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The Faceless Portrait: Anonymity and Identity in Andres Serrano's *The Morgue*

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Abstract

This article examines Andres Serrano's *The Morgue* in relation to Barthes's esteemed assertion that in photographing the corpse, the living presence of the corpse is apparent. I suggest, however, that the photograph could certify the presence of the corpse as 'thing' without creating in the viewer an impression of the corpse as 'living'. My article aims to outline the perimeters of this alternative way of conceptualising post-mortem photographs, firstly by reconsidering Barthes's notion of the 'living' and the 'thing' in photography. In the context of Barthes's hypothesis, I will draw on the tradition of Victorian death portraits, specifically the way in which they reflect a human desire to preserve life through photography rather than commemorate death. These analyses will form the basis for a close reading of the photographed corpse outside the concept of a 'living' thing, as seen in Andres Serrano's 1992 photographic series *The Morgue*. I will ultimately assert that Serrano's stylistic choices in terms of cropping and titling, alongside manipulation of the viewing gaze and the consequent removal of subjectivity, redefine our relationship with the idea of the corpse, at the same time radicalising our expectations of post-mortem photography.

Key Words: death portrait, post-mortem photography, Andres Serrano, Barthes, forensic gaze

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes outlines the relationship between photography and death, noting that a photograph captures the death of a moment and, consequently, the death of the subject's living presence in that moment.¹ In the instance where the subject does not have a living presence, Barthes offered:

In photography, the presence of the thing (at a certain past moment) is never metaphoric; and in the case of animated beings, their life as well, except in the case of photographing corpses; and even so: if the photograph then becomes horrible, it is because it certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is alive, as *corpse*: it is the living image of a dead thing.²

Barthes argues for a literal presence in the photograph; a 'living image', where the photograph can 'certify' life, an act that occurs between photograph and spectator rather than subject and photographer. The 'living image', therefore, is the image produced in the viewer by the photograph. In referring to the image as 'living' and the corpse as a 'dead thing', he reveals that for the corpse, that which certifies life in the photograph can only ever be the absence of life. Yet Barthes does not discuss the possibility that a photograph could certify the presence of the corpse as mere 'thing,' that is, a corpse devoid of the impression of 'life' for the spectator.

This article aims to outline the perimeters of this alternative way of conceptualising the photography of corpses, firstly by scrutinizing Barthes's notion of the 'living' and the 'thing' in photography. The phenomenon of death portraiture will then be examined in line with Barthes's thinking, specifically how death portraiture reflects the human desire to use photography to preserve life rather than commemorate death. These analyses will then form the basis for a close reading of the photographed corpse as 'thing' rather than 'living' in Andres Serrano's 1992 series, *The Morgue*.

New York-based photographer Serrano is perhaps best known for being labelled blasphemous and anti-American by the US Senate for his 1987 work *Piss Christ*. The photograph, depicting a small statuette of the Crucifixion submerged in a tank of urine to produce a strong amber glow to the image, was the centrepiece of a Senate attack on the National Endowment for the Arts. The Senate felt that the collusion of a base bodily fluid with an image of Christ was degrading to both Christianity and decency; however the 1994 catalogue for his solo show posited that Serrano approaches religion with a thoughtful and critical eye. The catalogue reminds one that Serrano ‘has repeatedly stressed that his intention is not to insult Christianity, but on the contrary, to protect faith and its purity by securing everyone’s inalienable right to ask questions.’³ His approach to Christianity is critical – in the case of *Piss Christ* he points to the fissure between a biblical disparaging of idols and a Catholic reliance on them – with a careful respect for the history of Christian iconography in his art. In fact, he is often compared to the Baroque and post-Renaissance masters, including Caravaggio, who used the drama of colour and lighting to re-present biblical tales.⁴

Religion is pervasive in Serrano’s work, which consistently highlights the aesthetic within politically or socially volatile subjects, such as his portraits of the Ku Klux Klan and New York’s homeless.⁵ The use of either religious symbols or iconographic poses by Serrano likens his subjects to saints or other religious figures, arguably elevating them, as I will argue later, with respect to the cadavers photographed in his 1992 series, *The Morgue*. This series, featuring photographs taken at an unidentified city morgue, demonstrate a similar mix of the controversial and the beautiful. However, unlike his other works, *The Morgue* does not involve creating portraits; instead it separates the corpse from its living identity. As I will show, Serrano’s stylistic choices in terms of cropping, titling, posing and the consequent removal of subjectivity, redefine our physical and emotional relationship with the idea of the corpse. This radicalises both our expectations of post-mortem photography and our perception of the photographic tradition as a whole.

Photographing the Dead 'Thing'

The notion of the corpse as ‘thing’ originates in Barthes’s statement quoted above, in which he speaks of the ‘presence of a thing’. Despite being inanimate, however, the corpse does not fall into this category for the theorist; he insists that both the photograph and the corpse are ‘alive’. This could be because the corpse is visually indistinct from its once living form, which is the source of Barthes’s observation that ‘the corpse is alive; as *corpse*’.⁶ However, the other sense in which the corpse is alive is within the ‘living image’, which refers to a relationship between subject and viewer relayed through the photographic medium. This concept of the ‘living relationship’ between viewer and subject is exemplified in this photographic visual exchange. Yet, there is another sense by which the photograph is ‘alive’ for the viewer: If a pre-determined personal relationship does exist between the subject and viewer in life, the photographic exchange is thus enhanced by the emotions and memory of the viewer. In both cases, it is the viewer-subject relationship that brings to life the image.

