

Death as subject matter in the work of selected European,
American, and South African artists in relation to attitudes
towards death in those societies (post-1985).

Peter Rippon

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DEATH AS SUBJECT MATTER IN THE WORK (POST-1985) OF SELECTED
EUROPEAN, AMERICAN, AND SOUTH AFRICAN ARTISTS IN RELATION TO
ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEATH IN THOSE SOCIETIES.

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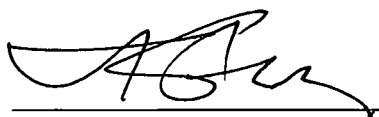
I declare that this partial dissertation is my own work and has not been submitted for any
other degree or examination at any other institution.



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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates how death as a subject matter in the work of contemporary artists living in European, American, and South African societies, relates to attitudes towards death in those societies. It examines how attitudes towards death have changed over the centuries, and how death is perceived in these societies today. It examines how the treatment of death in art today differs from other periods because of these attitudes.

Chapter One, Section One examines three major shifts in attitudes towards death in Western history, as outlined by Philippe Ariès, a leading writer in the field.

Chapter One, Section Two looks at death as a subject matter in Western art history, from ancient Greece to the mid-twentieth century. Categories discussed include funerary art, religious art, art and medicine, death personified, historical and analytical, personal, political art, and death and consumerism.

Chapter Two, Section One examines attitudes towards death in contemporary Westernized societies, focusing on the medicalization of death, funeral rituals and disposal practices, and attitudes towards death in South Africa, specifically within the cultural framework of white, English-speaking South Africans.

Chapter Two, Section Two examines death as a subject matter in the work of selected contemporary artists in America, Europe, and South Africa, and how it relates to attitudes towards death in those societies. Artists examined are Damien Hirst, Christian Boltanski, Joel-Peter Witkin, Andres Serrano, Donna Sharrett, Gerhard Richter, and Jo Ractliffe.

The paper concludes by outlining the main arguments of the research and conclusions reached.

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1992

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125.7 x 152.4 cm

(Fundación Proa, 2003)

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Andres Serrano

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1992

Cibachrome, silicone, plexi-glass, wood frame

125.7 x 152.4 cm

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Andres Serrano

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PREFACE

This dissertation uses the following conventions:

- Titles of artworks and works of poetry are given in *italics*.
- Titles of exhibitions, bodies of work, and series are given in **bold**.
- Titles of books, journals, and internet sources are underlined.
- References are given using the Harvard method.
- Quotes are given using double quotation marks ("...").
- Quotes of four lines or longer are indented and are in smaller type.
- Quotes within quotes are given using single quotation marks ('...').
- For the purposes of this dissertation, the word "contemporary" when referring to an artist means an artist who is currently still alive and working as an artist. When referring to artworks "contemporary" means works made after 1985.
- When referring to people living in South Africa the word "black" has been used to mean people of African descent, and the word "white" has been used to mean people of European descent.
- Where available English names have been given for works originally named in another language.

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation will investigate how death as a subject matter in the works of contemporary artists living in European, American, and South African societies relates to attitudes towards death in those societies. It will examine how attitudes towards death have changed over the centuries, and how death is perceived in these societies today. It will examine how the role of death in art today differs from other periods because of these attitudes.

Death as a subject matter in art is used in different contexts, including political, historical, social, analytical, and personal. This dissertation will discuss these various contexts and compare the different ways in which they relate to attitudes towards death in society.

I have chosen to examine European and American societies because they are Westernized and industrialized societies. The same cannot be said of South Africa, as it is considered to be a developing country and has a large rural population. However, the segment of South African society that I have grown up in and find myself living in reflects Westernized European and American cultures.

SUMMARY

In this research I intend to dispel the notion that all artists who explore death in their work do so as a result of some morbid fascination with it, or in an attempt to impart shock value to their work. I will show that there are artists who engage death in their work in an attempt to gain an understanding of death themselves, and to foster a better awareness in others of the problematic issues in modern attitudes towards death in contemporary Westernized society. However, I will also show that there are some artists who capitalize

on the taboo surrounding death, solely for its shock value. A more important reason for this research is the lack of literature on the subject. While much has been written about Western attitudes towards death, the connection between these attitudes and death as a subject matter in contemporary art has been neglected. My primary reason for choosing this topic, however, is its relationship to my practical work, which explores issues of death in a personal and social context. I began examining attitudes towards death in response to the death of my father. I experienced a definite shortcoming in the attitudes to death within my cultural framework (as a white, English-speaking South African). This shortcoming was manifested in the treatment of death by the medical and funerary industries, by the modes of expression of grief available to mourners, and by the feelings of discomfort and unease elicited among people in my social environment.

Therefore, my reason for choosing to research attitudes towards death, and death as a subject matter in art, in a specifically Western context is twofold: my own cultural framework is largely determined by Western cultural mores; and my art-making is directed by Western art-making practices and traditions.

The first chapter of this paper will provide a historical context for the dissertation. It will discuss the changing attitudes towards death in different periods of Western history, the history of death in Western art, and the relationship between the two. Chapter Two, Section One will examine attitudes towards death in contemporary societies, and Chapter Two, Section Two will analyse the use of death as subject matter in the works of selected contemporary artists in relation to these attitudes. Artists examined are Damien Hirst (b. 1965), Christian Boltanski (b. 1944), Joel-Peter Witkin (b. 1939), Andres Serrano

(b. 1950), Donna Sharrett (b. 1959), Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), and Jo Ractliffe (b. 1961).

The dissertation will conclude by noting the main arguments raised in the paper and conclusions reached.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Chapter One provides a historical context for attitudes towards death in Western societies and for death as a subject matter in art. In this chapter I will begin, in Section One, by discussing the changing attitudes towards death in Western history, starting in the early Middle Ages and continuing to the end of nineteenth century. These attitudes are encountered in deathbed rituals, funeral and disposal practices, and rituals of mourning.

In Section Two I will discuss death as a subject matter in Western art history. I will examine the different areas of art where the theme of death can be found, such as funerary, religious, and medical art. I will also explore the various approaches to the subject of death in art, including the political, historical, and personal. This section draws examples of artworks from a wide historical range, from ancient Greece to the mid-twentieth century.

Section One

The history of attitudes towards death in Western societies

It's easy enough to die if the things you care about are going to survive. You've had your life, you're getting tired, it's time to go underground – that's how people used to see it. Individually they were finished, but their way of life would continue. Their good and evil would remain good and evil. They didn't feel the ground they stood on shifting under their feet.

George Orwell, Coming Up for Air

It is not surprising that attitudes towards death in Westernized societies today differ from those found in earlier periods. What is surprising is the speed with which these attitudes have changed in recent history. In his seminal work, Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present, Philippe Ariès (1974: 85) notes that the changes in attitudes towards death from the Middle Ages until the mid-nineteenth century occurred so slowly that contemporaries did not notice. In modern times, however,

we have witnessed a brutal revolution in traditional ideas and feelings, a revolution so brutal that social observers have not failed to be struck by it. Death, so omnipresent in the past that it was familiar, would be effaced, would disappear. It would become shameful and forbidden (ibid).

This is not to say that when someone close to us dies we ignore the fact. Llewellyn (1991: 16) believes that our behaviour does change, but death still takes place at a distance. It is seen as an abnormality that has intruded into our otherwise normal lives. He goes on to explain that in today's Western world death is presented as a binary model, in which death is seen as the opposite of life. In earlier times, however, dying was a process, a rite of passage, one that may have begun long before the moment of natural death itself

(ibid: 18). The ritualized period of dying was "stretched in ways which by today's standards would be considered tasteless and unacceptable" (ibid: 16).

Ariès describes three attitudes towards death in Western history, occurring at different periods. However, he emphasizes that one attitude did not supplant the previous attitude, rather that one gradually shifted into the other through subtle modifications (Ariès, 1974: 27).

The earliest and longest held of these attitudes was a familiar resignation to the collective destiny of mankind (ibid: 55).

In death man encountered one of the great laws of the species, and he had no thought of escaping it or glorifying it. He merely accepted it with just the proper amount of solemnity due to one of the important thresholds which each generation always had to cross (ibid: 28).

The second attitude he describes appeared around the twelfth century, and reveals an importance placed on the self – one's own existence and one's own death (ibid: 55). Beginning in the eleventh century, "a formerly unknown relationship developed between the death of each individual and his awareness of being an individual" (ibid: 51).

The third attitude he describes began in the eighteenth century. Man became less concerned with his own death and more concerned with the death of the other person.

This resulted in a more dramatized and romanticized treatment of death (ibid: 56). Death also became eroticized. As Binion (1993: 1) states, "Throughout the nineteenth century plus a little before and after, high culture in the West was rife with visions of death as

seductive and of sex and death intermixed". The conjunction of sex and death in the arts existed well before this period, but until then death had been an enemy of carnal love. Now, however, "fleshiest love reconciled with death in all sorts of imaginary ways" (ibid: 2).

Ariès's first attitude towards death

These attitudes need to be focussed on in more detail. The first attitude that Ariès describes existed in the Early Middle Ages, before the twelfth century. As already mentioned, dying was not considered as a specific moment in time separating life and death, but rather as a liminal period, a transition between the two states. This period was governed by a set of rituals, which were organized and presided over by the dying person himself (Ariès, 1974: 11). He usually had forewarning, and knowing his end was near made the necessary preparations (ibid: 7). The dying person's bedchamber became a public place, and it was important that his friends and family were present (ibid: 12). Children were also present. Until the eighteenth century, portrayals of deathbed scenes rarely failed to include children (ibid). According to Kübler-Ross (1969: 6), being included in the process gave children the comfort that they were not alone in their grief, and helped them to learn to view death as a part of life.

The rituals themselves were carried out very simply (Ariès, 1974: 7). First the dying person expressed sorrow for the end of life, and sadly recalled beloved people and things (ibid: 9). The next step was for the dying person to pardon the people who were in attendance of any deeds they might have committed against him (ibid). This was followed by the person's final prayer, in which he confessed his sins to God (ibid: 10). At this point

came absolution, granted by a priest, who read psalms, burned incense over the person, and sprinkled holy water on him. After his final prayer, the dying person waited for death, and should he have to wait long he did so in silence (ibid). After saying his final prayer there was no need to utter another word (ibid: 11).

Ariès's second attitude towards death

This attitude, according to Ariès, was partially altered during the late Middle Ages, beginning in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (ibid: 27). This is the second attitude towards death that he describes, characterized by the introduction of the concern for the individual destiny of each person into the old idea of the collective destiny of mankind (ibid: 28). This shift he ascribes to a series of new phenomena, the first being the portrayal of the Last Judgement. (ibid).

Before the twelfth century, the general view of the Apocalypse was that Christ would return at the end of the world (ibid: 29). The dead who belonged to the church would awake on the day of the Second Coming, after a long sleep (ibid: 29, 31). Those who were not members of the church would not awaken, and were left in a state of non-existence. There was no judgement, and no place for individual responsibility. This view changed in the twelfth century. (ibid). It was then believed that at the end of the world the Last Judgement would come, all the dead would be resurrected, judged according to their deeds, and separated into the just and the damned (ibid: 31, 32).

Later, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the judgement of each individual was shifted from the end of the world to the moment of the person's death (ibid: 33). In

addition to family and friends, depictions of deathbed scenes now had forces of heaven and hell clustered around the bed, a spectacle only visible to the dying person (ibid: 34). These forces were there to vie for the person's soul, for it was no longer the person's deeds that determined his fate in the afterlife, but the state of his soul at the moment of death.

Another phenomenon Ariès describes is the interest in macabre themes and portrayals of physical decomposition (ibid: 28). Flynn (1998: 6) notes that the cadaver, or transi, appeared in art and literature, representing the body in its "liminal, decaying state, which functioned as a memento mori for the onlooker, a reminder of the transience of human existence". People of this period were acutely aware of their impending death, and so were more appreciative of life while they had it (Ariès, 1974: 44-5).

The last phenomenon instrumental in the shift in attitudes towards death in the late Middle Ages that Ariès describes is the return to funeral inscriptions and to the personalization of tombs. Earlier, in the fifth century, personalized burial places had begun to disappear (ibid: 46). The dead person was at that time given over to the church to be buried in an unmarked, often communal, grave (ibid: 47). The location of the dead person was not important, so long as he was in the care of the church (ibid: 22). Around the beginning of the thirteenth century, however, individual funeral inscriptions began to reappear (ibid: 47). Although rare at first, and reserved for illustrious personages, inscriptions became very common in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries (ibid: 47, 49). They show the desire to individualize the burial site, and to perpetuate the memory of the deceased (ibid: 49).

Ariès's third attitude towards death

The third attitude towards death that Ariès describes, which arose in the eighteenth century, is characterized by a greater concern for the death of the other person, "whose loss and memory inspired in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the new cult of tombs and cemeteries and the romantic, rhetorical treatment of death" (ibid: 55-6). Although the rituals surrounding a person's death remained much the same, they lost the banality with which they had been previously performed (ibid: 66). The dying person retained the initiative in the ceremonies surrounding his death, and remained the central figure in the events, but it was the attitude of those in attendance that had most changed (ibid: 65-6). Whereas before mourning was governed by social conventions, it now "claimed to have no obligations to social conventions and to be the most spontaneous and insurmountable expression of a very grave wound" (ibid: 67). This exaggeration of mourning indicates that people accepted the death of another person with greater difficulty than before, and that the death of the other came to be more feared than the death of the self (ibid: 67-8). This attitude gave rise to cemeteries (separate from the church where the churchyard had previously been the site of burial), in which people could come and visit the graves of their loved ones, a development that reveals an unwillingness to accept the departure of the deceased (ibid: 68).

Conclusion

To summarize, before the twelfth century the attitude towards death and dying was one of solemn acceptance and resignation to the collective destiny of humanity. This attitude shifted slightly around the twelfth century when there arose a preoccupation with the individual destiny of each person, one that was affected by that person's deeds during his

or her life. This concern for the death of the individual saw the return of personalized burial sites and funerary inscriptions. By the eighteenth century the concern for one's own death was overshadowed by the concern for the death of the other. This gave rise to a romantic treatment of death in art and literature, and brought about the development of cemeteries where people could visit the graves of the deceased. This demonstrated a reluctance to accept the loss of a loved one.

At the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, people had begun to feel uncomfortable about death. However, they had not yet developed the denial of death that would characterize twentieth-century attitudes towards death in Western societies. Attitudes towards death, shifting gradually since the early Middle Ages, would now undergo a markedly rapid change. This change in attitudes towards death will be explored in Chapter Two, Section One.

The next section of this chapter provides an overview of death as a subject matter in Western art history.

Section Two

Death as subject matter in Western art history

The glories of our blood and state
Are shadows, not substantial things;
There is no armour against fate;
Death lays his icy hand on kings:
Sceptre and crown
Must tumble down,
And in the dust be equal made
With the poor crooked scythe and spade.

James Shirley, from *Death the Leveller*

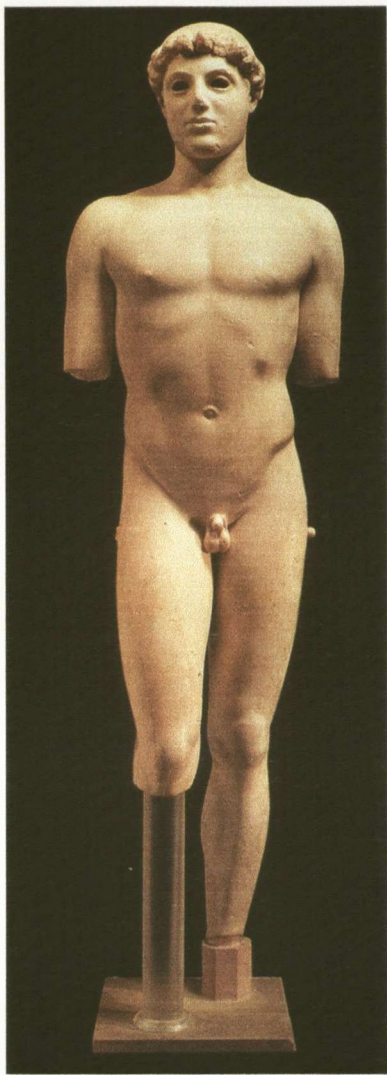
Davies (1997: 60) argues that art throughout history has provided not only an instrument for human reflection on death, but also a means of engaging mortality. As he puts it, "From the medieval portrayal of life as a dance, with death in the background, to more modern existential depictions of death through a wide variety of symbols of desolation artists speak against death for many" (ibid).

