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# The poetics of thanatology

## An explorative essay on photography, empathy, and death

### **ABSTRACT**

*This essay has been a way to interpret my creative work and artistic practice through a series of photographs entitled *The Poetics of Thanatology*. The text reflects on and explores themes that are potentially touched through the visual language and creative process of photography. More specifically, I explore connections between a childhood memory, death, and photography. The anthropocentric approach to reality is deeply ingrained in our culture, and this has formed hierarchical structures—Us and Them. Through still life photography of dead plants and insects, I examine the human experience of empathy in relation to non-human organisms. I view my practical creative work in my studio as a space for critical reflection and as irreplaceable, meaningful and slow, sensuous experiences. These experiences have challenged me and my art students' anthropocentric approach to the world.*

*Keywords:* art, photography, death, empathy, still life, anthropocentrism, World War II

### **EVERYTHING HAS SCARS**

When I was little, maybe nine years old, one of the most secret places I knew of was at the top of my parents' bookshelf, which I could only reach by climbing through the lowest shelves. On these bookshelves, I found several books that have shaped my perception of the world. These books have taken up permanent residence in my memory and subconscious. Many of the books contained pictures I did not understand, but I could feel in my body that I was scared of them. One picture showed a large mountain with human-like skeletal bodies. What was that? Another one showed a sad man in a bathtub. The text under the picture said something about a freezing experiment, a bedroom full of people who looked very sick. Later, I came to understand that my father collected these books.

I did not dare to ask questions; I did not want anybody to know that I have seen. Eventually, I learned that my father had been a prisoner of war in the German concentration camp Mauthausen-Gusen in Austria for almost four years. We never talked about this at home, and I could not ask a single question. I was afraid that his body had been exposed to all the humiliation I had seen in the books. Susan Sontag describes a strong and recognizable experience in the book *On Photography*, in which, as

a twelve-year-old, she had seen pictures from the Bergen-Belsen and Dachau concentration camps. She writes: ‘Nothing I have seen— in photographs or in real life—ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously’ (Sontag, 1997, p. 20). She writes that this incident divided her life in two, in a before and after. ‘When I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead, something is still crying’ (Ibid, p.20). Such experiences link us to the deepest, darkest, tabooed black hole that we cannot see but of which we feel the gravity of on the body—death.



**FIGURE 1.** (Terminated Dialogue) Flies.

For many years I have avoided the concentration camp as a theme, but in my artistic work, the theme was disguised in an overarching phenomenon—death. Death, decay, transience, degeneration, disappearance, vanishing, end, grief and empathy are recurring elements of reflection in my photographic work. Sometimes they are well camouflaged, and other times straight forward, but always present.

The experiences from my childhood have left invisible scars. It feels like I am still balancing on the shelves and unable to comprehend what I have seen. Over and over, again, once again - how can human beings be so evil? And it does not help with Hannah Arendt's explanation that this evil was banal because it was committed by ordinary people who were obedient and loyal to the authorities, such as Adolf Eichmann, who coordinated deportations to concentration camps during World War II. Arendt writes that Eichmann perceived himself as innocent and believed himself to be acting in accordance with the rules. He always checked that the order was in accordance with the law and claimed that he did not need to have a bad conscience since he knew the law well (Arendt, 2006, p. 283). Duty and obedience are something you learn, including at school, but do you also learn empathy? Abuse of these ‘virtues’ can be traced within and beyond contemporary dictatorial systems. These virtues may make us *banal* today, too. If one agrees with Arendt's reasoning that an ordinary, dutiful citizen is capable of committing cruel acts, then human nature is even more frightening, and one becomes afraid of oneself. Does this banal evil creep quietly around in my own flower meadows?



