Representing the Hidden

– *Opening Doors as a Photographer*

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Abstract

The written thesis, *Representing the Hidden – Opening Doors as a Photographer*, accompanies the photographic project titled *To Serve the Living*. *To Serve the Living* is a subjective photographic study of the funerary industry in Finland, and it looks at the large-scale, yet hidden industry of laying a body to rest. The project offers a safe space for viewers to consider themes relating to mortality and death. *To Serve the Living* is presented as a gallery exhibition, consisting of framed silver gelatin print photographs of locations such as funeral directors' offices, crematoriums, morgues, and of those who work in these places.

The written thesis discusses the practical challenges faced in making the work, namely organising access to these locations, and the ethical decisions made, such as showing images of a subject considered taboo. The goal of the written thesis was to understand the intentions of the practical project and help contextualise it in the framework of contemporary photography. The written thesis uses case studies of two photographers, Lynne Cohen and Edouard Jacquinet, to help define the practice of subjective documentary photography.

Key words: death, mortality, analogue, photography, subjective documentary, Design Institute

Tiivistelmä

Lopputyöni kirjallinen osa, *Representing the Hidden – Opening Doors as a Photographer*, valottaa valokuvallista lopputyötäni *Elävien palveluksessa*. *Elävien palveluksessa* on subjektiivinen valokuvallinen tutkielma kuolemaan liittyvistä käytännöistä Suomessa. Lopputyösarjassani tutkin tätä merkittävää mutta suurelta osin piiloon jäävää toimialaa. Valokuvatutkielmani tarjoaa katsojalle turvallisen kontekstin, jossa pysähtyä pohtimaan kuolemaan ja kuolevaisuuteen liittyviä teemoja. Valokuvasarjani lopullinen esitysmuoto on gallerianäyttely, joka koostuu kehystetyistä hopeagelatiinivedoksista. Kuvien aiheena ovat muun muassa hautaustoimisto, krematorio, ruumishuone sekä ihmiset, jotka työskentelevät näissä paikoissa.

Lopputyöni kirjallinen osa käsittelee käytännön haasteita, joita kohtasin valokuvatutkielman tekovaiheessa, kuten kuvauslupien neuvotteluja alaan liittyvien eri toimijoiden kanssa sekä eettisiä päätöksiä, joita jouduin tekemään käsitellessäni aihetta, joka on monilta osin tabu. Kirjallisen työni tavoite on selventää lopputyösarjani motiiveja sekä kontekstualisoida lopputyöni suhteessa nykyvalokuvaan. Kirjalliseen osaan kuuluu kaksi tapaustutkimusta, joiden avulla pyrin määrittelemään, mitä subjektiivinen dokumenttivalokuvaus on. Näissä tapaustutkimuksissa käsitellen Lynne Cohenin ja Edouard Jacquinetin valokuvasarjoja.

Avainsanat: kuolema, kuolevaisuus, analoginen, valokuvaus, subjektiivinen dokumenttivalokuvaus, Muotoiluinstituutti

"Death is the major issue in the world.
For you, for me, for all of us. It just is.
To not be able to talk about it is very odd."

– Cormac McCarthy

(Woodward 2005.)

Representing the Hidden
– *Opening Doors as a Photographer*

1 Introduction

For the practical part of my thesis work I have made a photographic study of the people, places and practices of the funerary business in Finland, titled *To Serve the Living*. I wanted to look at this large-scale, yet hidden industry and consider why we take comfort in parts of the ritual around laying a body to rest, whilst shying-away from discussing other practical and logistical aspects of the process.

In this written part of the thesis, I will be discussing some of the challenges I faced in making the work, and the ethical decisions I made. There are a number of important ethical issues to address, such as my intentions with approaching an area that is highly emotionally charged for the family members of the deceased. The goal of my written work is to deepen my understanding of my intentions with the practical project and help contextualise the project in the framework of contemporary photography.

To begin with, in chapter one I will outline my starting point and examine the motivations that have led me to take on this project. I will also discuss my goals and method for both the practical and written work.

I see my own practice as being a part of a tradition of subjective documentary practice. To this end, in chapter two I will set a historical context for the practice and look at my previous projects to see how I have arrived at making work in this way. I will use as case studies the work of Lynne Cohen, and the photobook *Marguerites* (2020) by Edouard Jacquinet to discuss the benefits of documentary practice as opposed to photojournalism and explore the grey areas between documentary and straight photojournalism.

In chapter three I will take a closer look at my own photographic process and discuss the working practices I have arrived at and the ethical choices I have made in approaching my chosen subject. This includes both practical considerations, such as using analogue processes, and moral considerations, including breaking the taboo of discussing death and mortality. Finally, I will also touch

upon building narratives through the choices made in the sequencing of the photographs in their final presentation, as choosing what to show, what not to show, and juxtaposing images side by side can force a narrative that can be misleading to the truth.

I expect to find through the writing of this thesis a way to verbalise the reasons for my approach to photography, argumentation for the validity of approaching subjects in this subjective manner, and the usefulness to viewers of a project that represents hidden aspects of our society. These will be explored in the conclusion.

1.1 Starting point

In early 2021 I came across a drawing by Vincent Van Gogh at the Didrichsen Art Museum. I was faced with *Graveyard in the Rain* (illustration 1), made in Paris in 1886. There is a lot happening in the scene: two men working in the foreground, either digging or filling in previously dug plots. A figure with an umbrella stands in the rain watching, and in the background two men carry something between them, followed by one more person sheltered under an umbrella. The centre of the drawing is split by a row of wooden crosses, the diagonal rain streaking across the plane of the drawing.

The drawing may be over a hundred years old, but the scene was instantly recognisable. Black umbrellas and solitary mourners, rough labourers digging the grave, indifferent to the nature of their work. A pervasive sense of mourning in the gloom and rain. Looking at the drawing gave me pause to consider the figures presented and their recognisable professions that have seemingly always been just so.

As a cultural consumer, especially as a horror-fascinated teenager, I've internalised the cultural symbols that denote a funeral. Coming from England my pre-conceptions are very dour and Victorian tinged, not unlike Van Gogh's scene. Considering *Graveyard in the Rain*, I started to question the stereotypes I hold. To borrow an oft-quoted idiom, the two inevitable facts of life are death and taxes, so it stands to reason that the scene depicted is still occurring, however changed by time and progress. Yet, I neither know about the funerary industry, nor hear of it as much as I realised I maybe should, especially during a pandemic when news updates are daily recounting the number of lives lost and the pressure this is putting on hospitals.

Curiously, I can think of very little modern imagery of death practices in Finland or in my own country but can conjure up scenes from far-removed cultures such as the Hindu pyre burnings or the sky burials of Tibetan Buddhists[1]. My knowledge has been gleaned from Western-eyed documentaries and National Geographic style stories that dwell on the exotic. Closer to home, historic stories,

1 *https://ideas.ted.com/11-fascinating-funeral-traditions-from-around-the-globe/*

Illustration 1: Graveyard in the rain ('Fosse commune')
Vincent van Gogh
October–December 1886, Paris

usually focusing on gruesome aspects of cemetery overcrowding and grave robbing have informed my impression of the rites and rituals around death[2]. In both of these instances, we are complicit in gazing at and 'othering' – a prejudiced judging of a society, culture or tradition deemed lesser than our own. This feels hypocritical, when so much of our own society is unknown to us, and would seem just as exotic to those from outside our culture.

Most people will have to deal with the passing of a loved one at some point in their life, but until this time they will have no need to see the process of laying-to-rest. When the time does come, emotion will surely obscure the immediate experience and leave little room for reflection on the various aspects of the process.

My own experience of death and funerals is limited. My Grandfather died when I was eight, suddenly and unexpectedly, and I didn't attend the funeral. The decision was made by my parents to protect me from the grief of others, not wanting my lasting memories of my Grandfather to be associated with what they expected to be an emotionally confusing day for a child. My Grandmother came to live with us for a short while, and the arrangements for the funeral were made by my parents whilst having three young children in the house and also dealing with the shock of my Grandfather's sudden death themselves. It being the first time in their lives that they were this close to a death, and having to make the arrangements themselves, I believe that their own impression of the atmosphere of a funeral was informed by second-hand knowledge. I think at the time I was more upset by the uncertainty and chaos in the household, and whilst I understood that my Grandfather had died, I think I was still too young to fully grasp the permanence of death.

Much later, whilst I was in my early 20's, my best friend's father died, also very suddenly and unexpectedly. I was living away from home at university and got a call from my friend some hours after his Father had collapsed and died on his way out of the house. I travelled home the next day. The family had decided to have a wake with an open casket in their house. This is an uncommon practice in England, but I believe they wanted the extra time to spend with the body and to come to terms with what had happened, to say goodbye. I visited their small farmhouse, and whilst in the kitchen with the rest of the family, my friend's Mother ordered me to go into the living room and say goodbye to John. I say ordered, I had no intention of seeing John's body – I had never seen a dead body, and I wanted my memory of John to be of the warm, friendly man I knew him to be. However, who was I to refuse a grieving family member, and as it was important to her, I did as I was told.

2 *https://naturalhistorymuseum.blog/2017/05/31/horrors-of-the-green-ground-cemetery-human-anthropology/*

I'd spent a lot of time in that living room throughout my childhood and teenage years. Every time I visited my home, I also visited theirs. The sofa had been moved to accommodate the coffin, but otherwise things looked the same. I've spoken to a number of people about their reactions to seeing a body, and they have ranged from overwhelming outbursts of grief to physically extreme reactions. I didn't have any embarrassing response, as was my fear, no shock or need to flee the room. Here was John, smaller, and not 'sleeping' or 'at rest', but looking peaceful. I'm grateful that I did have the chance to see him one last time and under those circumstances, in familiar surroundings, with the sound of his loved ones talking in the room next door – a safe space where the people gathered could reconcile with the passing of John.