The theme of death ranges across many different disciplines in the arts. Death as a subject matter in art can be been found in well-defined categories, such as funerary, religious, and medical art, and also in areas of more subtle distinction, such as political, historical, analytical, and personal. The recurring use of death as a subject matter precludes an in-depth analysis of any one particular period or manifestation of the subject. This section will provide an overview of the more noteworthy areas of art history where the theme of death has played an important role, in order to compare historical attitudes to death, and to provide a historical context for contemporary practice.

Funerary art

Funerary art has existed in many cultures in many historical eras. An example giving by Flynn (1998: 28-9) is of the ancient Greek *kore* (female) and *kouroi* (male) figures (Fig. 1), which seem to have fulfilled a funerary function in commemorating those who had died young and still in the prime of their lives. The concept of *kalos thanatos*, or beautiful death, spared such people from the decrepitude of old age, and endowed them with a heroic status. These statues were characterized by the appearance of good health, strength, and benevolence. These characteristics were intended to convey more than just a sense of bodily well-being, they also expressed the qualities of divinity supposedly afforded to the recipients of this beautiful death (ibid).

In Europe, during medieval times, sarcophagi often bore a life-size sculpture of the prostrate body inside (Harris, et al, 1997: 3). According to Flynn (1998: 16) these *transi* tombs, as they were called, appeared around the 1400s, constructed out of polychromed marble and other materials. They were two-story tombs that, in varying degrees of realism, evoked the transition of the body into decay. They consisted of an effigy of the social body of the deceased (the body as remembered by those still living), as well its double, the natural body in a state of decomposition. These functioned as *memento mori* for the onlooker (ibid: 15). The concept of *memento-mori* originated in the medieval period, and is Latin for "remember you must die" (ibid: 71). This period saw the prevalence of Ariès's second attitude towards death – the concern for one's own death and individual destiny. *Memento mori* reminded people of this destiny, and of the fact that the fate of their immortal souls depended on their deeds during this life. The *transi* tombs illustrate the interest in the depiction of bodily decay that Ariès describes as one of the



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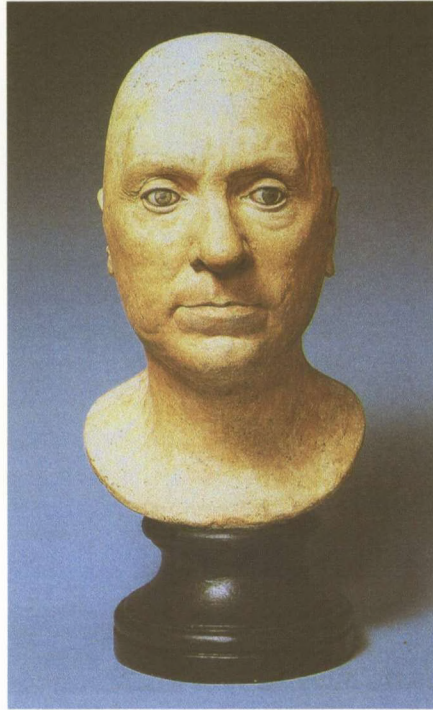
Fig. 1. Unknown artist, *Kritios Boy*
c. 480 B.C.
Marble

phenomena symptomatic of this attitude towards death. A good example is the tomb of Archbishop Henry Chichele (d. 1443), constructed in 1451 at the Canterbury Cathedral (Fig. 2). It uses polychromed materials to emphasize the contrast between the reposing social body and, below it, its counterpart, the emaciated, decaying corpse (Flynn, 1998: 15). Inscribed on the tomb is the warning: "Whoever you may be who will pass by, I ask for your remembrance, you who will be like me after you die: horrible in all things, dust, worms, vile flesh" (ibid). As Davies (1997: 23) says, "The corpse is the prime symbol of death. In its silence and decay it enshrines the radical changes inevitably brought by mortality, yet it challenges the living to respond."

Funeral effigies are a form of funerary art that is found throughout history. Skulls unearthed from the Neolithic ruins in Jericho, the earliest known permanent community, were plastered over to restore facial features, and had seashells inserted into the eye sockets (De la Haba, 1979: 32, 35). The distinguished faces of Roman aristocrats were cast in plaster death masks for posterity (Harris, et al, 1997: 3). From the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, effigies of deceased public figures remained in use, with debates raging in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries about the boundaries separating such practices from the realm of high art (Flynn, 1998: 14-15). The ability to re-create closely the appearance of the deceased with waxwork models and painted plaster effigies gave such techniques a prominent role within royal funerary ceremonies and other rituals in which the natural body was for some reason absent (ibid: 15-16). One such effigy was the lifelike plaster head of the English Puritan statesman and Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), c. 1658 (Fig. 3) (ibid: 17). It was used as his surrogate at his official funeral, which took place two months after his burial (ibid).



Fig. 2. The tomb of Archbishop Henry Chichele (d. 1443)
1451
Polychromed marble and other materials



*

Fig. 3. Thomas and Abraham Simon (attributed), *Oliver Cromwell*
c. 1658
Plaster funeral effigy with glass eyes

A good example of an effigy, given by Flynn-(1998: 87, 89), is *The Blessed Stanislas Kostka on his Deathbed*, 1702-03 (Fig. 4), by Pierre Legros the Younger (1666-1719). It is constructed using different marbles and alabasters. Stanislas Kostka, who died in 1568 at the age of eighteen, was a Polish Jesuit novice, and the work was commissioned by the Jesuits in 1702 at Sant' Andrea al Quirinale in Rome. It is situated in the darkened room in which the young novice died, and was intended to foster devout contemplation of Kostka within the context of Jesuit teaching. Another example is a work by Louis François Roubiliac (c. 1705-62), who constructed a monument to Joseph Gascoigne and Lady Elizabeth Nightingale out of marble from 1758-61 (Fig. 5), situated at Westminster Abbey in London. The monument shows husband and wife as a living couple confronted by death in the form of a ghastly skeleton emerging from a sepulchre (ibid). These examples coincide with the attitude towards death that Ariès describes as arising in the eighteenth century. This is the third attitude he discusses, which was characterized by the concern for the death of the other person, and which led to the "cult of tombs and cemeteries" (Ariès, 1974: 56).

Llewellyn (1991: 13) points out that the death ritual and the funerary objects that accompany it occupy a liminal place in human existence. Bronfen (1998: 507) explains that this liminal place is a transitional moment between life and death, and is occupied first by the dying person, who is about to enter a state inaccessible to those surviving, and then by the corpse of the deceased, who is no longer fully present in the world of the living. Death removes a social being from society, and so is perceived as a wound to the community and a reminder of its own impermanence. The death ritual and its attendant objects serve to redress the loss of a community member by creating a new identity for the deceased and reintegrating him or her back into the community of the survivors (ibid).



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Fig. 4. Pierre Legros the Younger, *The Blessed Stanislas Kostka on his Deathbed*
1702-03
Marbles and alabasters



Fig. 5. Louis François Roubiliac, Monument to Joseph Gascoigne and Lady
Elizabeth Nightingale
1758-61
Marble

In artefacts like the *transi* tombs, the social body is sustained in our memories, while the natural body after death, lifeless and decaying, remains to remind us of our own mortality (Llewellyn, 1991: 9). This juxtaposition of portraits and corpses may seem unsettling to contemporary western society, in which life and death are seen as a binary model. Life and death are spoken of as opposite elements, as contrasting as positive and negative, black and white, or good and evil, instead of being seen as a single cultural and spiritual process (ibid: 10).

Religious art

Another occurrence of the theme of death in Western art history is in religious art. In classical times the body was portrayed in its ideal form, and this perfection was considered as an expression of the divine (Flynn, 1998: 46). In medieval times, however, it was the agonized, suffering body that embodied the prospect of ultimate salvation. Medieval Christianity viewed the body as shameful, fallen flesh, which required disciplining against sin in order to gain redemption (ibid). As Flynn notes, Christianity has always centred on a powerful image of corporeality, that of the crucifixion. The corporeal nature of Christian doctrine is further reinforced by the Eucharist at the centre of the Catholic mass, in which bread and water are thought to be transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ (ibid: 65). Binion (1993: 85) states that since the inception of Christianity, its rituals and imagery have always centred on the corpse of Jesus, and his sacrifice for the sins of mankind. The Christian Communion re-enacts this sacrifice.

Christian imagery features the crucifixion, the descent from the cross, the lamentation, the pietà, and the entombment. From the fourteenth century, artists depicting the dead body

of Christ often accentuated its corpse-like quality beyond the natural (ibid). As with the *transi* tombs of this period, this depiction of the corpse and of physical decay adhered to the phenomenon Ariès describes as belonging to his second attitude towards death.

Some Renaissance masters that portrayed the dead body of Christ are Rogier van der Weyden (c.1400-64), Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), Andrea Mantegna (c.1431-1506), Matthias Grünewald (c.1480-1528), Rosso Fiorentino (1494-1540), Bronzino (1503-72), and Annibale Carracci (1560-1609) (Binion, 1993; Gardner, et al, 1970; Raine, 1998). Hans Holbein the Younger (1497-1543) vividly recorded the aftermath of death in the emaciated and agonized figure of Jesus in his work *Dead Christ in the Tomb* 1521, (Fig. 6). Raine (1998) describes the prostrate body of Christ as having long passed that moment in which the illusion of life lingers, before slowly evaporating.

One of the most notable interpretations of the theme of the dead body of Christ is the crucifixion scene from Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, c. 1510-15 (Fig. 7), as discussed in Gardner, et al (1970: 533-4). The altar is composed of a carved wooden shrine with two pairs of movable panels, with the *Crucifixion* outermost, visible when the altar is closed. The body on the cross is twisted in agony, and the flesh is already discoloured by decomposition. Christ's head has drooped to one side, and his fingers are splayed in desperate suffering. Even the crossbar of the crucifix is bending slightly under the dead weight of the corpse. The body of Jesus and the figures of the lamenters stand out starkly against a wilderness of dark mountains, which has the effect of intensifying the deathliness of the corpse (ibid).



Fig. 6. Hans Holbein, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*

1521

Oil on wood

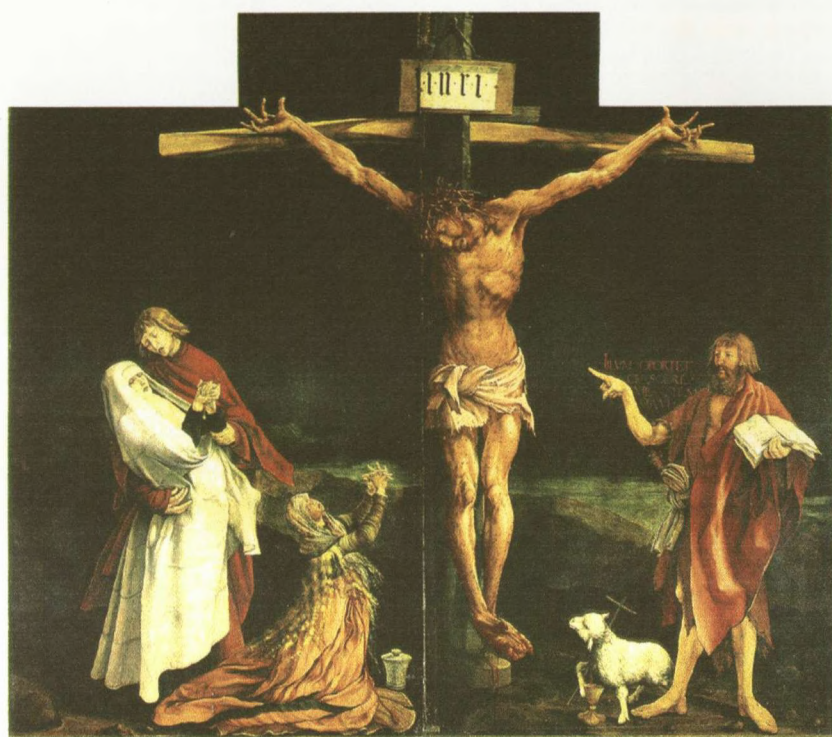


Fig. 7. Matthias Grünewald, *The Crucifixion*
c. 1510-15
Oil on wood (panel from the Isenheim altarpiece)

The conventional depiction of the body of Christ by artists of this period is described by Binion (1993: 86) as showing a man "of deepest spirituality desexualized, devastated, weighed down with immeasurable sorrow in dying". The treatment of his body in this manner served to remind Christians of the pain that Christ had suffered for the sake of humanity, and demanded from them a passion for his dead body (ibid). It also reflected the change of attitude towards death during this period. Whereas before it was believed that salvation was assured to members of the church and that there was no place for individual responsibility or accountability, it was now believed that one would have to answer for one's life at the Last Judgement. The depiction of the body of Christ in all its deathliness reminded people of the brevity of their own existence, the importance of atoning for their sins, and of living a pious life in preparation for their own death.

Art and medicine

Death and art were also conjoined when art and medicine formed a collaboration. The contribution of artists to the scientific study of human anatomy is an acknowledged fact in the history of medicine (Flynn, 1998: 70). This alliance is commonly regarded as marking the beginning of modern science (ibid). Comar (1999: 66) reveals that for the greater part of human history, medical knowledge of the human body was restricted to what could be observed externally. The most celebrated physician of ancient Greece, Hippocrates, never opened a cadaver, although Aristotle composed a collection of anatomical sketches of animals (ibid: 66-7). Aristotle stated that the internal parts of the human body must necessarily remain unknown, and could only be imagined by their resemblance to the organs of other animals (ibid: 67). Thus for a long time, well into the Middle Ages,

medicine was comprised of knowledge based on analogy rather than empirical study (ibid: 67-8).

In 1230, the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II passed a decree banning the practice of medicine without one year's prior study of the anatomy of the human body (ibid: 69). Gradually the reliance on dissection became widespread in Europe. However, any outcome reached by an anatomical examination was doomed to be lost if not recorded in an image. Thus, as dissection came to be considered more acceptable, so too did anatomical illustration, and by the fourteenth century physicians undertook dissections in close collaboration with artists (ibid).

In 1543 the Flemish doctor Andreas Vesalius published the first treatise on anatomy based entirely on observation and dissection, called De Humani corporis fabrica, or The Fabric of the Human Body (ibid: 73-4). The series of woodblock plates that illustrated this work indicate the productive exchange between the artistic and scientific communities during the sixteenth century (Flynn, 1998: 70). In this book, Vesalius produced the first comprehensive account and illustrations of the human skeleton (Comar, 1999: 74). Bones, muscles, and entrails were depicted down to the smallest detail. Organs were carefully scrutinized and displayed from several angles. Some illustrations made use of the flayed figure, or *écorché*, which showed a figure without skin in which the layers of muscle are peeled back successively, from the most superficial layer to the deepest level (Fig. 8). The *écorché* had been used before, but none had been as informative and comprehensible as those of Vesalius (ibid). These figures are often presented as standing isolated and apparently alive in a landscape, and may have functioned as a *memento mori*,



Fig. 8. Andreas Vesalius, *The Seventh Plate of the Muscles*
From 'De Humani corporis fabrica', first published 1543
Wood engraving

reminding those living of their inevitable fate and the brevity of human existence (Flynn, 1998: 70-1).

