

What remains: photographs, the corpse, and empty places

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This article explores the work of Sally Mann, Berni Searle, Ana Mendieta, and Shirin Neshat in relation to the trace-like emblem of the corpse. The corpse or corpse-like body is here read as allegorical of the body's inevitable decay and disappearance as well as allegorical of the photograph itself — both paradoxically entangled with transience and the desire for fixation. The skin of the body and of the photograph ages: it creases, bruises, folds, and wrinkles. The metonymic fragility of the skin of the corpse-like body and of the photograph is thus indexically enfolded with time — with complex memory processes, with absence and fleetingness of presence, distance and proximity, desire and violence, longing and loss. Marked by temporality and historicity, the corpse-like body in and of the photograph in the work of Mann, Searle, Mendieta, and Neshat presents the viewer-reader-writer with the haunting presence of always already inadequate “evidence”. The latter bears on (art historical) representation itself and tortures our sense of identity.

Stofflike oorskot: foto's, die lyk, en leë plekke

Die artikel ondersoek die werk van Sally Mann, Berni Searle, Ana Mendieta, en Shirin Neshat met betrekking tot emblematisiese spore van die lyk. Die lyk of lyk-agtige liggaam word hier gelees as allegories van die liggaam se onvermydelike verganklikheid en verdwyning en ook as allegories van die foto self — beide paradoksaal betrokke by verganklikheid en die begeerte na fiksering. Die vel van 'n liggaam sowel as van 'n foto verouder: dit verkreukel, kneus, vou en verrimpel. Die metonimiese broosheid van die vel van die lykagtige liggaam en van die foto is dus indeksikaal met tyd vervleg — met komplekse prosesse van herinnering, met afwesigheid en vlugtige teenwoordigheid, afstand en nabyheid, begeerte en geweld, verlange en verlies. Met tydelikheid en historisiteit as kenmerke bied die lykagtige liggaam in en van die die foto by Mann, Searle, Mendieta, en Neshat die betragter-leser-skrywer met die kwellende aanwesigheid van altyd onvoldoende “bewyse”. Laasgenoemde het betrekking op (kunshistoriese) representasie en pynig ons identiteitsbesef.

To the memory of my grandmother

Seen from the point of view of death, the product of the corpse is life. It is not only in the loss of limbs, not only in the changes of the aging body, but in all the processes of elimination and purification that everything corpse-like falls away from the body piece by piece. It is no accident that precisely nails and hair, which are cut away as dead matter from the living body, continue to grow on the corpse. There is in the physis, in the memory itself, a memento mori... (Benjamin 1998: 218).

It has been said that art history is essentially a melancholy science, given that it busies itself with images both obscure and out of reach. In the absence of fixed things, art history turns to reflect on itself. In this regard, this article is a self-reflexive meditation on various images that seem to prefigure the melancholia of art history.

It is my feeling that the works of the American Sally Mann, the South African Berni Searle, and the Cuban-American Ana Mendieta provide special instances of thought and imagery that concern themselves with the dialectical melancholia of making sense of things in the face of their inevitable disappearance. Thinking melancholia through their imaging of melancholia has led me to a contemplation of images of death. What will follow is an attempt to read/see images of death, more specifically, photographic images of death, as allegories of the dialectical melancholia of absorptive reading/seeing that defines art history.

In my interpretation, photographs allegorise the melancholy writing of art history — as writing with light in the dark (photo-graphia); writing with shadows or “shadow painting” (*skiagraphia*);¹ as thinking in the dark, to borrow a powerful metaphor of Frederic Schwartz's (2005: xii).²

Art history as a melancholy science

According to Michael Ann Holly (1999: 1), the discipline of art history “is constitutionally fated to suffer from a quiet melancholic malaise”. For “[t]he distance between present and past, the gap between words and images, can never be closed. In Freud’s phrase, it is melancholy, or unresolved mourning, that keeps the wound open”. The discipline of art history tries to salvage something from the oblivion of the past, yet something remains lost, someone remains missing, “a visual clue remains unseen” (Holly 1999: 1). One of the melancholy reasons for this insurmountable loss might be accrued to the blindspot that haunts our seeing and writing, particularly when we are face-to-face with the spectre of death in and of representation. It is death that is left over, when all is said and done, perhaps visible in art history writing only as an anamorphic stain.

This is the cata-strophe (meaning: upheaval, cf Stoichita 1999: 190) of writing and imaging art history: every artwork resists complete appropriation “either by the cleverness of historical explanations or the eloquence of descriptive language” (Holly 1999: 1); contra Hegel, no text devoted to artworks can culminate in the wealth of universal remembrance (cf Pensky 2004: 188). Writing and imaging art history is the writing and imaging of a disaster, to borrow Blanchot’s phrase — the disaster of endless ends. As Blanchot (1986: 28) wrote: “I call disaster that which does not have the ultimate for a limit: it bears the ultimate away in the disaster”. If anything, this disaster is what ties together art history writing and photo-graphy, particularly as the latter figures in the work of Sally Mann, Berni Searle, and Ana Mendieta in and as a melancholy constellation.

According to Benjamin (1999: 462), “image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation”. And as Pensky (2004: 186) writes, “this constellation, in turn, forms an image” — “not in the intuitive sense of a visual image (which would be, in the field of art, a mosaic and not a montage), but precisely in the sense of a new, *necessary* interpretation of the fragments’ relationships with one another”. In the context of this article, the fragments Pensky speaks of would be the fragments that define the work of Mann, Searle, and Mendieta: all three return again and again to the fragmentary, the unassimilated and the heterogeneous (cf Pensky 2004: 195). In the work of Mann, Searle, and Mendieta identity is itself fragmentary at best. As such, it acquires a mournful tone; mournful even after the process of mourning has been done. Mann’s, Searle’s, and Mendieta’s photographic works time and again give visual expression to the fragmentary and heterogenous traces or remainders left over after the incomplete work of mourning has been done.

What is left over? What remains? It is the fragmentary or heterogenous image of the expressionless-sublime corpse.³ It is a visual image that resists visibility; ceaselessly challenges representation; interrupts the beautiful appearance of totality. As such, the corpse consistently compels us to rethink the conjunctions with which we aim to make or totalise meaning. The imageless image of the corpse thwarts every system and every representation; it is an emblematic trace, both present and absent, which questions our desire for cohesive selfhood and totality, undermining the integrity of both body and image (cf Schwenger 2000: 407).

If the corpse always remains in excess of representation (hence the malaise that the representation of art history is afflicted by), it seems necessary then to trace it self-reflexively: the telluric and uranic⁴ corpse in and of representation inevitably involves a meditation on representation — in Roland Barthes’s sense of re-presentation qua resurrection (cf Mitchell 2005: 9). As lack, the corpse tortures the claims to fullness that representation always makes; and as void, it opens up representation’s strange production of presence (cf Gumbrecht 2001).

In order to trace the strange, uncanny presence of the corpse — in order to locate the presence of absence (cf Runia 2006) — focus will firstly be placed on selected images from Mann's recent book of photographs *What remains* (2003), read in conjunction with Searle's series of self-portraits *Looking back* (1999), as well as her site-specific *A darker shade of light* (1999). Using the wet-collodian process, commonly practiced in nineteenth century photography, in order to create images that are at once painterly, illusionistic, weathered and photographic Mann's photographs of anonymous corpses dialectically supplement Searle's performative meditations on the precarious constructions of the self as other.⁵

Secondly, Searle's deconstructive self-portraits *Not quite white* (2000), in which the artist is smothered in white pigment, and *Waiting* (2003), in which the artist is caught floating in deep water, will be related to Mendieta's *Imagen de Yagul* (1973) and *Untitled (Creek)* (1974) respectively. Mendieta's photographic images feature the artist's own partially obscured body: in a grave and in water. What seems to be at stake in these photo- and performance-based works is the precarious, historical fixing of the fluctuating appearances and disappearances of the body and of the self.