**FIGURE 2.** The Moth - Dead as if sleeping.

### **THE POETICS OF THANATOLOGY: DEAD AS IF SLEEPING**

Thanatology is an interdisciplinary science wherein studies of and about death are practiced from different perspectives, such as medicine, biology, psychology, social anthropology, and ethics. The term springs from the Greek words Thanatos (death) and logos (reason). In Greek mythology, Thanatos personifies death. He is the son of Nyx (the night) and has a twin brother, Hypnos (the sleep) (Atsma, 2000–2019). Thanatos is not the scary skeleton with the scythe that we know from medieval images but a gentle angel with black wings who takes life by standing close to a person and cutting off a lock of hair. This silence in the depiction of death is essential in my photographs. I aim to create a visual aura of reconciliation between life and death, between decay and beauty, between Thanatos and Hypnos. Such a reconciliation is desired in post-mortem photography (death-as-sleep). The tradition of staging and photographing the dead dates to Victorian times in England (1837–1901). Eventually, post-mortem photography became an important part of the culture of Europe and the United States. Even today, there are photographers who specialize in this. In the book *Photography and Death*, Audrey Linkman writes:

...early photographers deliberately attempted to portray the dead as if sleeping. This metaphor was not unique to photography in the mid nineteenth century ... Sleep is familiar; it takes place within the safe, protected environment of the home and family. Unlike sleep, death is a mystery beyond the sphere of

human knowledge. The state of unconsciousness is the link that connects sleep with death ... Unlike death, however, sleep is not final. (Linkman, 2011, s. 21)

My photographic staging of dead plants and insects have something post-mortem about them, including the desire for a beautiful representation of what is dead (figures 1, 2, and 3).



**FIGURE 3.** The Poetics of Thanatology – Found insects.

In post-mortem photography, the dead are depicted as alive or asleep. In some of these photographs, they are photographed sitting with their parents or among their living siblings, nicely dressed, 'sleeping', or staring from an abyss with their distant gaze. Often, it is impossible to know who was alive and who was dead when the photograph was taken, as everyone's eyes are equally distant. The photograph freezes the gaze of the living as death does. Is there perhaps an aura of death over all photographs? There is a visual paradox in some post-mortem photographs; due to the camera's long exposure time and small bodily movements, the living persons are blurred and appear ghostly, while the dead in their detailed sharpness appear to be more present and alive (figure 4).



There is mystery surrounding the hundred-years-old post-mortem photography—no matter how alive the people were when the picture was taken, everyone is dead now. Throughout history, this form of photography has been linked to death, memory, and eternity. The biggest dream for many people is eternal existence. In many photography theories, photography is attributed a special function: stopping time. However, photography cannot stop time nor turn life into eternity, as the stagnant time is death itself. Sontag writes: 'All photographs are a *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or a thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt' (Sontag, 1997, p. 15). In this context of the relentless movement of time, Roland Barthes writes: 'Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe' (Barthes, 2000, p.96). Every new photograph of myself is the past—I look at the picture and think: she was. Each new photo can be the last.



FIGURE 4. Victorian era post-mortem family portrait of parents with their deceased daughter. (Wikimedia Commons, n.d.)

### THE EVIL EYE OF THE PHOTO BOX

There is a major difference between photographing living and dead organisms. By photographing what is already dead, the camera cannot 'steal their soul'. Many anthropologists and ethnographers have reported that tribal societies they studied were afraid of the camera and of being photographed. For example, the Tepehuan tribe in Mexico was afraid that the photographer would take their soul and eat it later. They believed they would die or that an accident would occur when the photographs arrived in a foreign country. The camera was called 'the evil eye of photo box' (Olechnicki, 2013, translated by the author). However, if the camera 'steals' the soul of living organisms, can one say that by photographing a dead organism, the soul that would otherwise be lost is returned? This may be a naive thought, but one is confronted with it when looking at photographs of dead loved ones.

### *The challenging empathy*

The major difference between the post-mortem tradition and my photographs is the absence of people. My non-anthropocentric narratives can be difficult to understand as reflections on death. This is because we more easily identify with our own species and mirror our own lives in other people's fates. Dead plants and insects do not trigger empathy in the same way. We associate them with perishability,

decay and even compost. Their death is for us insignificant and inevitable. We reduce their life to two functions—to feed or inseminate other organisms. Their death acts as fertilizer for the earth.

