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# SEEING DEATH

PORTRAITURE IN CONTEMPORARY  
POST-MORTEM PHOTOGRAPHY



JOSEPHINE HIGGINS

*Image on cover: Heyert, Elizabeth. Daphne Jones. Born: August 1954, Died: October 2003. (2004). Chromogenic Colour Print. 76 x 97 cm. (Figure 22).*

# SEEING DEATH: PORTRAITURE IN CONTEMPORARY POST-MORTEM PHOTOGRAPHY

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A dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the  
requirements for the award of the degree of  
Master of Arts in Fine Art

Faculty of the Humanities  
University of Cape Town  
2013

University of Cape Town

Compulsory Declaration:

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature:

Date:

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Colin Richards and Svea Josephy, who both supervised this thesis.

Colin, for trying to teach me how to say what I mean, and to mean what I say. I cannot express how much I learnt from him, or how much his supervision meant to me.

Svea, for her insight into photography, her practical advice, her genuine care and for supporting me right up until the end. I really am so grateful.

To my parents, Deirdre and Sé Higgins, for their unending support. I cannot begin to express my gratitude and love.

To Jane Higgins, for being Nan and for the bit of sanity in Grahamstown on Sundays.

To Gareth Latter, for his love, support and making the long distance work.

To Tracey Smith and Philippa Heydenrych, for the group chats.

To the first year Michaelis Masters Students of 2012, for being such an inspiring group.

To Brent Mestre, for getting me through the first year. In the very first meeting, he said portraiture would be central to this thesis.

To Elizabeth Heyert, Pieter Hugo and Walter Schels, for their photographs and for agreeing to answer my questions.

Jules Kramer Scholarship  
MacIver Scholarship



# ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the aesthetics of the photographic representation of the actual dead body in Elizabeth Heyert's *The Travelers* (2004), Pieter Hugo's *The Bereaved* (2005) and Walter Schels and Beate Lakotta's *Life Before Death: Portraits of the Dying* (2004). The use of portraiture in each of these artist's series is crucial as it suggests an interest in the 'subject-ness' of the corpse.

Katarzyna Majak's (2011) theory of socialization as an attempt to lessen the scandal of the corpse through representation is central throughout this thesis. Majak argues that for the viewer the corpse is a scandal, because it uncomfortably presents the transformation of a body from subject to object. For Majak, socialization is essentially the taming of the dead body, achieved by re-presenting the corpse as an individual. Socialization emphasizes the subject-ness of the deceased individual, rather than the object-ness of the corpse, of pure unadulterated matter.

The use of portraiture in each of the above series socializes the corpse by presenting the individual identity of the deceased as a subject, in varying degrees. Death is approached through the recognizable conventions of portraiture itself, thereby to some extent taming or domesticating the corpse.

This thesis expands on Majak's valuable theory by establishing a continuum of socialization from subject-ness to object-ness. Importantly, this continuum reveals varying degrees of socialization within the three series. Socialization is used here as an analytical tool with which to explore the photographs, drawing out similarities and differences. I argue that through various aesthetic techniques, these three series encourage the viewer to look at these different images of the corpse with varying degrees of comfort.



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*This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my supervisor,  
Professor Colin Richards.*

*It was a complete privilege to work with such an incredibly intelligent, genuine,  
compassionate and influential academic and artist.*

# INTRODUCTION

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*“How sublime the thought that man, by a simple process, can constrain the light of heaven to catch and fix the fleeting shadow of life, even as it lingers upon the pallid features of death.”*

*(Anonymous editor of The Photographic and Fine Art Journal, 1858, cited in Ruby, 1995:66)*

## Seeing Death

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The theme of death is one of the oldest and most common in the history of art (De Pascale 2009:6), yet there is a paradox in the attempt to make the absence of life present in the representation of death. As philosopher Simon Critchley argues, “death is radically resistant to the order of representation. Representations of death are misrepresentations or rather representations of an absence” (2004:31). If a photograph of death is an absence made present, then representations of death are inescapably filtered and constructed. I consider, with Klaver, “death as part of a figural, pictorial, and cartographical construct. Although we cannot actually see or conceive of death that is truly ‘death’, we cannot doubt its presence and actuality” (2004:xix). I may not ‘see death’, but I see a dead body, and then a representation of a dead body.

In this light, I want to explore ways of ‘seeing death’ by examining the formal devices employed

in contemporary photographic representations of the actual dead body. There is a philosophical link between seeing and thinking (Levin 1993:5) and in this regard, ‘seeing’ death becomes a way of thinking about death. I am interested in exploring different ways of ‘seeing’, and thus thinking, about the dead body. This thesis could not be exhaustive or summative. I decided to focus on photographic representations of *actual* dead bodies. As I will explore further on, I react differently to a photograph of a corpse than I do to other forms of representation of a corpse, due to photography’s link to the ‘real’. Personally, the knowledge that I am looking at a trace of an actual corpse creates a much stronger reaction than that of a simulated corpse. The decision to focus on the actual corpse is an important one, as there is a range of artists who have represented simulated dead bodies.<sup>1</sup>

I further limited my study to photographic series that were produced specifically to be exhibited publically as art. This too is an important but

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1. Such artists range from photographer, Hippolyte Bayard’s *Self Portrait as a Drowned Man* (1840) (figure 1) to contemporary artist Kathryn Smith’s *Memento Mori* (2004) (figure 2). See Cosineau-Levine (2003) for an introduction to this topic.

Left: figure 1. Bayard, Hippolyte. *Self Portrait as a Drowned Man*. (1840). Direct Positive. 18,7 x 19,3 cm.

Right: figure 2. Smith, Kathryn. *Memento Mori (detail)*. (2004). Chromogenic Print. Size Unobtainable.



productive restriction, as photography is used to represent the dead in numerous ways: in private, post-mortem memorial portraiture, forensic investigations and news reportage.<sup>2</sup> Lastly, I decided to focus on the most recent works that matched the above criterion, as I wanted to explore *contemporary* ways of representing death. This subject area has been increasingly mentioned in short journal articles, yet few focus solely, and in-depth, on such works (Proulx 1997, Schwenger 2000, Schoeman 2008, Majak 2011).

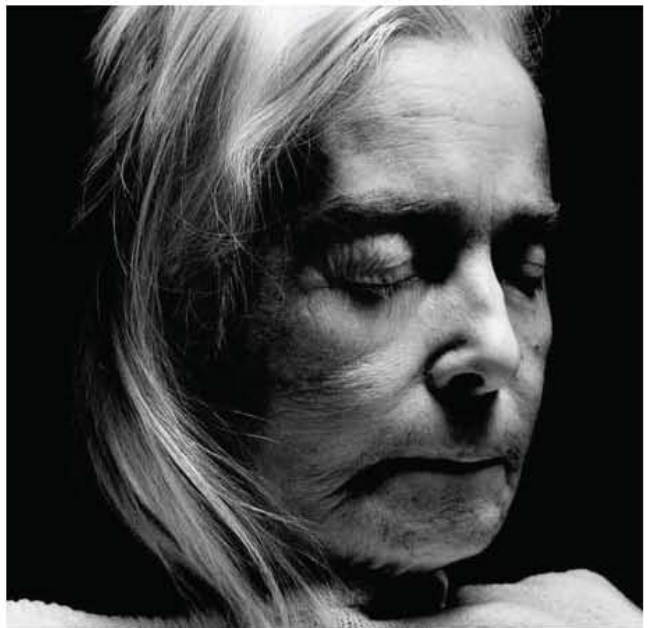
I researched a range of artists and selected works which fitted the above criteria; (American) Elizabeth Heyert's *The Travellers* (2004)(figure 3), (South African) Pieter Hugo's *The Bereaved* (2005) (figure 4) and (German) Walter Schels and Beate Lakotta's *Life before Death: Portraits of the Dying* (2004) (figure 5).<sup>3</sup>

I find it significant that each of the three selected artists – Heyert, Hugo and Schels – working around the same period, on different continents, chose to use portraiture as a

2. In line with this history, which I will explore further later, there are a range of artists who photographed deceased family members and loved ones, such as Sally Mann's *My Father* (1988), Krass Clement's *Ved Døden* (1990), David Wojnarowicz's *Untitled (Hugar Dead)* (1990), Nan Goldin's *Cookie in Her Casket, NYC, November 15* (1992-1993), AA Bronson's *Felix, June 5* (1994), Annie Leibowitz in *A photographer's wife, 1990-2005* (2005) and Maeve Berry's *Incandescence* (2009).

3. Some of the other photographs I examined, yet excluded due to the criteria, include Joel Peter Witkin's numerous photographs, such as *Glassman, Mexico City* (1994), Pieter Hugo's *Rwanda: Vestiges of a Genocide* (2004), Sally Mann's *What Remains* (2005), Daniel Schumann's *Purpur Braun Grau Weiss Schwarz* (2009) and Jack Burman's *The Dead* (2010).

4. My focus is primarily on the aesthetic representation of the dead body. For this reason, I will refer primarily to Schels in relation to *Life before Death* (2004), as, although it is a joint project, Schels is responsible for the visual material of the series. Lakotta wrote the text provided with each photograph, which I will explore in detail when I examine the series.



formal device to represent the dead body.<sup>4</sup> By portraiture I refer to ‘illusionistic portraiture’ as a “likeness which is seen to refer to the identity of the living or once living person depicted” (Woodall 1997:1). Portraiture has traditionally been employed to portray, record, reveal or construct something about the represented subject; whether character, physical likeness or economic or social status. As a result of the long history of portraiture there are numerous familiar formal conventions, which lend to mediation of the dead body. Portraiture also signifies an acknowledgement of the deceased as *subjects*, further enhanced by the fact that the name of each individual photograph, in all three of the series selected, is the name of the subject represented. The ‘deceased as subject’ will be a crucial aspect throughout my thesis, and a point I will return to later in this introduction.

Bottom left: figure 3. Heyert, Elizabeth. *Lottie Fennell*. Born: Unknown. Died: October 2003. (2004). Chromogenic Colour Print. 76 x 97cm.

Bottom right: figure 4. Hugo, Pieter. *Monwabisi Mtana*. (2005). Lambda Print. 61 x 50 cm.

Opposite page: figure 5. Schels, Walter. *Edelgard Clavely*. (2004). Black and White Lambda Print. 100 x 100 cm.



## Photography and Death

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In his seminal book on photography, *Camera Lucida* (1984), Roland Barthes highlighted photography's inherent link to death and the importance of the photograph's referent. These two aspects are significant throughout this thesis, which focuses on the photographic representation of actual dead bodies.

Barthes famously claimed that in every photograph, there is a "flat death" of the subject (1984:96). For Barthes, to be photographed is "that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, [he is] neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: [Barthes] then experience[s] a micro-version of death" (1984:14). The click of the shutter elicits a splintered relationship with time, emphasizing 'that-has-been' and creating a type of visual rigor mortis in that which is photographed. Thus, Barthes states that "whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe" (1984:96). This form of photographic death is present in every photograph as the subject becomes an object. There is a loss of subjectivity and "the photographer knows this very well and himself fears (if only for commercial reasons) this *death* in which his gesture will *embalm* [the subject]" (Barthes 1984:14; my emphasis). In a photograph, as in death, a subject becomes immobile and 'embalmed'. This link between photography and death, from subject to object, is a crucial point that I will return to throughout this thesis.

Barthes also asserted that "a specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent,

or at least not *immediately* or *generally* distinguished from its referent" (1984:5). When I look at a photograph, initially I only look at the referent; in this case, the corpse. This is because in every photograph there is a 'certificate of presence' in that there is always a necessarily real thing (the referent), which has been placed in front of the lens to produce that photograph. As Barthes emphasises "the photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which touch me, who am here" (1984:79). The photograph, as an indexical object, is not only a representation or one's understanding of the real; it is a *trace* of the real (Krauss 1977). The essence of photography is this, the "that-has-been" (Barthes 1984:77). I believe the 'that-has-been' of photography and the fact that these photographs are traces of actual dead bodies are intrinsic to my reading of these series.

Sontag affirms this state of affairs when she states that "a photograph is not only an image, an interpretation of the real; it is also a *trace*, something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or *death mask*" (1977:154; my emphasis). A photographic portrait is like a death mask in that it is a material trace of a subject. The residue remains even though the subject is now absent. The tradition of death masks dates as far back in societies of the ancient world (De Pascale 2009:198). Varying materials, such as wax and clay, were laid on the face of the deceased as a means of faithfully preserving the subject's features. In this sense, death masks were the forerunner to post-mortem photographic portraiture, and understandably have since been rendered largely obsolete by photography.<sup>5</sup>

The death mask, as a trace of the deceased,

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5. I will explore death masks in detail in relation to Schels' *Life before Death* (2005).

functioned not only as a record of features, but as a double for the deceased subject. The death mask then, as a “likeness of the deceased, modelled schematically and laid out on the face of the corpse, is not so much a portrait as it is a symbolic compensation for the loss of the actual body” (De Pascale 2009:298). The death mask, as a double with redemptive potential, was seen to symbolically take the place of the deceased, thereby lessening the loss of death. According to Sigmund Freud,

the double was originally an insurance against ... ‘an energetic denial of the power of death’ as [Otto] Rank says; and probably the ‘immortal’ soul was the first ‘double’ of the body. This invention of doubling... led the ancient Egyptians to develop the art of making images of the dead in lasting materials. (1997:210)

There is an attempt to symbolically *protect* the self through doubling as a *compensatory* act. This is similar to how photographic portraits can function as compensation for absence and loss, whether temporary or permanent. As George Baker argues, “the photographic portrait created as a memorializing double of the bourgeois subject should be considered a compensatory operation, even at its origin; the creation of a double serves the purpose of protecting the ego, of shoring up the subject against its dissolution” (1996:109). Through the use of photographic postmortem portraiture, similar to that of the death mask, there is a desire to ‘shore up the subject’, or to preserve the individual in the face of death. I will argue that this is present in all three of the series that represent the dead through portraiture.

## Changing Ways of ‘Seeing’ Death

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Although death is a singular biological event, the human relationship with death changes over time and across space. I want to very briefly explore the history of these changing attitudes, primarily in Europe and America, as I believe they have a bearing on the way in which death is viewed and represented in these photographs.<sup>6</sup> French historian Phillipe Aries’s *Western Attitudes toward Death and Dying: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (1974), explores changing ‘western’ outlooks on death. By ‘western’, Aries seems to mean European with an increasing interest in American society. It is important to acknowledge that there are numerous cultures, religions and group beliefs that do not fit with Aries’ contention. Aries’ argument, although problematically full of generalizations, has been influential and generally accepted when speaking about western metropolitan attitudes towards death. I believe there is some value in Aries’ discussion as he outlines some important shifts in thought.

In Aries’ study, he identifies and describes four different periods of thought in Europe and America. During the first period, “Tamed Death”, the oldest and longest held attitude, death was not something to be feared but rather to be accepted due to religious faith (Aries 1974:2). The second attitude, “One’s Own Death”, began to slowly appear around the eleventh and twelfth centuries, leading away from society’s previous familiarity with death. During this time, more emphasis

6. This is a massive area of research and I cannot give due justice to the complexity of changing attitudes towards death. See Dollimore (2001) for an in-depth study of death perceptions.

was placed on the death of the individual. In the third period, “Thy Death”, during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, “the death which [was] feared [was] no longer so much the death of the self as the death of another” (Aries 1974:68). Attention shifted from the death of the self to the death of a loved one. From this period, death was no longer to be accepted or ‘tame’.

The fourth period, “Forbidden Death”, started from the mid nineteenth century and was increasingly prevalent in the first half of the twentieth century. Aries argued that during this time death had become something to be denied, in line with Sigmund Freud’s essay *Our attitudes towards death* (1915). Aries also remarked on death as taboo in the west, as a socially constructed notion of that which is to be denied and avoided, something that is not said, done or touched. This argument developed from the essay *Pornography of death* (1955), in which English sociologist Geoffrey Gorer stated that death had replaced sex as the principal forbidden subject. According to Aries, “between 1930 and 1950 the evolution [of death as taboo and something to be denied] accelerated markedly ...due to an important physical phenomenon: the displacement of the site of death” (1974:37). Thus, Aries also refers to this as the “Invisible Death” model, as the dying were hidden in hospices and the clinical environment of hospitals, while the dead were removed to funeral homes. These changes occurred much more rapidly than in the other periods, as industrialized, secular, modern society grew quickly from the early nineteenth century.

Beyond the Eurocentric generalizations, Aries’ conceptualization of attitudes towards death is not without other flaws, and has been the recent subject of increasing criticism (Dollimore 2001). Aries neglects to discuss the role played in the experience of death by social, cultural, religious and economic issues. He simplifies his historical overview with a nostalgic attitude that death was ‘more acceptable’ in the past. Aries also overlooks numerous instances in the twentieth century during which death and the dead were not invisible. Aries does not acknowledge that, from the start of the illustrated press in the mid-nineteenth century, the pictorial representation of death, especially during times of war (figure 6), became a widespread and common feature of reportage. With the improvements of technology, distribution of images of death and war in the media became commonplace throughout the twentieth century (figure 7), such as the well known photographs of brutal crime scenes by Arthur Fellig, known as Weegee, which were a staple of tabloids in the thirties and forties (figure 8) (Sontag 1977:46).<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the capacity for ‘death denial’ in the modern ‘Anglo-American’ society became a common view amongst scholars (Mitford 1963, Kubler-Ross 1969, Benjamin 1992, Baudrillard 1993).

7. Other examples include “[Robert] Capa’s image of the falling soldier; the photographs of the corpses in the Nazi concentration camps, Eddie Adams’ iconic image of General Loan’s execution of a Vietcong suspect, to footage of the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the subsequent shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald” (Hanusch 2010:32).



Top left: figure 6. Gardner, Alexander. *Home of the Rebel Sharp Shooter, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.* (1863). Albumen Print. 17 x 22 cm.

Bottom left: figure 7. Bourke-White, Margaret. *Triple Nazi Suicides.* (1945). Gelatin Silver Print. 20,3 x 25,4 cm.

Bottom right: figure 8. Fellig, Arthur 'Weegee'. *Dead on Arrival, New York City.* (1945). Vintage Gelatin Silver Print. 26,0 x 20,3 cm.



## Increased Visibility of Death

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It is ironic that the numerous scholars researching the death denial movement, including Aries himself, were contributing to a large amount of literature and general interest in death at that time. In the sixties and seventies, there was an increase in research surrounding death and its legal, medical and moral issues; this interest was termed “the death awareness movement” (Huntington 1979:2). This resurgence of interest in death studies extended to the representation of death (Proulx 1997; Schwenger 2000; Linkman 2011). As Proulx states, “since the 1970s there has been an explosion of photographic interest in images of death...with scores of books and exhibitions of work in the so called ‘postmortem’ genre” (1997:30). The work of these artists, such as Jeffrey Silverthorne’s *Morgue Work* (1973) (figures 9, 10), “marked a distinct break with the preceding limited and somewhat reverential treatment of ‘natural’ death. In the 1970s, creative, young photographers came to identify death as the last taboo” (Linkman 2011:159). This statement supports Gorer’s and Aries’ assertion that death was taboo in the twentieth century. In a break from the older photographic styles of representing death, some of these artists photographed the dead for artistic purposes rather than as personal keepsakes or for news purposes.

Recent scholarship on death suggests that it is making a return to the public and visual realm (Walter 1994; Ruby 1995; Seaton 2005; Depascale 2009; Hanusch 2010). Jacqui Lynn Foltyn, in her essay, *Dead Famous and Dead Sexy: Popular Culture, Forensics, and the Rise of the Corpse*, argues that “as death as an actual experience has declined, there

has been an increase in mediated portrayals of it” (2008a:164). In this text, Foltyn examines the increasing prevalence of the simulated cadaver of scientific and forensic investigation, exported globally, in popular culture and modern media, as well as the cultural meanings of that ascent. Foltyn, who has been studying representations of death since 1993, commented that, since 2000, “the corpse count has gone up” (2008a:154) in the media.

There is a ubiquitous representation of simulated corpses in which death is spectacularized and commodified in television series, films, books and computer games. With costumes and makeup, but increasingly with advanced special effects, simulated cadavers are shown with amazing verisimilitude. According to Ruby, it is important to note that due to the ubiquitous representation of death,

reactions and expectations about how death is supposed to look are aesthetically, not experientially derived...conventions of representation drawn from television, theatre, movies and paintings have influenced how death is displayed...and perhaps, how we think death should look in ‘real life’. (1995:15)

In this sense, simulated death in industrialized societies has become a template with which to compare images of death, and plays a role in shaping attitudes towards death and how one regards a dead body.

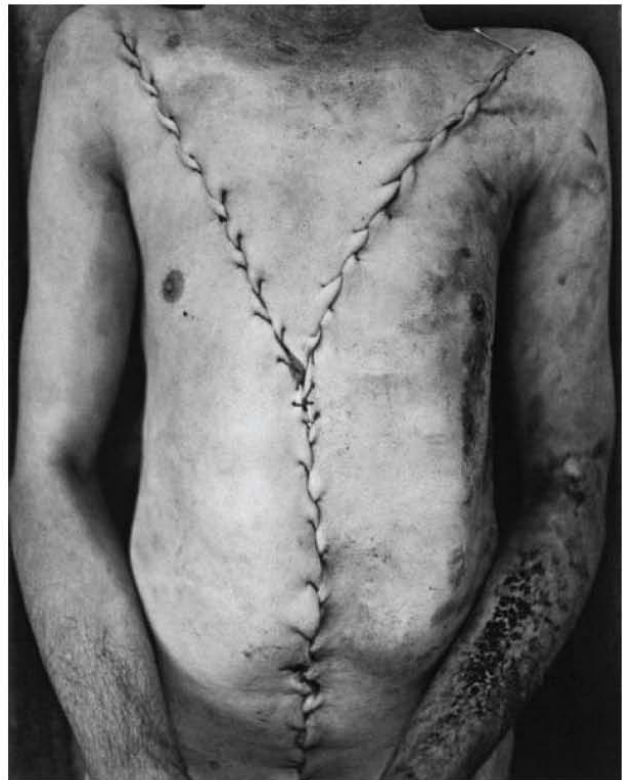
There is also an increase in the representation of actual dead bodies. Images of people, dying and dead, have long been shown in newspapers, magazines and on television.<sup>8</sup> However, images of death have become even more accessible

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8. See Seaton (2005) and Hanusch (2010) for an in-depth discussion of the representation of death in the media.

Right: figure 9. Silverthorne, Jeffrey. *Lovers, Accidental Carbon Monoxide Poisoning.* (1974.) Silver Gelatin Print. 27 x 54,2cm.

Left: figure 10. Silverthorne, Jeffrey. *Torso, Murdered Man.* (1974). Silver Gelatin Print, 54.2 x 27cm.



with the expansion of the internet and ‘citizen journalism’. For example, in 2006, footage of the hanging of Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, was made available on YouTube (Foltyn 2008a:157). Since the obsessive coverage of celebrity (including politicians) deaths in the latter half of the twentieth century (such as John F. Kennedy, Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe), there is an increasing interest in dead celebrities (Amy Winehouse and Michael Jackson are recent examples). Based on an older tradition, there is also rapidly growing infotainment coverage of, and industries based on, murder victims, serial killers and celebrities who have experienced mysterious deaths. An increasing number of television series, movies and books are based on real murders and murderers. I have invoked these differing instances to suggest that there is a return to a public appetite for seeing the dead body.

There are endless possible reasons for this increased interest in and representation of death. There have been numerous modern collective tragedies that have added emphasis to the importance of the dead body, such as the recent war in Iraq and Afghanistan; terrorism; instances of ethnic cleansing and a spate of natural disasters. On top of this, global media has increased the awareness of such events and concerns. According to Foltyn, there has also been a move to strengthen the rights of the corpse within the law as the “march of human history...has been one that grants more and more people rights before the law” (2008b:100). For example, there is a growing emphasis on the rights of a corpse in relation to issues of display in museums and repatriation. In South Africa, this issue was seen in the return of Sara Baartman’s remains, from display in France

to her birthplace in the Eastern Cape (Crais & Scully 2009).

Foltyn also argues that as “millions of baby boomers are now facing their first intimations of old age and hence mortality, and one reason ‘death has gone pop’ is that a market has emerged to examine the hidden experience of death and to return death to the community” (2008a:169). Due to the millions of aged, middle class people from the post war ‘baby boom’, there is a sharp increase in the number of people nearing death. This is in turn connected to liberal media, knowledge of rights and medical progresses which allow people to live for longer. Other advances in technology, such as face transplants, organ harvesting, cadaver collagen beauty treatments, genomics and growing international trafficking of body parts, are forcing people to rethink the ‘potential’ of corpses.<sup>9</sup> Despite the developments in science and medicine there is no longer, in comparison to attitudes at the early twentieth century, a general tendency towards an unquestioning faith in science and medicine. Diseases such as cancer and AIDS have again highlighted our mortality (Sontag 1991). All of these complex instances, which are by no means exhaustive “have pushed the corpse to the forefront” (Foltyn 2008a:100). The dead body is very much a subject of public, media and corporate interest.

As I have suggested, there is an increasing prevalence of both the simulated and actual corpse today and “in this vein, the de facto argument that we live in a death-denying culture is more mantra than fact” (Foltyn 2008a:156) and there is strong evidence to suggest that death is neither invisible nor denied (if it ever truly was). Thus, since the latter half of the twentieth century, and

9. There is a long history of corpses being used for medical purposes. See McDonald (2005) for an introduction to this topic.

increasingly in the twenty first century, “we appear to be witnessing another shift in public attitudes to death” (Hanusch 2010:33). This highlights the relevance and potential power of the three artist’s series and this research, as there is a reconfiguration of how the contemporary corpse is seen. I believe that “instead of looking away, we are now trying to figure out techniques for observing death safely with some level of comfort” (Hanusch 2010:19). There is an attempt to render death familiar and thus approachable to the artist and to the viewer. I argue that this is evident in Elizabeth Heyert’s, Pieter Hugo’s and Walter Schels’ decision to represent the deceased through portraiture, thereby placing an emphasis on the corpse as a ‘dead *subject*’.

## ‘Socialization’

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In *The Visibility of Death* (2011), Polish writer and photographer, Katarzyna Majak, writing for the journal, *Fotografia Quarterly*, questions “what does death or its photographic portrait look like?” (2011:128). Majak attempts to answer this question by discussing a large number of contemporary, photographic representations of dead bodies. Before this, however, Majak argues that “the corpse is a scandal based on the fact that the individual within the corpse becomes, or perhaps even turns out to be, an object” (2011:129). There is discomfort in viewing the pure matter and object-ness of what was once a subject. For Majak, there is a difficulty in attempting to “reconcile this brutal fact with the deeply rooted intuition of every human being’s subjectivity as an individual” (2011:129). For the viewer, as a subject, there is discomfort in seeing

an individual as entirely an object. This scandal of death is mirrored in Barthes’ anxiety over the subject becoming an object in the ‘flat-death’ of being photographed.

In the face of this scandal of death, Majak argues that “the human being must take power over the rebellious image-corpse through various procedures of image recovery” (2011:129). Thus,

the image must signify erasure, or metamorphosis of the corpse as object. This process can take two opposing methods – the socialization of the corpse, turning it back into an individual, or the banishment of the corpse by depriving it of the right to any claims to affinity with human beings – both strategies aim at avoiding scandal. (Majak 2011:129)

To lessen the scandal of the corpse, Majak argues that one of two *opposing* procedures of image recovery must be undertaken. The first, socialization, is the focus of her article and my thesis, as I feel it is valuable for the discussion of the three selected artists’ works. For Majak, socialization is the ‘taming’ of the corpse, which is achieved through representing the corpse as an individual again. As the corpse risks becoming the ultimate unknown ‘other’, socialization is an attempt to recover the corpse and lessen this alterity through visibility. The second option, the dehumanizing “banishment of the corpse”, is an attempt to distance the body from “any claims to affinity with human beings”.<sup>10</sup> The unsocialized corpse is the untamed body as matter. I have not taken this up, in spite of both dealing with the scandal of the dead body, as I do not feel that it is as relevant to the three series.