Thirdly, I will reflect on Iranian-American Shirin Neshat's haunting photograph *Women without men* (2004), a multi-layered photograph of a woman floating in a river, which I interpret as a monad that crystallises past, present, and future. What joins the work of Mann, Searle, Mendieta, and Neshat is a remarkable sensitivity to the inevitable loss that accompanies the recording or representation of life in history.

The photograph as living corpse

The corpse or corpse-like body in both Mann's and Searle's work can be read as an allegory not only of the body as inevitably subject to decay and disappearance but also as an allegory of the photograph itself — as paradoxically entangled with both the desire for fixation and with transience (cf Bal 1999: 169f). According to Peter Schwenger (2000: 396), “[w]hen the image is that of a corpse, the photograph becomes ‘horrible’, it seems, largely because of its undecidability; it is ‘the living image of a dead thing’”.

Moreover, the photograph seems to be the most evocative medium with which and through which to think and practice art history writing as melancholy writing. This would be one way to grasp Benjamin's (1999: 507-530) absorptive “Little history of photography”, an essay that performs the writer's incredible melancholic ambivalence toward the past photographically recorded in black and white, light and dark. Moreover, in Benjamin's essay the photograph is read as a crime scene in a manner that prefigures Sally Mann's haunting photographs called *What remains*, of human bodies decomposing at a forensic study site. Bearing in mind that Mann's photographs may provide a way to think about art history as a process without an object, what follows is an attempt at entangling the technology of photography with the melancholy process of art history writing, both of which are haunted by images of and as death.

The skin of the body and the skin of the photograph (as image and as object, cf Mitchell 2005: xiii, Wood 2004: 371) ages: it creases, bruises, folds, and wrinkles (cf Bal 1999: 170, Cohen 2002: 105, Schoeman 2005a: 274). The metonymic fragility and activity of the skin of the corpse-like body and of the photograph are thus indexically enfolded with time — with complex memory processes; with absence and the fleetingness of presence; with distance and proximity; with desire and violence; with longing and loss.⁶ Marked by temporality and historicity, the corpse-like body in and of the photograph, as staged in the work of Mann and Searle, presents the viewer-reader-writer with the haunting presence of “evidence” that is always

already inadequate.⁷ This inadequacy bears on representation itself and, correlatively, tortures our sense of identity.

Walter Benjamin links the uncanny corpse (cf Fried 1987: 93) with what he calls “the expressionless”: “[T]he moment in which life is ‘petrified and as if spellbound in a single moment’” (Benjamin 1999: 340 qtd Felman 1999: 217). According to Benjamin (1996: 340), “[t]he expressionless is the critical violence which, while unable to separate semblance from essence in art, prevents them from mingling. It possesses this violence as a moral dictum”. Benjamin goes on to note that “the sublime violence” of the expressionless “interrupts expression”, shattering “the false, errant totality — the absolute totality” proffered “in all beautiful [or mythic, GS] semblance”. He writes dialectically: “Only the expressionless completes the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of a symbol” (Benjamin 1996: 340).

Moreover, Benjamin sees the corpse as the emblem par excellence of allegory. Allegory, in Benjamin’s view, interrupts or shatters the false appearance of totality embodied in the idealist-Romantic symbol, and as such it is intimately related to the sublime, imageless or bloodless⁸ violence of the expressionless (cf Menninghaus 1993: 169). The category of the expressionless and the figure of allegory may thus be conceptually enfolded as a means to evince the peculiar, seemingly paradoxical status of the photograph as “this wrecker of unitary being”, to cite Rosalind Krauss (1999: 290).

As a heterogeneous theoretical object (cf Krauss 1999: 295),⁹ or expressionless figure of allegory, the photograph presents the viewer with an irreducible aporia. It participates “in the structure of the trace, the index, and the stencil” (Krauss 1999: 290), all of which bear a “concrete, existential proximity to [their] meaning[s]” (van Alphen 1998: 104). As such, the photograph bespeaks past and present, absence and presence, visibility and invisibility, dead and alive, at one and the same time. Something must have been there in order for the photograph to be, to be seen by us, here and now. But that something is no longer there. In the instant in which the photograph is taken something has passed, and this something passes by both photographer and the future viewer of the photograph.¹⁰ Moreover, for the modern art historian, seen at least since Aby Warburg as bearing a resemblance to a photographer, this passing by characterises every imagistic constellation that attempts, but fails, to figure “unitary being” or exactitude. Georges Didi-Huberman (2003: 61) writes evocatively:

But what of this “exact” knowledge? Photography might be right about something (but what?), even as it falls short of what it leads one to believe by virtue of its tricks, points of view, and fabrications of beauty. Inversely, what exactly does it lead one to believe or imagine about that thing whose existence it nonetheless certifies? Another way to describe this paradox of evidence is to say that photography is a practice of facticity. Facticity is the double quality of that which is *in fact* (irrefutable, even if contingent) and that which is factitious. It is a paradox of mendacious irrefutability, as it were.

Barthes claims that all photographs, despite being absolutely unique, and “virtually regardless of subject matter, are potentially carriers of the *punctum* of time and death” (Fried 2005: 561), which prick us after the fact.¹¹ As Fried (2005: 560) observes, “something being past, being historical, cannot be perceived by the photographer or indeed by anyone else *in the present*. It is a guarantor of antitheatricity¹² [or absorption, GS] that comes to a photograph, that becomes visible in it, only after the fact, *après-coup*, in order to deliver the hurt, the prick, the wound, to future viewers”. As such, we have to be so absorbed in a photograph so as to be essentially blind to it — “in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes”, to cite Barthes (in Fried 2005: 555). Or as Kafka (qtd Fried 2005: 555) noted: “We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds”. Does this not have special bearing on photographs of corpses, or corpse-like bodies or, indeed, of photographs as living corpses?

And does this not have special bearing on art history as melancholy writing — as photo-graphy of dead things, which we return to again and again, in a thwarted attempt to drive them from our minds?

Dying light

Two photographs by Sally Mann seem to “theorise” the curious dialectic of photographing things in order to fix and drive the passage of time out of our minds. The title of her photograph *Last light* (1990) (Figure 1) itself conjures up “the inexorable passage of time” (Fried 2005: 561), and light.



Figure 1
Sally Mann, *Last light* (1990). Gelatin silver print.

Braided together, both the passage of time and of light relate to life and death. Bal (1999: 169) writes: “Light is not a given but a live being, a friend or an enemy, an ally or an opponent, an aid or an impediment, that lives in time”.¹³ But living in time also means dying in time. Furthermore, if light is the source of life it is also the source of a photograph: it is the capturing of light that produces a photograph. *Last light* thus speaks not only of the last light of the living being but also of the photograph itself; both may thus be allegorised as living corpses, and as such, they also have a special relationship with art history writing as a melancholy writing about things dead as well as alive.



Figure 2
Sally Mann, *What remains* (2000). Tritone photograph, dimensions unknown.

Yet what makes this dialectic of *Last light* particularly poignant or piercing is the fact that here it is early youth that is seen marked or stained by inevitable death. This becomes intensely clear when we read or view *Last light* in conjunction with an untitled photograph from Mann's most recent book *What remains* (Figure 2).

The latter photograph shows the blurred, erased or rubbed out face of a child¹⁴ — an anonymous, de-faced face that recalls similar faces in installations by Christian Boltanski. The androgynous child in *Last light*, seemingly poised on the borderline between innocent exhaustion and the violence of abuse, between intimacy and restraint, appears already latently present in the photograph, and vice versa. It is as if the face of the child in *What remains* has been magnified to such a degree in the photograph that he/she has been flattened or “worn to the thinness of [photographic, GS] paper” (Crane qtd Fried 1987: 93).

I am reminded here of Barthes's (2000: 96) evocation of a photograph of two little girls looking at an airplane: “They have their whole lives before them: but also they are dead (today), they are then *already* dead (yesterday)”. Like the two girls in Barthes's photograph, the two children in Mann's photographs are dead to the degree that they are merely stains or traces of life once lived — flat or thin as photographic paper, “dead for having been seen” (Dubois qtd Metz 2003: 140).¹⁵

Two more photographs from Mann's *What remains* enunciate a similar dialectic; both from the chapter “Matter lent” (Figures 3 & 4), both picturing corpses.