Contact with non-human organisms can give us a unique experience. In the essay ‘Meeting between man and animal – a philosophical study’, Hans Herlof Grelland bases his discussion on Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis of the experience of being seen by another human being and feeling shame. ‘To be exposed to the other's gaze is therefore also to be exposed to the other's judgment, the one who sees me, thinks something about me” (Grelland, 2018, p. 22, translated by the author). Thus, the other has power over us because we cannot control what the other thinks about us. That shame, claims Grelland, which we experience when seen by another human, is absent in contact with animals. We can say ‘... that animals can give us something humans cannot: an ontologically irrelevant gaze. An experience of relation where something is never at a stake. And sometimes this form of safety can have a deep meaning’ (Grelland, 2018, p. 25 translated by the author). In the face of the ontologically irrelevant gaze of animals, we can be ourselves. In other words, we do not experience a judgment by being seen by animals; it is the human gaze that judges, evaluates and classifies. However, it is possible to recognise the ontologically irrelevant gaze in humans as well: the gaze of the dead reflects our own transience; it does not judge us.

The photography process gives me the opportunity to feel empathy with other living organisms. It also gives me the opportunity to reflect on their existence, which ends just like our own—with death. Having empathy for organisms that do not resemble ourselves may seem difficult, but it is not impossible. In the book *Philosophy of Life. A personal contribution about emotions and reason* Arne Næss describes his empathic encounter with a microorganism:

I once saw a certain organism through my microscope in a little raindrop. It moved around the droplet like a ballet dancer. But the droplet quickly began evaporating. The movements became stiff and less graceful. It made sense to me to save the organism for its own sake by hurrying to fetch more water. I did not believe that the organism had the capacity to suffer. But I believe I might call this identifying with a living creature, even if it was one that was considerably different from myself. (Næss, 2002, p. 106)

In recent years, we have become more aware of insects, especially honeybees and bumblebees. This is not because we have empathy for the insects but because we feel threatened by ecological imbalances that can lead to our own extinction. Paradoxically, this anthropocentric argument and trend can save many insects. Identifying with animals, and therefore adopting an empathic approach towards them (zoocentrism), is more widespread than empathy for insects. In the book *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*, David Abram (2010) shows a possible change of perspective in the relationship between us and non-human organisms. He describes an encounter with a mosquito:

I watch the mosquito's abdomen fill up with my blood. Countless times I have annihilated mosquitoes with a slap against my arm, or else brushed them angrily away. Yet today I just watch, humbled, ashamed to be offering only this tiny sip of my blood in return for the abundant sustenance I draw from the biosphere, yet still glad to confirm my membership in the big web of interdependence, as both eater and eaten. (Abram, 2010, s.62)

Abram's words show a deep recognition of our mutual dependence and respect. To put it simply, we are living organisms sitting in the ‘same boat’. It is sad that this symbiosis between organisms and plants, developed over millions of years, is today on the verge of global collapse. Plants are also in the same ‘boat’. They are living organisms which deserve our attention, but plant-empathy is something we think less about. We instrumentalise plants to the same extent as animals. In the book *Plants as Persons. A Philosophical Botany* (2011), Matthew Hall tries to defend the equal existence of plants. He conveys Francis Hallé's statement that we humans are completely ignorant about the biosphere of plants. Consequently, we suffer from *plant blindness*, a phenomenon described by Wandersee and Schussler in *Toward a Theory of Plant Blindness* (2001). But what causes our blindness? Why are the plants overlooked by us? According to Wandersee and Schussler (2001), we do not see plants as part of our lives. We think of plants only as a background image for animals. We do not recognise that plants are of

great importance to the entire ecosystem, and we misunderstand the different timelines under which plants and animals operate (Wandersee and Schussler, 2001). One could add that we do not accept the existence of other organisms for their own sake. We have made this planet a stage for our anthropocentric lives' drama, overflowing with the props we produce. The plants are woven into all organic life, but we talk about them as if they were a separate homogeneous group and a storehouse of useful materials.