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10. I will explore Julia Kristeva’s notion of ‘abjection’ in relation to this on page 15, in this introduction.

Socialization is conventionally understood as the process by which an individual learns how to interact with others and becomes a member of a group (Long & Hadden 1985). The term is employed by sociologists and psychologists to discuss the ‘preparation’ of an individual, with beliefs, personality and behavior, by various social agents: family, peer groups et cetera. Thus, socialization is a process through which biological organisms become *human* as parts of social systems. This definition can be traced in Majak’s use of ‘socialization’, as she outlines it as an attempt to place emphasis on the *humanity* of the corpse. Thus, emphasis is not placed on ‘biological’ matter, but on the social aspects of the once-living subject, as the corpse is made human again.

Majak briefly explores each of the photographic series she discusses as an attempt at socialization, stating that “the death with which we are dealing here in its various representations

is tamed and assimilated, dressed up in images” (2011:133). This desire to mollify the scandal of death through representation is not new. As Majak states, “for centuries, people have attempted in various ways to face the challenge posed by death in the form of a corpse. The image as a reaction to the scandal of the corpse is a phenomenon as old as our culture” (2011:129). This relates to the idea of the death mask as ‘shoring up the subject’ as a means of mollifying death, which I have already discussed. Majak describes representation itself as a method of socialization; through the creation of an image, death is made at least partially approachable and in some series, sensible. This point is made clear by Elizabeth Bronfen, as she argues that “the threat that real death poses to any sense of stability, of wholeness, individual uniqueness or immortality is antidote through representations that exteriorize this real by transferring it to an image” (Bronfen in Townsend 1998:135).



Left: figure 11. Unknown Photographer, *Pennsylvania or New Jersey. Husband supporting Dead Wife.* (c. 1845). Daguerreotype. (Reproduction taken from Linkman, 2011:60).

Right: figure 12. DC Yearshire, John. *Police Pathology Photograph.* (1990). Size Unobtainable.



Through the process of representation as a form of socialization, the threat placed by the corpse on one's subjectivity is minimized and stabilized and the stability of the viewer is tied to socialization. The socializing features of representation itself are particularly true of photography due to the nature of the medium as discussed earlier: photography presents the 'real' dead body as a trace in a 'safe' and contained two-dimensional image.

It is through this distancing of representation that the dead body is inescapably filtered. I consider Majak's initial concept of socialization to be a useful entry point to explore the various formal devices used by Heyert, Hugo and Schels to photographically represent the dead; the way they have chosen to see death. However, I found Majak's concept, which has great potential, rather too general and undifferentiated to fully grasp what the term 'socialization' might entail and how it might aid us in understanding photographs of death.

I do not intend to use socialization as a form of value judgment or as a model for the representation of the dead, but rather as an analytical tool to deepen discussion of the three artist's series. Considering socialization in greater detail, I would argue that socialization is a continuum. In terms of representation, the very socialized would be a photograph of a corpse almost as a living individual, in instances of nineteenth century postmortem memorial portraiture for example (figure 11), whilst on the other end of the continuum would be a forensic photograph of a body as object (figure 12). I consider the three series which I

selected to be positioned much closer towards the socialized than the unsocialized. Further, I argue throughout my thesis that socialization is evident, *in varying degrees*, in the three series that I selected, in both the treatment of the dead and in their representation. This is an important aspect of my use of 'socialization'. In this thesis, out of the three series, I will position Schels' *Life before Death: Portraits of the Dying* (2004) as the most socialized, Hugo's *The Bereaved* (2005) as the least socialized and Heyert's *The Travelers* (2004) as between the two.<sup>11</sup>

I consider this continuum of socialization to be a movement between *subject* and object. As, to turn a corpse back into an individual is to turn an object back into a *subject*, thereby lessening the 'scandal' of death and the objectification of the individual. I accept that there is no full measure, or no absolute zero degree, of socialization. Similarly, the "subject/object relation is arguably not a clearly defined separation where either can be easily located" (Troyer 2007:25). This concept is evident in the language used to discuss the dead.<sup>12</sup> 'Corpse' refers to the materiality – the pure object-ness – of the anonymous dead body, whilst 'the deceased'/loved one/beloved implies a link to the living and subjecthood. I believe each of the three series are closer to *subject* than they are to object.

In line with this emphasis on the corpse as individual, it is in the discussion of the artists' use of portraiture that I find Majak's concept of socialization most valuable. Majak briefly mentions the implication of portraiture and representing the dead, when discussing Canadian photographer, Jack

11. From this point onwards, I will refer to Schels and Lakotta's series as 'Life before Death'.

12. The issue of the continuity of personhood in death is a much debated issue. See Mackie (1999) for a discussion of whether the term 'dead person' is correct and whether a corpse is indeed 'psychologically continuous' with a dead person. In general, this is a complex issue and far beyond the scope of my research here, but still requires a mention.

Burman's, series *The Dead* (2010) (figures 13, 14). The series consists of photographs of preserved human specimens and skeletons, "often described as...post mortem portraits" (Majak 2011:130). Majak further states that

the very word – portrait – clearly indicates that the corpse is not depicted as an object, that we are dealing with the revindication of the individual through the way the bodies, especially the faces, are presented...the genre of the portrait invests the dead matter of the corpse with a spirit and discreetly suggests a possibility of contact, as if with a living individual. (2011:130)

Through the decision to represent the deceased through portraiture, there is an attempt to turn the corpse, an object, back into an individual to recover it for the viewer. The interest in the face which portraiture suggests emphasizes the subjectivity of the deceased, as so much of what is considered 'human' about us is seen to be visible in the face (Levinas 1963). The use of portraiture signifies, by different degrees, an acknowledgement by Hugo, Heyert and Schels of the deceased as *subjects*. I will argue that the three artists' use of portraiture, and the kind of portraiture that they engage, socializes the corpse by a process of image recovery, for both the photographer and the viewer, through the emphasis placed on the subjectivity of the corpse, rather than the corpse as object. This is a crucial point throughout this thesis.

The form and appearance of the photograph, as a portrait, also contains a strong socializing aspect. The historical conventions of portraiture socialize the corpse, as the dead body is made to seem familiar

through the use of those conventions. This aesthetic renders the image acceptable, as conventions of portraiture and (often entirely socio-aesthetic) cultural ways of seeing encourage the viewer to engage with the image, even if the referent is incomprehensible as an object.<sup>13</sup> In this case, the photograph of the corpse is made approachable through the use of conventions such as format, pose and gesture; the familiar representation of a subject. This is in opposition to the unsocialized photograph of the corpse represented as unknown and unfamiliar; "depriv[ed] of the right to claims to affinity with human beings" (Majak 2011:129).

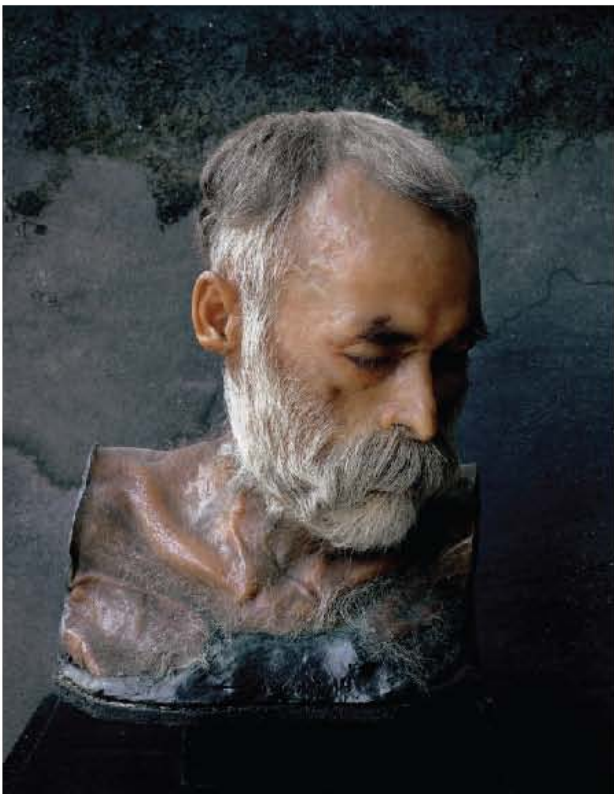
## Socialization and Abjection

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I want to expand for a moment – but only that – on this notion of the 'unsocialized' corpse, so as to better understand the socialized corpse. Returning to my discussion of Majak's *two* procedures of image recovery, Majak only briefly outlines the second option – the dehumanizing "banishment of the corpse". Majak outlines this option as an attempt to distance the body from any similarity with a human being and make it vanish completely, yet does not provide examples of this. I consider the unsocialized corpse to be represented not as a *subject* but as brute and anonymous dead meat; the emphasis is on the object-ness of the body. Thus, I regard the 'untamed' corpse, represented in this manner, to be in a powerful state of abjection.

I use 'abjection' here along similar lines as those of Julia Kristeva in her book, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, Mourning and Melancholia*.

13. Although far beyond definition here, by 'aesthetic' I refer to a kind of formal analysis, partly as result of visual conventions particular to the reception of photography.



Top: figure 13. Burman, Jack. *Untitled #6*. (2009). Cibachrome Photograph. 129.5 x 108 cm.

Bottom: figure 14. Burman, Jack. *Argentina #11*. (2009). Cibachrome Photograph. 129.5 x 108 cm.

Kristeva argues that “the corpse seen without god and outside of science is the utmost of abjection” (1941:4). Without religious faith or the medical gaze as forms of meaning-making, the corpse is completely abject and without sense. A number of writers have applied Kristeva’s argument to representations of the deceased (Smith 1999; Schwenger 2000; Schumann 2008; Buchler 2011). In fact, Majak begins her article with a discussion of Kristeva’s theory as one of the “most evocative descriptions of this shock [of the corpse]” (2011:129). Unfortunately, Majak only briefly points to the difference between socialization and abjection in her conclusion, stating that “the sort of death [represented by the socialized corpse] is no longer the sort of scandal which Kristeva described” (2011:133).

I want to expand on this and argue that, essentially, the unsocialized corpse is, or is close to, the abject corpse. For Kristeva, the abject is “not lack of cleanliness or health...but what disturbs identity, system, order...what does not respect borders, positions, rules...the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (1941:4). I understand abjection then as a breakdown of borders, the collapse of an inside/outside binary with a simultaneous attraction and threat to the subject.<sup>14</sup> When the corpse is in a state of decomposition and thus abjection, subject and object cannot be distinguished as material leaks across boundaries that are not clear. The abject corpse, as an uneasy frontier, is an opposite of socialization, then, which is an effort to turn the

corpse back into a *subject*. Socialization attempts to fix the borders of subject-ness and lessen the scandal of the abject corpse. Thus, socialization is also partly an attempt to conceal abjection and eliminate it from the visual. Thus, in the three series on which I focus, the abjectness of the dead bodies is concealed to varying degrees.

I want to clarify my use of ‘socialization’ and ‘unsocialization’ further by focusing on a series in which there is a small degree of socialization and in which abjection is clearly present; Andres Serrano’s *The Morgue (Cause of Death)* (1992).<sup>15</sup> This particular series is well known and widely written about, circulates in a fine art context, is widely exhibited, relatively recent and created controversy. I will argue that, although there is by no means a total absence of socializing processes of image recovery, many of the corpses seem abject and there appears to be little attention paid to the representation of the individual subjectivity of the deceased. It is important to note, however, that due to the large number of works in this series, this varies from photograph to photograph. Unlike the three series that are my main focus, here I aim to establish Serrano’s series as more unsocialized than socialized.

*The Morgue* (1992) consists of almost three dozen colour photographs of *unidentified* corpses in a morgue in New York City.<sup>16</sup> In some photographs the body of the corpse is visible (figure 15), and in others we are shown an extreme close-up of a fragment of the body in the foreground, such as a wound, a hand or a

14. The notion of the subject is complex, and will be explained further in chapter one, specifically pages 44 - 47.

15. From here on, I will refer to the series as ‘The Morgue’.

16. I believe that the use of photography, the location of a mortuary and an interest in the traces and remains of an event, references a ‘forensic aesthetic’. See Ralph Rugoff’s *Scene of The Crime* (1997) for an introduction to this particular aesthetic.

Top: figure 15. Serrano, Andres. *The Morgue (Rat Poison)*. (1992). Cibachrome Photograph. 125.7 x 152.4 cm.

Bottom: figure 16. Serrano, Andres. *The Morgue (Killed by Four Great Danes)*. (1992). Cibachrome Photograph. 125.7 x 152.4 cm.



mouth. When the deceased's face is shown, it is most often partially covered with coloured fabric (figure 16). This is a strong contrast to the three series on which I focus, as each of these place differing emphasis on the face of the subject through familiar conventions of portraiture. As stated previously, it is the face that is associated with subjectivity and humanity. Serrano's aesthetic decisions are partly due to the terms of Serrano's access to the morgue, as by agreeing that he would not reveal the identity of those he represented, Serrano could photograph as he wished (Fitzpatrick 2008:33).

In line with this and the site of the photographs, the name of each photograph is the unnatural cause of the subject's death. In comparison to Heyert's, Hugo's and Schels' series, we are not given the names of the deceased and thus, cannot engage with the corpses as *particular* individuals. Serrano stated that "he never knew them as human beings. He never knew what languages they spoke, what their religious or political beliefs were, how much money they had, or who they loved. All he [knew] about them [was] the cause of death" (Serrano in Blume 1993: online). The primary focus is not on the corpse as a once-living subject, as our attention as viewers is rarely focused on the subjecthood of the deceased individual.

Andrea Fitzpatrick's review of Serrano's series, *Reconsidering the Dead in Andres Serrano's The Morgue: Identity, Agency and Subjectivity* (2008), addresses the lack of emphasis on the subjecthood of the deceased individuals. As the title of the review suggests, Fitzpatrick centered her response on three concerns: the (lack of) identity, agency and subjectivity of the deceased. In this sense, Fitzpatrick can be seen to be calling for further socialization of the corpses in *The Morgue* (1992). For Fitzpatrick,

due to the anonymity through which Serrano must structure his work, the corpses are disconnected from personal identity and biography, bereft of connotation alluding to family, community, and loved ones. Serrano's corpses exist in the here-and-now of the morgue and in the immediacy of photographic emulsion. (2008:33)

The corpse as an anonymous and de-individualized body, estranged from contexts and markers of identity, is no longer a subject. The dead body is objectified by its position in the morgue and its representation. Majak, commenting on Fitzpatrick's critique of *The Morgue* (1992), affirms this, stating that "[the] bodies become separated from their individual identities and biographies, transforming into autonomous and self sufficient objects. The basic problem for Fitzpatrick is that the corpses, separated from their individual context, cease to be subjects" (2011:131).

Instead of attention being placed solely on the subject-ness of the corpse, there is a visual interest in the materiality of the dead body as an object. The use of dramatic studio lighting, set up in the morgue by Serrano, accentuates the shape and surface of the different body parts of the corpses. In some of the photographs, I witness abject evidence of the bodies as objects of postmortem measurement and investigation, such as skin as a border crudely stitched back together. The abjection of the dead bodies is emphasized by these details, which Serrano chose to focus on: orifices, wounds, decomposing skin, marked flesh and bodily liquids, such as blood, which still appear wet (figures 17, 18). Such photographs depict the abject disturbance of borders.

The attention paid by Serrano to the 'messy' aspects of the body seems in line with the general interest in abjection and the materiality of the

Top: figure 17. Serrano, Andres. *The Morgue (Knifed to Death II)*. (1992). Cibachrome Photograph. 125.7 x 152.4 cm.

Bottom: figure 18. Serrano, Andres. *The Morgue (Burn Victim)*. (1992). Cibachrome Photograph. 125.7 x 152.4 cm.



body in the last two decades of the twentieth century (Smith 1999; Cosineau-Levine 2003). During the 1980s and 90s, there was an increase in often quite challenging images of the dead body in artworks. Val Williams, argues that, judging by the work of artists at that time, there was an interest in

intimate studies of the human body and that rather than reflecting on the nature of death in a metaphysical way, [photographers] have looked unflinchingly on its physicality, in the mortuary at the end of the street, at the hospital around the corner. (Cited in Cosineau-Levine 2003:62)

These photographs were of a different kind of proximity to death and more about materiality than meaning and sense-making. Apart from Serrano's *The Morgue* (1992), series such as Sue Fox's *Untitled* (1996) (figures 19, 20) also suggest an interest in the corporeality and abjectness of the body reduced to matter. Such photographs tend towards the unsocialized or abject corpses of forensic postmortem images; the body as excess and waste. This difference in socialization is evident too in Serrano's choice of subject – unknown bodies in a morgue – in comparison to the three artists whom I discuss. In Heyert's and Hugo's series, the subjects are photographed in a funeral home and in Schels' series, the dying and deceased are photographed in a hospice.

There is, however, a degree of socialization in the series, as Serrano states, “for me, these are not mere corpses. They are not inanimate, lifeless objects...since doing my work, I have seen pictures in a book of forensic pathology, and the pictures are hard core, gruesome, very clinical

and detached. The lighting is flat, there's no art involved, just technical representation” (Blume 1993: online). Serrano invested interest in these corpses and took special care in their appearance. Apart from the socialization of representation itself, the photographs are surprisingly sensuous in their careful composition, rich colours and immense detail, emphasized by the large scale cibachrome prints.<sup>17</sup> This aestheticization tames the corpse, making it more approachable and appealing. The glossy prints and studio lighting are almost reminiscent of advertisements, which further socialize the corpse as the “beauty of his art relies on the mechanism of advertising to sell repressed ideas, thus forcing viewers to come to terms with advertising's seductive power as well as to cope with difficult subjects” (Hobbs 1994:22).

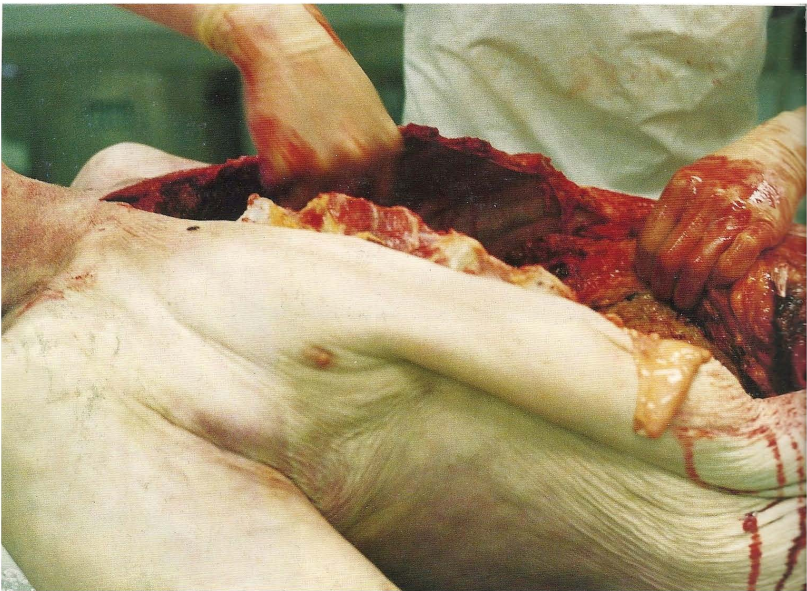
This attempt to beautify the grotesque is just one of numerous art historical references that Serrano purposefully created in the series. For instance, the formal beauty of these prints is partly reminiscent of theatrical baroque or Italian renaissance stylization with evocative and dramatic flash lighting and thick black backgrounds (Bal 1999). As a reviewer of the work states, “the polychrome flesh is like stained fabric, and the way it is punctuated by hairs, wounds, crevices, and jewel-toned body fluids oozing from wounds is exceedingly painterly” (Fitzpatrick 2008:33). These art historical references present in the photographs socialize the images by invoking familiar conventions, discussions and ways of viewing, lending a sense of acceptability to a particular community of viewers. Through such art historical references, the viewer is distanced from the scandal of the corpse.

I want to focus now on one specific image to further draw out what I mean by minimal

17. The size of the print can vary according to the edition, however the average size appears to be around 127 x 152 cm.

Top: figure 19. Fox, Sue. *Untitled.* (1996). Cibachrome Photograph. Size Unobtainable.

Bottom: figure 20. Fox, Sue. *Untitled.* (1996). Cibachrome Photograph. Size Unobtainable.



socialization. I selected *Jane Doe, Killed by Police* (1992) (figure 21) as it is one of the few photographs of the series in which the face of the deceased is shown and is thus a better comparison to the series that I have chosen (in which the face of every subject is clearly visible). In this particular photograph, Serrano's focus on the face mitigates against too high a degree of unsocialization. There is still a degree of coherence to the woman's face, which signals a degree of socialization – we still recognize the deceased as a once-living person.

Despite this, I am also particularly aware of the object-ness of the corpse represented in *Jane Doe, Killed by Police* (1992). The photograph is a close view of a woman's face in profile, cropped "at the chin, effectively beheading the woman in the visual register, separating the head from any sense of the body or clothing, and creating a monumental objectification" (Fitzpatrick 2008:34). The extreme cropping, present in many of the photographs, adds to the loss of subjectivity as the woman is objectified and separated from most of



that which could suggest her subjecthood. Despite the focus on the face, the deceased's age, race and individual appearance is not clear due to the level of the corpse's decomposition. Only through an interview did I learn that the woman was black and middle aged (Blume 1993: online).

The lack of attention paid to the identity of the corpse is emphasized further by the title of the photograph, as she is called 'Jane Doe'. This title explicitly points to the absence of her own identity, as her corpse was not claimed by family or friends and she was left without a name or subjectivity. Through the title, "this woman is identified or named exclusively by her death. She is called not simply Jane Doe but *The Morgue (Jane Doe, Killed by Police)*. The brutality of her death encroaches upon, and indeed encompasses, any subjectivity she may have had whilst living" (Message 2004:129). The cause of death is reinforced by the abject, bloody gunshot wound which is visible just above the deceased's ear; perhaps the reason the subject was photographed in profile.

Due to the fold in the skin of her neck, the pull of gravity at muscular level and the tilt of her chin, I realize she is lying down. There is passivity and death in this proneness as the dead "are almost always lying down – the body fallen to the ground, the beloved in bed, the corpse that must be identified in the morgue" (Cumming 2008: online). This is emphasized by the horizontal, rectangular format with which Serrano chose to represent the deceased, in contrast to the upright portrait format used by Heyert, Hugo and Schels.

In what is almost a line straight up from the bullet wound, there is a deep sunken hole where one of the subject's eyes would have once been. The subject's sightlessness is emphasized by the lighting, which casts a deep shadow from her brow bone into the recess of her eye socket. I feel a discomfort in this absence of a gaze, which is an important point

I will discuss throughout this thesis. Fitzpatrick argues that "Serrano plays upon the agency of the gaze, but only to emphasize the extent to which the body in *Jane Doe, Killed by Police* is denied the inter-subjectivity that the gaze fosters" (2008:39). In the discourse surrounding photography and indeed, any form of representation, the inability of the subject to counter the gaze is read as a loss of agency, and a loss of subjecthood. The unrequited gaze reinforces the object-ness of the body as corpse. This discussion has often been applied to the sexist male gaze, wherein the passive female is an object to be watched (Berger 1972). This is particularly interesting in relation to the gaze that (frequently) falls upon the female corpse (Bronfen 1992). These factors contributed to Fitzpatrick's reconsideration of *The Morgue* (1992), as she felt a number of the photographs required a feminist reading.

Due to the careful lighting and the size, focus and colour of the photograph, the texture and appearance of her decomposing flesh is inescapable; "striking are the rings and blotches of peeling, discoloured skin, and the spotted markings in shades of brown, beige and red, which transform the woman's face into a mask of camouflage" (Fitzpatrick 2008:34). In this sense, the 'beauty' of the prints is both socializing and unsocializing, as with beautification Serrano treats the dead body as an aesthetic object and it is easy to become lost in the surface of the image instead of considering the subjectivity of the deceased (Fitzpatrick 2008). Jane Doe's leaking, decomposing face reminds me that the corpse is an abject body, now signifying little more than waste and excess. The decomposition betrays the coherence of the subject, disturbs identity and suggests the vulnerability of the body

Opposite page: figure 21. Serrano, Andres. *The Morgue (Jane Doe, Killed by Police)*. (1992). Cibachrome Photograph. 125.7 x 152.4 cm.

as it becomes 'other'. There is little attempt on Serrano's behalf to return a sense of individual identity to the corpse through socialization, or to attempt to reconstruct the borders of subject and object. The liminality of the unburied dead body in the morgue is also inescapable. With the limited socialization and attention to subjecthood of the deceased in *The Morgue*, the dead are left radically 'other'; there is little attempt to conceal this abjection.

## Socialization and the Ethics of Representing the Dead

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Whilst researching different works for this thesis, I became increasingly aware that each series of photographs of dead subjects received very different responses as a whole from the media, the public and critics. I found it significant that a particular series would raise more ethical objections, at a stronger degree, than another series. Thus, in line with my primary focus, I want to briefly explore the ethical issues which arise in viewing each of the three series in relation to the different manner in which the artists have decided to represent the dead. It is important to clarify that the ethics of representing the dead is by no means the focus of this document, but I feel that I should acknowledge that ethical questions are deeply embedded in the practice.

Due to the medium's indexicality, photographs of the dead in particular "have instigated and contributed to discussions concerning the role of art and the appropriateness of photographing the dead, and have highlighted cultural sensitivities concerning the treatment of the corpse" (O'Neill 2011a:129). This is complicated further as, technically, the dead do not have the same rights as the living, as they are no longer classified as

human (Orend 2002:41). Numerous concerns are raised by such photographs: respect and dignity for the deceased; privacy and sensitivity for the bereaved; religious beliefs, discomfort with one's own mortality; issues of consent and access; fears of morbidity and questions of taste. These concerns and issues vary greatly as beliefs regarding death and the dead body vary so greatly from one religion, social class, gender, age or ethnic group to another. Photography again seems to highlight such dilemmas, raising questions of who has a right to look at who, and why, and when. This is emphasized by the unequal power relation that exists in the representation of the dead by the living.

Such issues were highlighted in many of the responses to Serrano's *The Morgue* (1992), as the series was met with great controversy and moral/ethical outrage by the public, institutions, critics and the state (Hobbs 1994; O'Neill 2001b:129). For instance, the very aim of Fitzpatrick's critique of Serrano's series was to

explore the ways in which Serrano shows his awareness of the vulnerability of the dead, not by recognizing it as an ethical paradigm, but by exploiting and reifying it, perpetuating a subjectivity for the dead that is disrespectful, if not also wounding. (Fitzpatrick 2008:28)

For Fitzpatrick, Serrano did not acknowledge the identity, agency or subjectivity of the deceased. In this sense, it seems that for Fitzpatrick to consider the representation of the dead ethically acceptable, she requires the corpses to be socialized, with a greater emphasis on the deceased's subjectivity.

I believe that such a response, a moral or ethical outcry, is partly tied to a lack of socialization of the dead, and a consciousness of this connection is woven throughout this thesis. I will suggest that there is a correlation between the series'

levels of socialization and the *perceived* ethics of the series. Socialized series tend to be perceived to be more ethically acceptable, whilst abject and less socialized representations of corpses tend to be perceived to be less ethically acceptable (unless the corpse is unrecognizable as a human in relation to Majak's second image recovery option). Hugo's *The Bereaved* (2005) is the least socialized of the three series and immediately raises ethical concerns, whilst *Life before Death* (2004) is the most socialized of the three series, and has generally been perceived as ethically acceptable by the media, public and critics.

