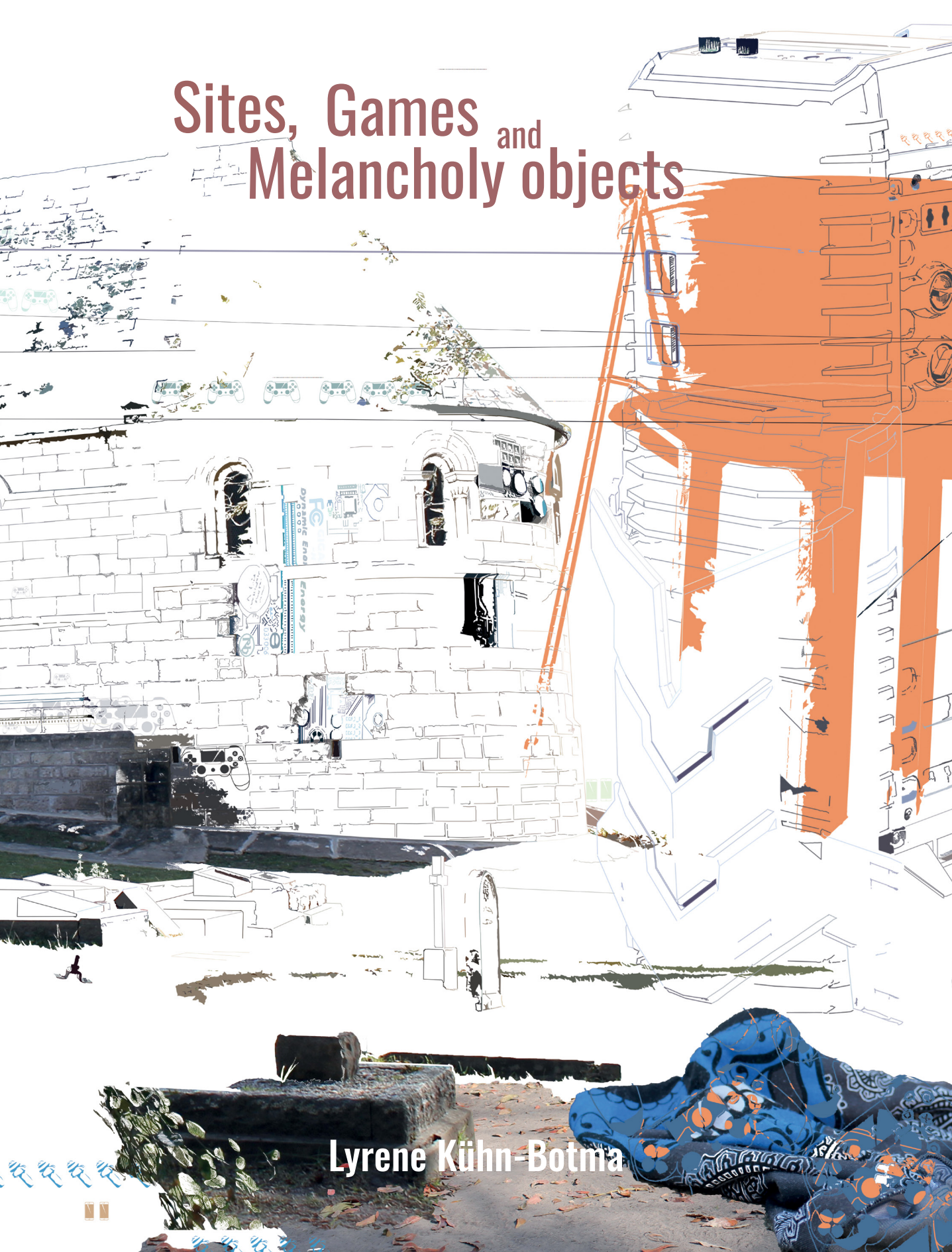
Sites, Games and Melancholy objects



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GRIEF AND ART:
SITES, GAMES AND MELANCHOLY OBJECTS

by

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Foreword

My interest in grief, loss and mourning derives from my brother's fatal motorcycle accident which took place in 2013, when he crossed train tracks in the Namib Desert. Following this loss, I found habitual mourning practices to be insufficient. In response, I have expressed my grief in a variety of alternative ways, such as tattooing (a more popularised performative expression), iterations on social media and digital sites, and playing specific types of video games in remembrance. Playing video games was an interest shared by me and my brother. After his death, I returned to the *virtual* places in which both of us played in order to find an intimate place, once shared, to commemorate his life.

In doing so, I discovered the potential meaning that these *virtual* environments have for me, as the bereaved. By starting to reflect on this, I found that my grief is intimately connected to tangible objects and sites, as well as experiences of play. This triggered my need to investigate and elaborate on these experiences as a bereaved person in a contemporary society in which various forms of commemoration are available via different technologies, devices and objects.

Abstract

In this *Grief and Art: Sites, Games and Melancholy Objects* Masters' research project comprising a written dissertation, an exhibition of drawings, digital drawings, pigment ink drawings with printed silkscreen layers and/or embossing, as well as an exhibition catalogue, I explore personal responses and visual iterations in the wake of grief, bereavement and loss. The objective of this study is to investigate current and alternative responses to grief and loss in terms of visual culture and art. In order to visually and artistically expose and elaborate on difficult experiences of grief and loss, I contrast personal responses to grief, to public and/or cultural responses. I investigate the difficult, unique and communicative iterations of contemporary grief on multiple platforms – every day and digital sites – through artworks that are made using traditional as well as contemporary methods. I include experiences of grief relative to personalised sites and places, video game experiences connected to grief and death, as well as contemporary technological devices and other objects associated with personalised grief. These personal experiences are investigated to explore the visual ways in which experiences of loss and trauma have been communicated through the conduits available in technologically-driven societies, and how these new experiences provide novel empathetic experiences of loss to viewers of artworks.

Firstly, specific video games and *virtual*[1] sites are investigated as sites where loss and grief can be expressed as contemporary, personal practices of mourning. The repetitive playing of video games as an act of remembrance in mourning is a relatively novel iteration of grief. On the other hand, the ancient practice of pilgrimage could be compared to entry into *virtual* places of play. Such virtual places become separate yet integrated spheres of existence within the lived experiences of everyday life. Death, dying and mourning exist within the mechanics and narratives of contemporary video games; however, what is explored is the potential of video games to become sites where bereavement is recognised, incorporated and expressed – new experiences of bereavement which may manifest in contemporary artworks.

Secondly, the melancholy object, as articulated by Margaret Gibson (2004: 289), is a central component of this study. The melancholy object signifies memory, which is inherent to the mourning process and, as such, could be described as the memorialised object of grief (Gibson, 2004: 289). I propose that, along with other everyday objects that can be recognised as melancholy objects, technological devices, such as cell phones, computers or video game consoles could be considered on some occasions as melancholy devices that have the potential to digitally recall

1 Throughout this dissertation the words 'virtual' and 'real' is placed in italics. This is to account for the ambiguity of these terms, specifically when it comes to the interlaced and equivocal nature of perception and imagination regarding what is considered real and virtual.

the deceased through images, photographs, videos and social media sites.

Lastly, I argue that diverse sites of grief, including everyday sites – such as cemeteries, grassroots memorials or roadside shrines – become imaginatively intertwined with *virtual* or digital sites – such as online sites to grieve, commemorative social media sites, videos, digital photographs or the *virtual* places of video games. This occurs when the bereaved person engages with images and art about grief and loss. Sites where grieving and commemoration take place provide valuable insight into the meaning attached to the sites of death by the bereaved throughout history. My hypothesis is that different types of sites have the innate ability to overlap with one another. This ability of everyday, *virtual* and digital sites to influence and overlap one another in contemporary society is explored visually. Furthermore, these sites are considered in terms of their potential to reveal other sites of memory within the body of the bereaved when memorialisation occurs. I conclude that all these attributes of grief and commemoration are intimately connected to the body of the bereaved, which becomes the moving and living site where memorialisation in inner pictures takes place. Such inner pictures are closely connected to - sometimes as the catalysts of - artistic exploration.

Keywords: *death, mourning, loss, grief, images, pictures, photograph, place, avatar, sites, video games, melancholy object, digital, virtual, drawing, digital drawing*

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INTRODUCTION

Grief and loss are experiences which are universal and inevitable regardless of culture, religion, gender, or age; however, the ways in which grief and loss are experienced are unique and personal. This dissertation focuses on the visual reactions, responses, iterations, and experiences of contemporary grieving individuals following loss in the form of the death of a loved one. Historical iterations and practices of mourning have been documented and studied extensively by authors, such as Philippe Ariès (2008), Hans Belting (2001) in his anthropological approach to images, and Douglas Davies (2002) while others, such as Candi Cann (2014), Margaret Mitchell (2007), Rachel Ord (2009), Peter Jan Margry and Cristina Sanchez-Carretero (2011), Margaret Gibson (2004) and Brenda Mathijssen (2017) have investigated contemporary responses to grief and loss. These writers form the foundation of my investigation into contemporary responses to grief from which I then create layered types of visual commemoration in art.[2]

In this dissertation, I investigate the layered character of contemporary mourning practices by referring to established, contemporary, globalised and westernised mourning practices; as well as new and alternative means of commemorating the deceased, especially through the use of contemporary technology which includes cell phones, tablets, laptops and personal computers. The aim in doing so is to gauge its visual, cultural, and artistic effects. Furthermore, I explore the ways in which grief and loss are enacted and experienced in a contemporary society in which some individuals find religious, cultural, or generally observed mourning practices to be lacking or insufficient. Moreover, I examine the ways in which visual explorations in art could interpret the complex experiences of grief and loss, especially where contemporary technologies are involved.

The above-mentioned aspects point towards people's responses and experiences of grief and loss and, ultimately, to the body of the bereaved. I argue that it is within the body of the bereaved that remembrance occurs and a response to art dealing with the subject of loss and commemoration takes place. To address the above aspects, I examine memory, remembering and commemoration while considering images, traces and reconstructions of the deceased in the form of videos, digital photographs, memorials and *virtually* reconstructed traces of the deceased in video games, as well as on social media sites and Internet forums.[3] All these traces are accessed via technological devices which are, inevitably, integral to the experience of grief, loss and commemoration. Traces of the deceased and iterations of grief are viewed through the lenses of three types of commemoration, which I consider to be my focus – *Video Games, Melancholy Objects* and *Sites* – and which constitute the three chapters of this dissertation.

2 In the form of digitally-layered images using Adobe Photoshop, and layering pigment ink drawings with traditional silkscreen printing.

3 Social media sites, such as *Facebook, Instagram, Twitter,* and *9Gag*, as well as Internet forums, such as *Reddit* and *4chan*

Chapter 1, *Video Games,* examines whether video games may constitute *virtual* environments where commemoration of the deceased could take place. Recently, video games have become places where individuals are free to explore not only the video game, *virtual* environment, narrative or video game mechanics, but also their personal experiences of play and, potentially, playing in remembrance. Various aspects pertaining to death in video games are explored in this chapter. This includes the effect of playing *virtual* pilgrimage in a video game, specifically while playing in remembrance of the deceased. I connect specific video games to the trope of pilgrimage as explored by Donald Howard (1980), and investigate whether the player, who may also be the bereaved, may enact their own *virtual* pilgrimage along with the characters in the game. Both games discussed in this chapter – Santa Monica studio's 2018 instalment of *God of War* and Thatgamecompany's adventure art game *Journey* (2012) – deal with death, loss, bereavement and pilgrimage in their design and narrative. This has the potential for bereaved players to include their own *real*-world experiences of personal grief and loss to generate a novel iteration of their bereavement.

Furthermore, the instances and abundant occurrences of death in video games are discussed. My aim is to point out that although video games are saturated with occurrences of death, the processes of dying and bereavement are absent. Comparatively, in art, death is approached in a serious manner. Artworks, such as Christian Boltanski's *The Store House* of 1988, are investigated, not necessarily for their link to video games, but rather for the way in which a viewer, or player, may respond to works dealing with subject matter pertaining to loss and commemoration. While playing, the bereaved may be reminded of death when his/her avatar dies. However, while the game promises to return the avatar to the player, such a promise is not reflected in everyday life. This is one of the instances in which I surmise that individuals may choose to recreate the deceased in the form of avatars with whom, or by means of which, to engage in video game role-play. The bereaved player may fail in the game world, resulting in the avatar's death; however, the avatar will be returned to the bereaved with whom, or by means of which, to continue to play. My goal is to relay the potential of the video game to explore personal grief by comparing the bereaved player's response to character or avatar death. In some games the main protagonist, avatar, or non-playable characters (NPCs)[4] can die permanently in the video game world. The effect of these deaths can be devastating to players who, through the medium of video games, feel responsible for these deaths because the choices players make through their avatars have an influence on the *virtual* lives of other characters. This effect is addressed by drawing a comparison between the death of a fictional non-playable character, Mordin Solus, in Bioware's *Mass Effect 3* (2012), and the recreation of the death of Joel, a boy in the *real* world who died of cancer, in Numinous Games' video game *That Dragon, Cancer* (2016). In the art which I

4 Non-playable characters or NPCs are digitally-generated characters in the video game world with whom the player can interact through his or her avatar, but not play as his or her avatar. These characters are completely computer-generated, designed and run.

have created involving the experiences of grieving *virtual* characters, the deceased is compared to these characters in terms of the way in which, after the death of a loved one, their image and traces of them currently exist in the same mode as that of a fictional or *virtual* video game character. They share the same mode of existence as pictures and potential copies thereof which are referred to and memorialised.

Following this, I aim to explore how games may be returned to by the bereaved as an activity shared with the deceased. Thus, the game is played for an entirely different reason, namely to remember, commemorate and recall memories of shared games and play. In this way, the bereaved may play and revisit specific games and *virtual* places in the game world as an act of remembrance. Moreover, I investigate how bereaved players have commemorated their loved ones in the *virtual* environments of video games, such as Linden Lab's *Second Life* (2003-) or Blizzard Entertainment's *Overwatch* (2016). Some commemorations are personal and created by players while others are created by video game designers or developers as part of the video game code. I conclude that video games provide individuals with unique *virtual* environments where bereaved players have the potential to commemorate their loss. In playing games, there are many ways in which the bereaved player may choose to commemorate the deceased, for instance by replaying specific games in remembrance of the way in which these were played with him or her while still alive. This includes recreating and *virtually* playing with the deceased by reconstructing their likeness as avatars, to be confronted with the permanent death of a *virtual* character which, in turn, reminds the bereaved of their own loss. *Virtual* commemoration is further considered where the deceased is remembered in the acts of erecting online memorials or visiting personal *virtual* sites of play. The bereaved player can then, from his/her stationary position, memorialise the deceased while playing. Commemoration becomes part of activities not necessarily associated with bereavement through the activity of play. Similarly, the art which I have created as part of this research project is not necessarily playful but explores colourful tones in digital drawings and detailed drawings of plants and hands. The art created is not necessarily sombre and heavy-hearted. Instead, it explores imaginary landscapes along with everyday objects and experiences interwoven with moments of grief, commemoration and elements of play. These explorations seek to negotiate the prevalence of grief in everyday life – an experience which, I argue, is interlaced and continuous.

In Chapter 2, I take a step back from the *virtual* environments in order to examine the technological devices on which these projected worlds are screened and accessed. Throughout history objects which have been used in death rituals and which therefore held a sacred meaning can be identified (Davies, 2002; Belting, 2001). In the contemporary environment, Margaret Gibson (2004) describes these objects as melancholy objects because they have become much more personally attributed by the bereaved as opposed to objects used historically in a cultural or religious context. When investigating melancholy objects in contemporary society, it is necessary to reflect

on how the deceased was commemorated and remembered historically. I investigate how, after the Enlightenment, the westernised approach to grief and bereavement has shifted to understate ritual and focus on a more scientific approach which includes investigation, compartmentalisation, and a search for truth by way of experimentation (Small, 2001: 20; Currer, 2001: 50). The result of this approach is, amongst others, the development of the so-called medical model of grief. The Stages Model made famous by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler (2005) is reflected upon critically. Thus, I consider how some individuals may respond to the contemporary models and workings of grief and bereavement. Artists such as Rachel Whiteread (*Embankment*, 2005) have investigated the innate meaning and authority possessed by her own melancholy object by tracing, copying and mass producing it to the point that the collection of copied and casted objects overwhelm the viewer. One specific contemporary practice which I consider, along with writers, such as Rachel Ord (2009) and Candi Cann (2014), is the act of personalised tattooing. By participating in this iteration of bereavement, the bereaved return grief and loss to their own bodies where they choose to display and perform their grief as a means of an embodied, visual, melancholy object incised on their skin – an impression alluded to by the embossing of paper sheets in my own art explorations.

Such responses to grief and bereavement through melancholy objects, including those tattooed onto the human body have led me to consider prehistoric examples of objects used ritualistically in the expression of grief. I surmise that melancholy objects have existed for thousands of years as part of death rituals. Objects such as the Egyptian *ka* statue were used as a replacement body for the deceased to which their soul (*ka*) could return. My aim is to explore the continuity between prehistoric examples and contemporary technological objects of grief, such as the cell phone or computer. Technological devices have the potential to house, within their memory and access to the Internet, the digitally-traced and copied pictures of the deceased as digital photographs, videos, voice notes, online posts, and communications. My goal is to connect the characteristics of the melancholy object to technological devices which, I suggest, is a melancholy object or *device* which could be believed to house the digital 'soul' of the deceased in the same manner as the *ka* statue has in the past.

Like melancholy objects, the melancholy device has specific presence and representation in the life of the bereaved. Furthermore, I consider the changing relationship between the melancholy object and the bereaved, as articulated by Brenda Mathijssen (2017), to inform my supposition that the melancholy device is part of the everyday life of the bereaved. By comparing the idea of the melancholy object, as well as the changing relationship between the bereaved and these objects, I consider the *Black Mirror* episode entitled *Be Right Back* (2013) in which a deceased person is recreated synthetically from his online interactions, photographs, videos, posts and communications as a 'living' melancholy object. This potential for the online presence of the deceased to continue to exist is translated metaphorically into the potential for cactus and

succulent plants to continue to live once removed from the soil. Similarly, the image and traces of the deceased continue to be copied, observed, revisited and recreated on technological devices, such as cell phones and computers which, in turn, are kept 'awake' by the bereaved by charging and actively interacting with them. Moreover, I conclude that technological devices have the potential to become melancholy devices which may contain pictures of the deceased, access to online websites on social media pertaining to the deceased, videos or previous communication with the deceased stored within their memory. The device is a technological object that is used and referred to in everyday life, once again returning traces of the deceased to the everyday function, and as part of other daily activities, of the bereaved.

In the final chapter, the focus shifts towards the sites where these intimate and public interactive commemorations with the deceased take place, be it in everyday life rituals or online on *virtual* and digital (web)sites. In Chapter 3, I consider various sites associated with grief and bereavement, such as the cemetery, memorial site, grassroots memorials and roadside shrines, in terms of their significance or meaning to the bereaved, as well as their potential to interlace and influence one another. David Sloane's investigations into the recent history of the American cemetery (2018), as well as Philippe Ariès's (2008) examination of death and commemoration of the past 1 000 years, provide valuable insight into the cemetery's characteristics, value, and current and past uses. My aim is not to disregard the cemetery but to add to its experience other experiences of contemporary sites of commemoration in use today. These sites include the *virtual* sites of video games discussed in Chapter 1, as well as the digital sites, melancholy objects and devices discussed in Chapter 2. My goal is to discuss and investigate the layeredness of the meaningful sites where commemoration takes place, specifically the site where the deceased died – the grassroots memorial and roadside shrine. Once again, the work of Christian Boltanski is considered, specifically the site-specific work *Animitas* (2014) in which the artist investigates a meaningful site in the Atacama Desert in Chile by utilising the sound of hundreds of small bells, representing lost souls, chiming in the wind. I propose, with the support of Jack Santino (2011), that these sites have the potential to act as a portal or catalyst to reveal other sites of memory where the bereaved interact with, share the site online, or engage with sites that have meaning for them. Diverse sites, used for the purpose of grieving, are then activated by the bereaved, who memorialise the deceased through acts and responses.

In the concluding section of this chapter, I add objects, pictures, as well as digital and specific *virtual* sites pertaining to loss, to the traditional array of sites of commemoration. In order to do so, I consider Martin Heidegger's indication in his article "Art and Space" (1973) that objects – not only those belonging to a place – should also be considered places. Heidegger's conjecture is then compared to the melancholy object, device, and photographs to consider these objects as sites themselves. My intention is to consider Roland Barthes' (1980) concept of the *punctum,* which wounds the viewer when looking at a photograph, as catalyst when engaging with such

pictures. In addition, I use the Foucauldian heterotopia as the basis upon which to argue that a photograph, then, may have the potential to set off an intense moment of memorialisation in the bereaved, which may transport them to other sites of memory, interlacing these sites of remembrance and commemoration within the body of the bereaved.

I conclude this dissertation by arguing that by viewing and interacting with objects, devices, sites, or art dealing with loss in commemoration, the bereaved person is transported to other sites through memory. This experience may be interpreted as the ephemeral moment of melancholy, which is frequently discussed in this dissertation, wherein a cascade of inner memory images floods the mind of the bereaved. In participating in commemoration in play while interacting with objects and devices which enact the memory of the deceased, while looking at pictures of the deceased which wound the viewer/bereaved (as the *punctum* articulated by Roland Barthes, 1980), while engaging with the *virtual* and digital presence of the deceased via technological devices or while engaging with a work of art dealing with these intimate experiences, the body of the bereaved becomes the site where memories, sites and commemoration are in flux – the body becomes the constant and moving site where, ultimately, memorialisation takes place.

CHAPTER 1: VIDEO GAMES

At the core of this study, and what initiated my interest in the different and alternative ways in which we can mourn today, are video games. This dissertation starts with a discussion of video games because, to me, playing video games was my personal, initial response to death and loss. Therefore, I propose that playing video games can constitute a personal, unique response to grief and loss. The medium of video games, which involves digital images, *virtual* environments and the use of technological devices, are connected to and prevalent in the following two chapters – *Melancholy Objects* and *Interlaced Sites*. The focus of this study is not necessarily on identifying the mechanics or visual style of video games. Rather, the experience of playing specific video games, the effect thereof on the player, and the personal bodily response of the player and the viewer in bereavement are investigated. In addition, the four different aspects with which I associate the experience of video games and grief are analysed in the sections to follow, namely the four sub-sections of this chapter.

The specific connections made between video games and mourning practices are based on their mutual characteristics of repetition and 'interactivity'. Of particular interest to me is the action of replaying games in specific circumstances and the experience of playing them, especially as a mourning practice. This correlation is also explored and analysed in my own art practice. Sanders (2016: 116) asserts that:

> The video game is vital to the experience, just as a piece of text is vital to the transactional experience. Similarly, the gamer is also essential in the experience.

As Sanders (2016) states, a video game is a transactional experience in which the presence of the body of the gamer is central. The player reacts to the game via input, and the game responds with certain results. Sanders' statement highlights this vital relationship and element integral to the video game (and this dissertation), namely the player. Throughout this chapter, I explore how a bereaved player may exploit the playing of video games not only for its entertainment value, but also for its sentimental investment in the experience of play and its potential to allow the bereaved to express, explore and practice mourning. My interest in play focuses specifically on video games and how this type of play may relate to artistic creativity. Moreover, I investigate the *virtual* and imaginary world of video games, as well as the effect of absorption and affect on the bereaved player. Thus, as far as art, imagination and creativity are concerned, this study does not investigate the mechanics of video games per se. Instead, this research focuses on the experience of playing video games and how that experience may relate to the bodily experience of commemoration. Subsequently, I connect this experience to the following elements: the absorption of the player in the imaginary world of the video game; the effect of playing and interacting with the environment and guided narrative on the player; the potentially devastating effect of death, dying and loss in

video games; and, finally, how the player reacts to that experience in the imaginary world of the game and, analogously, to art. All the above-mentioned experiences related to video games are analysed through the lens of *real* experiences of death, mourning and loss, specifically. I assert that play may be conducted in an extremely serious manner, and, if this is the case, the question is whether the imaginary *virtual* sites within video games have become sites where mourning can be practised. If so, I ask whether the act of playing specific video games in an act of remembrance is a contemporary, personal mourning practice. Additionally, I consider whether this activity and experience of play-mourning can be visually interpreted as a response in terms of art.

To answer these questions, the four experiences and influences that the player may have while playing video games are examined in the four sections of this chapter, namely *Digital Pilgrimage, Playing Death, Responding to Virtual and Character Death* and *Between Living and Dying.* The active, deliberate interaction and the dedication, which are distinct qualities of the act of playing, are important assumptions for my argument. The question is whether video games may provide various ways of exploring and unlocking numerous aspects of grief and loss. It is through repetitively engaging with a *virtual* and imaginary video game world and the *virtual* characters who inhabit it that the player may start to explore and express his/her grief and loss. Play provides the player with the freedom to assume diverse mentalities with which to approach or conduct the game. Thus, I wish to investigate whether specific video games could be approached by the player with the attitude of remembrance, or whether it may be a personal response to grief and a means of memorialisation which may be productive as a preliminary stage of artmaking.

In the first section – *Digital Pilgrimage* – experiences of play are explored in the narrative metaphors of pilgrimage. In this section, I analyse the experience of playing through a guided pilgrimage in video games, especially when playing while experiencing actual grief and loss. This is analysed from the angle of the traditional topos of the pilgrimage as articulated by Donald Howard (1980) and Turner and Turner (1978). The relationship between the player, the game and the experience of playing is visually interpreted and explored in my own art in the form of digital drawings. Pilgrimage is an important and popularly used metaphor or trope in video game narratives. Tom van Nuenen (2016) applies traditional pilgrimage tropes, as well as Arnold van Gennep's (1960) concept of the rites of passage in ritual to relate to the flow and pattern of pilgrimage and, analogously, to the video game *Journey* (2012). Through the vehicle of pilgrimage, *virtual* characters can embark on a journey in which they explore various places, and appear to grow and change in the process. It is the ideal metaphor by means of which to create a wide variety of natural surroundings, move about in the *virtual* environment of the video game, and demonstrate character and avatar growth and development.

These pilgrimages undertaken in the video game, however, also influence the player who is on the same journey as the avatar while playing. Howard (1980: 7) argues that in traditional theatre,

which retells and explores pilgrimage, the viewer is the "privileged spectator" of the pilgrimage. Alternatively, in going on digital pilgrimages, the bereaved player becomes a privileged spectator since he or she not only spectates but also participates in the digital pilgrimage through their avatar. Keeping in mind that the act of going on a guided pilgrimage in a video game has an effect on the player's everyday experiences, my question pertains to whether the experience of playing through a guided pilgrimage may offer an opportunity for individuals to – in a *virtual* manner – have agency in conducting a guided pilgrimage in a video game which they could connect to their own grief. The guided pilgrimage inherent to the medium of video games is an alternative and novel vehicle used to navigate death in a secularised world that may be further explored in art.

In order to answer these questions, the 2018 instalment of Santa Monica Studio's *God of War* and Thatgamecompany's 2012 adventure art video game *Journey* are analysed. While engaging with both games, the player would play the game on a daily or weekly basis: the player chooses to enter a *virtual* pilgrimage by continuing in the narrative of the game in *God of War* or replaying the journey in *Journey.* In this investigation, I also ask whether the habitual engagement and experience of playing the video games could be compared with the creative yet disciplined routine practice of engaging in art making itself, by the artist in her studio space – another space of play. By playing through the avatar's journey, players habitually sit in front of a screen and engage in the experiences of *virtual* characters or in repeated play set out as a grieving practice. The question is whether, by comparison, the artist in her studio may have her own set rules or her own applied mindful approach when creating specific repetitive works in a habitual practice of art making.

In the second section, *Playing Death,* the way in which death and dying occur in specific video games, as well as the effect thereof on the player are investigated. I ask whether the bereaved can express their grief in the *virtual* environment of the video game. In video games, the death of the avatar is displayed, approached and processed in diverse ways. Video games differ in their various approaches to avatar death. In some cases, such as *Mass Effect 1-3*, the word 'death' or 'died' is not mentioned when the avatar does indeed die. By comparison, in Bandai Namco' Souls Series, *Dark Souls*, the screen reads "You Died" when the avatar dies. Alternatively, in *World of Warcraft*, death and even the afterlife are implied despite the fact that the avatar does not die permanently, but is resurrected. To explore the different types of death, I compare the various ways in which avatar death is presented visually in these specific examples of video games. By using this comparison, I explore the ways in which avatar death as a ritual in video games may be related to rituals of grief. Video games, themselves, may have other purposes and ambitions in staging death and re-death. However, it is important to note that this practice would occur in the absence of the actual death of the avatar and may include the strategic naming of death when the avatar dies and when resurrection (respawning) takes place. Whereas the avatar almost never

dies permanently while the player is playing the game,[5] other characters may die within the video game world. The video game mechanic of avatar death and resurrection may be an integral part of the video game that reminds the bereaved player of death and loss in real life. However, it is not the only way in which the player may explore, express and practice his/her grief and loss. I argue that the *virtual*, imaginary environments of video games can constitute spaces in which to practice grief by playing video games in specific contexts and attitudes to become a personally devised or custom-made mourning practice.

The player's response to the 'character death' and 'permanent death' of a *virtual* character is explored in the third section: *Responding to Virtual Character Death.* This response is then compared to the informal, generated practice of the player while in mourning and expressing grief in the video game. Fictional characters become loved and cared about when we spend time learning about them and, in the case of video games, when we interact with them. Playing, as a mourning practice, may seem odd because it is usually associated with fun and escapism. However, media theorist Dominic Lopes (2010: 104) similarly states in his book *A Philosophy of Computer Art*: "Art can be stodgy and elitist, but it's not always; and video games can be silly diversions, but they don't have to be". Play is an activity which is not always fun or even funny; it can be an extremely serious and tedious endeavour (Huizinga, 1949: 9). The Dutch historian and play theorist Johan Huizinga (1949: 8) speaks of a make-believe quality that "betrays a consciousness of the inferiority of play compared with 'seriousness', a feeling that seems to be something as primary as play itself". The fact that play is "only a pretend" does not, in any way, block it from continuing in the most serious manner (Huizinga, 1949: 8). For Plato (Laws 644 de, 803 BC), play ensues specifically when joy and sorrow have been united. Playing is characterised by absorption, a devotion that translates into rapture, a temporary moment, at least, that completely obliterates the temporary feeling, according to Huizinga (1949: 8).

