

Nothing Matters—Unless We Make It So: Art, Mortality, and the Creation of Meaning

Abstract

This article treats mortality not as an endpoint but as a force that shapes how we create, relate, and endure. It explores how visual art gives form to absence—rendering loss visible and memory material. Anchored in *Dad (2021)*—an artwork made with my father’s ashes—this study uses creative autoethnography to examine how personal loss becomes method, not just motif.

Through sudden death and slow decline—my father’s passing and my mother’s dementia—the article traces mortality’s dual faces: abrupt and prolonged. Engaging Heidegger, Camus, and de Beauvoir, it argues that confronting death through art does not console—it clarifies. Artists like Quinn, Boltanski, Salcedo, Margolles, and Calle engage the materiality of grief—from blood to bone, mist to loss—transforming the ephemeral into form.

Cultural rituals—from Egyptian mummification to Día de los Muertos—echo this impulse, insisting that the dead be made present, not erased. The article argues that art, like ritual, resists forgetting.

We do not escape impermanence. But in struggling toward meaning, we shape lives that are no less vivid for being finite.

Keywords: Mortality, Art, Creative Autoethnography, Memory, Impermanence, Grief, Ritual, Materiality.

Introduction

The morning after my father died, I reached for my camera—not to aestheticise the moment, but to resist its disappearance. I needed to steady something inside the rupture, to salvage what felt on the verge of erasure. That moment marked more than grief. It became a point of departure: how does art give form to absence? How does it make the unbearable visible?

Dad (2021)—a posthumous image of my father rendered in ink infused with his ashes—was not made to commemorate him. It was made to reveal what his disappearance made visible: that mortality, when engaged directly, does not silence. It speaks.

This article examines how death, rather than simply ending life, reorganizes it. It asks how art transforms mortality from abstraction into texture—something we can see, touch, and grapple with. Through personal loss and philosophical inquiry, it considers the material traces of grief as they appear in cultural ritual and contemporary art. As Iversen (2007) observes, affect in visual art often escapes cognition, surfacing instead through

latency and deferred recognition—a structure that mirrors the way grief materialises not immediately, but through residue and return. Artists like Marc Quinn, Doris Salcedo, Teresa Margolles, Christian Boltanski, and Sophie Calle are not simply meditating on death—they are staging it. Their works, like *Dad* (2021), resist forgetting by insisting on form.

Philosophers such as Heidegger, Camus, and de Beauvoir have long argued that death clarifies what life obscures. This article extends that insight into visual practice—asking not how we represent death, but how we relate to it. What does it mean to hold the ashes of a life and still create? What shifts when death becomes method, not just motif?

We don't outlive loss. We live inside it. This article examines how art confronts that fact—not as metaphor, but as material. Mortality is not an event. It is a structure. And honest art doesn't explain it. It inhabits it.

Methodology

This article employs a three-part methodological framework: autoethnography, cultural analysis, and philosophical critique. These approaches do not merely examine mortality—they reckon with it: from the personal to the philosophical, from ritual to artistic form. No single method is sufficient on its own. But together, they illuminate the tension between embodiment, tradition, and the search for meaning in the face of inevitable loss.

Autoethnography: First-Hand Experience as Inquiry

Creative autoethnography situates personal experience as a legitimate and generative source of knowledge. As Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, and Arthur Bochner argue, autoethnography “acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research” (2011: 2). In this article, it takes the form of artistic practice grounded in disruption—most explicitly in *Dad* (2021), which incorporates cremains to register loss through process and trace. This inquiry is shaped by personal rupture—anchored in the jarring finality of my father’s passing and the incremental, disorienting fade of my mother’s mind. Following Ellis et al. (2011), this approach grounds analysis in the relational, embodied texture of experience.

While the phrase “lived experience” has become a widespread qualifier in contemporary discourse, it risks redundancy unless used with precision. Philosophically rooted in the phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty—and politicised through feminist and postcolonial epistemologies—its value lies in affirming first-hand, embodied knowledge. But when deployed carelessly, it can collapse testimony into performance, and personal proximity into proxy authority. As Táíwò argues, when the ideas of the marginalized are mediated through elite institutions, they risk being reshaped in ways that ultimately serve elite interests (2022). In this article, experience refers to what has been directly endured and transformed through artistic practice—not abstracted, theorised from a distance, or rhetorically embellished.