Flynn (1998: 70) notes that at the same time artists were undertaking dissections for their own purposes. During the Renaissance there was a demand for naturalistic realism, and artists could no longer rely solely on the study of nude models for their knowledge of the human form. Not only had public nudity become culturally unacceptable, artists also shared with physicians the desire to understand the internal workings of their subjects. Many artists, including Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) and Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564), undertook the illegal dissection of corpses in the belief that a better understanding of the interior workings of the body would enable them to represent the exterior form more convincingly (ibid).

Comar (1999: 72-3) believes that Leonardo best embodied the fusion between art and science. He carried out and visually recorded many dissections, but he set out not to simply imitate what he saw, but rather to execute a plan of the structures and functions of the body (Fig. 9). His work was not merely a documentation of the dissection, but was the result of an analysis. He recorded his observations in a random collection of notebooks, which he did not publish. Thus little of his work was distributed in his own lifetime, and, unlike Vesalius's work, had little influence on his contemporaries (ibid).

Dissections also made their way into what could be called "high art", or artworks that were not intended to serve a practical purpose in the field of medicine. *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Tulp*, 1632 (Fig. 10) by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-69), for example, belonged to a genre of Dutch guild portraiture (Kitson, 1982: 46). This painting was the

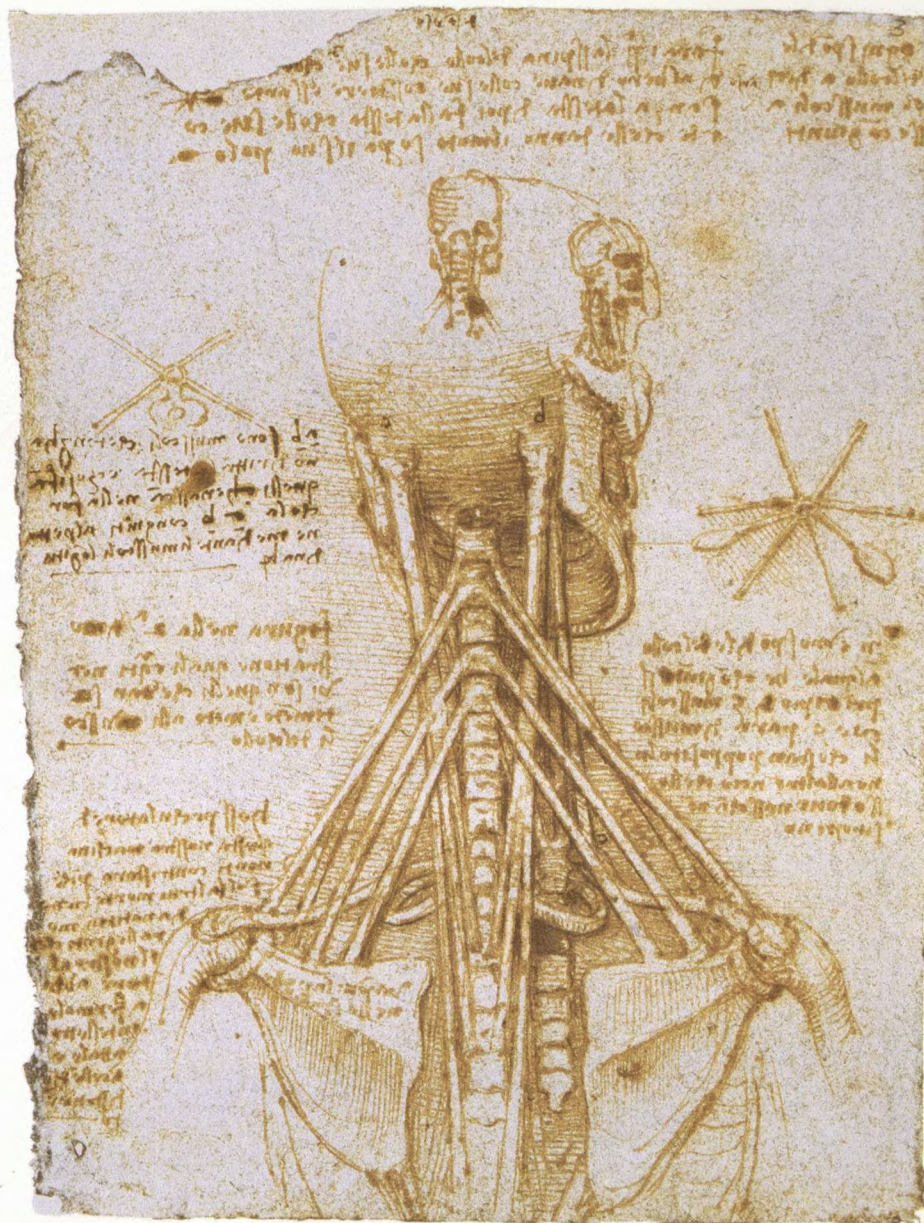


Fig. 9. Leonardo da Vinci, *Anatomical study of the neck muscles*
c. 1510.

Pen and ink on blue-coloured paper



*

Fig. 10. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Tulp*
1632
Oil on canvas

first in this field to unify the figures by their common interest in an event taking place within the composition, and not merely by gestures and glances. Group portraits of surgeons' guilds, usually posed with a skeleton, had been a recognized category of painting in the Netherlands since the beginning of the seventeenth century. The dissection in Rembrandt's painting is being undertaken by the chief anatomist of the Surgeons' Guild of Amsterdam at the time, Dr Nicolaes Pietersz Tulp (1593-1674), who was a follower of Vesalius. The surgical dissection of corpses had by this time been made into established official occasions with fixed procedures rigidly controlled by the guilds. It was forbidden to hold a dissection, either in public or private, without permission from the guild, and the corpse had to be that of an executed criminal. This painting seems to depict a private dissection, because public dissections usually began with the opening of the stomach (as in Rembrandt's later work, *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Joan Deymen*, 1656). These private dissections were allowed prior to or following the public ones, and it was at these that scientific knowledge was primarily advanced, whereas public dissections had become occasions for elaborate ceremonial and symbolic punishment of the criminal. The painting does not appear to be a documentary reconstruction of one of Dr Tulp's anatomical demonstrations, but more of a symbolic representation (ibid). While the work may not fall into the category of anatomical study, Rembrandt does allude to this field by including an open book, presumably with anatomical plates, with which the surgeons compare the dissected arm of the corpse. It is also possible, as Kitson (1982: 46) points out, that Rembrandt painted the dissected arm from an engraving, rather than from an actual cadaver.



Death personified

The use of the skeleton as the personification of death is also a popular motif in Western art history. Moon (1996: 30) explains that flesh decays rather quickly after death, leaving only the bones, thus for a long time bones have been a reminder of the loss of life. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, death was often depicted as a living skeleton carrying an hourglass running out of sand, or a scythe prepared to cut – items that served as reminders of the brevity of life (ibid). For example, Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), in his engraving *Knight, Death and the Devil*, 1513-14 (Fig. 11), depicts Death as a skeletal corpse riding a skinny nag and holding an hourglass up to a stalwart knight (Simon, 1970: 47).

In the 14th and 15th centuries, the Dance of Death was also a popular theme in art (Comar, 1999: 71). Its purpose was ironical, humorous, and cautionary: to bring death to life, and to show death as a partner with whom the living must dance (ibid). Pollefey (1998) states that the Dance of Death usually took the form of frescoes painted on the outside walls of cloisters, family vaults, ossuaries, and sometimes inside churches. Death, in the form of an emaciated corpse or skeleton, and often playing a musical instrument, leads everyone into the dance: from the whole clerical hierarchy – the pope, cardinals, bishops, abbots, canons, priests – to members of the secular world – emperors, kings, dukes, counts, knights, doctors, merchants, usurers, robbers, peasants, and children. Death makes no distinction regarding social position, wealth, sex, or age (ibid).



The Dance of Death also appears in manuscripts. An example Pollefey (1998) gives is Hans Holbein's Dance of Death, first published in 1538. In this forty-one piece woodcut



Fig. 11. Albrecht Dürer, *Knight, Death, and the Devil*
1513–14
Engraving

Death intervenes directly in scenes of everyday life. The first four woodcuts are scenes from the Genesis: *The creation* (Fig. 12), *The temptation* (Fig. 13), *Expulsion of Adam and Eve* (Fig. 14), and *Adam tills the soil* (Fig. 15). Death first appears in the third woodcut, the expulsion, waiting triumphantly, and holding a musical instrument. The fifth woodcut, *Bones of all men* (Fig. 16), portrays a group of skeletons playing various instruments. The dance begins in the next woodcut with the Pope, and goes on to thirty-four other victims. The fortieth woodcut is *The Last Judgement* (Fig. 17), and the last in the series is *The escutcheon of Death*, which shows the armorial emblem of Death. Holbein's portrayal of Death is usually as a dispenser of justice, denouncing greediness and the abuse of power. The clergy receive rather harsh treatment in Holbein's hands. Death visits the pope (Fig. 18) at the most prestigious moment of his career, while he is crowning an emperor. Death arrives while the cardinal is selling indulgences (Fig. 19), and grasps the monk who is trying to escape with his possessions (Fig. 20). The nun, while praying in her richly decorated room, throws an amorous glance at her lover (Fig. 21). Death lurks in the background, and extinguishes a candle on the altar, an indication of the nun's destiny. Death is sometimes portrayed as cruel, as in *The child* (Fig. 22), in which he takes a child away from his family, but he is also portrayed as helpful. He helps Adam till the soil, and likewise helps the farmer plough the field (Fig. 23). He pours water for the king to wash his hands (Fig. 24), and he accompanies the old man (Fig. 25) and the old woman (Fig. 26) to their final sleep (ibid).

Skeletons are also employed in depictions of the Last Judgement, with the skeletal Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse, riding a bony horse, wreaking havoc on the world (Moon, 1996: 30). Dürer again provides a classic example with his woodcut *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, c. 1498 (Fig. 27), in which Death pitches a fallen bishop into the



Fig. 12. Hans Holbein,
The creation
From 'Dance of Death',
first published 1538
Woodcut



Fig. 13. Hans Holbein,
The temptation
From 'Dance of Death',
first published 1538
Woodcut



Fig. 14. Hans Holbein,
Expulsion of Adam and Eve
From 'Dance of Death',
first published 1538
Woodcut



Fig. 15. Hans Holbein,
Adam tills the soil
From 'Dance of Death',
first published 1538
Woodcut



Fig. 16. Hans Holbein,
Bones of all men
From 'Dance of Death',
first published 1538
Woodcut



Fig. 17. Hans Holbein,
The Last Judgement
From 'Dance of Death',
first published 1538
Woodcut



Fig. 18. Hans Holbein,
The pope
From 'Dance of Death',
first published 1538
Woodcut



Fig. 19. Hans Holbein,
The cardinal
From 'Dance of Death',
first published 1538
Woodcut



Fig. 20. Hans Holbein,
The monk
From 'Dance of Death',
first published 1538
Woodcut



Fig. 21. Hans Holbein,
The nun
From 'Dance of Death',
first published 1538
Woodcut



Fig. 22. Hans Holbein,
The child
From 'Dance of Death',
first published 1538
Woodcut



Fig. 23. Hans Holbein,
The ploughman
From 'Dance of Death',
first published 1538
Woodcut



Fig. 24. Hans Holbein,
The king
From 'Dance of Death',
first published 1538
Woodcut



Fig. 25. Hans Holbein,
The old man
From 'Dance of Death',
first published 1538
Woodcut



Fig. 26. Hans Holbein,
The old woman
From 'Dance of Death',
first published 1538
Woodcut



Fig. 27. Albrecht Dürer, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*
c. 1497-8
Woodcut

*

mouth of a dragon (Gardner, et al, 1970: 536). Another good example is given by Pollefey (1998), that of *The Triumph of Death*, c. 1562 (Fig. 28), by Pieter Brueghel the Elder (c. 1525-69). Death is armed with a scythe and rides an emaciated horse. He drives the hordes of people into what is either a crate or a tunnel. An army of skeletons invade the apocalyptic landscape, slaughtering people indiscriminately: the king, the mother and her toddler, the knight, the fine ladies, the peasants, the lovers (ibid). The overriding message conveyed by these depictions of the Dance of Death and the Last Judgment in this period of history is clear: in the eyes of Death all men are equal.

Another theme in which death is often personified in the form of a skeleton is that of Death and the Maiden. Binion (1993: 73) reveals that this theme was an offshoot of the Dance of Death, and, like its progenitor, originated in Germany and flourished during the fourteenth century. Artists such as Hans Baldung Grien (1484/5-1545), Niklaus Manuel Deutsch (c. 1484-1530), and Barthel Beham (1502-1540) were proficient with this theme, and never tired of depicting succulent female flesh at the mercy of a grinning skeleton or corpse (ibid). Hans Baldung Grien's *Death and the Young Woman*, 1517 (Fig. 29) shows Death seizing a young woman by the hair and pointing to the grave dug at her feet (Pollefey, 1998). The woman's eyes are red and tears run down on her cheeks as she submits sorrowfully to Death (ibid). The warning inherent in such works was that death had the last word against fleshly delights (Binion, 1993: 73). This conjunction of physical love with death was age-old, but in the late eighteenth century its status changed from negative to positive. Whereas before death had been an enemy of earthly love, now love was reconciled with death in a sensual way (ibid). This shift corresponded to the change of attitudes towards death that arose in the eighteenth century, which was characterized by a greater concern for the death of the other person, as opposed to the death of oneself,

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Fig. 28. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Triumph of Death*
c. 1562
Oil on panel

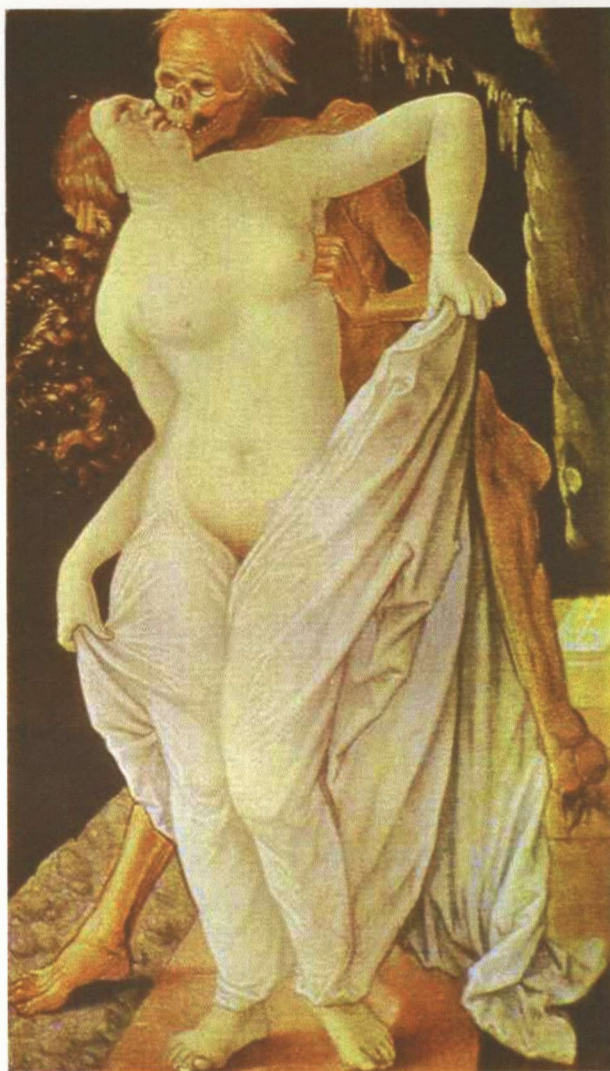


Fig. 29. Hans Baldung Grien, *Death and the Young Woman*
1517

Tempera on wood

and a more romantic and sentimental treatment of death. By 1894 Edvard Munch (1863-1944) had exemplified this change of attitudes in his *Death and the Maiden*, 1894 (Fig. 30), in which the bone man and a naked beauty are locked in a passionate embrace (Binion, 1993: 73).