Figure 3

Sally Mann, *Matter lent* (2000). Tritone photograph, dimensions unknown.



Figure 4

Sally Mann, *Matter lent* (2000). Tritone photograph, dimensions unknown.

The corpse — or, more fittingly, still or stilled life — in both photographs has been erased. They are both expressionless ruins, discarded remains, only barely separable from the material surface of the photographic paper they have been indexed onto. The decomposing or torn bodies in these two photographs are present as well as absent to the viewer, too distant and too

proximate all at once.¹⁶ They have been reduced to discomfiting and defamiliarising traces of traces — scratched, stained, smeared, and besmirched in life as in death.

What we are left with, what remains, are these ultra-thin blurs of life that have all but merged with the ultra-thin surface of the photographic paper itself. It is in this regard that one might allegorise the photograph itself as corpse — creased, bruised, folded, and wrinkled. Ruined from the very beginning; ruined “from the moment of the first gaze” as Derrida (1993: 68) writes in a different context.

But the photograph is also a living corpse; for “the past that matters has a curiously living presence” (Cohen 95: 193). One might recall here de Man’s notion of the *prosopopeia*: “the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech” (de Man qtd Felman 1999: 217). That is to say, *prosopopeaic* speech attributes “consciousness and voice to an inanimate body”, a “voiceless cadaver” (Fuss 2003: 1). Of course, this is a supreme fiction, because dead objects cannot speak for themselves; as Bal (2002: 8) writes: “We surround it, or *frame* it, before we let it speak at all”. It is in our intersubjective interaction with dead objects that these objects speak back, thus participating, willingly or unwillingly,¹⁷ “in the production of meaning that [art historical] ‘analysis’ constitutes” (Bal 2002: 9).

My colleague Prof Suzanne Human has intriguingly suggested to me “that Aby Warburg provides an alternative to Barthes’ clichéd notion that photography is mortifying”. She notes that “[f]or Warburg it preserves and transmits the energy of past experiences”.¹⁸ Human is referring to Warburg’s notion of the “engram”, which he borrowed from Richard Semon. In his intellectual biography of Warburg, Gombrich (1986: 242) observes that “[a]ny event affecting living matter leaves a trace which Semon calls an ‘engram’. The potential energy conserved in this ‘engram’ may, under suitable conditions, be reactivated and discharged...”. According to Warburg, “[i]n the life of civilizations it is the *symbol* which corresponds to Semon’s ‘engram’. In the symbol — in the widest sense of the term — we find preserved those energies of which it is, itself, the result” (Gombrich 1986: 243).



Figure 5
Andres Serrano, *The morgue (Fatal meningitis II)*, 1992, Cibachrome, silicone, plexiglass, wood frame, 125.7 x 152.4 cm.

Hence Warburg’s notion of “cultural memory”, a concept Bal (1999: 66) takes recourse to in her discussion of Serrano’s *The morgue* series (1992) (Figures 5 & 6). She writes: “Instead of ‘influence’, the past is present in the present in the form of *traces*, diffuse memories. ... Cultural memory is collective yet [correlatively, GS] subjective by definition. This subjectivity is of crucial importance in this view, yet it does not lead to an individualist subjectivism”. Bal’s suggestion of a cultural memory that is “alive” in Serrano’s photographs relates well to

Warburg's vitalist, dynamic engram, as well as W J T Mitchell's (2006: 6) animistic notion of images "wanting — i.e., needing, demanding, and lacking".

Bearing in mind Benjamin's critical distinction between symbol and allegory, I propose a dialectical intertwining of Barthes's, but also Benjamin's allegorical, notion that photography is mortifying with Bal's suggestion that photographs are "epidermically" both dead and alive: they affect, touch, and change us as much as we affect, touch and change them. Images pain us, and vice versa. This "entangled mobility" (Bal 1999: 65) "puts the subject at correlative risk" (Bal 1999: 63). For Bal (1999: 66), "[t]he past lies just outside the grasp of the photograph, but its relationship to it is here for us to see". This means that the photograph implies memory as *activity* but also as loss (Bal 1999: 66); paradoxically it is precisely the latter that reactivates the former, mobilising the community to rejuvenate "the erased culture for a future in which it can finally come into existence" (Bal 1999: 74).¹⁹ Hence for Bal the "ageing" that is at work in the photograph qua corpse is entangled with the rejuvenating force of intersubjective remembrance, something which is also at stake in art history writing.²⁰



Figure 6

Andres Serrano (1950), *The morgue series (Rat poison suicide)* (1992). Cibachrome under perspex, 127.5 by 152.4 cm. Groningen: Groninger Museum.

Nietzsche (qtd Michaud 2004: 239) wrote: "To understand historically is to revive". One might say that this precarious, intersubjectively auto-biographical, historical revival is precisely what is at stake in Berni Searle's *A darker shade of light* (1999) — a series of digital prints featuring the artist's own body.

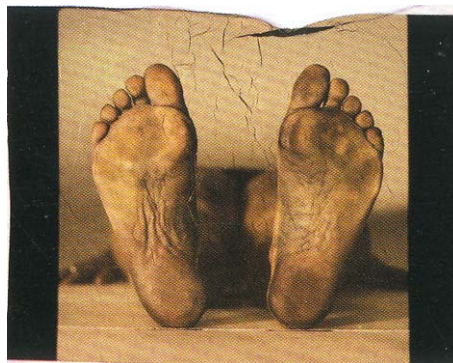


Figure 7

Berni Searle, *A darker shade of light* (1999). Digital print on backlit paper, dimensions unknown.

Discussing the bruising effect that the black Egyptian henna, metaphor for deep, precolonial African origins, has on Searle's body, Rory Bester (2003: 26) notes that "the henna on these especially intimate parts of her body introduces a sense of trauma to readings of Searle's body. And it is especially the stained soles of Searle's feet²¹ (Figure 7) that have 'an ambiguous reference to people who no longer exist'". Bester observes the resemblance between Searle's

images and Serrano's *The morgue* series, an observation rooted in the uncanny proximity that Searle's body has with a corpse. By extension, Searle's body also bears a resemblance to the flattened faces and corpses in Mann's *What remains*, where the viewer is faced with the seeming merger of the body with the thinness of the photographic paper — wrinkled, cracked, discoloured, bruised and folded.

But if *A darker shade of light* consists of a series of “flattened” self-portraits, all of which attempt to revive the precarious biographical historicity of the artist's personal past, a past characterised by the trauma and catastrophe of colonial dislocation and discolouration, this bears on every viewer's past. If Searle is tracing her own “that has been”, to cite Barthes (2000: 96), she also bruises, pierces, and wounds us with the knowledge of our own “that has been”. As Barthes's (2000: 97) observes poignantly: “[E]ach photograph always contains this imperious sign of my future death”, a sign that paradoxically hurts me after the fact, after seeing it. To revive our very personal past, at the same time that we attempt to revive our collective past, means to be always already bruised by loss.²² For just as Searle's body is absent even to herself, so we are absent to ourselves. Expressed slightly differently, “[t]hese ‘ghost voices’ [these speaking dead, GS] refuse reanimation *through* reanimation” (Fuss 2003: 24). They remain other to us.



Figure 8

Berni Searle, *Looking back* (1999). Colour photograph, glass, silicone, spices, dimensions unknown.

Benjamin (qtd Felman 1999: 217) writes: “I alone remain”. This seems a fitting epigraph or epitaph to Searle's *Looking back* (1999) (Figures 8 & 9) series of self-portraits, coloured and discoloured by spices, loaded and subtle metaphors for colonial traffic, that “are at once seductive and deadly, carrying with their opacity an implicit threat of suffocation and burial” (Smith in Bester 2003: 16). Presenting her self as part-body/part-corpse, Searle's expressionless face defaces or shatters our attempts at totalising her as well as ourselves.



