

Arrested Development: Death in the Expanded Field of the Family Album

‘Where a [portrait] painting belonged to the family, one might from time to time enquire after the originals of the portraits. But within two or three generations the interest dies: the pictures, to the extent that they survive, do so only as testimony to the art of the person who painted them. In photography, however, one encounters a new and strange phenomenon: in that fishwife from Newhaven, who casts her eyes down with such casual, seductive shame, there remains something that does not merely testify to the art of [...] the photographer, but something that cannot be silenced, that impudently demands the name of the person who lived at the time and who, remaining real even now, will never yield herself up entirely into art’.

Walter Benjamin, *A Short History of Photography* (1931).

¹ Susan Bright suggests that the concepts of ‘excess’ and ‘loss’ as they pertain to digital photography, refer to the over-abundance in the field of the image versus the depletion in the field of the real. See Bright 2013:10. See also Kelsey 2013.

‘Be here now!’ was the exhortation. At the age of nineteen, under the sway of earnest, questing and not very entertaining readings in Existentialism and Zen Buddhism (neither of which was I to explore henceforth), I spent the ten weeks of my first grown-up travel experience trying to ‘live in the present.’ The journey remains unrecorded, and – with the exception of a few mental snapshots – unremembered. Contrariwise, now in my (optimistically termed) middle years, I scarcely walk the dog in the oft trodden fields near home without taking a camera or smartphone. This change in my own practice reflects one of the conundrums of photography: does it halt and embalm life, or prolong it? In capturing a particular, evanescent moment – in trapping its subject like a fly in amber – is photography a kind of little death, or does it redress lost time and memorialise it? And what has intervened between my two approaches to time and to image capture?

In the first place, digital technologies have erupted, with their facilitation and, indeed, encouragement of prodigious pointing and clicking. We live in an image-saturated, networked world where photographically documenting both private and public life is ubiquitous. The axes analogue-digital and private-networked, with attendant concepts of excess and loss, shape the evolving identity of the photographic object today.¹ Yet as I shall argue, this altered photographic paradigm has not dissolved the old association between photography and temporal arrest that has provided photography with a mnemonic role to play. We are still halted in our tracks by the effect of the real in a photograph, though *pace* Walter Benjamin, perhaps we also too readily yield up that reality into art. In the second place, a lifetime of working in, on and around images means that I coax even the truly banal to display itself to me as something to be snatched, archived, and possibly mined later. This idea of the conquest of a world – my world – *as picture* insures me against oblivion and feeds a hunger for continual crossings between my life and my work. I am, in short, seduced by the [sheer pictorial quality of the ordinary](#), by the fact that reality so often presents itself to me as already framed.

2 In her short introductory text to a book of photographs by Peter Hujar, Susan Sontag quotes from her first novel, *The Benefactor*, saying “Life is a movie, death is a photograph”. Her sense of the proximate relationship between a photograph and death is explicit in this text, where she insists that photography converts “the whole world into a cemetery [...] The photograph-as-photograph shows death. More than that, it shows the sex-appeal of death”. (Sontag 1976: Introduction.)

3 ‘I shudder ... over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.’ (Barthes 1980:96). Photographer David Green’s comment that what he calls ‘the cloying melancholia’ of a post-Barthesian era of photographic theory now haunts critical approaches to ‘all photography’ is, I think misguided (quoted in Bull 2010:17). The broader point of Barthes’ observation concerned itself with questions of temporality and the fact that the afterlife of a human subject in a photographic image extends far beyond the duration of that human life.

4 An exhibition *Ego Documents: The Autobiographical in Contemporary Art* at the Kunstmuseum in Bern in 2008 brought together artists that included Mona Hatoum, Louise Bourgeois, Martin Kippenberger, On Kawara, Isabelle Krieg, Nicolas Nixon and Sadie Benning. Other – more specifically photographic – collections might include Nan Goldin, Sally Mann, Duane Michals, Larry Sultan, Hannah Wilke, Jo Spence, Sophie Calle, Anne Noggle, Elinor Carucci, Ana Casas Broda, Wolfgang Tillmans and Léonie Hampton.

5 Lucie Ryzova made this interesting distinction between family albums and peer albums as a distinct, homosocial genre in Egypt, ‘The Faces of Hosni: Textual and Visual Strategies in Mid-20th Century Egypt’ paper, delivered at the conference *Intimate Archives: Photography and Life-Writing*, Wolfson College, University of Oxford, 29 November 2013. I would argue that the principle applies broadly, if with culturally specific characteristics, and that online social networks are frequently employed as multi-user peer albums.