His funeral was also the first I had attended, and, with my family, I joined a full church for the service. Afterwards, the whole congregation walked from the church to the cemetery in the valley where he was buried. It was, as much as a funeral can be, a warm and familial day. I was an observer to all of these rites, and at the time I didn't consider the huge amount of arrangements that would have had to have been made by a family still in shock, and all the work by various individuals that is needed to lay a body to rest.

Looking into photographic work dealing with the subject, I could find poetic photo-essays on the death of a loved-one that dealt with suffering and grief[3], clinical surveys of some of the medical facilities[4], and journalistic essays on the subject, laying out the processes and functions of the funerary-industry in an informative way, but leaning either into an illustrative project[5], or a narrative-driven personal essay[6]. I wanted to see something that combined all of the above, being emotive without focusing on grief, and informative without being illustrative. That is what I have set out to make: a subjective view of an industry and its inner workings that aren't readily accessible, but that hold a fascination for many and that will inevitably become relevant to each and all of us at some point.

3 *Henrik Malmström – On Borrowed Time, 2010, self-published*
4 *Neil Pardington – The Clinic (https://neilpardington.com/the-clinic)*
5 *Jeffrey Silverthorne – The Morgue (https://www.stanleybarker.co.uk/products/morgue-jeffrey-silverthorne)*
6 *Krass Clement – Ved Døden (http://www.krassclement.com/books/veddoden.html)*

1.2 Intentions and method

My intent with photography has always been to gain access to areas and places that I would otherwise have no business being. Photography is a practice of noticing, and in doing so, elevating the ordinary for audiences to consider and appreciate. Projects I've made in the past three years have all been focused on recording overlooked aspects of society that, regardless of the fact that everyone today holds a camera in their hand, would otherwise go unnoticed and forgotten. My intention with this project is to provide an insight into an industry that remains mysterious to many, and in doing so, invite viewers into a safe place to consider the subjects of death and mortality, subjects that are considered taboo. As the art historian Chris Townsend writes:

> *What remains clear is that for most of us in the West death has been distanced from life. Where the graveyard was geographically central within medieval and early modern communities it is now peripheral, an addendum to the suburbs. Where once most people finished their lives in domestic surroundings, surrounded by friends and neighbours, now they die in hospitals or homes for the aged. Again such places are geographically marginal, pushed away from the locus of everyday life. Dying is an alienated and alienating experience that we want to ignore or forget. And so the "ordinary" individual dies remote from home and family, the body is either interred or incinerated with the minimum of ceremony.* (Townsend 1998, p.130.)

In my view, Townsend succinctly sums up why it would be beneficial to photograph in these peripheral locations to every-day life. The moving of death practices outside of our view, hidden away to protect our sensibilities, has distanced us from them emotionally as well as physically. We are not only alienating the dying, but alienating ourselves in our grief, our community not knowing how to respond. By photographing in these 'geographically marginal' spaces, I hope to give back some agency both to myself and the viewers of the project. I personally think it wise to know the reality of our world, rather than shying away and infantilising oneself.

Illustration 2: The Morgue (Knifed to Death I)
Andres Serrano
1992

Illustration 3: Untitled, from Body Farm
Sally Mann
2000–2001

I'm using the term 'subjective documentary' to describe the field I'm working in. As with most photographic work the boundaries between different genres are loose at best, and so to outline what I am aiming for I will use case studies of two photographers whose work I have found successful and engaging. This process will help contextualise my project in the wider field of contemporary photography and give space for self-reflection on my own intentions and practice.

Photographing on location, I wanted the project to look at the different aspects of the topic, taking in workspaces, tools, uniforms, vehicles and related ephemera and objects, and to observe traditions and actions involved in all the stages a corpse will pass through on its journey to a final resting place. It was not my intention to make detailed, shocking images of the corpse. Works such as Andres Serrano's *The Morgue* (1992, illustration 2) and Sally Mann's *What Remains* (2001, illustration 3), which both consist of unflinchingly straight photographs of dead bodies, use the corpse to force their viewers into facing their own mortality. Whilst this is an inevitable end point in a discussion around death, I want to discuss our societal approach to the subject, using the surrounding infrastructure of the industry instead to lead the viewer into considering why we have hidden away what is a natural process, and one that is understandable to be intrigued by.

I worked with analogue processes throughout the project, photographing with square format, black and white film, using flash. I also made the final prints in the darkroom and framed them for a gallery setting in traditional frames. The materiality of analogue processes is one that reflects the humanity of the subject, and I'm not averse to leaning on the romanticism of tradition. The reliability of truth in photography needs also to be considered, and I think going back to pre-photoshop techniques will give viewers confidence in the trustworthiness of the images and slow down their consideration of the photographs in a way that images presented online or in a news context rarely do. The analogue process also suits my style of working, and its slower practice has hopefully led to the emotive, atmospheric aesthetic that I was aiming for, rather than a colder recording of a situation that I often read a digital image as.

Whilst I think that this project is one that could work in a number of different contexts, my initial aim was to make a gallery exhibition of framed works. This is the setting in which I think I can most easily and safely lead the viewers' reading of the work, and one which will afford the dignity that the subject deserves. If such a presentation works successfully then I would be interested in also exploring the possibility of making a printed publication, but this wasn't something I felt I could complete satisfactorily in the time frame I was working to.

2 Context – subjective documentary practice

I find it challenging to define my practice, not wanting to pigeon-hole myself into one specific genre. When explaining my intentions, I'm often explaining more about what I am *not* doing than what I am; I'm not a photojournalist trying to capture a fleeting moment in the action, neither am I staging a scene. I may ask a person to stall in what they are doing for a moment, but I'm not a director trying to force a mood or an idea that I'm looking for.

I consider what I am doing to be in the area of subjective documentary. Documentary photography aims *"to show, in an informal way, the everyday lives of ordinary people to other ordinary people"* (Bate 2016, 53), and unlike photojournalism, documentary photography delves deeper into a topic by spending more time with a subject, rather than being interested in the 'current event'. I believe awareness of my subjective approach is important. By admitting up-front that I am conscious of my own bias in my actions, I am free to explore the subject without feeling tied to a brief or an expected outcome. Working under this genre doesn't restrict the aesthetic of the work made and allows freedom in the working method but does tie it into a framework that the viewer can easily understand. I align this approach with what theorist Charlotte Cotton describes as 'deadpan':

> *[The Deadpan style of photography] allows the subjects to control their representation, the photographer merely bearing witness to their existence and self-possession. […] The photographing of groups and communities for art galleries and books tends to be done on longer timescales than for commissioned news stories, and usually with more repeated visits. The fact is often mentioned in the supporting texts as evidence of an art project's ethical, counter-reportage dimension. A photographer has been able to spend time with the subjects, waiting for the right moment and photographing them from an informed, albeit an outsider's, position.* (Cotton 2009, 172.)

Although in this quote Cotton is talking about photographing marginalised groups or survivors of atrocities, I think the definition and the goals and ethics of the deadpan genre can be applied to any subject. When done right, the deadpan approach displays an interest in the subject and a respect for the people involved. It also requires the maker to place trust in the viewer. As the subjects explored become more complex, they rely on an engaged reading. It cannot be guaranteed that all who see a project will give it this attention, but for those willing to commit themselves to picking out the intricacies, there will be more to be found by engaging with the body of work as a whole, considering how the images relate, and the motivations of both the photographer and those agreeing to be photographed.

I find my practice increasingly performative, the tasks of gaining access and finding information being perhaps the biggest part of a project's process. It also requires a huge amount of collaboration: even the photographs that do not show a person need a lot of interaction before they become the final photographs. Therefore, I do not identify with the street-photography style of working, where an artist waits for a photogenic subject to cross their path. However, it cannot be said that I am presenting a clinical, categorical, all-encompassing record of the industry either, which is often how the practitioners of the deadpan style present their work. The places shown here are the places I have found and been allowed access to, and the details recorded are those that I have personally found to be worth recording. This is again where the subjective viewpoint comes in. It can be, and often is argued that all photography is subjective: the author is choosing where to point the camera, what to exclude from the frame and when to press the shutter. But in intention at least, photojournalism aims to be as objective as possible in recording the truth, which is why I cannot define my approach as such. However, drawing a line under the multifaceted attempts to define the different approaches to documentary work, social documentary filmmaker John Grierson has said:

> *The only reality which counts in the end is the interpretation which is profound. It does not matter whether that interpretation comes by way of the studio or by way of documentary or for that matter by way of the music hall. The important thing is the interpretation and the profundity of the interpretation.* (Bate 2016, 71.)

What I am aiming for with my work is always to show a coherent interpretation of the subject as I have found it. How the viewer then interprets my presentation is one that I can anticipate and attempt to steer, but inevitably an artist cannot control the reading of their work. I need to be aware of this and assure that I am not going to mislead in any damaging way. To this end I will look at the work I have made previously, and briefly discuss how the outcomes of these projects have led me to want to approach my chosen subject in the manner I am. I will also use as case studies two photographers – Lynne Cohen and Edouard Jacquinet – who have inspired my method and explore why I find their work successful.