This method is not purely autobiographical. It is interrogative. Two absences frame this work: one sudden, one prolonged. Both demanded an artistic reckoning. As Leavy (2015) notes, creative autoethnography moves beyond narration—it materialises inquiry, and in doing so, invites reflection not only on what is remembered, but on how it is represented.

This use of autoethnography is not meant to elevate the personal above the conceptual. It is meant to test the conceptual against the weight of what has been endured. These encounters with death are not universal in form, but they are inescapable in kind. What they offer is not moral authority—but access to a problem that evades abstraction.

Cultural Analysis: Rituals of Continuity

Cultural analysis examines how societies render death bearable through form. Rituals do not merely process loss—they reframe it. From Egyptian mummification to Tibetan sky burials and the Japanese art of kintsugi, these practices operate as technologies of continuity. They are not evidence of superstition. They are structures of meaning.

As Robert Hertz (1960) argued, death is not merely a biological event—it is a social fact, embedded in collective rhythms, symbolic orders, and shared memory. These rituals are not inert customs; they are creative acts. They take what is broken and name it. They preserve what cannot be explained. And in doing so, they allow us to remain oriented, if only barely, in the face of irreversible change.

Philosophical Critique: Impermanence and Obligation

Philosophy provides the final axis—interrogating what mortality demands of us. Heidegger’s insistence on being-toward-death, Camus’s defiant embrace of the absurd, and de Beauvoir’s ethics of ambiguity all serve not as conclusions but provocations. They remind us that finitude is not a footnote to existence—it is the condition that makes clarity possible.

These perspectives are not treated as detached abstractions. They are tested against real situations: my mother’s late-stage lucidity, the moment her voice returned not as memory, but as declaration. In that instant, death was not theoretical. It was named. It was heard.

Methodological Synthesis

This article does not isolate these approaches. It fuses them. Autoethnography anchors the inquiry in real encounter. Cultural analysis connects that encounter to collective practices. Philosophy holds both to account, refusing false closure.

The work *Dad (2021)*—made using ink infused with my father’s ashes—is not presented as self-expression. It is a test site. A way to ask: what does it mean to materialise loss? What does it cost to make memory visible?

Still, this synthesis has limits. Personal narrative can slip into anecdote. Cultural analysis can flatten difference. Philosophy, for all its insight, can hover too far above the grief it aims to explain. These methods do not offer answers. They triangulate a problem—imperfectly, provisionally. Not to resolve death, but to stay with it long enough to understand what it asks of us.

Philosophical Framework: Mortality as a Lived Inquiry

Mortality is not an abstract proposition to be filed away in academic discourse. It is the most immediate and undeniable truth we inhabit. Its presence—quiet, persistent—shapes how we live, how we love, how we create. Philosophers have long grappled with this condition, offering divergent responses. Some see in death a demand for authenticity. Others see absurdity. Still others insist that mortality makes care possible. In exploring mortality as a generative force in artistic practice, the work of Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir offers not resolution, but orientation. Their insights sharpen our attention to the stakes of being alive.

Heidegger: Authenticity in the Face of Finitude

In *Being and Time* (1962 [1927]), Martin Heidegger asserts that human existence—what he calls *Dasein*—is defined by its orientation toward death. “Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein” (1962: 294): a formulation that renders mortality not as an endpoint but as the condition that gives meaning to life. His concept of *Sein-zum-Tode* (being-toward-death) challenges our tendency to avoid death and insists that authenticity arises only when we face our finitude directly.

To live *as if* death does not exist, Heidegger argues, is to live distracted—lost in convention, shaped by others’ expectations. By contrast, the authentic life begins with a sober recognition: that everything we love—every choice, every act—is marked by transience.

But what happens when the mind itself dissolves? When the very continuity of self—so central to Heidegger’s project—begins to erode? My mother’s slow descent into dementia should have shielded her from this confrontation. And yet, in December 2024, when asked what she thought about while sitting quietly, she said: “I think about blank.” Not *nothing*, but *blank*—as though intuiting the void itself.

A month later, that clarity sharpened. When my sister asked, “How are you doing, Mom?” she replied, unflinchingly: “I am dying.” Her lucidity stunned us. Here was someone losing her continuity of self—yet naming her own limits with disarming clarity. That moment passed quickly. But for an instant, she embodied exactly what Heidegger meant: a direct, unmediated encounter with being-toward-death.

