

'Death, Squared'

In the era of post-photography, of the crisis of the index, of authenticity, the dead have come back to ground the image, to operate as guarantors. Sometimes, that's how it seems.

During the Iraq War, the American military authorities did their utmost to suppress the circulation of images of the dead or wounded – even the sight of a flag-draped coffin snapped in an aircraft hangar in 2004 caused consternation. Images taken by photojournalists had to find other routes than newspapers and journals, and spilt over into galleries, artists' books, anthologies of suppressed images. Thomas Hirschhorn produced 'The Incommensurable' (2008), an eighteen metre long banner of bodies ruined by violence and deemed too graphic for Western news outlets. The photojournalist Michael Kamber chased down tales of censorship, credentials revoked and images seized, and produced the vast anthology *Photojournalists on War: The Untold Stories from Iraq* (2013). Images of the war wounded or soldiers' dead bodies or as formal or informal records of torture remain intensely contested, the struggle between disclosure and suppression fought out in the public sphere.

In medicine, too, death has been progressively sequestered from normal experience, cloistered behind machine ensembles, disarticulated specialisms and the discourse of end-of-life care pathways. Photographers have rebelled against what Philippe Ariès in *The Hour of Our Death* called 'invisible death', 'the absolutely new type of dying' that emerges in the latter half of the twentieth century. In *Morgue Work*, begun in 1972, Jeffrey Silverthorne went back repeatedly over twenty years trying to capture the image of the place, trying to understand. Eventually, he stated: 'There is too much life here, an absolute overload, and now I feel that if I can understand, there is something wrong with me.' Since then, Andres Serrano's *Morgue* series (1994) or Sally Mann's *What Remains* (2003) – the latter of which included images of bodies at a research facility left to decompose in various environmental conditions – have courted inevitable controversy. And the impetus is still about 'lifting the veil of secrecy', as Danish photographer Cathrine Ertmann put it in 2013 in comments on her own study of the morgue, *About Dying*.

These days, archives and collections of post-mortem photography, once considered gruesome or morbid Victoriana, such as the Burns Archive in New York or the Thanatos Archive in Washington State, now issue beautiful editions and anthologies. Original images are much sought after and collected. Meanwhile, the practice of post-mortem photography has returned, particularly as an encouraged part of the mourning process in neo-natal deaths. In his monumental study *The Work of the Dead*, a cultural history of mortal remains, Walter Laqueur emphasizes that any history of the modern dead needs to understand also the *longue durée*, the way patterns of behaviour and emotion towards the dead recur across centuries, across millennia.

Many of these contexts come to mind when considering Edgar Martins' exploration of the photographic and forensic archive of murders and suicides of the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences in Portugal.

The photographic index as trace of violent death. The ethics of re-framing medical records as objects of art. What rights to the body, to the archive, does the camera eye possess? What faces, what weapons, what documents, what texts? What to disclose, what to withhold? At the same time, Martins folds the series back on itself to interrogate the association of photography, death and authenticity, steadily tugging at these links that have been reinforced by dominant theories of photography, since at least Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes. Both think of the photograph as always already a *memento mori*. Martins offers a rigorous investigation of the photographic archive itself, a project that lifts the veil, that moves the viewer greatly, but also demands that you must always conceptualize just what it is that is being revealed. To rethink the index.

Imagine it: you discover the archive of an august institution, stretching back well over 100 years, overlooked, a little ragged at the edges, the bureaucratic rationality of its ordering systems slowly collapsing through age and benign neglect. Scientific research is not always interested in its own history; it is tilted towards the future. It is still an active centre, with more evidence arriving all the time, a ceaseless flow of objects piling up, an unfolding history of violence. Here is an archive that embodies the iron law of entropy, the tendency towards disorder, the undoing of structure. The age of the archive also means that it is an inadvertent history of photography itself. Early reports include sketches or drawings, then hand-drawn details on photographs, then a mournful acceleration through types of plate and celluloid film, boxes of negatives, rolls of undeveloped film, polaroids. Martins re-photographs photographs, overexposes and fogs the record. Later on, there are mobile phones and digital cameras, bagged for evidence. The archive hints at the end of film: death, squared.