While neither Huizinga nor Plato speaks about video games, specifically, the same characteristics of play are inherent to video games. It may be argued that in replaying specific video games with new rules set up explicitly for the purpose of remembrance, a new creative play practice is born. As Huizinga (1949: 8) mentions, play becomes tradition, which refers to an activity that is repeated. I wish to propose that it is a practice or undertaking, which is done, redone and repeated. Commemorating the deceased by playing video games results in reliving the process of mourning. There is a double focus on memory, namely the memory of the deceased and the memory of ongoing mourning as experienced within the body of the bereaved in the process of reacting to these circumstances of playing.

5 The death of the main character at the end of Rockstar Games' Western action-adventure game *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) is an example of an exception to this norm.

By entering play and exploring imaginary, *virtual* spaces with specific circumstances and aims, as a means of remembrance, players may choose to "insert" the deceased's likeness and representation into their own present experience of play by means of character creation or role-playing as the deceased as an avatar. Players may create their avatars to resemble the deceased, as in the case of Bioware's role-playing video game series *Mass Effect* (2007-2012) and Linden Lab's online virtual world *Second Life* (2003). The deceased is then purposefully and deliberately traced in specific and current video game experiences in order to continue to 'play' in the present. By choosing to "insert" a trace or likeness of the deceased into a *virtual* place as an avatar (or, for that matter, in the form of a grassroots memorial), new and imaginary scenarios are constructed through interaction while playing. In turn, the experience of these interactions is analysed through digital manipulation and the personal generation of memorialisation through digital art in my own art practice.

Apart from the in-game memorialisation of the deceased, I also investigate the intrinsically wounding effect of character death, or 'permadeath' as made famous by Matt Burns (2013). Poignant character deaths have a lasting impact on the player. Players who spend time with *virtual*, non-playable characters in the video game world get to know them as well-rounded fictional characters and must experience their death as well. One of the differences between video games and films or books pertains to the responsibility and agency experienced by the player when it comes to changes in the video game world and its characters. I discuss how the realisation that the player's actions and reactions as the avatar may have permanent effects on the *virtual* lives of the non-playable characters (NPCs) adds another dimension and immersive quality to the experience of playing video games. To explore this, I compare the death of a *virtual* character, Mordin Solus, in *Mass Effect 3* to the death of the main character, Joel, in the autobiographical video game *That Dragon, Cancer* by Numinous Games. The difference between these deaths is that the death of one character, Mordin Solus, is completely fictional while the death of the other, Joel, is based on the *real-world* death of a child by the same name. Even though both deaths – of *virtual*, fictional characters, such as Mordin Solus and Joel – are within the video game world, the knowledge that Joel was a boy in the *real* world who succumbed to cancer at the age of five has a devastating impact on the player. The player knows the outcome of the story yet chooses to play through the heart-wrenching experience of Joel's parents, Ryan and Amy Green, who designed and wrote the game, respectively. Apart from the effect that Joel's *real-world* life and death has on the player, the video game itself is an example of how grieving individuals, Joel's parents, use the medium of the video game to share, express and explore their grief and loss in contemporary society. There is therapeutic value in Joel's parents' attempt to navigate and share their experience of grief and loss through an interactive medium. However, in the game, the player is an outsider playing the roles of various family members in their traumatic experience of loss. By comparison, when a viewer engages with the artworks created as a result of the traumatic experience of loss, including the response of playing games in bereavement, the viewer is invited

to engage with the expressions and exploration of the bereaved player. The viewer then interacts with imaginary environments which are more accessible as imaginary sites of loss.

Finally, in the fourth section, *Between Living and Dying,* the response of attempting to insert the deceased or expressing grief in *virtual* video game environments is investigated. In doing so, the bereaved player constructs a likeness, representation or remembrance of the deceased in a *virtual* world where time flows differently and, in some cases, private expressions are made public while others remain intimate and hidden. *Virtual* characters or avatars may be traced to, or be representative of, a deceased person by either the individual players or the developers who create the video games. Having been generated as a *virtual* character or avatar by the bereaved or video game developers, traces of the deceased continue to *live* a coded life, existing permanently within the imaginary video game world. I am interested in whether this online existence constitutes presence of the deceased, how *virtual* representation and memorialisation differ from physical mementos and burial sites, whether the *virtual* sites and representations of the bereaved provide contemporary practices to express grief and loss, and how this relates to art making.

Official and unofficial commemorations are considered. An example of official commemorations is the insertion of Robin Williams as a *virtual* NPC in Blizzard entertainment's *World of Warcraft* (2004-) after his death in 2014. Another example is the grassroots in-game memorial of professional *Overwatch* player and coach, Jason Hawelka in Blizzard entertainment's team-based multiplayer first-person shooter video game *Overwatch* (2016). Unofficial commemorations, such as the personal response to loss by creating avatars that resemble the deceased in Bioware's *Mass Effect* (2007-2012) series, as well as the public cemeteries and memorials generated in the online *virtual* world of *Second Life* (2003) by Linden Lab offer examples of how individual grief is explored *virtually* in contemporary society. Subsequently, the experiences of the above-mentioned examples of commemoration in *virtual*, active environments are analysed in my own art. In my digital drawing series *Stages,* for instance, the lived and active experience of playing and exploring *virtual* environments of play in mourning is once again made static. In the digital drawings, the movement of video and video games is merely suggested, and the experience of the *virtual* intangibility of the deceased emphasised. In this sense, my questions and explorations return to the body of the bereaved/player, where experiences of grief and loss are connected through memory when memorialisation occurs.

1.1 Digital Pilgrimage

The journey undertaken in the act of pilgrimage is a practice dating back centuries across various cultures and, specifically, numerous religions. The pilgrimage is a favoured image of travel (Howard, 1980: 3). Donald Howard speaks about the pilgrimage in writings and stories of adventure such

as the writings of the English cleric, Samuel Purchas. However, the idea of pilgrimage remains popular and serves as inspiration to similar contemporary accounts and stories. Howard (1980: 4) continues that the vast collection of writings, such as those of Purchas, "has something to reveal about the rise of fiction, of satire, of the novel […]". Whereas Howard speaks of the writings of pilgrims and the influence of adventurers on more contemporary writing, I suggest continuing this thread to the engaging storytelling of video games.

In the overall motif of the pilgrim, he/she would undertake such a journey for spiritual, religious or personal significance. Whatever the reasoning, the pilgrimage undertaken may lead to some transformation. The transformation is caused, not necessarily because of a specific religion, but due to the experience of the journey itself. Howard (1980: 6) comments on the sentimental force that the idea of pilgrimage and the pilgrim continued to have in European thought and literature. In contemporary video games, this same practice and experience provide the perfect formula by which a narrative structure and video game mechanics may be applied. Thus, the prevalence of video games using the same structure or motif as the pilgrimage is widely found, especially in adventure games and those involving role-play, such as Thatgamecompany's *Journey,* Santa Monica Studio's 2018 instalment of *God of War* or even sci-fi games such as Bioware's *Mass Effect* series. Other games such as Linden Lab's *Second Life* use the *virtual* platform of the video game environment to recreate existing pilgrimage sites of various religions. When discussing these sites and the potential of video games to facilitate and recreate pilgrimage, Kaburuan et al. (2011) remark that "[m]ost of the sites are designed for avatars to do meditation and pilgrimage. An avatar could go through each detail of the site and perform virtual pilgrimage as it is in the real world". The potential and discourse of these sites are multifarious; however, I wish to focus on the way in which games that do not recreate pilgrimage sites may also facilitate and recreate a pilgrimage experience in playing the narrative of the game.

While engaging repeatedly with specific video games, *Journey* and *God of War,* the player, along with, or rather as, the avatar, is the pilgrim embarking on a journey. In video games, the formula and motif of the pilgrimage are echoed, but very rarely the same rationale is copied. If this is the case, the question is whether the *virtual* journey on which the player embarks, along with the avatar, also has a transformative effect. This question is asked specifically regarding the player playing the video game in grief or remembrance of the deceased. Usually, the journey is forced upon the avatar, or the avatar would not embark on the journey with a pilgrimage in mind. According to my experience of playing multiple video games, the outcome of the journey for the avatar usually has the same effect as the pilgrimage. This is especially the case with the two video games discussed and compared in this dissertation, namely *Journey* and *God of War.*

The experience of this *virtual* journey, environments and imagery on the screen is then pin-pointed and investigated in the digital drawing *Stages.* In *Stages*, the player/viewer is guided,

or forced, through four visual stages. Digitally-drawn scenes and stages are compared with key or desired moments which the bereaved may experience in their journey in grief. The viewer is constantly aware of the player whose hands can be seen at the bottom of each scene, but the player is unable to change the stages being played out. The stages are frozen, made static, to amplify the intangibility and immovability of the deceased's absence.

Returning to the video game pilgrimage within the *virtual* video game world, the avatar serves the function of carrier of both character and player. Howard (1980: 6-7) remarks that the pilgrimage is a metaphor for human life, and speaks about the religious pilgrimage to the holy Jerusalem. However, this same notion can be applied to the experience of the player while undergoing the journey of the video game avatar. The avatar is the vehicle through which the player is able to move around, interact, and engage with the narrative, *virtual* world of the game itself, game mechanics and secondary imaginary world represented by the combination of game world and player agency. Santa Monica Studios' 2018 release of *God of War* follows the pilgrimage of Kratos, a Greek demi-god; and his son, Atreus, a half-Greek, half-Norse Frost Giant; in their goal to scatter their wife's/mother's ashes on the highest mountain in all the nine realms of Norse mythology. The core premise of the entire game is the goal of scattering Faye's ashes. Throughout the game, the different ways in which father and son grieve are reflected and elaborated upon. The bereaved player is constantly made aware of grief and loss, not only in the two characters' performance, but through the visual reminders of grief. Faye's dangling ashes (Figure 1.2 on the far left on the hip of the character on the left) on Kratos' belt may remind the player of grief and, in playing, be reminded of his/her own grief and loss, which the player, in turn, carries with him/her while playing. In this regard, the player not only relates to the *virtual* characters' grief, but also 'carries' his/her own grief along with that of the characters while playing through the video game's guided journey.

The 2018 instalment of *God of War* continues the narrative of the previous *God of War* series, first released in 2005 on the Sony PlayStation 2.[6] In the previous instalments of the game, grief also plays a role. However, it is in the background and not as directed as in the newest instalment. Initially, Kratos' quest for vengeance is brought about, amongst many other causes, by the death of his first wife and daughter. What makes this complicated is that Kratos, himself, was the one to kill them, and some of both their ashes have been affixed to his skin, giving him a ghostly white and textured appearance (Figure 1.1).[7] The 2018 instalment of the video game follows Kratos

6 The *God of War* series follows Kratos as the main playable character (seen in Figure 1.1 and 1.2), first in his initial quest to be the strongest Spartan, then as the Greek god of war himself and, finally, as he attempts to take revenge on the Greek gods, including his father, Zeus, after he opened Pandora's box and fear ravaged the lands, resulting in the gods losing all sanity.

7 This was not done on purpose as the Greek god of war, Aries, placed his wife and child in a village to be attacked by Kratos and his Spartan army. Kratos, in a fit of bloodlust, enters the town and slaughters all, including two individuals in a temple. It is only after the fact that Kratos recognises his wife and daughter whom he thought were home in another village. After this moment, Kratos is cursed by the residing oracle to have the ashes of his wife and daughter permanently affixed to his skin, and thus the '*Ghost of Sparta'* is born.

to Midgard, thus entering Norse mythology. Kratos has left his past behind, met Faye whom he presumed was a Nordic human, settled and had a child named Atreus. The video game starts with the player, in role as the character, Kratos, who is collecting trees to make a funeral pyre for his deceased wife on which to be burnt. After the brief informal ceremony of burning her body, the player returns to the pyre, collects Faye's ashes in a small pouch made of fabric (Figure 1.1), and places this on Kratos' left side towards the back of his belt (Figure 1.2). Throughout the entire game, Faye's ashes are in the player's view on Kratos' belt, dangling, shaking and moving along with father and son in the journey to a different, final resting place. The bag of ashes becomes a character in its own right – the representation of the deceased whose presence is experienced both in her absence from the screen and the presence of her ashes. Faye and her presence play a central role in the narrative of the video game; the entire video game narrative follows father and son fulfilling Faye's last wishes, namely to scatter her ashes. This is an act to which many grieving individuals may relate.

Even though, in the *real* world, we would not have to fight monsters and slay gods in order to fulfil that wish, *God of War* translates the traumatic experience of having to come to terms with sudden loss and the trauma associated with death into a rule-based, game-driven experience. Howard (1980: 7) comments on the potential for pilgrimage in theatre, saying that "this image allowed the author to be not a returned traveller and omniscient narrator but a privileged spectator, exploring personages in relation to one another and to the world […]". I would argue that the player's experience of the video game world, playing as the avatar and interacting with the characters who inhabit that world is a contemporary form of interactive theatre. Thus, the player's experience as 'privileged spectator' in this narrative world is much more immersive and is experienced as a journey undertaken by both the player and the avatar. The challenges faced while playing the pilgrimage-like narrative of *God of War* are not only of the mind or soul, but instead related to video game mechanics and narrative. To me, this is an interesting translation of the complicated experience of loss and trauma when experienced as a player coming to terms with a similar loss. Kratos' skin is still pale and literally covered in the ashes of his previous wife and daughter. In this regard, Kratos carries with him all the ashes of the ones he has loved and lost to death. They are all visually present on the screen throughout the entire game, making the player aware of the burden of loss.

In *God of War*, specifically, the viewpoint of the player is that of a moving camera which never cuts or interrupts a scene of gameplay. In the game, the point of view and the view of the entire game can be experienced as one long cinematic shot. The only instances in which the camera's view, or that of the player, are interrupted are by avatar death or when the player stops playing the game. The camera moves seamlessly from in-game view, where the player is in control of the camera angle and view, to 'cut scene', where the player loses control over the camera and follows the flow of events. In an article for Medium.com, Rosenfield (2018) is of the opinion that the one-

shot camera technique applied in *God of War* is unsuccessful in terms of re-enforcing immersion and empathy. She further states that "[t]here's a reason why tools like editing exist, and it's to [shepherd] the audience's perspective towards the intention of a work". According to Rosenfield (2018), there are instances in which a close-up shot or reverse shot of the characters would have aided in evoking the player's empathy and gaining of insight into the complicated relationship and experiences of both characters. I disagree with Rosenfield's statements, specifically regarding this video game. It is true that some detailed responses or reactions of the characters in the video game are not visible to the player, specifically because of the camera's point of view and inability to quickly move in closer without cutting the scene. To me, however, this creates an opportunity for the player to imprint his/her own experiences of loss and confusion without it being visually decided for him/her. The sometimes distant point of view with regard to the characters also reinforces the sense of isolation and disconnect experienced by both characters in the wake of their respective loss, the experience of individuals not being able to fully understand another's experience of loss and grief. The traumatic experience of death and loss is universal, yet the personal and intimate response to it is experienced solely by the bereaved, themselves. Even if they have lost the same person, the grief is unique.

In playing *God of War*, the bereaved player is continuously aware of not only death but also of mourning and the accompanying isolation and melancholy with which it is associated. This is a specific type of presence of death in the video game, and is therefore unique. The game has been designed in such a manner that it is void of major cities and people in an effort to reiterate the emotional desolation and melancholy experienced as a result of loss. This experience by the player is a strategy applied in my art as well. The whole body of work created towards this study involves drawings, both digital and hand-drawn, which have vast empty spaces surrounding them. Hands, rather than figures or cities, are drawn obsessively. The single figure drawn and copied in one of the *Stages* (Figure 1.5) is not recognisable and is dressed in motorcycling gear. The recognisable spaces which have been generated imaginatively, such as the landscapes in *Sacrosanctity* (Figure 1.7) and *Interlaced Environments* (Figure 1.8) are desolate and empty. There is isolation in the works created, which reiterates the isolation felt when in mourning, the isolation experienced in the void of the deceased's physical absence. The bereaved player is reminded of his/her own grief and loss which enables him/her to interact with the struggles posed by the video game, in the narrative, as well as in the video game mechanics, through a different lens – of loss and remembrance of the deceased.

The isolation experienced in *God of War* is also continued in Thatgamecompany's adventure art game *Journey* (2012). The short two-hour narrative takes place in a wide-open desert-like space. *Journey* is a sandbox, or open-world, video game which is a particular style of game in which the player is introduced to an open space wherein he/she can roam freely and interact as he/she sees fit without being physically restricted or barred. While *God of War* also has an open world,

it has more restrictions than in *Journey.* In *Journey*, the player's avatar is an androgynous figure dressed in a cape and hood. In comparison with most traditional video games, this game is quite short in that it is only approximately two hours long. *Journey* does not rely on verbal dialogue or written text to experience the overall narrative.[8] The game's plot metaphor is a journey which each player may experience differently. Though there is a pictorial or visual storytelling, it can be interpreted by each player in his/her own way. At its core, the game follows the journey of life, from birth to death. However, the game is cyclical rather than linear in nature as each ending journey is the beginning of the next. This is where the cyclical element of the game is very important. As the avatar's journey ends at the end of the game, the game can be started anew with the next avatar ready to start as the previous one exits the screen. Both avatars look the same which, to the player, can be read as either the same avatar starting the journey again or another starting anew.

Journey has been designed more simplistically in comparison with *God of War*. The anonymous figure in *Journey* remains exactly that, and there is no elaboration on the avatar's personal history, the reason for his/her journey or even his/her name. However, this, in turn, opens the avatar up to interpretation and impression rather than recognition or simile. The experience that *Journey* generates within the player is different from that in *God of War.* In *Journey*, the avatar is a small, almost fragile figure rather than a supernaturally strong demi-god, and gives no explicit reason for embarking on his/her journey. The player may, then, in playing the video game *Journey* with the specific purpose of remembrance, embark on a short pilgrimage of the cycle of life, death and the ambiguity of what lies beyond. In a very different manner than in *God of War*, *Journey* also presents the player with a platform to express and enact his/her experience of grief and loss onto the experience of playing the video game. Tom van Nuenen (2016: 468) investigates this specific video game's potential to enact the experience of pilgrimage when saying that the game "can be viewed through the unconventional prism of tourism studies, as potential space for virtual pilgrimage".

In the opening scene of *Journey*, the avatar moves up a dune to look up at an enormous mountain (Figure 1.9), which is subsequently roughly understood as the final destination. This is not commanded or said to the player; one merely assumes that the mountain is to be scaled no matter the cost in order to gain something. By comparison, in *God of War*, the destination is also a mountain to be scaled, but the mountain itself is obscured and cannot be seen until the very end of the game.[9] Van Nuenen (2016: 469) as well as Turner and Turner (1978: 2), tie the act of pilgrimage to Van Gennep's (1960) structure of cultural rites of passage which follows a pattern of "separation, initiation, and return" (Van Nuenen, 2016: 469). Van Nuenen (2016: 469), as well as the game's creators apply this pattern to the video game *Journey*, specifically.

8 The game makes use of fictional hieroglyphics to convey messages.

9 Kratos and Atreus believe the mountain to scatter Faye's ashes to be the one they can see in Midgard, but the mountain to which she refers is actually one in another realm, in Jotunheim, the realm of the Giants.

The opening scene of *Journey* can be compared to Casper David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1817) (Figure 1.10). Friedrich's painting, which derives from the sublime genre of painting, is comparable to the small figure seen in the opening scene of *Journey* (Figure 1.9). The avatar in *Journey*, much like the wanderer, stands upon a height to survey the vast, monumental journey that lies ahead of it. The difference is that, in Friedrich's painting, the surveyor is atop and governing his environment. However, the scene and scenery surrounding the avatar in *Journey* create a more ominous image, hinting at the challenges the avatar is to face. According to Van Nuenen (2016: 472), "[t]hroughout the entire game, the strictly prescribed sequence that pertains to pilgrimage is reinforced by *Journey's* level design and camera mechanics, where the mountain is nearly always visible in the distance". When viewing the figure in Friedrich's painting, it seems as though a destination is reached and a trophy claimed after having gained dominance over the obscured landscape. In the video game, the player must ensure that the same comes to pass for the avatar – the scene seen is just the beginning. As *Journey* progresses, the avatar begins to feel smaller and weaker in its journey to the ever-present mountain. Wind blows against it; snow covers it and sand overpowers it. The avatar's brutal surroundings become larger and larger until it feels as though it will swallow the avatar whole (Figure 1.11). Isbister writes, specifically, about *Journey* in her book: *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*. She investigates the capacity of video games to influence and transform our lives by playing them. With specific reference to *Journey*, she (2016: 120) comments on the avatar's smallness by saying that the "diminutive avatar appears silhouetted against magnificent and sparse landscapes, all of which helps make the player feel tiny and insubstantial". It seems that there is a shift in the main character halfway through the game because nature/fate replaces the avatar as the one in control.

During this time of turmoil in the game, the player starts to experience the overwhelming power of the uncontainable. This phase of the game could be interpreted as the middle phase of Van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage, a phase in which the pilgrim is in a liminal space of change and transformation.[10] Like *God of War*, the game evokes the familiar experiences of loss and anxiety, and are felt overwhelmingly in the players' surroundings in both games. The difference is that in *God of War*, the avatar has the aim of scattering ashes, and of trying to come to terms and live with his grief. In *Journey*, the avatar itself is the element that is scattered and fades from view. The player does not carry an implied sense of loss in *Journey*; instead, he/she may be surprised by the loss of the avatar at the end of the initial journey.

In the digital drawing series *Stages* (Figures 1.3–1.6), the viewer is presented with four scenes or stages. Like *Journey*, the scenes could be considered a repeated line. Even if there are four stages in a line, they are read and re-read without necessarily having an end or conclusion. The

10 Van Nuenen (2016: 476) recognises a different middle liminal phase in *Journey* than I do. He considers the phase where the avatar starts to 'fly' towards the mountain as the liminal phase; however, I consider this phase to be the start of the final 'return' phase of the pilgrim who has achieved some sort of enlightenment and found answers as a result of the journey.

digital drawings are created to look like a hybrid of silkscreen motifs, copied digital photographs and elements reminiscent of video games themselves. This would include the use of the first-person perspective, the use of typical video game user interfaces such as health points bars (visible in the work *Sacrosanctity* (Figure 1.7)), as well as the use of colour and flatter tones. However, the drawings do not have a similar aesthetic generally associated with video games, and do not initially remind the viewer of video games either. It is only by investigating the line drawings, recognition of video game tools like the PlayStation controller and copied elements from video games that the connection can be made. The digital drawings have simplified elements and solid structure along with painterly marks and drawn areas. In the first stage, for example (Figure 1.3), a grave is drawn very intricately. However, in the second stage (Figure 1.4), the scene is very simplistic, with a small user interface and copy of an avatar on the left and bottom left of the drawing. The drawings were not made to resemble the game at all. Rather, they were made to explore the experience of the player while playing the game in remembrance or in grief, hence the presence of the player's hands, in most cases, holding a PlayStation controller. The hands are integrated into each scene, but stay close to the bottom of the drawing, in the same position and seen from the same point of view as the player him-/herself would see his/her own hands while looking at the screen in front of him/her. This layering is suggested by the placement of the hands and the scenes above them. The viewer becomes the player, both of whom respond to visual explorations of grief and loss by interacting with these scenes exploring loss digitally.

The general assumption is that a player escapes his/her reality by engaging in hours of video games. Absorption takes place when the player becomes so invested in play that *real* world time, problems and situations melt away. Justina Gröber (2014: 17) states that "[a]lthough fictional by content, as mental spaces, adventure games engage through the metaphysical immensity of their settings that escape a player's actual reality". However, in playing specific video games and visiting imaginary, *virtual* sites of video games to mourn, the *real-world* reality of the player/bereaved is brought with him/her into the game world. Thus, the game starts to be more difficult to play for an entirely different reason than before. The act of playing the game is no longer an escape from the current reality and circumstances; it becomes a space and *virtual* site where grief is deliberately acknowledged, and loss explored. In his book entitled *Death, Ritual and Belief*, Douglas Davies (2002: 237) asserts that art dealing with death, loss and the experiences thereof is a unique medium used to express such personal experiences:

> […] and much more could be said about the creative arts as means of dealing with death. For people whose self-identity is associated with the imagination and its flourishing through literature or artefact, it is to be expected that novel vehicles will be drawn upon to deal with death in a non-religious world.

The guided pilgrimage of video games has become an alternative and novel vehicle for dealing with death in a secularised world – not only through guided pilgrimage or *virtual* spaces of commemoration, but also in the resolute act of playing as a mourning practice. The resulting effect of playing as a mourning practice is more prevalent in the gaming community than expected. Anna Haverinen (2014: 157) mentions that, for gamers, the likely response would be to commemorate within the video game world, "which is why creating events and building virtual memorials inside the gaming world feels a natural choice for [players] to express their feelings". The act of online, *virtual* and video game memorials has become more commonplace within the gaming community. However, I would add to this the act of playing itself as a practice of remembrance, therefore not only representing a memorial of the deceased within the video game world, but also purposefully recreating a likeness of the deceased as an avatar, or playing specific video games as a means of remembrance. This could be conducted without having a specific place within the game world which is reminiscent of the deceased. Rather, the act of playing a specific game in specific circumstances itself becomes the mourning practice – similar to visiting the grave of the deceased or uttering an annual prayer.

This same practice is believed to be recognised in the habitual practice of art making in the studio or on design and, specifically, in digital drawing programs such as Adobe Photoshop. In my own art practice, the studio is considered the space of play. The magic circle, as Johan Huizinga (1949: 10) terms it, is the imaginative world of play, the physical place of playing, and holds the qualities of seriousness, absorption and devotion inherent to it. The artist has the freedom to engage with and follow her own rules to guide creative play in the studio space, as in the drawing programs used such as Adobe Photoshop, and when playing a video game in an innovative way by inserting personal content. Art is then observed, repeated, constructed and conducted like play. Self-imposed rules apply in the playing field of the artist, in the studio space, and regarding the materials used and disciplines adhered to. Materials can be manipulated in specific ways when rules (*ludus*) are applied to making observational or digital drawings, and silk screening and embossing. Furthermore, in the vast collection of circular drawings in the *Circles* series (Figure 1.12), this kind of disciplined routine practice of daily or weekly creative engagement in play is manifested in each circular shape which suggests a specific ludic sphere. The rules applied here were that the work must resemble a circle, be 28 x 28 cm in format, and have uninterrupted lines made by means of a 0.1 pigment ink pen. The wall of circles (Figure 1.13) is but a sample of 125 in total, of how a repeated, everyday practice could accumulate to overwhelm the viewer by sheer numbers. Moreover, the work reflects the value and development of repetitive practices in games, which have a structuring and therapeutic function.

By engaging repetitively with video game narratives that embody the experiences or consequences of death, grief or loss, bereaved players may find a space and meaningful activity by means of which to actively engage with and relate their own experiences of loss. Similarly, by engaging in

repetitive art making, specifically within the mind set of continually creating a work as an expression of facing personal experiences of grief and loss, the artist in her studio is able to face and process her experiences of loss in a semi-rule-based expression of creative play. Artworks dealing with the experience of grief, loss and absence may find purchase and share the communal experience of death through empathy and relation by the viewer.

1.2 Playing Death

While mourning does exist within the narrative aspect of video games, 'character death' and 'avatar death', in the form of respawning or 'permadeath', are considered video game mechanics. As it is, video games are already widely associated with death and dying, though not necessarily with mourning.[11] Death is approached in diverse ways in different video games. Video games have very particular methods of display when the avatar loses all his/her hit-/health-points. It is interesting to note that the words "Die", "Died", "Death" or "Killed" are rarely, if ever, used when the avatar does indeed die. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule and, while these exceptions are very few, death itself plays an integral part in either the video game mechanics or the narrative of the game. Therefore, it is worth considering the different ways in which death and dying are present in video games. In these presentations of death and dying in video games, mourning and lamentation are quite absent. Thus, the question is whether the video game world can still be used for the player's own mourning and lamentation if deaths in the *virtual* environment of the video game world do not carry the same weight as in everyday life.

To address these issues, I compare the way in which avatar death is displayed in a small number of games. These games include *Grand Theft Auto* (1997-), *Demon's Souls* (2009), *Mass Effect 1-3* (2007-2012), *Journey* (2012) and *World of Warcraft* (2004-). In these video games, avatar death is displayed in a variety of ways. In some cases, for example *World of Warcraft,* the avatar does, in fact, 'die' after which his/her spirit is released to find its way back to a body. By comparison, in *Mass Effect 1-3*, the video game display does not explicitly comment on the avatar's death, and the player restarts from a previous checkpoint or save with the so-called death erased and time reversed. In the comparisons made, it is evident that lamentation and mourning of the avatar are strangely absent from these events, and that his/her death merely seems to serve as a practical solution to reset the game. In video games, death has an entirely different meaning to that in everyday life. The constant death and return of the avatar may remind the bereaved player of death and loss, but the game does something which real life cannot – it promises the return of the dead.[12]

11 Mourning does exist within the scope of the video game narrative; however, it is not nearly as prevalent as the occurrences of death – both as video game mechanic and narrative subject matter.

12 With this statement, I am excluding the effect that the permanent death of a *virtual* character or avatar may have on the player; this will be discussed in the following section: *Responding to Virtual Character Death.*

When an avatar dies in a video game, the *virtual* 'death' is rarely displayed, played out or presented in the same style. Death is used as a video game mechanic; a convenient way of resetting play after the player has failed or made a mistake. Avatars in fighting games are KOed (knocked out) if they lose all their health- or hit-points. For example, in Rockstar Games' action adventure sandbox video game *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* (1997 -), when the avatars are shot, fall or are involved in fatal crashes, thus losing all their health-points, they fall to the ground, lifeless. As this happens, the screen fades to a fuzzy black and white while the word "Wasted" is displayed on the screen (Figure 1.14). While it is indeed true that in video games, death can be made a plaything, the game promises to revive the avatar.

