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Although many artists can be said to contemplate mortality in their work—usually in a veiled, Robert Frost kind of way—a clearheaded few have cut through the allusive haze and made their contemplation plain. Whether natural selection, mercy killing or suicide, intimations of death have gotten artists through many a hard night. Sensing her failing beauty and waning political influence, the Countess Castiglione posed for *The Foot*, one of her most touching and sardonic images. Kazimir Malevich designed and painted his own coffin without compromising his aesthetics or his politics. His austere Suprematist box suggests that the beauty of having a formal ideology is that you can take it with you.

Staging death has also been an effective way for artists to express a wish, foment resistance, or change careers. They have posited death in the form of crystalline inertia (Robert Smithson), weightless dispersion (Andy Warhol), theatrical entombment (Paul Thek), subterranean surveillance (Bruce Nauman), ritualized grief (Gordon Matta-Clark), or delusional grandeur (Bas Jan Ader). For each of these artists, the metaphor of death promised a subversive alternative to the equally fatal obligation of producing yet another signature work.

Today artists no longer face this dilemma between their integrity and the demands of the culture industry. In fact, making reliable works of art now requires that artists sacrifice themselves as beautifully as possible. General Idea serves up giant placebos of themselves, David Hammons masters kicking the bucket, and Maurizio Cattelan digs a grave just as he is becoming a star. In a time when art gets subjected to the same numbing cost analyses as IKEA shelving units, a little death homeopathically injected into the system might be just what our culture needs.