Camus: Rebellion Against the Absurd

Where Heidegger seeks meaning through authenticity, Albert Camus rejects the premise altogether. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1975 [1942]), he frames the absurd as the tension between our hunger for coherence and the indifference of the universe. He opens bluntly: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide” (11).

Camus is often mistaken for a nihilist. In fact, he offers a defiant affirmation. The absurd does not render life meaningless; it makes revolt necessary. The artist does not create to explain. She creates to resist despair. “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart” (1975: 111). Creation becomes a form of rebellion—a refusal to be silenced.

Camus would not see my mother’s “I am dying” as philosophical insight. He would see it as absurd lucidity: a moment of awareness in the face of chaos. The mind unravels. But in naming the void, she became conscious of it. And for Camus, consciousness is the only real freedom.

Art does not resolve death. It refuses to obey it. To make meaning is irrational, and therefore heroic. In this sense, *Dad* (2021) was an act of revolt—not to explain my father’s absence, but to resist being silenced by it.

De Beauvoir: Mortality as Ethical Demand

Simone de Beauvoir shifts the question entirely. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (2018 [1947]), she argues that death is not a solitary condition—it is relational. We do not die alone, nor do we mourn alone. Every death implicates others. Every act of remembering—or forgetting—is an ethical act.

“To will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision” (2018: 14). Freedom, in this account, is not individual transcendence. It is attention. Responsibility. To care for the dying is to resist disappearance. To witness is to affirm meaning, even in the face of loss.

When my mother said, “I am dying,” it was not simply a personal reckoning. It was a call—a demand for witness. It tethered us to her, and to each other, in a shared reckoning. As de Beauvoir reminds us, grief is not weakness. It is a moral orientation. To face death, for her, is to recover the truth of life—to see more clearly what matters and what does not. In responding to death—through care, through art—we construct not certainty, but solidarity.

Synthesis: Constraint and Catalyst

Heidegger calls us to authenticity. Camus calls us to revolt. De Beauvoir calls us to responsibility. Their views diverge, but each insists: mortality is not a problem to be

solved. It is a condition to be engaged. And creative practice, far from escaping this condition, renders it visible.

To make art in the face of death is not to explain it away. It is to press presence into absence. To give form to the unresolvable. In this sense, philosophy and art converge: not as answers, but as gestures of attention.

As we now turn to the rituals through which cultures make death bearable, we carry these provocations forward. Mortality limits us. But it also clarifies what matters. And in that narrowing, it demands a response.

Cultural Traditions and Rituals: Mortality as a Lived Continuum

Across most cultures, death is not regarded as a neutral absence, but as something to be marked—ritually, symbolically, or materially. Whether through preservation, transformation, or celebration, human societies have long marked the threshold between life and death with material form and symbolic weight. As Philippe Ariès demonstrates in *The Hour of Our Death* (1981), such rituals emerged from historical shifts in how death was domesticated, publicised, and eventually medicalised—moving from the visible theatre of communal mourning to the isolated corridors of institutional care. These shifts continue to shape how we relate to loss. These practices do more than process grief—they translate mortality into something graspable, something shaped. Artists working with loss draw from this same impulse: not to explain death, but to render it visible. The cultural and ritual frameworks that follow are not offered for their historical range, but because they illuminate the ethical and material logics artists continue to engage.

Preservation and Memorialization: Holding onto the Dead

Egyptian Mummification: Defying Decay

In ancient Egypt, the embalming and entombing of bodies alongside personal effects expressed a belief in continuity beyond death. The tomb became a space of transition, not erasure—anchoring identity within the cosmic order (Assmann 2005). Artists working with bodily remnants similarly refuse disappearance. Their goal is not spiritual preservation, but the insistence that loss must leave a trace. Ashes, hair, bone, and photograph do not restore life—but they shape its aftermath.

Victorian Mourning Jewellery: The Body as Memory

In Victorian England, hair from the deceased was often woven into mourning jewellery—intimate objects that rendered grief both wearable and visible. As Elisabeth Bronfen (1992) observes, such artifacts transformed death into material memory, collapsing the divide between body and object. Contemporary artists who incorporate human trace elements into their work echo this impulse: they do not merely depict absence, they materialise it.