In FromSoftware's action role-playing game *Demon's Souls* (2009), the screen sometimes reads "You Died" when the player fails. In this regard, the avatar death has significant meaning in terms of the video game mechanics themselves and the narrative of the game. Thus, as in the previous examples, the death of the avatar is accepted and acknowledged. Similar to *GTA*, in *Mass Effect*, the viewer is presented with a fuzzy display of a slow-motion view of his/her avatar falling to the floor while the screen reads "Critical Mission Failure". In most games, when the player fails, he/she is respawned either at an earlier checkpoint, a save or at the start of an objective. In this sense, the death experienced in the game is not an experience which may be likened to death and loss in the *real* world. In video games, death is used as a tool to continue gameplay after the player has failed and his/her avatar has no more health left. Players may even succeed in never dying in a single play-through or dying on purpose. Dying on purpose has many uses: the player may choose to die on purpose in order to try again in better circumstances or may have made a mistake while playing and wishes to 'reset' play and have the mistake erased by 'dying'. Whatever the reason may be, the *real-world* consequences of death do not follow one to the video game world. Bernardi ([n.d.]) states that "[v]ideo games allow players to become experts at dominating and avoiding death, but they also allow players to die in a consequence-free environment. If a player wants, she doesn't have to run from death; she can greet it head-on, on her own terms, as often and in as many scenarios as she likes". The video game offers resurrection, an endless loop wherein the player/bereaved can continue to play in remembrance of or 'with' the deceased without being burdened by the finality of death. Play promises to continue, spaces can be revisited, characters can be seen again, and scenarios can be retried. Although video games do use death as a tool, the player may also rely on that tool and use it as an opportunity not to be overwhelmed by it.

While the player does experience loss during these events, he/she does not experience the loss of grief; the loss experienced is a capital loss.[13] While some video games punish the player for

13 The player loses items looted, ammunition collected, and experience points earned during that time, depending on the video game and its rules.

failing or, essentially, dying, others merely give him/her the opportunity to try again. Joe Bernardi ([n.d.]) states that death is present in almost all games, old and new; however, dying is strangely absent. From the perspective of the player, the character is alive, then a "switch is flipped" and the character is dead (Bernardi [n.d.]). The avatar does not writhe in pain or succumb to a specific wound on the body; the avatar merely drops to the floor or ground. This is in stark contrast to death in the *real* world and the responses of the bereaved to death and loss.

By contrast, in visual art, death, loss and lamentation are often expressed and explored visually in the most serious and sombre manner. Historically, one may return to portraiture, especially those of the deceased which have been painted after their death from the casts of death masks and moulds. Other prominent examples of the impermanence of life are the vanitas topos in the genre of still-life painting of the late Northern Renaissance. Christian Boltanski's oeuvre is a testament to his interest, not only in memory, but also in the devastating affect that art dealing with loss and trauma may have on the viewer. In his work *The Store House* of 1988 (Figure 1.15), the viewer is presented with enlarged and blurry monochrome photographic portraits onto which a light is shone. Beneath each photograph is an assembled plinth of unlabelled tin boxes. Within each box is a selected piece of fabric which, to the viewer, is omitted from sight. The work evokes the essence of a shrine or memorial. In its imagery, the shrine-like tin boxes attract a sense of preserved mementos with the singled out and blurred portraits accompanying them. The work recalls the experience of lamentation from the viewer. A sense of loss is experienced for a collection of strangers whose presumed objects of grief are stowed beneath their portraits. In comparison with the digital drawings in my work *Stages* (Figures 1.3–1.6), the viewer is not presented with similar melancholic scenes. The first scene (Figure 1.3) may evoke a sense of loss, certainly, with the carefully drawn grave and extremely large, empty hands seemingly superimposed over it. However, the following three scenes (Figures 1.4–1.6) seem to have an added element of simplicity, colour, and playfulness. The motif of the controller reminds the viewer of the players and their aim of imposing control over the scene. However, these scenes are far from playful and do not depict pictorial scenes of play. Moreover, not all of these scenes evoke the same melancholy of loss. This may be a result of enriching the experience of loss and grief in other activities such as play. The work refers to the way in which, through a serious, interactive, and fun activity, the bereaved player can reintroduce the memory of the deceased into the lived experiences of play in *virtual* video game environments.

Most consumer-orientated games, however, have one thing in common: respawning the same character in order to enable the player to continue playing the game and, in so doing, attempt to win the game or beat the opponent, once again prolonging life rather than confronting death. By contrast, in Blizzard's massive multiplayer online video game *World of Warcraft* (2004 -),[14] the

14 Players have the choice of aligning themselves with the evil Horde or the honorable Alliance. Inside these allegiances, the player may choose to create an avatar of specific gender and race. Factions consist of a composition of their own unique races and lore. The chosen avatar will then represent the player in the world of Azeroth. *World*

avatar can, in fact, die. Once an avatar dies, either at the hands of another player or at the hands, or claws, of a beast, the player must release his/her avatar's spirit in order to come back to life. In contrast with *World of Warcraft* and *Mass Effect,* in *Journey* (2012), the avatar does not die. There are moments when the avatar is in grave danger and exhaustion is implied, but never death. After dying in *World of Warcraft*, the avatar then respawns as a spirit in the nearest graveyard (Figure 1.16). The player then has the choice of either suffering a penalty and resurrecting at the cemetery by speaking to the Spirit Healer residing over the cemetery, or returning to the site where she died and respawning in close vicinity to her body. The reason for this is probably also due to practical game mechanics. In *World of Warcraft*, there cannot be a roll back in time after the avatar dies/ fails. The world is set in real time and is played online along with thousands of other players at the same time. A roll back cannot occur for everyone the moment each player's avatar dies. If this were possible, the game would be in a perpetual state of roll back. *World of Warcraft* is also an example of a video game that deliberately enforces the terms 'death' and 'dying' when the avatar fails since it is used as a video game mechanic. Different classes in the game, such as *Priest, Death Knight, Druid* or *Paladin*, to name a few, perform spells that can resurrect players. Thus, a type of purgatory is needed for avatars to go once dead.

According to Bernardi ([n.d.]), "Video Games have gradually turned death, the most influential and thought-provoking aspect of human existence, into a nearly-unexamined cliché". Yet games rely on our common use of 'death' as a metaphor, for example saying that the computer has died. In video games, death is a tool that is used as a means of trying to improve upon a failed attempt. Furthermore, the death of an avatar is used as a sort of punishment for failure. Jason Tocci (2008) reports that the video game "may be the only narrative medium in which the death of the protagonist isn't just devoid of drama but is entirely routine". You lose; therefore, annoyingly, you must walk a distance in order to be revived. Character death is an event that is annoying rather than reflective (Tocci, 2008). As a video game mechanic, death does not form part of the experience of playing in remembrance. The bereaved may experience the death of the avatar and be reminded of death and loss, but the avatar is returned. It is in experiencing permanent death of an avatar or video game character that the bereaved may truly be reminded of the loss experienced in the *real* world. The reminder of death, or memory of the deceased is not only experienced through death itself in video games; it is in the act of playing the game itself that the bereaved player may be reminded of the deceased. It is, perhaps, the specific video game played in a creative or innovative way that may evoke this moment of memorialisation rather than the prevalence of death and dying within it.

Fictional death in consumer-orientated games does not have the same meaning and weight as a narrative trope. Screens fading to black or becoming blurred and obscured imply that the player

of Warcraft is played online, creating many possibilities for studying the social and psychological roles of the player; however, in this study, I focus on death and how affective responses differ and are turned upside-down in game worlds.

has failed or that his/her avatar has died. Yet the death is not permanent. The avatar is either resurrected or time is rolled back to the period before the so-called death even occurred. Video games use these mechanics in order to allow the player to continue playing while suffering the consequences of his/her failure. Mourning and death as we know these to exist in the *real* world do not play a role or carry weight in this regard. Death itself becomes the threshold with which to play freely in video games. The bereaved player plays the game in remembrance; the way in which death mechanics are displayed is but one aspect of the player's experience in the game. The bereaved player may express and experience the act of playing in remembrance in other ways which do not directly have to do with *virtual* characters dying. On the contrary, it is in moving around in the environment of the video game and in playing the story of the video game that the bereaved player practices his/her remembrance and memorialisation. The promise of the avatar's return after death makes the video game world a 'safer' or 'consequence-free' environment where the player knows that even if he/she were to fail or 'kill' his/her avatar, it is promised to return to him/her to continue to explore, express and play in the memory of the deceased.

In making art about death and the potential of *virtual* environments to establish continuity in remembrance, the viewer may engage with imaginary environments which, similarly, present the viewer with imaginary places where loss and the continued existence of the deceased as a trace or digital copy inside these imaginary places may be explored. In engaging with art, the bereaved and the viewer, like the player, engage with imaginary, *virtual* environments of loss and bereavement where they may discover a means of commemorating and memorialising the deceased.

1.3 Responding to Virtual Character Death

Apart from the endless resurrection of most avatars in video games and video game worlds, there are the few exceptions of permanent character or even avatar death in video games. The permanent death of a character or avatar has a devastating effect on the player. Of course, the permanent death of the main antagonist of a video game would be a satisfying experience for the player. However, the friendly characters or even the main protagonist in a video game who die permanently have an entirely different effect on the player. One of the main contributors to this effect on the player is the incredible sense of responsibility experienced by him/her while playing a video game. The mediated experience of playing through another character on a screen connects player and avatar in such a way that the player starts to own the experiences of the avatar. Naturally, other media have the same result, such as books or film. The difference is that the player him-/herself plays a story, [15] and moves around and experiences the video game world and controls how his/her avatars look and sometimes even how the avatar is supposed to react

15 Multinarrative game mechanics explain various game endings and possibilities.

and answer. This is the case in the video game series *Mass Effect*. In the interactive game, the player is so involved in the storytelling process that it makes engagement with video games a much more lived experience. Wolf (2012: 1.2) confirms that our experiences as players are "[…] as alive in our thoughts as our own memories of lived experience". The player becomes a fellow author in the game because, in playing as the avatar, he/she feels responsible for the choices made by the avatar. These choices influence and are included in the narrative, reiterating the player's impact and responsibility.

In view of the above, the question is whether the *virtual*, permanent death of video game avatars or non-playable characters carries the same weight as that experienced in everyday life. Moreover, does experiencing the permanent death of a character or avatar remind grieving players of their own loss and grief, especially while playing specifically chosen video games in remembrance of the deceased? I compare two specific examples of character death within the video games *Mass Effect 3* (2012) and *That Dragon, Cancer* (2016). In both of these games, a *virtual* character dies. However, the circumstances and results of their deaths differ greatly. On the one hand, the character in *Mass Effect 3*, Mordin Solus, is a fictional, *virtual* alien whose death is the result of the choices made by the player in the narrative of the game. The death is devastating and can be avoided, depending on the player's decisions as the avatar in the video game. On the other hand, in *That Dragon, Cancer*, the death of the young child, Joel, cannot be avoided, regardless of the player's choices. Another very important difference is that Joel's character in the video game is autobiographical. He is based on a boy who lived and died at the young age of five. Joel's parents made the video game in an effort to share, express and deal with their grief after Joel's passing.

Wolf (2012: 17) defines imaginary worlds as:

> […] realms of possibility, a mix of familiar and unfamiliar, permutations of wish, dread, and dream, and other kinds of existence that can make us more aware of the circumstances and conditions of the actual world we inhabit.

Although video games are also imaginary worlds, they are explorable through the use of this unique medium. The player may explore the *virtual* sites of the game-world and enact change through input as an avatar. Van de Vall (2008: 140), who does not refer to video games, but rather to new media and digital art, as opposed to traditional media such as painting, argues that video games are not more interactive than any other art form or medium. She (Van de Vall, 2008: 140) further states that "[a]ll art, classical and modern, is 'interactive' in the sense that it requires the active imaginative and cognitive involvement of the recipient". Thus, I would argue that video games are as interactive as many other media and pictures, but that this interaction is unique in terms of the player/participant input via the game controller and avatar, specifically, which may lead to narrative and visual changes and progression.

In Bioware's video game series *Mass Effect*, the imaginary world is the Milky Way galaxy in the year 2183, and the avatar is a commander in the Alliance Navy. The Alliance is not the navy of one specific country on earth, but that of earth as a whole, representing humanity in the Milky Way galaxy. In the game, the avatar can make choices when in dialogue with other characters and during cut scenes.[16] This dialogue mechanic gives the player the opportunity to create and play the personality of the main character in any way he/she sees fit. The choices made by the player in the game can either be more neutral or lean towards a spectrum of good and evil, and are referred to as *paragon* or *renegade* choices within the game. Most choices are quite standard in the beginning; one can see a clear distinction between *paragon* and *renegade* choices.

The bereaved player may choose to 'insert' the likeness of the deceased by creating an avatar, in this case, a Commander Shepard, that resembles the deceased as closely as possible within the restrictions of the game. If the player chooses to do so, he/she may play the specific video game 'with' the deceased represented as the avatar. This is another way in which death, mourning and loss are expressed by the player in the video game. The video game chosen, namely *Mass Effect,* could be chosen, not because of its approach to death within the game, but because the bereaved may have played this specific game with the deceased in life. In this regard, the video game chosen in order to commemorate the deceased is selected based on deeply personal reasons for playing the game itself. In my case, this is true, and relates to my deliberate insertion of elements of the video game *Mass Effect* in my digital drawing *Stages.* In the second scene of my digital drawing series (Figure 1.4), a line drawing of the avatar, as seen on the screen, has been copied. By superimposing the hands of the bereaved player over this scene, the viewer is not only confronted with the view of the avatar on the screen, but also with the viewpoint of the player holding the PlayStation controller while in the act of playing in the video game world – an imaginary video game world that has been re-appropriated to resemble an environment of loss and grief with the repeated symbol of a digitised gravestone scattered on the open terrain.

The 'Commander Shepard' (Figure 1.17) created by the player becomes an individualised projection of him-/herself. Thus, if he/she imprints his/her set of core values onto the avatar, the player and character become amalgamated.[17] There is an embodiment of the avatar's characteristics by the player and vice versa, and each is noticeable in the other. That is to say that the characteristics of the player may be visible when role-playing as the avatar, and the avatar

16 During conversations, when the avatar is expected to respond, the player is presented with a wheel of choices. Each has its unique short- or long-term outcomes with regard to the overarching storyline. The choices are usually good, evil, sarcastic or neutral; but as the game progressed and newer installments thereof were released, the dialogue mechanic became much more intricate with the result that it became more difficult to distinguish between the so-called 'good' and 'evil' choices.

17 The in-depth character and personality creation at the beginning of the game forms the basis of the relationship between the player and the avatar. In the process of generating an avatar to look a particular way and have a specifically chosen personality and backstory, the player already starts to instil agency and individuality into the avatar created.

may have an influence on the player once play subsides and he/she continues to conduct him-/herself in everyday life. This is especially true in a game like *Mass Effect 1-3* when players spend roughly 80+ hours with their created commander in each game. The bereaved will trust that even though he/she may fail and get his/her character – the *virtual* trace of the deceased – killed, the game will return the avatar to the bereaved so that they may continue to play together in the *virtual* environment of the game. In my digital drawing *Stages,* this repetition of a *virtual* trace of the deceased is explored. In the third scene (Figure 1.5) of the imaginary environments visually constructed in the *Stages* series, a picture of the deceased is traced as a line drawing and copied multiple times. The presence of the bereaved player is still superimposed onto the scene, which resembles the screen, with the hands holding the PlayStation controller seemingly attempting to move the copied characters.

Due to the choices made by the avatar and player in *Mass Effect*, there is the possibility of the main characters dying as the narrative unfolds.[18] This can be devastating to the player because it is, essentially, the player's choices that result in a character's permanent death. While playing, the player may feel much more responsible and experience a sense of loss for a death of a beloved character. The characters 'with' whom the player plays during the three instalments of the game are very much fleshed out and become well rounded as individuals whom one gets to know. The player engages with these characters for extensive periods of time, thus becoming acquainted with them, and becoming familiar with their likes and dislikes, and in the process, also bonding with, coming to care about or even despising them altogether. Isbister (2016: 20) describes this effect very well:

> Solitary gameplay is not by definition lonely. In fact, digital games frequently include virtual "living, breathing" others who provide support, resistance, and local [colour]. Game designers use dynamic and reactive engagement with these other characters that populate a game's story world to add to the emotional palette of games as a medium. In a film, the viewer learns about the protagonist through his or her interactions with other people in the narrative world of the film. In a game, players can themselves interact with those others – spending hours journeying alongside them, struggling to rescue them, sometimes experiencing betrayal by them and losing hard-won ground as a result.

Isbister (2016: 22) is in line with my conjecture with regard to the effects of NPCs on the player. While surveying a range of players, she asked her students about the moments – while playing video games – that made individual players cry. The most frequent answer related to the moments in game involving the death of NPCs with whom the players had interacted through the course of playing. Isbister (2016: 7) asked this question in response to the following question posed by Electronic Arts (EA) in a recruitment advertisement during the 1980s: "Can a Computer Make You Cry?"

18 The character's death is not necessarily the result of a renegade choice made by the player; the player may decide to make the so-called 'good' choice and lose a companion in the process.

Gröber (2014: 18) states that "[i]maginary settings in film, literature or digital games, stay with us in our normal life as part of mental reality. These alternative worlds influence how we think and act in real life". I concur with Gröber in that it is true that while playing *Mass Effect,* players may find themselves wondering which topics, angles or points to choose while conversing with people in their everyday lives. Jamie Madigan (2016: 211) writes about the psychology in video games, stating that even the appearances of avatars "can affect our thoughts and behaviours just like wearing different clothes can". The effects of the avatar on the player can even continue after the player has set aside the video game and returned to everyday life (Madigan, 2016: 211). This effect of which Madigan speaks is reinforced if the bereaved player plays specific video games in remembrance and mourning. This is once again exemplified in *Mass Effect* where even the likeness of the deceased can be 'inserted' into the video game world as an avatar. Isbister (2016: 7) asserts that "[i]t's also true that over time, some viewers/readers form powerful attachments to characters, a phenomenon known as 'para-social interaction'". If this statement by Isbister is to be connected to the practice of playing and interacting with *virtual* characters and avatars in remembrance, I surmise that it would merely strengthen this experience for the bereaved player. Isbister also speaks of para-social interaction resulting from continued interaction over time. I connect this to the repeated interaction of the bereaved player with the *virtual* environment of the video game and its characters in order to explore his/her own grief and loss, a practice that is repeated habitually over time.

Haverinen (2014: 165) is of the opinion that "[t]he gaming spaces themselves become meaningful in a similar way as any other places do in the offline world. The bereaved remembers and experiences the places through the memory of the deceased person, a lost relationship". Haverinen writes about informal, in-game memorialisation of a deceased player who previously played the game *Second Life* by Linden Lab (2003-). I concur with her statement but would add to this the layer of experience when creating an avatar that resembles the deceased with whom to continue play in the video game world. When purposefully creating an avatar that resembles the deceased, players may respond to his/her appearance by role-playing the avatar as though he/she were the deceased. Players may also respond to the avatar who intimately resembles the deceased. It may be difficult to be confronted with the *virtual* representation of someone who has passed away. In addition, when a main character dies, players may find themselves in grief in front of the screen. In my own experiences of playing *Mass Effect*, there were times when the game was too difficult to play, not because of the games' fighting mechanics or puzzles, but because of the fear and strain I endured as a player as a result of those decisions and consequences. The second (Figure 1.4) and third (Figure 1.5) scenes in my *Stages* series include two traces copied as a line drawing. In the second scene, the avatar known as Commander Shepard is traced digitally while, in the third, the deceased has been traced and, subsequently, the traces have been copied to generate multiple traces of his image in one digital drawing. There are similarities between these two characters. The deceased is outfitted in a helmet and motorcycling gear or 'protective suit

of armour' and an off-road motorcycling helmet. Similarly, the avatar is also outfitted in a *virtual* spacesuit which includes a helmet. Both characters now only exist as copies or traces in digital drawings, in video games or on digital photographs and videos. The avatar was never tangible, but now the deceased has joined the avatar in the same *virtual* realm of 'existence'.

During my initial play through of the game *Mass Effect 3*, I experienced the *virtual* death of a character. While playing, the choices of my avatar led to the death of a main character, Mordin Solus. Solus' death was extremely difficult to deal with even though his death, and life, were fictional. Throughout the game in *That Dragon, Cancer*, the player is presented with various choices at different stages in Joel's life, but the result is always the same: Joel's death (Travis, 2017). *That Dragon, Cancer* is visually generalised by the characters not having extremely detailed avatars, or even fully constructed faces (Figure 1.18). While the generalised shapes and forms of the characters do, in fact, resemble the *real* world people after whom they were modelled, I argue that the more generalised presentation of Joel and his parents provide a canvas onto which players are be able to impose or project their own experiences of grief and loss.

Playing the game activates an immediate and intimate response to loss, a glimpse I experience as an ephemeral moment of melancholy which results in a cascade of images of memory that flood the mind of the bereaved. This results in a long, yet momentary bodily experience of extreme loss and grief. In my own mourning practices, I play *Mass Effect 2* or *3* to remember my brother and commemorate his life. In doing so, I am able to continue playing the game with him in a different manner, and to elicit some bodily effects of loss. As I play with the avatar that has been created in my brother's likeness, I remember him and am overwhelmed with sorrow. I am left in a bodily state of shock and melancholy, yet satisfied and happy that at least I can play this video game 'with' a likeness of him in order to remember him. This ephemeral bodily moment of melancholy is comparable to that *moment* about which Proust wrote in *Remembrance of Things Past* (1922): the dipping of the madeleine in the tea and tasting that first spoonful of madeleine-soaked tea. Like the madeleine-soaked tea, the moment of melancholy is an instant that initiates an overflow of memory flooding the body. This moment is extremely short but important to the bereaved. It is brief, incomplete and obsessed over. It may be a moment of overwhelming sorrow and loss, yet it is a healing moment which cements the existence of something that is no longer present, no longer tangible. The intangible moment generates a disbelief and disorientation in the everyday environment of the bereaved. As a result, that moment is obsessed over and is something which I have attempted to make visible in art.

My pigment ink drawing *Incredulity* (Figure 1.19) alludes to such a moment of disbelief and impossible tangibility. A hand gesturing towards a critically wounded cactus points out and cannot completely touch the wound. This is a reference to Caravaggio's *Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (Figure 1.20) and how the religious figure himself portrayed in the painting only believes in the miracle

of the resurrection through tangible evidence. The created avatar in the *virtual* environments of video games is an attempt to make the intangible and invisible deceased visible once more; and tangible once again through the mediated experience of interaction made visible on a screen. It does, however, only remain *virtual* or imaginary as no form or created space is able to tangibly replace the absent body of the deceased. Yet, thereby, the trauma of grief and loss is pointed out. The bereaved attempts to face the trauma by means of personal responses and iterations of his/her loss. However, these attempts are digital and only accessible through a mediated experience, an experience which wounds, but also heals the bereaved when engaging with it because it is intangible and layered. The wounding experience is compared with the inevitable prick or wound a cactus may inflict, a piercing experience and the transient moment of melancholy experienced by the bereaved when playing and remembering the deceased.[19] The deceased is 'accessed' through a technological device. However, the bereaved is not only made visible in a picture, but interactive, which simulates a means of interaction. The art created and investigated aims to confront this ambiguous experience.

1.4 Between Living and Dying

Myths, according to Mosco (2004: 3), are stories which animate and include both individuals and societies, providing paths to escape and make sense of the banality of everyday life; myths offer "entrance to another reality, a reality once characterized by the promise of the sublime". Mosco examines the myths regarding technology and, specifically, cyberspace by looking at the diverse predictions and mythologies connected to the technological advances of the past. These premonitions, fears and wonders which have been imposed culturally onto these technologies inform our understanding of the technologies and assumptions about their future developments. According to Mosco (2004: 32), cyberspace is the space in which myths are endorsed. He further states that cyberspace "contributes to mythic thinking today, because it embodies the sense of betwixt and between". Under the blanket term of cyberspace, video games also have their place. This liminal space of which Mosco speaks is prevalent in the various realms we encounter. In this regard, I am referring to the realms which I investigate, specifically, namely the *real* world, imaginary world, *virtual* world, and video game world. These realms are interlaced with, and influence, one another through the conduits at our disposal, which include art, books, films, imagination, series, social media, anime, and video games to name a few.

It is on these conduits or media that the bereaved may engage with digital imagery of the deceased, such as photographs, videos or representations in video games themselves. Online, digital sites reinforce the past existence of the deceased through diary-like entries that the deceased have uploaded in their lives. The online presence of the deceased does not disappear once he/she

19 It also refers to the way Barthes has described the *punctum* which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

has died. On the contrary, these sites may display the deceased to the world as though he/she is still among the living. Sites, such as *Facebook* and *Instagram* have the incredible ability to infect themselves with evidence of everyday life to the extent that for some people, it is a necessity and an absolute reality. Lives are lived and explored through *Facebook*. This social and *virtual* reality exists in cyberspace, as well as in everyday life. Contemporary technological devices are making information and entertainment, in other words, data, central features of life (Mosco, 2004: 19). I connect this phenomenon to video games by asking whether the deceased can be memorialised within the *virtual*, imaginary worlds of video games and, if so, whether this memorialisation also lies in a realm of betwixt and between the living and the dead. These questions are examined by means of examples of official and unofficial memorialisation in video games. I then draw a comparison between the *virtually* memorialised deceased and in-between phases of the soul made manifest in theologies and cultures, such as Indonesian funerary practices and the Roman Catholic purgatory.

In recent games, developers have started to officially memorialise the dead in their video games by paying homage to those who were well-known figures in society, who played the games themselves, or those who desperately wanted to play but passed away before they had the opportunity to do so. In this regard, some individuals are memorialised as non-playable characters (NPCs), characters existing in the video game world who follow a coded life in the game world as designed by the developers. The NPCs resemble the individuals after whom they are modelled and might also quote them. In this regard, there is a created, *virtual* representation of the deceased. Thus, there is an opportunity for the bereaved to be able to interact with the *virtually* recreated deceased. Although this experience is constructed, incomplete and unsatisfactory, the bereaved person is still able to interact with the deceased in a mediated form. In order to interact with the *virtual* body of the deceased, the player would have to adhere to the paradigms and conditions of the video game. The only way of interacting with the *virtual* body of the deceased is through technological devices, layers of physical and *virtual* sites, and a screen.

The in-game memorialisation would not necessarily be in the form of an avatar. In Blizzard Entertainment's team-based multiplayer first-person shooter video game *Overwatch* (2016), the developers added a small in-game memorial in remembrance of German professional player and coach, Dennis Hawelka, nicknamed *InternetHulk*, who had passed away in 2017 (Figure 1.21). The in-game memorial is located on one of the game's many maps' spawning rooms.[20] It is interesting to note that the room where the avatars respawn and are virtually reborn/re-animated is the room where the *real*-world death of a player is commemorated. The specific map on which the memorial is located is set in a fictional, futuristic German city named Eichenwalde. The memorial takes the form of a small, informal collection of items and writings. There is a fictional

20 In *Overwatch* (2016), this is the room or location on the map where each team starts and, consequently, respawns after a player character is killed by another.

German propaganda poster of a large crusader-like soldier reading “Crusader stehen wache” (crusader, stand guard). In addition, graffiti is suggested at the top of the poster with the initials of Hawelka’s name and professional nickname, which have a heart symbol connected to them. In front of the poster, there are a lit candle and a single, white flower resembling a St Joseph’s Lily. This in-game memorial resembles other contemporary grassroots memorials seen in public places. The site where the memorial is erected, albeit a *virtual* site, is chosen, specifically, and is in some way connected to the deceased. In the case of this in-game grassroots memorial, the deceased was of German descent and usually played an avatar which took on a supportive role within the video game dynamics such as a *healer* class.

Blizzard Entertainment is famous for memorialising individuals who make an impression or stand out, as non-playable characters in their different franchises. These individuals can become memorialised as *virtual* characters, among other things, consisting of only coding and image. These avatars can be interacted with by other players in the form of their avatars in the game world. The dead, as code, is ‘eternalised’ within a game structure, and given a digitised body which is neither physical nor subjected to the effects of time in the same manner as a physical body. An example of this is Blizzard Entertainment’s homage to the actor, Robin Williams, after his death in 2014. In the video game *World of Warcraft*, one can see a non-playable genie named Robin on a small island off the coast of Nagrand (Figure 1.22), a tribute to Williams’ role as the genie in Disney’s 1992 film *Aladdin.* Isbister (2016: 209) explains that “[g]ame developers have interwoven network communication and the sense of copresence it creates deep in the experiences that they offer players today”. Since players traverse, play, experience and spend time in video games or *virtual* worlds, they become familiar with and believe that they come to know the non-playable characters around them. To the player, these characters ‘go about their day’ in the same manner in which they, themselves, do even though it is a coded and scripted life. Game developers and designers dedicate a great deal of time to the experience of play and making it feel *real* in order to achieve the copresence of which Isbister speaks and, in most cases, they succeed. Through these acts of memorialisation, the video game world becomes intrinsically connected to the *real* world. The video game world is presented as being aware of the existence of the *real* world through the conscious representation and influence which the *real* world expresses upon the video game world. In this way, the conscious presence and reference of the one world iterates the other’s existence although the influenced world is not physical.

In their scripted environment, created non-playable characters or memorialisation of the deceased within video games may be considered to dwell in another realm of existence. This I compare with beliefs about the location of the spirit or presence after death of the deceased, both historically and religiously. Davies (2002: 6) writes about Robert Hertz’s interest in Indonesian funerary practices, and how, in the practices of the Indonesian people, the corpse had a ‘wet’ and ‘dry’ phase. During the ‘wet’ phase, the corpse was placed inside a container, with an urn attached to it to be able

to collect the liquids draining from the decomposing corpse (Davies, 2002: 26). The 'dry' phase took place once the skeleton, devoid of flesh and liquids, was taken from the container and finally buried (Davies, 2002: 26). During this transition from the 'wet' to 'dry' liminal phase, the deceased was considered to be neither in the realm of the living nor in that of the dead (Davies, 2002: 26). Only after the burial of the deceased during the 'dry' phase was it able to join the ancestors in the realm of the dead (Davies, 2002: 26). During this transitional time, the corpse was, in a symbolic sense, considered to be isolated and alone (Davies, 2002: 26). For the Indonesian people, this place of neither the living nor the dead may not have had a formal name, such as purgatory or limbo as in the Catholic theology, but I argue that it served the same purpose of being a liminal or crossing-over phase.

Thus, Virtual Purgatory is where the *virtual* characters created in memory of the deceased are present. These created constructs are in a realm that is neither active (coded living) nor inactive (coded 'death'). They can interact with other people although it is through an extension, seeing that the player interacts with the NPC via his/her avatar. The created, imaginary world of the video game is not dead; players play and interact with both other players and non-playable characters inside this world. Moreover, the place is neither alive nor on a physical plane of existence. It sits between the tangible, alive, and intangible, dead. I surmise that the created characters exist in eternal purgatory rather than being memorialised, isolated and alone, devoid of life. The created character is a coded and created representation of the deceased individual. It is a construct of the generalised characterisations of the deceased from memory and visual media. Yet the non-playable character is interacted with and referred to as the deceased. Player characters 'visit' the genie representing Robin Williams or interact with it. Players can even emote by selecting the genie and typing in "/love", for example after which the system reads "[character name] loves Robin".