In some senses, though I am fully cognizant of the manifestly constructed nature of photographic representations in an age of digital capture and proliferation, like many people, my immersion in photography comes from a traditional, historical place. I am smitten by the familiar gorgeousness of the everyday, and I wish to poach it as readymade, flatten it and make it my keepsake. I feel besieged by the future ‘lostness’ of it all, and yes, like every essayist on photography, my thoughts still return to the well-worn melancholy of Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, who both saw the still photograph as the very distillation of mortality.² I continue to be affected by Barthes’ famous phrase: ‘by giving me the absolute past ... the photograph tells me death in the future’. (*En me donnant le passé absolu de la pose ... la photographie me dit la mort au futur.*) (Barthes 1980:96) Note, the photograph does not tell of death in the future: it is itself the document of a future-past, the testimony of an event – Barthes calls it a catastrophe – so certainly doomed to happen that one might say it has already taken place.³

There are many artists today whose practice includes documenting and photographing their own daily lives.⁴ There is a continuum between such practice and the unassuming ubiquity of the snapshot: photographs whose place is in the personal or family album, or in what Lucie Ryzova (2013) has usefully termed ‘the peer album,’ distinct in its specific content and usages from the family album.⁵ Such apparently unexceptional photographs serve a mnemonic role in the construction of social narratives and self-narratives that link the isolated moment – the singular incident – to its prehistory and also to its future, a link securing the association between photography and mortality. For artists working in and with the paradigm of the photograph as archival document, the camera is more than merely an instrument of refined empiricism. Rather, following Walter Benjamin’s famous theorisation of the photograph’s ability to tap an ‘optical unconscious’ *inside* the visible, such works often also explore the notion that the camera records (in individual images, but also in series) what the eye does *not* see. But because photographs now so extravagantly and gratuitously constitute the visual culture of our received environment, they continue to grant us the sense (or illusion) of being a slice of life. Yet the mere existence of a photograph, analogue or digital – with all the conscious and unconscious, instantaneous and considered decisions that underlie its production – is a *staging* that hyperbolises relations (formal, social, psychic) in the perceptual field. The freeze-frame is life as you have never really known it.

It is now a commonplace of photographic theory that the special relationship between mortality and photography is a product of the singular, indexical status of early photographs, each being the material trace of a unique emanation of light from a particular object at a specific time. Barthes’ formulation of the implications of this remains as pertinent today as it was when he published *Camera Lucida (La Chambre claire, 1980)*. He famously described the characteristics of photographic image capture as the ‘quiddity’ (or ‘thingness’) of the referent, its temporal quality being its ‘pastness’, the notion of ‘having been.’ Thus formulated, this modest artefact plays several roles. It is simultaneously a trace (a material, indexical sign that refers, by contiguity, to the past); a relic (the physical remnant of a past action that is charged with transcendental truth); and a fetish (an object that stands as a substitute for the lost thing, and in doing so, both disavows and compensates for the loss itself). All three metaphors situate the

6 Benjamin 1972 (Kindle 2011):@ Loc. 46%.

7 While there is an indefinite amount of information provided by a continuous-tone photograph, the extent to which information is lost in digital file compression – so called lossy compression – is the outcome of a compromise struck between image quality and file size.

photograph in a special relationship with the passage of time, one whose link to the empirical and the real is sustained by the discourse of magic. In this sense, photography is haunted by its referent not merely as a representation, but quite literally as a revenant, a ghost.

If I am stressing Barthes, it is because he so cogently described the intricate meshing of tenses in the circulation of gazes within photographic production. In an often reiterated passage in *Camera Lucida*, he begins rummaging through the photographs he finds in the apartment of his recently deceased mother; searching for something that he knows he will not fully find. Who among us has not sought, in the [photographs of our own 'dearly departed'](#), a clue to the mystery of the final vocation of all that vitality? Who has not been struck with an uncanny sense of the enigma of disappearance; incomprehension that *this* particular and idiosyncratic existence (a specific combination of bodiliness, intelligence and memory, humour and fear, desire and history, longing and satiety) – an existence that addresses 'us' across the surface of the photograph – has been extinguished?