Figure 9

Berni Searle, *Looking back* (1999). Colour photograph, glass, silicone, spices, dimensions unknown.

What remains is a “complexly dialectical theatrical strategy to achieve antitheatrical results” (Pippin 2005: 585) — that is, to allegorically create “a space of stillness” (de Botton 2005: 4) in a colonial and postcolonial world where “*even the dead* will not be safe” (Benjamin 2003: 391) from being deprived “of their singularity and distinction” (Fuss 2003: 27).²³

In the context of photography, here seen as *particularly* evocative of what is at stake in art history writing as melancholy writing, the emblem of the expressionless corpse is thus an entirely self-reflexive one. The expressionless, if speaking, corpse operates allegorically, as a figure for photography itself, a dead voice” (Fuss 2003: 30) that remains and returns to wound us (art history writers and readers), after the fact. For what haunts the practice of art history more than the realisation that even the most “truthful”, in other words, *photo-real*, recording of life in and of the historical past is marred by profound and inescapable loss, at the same time that it is “enlivened” by “imaginary ontologies” (Wall in Tumlir 2001: 115)?²⁴

Empty places

The emblematic trace of the corpse has been a recurring, and uncanny, figure in this dissertation — as an allegory of the written text or page of drawing; as an expression of the expressionless; and as the sober and sublime imagelessness of humanity’s ethical essence (cf Menninghaus 1993: 169).²⁵ Moreover, I’ve argued that as a figure which interrupts the false appearance of absolute totality (cf Benjamin 1996: 340; Menninghaus 1993: 169), the corpse is an emblem per excellence of allegory²⁶ — a figure with an absence or emptiness at its origin and at its end (cf Marin 1995: 40). As such, this figure of absence and emptiness seems to literally embody the absence and emptiness that is to be found at the heart of art history writing as melancholy writing.

But if absence or emptiness marks the origin and the end of the corpse as expressionless and as allegory, representations of corpses are transformed into meta-representations. An image of death has an unnameable absence or emptiness at its heart; and in lieu of something being there, the image reverts to auto-representation. Images of death, which often take the shape of meta-images, lay bare the process whereby enunciation is denegated at the moment in which enunciation takes place (cf Marin 1995: 26f). An image of death is an impossible image; it is an image of the imageless, a saying of the unsayable. As Louis Marin (1995: 84) writes in his meditation on Poussin’s *Arcadian shepherds (Et in Arcadia ego)*: “For we know all too well that the cogito of death, like my death, is unsayable”.²⁷ But death, as the guarantor of representation,²⁸ tortures all representation, and perhaps, most tellingly, art history representation, from the start.

Previously I referred to photographic images of death by Sally Mann and Berni Searle as self-reflexive images. Marked by temporality and historicity, the corpse-like body in and of the photograph, as staged in the work of Mann and Searle, presents the viewer-reader-writer with the haunting presence of ‘evidence’ that is always already inadequate. This inadequacy bears on representation itself (perhaps especially art history representation) and, correlatively, tortures our sense of identity. The corpse-like figures in Mann’s and Searle’s photographs appear to be “worn to the thinness of [photographic, GS] paper” (Crane qtd Fried 1987: 93). The photographic image of the cadaver is thus itself cadaver-like: “creased, bruised, folded, and wrinkled”; “expressionless ruin, discarded remain[der]”; flattened death (cf Fried 2005: 561).²⁹

I wish to extend this reading of the photograph of the corpse as itself corpse-like, in order to address the absorptive “aesthetics of disappearance” at play in select images by Ana Mendieta and Berni Searle. To this end, I will focus on the ambiguous interlacing of photography and

performance — ambiguous because of the proximity between theatricality and antitheatricality, visibility and invisibility in both spheres. In this regard, Michael Fried's (2005) identification of an "unconscious" desire to overcome theatricality — putting oneself on show — by theatrical means in Roland Barthes' meditation on photography proves fruitful when read adjacent to performance theorist Peggy Phelan's suspicion of visibility.

According to Fried (2005: 561), "something being past, being historical, cannot be perceived by the photographer or indeed by anyone else *in the present*. It is a guarantor of antitheatricality [or absorption, GS] that comes to a photograph, that becomes visible in it, only after the fact, *après-coup*, in order to deliver the hurt, the prick, the wound, to future viewers". For Fried (2005: 546), the sting of time and death is not *shown* to the beholder by the photographer, "for whom it does not exist"; rather the beholder sees it only after the fact, after having turned away from, or closed his or her eyes to, the visible.³⁰ Similarly, instead of a fetishism of visibility, Phelan proposes "a possibility of being or becoming 'unmarked', an 'active vanishing' that 'refus[es] ... the pay-off of visibility'" (Smith in Phelan 2003: 293). For Phelan, transience and mortality are fundamental to the experience of embodiment; as dematerialisation is to materiality and invisibility is to visibility.



Figure 10

Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), *Imagen de Yagul (Image from Yagul)* (1973). Lifetime colour photograph, 50.8 by 33.7 cm. Collection Hans Breder.

Theatricality and antitheatricality, visibility and invisibility, materiality and immateriality consistently mark Mendieta's and Searle's images — both artists foregrounding the female body as the site of violence (cf Rogoff 2000: 125). Mendieta's *Imagen de Yagul* (1973) (Figure 10) coupled with Searle's *Not quite white* (2000) (Figure 11), makes this apparent.

In Mendieta's image the body of the artist is present in its absence (cf Runia 2006: 1), partially visible in its invisibility; both absence and invisibility generating meaning (cf Damisch 1994: 312). This is an image of a performance of disappearance in which Mendieta laid her body, partially obscured by flowers, in a Mexican tomb. The actual performance is not visible; its time is lost to us except as a photographic trace. If Mendieta is tracing the performance of

her “that has been”, to cite Barthes (2000: 96), she also bruises, pierces, and wounds us with the knowledge of our own “that has been”.



Figure 11
Berni Searle, *Not quite white* (2000). Billboard image, dimensions unknown.

Likewise, in the photograph by Searle we are faced with an after-image of the “performance” of the artist as other — as not quite white; neither quite dead nor wholly alive. Coloured and discoloured by white pigment, Searle’s partially obscured self-image carries with it a “threat of suffocation and burial” (Smith in Bester 2003: 16) that recalls the mimicking or rehearsal of burial and disappearance in Mendieta’s image. Searle is absent to herself, absent to the precarious biographical historicity of her personal past, and she is absent to us; she is visible only in her invisibility. As such, “she becomes ‘us’ while becoming ‘it’” (Bal 1994: 315). What remains is a “complexly dialectical theatrical strategy to achieve antitheatrical results” (Pippin 2005: 585) — the beholder seeing without having been shown fully.

Both Mendieta’s and Searle’s “staged” or “performed” images of violence and death are self-reflexive images: images that stage their own processes of coming to be, by reflecting on the processes whereby the body ceases to be, or whereby the lived body is transformed into a thing-body (cf Fried 2002: 197). Images of the body present in its absence, images of the body in the process of disappearing or transformation reflect on their own dialectics of fixity and transience. It is as though they visualise what is essentially invisible to us: our own thing-bodies (cf Fried 2005: 197). As “theoretical objects” that think themselves,³¹ these self-reflexive images of death are deeply paradoxical. They are images “of what died yesterday and remains alive today”, images “of what will live always, despite everything that annihilates us today” (Mondzain 2005: 2001). As such it is these images that most vividly thematise the technology of art history writing as melancholy writing.



Figure 12
Francesco Traini (1321-1363), *The triumph of death* (c 1340). Fresco. Pisa, Camposanto.

Time the Destroyer

And yet, “living always” also translates as “dying always”; it means never ceasing to die. A vivid thematisation of this dialectics of ceasing and never ceasing may be seen in Francesco Traini’s (documented 1321-63) fourteenth century mural, *The triumph of death* (c. 1340) (Figure 12).