In other instances, players themselves have started to use the video game platform unofficially in order to practise and express their grief online and on a *virtual* platform. In contrast to Blizzard Entertainment's official memorials of well-known figures in the real world, Linden Lab's online virtual world *Second Life* presents players with the opportunity to erect or practise their own personalised memorials, memorial sites, or memorial walls, or to request *virtual* funerals or even small cemeteries (Haverinen, 2014: 157). Haverinen (2014: 171) mentions the use of online memorial chapels which are intended for public use such as the *Remembering Our Friends* memorial in *Second Life* and which sometimes function as a substitute for the lack of a physical memorial or final resting place of the deceased. For some individuals, these sites are easier to access in order to express their loss in a *virtual* public space. Cann (2014: 111) also identifies the contemporary practice of creating avatars of the deceased. She (2014: 111) theorises that this is another way in which the bereaved may continue a relationship with the deceased. She (2014: 111) states that "[t]hese avatars are touted as a way to build an online legacy, or even to bring

deceased ones back to life through socially constructed memory projects". In this instance, Cann (2014: 111) is not referring to video games, but rather to dedicated websites used to build avatars of the deceased such as *Virtual Eternity*. However, my view is that the same sentiments could be applied to avatar creation in video games, where the player not only interacts with the avatar of the deceased, but also role-plays with or plays as.

Previously, the bereaved may have experienced the moving image of the deceased through dreams and visions. However, these were not guaranteed visitations, but were sporadic or serendipitous experiences. Digitally, one can actively revisit sites where the deceased has been reconstructed as a virtual avatar, or one can actively visit various *virtual* sites of play by sitting in front of the screen. Still, the likeness cannot be separated from the digital mode of display. These "[i]mages continue to be tied to the screen" (Belting, 2001: 25). In my own art, the images created are also tied to or suggest the screen. It is only via the medium of the computer and handheld device that the deceased can be presented as a moving, speaking image. My work consists of a combination of pigment ink drawings – some with silkscreen layering – and digital drawings. In both cases, the viewer is reminded of the screen in the production of the works. The first is in the use of a silkscreen in the art-making process which is then printed onto paper in an analogue manner, that is, by hand. The layers printed using silkscreen are printed with a larger mesh (a grid count of 30) which leaves a printed layer that looks 'pixelated' in some cases. This is done once again to suggest the screen and the pixels that constitute a digital image. The second is by using the computer and the digital screen in order to create the artwork as a digital drawing which is then printed in a digital process such as Giclee print. In my digital drawing series *Stages* (Figures 1.3–1.6), along with all the artistic explorations of this theme, the image is once again presented in the form of a static medium. The screen, as a lingering moment – an ephemeral moment of melancholy – is explored.

Movement is imaginatively suggested in passing or lingering moments and scenes. Here the affect and overwhelming sense of intangibility of the deceased, as experienced by the bereaved, are imaged. The entire series in my *Stages* digital drawings is intrinsically tied to the screen, as is the landscape in the work *Sacrosanctity* (Figure 1.7) although they have been printed out. The works were created on a screen using a computer and Adobe Photoshop to draw, copy and collage a combination of marks and forms. Throughout the entire series, the first-person point of view of hands is anchored to the bottom of the drawings, and other icons remind the viewer of the digital origin of the works. However, this point of view is not from the avatar's perspective, but from that of the player, thus inserting the viewer into the role of the bereaved player at play. In this way, the viewer becomes part of the layered scenes playing out in front of him/her. In *Stages*, the stages refer to the stages in games as well as incomplete stages of grief. The controller reminds the viewer of the video game setting: the handheld device used when engaging with *virtual* spaces. Flanking the two avatars are the stage to the left, an unknown grave overgrown

with succulents (Figure 1.3), and to the right, a stage depicting a Google street view screenshot copied from a picture of a shared childhood home and street (Figure 1.6). The street is copied digitally and traced while the home is omitted.

Douglas Davies (2002: 197) states that "[b]y engaging with death through ritual, the identity of the dead will be turned to some positive effect in the ongoing memory of the living". However, by engaging with death through the ritual of play, the identity of the deceased is not only turned to positive effect in the memory of the bereaved but also continues to form part of the more social and pleasurable world of the lived experiences of the bereaved. By inserting the deceased within the worlds of video games, they continue to be 'present' in the context of other activities and traditions which are not morbid; rather they once again become part of everyday life and no longer sit on the fringe of the narrative and lived experiences of the bereaved. The same can be said of repetitive engagement in art-making practices produced with the attitude of mourning. By combining mourning processes with the habitual processes of art making, the bereaved integrates and incorporates his/her lived experience of grief into a creative, visual practice exploring grief and loss, analogous to experiences cultured in video gaming.

CHAPTER 2: MELANCHOLY OBJECTS

The deceased is absent as a result of death, yet the bereaved aims obsessively to fill this void which is characterised by the absence of the body, and in effect presence, of the deceased. One of the means by which the bereaved attempts to do so is through *virtual* environments and video games, as discussed previously. However, in this chapter, I aim to discuss other physical objects with which the bereaved choose to surround themselves as a replacement for the presence of the deceased; these objects are identified as melancholy objects. Contemporary, globalised methods of practising grief include a combination of medical, religious, and personal responses. In Chapter 2, the focus shifts from the digital and *virtual* worlds discussed in Chapter 1 to the devices through which these worlds are accessed. Technological devices become newly-created melancholy devices yet their uses and functionality cannot exist *only* for the sake of grieving or representing the deceased. The technological melancholy object, as I define it here, has many identities, including the functions of representation and reminder of the deceased.

In this chapter, I explore and discuss the physical objects representing grief, and develop the concept of melancholy objects as articulated by Gibson (2004). I pick up a thread from earlier methods of mourning the dead to contemporary means of exploring grief. Melancholy objects represent grief and the changing relationship between the bereaved and the deceased. I interpret this relationship as a visual dialogue that may become an encrypted conversation that occurs when the bereaved person interacts with, is reminded of, or uses these objects of grief. Once again, as in Chapter 1, the experiences of grief and loss are experienced from within the body of a bereaved person who responds to objects or art dealing with death and loss. Grief and loss are traumatic experiences which are difficult to process and explain. In my art making, I respond to this difficulty by translating my experiences of loss and generating personalised symbols or objects of grief.

The body of the deceased is made motionless to the human eye or perception through death and then intangible or irrevocably changed through burial or cremation. Before burial or cremation, however, the body also changes, but this change is not seen or necessarily recognised by the individual. The moment of death is ambiguous. Knausgaard (2012: 3) describes this process on the first page of his book *A Death in the Family: My Struggle,* by saying that "[t]hese changes in the first hours occur so slowly and take place with such inexorability that there is something almost ritualistic about them". The body seems static yet biological processes continue as they are supposed to after the body has ceased to function as it had previously. In the body of the deceased, there is continuation of movement. However, this movement is not seen; rather, it takes place internally, within the body of the deceased while outwardly appearing to be still. Subsequently, however, the body of the deceased is removed and/or tremendously changed by

outward processes such as cremation.

What, then, takes the place of the body of the deceased in the life of the bereaved? There are constant examples of how, in the past, cultures and societies have creatively replaced the body of the deceased with another physical object. In the past, skulls could take its place, as seen in a group of skulls excavated at Jericho (Figure 2.1). These skulls, which date back to early 7000–6000 BC, provide examples of individuals' and/or societies' attempts to understand death. The physical skulls of the deceased individuals were re-embodied by plastering and even painting them (Belting, 2001: 87). In Egyptian funerary practice, a *ka* statue was made to imaginatively represent the deceased and was used as a placeholder for the absent deceased body. Objects of grief often mediate conversations about, and expressions of, grief and loss. The practices and rituals conducted in mourning are, simultaneously, an attempt to honour, make sense of and make present (tangible) an absent deceased person. Today, the bereaved continue to find objects and artefacts which represent the missing body of the deceased in order to fill the void after having experienced the loss of a loved one. These artefacts and objects, which include both overlooked and venerated objects, such as clothes, religious objects, personal effects, the previous possessions of the deceased or his/her remains, may be used in bereavement as either an integral part of the rituals conducted within a community or as an artefact which personally represents the deceased. These contemporary objects are termed melancholy objects by Margaret Gibson (2004).

Gibson (2004) conceptualises the melancholy object in grief, developing Winnicott's (1997) conjecture of the 'transitional object'. According to Gibson (2004: 286), melancholy objects are artefacts which have been central to the grieving process, with specific focus on the memory of the grieving process itself. Melancholy objects play a central role, acting as a conduit, in the memorialisation of mourning itself (Gibson, 2004: 286). These objects of grieving represent the mourning process to the bereaved. As time passes, these artefacts begin to embody, more than the memory of the deceased to whom they belonged, the memory of grief itself. If this is the case for melancholy objects, I ask whether technological devices used to house videos and images of the deceased can likewise be considered melancholy objects. Gibson's conjecture of the melancholy object describes contemporary societies and individuals in grief; however, I surmise that throughout history, as in the examples of the Skulls of Jericho, the Egyptian *Ka* statue, and religious reliquaries, melancholy objects have been present in the grieving experience. In this chapter, Gibson's conceptualisation of the melancholy object forms the basis of my interpretation of contemporary melancholy objects.

I scrutinise specific melancholy objects which include clothes, ashes, photographs, videos, technological devices and hardware, *virtual* environments and the embodiment of a visual melancholy picture object in the form of a tattoo on the skin of the bereaved. I posit that melancholy

objects have been used throughout history and that while previous objects, which include artefacts, such as skulls or statues, were created for the purpose of mourning, contemporary existing objects may be identified as melancholy objects. I concede that in the past, individuals may also have identified personal objects as melancholy objects yet those objects were contextualised within traditional or religious rites. In the array of contemporary melancholy objects, I propose to include technological devices and hardware which belonged to the deceased or which facilitate interaction with, or houses data involving the deceased. Furthermore, I suggest that these objects have comparable potency to other, more usual melancholy objects, such as clothes, ashes, and photographs. These objects are assessed together with technological devices and hardware as manifestations and responses to grief and loss in the following three sections.

In the first section – *The Object in Grief* – I discuss conceptions of grief, ritual, and mourning, historically, in comparison with unique, contemporary, social, and artistic responses and conceptions of grief. I ask whether unique and personalised contemporary responses to grief may be regarded as parallel in significance and gravitas to earlier culturally and religiously embedded mourning rituals. To address these questions, I start with a discussion of, and comparison between, responses to grief and loss during the past 1 000 years, as chronicled by Philippe Ariès, and contemporary responses to the traumatic experience, as articulated by Douglas Davies in his book *Death, Ritual and Belief* (2002). I argue that past instances and the flow of events from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment today are causative of the current responses to grief, namely the medical models of grief. The aim of these historical references is to understand contemporary inclinations towards melancholy objects. The focus, then, shifts towards an investigation of contemporary responses to grief and loss, and how, after the Enlightenment, the focus that moved away from ritual has now, in contemporary societies, returned to more personalised and/or social (on a global scale through the use of the Internet) ritualistic practices of mourning. The Enlightenment gave way to the development of the medical model of grief which prioritises the curing of grief and loss to ensure optimally functioning people. This model, especially Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler's five-stages-model (2005) is criticised, not necessarily for its conception, but for the overwhelmingly simplistic public interpretation thereof.

Recently, individuals and groups have identified the medical model of grief and loss to be socially, culturally, and religiously lacking. As a result, many bereaved people have chosen to negotiate their performances and utterances of grief and loss in unique and unforeseen ways.[21] An example of this is the practice of tattooing as a personal utterance of grief and loss. I argue that tattooing in remembrance could constitute a performed pictorial melancholy object which triggers and represents individual grief. Personal expressions of tattooing are investigated while considering Ord's (2009) conceptions of tattooing as performance in grief. According to Ord (2009: 196), she herself attempts to re-imagine the way in which we construct grief by 'performing' her grief (tattooing

21 Included in these responses is the practice of playing video games, as discussed in Chapter 1.

her skin) in the form of “embodied resistance”. I argue that by deliberately incising images as reminders of the deceased, the bereaved engrave their skin with an intimate melancholy object, which serves as a daily reminder of the deceased in the lived experiences of the bereaved. This contemporary practice brings the process of mourning intimately into relation with the body of the bereaved – more so than before. Specific artists also negotiate their loss through creative application. Whiteread’s personal response to grief and loss, and visual negotiation with her own melancholy object, a personally shared and used box discovered in the house of her deceased mother, is considered in her monumental sculptural piece *Embankment* (2005). These examples of contemporary and personal responses to grief and loss manifest alternative negotiations in the wake of mourning which are more centred on personal expression, performance, and experiences.

This paves the way for an investigation into the personal responses to, and experiences of, melancholy objects by the bereaved. This is done from the perspective of the body of the bereaved, where body is understood in terms of Belting’s (2001) conceptions of the connections between our own bodies and images, as conceptualised in his book *An Anthropology of Images: Image, Medium, Body*. At the core of Belting’s argument is the assumption that our bodies are the locus from which we experience, interpret, and respond to images. I connect his conceptions of images and our bodies, which also include images of memory and imagination, to remembrance and commemoration. In responding to a melancholy object or a trigger of memory, the bodies of the bereaved may experience the devastating absence of the deceased. Following this is the experience of loss. Working from LaCapra’s (1999) conceptions of absence and loss when it comes to memorialising the deceased, I connect this experience with the bodily experience of remembrance and recollection in loss. This moment of remembrance, as experienced by the bereaved and which is instantaneous and consequential, is interpreted as an ephemeral moment of melancholy. This moment of melancholy is usually triggered through memory and commemoration which, in turn, are often triggered by the use of, or engagement with, a melancholy object or picture dealing with the subject of grief and loss. When confronted with images of the deceased on carriers of pictures, such as technological devices or physical objects, an overwhelming moment of memory and melancholy is experienced by the bereaved or viewer. The experience of this moment is interpreted visually with reference to the work of Motoi Yamamoto entitled *Utsusemi* (2005).

In the second section – *Melancholy Device* – I consider the connection between melancholy objects in history and those in contemporary society. Technological devices have acquired their own meaning and significance in present-day grief and mourning practices. My question pertains to whether there is a link between the historical practices of imaginatively embodying the presence of the deceased by means of objects and artefacts, and the contemporary use of devices to house images as traces of the deceased in life. Copying the likeness of the deceased has been practised throughout history. Portraits of deceased individuals have been painted on boards

and attached to upper-class mummies from Roman-occupied Egypt during the 2nd century AD (Peacock, 2000: 433). Moreover, death masks or casts made from the faces of the deceased, which were originally used as references when painting the deceased, were produced from the Middle Ages until the 19th century (Wallechinsky & Wallace, 1978:1189).

Using Belting's conjecture in his book *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* (2001) as my point of departure, I contextualise certain details of Egyptian funerary practice, which include the use of a venerated object, the *ka* statue which, in their systems of ritual and mourning, was used as a physical embodiment of the absent body of the deceased. Housed within the *ka* statue was the *ka*, or life-force, of the deceased now separated from its original body and continuing to exist in the false body of the statue. I relate the Egyptian conceptions and characteristics of the *ka* statue to melancholy objects, the contemporary technological device, and its potential to be used as artefact to present the deceased. My aim is to identify technological devices and computers as melancholy devices. In order to do so, I compare the conceptions of Egyptian funerary practice which involves the use of a *ka* statue as physical representation of the deceased to interactions and uses of technological devices in contemporary society. Davies (2002) writes about Egyptian funerary practice in terms of its intense focus on ritual and process. I take Davies' conjecture of Egyptian funerary practice and identify similarities with contemporary practice, specifically by comparing the *ka* statue to the technological device. In his book *The Digital Sublime*, Mosco (2004) makes a poignant comparison between the Egyptian *ka* statue and cyberspace as a 'virtual community' when talking about contemporary cyberspace lore. I utilise his conjecture to reinforce my argument that today, the technological device can be a melancholy object similar to the way in which the *ka* statue was identified in the past.

Digitally, one can actively revisit sites where the deceased has been reconstructed as a virtual avatar, or one can actively visit various *virtual* sites of play by sitting in front of the screen. Still, the likeness of the deceased cannot be separated from the digital mode of display. Images, as Belting (2001: 25) states, "continue to be tied to the screen". It is only via the medium of the computer and handheld device and so forth that digital images of the deceased can be presented as a moving, speaking image. In my studio research, however, the image is once again presented in the form of a static medium. Movement is imaginatively suggested. In the collection of digital drawings, prints and pen drawings, the affect and overwhelming sense of intangibility of the deceased, as experienced by the bereaved, are investigated.

According to Barthes (1980), physical photographs have been integrally connected to death and mortality. However, all these previous modes of copying and preservation of the likeness of the deceased have been stationary and silent. By contrast, contemporary digital technologies can preserve recordings of the deceased as a moving, speaking image. Digital images do not appear as a result of the same conditions as those that exist in the form of a tangible, stable medium.

Rather, they appear from digital code (Belting, 2001: 25). I regard the digital device and computer as tangible media upon whose screen digital images can appear. Without the technological conduit, the digital image cannot be displayed. Digital and *virtual* images are therefore bound by certain conditions. However, these conditions allow for the construction of imaginary digital spaces and moving images. These are rendered visible through input, from the bereaved and/or viewer, as explored in my digital drawing *Conduit* (2019) (Figure 2.3). Videos and sound associated with the deceased are digital and can only be presented in that form via the device. However, a work of art or still image has within it the potential to expose itself in movement and sound via the viewer's imaginative interaction with the work. In my artworks, the lack of movement and sound is exploited in this way by exposing its suggested movement to the viewer as a still image.

In the third section – *"Living" Melancholy Objects* – the previous two sections are considered when investigating technological melancholy objects and the constantly changing relationship between the bereaved and these objects, a specific characteristic of the melancholy object investigated by Mathijssen (2017). In order to contextualise Mathijssen's concept regarding contemporary technologies, I compare this changing relationship between object and bereaved with the *Black Mirror* (2013) episode (S2E1) *Be Right Back.* In the previous two sections, the objects of mourning have been identified and noted within the different contexts and practices. Specific objects in grief and bereavement, which are intrinsically connected to the deceased, have specific identity and meaning after their owner's death. These melancholy objects start to have their own afterlife. This is where I make the connection with melancholy objects and the *Black Mirror* episode. The melancholy object identified in the single episode narrative of *Be right back*, is the synthetic body of the deceased, Ash Starmer (Domhall Gleeson), wherein his newly-constructed personality interacts with its former fiancée, Martha (Hayley Atwell). I investigate the episode and Martha's (the bereaved) growing obsession to once again have a tangible body with whom to interact when it comes to Ash (the absent deceased). Throughout the narrative of the episode, Martha's relationship with her former, living and now synthetically-created, partner changes, and is likened to the way in which the relationship between the bereaved and the melancholy object changes, as noted by Mathijssen. The episode concludes when the 'living' melancholy object is displaced and physically moved in the same way in which any other melancholy objects are changed by ongoing grief.

By comparison, artists may respond to these complex experiences by generating meaning through visual symbolism and investigation. I compare my own art research, specifically the *Symbols* series, with the work of artists, such as Jan van der Merwe and Alice Anderson who work intimately with objects of memory. In my work, I attempt to make sense of, and relay, the experience of grief and loss. In addition, I include the exploration of the objects found and used as replacements for the deceased.

The photograph can translate an image or trace of an individual, in this case, the deceased, into or onto another medium. This trace on photographic print/displayed on the screen has a lifespan of its own. The translation of the traces of the deceased as photographs takes place by deliberate interaction – taking the photograph and harbouring it, either as a printed photograph or as a digital photograph. This trace, in turn, is kept and reiterates the existence of the deceased as melancholy object/device. The same occurs when translating or placing traces of the deceased on digital, *virtual* sites. This occurrence is translated metaphorically into a comparison between cacti, succulent plants, and funerary wreaths in my own portfolio of work. Funerary flowers are experienced as ironic objects in grief, a beautiful offering to grieving individuals which is, after having been picked, in a state of permanent decay. In response to this, I argue that cacti and succulent plants would be an adequate replacement for funeral flowers in the digital age. Unlike the flower, the cactus or succulent can survive for a few weeks after having been picked, and has the potential to continue to live once intervention takes place by replanting it in/on soil. The succulent's ability to prolong life in this way is at the root of my argument in which I draw a comparison between traces of the deceased in the form of photographs (digital and printed), videos, voice notes, online commemorations and *virtual* explorations, and the succulent and cactus plant. Just like the plants, the traces of the deceased can continue to exist, provided that interventions take place. This intervention is the purposeful harbouring, copying, tracing, viewing and engagement with images of the deceased.

I conclude that any object may be a melancholy object, including the hardware and technologies with which we surround ourselves. The technological object has the same potential to be a melancholy object as any other physical object, provided that inherent meaning is instilled in the object in grief and loss. As far as the device is concerned, this occurs when the intangible data pertaining to, representing, and enforcing the presence of the deceased is stored, viewed or accessed via the technological device or computer. The technological device itself becomes a representation of the deceased in the life of the bereaved, thus taking the tangible place of the absent body of the deceased. There is an inherent need by the bereaved to find purchase in a tangible medium that takes the place of the now absent body of the deceased. Melancholy devices, in and of themselves, cannot serve as a representation and presence of the deceased. While they have other functions, which have nothing to do with references to the deceased or with grief and loss, these objects become part of the everyday lives of the bereaved. However, they also enable the bereaved to return to the memory and representation of the deceased, incorporating grief and mourning through pictures and digital imagery to the everyday functioning of the bereaved. These experiences and phenomena are explored visually through the use of symbolism and, in my own research, the generation of simplified symbols that have become an encrypted message attempting to communicate the complex experiences of grief and loss in a society in which grief is expressed, not only physically, but also digitally. The objects of grief are intimately connected to the body of the bereaved, which becomes the locus of images and traces

of the deceased, a site where remembrance takes place.

2.1 The Object in Grief

Traumatic responses to grief and loss are experienced and, subsequently, expressed in the body of the bereaved, or bodies of a bereaved community or family, in a variety of ways. Belting (2001: 11) refers to the body as carrier and projector of images; the body is the generator of images of memory and imagination and the carrier within which they are experienced. Belting relates his research specifically to the contemporary generation of images and our relationship with them. However, memory and imagination also play a key role in grief, especially in terms of remembrance. Thus, I connect Belting's conceptions of the relationship between the body and images in memory and imagination with remembrance, grief, and loss.

However, the body of the bereaved throughout history is not my focal point. Instead, I wish to focus on the body of the bereaved in present-day mourning practices and the way in which the bereaved respond to grief and loss in contemporary society. It is important, however, to look back at history and recognise how objects also have played a significant role in death and ritual. I argue that the response to grief and loss experienced within the body of the bereaved is mediated through melancholy objects and devices. It is within our bodies that we may experience the complete absence of the deceased. This response is triggered externally by identified melancholy objects, such as artefacts, photographs, and digital imagery on technological devices, ashes, or possessions. Immediately following, or resulting from, this bodily response, is the presence of the deceased in the wake of their absence. Belting (2005: 45) argues that it is in the place of the missing body of the deceased that images were installed. In this case, Belting speaks, specifically, of funerary images; however, I argue that the representation of the deceased, not necessarily as a likeness or trace as in the case of the photograph, has been instilled in melancholy objects in the place of the missing body of the deceased as well. There is an innate to-and-fro when it comes to experiencing the stark absence of the deceased. The memory of the deceased will always come to the present when reminded of their absence, and with that, always the experience of loss that follows. These moments are experienced exclusively within the body of a bereaved person. The question, then, arises as to how the personal expressions and practices of grief have changed and adapted to the current processing mechanisms of mourning relating to melancholy objects, and the impact thereof on expressions and investigations of visual art.

Historically, the bereaved have responded to death through mourning and mourning practices which, in turn, are governed by their specific beliefs and culture. Very often, however, in contemporary societies, most individuals no longer belong to a specific religion, or find themselves alienated from their cultural heritage. Integrally connected with culture and religion is ritual, but with the

two former aspects missing from individuals' lives, the latter has also fallen away. In turn, ritual is intimately connected with objects. It is through the conduit of the object that grief is practised as mourning. Davies (2002) asserts that recently, there has been a turn, or return, to ritual without its being connected to religion or a specific cultural group. Individuals have started to respond personally in terms of practice and tradition, especially when it comes to grief, loss and mourning: "Ritual has come to be seen as something which can stand alone, apart from traditional religion, as a part of basic human and social behaviour with power to support and encourage individuals during difficult periods of life" (Davies, 2002: 237). While Davies' focus is on ritual, specifically, I identify ritual as being coupled with melancholy objects, throughout history into contemporary society. Wherever Davies comments on ritual, I immediately associate melancholy objects as the accompaniment and conduit through which ritual is practised. Along with ritual, melancholy objects can be identified as far back as 7000 BC, with the Skulls of Jericho mentioned in the introduction to this chapter.

Melancholy objects are constant, but the formality with which they are approached, what they are and have evolved into in contemporary society, has changed. According to Ariès (2008: 5), throughout history and, especially, the Middle Ages, death, the dead, mourning and grief were fundamental to everyday life. Davies (2002: 7), who focuses more on the significance of ritualistic practice in mourning, states that archaeology suggests that burials were an early human activity and that many historic religions have paid much attention to the ritualistic disposal of the dead. Moreover, humans have, as far back as archaeology extends, dealt ritualistically with their dead (Davies, 2002: 25). Where ritual is mentioned, so, too, are objects. The Skulls of Jericho are melancholy objects in grief as much as they are ritualised. The same is true for other cultures' historical and contemporary rituals in death and mourning. The Egyptian *Ka* statues, as objects which served as a representation of the deceased, is another example, as well as physical photographs kept in albums or portraits of the deceased. Societies and cultures vary greatly in their responses to mourning; however, I surmise that they all include the common exercise of repeated ritual and funerary practices performed with the use and acknowledgment of objects of grief.

Mitchell (2007: 2) writes about contemporary melancholy objects. She identifies them as the artefacts, objects and personal belongings of the deceased which start to gain specific and potent meaning after their death:

> It is sufficiently interesting that we attribute feelings, desires, and emotions to the deceased, that we continue dialogues with them, that the material possessions they leave behind become imbued with potent meaning, and that we carry on public fights and peruse causes on their behalf.

Physical objects such as the clothes worn by the deceased become like treasures which need to be suspended in time by some means.[22] Mathijssen (2017: 8) writes about clothes as melancholy objects, saying that they "induce the sensory presence of the dead" and become like a type of second skin. The physical and immediate contact that clothes provide, while the deceased was alive, is now re-experienced by the bereaved person who perhaps touches, smells, and wears the items of clothing. Clothes start to represent the deceased via the senses; they smell like, feel like, look like, and are thus likened to, the deceased. Clothes capture an impression of the presence of the deceased. The second skin is now, after death, referred to as a primary organ since it is one of the few things, besides the body, left behind that so candidly resembles the deceased.[23] In the past, relics were placed in churches to represent deceased saints or prophets. These reliquaries not only included other remains of the deceased, but also parts of the deceased themselves (relics) which were embedded in the reliquaries (Figure 2.2) (Boehm, 2001 [2011]). Similar to the characteristic of the reliquary that houses a relic, in contemporary society, the deceased is placed digitally and *virtually* inside the technological melancholy device or object that houses his/her image and representation.

Since the Enlightenment, however, a change has occurred in terms of the way in which we approach and ritualise death and bereavement. Maddrell (2013: 503, 509) attests that grief and lamentation are now being negotiated in more personal and unique ways. These are also structured according to westernised ideas of a medical approach to grief (Small, 2001: 20; Currer, 2001: 50). This negotiation is also connected to increasing "privatisation" of faith and the focus on reason and progress since the Enlightenment (Small, 2001: 20). Michael Anderson (2001) writes about contemporary responses to grief and loss, and the medical model of grief. He (2001: 139) verifies this medical response to grief by stating that activities and treatments such as bereavement counselling are made relevant by the classification of grief as an "unwelcome intrusion (or violent interception) into the normal efficient running of everyday life". There are many categorisations and "models" of grief, such as the famous Stages Model proposed by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler in 2005, as well as the Continuing Bonds model which follows the Stages Model. The secularised and accepted contemporary response to grief and loss, which I discuss, is the "scientific", or rather, "medical" model of grief and loss which is the prevailing contemporary means of making sense of the experience of death and loss from this point of view.

Within the medical doctrine, there is no explicit mention or importance attached to objects of grief which, I argue, results in the model being insufficient. Death and the accompanying grief

22 Clothes may be placed in containers to retain their scent; perfumes used by the deceased are bought, specifically, to be able to smell and remember them by. Objects which the deceased was busy using are taken and kept in their original shape or state so that no other is able to change or influence them.

23 After my brother passed away, those who were very close to him laid claim to specific pieces of clothing which had belonged to him. I took his broken glasses (seen in *Stages* (Figure 1.3)) and the buff he wore while riding his motorbike (photographically copied and edited, seen in the bottom right-hand corner of *Sacrosanctity* (Figure 1.7)); it had been cut open by the paramedics, filled with blood and dirt, and patched together for me by my grandmother.

are always a part of our lives. Yet many younger people living in technologically-advanced, high-income economic conditions, may have become quite alienated from the rituals of grief and loss, especially at a young age. This is interesting to note, seeing that most societies and households have televisions and have access to the Internet, where images of death, loss, deterioration, and destruction are broadcast and are considered a 'normal' occurrence in everyday life. Recently, a multitude of factors have brought on these attitudes towards death. According to Jockey (2001: 186), these factors may include:

> […] the secularisation and diversification of religious belief and practice; social and geographical mobility; the growth of both consumerism and environmentalism; changing conceptions of home and hygiene; the manner and scale of the occurrence of death in two world wars and the professionalization of care of the dying and disposal of the dead.

However, earlier communities, and many communities today, are shaped by rituals in which burial practices and mourning were/are part of everyday life.[24] My focus is geared towards secularised and globalised individuals who do not follow cultural, religious, or formal mourning practices.