Dissolution and Transformation: Embracing Impermanence

Tibetan Sky Burial: Returning to the Elements

Tibetan sky burial involves offering the body to scavenger birds as an act of release. Grounded in the Buddhist concept of *anicca*, or impermanence, the ritual exemplifies a cosmology in which clinging is suffering and release is compassion. This logic resonates with contemporary artistic practices that embrace decay, entropy, or dispersal—works that rot, melt, or vanish over time. These are not gestures of neglect. They are refusals of permanence as virtue.

Día de los Muertos: Death as Presence

In Mexico, *Día de los Muertos* rituals welcome rather than mourn the dead. Altars are adorned with food, flowers, and photographs, not as relics but as invitations (see Figure 1). Here, remembrance is not passive reflection but active summoning. The dead are not abstractions; they are expected guests.



Figure 1. *Día de los Muertos* altar with marigolds and mementos.

This view of memory—as relational, revisitable, and embodied—aligns with artistic practices that reactivate grief rather than resolve it. To remember is not to move on. It is to make space again.

Kintsugi: Visible Repair, Not Restoration

In the Japanese tradition of *kintsugi*, broken ceramics are repaired with gold lacquer, making the fracture itself part of the aesthetic (see Figure 2). This practice reflects the spirit of *wabi-sabi*, which, as Juniper notes, involves “an intuitive appreciation of transient beauty in the physical world” (2003: 51), and a reverence for what society and mass culture often deem worthless. Rather than conceal damage, *kintsugi* dignifies it.

Artists who incorporate fracture—whether through physical damage, ash, or symbolic residue—perform a similar gesture. Their works do not erase loss. They hold it, name it, and in doing so, transform it.



Figure 2. Stoneware with crackled glaze, stained by ink; gold lacquer repairs.

Materiality and Ritual: The Artistic Impulse

What unites these rituals—whether preservative, transformative, or celebratory—is their insistence that death must take form. The body is held, offered, or reconfigured, but never

ignored. Artists who embed human trace into their practice extend this ritual logic. Their work is not imitation. It is continuation.

As curator Mary Jane Jacob argues, public mourning can be shaped not as spectacle but as a shared ethical and aesthetic space—what she elsewhere frames as an approach grounded in responsibility—through which the communal processing of grief resists erasure and fosters recognition (2003).

Still, there is risk. To extract ritual for aesthetic effect alone is to flatten it into metaphor. These traditions are not decorative. They are lived, specific, and ethically situated. Artists engaged in this terrain must tread carefully, not merely borrowing symbols, but reckoning with their depth.

In the absence of ritual, mourning often becomes an act of invention—finding new ways to hold loss. Victor Turner suggests that rituals do not simply mirror social structures—they help produce them. In the context of death, they shape how grief is held, witnessed, and transmitted (1969). And art, at its most honest, joins this older human effort: to make visible what would otherwise remain unspeakable.

Modern and Contemporary Artistic Responses

Philosophy can frame mortality—but it cannot hold its residue. Art, by contrast, gives form to what escapes abstraction. It transforms grief into something tactile, disruptive, and unresolved. Where ritual seeks to soothe and philosophy to explain, these artworks insist on dissonance. They confront death not as metaphor but as material: ash, blood, bone, breath.

What follows is not a survey, but an argument—each artist invoking mortality through matter, and refusing the silence that often follows death. Their works do not seek consolation. They ask instead: what happens when absence becomes form?

Matter, Memory, and the Fragile Self

Marc Quinn's *Self* (1991–ongoing) is a frozen self-portrait made from ten pints of his own blood, cast into the shape of his head and sustained only by refrigeration (see Figure 3). Its fragility is not metaphorical—it is infrastructural. Without electricity, it liquefies. The work hinges on a precise tension: the image of a self, clinically suspended at the edge of disappearance.

Quinn does not represent mortality; he rehearses it. Every five years, the sculpture is remade from his current blood, its continuity bound to his biological survival. As Wilson observes, “Quinn’s sculpture is...a life support system...as dependent on science as our own lives are” (2020: n.p.). In place of permanence, *Self* foregrounds dependency. It is a *vanitas* for the technological age—not of dust, but of coolant and contingency.



Figure 3. Marc Quinn. *Self* (2011).

