, “In the Valley of the Shadow,” 5.

¹⁸⁶ This description might come off as negative to some, but Goldin clearly intends it to be positive.

¹⁸⁷ “A Timeline of AIDS,” Aids.gov, ed. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <http://aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/aids-timeline/>

good.¹⁸⁸ By the end of 1986, 29,003 Americans had developed full-blown AIDS, and New York City residents comprised nearly 30 percent of these. The city claimed three times as many diagnoses as San Francisco, and 7000 percent more than most states.¹⁸⁹

Visual and performing artists were among the city's hardest hit. Cookie Mueller observed just before her own death how "Each friend I've lost was an extraordinary person, not just to me, but to hundreds of people who knew their work and their light...All of these friends were connected to the arts. Time and history have proven that the sensitive souls among us have always been vulnerable."¹⁹⁰ In reflection, it is because of the terrible link Mueller points out that so much art documenting the social and physical ills of the AIDS epidemic exists.

There are also absences pointing out how much more art the world has lost. On December 1, 1989, in the middle of *Witnesses*' seven-week run, hundreds of museums and galleries—including Artists Space—symbolically shut their doors as part of the first Day Without Art. Susan Wyatt, Artists Space's Executive Director, mentions the day in her catalog acknowledgements, and explains that the gallery will close to "mourn those who have died of AIDS."¹⁹¹ But the closings were also intended to mourn those who

¹⁸⁸ According to experts, this is because the doses prescribed were initially too high and because it was being used alone, thereby increasing the chances that the virus would become resistant. Dylan Matthews, "What 'Dallas Buyers Club' got wrong about the AIDS crisis," *The Washington Post* 10 December 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/12/10/what-dallas-buyers-club-got-wrong-about-the-aids-crisis/>

¹⁸⁹ "AIDS Weekly Surveillance Report," United States AIDS Program, Center for Infectious Diseases, Centers for Disease Control, 29 December 1986, http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pdf/statistics_surveillance86.pdf

¹⁹⁰ Cookie Mueller, "A Last Letter," in *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, ed. Nan Goldin (New York: Artists Space, 1989), 14.

¹⁹¹ Susan Wyatt, "Acknowledgements," in *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, ed. Nan Goldin (New York: Artists Space, 1989), 2.

weren't even gone yet. The group Visual AIDS explains their initial design of the mass action as "a metaphor for the chilling possibility of a future day without art or artists."¹⁹²

Such a day did not seem so far away to David Wojnarowicz. In his *Witnesses* catalog essay, "Post Cards from America: X-Rays from Hell," he shares his thoughts on the flood of friends' memorial services, and the social importance of publicizing the inevitable personal rage and sadness resulting from the situation Mueller describes. Most acutely, he stresses the terror of not mattering that, at least in part, fueled Goldin's obsessive documentation and his own need to produce artworks:

One of the first steps in making the private grief public is the ritual of memorials...I have attended a number of memorials in the last five years and at the last one I attended I found myself suddenly experiencing something akin to rage. I realized halfway through the event that I had witnessed a good number of the same people participating in other previous memorials. What made me angry was realizing that the memorial had little reverberation outside the room it was held in. A TV commercial for handiwipes unfortunately had a higher impact on the society at large. I got up and left because I didn't think I could control my urge to scream.¹⁹³

In raging against the invisibility of memorial services for PWAs, he also rages against the invisibility of queer people and artists—the refusal of "society at large" to care about the suffering of those on the margins. It is a reminder that the Culture Wars of the 1980s and 1990s were not just about funding and the relative offensiveness of artworks. They were about recognizing, or not, the social validity of the people who made them.

¹⁹² The action in its present incarnation is called Day With(out) Art "to highlight the proactive programming of art projects by artists living with HIV/AIDS, and art about AIDS, that were taking place around the world." Visual AIDS homepage, <http://www.visualaids.org/projects/detail/day-without-art>

¹⁹³ David Wojnarowicz, "Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell," in *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, ed. Nan Goldin (New York: Artists Space, 1989), 11. This quote also appears in part in the chapter on Robert Mapplethorpe, as it is highly relevant to both topics.

Along with Mapplethorpe's Corcoran show and Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* was one of the rallying points for conservative politicians who threatened to gut the National Endowment for the Arts and strip artists (and homosexuals) of public outlets for their opinions. "Art for AIDS sake has feds trying to yank gallery's grant," read one headline. "Offensive art exhibit," said another.¹⁹⁴ Despite headlines' implication of the artworks, the main outcry was not over Goldin's curation of works, but her curation of essays—specifically, Wojnarowicz's, which slams Senator Jesse Helms, Mayor Ed Koch, Cardinal Joseph O'Connor, and other public figures who had ignored the AIDS crisis or made homophobic statements about it. He reserved the worst ire for O'Connor, whom his essay describes as a "fat cannibal from that house of walking swastikas up on Fifth Avenue" and a "creep in black skirts." Among other things, the Cardinal had ardently opposed laws forbidding discrimination based on sexual orientation,¹⁹⁵ and had fought against condom distribution to stem New York City's escalating death toll.¹⁹⁶ To Wojnarowicz, O'Connor's devaluation of the lives and health of PWAs was not so different from the Catholic Church's policy of non-involvement in the Holocaust, which pushed Europe's Jews further towards society's margins. Fifty years later, PWAs condemned community leaders for nervously standing by because the virus wasn't coming for them.

¹⁹⁴ Artists Space homepage, <http://artistsspace.org/exhibitions/witnesses-against-our-vanishing-3>

¹⁹⁵ Josh Barbanel, "Archdiocese Challenges Koch's Order on Hiring," *The New York Times* 27 November 1984, <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/11/27/nyregion/archdiocese-challenges-koch-s-order-on-hiring.html>

¹⁹⁶ Ari L. Goldman, "Catholic Leader Rebuts O'Connor on Condom Issue," *The New York Times* 30 December 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/12/30/us/catholic-leader-rebuts-o-connor-on-condom-issue.html>

To those artists participating in Goldin's *Witnesses* exhibition, then, each act of memorializing another, or oneself, was a statement of vitality and legitimacy. The quote accompanying Mark Morrisroe's photograph of himself in bed (1989, Fig. 3.7) makes plain his desperation to be heard:

They have stopped listening to me, so I wrote everything down in a note, who was trying to murder me and how, and then smashed the vase of flowers Pat Hearn sent me so I would have something to mutilate myself with by carving in my leg, 'evening nurses murdered me'; and I took the phone receiver and pummeled my face over and over and sprayed blood all over the walls and on this book; and then I took the butter pat from my dinner tray and greased up the note and stuffed it up my asshole so they would find it during my autopsy.¹⁹⁷

Many of the other works featured are nudes, tenderly and vulnerably reclining in bed (Fig. 3.8) Similarly, others, such as Greer Lankton's empty humanoid skins or Janet Stein's *Queen B. Easy Chair Dress*, speak of memory, envelopment, and comfort.

Gathering these statements together, the exhibition—like its predecessor, the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt—took on the character of a queered Schindler's List: proof that the people referenced in it mattered, and that somebody gave a shit.

* * *

Within this vocabulary of absence, bed imagery played an important role in conveying a sense of intimacy and the experience of loss. More so than the depiction of any other private space, it recognized the importance of empathy in dispelling ugly myths, diversifying conceptions of PWAs, and cultivating popular concern. Foremost among what made beds so powerful in this fight is the implied presence or absence of the body

¹⁹⁷ Nan Goldin, ed., *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* (New York: Artists Space, 1989), 23.

within; a bed (or sofa, or chair) cannot exist without bringing to mind the human figure, as in Goldin's *Empty beds, Boston* (1979, Fig. 3.9), *Cookie and Vittorio's living room*, or Shellburne Thurber's *Motel Room* (1987, Fig. 3.10), also included in the *Witnesses* show.

Following this is that beds are both common and private. Commonness makes them relatable as spaces of comfort and intimacy. Their connection to the private joys and sorrows of individuals with AIDS has the potential to make *those individuals* and their loved ones relatable. "It's [about] inclusion, about being inclusive," said Felix Gonzalez-Torres of his untitled 1991 project that placed 24 billboards around New York City (Fig. 3.11). The billboards, like many of the *Witnesses* artworks, stressed the ordinary humanity of their maker. Each one featured the same photograph of the empty bed he had shared with his boyfriend Ross Laycock, who had died earlier in the year. He continues: "Everyone can relate to it. It doesn't have to be someone who is HIV positive."¹⁹⁸

Gonzalez-Torres once admitted in an interview that "When people ask me, 'Who is your public?' I say honestly, without skipping a beat, 'Ross.' The public was Ross. The rest of the people just come to the work."¹⁹⁹ This is similar to Goldin's statement that the *Ballad* is "the diary I let people read."²⁰⁰ Neither artist seems to differentiate between "public" and "private" work, and this willingness to share their emotional lives is much of what has endeared them to the public. Goldin's commercial work looks just like the photographs she takes of lovers, and has been included in the *Ballad*. Gonzalez-Torres's

¹⁹⁸ Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Interview with Ross Bleckner, *BOMB* 51 (Spring 1995), <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1847/> <http://keehnankonyha.com/journal/2013/2/13/a-selection-of-snapshots-felix-gonzalez-torres-i.html>

¹⁹⁹ Robert Storr, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Etre un Espion," *ArtPress* 198 (January 1995) 27.

²⁰⁰ Nan Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (New York: Aperture, 1986), 6.

personal snapshots of his apartment, boyfriend, and cats are of the same aesthetic as the 1991 billboards. They also, of course, feature the intimate space of the bedroom. One snapshot (Fig. 3.12) depicts two plastic dolls from the artist's toy collection—Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble—nestled beside each other in his bed, tucked beneath his striped white sheet with their heads resting on an eyelet pillowcase. The dolls grin widely, like a happy married couple sharing a private joke or planning a weekend together. It doesn't really matter that they're both male (as much as dolls can be), and therefore it matters a great deal.

Such is the case with the billboards. Spread out across the boroughs, they reached a large swath of New Yorkers, not just Lower East Side artists who mourned the same losses and agreed with the same liberal politics. Viewers included tourists walking from Times Square to the Port Authority Bus Terminal, United Nations officials in Midtown, Uptown hospital and museum workers, and families in the Bronx.²⁰¹ The work—like many of the pieces created by the activist collective Gran Fury—appropriated a traditional space of advertising, thereby implying an attempt at the interpellation of passersby and the intent to send a specific message. But unlike Gran Fury's to-the-point public works such as *Kissing Doesn't Kill* (1989, Fig. 3.13) and *Pope Piece* (1990), or the similarly authoritative messages of Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, there was no clear directive, just as there were no bodies in the delicately lit, rumpled bed.

In choosing a photograph absent of the human form, Gonzalez-Torres increases the opportunity that the viewer will viscerally imagine his or her own body wrapped in these sheets, or register an ache of nostalgia for a lover with whom they had once shared

²⁰¹ Anne Umland, "Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (Berlin: SteidlDangin, 2006), 241-45.

a bed.²⁰² “[H]e seeks to encourage a more open-ended reading of the work,” says curator Nancy Spector. “[O]ne that does not presume a specific gender configuration or sexual orientation.”²⁰³ Or, in the artist’s own words:

Some homophobic senator is going to have a very hard time trying to explain to his constituency that my work is homoerotic or pornographic...but if I were to do a performance with HIV blood—that’s what he wants, that’s what the rags expect because they can sensationalize that...[we have] to trust in the viewer and trust the power of the object. And the power is in simple things.²⁰⁴

Gonzalez-Torres, Goldin, and their friends built entirely different relationships with viewers than their contemporaries in the Pictures Generation did. Each of these groups recognized the importance of the individual viewer’s psychological experience of an artwork. However, whereas Barbara Kruger and Richard Prince sought to replicate the anonymously produced, mono-directional messages bombarding consumers in a capitalist society, Gonzalez-Torres and Goldin gave something of their own intimate experiences to viewers. They wanted empathy and connection in return, and as a result did not simply abandon viewers to sort out feelings of existential powerlessness on their own.

Rather than simulating glossy capitalist prescription, Gonzalez-Torres invited the billboard viewers in—and there was room for them. The work’s simple starting point consists of a widely recognizable signifier plus the instinctual emotional response of each passerby to this image of warmth and comfort. Initially there is no opportunity for a heterosexual or seronegative²⁰⁵ viewer to not to identify with it, to mark it as “gay” or “an

²⁰² Kelly T. Keating has registered a similar, though not identical, interpretation of *Untitled* on his arts and culture blog, The Great Within.

<http://www.thegreatwithin.org/2009/11/absent-body-felix-gonzalez-torres-aids.html>

²⁰³ Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2007), 144.

²⁰⁴ Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Interview with Ross Bleckner.

²⁰⁵ This term refers to the absence of the HIV virus.

AIDS picture” and dismiss it out of prejudice.²⁰⁶ Nor is it likely that a person living with HIV or AIDS will reject it as “victim” imagery.