Ord (2009: 196) criticises the common view of grief as a so-called pathological condition which is viewed as a psychological experience that requires the intervention of a medical professional. The construction of grief is complicated as there are psychological guidelines, and medical and ethical ways of assisting the bereaved when dealing with grief. Kübler-Ross and Kessler famously proposed the *Five Stages of Grief* (2005). There is a procession of emotions, which do not necessarily have to follow a specific order or be experienced one at a time.[25] The five stages, the psychological conditions, and the clinical means of dealing with death all attempt to attain the essence, and define a universalised understanding of, grief and bereavement. However, Small (2001: 39) states that we should not consider the changing ways of making sense of bereavement and grief as some accumulative way of moving towards a perfected condition. He (Small, 2001: 39) continues that it is simply an alternative view of the matter; soon, another view and model of grief, bereavement and mourning will take its place. However, it is this current categorisation of grief that I find somewhat problematic. It has developed into being too much of a guideline rather than an investigation into, and an attempt to understand, the personal process of grief. It also lacks acknowledgment of the importance of melancholy objects which sits at the core of the way in which we negotiate our loss and remembrance. I agree with Mitchell (2007: 4), who states:

24 Part of the distance added to mourning, death and grief is also that death is no longer dealt with in the context of family and/or local community. The process, or some of the process, is being "outsourced" to doctors, hospitals, funerary homes, and counsellors.

25 These stages consist of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

> […] Kübler-Ross's work (1969) has cast a long shadow on our understanding of death and grief. There remains an implicit assumption of "phases" and working towards a resolution of "letting go". Indeed, respondents in studies of bereaved persons […] speak of friends' and relatives' expectations of an acceptable time for grieving, after which the person should be "over it".

In accordance with Mitchell, Davies (2002: 53) states that "the idea of bereaved people 'getting back to normal' is potentially misleading", for the majority of grieving individuals, especially close family members, there is not a state to which they can return before the death occurred. The everyday, grief-stricken individual knows about the Stages Model due to its vast popularity and application in television and psychology. However, these same individuals rely on the Stages Model as a map or shorthand on how to grieve and finish grieving. But grief is never over; it stays with the bereaved as long as the memory of the deceased stays with them. There may come a time when grief itself is accepted, but not over. In my digital drawing series *Stages* (Figures 1.3–1.6), discussed in the previous chapter, I also allude to the Stages Model in the title of the work. I purposely did not make five stages in the series, but instead, I created only four. While these stages in the series are not named after the stages of grief, it can be assumed that the 'final' stage – acceptance – has been omitted from this series of drawings.[26] In the series of drawings, and in the entire body of work created, I repetitively insert melancholy objects as part of this grieving process. In the first drawing of the series (Figure 1.3), the repeated symbol of my brother's broken glasses is seen on the left, hovering over the scene of a grave.

Davies (2002: 209) states that the mix of approaches to death, namely a combination of religious, secular, artistic and idiosyncratic, which is emerging in developed secular societies, can be considered as the result of our secularisation as well as the human drive for significance. It is a culmination of both the medical model of grief and loss and constructed funerary practice which, I argue, generates new meanings to grieving individuals. The contemporary means of working through grief and mourning is innovative, personal, and diverse; it is neither annual nor necessarily repeated in the same ways as previous mourning practices such as the annual cleaning of a grave, for example. There are many enterprises and creative ventures that have been generated by the need to practice grief in unique ways and which use interesting methods. In my opinion, these endeavours also involve the use or generation of a melancholy object in grief. This also includes pressing the ashes of the deceased into vinyl records.[27] The owner of the company, AndVinyly, Jason Leech, remarks that the ashes themselves have an influence on the recording on the vinyl, making the bereaved incredibly aware of the presence of the remains of the deceased in the recording, so to speak. Other commemorations involve the bereaved incising

26 The bereaved may also cling to bereavement and loss as a newly-formed identity, which is an unhealthy response. Nevertheless, grief never goes away entirely.

27 *AndVinyly* is a small company that presses the ashes of the deceased into vinyl records. These records may have anything recorded onto them that the bereaved wishes. Available from: http://www.andvinyly.com/ [accessed 09-12-2019].

and mixing the ashes of the bereaved with ink and applying these to the skin as a tattoo (Cann, 2014: 75).

Rachel Ord considers tattooing a personal way of processing grief, and refers to it as a way of 'performing' one's grief. She (Ord, 2009:196) further argues that tattooing counteracts trending discourses on grief:

> The body can be a form of resistance to dominant discourses on grief, and there are many ways to grieve, cope, and experience loss. In particular, I explore tattooing as an embodied resistance to the medical model, as a means of performing one's grief, and as an alternative discourse on grief. Overall, I attempt to re-imagine the way in which grief as a whole is constructed.

Robyn Ord (2009: 195-196) has personally embodied her private experience of pain and grief by tattooing. Tattooing, as a medium of visualising grief, has become increasingly popular and accepted in the eyes of the general public. The practice of tattooing is varied and ancient, dating back to the Neolithic period – as far back as 5 300 years ago (Fedorenko et al., 1999: 105). The practice, which has been frowned upon for hundreds of years, has also become more popular in recent years.[28] Belting (2001: 22) compellingly elaborates on images as visual ways of grieving by arguing that "the picture we produce with our body or on the body does not represent the body as such; rather, it uses the body as a carrier medium". Considering Belting's statement, this further reinforces my argument that a tattoo in remembrance becomes a melancholy picture object. It is an external 'picture object' in ink in the form of intricate design which represents grief, loss, and the deceased, possessing potent meaning and authority in the life and body of the bereaved. Cann (2014: 49) convincingly argues that:

> Tattoo remembrances are literally carried with us, age with us, and allow a virtual afterlife for the dead, simultaneously establishing the identity of the bereaved in a fixed and permanent way in a society that denies the corpse and no longer gives space for grieving.

Memorial tattooing, as a form of remembrance, is a cultural grieving practice that may be shared by specific communities. I surmise that tattooing is a social response by grieving individuals in globalised societies and communities who may experience their rituals of loss as lacking or non-existent. The tattoo, as a melancholy picture object, is an example of how contemporary melancholy objects are identified or created individually and carried with the bereaved on their bodies in the wake of grief and loss, rather than being created as part of structured and traditional

28 Tattooing has had various meanings and functions in cultures around the world and during different periods in history. Sailors had tattoos in order to help others identify them after death and to be able to receive a Christian burial; prostitutes used the practice as a way of protesting against the systems and societies that chose to imprison them; and tattoos were even used to permanently mark concentration camp inmates in Nazi Germany (Spindler, 1994).

death rituals. I allude to the contemporary practice of tattooing in my work by permanently changing the 'skin' or paper by means of embossing. By permanently impressing the paper with funerary wreaths (Figure 2.26), I intend to remind the viewer of this funerary practice. In all the pigment ink drawings created, such as *Incredulity* (Figure 1.19) and *Interstice* (Figure 3.12), I specifically used a 0.005 pigment ink pen, resembling a needle that incises ink on the sheet of delicate paper. The small tattoo on my own body of the minimalistic man is recreated as a symbol (Figure 2.23) and printed in my *Symbols* series.

In contemporary visual art, artists have started to negotiate and experiment with novel approaches to confront their own grief and loss. In Whiteread's large-scale installation *Embankment* (2005), she attempts to navigate the losses she experienced in grief through objects. The same comparison can be applied to my digital drawing *Conduit* (2019) (Figure 2.3). In both cases, the artist attempts to generate a tangible creation out of the traumatic experience of grief and loss as absence. Whiteread (Figure 2.4) elected to copy and cast a precious cardboard box which had sentimental value for the artist. In my own digital drawing *Conduit* (Figure 2.3), I selected the small wooden box containing my brother's ashes – an object which I would have preferred to have sentimental value but which does not have the same sentimental value as that of other objects pertaining to the deceased. In my digital drawing, I have elected to enlarge the box of ashes, attempting to enhance its status in my life. The loss experienced is not only of the deceased, but also of physical presence, the loss of certain activities and, in essence, tangibility.

In Whiteread's *Embankment* (2005) (Figure 2.4), the viewer is confronted with a vast number of polyethylene casts of the interior of cardboard boxes. This monumental work relates to concepts, such as space, environment, and the experience of upheaval and change. However, another key element that added to the conception of this work is the addition of a single cardboard box which the artist and her mother used while she was growing up ([Anon], 2019). In the wake of Whiteread's mother's death, she rediscovered a box in her mother's home ([Anon], 2019). This particular box had many identities in the artist's childhood and became a precious object which reminded the artist not only of her mother's life, but also of her own loss. In my opinion, the artist's response (taking a small variety of boxes with which to create thousands of polyethylene casts – enough to fill the space of the Turbine Hall of the TATE Modern museum in London) is a unique and creative one to the intimate experience of the 'relic'-like box discovered. It is as though the artist responded to the overwhelming presence and authority possessed by the box by translating the complex experience of being overwhelmed into visual excess. The polyethylene boxes are monumental in size when stacked on top of one another, and resemble the weathered and used packaging of precious items placed in boxes either to be kept safe or out of view. However, it is not only that which is inside the box that is precious, but also the box itself. The overlooked object as container is so much more precious because of its own life and superfluous presence. The box, along with the bereaved, remembers the deceased. It seems as though the box 'knows' the

deceased because of the evidence of its being used by the deceased, which provides proof of interaction. As a result of this, the box is venerated as a relic-like object even though, to others, the object itself may seem insignificant.

At first glance, the boxes themselves also look clinical and devoid of any human use and spontaneous human interaction. This is reminiscent of the medical model of grief and the clinical way in which grief and death are approached in contemporary society. However, upon closer inspection, the boxes are stacked in ordered and disorderly piles ([Anon], 2019). The boxes engulf the space of the Turbine Hall; they make themselves present and remind the viewer of the body and human use ([Anon] 2019). To me, the work by Whiteread is, among various other conceptions which the work evokes in the viewer, an exercise in exploring her own grief and loss in personal and unforeseen ways. The work does not imply other modern practices such as tattooing, but reminds the viewer of the body and its interaction with the objects around it – the impressions one can leave behind, impressions which the artist has copied and suspended in time.

Field et al. (1997: 9) consider bereavement a universal, rather than a culturally variable, experience. Although I agree with this, a distinction has to be made between bereavement, which is the experience of having lost a loved one to death; grief, which is considered the reaction to bereavement; and mourning, which is the cultural response, and expressions through which grief and bereavement are conveyed (Brown & Goodman, 2005: 248). If one considers Brown and Goodman's (2005) distinctions between grief, bereavement and mourning as true, then I support this statement by Field et al. (1997). Currer (2001: 53) adds that although grief and bereavement may be generally universalised responses, the models constructed by means of which to work through grief have often been "culture-blind".[29] As an antithesis to commercialised, contemporary, formal funerary practices and the medical model of grief, individuals have initiated personalised and popularised grieving events. Individuals initiate their own personal mourning events such as commemorative tattooing in an attempt to re-enchant lives devoid of formal mourning rituals. Cann's (2014: 70) point of view adds to my argument in that she theorises that the "*act* of tattooing is itself a ritual for the mourner". By participating in the culture of tattooing, especially as a commemorative act, individuals incise their own skin with melancholy picture objects which represent or signify their grief and loss. The practice of tattooing represents a social shift in mourning. However, I wish to argue that this shift by the modern-day grieving individual has once again positioned melancholy objects as central and integral to their negotiations and expressions of grief and loss. In my collection of pigment ink drawings and digital drawings, there is visual repetition of digitally-generated symbols which were created in the wake of grief and loss. Like tattoos, these symbols are purposely placed on top of, in-between and behind

29 Currer (2001) also mentions research which explores cultural differences, and that the "culture-blind" models are now being critiqued.

other objects and landscapes as a means of exploring contemporary negotiations of grief and loss within the context of imagined places of bereavement. The symbols are created from a combination of personal, melancholy objects, socially-accepted images of loss and bereavement, and technological devices on which we can mourn today.

Experiencing the absence of the deceased may trigger an ephemeral moment of melancholy within the bereaved. This moment is experienced as the result of a reaction to remembering the deceased by voluntary or involuntary triggers. These triggers are melancholy objects, such as photographs (both physical and digital), artefacts, clothes, possessions, or even rediscovered, discarded items belonging to the deceased. Absence and loss are two experiences that have a difficult and contradictory relationship to each other. LaCapra (1999: 699) states that the relationship between absence and loss is that of distinction as well as conflation. He explains this by eliciting the experience of both trauma and post-trauma. There is a contradiction between the two experiences yet there is also a conflation in the sense that the post-traumatic experience reveals itself by haunting those who have experienced a traumatic event in the past. Therefore, that which is lost is absent; yet that which is absent is also present. The absence of the deceased does, in fact, exist; the deceased is remembered through various means of performance and melancholy objects, and is therefore made present. Loss is an experience accompanied by the feeling of absence. The ongoing feeling can be nostalgic or melancholic. In my research essay for my BA Fine Arts degree, *Obsessive Mourning: Personal Bereavement, Trauma and Presence* (2014), I refer to my deceased brother as the absentee; he was identified by his absence from my life; my loss was his lack of presence. Yet there are brief moments when he is remembered, and his presence/absence felt. It is through the act of remembering that my loss is experienced in the present. This is further explained by Huyssen (2003: 3-4):

> If the Romantics thought that memory bound us in some deep sense to times past, with melancholia being one of its luminal manifestations, then today we rather think of memory as a mode of re-presentation and as belonging ever more to the present. After all, the act of remembering is always in and of the present, while its referent is of the past and thus absent.

Huyssen analyses historical trauma and public memory in terms of history and the phenomena of forgetting and selective remembering. In his book *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, he connects these phenomena to the creation of art and the physical architectural sites which evoke memory, presence, and absence. In my research, I neither focus on collective memory or trauma, nor on architecture. Instead, my focus is on objects, sites, video games and the experience of the individual. However, the individual's experience is still relevant and considered in Huyssen's writing. Through the act of re-membering, as Huyssen states,

the permanent absence of a deceased person becomes present in a twofold manner. He/she becomes present in time as well as experience. His/her lifetime is incorporated into the life of the bereaved because he/she is pulled forcefully into presence (our present life) through the objects that represent him/her and, to that extent, memory.

This moment of memory is usually triggered by interaction with another person or a melancholy object which evokes the presence and memory of the deceased. As the bereaved experience such moments, a sort of utopia is created fleetingly in the mind, a moment that passes in an instant. Yet this is no true, conventional utopian ideal because, as the moment passes instantly, absence takes its place once again and the bereaved is left only with grief. It is as Huyssen (2003: 4) states: "Inevitably, every act of memory carry *[sic]* with it a dimension of betrayal, forgetting and absence". While betrayal is a harsh term, it is obvious that in the act of memory, one can become quite blissful and nostalgic. When two people reminisce about a loved one who passed away, there is this air of bittersweet happiness. The conversing friends or family will probably recollect a humorous memory, but after the laughter dies down or the nostalgia fades, a feeling of betrayal may set in. While the deceased has not betrayed anyone, the utter feeling of betrayal and loss is experienced. The flash of memory sets into motion what I interpret as an ephemeral moment of melancholy. It can be interpreted as a moment in which a veil is pulled back, or the experience of being briefly plunged into water and then instantly returned to the dry landscape, still dripping from the previous moment's immersion. This moment or glimpse causes an involuntary cascading reaction which is experienced in real time as well as distorted time within the bodies of the bereaved. For a moment, the bereaved person is mentally suspended within water, having temporarily entered another plane of consciousness, a place of remembrance and sorrow. Davies (2002: 178) refers to individuals who have said that experiencing the presence of their deceased mother is presented as a 'fleeting glimpse'. A moment of melancholy can be triggered internally or externally, creating an instance of shock. This glimpse may happen unintentionally and involuntarily. The experience of triggered memory sets the piercing or wounding experience into motion for the bereaved, who has not prepared for the experience at all.

LaCapra (1999: 700) states that "[t]he past is misperceived in terms of sheer absence of utter annihilation". According to LaCapra (1999: 700), the past remains as a "haunting presence" or "revenant". This simile brings to mind Adolph von Menzel's painting *Studio Wall* (1872) (Figure 2.5), which depicts a series of busts and pieces of modelled clay, as well as casts of deceased faces, hanging from a red wall. A dramatic light envelops these casts in an eerie manner, bringing them to life. The ephemeral moment is set into motion and generates an experience of the uncanny. One remembers someone who has passed away, but that is just it: he/she has *passed* and is no longer present in both senses of the word. The effect of the involuntary experience can be likened to sharp light from a candle flickering in front of lifeless pieces of clay casts. As in Von Menzel's painting, the light which, in this scene, is a metaphor for memory, gives the dead, clay

object life. Yet this life feels artificial and the illusion of memory is soon shattered.

The flickering of light, the act of memory and the experience of the moment of melancholy results, once more, in a feeling of loss. Through memory and imagination, one can give life artificially to the casts. Yet this life feels incomplete because the experience does not feel completely authentic. It is this synthetic feeling, in particular, that shocks the bereaved. Memory is the fleeting feeling that something was alive. The casts that are the catalyst in this process of the ephemeral moment might be real and present, but it is the feeling of the casts' artificial life that wounds and shocks. The cast is only clay; the clay merely painted on a canvas. One knows that it is empty through the artificial experience, and it is this specific moment which causes an ongoing experience of loss.

Yamamoto's *Utsusemi* (2005) (Figures 2.6–2.7) can also visually illuminate the bodily experience of the melancholy moment stimulated by an object. The sculpture consists of a single, constructed staircase made of salt. Yamamoto uses salt due to its intimate connection with Japanese death rituals. Salt is used in Japanese funerals, and represents purification and cleansing.[30] The artist uses this material for its connections to death as well as ritual. In creating *Utsusemi*, the artist constructs a salty staircase that resembles a wall. The salt is pressed into bricks and layered accordingly to construct the wall. The large-scale installation leaves an overwhelming impression because it is life-sized. The artwork can represent something that is monumental such as the overwhelming feeling of loss, a loss that is much heavier than oneself. Therefore, the stairs serve as a visual metaphor for the cumulative and escalating experience of grief and loss.

The work is also subjected to a 'catastrophic' revelatory event. An earthquake is simulated during the artwork's exhibition period, with the result that the work becomes permanently changed. To me, the moment the 'earthquake' occurs, and the effect it has on the work physically, could represent the moment that the melancholic memory, as a response, takes place in the body of the bereaved. It is a moment that shocks and forces permanent change to occur. The staircase is permanently damaged. Figure 2.6 depicts the artwork before the simulated earthquake. The large crack that is visible in the shadow of the staircase appears to be a premonition of what is about to happen, a warning that the work will be forever changed. The artwork's title *Utsusemi* translates into *After Earthquake*, suggesting that ruination will take place. An earthquake is an overwhelming natural disaster that is both terrifying and unstoppable. Consequently, all that one can do is to try and survive such a catastrophe. This can be related to the experience of death and loss, and the aftermath of such a tragedy. Imminent or sudden death cannot necessarily be stopped; one is merely forced to experience the confrontation and the consequences that may lead to permanent emotional and psychic change.

30 The artist's sister passed away at a young age, prompting him to investigate the ways in which Japanese culture and ritual surrounding death are constructed and meaningful.

Religiously-orientated bereaved people rely on religion to help them make sense of, and process, death and loss through religious ritual and mourning. However, since the Enlightenment, science and reason have, to a large extent, displaced religion as the mode of making sense of, and understanding, abstract concepts confronting humanity. Davies (2002: 230) observes that "[i]n shorthand terms, theology has been replaced by ecology, the soul by the body, heaven by earth, churches by leisure centres". Expressing grief is a human activity which is universally shared and wanted. In the past, ritualistic practice was the norm when it came to dealing with grief and loss. However, I am of the opinion that an aspect of grief and loss, which has remained constant, is melancholy objects. Even if the bereaved created and owned melancholy objects by accident, intentionally or as the result of observed ritual, they have been constantly present in mourning as the physical replacement for the deceased.

Grief is being navigated and negotiated in novel and unique ways by bereaved individuals who find their current, globalised and 'medicalised' models of grief to be lacking in terms of imbedded meaning. In my view, this sense of insufficiency is experienced partly because of the lack of importance and meaning that objects of grief are allocated in contemporary models of grief. Individuals respond to this lack by creating and embedding meaning in a variety of objects in their lives, or to the previous life of the deceased. In the past, melancholy objects were formally created objects in observed mourning rituals. There are, of course, exceptions to this norm. During the Egyptian funerary practices of the Old Kingdom (c. 2686–2160 BC), everyday objects were used by the lower classes as objects of mourning (Seidlmayer, 2000: 124). However, this trend changed to include objects created solely for the purpose of mourning in the First Intermediate Period (c. 2160-2055 BC) (Seidlmayer, 2000: 124). Contemporary melancholy objects are existing objects which are identified and recognised by the individual, rather than a group, as holding potent meaning, the presence of the deceased and grief. Alternatively, these may include uniquely created objects, once again by the individual, which contain personal meaning. Melancholy objects in contemporary society differ from previous objects in that they can include any everyday objects and even picture objects on the body of the bereaved.

2.2 Melancholy Device

All manner of objects surrounding the bereaved may serve as reminders or representations of the deceased. These melancholy objects are deeply personal and intimate to the bereaved. As illuminated in Whiteread's artwork *Embankment*, the object may also be overlooked artefacts which, following the death of a loved one, become elevated to a relic-like object. These artefacts symbolise and echo the deceased in life and serve as a reminder of them in the wake of their physical absence. The practice of replacing the absent deceased with a physical object is not necessarily a novel iteration or reaction to personal grief and loss. On the contrary, as mentioned

in the previous section, using an artefact as a replacement for the absent body of the deceased is indeed an ancient practice. Examples include the Skulls of Jericho and the Egyptian funerary practice of using a *ka* statue as a replacement for the body of the deceased in the *real* world.

The contemporary melancholy object is intimate, informal and may be anything, not necessarily an artefact specifically produced to replace the absent body of the deceased such as his/her ashes. While I have pointed out some novel melancholy objects such as tattooing, I wish to raise the question as to what other newly-generated melancholy objects may be recognised by the bereaved in contemporary grief. My analysis of this question is based on my hypothesis that contemporary technological devices may also be considered melancholy objects, comparable to the *ka* statue in Egyptian funerary practice. I am interested in whether the physical technological object becomes a melancholy object because of the data stored in its memory, or whether the bereaved only finds the intangible data to be comparable to a melancholy object. There is a common thread between the initial observed practices regarding melancholy objects and the identification of contemporary melancholy objects even if the former is the result of formal ritual and the latter that of spontaneous recognition in personal grief and loss. My conjecture is that the technological devices with which we surround ourselves have come to represent the synthetic 'body' to which the 'spirit', or in contemporary terms, the digitally-traced representation, of the deceased may unknowingly or unintentionally return.

Davies (2002: 93) explains that in terms of Egyptian funerary practice and ritual, Egyptian mourning practices were related to their own ritual and system of belief concerning life after death. In keeping with their belief, they considered the preservation, careful care of the body and, what they termed, the movable life force (Davies, 2002: 93). According to the Egyptian belief system and cultural practices, there is a form of afterlife in which the mobility of the soul, the *ka*, becomes the key element. The Egyptians believed that there are three elements to the soul, namely the *ba,* considered to be a kind of manifestation and combination of the dead as *ka* plus the dead body; the *ka,* the life force leaving the body after death, which has its own existence; and the *akh,* a part of the individual which had an existence among the stars removed and uninvolved in earthly activities (Davies, 2002: 93-94). A body or vessel to which the spirit/life force or *Ka* could return was essential. Thus, the *ka* statue replaced the decaying body of the deceased as a permanent representation thereof. The biological body decayed, and the life force separated from it in the event of death. Therefore, a synthetic body had to be constructed as a copy of the original to which the life force could return. The *ka* statue, accompanied by other elements and ritualistic practices, allowed for the artificial presence of the deceased (Figure 2.8).

I recognise a phenomenon resembling the characteristics of the *ka* statue (Figure 2.8) in contemporary technologies when it comes to grief and mourning. I believe this recognition can be compared to Belting's (2005: 45) identification of the lost body of the deceased being replaced by

the physical photograph, thus becoming a virtual body in the image. I wish to relate this comparison to the technological device as 'body' on which pictures of the deceased have been stored. Mosco (2004: 77) speaks of contemporary cyberspace lore in arguing that the miniature models of the deceased left behind in Egyptian tombs (*ka* statues) constituted a virtual community. However, in this regard, Mosco does not conceptualise the *ka* statue as being part of grief and mourning. My aim is to connect Mosco's statement regarding the *ka* statue to mourning and the contemporary melancholy object, in particular. This incidence, or rather, the activity of using a physical object as the synthetic body of, or physical proxy for, the deceased, is practised informally on a global scale. The synthetic 'body' of technological devices was not specifically created to house the spirits of the deceased, as is the case with historical melancholy objects and the *ka* statue. Technological devices and computers were originally designed to increase and endorse communication and are an integral element of most individuals' everyday functioning. Cell phones are used, among others, to take photographs, store photographs, videos, voice notes, messages, and other forms of recording. Technological devices are carriers of images that are thought to be memories, thus serving as external libraries of representations and photographs which we can access freely.

Following the dawn of the mechanical age, printed photographs were central to the memory and commemoration of the dead. Indeed, Belting (2005: 45) discusses the funeral images of the deceased, which used to be printed photographs, and how these played an integral role in replacing the absent deceased. Photographs are no longer necessarily printed; they are stored on devices, external storage hardware or on cloud-based storage systems. Photographs have changed their material quality as we know it; they are no longer tangible and have, according to Belting (2001: 25), "lost their physical connection to a carrier medium". In Belting's case, he speaks of the image/picture rather than just the photograph, specifically. However, in this regard, I do not completely agree with him. The picture still has a carrier medium; it is both technological and physical. The carrier medium, however, does not exist as material for a single purpose as in the case of printed photographs or paintings. Thus, Belting (2001: 25-26) notes that the medium is a hyper-medium, and represents as a result of input, not as a matter of existence.[31] However, the question is whether the technological object, when not displaying a picture, is the carrier medium in the same sense.

Digital photographs can be displayed on a screen. Thus, rather than leaving fingerprints on the material or paper of the photograph, these are left on the screen of the device in front of the displayed photograph. While new forms of housing new media are regarded as safer, this is not necessarily the case. The hard drives can break, become redundant, be stolen, fall on the floor or be submerged under water. Technological devices necessitate discipline and care, comparable to caring for a grave, such as regularly putting down flowers, ripping out the weeds, and dusting and

31 Belting goes on to discuss the role of digital media and images with regard to his argument pertaining to an anthropology of images.

cleaning the tombstone. The bereaved person is responsible for the existence of the deceased by storing data on numerous devices, and copying and duplicating it in order to ensure its existence through documentation. This documentation is twofold: the autobiographical existence of the deceased and the existence of recordings or pictures of the deceased during his/her lifetime. The data needs to be reiterated, copied, and duplicated as it is not physical in the same sense as a grave or niche. There is no physical representation of the deceased other than the technology, which usually resembles a flat, plastic brick and which also stores other videos and information. This reiterates the object's purpose: it is not solely dedicated to the recordings of the deceased, and has a multitude of purposes and potential to store a wide variety of data. On the other hand, a grave or urn of ashes, as a melancholy object, has a single purpose.

Representations, documentation, videos, and voice notes, to name a few, of the deceased are located between other data and documentation in the memories of the devices with which we surround ourselves and carry with us on a daily basis. Nevertheless, the question is whether the object, when not displaying an image, is the carrier medium in the same sense as ashes in urns or other recognised melancholy objects. I am of the opinion that the physical object, that is, the technological device, has the potential to become a melancholy object in the same way that any other object can. In retaining certain data, such as photographs, videos, voice recordings, messages, or documents, reminiscent of, representing or belonging to the deceased, the technological device holds personal meaning and potential for presenting images and traces pertaining to the deceased. The 'black box' of the cell phone or computer becomes a melancholy object because of what it represents or houses within its own memory.

Computers, smart phones and/or tablets have become, to draw a comparison between them and the *ka* statue, the technological 'statue-corpse-substitutes' of the deceased. The screen or interface may have many facades, but among them are the stored portraits, movements, online 'presence' and social media pages of individuals who are no longer alive. Haverinen (2014: 165) supports this in saying that "[t]his is why immaterial objects, such as profile pages in social media or even phone numbers, can carry sentimental meanings for the bereaved". The conveniently located devices are far easier to reach and more accessible compared to the historical geographic locations and artefacts allocated to mourning and the deceased. Whether it is a matter of convenience, lack of institutional funerary practice or logistical difficulty, the device is the preferred object for the expression of grief in present-day mourning amongst select individuals. The roadside memorial, the tombstone and the grave, and the memorial plaque can be photographed and stored on devices resembling portable shrines that can be carried in pockets, handbags or backpacks.

In my own art-making process, I have attempted to bring the experience of grief and loss into my art making. However, what was necessary in order to attempt to communicate grief and loss to the viewer was not representations of the deceased himself, but of the experience of grief

and loss. Thus, over the past seven years, I began to investigate the process of grief, and have come up with individually- and personally-generated symbols to signify and articulate my grieving process, difficulties, findings, and melancholy objects/devices. The generated symbols are 'copied' using the Ctrl+C function and are used in most of the works which I created. This aids the attempt to interlace the sites and experiences of grief explored in the collection of work. However, it also serves another purpose, namely to reprise the overarching and continued experiences, environments and objects of grief and loss. One of the works in which the cell phone symbol is used is the digital drawing *Conduit* (2019) (Figure 2.3). In the digital drawing, the cell phone symbol has been layered in front of, and over, a wooden box. The rectangular box itself consists of a compilation of photographic detail, and digitally-drawn elements. Over this box, small cell phone symbols are lined up and either cut out and pasted, digitally, or placed over the box. The small lines of cell phone symbols resemble windows as a threshold between two environments. The box, which has been stuffed into an envelope, represents the ashes of the deceased. The technological device 'infects' and influences the box of ashes in the same way that the images and likeness of the deceased may infiltrate and reside in the cell phone of the bereaved person. The surface of the wooden box is changed and influenced by the copied cell phone symbols. In another work, the *Semblance* series (Figure 2.9–2.14), potential melancholy devices are silkscreened over drawings of hands holding the device. However, the devices are omitted from the hands. Instead, empty hands, seemingly holding the absence of the device, are drawn. All these objects and gestures are framed by a digitally-manipulated funerary wreath. The series of drawings resembles a series of vignettes, each of which encapsulate a specific interaction or relationship with a device that, in turn, represents grief and loss.