Death personified as a skeleton also appears in works that do not adhere to the specific themes already discussed. He sometimes appears in deathbed scenes, in which the central figure is not Death, but the dying person. One such work is Hieronymus Bosch's *Death of the Miser*, c. 1490 (Fig. 31), which shows a miser in his deathbed (Beks, 1994: 48). Death, in the form of a skeleton wrapped in a white shroud and carrying an arrow, is coming through the door (Pollefey, 1998). An angel is trying to draw the dying man's attention towards the crucifix hanging by the window. However, the man's attention is focused on the bag of money being offered to him by a small demon. Even with death so close, the miser seems willing to sacrifice his salvation for worldly goods (ibid). This struggle of good and evil at the end of the man's life demonstrates the shift in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of the judgement of each individual from the end of the world to the moment of that person's death. Now it is the state of the man's soul at the moment of death that will determine his destiny, regardless of his deeds in life.

Occasionally death is alluded to not by a skeleton, but just a fleshless skull, which acts as a memento mori (Moon, 1996: 30). However, as Binion (1993: 56) asserts, the skeleton has persisted in art as a grim token of death, remaining the principle death symbol all through the nineteenth century.



Fig. 30. Edvard Munch, *Death and the Maiden*
1894
Drypoint on copperplate



Fig. 31. Hieronymus Bosch, *Death and the Miser*
c. 1490
Oil on wood

Grof (1994: 23) believes that the intense interest in death and dying in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance was greatly stimulated by the general uncertainty of life at this time. Death was ever-present and openly visible. People died by the tens of thousands in famines, wars, and epidemics. It was not uncommon for an outbreak of pestilence to claim up to half of a population. People were accustomed to witnessing the deaths of their relatives, friends, and neighbours. Funeral processions were a standard part of daily life (ibid). During this period great importance was placed on the art of dying well (Askew, 1990: 102). A body of literature arose that dealt with the problems of death and dying, and is known as the *ars moriendi*, which means "the art of dying" (Grof 1994: 23). *Ars moriendi* literature stressed the importance of living well in order to die well, which, among other things, meant maintaining a state of contrition and the submission of the individual will to that of God (Askew, 1990: 102). An important theme that was consistently stressed in these treatises was the effectiveness of meditating upon death (ibid: 102, 104). Remaining conscious of the closeness of death helped to prevent people from falling into sin, thereby providing a clear conscience and strengthened piety (ibid: 103-4). The Dance of Death and other *memento mori* themes in the art of this period served to constantly remind people of their mortality and to engender the proper sensibility towards death.

Historical and analytical

Death as a subject matter occurs in countless works in which death is not represented in a personified form. This includes works depicting people dying, images of dead bodies, scenes of mourning or of the rituals surrounding death, and works that are made in response to the death of a particular person.

An example of an artist in Western art history who incorporated several of these approaches to death in his work is Théodore Géricault (1791-1824). Eitner (1993: 183) reveals that Géricault dealt with death in a historical and narrative fashion in *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819 (Fig. 32), and also in a more analytical manner in various still-lives of severed limbs (Fig. 33) and heads (Fig. 34), and portraits of dying hospital patients, that were painted as studies for *The Raft of the Medusa*.

The theme of *The Raft of the Medusa* is taken from the ordeal of the survivors of the French ship *Medusa*, which, laden with Algerian immigrants had sunk off the west coast of Africa (Gardner, et al, 1970: 645). Géricault depicts the most dramatic moment of the episode, when the castaways are trying to attract the attention of a passing ship. The figures are piled upon each other in a vivid display of suffering, despair, and death (ibid).

The studies that he executed were not meant to be of any practical use, as all of the figures of *The Raft of the Medusa*, even the corpses, were painted from living models (Eitner, 1993: 183). Rather, these studies served him as an emotional stimulus, and to refresh his imagination (ibid). In fact, he chose not to depict the men on the raft as they were when they were found – emaciated, with matted hair and beards, and their bodies covered with sores – but instead he depicted the figures, both living and dead, with the appearance of athletic vigour. His concern was with the drama of the event, which he felt would be detracted from by detailed realism, which would render the work picturesque (ibid: 182). Despite this, he chose to familiarize himself with death by virtually turning his studio into a morgue for some weeks. He brought severed heads and limbs into his studio to paint, where he kept them to record their gradual decay. This interest in the



Fig. 32. Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*
1819
Oil on canvas



Fig. 33. Théodore Géricault, *Study of Dissected Limbs*
1818-19
Oil on canvas



Fig. 34. Théodore Géricault, *Severed Heads*
1818
Oil on canvas

intimate aspect of death went considerably beyond ordinary nature study. However, from this exposure to death he familiarized himself with the sights and smells of death, and lived with it as the men on the raft had. His preoccupation with dead bodies also contained an element of the aesthetic (ibid: 183). Nochlin (1994: 19) describes how the coherence of the bodies had been destroyed, allowing Géricault to rearrange the fragments in ways that were both dreadful and elegant. The placement of the heads on a horizontal surface relegates them to the status of objects, which plays against their former role as the most significant part of the human body. The controlled placement of the body parts by the artist renders them even more disturbing. In this sense Géricault's endeavour is an aesthetic one, involving formal intervention (ibid 21-2). Nochlin (1994: 19) expresses it well when she says, "The mood of these works shockingly combines the objectivity of science – the cool, clinical observation of the dissecting table – with the paroxysm of romantic melodrama."

* Deathbed Portraiture

Another notable category of art in which death is a subject matter is that of deathbed portraiture, in which death is approached in a personal manner. According to Sumner (1995: 20) this was a common genre in northern Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and it was not uncommon to find royalty, clergymen, and particularly children and artists painted just after their death.

A good example of this type of painting is *Venetia, Lady Digby on her Deathbed*, 1633 (Fig. 35), by Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641). Venetia was married to Sir Kenelm Digby, and died unexpectedly during the night on 1 May 1633, having shown no signs of illness



Fig. 35. Anthony Van Dyck, *Venetia, Lady Digby on her Deathbed*
1633
Oil on canvas

when she retired to bed the previous evening (ibid: 23). Kenelm summoned Van Dyck, who was a friend of his, to come and draw her on the second day after she died, and the painting was completed seven weeks later. Kenelm was grief-stricken and entered into a long period of withdrawal, during which he kept the portrait continually at hand. Van Dyck painted Venetia exactly as he saw her, with only the addition of a pearl necklace and a rose lying on the hem of the sheets (ibid).

The genre of deathbed-portraiture during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was in keeping with the trend at the time to personalize burial sites and to perpetuate the memory of the deceased. It also prefigured the change of attitudes towards death in the eighteenth century, which was marked by a greater concern for the death of others. Deathbed portraiture was not confined to this period only. A famous example from the nineteenth century is *Camille Monet on Her Deathbed*, 1879 (Fig. 36), a painting by Claude Monet (1840-1926) of his wife on her deathbed.

X Another artist who worked with death in a personal manner in his work was Edvard Munch. Much of Munch's work at the end of the nineteenth century dealt with sickness and death (Elderfield, Eggum, 1979: 8) His mother and sister both died of tuberculosis when he was a child (ibid: 58). Hodin (1972: 90) describes him as lonely and suspicious of affection as a result of having experienced too often the loss of those close to him. He considered sexual intercourse to be a mating with death (ibid). For his generation death no longer appeared as a transition to a new life, but rather remained the unknown (ibid: 91). The rationalist mind of man was alienated from nature and could no longer live in harmony with natural cycles of life. In his works Munch expressed man's helplessness in the face of death, and as a result they aroused the hostility of his generation, which did not

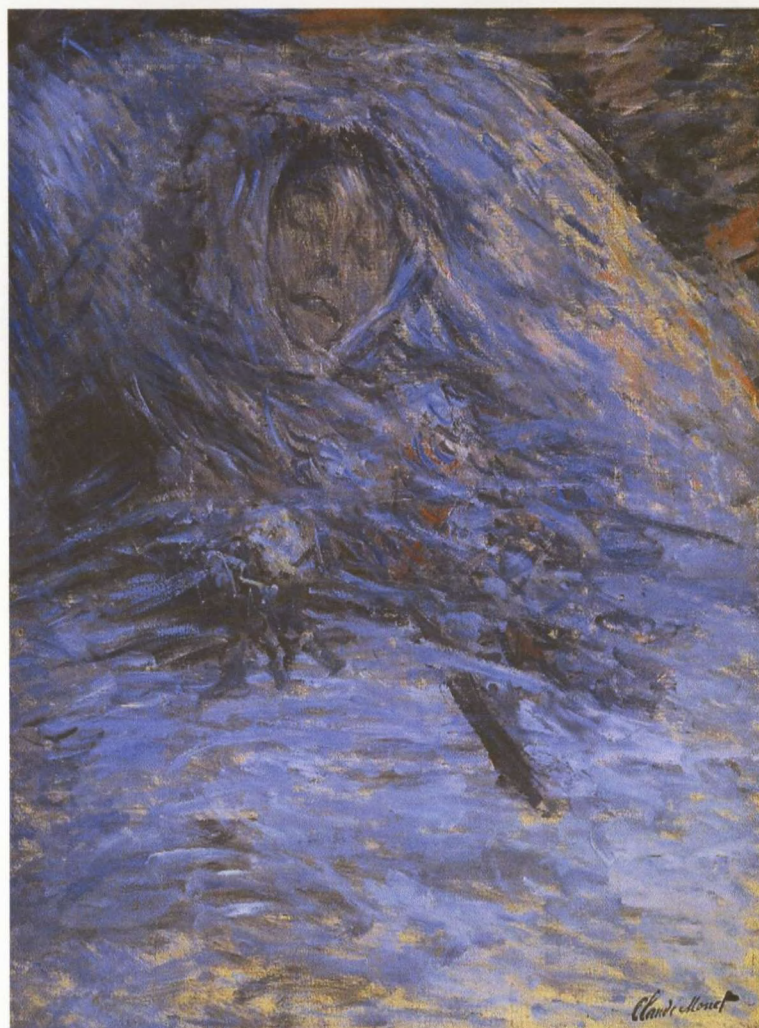


Fig. 36. Claude Monet, *Camille Monet on Her Deathbed*
1879
Oil on canvas

wish to be made aware of its innermost weaknesses (ibid). Munch did not want to think of his own body decaying after death (ibid: 93). Hodin quotes him as saying:

Death is pitch dark, but colours are light. To be a painter is to work with rays of light. To die is as if one's eyes had been put out and one cannot see anymore. Perhaps it is like being shut in a cellar. One is abandoned by all. They have slammed the door and are gone. One does not see anything and notices only the damp smell of putrefaction (ibid).

Munch painted several deathbed scenes in reminiscence of his childhood experiences of loss. *Death in the Sickroom*, 1895 (Fig. 37), shows a family present at the death of a female relative (Elderfield, Eggum, 1979: 44). She is sitting in a chair, turned away from the viewer, and not visible to us. Death is thus depicted as an absence (ibid). The deceased is no longer fully present – her body is still there but her presence is not. The mourners grieve in detached groups, in isolation and bewilderment (Elderfield, Eggum, 1979: 9; Hodin, 1972: 91). The pain of the bereaved is more evident in *By the Deathbed, Fever*, 1895 (Fig. 38); and both *The Dead Mother*, 1899-1900 (Fig. 39), and *The Dead Mother and Child*, 1897-99 (Fig. 40), depict the anguish and despair of the child after its mother's death (Hodin, 1972: 91).

In the twentieth century death would come to be viewed with fear and discomfort (to be discussed in Chapter Two), an attitude epitomized by Munch and his work at the turn of the century. However, these paintings depict a scene that would become much less common in the twentieth century: death at home surrounded by family and friends.



Fig. 37. Edvard Munch, *Death in the Sickroom*
1895
Oil on canvas



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Fig. 38. Edvard Munch, *By the Deathbed, Fever*
1895
Oil on canvas



Fig. 39. Edvard Munch, *The Dead Mother*
1899-1900
Oil on canvas



Fig. 40. Edvard Munch, *The Dead Mother and Child*
1897-9
Oil on canvas

Death in a politicized context

Politics provide the perfect arena for the dramatization of death in art. A good example of this is *The Death of Marat*, 1793 (Fig. 41), by Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825). Jean Paul Marat (1743-93) was a journalist and a proponent of the French Revolution, and a member of the National Convention (CGFA, 2002). He was assassinated on 13 July 1793 by a young Royalist, Charlotte Corday, who managed through artifice to gain admittance to his apartment. Marat received her while in his bathtub, in which he would sit for hours treating the disfiguring skin disease from which he suffered, and she stabbed him to death. David had been Marat's colleague in the Convention, and was invited the day after the murder to paint Marat's portrait. The state of the body prevented David from painting an accurate depiction of the victim. Instead he created an idealized representation of Marat as a healthy and young man in death. David's admiration for Marat and his anger for the murder are revealed in his treatment of the subject. Marat's face is shown as suffering but gentle, and the objects from his world are offset by the assassin's knife and the petition with which she gained entry. Marat still holds the petition in one hand and his quill pen in the other, a pose that emphasizes the treachery of the murder. The light falls softly on the victim's features and harshly on the assassin's petition, and accentuates the blend of compassion and outrage David felt at the sight of the victim (ibid). Apart from his political agenda, David's treatment of death in this work is quite clearly personal as well.

A more recent example of death being dealt with in a politicized context is *Guernica*, 1937 (Fig. 42), by Pablo Picasso (1881-1973). Picasso painted the picture in response to the bombing of the town of Guernica in Spain on 26 April 1937 (Bruckner, et al,



Fig. 41. Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Marat*
1793
Oil on canvas



Fig. 42. Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*
1937
Oil on canvas

1984: 88). It was the site of the first ever all-out aerial bombing attack on a town. The attack was carried out by German aeroplanes commissioned by General Francisco Franco, then the head of the Fascist military uprising against the Spanish Republican government. Bomber planes dropped bombs right across the town, while fighter planes machine-gunned people who tried to flee into neighbouring fields (ibid: 88). Picasso had been approached earlier that year to provide a large painting for the Spanish pavilion at the Paris World's Fair in July that year (Bruckner, et al, 1984: 89; Chipp, 1988: 3). Before the bombardment of Guernica, the work Picasso had planned was a painting of an artist and a model in a peaceful studio (Chipp, 1988: 58). Instead he transformed his shock and outrage over the bombing into images of violence and suffering, elements of which were already present in his earlier works (ibid: 198). In *Guernica*, Picasso presented a world afflicted by the horrors of war. Chipp (1988: 194) quotes Picasso as saying that in "*Guernica*, and in all my recent works of art, I clearly express my abhorrence of the military caste which has sunk Spain into an ocean of pain and death." It is the only work he made that was directly motivated by a specific historical event, one of which he knew almost nothing firsthand but one that generated immediate worldwide controversy (ibid: 912). The painting, therefore, took its place on the world's stage at once because of its politicized title and the anticipation of atrocities to come (ibid).

When it was installed at the Spanish pavilion at the Paris International Exposition, *Guernica* served, like the entire main floor of the structure, as an instrument of propaganda (ibid: 194). It immediately became the object of political controversy (Bruckner, et al, 1984: 89). Although it was virtually ignored by the press, it was attacked by the political opponents of the Spanish Republic, and was even opposed by some of the members of the Spanish government who had commissioned it (Chipp, 1988: 194). The

controversy continued for years afterwards, and Picasso consigned it for four decades to The Museum of Modern Art as a kind of political hostage, to be returned to Spain only when Franco's oppressive government had been overthrown (Bruckner, et al, 1984: 89; Chipp, 1988: 171). According to Bruckner et al. (1984: 89) it is the only piece of antiwar art known that has been used as a weapon against a government and a dictator and that has been the object of international negotiations by the kinds of statesmen who usually negotiate over war and peace.