* * *

Concerns about victimization and the one-dimensional equation of PWAs with the syndrome itself were as much hot-button topics in the 1980s and 90s as the closure of gay bathhouses and the radical tactics of ACT-UP. When faced with the responsibility of representing and commemorating those who had been lost, how could image-makers truthfully represent the effects of AIDS but avoid stripping their loved ones of dignity, agency, and individuality?

The bed was a challenging space in which to do this. Beds are abundant in AIDS photography, by necessity and because of viewers’ expectations. There is no denying that those who are most seriously ill due to AIDS spend much if not most of their waking time in bed. Most of those who die do so in bed as well, whether in a hospital, in an inpatient hospice, or at home. But in addition to being a comforting personal space, a bed can also imply passivity, weakness, and the relinquishing of decisions, especially when it holds an immobile, diminished body. Activist groups were not insensitive to this implication, and many took offense at the profusion of imagery depicting physically wasted PWAs in bed—people whom viewers often had a hard time identifying with.

The greatest ire seems to have been reserved for seronegative, usually heterosexual photographers, journalists, and producers who sought out dying individuals

²⁰⁶ I want to be clear that I don’t mean to imply here that artists should shape their work to pacify the prejudices of others.

whom they initially did not know: Theresa Frare, who allowed Benetton to use her photograph of David Kirby, skeletal in the arms of his weeping father, in an advertising campaign (Fig. 3.14); the usually socially conscious producers of *Frontline*, who followed homeless PWA Fabian Bridges for months as he hustled in order to support himself²⁰⁷; Geraldo Rivera, who delivered the eulogy for his interview subject Kenny Ramsauer, rather than one of Ramsauer's longtime friends²⁰⁸; and Nicholas and Bebe Nixon, whose distressingly de-contextualized book on PWAs caters to the expectations of the white upper and middle classes rather than the actual needs of their subjects.

The Nixons' 1991 *People with AIDS* book project is the classic example of well-meaning but disastrously flawed AIDS journalism. Each of its fifteen chapters begins with Nicholas Nixon's large-format, intimate photographs of a single individual as he or she confronts the pneumonia, Kaposi's sarcoma, weight loss, altered abilities, and financial and psychological challenges of their illness. An essay by Bebe Nixon, written in the subject's own words, accompanies each set of images. The subjects' comments meander from memories of what they had hoped for in life to descriptions of their physical symptoms. Frequently following these are essays or letters from family members, describing their own bargaining, fears, and exhaustion. The separation between whom the subjects "used to be" and what their existence has become is heavily implied.

²⁰⁷ Douglas Crimp discusses this in "Portraits of People with AIDS," which is discussed later in this chapter.

²⁰⁸ The *New York Times* coverage of Ramsauer's memorial service only mentions him by name twice—the same number as Rivera—and the last six of the article's nine paragraphs are about AIDS in general. Lindsay Gruson, "1500 Attend Central Park Memorial Service for AIDS Victim," *New York Times* 14 June 1983, <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/06/14/nyregion/1500-attend-central-park-memorial-service-for-aids-victim.html>

Among the book's subjects is Tom Moran, who with eleven images has the lengthiest photo spread in the book. Nine of the eleven depict him alone, and only in the first does he appear nominally well. The chapter could almost function as a flip book exhibiting Moran's decreased body mass, increasing dejection, and disappearing markers of individuality. First we see him at home, dressed in his own clothes and looking into the camera (Fig. 3.15). Then his body shrinks, and by the ninth image he is naked, horizontal, and prone in a hospital bed (Fig. 3.16). His solemn face occupies the left side of the frame; his bony ribs, the other. The sheet, pillow, and walls are all a blank white, revealing nothing about this man, as though his particular characteristics have disappeared along with his health. The effect continues into the tenth photograph (Fig. 3.17), where Moran is propped up in a hospital bed in a large, strangely empty room. His eyes are half-closed, and it is hard to tell if he is asleep or simply too weak to open them all the way. For all we know, he could be dead. He is unrecognizable, and it is unclear whether he knows the photographer is there or not. The hospital gown covering his torso bears the words "LEMUEL HOSPITAL SHATTUCK," as though he has ceased being Tom Moran and become another undifferentiated Sick Person, fused with and engulfed by his hospital bed. This bed is less a symbol of Moran's desires and emotional life than it is a symbol of powerlessness and absent identity. The ends of the book's other chapters are almost interchangeable, and in light of this, its title seems even more appropriate. It really does show some people, with a lot of AIDS, and not much else.

The Nixons' subjects are very, very ill, and nearly all are gay white men. All chapters but the last end with a coda like the following:

Keith's lesions eventually spread to his lungs. During his final illness, Keith's brother came from New York to look after him in the hospital. His mother

telephoned from Memphis three days before his death, and spoke not to Keith, but to the nurse. She wanted to know if he was dead yet, and told her where to ship the body. Keith McMahan died on July 16, 1988, at Beth Israel Hospital. He was thirty-five years old.²⁰⁹

Nicholas Nixon's first showing of the images occurred as part of his 1988 MoMA retrospective, and the mainstream critical response was overwhelmingly positive. Media outlets like the *New York Times* lauded him for his "sobering and unforgettable"²¹⁰ work and for producing images with "wider social consequences"²¹¹—though what those consequences might be remained unclear. The New York activist community, however, was not pleased. ACT-UP staged a quiet protest of the exhibition consisting of two women sitting on a gallery bench near Nixon's PWA photographs, each holding an image of a smiling friend or family member living with AIDS. "NO MORE PICTURES WITHOUT CONTEXT" read fliers handed out in the gallery by other ACT-UP members:

We believe that the representation of people with AIDS affects not only how viewers will perceive PWAs outside the museum, but, ultimately, crucial issues of AIDS funding, legislation, and education.

In portraying PWAs as people to be pitied or feared, as people alone and lonely, we believe that this show perpetuates general misconceptions about AIDS without addressing the realities of those of us living every day with this crisis as PWAs and people who love PWAs.

FACT: Many PWAs now live longer after diagnosis due to experimental drug treatments, better information about nutrition and health care, and due to the efforts of PWAs engaged in a continuing battle to define and save their lives.

FACT: The majority of AIDS cases in New York City are among people of color, including women. Typically, women do not live long after diagnosis

²⁰⁹ Bebe Nixon, "Tom Moran," in *People with AIDS*, ed. Bebe Nixon and Nicholas Nixon (Boston: David R. Godine, 1991), 54.

²¹⁰ Andy Grundberg, "Photography View; Nicholas Nixon Seeks a Path to the Heart," *The New York Times*, 11 Sept. 1988, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/09/11/arts/photography-view-nicholas-nixon-seeks-a-path-to-the-heart.html?src=pm&pagewanted=2>

²¹¹ Ibid.

because of lack of access to affordable health care, a primary care physician, or even basic information about what to do if you have AIDS.

The PWA is a human being whose health has deteriorated not simply due to a virus, but due to government inaction, the inaccessibility of affordable health care, and institutionalized neglect in the forms of heterosexism, racism, and sexism.

We demand the visibility of PWAs who are vibrant, angry, loving, sexy, beautiful, acting up and fighting back.²¹²

Douglas Crimp focuses on the event in his 1988 interpretive essay on AIDS journalism, “Portraits of People with AIDS.” Like the protestors, he is angry with many mainstream journalists’ apparent abuse of (and unawareness of) their privileged subject positions. Specifically, he takes issue with the way in which their narratives and imagery cater to preexisting stereotypes of PWAs—formerly promiscuous, presently emaciated gay white men, rejected by their families and dying mostly alone, with little support from each other. What comes of such stories? Neither Nixon nor Frare, nor network TV’s newsmagazine producers confront the immediate social needs of PWAs in the 1980s: affordable medication, increased government funding for research and prevention, and public campaigns to combat misinformation. Crimp’s final conclusion about Nixon’s images is this: the problem is not that they are less true than the photographs held up by the protestors—in fact, both have the potential to mislead—it’s that they aren’t useful. They luridly state and exploit a problem, without examining its roots, context, or potential solutions.

The responsibility for such examination necessarily falls on the shoulders of professional journalists in a way that it does not for artists who record their own

²¹² Douglas Crimp, “Portraits of People with AIDS,” in *Melancholia and Moralism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002), 87. First presented at the conference “Representing AIDS: Crisis and Criticism,” University of Western Ontario, November 11-13, 1988, and published in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992).

experiences with illness, or those who seek to memorialize friends or family members. “We are all clumsy with grief,” says Goldin about her fellow survivors. “I do not believe we need to develop a correct etiquette.” However, this statement does not seem to have extended to outside media professionals, whose primary business is information, rather than personal grief. The journalist’s very name conveys the fact that he or she investigates other people and events, usually outside of his or her own social and family circles, for money.²¹³ It is a tenuous, easily criticized position, particularly when he or she uses the authority of the press to speak not just about, but for, others (as the Nixons literally did). Undoubtedly some of the photographers and journalists mentioned here believed they were making positive contributions to society by exposing the physical suffering of PWAs, and did not consider the possibility that they were exploiting their subjects’ otherness. But it remains that in many cases they did.

Artist Martha Rosler pointed out the near impossibility of speaking for others via representations of their bodies in her infamous work *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974-75, Fig. 3.18). Each of the artwork’s twenty-four panels displays a deadpan photograph of a defunct storefront or bottle-littered sidewalk, alongside a list of words, mostly slang synonyms for “drunk.” It’s the stereotyped idea that she and many people at the time had of the Bowery, gathered from and reinforced by the popular imagination. Nary a person appears in the images, though, stressing Rosler’s admitted disconnect from the actual, full experience of living a poverty-stricken life in a forgotten neighborhood. Her refusal to project her preconceived ideas of the Bowery’s residents onto their bodies results in something even more troubling and less adequate

²¹³ Though, I should add, usually not very much of it, and often on a speculative basis.

than a typical street photography exposé. We are left with the notion that no one outside of a particular group is truly qualified to speak for it. As Rosler says, “which political battles have been fought and won by someone for someone else?”²¹⁴

* * *

For grieving friends and families, the mere bodies of those lost to AIDS—featured so prominently in outside journalists’ work—are also completely inadequate as screens on which to project one’s memories, a sense of the person’s individuality, or recalled physical presence. The pain of their absence, plus the continued life of their possessions and surroundings, can spark sensitive memorials, but such creations also recognize the impossibility of fully recalling the past. Few panels on the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt (Fig. 3.19), for instance, include actual portraits, and seemingly fewer reference the syndrome that attacked each person who is remembered there—for it is people’s lives and deaths, not AIDS, that the panels commemorate. Instead we see names, old t-shirts and blue jeans, musical notes, flags, fabric scraps, and countless inscrutable private symbols, each one on a three-by-six foot quilt panel.

The NAMES Project Quilt is one of the most widely known works of memorial art in history. Its material representation of the absence left by dead loved ones closely resembles the visual tactics employed by Goldin, her Boston School cohort, Gonzalez-Torres, and other photographers who documented their own lives. The quilt references

²¹⁴ Martha Rosler, “In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography),” in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1992), 307.

intimate spaces and the absent body in several profound ways, one being that the quilt itself is a bedcovering—traditionally made by a family member—meant to keep an implied body warm. Another is the incorporation of clothing that once adorned and protected the bodies of those remembered.

Quilts made from clothing scraps are an established American tradition. Often these traces of physical presence and absence take on a memorial function, a phenomenon that is widespread but has most recently been examined in relation to the quilters of Gee’s Bend, Alabama. Gee’s Bend quilter Mary Lee Bendolph declared in 2006 that “I like to work with the old clothes because it’s got love in it...Old clothes carry something with them. You can feel the presence of the person who used to wear them. It has a spirit in them. Even if I don’t even know the person, I know someone wore those pants, and it feels lovely and warm to me.”²¹⁵

Cleve Jones, one of the NAMES Project’s founders, roots the idea for the project in similar memories of a quilt his great-grandmother made from his great-grandfather’s pajamas. Inspiration came to him in 1985, during the annual candlelight march in memory of City Supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone.²¹⁶ Angry with most people’s seeming lack of acknowledgment or concern about the AIDS epidemic, Jones and a friend asked fellow marchers to write the names of people they knew who had died from the disease on large placards. At the march’s culmination, organizers

²¹⁵ Joanne Cubbs, “A History of the Work-Clothes Quilt,” in *Gee’s Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*, by Paul Arnett, Joanne Cubbs, and Eugene W. Metcalf Jr. (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2006), 74.

²¹⁶ Cleve Jones was on Milk’s staff prior to Supervisor Dan White’s murder of both Milk and Moscone on November 27, 1978.

climbed up ladders and taped the placards to the side of San Francisco's Federal

Building. Jones recalls:

I was just overwhelmed by the need to find a way to grieve together for our loved ones who had died so horribly, and also to try to find the weapon that would break through the stupidity and the bigotry and all of the cruel indifference that even today hampers our response. I got to the edge of the crowd, and I looked back at that patchwork of names on the wall, and I thought, it looks like a quilt. And immediately I thought of my great-grandmother and my great-grandfather back in Bee Ridge.