By depicting the technological device on the façade of the box of ashes in *Conduit* (Figure 2.3), I attempt to reiterate the strange yet symbiotic relationship that the two objects and, in effect, the experiences, have on one another today. Indeed, while the technological device is not exactly a precise reincarnation of the *ka* statue, it bears close resemblances to, and connections with it in terms of potential function and representation. The contemporary technological device is neither static, like the *ka* statue, nor a unique, ritualised object created solely for the purpose of mourning and representation of the deceased. Yet there are striking similarities between the two objects regarding their potential to serve as objects that represent and remind the bereaved of the deceased. The *ka* statue does this through ritual and generated symbolism while the device does so through personal application and intentional use. The technological device may be the contemporary artefact for the memorialisation of the image of the deceased, both moving and static. Contrary to the objects of the past, the device and computer are objects which are central to the everyday life of the bereaved and they have the added function of bringing back the memory and representation of the deceased into the daily functioning of the bereaved. Contemporary, technological, melancholy objects are not necessarily associated with observed ritual in mourning,

but rather with personal choice in terms of the way in which to memorialise and enact grief and loss.

2.3 "Living" Melancholy Objects

Melancholy objects have another interesting characteristic, namely the relationship between the bereaved and the object itself. Mathijssen (2017: 2) develops Gibson's conjectures on melancholy objects, and concludes that these objects play a central role in the changing relationship between the bereaved and the deceased. Davies (2002: 5) states that "[g]rief is that human emotion which expresses death's rupturing of relationships". He adds that grief is a form of self-reflection and reflects on the depth of human life. The question, then, is whether melancholy objects are an attempt to continue and reattach the ruptured relationship through the physicality and presence of the objects themselves rather than merely to what and who they represent.

In line with Davies' assumption, my conjecture is that it is the sheer absence of the deceased that ruptures the relationship in grief. However, the melancholy object and device, as inanimate, physical replacements for the ruptured relationship, are attempts to make the relationship central to the everyday life of the bereaved once again. Mathijssen (2017: 2) highlights a ritualistic perspective with regard to grief and melancholy objects, and argues that such a perspective can stimulate "continuing bonds as a process of negotiation in which the bereaved separate, relocate and integrate the deceased in their ordinary lives". I connect Mathijssen's theory to my own hypothesis that a medical model of grief may indeed be lacking in terms of agency and efficiency due to the diminished importance and significance given to melancholy objects which provide a sense of continuity in grief.

According to Mathijssen (2017: 14), the ritual process is not necessarily always a process which ends in the melancholy object becoming a part of the everyday life of the bereaved.[32] In most cases, the bereaved never discards a melancholy object. Though it may change in form or location, it remains significant in the life of the bereaved.[33] The relationship between the bereaved and the object may change with time yet melancholy objects have a specific presence that makes it nearly impossible for the bereaved to let go of. Melancholy objects are impoverished; they stand in for the lost body of the deceased, but they will never be able to substitute them. This yearning for substitution is wounding; the objects may become a faux body for the deceased and will seldom

32 In most cases, in which the author conducted interviews with bereaved individuals in the Netherlands, in various stages and circumstances of grief, it was found that the bereaved either moved the melancholy object outside of his/her central everyday life or removed it completely by storing it (Mathijssen, 2017: 8-10).

33 However, there is one exception: the remains of the deceased are often scattered in specifically selected spots (Mathijssen, 2017: 11). The remains are not thrown away; instead, rituals are created in which the ashes' identity shifted. The presence of the deceased was replaced by that of the specific place where the ashes were scattered. Even in such cases, the melancholy objects are not lost, but have transformed into the immovable places and spaces of loss.

be discarded on purpose because they echo a body already lost. In my opinion, the discarding of melancholy objects gives rise to a second lamentation. Thus, the object is kept even if it is in a closet or dark loft because the bereaved struggles to discard it.

I associate the impoverished relic-like objects of melancholy, and their potential for continuity with an episode of the British television series, *Black Mirror* (2011 -), created by Charlie Brooker (Figures 2.15–2.17). The episode[34] entitled *Be Right Back (2013)* involves the death of Ash Starmer (Domhall Gleeson), Martha's (Hayley Atwell) fiancé, after the couple's recent move to Ash's secluded, childhood home. The melancholy object that the bereaved (Martha) eventually has is a synthetic body of Ash, which has been implanted with his 'personality'. This personality was derived from digital data, such as social media posts, voice notes, videos, and photographs of him.[35]

Following Ash's death, Martha is initially infatuated with, and devoted to, her phone or laptop on which she communicates with 'him'. There are different stages with regard to her immersion into the 'personality' of the deceased. At first, they merely exchange emails. Later, the program comments that they can take it a step further by being able to talk to each other, to which Martha agrees. She talks to 'him' constantly rather than with anyone else. Finally, the program suggests that they can once again make the experience more *real*. She orders a body onto which his image and personality are uploaded. In viewing this episode, one is also confronted with the potentially terrifying monopoly that companies, whose services or future services are founded on the principle of substitution, could have over grieving individuals. The bereaved are at their most vulnerable, and desperate to fill the absence of a physical body, in the wake of their grief.

In the end, Martha attempts to force her faux fiancé, her 'living' melancholy object, to commit suicide. She realises that the body in front of her is not truly her beloved, but a very good imitation of him.[36] She recognises the utter eeriness of her choice to synthetically revive her fiancé, and is confronted with a being whom she supposedly knows but who has failed to replace the deceased in the end (Figures 2.16–2.17). He is about to do as she commands by jumping off a cliff when she hopelessly utters that her Ash would not commit such an act because any human has free will and would be terrified at such a command. In turn, the synthetic Ash absorbs this information

34 Season 2, Episode 1

35 After Ash's death, a friend introduces Martha to a service that uses all the data of the deceased on online platforms, as well as personal computers, emails, photographs and videos, to synthetically create a virtual personality with whom to communicate. Initially, this alien concept frightens and angers Martha. After some time has passed, however, she realises that she is pregnant and feels the need to share the news with her fiancé immediately. Following this realisation, she turns to the 'fiancé' on her laptop.

36 As her melancholy object, he becomes a unique burden. He is like an infant who is still learning new things – things that her fiancé is unable to learn because he is dead. She cannot talk to him about shared experiences because he did not share them with her; he is still learning by following her orders and becoming more human in the process. Yet this human into which he evolves is not her deceased fiancé. Instead, he is becoming a new being with new experiences and opinions.

and starts sobbing, pleading with her not to make him jump. Of course, she then cannot force her beloved to kill himself.

Martha's relationship with her melancholy object changes significantly throughout the episode. Initially, she and the object are inseparable; however, as time passes by, and her responses and reactions to grief evolve, she begins to push the object away. It should be noted, however, that this is a normal process. At first, the object is central to the lives of the bereaved, but as time passes by, the "intensity of [their] grief changes and so too does the meaning, value and emotional effect of" objects (Gibson, 2004: 288). The clothes of the deceased may be worn daily even if they are too big, too small, or made for a different gender. Firstly, objects enable the bereaved to "separate the deceased from a passive setting" and, secondly, to "recreate physical as well as mental proximity" (Mathijssen, 2017: 7). The objects then start to hurt the bereaved because they memorialise their grief. Gibson (2004: 289) theorises that the melancholy object itself becomes a memorialisation of grief:

> However, the melancholy object as a memorialized object could also signify the incompletion of mourning – a reminder that grief never entirely goes away. The melancholy object is then the affective remainder of residual trace of sadness and longing in non-forgetting.

The melancholy object is not only reminiscent of the deceased, but also of the grief and trauma of the bereaved in mourning. One realises that the melancholy object is not one's own property to take; thus, taking the object involves a certain sense of awkwardness. It is not one's to keep, yet the owner is deceased; the object is 'orphaned', making one the adoptive 'parent'. The bereaved may feel that the objects then need to be placed out of sight. Martha's melancholy object, the synthetic Ash, is also placed out of sight. At the end of the episode, the viewer can see that Ash is moved into Martha's attic, having only a small sitting room in which to function. Annually, she allows her now born and aged daughter to see the 're-animated' Ash. Contrary to this reaction, some artists have chosen to multiply the melancholy object to monumental proportions, as in Rachel Whiteread's artwork *Embankment* (Figure 2.4).

The *Black Mirror* episode represents a unique response on the melancholy object, namely to animate the object. I surmise that, similarly, the melancholy device has a strong 'living' presence and can continue to 'live'. Among other technological devices, personal computers, smart phones, tablets, and gaming consoles can continue to 'live' after their 'parent' has passed away. *Facebook* pages, *Instagram* profiles, *Twitter* accounts and profiles on any other social media platforms or forums of individuals will continue to exist and remain active, and will only be removed or renamed as a memorial page after a living person has intervened.

One of the melancholy objects which is central to my grief is my brother's personal computer. The computer can be seen standing as tall as the church to its left in the landscape of the digital drawing *Sacrosanctity* (Figure 1.7). As evidenced in the title of the work and judging from the enormity of its scale in comparison to the church, the computer case is regarded as an extremely important and powerful melancholy device. After my brother's death, I took his computer as a replacement for my own; I then worked with and around all the data and work he had accumulated on the machine without erasing any of it. The computer's name is the same as my brother's and the object has since represented him in my everyday life. As previously stated, these objects mimic life in that they can be metaphorically awakened and used, interacted with and put to sleep again. Clearly, they cannot think freely or raise opinions as the deceased could in life. Yet the potential to interact via input and the pressing of buttons is unique and potent in its own way in terms of representing someone who has passed away. Therefore, there is an interactive continuity to their existence.

Another important question pertains to the effect on the bereaved should these faux living mechanical objects 'die',[37] and whether this will trigger a type of loss with which the bereaved is familiar in grief. I was in the ill-fated position of experiencing a second lamentation when an unfortunate burglary resulted in my brother's computer, my own melancholy device, being stolen. What followed was the same series of inexplicable and devastating experiences of loss, but not to the degree of the shock of his death in 2013. The involuntary loss of the melancholy device resulted in the instant and, once again, constant reminder of grief. This time, however, there was no physical replacement for the deceased to which to return; it, too, was absent. Along with the computer, all the additionally backed up videos, photographs, messages, and 'evidence' pertaining to my brother, which I had in my possession, were also stolen.[38]

The materiality of the 're-animated' character of Ash, as well as the loss of my own technological memory boxes, should be considered. The melancholy objects referred to thus far are tangible. In the case of Ash, the deceased is made physical by a company which provides such services; since merely communicating on an interface basis was no longer good enough. A body, or something tangible is yearned for. In my own case, the videos, photographs, and recordings of my brother's voice could no longer become physical in the same sense – apart from printing the photographs of him or interacting with the technological devices. Videos cannot be touched or made tangible in the same sense; the moving image requires media to be able to function. The technological melancholy object that is left to most grieving individuals today is the hard drive, tablet, cell phone and computer itself. In this regard, these technological objects, tools, and devices become melancholy devices. I surmise that the technological object has the innate quality of becoming a melancholy device to the bereaved, depending on the data displayed and stored on it. The object

37 If the machine breaks, becomes too old to use or is lost or stolen.

38 A portable hard drive with a dedicated folder of photographs, videos, writings, and projects of, and about, my brother.

and digital data or images of the deceased are melancholy objects. Yet, in some cases, one cannot be displayed without the other; thus, the combination of the two comprises the melancholy device.

The technology we have at our disposal today (such as hard drives) could, possibly, become obsolete in the near future, in the same way that the floppy disk and VHS tapes have become. It is our thinking about technology as immortal, in a sense, and our viewing it as the absolute solution to our problems, that is problematic. Not only may the hard drive break, be lost or stolen, but the means of reading the data on that particular piece of hardware soon may also no longer be available or easily accessible. Thus, the idea that the digital photographs, videos, and recordings, when stored, are perfectly preserved, is false. However, videos, recordings, and multiple digital photographs are the closest one can get to the moving image of the deceased once again. The technology upon which we rely is uncertain in terms of longevity. Still, it is the only way of experiencing the deceased as a moving picture. While it is far from creating the true bodily experience of being in the presence of the deceased in life, it is a comforting compromise.

Two artists who use objects as artefacts to symbolise memory and memorialisation are Jan van der Merwe and Alice Anderson. In both portfolios of work, physical objects are used as artefacts to enact memory and memorialisation. In the case of artists, this is not necessarily memorialisation in terms of death and grief, but rather the memorialisation of memory itself. In Anderson's *Memory Objects* (2011, 2012), the artist coils coloured copper wire around objects, encasing them in a shell of thinly-wired copper. Various types, shapes, and sizes of objects are encased in wire. Among the objects are a laptop (Figure 2.18), an album (Figure 2.19), and a pair of glasses (Figure 2.20). All three objects may trigger a cascade of memories for many individuals viewing the works. Due to the copper encasing, they become universally recognised while remaining uniquely personal objects around which the agency of memory is woven. The pair of glasses could be compared to, and are reminiscent of, my brother's kept pair of glasses, seen on the left in the first stage of the work *Stages* (Figure 1.3). Anderson's glasses are not of the same style as those in *Stages*. However, her glasses evoke the same personal connection made with the melancholy object seen in my own work. They are reminiscent of the same glasses worn by the deceased because the glasses in Anderson's work are transformed into those in my own memory through their presentation as an enclosed and encased item onto which my own impression of the personal object may be projected. The same could be said of the *Laptop* or even the *Album* in that they remind viewers of their own albums and the collections of photographs and likenesses stored in or on these objects.

In Jan van der Merwe's work, the artist recreates poignant objects out of scrap and rusted metal. Previously overlooked pieces of material are transformed into objects which may remind viewers of their own memories connected with them. In Van der Merwe's work *Letters from the Past*

(Figure 2.21), the artist created life-sized envelopes out of rusted metal. The letters are delicately shaped in the form of the enclosed envelope and have patches stuck to them, resembling postage stamps. The artist, like Anderson, chose an object which is recognisable and, in Van der Merwe's case, transformed it by recreating the object in a material which is far removed from its original state. Paper envelopes are fragile and can be short lived. Yet, in recreating the object in metal, it is made to become more durable and lasting. The rust on the envelope, however, reminds the viewer of its former fragility and, by extension, the fragility of memory and decay. In the digital drawing *Conduit* (Figure 2.3), the wooden box of ashes is stored within an open envelope. The envelope itself is creased and torn yet it will remain permanently in that moment of deterioration as it has been digitally captured and copied so that it remains permanently damaged. In the case of Van der Merwe and Anderson, both artists chose to use physical objects to remind and represent memory to the viewer whereas in my own work, I elected to use digitally-created and stylised symbols to represent memory and the experience of grief and loss.

In the *Symbols* (2018-2019) series (Figures 2.22–2.25), encrypted symbols that have been generated throughout my grieving process are used to replace funerary portraits inside embossed funerary wreaths. The series of embossed wreaths encasing a circular, repeating, unique symbol is the result of attempting to navigate the complex experience of grief and loss to generate universalised symbols to represent personal loss. The wreath is reminiscent of funerary wreaths used both historically and today. However, it is embossed, fixed into the skin of the paper itself (Figure 2.26). Flowers are intimate objects which are widely used in the mourning and grieving process across many cultures and religions. They remind the viewer of grief and loss, and serve as the introductory frame of the work.

A photograph of the deceased is often displayed in the middle of the wreath. However, this has been replaced with the circular, patterned symbols. The symbols in the centre of the artwork are silkscreened in the colour blue. The colour tone is used as a conceptual peg, reminding the viewer of the computer, the infamous *blue screen of death* which most individuals who own a computer using the Microsoft operating system have experienced. Most mechanical computer parts (hardware) may have an element of blue displayed on them. Moreover, blue is the colour historically used in the painting discipline to identify and represent the most holy and important figure, such as the Virgin Mary. Blue also has cultural connotations of depression and sadness. Furthermore, feeling blue is a term widely used to describe a general feeling of sadness and depression.

All the symbols in the *Stages* series were generated on a computer using Adobe software. The symbols were conveniently created to be able to generate multiple exact copies throughout the portfolio of drawings in different media and using different processes. Some symbols are printed using silk-screening methods, as seen in the *Symbols* (Figures 2.22–2.25) series. Others were

used as a brush mark in Adobe Photoshop when generating digital drawings, as seen in the digital drawings *Stages, Sacrosanctity* (Figure 1.7), and *Conduit* (Figure 2.3). The repetition of symbols may appear to resemble an encrypted message to the viewer engaging with the work. Some symbols are private while others are more generalised. Not all of the symbols share a connection with death. In fact, only the gravestone symbol alludes to death, specifically, while the others seem to be ordinary, everyday symbols. However, this is the point I wish to make, namely the urge to make, and result of making, grief central to the everyday life of the bereaved via the melancholy object/device. The gravestone (Figure 2.27) is not only a representation of a physical gravestone, but contains elements which, it has been suggested, have been produced digitally. The stone itself is surrounded by small lines invading it, as if the stone has been digitally conjured up on a screen rather than planted physically in a graveyard. This links with the digital grieving process and the use of technology to commemorate the deceased on a synthetic communal platform. The screen (Figure 2.24) presents the viewer's relationship with the computer/user interface as a new viewing medium used to look at photographs. The screen is accompanied by a mouse cursor, seemingly hovering inside it. This cursor connects to the computer screen as the cursor is one of our only input devices and influence on the screen.[39] The moving and clicking of a cursor suggests that human movement becomes imminent in hardware, in the interconnected signalling and transference of information and data. The mouse curser suggests the human influence or mode of transportation in the software of the computer. Apart from the screen, the PlayStation controller (Figure 2.22) is also the technological device used to influence and enact change in the software displayed on the screen. The controller may be the representation of its potential to connect mourning to video games, specifically, and the notion of having an avatar as the representative of the bereaved in a *virtual* world.

These technological symbols are opposed and compared to symbols of organic objects and humans. The first is a small representation of a human. The symbol of a man (Figure 2.23) is a personal sign that was generated by my brother himself, and is the product of a small architectural sketch.[40] This icon refers to the personal element which everyone has in their experience of loss. The next symbol depicts a small detail of a succulent (Figure 2.25). During my initial period of grief and loss, I experienced the act of gifting flowers to grieving individuals as contradictory in nature. A bunch of flowers is a prominent *vanitas* symbol, and is immediately associated with impermanence and the fleeting quality of life. Once the flower is picked, it is immediately and constantly in a state of decay. To me, a suitable replacement for these plants of mourning is the cactus or succulent. Not only are cacti and succulents immensely popular plants in contemporary society, but they are also integrally connected to the South African landscape and culture. Cacti and succulents are extremely familiar to most South Africans, and are particularly personal to

39 One could also use a stylus or one's own hands on a touch screen; however, one's body is unable to make software changes without the use of, and essential barrier, that is, the hardware (carrier) of the software.

40 My brother studied Architecture, and received his bachelor's degree (B. Arch) in 2013, a few months before his death.

me. These plant replacements can continue living for a few weeks once removed from the soil and may, subsequently, be planted once again. This continuity in their existence is reminiscent of the continuity of the moving image or avatar of the deceased in video games, videos, and digital images.

In my body of work the scope is broadened with reference to the succulent symbol in *Symbols* to include the pigment ink drawing explorations of cacti and succulents as well. When a succulent or cactus is removed from the soil, it is suspended in a state between living and dying and, if left without sustenance and soil for too long, it will perish. However, it has the potential to continue to live if there is a deliberate intervention. Unlike the continuous life of succulents or cacti, the life of the deceased is cut short. Nevertheless, the suspension and displacement of succulents and cacti are similar to the displacement of the likeness of the deceased and traces of their image in *virtual* environments. The digital images relating to the deceased, as well as their likeness, continue to move, to be edited, changed, or watched as moving videos. In the pigment ink drawing entitled *Faux* (Figure 2.28), hand-drawn, artificial hearts which are medical prostheses connote this suspension between the living and dying of the body. These types of prostheses, namely hearts, are temporary, intermediary, functional objects typically used to bridge the time between the removal of one's heart and receiving a heart transplant, or if transplantation is impossible. Thus, it is an intermediate synthetic solution to a critical health problem.

The investigation into cacti and succulents as precious mourning objects is evident in the meticulous and fine drawings. The plants are drawn using mostly a 0.005 pigment ink pen, reflecting the care and attention given to the object. Most of the plant drawings refer to specimens from the garden of my childhood home: objects which, after experiencing the death of a sibling, began to acquire a new identity and value. Some plants are delicately and sparsely drawn while others resemble shrubs containing dead, dried out leaves, intimating a feeling of unease and tension by means of the dark crevices behind the cactus leaves. Most often the motifs accompanying these plants are hands, typically in gestures of blessing, holding seemingly empty spaces, pressing buttons on a controller, or stretching out to reach something unattainable. In *Sacrosanctity* and *Incredulity,* the signalling hand resembles the gesture of a religious blessing. In *Incredulity* (Figure 1.17), the pointing hand is reminiscent of Caravaggio's *Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1607–1602) (Figure 1.18) which is mentioned in Chapter 1. Such references suggest a comparison between Christian institutional mourning practices, which are often experienced as fragmentary and insufficient, and alternative image practices, which aim to supplement them. Hands are central to the interactivity between our bodies and the digital apparatus and their pictures. However, the important functioning and interaction of our hands are forgotten when working on devices and computers because the movements and gestures become second nature. Users become immersed in the displays on the

screen while the gestures and inputs made with our hands become automatic and mechanical. In the *Semblance* series, the device is removed from the gesturing hands, pointing to their existence as the overlooked yet primary mode of tangible interaction with the screen.

CHAPTER 3: INTERLACED SITES

In this final chapter, my conjectures of the objects, devices, and experiences investigated in the previous two chapters are now considered in more depth in terms of the sites to which they are connected or with which they are associated. Various sites are considered with reference to grief, loss, and mourning practices. Following my investigation, in Chapters 1 and 2, into the playing of video games in commemoration and objects which represent grief, respectively, I now turn to sites of grief. I differentiate between the various types of sites of grief, namely everyday sites, as well as digital and *virtual* sites. These sites include the cemetery, private memorials, roadside memorials, grassroots shrines, *virtual* cemeteries, online memorials, and digital memorials. I ask how a place may be imaginatively transformed by grief for certain individuals. Moreover, I examine whether this same transformation could take place on digital and *virtual* platforms and, finally, how these diverse sites interact with and influence one another. In the first section, *Memorial Sites,* I investigate whether the various experiences of physical, digital and *virtual* sites overlap with one another to generate an interlaced experience of place. Here, other disparate places may reveal themselves through the site acting as a portal where memory, recollection and, ultimately, commemoration occur. In the second section, *Transition and Continuity,* photographs are considered heterotopia-like places (as defined by Michel Foucault) where other disparate places may reveal themselves. This revelation is triggered by the *punctum* (conceptualised by Roland Barthes) which causes a bodily reaction of memorialisation within the body of the bereaved viewer.

Throughout history, places used to commemorate the deceased have earned importance as part of formal or observed practice (Ariès, 2008; Davies, 2002; Belting, 2001). In the previous two chapters of this dissertation, I have alluded to these places in my discussions regarding the objects and video game environments used in the grieving process. Examples of historical sites of mourning include the burial site, the place in which the *ka* statue resides (Belting, 2001), the cemetery (Ariès, 2008; Sloane, 2018) or the body of the bereaved in bereavement (Belting, 2001; Cann, 2014; Ord, 2009; Sloane, 2018). Cann (2014: 22) connects place and memorialisation in her investigations of contemporary bereavement when stating that the "*place* of memorialisation is important because of the memories of the living and the meaning assigned to the location in the context of grief and loss". In this chapter, I argue that in contemporary terms, the places used to commemorate the deceased are not only located in traditional and formal sites, such as the cemetery or wall of remembrance, but also at the specific locations where acts, activities or the death of the deceased took place. I add to these places of commemoration the potential for technology to be used in the act of commemoration. I surmise that technological devices and computers are also sites that can be accessed in commemoration since, similar to a portal, they open *virtual* and digital sites, as well as environments where commemoration takes place.

I hypothesise that all platforms used to potentially express grief and loss, such as the melancholy object, device, photograph, video game world, online (web)sites or places of commemoration, mediate experiences of memorialisation. Thus, a conduit or place holder is used in order to commemorate. I suggest that the various sites and objects of grief and loss become imaginatively interwoven through the act of remembrance and that the diverse sites, such as technological devices housing digital photographs, *virtual* environments or generated sites of commemoration, *real*-world memorial sites and the bodily reaction of memory collude and collide in the act of remembrance.[41] This interweaving may occur during acts of commemoration that take place either online or at specific places used for commemoration. Despite their diversity, however, these sites have the potential to interlace, inform and influence one another via the body of the bereaved. I ask how these various interlacing sites may be explored visually. To answer this question, various sites, experiences of sites, memory in bereavement and the contemporary responses of the bereaved in terms of site are investigated in the following two sections titled *Memorial Sites* and *Transition and Continuity.* Moreover, poignant examples of artists who respond to sites, be it *real*-world sites, digital sites, or sites of the body, are discussed. Such artists, like Christian Boltanski and David Hockney, each display unique visual responses, performances, and questions regarding site and how it potentially relates to grief and loss. By investigating these examples, I conclude that sites where the bereaved may choose to commemorate the deceased, may be imaginatively enacted or engendered by means of melancholy objects and devices[42] which hold within them the potential to connect to other places and sites of memory. The interlacing of experiences of memory is intimately connected to place. Similarly, these aspects are purposefully connected and interlaced in my artistic explorations of places of commemoration. When viewing the work, the body of the viewer or the bereaved becomes the site where, in reacting and engaging with the work, memorialisation occurs.

However, in order to investigate the intermingling of the experience of various sites, the site with which we most commonly associate death and commemoration, namely the cemetery, is discussed first. Cemeteries have long been places used to commemorate the deceased and perform mourning practices. In his research on death in the last 1 000 years, Philippe Ariès (2008) clearly presents the history of the cemetery and how its identity shifted along with social and cultural circumstances. In the first section – *Memorial Sites* – I investigate and problematise the marginalisation of cemeteries, with consideration to Ariès' poignant documentation and investigation into earlier death and mourning practices in which the cemetery plays an integral part. I bring to bear David Sloane's (2018) investigations into the recent history and current circumstances of the cemetery in America on the contemporary cemetery in South Africa. Within this context, I then consider the increasingly popular option of private memorial sites such as the

41 It is this collision which also reinforces the ephemeral moment of melancholy discussed in Chapter2.

42 Included in melancholy devices is the computer or video game console by means of which the bereaved player may access *virtual* environments of video games in commemoration.

Avalon Memoriam in Bloemfontein, South Africa.

Grassroots memorials and roadside shrines relate to a dramatic event which led to the death of a loved one. This event may be a traumatic event of loss, or a commemorative event. I wish to investigate how places pertaining to death, grief and memory are transformed by such events. Peter Jan Margry and Cristina Sanchez-Carretero's (2011) writings regarding grassroots memorials and contemporary memorialisation are regarded as key sources when investigating specific grassroots memorials. While the importance of such memorials is highlighted when considering my brother's roadside memorial in Namibia, personal memorials such as the Japanese Butsudan are considered in the realm of in-home commemoration (Cann, 2014). The effect of specific poignant events and experiences expressed at specific places is considered with reference to Santino's (2011: 99) concept of grassroots memorials acting as portals which open up to the "other-world". The response of commemorating in places where the deceased passed away is elaborated upon with reference to Boltanski's sound installation *Animitas* (2014) which echoes commemoration and focuses on poignant moments passing as small bells resonating in the wind of the Atacama Desert in Chile.

We have an innate need to commemorate the deceased in tangible ways (Sloane, 2018: 160; Davies, 2002: 25; Ariès, 2008: 202; Gibson, 2004: 289; Ord, 2009: 196; Cann, 2014: xi). The sites pertaining to the deceased therefore become extremely important in the life of the bereaved. These sites not only include the cemetery, but also sites or shrines in homes, online, or on digital and *virtual* websites and environments. The device itself becomes a site where potential portals may reveal themselves to the bereaved when engaging with photographs, videos, or other visual media (web)sites, through the interface of the screen. Alternatively, new and unforeseen sites may be included, mediated, and structured through the individual's choice of commemoration, such as the body of the bereaved.

In the second section – *Transition and Continuity* – I consider the relevance of Barthes' concepts of the *studium* and the *punctum* to the reactions of the bereaved to photographs of the deceased. In his book *Camera Lucida*, Barthes (1980: 26-27) discusses and contrasts two experiences when looking at the photograph: the *studium* and the *punctum.* The *studium* piques the viewer's general interest when gazing at the image (Barthes, 1980: 26). The *punctum,* however, is explained as a wounding or stabbing reaction to viewing a specific photograph (Barthes, 1980: 26-27). Barthes connected these experiences when viewing photographs of his deceased mother when she was a child. I liken this unique detail that hurts the viewer to the ephemeral moment of melancholy[43] in the act of memory. Barthes argues that photographs block memory. He states that the photograph is "never, in essence, a memory" and that it is actually a counter-memory (1980: 91). I agree with Barthes, who adds that the photograph "*fills the sight by force*" which does not account for

43 Discussed in Chapters 1 and 2

the bodily experience encompassing all the senses in the act of memory. Thus, the ephemeral moment of melancholy may be triggered by a photograph, but the photograph itself is not what recalls the memory; it is the cascading and flooding of the bodily experience of memory that leads to the moment of remembrance. The photograph and the *punctum* may only be a trigger.

The *punctum* is one aspect of the photograph which wounds the viewer. Following this wounding experience is the viewer's reaction to it. The photograph has the potential to reveal sites and moments in memory to the bereaved. This revelation is elaborated upon through the scope of Foucault's (1986: 24) theory of the heterotopia, which is defined as:

> […] real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.

Foucault talks about the heterotopia in the context of public cultural places that are interpreted as being on the cusp and edges of everyday society. One heterotopic place identified by Foucault (1986: 26) is the cemetery. However, my aim is not necessarily to discuss the cemetery as a heterotopic place, but rather to elaborate on its potential to reveal other sites and to ask whether the experience of interacting with a photograph may be experienced in this way. According to Foucault (1986: 26), heterotopias "are most often linked to slices in time – which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies". Foucault (1986: 26) states that the heterotopia is only able to function at its full capacity once there is a complete break with our understanding of traditional time. Moving parallel to this heterochrony, on the other hand, is what Foucault (1986: 26) refers to as a "quasi-eternity". Foucault applies this to the cemetery as an example; however, I would apply this to the experience of the ephemeral moment of melancholy when engaging with a photograph. In recollection, there is an ambiguous experience of space and time. Other realities, histories and places collude and intersect the real-time experience of being in remembrance. I have alluded to this in Chapter 2, when discussing LaCapra's (1999) theories of absence and loss, as well as Huyssen's (2003) statement that in remembrance, memories are brought to the present. A similar experience of colluding realities in the act of recollection can be identified in online digital and *virtual* commemoration. Real time, game time and the individual's experience of time collude in the site of the *virtual* world. In these experiences of warped time, different sites may also seem to interlace, influence, and indicate to one another sites or visual traces of individuals who are captured in a specific time pertaining to their own lives. The time capture of visual traces, such as photographs or videos, is repeated and revisited digitally; it remains static in its time capture yet the time experienced by the viewer/

bereaved always continues and changes.