Death and consumerism

Twentieth-century attitudes towards death are reflected aptly in the death series of Andy Warhol (c.1928-87). Honnif (1993: 45, 60) explains that the first piece in this series was the painting *129 DIE IN JET*, 1962 (Fig. 43), which depicts the front page of a tabloid newspaper with the photo of an aeroplane crash and the headline in large capital letters: "129 DIE IN JET!". Other images in this series include car crashes, victims of poisoning, suicide victims, and the electric chair (ibid: 60). If Warhol's commercial series reflects the "American way of life", then perhaps his death series reflects the "American way of death" (ibid).

The death series consisted of two parts: one dealt with famous people who were dead, and the other with the impersonal death of people who were not famous. An example of the first category is his imagery of Marilyn Monroe (Fig. 44). He took one of her publicity photographs and turned it into an icon and a symbol of eternal youth and beauty (ibid: 60-1). Honnif argues that extravagant consumerism is a means by which members of society distract themselves from their mortality (ibid: 61). People pursue beauty,



Fig. 43. Andy Warhol, *129 DIE IN JET*
1962
Acrylic on canvas

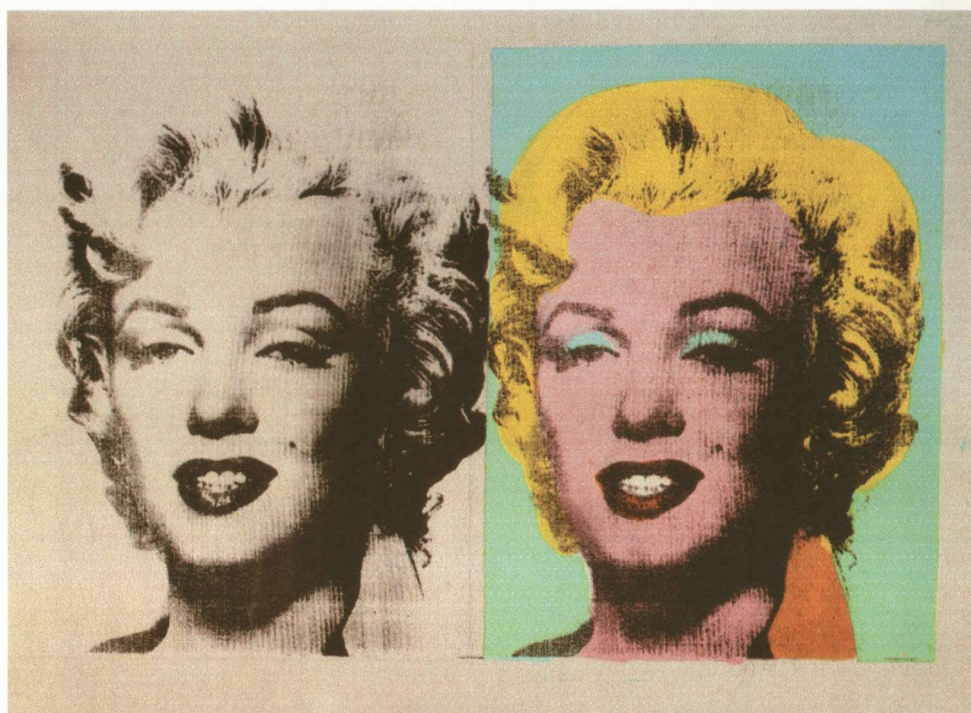


Fig. 44. Andy Warhol, *The Two Marilyns*
1962
Silkscreen on canvas

glamour, and sex appeal, and create a visual image to strive to, such as that of Monroe. People then adjust their outer appearance and their inner perception of themselves in keeping these images. In the same way, the bodies of the dead in America are treated cosmetically to create an idealized image of the dead person, making them appear healthier and fresher than they were when they were alive – a phenomenon that will be discussed in the next chapter (ibid).

The second category of his death included his car crash works, such as *White Car Crash 19 Times*, 1963 (Fig. 45), *Orange Car Crash 10 times*, 1963, and *Green Burning Car I*, 1963 (ibid: 62). The cars are transformed from symbols of wealth and status into symbols of violent, senseless, and brutal death. Warhol took the images from newspapers, which added to the impersonal sense of the work. Only occasionally do the works in the second category of this series feature a person, such as a young woman who jumped off the Empire State Building, or the woman who died of food poisoning after eating tinned tuna fish. The latter example again shows a link between death and consumerism (ibid). The impersonal nature of the works in this series reflect the attitude to death of twentieth-century Western society, in which death is seen as something that takes place at a distance, and is not something that one thinks about except when portrayed by the mass-media, and even then it is merely impassively absorbed.

Similar sentiments can be found reflected in the work of various contemporary artists, although some artists are seeking through their work to address the problematic issues found in the contemporary attitudes towards death in Western societies. These artists will be discussed in the second section of the next chapter.

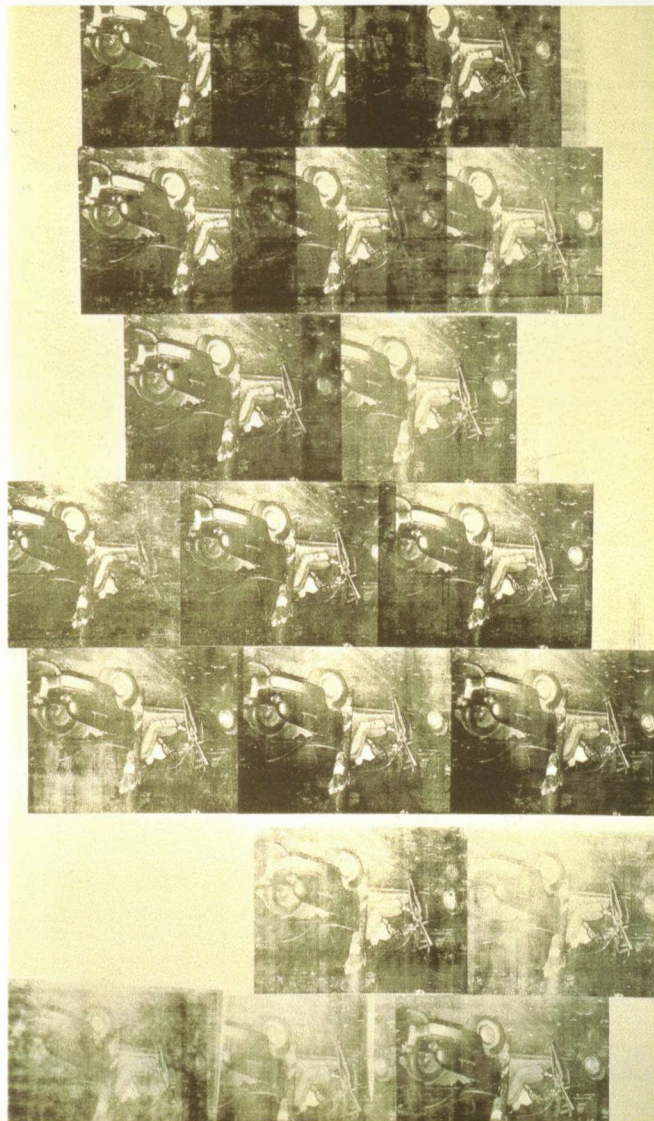


Fig. 45. Andy Warhol, *White Car Crash 19 Times*
1963
Synthetic polymer, silkscreen on canvas

CHAPTER TWO

Introduction

In this chapter I will examine death as a subject matter in contemporary art and its relation to attitudes towards death in contemporary Western societies.

I will begin in Section One by discussing attitudes towards death in contemporary Western societies. I will discuss the medicalization of death and of grief, modern funeral and mourning rituals, and modern disposal practices. I will compare and contrast attitudes towards death found in America to those found in Europe. I will also discuss attitudes towards death in South Africa, specifically within my own cultural framework as a white, English-speaking South African. Although not a Western country, various cultures in South Africa are Westernized to varying degrees.

In Section Two I will examine death as a subject matter in the work of various contemporary artists from Europe, America, and South Africa. Included are American artists Joel-Peter Witkin, Andres Serrano, and Donna Sharrett; British artist Damien Hirst; French artist Christian Boltanski; German artist Gerhard Richter; and South African artist Jo Ractliffe.

Section One

Attitudes towards death in contemporary Western societies

Death's grown, I should say, now that the consolations and hopes have been taken away. Grown to be almost as large as it was when people seriously believed in hell. Because, if you're a busy film-going, newspaper-reading, football-watching, chocolate-eating modern, then death *is* hell. Every time the smoke-screen thins out a bit, people catch a glimpse and are terrified.

Aldous Huxley, Eyeless in Gaza

According to Ariès (1974: 85), the twentieth century saw death develop into a taboo subject. Littlewood (1993: 70) argues that in contemporary Westernized societies, death has replaced sex as the dominant taboo topic. As an example, one only needs to examine the way these subjects are approached with children. Formerly children were led to believe that babies were brought by the stork, yet were customarily present at the deathbed of a dying relative (Ariès, 1974: 92). They were also included in the discussions surrounding the death of that person (Kübler-Ross, 1969: 6). Today, however, they are initiated at an early age into the facts of sex and reproduction, but when someone dies they are told the person is resting among the flowers, or has gone on a trip (Ariès, 1974: 93). They are often not allowed to visit the dying person in hospital, or, if the person is fortunate enough to die at home, then the children are sent to stay elsewhere (Kübler-Ross, 1969: 7). Discussion of the death is regarded as too morbid for them, and they are excluded on the presumption that they are not equipped to deal with it (ibid: 6).

According to Mulkay (1993: 31), advances in medicine since the nineteenth century have resulted in a dramatic decline in deaths from short-term infectious diseases. Before this

time the mortality rate was particularly high among children, and remained at a relatively high level throughout adulthood, whereas today the incidence of death is concentrated among the elderly (ibid). As Walter (1996: 196-7) states, the death of a parent or sibling is no longer a normal part of childhood in modern Western societies. Many people go through most of their adult lives without experiencing personal bereavement, and feel incompetent on the topic of death (Davies, 1997: 165). As the experience of death in the community during an individual's lifetime has become more rare, and fewer people have seen corpses or experienced bereavement, a relatively sober view of death has been replaced by a voyeuristic and vulgar view of it (Littlewood, 1993: 70).

Although death became a taboo topic in the twentieth century, whether it remains one today is a debatable issue. Strauss (1993: ix) points out that although many journalists, clinicians, and academics tend to describe it as taboo, the amount of literature that has developed on the subject would argue against such a description. Davies (1997: 1) elaborates by saying that in the last few decades of the twentieth century death has become widely documented, with archaeologists studying the prehistory of death rites, historians examining and comparing the mortuary rites of different periods in history, and anthropologists describing contemporary patterns of dealing with death. Added to these are an increasing number of biographies, books, and pamphlets discussing grief and mourning, with psychologists providing more technical accounts of grief (ibid). Mellor (1993: 11) argues that although death is no longer a forbidden subject, it remains a hidden one in the sense that it is generally sequestered from public space.

It is true that most people in modern Westernized societies die in hospitals or in other institutions, away from home and hidden from society (Walter, 1996: 193). In the period

that follows the person's death, family and friends keep their grief to themselves (ibid). The general attitude towards death in Westernized societies seems to be that of fear and shame (Littlewood, 1993: 69). Dying people induce discomfort and embarrassment, and as a result are removed from the community to die in isolation (ibid: 69-70). Mourners are also often left isolated, because they are living reminders of the unavoidable reality of death, and may be avoided rather than supported (ibid: 70).

The medicalization of death

The appropriate place of death has become firmly located outside of the community and within the hospital (Littlewood, 1993: 71). The medicalization of death has played a major role in the modern denial of death. Doctors first began to appear at the deathbeds of the privileged during the eighteenth century, making it possible, with the use of opiates, for one to die without pain (Bradbury, 1996: 88). The promise of a pain-free death meant that over time doctors took the place of the clergy at the moment of death (ibid).

As Kübler-Ross (1969: 6) argues, our growing knowledge of science and man should give us better ways to prepare ourselves for the inevitability of death, but instead the more we achieve advances in science, the more we fear and deny the reality of death. This situation has partly arisen from a belief, originating in the nineteenth century, that scientific medicine would ultimately be able to overcome death itself (Littlewood, 1993: 70). People in modern Westernized societies have a significantly greater control over natural processes than ever before, but no matter how effective medical control becomes in delaying the moment of death, that moment still arrives (Davies, 1997: 68-9). This

inability to ultimately control death is viewed by the medical world, and modern society in general, as a failure (ibid: 69).

Death in the hospital is no longer the occasion of a ritual ceremony over which the dying person presides while surrounded by friends and relatives (Ariès, 1974: 89). Instead, death has become a technical phenomenon (ibid). Dying is no longer seen as a spiritual transition, but as a medical condition; the dying member of the community has become the dying hospital patient (Walter, 1996: 196, 193). The central character at the scene of death is no longer the dying person, but the doctor, who relies not on prayer, but on surgery, drugs, and medical knowledge (Walter, 1996: 193). Even the knowledge of the person's condition is no longer held by the individual, but has become the property of the medical team, who often choose to keep it from the patient (ibid). The information that he or she is in fact dying is often withheld from the patient by the doctors, either out of a misguided notion that the person will not be able to cope with such knowledge, or out of a plain unwillingness to approach the subject of death (Kübler-Ross, 1969: 28). When a person is severely ill, he or she is usually treated as someone with no right to an opinion, and it is often someone else who makes the decision to hospitalize that person (ibid: 7).

The moment of death has now also been dissected into a series of little steps (Ariès, 1974: 89). Using life-supporting technologies it is now possible to keep a body alive artificially (Schulz, 1978: 90). A person can still be considered alive even after his or her respiration and heartbeat, formerly the primary indicators of life, have stopped (ibid). As Ariès (1974: 89) states, these "little silent deaths have replaced and erased the great dramatic act of death, and no one any longer has the strength or patience to wait over a period of weeks for a moment which has lost part of its meaning."

In the twentieth century, grief has also become medicalized, with psychiatrists now defining what is normal and what is abnormal grief, whereas previously community norms defined appropriate mourning (Walter, 1996: 196; Littlewood, 1993: 71). Bereavement has come to be viewed as an experience similar to that of a disease, in that it is treated more as an illness than as a change in social or religious status (Littlewood, 1993: 71; Davies 1997: 49). Grief is considered as a deviation from the path of normal behaviour, a path to which the bereaved person is expected to return to in time, just as an ill person will return to good health (Davies, 1997: 49).

It can be said, therefore, that the social organisation of death, dying, and bereavement generally takes place outside of the community (Littlewood, 1993: 82). The modern experience of death can be described as isolating, frightening, medicalized, and meaningless (Howarth, 1996: xiii). Kübler-Ross (1969: 10) argues that the field of medicine is no longer a "humanitarian and respected profession" but a "depersonalized science in the service of prolonging life rather than diminishing human suffering". In modern society, death has to a certain degree been tamed, in that it has become largely predictable, can be postponed by medical treatment, and takes place mostly within organized bureaucratic structures (Mulkay, 1993: 47). Ultimately, however, there is no control over death, and because of this death continues to oppose modern human beings (Davies, 1997: 69).

Funerary rituals and disposal practices

Further insight into a society's attitude towards death can be gained by examining its funerary rituals and disposal practices. The natural facts of life are that people are born, grow old, and die (Davies, 1997: 18). However, as self-conscious beings humans have always needed to adapt to the problem of death (ibid: 1). Thus funerary rituals can be viewed as the human adaptive response to death (ibid).

Individuals are social beings, and death removes them from society (Bronfen, 1998: 507). To the community this removal is perceived as a wound, and as a threatening reminder of its own impermanence (ibid). Rituals of mourning serve to remedy this wound by creating a new identity for the deceased, and reintegrating him or her back into the community (ibid). These rituals attempt to make sense of the ending of a life by reconstructing the identity of the dead within some wider framework of significance (Davies, 1997: 7). They also serve to locate the dead firmly in the past and in the memory (ibid: 2).