What is collected there freezes the scene of murder and suicide, boxes up autopsy reports, 'crime scene' photographs, and physical evidence – clothes, weapons used, physical clues, and suicide notes. Investigators document the implements used, the wounds knives or guns deliver, explore the tensions improvised ligatures and ropes can bear, all to determine the method employed, to fix the date and time of death, to calculate the probability of murder, suicide, accidental death.

The existence of the Institute's archive, most of which is centralised in Lisbon, is an instantiation of what Michel Foucault called 'the birth of the clinic', a new distribution of the visible and the invisible, the normal and the pathological in medicine. Anatomy, dissection, and the opening up of the corpse to search for the abnormality were crucial to this modern project. Murder has always been a matter for the state; suicide, though, is more enigmatic. Foucault (who had as a young man attempted suicide) wrote in his *Introduction to the History of Sexuality* that in this new 'biopolitical' dispensation the act of suicide 'was one of the first astonishments of a society in which political power had assigned itself the task of administering life.' The 'suicide' – a relatively new term for the eighteenth century championed by Enlightenment *savants* like Voltaire because it avoided the Christian moralizing of 'self-murderer' – was an abnormal figure, an anomaly, an unacceptable escape from the compulsion to live. The ancients had formalized the conditions where this was an honourable and noble act. The Greeks used terms like *autocheir*, 'to act with one's own hand', or *authenthes*,

'self-acting', the latter term rooted in notions of the *authentic*. Socrates chose to drink hemlock over exile: he is still celebrated for that principled stand. In Christian and Enlightenment thought, *Selbstmord*, self-murder, was a moral and criminal act. Those who survived their self-murder could be prosecuted, property seized. In England, suicides were still buried at crossroads and staked through the heart to pin their unquiet spirit to the bitter earth into the early nineteenth century. It remained a technically illegal act, an offence more to the state than God, until 1961. For the new sciences of life, overcoming these superstitions, suicide was now an anomaly that had to be documented, researched, broken open, archived.

When formative sociologist Emile Durkheim turned his attention to suicide, he was insistent that as a *social* problem the analyst needed to 'forget the individual' and seek the 'real laws, allowing us to attempt a methodical classification of types of suicide'. Chapters followed on Egotistic Suicide, Altruistic Suicide, Anomic Suicide. Strict adherence to dispassionate abstraction would 'solve' how to approach this classification: 'The victim's acts which at first seem to express only his personal temperament are really the supplement and prolongation of a social condition which they express externally.' But there is a kind of madness in the alleged rigour of this science of abstraction, the suppression of the human story for the actuarial calculations of life and death. Suicide becomes one more tabular index for the Statistical Society, which counts death by abstract number, divided and subdivided by category.

The elegance of the Martins project, re-archiving this archive, is that his serial images reveal the *archive fever* that undoes the apparently neutral, objective project of the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences. What emotions underpin the collection of evidence, the careful coiling of ropes, wires and cables involved in such violent deaths? What kind of personal decisions were made by investigators about the significance of a particular death scene? Can you order and contain such misery? Does the photograph, the diagram, the autopsy report, ever get to the motivation of a single case? Of course not. The files seem to open only on to bureaucracy's structural exile, institutionally, from these private emotional storms.

Martins' collaborators at the Institute seemed to understand this, however, providing him with access to old files, evidence rooms, helping him sift and re-order materials, connecting up with different information systems across the police and criminal justice system to try to 'solve' the enigmas generated by the archiving process itself. Martins observed techniques and methods of ongoing investigations, examined material from 'live' deaths, even shadowed autopsies. But it is interesting that even as this ordering and sifting proceeded, the scientific record seemed to turn back into its forerunner, the cabinet of curiosities, operating on weird, occult logics, less objective record and more like one of Joseph Cornell's Surrealist box of tricks. In one place, a bowler hat with a gigantic bullet hole; elsewhere the skull with an apparently matching wound. What exorbitant death was this? What story does it tell? Age has untethered these objects from their taxonomic place in the archive, leaving the relation of the pair of objects as an enigma. The *archons*, the patriarchs who police the archive and dream of total knowledge, lose their grip, experience the terror of the unreadable artefact, the trace of the unknowable death that has eluded them.