I thought, what a perfect symbol; what a warm, comforting, middle-class, middle-American, traditional-family-values symbol to attach to this disease that's killing homosexuals and IV drug users and Haitian immigrants, and maybe, just maybe, we could apply those traditional family values to my family.²¹⁷

Since 1987, the quilt has grown from the single panel Jones made for his best friend Marvin Feldman to an overwhelming 48,000 panels.²¹⁸ Its estimated 54 tons include thousands of pieces of clothing, sheets, and blankets that once nestled against the skin of the dead, perhaps retaining traces of hair or cells or makeup. It has become, in essence, a cluster of tens of thousands of unique beds. The artist Mark Morrisroe is memorialized on the quilt by his boxer shorts, sprawled across four quarters of fabric that appear to be recycled shirts (Fig. 3.20). Friends' signatures surround the shorts, but only one name, "Jack," is signed right on top of them—probably photographer Jack Pierson, Morrisroe's friend and former boyfriend. Looking at the names and clothing scraps scattered across Morrisroe's panel and the rest of the quilt, one thinks of *Brokeback Mountain*'s Ennis Del Mar, gently stowing his dead lover's shirt beneath his own, or

²¹⁷ "Interview with Cleve Jones" edited transcript, *PBS Frontline*, 7 December 2004, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/aids/interviews/jones.html>

²¹⁸ The Names Project Foundation AIDS Memorial Quilt homepage, <http://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-aids-memorial-quilt>. Jones' panel for Feldman is one of the few panels featuring a portrait image.

American Beauty's Carolyn Burnham, falling into her murdered husband's closet, clutching his clothes and sobbing.

The NAMES Project Quilt has provided a metaphorical repository for memories and grief. It is important that these displays of love are thoroughly public²¹⁹, since they also strive for social change. Like gravestones, obituaries, and photographs, the quilt is less for the deceased than for those left behind. It asks strangers and acquaintances to recognize the lives that have passed and the gaping absence felt by those remaining. In addition to taking the form of a bedcovering, each three-by-six-foot quilt panel is the size of a twin bed, the shape of a coffin, and roughly the size of an average grave—each one a resting place for the human form. But as with Gonzalez-Torres' and Goldin's empty beds, there are no bodies.

Memorial artworks rooted in absence have proliferated in a variety of media since the last decades of the twentieth century, perhaps because they have provided something that traditional allegorical figures and portrait statues have not. They identify with the viewer, physically mimicking the actual condition of loss and referencing what remains, rather than trying (and failing) to resurrect that which is no longer there. The earliest example may be Maya Lin's Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, a cold, hard gash of rock bearing the names of those lost. More recent are the Oklahoma City National Memorial, with its field of empty chairs (Fig. 3.21); the National September 11 Memorial's huge rectangular pools, each one marking the footprint of an absent tower (Fig. 3.22); and the Galveston Wall of Remembrance, an AIDS memorial designed so that visitors can stand

²¹⁹ While blocks of the quilt are sometimes shown in gallery or museum exhibitions, it is most known for having been displayed in large outdoor spaces such as the National Mall in Washington, DC.

inside it and experience “the wounded feeling [and] the hollowness”²²⁰ of loss. The Wall’s designer T.J. Dixon says that, hopefully, “in an abstract way, it will begin to touch some of the feelings that one has when you’ve lost a son or daughter or friend.”²²¹

Stress on absence encourages visceral identification by participants, and foregrounds the concrete social losses precipitating from catastrophe, by marking the space the dead are no longer a physical part of. A focus on absence also avoids the attempted resurrection of the dead through their images, as well as the combined fascination and repulsion that frequently result from the display of the dead or sick body—the viewer’s search for comfort through *lack* of identification with the horror before them.²²²

* * *

This is not to say that the afflicted or lifeless body never appears in works memorializing friends or family. Goldin, A.A. Bronson, Philip-Lorca DiCorcia, and others have adopted an integrative approach, denying neither the body’s decline nor the broader sense of who their loved ones were.

An especially apt example is Goldin’s *Cookie Portfolio*, with its loving attention to Cookie’s body as well as her belongings and surroundings. Here, Goldin’s multiple-

²²⁰ Robert Stanton, “Memorial in Galveston to be dream come true for couple who lost son to AIDS,” *Houston Chronicle*, 8 December 2005.
<http://www.chron.com/neighborhood/baytown-news/article/Memorial-in-Galveston-to-be-dream-come-true-for-1666143.php>

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Hal Foster has spoken eloquently about this in relation to Andy Warhol’s work in “Death in America,” *October* 75 (Winter 1996), 37-59.

frames-per-subject approach fulfills her oft-noted desire to represent long-term relationships.²²³ We are familiar with Cookie's presence, *and* then we experience her gaping absence from the well-worn furniture in her apartment and the social spaces she no longer inhabits. "I put together this series of pictures of Cookie from the 13 years I knew her in order to keep her with me," writes Goldin. "In fact they show me how much I've lost."²²⁴

A.A. Bronson manages a somewhat similar effect within a single frame in *Felix Partz, June 5, 1994* (1999, Fig. 3.23). He nominally follows in the nineteenth-century postmortem portraiture tradition, but with an increased emphasis on Partz's unique surroundings and persona, rather than his likeness. The *Felix* image is shocking, not in the least because of its seven-by-fourteen-foot size. Then there is the subject matter: Partz's body, still lying in bed several hours after his death. His skin is shrunken and bruised, and his body is so wasted that, according to Bronson. "There wasn't enough flesh to close his eyes."²²⁵ The open eyes and gaping mouth are jarring, and even frightening. But the photograph is also a riot of color and pattern, from Partz's oversized op-art button-down to his spotted, striped, and plaid blankets. Behind his fragile head are four different colors of pillows. This bed holds more than a generic dead body. The photograph's size makes the body within it that much more startling, but his individualized surroundings prevent the viewer from fully rejecting identification with Partz or Bronson. It is in the way in which Partz composed his final resting place that we see the bold, artistic person he was, and recognize the roots of Bronson's grief. As in

²²³ Goldin, *Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, 6.

²²⁴ Goldin, *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 256.

²²⁵ A.A. Bronson, Interview with Bad at Sports, *Art Practical*, 8 October 2012, https://www.artpractical.com/column/interview_with_aa_bronson/

Goldin's *Sharon nursing Cookie*, we no longer see these things in Partz's body, which now exists as evidence of Bronson's aloneness.

Along with Jorge Zontal, Partz and Bronson had previously comprised the collective General Idea. The group's exuberant 1984 *FILE* magazine cover (Fig. 3.24) provides a bitter contrast to *Felix Partz*. Upbeat, nonsensical, and seamlessly collaged, it looks like a prog-rock album cover made by John Heartfield. Against a field of blue-white clouds, all three members of the collective nestle into bed, a pink blanket pulled up to their chins and their heads resting on cushy white pillows. They display the same silly grins as Gonzalez-Torres's *Flintstones* dolls, and in retrospect this gleeful bedroom synchronicity serves to point out, like Partz's colorful surroundings, the well of love and absence Bronson draws from in his later solo works. Bronson, Partz, and Zontal worked and lived together from 1969 until Zontal's and Partz's 1994 deaths from AIDS, and were deeply committed to one another. Left by himself in the home they had shared, Bronson no longer knew how to function on his own, as a person or an artist.

I didn't produce anything for five years. I didn't know how to produce. I'd spent my entire adult life as part of a group. It was like having my arms and legs cut off. I had absolutely no idea how to even make a decision as an individual. The thing that I always point out is that Jorge always read all the movie reviews. He knew what movies we should see, and I no longer knew what movies to see...the Felix piece is really my first 100 percent solo piece. Then there's a death portrait of Jorge from photos that I took about a week before he died. Then I made a third piece, which was a kind of coffin with my own image on the cover, which is a representation of the part of me that went with them.²²⁶

Bronson returned to art-making by producing work rooted in this absence, including the artist's book and memoir *Negative Thoughts* (Fig. 3.25), which intersperses biographical writings with photographic portraits of Partz and Zontal. The title can

²²⁶ A.A. Bronson, Interview with Bad at Sports.

alternatively refer to Bronson's HIV-negative status, the negative space left by the other two members of General Idea, and the artist's increased pessimism following their deaths.²²⁷

* * *

In translating their grief into imagery, artists such as Bronson, Goldin, and Gonzalez-Torres convey what living is like when a piece of one's life has died away. In denying neither who their loved ones were, nor the gaping emptiness of loss, they also recognize the extent to which their departed loved ones *lived* with AIDS in addition to dying from it. The concept of "living with" HIV or AIDS—living a full, productive life—became such a *cri de coeur* during the 1980s and 90s that many activists shunned talk of dying from it, despite the fact that thousands still were doing so. ACT-UP replaced Nixon's photographs of emaciated, semi-conscious bodies with happy, grinning faces. Despite *Rent*'s range of emotions, its lyrics praise "People living with, living with / Living with / *Not* dying from disease."²²⁸ It's an understandable but frequently one-dimensional sentiment.

In his *Witnesses* essay, David Wojnarowicz examines what it is like to both "live with" and "die from." The impulses regarding life and death that he experiences as a PWA are contradictory, frustrating, and unlike anything else:

I am a bundle of contradictions that shift constantly... Sometimes I don't think about this disease for hours. This process lets me get work done, and work gives

²²⁷ A blog at http://artistsbooksandmultiples.blogspot.com/2014_03_01_archive.html notes the first and third possibilities, but not the second.

²²⁸ Jonathan Larson, "La Vie Boheme," in *Rent* (New York: Verve, 1996).

me life, or at least makes sense of living for short periods of time. But because I abstract this disease, it periodically knocks me on my ass with its relentlessness. With almost any other illness you take for granted that within a week or month the illness will end and the wonderful part of the human body called the mind will go about its job erasing evidence of the pain and discomfort previously experienced...But each day's dose of medicine, or the intermittent aerosol pentamidine treatments, or the sexy stranger nodding to you on the street corner or across the room at a party, reminds you in a clearer than clear way that at this point in history the virus' activity is forever.²²⁹

It is a complex state of being. Wojnarowicz knew a great deal about remembering, and forgetting, and erasing painful experiences. His multiple memoirs such as *Close to the Knives* tell cutting stories of violence, rape, and loneliness. Yet he never describes any of these as being so permanently enmeshed with his day-to-day processes as HIV and AIDS are—as they were for Partz, Bronson, Gonzalez-Torres, Goldin, and many of the other artists mentioned here.

The processes of “living with” and “dying from” are hard work for anyone involved: PWA, witness, caregiver, or all three at once, as is frequently the case. They are presumably even more difficult when compounded by the threat of invisibility in the present and future—sometimes even within the institutions that are supposed to be helping them. Hospitals' responses to PWAs were not initially welcoming or empathetic, and in many cases refused to acknowledge personhood altogether. In the mid-1980s, patients were still dying in emergency room hallways because not all hospitals would admit them.²³⁰ Doctors advised family members to wear gloves when washing a PWA's laundry or dishes.²³¹ As with Nicholas Nixon's photographs, focus on the “dying from”

²²⁹ Wojnarowicz, 9.

²³⁰ Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 507.

²³¹ Shilts, 521.

aspect of being a PWA seemingly invalidated the “living with,” and exacerbated the social isolation of illness.

Many PWAs and their loved ones instead found comfort in the growing modern hospice movement, which, like Goldin’s, Bronson’s, and Gonzalez-Torres’s photographs, provided a more comprehensive and individualized understanding of illness, death, and the people involved. Hospice treats the bodily and psychological needs of each dying individual—as well as the needs of his or her survivors.²³² Founded by British doctor Cicely Saunders in the 1960s, hospice care rejects the usual focus on medically prolonging life at all costs, which patients frequently describe as dehumanizing. Barbara Coombs Lee, an advocate for the rights of the dying, describes how so many terminally ill people “want to leave this life with the personhood, being the person whom they have become throughout a lifetime. They want to leave this life in the comfort of their own beds in the embrace of the people whom they love.”²³³ Witnessing such a departure can have a more comforting effect on survivors as well. Instead of staving off medical death, regardless of a person’s degree of suffering and incoherence, hospice focuses on the comfort of the terminally ill. It is a holistic method that places high value on the empathy of palliative care workers; it also supports the administration of strong painkillers, the involvement of a patient’s family, and the right to die at home. Quality of life and quality of death become wrapped up in each other.

²³² Hospices, usually run by nuns, had existed for many hundreds of years, but Dr. Saunders was the first to join modern medicine with the comfort and care hospices offered to the dying.

²³³ “Choosing to Die,” *The Diane Rehm Show*, WAMU 88.5 American University Radio (Indianapolis, Indiana: WFYI, 7 July 2014).