To explore the varying perceived ethics of representation of the dead in the three series on which I focus, I will discuss Mary O'Neill's two articles, *Speaking to the Dead: Images of the Dead in Contemporary Art* (2011a) and *Images of the Dead: Ethics and Contemporary Art Practice* (2011b). In both of these pieces, O'Neill "posits[s] the argument that the 'ethical' turn in discussions of contemporary art is often an avoidance of difficult subjects rather than an engagement with them" (2011b:129). Ethical concerns are true and 'noble', but they should not automatically override the fact that as individuals, many without the previously traditional belief in the church or science, may be fearful, or curious, about death. As O'Neill states, "if, even at the great distance the photograph entails, we are able to go a little way in our confrontation with this fear [of death and the dead body], this is not a bad thing" (2011a:134-135).

## The Corpus

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In each of the following three chapters, which make up the main part of this thesis, I will focus on one of the three photographic series. I

have selected photographs within each group and discuss the varying ways in which each of the artists represent and socialize the dead, drawing out similarities and differences between them. For the most part, the photographs that I discuss can be seen to be representative of their respective series – clearly I cannot discuss each photograph of each series in depth. To enrich my argument, I will also incorporate discussions of other artist's representations of the deceased, comparing them to the three series that I have chosen. As is already evident from this introduction, within each chapter I use sub-headings to group similar thoughts and discussions. The sub-headings flow from one to the next and should allow for easier access to each chapter for the reader.

In Chapter One I begin with Elizabeth Heyert's *The Travelers* (2004) as it is neither the most nor the least socialized of three series. I explore the aesthetics of the photographs, particularly focusing on the elements of socialization in the series. This includes Heyert's decision to represent the corpse as if she/he were still alive, the initial likeness between death and sleep, the role of the mortician and embalming in turning the corpse into a 'postmortem subject', the objects photographed with the deceased and the narrative surrounding the subjects. I introduce the ethical difficulties of the series, which I take up in greater detail in Chapter Two, where such questions become immediate and pressing.

In Chapter Two, I argue that Hugo's *The Bereaved* (2005) is the least socialized of the three series. Through portraiture and the close focus on the face of the subjects, I perceive the deceased as subjects. However, due to the limited emphasis on the subjectivity of the deceased as individuals and a number of Hugo's aesthetic choices (such as the full colour of the prints, which highlights the beginning of the subject's decomposition), I also perceive the

object-ness of the corpses. I explore why this lesser degree of socialization is perceived as particularly problematic in terms of Hugo's choice of subjects and aesthetic. I offer an alternative reading to the series that is not primarily concerned with the politics of representation, but rather with the questions of portraiture and the representation of death that *The Bereaved* raises.

In Chapter Three, I explore Walter Schels and Beate Lakotta's *Life before Death* (2004) as the most socialized of the three series. I examine the many aesthetic aspects that contribute to the socialization (and perceived ethical acceptability) of the representation of the corpse; the black and white prints, the inclusion of a 'before' portrait of each deceased individual whilst they were still alive, the accompanying text and the pose of the 'after' portrait mirroring the 'before' portrait. Despite the high level of socialization, there is still an uncanny mix of subject-ness and object-ness in the representation of the deceased.

It is with this point that I conclude the thesis, as this is evident in varying degrees in all three of the series. Despite the varying levels of socialization which lead to my awareness of the subject-ness of the dead body, ultimately I still perceive the object-ness of the corpse as represented in each of the series. In this sense, I conclude that ultimately socialization is an *illusion*. This illusion is constructed as a means to tame and domesticate the corpse, allowing the viewer to see and think about death safely. The need for this illusion, to varying degrees, highlights certain contemporary attitudes towards the dead body in each of the three series. This thesis supports the suggestion that there are adjustments in the way that the corpse, or rather, the postmortem subject, is seen and represented.

# CHAPTER ONE: *THE TRAVELERS* (2004)

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Elizabeth Heyert's *The Travelers* (2004) consists of thirty-one conventional portraits of deceased subjects, photographed from February 9, 2003 to March 14, 2004. Heyert photographed each individual in primarily three-quarter length, frontal view, against a black background with studio portrait lighting. Heyert chose a nineteenth century style, 8 x 10 inch Deardorff camera in order to achieve the "most 'beautiful', formal photographs I could, with very little grain, vibrant color, and no enlargement problems that can happen with a smaller, less formal camera" (Heyert, personal communication, August 3 2011). Exposure times could be up to eight minutes long, which is interesting in the sense that no sitter alive could sit completely still for that amount of time. The colourful detail is inescapable, as the images have been enlarged to just smaller than life size chromogenic prints at 76 x 97 cm each. As seen from the images online of the show exhibited at the Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York from June 9 – July 23 2004, the works are neither precious, nor intimidating in size (Heyert 2004: online).

The formal impact of the photographs is such that it almost distracts from the subject of the dead. The familiar conventions of portraiture lead us to see subjects not objects, individuals not corpses. Heyert places an emphasis on the subjecthood of each individual through gesture, pose and personal items photographed with the dead. Heyert purposefully chooses to represent the dead as if they are still alive, stating that "these portraits are not about death, but about

people's lives" (Heyert & D'Erasmus 2003: online). This decision will be a focus throughout this chapter and will be explored in relation to Majak's conceptualization of socialization as an attempt to restore a sense of individualism to the corpse. I believe there is a desire to face the dead, "however, since we are too afraid to look at the face of death the images place a mask of life over it" (Majak 2011:132). There is an attempt to rearticulate the dead so as to keep vivid their relation with life at an individual level.

Since photography's inception, the medium has been used not only as a means to construct the identity of the living, but also to represent the dead. Heyert's decision to represent the deceased (as if they were living) must be considered in relation to the long history of postmortem memorial portraiture. I will compare the conventions of this established form of portrait photography (in America in particular) with *The Travelers* to see if, and how, the photographs differ from one another.

*The Travelers* was triggered by a newspaper article regarding a mortician in Harlem, "who did this old style, Southern Baptist, traditional burial in which people were dressed up to enter paradise" (Heyert & D'Erasmus 2003: online). Isaiah Owens, an ordained Baptist minister, has been a funeral director since the 1960s, catering to the particular religious and social community of which he is a part. Southern Baptists believe that in death one should look one's best when reunited with God. Owens is famed for his ability to restore a lifelike appearance to a body through the use of cosmetics

and special embalming methods. A large element of the socialization visible in the photographs is due to the preparation of the corpse by Owens. The embalming of the body will be explored as a crucial aspect of the series, as it is significant that Heyert photographed each subject *after* Owens had prepared the body for viewing. As Heyert stated, “each time I went to take a photograph, I would have to put myself in a place where I could ignore the early stages, before the bodies were *safely* groomed and coiffed and dressed” (Heyert, personal communication, August 3, 2011; my emphasis). Death is tamed through the work of Owens and then Heyert, returning an acceptable image of a ‘self’ to each body.

The emphasis on the corpse as a subject, through embalming and portraiture, is furthered by Heyert’s attempt to ‘preserve’ the disappearing history of the subjects: “their links to the South, and the church and the style of dressing up [were] vanishing” (Feuer 2004: online). The title of each photograph is displayed alongside the image – the name of the deceased, along with their dates of birth and death, further socializing the corpse. Spanning the twentieth century, the dates spark a specific interest in the reading of the photograph, as they trigger my imagination. The simple facts provided suggest the social history of the majority of the subjects. Some of the dates speak of the journey made from the rural South to the northern cities of America, in an attempt to escape racial prejudice. The name of the series, ‘The Travelers’, reflects this move away from, as well as the bodies’ return for burial to, the South. Heyert’s position as an ‘outsider’ to this community, especially in her choice to represent the dead black subjects, raises critical questions. I hope to address such issues throughout the thesis, but will be approaching the ethics of the series in relation to socialization towards the end of

this chapter. Lastly, I will explore the nostalgia and narrative created by *The Travelers* (2004) as a form of socialization as I am led to consider the history and the life lived by the deceased as subjects.

## First Appearances

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The image, *Daphne Jones. Born: August 1954, Died: October 2003* (2004) (figure 22), presents a small, elegant woman in the centre of a black background. There is an aesthetic appeal to the photograph, as “some of the attributes of beauty (stillness, calm and repose) are attributes of death” (Foltyn 2008a:165). Jones is dressed in a soft blue, fitted dress and matching embroidered jacket. A white chiffon scarf complements her white lace gloves, the small embroidered floral detailing on the jacket and her short, dangling earrings. This elaborate outfit socializes the dead body, as Jones seems to be dressed up in her best clothes and care has been taken in her appearance; this is true of each photograph in this series. There is a concern for the dignity of the deceased as a subject.

Jones’ right arm lies across her body with her right hand resting on her left forearm, her fingers bent as if she had lightly placed it there herself; her left hand is on her thigh. Although the light is relatively balanced, the primary source of light is from the left of the image, softly highlighting the right side of her face and body. There is vulnerability, yet animation, in the pose, as her body gently folds in on itself. Her head tilts slightly to the left, her chin is curled towards her chest and her left shoulder drops lower than her right, creating the peaceful illusion of rest or sleep. Jones’s eyes are closed, further encouraging

Figure 22. Heyert, Elizabeth. *Daphne Jones*. Born: August 1954, Died: October 2003. (2004). Chromogenic Colour Print. 76 x 97 cm.



the illusion of sleep. To represent the dead as if they were merely sleeping, or resting, is an age-old convention (De Pascale 2009). This visual analogy of sleep and death attempts to demystify death and socialize the body, as sleep is familiar to us by its quotidian nature. There is comfort in the conception of death as painless, like falling asleep. Jones's lips tilt slightly upwards at the corners as if she were smiling, suggesting a personality as well as creating an illusion of eternal peace. Perhaps, most importantly, sleep as a euphemism for death minimizes the finality of death, with the suggestion that one can wake up – reflecting the safety, in certain religious beliefs, of the afterlife. For Southern Baptists death is the beginning, as the afterlife is likened to paradise (Heyert 2004). Religious faith gives death meaning; hardships in life will be rewarded now or in the afterlife and death can, to a certain extent, be celebrated. Owens refers to death as “going to the party”, corresponding with Jones appearing as if she was going to a celebration (Heyert 2004: online).

The visual emphasis on life and the suggestion of sleep initially distracts from the fact that we are looking at a corpse. The date of her death in the title reminds us of this and, on further inspection, the signs of death become visible. Jones's hands seem heavy and rigid, the pose awkward and, by the draping of her clothing and the position of her body, I realize that despite the verticality of the photograph, Jones is not standing. Heyert positioned her large format camera directly above each subject and photographed them from the top of a tall ladder. Further, there is the very pale, light blue eyeshadow on Jones's closed eyelids and neutral lipgloss on her lips. The skin of her face is strangely even and free of any wrinkles. With the knowledge of her death, I know that her appearance is largely due to the work of Owens as mortician. I thus question how much

of what I see is a product of Heyert's efforts and how much is a product of Owens's. This concern is suggested in the title of a review of the work in the New York Times, *Bringing Back the Dead: Photographer Captures a Harlem Undertaker's Art* (Feuer 2004).

Without my interview with Heyert, I would not have known that Jones's scarf covers a large scar on her neck and that the sleeves and gloves hide the needle marks of her cocaine habit (Heyert, personal communication, August 3 2011). Both Owens and Heyert have idealized the dead body, concealing the fact that the woman was emaciated and died of an AIDS-related illness. The photograph itself follows the traditions of earlier portraiture, asserting respectability of a certain cultural type and (staging) material success and distinctive moral values, all through appearance and an emphasis on (constructed) subjectivity. Heyert, when commenting on this particular image, said:

I was looking for something else. By not exposing the viewer to the toll that her difficult life had taken on her body, I feel I was inviting the viewer to be open to Daphne as a human being, to approach her with compassion, and curiosity about the inner person. (Heyert, personal communication, August 3 2011)

Heyert did not want the viewer to focus on the body as an object, but rather on the humanity of the individual as a *subject*. I will return to, and complicate, this important point further on.

Throughout the process, Heyert spent a significant amount of time with Owens. Heyert would

always ask about the person I was going to photograph. If possible I got Mr. Owens to

tell me anecdotal stories about them, rather than a life history. Often, as part of the funeral service, there was a pamphlet printed about the person, which I also read. (Heyert, personal communication, August 3 2011)

Despite the stories' importance to Heyert, they are absent from each image. As an outsider, Heyert did not want to claim the stories as her own, feeling the accounts were too private for public consumption. Anecdotes and collateral material are not made known to the viewer, who is presented with an idealized view of the subject (constructed both by Owens and Heyert) instead. In this sense, there is a tension regarding Heyert's decision of what is, and is not, for the public to see.

Figure 23. Southworth and Hawes, Boston. *Postmortem Portrait of an Unidentified Child*. (c. 1850s). Daguerreotype. 16 x 21 cm.



When asked if the focus on life denied the presence of death in these portraits, Heyert stated that they are “neither a denial of death, nor the truth about death or even about life” (Heyert, personal communication, August 3 2011). Instead, Heyert likened these particular portraits to “visual eulogies” (Heyert, personal communication, August 3 2011), as the stories one chooses to tell about the deceased. A eulogy is ordinarily a written or oral praise of a subject recently deceased. It is the believed biography, both information about, and affirmation of, the life, habits and character, of a *subject*. It is in this light that Heyert attempts to frame the idealization of the subjects. I find that the images in *The Travelers* are most like eulogies, as a form of comfort in the face of death, providing a way to think about the deceased by focusing on the *good* life (or pretended life) lived, rather than the life lost. This link as a visual eulogy socializes the corpse as we see the subjects, such as Daphne Jones, as an individual. Heyert attempts to show Jones at her ‘best’ rather than her most abject.

## Postmortem Memorial Portraiture

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Heyert’s representation of the deceased as if they were still living is not by any means new and her work needs to be situated in, if only to contrast it with, the long history of representing the deceased in America. Jay Ruby’s *Secure The Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (1995) explores the conventions of the postmortem memorial photograph in America from 1840 to the present. The custom of portraying the dead as if they were living was relatively common in the nineteenth century. As photography borrowed the conventions of painted portraits, photographers

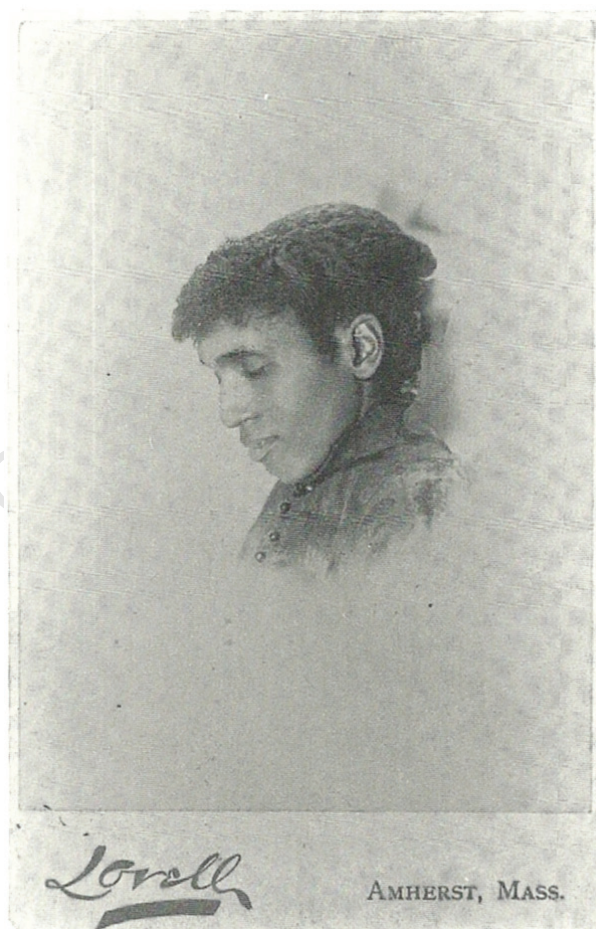
drew on the pictorial conventions established by the long tradition and history of mourning and posthumous painting (Ruby 1995). Two of the three generally accepted styles of postmortem memorial photography, which emerged between 1840 and 1880, were designed to conceal the effects of death. These images were taken as soon after the subject’s death as possible to prevent signs of decomposition, providing the viewer with a lifelike representation of a dead subject.

The first convention to imply that the subject is still alive, as outlined by Ruby, is through the visual analogy of sleep. I have already briefly discussed this visual convention, but would like to contrast a typical image from this period with *The Travelers*. Many of the elements in *Postmortem Portrait of an Unidentified Child* (c. 1850s) (figure 23) suggest that the young, female child is merely asleep. She is lying peacefully on her back, on a white sheet, the folds of which reinforce the appearance of sleep. The soft focus, black and white image is, importantly, horizontally oriented and emphasizes that the child is reclining. The mellow lighting picks out the simple white dress, falling gently around her body like a nightdress. Her small hands rest together on her stomach and her crossed legs give the appearance of being comfortable. The child’s face is peaceful and, without the title, it would be very difficult to know that the child is deceased. As is typical of such images, the viewer’s mind is “lured away from distressing thoughts of decomposition and decay, and invited to dwell instead on the more hopeful prospect of a new and better dawn” (Linkman 2011:21). The only element that might alert me to her posthumous state is the small Star of David clasped in her hands. Knowledge of her death triggers an uncomfortable realization of the careful composition of the prone deceased. The image is relatively small at 16 x 21 cm, highlighting the function of the photograph as a personal keepsake.

In *The Travelers*, the subjects' elaborate outfits seem too vital in their full colour to support the analogy of sleep. The props included in the images, such as large hats, jewelry and fresh corsages, do not seem likely in a portrait of a sleeping subject, just as the Star of David disturbs the impression that the child is at rest. The subjects' forced smiles and observable make-up (for example, the bright red lipstick on a number of the female subjects) dismiss this visual analogy of sleep. The black background creates an illusion that the subjects are almost hovering, but there is no drapery to take this metaphor of rest further. Unlike *Postmortem Portrait of an Unidentified Child* (c. 1850s), the images are presented vertically, concealing the proneness of the dead. In comparing the conventions of images such as *Postmortem Portrait of an Unidentified Child* (c. 1850s), it seems that Heyert did not intend to purposefully trade on the visual analogy of death as sleep.<sup>18</sup>

The second type of postmortem memorial photographs Ruby terms 'alive, yet dead'. All of these images are tilted vertically upwards, as if the figures are standing (figure 24). The notion of horizontality is in the etymology of the dead body as 'cadaver', from *cadere*, meaning to fall (Kristeva 1941:3). There is a discomfort with representing people in horizontal format, as it suggests vulnerability and death.<sup>19</sup> There is desire to turn the body *upright* again, placing emphasis on vitality and agency. This is true of every series

Figure 24. Unknown Photographer, Lovell Studio, Amherst, Massachusetts. *Vignetted Postmortem Photograph of Unidentified African American Woman*. (circa 1880). Gelatin Silver Print on Cardboard Mount, Cabinet Card. Size Unobtainable.



18. It is interesting that the forerunner to Heyert's *The Travelers* is a series of monumental black and white portraits of sleeping subjects, *The Sleepers* (2003). The sleeping subjects are given gravity and stillness suggesting death, whilst *The Travelers* seem almost animate and vital in their vivid colour and poses. I have not explored this further here as, for Heyert, the decision to represent both the sleeping and the dead was "not a conscious decision at all. However I am continually drawn to the idea of being an outsider and an unobtrusive witness when I make portraits" (Heyert, personal communication, August 3 2011).

19. This has also been discussed in depth in relation to the representation of the female body. See Krauss's (1977) discussion of photographer Cindy Sherman's work.



chosen for this thesis. The nineteenth century images or negatives were retouched with dyes and inks to highlight the link between colour, vitality and life. The eyes of the subject were opened for the photograph, and in some instances even painted open afterwards (Ruby 1995:72). In *The Travelers* one is aware of the horizontality of the bodies due to the fall of the subject's clothing. The subject's eyes were not opened, nor did Heyert re-touch the photographed faces with additional colour, despite the many more methods available than in the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth century desire to photograph subjects as living was not a result of death denial, or even an attempt to portray the individual, but rather the last chance to record someone's likeness. As Ruby argues, if the only aim was to recreate the impression of life in the deceased, a postmortem memorial photograph could not show the subject alive as a painted portrait could; "at best, postmortem photographs constitute a failed attempt at *trompe l'oeil* which fooled no one. Their function was not to keep the dead

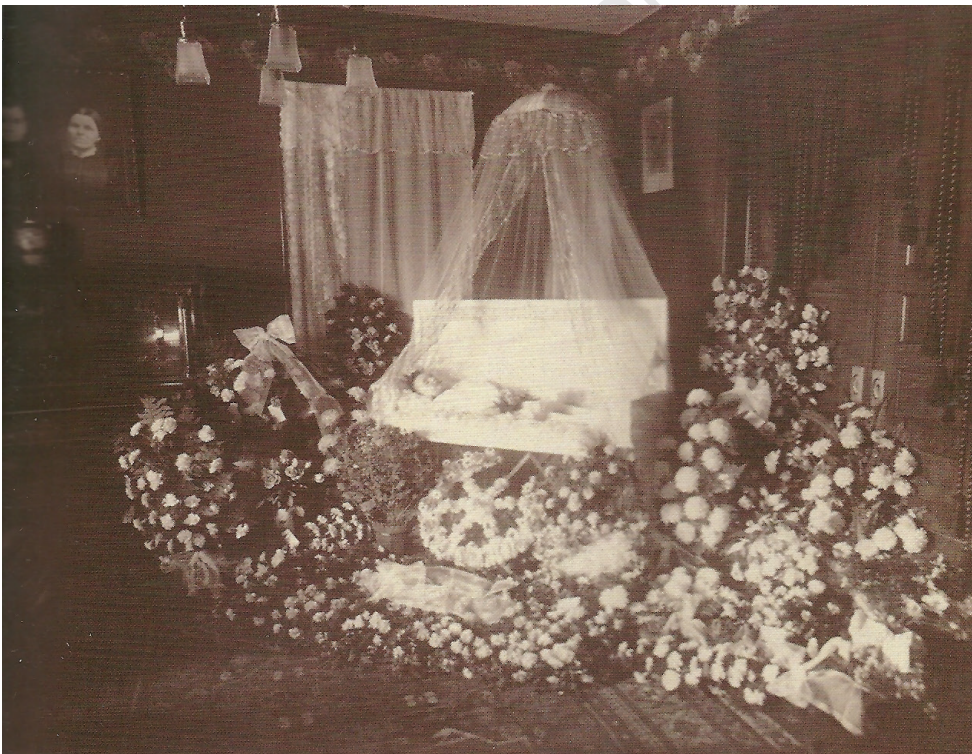
alive, but to enable mourners to acknowledge their loss" (1995:43). In a time when it had become increasingly important to document one's existence photographically, sometimes a person died without having had his/her image taken. Thus, "the commissioning of postmortem portraits centers on the absence of any photographs taken during the deceased person's life" (Linkman 2011:18). This is particularly true due to the high infant mortality rate. In correspondence with Elizabeth Heyert (August 3 2011), Heyert stated that she was "definitely influenced by Victorian photographs taken of children after death. Usually those photos were in albums with children dressed in their clothes, sometimes in party dresses or suits, propped up or posed to look as if they were alive... I found that extremely moving." It seems natural to desire that the *only* photograph of an individual would suggest the life lived, rather than lost. However, in contemporary society, most individuals have many photographs of themselves and there is no longer this need to recreate life for an individual's

only photograph. By this I mean mostly adults; Ruby (1995:179–183) and Linkman (2011:120–135) both discuss how this practice is popular in the process of mourning stillborn children, highlighting the therapeutic effect these photographs can have for the bereaved parents. It is clear, however, that this is not the purpose of *The Travelers*.

The third, and last, variant depicts the deceased with the mourners and suggests the start of the changes that memorial photography would undergo in the beginning of the twentieth century. These photographs shift away from the likeness of the individual, to mark the occasion of the funeral as an event and acknowledge the mourners and the social event overall (figures 25, 26). The images reflect changes in the growing funeral industry and show the coffin in its entire environment, with props such as flowers

Opposite page: figure 25. Unknown Photographer; possibly East European or Russian, *Elderly Woman in her Coffin*. (c. 1940). Gelatin Silver Print. Size Unobtainable.

Below: figure 26. Kinkege (?), American, *Last Memory Photograph in a Family Home*. (c. 1910). Gelatin Silver Print on Cardboard Mount. Size Unobtainable.



and draped canopies. By the 1930s photographers had already, inadvertently, established two standard views, “one where approximately half the body was seen, and a second where the entire casket was visible...the conventions, whether the photographer be a professional or snap-shooter, remain virtually unchanged to the present day” (Ruby 1995:77).

The first photograph that led to *The Travelers* (2004) reflects this. It was a black and white image of a woman in her casket. Heyert was disappointed by what she felt was just a document; “I kept looking and looking at the image; it was as if she was surrounded by all of this stuff that should not be there: the elaborate coffin, the quilted satin pillow, the flower arrangements” (Heyert & D’Erasmus 2004: online). The next photograph Heyert took was the first of *The Travelers*, in which she eliminated the paraphernalia of the funeral and photographed the subject on her own, placing emphasis on the identity of the individual; this is true of the images in each of the three series to be discussed. For Heyert, with these changes, “it stopped being about death and became about her life. It didn’t seem like she wasn’t there anymore, or as if I was looking at a façade. I could feel her humanity” (Heyert & D’Erasmus 2004: online). Through focusing solely on the individual, Heyert felt she was able to portray the subjectivity of the deceased.

I have argued that Heyert’s postmortem photographs meet none of Ruby’s three categories. Heyert produced these photographs for a very different audience and her work is thus not tied to the needs of the bereaved for private objects of mourning. Neither by intention, execution, function nor audience do these photographs (or those of Hugo’s *The Bereaved* (2005) or Schels’s *Life before Death* (2004)) serve as memorial images as historically understood or privately practiced.

Heyert herself would agree: “I do not think of what I did in Harlem as memorial photography at all” (Heyert & D’Erasmus 2004: online).

## Representing the ‘Self’

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I would like to change focus now to further explore Heyert’s socialization of the corpse from object to *individual* subject. Heyert represents the deceased not only as if they were still alive, but attempts to portray, to whatever extent is possible, the *character* of each individual. By character here, I refer to an individual’s unique personality. This is perhaps the most significant difference between the conventions of postmortem memorial photography and *The Travelers* – the majority of postmortem memorial portraits did not attempt to portray the character of an individual, but simply record the features of the subject or the event of the death itself. In contrast to *The Travelers*, “rarely [was] the photograph personalized i.e. designed to convey something about the deceased as an individual” (Ruby 1995:69).

I want to focus here on *Preston Washington Sr. Born: February 1924, Died: September 2003* (2004) (figure 27), as, in personal communication with Heyert, she told me that the aim of this photograph was to reflect Preston Washington’s character. The photograph presents an older man, eyes closed, facing the camera. The photograph displays the man vertically (and is itself vertical), his head positioned as if he were standing, despite the fact that the dead body was propped up to be photographed. I notice, in this portrait in particular, that Heyert is not directly above the body, and this creates a strange perspective. The resultant foreshortening means that his neck is not visible and creates a sense that his body

is levitating towards, or away from, the viewer. The photograph is cropped mid-thigh on the Washington's smart, pressed, thin black and white pinstripe trousers.

The sleeves of his shirt have been neatly folded back, revealing both of his wrists and creating a casualness that is in contrast to his smart attire, but is in keeping with his unbuttoned collar and loosened tie. There seems to be a subtle intimacy and familiarity in this pose, as if the subject had made himself more comfortable. The tie is jauntily askew, running to his right in a diagonal line, and is turned over on its side in the centre, as if it had been flipped due to the subject's movement. The tie and Washington's haphazard pose suggest that Heyert has caught him mid-movement. The vitality in his pose almost encourages me to expect further movement.