In an old photograph of a young girl in a winter garden in Chennevières-sur-Marne, Barthes the adult son finally re-encounters his mother, whom he had nursed in illness as if she were his child. In this mysterious cohabitation of past and present, presence and absence, he mourns the loss not only of the mother, but also the loss of himself as a child, and the prospective loss of his very self: 'From now on I could do no more than await my total, undialectical death'. (72) Barthes scours the photographs of his mother from a time that belongs to History, which he defines as that time when we were not yet born. While this historical time excludes him, in this single photograph, he finds the desired *punctum*, that detail that, in piercing the photographic surface and extending out to prick him, also punctures the temporal cohesion of the photographic image. Walter Benjamin had foreshadowed this in his essay 'A Short History of Photography' (1931), speaking of the quest to find in the photographic image 'the tiny spark of chance, of the here and now, with which reality has, as it were, seared the character in the picture [...] that imperceptible point at which, in the immediacy of that long-past moment, the future so persuasively inserts itself that, looking back, we may rediscover it'.⁶ There is little to add to this marvellous formulation; I would simply say that the *punctum* is the subjective combination of a particular detail with the spontaneous consciousness it arouses in a specific viewer – in myself – of the passage of time as it addresses me from the photograph.

It could be argued that digital photographs will never exercise such seduction: for one, their aging manifests not as marbled and mottled yellowing, but as pixelated degradation and noise.⁷ Their appearance is detached from any material support and is therefore free from the particularities of surface deterioration, though they are threatened with other forms of extinction (failure to backup, hard-drive crash and so on). Recently emerged (and emerging) digital technologies of image production radically alter the very nature of photography: as Fred Ritchin (2009:15) puts it at the opening of his book on photography in the age of digital reproduction, 'photography, as we have known it, is both ending and enlarging'.

Emerging from principles that share nothing with the photochemical processes of film-based media, digital photography makes more manifest the possibilities of erasure and manipulation, more overtly vexing the truth value of the photograph, its status as document. With the move from grain (providing 'an absolute continuum from brightest light to darkest shadow'

8 See Manovich 2003:242. See also Manovich 2002.

9 Baudelaire in trans. P.E. Charvet 1972: 295.

10 See 'Deathless Data: What happens to our digital property after we die?' *The Economist*, 21-27 April 2012:68.

11 This is clearly different from Sontag's view that there is an ontological separation between the cinematographic and the photographic, see note 2 above.

(Benjamin 1931[1972]) to pixel (breaking up form into an even grid of its smallest elements), the assumptions concerning the indexical nature of photography, and hence, of photographic truth, are eroded. Consequent to such erosion, it may be argued, the powerful relationship between a photograph and a past event is also undermined, thus also loosening the intimate embrace between photography and mortality.

Indeed, there can be no doubt about the epistemological uncertainty into which we are thrown when we look at a digital photograph: an uncertainty about the very nature of what we are seeing. But I would argue that when a digital camera has been used to capture something – whether that be a spontaneously encountered scene or a posed arrangement – in much the way that a film camera is used (with editing programmes like Adobe Photoshop deployed as a virtual darkroom), at present, much digital imaging preserves the cultural codes of the techniques it simulates (photography, cinematography). This is why for a critic like Lev Manovich, the category of 'digital photography' does not exist.⁸ Following Manovich, I would argue that the tensions between life and death, and the paradoxical ways in which photography seizes upon such tensions, may manifest themselves in a digital photograph just as they had in the earliest photographic experiments with silver compounds that Baudelaire (1972:295) had dismissed as a 'trivial image on a scrap of metal',⁹ although we may not as yet have any guarantee as to how our virtual and digital property will be stored, accessed, or bequeathed upon our demise.¹⁰

Because of its unique contiguity with the time and place at which it was taken, the photograph is characterised by a transfixing immobility, one might call it a petrification. For some, this immobilisation of the temporal flow renders a photograph merely a fragment of a hypothetical, continuous whole. One may then consider the 'freezing and slicing of the world into discrete chunks' to be an 'insidious distortion' (Ritchin 2009:11) at worst, a constructed fiction at best. Gilles Deleuze regards the individual photograph as merely a segment in a succession of images constituting a putative filmstrip; a photogram waiting to be connected to others in a series. Time is that 'with' which (Deleuze puts the word *with* in inverted commas) 'images are made to pass consecutively' (Deleuze 1983:2).¹¹