The ethical and psychological implications are subtle but unavoidable. The blood, drawn from the artist's body, resists symbolic detachment. It implicates him—not just in form, but in substance. What we see is not merely Quinn's likeness, but his plasma, his cellular decay, his future loss postponed by machinery. In *Self*, art becomes not a gesture toward immortality, but a confrontation with its impossibility.

The Body Consumed: Ritual and Transgression

In Steven Cohen's *Put Your Heart Under Your Feet... And Walk!* (2017), mourning does not symbolize—it metabolizes. The artist, costumed in an extravagant assemblage of gramophones and mourning objects, ingests a portion of his late partner Elu Kieser's ashes during the performance's climax. The act, illegal in France, is raw, irreversible, and ethically destabilising. Cohen called it "an ultimate act of ritual mourning" (Blignaut 2017). But it also reads as defiance—against decorum, against separation, against the sanctioned limits of grief. As Amelia Jones (2012) notes, performances that confront trauma often exceed legibility and decorum, becoming sites of affective rupture where the artist's body bears witness in ways that resist closure. Cohen's ingestion of Kieser's

ashes exemplifies this—his mourning is not merely enacted, but metabolised through performative excess. The human body becomes both ritual site and vehicle of transgression. The mourner internalises the mourned. Ashes, once bone and breath, pass through Cohen's digestive tract—fragmented, absorbed, excreted. This is not metaphor. It

is matter undergoing transformation through flesh. Ritual becomes chemical. The line between self and other blurs, not symbolically but biologically.

Where most memorials aim to stabilize the dead, Cohen destabilises them. His work refuses consolation. It replaces reverence with discomfort, aesthetic distance with bodily intimacy. Mourning, here, is neither private nor performative—it is ingested, embodied, and unfinished.

Archival Absence and Bureaucratic Erasure

Christian Boltanski's *No Man's Land* (2010) is a vast installation of discarded clothing, laid out in an immense field and surveilled by a robotic claw that periodically lifts and drops garments at random (see Figure 4). The claw has no memory. The clothes bear no names. There is no biography, only accumulation. The viewer is positioned not before tragedy, but before logistics.

This is not mourning—it is procedural forgetting. Boltanski stages erasure not as an exception but as system. The claw mimics decision-making while embodying its absence. Each movement is devoid of purpose, exposing the impersonality of mechanisms that manage life and death at scale.



Figure 4. Christian Boltanski. *No Man's Land* (detail) (2010). Installation view with piles of discarded clothing.

As Kuspit, Garb, and Semin observe, Boltanski's archival aesthetic "suggest[s] a documentary intention" even as it "exposes the fragility of memory" (1999: 63–71). The

work does not evoke the dead—it implicates us in their anonymity. It is not a lament; it is a schema of loss rendered operational.

No Man's Land offers no emotional arc. The viewer is not asked to feel but to witness—and in that witnessing, to recognise the structural indifference with which most deaths are processed, stored, and forgotten.

Grief as Political Forensics

Doris Salcedo's *Atrabiliarios* (1992–2004) embeds the shoes of Colombia's forcibly disappeared into the gallery wall—each pair partially obscured behind translucent vellum, held in place with thick, visible sutures (see Figure 5). The effect is not aesthetic. It is forensic.

Each shoe is a relic of absence—unburied, unprocessed, unacknowledged. As Georges Didi-Huberman (2005) suggests, images do not simply reveal what is absent—they “make it seen” through the residue of what remains. In Salcedo's work, absence does not vanish—it is layered, sutured, and made tactile. The fibre veil refuses full legibility. As Brinson writes, the sutures suggest “both repair and a distressing piercing” (2015: n.p.). Here, the work does not represent grief—it materialises it. As Jill Bennett argues, some artworks operate not by representation but through what she calls “affective processes” (2012: 4)—where trauma is not narrated but embedded, folded into the grain of material. We are not permitted to see clearly, only to look—through layers that emulate the bureaucratic fog of denial and delay.

