

Invisible Worlds: The Interplay of Photography, Death, and Commemoration

Slide 2 - Dust Image

Throughout this presentation I will be discussing my interdisciplinary research based practice to explore themes of memory, ritual, commemoration and grief. This presentation will also delve into the transformative potential of visual media in reshaping perceptions and practices related to commemoration and disposal. My practise is predominately photography led working with organic materials including domestic dust which I refer to in this presentation as *residue*. The process of sourcing, collecting and assembling domestic dust is a personal ritual connecting me to the mystery of past events. The dust I collect serves as a language to communicate nebulous levels of reality that are not directly accessible to us. Dust is an organic substance multiplying, thriving and propagating. It is the physical manifestation of human presence and in my practice acts as a multilayered symbol of embodied memory. The philosopher Michael Marder states that dust is a 'breath of matter on the brink of spirit, both solid and yet insubstantial, an element as much of air as it is earth.' If dust speaks of our physical manifestation, then the invisible collective consciousness draws on metaphysical themes, implying unison between the material and invisible realms.

Slide 3 - Residue Studies image

Residue refers to the physical and immaterial effects that are embedded within the images I produce. The etymology of the Latin word *residuum* translates as, *something remaining*.

Slide 4 - N.S Quote

In *The Senses are Still*, anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis writes 'dust is the perceptual waste material formed by the historical-cultural repression of sensory experience and memory'. *Residue* also symbolises the psychological burden that lives under our skin in the form of repression and represents a transitional state before returning to the earth. In some cultures, the act of scattering dust and ashes symbolise *letting go*. Releasing the energy that once was and dissipating it into the environment.

Slide 5 - House Clearances image

Community rituals and disposal practices of the deceased, are steeped in cultural and spiritual significance. They often entail a domestic, interior ritual, where corners in homes become altars and everyday, mundane objects become charged with symbolic significance to grieve and remember. Ritual allows the living to move forward and photography is a powerful tool which acts as a mediator to experience death, mourning and ritual processes.

Slide 6 - Dane Strom image

In some cultures, such as Mexico, material objects and photographs act as conduits for the living to communicate with the dead. The domestic space extends to the cemetery and acts as a site for collective memory.

Slide 7 - Marcel reyes-cortez quote

In his essay *Maintaining the Dead in the Lives of the Living: Material Culture and Photography in the Cemeteries of Mexico City*, Marcel Reyes-Cortez writes 'Social visibility and social recognition are central to the memory-making processes and practices mourners adopt to negotiate their grief and bridge the gap between the visible and invisible worlds of the dead'. Anthropologist Alfred Gell believed that objects have agency as well as people, existing on multiple levels simultaneously.

Slide 8 - Marcel reyes cortez image

The photograph can aid the living to recall, interact, maintain and extend lived experiences to imagine a present and a future. It can assist mourners to humanise the dead and support a reconciliation with grief. Photographs are imbued with ethereal significance and treated more than a material representation of the dead. The materiality of domestic objects, along with the photograph, are crucial memory making tools for mourners to extend relationships

with the dead. The photograph does not replace the living but it overcomes the absence of the visible self. Cortez also states that 'mourners in Mexico City have appropriated the dead and exported them to rituals that challenge the invisibility and privacy of the spaces dedicated to them'. Photography allows us to make sense of the world and our experiences beyond what is visible. Photography not only allows us to see what is present within an image but also what is absent.

Slide 9 - House clearances image

I've always been drawn to empty domestic spaces void of people in my practice. Before starting my house clearances project in 2010, I always had an interest in photographing my friends and families homes. I enjoyed observing clusters of objects and trinkets, imagining stories in my head of how the objects ended up there.

Slide 9 - House clearances image

The houses I photographed in Essex during 2010 were mostly from the 1970's and owned by the local council, with colourful patterned carpets and faded wallpaper. None of the photographs in this series are staged. For me, this was important because I was trying to capture a sense of liminal space, one that is in between habitual use and in a state of transition.

Slide 10 - House Clearances image

I photographed objects and furniture exactly as they had been left behind, uninterrupted. In most cases the owner or tenant of the property had passed away or elderly individuals had moved to a care home, leaving only traces of human occupation behind. Orphaned objects and discarded furniture compose themselves as melancholy still lifes, depicting a subtle tension between object and space. Indeed it is the very absence of human activity that provokes our curiosity and intrigue to the mystery of past events.