Through these discrepancies I consider the dead body of Washington as if he is still a living individual; the corpse is tamed. Whilst taking this photograph, Heyert

learned that Preston had been something of a hustler...when he was being moved out of the coffin for the photo, I saw that his sleeves had been rolled up so they would not hang too low under his jacket...and when he was placed back in position his tie flipped a bit... someone at the funeral parlor joked that now he looked more like himself so I left him as he was. (Heyert, personal communication, August 3 2011)

The point was to make Washington look like himself when he was alive. Due to these subtle details, which suggest the character of Washington, we can attempt to animate the deceased through our own projections and try to know him as an individual, to socialize him further. In attempting to portray

Figure 27. Heyert, Elizabeth. *Preston Washington Sr.* Born: February 1924, Died: September 2003. (2004) 76 x 97 cm.



each individual, Heyert “tried to give aesthetic clues to the viewer, who would, hopefully, respond with the human feelings that were absent in the subject” (Heyert, personal communication, August 3 2011). Heyert further states that “my idea was to try and find the humanity in each of my *subjects*, who were once complex, emotional, layered human beings and now were *corpses*” (Heyert, personal communication, August 3 2011; my emphasis).

Washington’s face is tilted very slightly to his right, as if towards the light that highlights his body. The skin of his face, in contrast with his wrinkled hands, looks smooth and even. His grey-flecked beard and mustache are perfectly groomed. The bemused expression on his face – lifted dark eyebrows and the up-turned corners of his lips – adds to the feeling that I have (just) missed something, as if his personality is just outside of my reach. Heyert’s focus on the self suggests the increased nineteenth century desire, initially in the name of art, to portray an individual photographically, rather than to merely record their likeness, by careful posing, theatrical lighting and composition. This indefinable quality believed to be evident in the face, is what Barthes calls the “air”: a particular expression or look that is distinctly the character’s own. “The air is not a schematic, intellectual datum”, (Barthes 1984:109) but is rather “something moral, mysteriously contributing to the face the reflection of a life value” (Barthes 1984:110). The air is Heyert’s construction of this ineffable quality in Washington’s face, socializing her subject.

If the ‘air’ is dependent on “the reflection of a life value” as Barthes suggests, is it always, by nature, absent in the photograph of a corpse (1984:110)? The postmortem portrait seems to

being now gone, to deny death. If the purpose of a portrait is to convey a special quality or revealing character trait of the sitter that makes him compelling and unique, the face of a corpse hardly lends itself to the display of emotion or personality. (Ruby, 1995:29)

In a sense, the challenge of these works for Heyert was, “could their ‘shells’ without their ‘souls’ still tell us about who they were as humans, beyond the superficial hair colour or facial features, if I found the way to portray them as living humans?” (Heyert, personal communication, August 3 2011). Heyert wanted to portray the subjecthood of the individual, rather than focus on the surface of the corpse as ‘shell’.

This emphasis on self when representing the subject-to-object scandal of death seems to mirror an aspect of portraiture in general. Barthes describes his idea of an ‘air’ to be a “luminous shadow which accompanies the body; and if the photograph fails to show this air, then the body moves without a shadow...there remains no more than a sterile body” (1984:110). If the subject’s ‘air’ is not represented then s/he becomes a body, or rather, a corpse. To counteract the ‘flat’ death of photography, photographers attempt to “produce effects that are ‘lifelike’... as if the (terrified) photographer must exert himself to the utmost to keep the photograph from becoming Death” (Barthes 1984:14). The ‘air’ that Heyert attempted to represent in *Preston Washington Sr. Born: February 1924, Died: September 2003* (2004), and in the other photographs in this series, is to socialize the corpse by softening the blow of its transformation from subject to object, “to keep the photograph from becoming death”.

contain a fundamentally contradictory desire – to retain the dead, to capture some essence of a

Left: figure 28. Heyert, Elizabeth. *James Earl "Jay Moe" Jones* Born: February 1982 Died: March 2004. (2004). Chromogenic Colour Print. 76 x 97 cm.

Right: figure 29. Heyert, Elizabeth. *Raymond E. Jones Sr.* Born: December 1928 Died: January 2004. (2004). Chromogenic Colour Print. 76 x 97 cm.



## Vanitas and Still Life

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Another aspect of socialization lies with the objects with which the majority of the subjects of *The Travelers* are photographed. The objects reflect historical conventions of both painted and photographic portraiture, in which props such as flowers, books and religious items would be used to compose the image. However, in line with Heyert's emphasis on the individual, the objects personalize the image, having been of personal significance to the bereaved and the deceased and to be buried with each individual. Such objects include favourite jewelry, money photographs, letters and even social uniforms, such as Masonic Fezzes and sashes (figures 28, 29). The items and their placement humanize the photographs by establishing living connections



and alignments, but also through their banality and familiarity in the representation of everyday life. The objects trigger narrative and thought and encourage the viewer to engage with the deceased as subjects.

*Nathalie Ames. Born: September 1951, Died: January 2004* (2004) (figure 30) is one of the images with a more dramatic use of props in the series. In line with Southern Baptist beliefs, Ames is dressed to meet Jesus as a bride in a long sleeved, white wedding dress. Her hands rest, right on top of left, palm down, in her lap. Her skin, evident in her face and hands, is incredibly pale. Both of her eyes are closed, and her dark eyelashes and eyebrows stand out against her skin. Unlike many of the other portraits of women in the series, her hands are ungloved and we can see the furrowed texture of her skin. The subtle folds and gathering of the dress's fabric emphasize the dead weight of her hands. In the centre of the skin, on the top of each hand, is a light purple mark that suggests bruising, this abjection disturbs me. Her face is framed by her short, dark hair, in which small daisies and sprigs of baby's breath have been placed. There is also a collection of approximately twelve bright red roses, which are scattered haphazardly on her stomach, above her hands, almost like a bouquet that was dropped when life ceased. My eyes were repeatedly drawn to the blood red of the rose, matched by her red lipstick and painted nails. The red seems out of place against the symbolic innocence of the white dress and her partial smile (constructed by Owens).

Left: figure 30. Heyert, Elizabeth. *Nathalie Ames. Born: September 1951 Died: January 2004.* (2004). Chromogenic Colour Print. 76 x 97 cm.

Opposite: figure 31. *Van Utrecht, Adrian. Vanitas Still-Life with a Bouquet and a Skull.* (c. 1642). Oil on Canvas. 67 x 86 cm.

From the nineteenth century, flowers became an established part of the funerary ritual and postmortem memorial portraits, as they were

the most widely used accessory appearing in portraits of males, females and children. Symbolically flowers represented beauty, fragility, transience and regeneration...scattered on the deathbed, flowers served as tokens of the survivor's love for their dead and as evidence of their concern to take proper, reverent care of the body. (Linkman 2011:36)

The roses, then, socialize the dead by linking the deceased to the bereaved – those who chose the roses. Black and white rosary beads spread out in a gentle arc from underneath Ames's right arm, with a crucifix plainly visible at the bottom of the beads. As is evident in *Postmortem Portrait of an Unidentified Child* (c. 1850s), many nineteenth century portraits, of both the living and the dead, included such items as a symbol of the subject's religious belief. The rosary beads suggest that the woman was devout in life, which links to the decision to be buried as Christ's bride. Through religious faith, death is tamed.



The use of particular objects in *The Travellers* echoes the tradition of *vanitas*, a sub-genre of still life painting (figures 31).<sup>20</sup> The phrase ‘still life’ originates from the French term *nature morte* which means ‘nature dead’ (De Pascale 2009:102), suggesting a clear link to mortality. Not only is the idea of *still life* intriguing here, but the Latin root of the term *vanus* can be translated as ‘empty’ or ‘fleeting’, suggestive of the absence of death which is made present in these postmortem portraits. In *vanitas* paintings, collections of certain objects symbolized the ephemeral character of worldly pleasures and possessions and the inexorable passage of time. Flowers, money, jewelry, clocks and skulls (corpses) are evident in *The Travelers*, as they are in *vanitas* paintings. The items, as *vanitas* objects, tame the scandal of death, as

what are hourglasses, young women looking into mirrors, skulls, candles, decaying fruit, wilted flowers, and old books, if not ways of making death visible without discomfort?... In art history we say an hourglass is a *memento mori*, a reminder of death – but it is not, it is a way of not thinking about death, not looking at it and not thinking about it...only a very few images have to do directly with death instead of its costume jewellery of signs and symbols. (Elkins 1996:108)

In both *vanitas* and *The Travelers* (2004), there is a preference for euphemism and an anxiety with confronting death directly. The objects can enhance the socialization of the corpse by dealing

with death indirectly, as “the association of the corpse with everyday objects, whatever else its significance, [helps] to transform the potentially frightening into the familiar, and [awakens] happier memories for the ones left behind” (Linkman 2011:42).

## The ‘Beautiful Memory Image’

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The appearance of each subject in *The Travelers* owes much to the work of the mortician, Isaiah Owens. Heyert did not want to photograph the corpses before they were embalmed as she states that

the dead do not look like they do in my photographs. They look awful, a state to turn away from, not to embrace and appreciate. They look degraded and undignified...they look, not surprisingly, drained and lifeless, like people to whom something truly dreadful has happened. (Heyert, personal communication, August 3 2011)

So Owens plays an important part in the socialization of the abject corpse; the dead body must be presentable and contained to please and comfort the bereaved. This is emphasized by the slogan of Owens’s funeral home: “Where beauty softens your grief” (Heyert & D’Erasmus 2004: online). I want to focus here on Owens’s attempt to turn the corpse into a ‘beautiful memory

20. *Vanitas* developed in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The term is a derivative from the Latin expression, *vanitas vanitatum*, taken from a particularly pessimistic part of the Bible, Ecclesiastes I (De Pascale 2009:99). It is also interesting to consider that one of the definitive characteristics of still life images is the absence of a human figure.

image'; a term used to discuss the work of morticians (Mitford 1963; Charmaz 1979; Ruby 1995; Linkman 2011).

It is said that a corpse is already an image before being photographed. For instance, Barthes states that being photographed he himself "become[s] total-image, which is to say, Death in person" (1984:14). Thus, a corpse is a "total-image", as in death an individual is transformed into an object and an image. Philosopher Maurice Blanchot elaborates: "the cadaver's strangeness is perhaps also that of the image", as

the cadaver is its own image. It no longer entertains any relation with this world, where it still appears, except that of an image, an obscure possibility ... And if the cadaver is so resemblant, it is because it is, at a certain moment, resemblance par excellence; altogether resemblance, and also nothing more. It is the likeness, likeness to an absolute degree, overwhelming and marvelous. (Blanchot cited in Schwenger 2000:400)

A corpse is likened to an image, as both are described as resemblances to a referent which is no longer. Both photography and the objectification of death condense subjects into an image, changing the animate to inanimate.

In John Troyer's article *Embalmed Vision*, he explores how "the modern human corpse became an invented and manufactured consumer product through the industrialization of the dead body in mid nineteenth century America" (2007:23). For Troyer, the corpse was commodified through two technologies in particular: postmortem memorial photography (previously discussed) and embalming, both of which emerged in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Both of these technologies were concerned with the preservation and mediation of the corpse

"seemingly stop[ing] the visible effects of death as they were seen by the general public" (Troyer 2007:23). The aim was to remove the abject signs of death from the photographs and from the corpse *as image*.

Troyer argues that "in short, through these technologies a completely new definition of the human corpse was born" (2007:23). Troyer uses the term 'postmortem subject' to suggest a new way of thinking about the dead body. I find this point crucial in relation to my use of the term 'socialization', as Troyer is thinking about the deceased body as a *subject*. For Troyer, "the historical emergence of the *postmortem subject* can therefore be seen at the moment when preserving the corpse became an act of making the dead body look more alive" (2007:24). The aim was for the embalmed body to look like the postmortem memorial photographs of the 'dead but alive' corpses. Postmortem memorial portraiture "defined and standardized a history of postmortem visual culture that played an integral part in the production of life-like corpses for late nineteenth century embalmers" (Troyer 2007:30). The appearance of the corpse was standardized into a lifelike form, effecting the expectations of what a dead body should like. These technologies led to 'embalmed vision' from the modern period onwards, as "the mechanical modification of the dead body affected how the observer visually experienced the corpse, and also came to alter the popular American understanding of how 'natural' or 'normal' death would appear" (Troyer 2007:34).

This 'embalmed vision' is evident in Owens's desire to present a 'postmortem subject' and to turn the image-corpse into a 'beautiful memory-image'. The desire for the deceased to look their best, or true to life, is to a degree understandable. The process of embalming can be likened to the daily

process of ‘improving’ oneself for public, relating directly to American cultural values regarding the nature of the individual and of life, such as a concern with appearances (Mitford 1963; Irions 1977; Huntington 1979). However, modern embalming takes this further, as Owens not only dresses the deceased in their Sunday best, but “preservation technologies represent a series of overlapping choices, embalming chemicals, apparatus, and funeral practices all intent on keeping the dead body looking ‘properly’ human” (Troyer 2007:23). Owens, through processes of embalming, delays time and removes the visible and abject effects of death, correcting death’s pallor with cosmetics. These procedures of image recovery are a form of visual control over the corpse, as embalming overrides the body’s organic decomposition and visual degradation to keep the corpse looking ‘human’ for longer. Due to Owens’s work, the abjection of the body is, to a certain extent, both hidden and prohibited. The dead body is sealed up to maintain borders of subjecthood and remove the appearances and signs of death in an attempt to recreate life. The abjection that Kristeva outlines is barely visible in Owens’s – and thus Heyert’s – postmortem subjects.

It is interesting to consider that “no law requires [embalming], no religious doctrine commands it, nor is it dictated by considerations of health, sanitation or even personal daintiness” (Mitford 1963:54). I believe embalming lessens the wound of death by socializing the corpse as object, back to subject as an aid to the bereaved, providing an acceptable image for recall. As Aries states,

Americans are very willing to transform death, to put make-up on it, to sublimate it, but they do not want to make it disappear... in reality they are not visiting a dead person, as they traditionally have, but an almost-living one who, thanks to

embalming, is still present... the definitive nature of the rupture has been blurred. (1974:100)

This is not a complete denial of death, but rather an attempt to make the corpse more ‘lifelike’ and thereby less threatening. A large element of Owens’s work lies in the ability to blur the “definitive nature of the rupture” of death: in socializing the dead body. Owens and Heyert both seem to be engaged in a defense against the threat of the ‘object-scandal’ of death; to present the best image and to soften the effects – and scandal – of death for the living.

## Characters and Facades

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In speaking to Heyert, researching the series and considering photographs such as *Daphne Jones. Born: August 1954, Died: October 2003*, I believe that Heyert took particular care to emphasize the humanity of the subjects and to respect Owens’s work and the community that she photographed (both living and dead). However, it is necessary to explore further Heyert’s genuine but naïve attempt to represent the character of each individual, particularly as Heyert did not know the individuals before their death. Heyert stated that “once I took [the deceased] away from the elaborate trappings, it was as if I knew them I could see who [she/he] was” (Heyert & D’Erasmus 2004: online). The more I look at each portrait, the more I begin to perceive the ‘subjects’ as present absences and objects. I see the corpse as “altogether resemblance, and also nothing more” (Blanchot cited in Schwenger 2000:400); artifice and facade. There are limits to Owens and Heyert’s socialization of *The Travelers*, because, though we may see individuals, we see corpses too.

Heyert’s desire to represent a ‘self’ is linked to her use of photographic portraiture as “[photography]

Figure 32. Heyert, Elizabeth. *French Perry*. Born: September 1924, Died: September 2003. (2004). Chromogenic Colour Print, 76 x 97 cm.



justifies this desire, even if it does not satisfy it: [a viewer] can have the fond hope of discovering truth only because photography's noeme is precisely, that-has-been" (Barthes 1984:99).<sup>21</sup> Due to the indexicality of photography and the fact that these subjects 'have-been', initially I feel there is something I can learn about these individuals. Barthes believes this feeling of coming closer to the 'truth' of the individual is encouraged when he perceives a 'likeness'. Essentially, the likeness of a portrait leads the viewer to interact with what is represented as if it were a subject, rather than the photograph as an object in its material form. Photographs, in their ability to record and make visible the traces of what has passed, give one the *false* impression of being able to know, and to understand.

When Heyert says that she felt she could 'know' the subject, she seems to overlook the obvious fact that the subjects are dead and that she did not know them in life, and elides Owens' and her own heavy construction of the identity of each subject. As a viewer, I am uncomfortably aware of the deceased's loss of agency in their own representation; agency being "the degree of control which we ourselves can exert over who we are" (Woodward cited in Fitzpatrick 2008:28). Not only am I aware of Heyert's and Owens' construction, but also of my own (frustrated) attempts to animate the deceased subject. In my effort to know the subject's truth, I create my own subjective narrative. In this regard, the representation of identity is difficult because "the dead are posthumously subject to a variety of identity categories different from what they may have chosen in life" (Fitzpatrick 2008:28). Together, Owens, Heyert and the viewer construct an identity for the deceased.

Today, identity and selfhood are understood to be multi-faceted, suggesting the inability of

photography to ever record something that is fluid and intangible. Further, the idea of the self has been shown, by psychoanalysis, literature and modern life, to be much more complex than originally thought. There is no longer a belief that one's self can truly be known or represented in the living, let alone the dead. There was an "almost simultaneous demise of certainty in the singularity of self and of the trust in the objectivity of photographic representation" (Sobieszek 1999:214). There is an overall skepticism towards the 'self' that is not present in Heyert's *The Travelers*.

An image in which I am particularly aware of this is *French Perry. Born: September 1924, Died: September 2003* (2004) (figure 32). In this photograph, an older man is dressed smartly in a black, buttoned tuxedo, black bow tie and a crisp, white dress shirt. Perry wears white satin gloves. Although all of the outfits worn by the subjects in *The Travelers* are different in appearance, there are also a number of similarities running through the portraits. For example, Heyert states that, "in a number of cases women were in the same style dresses, but different colours" (Heyert & D'Erasmus 2004: online). Much of the similarity is due to Owens' stock of a whole range of outfits from which the bereaved can choose, including a full range of satin and sequined burial gowns, suave suits and accessories of pearls, gloves and flamboyant hats. Owens' title as funeral director imitates the professional, profit-driven business director, as well as the theatrical stage manager. These outfits may seem relatively dramatic to the viewer, as an outsider of this community, because "of cultural differences that appear to be stylistic. The style of dress and of burial in general is an old fashioned Southern Baptist practice that is out

21. For Barthes, the 'noeme' is the 'essence'.

of style now, even down South” (Heyert, personal communication, August 3 2011). Perry’s over-the-top outfit presents him as if he were a performing character, or a caricature of himself. Despite Heyert’s attempt to represent the self, as a viewer I see the surface of the “adorned shell”.

Perry’s expression is evident in each face of *The Travelers* (2004), which have all been formed into a smoothed out, almost wax-like, appearance with a vacant smile. For Owens, the transformation of the bodies is less about the unique self of each individual, as Heyert states that “Owens’ aim seems always to be to improve or to create an ideal, often with mixed success” (Heyert, personal communication, August 3 2011). Owens’ interaction with each corpse is noticeable, and what at first signified a presence and selfhood on closer inspection affirms an absence and idealized construction. The interference with the dead body begins to detract from the supposed ‘humanity’ of the deceased. I begin to see the face as an artificial and static façade rather than the natural expression of an individual. There is only so much that these corpses can be socialized by Owens and Heyert, as there is still movement between object and subject, corpse and individual. As Majak states of the series, “the allusive imitation of life easily transforms into its caricature” (Majak 2011:131). This is the risk of these photographs, as they can be seen to function as caricatures wherein certain characteristics or peculiarities are exaggerated, creating almost comic or grotesque imitations of their subject.

Perry’s stiff folded hands are bent back towards his arms, which leads me to consider the corpse-ness, or object-ness, of *The Travelers*, as this is one of the few portraits in which *rigor mortis* is really visible in its subject. The American flag is perched awkwardly under his left arm, folded in a triangle so that only the deep blue background and white stars are visible. I believe

Heyert’s attempt to emphasize the subjecthood of each individual relates to the subject-to-object scandal of death and photography. To quote Barthes (1975:14), it is “as if the (terrified) photographer must exert [her]self to the utmost to keep the photograph from becoming Death”. It is interesting that Heyert chose a rather conventional or naive idea of subjecthood, as individuality and uniqueness, in the face of death, instead of a more critical view in line with contemporary attitudes. These bourgeois notions of the individual seem accepted in death, yet are questioned so frequently in life.

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## Nostalgia and Narrative

Heyert, in likening her works to eulogies, states that “these photographs are a visual version of what the living – the families, Owens, myself – want to remember, the stories we all want to tell about the dead” (Heyert & D’Erasmus 2004: online). The narratives that *The Travelers* encourage, distract us from the scandal of death. Our need to tell stories and re-live the past emphasizes photography’s perceived ability to help us to remember and to “secure the shadow”. Once again, the role of the photographer seems akin to the task of the mortician; preservation and a ‘memory-image’ seem important to the work.

A significant aspect of this project for Heyert was the intense sense of the fading of a community and tradition. As Heyert said:

I was aware that I was photographing a community from the past, a vanishing piece of cultural history...some of the people I photographed left a brutal life in the

Depression-era South to move to Harlem, where many of the southern religious traditions were re-established...with Harlem rapidly changing, these traditions are fading.<sup>22</sup> (2004: online)

The photographs attempt to capture this aspect of history before it is gone forever.<sup>23</sup> Photographs, in their materiality, serve as relics of the past, providing and preserving material contact with 'that-has-been'. Throughout its history, the medium has been used to prevent the loss of histories, as it "offers a unique way to redeem the past – a highly realistic pictorial record of that which is no more...it provides us with a mechanical memory" (Ruby 1995:60). These portraits place nostalgic insistence on something that *was*; on an idea of individuals, religion, a tradition and a community that is slowly disappearing and that Heyert (and the viewer) desires to, but can never really, know. This nostalgia can distract us from the scandal of death and encourage us to interact with the corpses as subjects.

The notion of preservation in *The Travelers* is not foreign to Heyert herself, as she states that "Owens and I had many conversations about *preserving* history...he seemed to find it surprising that someone from outside the community would want to *preserve* this tradition" (Heyert & D'Erasmus 2004: online; my emphasis). Heyert is in no way a member of the community she photographed, as a white non-religious woman

who grew up in the north of America. Heyert's position as outsider to this community means that one cannot approach this work in terms of the depiction of death alone, but also through crucial issues such as identity, representation, social relations and ethics. Although this was not Heyert's focus, she recognized that "it was an opportunity to photograph a community of the dead and it was about religion, about culture, about race" (Heyert & D'Erasmus 2004: online).

Heyert has said that the series is symbolic of the twentieth century and, as W.E.B. Du Bois stated, "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line" (1905:1). As I have already discussed, the title of the photographs and the series reflects the move many subjects made from the southern to the northern states of America to escape racial prejudice. This journey "forever changed the visual self-image of the people who made the journey" (Willis-Braithwaite 1994:11). Portraiture played a central role in twentieth century Harlem, in "the visual embodiment of racial ideals promoted by leading African American intellectuals and writers... which demanded full democratic participation for African Americans in American Life" (Willis-Braithwaite 1994:12). The portrait served to create a new access to self-identity, as "in the studio the client was offered alternative realities to the social realities determined by the exigencies of class and race" (Willis-Braithwaite 1994:44). In the time that many of the subjects of *The Travelers* lived,

22. One of the best known collections of post-mortem photographs is by the African American studio-photographer James Van der Zee, in his book *Harlem Book of the Dead* (1978). Although beyond the scope of this paper, it is interesting to consider that these images are also sited in Harlem, although Van der Zee's images are inherently different to Heyert's as they depict a community through the eyes of an insider.

23. In this way, I believe the series may function as an archive, but this argument is too complex to incorporate within my current focus. See Merewether (1996).

there was an increased self-awareness, as well as growing national and personal pride and identity; portraiture was a means to reflect this.

I want to conclude by returning to *French Perry. Born: September 1924, Died: September 2003* (2004), to show that, to some extent, this history is reflected in *The Travelers*. Describing this photograph, Heyert said that Perry “wanted to be buried with an American flag...that is common for a Veteran, but when [she] saw the dates, [she] knew he must have been in the segregated army...but he and his family wanted to bury him with the flag” (Heyert & D’Erasmus 2004: online). It seems as though Owens, the bereaved and Heyert have purposefully attempted to create a sense of pride in the dead subject and we are again encouraged to think of Perry not as a corpse, but as an individual with agency and a personal history.

Embalming began around the time of the American Civil War, when young soldiers died far away and their bodies needed to be returned home. As I have discussed, *The Travelers* echoes this history, with many of the bodies prepared in Harlem by Owens to be flown back to the South for burial. This highlights the theme of transition that dominates funeral symbolism, as the concept of the liminality of the corpse is often associated with “notions of change, process and passage” (Charmaz 1979:12). This is evident in both religious and secular discourse on death, in which death is approached through notions of origin, passage, return and home; it emphasizes the need for the familiar. In *French Perry. Born: September 1924, Died: September 2003* (2004), the themes of the transition of death merge with patriotic notions of home and country.

Heyert’s position as a white American, photographing black Americans who faced racial oppression, is a loaded one, particularly as her desire to “preserve history” also

problematically references the collection of ethnographic information – most often white people documenting black people. The ability of photography to objectify and ‘other’ individuals, and the role it has played in racial oppression (such as the colonial photographs of African subjects which I will discuss more in chapter two), complicate Heyert’s position further, particularly when representing the dead. There is a difficulty in “the way distance in time and cultural distance from the photograph increase our interest” (Sontag 1977:135). In a sense, the subjects of the series are othered twice: once by race and twice by death. I will focus on this further in the following chapter, in relation to Pieter Hugo’s controversial images in *The Bereaved* (2005).

Despite Heyert’s respectful approach, I still feel that I am intruding on something private and intimate. I believe the knowledge that the preparation of the body by Owens is meant to be viewed by the bereaved means that people are encouraged to ask questions about the ethics and morals of representing the dead. Perhaps for these reasons, in discussion of *The Travelers*, writers/critics have emphasized, very early on in their text, the fact that releases were signed and permissions were granted, by the family of the deceased (Feuer 2004; Glueck 2004; Heyert & D’Erasmus 2004). This also speaks of the shift that Ruby discusses, where postmortem photographs become intensely private, only to be seen by the family. To gain permission to photograph the subjects, Heyert needed the families to approve of her approach and her aesthetic. Socialization would be a useful tool to gain permission, as it suggests respect for the deceased as an individual. I would argue that it is thus due to this notion of socialization that, after Heyert had finished photographing, “most families ... [were] happy to receive a – free – portrait of their loved one’s corpse” (Feuer 2004: online).

Although unreported, the relationship is not as amicable as has been suggested. Once Owens and the bereaved families realized how much money Heyert was earning from selling her photographs, they tried to force Heyert into paying them a percentage of her profits (Heyert vs Owens 2006). This was despite the families having signed full releases and Owens dealing with an attorney before he agreed to let Heyert take photographs in his funeral home (Heyert vs Owens 2006). Thus, Heyert sued Owens and the families of the deceased to get a “declaration that defendants have no ownership or monetary interest in the photographs and that the releases are valid and binding” (Heyert vs Owens, 2006). Judge Ascota ruled in Heyert's favour, because there was no original contract about payment and, under American law, Heyert owns her own photographs. This instance underlines the ethical questions that arise due to the fact that photographs objectify, and are commodities in their materiality. This is true of each of the three series; a representation of an individual becomes an object to be bought and owned.