Illustration 4: Siikonen's cricket farm
2018

Illustration 5: Siikonen's cricket farm
2018

2.1 My practice

All of the projects I have made since starting at Lahti Design Institute have been motivated by an urge to gain access and explore a phenomenon that I am an outsider to. Even before having the excuse of being a student I visited a facility that farmed crickets as a sustainable food source under the pretence of shooting work for the entrance exams, (illustrations 4 & 5). The owners were bemused by my interest in what they were doing as I had no previous knowledge of the industry, having stumbled upon their existence by chance, and I wasn't there with any designs to invest or profit from the business, just simply to see and learn and document. The photographs I made at the cricket farm would probably be best described as photojournalistic, explaining the processes and describing the situation, but the steps I went through to be granted access were, without me knowing, going to become a major part of my process in further projects. I had started by contacting the start-up company that owned the cricket farm, and after first visiting their offices and laboratory, I was given the farmers' contact details. I hadn't known that this was where the project would lead me when I first contacted them, and my impressions of the industry were made in conversation directly with those involved. Needless to say, this isn't an area that I would have stumbled upon and had the opportunity to photograph without cooperation and involvement with others.

After gaining admittance to the photography programme at the Design Institute, the first self-initiated project I started was a series that I am still working to finalise titled *Muut eläimet* (illustrations 6, 7 & 8). The motivation for this project came from my experiences visiting Finnish schools. When I first moved to Finland I worked briefly as an English language tutor, running after-school classes in Helsinki and Vantaa. During the job I was able to visit a number of different school buildings, which varied in size and age, and the one constant that I noticed in all of the schools was collections of taxidermied animals. Coming from England, I hadn't seen this in schools before and found it an interesting eccentricity. I set out to make a typographical study of these collections across a number of schools. To begin with, when discussing my idea with people, there was doubt as to whether this was actually a common practice, and not just a coincidence that the schools I had visited still held the collections. After contacting and visiting a number of schools though, it was quite clearly a very

Illustration 6, 7 & 8:
Muut eläimet
2019–2021

common occurrence, albeit one that was slowly disappearing – many of the schools I visited were downsizing, relocating or simply throwing out their collections.

At one school, after being led to the science classroom that held their collection, I asked if I could also photograph the large bird hanging on the wall above the staircase we had just used. The teacher who was with me, and who had led me up that very staircase, couldn't think what bird I could mean, and when we walked back for me to point it out, was surprised to see a bird I thought difficult to overlook (illustration 6). Another teacher I had been in contact with emailed me excitedly to tell me they had 'found' more of their collection. The animals that they had found were in glass bookcases in the school's main hallway, a corridor the teacher used numerous times a day, but without noticing the fox that watched her.

These examples show how blind we can become to our surroundings. It is my intention with photography to call attention to these blind spots in our own environment. The most pleasant experience during the photographing of the *Muut eläimet* project was allowing a group of young students to look through the camera's viewfinder at the composition of stuffed birds I was about to photograph. The students had been queued next to this display only five minutes before, waiting to go into their classroom, and paying no mind to the animals there. However, with the attention of the camera, they were all suddenly conscious of, interested in and questioning the display.

Muut eläimet was typographical in nature, and took an objective approach in the photography, simply presenting the phenomena without comment. For the next lengthy project I worked on I wanted to look at a wider-ranging topic, to be able to mix different subjects and approaches into the final work.

Having moved to Lahti as an outsider I'd been interested in the councils attempts to brand it as the 'Business City', juxtaposed with its self-image as the 'Chicago of Finland', a previously industrious city now struggling with high unemployment and a drug problem compared to the rest of the country. I set out to make an objective overview of the city, using these two differing viewpoints as a guide for how to approach it, showing the industrious, ambitious side of the local population, but also exploring the criticisms of the town and its high unemployment rate. In retrospect, the height of a global pandemic was not a good time to undertake such a project. I had intentions of making portraits of young people training in specific areas of work, as well as business people who had chosen the city as their company headquarters. However, understandably, this was impossible to arrange, and so the final images heavily leant towards the 'Chicago' image. Being limited to shooting outside meant that the decaying physical infrastructure of the city became the main focus, and the project took on a critical tone, (illustrations 9, 10, 11 & 12). The project wasn't wholly unsuccessful though

Illustration 9, 10, 11 & 12:
Business City
2020

– whilst I didn't meet the criteria of objectivity I had originally set out with, I did create a very honest subjective view of the city: a viewpoint of someone who was not granted access behind the doors, and so perhaps representing an image closer to that an outsider sees.

With *To Serve the Living*, I wanted to engage with a topic using all of these learned approaches – reaching out to places that could invite me to visit and mixing images of different situations to create a singular, coherent viewpoint. I wanted to be candid about taking a subjective documentary approach, and explore the relationship between text and images, or lack thereof. Most importantly, I wanted to offer a safe space for unjudgmental voyeurism, to be able to gaze at a part of our own society.

To expand further on the factors discussed above I will next engage in two case studies, one on the work of photographer Lynne Cohen and the other a singular project by the photographer Edouard Jacquinet. My aim is to examine the issues of subjective documentary practice further and to explore how these have influenced my own practice.

Illustration 13: Government Employment Office
Lynne Cohen
1977

Illustration 14: Spa
Lynne Cohen
1999

2.2 Case study: Lynne Cohen

Lynne Cohen (1944–2014) made her career photographing the interiors of domestic and institutional settings, (illustrations 13, 14 & 15). Photographing mainly in her home country of Canada, she worked with a large format, 8x10" camera, and focused on making large-scale printed work for exhibition, which was later collected and published in a number of monographs. The majority of her work is black and white, but later in her career she switched to colour. (Hakim, 2007.)

Cohen didn't work in series, instead approaching each image individually, which when viewed together with her entire oeuvre begin to read as typologies of type. However, her practice is different from that of the German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, most known for their mathematically strict records of water towers and other functional structures (illustration 16) and considered the purist representatives of the typological approach. Cohen considers herself *"not a 'new typologist' or 'old topographer' out to photograph as many spas or classrooms as I can."* (Cohen 2012, 150.) Instead, each photograph acts more as a portrait of a particular place, not intended to stand in as an illustration for all similar institutions. This is where the photographer's subjective viewpoint comes in: the more repetitious the photographs become the more objective we can consider the document, with a larger pool of references leading to a better representative of the average or the mean. But Cohen is making careful decisions on what and where to photograph, sometimes coming away from a visit with no photographs at all. In her own words: *"I am not a documentary photographer who attempts to produce an objective record of how things are. Rather I aspire to document what is going on in my head, to find resonances between my thinking and the world."* (Cohen 2012, 150.) In fact, Cohen rejects considering herself as a documentary photographer at all:

> *While it's true that I appropriate a documentary approach and many of the formal strategies of documentary photography, my work is not documentary and was never meant to be. My interests lie elsewhere. I want to make pictures that are conceptual, social and political, pictures that are connected both to the real world and to art but without being documents of either. I sometimes think that what I am doing is documenting an idea I have in my head and trying to link it to this or that bit of the world. Also unlike documentary photographers, I am not mainly concerned with documenting places and often don't make a photograph in a place even if I have gained access.* (Hakim 2007.)

Illustration 15: Military Installation
Lynne Cohen
1990

Illustration 16: Water Towers
Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher
1972–2009

Her desire to distance herself from the genre is understandable. As previously discussed, the freedom to work without any expectations is liberating, but in my view Cohen's work, under any name, follows the codes of this social, subjective documentary genre. The rooms Cohen shows appear as dioramas, always devoid of people, but not of their presence. The absurdities of our society are highlighted when we are made to stop and consider the places we have made for particular purposes. There is an uncanniness, and even places such as military institutions appear familiar and timeless, and in the intervening 40 years between her taking *Government Employment Office* (illustration 13) and now, the tropes of the bureaucratic setting are still recognisable.

Cohen's photographs are always presented with very little extraneous information, usually only with the official title of the space, '*Police Range*', *'Military Installation'*, *'Spa'*, sometimes with the year, or even just a vague period. This choice to have the image be the main carrier of information, rather than a text attached to it, is at the heart of the distinction between photojournalism and documentary in an art photography context, forcing the viewer to collect as much information as possible from the image itself, and in doing so to relate the found clues with known aspects of our own lives. Used alongside a journalistic piece, these interiors would serve as illustrations to give set decoration to the story but presented as they are in a gallery or art book context, viewers must engage critical thinking, needing to come to their own conclusions about the scene presented. It is the details that engage the viewer, the space as a whole giving context for the markers of use.

Cohen claims not to be trying to push a political agenda with her choices, but this comes across as an act of subterfuge on her part, as much of her work leads one to question the usefulness or necessity of these faceless institutions. Her favoured locations are usually functional, with any aesthetic qualities being a secondary concern. Showing the function serves as the critical commentary on Western societies values, the decoration brings the comedy. It is a view we rarely take on our own surroundings, instead gazing on the exoticness of other cultures where it is easier to see a marked difference between 'them' and 'us'. Indeed, the fact that she is photographing in places that she isn't, at least in terms of nationality, foreign to, favouring sites in North America, we can gaze on these scenes without fear of appropriation or mis-reading the situation. For the most part her interiors hold some recognisable aspect to our more public Western institutions, even if it is only a choice of wall decoration or furnishing material.

For me, a big part of the enjoyment of Lynne Cohen's work comes from the absurd humour to be found in the settings she photographs. They act as high satire, laughing at the quirks of complexes that take themselves extremely seriously. Cohen considers herself as someone who photographs irony, rather than an ironist, but one who does indeed find humour in the quirks found. No matter how

important or sacred a situation, there is always comedy present, something that is avoided by many for po-faced sincerity, mistaking the ability to laugh as being disrespectful.