This notion of the 'shot' as a fragment of a *durée* or temporal continuum is precluded from one particular, common genre of photography: the posed portrait which, in the traditional family album and on the Facebook page alike, is frequently used to commemorate an event and serve as its testimony and memorial. Here, not only has a gaze arrested its objects, snatched them from the flux of time and cast them into the perpetual present tense of photographic capture, but also, those objects have been complicit by immobilising themselves. Such formality underlines the conventionality of all photographic poses. Convincingly, Craig Owens (1992:210) sees in the pose something of a chilly deathliness inhabiting photographs. 'I freeze,' he writes, 'as if anticipating the still I am about to become; mimicking its opacity, its stillness; inscribing, across the surface of my body, photography's "mortification" of the flesh.' In her experimental first novel *The Benefactors*, Susan Sontag (1963[2009]:215) observes: 'When one has a picture taken, the photographer says "Perfect! Just as you are!" That is death'. The mortification of which Sontag and Owens speak – both the subject's seizure from the realm of the vital to that of the image, and the rigid, statue-like arrest of the subject's body – resonates with Barthes' notion, in *Camera Lucida*, of death as the *eidōs* of photography. 'The Photograph',

¹² Audrey Linkman 2011 brings together a memorable wealth of 19th and early 20th century post-mortem photographs, while also exploring the uses of photographs of the living for memorial purposes. See also Jay Ruby 1995.

¹³ See Linkman 2011:11, for a reproduction of this photograph.

¹⁴ The fact that for Freud, the paradigmatic lost object was the 'mother's penis' is here of no account: I am referring in particular to the structure and operation of the fantasy, rather than its content.

observes Barthes, 'creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice.' (11) It is a death-like arrest that constitutes the pose, Barthes tells us.

There is one genre of photography in which the mortification of the pose conflates entirely with the arrest of the photographic event, and that in photographs of the dead. Early posthumous photographs, which virtually coincide with the invention of photography as a medium, encapsulate the ways in which death is enmeshed with photographic meaning. Here, death was not merely the metaphorical underpinning of the photograph, it was one of its privileged subjects. The Victorian family album, for example, included photographs not only of graves and mourners (it was habitual to stop the funeral procession in order to pose for a group portrait), but also portraits of the deceased, disturbing the division between life and death by arranging them in compliance with the contemporaneous pictorial conventions of portrait photography.

Fastidious care in posing the dead was especially lavished upon photographs of dead children, tenderly laid out in the finest linen the family could afford. The simulation of peaceful sleep, or occasionally even the artful imitation of life itself (with eyelids skilfully retouched so as to make the eyes appear to be open), testifies to the family's desire to see and remember the person, or indeed to disavow the passing of that short life. The power of the photographic image to mitigate the finality of death was sometimes even anticipated, with photographers bidding potential clients to 'secure the shadow, ere the substance fade', one of photography's earliest advertising *clichés*, appealing in particular to patients suffering from tuberculosis.¹²

The poignancy of this desire to memorialise a brief life that might otherwise have gone unrecorded, is nowhere so acute as in a photograph by Augustus Lupson, *In Affectionate Remembrance Richard Nicholls Milliken Born Feb 11 1857 Died Dec 23 1861*. Having no photograph of the child, his family settled for a metonymy, commissioning a photograph of his hat, to which the above inscription was attached.¹³ One cannot overlook the fetishistic implications of such a photograph, with degrees of absence and loss represented by objects that stand in for them: the inscription, the hat, the photograph itself. In the Freudian sense of that term, a fetish is a substitute that has been set up as a memorial to something traumatically lost, and as such, it is a token of triumph over that loss. Indeed, the analogy of the posthumous photograph with the fetish elides with the fetishistic nature of the photographic image per se: for Freud, the fetish is contiguous with the lost object, and its apprehension represents a frozen segment of a spatio-temporal continuum.¹⁴

Images of the dead – of corpses – bridge the gap, or fill the continuum, between photography as magic and photography as science, the first, in Allan Sekula's words (1982:95f), 'an arena of sentiment bounded by nostalgia on the one end and hysteria on the other', the second endowed with the power to inform and elucidate, based on the photograph's status as document. We are daily exposed to images of death in films, newspapers, 24-hour rolling news. Ariella Azoulay (2001:28) speaks of 'television' as the 'ultimate display showcase' of death, with the moment of death acting as the 'one-time moment', the photo-op par excellence. Yet despite this overexposure to death in the media, the sanitised separation of the dead from the living, not unrelated to an awareness, dating from the twentieth century, of how disease spreads, has made us squeamish about proximity with dead bodies. There is also an increased sensitivity to issues of agency and

¹⁵ The choice is mind-boggling, and includes social network photo sharing, subscription based or peer-to-peer or peer-to-browser or mobile photo sharing, or web photo album generators: there are also dedicated apps for handheld devices.