Slide 11 - House Clearances image

I was only ever given snippets of information about the tenants of the properties I photographed. The majority of the council houses had a melancholic presence about them. Sometimes I felt a heavy energy as I moved from room to room with my camera. In this series of photographs I was ultimately trying to capture a feeling of absence.

Slide 12 - House Clearances image

Domestic settings and personalised interior spaces become emotional realms of mourning and remembrance.

Slide 14 - Riverbank, India image

Largely in Western societies, strategies are formed to distance ourselves from death, whereas in many non-Western cultures, death is not considered a taboo subject and mostly discussed freely. In India, Hindus and Buddhists believe that death is not the end of life - but a transition into some other state. In Varanasi also known as the 'City of Death' the body is taken to the river Ganges and blessed with holy water before cremation on the riverbanks. The focus is less on the physical body and more on the release of the spirit from its earthly vessel.

Slide 14 - Agnes Denes image 1

Agnes Denes, a Hungarian-American artist whose concept based work emerged in the 1960's created Rice/Tree/Burial in 1968 a ritualistic event exploring themes of environmental issues and human concerns.

Slide 15 - Agnes Denes image 2

Denes states that 'I planted rice to represent life - initiation and growth, chained trees to indicate interference with life and natural processes - mutation, variation, decay and death and buried haiku poetry to symbolise the idea or concept - the abstract, the absolute and creation itself.

Slide 17 - Agnes Denes quote

Denes describes the act of giving and receiving from the earth, 'on one hand indicates time passing, returning to the soil, disintegration and transformation but also acts as a metaphor for human intelligence and transcendence through the communication of ideas to our future descendants.'

Slide 18 - Dust Cave image

In my photographic series Dust Cave, I wanted to explore the intervention of man-made and natural materials to draw on our reciprocal relationship with the environment. Along with naturally occurring dust, I have also added huge clumps of domestic dust interlaced with shrubbery, as it takes on new life forms in an abandoned caravan. The references of decay and disgust aim to question ideas of our existence and own mortality in a Western society that often tries to avoid the subject of death.

Slide 19 - Veda Austin image

Veda Austin has spent ten years researching and photographing water in its state of creation using a method called crystallography. In *The Language of Water* she discusses how significant salt is within the body and that when somebody dies, the water evaporates but the salt, which contains an electrical charge remains. The salt in her words is *immortal*. In some cultures the body is the vessel of the self, containing the soul or spirit. Although the

spirit has no definable physical substance or accessible scientific proof, it is still believed across many cultures that its existence has long been held as the essence of one's being. An entity that lies within all of us and which some argue survives death.

Slide 20 - Sally Mann image

In Sally Mann's *Body Farm* series, Mann visited the University of Tennessee's forensic anthropology research facility, to photograph bodies in various stages of decomposition. Mann's photographs are an attempt to examine the decaying human form in a way that brings a haunting beauty to the process of bodily decay. Although difficult to look at, these images allow us to experience a sense of death through viewing the photographic image. So what kind of *residue* do we return to? What's in a person? Mann's work makes me contemplate these sorts of questions.

Slide 21 - Dust image

'In the beginning and without end' is the title of a book chapter taken from 'Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection' by Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva. In this still and moving image work, my aim was to manipulate the dust to place emphasis on the material in motion, whilst a crumpled heap of dust sits in the corner adopting anthropomorphic qualities. This adds a performative dimension to the photographs, creating shapes, movement and traces that can be photographed. Grotesque material, such as domestic dirt, contextualises these artworks in the realm of abject art. The concept of abjection has been extensively explored by Kristeva meaning, 'the state of being cast off'. The abject does not respect boundaries creating a threatening disturbance between order, rules and what is appropriate for public display. In one way the juxtaposition between the dust in motion and the inanimate pile of dust symbolises life and death.

This series was photographed in several different community village hall spaces in Essex. At the time I was researching Henri Lefebvre's theories of 'The Production of Space' which

became important in the methodology to produce this work. Lefebvre highlights the confusion between mental, physical and social spaces, resulting in ideas of spatial disruption and feelings of uncanniness. Presence is also highlighted through the absence of sound in the architecture I am photographing; using silence to amplify a sense of boundless space. Drawing on metaphysical themes, modern day quantum physics is proving that the true essence of all that we see, hear, touch, taste and smell is made up of an invisible substance that permeates everything there is – including our own physical bodies. With this in mind, the dust is used as a representation of our physical bodies, as our true self or soul is invisible. The word spirit comes from the Latin word *spiritus*, originally meaning a breath or gust of wind. The Sanskrit word for *atman* often translates as *essence* or *breath*, which is the air and the air which is the soul. Like silence, dust is often an invisible substance that is woven through our bodily movements within space just like the very air we breathe.