American men and women of Goldin's generation had embraced natural birth, natural foods, and natural hair; it is not surprising that, in the midst of an epidemic, they embraced natural dying as well. "I feel like I'm a midwife," says Sister Loretta, a nurse with New York's Cabrini Hospice. "[L]ike I'm pushing new life. But instead of saying, 'Push, push, push,' I'm always saying 'Go toward the light. Look for your relatives and friends.'"²³⁴ The first American hospice opened in 1974, and the flood of AIDS patients in the 1980s increased the number of centers exponentially.²³⁵ By 1996, after AIDS deaths had finally started to drop²³⁶, there were more than 2100 hospices nationwide, which cared for over a third of all patients dying from AIDS or cancer.²³⁷ Among these numbers were Cookie Mueller and Vittorio Scarpatti, both of whom spent their final days at Cabrini in 1989.

One of the most distinctive aspects of hospice care is how it also cares for patients' loved ones: counseling them, guiding them, giving them something to do. The survivors become de facto patients. Nan Goldin was not able to be at Cabrini Hospice for Cookie's and Vittorio's deaths, but went there later on, seeking answers about how her friends had died. After speaking to the nuns and other patients, she felt more at peace:

I wasn't there and I had no clear concept of what a hospice was, so I wanted to learn where they had been and what they'd gone through... In America, hospice care—the process of helping patients and survivors face their impending loss, controlling pain, enabling patients to get their lives in order, and bereavement

²³⁴ Marilyn Webb, "Death and Dying in America," in *Hospice: A Photographic Inquiry*, ed. Dena Andre, Philip Brookman, and Jane Livingston (Boston and New York: Bulfinch Press, 1996), 6.

²³⁵ Webb, 7-10.

²³⁶ "AIDS Diagnoses and Deaths, 1985-2010," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/newsroom/HIVFactSheets/Epidemic/Care.htm>

²³⁷ Webb, 11.

counseling—is essential. I learned this after watching how hard it is for people to die without this kind of assistance and comfort.²³⁸

To Goldin, hospice is essential in the way that her own photographs are essential. Each helps to organize death and grief for those involved, providing tools for experiencing and acknowledging death and absence that do not require the erasure of the dead, or their subsumption into archetypes and stereotypes. Each one, ideally, is holistic. Hospice allows for the kind of personalized setting we see in Bronson's *Felix Partz* photograph, as does the photographer's desire to communicate who his absent partner was.

Artists, hospice supporters, and grass-roots activists alike stressed the importance of each PWA's full personhood. But for the artists discussed here, that was only the beginning. In order to fully mourn, they took on the task of proving that their absent lovers and friends were real, by showing the pain they left behind. Because how can one mourn for someone whom everyone else willfully refused to see? How can one combat an enemy when no one else also acknowledges it as their own? The title of Goldin's exhibition again comes to mind. As long as there are witnesses who push their own losses into the public eye, the gaps and spaces left behind will not simply fill in. The more we share our own wounds, the more likely those around us will be to see the scars and feel the pain themselves.

²³⁸ Nan Goldin, Interview with Philip Brookman, in *Hospice: A Photographic Inquiry*, ed. Dena Andre, Philip Brookman, and Jane Livingston (Boston and New York: Bulfinch Press, 1996), 52.

Chapter 4

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC COSMOLOGY OF SALLY MANN

Pensive on her dead gazing I heard the Mother of All,
 Desperate on the torn bodies, on the forms covering the battlefields gazing,
 (As the last gun ceased, but the scent of the powder-smoke linger'd)
 As she call'd to her earth with mournful voice while she stalk'd,
 Absorb them well O my earth, she cried, I charge you lose not my sons,
 lose not an atom

—Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

In the year 2000 in Lexington, Virginia, Sally Mann photographed her beloved pet greyhound Eva. The resulting prints are almost tactile on the paper, with the dog's delicate claws and sharp canine teeth crisply defined against Mann's dirty studio backdrop. Short tufts of hair glimmer darkly in silver gelatin. The photographs are also serenely still, because Eva is dead, and has been so for many months. When the dog had suddenly dropped dead on Valentine's Day earlier that year, Mann had sobbed with grief at her loss. Such a reaction is, of course, unsurprising. What is unusual is that in this case, the devoted owner had her pet skinned—so that she could keep the pelt (2000-01, Fig. 4.1)—and unearthed the carcass eighteen months later to witness its disintegration. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

The greyhound series, titled “Matter Lent,”²³⁹ became the opening chapter of *What Remains*, a five-part exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC in 2004. Landscapes, dog bones, living faces, and the disintegrating corpses of strangers meld together to form a larger meditation on death. Described by the photographer as “the apex of my career,” the exhibition is intensely physical in its dual embrace of decaying flesh

²³⁹ Also included within the *Matter Lent* series is a group of photographs from the University of Tennessee's Forensic Anthropology Center, which is discussed later in this chapter.

and tactile, historical photographic processes. However, the images are not made for shock value. They sensitively organize and clarify Mann's manifold beliefs about life, death, place, and the passage of time.

* * *

Because Sally Mann's work is both controversial and strikingly beautiful, she has always been highly collectible and welcomed by the photographic intelligentsia. She rose to fame with the release of *At Twelve* (1988), a study of twelve-year-old girls, and *Immediate Family* (1992), which featured her own young children growing up in rural Virginia. Like Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, she was swept up by the tide of the Culture Wars: Upon the publication of *Immediate Family* in 1992, everyone from Senator Jesse Helms²⁴⁰ to *The New York Times Magazine*²⁴¹ denounced the Mann children's nudity as exploitative and pornographic.²⁴² Her sales and profile only rose. Even when she shifted her focus to dark, dense landscapes of the American South,

²⁴⁰ Sebastian Smee, "Christmas Books: Art and Photography," *The Telegraph* online, 22 November 2003. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/donotmigrate/3607037/Christmas-books-art-and-photography.html>

²⁴¹ Richard B. Woodward, "The Disturbing Photography of Sally Mann," *The New York Times Magazine* online, 27 September 1992. <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/09/27/magazine/the-disturbing-photography-of-sally-mann.html>

²⁴² Mann has repeatedly stated how troubling she finds this interpretation, saying, "I don't think of my children, and I don't think anyone else should think of them, with any sexual thoughts. I think childhood sexuality is an oxymoron." Woodward. A 2015 article by Mann expands on the topic at length: Sally Mann, "Sally Mann's Exposure," *The New York Times Magazine* online, 16 April 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/magazine/the-cost-of-sally-manns-exposure.html>

curators continued incorporating her into the postmodern canon, praising her edginess and apparent interest in trauma, one of the hot topics of the early twenty-first century.

At times this feels like a willful insistence that either the peg is round or the hole is square. This is not to say that Mann's works are not postmodern,²⁴³ and do not explore the terrible violence of her homeland's past. They are both self-aware and critical. But the heart of her photography is in her individual, painfully temporal experience of love and frailty, and to understand that we must view her works with empathy in addition to voyeurism or bleakness.

It is easy to step inside Sally Mann's mind, since she writes most of her catalog texts herself.²⁴⁴ They are short, artistic, autobiographical, and searching. The two-page introduction to the *Matter Lent* catalog describes the deaths of her father, a stoic country doctor, and the dog Eva. In the case of Dr. Mann, his daughter asks: "Where did all that him-ness go? ...It was, as the song says, as if a library burned to the ground."²⁴⁵ She could do little to answer the question, but with Eva, she could try. Brushing aside questions about whether or not she is being respectful of the dead, she decides to dig up Eva's body, and ends her introduction with this act:

When the land subsumes the dead, they become the rich body of earth, the dark matter of creation. As I walk the fields of this farm, beneath my feet shift the bones of incalculable bodies; death is the sculptor of the ravishing landscape, the terrible mother, the damp creator of life, by whom we are one day devoured.

She devoured Eva in much less time than I expected. I undid the metal cage in which I had buried her and found what looked like a stick drawing of a sleeping dog: her bones, punctuated by tufts of indigestible hair and small cubes of adipocere, appeared like a constellation in a rich black sky. After bagging the

²⁴³ Her images are self-consciously made, are aware of social context, are critical of their subject matter, and consciously appropriate past styles and techniques. However, their postmodern identity is not the focus of this essay.

²⁴⁴ Mann earned an MFA in creative writing from Hollins College in 1975.

²⁴⁵ Sally Mann, *What Remains* (New York: Hachette, 2003), 6.

larger bones, I reverently picked out the tiny pieces that remained—tail bones, teeth, and claws, brushing the fragrant humus as an archaeologist might. Back on the floor in the studio I reassembled her, head to tail; bone by bone.²⁴⁶

Mann reverently isolates single bones, claws, or clumps of fur beneath the lens of her bulky eight-by-ten view camera. With few exceptions, the resulting gelatin silver prints are dark, rich, and gritty-looking. In one (2000-01, Fig. 4.2), a lone metacarpal extends into arching paw bones that terminate in a tiny, beckoning claw. Bits of dirt and decaying bodily matter (it is impossible to tell these apart) cling to the bones and scatter on the dim backdrop. The image field's edges blur into blackness on the left and utter transparency on the right, revealing clipped-off, vignetted corners—the result of Mann's antique printing process.

No photograph could appear more tactile, and yet more photograph-like, at the same time. There is a sense that anyone caressing the surface would feel tiny grains of earth shifting under his or her palm. Scratches in the glass negative's emulsion appear hair-like on the print, echoing the tufts of fur stuck to Eva's claw. The bones and dirt here beg to be touched, but the photograph looks nothing like direct human sight. This is partly due to her use of the wet collodion process, which involves brushing wet emulsion onto a glass negative and exposing it before it dries. The resulting prints are streaked and scratched, and the solid central objects fade into nothing at the edges. There is a faint fingerprint in the corner.

Mann's emphasis on touch, as well as her abstraction of the scene, reminds us that a photograph is a crafted object, subject to the ravages of time, rather than a pure image of a thing that is fixed in time. "To my mind," she says, "this series is the perfect

²⁴⁶ Mann, 6.

marriage of subject and technique. The ragged edges of a collodion image appear to be torn, seized from the flow of time. Ordinary film would be too slick to capture the state of decomposition.”²⁴⁷ Both the subject matter and the photographic surface are in flux: like Eva’s bones, the paper and its silvery coating appear impermanent, destined to go back to the earth. This photograph may hold an imprint of something fixed in the past, which we can look back upon with aching nostalgia from the present, but it is also something that continues to change in itself as it exists within the world, over time.

In tandem with the artist’s introduction, the plainest message her photograph sends is that death is not the blunt end of a thing, but part of a cycle of metamorphosis and creation. As the series title *What Remains* suggests, there is something still there after Eva’s death. One could say that her bones are decaying; one could also say that new earth is being made. Skin, bones, and earth become wrapped up in each other—literally—and eventually bring forth new life. The earth is “the damp creator of life, by whom we are one day devoured.”

* * *

There is not much room in Mann’s world for the kind of afterlife in which most Americans believe. Traditional Western conceptions of the afterlife involve either the continuation of the self (or soul) apart from the body, or the complete resurrection of

²⁴⁷ Lyle Rexer, *Photography’s Antiquarian Avant-Garde* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002), 84. Mann used the wet-plate collodion process for the *What Remains* photographs. Discussed at greater length later in this essay, the process involves brushing a glass plate with a solution of silver halides suspended in a sticky material. The plate must then be exposed in the camera before it dries in order to create a negative. The resulting negative can be printed using any number of methods; typically Mann makes silver gelatin prints.

body and soul together. But to Mann, “what remains”—all that remains—is memories, matted hair, and crumbling femurs. “You really have to realize,” she affirms, “that you’re not there after you’ve died. Your body’s just a carapace, it’s a shell that holds the real you, and when you die all that’s left is the carapace, it’s meaningless.”²⁴⁸ There is neither separation of body and soul nor the resurrection of either. Mann takes comfort from these strictly organic processes, which potentially provide more evidence and less terror than the possibility of an afterlife does.

Mann’s public, explicitly atheist descriptions of bodily death and decay were next to unthinkable during her childhood in the 1950s and 1960s. Though her parents were atheists, Jesus and heaven were ever-present at her rural, Southern public school, where morning prayers were *de rigueur*. The other children viewed Mann and her brothers, sitting apart in the hallway during this daily benediction, with suspicion.²⁴⁹ As a country doctor’s daughter, she also saw more death and suffering than the average midcentury child, who might never have been to a hospital or known exactly what cancer was.

Early- and mid-twentieth century American taboos on the intimate details of death and decay are well documented by scholars,²⁵⁰ and permeated all areas of cultural production. One just did not speak of such things. For instance, it was with much trepidation that, in 1963, Simon and Schuster published *The American Way of Death*, Jessica Mitford’s groundbreaking, muckraking investigation of the American funeral industry. Mitford’s original publisher had rejected the book due to its “goosey” descriptions of dead bodies and the mortuary practices used to restore corpses for open-

²⁴⁸ Steven Cantor, *What Remains*, documentary (Stick Figure Productions, 2005).

²⁴⁹ Cantor.