Despite this, Heyert's images of the deceased have, for the most part, been well received. Alan Feuer, a journalist for the *New York Times*, remarked that “Ms. Heyert's photographs are touching, sensitive and exceedingly respectful of the dead” (Feuer 2004: online). I consider this to be due to the emphasis she placed on each individual: the socialization of the corpse. Although there are traces of abjection and a risk of constructing grotesque caricatures, Heyert attempts to emphasise the subject-ness, not object-ness, of the corpse. Heyert states that she “think[s] these portraits... are about individuals...it is a human story” (Heyert, personal communication, August 3 2011). The emphasis on the ‘human’ and on the ‘story’ is a

comfort for the viewer, as it encourages us to consider the corpse as a subject. As Critchley states, “stories are a deception, but a necessary deception: we cannot face the emptiness of death with or without them” (2004:194).

This chapter has highlighted certain systems (or stories) that, I have argued, are developed and relied upon for coping with uncertainty in the face of death. *The Travelers* has been considered through Majak's assertion that to avoid scandal, a corpse must be socialized, from corpse back to individual. In some ways, this mirrors the threat of photography, i.e. from subject to object/image. From there, I outlined some examples of socialization in *The Travelers* (2004) and explored the problematic idealization of the dead body and how the deceased can be seen as caricatures rather than individual subjects. Both Heyert and Owens conceal abjection and re-present the dead body as a ‘beautiful memory picture’, for the viewers and the bereaved respectively. Ultimately, however, their interference with the dead body disturbed, rather than added to, the humanity of the deceased subjects and reinforced the object-ness of the corpse. Despite this, these portraits, functioning as visual eulogies, remain a useful means to approaching and thinking about the dead.

## CHAPTER TWO: *THE BEREAVED* (2005)

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The *Bereaved* (2005), by Pieter Hugo, consists of four close-up and tightly cropped colour photographs of the faces of deceased men. Aesthetically, the series references ‘standard’ portrait format in that they are centered, well-lit, and frontal. In three of the portraits the men’s faces emerge out of white, black and brown blankets. In the fourth portrait, the subject’s shoulders and the white interior of a casket are visible. When this series is exhibited, such as in the group show *Positive* (2007) in the Grahamstown Gallery, there is a small introductory text to accompany the photographs (Schmidt 2006; Bloch & Hunt 2007; Stuttiens 2012). As with the display of these photographs on Pieter Hugo’s own website, this information provides further context to the photographs, stating that the portraits are of “men who died of AIDS-related illnesses” (Hugo 2005: online) and were photographed in their caskets, in an informal morgue in Khayelitsha, a settlement located just outside of Cape Town. However, the photographs were actually taken in a funeral home, not a morgue, (Hugo, personal communication, October, 17 2012) prior to the bodies’ return to the Eastern Cape for burial (Hugo 2005: online).

The fact that the bodies were photographed in their caskets, in a funeral home, points to the processes of burial, mourning and social structures that the viewer of the photographs is not privy to. The information provided with the photographs states that “the photographs are the *start* of a new project exploring the spaces associated with mourning and the bereaved families of the deceased” (Hugo, 2004: online; my emphasis). The

title of the series reinforces this aim and led me to consider the people left behind and the gaps in families and social structures caused by these deaths. There has, however, been no additional work since the start of the project and the four photographs of the series do not fit with this statement or title. In Hugo’s own words, “the title is a working title. I started photographing funerals etc afterwards but I abandoned this” (Hugo, personal communication, October 17 2012). The isolated faces in the photographs seem far removed from mourning and families – “the group would more accurately be called ‘The Deceased’” (Thomas 2007a:13).

Unlike the subjects of *The Travelers*, there is no illusion of life, little narrative of subjecthood and few visual triggers to engage me: “these heads without bodies do not speak of the lives of the men” (Thomas 2007a:14). Of the three series on which I focus throughout this thesis, I consider the subjects of *The Bereaved* (2005) to appear the ‘most dead’ and thus the least socialized. I will argue that in looking at *The Bereaved*, I am aware of both the subject-ness and object-ness of the men represented. Due to the conventions of portraiture, Hugo’s focus on the face and the title of each image being the name of the man represented, I think of the deceased as subjects; there is an element of socialization to the construction of these images. However, there is also an emphasis on the surface of the faces, rather than on individual subjecthood.

The minimal socialization is problematic for me, as this limited subjectivity suggests stereotypes, underlined by the fact that all four subjects are black, male, of a similar age (approximately

thirty years of age), in a notoriously poor part of South Africa and died of AIDS-related illnesses. AIDS, like any other disease, involves not only a biomedical and biological factor; it is also a cultural, linguistic and social phenomenon. To consider AIDS in South Africa is to consider questions of colonization, modernization and poverty, as well as the political subtexts of the disease.<sup>24</sup> The portraits raise these issues, along with inherent concerns of voyeurism and objectification in photography and looking itself. Although issues such as the politics of representation exist in each series, I am particularly aware of them here and argue that because of the minimal socialization I am aware of the limits of representation, photography and portraiture and consider the absence created by death.

## Dead, not Alive

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The photograph, *Attwell Vuyani Mrubata* (2005) (figure 33), is representative of three of the four photographs in this series. The photograph shows the face of a deceased man, centered and enclosed by a patterned brown and pale yellow blanket, which almost fills the rest of the frame. The depth of field is very shallow; face and blanket occupy both foreground and background. The studio lighting that Hugo set up in the funeral home highlights Mrubata's face and features, but also creates dark shadows around the outer edges of his head. Mrubata's head both

emerges from, and recedes back into, the blanket. The blanket is tucked and folded under Mrubata's chin, as if the weight of his head has shifted the fabric, or has been wrapped to expose just the face. The proximity of the camera/Hugo (and thus the viewer) and the subject is inescapable. I feel as if I am intruding, as the proximity to Mrubata's face speaks of an intimacy that does not seem appropriate when gazing upon a stranger in what is usually a private moment.

In America, particularly towards the end of the twentieth century, a number of artists photographed "AIDS-related deaths...namely, Nan Goldin, David Wojnarowicz and AA Bronson" (Schoeman 2008:32) (figures 34, 35). However, each of these artists photographed family and friends who had died from AIDS-related illnesses; not strangers, as Hugo chose to represent.<sup>25</sup> As with Heyert, Hugo did not know these men prior to their death and thus relied on consent from the families concerned (Hugo, personal communication, October 12 2012). Unlike Heyert, however, the proximity of the pose highlights the discomfiting fact that the subjects themselves had no choice in their representation. This closeness creates a feeling of confrontation which is emphasized further by the scale of each photograph; a larger than life-size 61 x 50 cm. From the placement of the blanket it is clear that the subject was lying down. The corpse is tilted up to fit the portrait format so as to stand face to face with the viewer. Horizontality can be perceived as vulnerable and powerless, and this creates

24. The politics and realities of AIDS in South Africa are incredibly complex and beyond the scope of my research here. See Hunter (2010) and Abdool Karim & Abdool Karim (2010) for an introduction to AIDS in South Africa.

25. *The Bereaved* (2004) is not Hugo's first series to include photographs of corpses. Hugo's large series, *Rwanda: Vestiges of a Genocide* (2004), includes four photographs of the preserved bodies of the victims of Hutu crimes against the Tutsis. I do not focus on this series here as the rest of the images of the series explore the reminders and remains of the massacre, ten years on; often photographs of landscapes and discarded objects. If space was not so limited, it would be worthwhile to explore the comparisons between these two series in terms of socialization. For example, the photographs are all shot in landscape format and focus on skeletons covered in white lime.

Bottom right: figure 33. Hugo, Pieter. *Attwell Vuyani Mrubata*. (2005). Lambda Print. 61 x 50cm.

Left: figure 34. Goldin, Nan. *Cookie in her Casket, NYC, November 15 1989*. (1989). Cibachrome Print. 50.8 x 40.6 cm.

Bottom left: figure 35. Wojnarowicz, David. *Untitled (Peter Hujar) detail*. (1989). Gelatin Silver Print. 25,4 x 35,6 cm.



an uncomfortable power relationship when considering Hugo's, and his large cumbersome camera's, physical position above these men. This is more felt than in Heyert's work due to the confrontational nature of Hugo's style.

Also in contrast to *The Travelers*, it does not occur to me that the subject may be alive. Due to the close cropping of the image I cannot see Mrubata's body and there are thus no gestures, poses or potential for movement. There are also very few visual triggers, such as objects or outfits, to construct a narrative of subjecthood. The size, quality and full colour of the print encourage me to examine the *surface* of the photograph. The photographs are lambda prints, which results in sharp, precise and high-impact colour graphics (Schmidt 2006). The subtle variations of colour on Mrubata's face are striking: small red marks on his cheeks, a pale green-blue on his eyelids and subtle hues of green and purple on his forehead. These marks suggest the beginning of decomposition and the breakdown of the subject's borders and again allude to the abjection of the corpse.

Colour also emphasizes the swelling of the subject's features, suggesting bruising and pain. It is not clear which marks belong to life, death, AIDS or the body's postmortem encounters. When a reviewer of the work stated that the faces of the men were bruised, Hugo responded that "they are not bruised, they are dead. That is what a normal dead person's face looks like without make-up" (Stuttiens 2012: online). This serves as a reminder of the role economic and social factors play in the experience of death; there are no signs of fancy burial or embalming methods in *The Bereaved*. It is not the idealized 'beautiful memory picture' of an individual as created by Owens and Heyert. One nevertheless notices formal qualities that speak to much more than death.

Although not necessarily the focus, the blanket is a large yet ambiguous element of the photograph. The pattern of the blanket is not clear, as it is compacted closely around the subject. The contrasts of the light yellow and rich brown lead our eyes across the surface of the photograph. The tactility of the fabric leads me to consider the exteriority and materiality of what is photographed. As a similar blanket appears in three of the four series, I presume it is a standard procedure by the funeral home. The particular style of blanket is familiar to anyone who has driven through the small towns in the Eastern Cape; they are inexpensive and readily available. The blanket protects the body for its journey to the Eastern Cape.

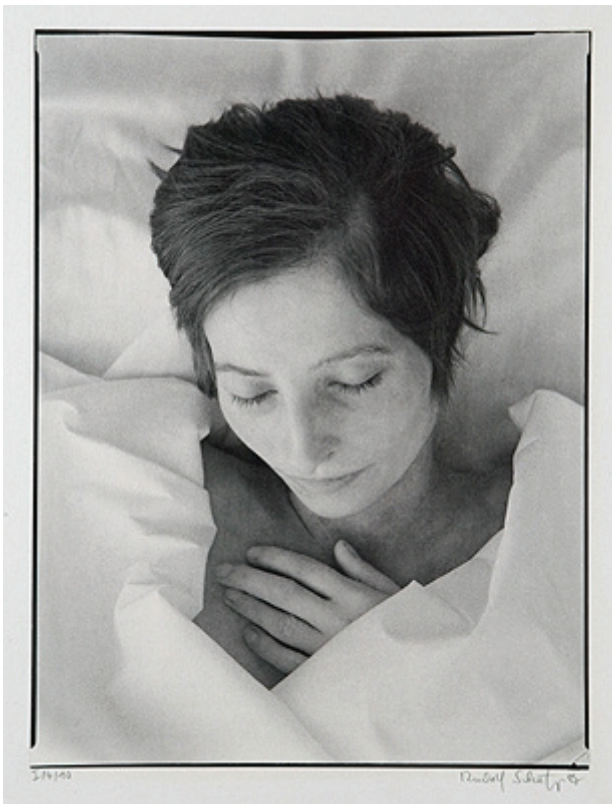
In this sense, the blanket could relate to traditional use. Due to the fact that the bodies were to be returned to the Eastern Cape, I surmise that the men are Xhosa and are thus, in line with tradition, to be returned to their place of birth for burial (Yawa 2010). This mirrors the journey and notions of home and origin as discussed in relation to *The Travelers*. Blankets are important in Xhosa tradition and thus could be seen to add depth to the portrait, as a blanket can be given as a gift and worn by subjects for traveling and numerous ceremonies, such as weddings, funerals and male initiation (Yawa 2010). The blanket in this sense socializes the corpse with tradition and significance. However, when Hugo was asked about this potentially significant use of the blanket, he stated that "I am not an anthropologist. Possibly." (Hugo, personal communication, October 17 2012).

The initial journey of the men from the Eastern Cape to Cape Town speaks of migrant labour, when young people often have to leave their rural homes to search for work, money and a better way of life in urban areas (Hunter 2010). Migrant labour has a long and discomfoting history in South Africa, as, during apartheid rule, black migrant labourers

were restricted from settling in the cities and the labourers lived in overcrowded compounds for long periods of time (Hunter 2010). Hugo's decision to represent only men emphasizes this history of the male migrancy model, as well as the links that this way of life is said to have had with the transmission of AIDS from urban to rural areas (Abdool Karim & Abdool Karim 2010). But Hugo's choice to shoot in colour suggests a separation from somber and weighty black and white social documentary that promise veracity in their 'witnessing'. This is important in the South African context due to black and white apartheid and 'struggle' documentary photography (Godby 2004). The colour of the photographs, "in a context in which we are accustomed to seeing black and white as the code for authenticity, is to bar... images from serving as evidence of what we already

Left: figure 36. Schafer, Rudolf. *Visages de Mortes 1.* (1987). Platinum Print. 41 x 25.4 cm.

Right: figure 37. Schafer, Rudolf. *Visages de Mortes 7.* (1987). Platinum Print. 41 x 25.4 cm.



know” (Baer 2002:21). Hugo’s choice to represent these men in colour separates these photographs from the supposedly factual documentary tradition, encouraging the viewer to question what they see.

Further, the blanket, along with Mrubata’s closed eyes, references sleep and rest. Despite this, I do not get the feeling that the subjects of *The Bereaved* are merely asleep. This is more apparent when one compares the photographs of *The Bereaved* to *Der ewige Schlaf / Visage de morts* (1987) by German photographer Rudolf Schafer. The series consists of thirteen portraits of deceased subjects in a morgue in Germany. Schafer, like Hugo, focuses closely on the face of each subject, but he deliberately uses the visual analogy of sleep. It is interesting to note that although Schafer focuses in on the faces of the subjects, he does not provide the name or any information about the deceased individuals (unlike the three series in this thesis). In *Visage de morts 1* (1987) (figure 36), a middle-aged woman is seen cocooned in a thin white sheet that folds open to reveal her right hand resting gently on her bare chest. It looks like she might be in bed, as in the background I see folds in the white fabric on which she rests. The scene seems familiar as a visual analogy of sleep, in comparison to the strange and overpowering placement of the blanket in *The Bereaved* (2005). There is little that is delicate or restful in *Attwell Vuyani Mrubata*.

Schafer’s series is also, importantly, black and white, which in this instance gives a peaceful and ephemeral appearance. In *Visage de morts 7* (1987) (figure 37), the wound on the forehead of a middle-aged man is less visible and abject because of the lack of colour. The colour in *Attwell Vuyani Mrubata* draws my attention to the swelling,

discoloration and marks on Mrubata’s face; to the traces of abjection.

There is no comforting analogy of a peaceful slumber in *The Bereaved* (2005); the subjects appear dead, not asleep. There is little idealization or sentimentality in Hugo’s approach and I would not liken these photographs to ‘visual eulogies’.<sup>26</sup> Death is an undeniably difficult subject matter and it is disconcerting to view the dead in such a direct manner. Death is often something one thinks around or approaches through abstraction, yet these images seem to face it head on.

## Both Subject and Object

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Socialization attempts to tame the object-ness of the body in order to restore a personal and individual identity to the corpse. In seeing the subjects of *The Bereaved* as the ‘most dead’, I see the corpses as the least socialized in comparison with *The Travelers* and *Life Before Death* and am thus most aware of the object-ness of the corpses in this series.

The composition of *Nyameka J Matiayna* (2005) (figure 38) is near identical to that of *Attwell Vuyani Mrubata*; the focus on a man’s face slightly off-centre, surrounded by a blanket. Although not to the same extent as in Heyert’s *The Travelers*, there is a suggestion that the deceased man has been prepared by someone in the funeral home. Matiayna’s face appears devoid of makeup or embalming fluids, but his face is clean and his facial hair is groomed. It also seems as though Matiayna’s jaw has been buttressed to keep his mouth closed and his lips together. All of these little details serve to socialize the body and make it viewable as a subject, to the viewers

26. The issue of idealization references the well rehearsed critique of ‘realism’, where one expects the artist to ‘lift’ the work, to create beauty and a meaningful narrative.

of the photograph, but also to the bereaved family members – although for the bereaved families, the deceased would appear more nakedly dead than to the viewer.

Matiayna's eyes are closed, suggesting respect for the deceased but also concealing the object-ness of the corpse. For instance, in *The Morgue (Hacked to Death II)* (1992) (figure 39), Andres Serrano focuses closely on the open eye of the deceased. There is an indescribable absence or coldness in this unfocused eye, not just a blindness, but a view of nothing; I am disturbed by seeing the eye as 'just tissue'. In contrast to the socializing effects of Matiayna's preparation (by Hugo and/or a funeral worker), in Serrano's photograph, the object-ness of the open dead eye and the abjection of the glistening, red blood that runs in streams around the unseeing eye in the photograph serve to reinforce the sense of the dead body as object.

Hugo's close focus on the face of each subject also socializes the corpses in *The Bereaved* as "the exclusive concern with the face means that [the] work addresses the nature of the person...more than that of Subject, an individual, a Subjectivity, if not an identity, at least a body" (Onfray, cited in Sobieszek 1999:280). This focus on the face is very important as it suggests an interest in the human, the face being a key aspect in the perception of a subject. The face is incredibly complex and we read much into the poetics of the face. The title of the photograph – the name of the subject – suggests a return of subjecthood to the people photographed by Hugo, as we put names to faces, as subjects. Sontag believes that it is "significant that the powerless are not named in the captions" (2003:70). Thus the subjectivity is delineated and assigned importance when the powerless *are* named in the captions; Matiayna is (was) a real person.

With the absence of work by a mortician like Owens, Matiayna's face is expressionless. Hugo's

Top: figure 38. Hugo, Pieter. *Nyameka J Matiayna*. (2005). Lambda Print. 61 x 50 cm.

Bottom: figure 39. Serrano, Andres. *The Morgue (Hacked to Death)*. (1992). Cibachrome Photograph. 125.7 x 152.4 cm.



focus on the face suggests that “it is peculiarly on faces that death is visible. To look upon faces is to look upon expression, moods, attitudes, solicitations. When this vibrancy and volatility is effaced by death, the face is vacant and desolate, as the surface of things cannot be” (Lingis 1994:167). There is certainly no vibrancy, no subjecthood, in Matiayna’s face – as with each portrait in *The Bereaved*, my attention is drawn to the materiality and surface of Matiayna’s face; the object-ness. The skin of his eyelids and the surrounding flesh is lighter than the rest of his face; the colour is enhanced by the tan of the blanket. The dark shadows in the crease of Matiayna’s eyelids, below his brow bone, and the wrinkled skin of his eyelids, which almost sticks to his eyes, emphasize the fact that his eyes have sunk back into their sockets – another marker of death. This distracts from the credibility of a subject beneath the closed eyelids who could ever return my gaze; the absence is underscored.

The unrequited gaze traps me in the act of viewing and creates an acute self-awareness as the viewer, as I consider the implications of my looking. I want the look to be returned. Ultimately, the closed eyes reinforce the object-ness of the corpse, as the subject’s inability to return the gaze can be read as a loss of subject-hood. One is also always already objectified within an image, as “photographs objectify: they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed” (Sontag 2003:72). The distance between photographer and subject objectifies the sitter (and in some measure, the viewer). Beyond this, the distance between subject and viewer further emphasizes this loss of subjectivity. It is the person who wields the gaze that is initially meant to hold power over the passive subject; this compliance shifts the ‘subject’ to the position of ‘object’. Mieke Bal calls this a “second-suffering – a theft of subjectivity” (2007:95). My discomfort is thus in part a result of my awareness of

my own responsibility in the further objectification of the deceased.

A component that further contributes to my awareness of the object-ness of the subjects of *The Bereaved* is that of the lack of attention given to their individual subjectivity. Unlike Heyert, Hugo did not spend time learning about the stories of each person and did not attempt to portray the ‘air’ of each of the deceased through socialization (Hugo, personal communication, October 17 2012). The close crop of *Nyameka J Matiayna* (2005) also means that there are no elements, such as clothing, gestures and props, to trigger a (false) narrative of his subjecthood. Unlike *The Travelers*, there are no objects that personalize this portrait and distinguish it from the other three, and there is little to indicate the life lived by Matiayna. As Kylie Thomas (2007b:28) in her discussion of these photographs states, there is a “desubjectivisation of the individuals they depict”.

Hugo does not lay claim to knowledge of those whom he represents. He thus evades, and perhaps avoids by intention, Heyert’s somewhat naïve emphasis on the supposed character of each subject. There is an element of ‘truth’ in a photograph, yet “whether that truth is about the individual... well, I am dubious about that” (Hugo, personal communication, July 24 2010). Hugo’s skepticism of photography is in line with contemporary concerns of the medium, as

the fixed immovable features of a portrayed face can seem like a mask, frustrating a desire for union with imaged self... in looking at conventional portraiture, we no longer have faith in a moment of phantasised unmasking, of release... it is structurally impossible to remove portraiture’s mimetic mask and make her communicate. (Woodall 1997:9)

Whilst looking at *Nyameka J Matiyayna* (2005), I am not led to believe that I am discovering the truth of his identity in a “phantasised unmasking”, nor do I expect him to communicate. Instead, as I consider the mimetic likeness, I am reminded that this is not possible. I am aware that while I desire a subject, I am looking at a silent mask, a corpse. As a portraitist, Hugo himself is particularly doubtful of the medium, as he said, “I particularly distrust portrait photography. I mean do you honestly think a portrait can tell you anything about the subject [dead or alive]? And, even if it did, would you trust what it had to say?” (O’Hagan 2008: online).

Whilst viewing *The Bereaved* (2005), I am aware of these limitations of representation, portraiture and photography. Hugo, discussing an awareness of such limits, said that “it was realizing that photography could only describe the surface of things ... it cannot do much more than that” (Hugo & Rabinowitz 2012: online). The emphasis, then, is not on the subjectivity of the deceased, but rather on the description of the surface of what is represented; the physical likeness of each individual.

## The ‘Identity’ Pose

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I want to discuss Hugo’s focus on the physiognomic likeness of each subject of *The Bereaved*. It is in the nature of a photographic portrait that the physiognomic, or physical, likeness of the subject will always be visible. What I mean here is that Hugo does not attempt to portray anything other than this physical likeness – he does not attempt to construct a feeling or ‘air’ for the deceased.

I suggest that Hugo’s attention to the face references the mugshot or identity pose, which, despite not giving subjecthood, does suggest an interest in the identity of the subject represented.<sup>27</sup> This highlights one of the primary functions of photography, as it “began, historically, as an art of the Person: of identity, of civil status” (Barthes 1984:79).

*Sixolile Bojanane* (2005) (figure 40) differs from the other three portraits in the series, because there is no blanket in the background. Bojanane’s head is tilted slightly downwards and is set against

Figure 40. Hugo, Pieter. *Sixolile Bojanane*. (2005). Lambda Print. 61 x 50 cm.



27. To clarify, I mean identity that involves “a quality or comprises a set of qualities, attributes, or characteristics that are considered important in specifying, individuating, and defining the self, and for being recognized in specific ways by others. Identity is a notion that signifies singularity and distinction from others but also encompasses the identifications forged with groups or communities that share similar identity categories” (Fitzpatrick 2008:28).

the white fabric of (presumably) pillows in the interior of a coffin. It is also the only photograph in the series in which the subject's shoulders and clothing are visible. Bojanane wears a worn, black, buttoned-up jacket with a beige collar and an off-white shirt beneath. The clothes socialize the corpse as they are "an indication that he was once part of the world of the living" (Thomas 2007b:19). The subject looks as if he is the youngest of the people represented in this series, with soft, youthful features and skin devoid of wrinkles. Yet the white background and bright lighting emphasize that, of the four portraits, Bojanane's face is the most marked, discoloured and swollen. I notice the undulating outline of his near bald head against the background and the surface of his face; his eyes have sunken back into his head, emphasized further by the swelling of the skin surrounding his eyes, and his bottom lip is misshapen and scarred.

This straight-on study of Bojanane's likeness, the visibility of the form of his head and his neutral or expressionless face, makes this photograph, of the four portraits, the most *reminiscent* of a mug shot in its pose and conventions, the "standard symbol for identity in the twenty first century" (Kemp 2002:116).<sup>28</sup> Today, the pose is used by state and other institutions to represent the identity of each and every individual in identification books, driver's licenses, passports, membership cards and criminal records. In short, this pose suggests a long history and well-established function of photography.

From the mid-nineteenth century, apart from the desire to photograph the 'air' of an individual,

there was also an interest in documenting a sitter's physical likeness. Through photographic evidence, moral qualities were linked to physical traits, and in the name of science and pseudo-sciences (such as physiognomy) the individual was knowable from their appearance. As in *The Bereaved*, these portraits, which focused on the faces of their subjects, were not about metaphysics or the representation of the individual's unique subjectivity, yet they still attested to the identity of the subject.

The mugshot reminiscent pose of *Sixolile Bojanane* (2005) and Hugo's representation of black subjects only, alludes to colonial references as "ethnographic photographers, influenced by physiognomic and phrenological theories, could be said to have created the prototype of what we now know as the classic mug shot" (Kemp 2003:111). From the mid-nineteenth century, (white) ethnographers used the camera to survey (black) bodies and faces, collecting evidence for social categorization and engineering. Photography and this type of intense study have played a particularly complex role in Africa, as Okwui Enwezor states, "no other cultural landscape has had a more problematic association with the photographic medium: its apparatus, various industries, orders of knowledge, and hierarchies of power" (2001:13). To achieve scientific, quantifiable information the subject was photographed directly, well lit, with a neutral expression. In comparison to the expressive face, suggesting subjectivity, the blank face is seen to be closest to what one actually looks like, and is thus a source of objective information, such as surface, shape and detail. There was no emphasis

28. The pose is not exactly the same as a classic mugshot. Firstly, mugshots are not taken post-mortem. Secondly, Hugo's portraits show only the frontal view of each subject, whilst conventional mugshots are traditionally two part, with a view of the subject in profile. Thirdly, in *The Bereaved* (2005), the angle of the view is different as Hugo stands above each subject, not opposite them. This is noticeable as, due to the angle, I cannot see Bojanane's neck and there is a subtle element of foreshortening in the perspective. Lastly, mugshots ordinarily show a wider perspective and include more of the torso in the photograph.

on subjectivity in these photographs. The bold and almost clinical style of Hugo's looking and the neutral expression on the face of Bojanane only seem to emphasize the scientific approach of colonial times.

The legacy of the mugshot in South Africa is important too, as this pose was used in the passbook or 'dompas' of the apartheid regime (figure 41); translated from Afrikaans, 'dompas' means 'dumb pass'. During apartheid, race and all of its stereotypes and fallacies had been presented as natural, instead of being understood to be a 'concept'.<sup>29</sup> The Population Registration Act of 1950 served not only as a catalogue of subjects but also ensured that each black individual was issued with an identity card or a passbook, containing the person's photograph (a mug shot), identity number and fingerprints. The passbook served to control the rights (or lack thereof) of individuals in South Africa. The individual became bound to his/her classification through a photograph of their head and shoulders; a pose similar to that of *Sixolile Bojanane* (2005). Hugo's identity and his use of photography undeniably reference the difficult history of 'white' examining 'black'. Whilst this is important to consider, readings of the work that approach the subject matter purely on this basis (Boncy 2009; Stupart 2009) only entrench the limitations of such essentializing positions. By only focusing on such concerns, such issues are cemented rather than questioned.

## Types and Stereotypes

Barthes explains the dissatisfaction with the absence of subjecthood in likenesses: "for resemblance refers to the subject's identity, an absurd, purely legal, even penal affair; likeness gives out identity 'as itself,' whereas I want a subject... Likeness leaves me unsatisfied" (1984:102). I look at the likeness of the present body, yet experience the absence of the dead subject. I want to consider how this lack of emphasis on subjectivity in *The Bereaved* leads to the creation of a 'type' in the four portraits.