Ariès (1974: 90) details the differing modern funeral rites of America and Europe. He describes how in England and north-western Europe the operations necessary to dispose of the body have been reduced to a minimum. It has become important that society notices to the least possible degree that death has occurred. The rituals that remain must be discreet and avoid emotion. The outward manifestations of mourning have been repressed, and do not inspire pity but repugnance. An excessive expression of sorrow is considered as a sign of mental instability or of bad manners; one only has the right to cry if nobody else can see or hear. As Ariès says, "Solitary and shameful mourning is the only recourse, like a sort of masturbation" (ibid).

Ariès goes on to explain how in some European countries the tomb of the dead person is no longer visited (ibid: 91). In England, for example, cremation has become the dominant method of disposing bodies, sometimes with the dispersal of the ashes (ibid). Davies (1997: 27) states that in 1936, two per cent of the dead in Britain were cremated. In 1967 the figure reached fifty per cent. By 1993 seventy per cent of the dead were being cremated (ibid). Ariès (1974: 91) argues that this is more than a desire to break with Christian tradition. The motivation is that cremation is the most radical means of getting rid of the body, of "nullifying it". People rarely visit urns, though they may still visit gravesides; in other words cremation "excludes a pilgrimage" (ibid). Another factor in this predilection for cremation is that it appeals to non-religious people (Davies, 1997: 193). A major part of this appeal is the fact that in Britain crematoria are owned and run by local authorities or by private companies, but not by churches. This makes the crematorium more of a neutral territory, in which the symbolism is often neutral, or at least variable, so as to serve the purposes of many different groups (ibid).

This suppression of almost every reminder of death is in contrast to the situation in America. People still visit the cemetery, and a certain respect for the tomb remains (Ariès, 1974: 100). Cremation is largely considered distasteful, for it gets rid of the remains too quickly and too radically (ibid). Ariès ascribes this situation to American commercialism (ibid).

During the American Civil War some families of killed soldiers were willing to pay to have the bodies sent home for burial (Proulx, 1997: 30). A new profession developed to embalm, arrange, and repair the damaged corpses for the journey (ibid: 30, 32). By the beginning of the twentieth century the dead, now beautified and arranged, were in the

care of undertakers and funeral parlours (ibid: 32). Today, people want to keep their dying and grieving private, and so are quite prepared to hand control over to professionals and to leave traditional ways behind (Walter, 1996: 193-4).

Embalming is now a very widespread method of preparing the dead in America (Ariès, 1974: 98). It is a practice almost unknown in Europe, and is characteristic of the "American way of death" (ibid). Ariès reads this phenomenon as a denial of the reality of death (ibid: 99). The embalmed corpses frequently undergo extensive cosmetic treatment to make the dead look as healthy and lifelike as possible (Davies, 1997: 37). The bodies are then placed in relatively elaborate "caskets" (no longer called coffins), giving the overall impression of the deceased as merely peacefully sleeping (ibid). According to Ariès (1974: 99), this beautification of the dead was the result of death becoming an object of commerce and of profit. It is not easy to sell something that is frightening, horrible, or painful. As Ariès puts it, "In order to sell death, it had to be made friendly" (ibid). Thus, in contrast to industrial Europe, Americans do not want death to disappear, because this would mark the end of profit, but they are willing to transform death to make it more appealing (ibid: 100).

The trend, therefore, in Britain is to suppress the existence of death by rejecting the physical reality of the body through cremation. The American trend is to deny death by restoring the corpse to a semblance of liveliness. Ariès stresses, however, that this "flight from death" should not be attributed to an indifference toward the dead person (Ariès, 1974: 91). In fact, he states that the suppression of sorrow, the need to suffer alone and secretly, aggravates the trauma experienced by the bereaved (ibid: 91-2).

Attitudes towards death in South Africa

The extent of cultural diversity in South Africa leads to difficulty in ascribing certain attitudes towards death to certain cultural groups. For example, attitudes held by white people in South Africa are influenced by British and Dutch colonialism, by a historically Christian dominated faith, and by urbanization. As such, their belief systems are necessarily different from the traditional beliefs of rural black people. The distinctions become blurred, however, when one takes into account the impact of Christianity and increased urbanization on the belief systems of the black population. The strong presence of the Hindu and Islamic faiths, and of people of Indian and Arabian descent, further complicates the issue.

This research paper is largely in response to my own experience of death and its treatment in the cultural framework of white, English-speaking South Africans. I will endeavour here to recount my own experiences and observations about attitudes towards death within this cultural framework, and compare and contrast them to those in America and Europe.

In terms of funeral rituals and disposal practices, this specific cultural context bears more similarities to Britain and north-western Europe than to America. Cremation here is an increasingly popular means of disposal, as in Britain. Unlike America, coffins are used, not caskets, and embalmment is rare. We do not share the American desire to disguise and beautify death, but rather the British desire to minimize the processes of disposal and bereavement. There is no longer a recognized period of mourning. Funerals are held as soon after death as can be organized. The funeral ritual is restrained and formulaic;

personalization is kept to a minimum. Outward displays of grief cause embarrassment and discomfort. A person in mourning is allowed to be reserved and solemn, but expressions of sorrow should remain something private.

Soon after the funeral, once the deceased has been efficiently removed from the sphere of the living, the survivors are expected to go back to work, to "pick up where they left off," and to generally regain a semblance of normalcy in their lives. At this point they often discover that people around them are uncomfortable in their presence, especially those who have never experienced loss and grief themselves. Grief is seen as an abnormality that the bereaved need to "get over."

As in other Westernized countries, death here has become largely medicalized. The hospital is seen as the appropriate place for a person to die. At least, this is true among urbanized whites. As Ramji (1998) points out, among the black population traditional medicine plays an important role. For the treatment of illnesses, both modern and traditional medicines are utilized, the choice between the two depending on factors such as age, education, income, religion, and degree of urbanization. The seriousness of the illness is also a determining factor, with more serious illnesses being treated with modern medicine, and lesser ones with traditional medicine. However, the spiritual component of death and dying falls within the province of the traditional healer or church leader. As such, a black South African is more likely to die at home than is his white counterpart. Family and friends play an important role during this time, as well as during the period of bereavement (ibid).

Disposal practices among the black population also differ from those of whites. Frikkie Booysen, a sociology professor at the University of the Free State, is quoted in an article by Moore (2003: 1) as saying that cremation is avoided because "most African cultures do not believe in that ... They believe that a person should be buried in a coffin, in the ground." He adds that normally families will slaughter an ox as part of the funeral ritual (ibid). Graveside ceremonies are also more popular among the black population than among whites, who prefer traditional church services or even discreet ceremonies at the funeral parlour.

Given our violent past, death is more politicized in South Africa than in some other Westernized countries. However, in the everyday existence of the general population death remains something not spoken or thought about. It is still largely a taboo topic, a fact attested by the number of raised eyebrows and uneasy reactions I have encountered throughout the course of this research when explaining the topic of my paper. The advent of the AIDS pandemic has also made death a taboo subject in new ways by stigmatizing the cause of death as well as the fact of death.

Conclusion

In the twentieth century we saw death move from the realm of the spiritual to the realm of the medical. It has become something unnameable and unknowable. Mourning has become indecent, something that should be kept hidden; in Ariès's (1974: 99) words, it has become a "morbid state". Funerary and disposal practices are no longer a means of affirming the fact of death in the minds of the mourners to aid their acceptance of their loss; rather they have become a means of suppressing or disguising the fact of death.

Our constant exposure to death in the media does not make us more at home with death. If anything, it distances us further from death by making it more impersonal, and something that happens "out there." It reinforces our secret belief that death and loss is something that only happens to other people. This exposure to death cannot be likened to the exposure to death people experienced in the Middle Ages, when those that were dying were often family members or neighbours. Because the mortality rate was particularly high among infants and children, it was common for an individual to have lost a child or a sibling. This served to familiarize people to death far more than today's bombardment of war images and twenty second news stories.

As I discussed in Chapter One, Section Two, Andy Warhol utilized such media imagery of death in his works. As Mullins (2002) says, "Death may be more palatable, or somehow less real, once it has been through a few filters," but that certain contemporary artists "have chosen to bypass secondhand press images of the kind favoured by Warhol" and "have removed the media blinkers that control what we see and how we see it". These artists will be discussed in the next section.

Section Two

Death as subject matter in contemporary Western art

We are dying, we are dying, so all we can do
is now to be willing to die, and to build the ship
of death to carry the soul on the longest journey.

D.H. Lawrence, from *The Ship of Death*

This section will discuss how various contemporary artists have approached death in their work, and will examine whether they merely reflect existing attitudes towards death, or in fact address some of the problematic issues found in these attitudes. Their approaches are varied. Andres Serrano examines the physical reality of death by photographing corpses at a morgue; Donna Sharrett explores her own personal loss and grief through her ritualistic, craft-like work; Gerhard Richter considers the politicized deaths in prison of members of a German resistance movement in the late 1970s; while Damien Hirst studies the cycles of life and death in his controversial sculptures and installations.

Damien Hirst

Damien Hirst was born in Bristol, England in 1965. He studied at Goldsmiths College, and graduated in 1989 (The Royal Academy of Arts, 1997: 199). At the age of 23, while a second-year student at Goldsmiths, he organized an exhibition called *Freeze*, which contained his own work and that of his peers (Saltz, 1995: 83). This show launched the careers of many successful young British artists, including his own (The Royal Academy of Arts, 1997: 199).

According to Maloney (1997: 33), Hirst's ideas and interests shaped quickly and easily, and his work developed during the 1990s to reflect changes in contemporary life. He relied on the straightforward appeal of colour and form, making art that contained little mystery in its construction. He reduced painting to its basic elements, creating "spot paintings," which consisted of saucer-sized coloured circles on white backgrounds (ibid). In any given spot painting all the dots are the same size but none of the colours are repeated (Saltz, 1995: 85). The resultant spot paintings are reasonably varied and intricate. The titles of the works are the pharmaceutical names of stimulants or narcotics, for example *Acetyltransferase*, 1993 (Fig. 46) (ibid). In an age when art has become a commodity these paintings are seen as luxury designer goods (Maloney, 1997: 33). Later he also began creating spin paintings, which utilized a more hands-on method, and, according to Maloney, "magnified a 'hobby'-art technique, drawing attention to the accidental and expressive energy of the haphazard" (ibid).

Hirst's paintings form an interesting parallel to his sculpture, but it is his sculpture that has earned him his fame, and which deals more overtly with life and death. Influenced by Jeff Koons's (b. 1955) sculptures with basketballs floating in water – for example *Two Ball 50/50 Tank*, 1985 (Fig. 47) – Hirst used glass medicine cabinets and display cabinets in his early work (Maloney, 1997: 33). *Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purpose of Understanding*, 1991 (Fig. 48), is comprised of thirty-nine glass cases containing fish suspended in formalin and displayed in a cabinet, and works like spot paintings as an arrangement of colour, shape and form. The work received a certain amount of criticism due to its ease of assembly; nevertheless people became fascinated by how ordinary things of the world could be placed so as to be seen as beautiful (ibid).

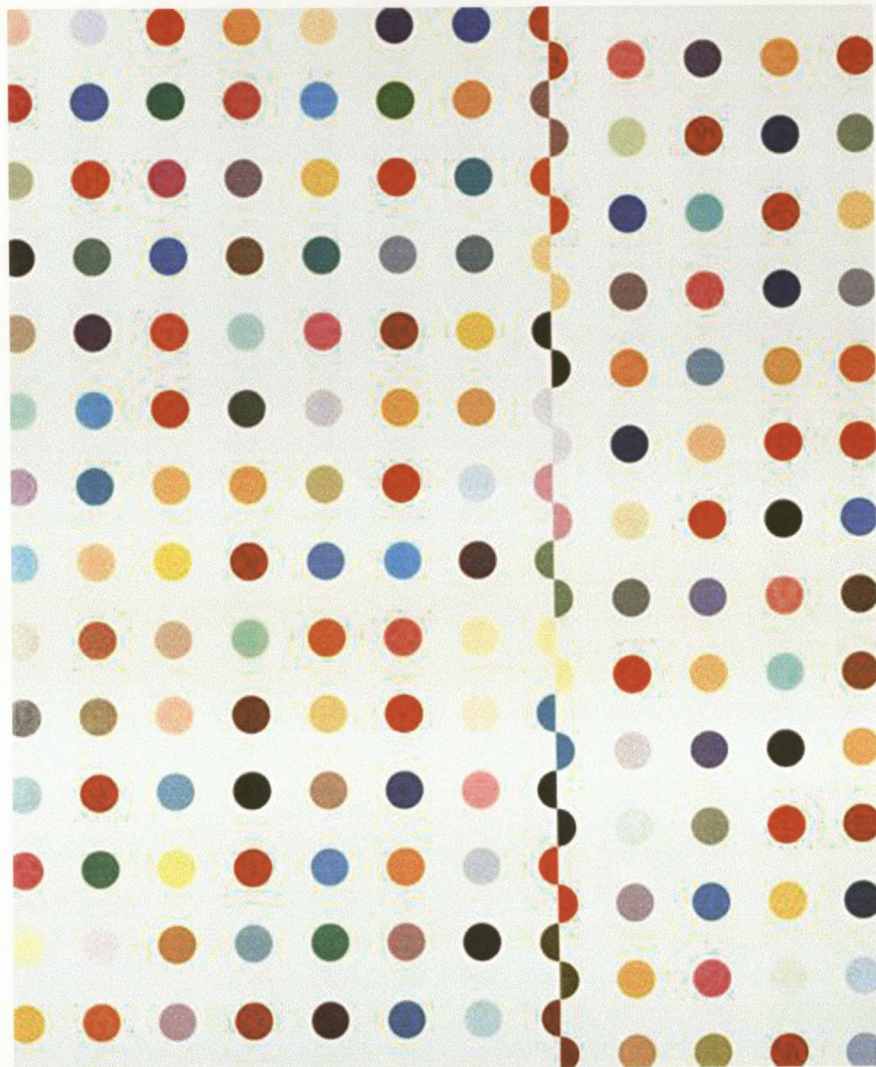


Fig. 46. Damien Hirst, *Acetyltransferase*
1996

Gloss household paint on canvas

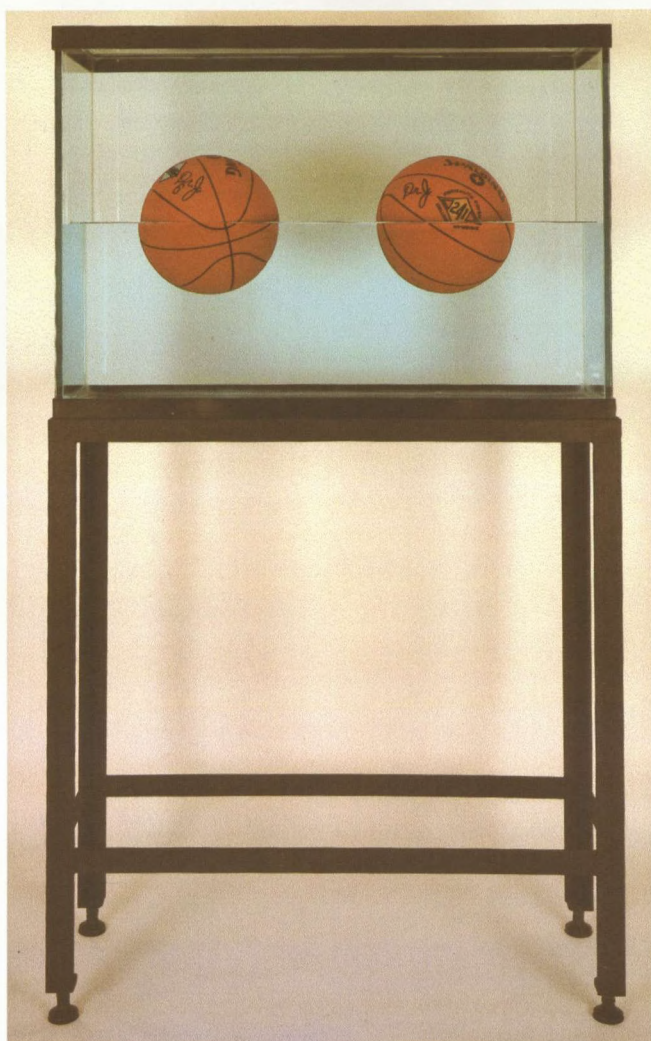


Fig. 47. Jeff Koons, *Two Ball 50/50 Tank*
1985

Glass, iron, water, basketballs



Fig. 48. Damien Hirst, *Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purpose of Understanding*

1991

39 fish in glass cases filled with formalin, mixed mediums

Many of Hirst's sculptures are intended as an examination of the process of life and death, bringing together the joy of life and the inevitability of death (The Royal Academy of Arts, 1997: 199; Maloney, 1997: 33). In an interview with Dannatt (1993: 61) Hirst said, "My interest in death is very lively, about how to live, what is important."