In this sly undoing of the archival urge, Martins at once acknowledges his debt to the New Topographical School of photography but also works to unravel its impulse to catalogue. Since his first book, *Black Holes and Other Inconsistencies* (2002), Martins has evoked Bernd and Hilla Becher and the other taxonomic objectivists they inspired (Thomas Struth, Jörg Sasse, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff). Martins, too, uses frontal, rectilinear, tripod-mounted, large-format photographs that adopt a language of neutral documentation, tapping into the power and authority of the photograph's 'reality-effect'. Yet his images of airport aprons or roadside barriers in *When Light Casts no Shadow* (2008), the long exposures of beaches at night (*The Accidental Theorist* (2007)), the technological environments of hydro-electric power generating plants in *Time Machine* (2011) or the antiseptic labs of the European Space Agency in *The Rehearsal of Space and the Poetic Impossibility to Manage the Infinite* (2014) imperceptibly shift the real and hyper-real over into the sur-real. These liminal spaces are at once documents and artificial constructs, floating between fact and fiction, places where bland neutrality somehow dead-pan their way into the fanciful and eerie, oneiric images that seem like stills from an imagined film. 'In the delicate weight of these landscapes, human perception seems to enter a different register. It is as if everything expresses contingency, as if space and time are about to simmer and disperse... The precise minimal image offers a canvas for imaginative projection but it can also be unsettling', Martins has observed in conversation with Gerry Badger. Disarmingly, Martins has said that the technical precision and microscopic detail of these of these photographs are in the end about the foundational *difficulty* the photograph has to convey any ideas at all.

The *Siloquies and soliloquies on death, life and other interludes* project, whose series of images can expand and contract according to exhibition space, seems to be a culmination of this simultaneous assertion and undermining of the impulse to catalogue, this tension between the objective and subjective. A panoply of different devices are employed across the series, with sub-sets of series within series that explore and exhaust one tactic before moving on to another. There are also new kinds of manipulation of the image, which seem designed to meet the ethical and aesthetic challenges of documenting such a place.

For me, this is clearest in the suicide letters. In his *Notes on Suicide*, Simon Critchley observes that notes 'are failed attempts in the sense that the writer is communicating a failure to communicate, expressing the desire to give up in one last attempt at expression.' The text of a note should be the kernel of the enigma, the last words impossibly freighted with final, determining meaning: the source code of the secret. Yet so often, they only deflate, deflect or *forever* defer meaning – by definition, no further corrections or clarifications can be made.

In this sub-set of his investigations of the archive, Martins departs most strongly from objective documentation, manipulating the photographic index of the letters. At times, he digitally erases the text of the letter; at times, he copies or retains the folds and creases of the suicide note only, preserving the material support, the damaged armature of the message, but not the writing itself. In a whole sub-set of images, he photographs only the edges of the

letters, end on, in a beautiful equipoise between disclosure and the maintenance of the secret. You can see that there is an address, but never become the addressee. These images remind me forcefully of those Johannes Vermeer paintings of women reading letters in angled light from the windows, or the envelope perpetually arrested in the act of delivery between maid and mistress, caught in the light, trapped by the eye, but remaining forever sealed. These are paintings about the birth of modern subjectivity, the private life, an interiority carved out by reading and writing. Martins evokes the other edge of this historical subject, its final end, the last words, the words with which the subject empties out existence.

Sometimes, though, Martins does gift us the secret of the letter, messages that carry a tremendous burden of awe – but also speak with abruptness, and irritation, and pettiness, and glorious banality, and gnomic severity. These photographs may be the ones from his exhaustive project that Martins chooses to restrict, or not to exhibit or re-circulate (here, surely, for understandable reasons the ethical quandary of the photo-documentarist reaches its apotheosis). But this series-outside-the-series gives the project its own secret reserve, its withheldness, which rightly marks out the limits and provocations of such an investigation.

Three other interventions into the project challenge the objectivist impulse, from different angles. Martins photographs evocative landscapes emptied of people, which the captions reveal are beach-heads favoured by suicides, or the olive bayous of the Alentejo region of Portugal, which in 2005 had the ominous privilege of recording the highest suicide rates per capita in the world. We stare at these landscapes fervently, less in the search for clues than to try to discern whether violence can leave some kind of magical trace in the image, like the ghosts Spiritualists used to conjure out wet collodion negatives in the 1870s. Like Joel Sternfeld's calm, bland aftermath images of murder scenes in *On This Site*, they also recall Sally Mann's investigation of whether the blood-soaked history of the landscape of the American South can be tricked into re-appearing to the lens. These are not just acts of preservation or remembrance, but of photographic invocation and transformation.