This ‘living’ relationship is apparent in Victorian death portraiture – the root of post-mortem photography. The use of the term ‘portraiture’ here is key: in the Victorian era, the ‘portrait’ was defined as ‘something which represents, typifies, or resembles the object described or implied; a type; a likeness’; this concept applied as much to the death portrait as it did to the live studio portrait.⁷ Death portraits of this era typified an individual, memorialising his or her character rather than simply creating a facsimile. Jay Ruby argued in *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* that the term ‘likeness’ is more accurate in describing how Victorians would view such portrait photographs, stating that standardized props and backgrounds meant that ‘the setting revealed little personal about the sitter’.⁸ However, he also admitted that these photographs were primarily used for mourning,

supposedly providing the bereft with a direct connection with their loved one's living counterpart.⁹ This connection relied on the photographer's attempt to capture the individuality of the deceased. While some props were common to many death portraits, they referenced a reality that typified, though it may not have replicated, that of the individual.

More significantly, the death portrait attempted to relay in the corpse something noticeably absent: life. Ruby outlined three main poses in early post-mortem portraiture: two that aimed to portray the individual as living – photographed with eyes open or later painted open, and 'the last sleep' style where the deceased is arranged in a bed with eyes closed, as though asleep – and a third which acknowledged the individual's death by showing them in the casket.¹⁰ Photographs of the deceased that used either of the first two poses asserted the death of the subject while referencing their living identity. This was achieved through the dressing and positioning of the body: the deceased was usually clothed in one of their finer outfits, and children were often held by, or seated alongside, family members.¹¹ The latter asserted the familial connection with the deceased while visually cementing the family's on-going proximity to them. In some cases, a post-mortem photograph of a child was the only family image of them in existence, and, in these cases, the family might request that the child's eyes be left open 'to provide a semblance of life.'¹² An advertisement for Wittaker photography (c.1860) shows two post-mortem photographs of the same child, one with eyes open and the other with eyes closed, with the words 'Fast Asleep and Wide Awake' written beneath. Although the subject's death is explicit, Wittaker was advertising his ability to create the illusion of life through his photography.¹³



Fig. 1: Hester Evans, 'Post-mortem Image of Portia Divine', c. 1879, carte-de-visite, Evanston, Illinois. The Thanatos Archive.

This practice is exemplified in the post-mortem carte-de-visite of Portia Divine (fig.1), where the deceased was arranged on a soft surface, with eyes closed, resting on a pillow.¹⁴ These elements contribute to a sense of peaceful slumber, which helps maintain the essence of the living individual. The photograph evinces how careful posing can make the corpse appear vivified while speaking to the girl's apparent nature; specifically her innocence and an angelic life. Though we are viewing the image in a different time and context to its production, her clothing, her fair hair and her white dress, prompt a recollection of young relatives, or make inferences about this particular girl's life that seem to transcend context and evoke sympathy. That being said, these images were not to be read purely as testimonies to the life of the deceased, as most Victorian death portraits presenting the dead as beautiful and serene in sleep because this was believed to reflect to a peaceful afterlife.¹⁵ This practice of mirroring did not *influence* the soul's place in heaven, but was for the sake of the viewer who, upon

seeing the photograph, would naturally think of the soul of the deceased. A depiction such as that of Portia would remind the viewer that she was at peace in heaven. This association was particularly strong as a belief in the literal rising of the dead for the Last Judgement, in which the body would rise as it was buried, took hold across the United States. These images would comfort the family in believing their loved one would rise looking as they do in the photograph rather than decaying.¹⁶

In contrast to this tradition of post-mortem photography, Serrano's modern interpretation in *The Morgue* re-presents the corpse as 'thing', rather than 'living thing'. Serrano's photographs do not offer a connection between the viewer and the deceased's living counterpart. *The Morgue* consists of detailed images taken from corpses, depicted in such a way as to imply these bodies are carcasses for inspection and objects without subjectivity. Some photographs reveal a section of a torso or a head cropped at the neck, while others focus on a single wound, and can be overwhelming to look at. These large photographs (125.73cm x 152.4cm) bombard the viewer with colour: deep reds, a spectrum of purple and brown, bright whites and soft yellows. The eye soon settles on the details of each corpse: larger than life-sized, a sense of their unified bodies disappears as the details of the skin come to the fore. The purple veins in one image become a smooth grid broken by moles and tags, intricacies that are barely visible in a smaller format. The images are primarily close-ups, though wider shots still truncate the body, showing perhaps half of the corpse. Every shot is set against a black backdrop, with strong, directed lighting creating high contrast between the body's light and shadow. Each image features one corpse, and a small number of them hint at the morgue context through the presence of a scalpel or a slither of the metal table on which the body lies. Where faces are captured, they are cropped or obscured by cloth.

Sparse titles accompany the images, revealing little about the individual, though on occasion their gender or race can be discerned from the image itself. Revealing, for example, the gender of a subject does not, however, serve to relay a particular identity, and in practice serves to further highlight the overtly attributive, but in fact impotent influence these traits have in signifying said identity. This is particularly evident in instances where several corpses are used to denote the same cause of death. For example, there are a variety of pneumonia-related deaths presented in *The Morgue*, represented by several distinct corpses. *Pneumonia Death* and *Infectious Pneumonia* capture the half-covered head of a black male and older white female respectively. *Pneumonia Drowning I* and *II* similarly present an infant of unknown gender and a white male. While photographed from different angles, the consistency in presenting a face obscured by cloth gives a sense of unity along with the titular cause of death. These images support the age-old aphorism that death and illness do not discriminate.