¹⁶ Abigail Solomon-Godeau explores the 'amorphousness of definition and epistemological' vagueness of the category 'documentary', but the distinction between 'documentary' and 'art' photography still serves as a rough shorthand for differing forms of photographic practice and the varied contexts of its circulation. See Abigail Solomon-Godeau 2003:169-183.

¹⁷ See Rudolf Schäfer and Jean Cocteau 1989.

¹⁸ See Walter Schels and Beate Lakotta 2004.

consent with regard to photography in general. For these reasons, the practice of posthumous photography often provokes waves of moral outrage.

The range of response tends to depend on the photographic idiom selected for the representation, and on the cultural and institutional context of its display; whether, for example, that framework is science (say forensic or medical), news or art (always the most contentious). Furthermore, the expanded field of photography has resulted in a dissolution, particularly in the blogosphere and on social media, of any hard and fast distinction that may have existed between the private and the public spheres, and with the rise in popularity of memoirs, life writing that employs photographs and blogs directed at particular areas of personal experience, the desire to photograph and document the various stations of a life has itself gone viral. The family or peer album has spilled over into the networked world and finds its home on publicly shared platforms such as Instagram, Flickr, JAlbum and Picassa,¹⁵ not to mention in dedicated blogs (memorial blogs and virtual memory boxes, births, weddings, communions, bar-mitzvahs, graduations, all of life's rites of passage now readily find templates easily tailored to individual requirements) that are either shared among designated viewers or enjoy open access online. This expanded field has resulted in a broadening of the publics of photography and in a diversification of its sites of display, from the amorphous 'museum without walls' of the blogosphere, through documentary reportage on websites and in photo-books, to the exhibiting circuits assigned to contemporary art.

It was in the 1970s that death became identified as the last taboo to be broken, first by documentary photographers, and then – if the distinction is to be made¹⁶ – in the circuits of the fine arts. Taking his challenge from Diane Arbus's proclaimed lack of interest in photographing the dead, Jeffrey Silverthorne's *Morgue Work* of 1972-4 explored, in an unvarnished way, the functioning of a local morgue in New York, including bodies lying in drawers and details of corpses (particularly striking and shocking is *The Woman Who died in her Sleep* and the *Torso of Murdered Man*) roughly sutured in autopsy. Others followed: Swiss photographer Hans Danuser's *Medizin I* (1984) was equally matter of fact, focusing in the same dispassionate way on organs as on metal, steel and rubber; while in Germany, Rudolf Schäfer (1987) photographed the heads of the dead, discreetly framed by sheets, at pains to equate death with 'eternal sleep' in the Victorian manner.¹⁷

For Walter Schels, photographing terminally ill patients and juxtaposing these portraits with portraits of the same people shortly after their death in the project *Life Before Death* was meant to serve a cathartic or reassuring purpose, possibly because in these faces, death looks a little like peaceful sleep. But of course the mere juxtaposition of the living with the dead does not address the metaphysical fear of the passage. The *telos* to which living with a terminal illness points is, by definition, death. From the perspective of that inevitable future event and the cadaver that will be its residue and testimony, the illness will have been the preamble, the process of arrival. Yet what Schels work also tells us is that as an event, the moment of non-violent death is un-photographable,¹⁸ has no place in 'death's showcase'.

In the UK in the mid 1990s, *Sue Fox* took 1500 photographs of bodies in a morgue in Manchester; the exhibitions of these works were met with public outrage. Details of lurid, marbled flesh and extruded organs, a hand with a ring formed by the word 'Mum', a child's tagged wrist and filthy,

19 See Sue Fox 1997. The three artists mentioned in this paragraph – Jeffrey Silverthorne, Hans Danuser and Sue Fox – were all included in the groundbreaking touring exhibition of photographs, *The Dead*, curated by Val Williams and Greg Hobson, in 1995. See catalogue, *The Dead*, with essays by Val Williams, Greg Hobson and Elizabeth Edwards, Bradford: The National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in Bradford, 1995.