Heidegger (1973: 7) speaks of sculpture as being an embodiment of place, which includes human encounters. I argue that melancholy objects and devices, like sculptures and other works of art, become places where interactions between a viewer/bereaved and object take place. Heidegger (1973: 6) remarks that "[w]e would have to learn to recognize that things themselves are places and do not merely belong to a place". In view of this, I hypothesise that the photograph, as melancholy object, has the potential to reveal itself through the wounding experience of the *punctum.* I surmise that the bodily reaction to the *punctum* is the ephemeral moment of melancholy. This reaction from the viewer or bereaved reveals the photograph's potential to act like a heterotopic site which opens up to sites of memory, not necessarily connected to the photograph or reference but, ultimately, reminiscent of the deceased. To support my argument, I investigate two photographic sources as examples, namely a photograph my brother took of his hotel room in Tokyo and the photographic collage of a hotel room in Kyoto taken by David Hockney. I assert that all of this is experienced within the body of the viewer or bereaved where, ultimately, memorialisation takes place.

3.1 Memorial Sites

In Chapter 2, I discussed contemporary responses to death and loss which developed from the Enlightenment to become the medical model of grief. I pointed out that for some individuals, the medical model is insufficient in terms of their commemoration while others have come to believe that there is a time when they are supposed to be 'over it' (Davies, 2002; Mitchell, 2007; Ord, 2009). Sloane (2018) writes about the cemetery and its contemporary value in his book *Is the Cemetery Dead*? He (2018: 160) suggests that "[p]eople are using a wide range of old and new images, styles, and modes to celebrate and mourn along roadways, in front of houses, even on their cars and their bodies […]". Sloane himself is of the opinion that cemeteries still have relevance today; however, he concedes that these institutions need to adapt to the changing times in terms of society, interactivity, technology, and ethnic and racial needs. I argue that the sites where grief and loss are commemorated no longer necessarily include the cemetery because individuals are more acutely aware of, and give authority to, significant places of personal grief, death, and loss.

There is a growing trend to attempt to reclaim the ritual aspect of grief, mourning, and loss (Davies, 2002) by accepting and turning to popularly accepted spiritual sites of foreign cultures or religions, such as holy sites in Israel or temples in India. In addition to incorporating what individuals perceive as personal spiritualism, they are also mourning publicly and informally by erecting grassroots memorials and roadside shrines, and electing to mourn online on digital cemeteries and social sites (Margry & Sanchez-Carretero, 2011: 5; Sloane, 2018: 90). These

forms of commemoration have moved away from the cemetery and churchyard, which used to be the designated site for grieving and commemorating the deceased, to other public places, next to roads, online, and at specific sites which retain personal meaning. However, I am interested in what makes these personal sites of commemoration significant, and whether digital and alternative sites of grieving constitute the same meaning to the bereaved. I argue that part of the inherent meaningful experience attached to mourning is informed by sites which enact personal responses to death and loss. Contemporary negotiations regarding the sites of grief, whether *real*-world or digital, bring together historical religious expressions mixed with personal and uniquely cultural responses to grief and loss (Davies, 2002: 209).

Many reasons for the recent decline in cemetery visits can be attributed to the withdrawal from observed religion to the choice of keeping the deceased in the form of ashes which are then set aside either in private homes or memorial walls, or scattered in other specific sites. The cemetery no longer necessarily forms part of our everyday life because it is no longer situated within the scope and movement of our lived environments. Sloane (2018: 5) comments on the cemetery by saying that "[m]odern society marginalized death, separated it from routine life". From the Middle Ages until well into the seventeenth century, cemeteries had dual purposes and were not only reserved for honouring and visiting the dead, but also served as town square and public park (Ariès, 2008: 64). Contemporarily, the 'wall of remembrance' (Figure 3.1) substitutes the cemetery typically found at churches or even privately-owned memorial sites. The Avalon Memoriam in Bloemfontein, South Africa, for example, is a private burial site, which accepts a fee for keeping the ashes of a loved one, or one's own, in a niche (Figure 3.2). Avalon is advertised as being the solution to the disused contemporary cemetery, but only to those who can afford it. The niches in Avalon are arranged in military style (Figure 3.3), and vary from niches resembling standardised tombstones to niches in walls. The remains of the deceased reside within these places in the form of ashes.

Apart from placing the ashes in memorial sites, they may be disposed of in a ritualistic or commemorative manner, or placed in the homes of the bereaved to eventually become part of the furniture. Davies (2002: 230) remarks that the crematorium, in its post-modern state, collapses both time and space; the body is rapidly destroyed, and the remains may be scattered. However, what if the remains are not scattered? Then the body may be rapidly destroyed, but its remains will remain in a home or in a memorial plinth in a state of suspended pause. On the other hand, ashes kept in homes may represent the deceased in an intimate place. The ashes may be referred to, visited within the home, and be present in the place of the deceased in the bereaved's everyday life. The contained ashes become part of the furniture in that they blend in with their surroundings. The place in the home where the ashes are placed can be very purposeful and deliberate, forming part of practised tradition. This is the case in Japanese homes, where a personal shrine or *Butsudan* (Figure 3.4) is placed in the home (Cann, 2014: 24). The Butsudan

is a shrine used among those practising Buddhism and Shintoism, and is either an ornate shrine or a more simplistic wooden cabinet. Within the personal shrine, there is usually a picture of the deceased, his/her name and, possibly, some melancholy objects (Cann, 2014: 24). These shrines are situated somewhere specific in Japanese homes, and are a sacred and religious personal site, albeit small. The shrines themselves often resemble cabinets of rarity (Figure 3.5) and look like ornate altar pieces. The Japanese shrines are traditionally and culturally imbedded in the everyday lives of the bereaved. The absence of the deceased is present in the home (Cann, 2014: 24). In this regard, the site of commemoration is easily accessible, as is the case with the melancholy device. Visiting, passing, or acknowledging the site of commemoration occurs on a daily basis, as opposed to having to visit or commute to a memorial site/graveyard. Cann (2014: 24-25) surmises that the Japanese practices of a continued presence and relationship between the living and the deceased could be why Japanese people do not experience the same needs to publicly commemorate as they do in the West. The deceased is not as erased and marginalised as is the case in some Westernised or non-denominational funerary practices, or lack thereof.

South African municipal cemeteries are, at best, at the edge of the city, reiterating Sloane's statement regarding the marginalisation of the cemetery.[44] The edges of the cities are unsafe and deserted; they have become true ghost towns because not even the living visit the dead. On the other hand, cemeteries on the outskirts of informal settlements in South Africa are widely used where rituals and religious practices are continuously observed. While it is not as though all cemeteries are deserted, most within and around the main cities usually are for social, political, and historical reasons. Some cemeteries in South Africa are remnants of previous eras, such as colonial cemeteries and those used during the apartheid regime. Kobus du Preez and Paul Kotzé ([n.d.]) investigated the President Brand Cemetery (1899-1902) in Bloemfontein, South Africa. They ([n.d.]: 3-5) point out how the cemetery was laid out and designed to segregate different religions, as well as military and non-military individuals. The cemetery itself was designed with designated blocks dedicated to different spheres of religion and society, some receiving more space and importance than others ([n.d.]: 4-5).[45] In Bloemfontein, there are three recognised cemeteries known to be the oldest in the town, namely the President Brand Cemetery, the Dutch Cemetery and a cemetery that was used solely for Black South African citizens (Du Preez & Kotzé, [n.d.]: 6-7).[46] Du Preez and Kotzé mention that non-whites were not buried in the graveyards around the time of 1898, except for those who had served in the military, and that the non-white communities of the time established their own graveyards close to their settlements.

44 This is not the case in cities, such as Paris, whose historical cemetery, Montparnasse; or Jerusalem, whose cemetery at the Mount of Olives, are still quite embedded in the inner structure of the city.

45 For example, the Jewish section of the cemetery is much smaller than the Catholic section (Du Preez & Kotzé, [n.d.]: 5).

46 Du Preez and Kotzé do not elaborate much further on segregated cemeteries as their focus is on the President Brand Cemetery.

Today, both types of cemeteries, namely those from the colonial and apartheid eras, are unsafe and not necessarily maintained. The 2017 Endangered Heritage Sites Nomination form for the President Brand Cemetery reflected these concerns by stating that the cemetery is "threatened by ongoing vandalism" and that it is a "breeding ground for criminal acts such as drug abuse and theft".[47] Cemeteries from the colonial and apartheid eras retain political significance and contested meanings within the now liberated South Africa. This could also be the reason that individuals opt for fewer political or contested sites such as private memorials rather than public cemeteries. In my view, there is a sense of distance and disenchantment between the dead and the living bodies because of our contemporary lifestyles, the privatisation of the funerary industry, medical models of grief, death and more. In various cities, some cemeteries have even become tourist and event attractions. In Kimberley, South Africa, for example, there is a ghost tour through the various cemeteries and select colonial homes in the town.[48] The cemeteries do not fulfil their intended purpose but have become monetised in order to make a profit.

In my own visual explorations of site, I consider the cemetery and the visual authority it possesses as representation of morbidity and death. In the digital drawings *Sacrosanctity* (Figure 1.7) and *Conduit* (Figure 2.3), specific cemeteries were integrated. In *Conduit*, a line drawing of the sacrosanct cemetery on the Mount of Olives adjacent to Jerusalem's Old City is seen hovering upside-down over a wooden box of ashes. In *Sacrosanctity*, the churchyard outside the Holy Trinity Anglican Church located in Knysna, South Africa, features partially. These are presentations of sites of death and commemoration which I have visited personally. These sites exude a universal sanctity and elicit experiences of inner reflection. There is an immense difference between the experience of the real-world place and that of the place as expressed digitally and *virtually* in pictures. For instance, contrary to the public nature of the cemetery visit, there is a sense of intimacy and personal expression when visiting digital sites. Digital pictures on devices can also represent the deceased in a manner which differs from the way in which this is done in cemeteries, in that it is a moving, speaking trace.

When passing the spot where a motor or roadside accident took place in South Africa, one sometimes sees a cross planted on that specific site on the side of the road.[49] The practice of planting crosses is not a specified cultural or religious practice. These forms of memorialisation are not necessarily 'new' since they have been documented in Christian culture since the Middle Ages (Margry & Sanchez-Carretero, 2011: 1, 31). According to Margry and Sanchez-Carratero (2011: 2), these practices of memorialisation are now "socially sanctioned" and considered to

47 Available from: http://www.theheritageportal.co.za/thread/president-brand-cemetery-bloemfontein [Accessed: 08-04-2020].

48 Available from: https://www.kimberley.co.za/places/kimberley/tours/kimberley-ghost-tour/ [Accessed: 15-01-2020].

49 After my brother's death, my father deliberately returned to the site of the accident to plant a cross with a plaque attached to it (Figure 3.7).

appear “as part of the commonly ritualized practices that deal with unexpected death”. They refer to these informal traditions as *grassroots memorials* since they believe that this accurately describes the phenomenon of memorials growing from a specific place in the public (Margry & Sanchez-Carretero, 2011: 2).[50]

There is a need to commemorate or acknowledge the precise area where a person ceased to breathe, where a presumed spirit has left the world. Sloane (2018: 199) refers to individuals with a Mexican cultural heritage, and their tradition of planting small crosses (descansos), small shrines or *nichos* at the site of an individual’s death. Sloane (2018: 199) writes that these individuals’ responses include attributing specific meaning and significance to the site where the individual ceased to live, or to mark a spot where a journey in life was interrupted by death. Following a similar path of reasoning, Schramm (2011: 5) states that memory is not only embedded in our bodies, but is also inscribed into places in different settings such as memorials and shrines. In this regard, Schramm addresses memories of violence. However, I surmise that the same can be said of the places where the living ceased to be. The specific place where the loss occurred is inscribed in the memory or body of the bereaved. Most roadside accidental deaths also have an element of violence attached. This is not necessarily violence experienced as acts of violence with the intention to harm; rather, road accidents are violent events in and of themselves.

Areas containing residual energy are not recognised or experienced in the same way by all. It is the memory of the specific site for certain people that generates this residual energy. Experiencing sites as containing meaning is not a recent occurrence in society. Ariès (2008: 202) writes: “Besides designating precisely, the site of funerary worship, the tomb was also intended to transmit the memory of the deceased to later generations. Hence the tomb has the name of *monumentum* or *memoria*”. Using Ariès’ conceptions as a basis for my hypothesis, I posit that the energy experienced in sites of loss is inherent to most of us, and has been for centuries. Margry and Sanchez-Carretero (2011: 21) argue that the informality of memorial shrines creates a sacred experience in individuals without it being attached to any doctrine or belief. The shrines’ informed elements amalgamate into being experienced as sacred. Santino (2011: 99) argues that mementos and notes are often integral to the grieving process. For instance, some individuals have remarked the importance of leaving a memento at the designated site where a death has occurred as it marks the last place where the deceased was alive. Memory is intrinsically connected with the body of the bereaved in responding to the site of loss. It is within our bodies that remembrance takes place at poignant sites, and within our bodies that other sites of memories are recalled. It is through this experience that, within the body of the bereaved, disparate sites of memory, recollection and commemoration are connected and interwoven in the experience of memorialisation.

50 Among other aspects, the authors focus on the change instilled by these memorials, as well as the public outcry and potential effects thereof on the public. I will not be commenting on this phenomenon; instead, I will focus only on personal memorialisation in public spaces such as roadside memorials.

Thought-provokingly, Margry and Sanchez-Carretero (2011: 13) comment on memorials straddling the realms of both public and private places.[51] Memorials may be placed within the city, on someone's land or in remote locations.[52] The location is not decided by someone, but by the event that resulted in death. A remote or roadside memorial is not placed because of the scene surrounding it or the number of people who may see it.[53] In Brent Meistre's photographic print *Grave, Brakbos, Keelafsnylengte, N.Cape, S.A.* (2013) (Figure 3.6), a grave is seen to the side of a dirt road in an empty landscape in the Karoo. Although the memorial in this specific digital print is not a roadside memorial, but a grave, Meistre's work elicits memorial elements that are also applicable to roadside shrines. The grave is isolated and acts as a memorial at the roadside. This grave, specifically placed on private land, is not unknown. Throughout history, famers all around the world have been buried on their farmsteads, but usually the whole family is buried together on one specific site. In the photograph, there is a single grave, placed as though facing the road. The grave and its placement in the landscape hint at an implied connection between the two. In the photograph, the viewer is overwhelmed by the sheer openness of the Karoo landscape, but the grave also adds to the experience of the artwork and the space it represents. The wide-open space, or a slice thereof, almost becomes sacred, as though a journey or pilgrimage must be undertaken in order to commemorate. The grave must be reached and, in this journey towards it, the object erected becomes more than a grave of a stranger.

Roadside memorials can be revisited on certain dates, at specific times or during particular events, thus creating a new form, tradition, or practice (Santino, 2011: 98). The memorials are uniquely structured to suit the needs, interests, and circumstances of the death, age, gender, and religion of the families who erect them. The memorial erected after my brother's death comprises a metal cross which was cemented into the desert landscape of Namibia (Figure 3.7). Santino (2011: 99) refers to these grassroots memorials as shrines which can be seen "as a portal to the otherworld, a place where two-way communication can occur". Santino (2011:99) speaks of the grassroots memorial as a place in remembrance that is not recognised as a specific place but which infers and evokes the memory and presence of the absent deceased. Here, I wish to include the technological device. The melancholy device should be considered a site of commemoration along with other personal sites of commemoration in the form of grassroots memorials and roadside shrines. Commemorative sites are meaningful and significant to grieving individuals in more personal ways. I support my hypothesis by quoting Sloane (2018: 191): "This diversity [of contemporary memorialization] does not jettison the past but incorporates elements of traditions

51 Memorials may be situated on public land or private property (Margry & Sanchez-Carretero, 2011: 13). This could impinge on laws and regulations set out by a specific country regarding communal and private places.

52 Dangerous places, contested land or government property.

53 There are specific cases in which memorials are placed because of the foot traffic and number of people who see them. There are also cases in which the memorial is unable to be placed in the space of the event, as in the case of the British Queen Mother's death. In such cases, another space of significance, which is either close by or which represents a more traditional space, is chosen (Margry & Sanchez-Carretero, 2011: 18).

into new forms in new spaces, giving everyday memorials increased power and visibility".

Technological devices allow for commemoration to occur through access to digital memorials of the deceased, memorial websites or, more personally, photographs and videos of the deceased. Kabaruan and colleagues (2011) have documented the *virtually*-recreated Holy Sites, such as the Jewish Holy Land site, The Buddha Centre, The Virtual Hajj, created by IslamOnline.net, and The Divine Mother site in the Hindu belief, in Linden Lab's virtual environment *Second Life.* These sites were measured out and recreated in the most accurate way possible in the *virtual* environment of the game (Kabaruan et al., 2011: 4). The sites are created for the purpose of allowing users to access them via their avatars in order to visit them *virtually* in pilgrimage and to use them as they would be used when visited in everyday life (Kabaruan et al., 2011: 5). Players may choose to access these *virtual* sites instead of the physical sites for different reasons, such as the inability to visit the holy sites due to health or funding, or they may feel more comfortable accessing these places in the form of an avatar. Regardless, the bereaved can access *virtually*-created holy sites and sites of commemoration on a daily basis from another country in front of their computers. The personal computers in our homes have within them the potential for the bereaved to commemorate the deceased, bringing commemoration back into the everyday lives of the bereaved.

A work which elicits the experience of a portal or transitional site is Christian Boltanski's sound installation *Animitas*[54] (2014) (Figure 3.8). To create the work, the artist installed "eight hundred small Japanese bells attached to long stems planted in the ground" in Chile's Atacama Desert (Lacombe, 2016). The specific site chosen for the work is extremely significant as it is "a pilgrimage site in memory of those who disappeared under the Pinochet regime" (Lacombe, 2016). The artist (2017) has also remarked that there are small shrines and grassroots memorials along the roads in the space where the artwork was installed. These shrines mark the sites of roadside accidents and are called *Animitas*. There is a similarity between Boltanski's installation, the sources of my drawings which include arid areas and plants, and the theme of the work pertaining to memory, absence, and loss. The most notable aspect of Boltanski's work is the use of sound.[55] The delicate sound generated by the legion of small bells generates a constantly changing melody. To me, it seems like a continuous moment which is present and instantly past. The viewer is unable to return to a previous moment; it is ephemeral and potent.

The memorialised place is brought to life by activity, pilgrimage, commemoration, and presence. In, turn, it serves as a representation of potential social expressions of personal loss. It constitutes presence while also establishing absence, the absence of the deceased and the presence of

54 Video of the work available at Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcgP28oruTU&t=21s [Accessed: 20-01-2020].

55 Boltanski's work has been reinstalled and recorded in different areas. However, my focus is on the specific, initial installation in the Atacama Desert.

the memorial and memorialisation of the deceased. Stengs (2011: 72) states that "ephemeral memorials may be considered ritualised sites that not only "are", but at the same time "act" and interact with the social reality through which they are constituted". Where the presence and/or absence of the deceased are experienced, their memory and memories of them are also experienced by the bereaved. Memory is temperamental, fragile, and extremely powerful. It is through the melody of the chimes in Boltanski's work that the memory and, by extension, memorialisation are evoked in the viewer. Additional senses which reinforce memory are elicited by the experience of viewing the work of art. The work reminds the viewer of his/her own loss by means of moving sound on a site which is delicate yet strangely powerful. Memory is also linked to every aspect of our lives. One can recall certain experiences and intimate moments merely through smell or sound.[56] Memory seeps through every detail of our existence, and embodies the sites we visit and actualise. Huyssen (2003: 6-7) asserts that "[o]ne of the most interesting cultural phenomena of our day is the way in which memory and temporality have invaded spaces and media that seemed among the most stable and fixed: cities, monuments, architecture, and sculpture". Huyssen states that memory has the ability to invade fixed structures, as if it does so unintentionally. I believe that it is quite the opposite. We purposely infuse structure with memory, and embody buildings with a spirit that, in turn, beats life into lifeless structure. Architecture references itself throughout history and in new structures. Similarly, memorialisation is embodied within the body of the bereaved.

The melancholy object/device opens a 'portal' to other sites of grief and remembrance through its interface. Thus, there is a similarity between Santino's (2011: 99) conception of memorials as portals and melancholy devices. A portal is created on the 'site' of the device which connects to representations of non-physical individuals lost to death in the forms of photographs, videos, voice notes, GIFs, and other visual material. However, it is also representational of, and influenced by, other places and memory. In the *virtual* environment of Thatgamecompany's video game *Journey*, the avatar moves through the desert landscape where small shrines resembling niches can be seen scattered across the landscape (Figure 3.9). To me, these niches resemble a memorial site, a *virtual* portal which evokes a sense of commemoration as the avatar walks slowly among the slabs. The *virtual* place is neither formally acknowledged as a cemetery, nor the niches pointed out as niches or gravestones. Nevertheless, these objects are recognised as such and the site experienced as a site of commemoration and introspection, albeit *virtual.* The cemetery is no longer necessarily as popularly used for its initial purpose. However, the alternatives, which accompany it, such as the example in *Journey* or *Second Life,* become sites which refer to it and interlace the initial site of the cemetery and personal experiences of commemoration and loss.

Sloane (2018: 17) states that contemporary grieving individuals "adapt older traditions to new technologies and develop new technologies to respond to deeply felt emotional needs".

56 Proust, see p.36

Digitised or *virtual* commemoration still yearns to be physical even if that physicality is only on the experienced site and tangibility of the melancholy object/device. Place is tangible and can be potent in terms of its meaning to an individual. The place philosopher, Edward Casey (2001: 404), attests that "place" is "the immediate ambiance of [one's] lived body and its history, including the whole sedimented history of cultural and social influences and personal interests that compose [one's] life-history". This tacit experience of place being intimately connected to the individual's body may reinforce the place-meaning of the device or object with which the individual interacts. The interaction between an individual and, especially, technological devices, has become much more involved and fluid. Gestures, and (mostly) finger and hand movements when holding a device interlace the device and body in a unique manner. Gestures while interacting with objects and, especially, devices, become second nature, and involve the bodily experience related to the device. This results in the device potentially being experienced as a place itself – a site from which alternate sources and imagery may be accessed.[57]

An excavation site in Israel is the theme of the drawing *Interlaced Environments* (Figure 1.8). In the pigment ink drawing with silkscreen layer, I explore an archaeological excavation site in Israel. The drawing of the site is incomplete, and various slices of time in history are visible on different topographical levels and intensity in drawing. To me, the site itself did not necessarily have religious meaning; however, the historical timeline visible in the geological layers of the site elicits a quality of past-ness. In my view, the visually-layered site has the potential to reflect layers of reality as experienced by the individual through technologies, rather than the initial or intended spiritual meaning pertaining to the culture or history to which it belongs. The site is visited, captured as a digital photograph, and shared via *virtual* sites such as social media. In this regard, the one *real*-world site is copied, digitised, and shared by the individual. The site shared on the Internet also allows it to be transcribed on the "geographies of our mind" and continues to exist in the "landscape of our imagination" as Cann so poignantly explains (2014: 107). Pictures of the deceased stay with us in memory and are recalled in commemoration. Thus, sites, pictures, and past experiences which have been transcribed on the "geographies of our mind" are recalled and re-experienced as a cascade of images within the body of the bereaved where memorialisation takes place.

3.2 Transition and Continuity

The philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1973: 7), speaks about dwelling and the sculptural medium by saying that "[s]culpture would be the embodiment of places. Places, in preserving and opening a region, hold something free gathered around them which grants the tarrying of things under

57 This is explored and alluded to in the series titled *Semblance* (Figures 2.9–2.14).

consideration and a dwelling for man in the midst of things". Considering Heidegger's suppositions, I would argue that the unique immersion and exchange that occur when a viewer engages with a work of art, and not only sculpture, are considered a site. When engaging with a work pertaining to the theme of loss and commemoration, the bereaved or viewer may respond by recalling and experiencing his/her loss, the ephemeral moment of melancholy as discussed in this dissertation. The same could occur when a bereaved person views a picture of the deceased in both forms, namely printed and digital photographs. In the case of the photograph, the trigger to the ephemeral moment of melancholy is the *punctum* as conceptualised by Barthes (1980: 26-27), discussed in the introduction to this chapter. With this in mind, the question is whether the same phenomenon could occur when a viewer/bereaved person views a photograph in remembrance.

Akin to the exchange between artwork and viewer becoming a site, I argue that the photograph may also be considered a site which has the potential to reveal itself as such when returned to in memory or commemoration. The photograph, which possesses the same characteristics of the heterotopia as theorised by Foucault (1986: 24), can then act as a site in which other sites can be inferred and presented to a viewer. I explore this transitive quality of photographs while examining two specific photographic examples. These examples include one taken by my brother in a hotel room in Tokyo in 2012, and the other, a photographic collage by David Hockney which also depicts the interior of a hotel/inn room in Japan. I surmise that the transitive quality of the photograph is reinforced by the transitive quality possessed by a hotel room. The room itself lies in a place that may be described as 'in-between'. It does not belong to those who inhabit it, namely those who usually use it when traveling/moving/being in transit themselves.

Barthes (1980: 26) refers to the accidental moment of discovering the *punctum* by stating that "it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me". The individually recognised *punctum* is deeply intimate and personal since it is recognised by the individual, and the resulting wounding experience is felt instantly and internally. The experience of viewing the photograph, appreciating its interesting composition and colour, and being wounded by a small detail is quick and eruptive. A photograph cannot transport the viewer to its original destination in remembrance; rather, it blocks memory (Barthes, 1980: 91). However, in the act of viewing a photograph, the mind/body can be transported *somewhere*. This *somewhere* is not an existing place, but the amalgamation of the quick, eruptive recollection of different places reconstructed in memory. It cannot be the place and the moment the photograph was taken, but it is not the place the photograph is being viewed either. The viewer is momentarily transported to a place where imagination and memory can move and react freely.

As seen in *Tokyo Room* (Figure 3.10), my brother took a photograph of himself in his hotel room without posing directly in front of the camera. Instead, the camera is pointed at the window, capturing his reflection along with a suggestion of the city outside. The photograph almost seems

to have been staged, as if the red curtains had opened and the layered play about to begin with all the backdrops ascending at the same time. My brother is not entirely visible in the photograph; it merely depicts a reflection of his silhouette posing in the window. The *studium*, then, is the photograph itself, an interesting shot fired at a window, the material. The *punctum*, in my case, with the photograph, can be seen as the outline that makes up my brother's figure, the smallest outline at the edge of the darkened figure that is pregnant with ambiguity. The figure standing in the window does not even seem real; it is suspended in a piece of glass, unrecognisable in a foreign city in a room that belongs to no one who resides in it.

In David Hockney's photographic collage titled *Gregory Watching the Snow Fall, Kyoto, Feb 21, 1983* (1983) (Figure 3.11), the artist assembled multiple photographs of a room at slightly different angles and viewpoints. This was done in order to generate and assemble a very unique and thought-provoking viewpoint of the inside of another hotel room in Japan, in this case, a traditional hotel room in Kyoto. By means of small changes in viewpoint and angle when taking each photograph, the assembled photographic collage generates a much more immersive and full-bodied experience of the inside of this hotel room. The point of view resembles a sort of fish-eye lens photography, but the result is that the viewer experiences the room as lived and immersive. The repetition of *Gregory's* profile, changes in position and his expression generate the experience of a moment passing and being recollected in memory. There are certain details and sections of the photographic collage which are incomplete and missing. To me, this reinforces the sense of recollection which I associate with this work. In remembering, no memory can remain complete or full, and certainly not static. Certain details or generalised places may fade into the background while other elements remain potent and powerful in memory. The open spaces in-between sections of photographs reiterate this experience. It is an incomplete collection, or recollection in memory, but a much more lived and immersive experience thereof. Compared to the photograph in *Tokyo Room*, there is clarity to the recollection as opposed to the ambiguity of the hotel room in Tokyo. The lighting of the room is ominous and melancholic in terms of recollection and the experience of the *punctum* while the room in Kyoto has a soft light, and experience of bliss and nostalgia in memory.

In the work titled *Interstice* (Figure 3.12), I attempted to recreate the complex and wounding experience of the *punctum* coupled with the bodily reaction to the photograph. I attempted to do so by removing the small, wounding detail from a personal photograph and recording it as a generated digital symbol. In *Interstice*, my personal experience of the *punctum* is shared with the viewer. In the original digital still (Figure 3.13), I am seen reaching out to touch my brother's head in the dark surroundings of a garage. I reach, but my hand is unable to touch the tips of his hair. Very often the *Punctum* is a "detail", that is, a partial object (Barthes, 1980: 43). In the drawing, the wounding detail of the photograph is removed from its original form as a digital still and reduced to a small symbol of a hand layered on top of a drawn shrub of prickly cacti and hands.

The wounding point is the small space between my hand and my brother's head. The hand is unable to touch the deceased. This time, it is obscured, not by a screen as is the case with digital images and videos, but by the representation of the smallest of spaces. The visual information of the original photograph is not shared with the viewer because, for the viewer, the same detail will not necessarily be the point in the photograph which wounds him/her; the *punctum* is experienced personally. Instead, the personal experience of the *punctum* is shared in the drawing element of the work as the delicately-drawn, dying and aggressive cactus shrub.