While every photograph is unique, the series flows together with stylistic and compositional similarities beyond the obvious continuity of the 'morgue' concept. Despite the subjects' diversity, the images seem to blend together. In fact, they are possibly more powerful when placed together, because they negate the fact that these deaths (or 'death' itself even) are isolated incidents. As I will explain later, Serrano's removal of identity encourages a reading of the works together, but not necessarily as a personal narrative. When *The Morgue* opened in New York City in 1993, *New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman disparaged the 'mannered' and 'decorative' quality of the images, and decried Serrano's failure to 'convey a life in death'.¹⁷ Opinions on the show were mixed, but the negative reviews all hinged on a variation of Kimmelman's argument: that Serrano's photographs did not offer a meaningful commentary on death. Peter Schjeldahl concluded, 'Serrano's show is not about death at all. It is only about art [...]', a premise he described as 'iffy'.¹⁸ Kimmelman and Schjeldahl make an important point: the series does not attempt to capture or represent 'life in death'.¹⁹ However, neither critic considered the possibility that Serrano's work was not an attempt to represent life in death, but rather to offer a new approach to the image of the

corpse. As we will see, by removing names, careful cropping and denying the viewer's gaze, Serrano's *The Morgue* strips the corpse of its living identity.

Rejected Identity in *The Morgue*

The Morgue's concise, descriptive titles follow the basic formula: *The Morgue (Cause of Death)*, for example *The Morgue (Death by Drowning II)*. As the images are heavily cropped and faces obscured, the title is the dominant source of information for the viewer. In removing the name associated with each corpse, Serrano also removes all other possible descriptions of the deceased, effectively destroying its living and social identity. Serrano then re-baptises the corpse with his titles, making the image of the corpse into a symbol whose sole referent is the cause of death. Critics such as Andrea Fitzpatrick, whose argument will be addressed more thoroughly below, consider the redefinition of the deceased by their cause of death to be demeaning, while others embrace it as a prompt for further investigation.²⁰ However, neither reading takes into account that the titles, while taken from the morgue's official records, were shaped by the photographer. Serrano has admitted that while not misrepresenting the cause of death, he altered the wording to be more colloquial.²¹ Critics have cited Serrano's experience writing copy for an advertising agency as the source of his flair for words, arguing that he knows how to 'craft precise titles and how to use words sparingly but eloquently'.²² The use of the term 'craft' is crucial, for while they are often shocking in their seemingly detached phrasing, Serrano designed them to be more accessible, and paradoxically more personable, than medical terminology.

Altering the official cause of death results in what Ferguson called 'the poetic use of titles', in which Serrano uses conversational rather than medical terms while remaining true to the cause of death.²³ Ferguson argued that the poetic titling in *The Morgue* causes a disjuncture in the interpretive process, wherein the viewer is unable to combine title and photograph in a way that maintains the distance between their normal social contexts and the institution of the morgue.²⁴ The clinical nature of the photographs, according to Ferguson, would have been associated with the hyper-detached official causes of death. Instead, the titles engage the viewer through colloquial terminology, the title *Heart Failure*, for example, reads as clinical, but the official medical cause of death would have to be more exacting, indicating if it was hypertensive heart disease, or if the cause of death was suffocation though the underlying cause was congestive heart failure.²⁵ This titling places the victims in the real world as opposed to the imagined clinical space of the morgue. This also has the effect of softening the clinical reality of the morgue; Serrano's titles are a way of mediating these already shocking images for the viewer. One might easily connect this with the aesthetic elements of the image, discussed later, to bolster the argument that Serrano's detachment is not truly devoid of sympathy. Furthermore, the titles, in constantly referring to the cause of death, establish the corpse's origin as the moment of death, situating its existence post-mortem. This severs the corpse from its living counterpart, making it more difficult for the viewer to penetrate the photograph and connect with a corpse that is 'alive, as *corpse*'.²⁶

To comprehend the impact of Serrano's titles and composition we must consider the sole photograph with a name: *The Morgue (Jane Doe, Killed by Police)* (fig. 2). While Jane's gender is given to the viewer through the title, it is by no means an invitation to explore her identity. In the first instance, we are presented with a corpse deep in decay, where the gender is not implicit. The addition of 'Jane' to present the corpse as female is not discussed as an aspect of her identity, creating a sense of memorial or history as it would in a death portrait. Instead, her gender references the history of female representation, where critics view her as an allegory rather than an individual. Unlike the rest of the series, where the exclusion of faces and names renders the bodies anonymous, *Jane Doe* is made anonymous by the inclusion of a name and face. The name 'Jane Doe' is used in North America in reference to

the thousands of unidentified and unclaimed dead in the morgue. In his essay 'Reconsidering the Dead in Andres Serrano's *The Morgue*', Fitzpatrick insists that the title *Jane Doe* is intentionally derogatory and 'reduces her to the realm of those unloved bodies that remain in the morgue freezer for months, lacking figures to gather their remains or to advocate on their behalf.'²⁷ Fitzpatrick notes that the Jane Doe bodies, unclaimed by family or friends, are alienated from their living past. This social dissociation is experienced in Serrano's *Jane Doe* and reflects outwardly towards the rest of the series, which removes all of these bodies from the social sphere, with no one 'to gather their remains or to advocate on their behalf'.²⁸



Fig. 2: Andres Serrano, *The Morgue (Jane Doe, Killed by Police)*, 1992, Cibachrome, silicone, plexiglass, 125.73 x 152.4cm, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Fitzpatrick takes a singular view of these anonymous dead, assuming that the inclusion of the moniker 'Jane Doe' suggests criminality in all of the corpses photographed in *The Morgue*. However, *Jane Doe* sits within a series that depicts death by heart failure and various illnesses, implying a broad spectrum of deaths rather than a post-mortem mug shot. While it is hardly the only photograph where the victim has died as a result of violence, it is the only photograph to mention the police, which has the effect not of incriminating the deceased, but calling into question the right of the police to take a life (similar implications appear in Serrano's *Killed by Four Great Danes*, where the notion of the dog as man's best friend is called into question). The use of the name Jane Doe does not introduce a criminal element to the series, but rather highlights the overarching anonymity of the series. Jane Doe's face adds to her anonymity, frustrating any attempt at identification due to the corpse's severe state of decay. As noted by critics and the artist, the process of decay has discoloured her skin and rotted away the surface layers to reveal patches of white, making her race unclear.²⁹ Again, this emphasises the facile nature of assumptions based on race, further distancing the viewer from the subject. Decay is conceived of physically and metaphorically here: as Jean Baudrillard pointed out in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, the decay of the corpse is also a voiding of significance, so that the corpse is 'nothing but flesh, and ceases to be a sign'.³⁰ Serrano draws our eye to the variations in colour, layering and texture of Jane Doe's flesh to deflect the possibility of familiarity.