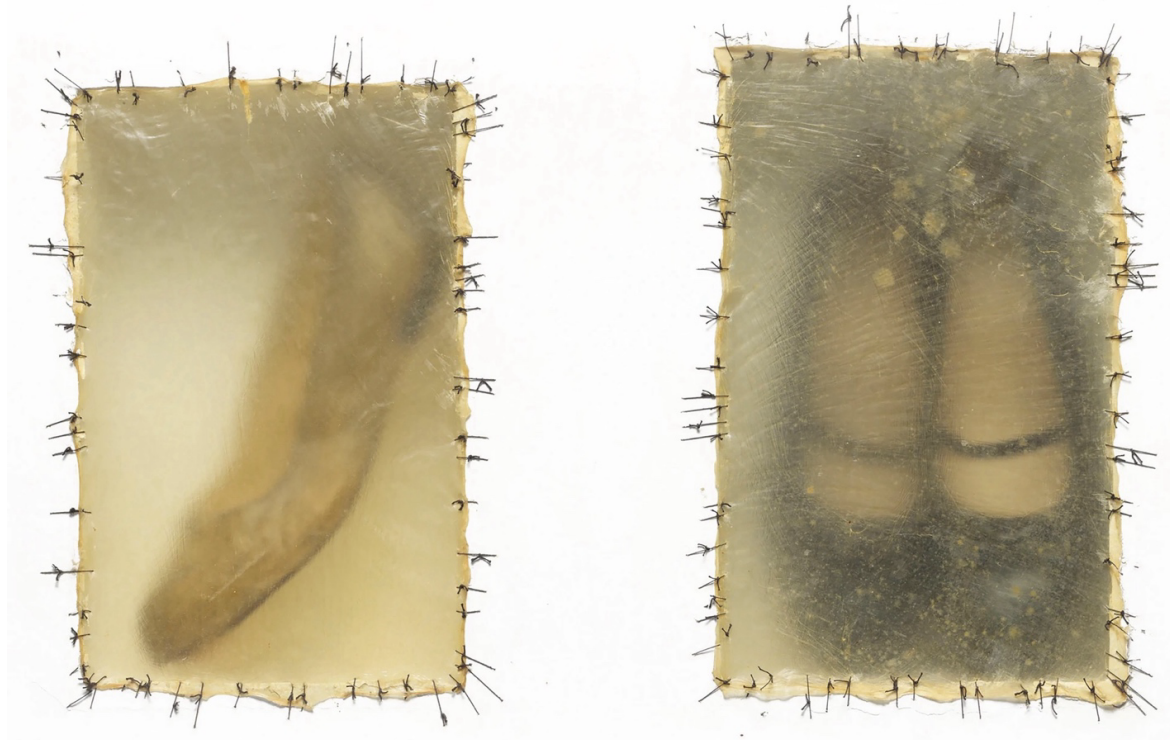


Figure 5. Doris Salcedo. *Atrabiliarios* (1992–2004). Detail of shoes embedded in the wall.

This is not private grief. It is political interruption. Salcedo refuses the resolution of mourning rituals. There is no closure. No comfort. Only the insistence that violence leaves traces—and that those traces must be seen, even when recognition is denied by the state.

As Judith Butler argues, the state's refusal to acknowledge certain deaths as "grievable" produces a hierarchy of mourning—where some lives are publicly mourned, while others vanish into sanctioned silence (2004). Salcedo's work resists this erasure, making loss materially insistent, even when names are denied.

Atrabiliarios is less an elegy than an indictment. Its muted tones and medical restraint mimic the cold mechanisms of institutional disappearance. It forces the viewer into the position of the bereaved—searching, uncertain, and suspended in the unresolved.

Atmospheres of Death: Breath, Vapour, and Violence

In *Aire* (2003), Teresa Margolles turns death into atmosphere. The installation emits mist infused with water used to wash corpses in the morgue. The viewer breathes it in—unaware at first, then horrified by the knowledge. What is usually hidden—handled by technicians, filed away in sterile reports—becomes shared air.

Margolles, trained as a forensic pathologist, does not depict death—she transfers it. Her materials are not metaphorical; they are postmortem fluids, trace evidence, chemical remnants of violence. As Bacal notes, "the air conditioners...employ water used to clean the bodies of anonymous murder victims" (2018: 26). Death circulates, not as symbol, but as substance.

The result is viscerally ethical. The audience is no longer a spectator. They become a participant in the aftermath of systemic violence. The work enacts what Achille Mbembe calls necropolitics—the state's power to render certain deaths invisible, ungrievable, unacknowledged (2003). Margolles reverses this erasure. She makes it breathable. Drawing from Schneider's (2011) exploration of how performance remains and returns, the idea of the body as an archive becomes literal here—a porous site of inscription where the material trace of the dead persists, not as metaphor, but as volatile substance that resists symbolic containment.