A second intervention is the insertion of rogue 'found' photographs into the series, puzzling insertions of landscapes or ambiguous images that seem to range through the history of photography – landscapes, stereoscopic views, vintage newspaper photographs, odd theatrical and enigmatic visions. These have been sourced from flea markets, auctions of odd job lots, family albums. There are also images that have drifted in from parallel projects, such as material from newspaper archives. These seem to work to derail the over-coherence any series or display or exhibition or book inevitably imposes, fighting to keep the grid of meaning open, defying the dread determinism of the forensic files.

The final intervention is of a face – here, at last, amidst the catalogues and series of mere objects and documents of death scenes. But although garbed and coiffed in different ways, it is the *same face* Martins presents, over and over, the digitally manipulated intrusion of a young man he had photographed for a project he had produced in collaboration with MIND in Barnet day centre patients in 2000, but who soon after died by suicide and brought that particular project to a sudden end. The way the face bleeds

through the paper, re-appearing again and again, suggests a specific traumatic undertow that lurks inside objective seriality, a haunting that is the mark of an ethical demand that cannot ever be resolved, even decades later.

Suicide is often just an impulsive gesture, the urgent yet entirely insular imperative to end an anguish that feels, in that precise moment, unendurable. It is an exorbitant act, with no quarter, which can't be snatched back. Yet even if a purely self-directed act, suicide is always *received* as a message sent somewhere else, an accusation directed *at* someone, since the act is inevitably conducted in a network of family kinships and extended friendships. The intention behind the act (as if that could ever be singly disentangled) is forever closed to those who survive. They are haunted by unanswered questions, unfinished business. This makes suicide a singularly poor mode of communication – and perhaps that's why so many cultures imagine suicides to have unquiet spirits, compelled to attempt to finish an incomplete or misunderstood message.

Whatever was destined, suicide ends up in *destinerrance*. This was the term the French philosopher Jacques Derrida coined that combines notions of destination and destiny with error or errancy. Every missive, every letter, he suggested in *La Carte Postale*, risks ending up in the wrong place, being misinterpreted, arriving at the wrong addressee, because it must use iterable language, and therefore the context of any given utterance can never be finally identified or exhaustively delimited. Every written letter becomes a *dead letter* too, gets stuck in the *dead letter office*, no return to sender, no addressee found, because of the inherent quality of writing to detach from its author, to circulate and continue to signify long after death. Derrida plays with the idea of the post-card – the text open, unsealed, free for all to read, yet closed, encrypted, intended for one addressee – as the emblem of writing at once always disclosive yet closed and enigmatic. Every note, not just a suicide letter, is foundationally readable yet ultimately unreadable.

This provides a framework, I think, for Martins' project in the archive of the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences in Portugal. These bureaucratic documents – police records, crime scene photographs, medical reports, coroner's conclusions – are destined for narrow medico-legal purposes. Cause of death is crucial because it usually also determines the nature and extent of insurance pay-outs (was it murder? Was it suicide? Clauses about suicide often nullify life-insurance claims). Statistical offices of health and hygiene can issue taxonomies of death, calculate suicide and murder rates in actuarial tables, speculate on policies that might remedy or reduce deaths, organize this evidence in the service of the biopolitical state.

Yet the signs, traces and marks of a morgue archive have an inherent *destinerrance*. This neglected, chaotic, overflowing archive comes to the attention of the photographer Edgar Martins. The interventions of serial photography do not merely reproduce the archive, but profoundly re-cast its significations, set it off on a different set of destinies and destinations. His re-presentation of the archive in exhibitions and artist's book multiplies addressees, opening it up far beyond the inherently closed world of the experts cloistered in the morgue. The photographic index, in the end, does not inhere in truth, but in the *destinerrances* it creates. This is what lives on after the end, the unexpected trajectories, the strange sympathies these images

conjure from perfect strangers, the viewers, us. These errant responses are what justify the project.

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