Another indication of Jane Doe's humanity is her eyes, since her gaze would have been a testament to subjectivity; and yet, being several months' dead, the eyes have sunk into the skull until a dried contact lens attached to her cheek is the only proof that she once had eyes at

all. Discussing *The Morgue* in relation to Bataille's *Story of the Eye*, Kylie Message notes that the unbalanced gaze of the corpse 'evokes a fear in the spectator due to the fact that this object, which once had a gaze equivalent to theirs, is now *reduced to an absence*' (my emphasis).³¹ This absence of subjectivity halts the viewer; it is as though they are looking at an inanimate object, but one which taunts him or her with the possibility of relaying something decidedly animate. Such is the anonymising effect of the missing gaze: its absence forces the viewer to accept that the corpse does not have an 'I' to proffer. As a result, Jane Doe remains an object for consumption, unable to defend against our prying eyes.

Barthes describes the act of being photographed as beginning with an awareness of the photographer's gaze through the camera lens: 'In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art.'³² In front of the camera there are a multitude of selves under consideration, each attempting to respond to a different gaze. The sitter must contend with the gaze of the photographer, the gaze of the 'others' who will see the photograph, and the artistic gaze, which is influenced by the gaze of the photographer, but will ultimately be tailored towards those in the artistic community who will interpret and respond to the photograph. Caught in the crossfire of these gazes, Barthes highlights the problems with presenting oneself to the camera, insisting that he is 'imitating' himself, performing for the photographer and the presumed others who will view the image.³³ The pose before a camera is active and passive; subject to the gaze of the photographer while engaging that gaze, if not attempting to block it, and allowing the gaze to penetrate, if only so far.

While responding to Lacan's argument that the gaze is both arresting and wounding, Owens argues in 'Posing', that the subject poses in order to prevent potential harm caused by the photographic eye: 'If, posing for a photograph, I freeze, it is not in order to assist the photographer, but in some sense to resist him, to protect myself from his immobilizing gaze.'³⁴ However the dead cannot pose; unable to assert themselves as 'I', they are left open to the photographer's 'immobilizing gaze', which itself loses some of its power when faced with an already immobile corpse. The body is usually photographed as a living individual, and the sitter is able to choose how to adjust his or her body and (in particular) face, in order to present 'themselves'. Even in a candid photograph the subject is caught in the act of something; there is the implication of life for the viewer, who predicts that the facial muscles will re-animate once the photograph is taken. The photographed corpse does not carry such a suggestion of life, but looks as though it could.

Characterised as the *doppelgänger* of the living individual, the corpse is expected to appear human – a representation of life. We see the same tendencies in death portraiture and at wakes, for which the corpse is dressed and made up to present a suggestion of the life once lived. As such, certain expectations accompany the photograph of a corpse: it must, as Kimmelman and Schjeldahl insisted, bear a trace of life in death. Failing to present this trace is not a flaw in the photographer: the image is a re-presentation of the corpse that explicitly acknowledges its inability to pose. The corpse, unlike the living subject, cannot assert an imitation of itself. Such is the case with *Jane Doe*: she is unable to pose and as a result the viewer is startled.

Message argues further that the absence of subjectivity to Jane Doe is enhanced when the viewer is offered a gunshot wound in place of her gaze. Message emphasises that the cause of death consumes *Jane Doe's* identity, which she argues consequently threatens the identity of the viewers who realise that their own death will consume their identities as well. While there is no doubt that the gunshot, as reflected in the title *Jane Doe, Killed By Police*, becomes her identity, I would argue that the replacement of the gaze with the gunshot wound speaks to the impenetrability of the subject. The wound, rather than offering a means for the viewer to enter

the image, is a flattened scar, where the shimmer of blood and texture of hair offer a surface referencing the title. Any information that Jane Doe could provide would have been offered in the now-absent gaze, affirming that who she once was is also absent and could not have been captured in the photograph. The photographed corpse can offer nothing; when the viewer looks to the picture, he or she comes up against the impenetrable wall of the photographic surface. Without identity, what remains is the visible: image and text. The strong lighting, cropping and use of Cibachrome film – known for its richness of colour – ensure that the viewer's focus is on the surface of the body, in particular on its colour and texture. We are left with the image of an unreadable object. While Kimmelman and Schjeldahl denied the corpse's value as an object rather than a trace, to ignore the reading of the corpse as an object is to refuse sensitive engagement with Serrano's photographs.



