



Et nos morts ?

Post-mortem photography in Europe today
from 22 september 2023 to 18 february 2024

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Collective exhibition gathering 20 authors,
accompanied by a publication, edited by the Maison Doisneau

Laure Albin Guillot, Philippe Bazin, Goran Bertok, Patrik Budenz, Christine Delory-Momberger,
Eric Dexheimer, Robert Doisneau, Odhràn Dunne, Laurence Geai, Steeve Iuncker, Irène Jonas,
Beate Lakotta et Walter Schels, Franck Landron, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Frédéric Pauwels,
Bruno Réquillart, Rudolf Schäfer, Raymond Voinquel et Sophie Zénon

Curating :
Michaël Houlette with the assistance of Camille Lebossé

Conference

Photographing the dead in the West today

Friday 12 January 2024 at 7.30pm at the Lavoir Numérique

reservation required : maison.doisneau@grandorlyseinebièvre.fr

Guided tours

Sundays 15 october, 19 november and 17 december 2023 at 2pm
and 28 january 2024 at 6.45pm

reservation required : daniela.matizborda@grandorlyseinebièvre.fr

Contacts Press

Robert Pareja / Sejla Dukatar

Maison Doisneau / Lavoir Numérique

+33 (0)6 20 21 94 73 / +33 (0)6 16 91 97 05

robert.pareja@grandorlyseinebièvre.fr / sejla.dukatar@grandorlyseinebièvre.fr

Robert
Maison Doisneau
de la Photographie Gentilly

1, rue de la Division du Général Leclerc, 94250 Gentilly
+33 (0)1 55 01 04 86 - maison.doisneau@grandorlyseinebièvre.fr

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© Eric Dexheimer / Signatures
In Fine. Tirages jet d'encre réalisés pour
l'exposition, 2011

EDITORIAL

The reasoning behind our decision to organise an exhibition of post-mortem photos is in direct relation to the mission statement of Maison Doisneau that underlines its focus on so-called “humanist photography”. We could sum up Maison Doisneau’s project as an attempt to analyse our lives, history and the conditions of our existence from an anthropological point of view, while taking into account cultural and social aspects. You could say that - more than 20 years after it was inaugurated – it was high time Maison Doisneau turned its eye to the dead.

The idea here is neither to consider death in the absolute sense, nor to explore the different ways in which photography can address death as an abstract concept (whether from a realistic or metaphorical point of view), let alone reflect on religious or mythological conceptions of life after death. We will not be crossing over to the other side, but instead resolutely keeping our feet on the ground and concentrating on the deceased and images of their mortal remains.

Photography and the dead have a long history, whether in the family circle, the media or various public and private institutions, all that remains is to consider fringe practices particularly in the field of art. For a long time, post-mortem portraits followed a certain number of technical conventions, for example in terms of lighting and camera angle (with the body usually placed lying down or semi seated). These conventions were connected to immutable funeral rites and few variations were seen in memorial portraits and how they were staged, as the only objective was to provide an image of the deceased for friends and relatives. It wasn’t until the 1970s when photography was clearly recognised as an artistic medium in its own right that the first works of art (or those that laid claim to this description) began to take an interest in the faces and bodies of the dead.

To provide this overview of post-mortem photography in modern-day Europe, we selected recent works - a majority of which are relatively unknown - produced by photographers, reporters, illustrators and artists. They are however introduced by a selection of images from the mid-20th century. In this way, we are complying with the general framework of the Maison Doisneau arts programming that mainly focuses on photographers who use the medium as a means of creative expression. By bringing together relatively homogenous approaches to the question - even if these works stem from specific intentions and represent period and context-specific relationships with the dead - we have also facilitated the task of comparison and analysis.

Michaël Houlette
Director Maison Doisneau / Lavoir Numérique

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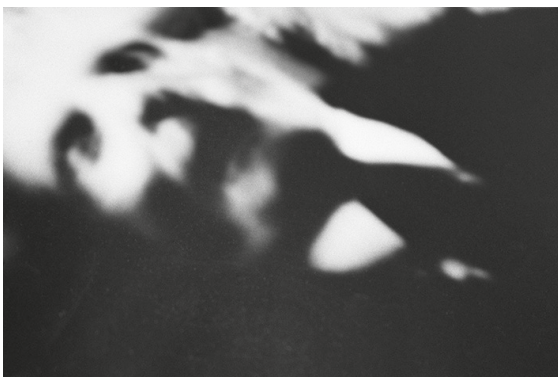
Photographing our dead

The bodies in these images may be those of individuals or, as we so tragically experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, the result of death en masse. They are our own dead, people who, when they were alive, were our contemporaries and shared in our lives, people whose disappearance affects us personally. They are the “everyday dead”, the men and women who die “on their deathbeds” and who represent the majority of deaths in societies that are not at war: According to French website Santé Publique France, 57% of deaths in France between 1993 and 2008 occurred in hospitals, 27% at home, 11% in retirement homes and 5% elsewhere.