The 'legal, even penal' aspect of identity to which Barthes refers, references the use of the mugshot to keep record of criminals.<sup>30</sup> The mugshot served to record each subject's likeness in a uniform manner

Figure 41. Unknown Photographer. *Dompas*. (c 1950). Size Unobtainable.



29. I use the term 'concept' here in line with Kwame Anthony Appiah's argument that race is a "concept"; a social construct based on arbitrary distinctions and often used as a type of metaphor for culture. Appiah asserts that "the truth is that there are no races ... the evil that is done is done by concept" (1994:34).

30. Photography was used to record criminals by municipal police departments from as early as 1841-1842 (Sobieszek 1995:113). Alphonse Bertillon, a physiognomic anthropologist, is said to have "created the modern mug shot" in 1879 as a means to identify criminals (Sobieszek 1995:120).

for ease of comparison and presents the subject's identity "as itself", not as a portrayal of the subject's inner being. However, the uniform approach and lack of emphasis on subjectivity created groups; 'likeness' became likeness to a type. Christian Pheline states that:

the identity no longer designates the individual singularity but, rather, the conformity to a type. The dogmatic form...itself experiences a sort of reversal: conceived at first to differentiate individuals, the signaling image came to totally banalize personal traits: the models tend to resemble each other like so many monotone variants of a single and same facial expression. (Cited in Sobieszek 1995:122)

By representing different individuals in an identical format, the subjects began to become similar to each other. There is a paradox in the mugshot pose, then: the intention is to represent an individual, but ultimately, the represented identity becomes one of a particular type and serves to reinforce that type. Hugo's focus on the physical likeness of his subjects, the "many... variants of a single and same facial expression", reference the mugshot and thus subtly suggests a type. There are few individualizing or socializing aspects to the portraits and so, with this suggestion of a type, the deceased can fall prey to stereotypes.

This suggestion of a 'type' is further heightened in *The Bereaved* by virtue of the fact that all four of the men Hugo photographed are black, of a similar age and economic status, and probably Xhosa, because they are to be returned to the Eastern Cape for burial. As my attention is drawn to the identity of the subjects, I am led to question Hugo's selection of subjects. Why *these* four men? Due to the fact that the "men died of

AIDS-related illnesses" is amongst the little that is stated about the men, it suggests that it is an important aspect of *The Bereaved* (Hugo 2005: online). This is interesting in comparison to *The Travelers*, where Heyert decided not to disclose that *Daphne Jones. Born: August 1954, Died: October 2003* (2004) had died of AIDS-related illnesses (Heyert, personal communication, August 3 2011). Heyert felt that by disclosing this information she would be encouraging the viewer to respond to a stereotype rather than to Jones as an individual (Heyert, personal communication, August 3 2011).

The limited socialization in Hugo's work, which may contribute to the creation of a 'type' by grouping subjects with AIDS, is complex, as there is a danger that *The Bereaved* confirms stereotypes of who gets HIV. As Andrea Stuttiens, in reviewing the series, stated, the portraits "do not give me any information about what and who is photographed, thus confirming images in my head about those who are HIV positive" (2012: online). This critique is particularly important as Hugo has often "faced harsh criticism for 'confirming' western stereotypes of Africa – with intonations of primitivism, savagery ...disease, dated colonial provincialism and so on throughout his work – and has often been accused of exoticising or exploiting his subjects" (Schuhman 2008a: online). Hugo's choice of subjects, and his manner of representation, often cause discomfort.

To some extent, the issues around Hugo's images mirror the approach to the disease from the beginning – a construction of stereotypes based on false binaries and categorization. Self/other and us/them divisions, such as homosexual/heterosexual or white/black, have always been at the centre of the discourse on AIDS. As "from the beginning, the construction

of the illness had depended on notions that separated one group of people from another – the sick from the well...them and us” (Sontag 1991:117). This leads to an ‘othering’, creating stereotypes that it is always ‘them’, not ‘us’ who contract HIV (Hunter 2010).

AIDS was initially perceived, both internationally and in South Africa, as a homosexual disease. Although this is understood to be false today, it is interesting that Hugo chose to focus solely on male subjects. During the 1980s in America and in Europe, the disease presented mainly with hemophiliacs, gay men and people who inject drugs.<sup>31</sup> When AIDS first appeared in South Africa, the government of the time used AIDS to promote racial stereotypes and stigma (Treichler, 1999:154). In line with this, internationally AIDS began to be seen as an African disease contracted by Africans. Thus, “weak explanations for HIV’s high prevalence in Africa left unchallenged racist stereotypes of ‘African promiscuity’ deeply embedded in the Western psyche and the legacy of colonialism” (Hunter 2010:25). Apart from racialized sexual stereotypes, this also ties in with negative perceptions of Africa and notions of degeneracy and disease.<sup>32</sup> Hugo’s selection of subjects does nothing to challenge these stereotypes in *The Bereaved*.

Claims of ‘othering’ also relate to Hugo’s decision to photograph subjects from a notoriously deprived part of South Africa, particularly as Hugo himself is (and his buyers

are) from a very different economic situation (Hugo, personal communication, July 24 2010). This is emphasized by the knowledge that the subjects died of AIDS-related illnesses. Poverty and disease are bound together as “the fact that illness is associated with the poor – who are, from the perspective of the privileged, aliens in one’s midst – reinforces the association of illness with the foreign: with an exotic, often primitive place” (Sontag 1991:137). The stereotype of (South) Africa as a place of poverty and disease is reinforced.

Hugo’s manner of representation – the lack of subjectivity, which suggests a type, which, in turn, risks reinforcing stereotypes – is particularly difficult in relation to the chosen subjects of *The Bereaved*. However, to focus on this falsely suggests that the only ethically acceptable photographs Hugo could take would be of males of his own age, race and social and economic class. Instead, I want to explore the way in which Hugo’s portraits may be seen to question and undermine these notions.

## ‘That-has-been’

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As I have argued, through the exclusion of the body Hugo does not explore the corpse *purely* as matter or object. The attention on the face creates an interest in the represented as a subject, offsetting some critiques of objectification.

31. In Andres Serrano’s series; *The Morgue (Cause of Death)* (1992), there is an image of a dead body titled ‘Blood Transfusion resulting in AIDS’.

32. See Treichler (1999) for a discussion of negative reports on Africa and AIDS.

Although the neutrality of the mugshot suggests uncomfortable historical links, today the pose and format is an almost universal symbol of identity and most people have, at some point, held this pose. Thus, the subjects of *The Bereaved* (2005) do not appear 'othered'. Nor does an everyday blanket or a coffin in a funeral home seem exotic. Although the subjects' faces are not embalmed to the extent of those in *The Travelers*, they are far from grotesque or abject. By excluding the body, Hugo chose not to focus on the most abject – not to show the severe effects of disease and death on the body.

It is true that Hugo's choice of subjects raise uncomfortable questions, but through his focus on four males of a similar age, we may also be led to consider how many more individuals also died of this disease. In 2000, AIDS was a major cause of death in South Africa for males between the ages of thirty-five and thirty-nine (Abdool Karim & Abdool Karim 2010:439). If we again consider the male migrancy model, the age of these men is also the age group "most central to the labor force, to childrearing, to caring for the dependent young and old" (Treichler 1999:112). In this sense, the photographs alert me to the demographic, economic and social effects of the disease beyond the frame. This is reinforced by the title of the series, 'The Bereaved' – those who are left behind.

Through Hugo's focus on these particular four subjects, he reinforces that AIDS began as a disease of the marginalized and oppressed, and in some ways, remains as such. This is evident in the differentiated death rates and inequalities observed in mortality rates (Abdool Karim & Abdool Karim 2010). In South Africa, for example, "statistical surveys favored by epidemiologists might show a correlation between race and AIDS" (Hunter 2010:26), as this is "the 'group' who faced the most severe

discrimination under Apartheid" (Hunter 2010:24). In South Africa, marginalization on the basis of race influences vulnerability to HIV infection due to, amongst other things, colonialism, education, sexual practices, apartheid and chronic underemployment. Hugo's focus on black subjects in a poverty-stricken part of South Africa suggests this.

The photographs also complicate the idea of death as leveler, as "not all deaths are the same and consequently, not all dead bodies are the same" (O'Neill 2011b:130). This view of death highlights the importance of the socio-economic arrangements in which one lives (and dies). The amount of time one lives with HIV is to a significant degree dependent on one's social and economic environment. Due to the relatively young age of the four men, I question the factors that may have led to their death. In the year this series was completed, "South Africa was still deeply enmeshed in government endorsed AIDS-denialism. Access to anti-retroviral treatment was being resisted and delayed by the government; voluntary HIV testing was not encouraged and HIV and TB were still talked about as unconnected" (Abdool Karim & Abdool Karim 2010:444). There was increasing media hype and public awareness around the government's policies, which were leading to thousands of deaths. Many people were becoming aware of the injustice of patent laws – which made life-saving drugs too expensive – and the effect that this had on the mortality rate and social structure of South Africa.

In a time of denialism, then, could Hugo's photographs be seen to face that which many chose not to confront? The portraits of *The Bereaved* through the 'that-has-been' of photography point to the actuality of AIDS and the deaths of those afflicted by it. In this record of their deaths, Elaine Scarry's theory of "analogical verification" or

“analogical substantiation”, from her book *Body in Pain: The Making and the Unmaking of the World* (1984:14), seems relevant. For Scarry, “when there is within a society a crisis of belief...the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of ‘realness’ and ‘certainty’” (1984:14). In this regard, Hugo’s decision to focus on the physical likeness, or “sheer material factualness” of each subject, could be seen to create an aura of realness around AIDS-related deaths, in a time of crisis. Hugo emphasizes the actuality of each dead body and of the disease, through the necessarily real referent of photography, “as if only by looking at reality in the form of an object – through the fix of a photograph – is it really real” (Sontag 1997:80).

These portraits literally put names and faces to the anonymous figures surrounding AIDS by showing ‘that has been’ (figure 42). When the work was exhibited as part of the Black, White and Brown group exhibition (2006) in Vienna, the background information provided suggested that this was Hugo’s intention, stating that the series “is ‘a personal statement’ that challenges ‘the anonymity of AIDS statistics in South Africa’” (Stuttiens 2012: online). I agree with Ruth Simbao (2009:8) that “no one can regard and not think. No one can look slowly and not consider. Regarding the distance of painful images is not necessarily to create a distance. Nor is the distance always immoral.” *The Bereaved* may not inform, but they can acknowledge the actuality of AIDS deaths. The photographs have the potential to cause us to think and to consider.

Figure 42. Hugo, Pieter. *Monwabisi Mtana*. (2005). Lambda Print. 61 x 50 cm.



## Ethical Objections

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The claim that the images challenge anonymity could, however, merely be seen as an attempt to be perceived as ethically acceptable. As Thomas states of Hugo's series, "it is extremely difficult to lift his images from the social, historical and political contexts that provide the frame for how they are read" (2007b:23). I would like to explore this further by suggesting a link between the limited socialization in Hugo's work and the ethical and moral objections that arise from *The Bereaved*.

O'Neill states that a common response to representations of the deceased is to "adhere to a notion of ethics that is fixed, a set of principles or beliefs that we can refer to" (2011b:305). This idea of ethics is a set of already existent concerns, both unchanging and familiar. Such a response "takes the form of concern for the dead and issues of 'informed consent' and 'dignity of the dead', provid[ing] viewers with a set of ready-made ethical objections to give voice to their sense of unease" (O'Neill 2011a:134). This response is encouraged by the "imbalance of power that exists between the living and the dead (at the level of embodiment, contact, vision, and access)" (Fitzpatrick 2008:28).

When looking at *The Bereaved* (2005), I consider my own embodiment in contrast to the corpses as objects. I am aware of the uncomfortable power balance because of my unmet gaze, the confrontational size and in Hugo's, and thus my own, stance over each body. There is a discomfort and guilt in looking (supposedly a position of power) at a person at their most vulnerable (completely defenseless). As Elkins states categorically, there is no such thing as just looking; "seeing is also controlling and objectifying and

denigrating, in short, it is an act of violence and it creates pain" (1996:27). The close proximity, confrontational gaze and intense focus on the face could be seen to threaten the dignity and privacy of the dead. Hugo's choice to focus so closely on each subject's face sits particularly uneasily with Hugo's decision to photograph the poor, the sick and the dead – the vulnerable.

This should be considered in relation to the audience of the photographs; most often privileged gallery goers. My own viewing of such an intimate moment, in the space of a gallery or even online, feels particularly voyeuristic. As a young, white, healthy, privileged female, my circumstances are very different to those of the subjects represented. This extends to the fact that photographs objectify and become commodities, as I discussed earlier. Hugo is an artist well represented by galleries in South Africa, Italy, America and the Netherlands, and whose images are sold and exhibited throughout the world. Through Hugo's decision to exhibit and sell an unresolved series (which he never finished) such as *The Bereaved*, Hugo places importance on the commercial aspect. Hugo must have been aware of the timeliness of his focus on AIDS and of an international market for such images and, thus, of the popularity or commercial viability of such a project. In this way, the aspects of socialization in the photographs can be seen as a selling aid, as this makes the images easier (less uncomfortable) to look at (and buy).

The context of the display of this series (and thereby issues of access) is thus a factor in the debate surrounding the ethics. For example, Thomas argues that

one of my own family members would not be subject to public scrutiny after death nor would an image of their dead body be sold as

an artwork without their consent...what I see writ large...is the politics of race that makes possible the existence and circulation of such images. (2007b:23)

Thomas argues that issues such as the politics of race helped Hugo gain access to these subjects, and for the photographs to be exhibited as they were. In this light, my earlier question about 'why these four men?' is partly answered by logistics and issues of access. As Hugo himself stated, "these are the only people we could get access to through their families" (Hugo, personal communication, October 17 2012). Hugo gained access to these men through the funeral parlour, who gained permission for Hugo to photograph the bodies (Bloch & Hunt 2007). The concern with access is again emphasized by the particular site that Hugo photographed in: a "morgue/funeral home/parlor/taxi rank/gospel choir recording studio. The owner is an entrepreneur" (Hugo, personal communication, October 17 2012). The fact that there are only four portraits suggests that this is not a request that many would agree to. The small number of portraits seems particularly strange as most of Hugo's photographic series contain a large body of photographs – for example, there are fifty-four portraits in his series *Looking Aside* (2006).

To address such issues of access, it was necessary to explain that Hugo had received consent from the subjects' family members (Bloch & Hunt 2007). However, the very notion of permission and informed consent

is itself a problematic criterion for the judgment of these works. Individuals are often not capable of giving informed consent because the circumstances do not allow for either 'informed' to truly be consistent with

understanding or for 'consent' to involve all the implications that the term involves." (O'Neill 2011b:133)

There are power relations involved in gaining consent and it is thus important to be aware of differences in education and social and economic status. I have already outlined the difference between Hugo and his subjects (and the families of the subjects). Granting permission during the photographic process does not imply control, nor even approval, of the finished photographs. Through easy online access to these images on Hugo's website, as well as those photographs exhibited (and sold) world-wide, did those who gave their permission have a full understanding of what their consent would entail? Did Hugo fully outline the terms by which these photographs would be distributed and exhibited? Would the deceased have given permission to have themselves represented in such a manner? Such questions can lead to a discomfiting sense of exploitation. These questions are particularly pertinent, because the fact that the subjects died of AIDS-related illnesses accompanied the exhibition of the photographs. The stigma of the disease remains with the subject, as well as to family and friends, even after death.

Hugo himself believes that in South Africa the response to such questions are "centered around issues of representation" (Hugo, personal communication, July 24 2010). Due to the minimal socialization in this series, these issues are emphasized more than in the other two that I discuss. Although the potential ethical objections that I have outlined are important, I have also argued that focusing solely on issues of representation would limit our engagement with other worthy aspects of the series. The "rush of moral indignation that often accompanies the encounter with...graphic

pictures...may be narcissistically satisfying, but it may also free us from the responsibility of placing our own experiences in relation to something that remains, finally, incomprehensible” (Baer 2002:84). For this reason, I conclude this chapter by discussing what remains incomprehensible when viewing *The Bereaved*.

## A Present Absence

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When looking at the portraits of *The Bereaved*, I am aware of the unalterable fixity in time of the photographs. I consider the fact that photographs “signal that we have arrived after the picture had been taken and thus too late” (Baer 2002:76). The ‘that-has-been’ is emphasized as “something from the refrained past has not been allowed to depart, but is still there, where the present should have swallowed it up” (Baer 2002:76). This is similar to death itself, as “we cannot look at death, but only upon its effects. It has already taken place. Death is the departed. The corpse remains; and that there are remains is profoundly disturbing” (Schwenger 2000:400). There is only a trace, as the referent is now lost. Thus, “however long I extend this observation I learn nothing” (Barthes 1984:107). There is a desire to see and perceive death, yet an inability to do so. The harder I gaze at these portraits, the more my vision is pushed backwards.

If I relied on looking alone, I would know very little about those represented in *The Bereaved*. Andrea Stuttiens, reviewing *The Bereaved*, stated that she is made “aware of the limitations of the image, the power of context in general” (2012: online). That is not to privilege text over image, or to deny the fact that the exhibition should be encountered as a whole, but rather that the photographs in *The*

*Bereaved* raise questions about the life and death of each subject, yet also reinforce the impossibility of providing answers. The little I know of the subjects, such as their names, their cause of death and their location, comes from the text, as “Hugo’s photographs do not explain or inform” (Boncy 2008: online). These photographs question just how little/how much a portrait can inform the viewer. Hugo himself said that “at the time when I made these images my particular preoccupation was with portraiture, its possibilities and its shortcomings” (Hugo, personal communication, October 17 2012). Hugo does not employ a naïve view of portraiture and subjecthood, but rather insinuates that a photograph cannot be fully substituted for its subject, nor can it fully sustain the burdens of collective and individual loss.

Sontag states that, overall, photographs “are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else, they haunt us” (2003:80). As a viewer, I want to understand and when this is denied, the loss involved in seeing, representation, and death is foregrounded. The realization that these men were once subjects and now are objects is a haunting one, and Hugo did not attempt to hide or idealize this. Instead, I consider the minimal socialization in the work to be a powerful and key aspect of this series. When critiqued for speaking about death “very flatly”, Barthes replied “as if the horror of death were not precisely its platitude!” (1984:92). Similarly, I believe Hugo’s sense of ‘platitude’ in *The Bereaved* (2005) strongly reflects the absence of the subject created by death and representation.

## The Deceased

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As I have argued, I see the subjects of *The Bereaved* as the ‘most dead’, or the ‘least socialized’, of the three series. Despite aspects that highlight the subject-ness of the deceased, I am more aware of the surface and object-ness of the corpse. However, the close focus on each face causes me to question Hugo’s choice of subjects, particularly because the limited socialization leads to further objectification and a suggestion of a type or stereotype. This is problematic considering Hugo’s selection of subjects and their vulnerability to stereotyping (whether one sees this due to race, sex, health, economic standing and powerlessness). I explored the ethical implications of minor socialization, whilst attempting to show that *The Bereaved* (2005) should not be approached purely on this level. Instead of Hugo’s work simply perpetuating the politics of representation, I believe *The Bereaved* can lead to an engagement with more complex issues around portraiture and representation.

Ultimately, the more I consider the portraits, the more questions I have. The limited socialization within the images makes me acutely aware of the absence of life represented in these photographs. Although disconcerting, *The Bereaved* suggests that nothing can speak for death and there are no easy or comforting answers. The photographs do not narrate or inform, but I believe they acknowledge and can help to create a consciousness. As Sontag states, “such images cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect” (2003:104). Within the opportunity to look provided by these photographs, is, perhaps, the invitation to think and to question, finally to pay attention.

## CHAPTER THREE: *LIFE BEFORE DEATH: PORTRAITS OF THE DYING* (2004)

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In *Life before Death: Portraits of the Dying* (2004), a joint project by partners, photographer Walter Schels and journalist and editor Beate Lakotta, life and death are paired together. The series consists of ‘portraits of the dying’, as the subjects of the series are terminally ill patients who Schels and Lakotta met in hospices around Northern Germany during the year they spent working on the project. The individuals represented are mostly adults, however, unlike the other two series I have discussed, two young children are also included.<sup>33</sup>

Schels’ part of the work consists of twenty-six paired, large-scale, black and white photographic portraits. One photograph is taken whilst the subject is alive and (for the most part) gazing at the viewer, and one is taken immediately after the subject’s death with his/her eyes closed (figure 43). As the title suggests, ‘life’ is presented before (to the left of) the ‘after’ portrait of death. The format of both portraits are conventional, in that each of the diptychs focuses closely on the face of the subject, which is set against a plain black cloth backdrop. Black is associated with death and mourning (Huntington 1979:45). The lighting in each portrait is dramatic due to the high contrast

studio lighting that Schels set up in each hospice. There is a consistent aesthetic throughout the series despite minor differences in angles, crops and proximity within the portraits.

As with the other two series discussed, the title of each portrait is the name of its subject. However, there is also a text of approximately two hundred words, written by Lakotta, which accompanies each diptych. I am focusing on the exhibition of the series at The Wellcome Collection, London from 9 April - 18 May 2008. This is because there is a video available online of the photographs and text as they were displayed in the gallery, and which seems continuous with other exhibitions of the series (Schels & Lakotta 2008).<sup>34</sup> The text is initially less noticeable than the monumental, chiaroscuro photographs, because it is printed in black on A4 white card. It is, however, an integral part of the work, as Schels himself states that “the text is as important as the photographs” (Schels, personal communication, July 15 2012). The text is displayed on the left side of each diptych, as if it should be read first, offering a context for the photographs as the viewer moves closer to the portraits. The text contains the age of the subject, the two dates on

33. It is interesting to consider that I have not come across one review that publishes the portraits of the children (a boy of six years old, Jannik Boemfeld (1998-2004) and a girl of sixteen months, Elmira Sang Bastian (2002-2004)). Each review has instead selected the portraits of the adults, suggesting discomfort around the portraits of the children (Cumming 2008; Havey 2008; Linkman 2011; Schels 2008; Shuhman 2008b; Sewell 2008; Warburton 2008).

34. In book format, the text is displayed alongside each corresponding diptych (Schels & Lakotta 2004).

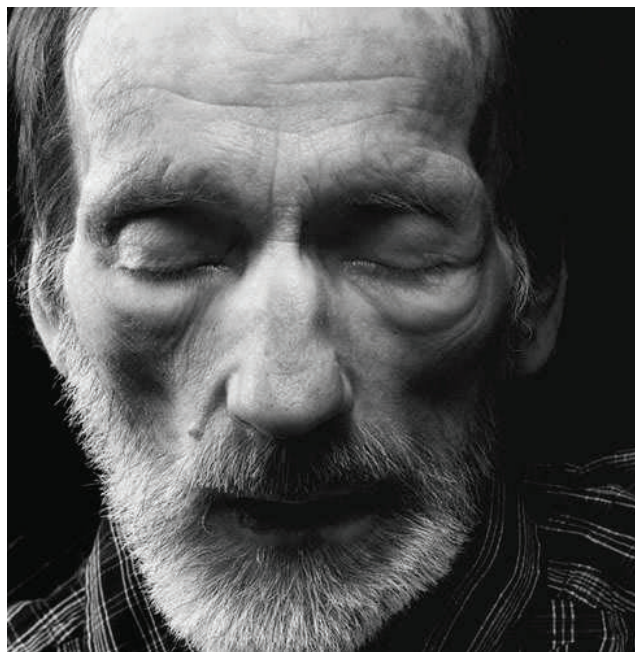
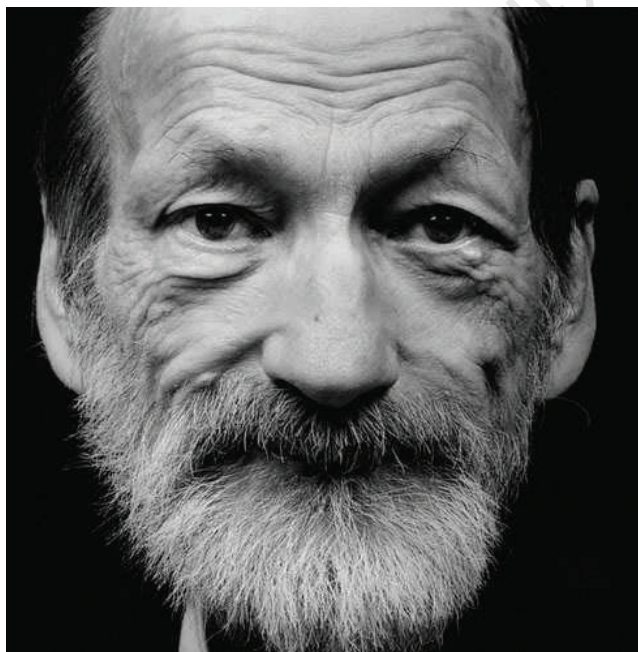
which the portraits were photographed and quotes and personal stories from conversations with the subjects regarding their impending death. Lakotta's texts are poignant and convey tragic personal circumstances, "bring[ing] a concise and often heart-rending context to each image" (Schuman 2008:152). The causes of the subjects' deaths, which are made clear in each text, such as cancer, heart disease or weakening of old age, are common. It is easy to identify with subjects as their stories are not exceptional. Identification is further encouraged by the inclusion of a range of ages, race, gender and social and economic backgrounds for each person in the series.

In this chapter, I will argue that due to the particular aesthetic choices of Schels and the inclusion of Lakotta's texts, emphasis is placed on the corpse as subject, rather than object. I consider *Life before Death* to be the most socialized of the three series, which infers that the dead fit closely into the community of living selves. There is a consistency in the empathy expressed in both the text and

photographs, which encourages us to identify with the deceased as subjects and individuals. I will argue that due to the high level of socialization in the series, the photographs do not raise many ethical questions. This is a very different response from that of Hugo's *The Bereaved*, as the viewer is less preoccupied with a ready-made set of ethical objections. This is not to say that *Life before Death* (2004) is actually any more ethically acceptable, as the series risks being 'over-socialized'. Schels and Lakotta represent dead subjects and ethical issues remain about photographing (and speaking for) the dead as if they were still alive.

The aim of this series for both Schels and Lakotta was an attempt to face their fear of death and dead bodies. Lakotta confirms this, stating in an interview that "our personal motivation behind this work was to face our own mortality; we tried to look very closely at that which scares us the

Figure 43. Schels, Walter. *Wolfgang Kotzahn*. (2004). Black and White Lambda Print. 100 x 100 cm.



most. Our wish was to overcome our own fears about death and dying” (Shuman 2008b:135). In this way, from the very beginning, the aim of the project was socialization: to lessen the scandal of the corpse through methods of image-recovery.

## Socialization in *Heiner Schmitz* (2004)

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I want to begin by examining *Heiner Schmitz* (2004) (figure 44), as it follows the conventions of the majority of the portraits in *Life before Death*. In the two photographs that make up this diptych, the subject’s face is cropped mid-forehead to just below the chin so that Schmitz’s face fills up both portraits. As stated previously, this focus suggests subjectivity in that we associate the face with much that we consider to be human. Schels photographed with a 6 x 6 cm analogue Hasselblad Camera (Schels, personal communication, July 15 2012) so that the photographs could be enlarged to a monumental size with minimal loss of detail; just less than 1 x 1 m each. It is interesting that similar choices have been made by each of the three artists who I have discussed; none of the series consist of small, precious photographs. The subjects in the photographs are larger than life, which evokes a strong reaction in the viewer. There is a desire to look closely at the immense prints and pin sharp detail of all three series. Each of the three artists also decided to remove the corpse from the context in which they were photographed; Schels and Heyert opted for a plain, studio-like background, whilst Hugo’s close crop obscures the background. The spaces usually associated with death, such as funeral homes and hospices, have been socialized out of the photographs.