His interest in death began early in his life. *With Dead Head*, 1991, incorporates a photograph taken of him at a mortuary when he was sixteen (Burn, 1992: 33). The photograph shows a young Hirst sporting a grin and posing with the severed head of an elderly man (ibid). Burn (1992: 33) quotes him as saying:

I was at the point of trying to come to terms with it all. 'This is life. This is death.' And the smile seemed to sum up the problems between life and death in some ridiculous way. When I was really young, I wanted to know about death and so I went to the morgue and I got these bodies and I felt sick. I felt I was going to die and it was all awful. But I went back and I went back and I drew them and drew them and tried to get to the point where death starts and life stops straight in my head. I don't think death really exists in life. It's that kind of looking for it and you can't find it.

In 1990 Hirst created a work that dealt directly with the cycle of life and death. *A Thousand Years* (Fig. 49) is a large rectangular glass and steel vitrine divided into two compartments by a glass partition (Corris, 1992: 96). One compartment contains a wooden cube, which serves as a nest in which maggots pupate and hatch into flies. The other compartment contains a skinned and putrefying cow's head on the floor, and, suspended above the head, an ultraviolet electronic fly-killer. Flies in the first compartment find their way through a circular hole in the glass partition into the second compartment, where they are either attracted to the fly-killer and are killed, or

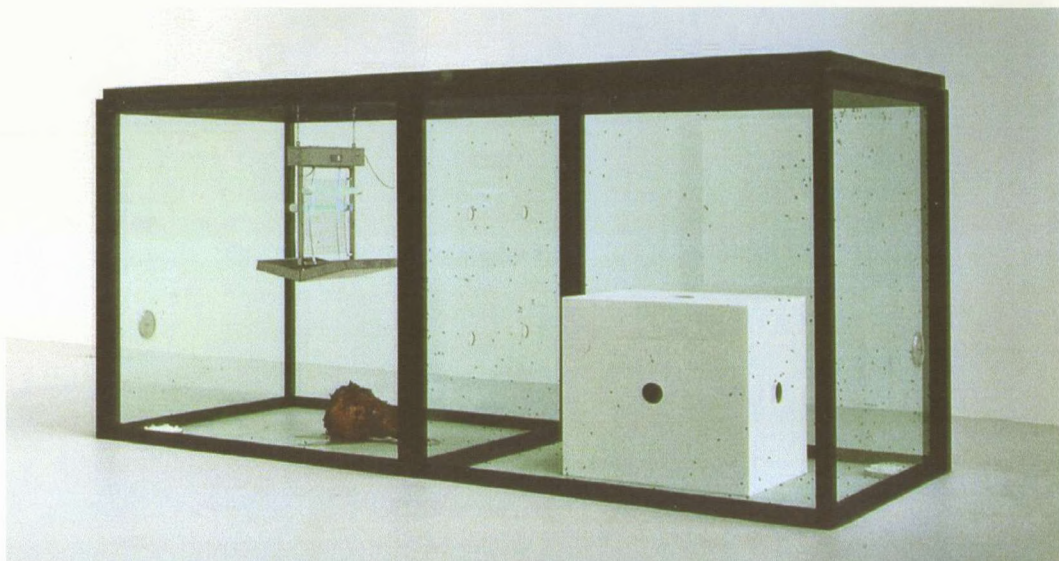


Fig. 49. Damien Hirst, *A Thousand Years*
1990

Glass, steel, MDF board, cow's head, fly zapper, bowls of sugar water,
maggots, flies

find their way to the cow's head where they find nourishment and a nesting ground for future generations (ibid). As Saltz (1995: 84) observes, the average lifespan of a fly is three to four weeks, so in five years over sixty generations of flies live, eat, reproduce, and die within this enclosed environment. This causes the viewer to think about time and the vast cycles of mortality taking place continually all over the world. The title is appropriate, a thousand years signifying a long time, but not an eternity (ibid). A thousand years is to the average lifespan of a human what one year is to the lifespan of a fly, which is perhaps the reason for Hirst's choice of title.

Another work that dealt with the cycle of life and death was *In and Out of Love* (1991), this time incorporating the brief life cycle of the Malaysian butterfly (Corris, 1992: 96). The work took the form of an installation in a former retail space. As with *A Thousand Years* Hirst created an enclosed biological system, but now the viewer was brought inside. In one room carefully looked after pupae metamorphosed into butterflies. They were thereafter attended to by numerous assistants, who kept them moist with plant misters and nourished with sugared water. The second part of the installation downstairs was somewhat less pleasant than the one above it. Scores of butterflies landed on wet monochrome canvases, becoming stuck in the paint, and effectively becoming points of colour in the painting. Ashtrays filled with cigarette butts took the place of the nourishing bowls of sugar water found upstairs (ibid). The resulting paintings could be considered beautiful on an aesthetic level, however the process involved is one that would offend those who, as Sewell (1992: 87) puts it, "feel that the abuse of living creatures is an unjustifiable and unacceptable extension of the boundaries of experience, and in no sense art."

According to Lucie-Smith (1995: 296), the work that established Hirst's reputation in the British art world was *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991 (Fig. 50), which consists of a dead tiger shark floating in a tank of formaldehyde solution. The shark is balanced and weighted to float in the middle of the tank, retaining the semblance of a live shark floating in water (ibid). It is Hirst's belief that death does not exist in life, and that death cannot be known by someone living; all that one can know is that life is going to end (Dannatt, 1993: 61). In this sense Hirst's view of death can be said to be typical of the modern Westernized idea of life and death as a polarity, as opposed to being part of a single spiritual and cultural process as believed in earlier periods. Hirst says he thinks "of life and death as black and white. If life is white, black is death. Trying to explain or imagine death is like trying to imagine black by only using white. There's no way you can get to it, it's like the same thing but opposite. This is life and death isn't" (Dannatt, 1993: 63). As Davies (1997: 2, 4) argues, humans are self-conscious beings, and self-consciousness cannot entertain the idea of its own cessation, although individuals can still contemplate their own absence from society as they ponder the death and absence of others. He quotes the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre as saying that "death is always beyond my subjectivity ... Death is in no way an ontological structure of my being ... it is the Other who is mortal in his being" (ibid: 4).

Hirst also engages the medical world in several of his works. An example is a 1992 installation called *Pharmacy*, which consisted of a room lined with cabinets containing row after row of pill boxes and medicine bottles (Saltz, 1995: 85; Dannatt, 1993: 59). The pharmaceutical terminology on the labels is foreign and strange, and induces visions

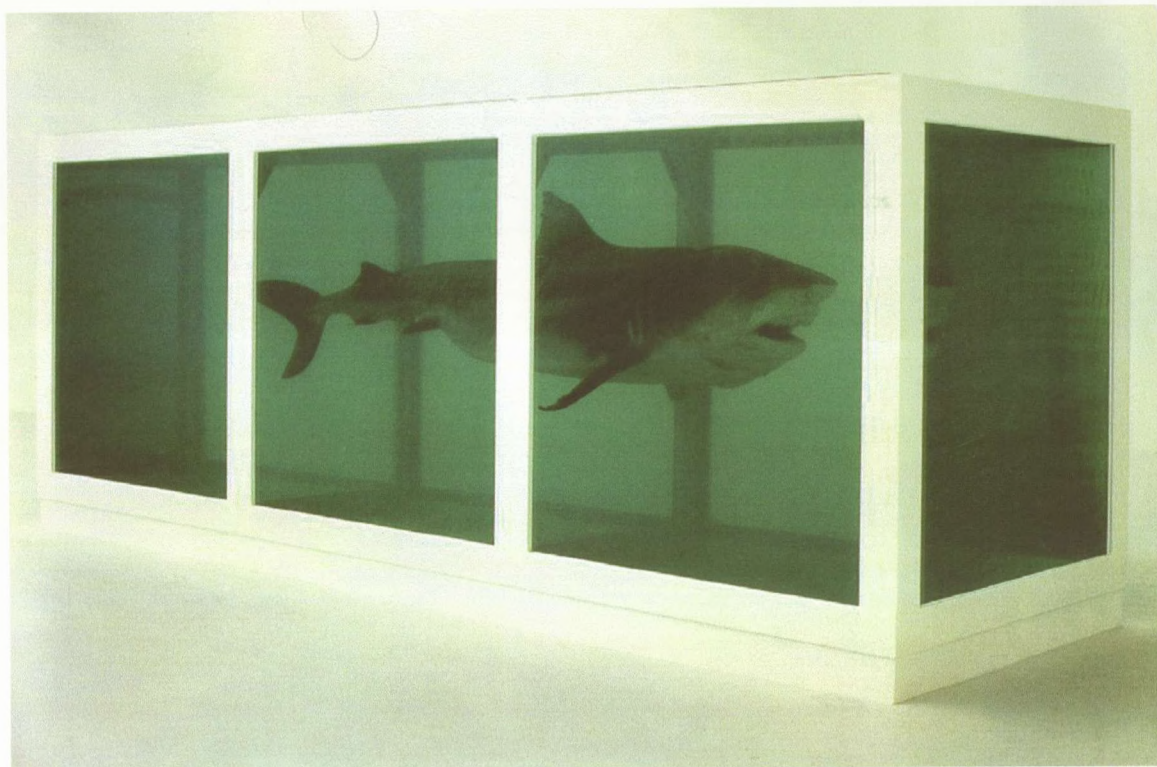


Fig. 50. Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*

1991

Glass, steel, silicone, tiger shark, formalin

of human suffering and dread (Saltz, 1995: 85). The display serves as a catalogue of the intricacies and mysteries of the human body, with every drug making reference to a specific illness that it is intended to cure or treat, but also listing the possible side effects. It reveals the human desire to combat disease and death (ibid). But as Hirst himself says, "You can only cure people for so long and then they're going to die anyway. You can't arrest decay but these medicine cabinets suggest you can" (Dannatt, 1993: 63). A similar piece is *Naked*, 1994 (Fig. 51), which is a wall-mounted display cabinet containing spotless metal and glass medical instruments and other medical paraphernalia, and a cow's brain in a jar of formalin (Saltz, 1995: 85). The piece evokes the clinical coldness and detachment associated with the world of medicine. The collection of instruments displayed could be read as tools of healing found in a hospital, or as tools of dissection and analysis found in a vivisection laboratory. Which invites the question of how the medical world regards the patient: as a suffering human being in need of care and healing, or as a specimen and a case study.

Hirst is probably more famous for his works using sliced up and preserved animals. These include *Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything* (1996), two cows sliced into vertical segments contained within twelve glass tanks of formalin and rearranged in an apparently random order; *This Little Piggy went to Market, This little Piggy Stayed at Home*, 1996 (Fig. 52), a pig bisected along its length and contained within two vitrines on mechanical runners, causing the two halves to glide back and forth past each other; *Away From the Flock* (1994), an intact lamb displayed in a vitrine of formalin; and *Mother and Child, Divided*, 1993 (Fig. 53), a cow and a calf, both bisected lengthways and each displayed in two separate vitrines of formalin. Kastner (1996: 155) describes these preserved animals as being "so



Fig. 51. Damien Hirst, *Naked*
1994

Chrome, glass, cow's brain in formalin, medical instruments

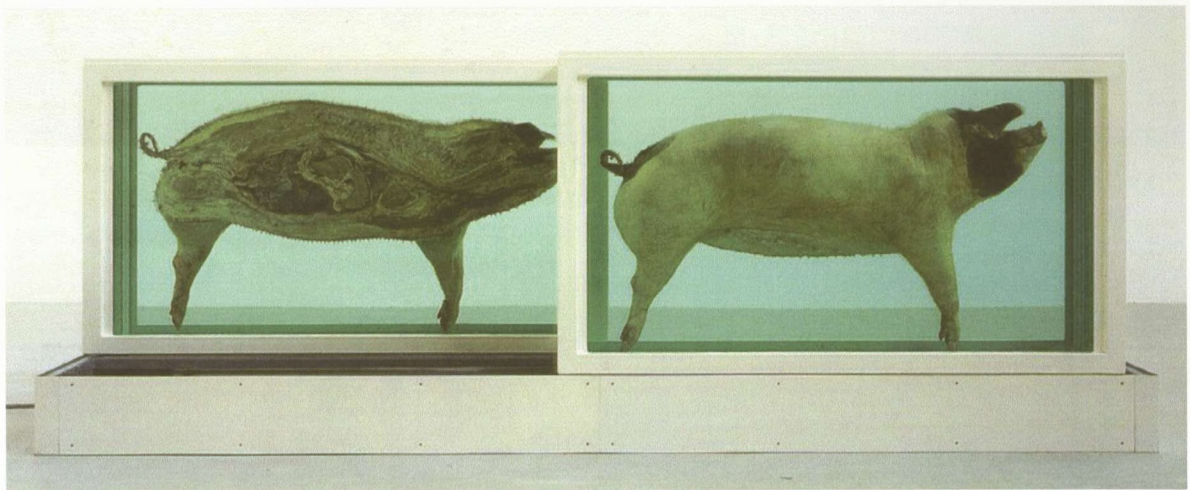


Fig. 52. Damien Hirst, *This Little Piggy went to Market, This little Piggy Stayed at Home*

1996

Steel, GPP composites, glass, pig, formalin

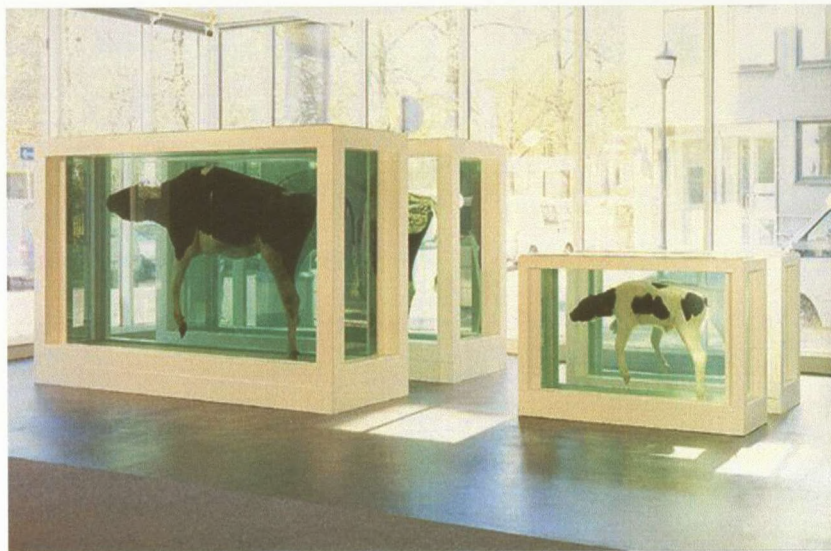


Fig. 53. Damien Hirst, *Mother and Child, Divided*
1993

Cow, calf, steel, glass, silicone, formalin, GPP composites

deadened and objectified by their transparent aqua tombs that it becomes difficult to reconcile what they look like with the reality of what they actually are." According to Danto (2001) these works have sparked a debate in ethics as to whether it is a better fate for an animal to end up as a work of art than as a meal on the dinner table. For Hirst they signify a contemporary world that has lost touch with its basic nature, and that is detached from the realities of life in the food chain. (Kastner, 1996: 155).