²⁵⁰ Including, for example, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross.

casket funerals.²⁵¹ The practice of viewing the body prior to interment is much more common in the United States than in the author's native Britain, and one that requires keeping up the fiction that dead bodies rest eternally in peace, rather than rotting into mush.²⁵² Mitford was intent on lifting the veil, fighting her adopted country's squeamishness all the way. Even Simon and Schuster (unsuccessfully) argued to excise the book's chapter on embalming, which includes such passages as this one:

Head off? Decapitation cases are rather routinely handled. Ragged edges are trimmed, and head joined to torso with a series of splints, wires, and sutures. It is a good idea to have a little something at the neck—a scarf or a high collar—when time for viewing comes.²⁵³

The chapter, now a regular presence in nonfiction anthologies, paved the way for even more graphic depictions of bodies after death. Popular dramas like *Six Feet Under* (2001–05), books such as Mary Roach's bestselling *Stiff* (2003), several funeral-related reality shows²⁵⁴, and multiple high-art photographic series featuring corpses²⁵⁵ have gathered more interest than criticism over the past thirty years.

Thrust into a clearer understanding of what exactly happens to grandma's body after she breathes her final breath, audiences today are willing to empathize with Mann and give her blunt realism a chance. In its review of *What Remains*, *Artdaily*

²⁵¹ Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited* (New York: Knopf, 1998), xv.

²⁵² Mitford, 50. The author also quotes another Englishwoman, who, reacting to an American funeral, says that "It shook me rigid to get there and find the casket open and poor old Oscar lying there in his brown tweed suit, wearing a suntan makeup and just the wrong shade of lipstick. If I had not been extremely fond of the old boy, I have a horrible feeling that I might have giggled. Then and there I decided that I could never face another American funeral—even dead."

²⁵³ Mitford, 47–48.

²⁵⁴ These include A&E's *Family Plots* (2004–06), Caitlin Doughty's YouTube series *Ask a Mortician*, Discovery Fit and Health's *Funeral Boss* (2013), and TLC's *Best Funeral Ever* (2015).

²⁵⁵ Including those by Mann, Andres Serrano, Scott Palmer, and Joel-Peter Witkin, among others.

characterizes the show as “dark, beautiful, and revelatory.”²⁵⁶ Tyler Green of *Artnet* writes that “the exhibition is exceptional. Somehow Mann finds beauty in the dead, in memories of the dead, and in places where thousands of men killed each other.”²⁵⁷ Sarah Boxer’s *New York Times* review of *What Remains* describes the greyhound pictures as “loving” and “sacramental.”²⁵⁸

However, these emotions seem to have been easier to find in front of the images of Eva—dusty, long dead, and a dog—than in front of the human corpses that followed. Due to the meat we eat, the roadkill we pass on the street, taxidermy displays at museums, and the fact that our pets often die at home, we Americans are more or less used to seeing dead animals in a variety of conditions. We are also less inclined to identify with a dog’s mortality than with a person’s, or to assign an animal a sense of modesty. Despite our willingness nowadays to at least walk into the gallery, there is no guarantee we will experience anything comfortably. Many of us still value the American way of death’s tidy fictions.

Modesty and disgust feature heavily in the rest of Boxer’s *Times* review—disgust at the subject matter itself, and then at the artist’s aesthetic treatment of it.²⁵⁹ The

²⁵⁶ “Sally Mann: *What Remains* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art,” *Artdaily.org*, 6 June 2004. <http://artdaily.com/news/10628/Sally-Mann--What-Remains-At-The-Corcoran-Gallery-of-Art#.VSU9TGYgXS8>

²⁵⁷ Tyler Green, “D.C. Diary,” *Artnet*, 26 August 2004. <http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/reviews/green/green8-27-04.aspx>

²⁵⁸ Sarah Boxer, “Slogging Through the Valley of the Shutter of Death,” *The New York Times* online, 23 July 2004. <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/23/arts/photography-review-slogging-through-the-valley-of-the-shutter-of-death.html>

²⁵⁹ In a later interview, Mann described Boxer as “the woman in the *New York Times*, who freaked out and called the photos gross.” Blake Morrison, “Sally Mann: The Naked and the Dead,” *The Guardian* online, 28 May 2010. <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/may/29/sally-mann-naked-dead>

exhibition's second segment, also part of the *Matter Lent* series, features photographs of bodies at the University of Tennessee's Forensic Study Facility, where researchers gather information on human decay. Law enforcement officials around the country use the resulting statistics to more effectively pinpoint murder victims' times and causes of death. There is no shortage of donors, who will their bodies directly to the facility.²⁶⁰ The bodies, in states of advanced decay, are not identifiable in Mann's close-up studies.

Boxer is nonetheless appalled:

The most morbid pictures contain two kinds of violation. The first, unavoidable if you're set on photographing corpses, is the violation of the privacy and the decency of the dead.²⁶¹ In one picture of a decaying corpse, you can't tell a woman's buttocks from her breasts. In another, a man's back has cracked and split apart like dry earth. Another picture shows a shoulder pocked like an orange peel. You want to look away. But Ms. Mann insists on investigating the very surface of the horror.

And that brings up the second kind of violation: the dreadful things Ms. Mann has done to the surfaces of her photographs...she used the wet-plate collodion process, introduced in 1851. She prepared the glass plates by coating them with silver nitrate on the spot, after which she had only five minutes to load the sticky plate into the camera and expose it before it dried.

The resulting photographs...often look burned, torn or spotted...In many it's hard to see where the violence of death itself ends and the violence in the picture making begins.²⁶²

Surface indeed looms large in the forensic facility series, and the images Boxer cites are among the most striking. The body with split skin across its back (2001, Fig. 4.3) is startling. Seen from directly above, the man's grizzled head lies face down in a bed of leaves. His back is puckered, folded, and split, like elephant skin or crushed velvet, revealing dark, glossy insides beneath. The photographic skin is split, too; the

²⁶⁰ Those interested in postmortem donation can contact facility coordinator Dr. Lee Meadows Jantz at donateinfo@utk.edu.

²⁶¹ In truth, a body does not have a sense of privacy or decency. But the living do, and they are the ones whose repulsion we are dealing with here.

²⁶² Boxer.

negative's delicate collodion surface peels away from the edges of the frame, threatening to obliterate all within. Similarly, the leaves and flesh near the picture's sides blur into unrecognizability. Whereas in the greyhound images the photographic surface was scratched and dusty-looking, here there is an impression of cracking, lifting, and gooey melding. It is on these things that Boxer's disgust focuses: the bodies' unabashedly organic qualities, the breaching of their skin, and the photographic surface's resemblance to the decaying bodies. Nothing here is hermetic, healthy, or whole any longer.

Why do these qualities foster such virulent reactions? There are a number of leading theories of human disgust, any of which would be appropriate in this situation. The most common suggest that disgust is a defense mechanism intended to keep us away from organic matter or behavior that could make us sick.²⁶³ Another prominent theory, dubbed the Terror Management Theory, posits that

In keeping us from confronting the implications of the fact that we must someday die, disgust helps to guard against the obviously maladaptive anxiety, terror, and potential paralysis that might be induced by contemplating such grim realities. Doing this, however, puts us at odds with our own physical bodies. Those bodies, and the various fluids, wastes, and functions associated with their operation and maintenance as organic systems, serve as constant, inescapable reminders of our animality and thus our mortality. As such...our bodies are primary and prominent objects of disgust...disgust ends up casting our very bodies as unsavory and thus pushes us to hide from what we are, from our own humanity.

This corresponds with Boxer's specific horror at how overtly organic and fragmented Mann's bodies are: "cracked and split apart like dry earth," "shoulder pocked like an orange peel." Her comparisons imply violence done to the bodies, staving off the idea that their disintegration is what bodies naturally do. Thus, the funeral director's

²⁶³ Kelly, 4.

fiction of postmortem integrity and stasis can be retained. One does not have to think of one's own body pocked with holes and decaying into mud.

It is easy to understand Boxer's repulsion in the face of the photographs. But is also important to understand how very different their meaning is to Sally Mann herself. In doing so, we may gain a more cohesive sense of the exhibition's intended message and the artist's unique worldview. Video footage of Mann visiting the facility illustrates her insatiable curiosity about natural processes. Without apparent disgust, she tilts her head, carefully examining each body's appearance and state of decay. She gently prods one with a gloved finger to find out what the mummified skin feels like. She notes the beauty of the bodies' colors and textures, and talks about their relationship to the ground on which they lie: "You explore it from two different angles; you explore it from what happens when death occurs on a landscape and then you explore it from the aspect of what happens to the thing that has died."²⁶⁴

To her, death and the remainder of the natural world are simply inseparable. Boxer's descriptions of the bodies support this, repeatedly comparing the appearance of human remains to earth and other organic matter. The corpses and the ground on which they lie become fused, indistinguishable, liminal. However, while this is a desecration to Boxer, it is truth and reverence to the artist. She acknowledges death, and does justice to its processes through her technique and choice of subject matter.

The forensic facility photographs reveal, in graphic detail, how bodies return to the earth. After death, enzymes within the body break down cell walls, releasing the liquid within. The body liquefies, and skin slips off in sheets. Insect larvae and the body's

²⁶⁴ Cantor.

own bacteria further aid in the decomposition process. Bloat sets in, then complete putrefaction. Science writer Mary Roach visited the facility while researching *Stiff*, her bestselling book on corpses, and compared advanced-stage decay to the melting Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz*, only in slow-motion.²⁶⁵

Looking at an image of a body lying on the forest floor at the facility (2001, Fig. 4.4), the description appears apt. It is well into the later stages of decay. A thin layer of blackened, mottled skin clings to the torso, blending with the carpet of fallen leaves. Arm, leg, and skull bones jut out like twigs and rocks. The gaunt flesh of the hands, feet, thighs, and face meld into the ground, erasing any barrier that once divided body from earth.²⁶⁶

These soupy remains settle into the dirt, richly fertilizing the ground. If the bones are carried off, the body leaves no traces visible to the human eye—as is almost the case in another of the series' photographs, which depicts the ambiguous ground at the base of a tree (2001, Fig. 4.5). We assume there is a body, but we can no longer identify it as such. However, its chemical remains, now belonging to the tree roots, literally linger. Trained dogs can identify a dead body's scent molecules in the dirt as many as fourteen months after it has been moved. Roach notes that she had trouble believing this at first, but no longer: "The soles of my boots, despite washing and soaking in Clorox, would smell of corpse for months after my visit."²⁶⁷

²⁶⁵ Mary Roach, *Stiff* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 106–114.

²⁶⁶ Mann's use of a variety of angles in her work—straight on, looking straight down from above, or even face to face with bodies lying on the ground—shows the surprising and underused versatility of a large-format view camera's movement when coupled with patience and proper ballast.

²⁶⁷ Roach, 121.

Mann's intimacy with the dead, what she seeks from them, and what she gives them are very different from what is sought and given by the other two most famous photographers of corpses, Andres Serrano and Joel-Peter Witkin. Well-known since the 1980s, Witkin has gained a cult following for his fetishistic figure studies of people with deformities and antique-process images of artfully arranged, hacked-off body parts. Serrano, a major player in the Culture Wars, is most known for the iconic *Piss Christ* (1987) and close-up studies of his own bodily fluids. In 1992, he also produced a series of morgue images, each one depicting a fragment of a body or face and titled with the cause of death.

Serrano chose to photograph corpses for their ability to provoke thought and emotion in general. "The morgue is a secret temple where few people are allowed," he says. "I explored this territory with fresh eyes and an open mind. I want the audience to do the same and to see it's a process of discovery for me too...Discovery of what I can find there for myself as a human being and as an artist."²⁶⁸

Keeping bodies unchanged is the point of a morgue, though, and each of the photographs isolates and temporally suspends the body within it. In *The Morgue (Rat Poison Suicide II)* (1992, Fig. 4.6), the subject's foot fills the frame, disallowing any spatial context. It does not exist within a changing world, nor do we expect it to decay. Nor is there any narrative context aside from the cause of death, a situation Serrano freely admits and even embraces: "I never knew them as human beings. I never knew what languages they spoke, what their religious or political beliefs were, how much money

²⁶⁸ Anna Blume, "Andres Serrano," *BOMB* 43 (Spring 1993).
<http://bombmagazine.org/article/1631/andres-serrano>

they had, or who they loved.”²⁶⁹ The photograph’s striking fragmentation, so akin to pornography, thoroughly objectifies the anonymous body—as though it has never been alive at all.

Serrano’s open-endedness may be respectful of the viewer, allowing each person to come to his or her own conclusions, but does it consider those whose bodies appear in the images? Unlike the unidentifiable, donated bodies at the forensic facility,²⁷⁰ Serrano’s corpses were all the morgue’s leftovers—unclaimed bodies, photographed at the approval of one of the pathologists who worked there.²⁷¹ Serrano *wants* to act as witness to death, as Mann does, but instead ends up isolating it in a cold and seemingly endless purgatory. And in choosing to highlight the causes of death, he draws our attention solely to the violence done to each body: *Knifed to Death I*, *Child Abuse*, *Death by Drowning*. With nothing else to go on, and no connection made to the wider world, we cannot help but speculate luridly.