Fig. 3: Andres Serrano, *The Morgue (Fatal Meningitis II)*, 1992, Cibachrome, silicone, plexiglass, 125.73 x 152.4cm, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Through their removal of identity, Serrano's images reject the traditional death portrait.³⁵ For example, in *Fatal Meningitis II* (fig.3), which is initially reminiscent of a Victorian death portrait, the photograph cannot read as a portrait. There are certainly elements that are familiar from the last sleep; the child's eyes are closed, the white colour of the cloth and the seemingly peaceful death is relayed. In fact, seen in isolation it may even appear an image of sleep, contrasting with Kimmelman and Schjeldahl's distaste with *The Morgue* series. Certainly Serrano plays on this tradition, but he also sharply pulls away from the tradition through varying degrees. First, the completely black background removes the subject from any context - this child is not swaddled on a bed or laid in the family home - and the void of the background removes it from such context and care. The only thing we can connect it to in terms of location is a morgue; Serrano intentionally does not allow us to view the child in a familial context. While *Fatal Meningitis II* uses the profile image and white cloth in the tradition of death portraiture, the lighting, posing and cropping separate the corpse from its living identity both as a member of a family, as discussed above, but also as a sentimental symbol for the viewer in recalling children within their own sphere. Serrano accomplishes this by obscuring the face, which creates an immediate barrier for the viewer, forming a physical obstacle between viewer and subject, thus making it almost impossible to discern the child's gender or facial features. This cloth is highlighted by the light, which allows some of the face to be cast in shadow and pulling attention away from the corpse. In post-mortem portraiture, the existence of the photograph gives the corpse an identity – she had a family who chose to

memorialise her in this way, and the photograph therefore testifies to halted social relationships. *Fatal Meningitis II*, within *The Morgue* series, is aligned with the other images of corpses, making the child depicted moderately ordinary, not special or 'angelic' as in the Victorian counterpart image of Portia Divine. Rather than a beloved daughter/mother in death portraits, Serrano presents an infant without a background, clothing, or any indication of uniqueness. Unable to situate the corpse within the social, it is just another corpse.

Examined as a series, *The Morgue* highlights the key difference in portraiture of the dead and of the living. Barthes notes that '[p]hotography is a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead.'³⁶ However, in *The Morgue* we are not given these painted visages. The dead are faceless, both literally, hidden through cropping, decay, or a cotton sheet, and metaphorically – where the corpse has no gaze to present to the viewer and therefore no direct relationship with them. A central purpose of the face is revelation, and therefore to be faceless is to offer nothing. In *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Gilles Deleuze reveals the face to be 'a matter of two poles, sometimes one prevailing over the other and appearing almost pure, sometimes the two being mixed in one direction or the other.'³⁷ These two poles are the expression of the face as a whole as well as conveying the minute workings of each individual aspect of the face. Both poles suggest something that the spectator is able to read, and even if the expression does not proffer anything concrete about the individual's identity, it offers a moment of emotion or thought. The face is active because these moments of expression are changeable, the boundary of one pole flowing into the other. The viewer's ability to read those expressions provides a connection with the life of the subject through the face.

With this in mind, in revealing nothing the 'face' of a corpse cannot *express* and therefore cannot be considered a face. When Deleuze describes the 'affection-image', he notes that it requires a combination of character and face – or an object that is equivalent to a face – in order to express said character.³⁸ The face is something that must present the qualities of the subject and it need not therefore be a likeness; as Deleuze notes, the close-up of an object can still express character to the audience given the correct circumstances.³⁹ We have seen in Victorian death portraiture that the corpse can express the essence of an individual; this is not the case in *The Morgue*, which is deliberately devoid of expression, emotion and individuality. As such, each portrait cannot be considered a memorial, represented previously in the example of Portia Divine. As argued above, the faceless nature of these corpses renders them as objects: present, but not living, they are death separated from life.

The Absence of Identity/ The Presence of the Photographer

Serrano's images deny the viewer connection with the photograph through the known codes and signs of portraiture, and yet Serrano's images are also distinct from the distanced forensic images taken in the morgue by pathologists. This distinction was analysed in Chris Townsend's Channel 4 series, and its companion book *Vile Bodies: Photography and the Crisis of Looking*. The programme and subsequent book compared official pathology photographs by D.C. Yearnshire with the work of contemporary artists such as Serrano. Yearnshire comments that 'In handling the corpse and the scene of the crime all material must be recorded systematically: the body must be treated as an object, no matter how much the photographer is affected by it'⁴⁰ Like Serrano, Yearnshire treats the deceased as a corpse-object such that there can be no relationship between the subject and either the viewer or, in Yearnshire's case, the photographer. While it is tempting to regard Serrano in the same light, the photographer remains visibly present in *The Morgue*.

The essential difference between Serrano's work and that of the pathology photographer lies in the materiality of the photograph. Serrano mounts his Cibachrome prints on Plexiglas with a heat press, creating a smooth surface of luminous colour.⁴¹ The effect recalls the aesthetic of the stained glass window, one that is enhanced by Serrano's compositional technique of presenting the colours in blocks. In *Infectious Pneumonia*, the face of the woman is covered by a vibrant red cloth that cuts the face off at the nose.⁴² In high contrast with the detail and contour of the face, the flat colour, devoid of shadow and highlight and block like shape, resembles the large mosaic of a pane of glass (fig.4). We can also see religious connections to fifteenth century painted portraits, which were commissioned after the death of a family member, such as Botticelli's posthumous portrait of Guiliano de Medici. In further connection to Serrano, the portraits were often also represented in deep reds, a colour particularly popular with the Medici. While Serrano only superficially acknowledges the influence of early Renaissance painting, the reference to other historical portraiture, adds to the sense of this portrait as a beautified image of death, an inclination more acceptable long ago, but now made invisible.



