An Interview with Olivier Castel on *My Graves*

Jennifer Bailey

This interview forms part of Bailey's exhibition *Photographs, containers and an interview / Des photographies, des conteneurs et une entrevue* at Small Room, Montreal, CA, presented online, due to Covid-19 restrictions, at @_sm_rm. The interview was conducted in August 2021 and the exhibition opened in the same month.

JB and OC discuss family, Covid-19, living arrangements, illness, children, work, relationships, and mutual friends.

JB: So, shall we commence talking about this work? On my Notes app I've written a little thing that is my memory of this work, which I thought would be a good starting point.

OC: Ok.

JB: (JB reads from her Notes app on her iPhone) As far as I can remember, *My Graves* is a massive, ongoing archive of images. Most seem to have been taken by you, and some perhaps were found on the internet, although I am not certain about this. Many of the images show objects or places that are very grave-like in form, such as a depression in the ground or the foundations of a building. Others had a less clear relationship with the idea of a grave, like a picture of an artwork that was not your own, or a flowerhead.

What I remember liking about the work or images was the heavyweight title set against a series of images of varying thematic depth and relevance to your wider practice. The images often looked as though they had been taken on a phone, opportunistically. It also seemed like a mysterious system for collecting and organising images that only you knew the code for.

It also seemed like an early smartphone-era project.

I seem to remember you showing these as a slideshow on a projector, not in a show but at a *Monaco* launch, maybe one in Deptford? But mostly I imagine the images living in a folder on your computer or on the Cloud.

OC: It's funny you mentioned the phone and the aesthetics and framing. I started this, I suppose, at the start of the 'digital revolution', when digital cameras appeared, so you could take as many pictures as you wanted and it wouldn't cost you more. Once I had the equipment, it was affordable and available. There was this limitless possibility. So, there were two tools technology-wise - the digital camera and the laptop, the computer, or iPhoto, in this regard for me, which enabled you to sort through the mass of photos you'd end up with.

It's something I've always enjoyed, going through photos. These tools, the digital camera and iPhoto, sort of appeared

in my life at the time I decided to become an artist, in my BA or even foundation course, so pretty early on. Then smartphones appeared in, I think, 2007 officially. I started this project, like, five years before that, but it was a similar technology that enabled it. Before that, it wouldn't really have been possible. Film cameras would have been too expensive, and also not practical - the amount of papers, prints. Or slides or negatives.

JB: Yeah, you would have had to have had a slide library in your flat, like, in archival folders or fireproof metal cabinets.

OC: Something I really enjoyed, from early on, was this mass accumulation I was able to do, as a young art student, and the consuming and adjusting and editing. Taking photos was very much like taking notes. It went from everything from my private life, to research, to, like, a quote in a book or something. You are right that there was no hierarchy in that sense. So I was quickly accumulating quite a vast library which I would then enjoy spending time ordering and editing into different folders - interests, projects, things I was working on.

(*My Graves*) was the one that cut through everything. It was the backbone of all the different things I was looking at. The tools, the digital camera, the (iPhoto) library enabled a daily practice. There was a kind of mental gymnastics of finding a rhythm and pace and a way to digest and use all of this information. I could do it in the background when doing other things, like talking to friends or watching something.

JB: So, you would basically take pictures in the way we all took pictures, as note taking - that's a really good example. Then the process of sorting was the second thing. So there would be loads that would be discarded, right, so wouldn't make it into the *My Graves* series?

OC: For sure, for sure. This editing thing is key to the work. I would naturally put far too much in that folder and then would be like - what the hell - that's not a grave, come on! I was too easy on myself. Katie would tell me, oh my god, no, half of them are totally meaningless to anyone (else)!
If I were to make it public I would be a lot harsher in the editing to give them greater clarity and meaning so it could be shared with other people. So, I didn't want to use this album where I've got, like, six thousand pictures. So I would take this album, duplicate it, and with the new one I could be harsh, and edit, edit, edit.

You know about my different names, each with their own project, interest, and so on? Well, this was the one thing that cut through all of them and also through the process behind the project, from early research, to development, to documentation, to private life, to other things. So I could make it whatever I wanted. As long as I felt it could fit within that frame, it was good, until someone comes in and says 'no, no, no, you need to be harsher.' The rare times I would show it, I guess I'd be reminded by other people - I would show it to friends, other artists, people I was working with at the time - that I needed to work a bit harder.