Recursive Grief and Public Intimacy

Sophie Calle's *Rachel, Monique* (2014) is not an homage—it is a recursive staging of maternal loss. Composed of images, text, sound, and personal objects, the installation loops through grief's unfinished logic. Her mother's final words—"Ne t'inquiète pas"—replay like a mantra, then mutate into an accusation. Grief becomes repetition with variation. As Derrida argues, mourning is not a finite process but an indefinite one—a continuous deferral of presence, echoing his concept of *différance*. Detachment is always postponed, and each encounter with disappearance re-activates loss (1982; 2001). Calle's

work is neither private ritual nor theatrical performance. It is a threshold. The viewer enters a porous space where mourning unfolds as recurrence. Objects and audio

fragments float between documentary and performance, intimacy and detachment. Memory is not preserved—it is tested, fractured, and performed again.

Unlike memorials that fix the past, *Rachel, Monique* evolves. Its shifting iterations across locations reflect the mutability of grief itself. The work resists closure, not as gesture but as ontology. Grief lingers, loops, alters, returns.

Calle makes no claim to therapeutic intent. The work does not heal. It haunts. It refuses to let mourning be sealed off from the living. And in doing so, it renders absence not as silence, but as repetition—a voice that will not end.

Dad (2021): Where Absence Becomes Medium

All the works discussed above confront death not through metaphor but through matter. Yet for me, mortality did not arrive as theory or theme—it arrived as rupture. *Dad (2021)* was not conceived in a studio or sketched in a notebook. It began the day my father died (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Greg Streak. *Dad (2021)*, mixed media with ashes and ink on photograph.

The morning after his death, I found myself standing beside his body with a camera—not out of artistic intent, but because I needed to capture something before it vanished. His skin had cooled. The flush behind his ears had turned purple-blue. What had once been my father was now a body—and soon, ash. I was not ready for that transformation to go undocumented.

From that point, the artwork emerged not as an idea, but as a compulsion. A portion of his ashes—coarse, jagged, mostly bone—were crushed between stones, just as pigments once were. I mixed them with black acrylic ink and allowed the fluid to interact with a photographic print of his face. The ink bled unpredictably. It soaked into his image. I did not try to contain or correct the spills. Grief, too, resists correction.

The final work measures just 200mm x 200mm. It is not monumental. But it is precise in its intimacy. The image dissolves and reappears. His face flickers in and out of focus, neither fully present nor fully erased. It is a visual analogue for mourning—how memory resurfaces uninvited, always distorted, always partial.

As Richard Brilliant (1991) observes, portraiture is never merely mimetic—it is a practice of memory and identity construction. In this context, the portrait does not preserve a likeness. It mourns it. It becomes a threshold, not a mirror: a way of remaining in contact with what exceeds representation.

The ethical dimension of working with ashes is unavoidable. But the Japanese concept of *mottainai*—respectful use, especially of what is left behind—guided the process. The vast majority of his remains were kept for ritual. Only a small, considered amount was integrated into this work. The goal was not to consume or preserve him, but to continue him—in a form that refuses finality.

As Simone de Beauvoir reflected in *The Guardian*, “One’s life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation and compassion” (1972). This principle holds true not only in life but in how we treat the dead—by allowing them to persist in matter, not as relics, but as relationships continued.

If Quinn’s frozen self-portrait reveals the fragility of form, and Margolles forces us to breathe the residue of anonymous death, then *Dad (2021)* returns us to the personal: to a father reduced to fragments, to an image undone by ink. Here, too, is Camus’s revolt—less philosophical stance than embodied refusal: to create in the face of meaning’s collapse. The work doesn’t offer catharsis. It doesn’t pretend toward resolution. It insists that absence is not the end of presence. It is its next, ungovernable phase.

Coda: Where Matter Bears Witness

Across these works—Quinn’s frozen blood, Cohen’s ritual ingestion, Boltanski’s bureaucratized erasure, Salcedo’s forensic memorial, Margolles’ breathable grief, Calle’s looping voice, and *Dad (2021)*—there is no common aesthetic. But there is a shared demand: that death be rendered in form, not forgotten in abstraction.