20 There is an interesting parallel between Barthes' notion of the 'quiddity' tapped by a photograph (a thing's 'thingness') and what James Joyce called the apprehension of the 'whatness' of a thing, through which an object achieves its epiphany. See James Joyce 1963:213.

21 These issues are central to questions surrounding the photography of war and political violence, see Ariella Azoulay 2001, and Susie Linfield 2010.

22 Sally Mann, with John Ravenal 2010. The book *Proud Flesh* records the ongoing effects of muscular dystrophy on her husband Larry Mann; its unacknowledged *telos* is, of course, death. Sally Mann, *Proud Flesh*, New York: Aperture Books, 2009.

curled fingers resting in a pool of thin, gluey blood; stitches and slabs and the abject chaos of the visceral spillage that is present once the integrity of the body has been violated: these images are both matter of fact and profoundly unsettling, for these quiet photographs bring into focus the material passage from body to corpse. Significantly, Fox compares the contemplation of these images to Vipassana meditation, where the subject focuses on a single object in order to 'see things as they really are', thereby gaining insight.¹⁹ Historically, allowing us to 'see things as they really are' was the ideologically freighted remit of photography: Fox's focus seems to suggest a continuum between an epiphanic revelation of a thing's 'whatness'²⁰ and the notion of tapping the optical unconscious to find what resides *inside* the visible.

The eruption of mortuary photographs in the context of the discourses and institutions of art proved to be even more controversial. At issue are notions of objectification, aestheticisation and the ethics of respect.²¹ The young Damien Hirst provocatively posing for a snapshot with a man's severed head in a morgue in Leeds (1991) sets the artist's agenda to explore the horror and beauty of death and to turn the pathways of pathology and microbiology into a medium for making art. Testing the limits of acceptability became a hallmark of Hirst's work. More consistently and provocatively using the mortuary as his studio and its contents as his palette, Joel-Peter Witkin fascinated and affronted viewers in equal measure, with his elaborately staged morgue tableaux: a ghoulish theatre of death born of Witkin's earlier explorations of deformity on the one hand, and of the sadomasochistic sex dungeon on the other.

But it was New-York based Andres Serrano's *Morgue* series of 1993 that really exercised the mainstream art world: large, close-up colour photographs of corpses. It is perhaps really in the context of his *Piss Christ* that Serrano offended the religious Right. For looking at his *Morgue* series now, one is struck by the reserve and tact of the works. Each close-up focuses on a particular section of the corpse, but the body in pieces clearly points to the fact of having once belonged to an integral body. In this way, the close-ups hyperbolise the very condition of the autopsy as a process that fragments the body. With their rich, sensuous detail, their baroque lighting and the chromatic range extending between black, scarlet and the tallowy hue of wax and skin, these images are less reminders of 'the autopsy room as a cold and bloody place' (Williams 1995:14) than hushed and moving *memento mori* that quietly acknowledge Catholic iconography.

Finally, Sally Mann's *Body Farm* (2010), consisting of darkly aestheticised photographs of decomposing corpses at the Forensic Anthropology Center of the University of Tennessee proved as provocative as her earlier photographs of her own naked children at play. They must be seen as existing in a single continuum, constituting a lifelong, comprehensive project to record the body and its trajectories through healthy youth, to illness, ageing and death.²²

Whereas Victorian mortuary photographs were commissioned for private use in rituals or practices of family bereavement, contemporary photographic representations of the dying and dead play varied roles in private and public life. A case in point is the acclaimed and widely circulated monograph of Annie Leibovitz (2006), who, for this massive tome, decided to interleave images of the elaborate, theatrical, high-profile shoots of her portrait and fashion work for *Rolling Stone*, *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, among other popular, glossy publications, with her 'family album' work. At the

23 For a pithy discussion of the memoir, and of the self-serving 'mendacity' to which it may be prone, as well as to the way it undermines the division between private and public domains, see Daniel Mendelsohn 2010.

24 See Pedro Meyer 2006.

25 This is the topic of an essay I am currently researching, on 'living with dying'.

intersection of these fields – and no doubt because of the role of her friend and lover, Susan Sontag, as a public intellectual – are the many black and white portraits of Sontag. During Sontag's final illness, Leibovitz stopped shooting, but she 'forced herself' to 'take those few pictures' that circulated in the press and on the Internet, of Sontag with her glorious hair hacked off, bloated beyond recognition, lying on a gurney on life support, and equally shockingly, the stretcher with her corpse being raised into the aeroplane ready to leave Seattle in November 2004. The final, now famous sequence shows Sontag's corpse, cleaned up and arranged, swathed in a pleated robe-like dress (Issey Miyake?), culminating with a green-tinted composite image assembled out of photographs of the separate sections of her body. One searches in vain, in these images, for the power and vitality transmitted by all photographs of the living Susan Sontag; the confrontation is sobering and humbling.