Witkin, on the other hand, uses bodies as raw material in realizing extravagant, monstrous self-constructions. This is especially apparent in *Feast of Fools* (1990, Fig. 4.7), one of his largest works. It is a jarringly grotesque collection of oozing human body parts, including the corpse of an infant, fresh fruit, and a variety of marine species, all depicted in black and white. Deliberate scratches from the negative and the layering of varnish onto the print itself create the illusion of age and decay, and vignetting at the corners hints at hermetic enclosure, as though the scene were displayed under a bell jar in

²⁶⁹ Blume.

²⁷⁰ According to Mann, she began the project with the understanding that all the bodies she photographed had been donated by their former occupants. However, after photographing she discovered that some were unclaimed bodies—like Serrano’s—that had been donated to science by hospitals. Blake Morrison.

²⁷¹ Blume.

a dusty museum of preserved anatomical curiosities. One doesn't even imagine the noxious odors that might emanate from such objects, due to this sense of enclosure and preservation.

However, the curiosity to be ogled here is not death and its processes; it is Witkin himself. If anything is made clear through his own florid writings, it is that his interest lies in the self. "I am not interested in photography per se," he states, "I am dedicating myself to myself. This is my vocation."²⁷² Yet the only bodies we see in his works are those of others, taken from a Mexican morgue²⁷³ and utterly stripped of personhood. Death becomes a tool for self-aggrandizement as the artist decadently re-presents the body parts through appropriated, power-heavy visual systems: medical photography, Roman Catholic iconography, and the *memento mori* still life. Parveen Adams clarifies this incongruity somewhat through the hypothesis that Witkin's worked-over surface exists as a kind of photographic skin, enclosing the artist's psychological construction of himself and assigning the physical print a kind of bodiliness. According to Adams, "[the] construction of a photographic skin allows Witkin to make himself into a photograph," and he presents not so much an image as an ego.²⁷⁴

Audiences can probably agree that there is a difference between photographing a unidentifiable, decayed body as part of an inquiry into the physical and spiritual nature of death, and lopping off an unclaimed body's foot for use in a self-aggrandizing baroque

²⁷² Germano Celant and Joel-Peter Witkin, *Witkin* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1995), 24-5.

²⁷³ Eugenia Parry and Joel-Peter Witkin, *Joel-Peter Witkin* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 1.

²⁷⁴ Parveen Adams, "'Se Faire Être une Photographie': The Work of Joel-Peter Witkin," in *Art: Sublimation or Symptom*, ed. Parveen Adams (New York: Other Press, 2003), 168.

salad of limbs. Both are grotesque; only one is violent. Yet Mann's and Witkin's works plainly share an aesthetic sensibility.

They are not the only ones. Lyle Rexer describes the small wave of photographers who began working with antique processes in the 1990s as an "antiquarian avant-garde." It includes photographers such as Mann, Witkin, Mark Osterman, France Scully Osterman, Jerry Spagnoli, Stephen Sack, and Jayne Hinds Bidaut. At first glance they share little but a focus on intimacy and craft in the face of the slick, cinematic color prints of the 1980s and 1990s, of which Serrano's are an example. Rexer notes that "so mixed are its motives that it might not be credited as a movement at all."²⁷⁵ However, he does point out that the body—both alive and dead—is a frequent subject.

It is easy to see how the blatant tactility of a daguerreotype or collodion negative would lend itself to the rendering of flesh, skin, and bone, as it does in France Scully Osterman's *Reverie* (2000, Fig. 4.8).²⁷⁶ The composition could easily belong to any mid-century master, but its maker ventures beyond the realm of pure sight into that of touch. The photograph's collodion streaks—at which Edward Weston might gasp—look like pillow creases on the sleeping woman's cheeks, and the apparent curling of the waxed salt print's edges create a sense of enclosure emphasizing the cocoon of warm blankets around her body.

The Pictures Generation and its followers may have rejected the preciousness and precise craft of Weston, Harry Callahan, and Minor White, but in many ways they retained those photographers' legacy of "straight photography." Their prints are

²⁷⁵ Rexer, 9.

²⁷⁶ France Scully Osterman is one of the leading photographers in this "school," and it was she and her husband Mark Osterman who taught Mann how to use antique processes.

frequently just as smooth and just as flat, and tend to display their subjects the way we imagine they look to the eye.²⁷⁷

Rexer's photographers do not do this in the least. From Victorians like Julia Margaret Cameron they appropriate a kind of scratch-and-dent *bodilyness* that operates in the intersection between sight, touch, and the imagination. From the high modernists they take the importance of craft and the idea of the photograph as an almost sanctified object. With their postmodern peers they share a sense of play and a desire to shove viewers out of their comfort zones. Like Cameron and her Victorian contemporaries, these photographers employ scratches, swirls, and brushstrokes to express their marvel at the human body. They create photographic skins to mark the plasticity and tangibility of their own bodies and the world around them. Sometimes the effect is dreamy, as in Dan Estabrook's *Untitled Twins (Joined)* (1993, Figure 4.9), and other times it is more of a three-dimensional punch, as with Chuck Close's *Self-Portrait* daguerreotype (1993, Figure 4.10).²⁷⁸ But it is always plastic. Close has said of the daguerreotype process that "[it] has astonishing detail and a dimensionality, like a hologram. It is not static...when you look at a daguerreotype, your experience does not stop with the imagery but also involves the physicality of the process."²⁷⁹

Gary Schneider, a South African who has lived and worked in the United States for many decades, is another prime example of photographers working in this mode.²⁸⁰ The body—most often his own—is arguably Schneider's only subject, so much so that a

²⁷⁷ Not to discount the fact that sometimes this was intentionally misleading, as with Sherrie Levine's 1981 *After Walker Evans* photographs.

²⁷⁸ Though Close is known as a painter, it is unsurprising that his obsession with the human face has also led him to photography.

²⁷⁹ Rexer, 36.

²⁸⁰ Rexer does not include Schneider in his book, but easily could have.

2011 retrospective was titled, simply, *Skin*. His earliest works, which examine the body's malleability and textures, spring from a similar conceptual tradition as Vito Acconci's *Trademarks* (1970). In 1975 he commenced the series "Self-Portrait: Skin and Hair," which fragments and sometimes grotesquely magnifies patches of his own body.²⁸¹ True to his conceptual roots, Schneider produced these images in a matter-of-fact, clinical style.

In recent years, however, he has migrated away from smooth, crisp printing and begun to experiment with processes such as daguerreotyping and the photogram to enhance the textural aspect of his prints. Like Mann, Schneider is a superb photographic printer²⁸² and manipulates these processes in remarkably expressive ways. For *Mask Self-Portrait* (1999, Figure 4.11), he pressed his face up against large-format film, leaving a sweaty mark from nose to ear. The film functioned as a kind of intermediary photogram that recorded not light but touch. Printed, it is both repulsive and enthralling. His face is a swirling nebula of blotchy oils and dead skin, flaking off into the wider universe. Though he is a tidy man in person, Schneider's work seems to recognize and revel in his own body's entropy. Live bodies such as this one flake and sweat and break down. They are subject to time, and pairing this subject matter with similarly physical photographic processes is powerfully resonant.

* * *

²⁸¹ Schneider was so attached to this series that he picked it back up again in 2013 and began exhibiting the two sets of images together.

²⁸² Early in his career, he made prints for Richard Avedon and Lisette Model, as well as printing the photographs for Madonna's infamous *SEX* book. Ken Gewertz, "Portrait of the Artist as Molecule," *Harvard University Gazette* 11 March 2004. <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/2004/03.11/13-schneider.html>

This bond is not entirely new: the photographic and the corporal have been tied together since the medium's earliest decades. The number of daguerreotype portraits dwarfs the number of daguerreotype images made of any other subject, and each one—a unique positive on silver-coated copper, laterally reversed and mounted behind glass—reproduces the experience of looking into a mirror²⁸³

Aside from portraits, there was war, a subject that constantly calls to mind the fragility of bodies, even in their absence. Crimea may have been photographed first, but the photographs of the American Civil War possessed a physicality like none seen before.²⁸⁴ Soldiers' portraits, medical imagery, emaciated prisoners, and body-strewn battlefields still echo in cultural memory (Fig. 4.12). A few are daguerreotypes, sharply defined but now scratched from the loss of their ornate cases. More popular at the time, however were collodion process images: ambrotypes, tintypes, and paper prints made from wet-plate negatives.²⁸⁵

Collodion, as a material in itself, twines together medical and photographic history as much as any subject matter. In 1846, Louis-Nicolas Ménard and Florès Domonte first conceived of soaking guncotton in a blend of alcohol and ether; thus collodion came into being.²⁸⁶ The following year, Boston doctor John Parker Maynard

²⁸³ As does the ambrotype, printed on glass. Tintypes are laterally reversed, but not usually mounted behind glass.

²⁸⁴ For further discussion of this topic, see Jeff L. Rosenheim, *Photography and the American Civil War* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013).

²⁸⁵ An ambrotype is essentially a wet-plate collodion negative mounted on a black background to create the illusion of a positive. A tintype was produced in a similar fashion, but on an opaque sheet of metal with a dark coating.

²⁸⁶ Charles Fabre, *Traité encyclopédique de photographie: Phototypes négatifs* (Paris, Gauthier-Villars & Fils, 1890). Guncotton is an explosive material made by soaking

used the material to create an adhesive surgical dressing.²⁸⁷ It is still used for various medical purposes today, such as attaching electrodes to the body and keeping catheters in place.²⁸⁸ It was not long after collodion's first medical application that photographers began advocating its use as a carrier for photographic emulsion. If it could hold bodies together, surely it could bind silver to glass and other surfaces. In 1851, Englishman Frederick Scott Archer published a new photographic process in *The Chemist*. Now known as the wet collodion process, Archer's method employed glass negatives brushed with a mixture of silver halides suspended in wet collodion.²⁸⁹

As with photography, collodion dressings' first widespread wartime use was in Crimea, but their first mass usage in the United States was during the Civil War. Field surgical guides and medical journals describe the material's use in treating bayonet, sabre, and gunshot wounds.²⁹⁰ At first it was only used in simple dressings, but Union Assistant Surgeon Benjamin Howard experimented with it as a way to seal grievous chest wounds, thereby preventing collapsed lungs.²⁹¹ A field surgeon could close wounds as

cotton fibers in nitric and sulfuric acids and then washing and drying the resulting material.

²⁸⁷ *The Medical World* 16 (1898), 255.

²⁸⁸ *Dorland's Medical Dictionary for Health Consumers* (Philadelphia: Saunders, 2007). Accessed online through The Free Dictionary, <http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/collodion>

²⁸⁹ John Hannavy, ed., *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography* (London: Routledge, 2013), 55. In 1854, Archer published a full volume on the subject, *The Collodion Process on Glass*. Historically, he is credited with developing the process, though other innovators such as Gustave LeGray experimented with collodion as well.

²⁹⁰ B. Howard, M.D., "Treatment of Gunshot and Penetrating Wounds of Chest and Abdomen by Hermetically Sealing," *American Medical Times* 7 (8 October 1863), 156-7; Julian John Chisholm, *A Manual of Military Surgery, for the Use of Surgeons in the Confederate States Army; with Explanatory Plates of All Useful Operations* (Columbia, South Carolina: Evans and Cogswell, 1864), 213.

²⁹¹ Glenna Schroeder-Lein, *The Encyclopedia of Civil War Medicine* ebook (London: Routledge, 2015), np. It is unclear what year he first used collodion for this purpose.

dramatic as Private Adolph Zirsse's (Fig. 4.13) with the aid of collodion.²⁹² Like a photographer preparing a negative, the surgeon painted a thick layer of it atop cuts and sutures with a camel's hair brush.²⁹³ It dried to form a "tenacious"²⁹⁴ second skin, binding to the body like a photographic image to a glass plate. The surgeon's brush marks remained as the wound healed—or as it got worse, as there was always the possibility of sealing in infections. Nonetheless, collodion was so eminently suitable an adhesive that it has not gone out of use.

Bell's photograph of Private Zirsse reveals the photographer's touch as plainly as the nameless doctor's. Horizontal brush lines cross the image from top to bottom, bisecting the puckered scar on Zirsse's upper arm. The occasional blotch of developer or collodion solution mars the background, and specks of dust settle on the subject's skin like freckles. Only Zirsse's self-possession—his warm and confident gaze—reminds the viewer that he is more than a physical being, however splendidly he displays the works of photographer and surgeon.

Mann is well aware of this history, and in public talks has discussed collodion's medical uses with esteem.²⁹⁵ For her, process and subject matter come together reverentially. She attaches deep meaning to wet plate photography's cumbersome physical process and sensitivity to her touch. Setting up a darkroom in the trunk of her car, brushing the plates with collodion, exposing the negatives in her view camera, and

²⁹² This is not to say that such procedures were performed solely with collodion.

²⁹³ James Startin, "Remarks on Feigned or Hysterical Diseases of the Skin," *The Half-Yearly Abstract of the Medical Sciences, Volume 2*, ed. William Stone (Philadelphia: Henry C. Lea, 1870), 89.

