

While Wojnarowicz's, and also Wilke's, use of their own dying bodies as subjects is alarming, working with the deceased bodies of others, as several artists in *DIRGE* have done, is a shocking practice to some. In the early 20th century, Sigmund Freud analyzed a range of non-Western death taboos, from restrictions on contact with corpses to impressions of the dead as hostile spirits destined to haunt the living, arguing that many of these practices extended, with modification, to the modern Western world.¹² His examination revealed the breadth of beliefs about, and responses to, dead bodies and how they influence religion, mourning, and ritual. Over a century later, cultural differences relating to interactions with dead bodies endure.

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook uses performance and video to focus on connections between life and death, engaging with corpses through a range of intimate actions, including reading, singing, and teaching. In *Death Seminar B* (2005), Rasdjarmrearnsook records her conversation with six dead bodies cloaked in white sheets. The room and artist are clad in white cloth as well; neutralized, the space becomes a liminal site for exchange between realms. The artist poses questions, and pauses in silence to hear responses from the group. Early on, she hears a corpse ask why she brings "her conditions to the death group," inverting expectations about the presence of the dead in this gathering.¹³ Rasdjarmrearnsook's delicate, sincere, and humorous interactions draw from Buddhist principals to propose value in continued closeness between the living and dead.¹⁴ While she admits this time spent with corpses is not without strain, in these moments she experiences a compression of spiritual space that causes "the reality of departure [to] fade away," opening the door for deeper connections and understanding.¹⁵ In witnessing the conversation, we are invited to consider the distance we construct between the dead and ourselves.

Kesang Lamdark signifies the mortal body in *Transparent Vest* (2013), a work made of plastic that the artist stitched and melted into the shape of a vest reminiscent of Tibetan Buddhist meditation attire. Part of an ongoing series of garments, this work references the practice of self-immolation by Buddhist monks and nuns protesting the government of China's policies against an independent Tibetan state. Made for *DIRGE*, *Transparent Vest* has a clear surface that reveals each seam, mark, and burn, evoking the fragility of human skin in response to fire. About the work, Lamdark notes, "In presenting an item of clothing without the wearer, [I] make present the body's absence. The use of plastic, a material that does not easily degrade, is also my way of preserving them."¹⁶

Using art to metaphorically preserve the dead, particularly those who are disregarded or deliberately concealed, is a practice shared by artist Teresa Margolles. Trained in forensic medicine, Margolles worked for many years in a morgue in Mexico City, where she regularly encountered the brutal consequences of violence and corruption. For the series *Papeles* (2003), the artist submerged thick sheets of paper in water that had been used to clean bodies after autopsies. With surfaces ranging from delicate tawny washes to thick deposits of blood and hair, each paper (there are 100 in the full series) represents one person, functioning as a distinctive post-mortem portrait of the anonymous dead.

Spring Hurlbut also represents the deceased in her *Deuil* series (2005-2008), photographs of individuals' ashes. Several years after her father James passed away, she measured the weight and size of his cremated remains, producing photographs that contrast the lightness of this physical matter with the heaviness of her grief. Subsequently, Hurlbut developed a series of symbolic ash "drawings," in which she arranged and photographed her father's ashes, as well as those of other deceased friends and pets, on black backgrounds, forming compositions that resemble shooting stars, nebulae, or distant galaxies. The photographs collapse distinctions between subjects and assert that "in death, everything is equivalent."¹⁷ These sublime cosmic forms suggest the transcendent, enduring nature of spirit, and connect individuals to a vast system of matter and energy.

When I was three years old, I didn't understand what death is. My mother died and so did my younger sister, at birth by cesarean. When I grew older, I discovered that there is a hole of ignorance that contained some kind of loss.

—ARAYA RASDJARMREARNSOOK

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *Death Seminar B*, 2005, single channel color video with sound, 00:18:00.
Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York.