Fig. 4: Andres Serrano, *The Morgue (Infectious Pneumonia)*, 1992, Cibachrome, silicone, plexiglass, 125.73 x 152.4cm, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

The message of viewing images from *The Morgue* as an allegory for death in our time is heightened by the similarity of the images to a stained glass window. The strong lighting, which some critics have termed 'photographic chiaroscuro', enhances the contrast between colour and solid black background, illuminating the deceased, not like light in a tomb (as chiaroscuro is often described), but light through a window.⁴³ The monumental size of the photographs gives them the appearance of windows set into the white walls of the gallery, and the black backdrop makes the photographic space appear punched out of the wall. In a stained glass window the use of light was in part related to the illuminating presence of God in the stories, and in this way we could see Serrano's aesthetic as giving 'life' to the object of the corpse through aesthetic. I do not mean to suggest he is vivifying the corpse, but rather presenting the corpse as an art object which is enlivened through composition and the artistic vision. While Serrano himself would not liken the artist to God, it does connote a sensibility of the artist in a position of extreme power over both their materials/subject and the viewer.

The allusion to stained glass windows resonates with Serrano's 1987 *Body Fluids* series which included religious sculptures submerged in urine, water and blood. In these works, Serrano re-presented and redefined Christian symbolism using unconventional materials. A

similar reconsideration takes place in *The Morgue* with regard to the stained glass window aesthetic. Traditionally, stained glass depicted scenes from the Bible or images of key religious figures to aid comprehension of the Bible by the illiterate masses. The correlation between stained glass and *The Morgue* is clear in the two photographs *Knifed to Death I* and *II*, each of which show a different hand of the same corpse cropped between the wrist and elbow (fig.5). The hands of the victim have been fingerprinted and there are small incisions on both arms just below the wrist. The hands are presented in blocks of black, pink and red, moving from the ink-blackened fingertips to the pale pink of the skin, bringing out the red of the knife wounds and smudges of blood near the edge of the frame. The images are arranged beside one another, black frames touching, recalling the interlocking pieces of glass separated by black lead strips in stained glass windows. The two hands belong to the same corpse, but rather than being splayed out away from each other as they were in life, Serrano has inverted the images to give the appearance of hands reach out to one another, mimicking a central scene from Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*.⁴⁴



Fig. 5 (Left to Right): Andres Serrano, *The Morgue (Knifed to Death I)*, 1992, Cibachrome, silicone, plexiglass with wood frame, 139.1 x 165.7cm, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; Andres Serrano, *(Knifed to Death II)*, 1992, Cibachrome, silicone, plexiglass with wood frame, 139.1 x 165.7cm, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Instead of reaching out in life, the hands reach out in death, neither one able to resurrect the other since the gestures of both man and God are performed by the deceased. Rather than representing man or God, we can imagine that the corpse is akin to the body before God gave the spark of life to Adam. Yet there is nothing in the photographs to engender hope in the viewer: instead, we recognise the gesture's futility. Again, the photograph denies a connection between viewer and subject by refusing to associate the corpse with a life lived or to engage in a living relationship with the viewer. The riot of colour bearing down on the viewer, enhanced by the contrast of light and shadow, and the interlocking panes of glass in *Knifed to Death I* and *II* encourage a reading of the entire *Morgue* series as, metaphorically, a stained glass window; to be viewed from a distance in order to consider the whole (fig.6).



Fig. 6: Fred Scrutin, Exhibition photograph of *Andres Serrano 1983-1993*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1995. Images from: Andres Serrano, *The Morgue*, 1992.

While the other images in the series do not fit together to form one scene as in *Knifed to Death I* and *II*, the anonymising effects of cropping, careful composition and discarding names of the deceased is made stronger, and more explicit, in viewing the entire series as one. With each additional image, the figures become more anonymous, part of a perpetual flow of corpses in and out of the morgue. Causes of death are given no particular preference or weight: violent deaths like *Knifed to Death* sit alongside *Heart Failure*, the dominant cause of death in the US. In the context of the series, the various causes of death are normalised. The presence of one image entitled *Death Unknown* trivialises the other titles, because while the cause of death is unknown, it carries the same weight as any of the other photographs. Taken together, the titles and images combine to suggest that this is just another day in the morgue.

Rubio, in the catalogue for Serrano's 2006 exhibition *El Dedo en la Llaga – (the) Nail on the Head* – stated that the artist is able to 'turn his subjects into archetypes', by which she means models or exemplars.⁴⁵ The cadavers photographed in *The Morgue*, though not quite archetypes are assembled to present a type. Serrano uses stock poses in these images in order to conceive of a new model for the concept of the dead body: the corpse as corpse-object. In photographs such as *Infectious Pneumonia* or *Jane Doe, Killed by Police*, the corpse is shown from the neck up and in profile, an arrangement so ingrained in imagery of the deceased that it can be labelled archetypal. For instance effigies, representing the deceased in repose, were common throughout the nineteenth century. Post-mortem portraiture also called upon this tradition.⁴⁶ Because of this careful separation of life and death, Serrano's *The Morgue* presents a form of post-mortem photography that severs itself from the traditions of individual history necessary in Victorian death portraiture. However, as a whole, to borrow from critic Arenas, 'one might be tempted to see the series as a kind of memento mori for our apocalyptic age'.⁴⁷ If we consider the series as a *memento mori*, reflecting the reality and universality of our impending death, the corpses become like a skull in a vanitas painting, a generic symbol of death. Working within this framework, Serrano alienates the viewer from the corpse without removing the photographer from the photograph. The viewer is still able to recognise the archetypal pose and even some religious references, but both are twisted or made alien within the photograph. Serrano does not present a 'living image' of the corpse; rather he presents the corpse anew.