Situated in the Campo Santo cemetery in Pisa, Traini’s mural flanks the burial ground. A flowing narrative that culminates in the three open graves at the bottom left of the picture, which reveal the thing-body in successive stages of decay, Traini’s painted reminder of death in life also includes in the narrative what is pertinently absent in pictures of death: the stench of rotting flesh. The viewer of *The triumph of death* beholds this stench in the faces of humans and animals alike, both of which are clearly horrified and petrified by the horrific sight and stench of human remains (Figure 13).



Figure 13
Francesco Traini, *The triumph of death* (detail).



Figure 14
Adolph Menzel (1815-1905), *Two dead soldiers laid out on straw* (1866). Pencil and watercolour, 18 by 27 cm. Berlin: Kupferstichkabinett

The stench of death, which would have been present in the burial ground in the courtyard, thus sticks to the painting, contaminating it (cf Bal 1994: 314 & Bal 2000). It is as though the smell of rotting flesh assists the actual decay or ruin of the image, over time. Thus the painting

of death is transformed into a body rotting with time — a body composed in its decomposition.³² What Fried writes with regards to Adolph Menzel's Bohemia watercolours, *Two dead soldiers laid out on straw* (1866) (Figure 14) and *Two dead soldiers in a barn* (1866) (Figure 15), may hold true here as well. By way of a process of empathic seeing or projection,³³ we are as if transported into the decaying image of death, an image that now figures our own imminent deaths — albeit abstractly (cf Fried 2002: 202).³⁴

But images of “disfigured and decayed human bodies” (Fried 2002: 202) are images of absence as well as presence, of presence in absence, of visibility in invisibility. If we project ourselves into them we project ourselves into an “irremediable void” of “absolute solitude” (Kristeva 1989: 189) — something Freud (1988: 369) links to the uncanny. We project ourselves hopelessly into the deathly silence of our own future graves. In the process images of death are allegorically transformed into burial sites — like the burial site in Jeff Wall's composite photograph *The flooded grave* — that reflect on their own processes of coming to be: the death and disappearance of the body; the emptying out of place in the past and in the future.



Figure 15

Adolph Menzel, *Two dead soldiers in a barn* (1866). Pencil and watercolour, 18.6 by 27.3 cm. Berlin: Kupferstichkabinett

It is in this sense that one can say: time, as “duration in traces” (Marin 1995: 69), sticks abjectly to the image in and of art history.

Self-reflexive images or metapictures of death, like Jeff Wall's *The flooded grave* (2001) (Figure 15), make present something that is essentially absent or invisible: the hole of death in the past and in the future. Wall's seamless montage of an open grave, with sea water and sea life at the bottom,³⁵ leaves something undisclosed, “something that cannot be seen in the viewing of the world [or work] but can be experienced or sensed — sensed as unseen” (Wall in conversation with Rawlinson 2006: 14), some time in the future. Without fully seeing, we sense our own imminent deaths in the flooded grave of the image.

The image of absent and present death in a cemetery, which roots us to the past, thus operates like a memory of the future (cf Krapp 2004: 32); the photograph “is a prophecy in reverse: like Cassandra, but eyes fixed on the past” (Barthes qtd Prosser 2005: 49).³⁶

What matters here, in terms of the transformation of art history writing into melancholy writing, is as Marin (1995: 69) writes with reference to *Et in arcadia ego*: “Now that you have encountered the signs of mortality, you can no longer escape them; you have been condemned to the sphere of memory and history”. In other words, the art historical absorption in images of death, images in and of the past, translates as a potentially dialectical immersion in the death of the life that is yet to come. Art history writing becomes melancholy writing because, even as it looks toward the redemptive or reanimative future, it is condemned by the distortions of the past.



Figure 16
Jeff Wall (1946), *The flooded grave* (1998-2000). Transparency in lightbox, 228.5 by 282 cm. Berlin: Friedrich Christian Flick Collection

“Like a body under water focused on breathing through a straw”³⁷

The condemnation to the sphere of memory and history, the sphere of distortion, is perfectly bodied forth in images of death in water. But, as Benjamin (1999: 303) writes: “Water as the chaotic element of life does not threaten here in desolate waves that sink a man; rather, it threatens in the enigmatic calm that lets him go to his ruin”.

Recalling the enigmatically calm water that ambiguously ruins Felix in Kentridge’s *Felix in exile* (1994), water as the calm, distorted and distorting origin³⁸ is what binds Mendieta’s *Untitled (Creek)* (1974)³⁹ (Figure 18) to Searle’s lithographs *Waiting* (2003) (Figures 19 & 20), both recalling video images of the body disappearing in water by Bill Viola — as in, for example, *The crossing* (1996) (Figure 17).



Figure 17
Bill Viola (1951-), *The crossing* (1996). Installation for video projection, dimensions unknown.

The analogy is productive because of the dialectics of visibility and invisibility, appearance and disappearance, death and transfiguration, self and the loss of self that animates Viola's video projection.



Figure 18

Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Creek)* (1974). Still from Super-8 colour, silent film, 3.min. 30 sec.

In Mendieta's image, the naked body of the artist seen from above, back turned to us and facing away, is barely visible, present only as a Barthesian, photographic and dynamic trace of "that has been" (Barthes 2000: 96). What we encounter in the image is the suggestion of the artist's body once there during a performance, now apparently eternally drifting away in time — lost to us. Similar to Mann's ultra-thin images of death, in which the cadaver seemingly merges with paper, in Mendieta's image the naked body of the artist appears paper thin — figure inseparable from mottled surface.



Figure 19

Berni Searle, *Waiting #3* (2003). Lithograph on BFK-Rives watercolour paper, 66 by 50.5 cm.

It is an enigmatic image of memory and of history, of deterritorialisation (cf Rogoff 2000: 125), mutually personal and social, summoning forth an intense feeling of the drift of time and the flattening of death. Mendieta's image haunts us with a sense of time slipping away, at the precise moment that we attempt to freeze it. It is precisely the image's hovering between

movement and stillness that animates our recognition that time unfailingly thwarts our desire to fix and possess life.⁴⁰

Echoing Mendieta's image, Searle's lithographs present us with the body of the artist, seen from below, submerged in deep, calm, crystal clear water, gracefully floating or hovering as if in time — *in vivo* and *in vitro*. What we see is a Baroque-like fragment of a body, without gravity and without consciousness,⁴¹ brilliantly coloured in flowing and folded red and white cloth,⁴² seemingly carried away by water.

That it proves to be the body of the artist, carried away and deterritorialised by the stream flowing between two irreconcilable places, Morocco and Spain, only furthers our sense that aesthetics fails time and again, at the moment in which it attempts to sublimate time.



Figure 20
Berni Searle, *Waiting #4* (2003). Lithograph on BFK-Rives watercolour paper, 66 by 50.5 cm.



Figure 21
Shirin Neshat (1957-), *Women without men (Untitled #1)* (2004). C-print, 102.9 by 165.1 cm.

We are faced with the beauty of disappearance enfolded with an encounter with the sublime horror of being left alone in the oblivion of death. Searle's image thus recalls another image, strikingly conjured up in T S Eliot's *The waste land* (1922): that of shoring fragments against our ruins.

Mendieta's and Searle's faceless and expressionless images of Opheliaesque death, both beautiful and violent, recall Iranian-American Shirin Neshat's haunting *Women without men (Untitled #1)* (2004) (Figure 20), an image that vividly cites and relocates John Millais's Pre-Raphaelite painting *Ophelia* (1851-51).⁴³

The body of a woman in a white shroud (perhaps the body of the artist herself) floats in Neshat's absorbing and absorptive image, illuminated by diffused light streaming in from the left, like the light in so many images by Rembrandt and Vermeer. The surface of the image, inseparable from the surface of the water in which the body floats, is composed of multiple points of view (cf Bal 1999), or what Heinrich Theissing⁴⁴ calls the entirety of time, made present in an image as multiple layers or beds of time. Every pictorial fragment of the image, every dimmed or heightened reflection seems to denote a different space of time. In this sense, the body of the woman seems to float in different beds of time — of past, present and future — represented as multiple reflections within reflections. It is as if the image monadically crystallises “the entire span of historical time within it” (Pensky 2004: 193).