In Leibovitz's book, these stark images of Susan Sontag contrast with the photographs that follow them, of the peaceful death of Leibovitz's father in his nineties (he was to die six weeks after Sontag); of his grandchildren shovelling earth onto his grave at the Judaeon Memorial Gardens in Olney, Maryland, where he was laid to rest in February 2005; of the birth of Leibovitz's twin daughters by a surrogate mother. The clue to how Leibovitz conceived the book/album is in its title: *A Photographer's Life 1990-2005* (with its dates bracketing the precise period of Leibovitz's relationship with Sontag). In its composition, Leibovitz skilfully and effortlessly weaves together the professional and the personal, ushering the reader into an immersive experience that suggests that all is flux, that life and death are naturally intertwined, and finally, in the pictures of her three children, providing proof that the future exists. Like Sally Mann's portrayal of her father's corpse (1988) amid strewn flowers, Annie Leibovitz's shot of her dead father captures something of the spirit of the Victorian family album, of the integration of death into family life.

Leibovitz's management of a smooth passage between the private and public realms makes her a typical child of the past few decades. With the spread of interest in micro-histories and the 'autobiographical turn' in the humanities, the cusp between private and public life has become a seam that is frequently mined. Moreover, the diffusion of the 'memoir' as a genre has had a correlative in photography and the visual arts, where the tapping of personal experience has become a *sine qua non* of a certain brand of authenticity.²³ In tandem with an aesthetic that borrows an apparent sense of happenstance and casual placement from snapshot photography, the early 1980s saw the seeping out of the private family/peer album into the art-photography exhibition and/or book. David Wojnarowicz, Peter Hujar and Nan Goldin all used photography as a form of visual diary.

Various forms of political and cultural activism also contributed to this shift, from the feminist conviction that politics are played out in the private domain (where, more generally, ideology nestles cozily and treacherously), to the early experiences of the devastation caused by Aids among gay communities. As other disciplines, such as social anthropology, began focusing on the local and the everyday, and as photography, 'in the wake of widespread self-reflection, was abandoning the single image and instead producing series and sequences' (Stahel 1994:7), photographers began to document their own lives. Unadorned depictions of subcultures played a part in bringing into focus the queer intimacies that, in the early 1980s, were still feared and publicly shunned as putative sources of 'contagion' in the moral

panic that accompanied the first spread of Aids. Considering her role as the record keeper of this generation, Nan Goldin observed that 'there is a popular notion that the photographer is by nature a voyeur, the last one invited to the party. But I'm not crashing; this is my party. This is my family, my history' (Goldin in Heiferman 1996:281). As she has frequently stressed, her work is the diary of her life.

Of the three – Peter Hujar, David Wojnarowicz and Nan Goldin, it was Hujar who paid most attention to the performative aspect – the acting out – of the sitters, as well as the formal qualities of portraiture (positioning, framing, lighting, texture, the relation of figure to ground). All three needed photography as an instrument – a probe – and as testimony, something that '[remains] real, even now' (Benjamin 1931[1972]:43%). And in the work of all three, images of the dying and the dead appear not as tableaux, but as extensions of portraits of the living, and explorations of what it is like to live with dying, the stunned sadness, the loss.

There is stillness and formality in Hujar's close-up photographs of the dressed corpses of friends in open coffins (Sidney Faulkner, 1981; Jackie Curtis, 1985). As with Diane Arbus, in Hujar's work, the idioms of fashion photography and the expressions of personal vision overlap, not only in the ambiguous splicing of differently gendered identities, but also in the delight in hyperbolic, camp pose. This is nowhere so clear as in his now iconic portrait of celebrated transvestite *Candy Darling on her Deathbed* (1973), overseen by a vase of glowing, overblown chrysanthemums (if ever there was a flower associated with death ...). Candy Darling, with her perfectly realised make-up, and a long stemmed rose arranged on her sheet, seems to be posed in anticipation of witnessing the scene of her own extinction.