In my home, there are many plants, many of which I have grown from seeds or shoots. Following the growth process of something you have given life to and taken responsibility for is both rewarding and demanding—we who have children know that very well. To me, the life of my plants is a mystery. They will never learn to speak my language to describe how the day has been or what they want. It is only their body language and my interpretation of it that tells me if they need more water or light. The plants appear as daydreams, a little lost, lost in their own mental world. They are silent witnesses to our lives.

I collect dead insects. Some I have inherited from the Natural History Museum in Oslo. From there, I received, among other things, insects in a glass of rubbing alcohol. The insects were supposed to be used in the museum's research, but that did not happen. I have selected the insects one by one and prepared them for drying (figure 5).

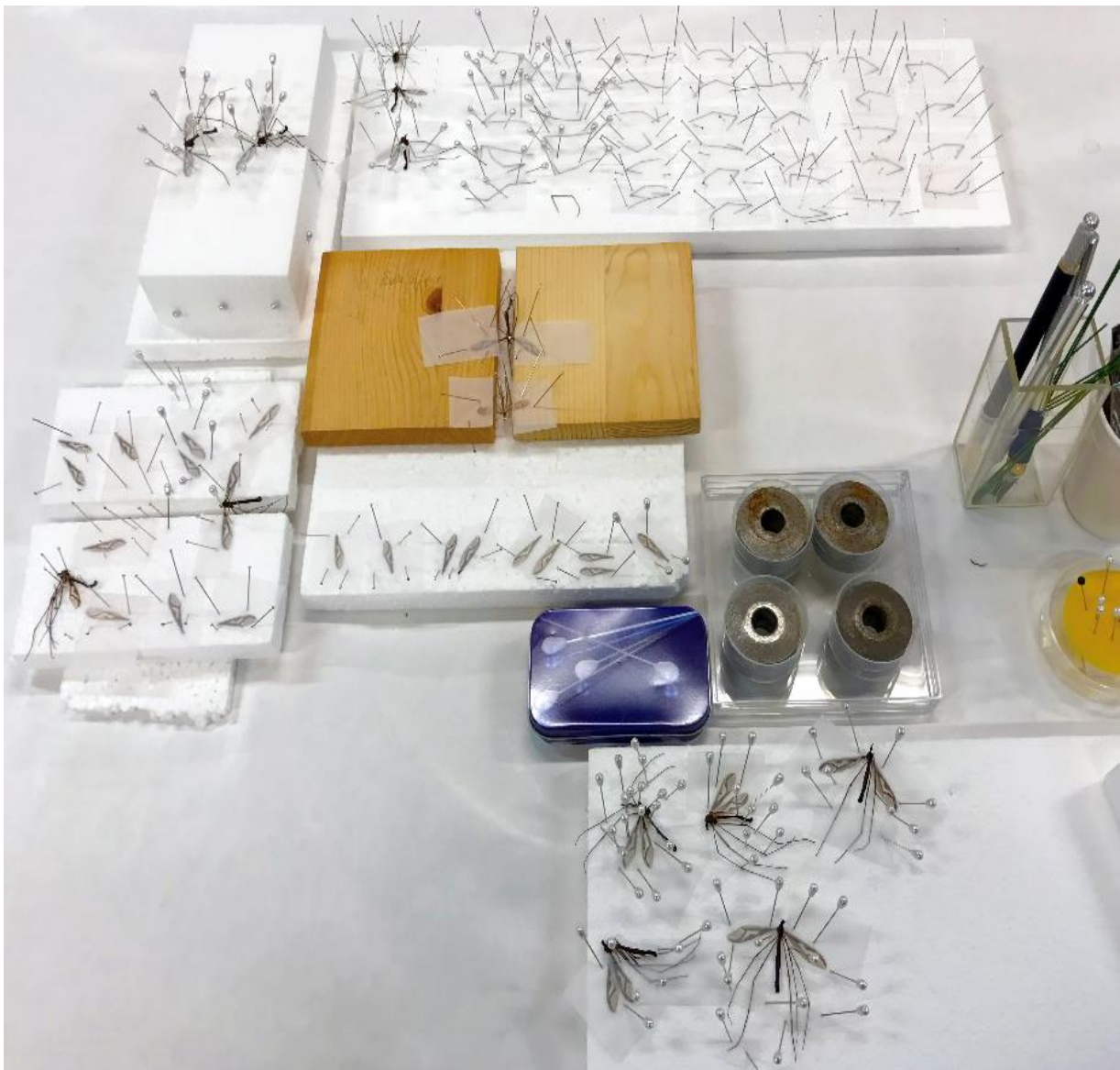


FIGURE 5. Drying of the Tipulidae family.

I do not throw away any insect parts. The loose wings and legs are transformed into new art objects. For example, in 'Insects Legs Poetry' (figure 6), where abstracted, real insect legs form an array of incomprehensible signs, signs that touch us when we understand their origin.



**FIGURE 6.** Insects Leg Poetry (A box with the cursorial legs of insects).

Flies comprise most of my collections. In our eyes, they are the 'gypsies' among insects. They do not belong anywhere, and no one wants them as guests. Throughout the summer and fall, flies die around me. Their death is 'theatrical'. They do not hide to die in silence—they make a panicky performance on the window stage and die in the spotlight on the windowsill, where I find most of them. The insects from museum collections have long thin insect needles in their backs (thorax). They are stored in boxes in the dark. In my photographs, I let the insects keep the needles. The needles testify to us our relationship to non-human organisms. Sometimes, when I look at the insects I got from the museum, I feel a sting between my shoulder blades, in my neck or stomach. This is not how I want to know what it is like to be an insect, but this identification happens spontaneously when I see the needles. Is this empathy?

How do we define the death of non-human organisms? How does one notice that an organism has died? How does it look like? How does that moment feel? What words can describe that? Is a flower dead the moment I cut it from the stem, or does it die slowly in a vase? It does not surprise me that so many writers connect a photograph of people with death. We are self-centred, mortal creatures—and each face mirrors our own transience. When we reflect on death, we reflect on human death or the fear of it. We see non-human organisms as something we use and consume but of which nature always has more of in its inexhaustible stock.