²⁹⁴ *Dorland's Medical Dictionary for Health Consumers*, np.

²⁹⁵ Such as "Why the Civil War Still Matters to American Artists," talk given 15 November 2014, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont.

developing the images on site is a meditative process involving her entire body. In turn, each resulting photograph carries traces of her body's interventions between the world and the resulting image: scratches, brush marks, fingerprints, and spots left by broken lenses that she chose on purpose for their defects.²⁹⁶ "The clarity brings you into the picture," says Mann of her wet plate collodion works,

[b]ut what truly attracted me to the process was its reverential quality. In the face of some extraordinary sight or place, you fashion an object, you do not just take a picture. It is ceremonial. I am not a religious person, but there is an experience of communion in wet-plate photography. It is not a drive-by shooting. When you pour the plate, it goes cold in your hand, and a wonderful frisson goes through you. And when you develop it, it is like a primordial magic or alchemy. I still feel that, every time I make a new plate and the image appears.²⁹⁷

* * *

Sally Mann's landscapes of the American South are absent of visible bodies, but they are in many ways the most comprehensive representations of her beliefs about death. Thus, they form the core of the *What Remains* exhibition. As with the first two chapters of the show, she begins with an intimate, personal experience of death and the land, then expands into broader territory.

"December 8, 2000," the exhibition's third section, examines a particular event that occurred on the Manns' family farm:

Because of a big bend in the river, our farm has water on three sides, a classic stronghold. This fact, coupled with the long views from our house, explains why at first we had no locks on the doors.

²⁹⁶ Melissa E. Feldman and Ingrid Schaffner, *Secret Victorians: Contemporary Artists and a Nineteenth-Century Vision* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 1999), 81.

²⁹⁷ Rexer, 81.

When the sheriff called to suggest locking up against an escaped prisoner, I was briefly amused by the impossibility of this, then paralyzed by bogey-man-under-the-bed fear. The fear was appropriate: the prisoner, a felon with sex offenses on his record, had escaped custody with two pistols and a shotgun...by the time he approached the house he only had the pistols. Ducking behind a tree, he put one of them to his head. His shot was tinnily distinguishable from the rifle shots of the police who had appeared at the last moment. He fell among the stumps and bracken, just a kid after all, my son's age, bled out in the milky winter light.

Shortly thereafter, the photographer's hunger for understanding surfaces:

When it was over and the trucks and cars and helicopters had cleared out, I walked over to the place where he died...there at the base of a hickory tree was a glistening pool of dark blood. I was tempted to touch its perfectly tensioned surface. Instead, as I stared, it shrank perceptibly, forming a brief meniscus before leveling off again, as if the earth had taken a delicate sip.

Death had left for me its imperishable mark on an ordinary copse of trees in the front yard. But would a stranger, coming upon it a century hence, sense the sanctity of the death-infected soil?²⁹⁸

In this case, the answer is mostly “no.” Mann’s experience of the event was terrifying and profound, as is her description of it. But the accompanying six photographs are not. The photographic prints themselves are smoother and less physical than the others in the exhibition, and they could have been taken anywhere, in any bland copse of trees on a sunny winter afternoon. There is no hint of the events that transpired there, aside from the police cars parked at the edge of Mann’s meadow in the first frame (2000-01, Fig. 4.14). Successive images (2000-01, Fig. 4.15) show a fuzz of sunlight filtering through bare trees onto a mess of dry fallen leaves. We see no evidence that Mann’s would-be attacker took his life here: no meniscus of blood, no chalk body outline or yellow tape. The police cars’ tracks in the final frame (2000-01, Fig. 4.16) could just as easily be from the family car.

²⁹⁸ Mann, 70.

In this sense, the series participates in a conversation about trauma that several photo critics have remarked upon in recent years. Most notable among these are Geoffrey Batchen, Lisa Saltzman, and Ulrich Baer. Batchen's 2012 essay "Looking Askance" outlined how a number of late-twentieth and early twenty-first century landscape and architectural photographers have engaged with the memory of horrific events. This type of art, he says, "seeks to bear witness to particular historical traumas while refusing to show them to us."²⁹⁹ Rather than directly bearing witness, as many of the photographers in this dissertation do, the artists Batchen writes about create deadpan photographs of empty spaces where atrocities once occurred. Most of these works, and the criticism responding to them, focus on our inability to commune with tragedies that are long gone or that we did not experience. He focuses on Australian photographer Ann Ferran, who in the early twenty-first century produced images such as *The Ground at Ross 9* (2001, Fig. 4.17). It depicts a perfectly ordinary stretch of grass dotted by rocks; it is also the former site of a notorious prison. The title and the very ordinariness of the image hint at horrific events covered over by the mundane. We look back at vague occurrences; the present functions not within a continuous narrative but as a vantage point from which to imagine the long-ago.

This structure of meaning is appropriate to Mann's "December 8, 2000" images, but art historian Lisa Saltzman also applies it to her antique process landscapes of Civil War battlefields and other spaces of past horror. Mann gives the *What Remains* exhibition a dramatic fourth act with her "Antietam" series—dark, loamy, and absent of visible

²⁹⁹ Geoffrey Batchen, "Looking Askance," in *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis*, ed. Batchen et al (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 227. For more on this in relation to Nan Goldin and other American artists, see Chapter Three.

bodies (2001, Fig. 4.18). The photographs are a continuation of Mann's earlier landscape series³⁰⁰, which examine other fraught historic sites, such as the location of Emmett Till's 1955 murder. Saltzman discusses Mann's landscapes in the context of body-strewn Civil War images³⁰¹:

Even though the photographs return materially to a set of antiquated practices, they cannot materialize specific events, be they national or familial, deeply traumatic or utterly mundane, that long predate them. There are no war dead strewn across the landscape; there are no lynched bodies dangling from the trees... The camera cannot bear belated witness; it can only record what remains. The cameras of Brady, Gardner, and O'Sullivan recorded nothing but aftermath; Mann's photographs extend that moment of aftermath all the way to our present. Like their historical antecedents, but in an amplified fashion, they bear witness to the condition of having come too late.³⁰²

Saltzman speaks eloquently, but seems to miss the point of the photographer's relationship with the battlefields of the South. Mann does not feel she has come too late, and her photograph of a dark hill at Antietam (2001, Fig. 4.19) isn't a statement of her inability to convey the rush of battle and bullets. Rather, she recognizes that the organic matter of history is still there, and experiences the land as such. The ground of her Southern homeland literally bulges with it. Speaking about her trip to Antietam, she says, "Walking around the beautiful undulations, I thought how death had been the sculptor of this ravishing landscape. How beneath my feet shifted the bones of bodies, now the dark matter of creation, the rich earth."³⁰³ Alexander Gardner and Matthew Brady's time is not Mann's only reference point. For her, history and death are many-layered, never-ending processes that do not just bring things to a close, but shape things to come.

³⁰⁰ These include *Mother Land* (1996) and *Deep South* (1998).

³⁰¹ Here Saltzman focuses on Mann's *Mother Land* series, but illustrates her text with an image from the *Antietam* series.

³⁰² Lisa Saltzman, "What Remains: Photography and Landscape, Memory and Oblivion," in *Haunted*, 131.

³⁰³ Mann, "Why the Civil War Still Matters to American Artists."

The photographs of *What Remains* slowly build up to this worldview, layer by layer. The bones of animals and the corpses of humans, the witnessing of death upon the land, and death's continual shaping of the earth's surface are acknowledged in the present. In one of the Antietam images (2001, Fig. 4.20), a lone, abundantly leafy tree stands amidst the grass. At its feet is either a dead log or a swath of chemical distortion that takes the shape of one. Everything is dim and clouded. Stalks of grass are caught in a swirling blur of developer and collodion. This roiling earth serves to remind us of all that is beneath it: human bodies dispersed into the dirt, animal bones, plant matter, tree roots, bullets, thread from blue and gray uniforms. The soldiers whose bodies remain in the soil may be Mann's ancestors. They may have had letters or photographs in their pockets, or wounds sealed with the same chemicals that wash across the surface of her picture. The crinkling and peeling at the image's edge tell us that it—and its maker—are just as organic and malleable. Historical records and actors do not stand outside the processes of history; they transform along with them.

* * *

Mann could easily have closed the exhibition with the Antietam photographs, comprehensive as they are. But their somber absoluteness unsettled her. "I need some [other] way to end it," she stated prior to the show's opening. "I think that to approach death with such an absolute finality is a mistake and I need some way to end it on a positive, life-affirming note."³⁰⁴ Hence the development of the exhibition's concluding

³⁰⁴ Cantor.

series, “What Remains.” In it she returns to the subject matter audiences most associate with her: her children Jessie, Emmett, and Virginia, long since grown up.

These are very different photographs from *Immediate Family*’s finely printed environmental shots of rural, seemingly feral children. Each of the twenty images included in the *What Remains* catalog shows a single face, so tightly framed as to preclude the appearance of an outline. Only skin, eyes, noses, and mouths appear, rendered in the same murky palette as the landscapes. Again, the edges of the frame are rife with fingerprints and peeling collodion.

The first (2004, Fig. 4.21) depicts Mann’s daughter Virginia, her eyes calmly opened. Dense freckles and fine lines appear beneath her lower lids, hinting at the effects of the sun over time. The camera’s shallow focus blurs her nose, lips, and brow, pulling the focus to her gaze. The photograph represents an intimate connection between photographer and subject, not least when one considers that Mann photographed each child’s face from above while he or she lay on a bench in her studio.³⁰⁵

A quote from Ezra Pound begins the series: “What thou lovest well remains, the rest is dross / What thou lov’st well shall not be / reft from thee.”³⁰⁶ But the photographs themselves question the last line’s sentiment in their acknowledgement of the children’s mutability. Sometimes the focus is on eyes, other times on lips or skin; sometimes the eyes are open, and sometimes they are closed (2004, Fig. 4.22). Occasionally the faces are all but blurred out of existence (2004, Fig. 4.23). Many of the images, as one reviewer notes, “make them look, well, dead.”³⁰⁷

³⁰⁵ As depicted in the *What Remains* documentary.

³⁰⁶ Mann, 104.

³⁰⁷ Tyler Green.

In this context, it is impossible to ignore their resemblance to nineteenth-century postmortem photographs in which the dead are posed as though sleeping (Fig. 4.24). It is true that most of the earlier photographs exhibit more of the subject's body, but the peacefully relaxed faces and closed lids of both convey a similar state of pure potential. In the postmortem photographs this is wishful thinking, and in Mann's images it embodies a parent's real and present desires in the face of her family's future.

It is brave to represent those she "lov'st well" in a state of such frank liminality. The bodies depicted earlier in the exhibition were heavy with certainty, but these faces are simultaneously tactile and immaterial, dead and alive. She does not pretend that they are immortal, though, and her use of the same materials and processes she employs for the earlier series in the exhibition emphasizes this. Mann's children are indeed what remains of the actions of history, and what remains of their mother's hopes and her future. They—and her love for them—are what remains *to her, for now*. Thus, Sally Mann may be the most appreciative and sensitive viewer of her exhibition's closing chapter.

* * *

Let us end with a thought experiment. In order to do this, some exploration of Sally Mann's subsequent work is required.

Jessie, Emmet, and Virginia's potential, as perceived by their mother, may be the reason she photographed them, rather than herself and her husband Larry, for the exhibition's open-ended conclusion. It is unlikely that Mann will ever experience her

children's deaths, but she knows that she will be present for her own, and probably for her husband's as well. Two series created after *What Remains* elaborate on this. "Proud Flesh" (2004–09) comprises nude studies of Larry Mann; "Upon Reflection" (2006–12) is a series of ambrotype self-portraits his wife began while bedridden after a serious riding accident.

Sally and Larry Mann's marriage is, by all accounts, a close one, and the "Proud Flesh" photographs (Fig. 4.25) do not let it down. They radiate with thirty years of trust and tenderness. Each ray of light—whether soft and diffuse, or cool and raking—is a caress. In this they resemble JoAnn Verburg's photographic still lifes of her sleeping, middle-aged husband Jim (Fig. 4.26). Unlike Verburg's work, however, the chemical aberrations she encourages in the printing process can be distinctly unsettling. In *Hephaestus* (2008, Fig. 4.27), Larry's torso is upright and strong, but racked by a plague of chemical spots and bubbles along his left side. He is opened up, decaying in front of our eyes, and we see right through him. The effect is more acute if we know that Larry has muscular dystrophy affecting his left arm and right leg. "One of the things that makes that series so strong," says Mann, "is that you have a man who is getting old. On top of that, he is having this terrible muscle-wasting disease in his left arm and right leg. But he is still proud."³⁰⁸

Mann introduces similar destructive aberrations into her self-portraits (Fig. 4.28). Displayed in groups and grids, they are nearly as tightly shot as the *What Remains* photographs of her children. They are alternately shy, vain, and sincerely frightening. Her

³⁰⁸ Jiang Rong, "An Interview with Sally Mann—'The Touch of an Angel,'" *American Suburb X* 5 January 2013, reprinted from *Chinese Photography* November 2010. <http://www.americansuburbx.com/2013/01/interview-sally-mann-the-touch-of-an-angel-2010.html>

eyes go white. Silver blotches colonize her face. Her body, like Larry's, is subject to the ravages of time in a way that her children's bodies will not be for some time.