With the size, clarity and rich tonal variation of *Heiner Schmitz*, there is an interest in the surface and detail of the face, albeit in a different manner than Hugo’s *The Bereaved*. In comparison to Hugo’s series, I am not as interested in the discolourations of death, nor in looking at the corpse as object. Schels’ very conscious decision to photograph in black and white adds greatly to the socialization of the corpse. In direct comparison to Hugo’s decision to show the changes of death in full colour, Schels “[did] not want to show the physical skin, but the deeper meaning of the expression of a face” (Schels, personal communication, July 15 2012). In contrast to *The Bereaved*, my attention is not held almost exclusively by the surface, but by the *subject* of the photograph. There is no emphasis on artifice (Heyert) or the surface and colours of the subject’s swollen faces (Hugo). Similarly, Sontag argues that, “many photographers continue to prefer black and white images, which are felt to be more tactful, more decorous than colour – or less voyeuristic and less sentimental or crudely lifelike” (1997:128). Schels, through his choice of black and white, attempts to avoid the voyeuristic abjectness of brute flesh in full colour.

Unlike Hugo’s series, there is, in Schels’ portraits, also a marked interest in “whatever it may be called – personality, individuality, self, soul, character... – what persists of being human [that] continues to be found embedded within, lurking behind, projected upon, or subsiding beneath the human face” (Sobieszeck 1999:15). Schels himself stated that “my interest is, to get a feeling between the face of a human being and what is behind it. Our face is the expression of what we are” (Schels, personal communication, July 15 2012). There is a desire to suggest a deeper meaning, orchestrated by photographic conventions of expression, pose, scale, distance and lighting. With the two photographs of Schmitz paired together,

the viewer can investigate what happens to the face (and to the subject) after death, searching for similarities and differences. We look for the miniscule visual difference that signals the massive change from life to death.

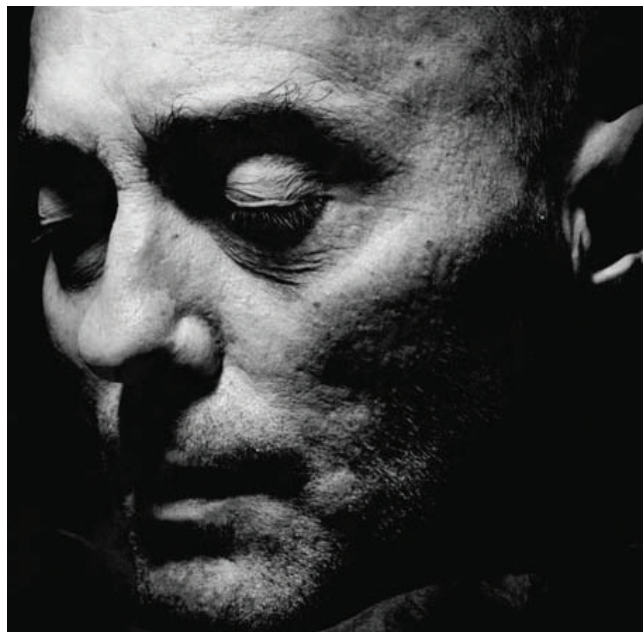
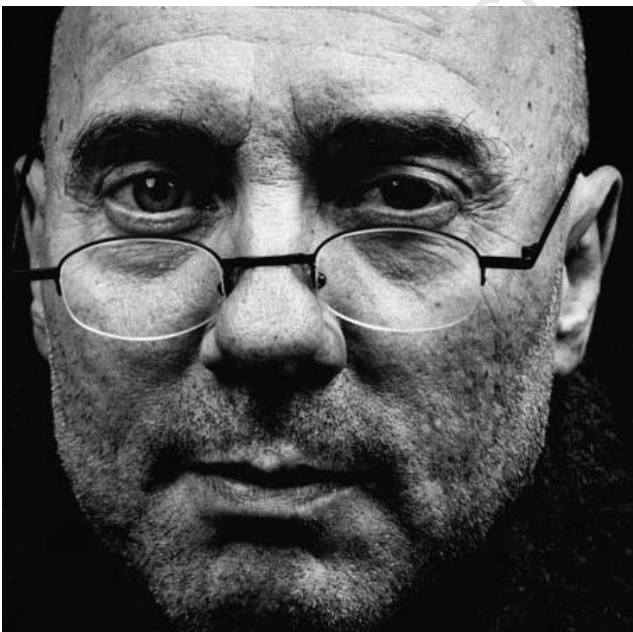
In the left portrait, the 'before' portrait, Schmitz's face is tilted slightly to the right, yet he looks directly at the camera in a fairly conventional portrait pose. He poses with his simple, black-framed glasses perched towards the end of his nose, so that he does not look through the frames to 'see' us, perhaps so as to facilitate eye contact and emphasize his gaze. I am aware of the subjectivity of Schmitz as a living person as he meets and returns my gaze. The flash is reflected in his eyes, his right eye in particular, which creates a glint of vitality. The light itself leads my gaze over the subject's face and calls for close scrutiny of it: I see the wrinkles on his forehead and around his eyes, his near baldness, the bags under his eyes and the graying stubble on his face. His lips are unsmilingly pursed together, creating dark shadows on either side of his mouth. I struggle to read the nuanced expressions in his face, but I sense

hints of intelligence, seriousness and sorrow. This desire to interpret his expression and his character draws me into the image. Schels, while describing the subject's expressions in an interview, stated that "what I was used to...was people who smiled for the camera. It is usually an automatic response. But these people never smiled. They were incredibly serious" (Moorhead 2008a: online). The 'before' portraits lead us to imagine how the certain knowledge of our own death would affect us.

Schels, who has taken hundreds of portraits during his career, stated that the subjects

were not pretending anything anymore...I felt enabled as a photographer to get as close as it's possible to get to the *core* of the person; when you're facing the end, everything that's not real is stripped away. You're the most real you'll ever be, more real than you've ever been before. (Moorhead 2008a: online)

Figure 44. Schels, Walter. *Heiner Schmitz*. (2004). Black and White Lambda Prints. 100 x 100 cm each.



Schels is interested in portraying not only the humanity of the subject, but also the 'core' of each individual, both alive and dead. In this sense, this mirrors Heyert's attempt to portray the subjecthood of a person, although Heyert focused purely on deceased subjects. It is interesting that both Schels and Heyert have a rather traditional interest in the 'self' of the subject, which has been critiqued in portraiture since at least early twentieth century (Woodall 1997) – the self is no longer understood to be fixed and immutable. It seems that through a need to socialize the scandal of the object–corpse there has been a return to a simplified, essentialist view of subjecthood.

In the portrait on the right, the 'after' portrait, Schmitz's chin is angled downwards slightly and his face is turned to the subject's right, towards the 'before' portrait and the main source of light. This creates a clichéd visual metaphor, suggesting that, in death, Schmitz has turned towards the light and away from the darkness. The left side of his face is set into strong contrast and takes up most of the frame. A large, dark shadow is cast below his left cheekbone, moving towards the back of his head and creating a skull-like shape, suggestive of death. In comparison to the 'before' portrait, Schels and Lakotta posed Schmitz for this portrait themselves to achieve their desired look. This would certainly have required trust on the part of the subjects, as Schels and Lakotta would have had complete control over their representation after death.

Like Heyert, Schels did not initially want to photograph the deceased as if they were standing or sitting. As he stated, "the first shoot was terrifying: we were so afraid that we just crept in and photographed the body in profile, lying on the bed, without moving it at all... but when we compared the before-and-after pictures, we realized it didn't work" (Moorhead

2008a: online). Again, like Heyert, Schels felt a fear when looking at the prone, dead body. Turning the corpse into a sitting position was an attempt to socialize the corpse to appear more like a living individual. Schels realized that "we had to sit the subject up, as they had been in the before–death shot" (Moorhead 2008a: online). In comparison to the other series, however, the verticality of the corpse is somewhat mitigated by the square format of the prints themselves. This format focuses our attention on the face of the subjects even more intensely, as there is little else in the frame.

For the project in general, Schels attempted as much as possible to mirror the 'before' pose in the 'after' photograph as "the person, who died, is still the same person. I wanted to compare the same face, before and after death, photographed with the same light and perspective" (Schels, personal communication, July 15 2012). The subjectivity of the deceased is underlined by the inclusion and mirroring of the 'before' portrait: the corpse retains its sense of individuality as it looks similar in death to the way it looked in life. This is also present in Schels' decision to photograph the very recently departed, while they retain a sense of their 'before' self: "it [is] the freshness of the body. It was still someone" (Ondaatje 2000:14). In *Life before Death* the bodies perhaps appear most as they did in life, as "the bodies never got 'prepared', the room in a hospice cannot be occupied too long, because other people are waiting for an empty room, there is no time to wait" (Schels, personal communication, July 15 2012). This highlights the effect of the time frame between death and photography on the level of socialization: Serrano's *Jane Doe (Killed by Police)* (1992) is the least socialized of the works I have discussed and had the largest time span between death and representation, while the images in

Schels' *Life before Death* are the most socialized and were shot as soon after the subject's death as possible.

Although a mortician had not yet prepared the bodies, they were to a certain extent still prepared for display and thereby socialized by the hospice staff and Schels and Lakotta. For example, when I look closely I realize, due to barely evident folds of fabric below Schmitz's chin, that his mouth has been propped closed. Abjection in the form of opened orifices, or even open eyes, such as in Serrano's *The Morgue* (1992), is largely avoided. Schmitz's eye sockets are cast into shadow, yet both closed eyelids are illuminated. With the angle of Schmitz's face, the nakedly frontal confrontation of Hugo's *The Bereaved* is also avoided. If the subjects eyes were to open, as Sontag says in another context, it would be "a gaze that soars rather than confronts, suggesting instead of a relation to the viewer, to the present, the more enabling abstract relation to the future" (1997:38). This generates a feeling of rest, creating a socializing link between death and sleep, as "the subject looks peaceful...the images do not suggest a painful or frightening death" (O'Neill 2011b:134). As I have previously stated, closed eyes are a form of socialization in all three series, in part due to the visual analogy of sleep. The use of the black and white photography and the calm feeling evoked by the 'after' portraits (as with Schafer's *Der ewige Schlaf / Visage de morts* (1987)) perhaps make the analogy of sleep most apparent in *Life before Death* (to varying degrees in the different diptychs).

In relation to this, the conventions of black and white photography suit the sombre subject matter and the gravity of the situation. There is also a beauty, aestheticization and socialization in the decision to photograph in black and white. Through the weighty, black and white aesthetic,

there is pathos in these portraits and a dignity and significance afforded to the deceased. The pathos which I initially craved when looking upon the faces of *The Bereaved* is present here. The black and white prints suggest a respectful distance and I find the photograph of Schmitz affecting, yet easier to look at. The visual language used aestheticizes and cools the subject matter, taming the corpse and providing space for reflection. The subject matter is less confrontational, giving the viewer more freedom to think generally about death.

### Socialization through Text in *Heiner Schmitz* (2004)

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Another factor that contributes to the socialization of the corpse is the text that is provided with each diptych. From the text accompanying *Heiner Schmitz* (2004), I know that Schmitz was only fifty years old when he died and that there were only twenty-five days between the two 'sittings' of his portraits. The brevity of this period is affirmed in the text, as, on seeing the "affected area on the MRI scan of his brain ...he had realised he didn't have much time left" (Moorhead 2008a: online). Through Lakotta's descriptive introduction, I read about who and what Schmitz *was*: "Heiner was a fast talker, highly articulate, quick-witted, but not without depth. He worked in advertising" (Moorhead 2008a: online). I identify with the narrative and am drawn further into the portraits – it is likely that the reader will find at least one story that relates to his/her own situation, or that of a loved one. The qualities I believe I saw in Schmitz's face become mingled with those I read into the text. Lakotta refers to the subject

by his first name, which suggests familiarity and reminds us of the time they must have spent together when he was alive and, most of all, emphasizes his subjective-ness.

The text socializes the corpse by providing Schmitz's persona and personal history. We consider the corpse as subject, not object, as "the life of language is the death of things as things" (Critchley 2000:62). Through the text, I do not perceive the corpse as a thing, but as someone. By including direct quotes from Schmitz in the text, we think of him as a living individual. The text also encourages us to consider the individual lives of its subjects by making us aware of how each subject felt about the process of dying. This aspect is absent in both Heyert's and Hugo's series; here my attention is brought to the *experience* of the subject in *Life before Death* and not just its history. The desire to tell stories about the dead in some ways mirrors Heyert's desire for *The Travelers*. The text places emphasis on the deceased as individual, as "these last words are so succinct and idiosyncratic – irreducibly individual" (Cumming 2008: online).

Lakotta, using a journalistic tone, also frames each individual in quite a particular way; Schmitz's persona as a 'quick-witted' advertising executive is a familiar, if not clichéd, one. The text functions quite specifically in its role to create empathy with its subject. Towards the end of the text, Schmitz is quoted directly as saying that "some of [my visitors] even say 'get well soon' as they are leaving; 'hope you are soon back on track, mate! ... but no one asks me how I feel. Don't they get it? I'm going to die!'" (Moorhead 2008a: online). This denial of death runs throughout the texts of the different subjects of the series, be it the subject's

own denial or that of their families and friends. As I have already discussed, it was argued that death in twentieth century western metropolitan areas was removed to hospices, hospitals and funeral homes, which led to a type of death denial. The position of Schels and Lakotta's subjects in German hospices references this.<sup>35</sup>

## The 'Before' Portrait

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I would like to further explore the inclusion of the 'before' portrait by discussing another diptych, as it is an important component of the socialization of the corpse. The diptych *Klara Behrens* (2004) (figure 45) is of a very similar format to *Heiner Schmitz* although the face is perhaps even more in focus, as, particularly in the 'after' portrait, Schels is closer to the subject. As a result, part of the right side of Behrens' face is not visible in either of the two portraits. In the 'before' portrait, Behrens' face is fractionally turned to her left, looking directly at the camera. The photograph is cropped just below her hairline and her chin. In the 'after' portrait, Behrens is turned further left, 'toward the light', in a three-quarter view. In both portraits, the light-toned fabric of her clothes is visible. I have already discussed the socializing role that clothes can play, but her clothes also ground the photographs so that her head does not appear to float in the dark, as Schmitz's head does in *Heiner Schmitz*.

In the 'before' portrait of *Klara Behrens*, I read Behrens' solemn gaze at the camera as a sign of

Opposite page: figure 45. Schels, Walter. *Klara Behrens*. (2004). Black and White Lambda Print. 100 x 100 cm.

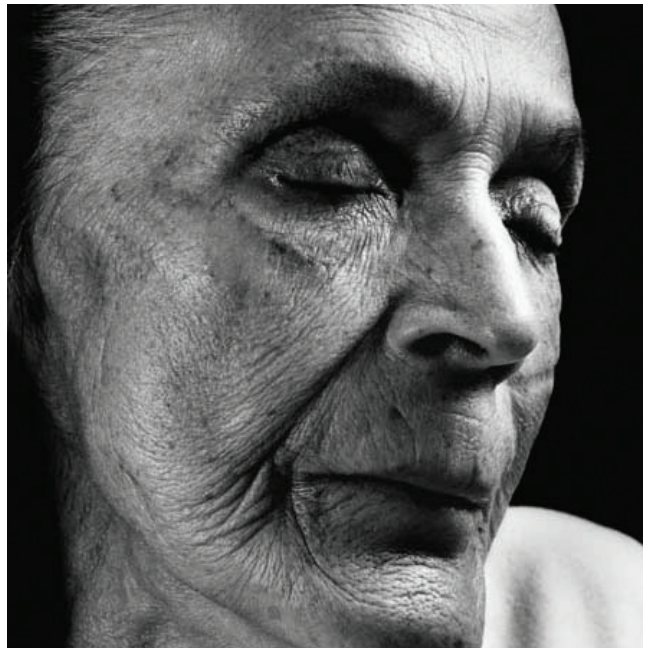
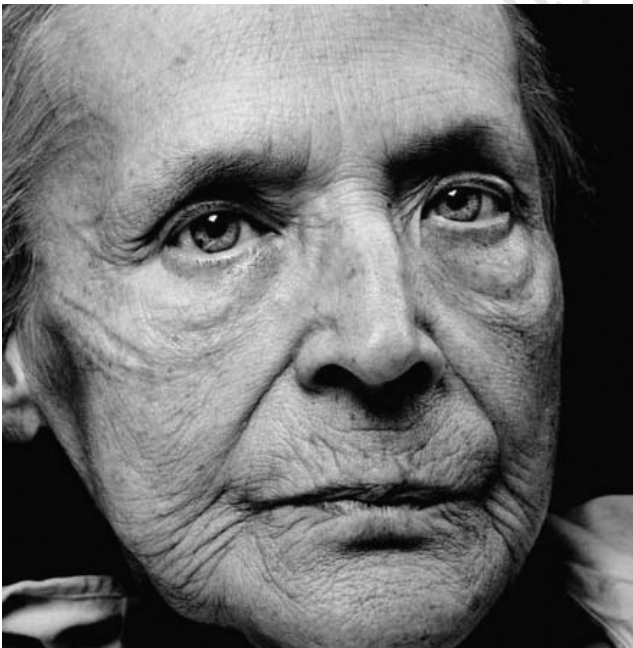
35. Variations of hospices exist throughout history, however "in 1967 Dr Cicely Saunders opened the first modern hospice in London to provide palliative care for the dying" (Linkman 2011:154).

her complicity in this series. As Sontag states, “in the normal rhetoric of the photographic portrait, facing the camera signifies solemnity, frankness...[and] also implies in the most vivid way the subject’s cooperation” (1977:38). It was important to Schels that consent be willingly and freely granted: “subjects have signed permission for publishing their picture before and after death, they all had the right to step back until the last moment, also the relatives of the subjects could withdraw the contract...but we never had any problems” (Schels, personal communication, July 15 2012). Thus we can consider that Behrens was fully conscious and aware of the project in which she was engaged. This provides us with comfort and makes us aware of her own agency in the project, even though she is now dead (as are all the subjects in this series, of course). In *The Travelers* and in *The Bereaved* this decision was made by

family and friends *on behalf of* the deceased.<sup>36</sup> In *Life before Death* we are encouraged to think of the dead body in the ‘after’ portrait as a once living agent.

Of course, this autonomy is only up to a point, as Schels decides how to represent each individual and what final photograph to select. Schels stated that “I never ask the question ‘how do they want to be photographed’” (Schels, personal communication, July 15 2012). However, knowing that the subjects have given their own consent, we feel less like voyeurs when looking at the portraits of the deceased. This is also due to the time that Schels and Lakotta spent with the subjects before their death. The socialization of their relationship with the subjects is transferred to us, and so we feel that the subject’s are not the complete ‘strangers’ of Heyert’s and Hugo’s series. However, some discomfort may persist, as we retain the knowledge

36. It is interesting to consider the issue of consent when representing children; the permission is given by the parents on behalf of the children.



that those represented are ultimately strangers who have been placed in the same powerless position of objectification and consumption. As with Heyert's and Hugo's series, these photographs are for sale.

In the 'before' portrait, Behrens' eyes serve as a fuse in the image as

ultimately, there is only *irido*, the iris that looks out and sees the other's face, and the eye that receives and returns the glance. At this point the surface is indeed profound: at this juncture between the interior and the exterior, there is a ligature of mind and body, consciousness and countenance, camera lens and human eye. (Sobieszek 1999:288)

I am repeatedly drawn to looking into her eyes, as it is here that I most perceive her subjectivity and the life of her 'interior' self. Of the three series, this is the only one in which live subjects are represented and in which the subjects' eyes are open. This suggests the link between life and open, *seeing* eyes. When I look at Behrens' eyes, I perceive her subject-hood, as "what *sees* is the mind, the person connected to the eye, but the eye itself is just tissue" (Elkins 1996:48). The presence of her returned gaze emphasizes her subjectivity and socializes the 'after' photograph.

In psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's allegory of the sardine can, seeing is a kind of intersection and a means of self-definition. Although controversial, according to Lacan, one knows one's self through a 'mirror stage'. This stage relates back to an infant's first view of their self in a mirror, as

an image of one's own body (which is not the same as one's body) is for Lacan the catalyst for constituting the coherence of self. But once that bodily coherence is recognized in one's self it is also recognized in others, who in this way

become in their turn versions of the mirror (Schwenger 2000:400).

I look at someone (or something) who returns my look and, as the gazes cross, I locate myself; "in looking at the other, the subject seeks to see itself" (Phelan 1993:16). The look that is returned gives us comfort, as it reflects a subject that is more coherent and safely contained (Iversen & Melville 2010). "For Lacan, *seeing is fundamentally social* because it relies on an exchange of gazes; one looks and one is seen. The potential for a responding eye, like the hunger for a responsive voice, informs the desire to see the self through the image of the other which all western representation exploits" (Phelan 1993:16; my emphasis). Seeing, then, is particularly social, and thus is something that *subjects* do. My gaze (as a subject) is returned in this portrait and, thus, my relationship with *Klara Behrens* deepens.

When posing for a photograph, as Barthes states, "everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing', I instantaneously make myself another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image" (1984:10). I have already discussed the transformation of a self into an object-corpse and thus an image in the act of being photographed. However, in this sense, Behrens' posing almost becomes a rehearsal for death. Behrens knows that this act of being photographed will occur again after her death. This rehearsal of death in the 'before' portrait links to early photography, as in the mid-nineteenth century exposure times were too long for the subject to sit still for the entire time. In order to have one's photograph taken one had to hold oneself motionless, like a corpse:

some critics complained that the strain of keeping steady made the subject's face look like that of a corpse. However, a simple solution was

soon available. Those wanting their portraits taken simply had to submit to having their heads placed within a constraining device that ensured a still posture for the necessary seconds. This device transformed the lived time of the body into the stasis of an embalmed effigy. In other words, photography insisted that if one wanted to appear lifelike in a photograph, one first had to act as if they were dead. (Batchen 1997:208)

Similarly, Behrens poses and transforms herself into an object to be photographed, in poses similar to those that she will be in when she is photographed after her death. What distinguishes all the subjects of *Life before Death* is the knowledge (of both the subjects and we, the viewers, when we look at these photographs) that their death, and thus their second portrait, is imminent.

Due to the detail and size of the photograph, Behrens' wrinkles are particularly apparent, especially around her mouth, as her lips are closed tightly together. From the text, I know that she was eighty-three years old when she died. I consider the nuances of her facial skin, as "it is more than just a mask covering the muscles and the large amount of fat which lies beneath. It's colour, lines, wrinkles and general texture are a barometer of a person's age, health and experience" (Kemp 2003:50). I wonder whether the wrinkles around her mouth are from years of smoking, from a particular way she smiled, or the loss of muscle tension as a result of old age. Through my attention on her aged appearance I contemplate her mortality, as "to look upon faces is always

to sense this death that is latent, visible in...the wrinkles of age" (Lingis 1994:167). As one grows older, one's facial skin becomes thinner and dryer, leading it to hug the contours of the skull. In this way, we may glimpse the dead in the living.

Beyond the nature of the series, as I have already explored, all photographic portraits already speak of death. There is an emphasis placed on mortality from the juxtaposition of the two portraits and the text, as we know that each subject will die, or rather, has already died. This is held to be true in the nature of photography, as a photograph "preserv[es] the photographed person while announcing his/her impending death" (Baer 2002:53). From the text, I know that there were only twenty-six days between Behrens' first and second portrait. The pattern of the series becomes disturbing as we know that each 'before' portrait will necessarily be followed by an 'after' portrait that records their death, and that this is the very reason for the existence of these photographs. Despite the hopeful text in which Behrens states that "sometimes, I do still hope that I'll get better", we know that she will die soon. When looking at a portrait of Lewis Payne before he was to be hanged, Barthes describes a similar feeling, stating "the punctum is: *he is going to die*. I read at the same time: *This will be and this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake" (1984:96).<sup>37</sup> While I am discomfited by the knowledge that she will die, I know simultaneously that she has already died.

37. Whilst trying to account for his being drawn to certain images, Barthes identified the punctum as an "element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" (1984:26). The punctum is little point of pressure or pain, a wound or prick, which captures, and arrests, the eye of beholder. The punctum punctuates the studium. The studium is that which surrounds the punctum as an uninteresting counterbalance. It is a public body of information, a general interest "as consequence of my knowledge, my culture" (Barthes 1984:25).

## The 'After' Portrait

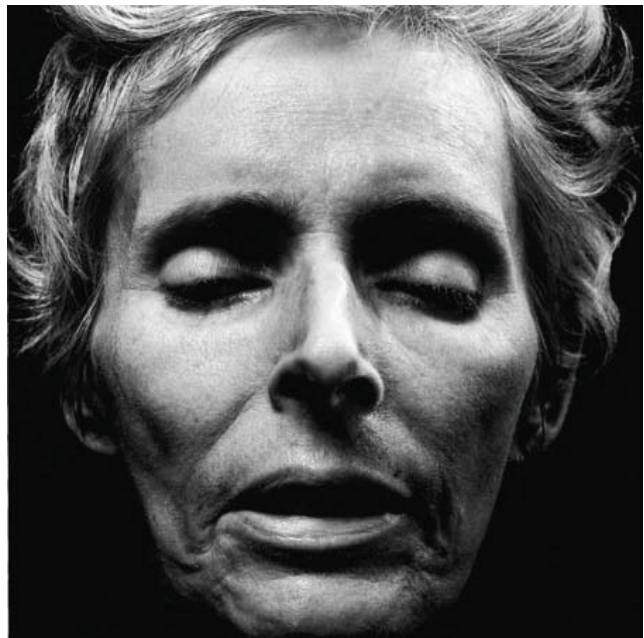
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The 'after' portrait confirms the nature of the series and the death of each subject. By focusing on the 'after' portrait of *Rita Schoffler* (2004) (figure 46), I want to explore here how despite *Life before Death* being the most socialized of the three series, I still see traces of death, and thus object-ness, in the represented corpse.

First, I want to discuss the socialization that is present in this diptych. *Rita Schoffler* differs from the previous two diptychs discussed, as in the 'after' portrait Schoffler faces the camera, with her head facing straight ahead and centred in the photograph. Her expression in the 'before' portrait is complex, as she both frowns and smiles subtly at the camera. I read traces of sorrow, acceptance and a kind of irony in her expression. This 'air' is reinforced by the text, in which she speaks of her painful divorce and regret. In comparison to the photographs of this series previously discussed, the

frame has moved outwards so that the crop is just above her hairline and we can see her hair in both portraits. I notice how much her hair has grown, from a short crop to longer waves, in the three months between the two portraits. In her 'before' portrait, Schoffler is wearing simple hooped earrings. These details and the text effectively socialize the image of the dead body of Schoffler from corpse to individual.

In contrast to her 'before' portrait and the other photographs that I have focused on here, Schoffler's mouth is partly open in the 'after' portrait. This disturbs the effects of the socialization as it suggests a loss of muscular control and life, as if she has exhaled her last breath. Her expression in the 'after' portrait is still complex, largely due to the uncomfortable twist of her mouth – in part, a result of the complete relaxation of the muscles in her face, her skin having succumbed to gravity in death. Essentially, her face gives us the appearance of death. The lighting in the 'after' portrait creates a much stronger contrast than in the 'before'



portrait: the illuminated areas of her forehead, cheekbones, nose and chin contrast strongly with the dark shadows in the recesses of her eye sockets, her mouth and her cheeks. Her face looks eerily similar to a mask, which leads me to consider again the long history of death and funeral masks and their relation to portraiture. Enhancing this impression of a death mask, her head appears to be floating, as no other parts of her are visible apart from her face and hair; not even her neck, which is visible in the 'before' portrait. In this way then, the 'after' portrait appears as a photograph of a death mask, a photograph of an object.