### **TO DRAW WITH THE LIGHT: THE MAGIC OF PATIENCE**

The word photography comes from Greek and means to draw with light. My six fibre optic light sources in the studio look like six pencils, and when I illuminate my motifs, I feel like I actually paint with the light. I touch the materials with rays, and the light brings the matter out from the darkness. When I try to remember a dream I had, it feels like I am taking it from the same darkness. It is the darkness we were born from and will return to.

Photographing small items requires patience. The slow movement of time allows for a reflective state. Thoughts are mixed up with emotions. They grow out like silk galaxies from the darkness of the subconscious, and there arises an atmosphere of the here and now, a community of humans, plants, and insects—*an us* and our common transience. Every day in the photo studio is unique. Before I start shooting, I must set up the equipment and stage my objects. Using tweezers, I try to place a fly on a fragile plant. The fly is dry and light. I must be careful that the tweezers do not damage its wings. I stop breathing and gently open the tweezers to release the fly on the plant's thin branch. The moment I put



down the fly, I exhale. My breath like a tornado destroys the staged landscape. The plant falls over, and the fly disappears. I look for the fly among many photographic tools, check the floor, and look under my shoes. The fly is not to be found. My initial thought is as follows: 'It was just a fly. No problem. I can replace them. I just have to look on a windowsill to find one'. But suddenly a relentless thought occurs to me that it is not just a fly; it is this unique fly. I then start looking for the fly until I find it, but the fly has lost a leg. What now? Nature has taught me to accept the matter as is; if it is not as it was when it was new, then it is as it should be now. I then straighten up the plant and put the fly on it again, sometimes repeating the procedure again and again, for example, when I touch the fly with my giant fingers as I set the light. The experience with tweezers and precision work has made me aware of my own constant vibration. This warm energy vibration is what distinguishes us from the dead. It is these vibrations which the first post-mortem photographs have captured through long light exposure (figure 4).