The body of the woman in Neshat's photograph, floating as if in the mist of time, appears to be transcending the gravity of catastrophe. But the ambiguous title of the work *Women without men*, poses several questions relating to transcendence: are women without men transfigured by this absence, liberated from the daily violence inflicted by men on women, free in the manner of spirits;⁴⁵ or are women without men cast adrift in limbo, without life and without redemption?⁴⁶ It seems as if liberation in Neshat's image is not complete, for the violence of men is tellingly present in its absence. Neshat's image may thus be read as an apocalyptic metapicture: one that allegorically makes present the painful absences and upheavals that worry and torture our conceptions of life lived in history.

Similarly, the images of lifeless bodies in Mendieta's and Searle's work hover between absence and presence, redemption and non-redemption, transcendence and non-transcendence, death and living on.⁴⁷ They are also images of women without men; women simultaneously liberated from, and lost to the violent presence of men and the disaster of time; women both visible and invisible. Never fully escaping this double bind, they are expressionless, essentially antitheatrical, images of loss and death in which we recognise ourselves (cf Benjamin 2003: 391). Mann's, Searle's, Mendieta's, and finally Neshat's “apocalyptic photographs” (cf Stochita 1999: 190), visualise “the problem of the possibilities and limits of meaning”, as well as “the threat of finding oneself at the point of irrecoverable loss and empty silence” as Dominick LaCapra (1996: 66) writes with reference to the representation of the Holocaust. As such, they are images which *weakly* “brush history against the grain” (Benjamin 2003: 392).

Notes

1. According to Barbara Maria Stafford (1985: 332), *skiagraphia* or “shadow painting” “depicts the appearance of shading on the surface of form”. She writes: “This chiaroscuro technique, said to have been invented by the Athenian Apollodorus (late 5 B.C.) utilizes both the “fading out” (by gradation) and the “laying on” (by building up) of shades of color. ... Chiaroscuro, as the fragmenting of unitary, solid, homogeneous surfaces into juxtaposed and contrasting atomistic particles of lumen et umbrae, is a metaphor for the destruction of the intactness of pure gold, luminous Being, health, the Beautiful, by the spotted inlay, dark becoming, blemished disease, and the variegated grotesque” (Stafford 1985: 323f).
2. Writing about Benjamin, Bloch, Kracauer and Adorno, Schwartz (2005: xii) notes: “They were aware that they were inevitably thinking, to some extent, in the dark. They responded by allowing this darkness of an unknowable present to expand into a space of extraordinary speculative richness”. Similarly, Breton (1969: 299) writes: “I have discovered clarity as worthless. Working in darkness, I

- have discovered lightning”. Elkins (1996: 206) describes all seeing as taking place in the dark: “Perhaps ordinary vision is less like a brightly lit sky with one blinding spot in it than like the night sky filled with stars. Maybe we see only little spots against a field of darkness. Once in a great while there may be a flash of lightning and we see everything, but then darkness returns. My vision, even at its most acute, is probably not much better than the points of the stars against their invisible field of black”. Cf Ernst Bloch’s phrase “im Dunkel des gelebten Augenblicks (in the darkness of the lived moment)” (in Benjamin 1999: 393).
3. The philosophers Burke and Kant defined the sublime in opposition to beauty. The latter is seen as small, clear, smooth, balanced, tranquil, and contained; whilst the former is seen as massive, obscure, rugged, unstable, chaotic, and formless. Beauty is peaceful; the sublime is threatening and painful. Beauty links with the life force; whilst the sublime links with death. In my reading of the corpse as expressionless-sublime, I link Burke’s and Kant’s, as well as Nietzsche’s, definitions of the sublime with Benjamin’s Judaic-mystical notion of the expressionless, which, in contrast to the sublime as fluid, freezes and petrifies — interrupting the semblance of totality, to reveal humanity’s imageless, ethical essence. For more on Benjamin’s notion of the expressionless, see Menninghaus 1993: 166-79.
 4. Hanssen (1998: 94) speaks of “telluric matter and materiality” and “uranic spirit and spirituality”. Whether seen from a theological or philosophical perspective, the corpse seems to be an emblem of both.
 5. Searle is a “coloured” South African artist, whose work oftentimes confronts the uneasy entanglement of geographical, political, and personal identity.
 6. Cf Bal (1999: 30) on “the image’s skin” as an “occasion for what Deleuze termed *texturology*: a theory or philosophy of the surface of the skin ... of texture as the site of point of view”. I discuss Richter’s painting *Reader*, in conjunction with Christensen’s Polaroid *The passing of time*, with reference to the surface of an image as skin in chapter one. In chapter three I refer to the depiction of corpses in Kentridge’s work as allegories of the material page of drawing, skins stained by touch.
 7. Cf Didi-Huberman (2003: 60): “What everyone in photography called evidence, Baudelaire was already calling belief. He went further yet, characterizing this belief as adulterous, imbecile, narcissistic, obscene, as modern Posturing and Fatuity, even as blind — and especially as revenge, industry’s imbecilic revenge on art. The great, tireless quarrel between art and science”.
 8. Cf Derrida’s (1992: 62) uneasiness with Benjamin’s recourse to the category of divine violence as bloodless (*vis-à-vis* the bloodiness of state-sanctioned violence), given the terrifying proximity between this divine violence and the violence of the Nazi gas chambers.
 9. Damisch’s (Bois *et al* 1998: 7) understanding of the theoretical object as a detail that “raises questions”, suggests that Bal’s (2001b: 84-7) notion of the “navel detail”, which borrows from Naomi Schor’s *Reading in detail* (1987), may be registered as a theoretical object. Bal prefers the concept of “navel detail” over Barthes’s concept of the *punctum* — as it is less violent. However, violence and death is precisely what is at stake in my reading of the photograph as living corpse, and thus I opt to retain Barthes’s concept as a potential theoretical object — the “unexpected detail”, which Fried’s (2005: 545) links “to the all-important current of antitheatrical thought and pictorial practice”. In fact, Fried already drew attention to this “unexpected detail” in his book *Realism, writing, disfiguration*. Citing a well-known passage from Stephen Crane’s *The red badge of courage*, Fried (1987: 94) speaks of the “unexpected detail” of the dead soldier’s shoes, which “had been worn to the thinness of writing paper”. Fried’s absorptive-allegorical equation of the horizontality of the corpse with the horizontality of the page of writing has bearing on my own absorptive-allegorical equation of the photograph with the corpse, and with art history writing.
 10. Didi-Huberman (2003: 66) speaks of a photograph as “a hallucinatory retention of a fleeting present”.
 11. Cf Freud’s notion of *Nachträglichkeit* or taking cognisance of something retroactively. Bal (1999) takes recourse to Freud’s concept when discussing “preposterous history”: putting behind what came before.
 12. This relates to Fried’s (2005: 546) ongoing concern with the antitheatrical tradition, which goes back to Diderot, wherein a fundamental distinction is claimed “between seeing and being shown”. He writes: “The *punctum*, we might say, is *seen* by Barthes but not because it has been *shown* to him by the photographer, for whom it does not exist”. Fried argues that Barthes’s book would suggest that photography is essentially theatrical, and yet he points out that this does not imply the literalism that he decried in his 1967 essay “Art and objecthood”. According to Fried, Barthes’s argument