But where are these dead people today? In Western Europe, we have a common history of similar funerary practices that are defined today by the fact that neither the dead nor their images are put on show. What was previously visible and part of a long-standing tradition, at least until the middle of the 20th century, has evidently evolved, if not completely disappeared. In Europe, for example, the dead are no longer present in the media. Although it was customary until the 1960s, daily newspapers, magazines, television news programmes and news websites have stopped publishing or broadcasting post-mortem portraits of recently deceased celebrities. Moreover, they only show the dead bodies of our fellow citizens in exceptional circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted this total absence of media visibility: the many dead, if the considerable rate of mortality announced is anything to go by, were conspicuous by their absence.

Since its beginnings almost two centuries ago, photography has asserted its role as a rich source of information about society and its defining characteristics. The essayist Susan Sontag described how photographs influence our ideas about things that are worth looking at, what we have a right to observe and therefore, by implication, what is socially unacceptable. There are strict laws governing images published in the press and on social media. Images can be censored and there are a certain number of generally accepted rules by which they must abide. In general, post-mortem photographs that we take of close family members are never seen outside the family circle and, as we mentioned previously, images of the dead bodies of westerners almost never appear in the media. All the necessary precautions are taken before showing photos of the dead, whether as part of documentary projects or which have been taken for artistic reasons. Even then, they are only exhibited in specific venues (museums, arts centres or festivals) and their exhibition is always a subject of debate.

Is taking photographs of deceased friends and relatives or exhibiting post-mortem portraits taboo? Is this part of “the pornography of death”, as was suggested at the start of the 1950s by anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer? Can we assert - as Philippe Ariès did in the latter’s wake - that our children are initiated in their early years to the physiology of love, but don’t know how to die and know very little about death itself? From our point of view, the invisibility of post-mortem photos in the media speaks for itself. It is quite simply a reflection of our relationship with death : these



© Christine Delory-Momberger / Agence révélateur
Le revenant. Tirage argentique réalisé pour l'exposition, 2004



© Odhrán Dunne
A great send off, diaporama sonore, 2019



© Sophie Zénon,
Capucin (le 9), épreuve issue du cycle In Case We Die - Momies de Palerme. Tirage argentique de 120 x 80 cm, 2008

“do not exist”. If they are not published or broadcast, it is for both legal and moral reasons. They are the subject of deletion, cancellation and self-censorship and, as far as social media is concerned, targeted by algorithm-based and human moderators.

To a certain extent, post-mortem photography today finds itself in contradiction with the zeitgeist. In a context in which life expectancy is high (80 years on average in France, Belgium and Germany), access to healthcare is guaranteed (in principle at least) and people can enjoy a certain quality of life, we don't have to deal with the question of death until we reach a ripe old age, or only episodically. As grieving is no longer a public affair, the loss of a close friend or relative can go completely unnoticed. Today, death is seen as an intolerable end to a life that is supposed to be rich and full. The idea that we have a duty to be happy and the fact that this social obligation is conveyed as a positive value in consumer society tends to curb supposedly negative emotions, such as the sorrow of mourning, the fear of death and the anxiety surrounding it.

The relationship we have with our dead and the way in which the remains of the deceased are treated paint a picture of our society and way of thinking. But what should our opinion be of a society that conceals its dead? The objective of our exhibition and this publication, this short journey to the land of the dead, is to give visibility to something that is kept hidden today. During the visit or while reading, we will finally have time to think and reflect upon the flow of thoughts and emotions (fear, stupefaction, repulsion, fascination,



© Bruno Réquillart
Catacombes de Paris, 16 juillet 2020. Tirages jet d'encre réalisés pour l'exposition, 2020

grief, empathy, etc.) that go hand in hand with the sight of a dead body. It is also perhaps a way of momentarily reviving the baroque tradition of vanitas, whose aim was to remind the observer of the fleeting nature of time and the fragility of one's existence.

Just like the works on show in the exhibition, the organisation of the chapters and the order of reproductions in this publication follow a certain chronology. After a foreword focusing on the photographic customs that were prevalent until the middle of the 20th century, we will successively address death itself, how the bodies of the deceased are managed and disposed of after death and how we are distanced from such considerations. Indeed, we tend to forget that there are certain protocols to which the dead are subject, whether in terms of rites or rules and regulations, including the different aspects of post-mortem care and the funeral service itself, followed by the final handling of the body before cremation or burial. In the case of the latter, we also have to take into account natural decomposition that can take several years. The photos brought together here illustrate the different stages in the “life of the dead”, questioning on each occasion what the living see and what is usually kept out of sight, what we are permitted to see and what is forbidden, what represents a break with the dead or a reconciliation.

Michaël Houlette
Director Maison Doisneau / Lavoir Numérique



© Frédéric Pauwels / Collectif Huma
Entre les rives du Styx, Tirages jet d'encre réalisés pour l'exposition, 2016-2017



© Irène Jonas / Agence révélateur
Série photographique sans titre. Tirages sur papier baryté réalisés en 2012 et réhaussés de peinture en 2022

ET NOS MORTS ?