**FIGURE 7.** The Poetics of Thanatology – (Spider silk web).

One late fall, I was walking along a gravel road. On one side of the road grew large, wild plants. Autumn had turned the plants into dark, dry skeletons. One plant, I noticed, was very tall, with a thick stem ending in branches that formed a semi-circular shape. I felt the plant was like a hand with spread fingers waiting to receive something that was to fall from the sky. Between the plant's 'fingers', a thin cobweb glistened. I saw no spider. It seemed as if the spider had ended the season's survival battles and gone to hibernate. Maybe it did not survive. I took the plant with me. In the photo studio, the plant was transformed into an object, torn away from the air and the moisture it was surrounded by, torn away from the time and sound of the place it came from. The plant object becomes a sign of communication I do not understand the meaning of, but I feel that something grabs me by the throat as I place the insects on the spider's woven ruins. What do I want? I do not want to know, not yet. The camera sucks in and swallows the light into its dark stomach and spits it out into the computer. The camera's 'memory' appears on the computer screen. A photograph is created. Is the physical plant and the insects irrelevant when the picture is taken (figure 7)?

Photography, its tools, and the technology involved are not innocent; they instrumentalise the physical world. Today, it seems as if the physical world exists only to be photographed. We are exposed to a chaotic stream of images on the internet. Images have become a substitute for nature. They are an intravenous web-illusion that sustains our virtual digital lives. 'Caught up in a mass of abstractions, our attention hypnotized by a host of human-made technologies that only reflects us back to ourselves, it is all too easy for us to forget our carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities' (Abram, 2017, p. 22). Is it possible that my camera captures nature's soul and deceives my sensitivity with its technologically simulated sensation? The fact that I contribute to the creation of the virtual, utopian photographic reality makes me very insecure about my work. My staging evokes shame, shame for working with photography, shame for being a human being. My staging reflects my own gaze—I myself become the *other* who looks at myself and judges. Each photograph carries the photographer's gaze, the photographer's judgment of what is being photographed and himself/herself. Could photographers who took the pictures in the concentration camps continue to take pictures of family, birthdays, or beautiful flowers? Maybe one cannot stop photographing. Photography distances us from reality by reducing pain. It heals longing, turns big things into small and small into big and beautifies the ugly. Photography is a witness you cannot trust, but you do it anyway, because photography is less painful than reality. The photograph always shows something that it would have been too late to change, and sometimes it can feel like relief. Can photography teach us to accept what we cannot change: the past?

Photography gives me an alibi for the long work process, which further gives me time for reflection and raises new questions. The long, silent 'photo conversations' with the existential materials I photograph bring me closer to *lingua sensual*: the sensuous language that teaches me to 'listen'. Being quiet and absorbing what is near, here and now is an empathic encounter. It is a stream of slow and meaningful sensory experiences. These experiences are absorbed for later to be streamed out again through the artistic expression. The little fly in front of the camera is the portal to a parallel universe, the universe that exists right next to me and touches my skin, yet I find it as separate and alien. Every photograph I take is a desperate attempt to belong, to be a part of, to feel oneself in the body of the other.

In my photographs are the dryness of the organic material and dryness of photo paper, what also connects the photograph to death. Although both the dry organisms and paper are subject to continuous decay, the rate of decay decreases considerably when the last drop of water has dried. To photograph is to mummify. Taking a photo is like cutting off a flower. What has existed is 'cut off' from reality and transferred into the paper. The fresh photograph then lives for a while before it withers and may eventually be discarded.