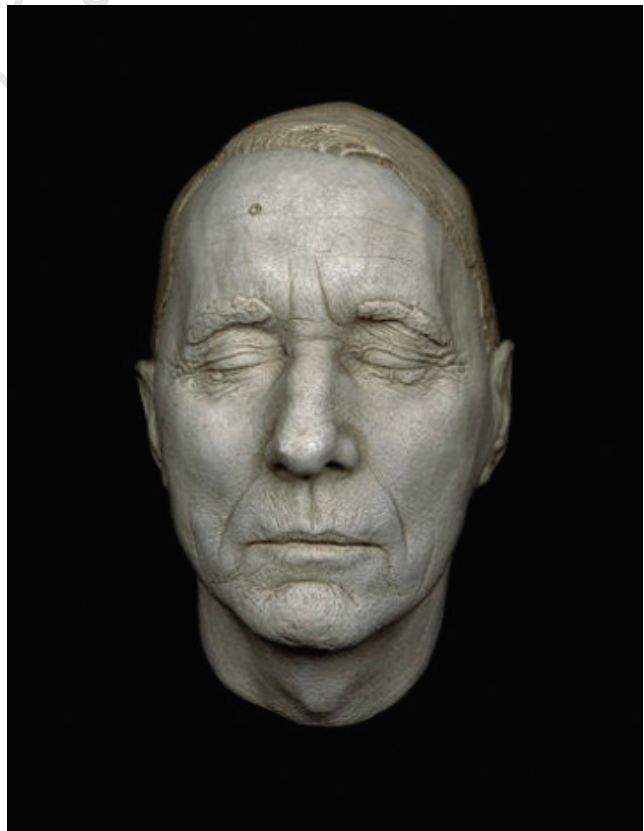
The 'after' portrait also appears similar to Danish artist Torben Eskerod's photographs in the series *Register* (2001). Eskerod's photographs are large-format color photographs of life and death masks, made in the 1940s by Holger Winther, a prominent

dentist who made casts of famous Danes as well as less well-known individuals (Majak 2011:129). In *Untitled (A)* (2001) (figure 47), I initially regard the photograph as a black and white portrait of a young female subject against a plain background; her head is centered, and she would be looking at the camera if her eyes were not closed. Her head and neck appear to be floating in the black background – as do Schoffler's in the 'after' portrait (although Schoffler's neck is not visible due to the close crop). On closer examination,

Opposite page: Figure 46. Schels, Walter. *Rita Schoffler*. (2004). Black and White Lambda Prints. 100 x 100 cm each.

Bottom left: figure 47. Eskerod, Torben. *Untitled (A)*. (2001). Digital Colour Print. 86.4 x 68.6 cm.

Bottom right: figure 48. Eskerod, Torben. *Untitled (B)*. (2001). Digital Colour Print. 86.4 x 68.6 cm.



the strange, smooth chalk texture of her face, the strange texture of her barely visible hair and the subtle tones of the blue-grey-with-peach-undertones of the plaster mask make it apparent that we are looking at an object. In *Untitled (B)* (2001) (figure 48), as in the 'after' portrait of Schoffler, the emphasis is on the contours of the face and on the folds of the skin sagging where the musculature has collapsed. As in Schoffler's portrait, there is an ineffable expression *preserved* on the mask; the animate has become inanimate. This interest in expression is evident in the title of Eskerod's series, *Register*. As reflected by the use of 'untitled' for each photograph, Eskerod does not focus on the identity of the mask's subject, but rather on expressions of the human face. There are lifelessness and expression, object-ness and subject-ness, evident in these photographed masks, as well as in the 'after' portrait.

In this mix of subject and object in *Register* (2001) and *Rita Schoffler* (2004), there is an uncanny sense of unease for the viewer. For Sigmund Freud, the uncanny is *unheimlich*, or that which is 'unhomely'. Freud outlined many more instances that could create such an uncanny sensation, but observed that "many people experience the feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts" (1997:218). This relates to Freud's initial, and perhaps most influential, example of something uncanny, which involves "doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate" (Jentsch, cited in Freud 1997:201). Such confusion between animate and inanimate, causes me to consider the role "uncanniness plays in psychic confounding of boundaries between subject and object" (Baker 1996:107). A life/death mask, like a corpse, is the

inanimate object of a once animate subject. The uncanny sensation is due to the confusion that these photographs cause over what is, and what is not, animate and inanimate, alive and dead.

This is true of photography as a trace too, as Barthes argues that a photograph of a corpse

certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is alive, as *corpse*: it is the living image of a dead thing. For the photograph's immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of the delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past. (Barthes 1984:78-79)

Due to the assumption of the indexical referent, the photograph of a corpse (or a mask) attests that the object is real. There is confusion over what is real and what is alive, and thus the photograph presents the corpse, as object, as something alive. Ultimately, this leads to doubts as to what is animate and what is inanimate, what is alive and what is dead. A photograph of a corpse, as presenting a corpse as alive, is uncanny. This confirms one of Freud's points regarding uncanniness, when he stated that "death and the re-animation of the dead are typically represented as uncanny themes" (1997:369).

The fusion of life and death, animate and inanimate, subject and object, in both the 'before' and 'after' portraits, leads to a powerfully uncanny feeling. In the 'before' portrait, the subject is alive, yet already dead due to the nature of photography and the series itself. Importantly, in the 'after' portrait, the corpse is both subject and object. Socialization has emphasized the

intangible nature of a photograph of a corpse by re-instating the corpse, as object, back into subjecthood and presenting the inanimate as animate.

However, important concerns are raised when one attempts to represent the deceased as though they are still alive. If socialization is an attempt to represent the corpse as a living individual, then aspects of socialization could lead to, or encourage, a denial of death. The taming of the dead body, when taken to an extreme level, bypasses the issues around photography of the dead and the dead body. It is in this light that I suggested that Hugo's limited socialization led me to consider representation, the dead body and portraiture. *Life before Death* (2004) risks over-socializing the corpse, suggesting that there is a fine line between socialization and denial.

## Accompanying Text

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The text which accompanies each diptych in Schels and Lakotta's work undoubtedly places further emphasis on the subjectivity of the deceased. The narrative of the series provides insight regarding the life lived by each individual. The stories in the text are familiar, often discussing everyday family and work life. Each text is specific to the subject and includes the subject's own views and opinions on death and dying. The different texts highlight numerous religious views on death, from Buddhist to Catholic to agnostic.

Death and dying, as the ultimate unknown, are contrasted here with personal thoughts, hopes, fears and experiences. The dead in the 'after' portraits are given consciousness and a voice through the text; subjectivity is created for

the corpses by Lakotta's narrative. I believe this desire for the dead to communicate

is best conveyed by the figure of prosopoeia, the trope by which an absent or an imaginary person is presented as speaking or acting, a form which indicates the failure of a presence, a face which withdraws behind the form which presents it...they are a face for that which has no face. (Critchley 2004:86)

In *Life before Death*, the deceased are presented as speaking as prosopoeiac forms. Etymologically, prosopoeia refers to 'making a face', which links to the suggestion of a death mask. The use of a prosopoeia in this series is as a face for death: something unknown to the living. The subjects represented, as prosopoeiac forms, are made to speak for death and in this sense, tame death by providing a face for "that which has no face".

The link between socialization and text is clearer when one considers that Hugo's *The Bereaved* was the least socialized and provided the viewer with the least amount of text and information. Heyert's *The Travelers* is more socialized than *The Bereaved*. Majak argues that socialization "and acts investing [the corpse] with meaning, are designed to take control over decay and regain lost communication" (2011:129). It is clear that if one of the purposes of socialization is to "regain lost communication", *Life before Death* is the most socialized of the three series.

However, Lakotta's and Schels's faith in the ability of the text to speak for the represented subject must be critically interrogated. For Schels,

the photographs, without knowing more about the living and dying of these people, would leave the observer of these portraits all alone. We are projecting ourselves into this person, without

knowing anything about him/her, it would be only a monolog, no dialog...After you read the text, you step back and get a new view about the faces. The dialog is most important. (Schels, personal communication, July 15 2012)

Schels and Lakotta use the text to encourage *dialogue* between the viewer and the deceased. However, it is not the subject who speaks, but Lakotta's own text. The direct quotes that appear in the text are framed in a very particular way to fit the project as a whole. It is not, and cannot be, a dialogue solely between the viewer and the viewed. Regardless, there is only so much that each text can say about its subject, and this text is an inescapably limited one.

In line with this, Majak "argue[s] whether Lakotta's texts...contribute anything to the images – the visual part of the project seems completely autonomous" (2011:130). I agree that the photographs speak enough without the text: the high contrast black and white and carefully constructed aesthetic is striking without the text. Majak's argument suggests that the text adds to an over-socialization of the dead individual, but despite Schels and Lakotta's naïve and heavy-handed use of text, it does inform my reading of the images. The text is part and parcel of the project, and an important part of the corpses' socialization.

## Response and Intention

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When discussing Pieter Hugo's *The Bereaved*, I argued that the series quickly raised many uncomfortable ethical and moral questions. In this light, I will argue that the high levels of socialization make *Life before Death* (2004) be perceived as more ethically acceptable. As

O' Neill stated of the series, the "ethical and educational benefits of [*Life before Death*] were not questioned in the media and public responses to the exhibition" (2011b:133).

In relation to *The Bereaved*, certain values, such as dignity, respect and consent, are considered necessary when representing the dead and discomfort results when such boundaries are crossed. Due to the socializing effects of the aesthetics and text of *Life before Death*, I do not focus on such concerns in this series. For example, the 'before' portrait presumes consent. With the subjects' cooperation and Schels' inclusion of numerous ages, genders, race, causes of death and social and economic status in the series, I do not perceive a need to focus on the politics of representation. This is supported by Schels' relationship with his subjects – Schels was not as much an outsider as Heyert and Hugo were. Nor does Schels create the suggestion of a 'type' (or confirm stereotypes) in the series and there is little *initial* discomfort with the representation of death. *Life before Death* leads the viewer's focus away from typical ethical objections, although there may be some discomfort with the idealization and over-socialization of the dead body.

As a reviewer of the work states, there is an "acutely observed shared humanity" in the series (Schuman 2008b:154). This socialization encourages us to put ourselves in the place of the deceased and consider our own deaths. This is in line with Schwenger's assertion that

while we can never see our own corpse, we always see in the corpse of another something of what has constituted ourselves...for we cannot help but *identify* the *recognizable image* of the departed, that shadow without living substance, with the other's self. And sensing that *process of identification* ourselves, we sense at the same time

that every self is similarly created by a process of bodily identification. The face in the coffin fascinates us because it is a reflection of our own. (2000:400; my emphasis)

We recognize and acknowledge the shared humanity between the deceased and ourselves and thereby become more aware of our own mortality. There is a process of identification. It follows then, that the more the corpse is identifiable as a subject, the more empathetic identification is encouraged. In *Life before Death* (2004), the deceased are the most socialized of the three series; therefore they are the most recognizable as subjects and thus, can be seen to encourage the most empathetic identification.

O'Neill comments on the response to *Life before Death*, stating that people are more comfortable with the ethics of the portraits because "the viewing of images [of dead bodies] is deemed acceptable if it is in an educational context" (2011b:133). In this case the series is purposefully framed as informative, with a text accompanying each diptych and Schels and Lakotta's stated desire to face death and learn from the dying. This perceived educational aspect "allows possibility of post-life in which deceased still function as social beings through potential to 'influence' others" (O'Neill 2011b:131). Through an emphasis on educational benefit, the corpse becomes less scandalous, as it functions as a subject from which to learn.

I am, however, skeptical as to how much one could really learn from these photographs or whether this series is any more ethically acceptable than the other two series that I have discussed. Heyert and Schels may have both placed more emphasis (in varying degrees) on the subjecthood of the deceased than Hugo, but this does not necessarily make the series any more ethically positive. I agree with Sontag that "images which idealize...are no less aggressive than work

which makes a virtue of plainness" (1997:7). *Life before Death* focuses closely on the faces of dead subjects and it should not be ignored that all ways of seeing objectify: "all seeing has this property, and even though it can be modified or diluted, it can never be eradicated" (Elkins 1997:27).

I do not believe then that the construction of an idealized illusion is any more ethically positive than Hugo's confrontational gaze. I say *illusion*, as ultimately in death and representation the subject becomes an object. As Elizabeth Bronfen states,

we experience death by proxy. In the aesthetic enactment, we have a situation impossible in life, namely that we die with another and return to the living. Even as we are forced to acknowledge the ubiquitous presence of death in life, our belief in our own immortality is confirmed. There is death, but it is not my own. The aesthetic representation of death lets us repress our knowledge of the reality of death precisely because here death occurs at someone else's body and as an image. (1992:x)

Ultimately, a living subject cannot engage with the deceased. Despite being encouraged to engage and empathize with the deceased, the attempt is futile as the death is not the viewer's own and the absence of the deceased can never be made fully present again.

## Life and Death

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I have argued throughout this thesis that *Life before Death* is the most socialized of the three series. A number of Schels and Lakotta's decisions on how to represent the deceased contribute to

the socialization of the corpses: the inclusion of the open eyed ‘before’ portrait; the black and white aesthetic; the reference to a death mask; the personalizing text and the educational benefit all play their part in socializing the ‘after’ portrait. This socialization encourages the viewer away from questions of the ethical acceptability of the series. In seeing the deceased as subjects, I consider my own mortality. The portraits of *Life before Death* “literally and figuratively — force us to look death squarely in the face and contemplate mortality” (Caspar 2008: online). In line with Lakotta and Schels’ aims for the series, I believe the diptychs attempt to make death something that the viewer can relate to, despite its innate futility. Over-socialization of the corpse can lead to a denial of death and the dead body and the most socialized series does not necessarily mean the most ethically acceptable series. Finally, the notion of socialization as an *illusion* is an important conclusion to this thesis.

# CONCLUSION

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"Were you ever Daguerrotyped, O immortal man?  
... unhappily the total expression escaped from the  
face and you held the portrait of a mask instead of a  
man."

(Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1841)

In an attempt to explore ways of seeing death, I have focused closely on how the dead have been represented in three different *contemporary* photographic series of *actual* dead bodies by three different artists. By setting these limits for this thesis, I attempted to focus my study to allow me to explore the significance of the formal, aesthetic decisions made by each artist. However, I would argue that there is also a need for a more inclusive study of contemporary photographs of death.

In order to delve into the representation of the dead body, I felt it necessary to briefly discuss the generally accepted changing attitudes towards death. I focused on American and European theories as I considered them to have a bearing on the series that I have discussed. Although his work is now considered to be contentious, I discussed (and complicated) Aries' assertion that death became taboo, less visible and something to be denied at the end of the nineteenth century. I felt this was necessary as the theory became almost common sense during the twentieth century. From this *supposed* denial of death, I traced a large resurgence in interest in the dead body – both the actual and simulated corpse – during the 1960s and 70s. I concurred with Foltyn (2008a, 2008b) that the visibility of the corpse in the public realm has increased steadily since the last two decades of

the twentieth century, and provided examples to support my argument.

I argued that this rising interest in, and visibility of, the corpse is reflective of currently changing ways of seeing death (Walter 1994; Foltyn 2008a; Hanusch 2010). As an example of this, I discussed the changes in the representation of the dead in photographic art, particularly during the twentieth century, which a number of writers have suggested (Proulx 1997; Schwenger 2000; Linkman 2011). I feel that there is a substantial gap in research on this matter, one that suggests exciting research opportunities for the future.

One of the central aspects of this thesis was the use of portraiture in Heyert's, Hugo's and Schels and Lakotta's series. I argued that this is particularly meaningful, as a portrait places emphasis on the individual represented as a *subject*, which is an interesting concept in the representation of a corpse, something more easily considered as an object. In relation to this, I explored Barthes' (1984) assertion that in photography a subject inescapably becomes an object and how the indexical nature of photography makes the photograph an inanimate trace of the animate subject. I established a link between postmortem photography and the use of death masks, as both serve as a means of preserving the subject through traces and doubling.

In line with the choice of portraiture as an aesthetic device to represent the dead, I employed and expanded on Katarzyna Majak's (2011) theory of socialization, which I found to be particularly valuable as an analytical tool for examining the representation of the corpse. I first outlined

Majak's use of the term 'socialization' as an attempt to mollify the subject-to-object scandal of death through a procedure of image recovery, by turning the corpse back into an individual. Socialization is required because "we see subjectivity at the same time that we see an object; we see the degree to which subjectivity is the seeing of an object. This, and not death, is the source of horror when we look upon a corpse" (Schwenger 2000:400). In agreement with Majak, I explored representation itself as a method of taming and socializing the corpse. Majak's theory also proved useful when we consider, to quote Hanusch again, that all three series seemed to be an attempt "to figure out techniques for observing death safely with some level of comfort" (2010:19).

To explore the techniques of the three artists I developed the concept of socialization further and expanded the term. I argued that if socialization is an attempt to turn the corpse back into an individual, then it is also about emphasizing the subject-ness of the deceased individual, rather than seeing the corpse as an object. The artists' selection of portraiture serves to socialize the corpse, as the subject-ness of the corpse is stressed, not the object-ness. It was necessary to establish socialization as a *continuum* to address the particularity of each series and to really explore the way each of the three artists had chosen to represent the dead body. I argued that socialization was evident, in *varying degrees*, in all three of the series that I focused on. Socialization as a continuum proved to be a crucial and particularly valuable point in this thesis.

To further expand my use of the term socialization, I discussed my understanding of 'unsocialization/unsocialized'. I argued that essentially the unsocialized corpse is the abject corpse, using abjection in the Kristevan sense of a threatened collapse of borders and boundaries.

The abject or unsocialized corpse is the body as a decomposing object leaking matter, barely recognizable as human. This set up a clear comparison to the socialized corpse, in which borders need to be reinstated to re-present the corpse as an individual, or at least hold it in momentary stasis.

In order to clarify this point further, I discussed Serrano's *The Morgue* (1992) as a work in which there was a small degree of socialization and in which abjection was clearly visible. I argued that in comparison to the three series that were my main focus, Serrano's photographs did not center on the subjectivity of the deceased as individuals. I concentrated on one image, *Jane Doe, Killed by Police* (1992), in which Serrano placed emphasis on the materiality and aesthetics of the dead body as object, to illustrate this point. Serrano's focus on decomposing bodies, wounds, bodily fluids and orifices situated the representations of the corpses as predominantly abject. However, there is no zero degree of 'unsocialization' and thus I highlighted the fact that the series was not without socialization; such as the aestheticization and art historical references which tamed the corpse. Serrano's transformation of the corpse into a beautiful object highlights the issue of the 'grotesque', which I did not explore here. There is a voluminous history on this discourse, and I believe a study that incorporated such issues, with relevant examples of photographers' works, would be very beneficial to this area of study.

As I felt the discussion of Serrano's *The Morgue* (1992) was appropriate in setting up interesting and valuable comparisons, I also believe there would be great benefit in examining socialized images in comparison with unsocialized images. Such a study could also perhaps explore whether photography with death as its subject is only able to work within this socialized continuum of image recovery.

In my introduction, I was careful to establish that ethical concerns regarding the representation of the dead would not be the focus of my thesis. However, I argued throughout my thesis that the more socialized the representation of the deceased, the more ethically acceptable the series is *perceived*, or *constructed*, to be. Likewise, the less socialized a series is, the less ethically acceptable the series is perceived to be. For example, Serrano's *The Morgue* caused great controversy, while the ethics of Schels and Lakotta's *Life before Death* were barely questioned. Closer examination is required to undertake an appropriate investigation.

In my first chapter I discussed Elizabeth Heyert's *The Travelers* (2004) as neither the most nor the least socialized of the three series. I argued that due to the conventions of portraiture (including poses and gestures), the full colour vibrancy of the prints, the initial suggestion of death as sleep and Heyert's attempt to show the deceased at their 'best', I did not initially perceive the subjects as dead, and likened these photographs to visual eulogies. The objects that Heyert photographed with the deceased, which I likened to vanitas objects, also served as an aid to not thinking directly about death.

I compared *The Travelers* to the conventions of postmortem memorial portraiture in America and established that *The Travelers* was not an example of postmortem memorial portraiture – in fact, none of the series that I focus on is. A key factor in this comparison was Heyert's aim to represent the 'self' of each individual, thereby socializing the corpse. I explored this aim of Heyert's as particularly naïve, however, as such notions of individuality and the self have long been questioned.

Another key aspect of socialization in the portraits was the mortician's attempt to present a 'beautiful memory picture' of the deceased. Thus, through the use of John Troyer's important theory of the *postmortem subject*, I established a link

between postmortem photography and embalming in the desire to conceal traces of abjection and present the corpse as a still-living individual. I also held that despite both Heyert's and Owens' attempts, I still perceived the object-ness of each dead body. Eventually, I considered the corpse-image as a façade and saw *caricatures* of subjects rather than individuals. This is particularly difficult in relation to Heyert's position as an outsider to the community and her desire to preserve the history of the subjects. I argued that this desire to preserve history created a narrative and nostalgia around the deceased to socialize the deceased in an attempt to make death meaningful.

The ethical objections to Heyert's series require closer study, particularly in relation to the ethnographic desire to preserve history. Benefit could be gained from examining this series as an archive and in fact Heyert herself agrees that the series functions as an archive (Heyert, personal communication, August 3 2011). The series has generally been accepted by the bereaved, the media and viewers, and it is perceived as more ethically acceptable than a less 'socialized' series would be.

I chose to focus on Hugo's *The Bereaved* (2005) in the second chapter due to the interesting comparisons that could be drawn between Hugo's and Heyert's series. Unlike Heyert's *The Travelers*, I argued that it would be difficult to mistake the subjects of *The Bereaved* as alive. The close and confrontational proximity, the minimal idealization (in terms of embalming and Hugo's aesthetic decisions), the lack of visual analogies (such as restful sleep) and the full colour of the prints that highlights the traces of abjection, clearly show that the men are dead. It was nonetheless important to point out that there were elements of socialization within the series, due to Hugo's use of portraiture, the inclusion of blankets, the focus on each face and the title of each photograph, all of which led

me to consider the subject-ness of the deceased. However, I also argued that of the three series, the subjects represented appear the ‘most dead’ and are thus the least socialized. This is due to, amongst other factors, the emphasis on materiality and physiognomic detail and surface, rather than on the ‘self’ of the deceased.

I suggested that the straight-on study of the subject’s expressionless face references a mugshot, which attests to the identity of the individual but not to their subjecthood. This created complex links to physiognomic theories, ethnographic studies and even mechanisms of apartheid. I argued that this minor degree of socialization leads to objectification and a suggestion of a ‘type’ or a ‘stereotype’. This is particularly difficult in relation to Hugo’s choice of subjects: all black men, of a similar age, who died of AIDS-related illnesses in a notoriously poor part of South Africa. Thus, I held that Hugo’s choice of subjects and limited socialization leads the series to be perceived as less ethically acceptable and encourages a set of well-rehearsed ethical and moral objections, such as questions of access and politics of representation.

Although I found the objections to Hugo’s series relevant and well-founded, in my discussion of the series I realized that despite initial perceptions, the least socialized representation is *not* necessarily better ethically. Through the ‘that-has-been’ of photography, Hugo attested to the death of these men at a time when the South African government was denying such deaths. Hugo’s subject matter is challenging in itself, and I attempted to suggest that Hugo’s series reflects these complexities; there are no easy answers. I argued that there is benefit in the absence of idealization and a naïve emphasis on individuality (such as is evident in Heyert’s series). The viewer is not encouraged to believe that she/he is discovering the truth of the subjects’ identity,

but is reminded that this is not actually possible. As a viewer, I am made aware – and thus made to question – the limits of representation, photography and portraiture. Hugo is photographing dead bodies, and his methodology causes me to consider the multitude of questions that arise from this representation.

In Chapter Three, I argued that Walter Schels and Beate Lakotta’s series, *Life before Death*, is the most socialized of the three series. This is partly due to the inclusion of the ‘before’ portrait of each subject before they died, displayed alongside the ‘after’ portrait of the deceased subject. I explored the importance of the ‘before’ portrait as the open-eyes of each subject engaged me as viewer, signifying each individual’s consent, agency and subjectivity. In the ‘before’ portrait, my attention is drawn inescapably to the mortality of the subject; not only due to the nature of photography as discussed by Barthes (1984), but due to the series itself.

The fact that the ‘after’ portrait was photographed as soon after the subject’s death as feasible, and was made to look as similar to the ‘before’ portrait as possible, encouraged me to think of the deceased as a *subject*. This made evident that the length of time between the subject’s death and their representation was an important socializing factor in all the series: the longer the duration, the less socialized the series, and vice versa.

Schels’ decision to photograph in black and white is also an instrumental aspect of taming the corpse. In relation to the ‘after’ portraits, I explored the visual and metaphorical link to the history of death masks. I argued that this attempt to shore up the subject in both these photographs and death masks is a socializing feature as they attempt to tame death. I also held that an uncanny discomfort is caused by confusion over what is animate and

what is inanimate within the portraits. Despite the high levels of socialization, I perceived both object-ness and subject-ness when looking at the corpses.

Another key aspect of socialization in this series was the text regarding the subject's personal experiences of dying, which accompanied each diptych. I realized that text is crucial to all three series' levels of socialization; *The Bereaved* (2005) had the least amount of text and is the least socialized, while *Life before Death* (2004) had the most amount of text and is the most socialized.

The use of text is related to Schels and Lakotta's desire to overcome their fear of death and learn from the dying, which creates a comfort in this supposed purpose or possible educational benefit. This also contributes to the supposedly more ethical aspect of the series, which led me to explore how *Life before Death* is constructed to be *perceived* as the most ethical of the three series. I went on to explore how the high level of socialization leads me to identify with the deceased as fellow subjects. Thus, due to various aesthetic choices (such as the use of portraiture), the viewer is encouraged to identify, in varying degrees, with the subjects represented in each of three series.

However, it must be noted that ultimately, any "attempts to inhabit [portraits] ex post facto, through empathetic identification and imaginary projection, via trans-referential bonds, is illusory at best" (Baer 2002:83). Thus, in line with the argument that I began in Chapter Two, I do not necessarily consider *Life before Death* as the most ethically acceptable of the three series. In fact, I suggested that there were elements of over-socialization in the series that raised some uncomfortable questions about idealizing (and denying) death. Socialization *constructs* the series to be perceived as ethically better, with more emphasis placed on the subject-ness of the

corpse. We are, however, still faced with Schels and Lakotta's representation of the deceased – we may be led to identify with the deceased, but ultimately the death is not our own. With this in mind, I brought the chapter to an end, likening socialization to an illusion. Regardless of the level of socialization in *Life before Death* or any of the series discussed in this thesis, the corpse *cannot* be returned to being an individual. It is a construction, a product of image-recovery, for the sake of the viewer and the photographer.

It is with this important point that I conclude this thesis. In reviewing my discussion of each of the three chapters, I realized that in spite of the varying levels of socialization, the object-ness of the corpse is inescapable. Ultimately, socialization functions as an *illusion* to tame the scandal of the 'subject-to-object' death. Loss and absence cannot be overcome by the illusion of socialization. Beyond the socializing aspects is only surface and I am left to consider another use for a mask: a cover, a veil, a façade. In the end, the corpse is (increasingly) an object. As Critchley states, "the representation of death is always a mask – a memento mori – behind which nothing stands" (2004:86).

That is not to say that there is no value in looking at these photographs. As Barthes stated, "I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe and I think" (1984:21). Seeing death, or the dead body, is a powerful way of thinking about death and highlighting contemporary attitudes towards the dead body. I employed the concept of socialization as a tool to discuss the artists' aesthetic decisions and their significance. My study concerning the work of these three artists supports the suggestion that there is a change in the way of seeing and representing the corpse, or rather, the *postmortem subject* (Walter 1996; Troyer 2007; Foltyn 2008a; Hanusch 2010;).



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