The corpse is elevated, if not monumentalised, for being a corpse. The living history is largely removed (the cause of death being the one element of the past that remains), distinguishing the work from Victorian post-mortem portraits, and focusing on the texture and

substance of the corpse. This shift celebrates its materiality, bringing into focus its status as an object of its own, while not denying the more generalised notion of the corpse's relationship with death. This is particularly strong when contextualised within the frames of religious iconography because Christ's death was employed as a metanarrative of a death for the sake of all mankind. This is also a subtle and significant shift from Barthes's insistence on the living presence of the corpse, for the corpse is presented as a thing that is an inanimate object; like a wilting flower in a vanitas that still recalls the cycle of life and death, but that need not be charged with the life that once was. In a Christian context, the body of Christ is an example of the corpse as a separate object from the deity: where his body was a vessel and an object of evidence once risen, but not intimately tied with the idea of the divinity of Christ.

Conclusion

This analysis has shown that *The Morgue* is the re-presentation of the corpse separate from a living identity. It is corpse as *thing*, not as *living image of a dead thing* (for even the word *dead* links the corpse to a living component that no longer exists) but as an object to be conceived singularly. Presented as icons which can be read as a whole, and shown through allusions to the familial Christian stained glass window, the series declares that there is no purpose to seeking a trace of the living in a corpse, since it is an inanimate object. Serrano has stated that *The Morgue* series arose from a desire to photograph John and Jane Does, a comment which indicates the importance of the concept of anonymity for Serrano ever since the series' nascence.⁴⁸ These could be anyone's bodies, but they belong to no one. Each is just a corpse: an aesthetic object, cropped beautifully and with light falling across it.

In its presentation of the corpse as a new type, Serrano's work might also be considered a reinvention of portraiture. While Serrano may not wish to be known solely as a portrait photographer, he has commented 'I think of most of my work as portraiture, in fact, alluding to other things, other issues, but starting with the individual first', establishing portraiture at the epicentre of his work.⁴⁹ Serrano's interviewer, Lucy Soutter, responded that his work rejects the individual, instead revealing the possibilities of who that person could be. Soutter therefore makes the distinction that in Serrano's work the portrait is never about the subject's identity, it is about presenting a different 'type' altogether. In *The Morgue*, the images combine to present the corpse as corpse-object, a 'type' that was formerly confined to the realms of forensics and medicine. In this way, the series as a whole typifies the corpse, presenting a specific likeness that we could consider a portrait of the corpse as corpse-object where the photograph certifies the presence of a thing rather than the corpse as alive. This series makes clear that the photograph does not always, and need not, present the corpse as alive, either alluding to the life lost or speaking to its presence before the photographer; it can be a purely aesthetic object. *The Morgue* offers a direct departure from Victorian death portraiture, but it does not represent a complete reversal of the death portrait in contemporary photography. While it opposes this tradition, Serrano's work is a form of memorial: modernised death portraiture for the benefit not of the family and friends of the deceased, but for a wider public and its understanding of the photography of death.

Notes

¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1981) p. 92.

² Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.79.

³ Piotr Piotrowski, 'From the Blasphemous History of Art,' in *Andres Serrano* (Slovenia: Moderna Galerija Ljubljana, 1994), p.4.

⁴ Mieke Bal, 'Baroque Bodies and the Ethics of Vision,' in *Andres Serrano: El Dedo en la Llaga* (Madrid: La Fàbrica, 2006), pp. 185–199; Amelia Arenas, "The Revelations of Andres Serrano," in *Andres Serrano: Body and Soul* (New York: Takarajima Books, 1995), pp. 8–13; Andrea D Fitzpatrick, "Reconsidering the Dead in Andres Serrano's", 1992; Piotrowski, etc.

⁵ Serrano's *Piss Christ* along with works by fellow photographer Robert Mapplethorpe were at the centre of Senatorial outrage against NEA funding. See: Phelan, Peggy, 'Serrano, Mapplethorpe, the NEA, and You: "Money Talks"', *TDR* 34.1 (1990), pp. 4-15.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ As noted in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, this definition is now rare, though it was generally accepted from its first use in 1567 until the late 1940s. In the Victorian era an accepted definition would also have been a two-dimensional representation of something in life, though the portrait of a person specifically is associated with representing the individual from a long tradition of painted portraiture, which used symbols to reveal more about the subject painted. Some similar props were common in portrait studios of the Victorian er. 'Portrait' def 2a. *Oxford English Dictionary* 2012. <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/148230?p=emailA8b7johRZ3s22&d=148230>> [Accessed 20 December 2012].

⁸ Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995) p. 61.

⁹ Ruby, p. 29.

¹⁰ Ruby, pp. 65-85

¹¹ Stanley Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America* (Altadena, CA: Twelvetees Press, 1990), Caption 8 notes.

¹² Stanley Burns and Elizabeth Burns, *Sleeping Beauty II: Grief, Bereavement and the Family in Memorial Photography* (New York: Burns Archive Press, 2002) p.2.

¹³ A similar claim was made in an 1846 advertisement for Southworth and Hawes of Boston, which declared: 'We take great pains to have miniatures of Deceased persons agreeable and satisfactory, and they are often so natural as to seem, even to Artists, in a quiet sleep.' From Adams, *The Boston Directory: Containing the City Record, A General Directory of Citizens, and a Special Directory of Trades, Professions &c. 1848-9* (Boston, 1848) p.11.

¹⁴ A carte-de-visite was a small photograph, printed on thin albumen then placed on a more durable card surface. These small prints were designed for albums and distribution among a family. The process also allowed for multiple prints to be taken from a single negative, making it popular for sending death portraits in the mail to family members unable to attend a funeral.

¹⁵ See Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, ed. by H Weaver (Oxford University Press, 1981); Audrey Linkman, *Photography and Death* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011).

¹⁶ For more on this see: Linkman, 14. Linkman particularly speaks of the popularity of embalming as it related to the Last Judgment, subsequently making the connection between the increased practice of embalming among the African American community and a similar rise in postmortem photography.