### CAN ALL MATTER BE EQUATED?

Is it possible to remove the hierarchies we have created among life forms? Is it possible to look at all matter as one? In an interview, David Abram expresses a holistic view of the matter: 'The matter is already intelligent. The materials from which the machines are made—metal in the car, bricks in buildings—they still carry with them a tangibility' (Bu & Biong, 2007, p. 99, translated by the author). Abram is interested in local storytelling that belongs to and creates a place's awareness. The matter in these places is what contributes to these narratives. 'Every place has its own state of mind. If we think that the mind is not in us, but in the earth—and that we are a part of it all—then each place has its own specific consciousness' (Ibid, p. 99, translated by the author). One can say that what we perceive as the atmosphere of a place is the simultaneous voices of all materials and organisms that are here and now and which are absorbed by our senses. We are united with the atmosphere; we are absorbed by it.

The substantial transformation of organic matter amazes me, and I am fascinated by the visually sublime forms of decay. From a physiological perspective, the decay of all organic materials is the same. Matter is transformed into the components of the earth regardless of cultural hierarchies. The relentless processes of decay deprive materials of their individual voices. In silence, they are digested and transformed into common formlessness at the micro level. And although I try to accept and reconcile myself with the perishability of all organic materials, I cannot forget the visual manifestation of evil that

I saw when I was a child. Every time I see rotten apples in the garden, I see something else at the same time.

If epigenetics is right that traumatic events from our ancestors can be passed on in genetic material to new generations, there is an unbreakable bond between my father's experiences and me. Could it be that I am looking for the pictures that my father saw in the concentration camp? Could it be that I have inherited my father's unanswered questions and am subconsciously looking for answers to how people can be so evil, that I do that through photography and my artistic work? Can such an artistic activity provide any kind of answer? The way I see it, creative processes generate more questions than answers.

As I mentioned, I find that my photographs teach me *lingua sensual*, a language we do not give sufficient recognition to. David Abram writes: 'The human senses, as we were taught in our college science classes, were deceptive; they were not to be trusted' (Abram, 2010, p. 67). *Lingua sensual* weaves us into the planet's matter and gives meaning, because it connects us back to nature.

Regaining trust in our senses is an important didactic task in art education. It gives room for ways of expression other than the verbal ones. I have learned this through my artistic work, which gives me the opportunity to approach nature in a unique way. By seeing, touching, smelling, collecting, dwelling on, studying and exposing it to new contexts, I establish empathic connections. In order to convey this sensory knowledge to my students, it must first grow from my own experiences, then in teaching. Empathy is not given. It must be practiced and maintained. We must stay alert to the manipulative verbal and written language that can transform evil into good, that can chain us to the words of others and distort our experiences. We must stay alert to images that invade us and isolate us from the material world.

I perceive my thanatological photographs as silent poetic reflections on the existence and death of organic life. With my photographs, I create a place of value for organisms that are at the bottom of the hierarchy, organisms that are doomed to the anthropocentric colonization of the globe. Maybe I am looking for a confirmation that what I saw in my father's books were not human. Everything is material. I adopt such a mindset in the photography process, yet my anthropocentric nature will always put human first. Therefore, I wish that what I saw at the time in the photographs—naked, dead skeletal bodies stacked on top of each other—were not humans but only an apple mound lying on a compost or a bunch of dead flies.

## EPILOGUE

There is another story that relates both to my father and to insects.

It was early spring. We used to wash all the windows in the house before Easter. My dad had his room on the second floor in the far corner of the house. Although he said there was no need to wash the windows in his room, my sister and I insisted upon doing so. We came like a whirlwind into the room, tore down the curtains and threw them on the floor. Suddenly, Dad came in and said we had to be careful because there could be a butterfly in the curtains or on the windowsill. He could see that we did not understand what he meant. He then went to the windowsill and showed us a small glass bowl filled with sugar water. He said he had been feeding a butterfly all winter. The enthusiasm for washing the windows turned into a stone in my throat. How could we...? We carefully searched the curtains to find the butterfly. We found it, but one wing was twisted, and it did not look alive. My father took the butterfly, said—*this is sad*—and left the room.

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Photos are taken by the author if no other reference. More photographs can be seen here:  
[www.jadwiga-art.com](http://www.jadwiga-art.com)