Slide 22 - Do we need a final farewell?

I listened to a podcast recently on BBC Radio 4 titled '*Do we need a final farewell?*' It discussed how the way we grieve is changing and the sharp rise of the *no fuss* funeral, with 1 in 5 people opting for a direct cremation last year. The podcast also stated that only a quarter of people in the UK now want a religious funeral, this suggests that traditional mourning rituals have become largely abandoned, throwing away the idea of religious beliefs, with individuals having more agency in how they pass over and grieve. Another aspect to consider is the rise of AI driven grief tech where our loved ones never leave us and remain in the digital afterlife as ghost chatbots. Artificial intelligence companies including *You - Only Virtual* map the dynamics of human communication and gesture, repurposing data to create virtual versions of individuals, so when they pass away, the flow of communication can continue with their loved ones. The company's motto is 'you never have to say goodbye'.

Slide 23 - Reflective question

How will this disconnection from the materiality of death impact the way we grieve and remember? The photographic object connects us to our senses and is important in sustaining its privileged position as a conduit for memory.

Slide 24 - Hallam quote

In *Death, Memory and Material Culture* Elizabeth Hallam states that 'The interplay of what is made visible and what is buried, that which is retained and that which is lost in the material cultures of death, has an impact in terms of possibilities of memory and forgetting'.

Slide 25 - Reflective questions

What impact will AI driven grief tech have in our ability to recall and process our experiences of death? And how will AI shift our attitudes to the changing culture of death?

Slide 26 - Granny Jackson's Dead image

Granny Jackson's Dead, an immersive theatre performance and research project by Manchester Metropolitan University and Big Telly Theatre Company, is a collaborative project exploring how tradition, research and technology come together to question themes of grief, loss and commemoration.

Slide 27 - Granny Jackson's Dead quote

An article by Manchester Met summarises the performance stating 'we aimed to explore what grief technology might do if we let it into our lives. It questioned if we can or should use technology in a healthy way to help us mourn and remember'.

Slide 28 - Dust under the microscope

To speculate on our future, by 2050, Western burial processes are likely to undergo significant transformations, driven by advancements in technology, shifts in cultural attitudes toward death, and the growing emphasis on sustainability. Virtual cemeteries, AI grief support and mind and body preservation are just some of the ways we might reimagine death in the future. Death could be approached not just as a moment of loss but as a part of a continuous cycle, where the physical body, digital legacy, and even consciousness play ongoing roles in the lives of the living. The concept of what it means to be "alive" or "dead" could blur, with technology creating new ways to interact with memories and even digital remnants of the deceased.

Slide 29 - The Hereafter Institute

Gabriel Barcia-Colombo explores what happens to our digital presence and preservation of our digital souls, in his 2016 immersive VR installation titled *The Hereafter Institute*. How does the integration of photographic images into both physical and digital death rituals challenge the traditional material boundaries between life and death, and what does this mean for our understanding of the afterlife?

Slide 30 - Jay Owens quote

In the publication *Dust - The world in a trillion particles*, Jay Owens writes 'What if dust could be sentient, like the animated soot particles in the film *Spirited Away* by Studio Ghibli'. A film that speaks of death and grief, combining animism and magical realism featuring animal gods and elemental spirits acting seen and unseen. These dust beings could have different personalities, behaviours, and interactions with their environment and people around them. Sentient dust might be curious about the world or playful like soot spirits interacting with other dust particles, clinging to objects and people. Over time, sentient dust could develop to form bonds with humans and objects, communicating through movement.

Slide 31 - Robin Wall Kimmerer quote + mossy jumper image

To quote Robin Wall Kimmerer in her publication *Braiding Sweetgrass* 'each person, human or no, is bound to every other in a reciprocal relationship'.

Slide 32 - Final reflective questions

How will the material absence of the body in death rituals reshape our relationship and connection with death and commemoration? Can photographic images in death rituals serve as a bridge between the material and the digital, and how does this intersection shape our understanding of presence and absence in mourning?

I would like to finish with a quote by Michael Marder:

Slide 33 - Micahel Marder quote

'Dust crosses the boundaries between the living and the dead, plant and animal matter, the earth and the sky, the inside and the outside, you and the world - *for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.*'

Slide 34 - Thank you slide

Laura Blight