Each of these works forces an ethical reckoning—not just with mortality, but with how we choose to represent, process, or erase it.

These artists do not sentimentalise the dead. They implicate the viewer in their disappearance. They do not offer closure. They materialise the consequences of that loss. Art, in these instances, refuses to console. It metabolises grief.

Conclusion: Mortality as a Lens for Clarity

Death does not simply end life—it renders it legible. It reveals the contours of what mattered, what was missed, and what cannot be recovered. For me, mortality arrived not as abstraction but as encounter. My father’s sudden death and my mother’s slow cognitive decline made impermanence undeniable—rupture and erosion, side by side.

Dad (2021) emerged from that reckoning. It is not a memorial. It is a medium through which absence takes form. By grinding his ashes into ink, I wasn’t preserving him—I was implicating his disappearance in the act of making. The work resists silence. It insists on form.

The artists considered here—Quinn, Cohen, Boltanski, Salcedo, Margolles, Calle—do not merely represent death. They work with it. Blood, bone, air, thread: each becomes a site of confrontation. These works refuse consolation. They do not soften death’s reality; they sharpen it. What they offer is not comfort—but clarity.

Art, in this frame, becomes epistemological. It does not explain mortality. It reveals how we live beside it—how we carry, embed, and sometimes inhale what has vanished. It exposes the ethical entanglements of mourning: who is grieved, who is forgotten, and how loss is made visible—or erased.

Mindfulness teaches that impermanence is not a flaw in the system, but the system itself. Art echoes this truth. It does not deny death. It marks its passage. It insists that even the unbearable can be held—briefly, imperfectly, but with intent.

Memory, like matter, is unstable. It degrades. It distorts. But it also constructs. And in that act—in the ritual, the mark, the trace—we find a way to stay human in the face of erasure.

Engaging mortality, then, is not about closure. It is about lucidity. The creative act becomes not indulgence, but necessity—a way of responding, however imperfectly, to the fact that everything we love will end.

As Camus reminds us, “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart” (1975: 111). We do not find meaning. We forge it—knowing it might collapse, knowing it won’t last, and doing it anyway.

Notes on Contributor

Greg Streak is an independent artist and researcher. He is an interdisciplinary practitioner working in sculpture, video, installation, and documentary filmmaking. He completed his practice-based PhD in Visual Arts in 2021. Streak sees the practice of art as a form of critical inquiry, or conceptually reflective research.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Acknowledgements

Chat GPT V4.0 was used for idea exploration.

Postscript

This article was finalised shortly before the passing of my mother, Felicity Brigid Streak (1948–2025). In her final days—unable to speak, sustained by oxygen and fed by syringe—she held our hands, mine and my sister Samantha’s, with astonishing strength. She passed peacefully on 22 June 2025.

This work carries her silence.

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List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Día de los Muertos altar with marigolds and mementos. Ron De Angelis / For the LA Times. Accessible at [<https://www.latimes.com/food/story/2024-10-30/day-of-the-dead-is-truly-a-holiday-for-food-lovers>]. [Accessed 25 January 2025].

Figure 2: Tea bowl, Satsuma ware, White Satsuma type, Kagoshima prefecture, Japan, 17th century, Edo period, Stoneware with clear, crackled glaze, stained by ink; gold lacquer repairs. Accessible at [<https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/snapshot/beauty-broken-objects>]. [Accessed 02 February 2025].

Figure 3. Marc Quinn. *Self* (2011). Blood (artist's), stainless steel, Perspex and refrigeration equipment. Image courtesy Marc Quinn Studio. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates. Collection of the artist. Accessible at [<https://digital.nga.gov.au/archive/hyperreal/artists-edu-resource.cfm%3Fartistirn=38528.html>]. [Accessed 02 February 2025].

Figure 4. Christian Boltanski. *No Man's Land* (2010), installation view with piles of discarded clothing. Photo: Tangi Bertin. Accessible at [<https://smarthistory.org/christian-boltanski-personnes-2010/>]. [Accessed 05 February 2025].

Figure 5. Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios* (1992–2004), detail of shoes embedded in wall. Accessible at [<https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Atrabiliarios--Desafiante-/3850BE689E3C6A8C>]. [Accessed 10 February 2025].

Figure 6: *Dad* (2021), mixed media with ashes and ink on photograph, [300 x300mm framed]. Artist's collection.