La photographie *post mortem* aujourd'hui en Europe

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Europe today

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Michaël Houlette
et Camille Lebossé
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The Maison Doisneau and the Lavoir Numérique

The Maison Doisneau and the Lavoir Numérique are cultural facilities operated by the Établissement Public Territorial Grand-Orly Seine Bièvre. They share the same mission and are run by the same team.

Maison de la Photographie Robert Doisneau
1, rue de la Division du Général Leclerc
94250 Gentilly, France
tél : +33 (0) 1 55 01 04 86
maisondoisneau.grandorlyseinebievre.fr

Le Lavoir Numérique
4 rue de Freiberg
94250 Gentilly, France
tél : +33 (0) 1 49 08 91 63
lavoirnumerique.fr

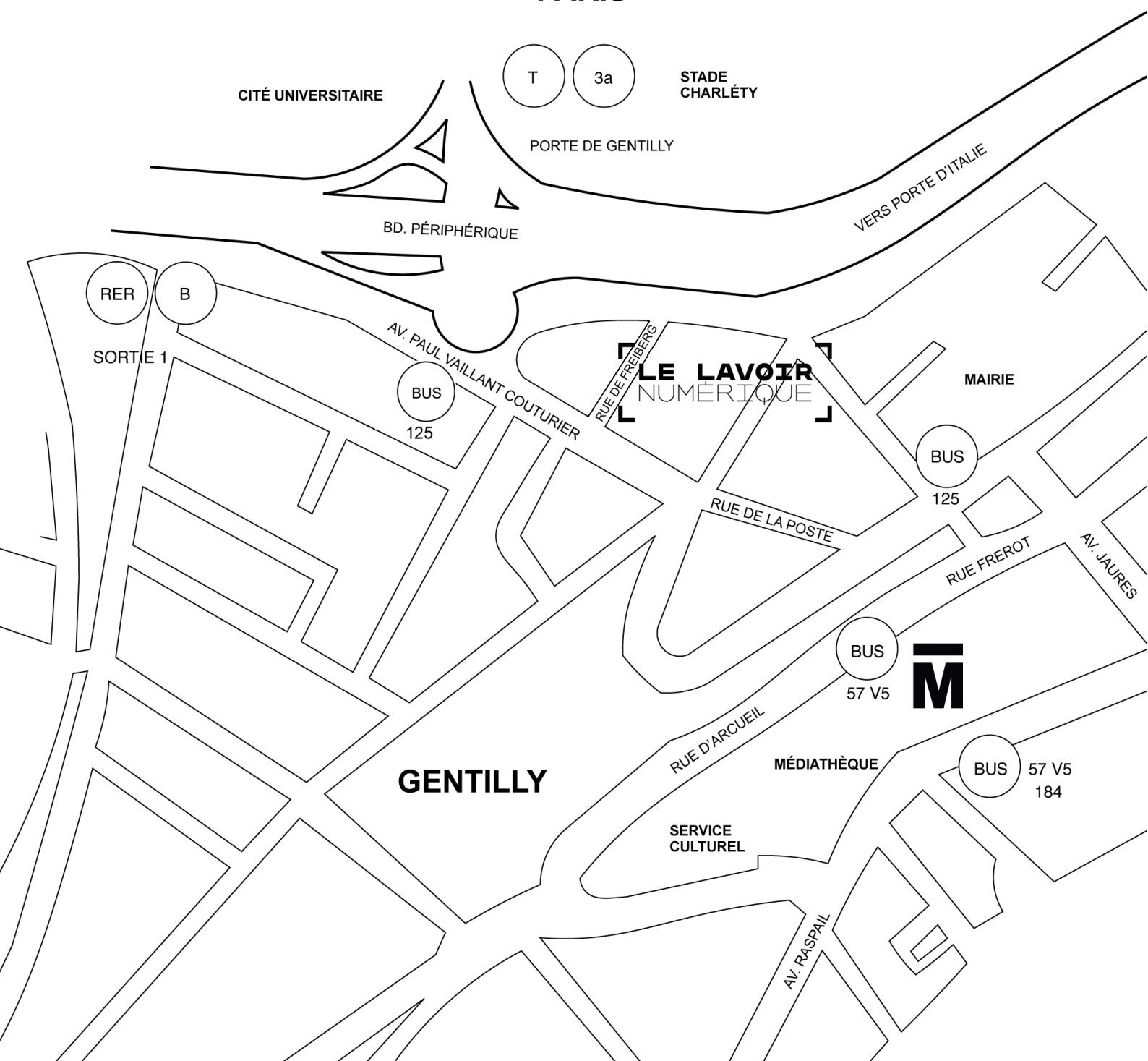
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saturday and sunday 1:30 pm - 7:00pm
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