¹⁷ Michael Kimmelman, 'Serrano Focuses On Death', *The New York Times*, 2 May 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1993/02/05/arts/review-art-serrano-focuses-on-death.html>> [accessed 22 November 2012].

¹⁸ Peter Schjeldahl, 'Art After Death', in *Columns & Catalogues* (Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 1994), 80–82 (p. 82).

¹⁹ The idea that a corpse should be viewed with respect to its living history is common, but ignores the reality of death in Western culture. Philippe Ariès concluded in *The Hour of our Death*, as indeed did Geoffrey Göer before him, that Western society has pushed death to the outskirts of society, tucking it away into the exclusive and sterilized corners of medicine, forensics and the care home. While Ariès noted that death was making a comeback during the 1980s in research, public mourning rituals and popular visual culture, today death is focused on the mourner rather than the realities of death. As Dr. John Tercier argued in *The Contemporary Deathbed*, death with dignity is a thing of the past, as corpses become more exclusively handled by those professions – medical, forensic and funerary – that must look on the corpse as an object, separated from their living existence (13-15). When seen from this perspective, it is not only acceptable, but also important to present a distanced and objectified view of the corpse, as Serrano has done.

²⁰ In his essay 'The Art of Dying', David Buchler asserts: 'Serrano's images represent the end of a life, but the beginning of an investigative process. The sense of an untold story is overwhelming' (42).

²¹ Serrano commented in an interview: 'While I have tried to be accurate with the causes of death, they are by no means scientific or medical'. Anna Blume, 'Andres Serrano', *Bomb*, Spring 1993. <<http://bombsite.com/issues/43/articles/1631>> [accessed 2 December 2012].

²² Olivia Maria Rubio, 'Salt on the Wound', in *Andres Serrano: El Dedo en la Llaga* (Madrid: La Fàbrica, 2006), 180–184 (p.181).

- ²³ Bruce Ferguson, 'Andres Serrano: Invisible Power', in *Andres Serrano: Body and Soul* (New York: Takarajima Books, 1995), 8–13 (p.13).
- ²⁴ Ferguson, p. 13.
- ²⁵ In the NHS "medical certificate of cause of death: Notes for Doctors" there is a section which clarifies that the cause of death should not include 'modes of dying', which would be more commonly used in daily life. Terms on the examples list (Table I) include Heart/Lung/Brain/Kidney/ etc. Failure, Shock and Asphyxia. For the entire pamphlet see: <<http://www.uhs.nhs.uk/media/suhtideal/doctors/medicalpersonnelinduction/yourinductionday/medicalcertificateofcauseofdeath-notesfordoctors.pdf>>
- ²⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 79.
- ²⁷ Andrea D. Fitzpatrick, p. 40.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Discussed in: Fitzpatrick; Kylie Rachel Message, 'Watching Over the Wounded Eyes of Georges Bataille and Andres Serrano', in *Images of the Corpse: From the Renaissance to Cyberspace*, ed. by Elizabeth Klaver (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), pp. 113–132; Lucy Soutter, *Andres Serrano*, TATE Interviews <<http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/audio/andres-serrano>> [accessed 2 December 2012].
- ³⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, ed. by Mark Poster, , Translated by Iain Grant (Sage, 1993), p. 180.
- ³¹ Message, p. 127.
- ³² Barthes, p. 13.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Craig Owens, 'Posing', in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture* (Los Angeles: University of California Press), 201–217 (p.211). Owens refers to Lacan's gaze as developed in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Alan Sheridan, trans. (New York: Norton, 1978).
- ³⁵ The artist has engaged with this tradition, stating in an interview that he admired that Victorian photographers 'could photograph the dead in a way that was not shocking for the audience'. Soutter, *Andres Serrano*, TATE Interviews <<http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/audio/andres-serrano>>.
- ³⁶ Barthes, p. 32.
- ³⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: The Athlone Press, 1986), p. 88.
- ³⁸ Deleuze, p. 97.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Chris Townsend, *Vile Bodies: Photography and the Crisis of Looking* (New York: Prestel, 1998), p.132.
- ⁴¹ Robert Hobbs, 'Andres Serrano: The Body Politic', in *Andres Serrano: Works 1983-1993* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1994), p. 24.
- ⁴² The photograph itself does not indicate gender. However, in a Tate Interview, Serrano revealed the gender, commenting that the subject is often mistaken for a man, though it is an elderly woman. He refers to this image as 'The Lady In Red' in the same interview. Lucy Soutter, "Andres Serrano" <<http://www.tate.org.uk/>> [accessed 2 December 2012].
- ⁴³ Mieke Bal, 'Baroque Bodies and the Ethics of Vision', in *Andres Serrano: El Dedo en la Llagu* (Madrid: La Fàbrica, 2006) p. 187.
- ⁴⁴ As noted in Piotrowski; Hobbs.
- ⁴⁵ Rubio, p. 180.
- ⁴⁶ There are examples of images showing the deceased seated upright, but this was more difficult to achieve as the corpse needed support to maintain that position.
- ⁴⁷ Amelia Arenas, 'The revelations of Andres Serrano', in *Andres Serrano: Body and Soul*. (New York: Takarajima Books, 1995) p. 123.
- ⁴⁸ Anna Blume, 'Andres Serrano', *Bomb*, Spring 1993.
- ⁴⁹ Lucy Soutter, *Andres Serrano*, TATE Interviews

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Biography

Lauren Sapikowski is undertaking a PhD in Humanities and Cultural Research at Birkbeck College, University of London. She is examining how the familial, forensic and artistic gazes were originally shaped with respect to postmortem photographs and were subsequently reinterpreted for use in nineties American commercial art photography. She has appeared on Resonance FM's the Thread and the Sick City Project.