In contrast, David Wojnarowicz, who was himself to die of Aids and who was Hujar's acolyte, one-time lover and caretaker when the latter was dying (Hujar died November 1987, Wojnarowicz in July 1992) kept a moving, intimate photographic archive of Hujar's last days, helping to bridge the gap between the personal memorial, the album and the public record. Clearly for him, photography is deployed as a form of visualisation, an *aide mémoire* in the painful business of grieving.

For Nan Goldin too, photography played a part in the process of mourning. She had acknowledged the relationship between her large series of photographs (curated in exhibitions as a slide show with a soundtrack), exhibited and published by Aperture as [The Ballad of Sexual Dependency \(1986\)](#), and the early suicide of her sister, imagining that to keep a close photographic record of her intimate life with all its joyous and, more frequently, bruising encounters, would be a form of staving off loss, of keeping herself and others alive. With the illness and demise of so many friends, Goldin became an archivist tracking that trajectory. In a series of moving photographs, for instance, various informal portraits show the French couple Gilles Dusein and Gotscho; the series ends, shockingly if matter-of-factly, with Gotscho kissing the closed eyes of the emaciated corpse of his lover (1993).

Goldin's portfolio of thirteen photographs of her close friend, [Cookie Mueller](#), who, in 1989, died of Aids at the age of forty, follows the exuberant, blonde Cookie through parties, children, friendship, marriage, the death of her husband Vittorio, finally to capture her prone in her own casket. About this loss, Goldin later wrote: 'I used to think I couldn't lose anyone if I photographed them enough. I put together this series of pictures of Cookie from

the 13 years I knew her in order to keep her with me. In fact they show me how much I've lost' (Goldin 1989:256).

The trajectory from photography as amulet to photography as shrine is realised in Goldin's apprehension of loss *despite* photography. In a simple sentence, Goldin guides us from the notion that photographing everyone in order to mourn a dead sister and hold future loss at bay, to the realisation that 'I photograph in order to remember' may itself be a cliché, finally evacuated of affect. This chimes with Ann Cvetkovich's notion (2003:241) that archives of trauma 'must enable the acknowledgment of a past that can be painful to remember, impossible to forget, and resistant to consciousness'. Indeed, in a photographic project titled *I photograph to remember/Fotografía para recordar* (1991-2007), tracking the traumatic events around the almost simultaneous illness and death of his parents, Mexican (Spanish-born) photographer Pedro Meyer acknowledges a logic that is more akin to narration and storytelling than to mnemonic reassurance. Beginning its life as a sequence of photographs on a CD-Rom, the project now has a [widely accessible web presence](#) and is downloadable on a computer or handheld device. The heartfelt pledge to photograph in order to remember has a particularly complex texture when viewed in the context of the practice of a photographer who has done more than most to vex the veracity of conventional photojournalism through the use of digital manipulation.²⁴ Meyer's work consistently exposes the subjective and ideological nature of image making, suggesting – as do great works of literature – that it is sometimes fiction that tells the more profound truth.

I have argued that despite the loosening of the link between a photograph and indexicality, despite the broad scope of mimetic and constructed purposes availed in the expanded field of photography in an age of digital reproduction and manipulation, the bond linking the diverse artefacts we identify as 'photographs' to the mnemonic faculty remains a tight one. Several photographers have explored the relationship of the living to the dying; invariably the link is intimate (parent, spouse, lover, child) and the vision is achingly personal. I mention just one of these projects here,²⁵ Briony Campbell's heart-rending [The Dad Project](#) (2009), the artist's 'attempt to say goodbye to my dad with my camera'.

When he was diagnosed with cancer, Briony Campbell's father agreed to collaborate with his daughter in the making of a short film during the last few months of his life. The series ends with a photograph of the dead father's waxy hand tenderly held by the daughter's living pink one. The father's collusion in the project, which combines film footage with still photographs; his declared wish to protect his relatives from the consequences of his death and his fear that they might not be able to look after themselves without him; and his wish to 'take the opportunity to learn a little bit more' about his daughter delicately establish the mutuality of the project. The habitual relations of power between the agent of photography and its object are unsettled. The work eases our apprehension about viewing the dead and the dying. This project was undertaken with the utmost reserve, both formal and ethical. The still photographs, often close ups of skin, thinning hair and fabric, are gentle and un-intrusive, yet they remain specific to a time, a place, a person now gone. As in the best mortuary photography, the result is not ghoulish, but rather tenderly touches upon the issues of life, death and memory that have inhabited the practice of photography since its inception.

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