The previously mentioned experiment is as follows: Take the five segments of *What Remains* out of order. Add the photographs of Sally and Larry Mann. Ask another person to put them in order. One can imagine that the children would come first, followed by their parents; then the escaped convict, the dog, and the corpses in some order or another. The landscapes would likely be last. We see yet again that Mann's conception of the relationship between humans, death, the land, and the passage of time is not the same as what may be expected. But the difference exposes the necessity of recognizing a singular artist's singular passage through time, space, and grief. Without viewers' empathy, the depth of her work may be lost on them.

EPILOGUE: CHILDREN OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

I do not wish to dramatically sweep away the late-twentieth century theories and works of Roland Barthes and the Pictures Generation, whose influence is both considerable and thoroughly international. However, it is undeniable that they loom like a cataract over contemporary photographic criticism, hazily obscuring the social significance and artistic impact of others. In major surveys they have become the go-to predecessors for any work touching on trauma, loss, longing, constructed identity, simulation, institutional critique, or pastiche.³⁰⁹

Yet we cannot hope to fully understand twenty-first century photography's much-discussed relationship with death, loss, and trauma without examining the 1980s and 1990s as this dissertation does. While the Pictures Generation latched onto the self-conscious de-aestheticization of 1970s conceptual art, the artists discussed in these four chapters have mounted an equally self-conscious counteroffensive of aesthetic photography and unironic beauty. Rather than mimicking anonymous corporate speech or a generalized, possessive male gaze, they speak in the first person, with a deep desire to convey their own sensory and emotional experiences in the world.

³⁰⁹ Examples include Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss's *Art Since 1900*, published in 2005 and 2011; *Vitamin Ph: New Perspectives in Photography*, published in 2006 and 2009 by Phaidon with an essay by T.J. Demos; and *Haunted: Contemporary Photography, Video, Performance*, 2010, edited by Jennifer Blessing in conjunction with the eponymous Guggenheim exhibition. One of the few significant works to challenge this assumption has been Michael Fried's *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, which argues that contemporary photography has its aesthetic and thematic roots in cinema. While there is much to criticize in Fried's volume, it *has* managed to expand the conversation on the state of photographic art.

In doing so, Robert Mapplethorpe, JoAnn Verburg, Nan Goldin, Sally Mann, and the other artists addressed in these four chapters ask for empathetic understanding from the viewer. By this I mean that each photograph is an invitation to consider what it is like to be them, to touch the bodies and spaces around them and value the experiences they value. Whether or not we share these values—and whether or not we question their agendas in taking this approach—we will likely understand them better.

Each photographer invites us in differently. Mapplethorpe does so via the intense gaze frequently shared between photographer and subject.³¹⁰ He also treats his subject matter as sculpture in the round, engendering a desire to walk through the space and contemplate his male bodies from various angles. Verburg produces life size prints, each one allowing the viewer to be physically contiguous with the scene. Goldin's empty beds and other memorial works encourage us to feel the absence of loved ones and share the pain of her loss. Sally Mann's intensely textural use of antique processes creates an almost synesthetic experience in which we can easily imagine holding crumbling animal bones and dark, rich topsoil in our own hands. Tying these methods together is the fact that each artist co-opts beauty as an artistic tool, and acknowledges the photograph as a tangible object. This is reflected today in the return of the photograph as an object, among both photographers and scholars of the medium.

Their dedication to representing human experience of time and space necessitates an acknowledgement of human fragility, flux, and mortality that one does not see in the work of their contemporaries. The Pictures Generation and those who wrote about them made great strides in theorizing death, while personally keeping their distance from it.

³¹⁰ Which in his case are often one in the same.

As the conscious use of Roland Barthes would dictate, we know little about Sherrie Levine's experience of time and space, and we know even less about Richard Prince's emotions regarding his loved ones' mortality. However, we gain intimate insight into how these concepts function in the lives of this dissertation's photographers. Each one seeks to understand how mortality and loss function within his or her own life and worldview. For them, death provides more depth and vibrancy than any other subject matter.

The influence of their values is profound. Emotional candor, the recognition of human mortality, the unironic portrayal of individual experience, and the importance of craft have permeated early twenty-first century art photography. So too have the critiques, conceptualism, constructed simulations, and avoidance of first-person narrative that are so common to the Pictures Generation.

The intersection of these two powerful traditions at the turn of the millennium has made for dynamic new photographic works. Late twentieth-century photography existed within a dialectic that swung wildly from the conceptual to the experiential. The photographers who followed in the twenty-first century have had the good fortune of being able to pick and choose from this wide variety of sources, and on the whole have ended up somewhere in the middle. Due to swift electronic sharing and an explosion of transnational exchange within the art world, influences have crossed international boundaries as well.

If there is any kind of linking thread running through photography today, it is the blurred distinction between what is "real" and what is constructed or imaginary. Few photographic works are what we would call straightforwardly candid, but few are entirely

invented, either.³¹¹ Rather, in the U.S. and abroad it has become common to stage or manufacture photographic situations that nonetheless feature real people—artists and their subjects—emotionally and physically experiencing the world. This is most prominent in documentary portraiture, which has become increasingly collaborative. The American Katy Grannan, for instance, is well-known for seeking subjects via newspaper ads. Instead of telling respondents how to behave, she allows them to select the location, clothing, and poses they feel most comfortable with, however mundane or bizarre (Fig. 5.1).³¹² The situation may be manufactured and strongly performative, but the result is sincere personal expression that emphasizes the subjects' physical and emotional vulnerability. Zwelethu Mthethwa similarly examines the domestic spaces and personal styles created by his fellow Cape Town residents, photographing each at home in an activity or pose of his or her choosing (Fig. 5.2).³¹³ Other photographers engaging in this type of collaboration with those around them include Phil Collins, Malerie Marder, Alessandra Sanguinetti, Maria Gelman, and Alec Soth.

Sometimes the blend of emotionally invested documentary photography and conceptual frameworks takes the form of outright, admitted simulation, as in An-My Lê's *Small Wars* series (1999-2002), which chronicles the faux-military exercises of Vietnam War re-enactors in Virginia. Instead of revealing life itself as a simulation—a goal of

³¹¹ Exceptions to the latter would be artists such as Mariko Mori and the group ACF + F, who create unabashedly Surrealist digital montages, as well as Walid Raad, whose Atlas Group manufactures entire archives of fictional people associated with the Lebanese Civil War.

³¹² Maria Lokke, "On the Boulevard with Katy Grannan," *The New Yorker* online, April 21, 2011, np. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/on-the-boulevard-with-katy-grannan>

³¹³ Sarah Lewis, "Zwelethu Mthethwa," in *Vitamin Ph: New Perspectives in Photography*, ed. by T.J. Demos (New York: Phaidon, 2010).

many Pictures Generation works—she records simulations that are genuinely part of their participants' lives. The artist is forthcoming about her own emotional ties to the work; we are meant to know that she was born in Vietnam and came to the United States as a political refugee in 1975. An image like *Lesson* (Fig. 5.3) allows the photographer, subjects, and viewers to confront war long after its initial trauma has set in. Critic E.J. Pettinger aptly describes Lê as “a war photographer who captures our attempts to fit war into our minds.”³¹⁴

In the United States, even the closest descendents of first-person photographers like Goldin brush a substantial veneer of performativity onto their work. Elinor Carucci's photographs of herself and her family in the nude (Fig. 5.4) often read as idealized setups; it is easy to step into her skin as she makes the photograph and imagines the viewer's gaze. Yet the people, their fears, and their affections for each other are genuine. So, too, is the case with Ryan McGinley's images of his friends' nude frolics among nature (Fig. 5.5). Like contestants on a reality show, they're having the time of their lives *and* are hard at work making pictures for people to see.³¹⁵ Similar work abounds outside the United States as well, especially in Europe. However, a strong current of traditional documentary runs through African photography, as in the work of Zanele Muholi, whose

³¹⁴ Pettinger, E.J., “The Vietnam of the Mind: An-My Le's ‘Small Wars’ at Boise Art Museum,” *Boise Weekly* online, January 7, 2009, np. <http://www.boiseweekly.com/boise/the-vietnam-of-the-mind/Content?oid=1013718>. Lê has more recently photographed American soldiers engaged in high-intensity training exercises.

³¹⁵ This brings to mind a family member's experience of being on a televised reality show. During the taping she began crying from the stress of it, and the show's kindly host said “honey, you don't have to do anything you don't want to. It's true that we're making a TV show, but this is still your real life. Don't forget that.”

sensitive and quietly beautiful depictions of black South African lesbians (Fig. 5.6) leave no room for the conceptual.

What of mortality, the central focus of these past four chapters? Contemporary photographers do not always address it as blatantly as Mapplethorpe, Verburg, Goldin, or Mann. However, recognition of the vulnerable, changeable human body infuses a wide swath of imagery like never before. High modernist photographers often looked to the body as a sculpture or as raw material to abstract; early conceptualists treated the body as a plastic thing upon which to experiment. For the Pictures Generation, the body acted as political battleground, a manifestation of social expectations and stereotypes. Now, this negotiation of social roles comes into contact with the idea that the body is a changeable, perishable vehicle through which we experience the world and others experience us. Grannan's subjects earnestly expose their soft bellies to her camera while nestling amongst disheveled foliage. Lê's explosions physically transport the terrors of war into suburban American communities.³¹⁶ Carucci's awareness of her own youth and beauty make its fleetingness that much more obvious. Muholi's focus on visible markers of gender identity and the scars of sexual violence stresses how each body moves through time and space. Even contemporary landscape photography dealing with trauma, such as Jitka Hanzlová's *Forest* series (Fig. 5.7), employs the natural world's slow shifts to stress the passage of time.

Contemporary photography's most insistent engagement with mortality may be in the rapidly growing use of antique processes, which inherently refer to age and frequently

³¹⁶ As opposed to Martha Rosler's much earlier *Bringing the War Home* series (1967-72), which used montage to stress suburban Americans' ignorance of and physical distance from the concerns of war.

embrace the appearance of entropic disintegration. It also participates in the renewal of aesthetic photography instigated by the photographers in this dissertation. In the last decades of the twentieth century, a club-like subset of American and French photographers taught daguerreotyping and wet-plate photography to themselves and each other, haphazardly working out the intricacies of these craft-heavy processes.³¹⁷ Today, the teaching of antique processes is commonplace in fine-art photography programs.³¹⁸ Such an emphatic return to craft is unsurprising in the context of high-resolution camera phones and digital photography's de-materialization of the art object.³¹⁹ Antique-process photographers counter these challenges to their artistic importance with unique, tangible, objects that bear traces of each maker's touch. Myra Greene employs black-glass ambrotypes as a direct analogue for her own dark skin in the *Character Recognition* series (Fig. 5.8, 2006-07). She presents cropped, close-up images of her facial features, each one echoing the visual conventions of ethnographic studies. The glass plates' collodion surfaces peel back and flake off at the edges, threatening Greene's already fragmented body. Barbara Ciurej and Lindsay Lochman's *Natural History* images (Fig. 5.9) use yet another early process, cyanotype, to create photographic skins. The pair overlays cyanotyped flowers onto digital portraits of older women. Thus, the women's

³¹⁷ Rexer, 8-10.

³¹⁸ I don't recall any fellow students during my time as a BFA photography student at the Rochester Institute of Technology (2002-05) exploring antique processes. As of 2015, however, even the school's basic Black and White Photography II course includes ambrotyping and other monoprint processes. <http://cias.rit.edu/spas-bfa-electives>

³¹⁹ Similar connections have been made in almost every recent essay discussing the return to antique/alternative processes.

faces and botanical specimens meld together, drawing attention to and celebrating the natural flux and mortality of both.³²⁰

One of the greatest mistakes in examining the ties between photography and death is to treat death as a conceptual framework when it is first and foremost an actual human event, experienced in different ways by each person. A death occurs because an individual life has happened. Time has passed and will continue to do so. The making of a photograph is the same, in that it is a personal act by a unique author. A photograph is made in a particular place at a particular time, and is nearly always the result of a photographer moving through the world.

These activities and intentions must be considered in photographic criticism, especially in relation to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The assertion that the authors of the 1980s and 1990s should *not* die so that the viewer can live may be the most important critical legacy of the photographers in this dissertation. The same can be said for any author, at any time. Those of us who write about photography must take into account all these things: how the artist, subject, viewer, social context, and manifold influences all come together at the site of the photograph to shape its meaning.

³²⁰ Barbara Ciurej and Lindsay Lochman, "Natural History," Barbara Ciurej and Lindsay Lochman website, np.
<http://www.ciurejlochmanphoto.com/naturalhistory/nathiststatement.html>

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