JB: You *were* working hard!

OC: For, you know, for it to make sense to somebody else.

JB: I totally understand that, it's just amusing to me that you were very prolific and were having to manage multiple practices under different names. That's the way I think of your practice: that you were having to be an artistic director for five, six, seven, eight different artists because you had lots of these pseudonyms. And *My Graves*, it was so mysterious to me. I knew it ran in the background (of the other projects) and I was always really interested in it, because I was always looking for new ways to work, and still am. I knew it was a... I don't like to use these boring art school terms: a process-based work, cumulative, but it's interesting that you were, like, shoving all kinds of stuff in (a folder) and would have to edit it later. I had imagined it being some kind of hyper-precise process for some reason. I like the idea that when you were chatting to people you were just moving images into a folder, like, that's what *I* do!

And then later, to justify it to others, to be accountable, for this grand work, you'd then have to edit it back and make it make sense. I thought you were going to say 'no, there is a very specific code, it needs to fit the golden ratio, or it has to have this feature'. It's quite a relatable thing.

OC: Maybe at the beginning, there were these rectangular, horizontal shapes. But then it was really freeing and enjoyable to look at it more broadly. I guess anything could be justified as fitting with this (the form of a grave). A stronger editing would make it more legible, but there's a randomness that I quite enjoy, this idea of the backstage tour of the works, of the different projects. It's the appeal I had with the names (pseudonyms) early on, that they're so immaterial and fragile and nothing - a name is just one word, two words - but it can have as much depth or thickness or reality as you fill them with. The photos are also so thin and easy. Just one photo, one image, taken as a quick note.

Quite early on I remember realising that everything I made were things I had already seen. It's a way of anchoring things, of testing things - taking a picture of this or that, things you might notice, or enjoy, or find relevant in different ways, on the spot. So taking a picture of this and that might be a reference point for different works. There's one example I quite like: Jean-Luc Godard was first reviewing films, before he made them, and he would describe this reviewing process, of interesting films, as a way for him to make films. In a way I find this process of taking photos a similar thing, that is, also a way of editing works and ideas. And in my own case, the enjoyment comes from having a vast amount. I need more chaos than peace. Or, like, a flood rather than a clear stream.

JB: That makes sense. It must be satisfying to accumulate them, and to look at them all together.

OC: And also finding threads through them, or mini versions - a group of three or six or 20 or whatever, that I might see as

an exhibition or that might articulate different ideas together. Until one comes in and messes it all up.

JB speaks about the difficulty of bringing together digital images in a way that is coherent and how to hold and manage them - online, on a smartphone, in files on a computer, etc.

OC: It's interesting you bring up this practical aspect. So, I had a first child, and my computer broke (laughs).

JB: Were the graves buried?

OC: Well - obviously, I had a fear of everything being wiped in one go, so I had backed them up, twice. Then years passed, and hard drives fill up, and then it's like, 'which version?' And because I was taking so many pictures, at some point the computer could not cope with the library so I ended up creating a new library every year, so I would need to switch between libraries as well, and often I would end up being really behind with sorting pictures. And because of this data loss in 2017, I then made an iCloud, but iCloud still needs to be linked with a library, but I had so many libraries so my phone would not sync, or something like this. Basically, I ended up in this muddy, messy black hole, a mess of hardwired hard drives and wire-free Cloud stuff. So, I don't really know where everything is. It would not be that hard to tidy everything up, and I need to, but I haven't got round to it. It's been a little while.

JB: I feel a certain psychic strain from the (digital) images I've accumulated. I thought images were light at a certain time. When I started taking photos on my phone I thought they were nothing. You get the first notice that your email account is full, or that your phone is full, and you realise 'oh, they have weight'.

OC: It becomes a weight. So in a way, the technical aspect of it, which enabled it, then also became what disabled it. Taking too many (photos), having too many libraries, and too many hard drives, and also a version in the Cloud, and then computers failing. Obviously, though, the main thing is time. I had a child.

My art making and thinking really existed in my spare time, especially in the evenings. I would go late to bed, and work late into the evening. I really enjoyed that. Going through photos on the computer was a kind of active-passive way of investing in this field. Having a child has massively eaten into this thing.