Looking through *Nothing is Hidden*, the 2012 book showcasing work from across Cohen's career, and published on occasion of her winning the Scotiabank Photography Award, I have come to realise that the strength comes less from the accumulation of images, but instead from her approach to each photograph being a singular work. The fact that there are layers of meaning to be found, and information to be gleaned, brings me back to her book, but I can find myself looking at only one or two images, not needing to read cover to cover to feel the atmosphere of the work. I want my own images to have this sense of a narrative in a single frame. Of course, it is important that the body of work as a whole holds together thematically and aesthetically, but I would want the viewer to be able to appreciate something in each image if presented with them individually. That so much information *can* be found from the photographs without reliance on text also supports my conviction that the viewers skills in deconstructing the image can be trusted, and that ethically it is acceptable to leave room for the viewers interpretation.

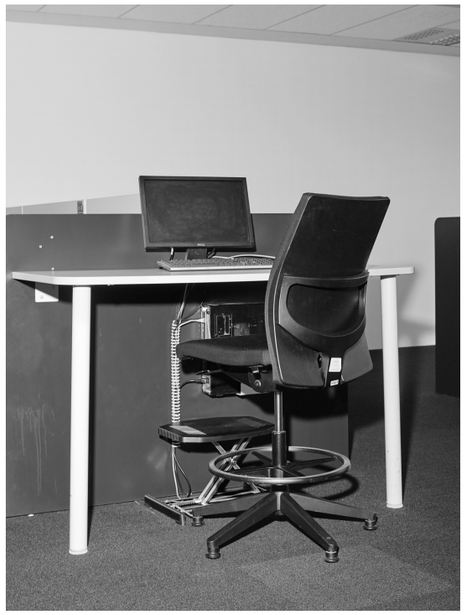
2.3 Case study: Edouard Jacquinet – *Marguerites*

In this second case study I will look at a single project from Edouard Jacquinet: *Marguerites*, shot between 2015–2019 and published as a book by Art Paper Editions in 2020, (illustrations 17, 18, 19 & 20). With the project Jacquinet (b. 1992) explores modern work environments, in particular call-centres, looking closely at the details that define the physical surroundings and how people inhabit the space.

Interiors of meeting rooms and shared office spaces are shown alongside workstations – the generic, black plastic office chair features heavily. The title refers to a star-shaped, spatial organisation of workstations common in shared offices, (Rencontres Photo Paris, 2019). The impression is not of a high earning, thriving business, but a workaday company with a high turnover of staff. The images are quiet and still, the pace seems calm. Even though people are shown they seem detached from us and their colleagues, as if in a daydream, completing their assigned tasks automatically.

Photographs taken outside are still surrounded by the concrete buildings of the modern-day business park, and views looking out from inside are obscured by blinds, or reflections from the office lighting on the glass. The viewpoint is not of a visitor, invited in to appreciate and admire, but of one of the workers, existing in the space and using it. At times the viewpoint is so close that details lose their context and start to become abstract. The portraits are for the most part detached, with the subjects being consumed by the task they are engaged in. One portrait denotes a marked difference, with a staff member, sat at a computer with a headset on, gazing back into the camera, aware of its presence.

At its birth, photography was heralded as an objective representation of reality, a scientific approach that could only show the truth. Walter Benjamin, in his 1935 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, writes that *"For the first time in the process of pictorial reproduction, photography freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens."* (Benjamin 1935, 2.) Put simply: the photographer cannot alter what is in front of the camera, as opposed to the painter who is making an interpretation. Even simpler still – the camera never lies. This claim came quickly into question however, and as photography gradually became



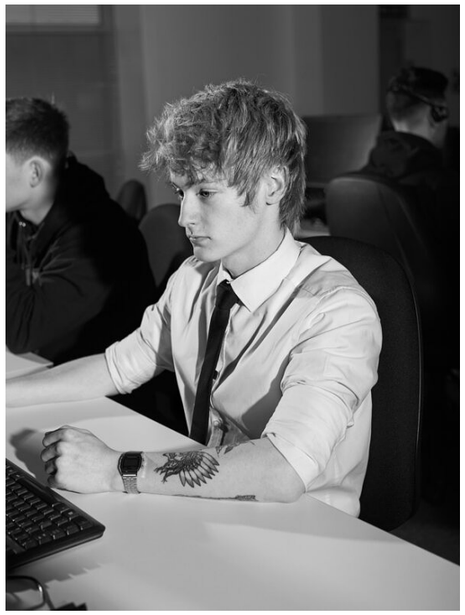


Illustration 17, 18, 19 & 20:
Marguerites
Edouard Jacquinet
2020

accepted as an art-form the artist's subjective viewpoint was recognised. What the photographer chose to photograph, the equipment they utilised, what they chose to include in the photograph and how they chose to frame it are all decisions made that can affect the viewer's reading. However, this doesn't need to be a problem for the documentary tradition in photography – it has simply meant that photographers need to have a self-awareness of their actions, and that viewers must have an understanding that they are looking at the truth as the photographer has found it, and that this is open to interpretation and argument, since it is at its core a subjective view.

Photojournalism's aims are different to documentary: *"photojournalism is a form of journalism which tells a news story through powerful photography [...] photojournalism differs from other forms of photography by its need to remain honest and impartial."* (Tate.org.uk.) Therefore, the question of truth in a photojournalistic image can be considered in more straightforward terms than documentary. The ethics of photojournalism go hand-in-hand with those of reportage in general listed as "*honesty, responsibility, accuracy and truth*" (CIP). The same issues of truthfulness apply here as do to documentary photography, but the stakes are a little different. In photojournalism the photograph is being used to show, as clearly as possible, the reality of a situation. It is not the photographer's job to interpret or project their opinions. This, inevitably, does happen, and the debates around how much subjectivity in photojournalism is acceptable is another matter, but for my purpose, it is enough to say that the aim of published photojournalism is to present a photograph that the viewer can trust in. To this end, photojournalism will often be published alongside journalistic reporting or essays that give context, and with captions explaining what is in the photograph.

The photographs in *Marguerites*, shot digitally in black and white, are presented one per spread, with no text to situate them other than a short interpretative essay on the inner front flap. The viewer needs to fill in a lot of the context themselves, and yet it is surprisingly easy to get a grasp of the situation. The photographs in the project make use of cultural indicators that, even for those who have never worked in an office complex, have been exposed to and which are reinforced through pop culture.[7]

Jacquinet's website describes *Marguerites* as: *"a long-term project constructed with a combination of selected details, fragments of space, shades of situations and atmospheres as a visual study of work environments."* (edouardjacquinet.com, 2021.) The interesting word in the description is 'constructed'. Jacquinet is not trying to present to us a straight photojournalistic report of a place, yet as a viewer this

7 *Think of the British and American versions of 'The Office', or the 'Dilbert' cartoon series. The comedy is often heavily trading on the mundanity and un-specific quality of the architectural spaces, the furniture and decoration they contain, and the work, often considered unrewarding, completed there.*

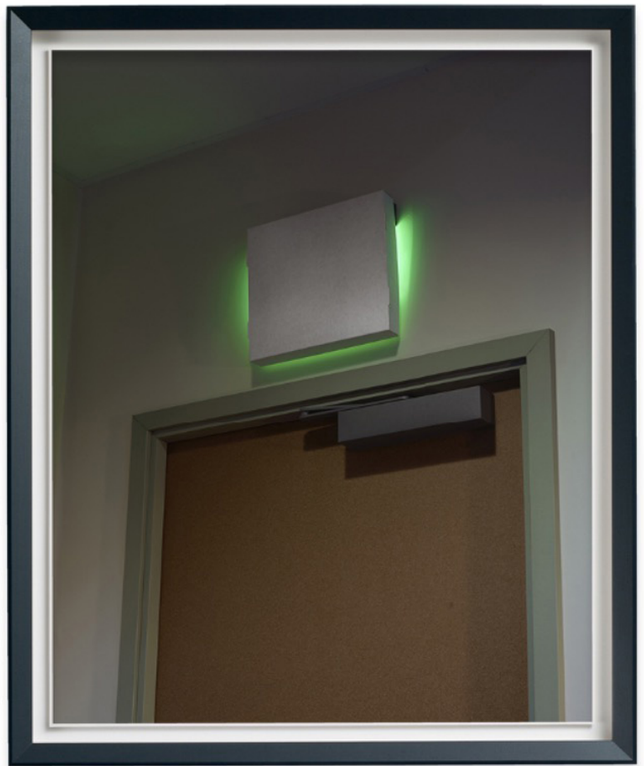


Illustration 21: Daily #29
Tomas Demand
2017

is exactly the impression we get at first glance. The text at the beginning of the book warns us "*You are probably wrong, but that's because it was your first thought, at first sight.*" In a journalistic context this would be how the interaction between image and viewer should go, trusting the images to provide the facts that support our presupposition. This trust is built on the history of the photograph, which from its birth was considered a scientific recording of reality.[8]

Jacquinet's choice to photograph in black and white, often quite close to his subjects and in fluid movement around the spaces also references the journalistic traditions of the 1940's and 1950's, the golden age of the photojournalism tradition, where the world was inundated with photography presenting foreign countries and cultures. But here the intention is different: the project isn't intended as an illustration or a narrative, but a rumination that leads us to consider a recognisable, but under-considered aspect of our own society due to its homogenous prevalence.

The construction here isn't in the literal sense of Tomas Demand's work, in which the artist physically builds a scene out of paper, creating a fictional environment, (illustration 21). Instead, the construction made by Jacquinet is one made through careful selection and sequencing of photographs taken from many different places at different times. The photographs are all documents of some real-world detail that has captured the artist's eye, and when viewed individually can be said (in the simplest understanding of the act of photographing) to show a truthful document of that moment. But in the presentation, the suggestion is that these scenes are all coming from inside the same building – an office to represent all offices, whereas the truth is that these images have been made in offices from around the world.