- suggests a link with the antitheatrical tradition in writing and representation, though he himself was not able to take cognisance of it. At the conclusion of his essay on Barthes's *punctum*, Fried himself notes that any attempt at a *radical* antitheatricality in photography is bound to fail, given the theatricality inherent to the medium. Similarly, Fried has argued that Courbet's attempt at radical antitheatricality also failed — though failure here should by no means be interpreted as failure to achieve the effect of absorption *tout court*. Amounting almost to a rebuke of Fried's claims, Hannah Arendt (in Silverman 2000: 130) wrote: "Nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a *spectator*." However, Fried's argument is structured around the acknowledgment that the denial of spectatorship *is a supreme fiction*, one that nevertheless grants us a glimpse of authenticity. The denial of the beholder dates back to Renaissance art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with its reliance on the representational frame, which provided the beholder "with a view into a parallel reality that does not acknowledge the presence of the spectator in the world in front of the frame" (Ndalianis 2004: 157). Damisch (1994) argues, contrary to the popular claim that the beholder of a Renaissance picture was situated at a fixed position outside of the picture, that the Renaissance beholder was situated inside the picture. This suggestion is not dissimilar to Fried's (1990) identification of a "quasi-corporeal merger" of the painter with his painting in Courbet's work, as an attempt at radical antitheatricality. Damisch regards the Renaissance painting as a stage set or theatrical mechanism; but instead of being an external spectator the Renaissance beholder is seen as a participant inside the painting as painted theatre.
13. Elsewhere, Bal (2001: 65) speaks of light as "a typical parergon".
 14. Cf Fried's (2005: 561) translation of the French word "gommé", a word Barthes uses in *Camera lucida* in relation to the *punctum* in contemporary photographs. The English edition to the book translates it as "blurred" but Fried notes that it might be better translated as "erased" or "rubbed out".
 15. Christian Metz (2003: 140) notes that "[p]hotography is linked with death in many *different* ways. The most immediate and explicit is the social practice of keeping photographs in memory of loved beings who are no longer alive. But there is another real death which each of us undergoes every day, as each day we draw nearer to our own death. Even when the person photographed is still living, that moment when she or he *was* has forever vanished. Strictly speaking, the person who *has been photographed* — not the total person, who is an affect of time — is dead: 'dead for having been seen', as Dubois says in another context. Photography is the mirror, more faithful than any actual mirror, in which we witness at every age, our own aging. The actual mirror accompanies us through time, thoughtfully and treacherously; it changes with us, so that we appear not to change". With "the ever-present association of the photograph with death" (Dexter 2004: 17), it would perhaps be fitting to associate the photograph with the still life.
 16. Cf Baecker (2003: 18): "[D]istinctions between distance and closeness must endlessly mirror themselves, with each pole constantly reappearing in the other: if one approaches closeness, motives are found that refer to distance; approaching distance, one nevertheless remains aware of the near-at-hand material techniques that make it visible".
 17. Fuss (2003: 25 & 26) warns: "[P]lease do not assume that what the dead really want is to return to the living. [...] These dead are fundamentally irrecoverable; bringing them back to life would entail nothing less than a violent occupation and displacement that would kill them of all over again". Cf Jessica Evans who in discussing the "tragic" photographic self-portrait of Jo Spence dying of cancer makes the following observations: "She seems to make death meaningful and thus restore to it a sense of its being part of a life. But in making this image was she really finding meaning from the void of death, the place where you cannot be? Or was she pointing to the inadequacy in the end of metaphors of 'control' which are based on a fantasy prevalent in much of our culture — that death can be made good, that we can get something positive out of it, and so avoid the terror, anger and confusion that death evokes?"
 18. Personal correspondence, 14 January 2005.
 19. Cf Fried (2005: 560) on the "future viewers that Barthes evidently craves". My colleague Michael Herbst has reminded me of Derrida's suggestion that a letter can never be received by its addressee. At the same time he reminded me of Žižek's dialectical rereading of this. The latter suggests that whilst this letter may not be received by its initial addressee, it will always arrive at some future addressee — perhaps unforeseen by the sender at the time. This also recalls Fried's (2005: 560) reading of Barthes's notion of the *punctum*, which cannot be seen by either the photographer or by anyone *in the present*, but always pierces us after the fact.

20. Similarly, in his essay “On the image of Proust” Benjamin (1999: 244) speaks of the dialectic between ageing and remembrance. He writes: “This is the work of *la mémoire involontaire*, the rejuvenating force which is a match for the inexorable process of aging. When that which has been is reflected in the dewy fresh ‘instant’ [of the photograph, GS], a painful shock of rejuvenation pulls it together once more...”. He notes: “Proust [who, Benjamin implies, writes in “photographic” images, GS] has brought off the monstrous feat of letting the whole world age a lifetime in an instant. But this very concentration, in which things that normally just fade and slumber are consumed in a [photographic, GS] flash, is called rejuvenation”. Cf also Missac (1995: 118) on “the flash, perhaps, with which one takes photographs at night”. The important point to bear in mind here is that for Benjamin mortification is always already *allegorically* dialectical: it always implies its opposite. One might phrase this Benjaminian dialectic as follows: “We can either train on it [the photograph] the withering gaze of the baroque allegorist who further immobilizes an already petrified landscape; or else we can contemplate it with the longing eyes of the ‘angel of history’ who yearns to piece the débris together” (Wohlfarth qtd Cohen 1995: 20n8). In my view Benjamin’s philosophy compels us to do both (cf Geyer-Ryan 1994). Though Benjamin radically distinguishes allegory from symbol (the former signifying transience, the latter eternity), his allegorical-dialectical notion of mortification/rejuvenation bears similarities with Warburg’s engrammatic notion of the mnemonic symbol. Furthermore, if for Barthes the photograph is “literally an emanation of the referent”, it would seem to have the *possibility* of being freighted with “the energy of past experiences”, however melancholy, ghostly or cloudy. Barthes (qtd Cohen 1995: 71) writes: “In the realm of the imaginary, the Photograph ... represents this very subtle moment where, to tell the truth, I am neither a subject nor object, but rather a subject who feels itself become object: I then live a micro-experience of death (of parenthesis): I become truly a ghost”. But would this invest the photograph with what Marx characterised as “the ghostly objectivity that ideological products possess” (Cohen 1995: 23)? Most certainly, and yet perhaps one could take recourse to Benjamin’s “allying [of] the theoretical procedure releasing the positive potential of [ghostly, GS] ideological projections with what he called ‘awakening’” (Cohen 1995: 25). In terms of this allegorical/dialectical/alchemical transformation of ideological “detritus into an index of vital social energy” (Cohen 1995: 25), Benjamin again sounds similar to Warburg. Both Benjamin and Warburg seek to “awaken” from the phantasmagoric ideology or myth coiling around cultural artefacts, detritus or fossils — such as the alluring photographs in our family albums — though both attempts are ambiguous and even ambivalent. The ambiguous/ambivalent way in which Benjamin (1999: 507-530) calls for an “awakening” from the alluring aura of the bourgeois photograph and bourgeois past in his essay “Little history of photography” is a prime example. So also the ambiguous/ambivalent language of desire in his *The arcades project* (cf Stoljar 1996). But one should bear in mind here that Benjamin, contra Adorno, inflects ambiguity with dialectics: “[A]mbiguity is the imagistic appearance of dialectics...” (Benjamin qtd Cohen 1995: 48) — that is, an imagistic dialectics of “unevenness” (Althusser qtd Cohen 1995: 49) and mobile contradiction negated in Hegelian dialectics. Thus the mythic ambiguity or phantasmagoric ideology of the (fleeting) image of the past is dialectically turned inside out, but not unequivocally dissolved. And yet Benjamin nevertheless holds out for a univocal end to mythic ambiguity, as in his notions of the expressionless and the messianic caesura of homogenous time. This contradiction is inherent to his critico-theoretical production, which some have termed Janus-faced. See also Gombrich (1986) on Warburg’s ambiguous/ambivalent excavation of/desire for myth, madness, superstition. Cf Castle (1995) and chapter one on the dialectical entanglement of reason or enlightenment and madness or fate. Cf also Eco (2004) on the deep-rooted ambivalence in the discourse of the Enlightenment: between, say, faith in Reason and melancholy sorrow for the transience of life, between Beauty (qua lucidity) and the Sublime (qua obscurity).
21. This particular photograph of the soles of Searle’s feet also bears a remarkable resemblance to Mantegna’s *The dead Christ* (after 1466) — both works suggesting a dialectics of death and resurrection. In my article “Felix in exile: William Kentridge’s self-reflexive allegories of art and history” (Schoeman 2004: 1-56) I draw a similar connection between Mantegna’s image and the image of a corpse in Kentridge’s *Felix in exile*. Here one can add Rembrandt’s *Anatomy lesson of Dr Joan Deyman* (1658) to the register of image as dialectical death and resurrection.
22. And yet, as Agamben (1999: 153) writes: “What cannot be saved is what was, the past as such. But what is saved is what never was, something new”.