JB: Can you remember when you gave the title to the project?

OC: Really, really early on, like right at the beginning. I remember there was a street outside where my parents live in Paris, a boulevard, quite a wide street. It was tarmacked, and sometimes things had to be rebuilt by cutting out a piece of the tarmac, and when the work is done putting a fresh piece on. That's where I put the visual and title together.

One thing for me, being raised in French in France, then coming to study in the UK and everything being in English: there was something really freeing about switching to that language and it being such an intentional language. Also being at ease with it but also (having) many limits, which reversely made me feel freer. I could use certain things that I could not in French. When I would think about the French translation, I would be, like, 'what am I doing?!' Somehow, words in English felt so easy, accessible...

JB: Like, cheap?

OC: Not cheap so much as the sound is detached from the meaning.

JB: Do you still take pictures and think 'this is for *My Graves*'?

OC: I was going to touch on this: I guess no. Occasionally I keep reminding myself that I should, again. I certainly wouldn't say that I would never go back to it: I've never left it.

I quite enjoy that it can have some intense moments, and then some quiet, even dead moments. I still have a phone, and I still take a lot of pictures, a lot nowadays of the kids, but still some I will take as notes. And I know that I will go through them at some point. Sure, it might be a year late, but that's fine. Also, the edit I'd do today wouldn't be the same today as it would be in ten years' time. This is where I find the beauty of it.

JB: Yeah, that's really nice.

OC asks JB about the photographs of containers she has been taking.

JB: Erm, they have to be empty (pauses). Yeah, what are the rules? They are things that hold other things... I know when I see them. There can be other things in the picture, but it needs to be mostly made up of these containers. They can be for water or food, but they can't have water or food in them at the point of sale. They can't be a ramen cup with noodles inside or a punnet of strawberries with strawberries. They are cupped into one another, so sit in one another, and are not branded, and they generally need to be reusable. But weirdly - and I have no idea why - no crockery, no ceramics.

It would be cool if that was my entire practice, like Hans-Peter Feldmann, like, 50 years of just taking pictures of plastic containers.

OC: Oh, (looks at notes) I wanted to talk about this idea of making screens. Often when I would show moving image work, the making of the screen would be as important as the content projected onto it or holding the image. It's always something I've enjoyed, the consideration of the container.

So, the same with *My Graves*. One of the last times I showed it, it was on a particular cloth, pegged outside, on a line, so

kind of like a washing line. The cloth didn't have a seam at either end. Like a loose fabric with a particular thread, maybe fibreglass. So, the support and container was so dense, so meaningful.

JB: That was the main thing I learned at art school, one of the most important things.

OC and JB discuss what 'people are up to'.

JB: …I feel like I don't do enough, although I am working on things all the time. I'm tired a lot of evenings, and that's just from work: I don't have a child to look after, I'm just looking after myself (laughs).

OC: No, but I loved what you said, about how you're trying to be easy on yourself, or…?

JB: I am being a lot easier on myself, yeah. That's been kind of a difficult process, but I want to enjoy everything I do.

OC: It's crucial, very important.

JB: It's incredibly important. I just didn't take it into account enough before.

You're bringing up children, though. This is the thing. I've been grappling with this a lot, like, when people with children are like 'I haven't really done anything', I'm like, you are actually doing quite a big thing, whereas I live like an adult teenager. I have a lot of time to think about life (laughs).

OC: That's good, though, that's good!

JB: Not *necessarily.* You shouldn't think about it too much; you should probably just live it. I've been trying to live it, and I'm nearly at the point where I'm living it.

Olivier Castel (born Paris, 1982) lives and works in London. He usually presents work under heteronyms and has created over thirty different identities since 2001. Often using ephemeral or temporal forms he works primarily with projections, reflective surfaces, light, text and audio. His work functions as a set of propositions, employing the imaginary and exploring the process by which something is made visible.

Jennifer Bailey (born Beckenham, 1984) is an artist who lives in London, whose practice is based between London and Scotland. Her work is concerned with the permeability of art production to societal structures, desire, capital and paid work. She is currently working on a project about happiness. Outside of her art practice, Bailey writes and works in education.