In an increasingly homogenised world, these photographs highlight symbols that are recognisable to many: office plants that may be real or may be plastic, shared office supplies with tangled wires, fresh faced youngsters in their first job. The cumulative effect is a photographic update on Douglas Coupland's novel *Generation X*: a view that is deeply ironic, a little bitter, but still with the awareness to question the roles we play in society. The signs of individuality in the spaces are often humorous, such as Christmas decorations wound around office furniture, motivational posters and greasy fingerprints marking company property. Yet the fact that these signs of humanity are always there on top of a bland and faceless piece of institutional property leaves a sense of futility: they are as interchangeable as the staff members themselves, and inevitably expendable.

8 *Only in recent years has this trust been widely lost, with conspiracy theories abounding online. Perhaps a consequence of a generation of people entering into the digital media landscape without the media training that is given now at school level, but equally perhaps a consequence of an over education in questioning the validity of presented facts. Either way, this is a different topic for another writer, but in a climate where the concept of trust in media has been severely damaged it's an important factor to keep in mind whenever discussing these topics.*

Illustration 22 & 23: Changing Technology
Lee Friedlander
1985–86

We do not get any information on the characters that are shown through the book, and it is through deconstructing the images that we can organise a hierarchy of employees: a confidently striding manager with a lanyard around his shirt collar, carefully groomed young telephone operators, one sporting a glaringly fresh tattoo that would be more at home on the arm of a wartime sailor, and maintenance guys blowing clouds of smoke on a break. The lack of given information allows, as I just have, to project our own experiences onto the individuals photographed, picking details from their surroundings and from how they present themselves to understand who they are. The subjects become totems for those we've met in our own life.

Between 1985–86 photographer Lee Friedlander approached a similar subject. Titled *'Changing Technology'* (illustrations 22 & 23) he focused on the faces of workers as they engaged with technology new to the office: *"I chose to photograph people working at computers as these ubiquitous machines seemed to be the vehicle for that change."* (Friedlander, 2021, 27.) Friedlander is considered one of the defining New Documentarists of American photography, straddling the boundaries of photojournalism, documentary and art. What strikes me about this series though is his choice to present the photographs as candid. Standing right in front of the office workers, using a flashgun, and being an outsider to the office in the first place, he was undoubtedly noticeable, so we are being asked to be complicit in the conceit that the subjects are unaware of the cameras presence and have been caught in a moment of truth.

Nearly 40 years later, we as an audience are more critical of the photography presented to us. Accelerated by the digital revolution of photography, which allowed images to be even further altered, our reading of photography has gotten to a point where we recognise the hand of the photographer in the presentation of a scene and can make better judgements on the validity of the photograph. This is liberating progress, meaning also that an artist such as Jacquinet no longer needs to adhere to these limiting journalistic approaches and can present his subjects as being complicit in the making of the work, whilst still maintaining the viewers trust in its truthfulness.

There can be some discussion over the ethics of this style of presentation. Is choosing to omit information such as location, purpose, company and individual's names from the final project deceitful to the viewer? As the subject isn't one that is hidden from view, misrepresented or representative of any marginalised communities, it's not going to be damaging to any one person, even if taken at face value. It may show the corporate workspace in a less than positive light when compared to their marketing materials, but as those marketing images already exist and are widely circulated, *Marguerites* can act as a counterpoint.

As with Lynne Cohen's work, there is a trust being placed in the viewer here to take the time to explore the work in order to get the most from it. The chosen subject here is even more mundane than those that Cohen chooses, yet becomes quite fascinating because of this. This raising of the mundane into an object worth contemplating is an act that I am trying to perform with *To Serve the Living*, being able to experience a workplace as it functions at its natural pace, rather than heading in with a pre-conceived notion of its defining function and working towards capturing that.

The context *Marguerites* is presented in is important to the reading of the work. It is easy to imagine the project working well in a gallery or even magazine feature, but the art book format is where it works best. The pace of reading is set by the viewer, and we have the option to move back and forth through the work, gradually picking out the important signifiers. The photographs here do rely on each other much more so than with Cohen's work. Narratives aren't necessarily to be found in each individual image, but together they build up a cohesive atmosphere. This impression of one singular environment in the project is a successful one, the averaging out of many places into one making it accessible to a wider audience. I think anyone would recognise and respond to at least some aspect of the workplace Jacquinet has constructed. I hope that my approach to the funerary industry will work in some similar way, that by avoiding site specific details, it will speak of an industry at large.

2.4 Conclusions on context

The works looked at in both these case studies can be seen as being simple documentary records at first glance, but there's a lot more going on in these scenes. That I am drawn to re-visiting these works and find myself discovering new details and aspects of the locations and the relationships between them is proof of the benefit of the methodical way these artists work.

One key reading of these projects is through the concept of liminal spaces. In architecture, a liminal space is any space that facilitates a transition from one place to another. In this way corridors, not rooms unto themselves but serving as connections between rooms, are liminal spaces, but also airports, bus stations, and waiting rooms at large are considered as such. These spaces exist to be passed through, and therefore we rarely stop to consider them, as their function is only to connect and lead us to spaces with a defined use. For example, the dentists waiting room functions only as a space to lead to the dentist's clinic.

Cohen is often photographing in these liminal spaces, but even in her photographs of non-liminal spaces, we experience the same uncanny feeling. This is for the most part due to the lack of people present – when we look at an image we are unconsciously searching for context. In the photojournalism tradition this context is always easily found in the accompanying text or captions, but in documentary we often need to discover it for ourselves, and we will look to the people presented to supply that context. Seeing spaces that are made specifically for a purpose, without it being used for that purpose leaves us feeling uneasy. This is why most advertisements for furniture, architecture or suchlike will feature people engaged with the place.

The office is another space in which we would normally pass through without being aware of the environment. Even those working in such a space every day become blind through exposure to the same scenes, in the same way we don't actively look at and appreciate our own house. Both Cohen and Jacquinet have concerned themselves with noticing these spaces and seen the important commentary they can have on the ideals of our society. By recording and presenting them in a manner we are not

used to seeing them in, in an art context, we are forced to really look closely, and as such consider our relationship to our environment.

As in both these case studies, with *To Serve the Living* I have been photographing in both everyday work environments and literal liminal spaces. However, the places I have been invited to photograph in could be considered liminal spaces in another sense, being as they are all places in which a body passes through between death and the final 'resting' place. Indeed, the stages a body passes through before being considered 'at rest' is liminal in the anthropological sense, being the threshold between this life and some unknown other. This is a consideration that I think would be lost if the work were shown in a straight-documentary context, an over-abundance of information attached to the images leaving the viewer no room to consider, question and ruminate on the particulars of these scenes being held up for consideration.

As a viewer, these deadpan studies allow us to gaze without embarrassment and take stock of our surroundings. The act of questioning 'why' and staring at the uncommon is a reflex we are quickly taught out of as children, it being considered rude. But the desire doesn't leave us, and with these photographs we are given the opportunity to satisfy our curiosity without fear of offending. The act of engaging in voyeurism with the permission of the photographer is one that here, looking at others work, I can rationalise quite easily. The artists have done the heavy ethical rationalising on behalf of their viewers to allow them to observe without guilt. Later, when I am the photographer making the decisions on what to show, and in doing so giving permission to viewers on what I deem an acceptable level of interested voyeurism, I will have to carefully avoid straying into gratuity. Inevitably my success will be judged after the work has been viewed by an audience from across a cross-section of society, but I would hope that my own ethical compass wouldn't allow me to include images that would cause offence, or that I couldn't defend exhibiting.

As well as giving us permission to gaze without embarrassment, we are also allowed to laugh at some of the situations these photographers are showing us. Neither are unaware of the absurdity of the human condition, and whilst they aren't making visual one-liners the likes of Martin Parr, they do smirk at the unintentional irony of workers trying to give their office a Christmas vibe, or military institutions supplying some soft cushions and house plants to prettify the surroundings. Some would choose to exclude these kinds of humorous elements to keep the tone of the subject serious, but I believe that there *is* humour present in most situations, and whilst I am not going out to make a 'funny' project, I would hope that some of the absurdities of what we think of as one of the more serious areas of life are felt. It may be muted, but it is still present.

The approaches taken by both photographers here also promise longevity as a document; as time passes the way audiences will read the images will change. In the case of *Marguerites,* it's difficult to say this early how the reading may change, but Cohen's work can already be looked at as a record of the homogenising of the western world, and the progression of military institutions from closed off spaces to an everyday and recognisable place. That her photographs are over 20 years old already is not a disadvantage either, this simply leads us to consider how much, or little, change has been made in that time, and to consider how these spaces may look today.

Looking at both photographers works I have had to consider the different approaches towards construction in a project, and how much this can be used before misleading the viewer. Cohen's approach to each photograph being an individual artwork is one that I aim to use myself, paying close consideration to what a single frame is telling. However, I will also be relying on Jacquinet's technique of building a cohesive environment from across various locations. Combining these two approaches should result in a project that doesn't repeat itself, with every included image holding within it its own narrative, whilst also working towards informing the viewers understanding of the industry as a whole.

From these case studies, one of the most beneficial realisations that I have come to is that the trust the photographer has put in their audience, by not relying on extensive written descriptions, is a valid way to present a documentary project. The first thought when thinking of documentary is of masses of information condensed into a cohesive narrative, to *tell* an audience the photographer's findings. But all the information doesn't need to be readily accessible, and by making the viewer work to find the nuances of a subject, the lasting impact is greater.