23. Cf Flusser (2000: 82): “The task of a philosophy of photography is to reflect upon this possibility of freedom — and thus its significance — in a world dominated by apparatuses; to reflect upon the way in which, despite everything, it is possible for human beings to give significance to their lives in the face of the chance necessity of death. Such a philosophy is necessary because it is the only form of revolution left to us”.
24. Or articulated slightly differently: “Fiction, too, in its own terms, is a statement about the world, and perhaps the history of art could be described as the history of fiction” (Belting 2003: 146). Belting’s comment reminds me of Wallace Stevens’s adage, from his *Adagia*: “The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly” (in Ríos 1994: 99).
25. Cf Benjamin (1999: 132): “Moral character is a thing without expression [*ein Ausdrucksloses*].” Cf Hanssen 1998: 95.
2. Benjamin (1998: 218) writes: “[T]he corpse becomes quite simply the pre-eminent emblematic property.”
27. Similarly, Bal (1994: 307) writes: “[T]he most frightening aspect of life and the most urgent motivation for, yet challenge to, representation: death. Death is a challenge to representation, for it is a moment that nobody can describe, an event that nobody can escape, a process that nobody can narrate. As Foucault said: One cannot say, ‘I am dead’.”
28. If one is to follow Hans Belting. See Wood 2004: 371.
29. Mondzain (2005: 2003) writes that, originating in the Catholic belief in the veracity of the Holy Shroud and the Holy Face, “[p]hotography is the modern tool of transubstantiation par excellence”; in it “the cadaver becomes a sign of life, the shadow becomes a source of light, the invisible is promoted to visibility, and art is one with nature.” And yet, by the same stroke, she writes: “The figure of death cannot reveal itself in the negative to become, miraculously, the figure of life. It can only lose itself in another figure, that of the death of death, in that other night of which Blanchot wrote: ‘It is the death that cannot be found.’”
30. “[W]e have to be so absorbed in a photograph so as to be essentially blind to it — ‘in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes’”, to cite Fried (2005: 555) citing Barthes.
31. On the theoretical object, the hypo-icon, the hyper-icon, and metapainting, cf Bal 1999, 2001 & 2002; Bois 1995; Bois *et al* 1998; Mitchell 1985; Stoichita 1997.
32. Cf Elkins (1999: 32): “Yet if every picture is a picture of the body, and if ‘distortion’ is an adequate word for the means of representation, then pictures are continuous refusals and repressions of the body: they are ways of controlling the body by fixing an image of what it is not. The positive doctrines of the pictured body, in that respect, are nothing more than shores against its ruins, and the task of a history of the represented body is to say what has not been shown, and to explain why it is absent”.
33. Juliet Koss (2006: 139) writes of the initial conception of empathy or *Einfühlung* by Robert Vischer: “This reciprocal experience of exchange and transformation — a solitary, one-on-one experience — created, as it were, both viewer and object, destabilizing the identity of the former while animating the latter.” Koss associates a critique of the notion of empathy as bourgeois, with amongst others Wilhelm Worringer and Bertolt Brecht, and one can add here Walter Benjamin’s vehement criticism of empathy as bourgeois interiorisation. Nevertheless, simply categorising empathy as bourgeois in the twenty-first century seems regressive. Today there appears to be little hope for the mobilisation of the masses by anti-solitary art; rather, it can be argued that the experience of art (visual or otherwise) is by definition a solitary experience, and all the more intense for it. Solitude need not immediately translate as asocial, isolated, or divorced.
34. Elkins (1999) draws a distinction between two kinds of pictures of the body: pictures of pain and pictures of metamorphosis; the latter appeals to the mind, whilst the former causes a visceral reaction. Traini’s painting pictures the visceral reaction caused by the stench of death, but the sensation it causes in the beholder remains an intellectual or abstract one. The same can be argued of Mendieta’s and Searle’s images of death.
35. In an interview with Jan Tumlir (2001: 216), Wall observes: “I knew that red anemone and purple urchins were common to the area. The anemone, urchins, crabs, and starfish were shot first, since they are slower-moving creatures and I could use them as a sort of base layer for the composition. They’re slow, but they move a lot, so each day the situation was quite different. It took maybe a week and a half to get enough pictures of these creatures and to move to the quicker species, the fish. Fish are very hard to

- control, so I made a point of trying to shoot almost every fish I have in every conceivable position in the tank, in order to make sure I have a good selection for the montage. Despite that, I still had to go back several times during the computer work to shoot additions.” Wall’s image was constructed as a digital montage from around 75 different images.
36. Schlegel somewhere speaks of the historian as a prophet with eyes fixed on the past.
 37. Viola 2002: 209.
 38. In his interview with Jan Tumlir (2001: 116), Wall observes, “everything is distorted when seen through water.”
 39. Still from Super-8 colour, silent film, 3 min. 30 sec. The work was executed in San Felipe, Mexico.
 40. Cf Amelia Jones (2003: 259): “But the individual photograph paradoxically points to a telescoping series of unfulfilled desires: our desire for, desire to know, desire to have, desire to make. We desire these things in order to make ourselves feel coherent, independent of others, and those closer to transcendence and immortality. However, the photograph, documenting the ‘that has been,’ also ultimately ends up indicating nothing other than our mortality.”
 41. In this regard, Searle’s body has escaped the bungling force of gravity and consciousness decried by the pre-eminent German Romantic and melancholic, Heinrich von Kleist.
 42. Searle’s colour use tellingly recalls Andres Serrano’s: both set the “red of death’s violence” (Marin 1993: 180) off against the transcendental purity of white. Mendieta’s repeated use of the colour red — in several *Siluetas* works — has clear violent undertones; as much as her use of white flowers in a *Siluetas* executed at Old Man’s Creek in Iowa (1977), conjures a sense of innocence and purity.
 43. The title of Neshat’s work is derived from the Iranian author Shahrmush Parsipur’s 1989 novel *Women without men*. Parsipur’s novel follows the interwoven destinies of five women — the unmarried teacher Mahdokht, the young prostitute Zarin, the two unmarried friends Faizeh and Munis, and finally the no longer young woman of the middle classes, Farrokhlaqa — as they arrive, by many different paths, to live in a garden on the outskirts of Tehran. All the stories highlight sexuality or the lack of it, ignorance of it and fear of it, on taboos and suppression. They are about how the control of female sexuality by society and, on a more intimate level, by men and not least other women becomes a telling parameter in the exercise of power. Neshat has produced a video work with the same title, which was shown at the ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum in Denmark, between March and May of 2008. The video work consists of altogether five large video installations - *Makdokht, Zarin, Faizeh, Munis* and *Farokh Legha*, which can be experienced in five specially arranged gallery installations. The video work lasts altogether for 1 hour 15 minutes. Neshat is currently directing a feature length film also entitled *Women without men*.
 44. As cited by Yalçın (2004: 182f) in his book *Anwesende Abwesenheit*.
 45. Benjamin (1998: 217) writes: “And if it is in death that the spirit becomes free, in the manner of spirits, it is not until then that the body too comes properly into its own.”
 46. Dostoyevsky experienced the dead body in Holbein’s *Dead Christ* as a terrible image without redemption or forgiveness. Cf Kristeva 1989: 188f.
 47. As in Aby Warburg’s *Nachleben*, cf Didi-Huberman (2005: 5).

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