Photographs block memory yet I surmise that the photograph itself becomes a place of transit. To support this transitive experience, both Barthes and Foucault's conceptions are taken into consideration. However, I consider photographs as picture objects which constitute place in their interaction with an individual/viewer. I draw this conclusion from Heidegger's (1973: 6) consideration of objects as sites, and his argument that sculptural pieces become places in their objecthood, and interaction and engagement with a viewer. If the photograph is considered an object which, in turn, should be recognised as a place in itself rather than merely an object belonging to a place (Heidegger, 1973: 6), then I would argue that the photograph has the potential to possess the same characteristics as the heterotopia. The photograph can transport the viewer to the place where he/she can attempt to piece a memory together by using his/her imagination and borrowing from similar experiences which can be applied to the one at hand. The portal to which the photograph may open or, rather, reveal itself, is a combination of experiences and incomplete memories belonging to different times and sites. This experience corresponds with the photomontage by David Hockney (Figure 3.11) in which various photographs at slightly different angles and spaces of time are pieced together. The resulting artwork is much more than an assemblage or collage of photographs pieced together like a puzzle. On the contrary, the resulting expression is a fully-rounded experience of an attempt at recollecting, remembering and situating a site. It is in this act of remembering or remembrance that the viewer/bereaved experiences a change, interaction, and transformation of site.

CONCLUSION: MEDIATION

Iterations of grief and loss can be practised by incorporating contemporary technology, interacting with melancholy objects and devices, exploring and expressing grief by playing video games in commemoration, and visiting *real*-world and *virtual* sites of commemoration. In practising these contemporary forms of commemoration, the bereaved person is enabled to mediate grief through the conduits identified and discussed in this dissertation. In all the investigated interactions, the bereaved/viewer/player becomes the nexus where traces, images, memories, and commemoration pertaining to the deceased are interlaced and connected. The bereaved viewer responds to external triggers, such as images and art, which results in recalling their loss, and the recollection of disparate experiences, memories, and reconstructions of the deceased as an ephemeral moment of melancholy. This flood of images and recollection in remembrance are brought about by interacting, participating, expressing, and exploring personal grief and bereavement through video games, geographical sites, melancholy objects/devices, and engagement with visual art on the subject of grief and bereavement. Images which signify and explore grief and loss, like the photograph and the experience of the *punctum* in photographs, are the triggers that set off the ephemeral moment of melancholy within the body of the bereaved/player/viewer: a moment which is instantaneous, sudden, and overwhelming. By interacting with technological objects (which have become melancholy devices in grief), electing to express grief on the skin by means of tattooing, recalling images of the deceased or engaging with art dealing with the subjects of these complex experiences of grief and loss, the bereaved carry the memory of the deceased and their identity as bereaved with them. As a result, the bereaved themselves become the constantly moving and changing site where pictorial memorialisation takes place.

Grief, loss, and remembrance are brought back to the core functioning of everyday life through various contemporary responses and activities. The deceased are commemorated in activities that are not traditionally connected with grief and loss, specifically activities such as play. By connecting these two experiences and expressions, new and creative practices of commemoration have been generated wherein the bereaved experience the traces of the deceased or representations of the deceased in a *digital* manner of interaction. The digital and *virtual* traces of the deceased in the form of photographs, videos, online posts, *virtual* characters, and memorial sites transform the deceased into code which exists only through the mediator of a screen, a site and a device. Mourning and ongoing grief are experienced within the body, memory, and imagination of the bereaved. Intimately connected to this body are melancholy objects which remind the bereaved of the deceased; video games where the deceased may choose to commemorate on platforms that are easily accessible in the home; or sites which are accessed either in person or though the technological device, computer, or video games. These three components of grief and loss are integral to the expressions and iterations of personal grief and loss. However, it is the bereaved

who can move between these objects, sites, and video games and, in so doing, endeavour to access their experiences of loss. It is by engaging and interacting with works of art on the subjects of grief, and the elements through which grief is expressed, that the bereaved/viewer may practise and experience memorialisation. It is within the body of the bereaved that grief and loss are intimately felt as remembrance – the ephemeral moment of melancholy – and within the body of the bereaved that memorialisation ultimately takes place. My research project comprises an investigation into the ways in which these moments may be memorialised in art.

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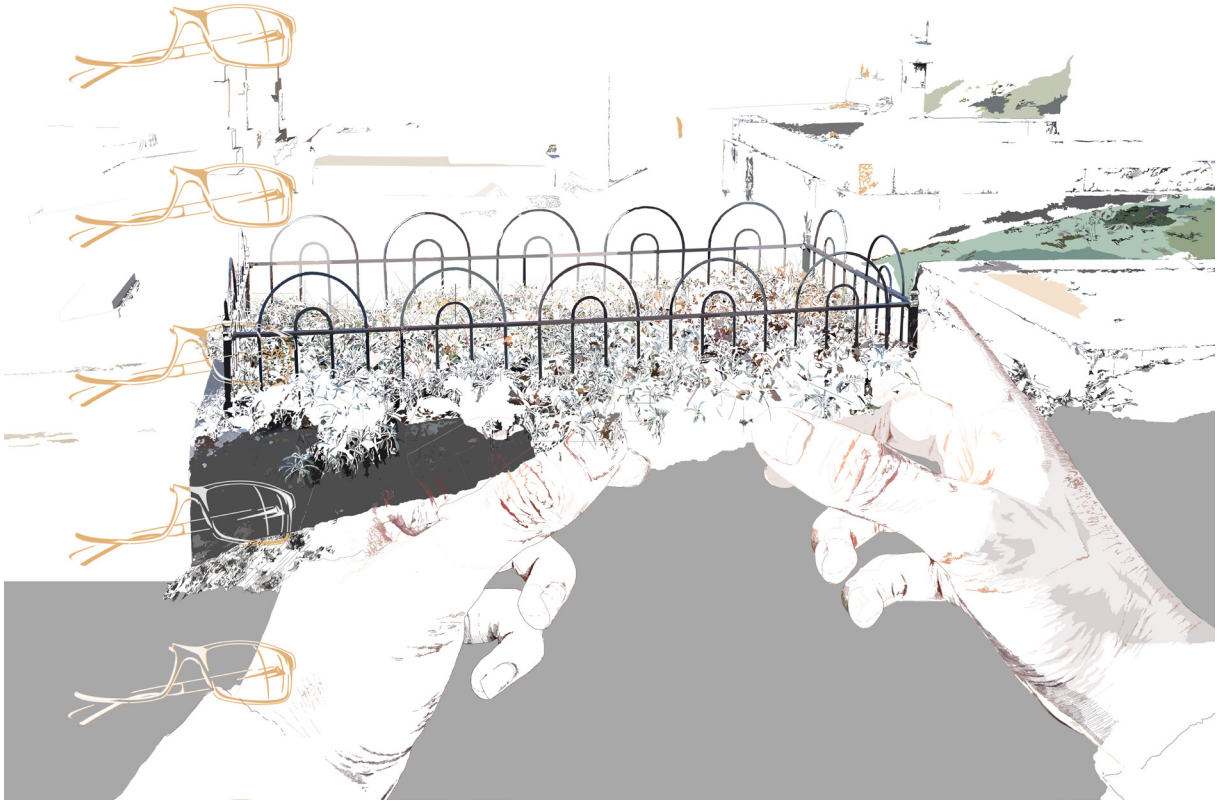

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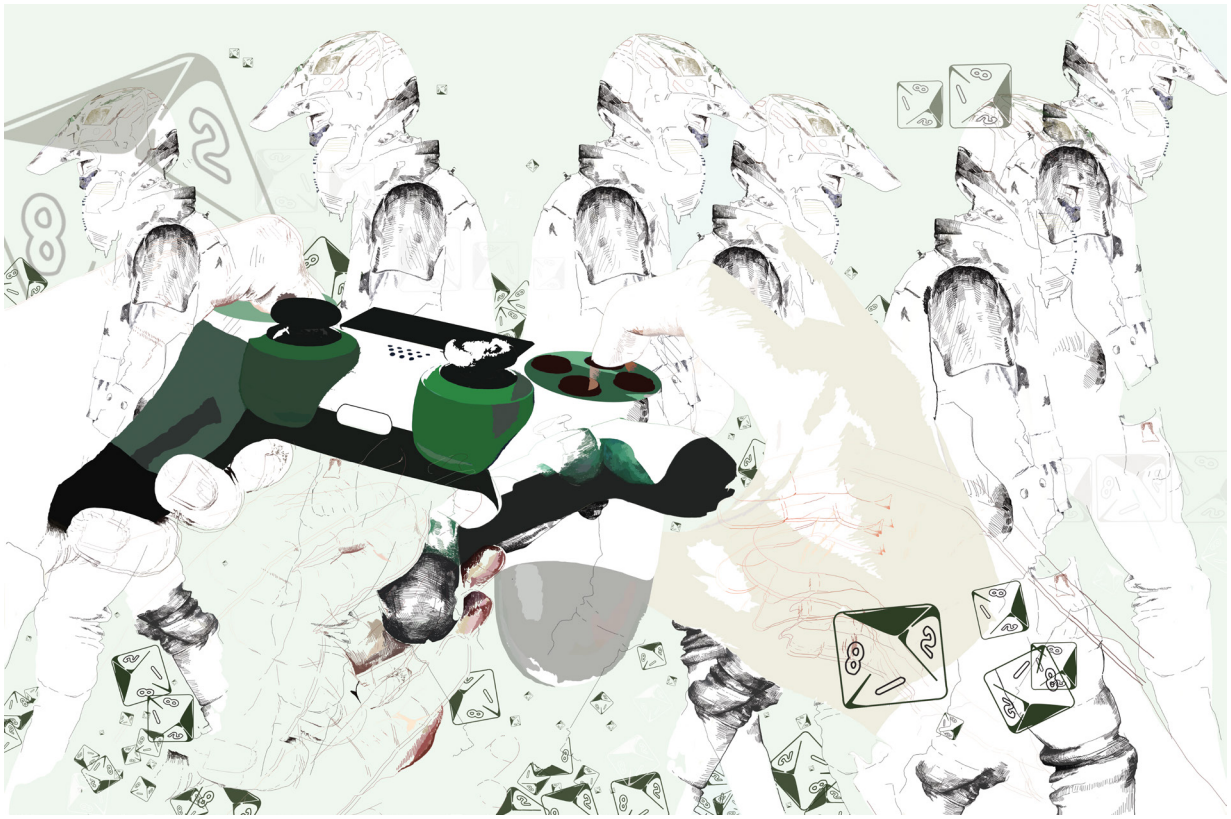

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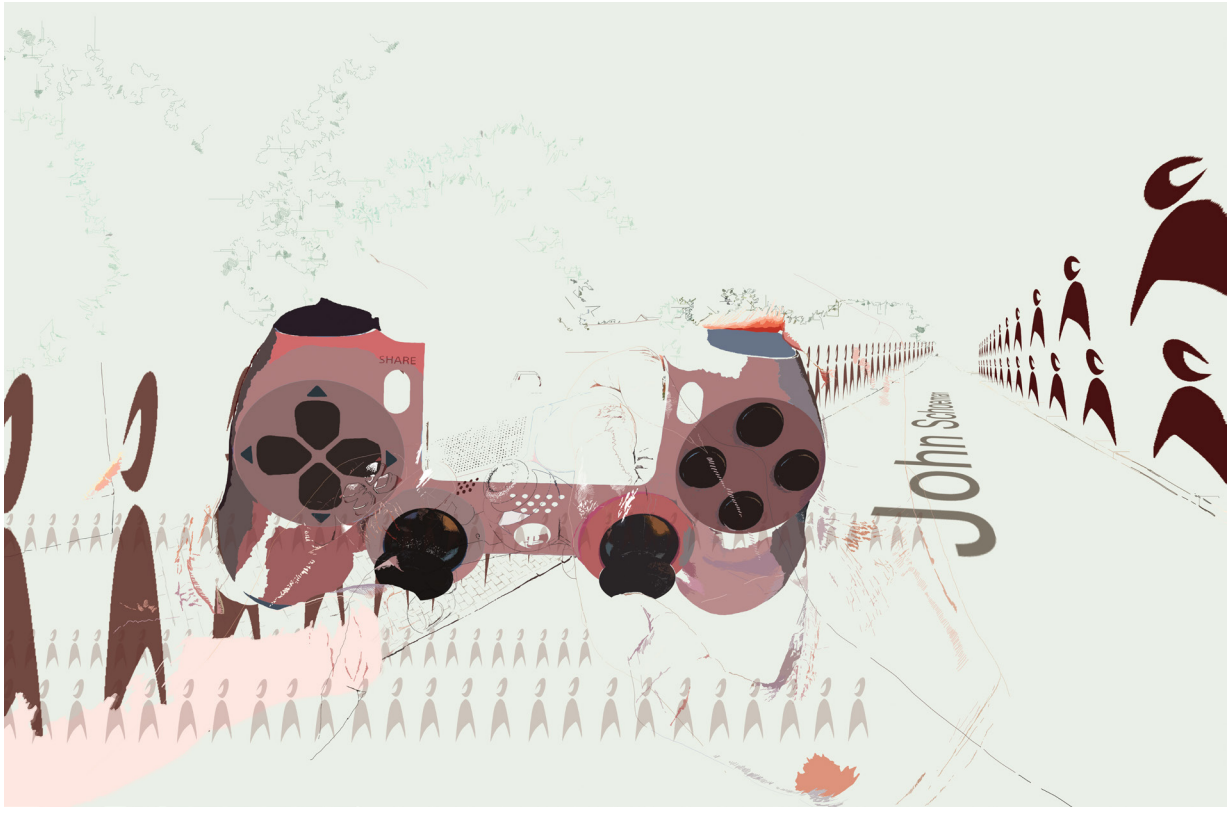

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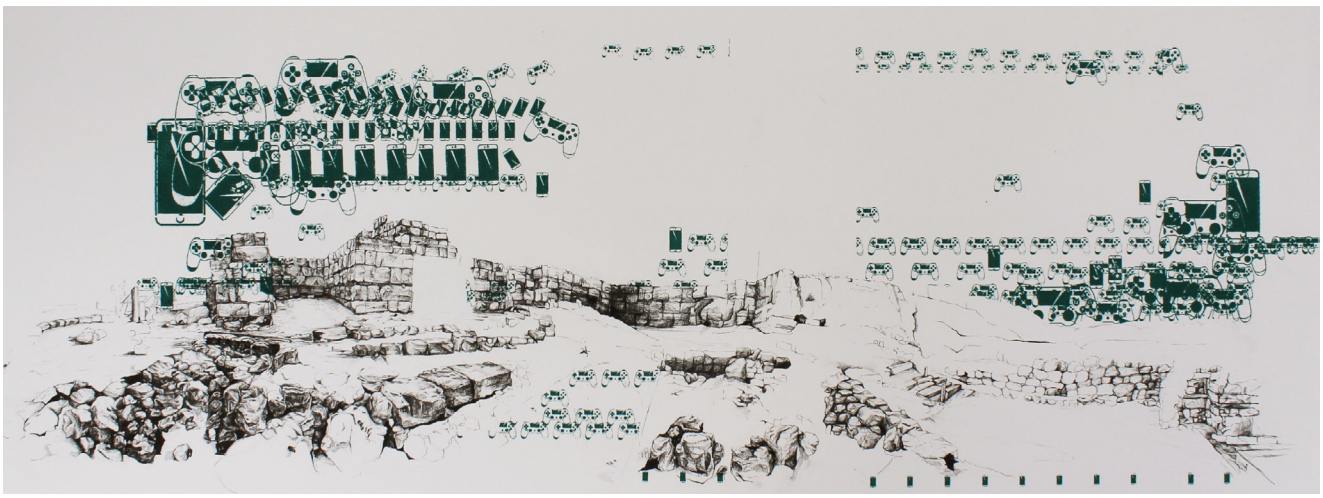

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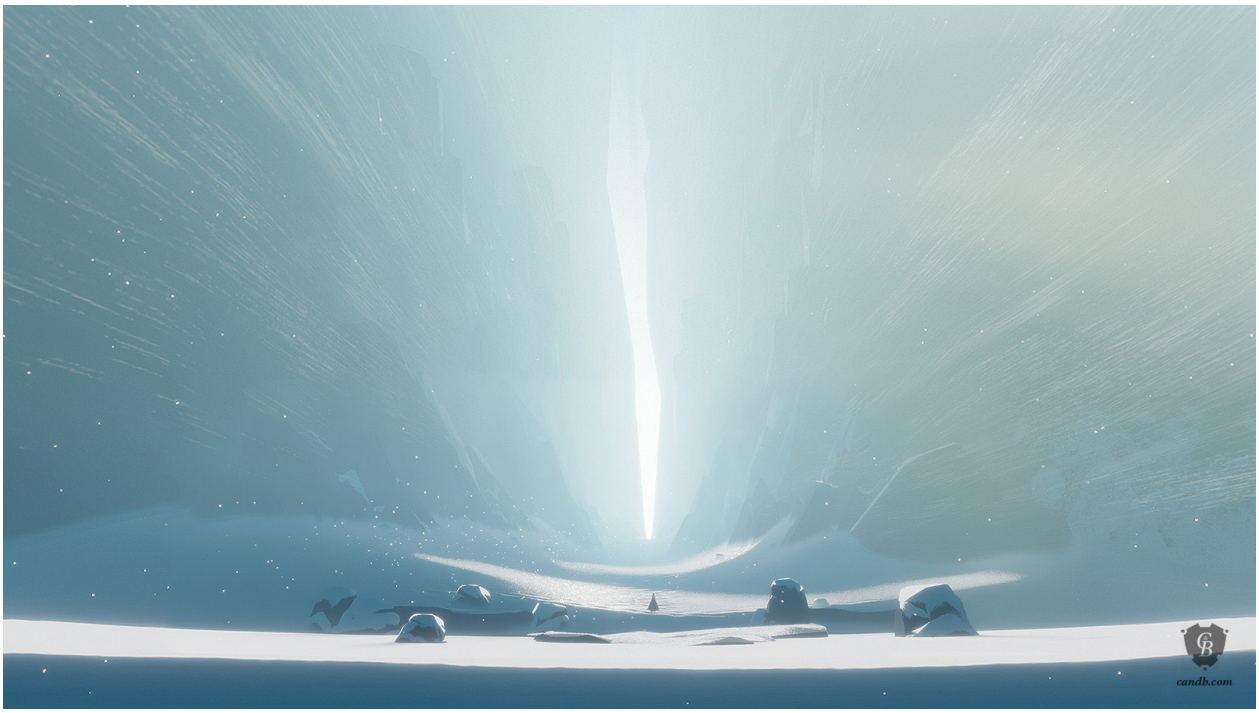

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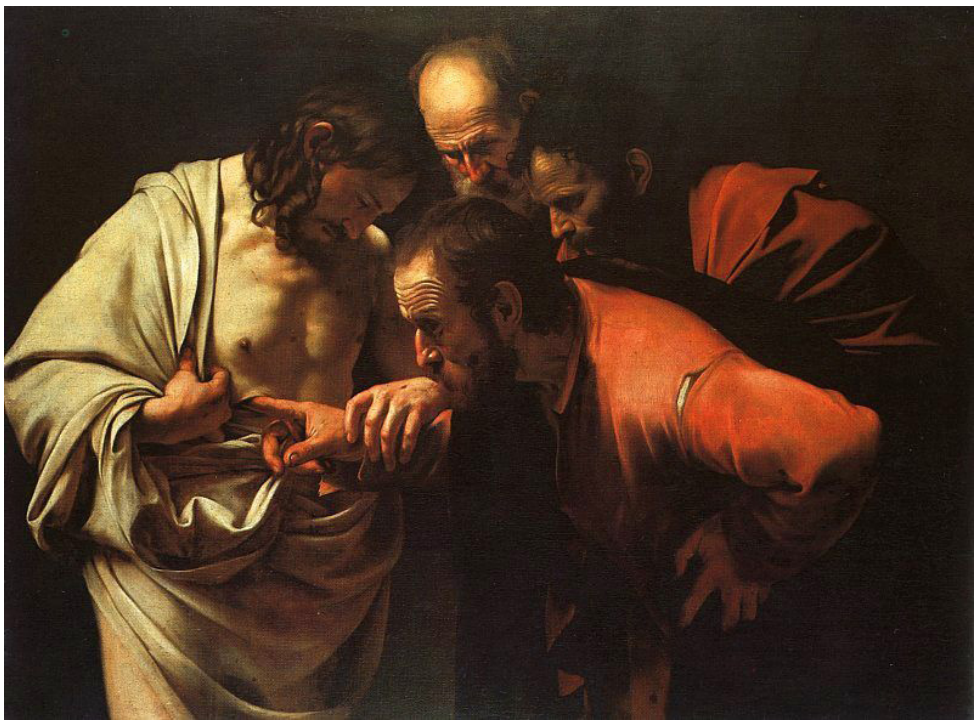

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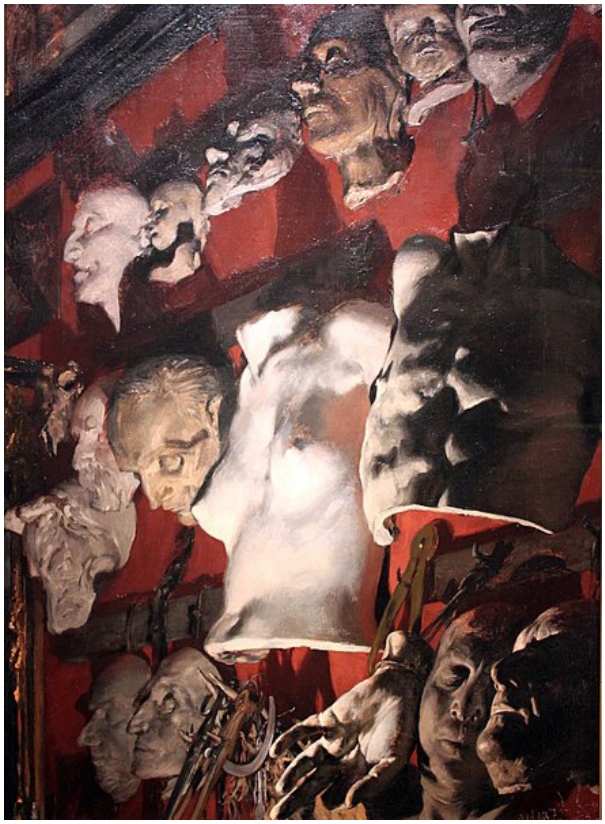

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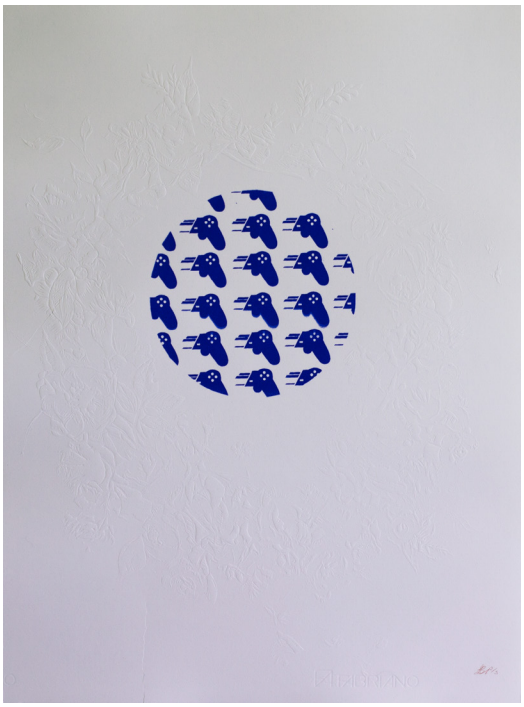

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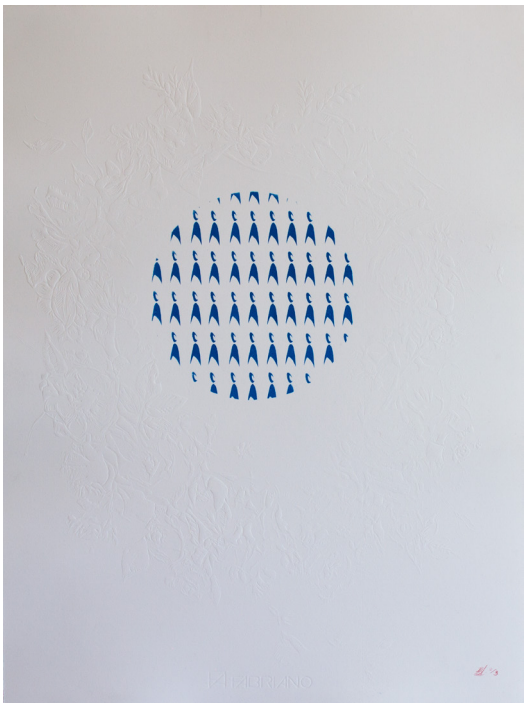

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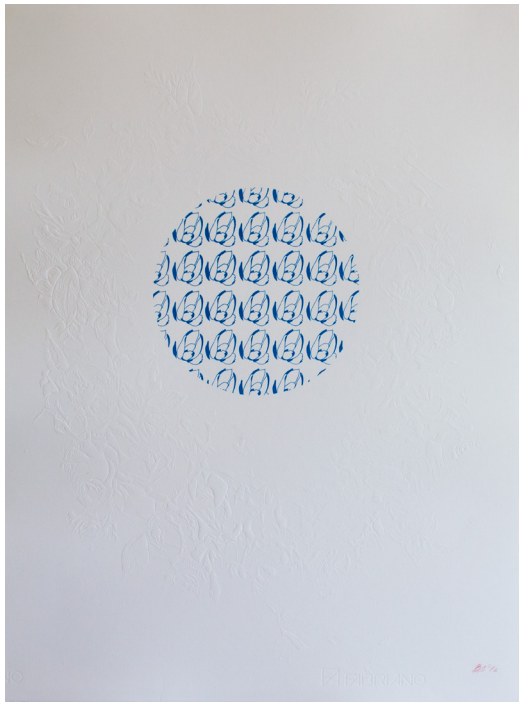

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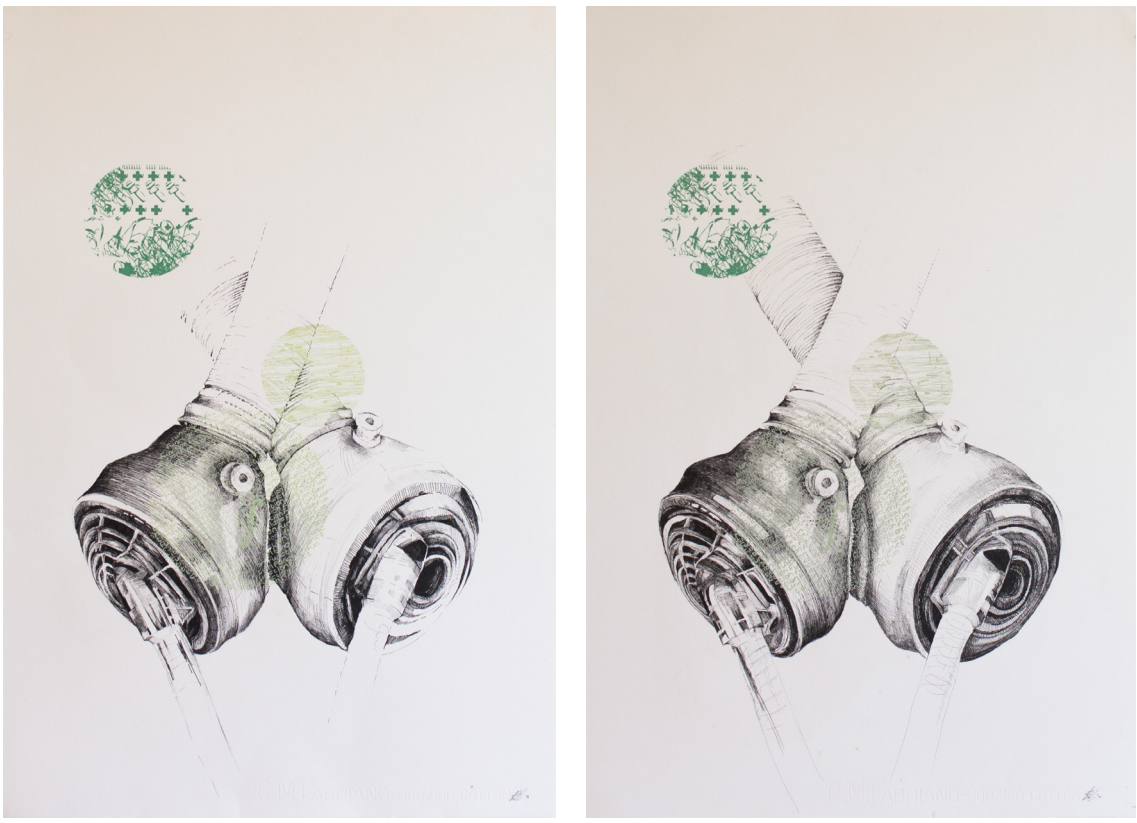

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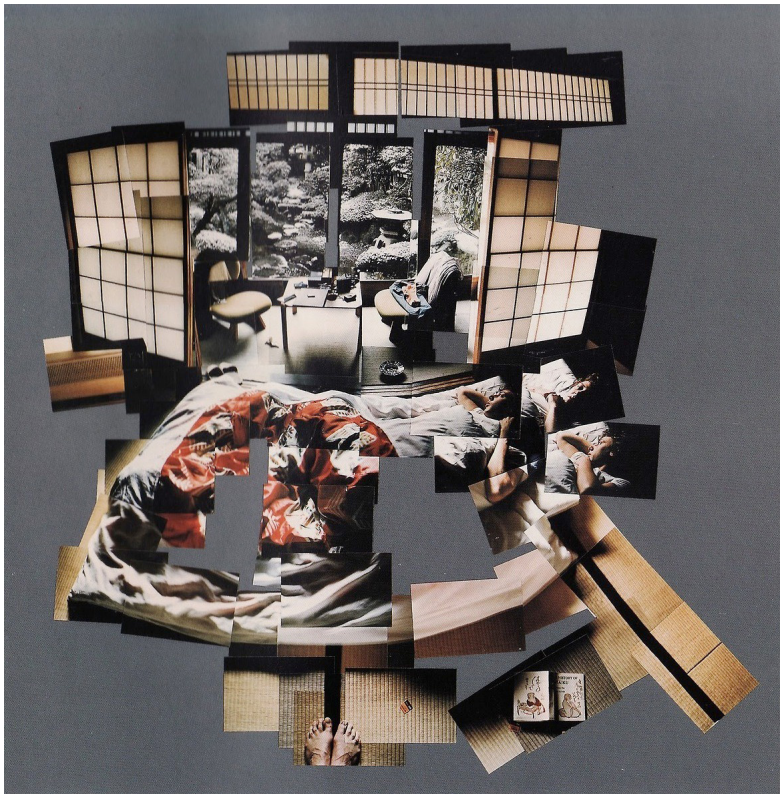

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