3 Process

My intention with *To Serve the Living* has been to make a project that invites inquisitiveness, stimulates thought and discussion and sparks an interest in the subject from audiences. Visually, I hope the final images exhibited are atmospheric and emotive – that they will affect an audience. These desires have informed my photographic methods and choices made throughout the making of the work.

In this next section I will show how I gained access to the people and places I photographed and discuss the working methods I used and my reasoning for using them. I will also talk about the selection process for the exhibition, and why I chose to make a gallery show rather than a printed publication.

3.1 Photography

The first choice I needed to make with the project was the correct format for the photographs, and after consideration I chose to photograph *To Serve the Living* in the 6x6" square format. This format is one that evokes a feeling of classic documentary photography, favoured by art-documentary photographers such as Diane Arbus. But as Instagram used the square as it's default format during its birth and subsequent journey to becoming a platform with over one billion users today, it has started to become symbolic of a new vernacular and throwaway photography.

Many artist photographers began to favour the 6x7" or 4x5" formats, and I believe this is in some ways as a response to the pervasiveness of the square format, an unconscious distancing from the glut of uploads from the amateur photographer. I also used the 6x7" format for previous projects, finding it easy to compose satisfyingly with, but wanted to try and break away from the unwritten fashion trends of the medium and force myself to consider my compositions in a more challenging way. I find the 6x6" square format a recognisably subjective format. Visually, we see the world on a horizontal plane, and so the rectangular crop mimics this, untroubling to our eye. The square format also makes us aware of the space *outside* of the frame, the objects omitted from the left and right of what the photographer has chosen to focus on. I believe the choice to use the square can help the viewer, whether explicitly or unconsciously, read the images as one person's subjective experience of a place, not as a visual record that attempts to include everything.

The 6x6" format also mimics the spaces I found myself in, not by design, but as a happy coincidence. The rooms depicted were usually small and intimate, if not cramped. The square format imitates this, and even with a wide angle we feel the confines of the space from the confines of the frame. A coffin is a large object – it will dominate a space, and in the photographs too, the coffins often command the attention. Even in the widest-angle photographs in the series, the eye is still drawn to the central focal point first.

The other consideration was choosing between analogue and digital. Ultimately the choice to shoot the project on film was primarily to keep my working practice slow and considered. I don't fetishize the use of analogue processes as being anymore valid than a digital approach, but I find that the restrictions it imposes help focus my attention. The places I visited were often windowless, so a tripod needed to be used, and I also mixed flash with the ambient light in most places in order to show everything in the room – I didn't want to create deep shadows that may have suggested to a viewer that more was being hidden than shown.

All of these choices support my already discussed assertion that I'm working in a subjective, rather than objective manner, as these chosen working practices are intended to create the mood I would like to present to the viewer. Art historian Lucy Soutter speaks of *"objectivity tinged with individualism"* (Soutter 2013, 33.) in her essay on the German school of photographers under the Bechers, and the American New Topographic movement, similar to the 'deadpan' style that Cotton describes. But unlike the work of the Bechers, or even Cohen, I'm not trying to use the level view to detract any objectivity or emotive qualities, and am allowing my personal experiences of the places to guide both the making of the images, and later the editing and sequencing of the work.

3.2 Gaining access & trust, representing others

After recognising that this was a subject that I'd be interested in exploring I made some research into the topic at large. However, as I wanted my experience of the places I would be visiting to be uninfluenced by expectations I limited myself to reading journalistic writing on the subject, rather than accounts of people's personal experiences. I also made a very cursory search of recent photographic works by contemporary photographers to ensure I wasn't embarking on a project already widely covered.

I found only one book that discussed the practices of the funerary industry in an explanatory way, and which covered aspects from the entirety of the industry. *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* (2015) is a humorous account of the author Caitlin Doughty's career in this line of work, explaining the processes in detail, and discussing what she sees as being the problems with the commercial enterprise as it works today – namely, the hiding away of the processes involved and the marketing of funerals to make the most profit. The book was a good entry point into the subject, but as I later learnt, was a bad representation for the industry in Finland, as the practices and laws in Finland are quite different to those in America.

One major example of the differences between the two countries is the normalisation of the practice of embalming in America: the process involves introducing embalming solution into a recently deceased body, stopping the natural decomposition and supposedly giving a more 'lifelike' look to the deceased. This unacceptance of the reality of human decomposition and the business of beautifying the dead is a relatively new practice, but is now standard in America, and Doughty discusses the problematic nature of this. In Finland this practice is against the law, and bodies that are buried or cremated are done so in a completely natural state.

Once I'd settled on the topic for this project, I needed to start the process of gaining access to places of interest. *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* had given me an outline of the places and professions that would be necessary to include and put in my mind an order for how the project would proceed. Starting

with funeral directors on the high-street, considering that their function is to be the public face for the industry, and there to assist people in planning a funeral, I planned to gradually work my way behind the curtain towards the hidden aspects of the industry.

With my previous project *Business City,* I had found after spending a lot of time trying to contact through email and phone that the best course of action was instead to go directly to the door and enquire in person, as I was able to explain my intentions easier face-to-face and enter into a dialogue about the subject. So, this was the course of action I set out with, visiting several funeral director's offices in Lahti unannounced. It was a roaring failure.

I had anticipated some hesitancy from those I would be approaching, understanding the obvious sensitivity around an area of work such as this, and the necessity for businesses to protect their representation. From the beginning I was offering to show any photographs taken to the respective subjects so they could review and OK them before further publication. I wanted the work to be made completely collaboratively, as I was wary of misrepresenting, and wanted the support of those who had trusted me to come into their workplaces. I didn't want to misrepresent as the reason for making the project in the first place was to be able to show the reality of the industry today as I found it.

A number of emails went unanswered and phone calls turned down before I got a call from a funeral director in Malmi who invited me to visit his office. Mika came to the profession from an office job and, after first establishing an office in Hämeenlinna, had expanded to Helsinki. On that first visit I didn't take any photographs, but instead discussed with Mika my intentions for the project and asked questions about the industry. He agreed that it is one rarely represented, and that people come with pre-conceived notions as to the kind of people working in it. During our discussion Mika unknowingly gave me the title for the project when he stressed that for him the purpose of his work is always to be serving the living.

Mika outlined for me the various places a body will pass through towards its final resting place. In Finland all bodies are taken to a hospital morgue, whether they have died in the hospital or at an outside location, such as at home or at an assisted living facility. If the person has died from unknown causes in the hospital, an autopsy can be done on sight. If the person has died outside the hospital from an unknown or suspicious cause their body will be taken for a forensic autopsy.

In most cases, arrangements for the funeral will be made by the deceased's family at the funeral directors office. Here they can make decisions as to how the body will be laid to rest – commonly choosing between burial or cremation, and the finer details in relation to this, such as the style of

casket or urn and the clothes the deceased will be dressed in. After these choices have been made, it is the funeral director's employees, known as the 'drivers'[9] who attend to the body. They will take the casket to the hospital morgue, and there will dress the body and place it in the casket. Outside of the morgue a body must legally remain in a closed casket, although the lid may be removed for viewings in places such as the chapel. From the morgue the body will be driven to the crematorium or graveyard. Usually, the crematorium will be on the site of the graveyard, along with a chapel for ceremonies, and here the body will be laid to rest.

From this conversation with Mika I was able to build a framework to follow for creating the project. The steps he outlined were all simple and were all implemented in clearly defined spaces. I made a list of the places I wanted to visit and photograph, including Mika's funeral director's office, the crematorium, chapel and graveyard and hospital morgue. I started reaching out first via email and following up with phone calls.

Photographing in Mika's office gave me further ideas on how I wanted to approach the image making. I didn't want to come in and be let loose to photograph everything at first sight. Instead, first taking the time to talk with the people there, being shown the facilities and having aspects of the business explained would lead to more interesting images, as I could focus on those things that held more relevance to the industry than those that would catch attention at first sight.

My plans to slowly make my way through the project towards what I imagined would be the more hidden locations of the industry didn't come to fruition. The first place that responded after visiting Mika's office was Levo Crematorium in Lahti, a place that I thought would need a lot of convincing to allow a photographer to visit. The staff there though were very welcoming and, very aware of the kind of stereotypes that people have about the place, were excited to show me the building and the various functions.

During my first visit to Levo I made photographs of the spaces in the building, looking for locations that suggested the buildings function from their contents. After reviewing the images from that first visit, I came back a week later to make some photographs of details. It was during this visit that I was shown through the oven peephole a body being cremated. I hadn't anticipated being invited to see the process this closely, let alone photograph it. I made the decision to take a photograph (after asking permission) with the thought that I could consider the ethicality of showing it later. Bate, discussing our desire to look at taboo or hidden sights, and our contrasting desire to 'confront reality' whilst simultaneously wishing to be in denial of unpleasant scenes says:

9 *Ruuminkuljettaja in Finnish.*

> *The desire to look can also invoke uncomfortable feelings of contradiction and guilt. What you wish to look at may not be something you want to actually see. As is well known from traffic accidents and other such unusual scenes, some people just cannot help themselves in having a prurient look. The idea of "witnessing" inevitably involves some kind of voyeurism, a concept defined as an illicit or obsessive act of looking. Even legitimate, socially acceptable, looking, as in detective fiction and documentary vision, has a part-component of voyeurism attached to it.* (Bate 2016, 77.)

I took the photograph in this legitimate, documentary-making frame of mind – I had been invited in and had without asking been shown this sight. I also had the unreliability of the analogue methods I was working with as a crutch and excuse to make the photograph – I had no idea how the photograph would turn out, using a rangefinder with no tripod, shooting through a small opening lit only by flame – you can see I had many excuses ready as to why I would at least *try* and take a photograph. It is in the decision to *show* the photograph that I really had to test the strength of my convictions.

Being invited into the crematorium facility had left me enthused as to the willingness of the people working in the industry to allow in an outsider and be photographed, and I began to think that I would easily gain access to most places if it was this easy to photograph what I considered to be a very sensitive area. In reality though, each location I wanted to visit was akin to starting a new project every time: finding the relevant contact person, first emailing to explain my intentions, following up with phone calls, often visiting before being invited back to photograph. I received a lot of negative answers.

During this time of waiting for answers I made numerous visits to cemeteries, hoping to be there whilst some activity was happening, graves been dug or covered perhaps. I did make some photographs of the workers who tended to the areas, but taking this approach made me feel uneasy. I was taking these people by surprise, and not allowing them time to think of how they wished to be presented in this larger presentation of the subject. This is not to say that I feel I was behaving in an underhanded way by asking for and taking their portraits – I still explained the project I was working on and took their contact details to allow them to be the first to see the photographs – but the approach didn't fit with my intentions for the project. I needed to be invited in, as I think that invitation to come and see can be felt in the resulting images, giving the viewer some degree of comfort and validity in their looking.

In the institutions that serve as shop-windows for the business there were few ethical issues to deal with, speaking directly with those involved, and ensuring that they were the first to see any photographs taken before showing them elsewhere, they always had control over their representation. I needed to be aware of the legal requirements of photographing in these places, for example making sure that no personal information, such as names and personal details of the deceased could be read on the paperwork attached to their remains throughout all of the processes, and for many of the subjects this was their main concern in needing to review the images. Once I gained permission to visit and photograph in the morgue however, I had to make a more concerted decision than I had at the crematorium of how much I was willing to show.

3.3 The morgue

Gaining access to the hospital morgue was the longest process involved in the project. Initially, I was in discussions with a driver who assured that I could accompany them to observe the dressing of a body in the hospital morgue in Helsinki. However, they had to go back on this offer when they were not permitted by the hospital to bring in an outsider who was not a member of the deceased's family.[10] During this time, I was also in contact with Lahti Hospital as I wished to photograph in their 'family room' and chapel – an area in the hospital where family members can visit with the body and have a priest perform a religious ceremony. I was granted access for this and whilst there was able to discuss with the person in charge of the morgue the possibility of returning to photograph those areas. He was welcoming, but I first had to go through an email chain of hierarchy to be allowed. I was invited back a week later to photograph in the morgue and adjacent autopsy room, although without permission to photograph bodies or visiting drivers.

I'd been informed that I'd have an hour to photograph in the spaces before a driver was coming to collect a body. Although I wasn't allowed to photograph the procedure, I was told I could observe if I so wished. Before that happened though, there was an unplanned delivery from the mortician of a person that had been found dead in their apartment that day, although it was believed they'd died around two weeks earlier. I was again invited to be present for the body being transferred to the refrigeration units used to store bodies in the morgue, although was warned that it was going to smell (the mortician assured me with gallows humour that it was only *"about as bad a smell as the average Finnish person"*).

I had wanted to be in the presence of a corpse at some point during this project – the body is the central object to the whole industry, and I felt it would be a failing on my behalf not to face it. However, being preoccupied with the organisation of gaining access, and having a general feeling that I wouldn't find myself this 'deep' at any point, I hadn't really thought at all as to how I would react.

10 *This was in some part due to the ongoing COVID pandemic, hospitals wanting to keep visitor numbers as low as possible to reduce the risk of infection.*

So, in this moment I felt a simultaneous push-and-pull as the body-bag was unzipped and part of the body inside revealed. I was nervous about catching sight (or worse, a waft of bad smell) and fainting dead away. I also felt an embarrassment about *wanting* to see, the prurient voyeurism that Bate described. This left me dancing uncomfortably back and forth behind the men attending to the body.

Pia Sivenius, in her essay *When something is not there, possibilities open*, which accompanies Marjaana Kella's photographs of subjects in a state of hypnosis, says:

> *Pictures of a person who is asleep, dead or hypnotised expose a body that is not being exposed with the purpose of being looked at. The pictures both show and hide a dormant threat, the threat of dissolution, nullification and loss of control. Even though we know that we are permitted to watch, we still feel ashamed. We find ourselves eye to eye with something that ought to be invisible.* (Sivenius, 2002, 7.)

This is the ethical conundrum I found myself in. I had been invited to observe this procedure, and do not believe it to be indecent to view a corpse, but I do have a humane consideration for the person that was, and the family of the deceased. I had to consider how comfortable I would feel about an inquisitive photographer using my body as a symbolic representation of death, putting myself in the place of lost control. I wasn't allowed to photograph in this instance, and I'm glad this was the case, as just being present gave me the opportunity to consider what I would be photographing had I the opportunity, and what benefit such a photograph would serve.

I was invited back to the morgue a third time, and this time with the permission to photograph scenes including bodies. I wasn't allowed legally to show any recognisable features of the bodies, including the face, but even if this hadn't been the case, I had decided myself that this was something I didn't want to do. I felt that the final project did need to have some representation of the body, to serve as a reminder of what it is that all of these institutions I have visited are tasked to deal with, and to show the thing we as a society work so hard to hide. However, I feel that photographing the face, or some other indicator of personality, would be overly defining one person, and make for a gratuitously sentimental image. For this same reason I have chosen to avoid making images of grief, including gravestones with family names on, or newspaper obituaries. I also didn't include any of the photographs I made in the hospital chapel, or of other religious iconography. The project I set out to make wasn't about the individual response to death, but to show the industry, and I believe including anything overly personal would be distracting.

Bate, continuing the line of thought about our wishing to deny the truth of presented unpleasant scenes says:

> *We can see this voyeuristic guilt [the guilt or shame we feel at looking at something we have been taught is indecent to look at] at work when sometimes it is directed at what is seen, and manifests as the thought expressed: "How dare you show me that." In being annoyed at the photograph, at what is shown in it, or even at the photographer, outrage and protest at photographic representations show that representations can intervene in a spectator's belief in reality.* (Bate, 77.)

That I have been granted access to these locations is a privilege, and one that I have had control over: I have made the decision to witness. Now though I have a responsibility to present what I have found in a way that is palatable to an audience. This doesn't mean that I need to sanitize the reality, but I am not trying to right any social injustice with this project, and an aggressive approach would be the wrong one. I want the viewer to feel that they have been given the same permissions that I have to these places. This has informed my choice to present portraits as being complicit in the photography, standing for the photo and breaking the fourth wall that exists in photojournalism. The project as a whole is not intended as voyeurism, but the opposite, to reveal what we have hidden for fear of being considered voyeuristic.

3.4 Creating the narrative

From the outset of making this project it has been in my mind to aim towards a gallery exhibition. In a printed publication there is more room to include ambiguous imagery, and the mass of images can work together to create the overall atmosphere, as with *Marguerites*. However, as I wanted each image to work as a stand-alone piece of work, I decided that curating a tight selection of images for the wall would force me to put much more consideration into which images I presented. I have tried to select photographs that have more information in them than they first seem to present, and photographs that have details to be discovered upon further investigation that suggest a narrative within the space.

My main concern with the sequencing was to avoid creating a linear timeline of actions. I didn't want the viewer to read the work as an A-to-Z depiction of the stages a body passes through when being laid to rest, as this would suggest that I was presenting a strict narrative to be followed and lose the intended subjectivity of my approach.

My first breakthrough in avoiding a linear narrative came when I started to pair images together to fit into a PowerPoint presentation. Finding diptychs that worked well together aesthetically rather than thematically (e.g., a detail that might not necessarily have come from the same location as the scene it is paired with) opened up meanings and distanced the photographs from a closed narrative. Pairing works as a good way to slow down the eye, requiring the viewer to take an extra moment to place the locations and consider their relationship to one another. Whilst making these diptychs I also began to experiment with how they are presented on the wall – again, noticing that having a straight line running the length of the wall suggested a 'correct' order to read the images in, but by lifting some of the photographs higher than others and breaking the linear rhythm the project started to present itself cyclically, without a beginning or an end, allowing the viewer to move back and forth between the images, (illustration 24). This is something that couldn't be done in a classically bound book, the progression of images being always set.












Illustration 24: Suggested gallery installation of To Serve the Living

This approach goes some way in addressing the ethical quandary of taking a subjective view on a phenomenon I am an outsider to. I do not present the work as comprehensive representation, and the fragmented nature of the presentation is essential: including gaps and spaces on the wall that represent the gaps in my own experience of photographing and looking at the industry. Another consideration I had in mind was that, to a person who has some experience or knowledge of the industry, a linear presentation would only highlight places that I have not included.

The other major consideration I needed to make in the presentation was what, if any, text to include with the images. As previously discussed, I wanted to leave room for personal reflection for an audience, and I think that many of the presented scenes are at least close enough to our preconceptions that a viewer can infer from what is shown what the location's function is. However, I didn't want to be quite as vague as Lynne Cohen in my titling, and in order to clarify and give just enough information, I have titled each image with its official location, for example 'Crematorium', 'Hospital morgue', etc. I didn't want this information to be too readily available however, my worry being that if I presented the titles below the image, viewers would read them first before looking at the image, and this might stunt their attention. For this reason, I have made the titles available on the wall – if a viewer needs the information, they can find it, but there isn't a piece of paper to carry around as an easy explainer. This may prove frustrating for some viewers, but I don't want the images to act as illustrations, and this is the way I have found best to avoid that.

The prints have been framed in a traditional manner, mounted with a passepartout in wooden frames. This felt like a natural progression in using analogue methods and give the photographs the gravity they deserve. I wanted the frames to be a natural wood to mimic the materials of the coffins and urns in the images. I also considered the idea of including some stainless-steel frames to reference the fittings of the medical facilities, however this proved too complicated to source, and I think it would have made for a confused presentation. In future hangings of the work though this is something I would like to continue exploring.

The choices made in the presentation, and in which images were printed and framed, should mean that I can curate the project in different iterations for different contexts. Not having a strict narrative means that images can be removed to make a smaller selection without altering the reading of the work, and new pairings can be made to highlight various aspects of the subject.

4 Conclusion

I started this whole project wondering about the modern gravedigger, yet they are the one large aspect of the industry I didn't manage to include. This wasn't through lack of trying. I've contacted most cemeteries in Uusimaa and Päijät-Häme, but as it is only a few companies that are tasked with digging and covering the graves for whole municipalities I was for the most part led to the same people each time. The reasons given for not wanting to be photographed were a difficulty in organising meeting and it being a busy season of work[11], but I think for the most part it was a concern over being misrepresented. So, a part of our death rituals remains mysterious to me. That said, I'm pleased with the final result of the exhibited photographs. There's cohesion between what is presented, and I don't think that there is a feeling of subjects being missing. My hope is that what I have made so far will help convince others of my intentions, and that I may still be able to include the cemeteries and those who work there in further iterations of the exhibition.

Most of my previous projects have had very different aesthetic outcomes, so before now I hadn't stopped to consider if I have a working method, but through the writing of this thesis I have come to recognise that whilst the projects I have made are often very different, my intentions for embarking are most often the same: to engage with a subject that I am outside of. I already have ideas for new subjects to explore, and whilst the working methods may change in the photography, the process of gaining access to the people and locations I am interested in will remain similar, although I hope with refinement and improvements each time that will streamline the process.

The presentation of the project has perhaps been the steepest learning curve here. I felt relatively confident with the darkroom printing of the photographs, even though there were some steps I hadn't done before such as the selenium toning. I outsourced the making of the frames and mounting the prints, but even without physically doing these parts myself it has still been a laboursome task. However, I think that the effort put into making this a physical and tactile exhibition has been worth it. The

11 *57,659 deaths were recorded in Finland in 2021, the highest number of deaths in the country since 1944 (YLE news, 2021).*

methods of presentation have helped to situate the work in the right context, i.e. the art-photography context, which allows viewers to understand the intentions of the work more readily.

The work hasn't been seen in its final form by many at this point, so it's difficult to comment on the response. However, whilst printing the work I've had a number of discussions with people over singular images, and that they work in this way, inviting inquisitiveness, is enthusing. The responses have ranged from people wanting to ask questions about the specifics of a location, to wanting to tell me stories of their own experiences. Also, people's first response is often to ask what the place depicted is, and usually their first guess is correct, or close enough to correct that I feel assured in my choice not to lead with texts.

Again, it's too early to say how those involved in the industry will respond to the work, but the fact that those photographed have agreed to allow these images to be exhibited gives me confidence that I have respectfully portrayed them. In fact, there are no ethical qualms on my behalf for what I have chosen to show. I think all of the photographs avoid gratuity, and I believe that the respect that I have towards the subject can be read from the photographs. I've enjoyed meeting the people involved in this industry and am grateful to have been allowed to come and observe. My curiosity has been satisfied, and I hope that the images I have brought back to present can satisfy the curiosity of others too.

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Illustrations

1: *Graveyard in the rain ('Fosse commune')*
Vincent van Gogh, October–December 1886
Retrieved on 24 April 2022
Available at: https://vangoghworldwide.org/artwork/F1399a

2: *The Morgue (Knifed to Death I)*
Andres Serrano, 1992
Retrieved on 24 April 2022
Available at: https://arthur.io/art/andres-serrano/the-morgue-knifed-to-death-i

3: *Untitled*, from *Body Farm*
Sally Mann, 2000–2001
Retrieved on 24 April 2022
Available at: https://www.sallymann.com/body-farm

4 & 5: *Siikonen's cricket farm*
Joshua Cockroft, 2018

6, 7 & 8: *Muut eläimet*
Joshua Cockroft, 2019–2021

9, 10, 11 & 12: *Business City*
Joshua Cockroft, 2020

13: *Government Employment Office, Ottawa, Ontario*
Lynne Cohen, 1977
Retrieved on 12 November 2021
Available at: https://www.gallery.ca/collection/artwork/government-employment-office-ottawa-ontario

14: *Spa*
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15: *Military Installation*
Lynne Cohen, 1990
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16: *Water Towers*
Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher, 1972–2009
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24: Suggested installation plan for *To Serve the Living*
Joshua Cockroft, 2022


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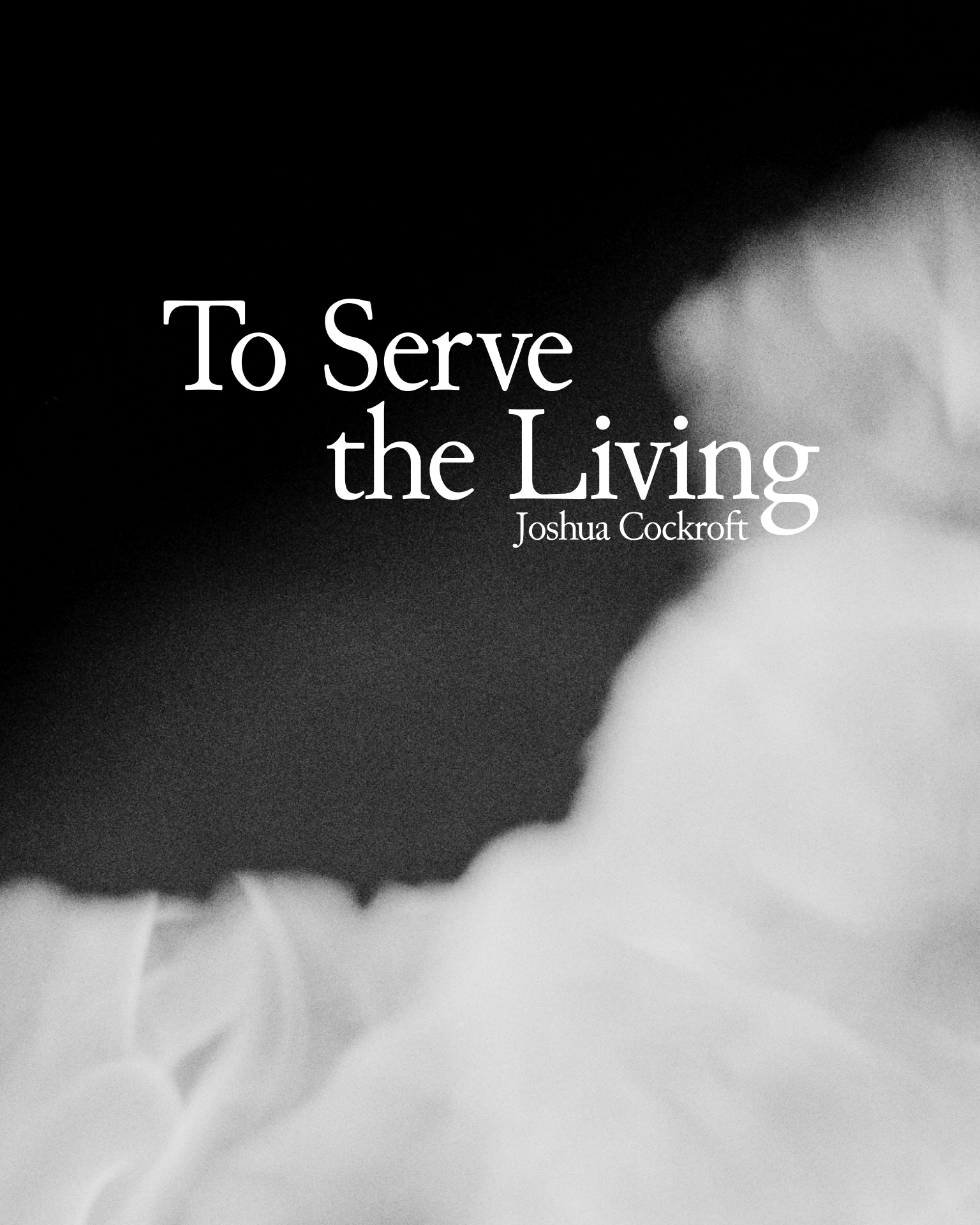

To Serve the Living

Joshua Cockroft

To Serve the Living

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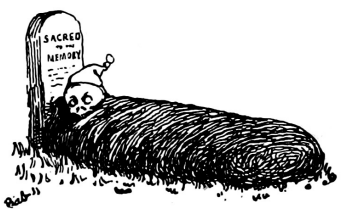
The preceding images are reproductions of 30x30cm, selenium toned, fibre based silver gelatin prints. The exhibition prints are framed in 46x46cm ash frames, with a 5cm passepartout.

1. *Urn*
2. *Funeral Director's Office*
3. *Shroud*
4. *Driver Delivery*
5. *Crematorium*
6. *Body Trays*
7. *Cremation*
8. *Worker*
9. *Cold Storage*
10. *Ashes*
11. *Chapel*
12. *Wreaths*
13. *Morgue*
14. *Gravestone*
15. *Dressed Body*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