Hirst could be criticized for capitalizing on the taboo surrounding death in order to impart shock value on his work. However, as Saltz (1995: 83, 84) argues, Hirst uses shock not so much to thrust his work in the public eye, but rather as a formal element to make aspects of life and death more visible. Whatever his choice of subject matter, his works are meticulously well made, with carefully considered compositions that tend towards symmetry and balance (ibid: 83). Hirst freely admits to using shock tactics, arguing that the work has to be on an extreme level to get through to people (Dannatt, 1993: 62). He says, "rather than be personal you have to find universal triggers. Everyone's frightened of glass, everyone's frightened of sharks, everyone loves butterflies" (ibid: 61). He claims that he would never want to preserve a human corpse in formalin as the shock factor would be too much, and the work would lose all metaphorical value: "You can look at a fly and think about a person, but if you look at a person who's dead you start to be aware that death isn't there ... Death lies in the corpse until you deal with corpses and then it's somewhere beyond the corpse" (ibid: 62).

Because Hirst believes that death cannot be known by someone living, in dealing with death in his work he is in fact dealing with life. As he once said, "Art's about life, and it can't really be anything else. There isn't anything else" (Saltz, 1995: 85).

Hirst's treatment of death may be considered to be voyeuristic and adolescent, but underlying that there seems to be a genuine attempt to understand death. His work can be seen as a process of coming to terms with something that has been suppressed in the public consciousness for so long.

Christian Boltanski

According to Harris, et al (1996: 58), Christian Boltanski is probably best known for his disquieting installations relating to the Holocaust and themes of death in general. His body of work has been described by Dana Self (2002) as "a disturbing archive of our social, cultural, ethnic, and personal histories."

He was born in occupied Paris in 1944 to a Jewish father and a Catholic mother (Temin, 2000: 9). During the occupation of Paris, Boltanski's father spent nearly a year hiding in the basement of their house, and Boltanski maintains that he was conceived there. Due to his father's fears of lingering anti-Semitism, Boltanski was not allowed out of the house alone until he was eighteen (ibid). His early life goes some way to explain his continual fascination with the Holocaust, but it could be argued, as Golding (1999: 94-5) does, that the Holocaust is simply a means by which he can dramatize in the most extreme way his preoccupation with the finality of death.

Boltanski began painting in 1958, and was self-taught (Askart, 2002). In the late 1960s he gained public attention with short avant-garde films, and with the publication of notebooks that he produced to come to terms with his Jewish childhood. This focus on real and fictional evidence of his own and other people's existence has remained central to his later work.

In the 1970s he experimented with the production of objects made of clay and from unusual materials such as sugar and gauze dressings. These works, including the series *Attempt at Reconstitution of Objects that Belonged to Christian Boltanski Between 1948 and 1954* (1970-71), again included flashbacks of memories that are blurred with invention.

It was during the same decade that photography became Boltanski's favoured medium for exploring forms of memory and consciousness. After 1976 he handled the medium as if it were painting, photographing fragments of nature as well as still-lives of everyday objects, then converting them into grid compositions that reflected the collective condition of contemporary civilization in a stereotyped way. He also began appropriating photographs from grade-school portraits, obituaries, tabloids, social clubs, and other such sources. While doing so he noted that the photograph has the potential to summon up not only a particular deceased person, but indeed entire groups of people.

In the early 1980s Boltanski stopped using found objects as a point of departure. Instead he produced theatre-like compositions by fashioning small figures from cardboard, scraps of materials, thread, and cork, and painted in colour. He then photographed these scenes, and printed them in large picture formats. These then led him to create kinetic

installations in which he focused strong light on figurative shapes to create a mysterious environment of silhouettes in movement, as in *The Shadows*, 1984 (Fig. 54) (ibid).

Boltanski is perhaps better known for his more contemporary photographic installations. These works have the effect of storage spaces that have been forgotten for decades, and can suspend the viewer's belief that they are in fact artworks (Davidson, 1996: 48). It is his intention to postpone the viewer's awareness of his work as art, which he does by using found elements as his material, what he calls "the debris of everyday life" (Davidson, 1996: 48; Temin, 2000: 9). Materials such as newspaper clippings, snapshot photographs, clothing, candles, domestic lamps, and old biscuit tins recur in his installations (Self 2002). These impermanent materials remind viewers of their own transient existence (ibid). This effect is heightened when the materials have a patina of age, as when the biscuit tins are rusted or the photographs simply edged with tape and backed with cardboard (Davidson, 1996: 49). It perhaps Boltanski's intention for the works to deteriorate and disappear after a while, thereby embodying the passing of time and serving as *memento mori* (ibid).

In many of Boltanski's works photographs play a strong role, as in his *Reserve* and *Monument* series. The photographs that he uses are snapshots, and their primary importance lies not so much in their visual impact, but in their cultural significance (ibid: 48). These photographs are usually taken from random sources like albums or group photographs found by chance; or from sources in which the identity of those photographed is erased as they are chosen, such as obituary notices, as in *Reserve: The Dead Swiss*, 1990 (Fig. 55); or sometimes gathered from a particular place, such as a town or a school, as in *Monument: The Children of Dijon*, 1985 (Fig. 56). These images

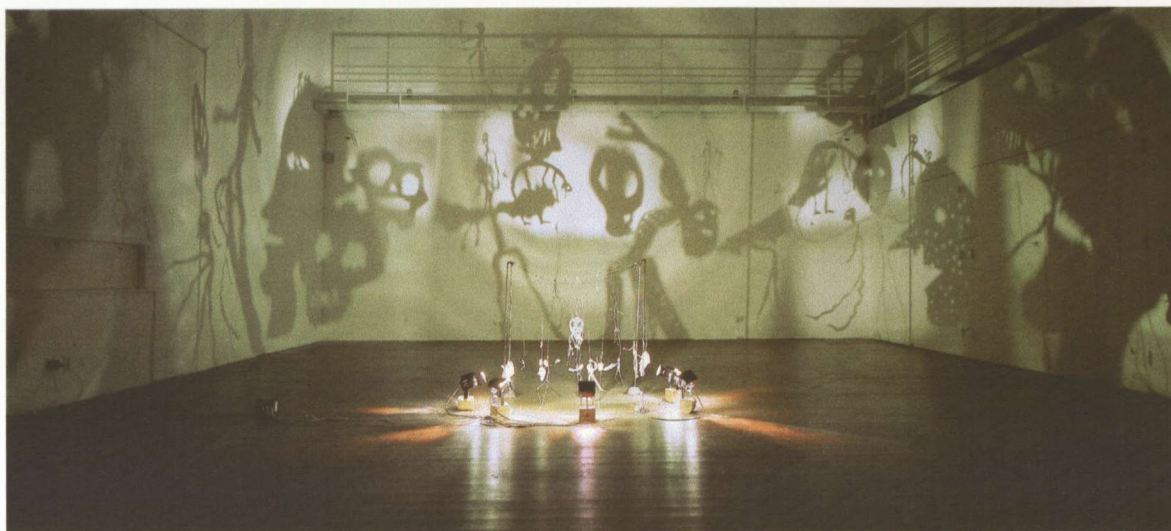


Fig. 54. Christian Boltanski, *Shadows*
1984

Installation view, Institute of Contemporary Art, Nagoya, Japan, 1990



Fig. 55. Christian Boltanski, *Reserve: The Dead Swiss*
1990
Installation view, Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot, Paris, 1991

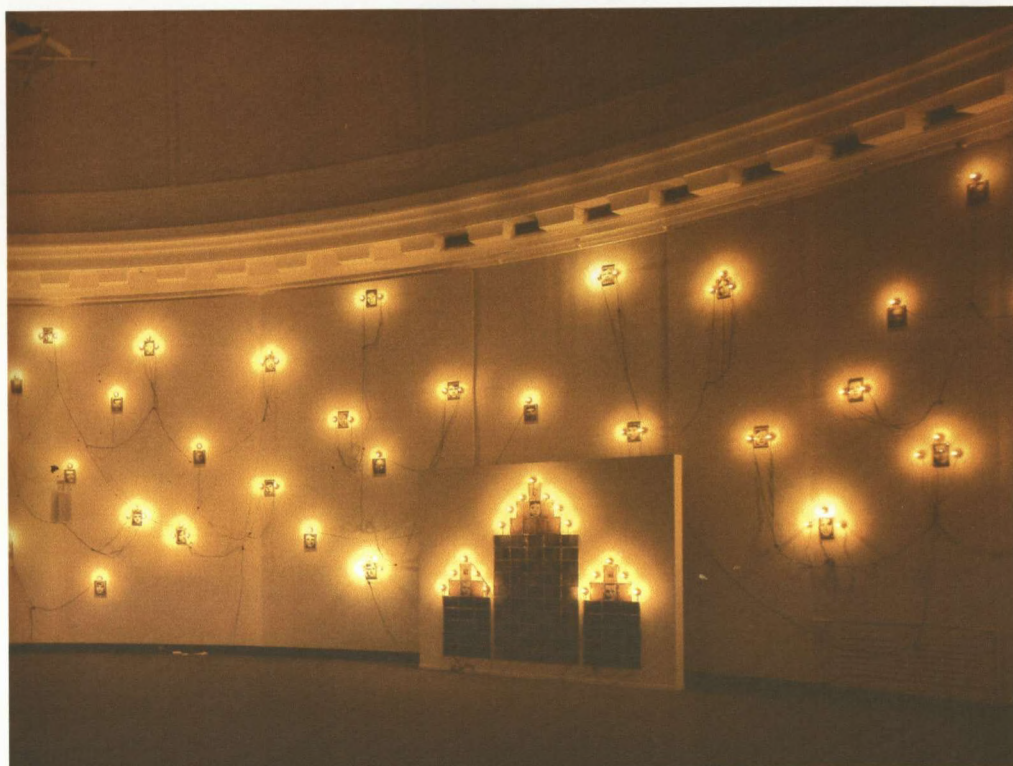


Fig. 56. Christian Boltanski, *Monument: The Children of Dijon*
1986

Installation view, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, 1991

are usually re-photographed and presented in multiples without captions. The uniformity of scale and appearance of these images emphasises the absence of individual identity (ibid).

In *Reserve: The Dead Swiss* Boltanski collected thousands of photographs from the obituary columns of Swiss newspapers (Tate Gallery, 2002). The accompanying texts to the photographs were removed, obliterating the identities of the subjects (ibid). He glued the photographed faces onto biscuit tins, which he piled in rows to form a claustrophobic corridor (Grumpert, 1994: 132). By memorializing the dead in this way he gave them a kind of immortality, while, paradoxically, rendering them anonymous (Temin, 2000: 9). He used the Swiss because, despite their political neutrality, they die like everybody else (Davidson, 1996: 50). McNally (2002) quotes Boltanski as saying he chose the Swiss because they have “no reason to die”. After death, however, categorizations such as nationality mean nothing (ibid).

In his *Monument* series, Boltanski subverts the concept of monuments – which are usually large stone or bronze sculptures that serve as a lasting reminder of the dead – by creating monuments out of ephemeral materials such as photographs, wires, and small naked light bulbs (Self, 2002). Boltanski’s monuments recall the Holocaust, but also remind the viewer of the universal themes of life and death (Davidson, 1996: 49). The representation of children also suggests a loss of childhood and innocence (ibid). Golding (1999: 94) quotes Boltanski explaining his use of images of living children, such as those in *Monument: The Children of Dijon*, in such a funereal setting: “we all have a dead child in us: we don’t die once, we have already died several times over.” For *Monument: The Children of Dijon* Boltanski used photographs from an earlier work, *Portraits of the Students of Lentillères College of Secondary Education, Dijon*, 1973 (Fig. 57), which he



Fig. 57. Christian Boltanski, *Portraits of the Students of Lentillères College of Secondary Education, Dijon*

1973

Permanent installation at the Lentillères College of Secondary Education,
Dijon

then re-photographed, reducing the clarity of the images and obscuring the features of the children's faces (Grumpert, 1994: 84). The placement of the photographs is open to change from installation to installation, but they are usually dispersed along one wall, where they are individually lit by small light bulbs with dangling black wires that gather haphazardly before reaching the electrical outlets (Kuspit, 1993: 253; Grumpert, 1994: 84). Grumpert (1994: 84) quotes him as saying of this work: "Ten years later, all these children's faces really seemed to me to be like corpses. The pictures are dead forever, since they are now adults." Through his use of the photograph in his works, Boltanski utilizes the power of the photograph to produce in the viewer a sense of nostalgia and melancholy for the lives of those pictured (Self, 2002).

Another medium Boltanski frequently uses in his works is clothes. Davidson (1996: 50) describes clothes as "the signs of a vital body and as relics of an absent body," which "suggest the body's presence and its passing." Boltanski often uses clothes as elements for classification and documentation, as in an early work, *Inventory of objects that belonged to a woman of Bois-Colombes*, 1974 (Fig. 58), in which he photographed a woman's entire belongings shortly after her death (ibid). The photographs question what can be learnt about an individual by their belongings (ibid: 51).

When used in installations, clothes are able to evoke a sense of human presence in a manner unlike any other medium. In *Reserve: Lake of the Dead*, 1990 (Fig. 59), hundreds of articles of clothing were strewn across the floor, crossed by timber walkways, creating the effect of a mass grave over which visitors were compelled to walk. Another piece using clothes is *Lost: New York Projects Dispersion*, 1995, which consisted of mounds of clothes piled up against the walls inside a church (ibid). Such works recall the



Fig. 58. Christian Boltanski, *Inventory of objects that belonged to a woman of Bois-Colombes*

1974

Installation view, Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Paris, 1974



Fig. 59. Christian Boltanski, *Reserve: Lake of the Dead*
1990

Installation view, Institute of Contemporary Art, Nagoya, Japan, 1990

photographs taken of the piles of items belonging to victims of Nazi concentration camps (Temin, 2000: 9).

The sense of loss in Boltanski's work mourns not for particular deaths but for death in general (Golding, 1999: 94). It also commemorates what he calls "small memory", which he describes as "an emotional memory, an everyday knowledge, the opposite of the great memory that is preserved in books. This small memory, which for me forms our singularity, is extremely fragile, and it disappears with our death" (ibid). The strange collection of objects in his work evokes this "small memory," in which he hopes viewers will recognize aspects from their own lives and will experience empathy, compelling them to reflect on their own tenuous existence and on their mortality (Davidson, 1996: 50).

Much of Boltanski's work deals with the idea of death being not only the loss of life but also the loss of identity. When he obscures the faces in photographs or removes the names from obituary notices he is stripping the identity from the person depicted. His Monument series seems to mock the belief that a person's identity can be memorialized and preserved by an object. His collections of hundreds of photographs or items of clothing are a reminder that in death we are lost in the multitude of the dead, and reveal our refusal to resign ourselves to the ancient notion of the collective destiny of mankind.

The loss of identity in his work perhaps refers again to the Holocaust, when the identities of the victims were stripped from them when they were put in concentration camps and buried in mass graves. Or perhaps it reveals his own discomfort at the knowledge that his own identity will someday be removed from the world. His work could then be seen as

addressing the twentieth-century fear of death, and the inability of modern people to conceive of their own non-existence.

His treatment of death is mournful yet beautiful, and he does not pander to the 'pornography of death.' He reminds us that death is sad and should be mourned, and that it is not vulgar and shameful.

Joel-Peter Witkin

American photographer Joel-Peter Witkin explores death in his works by focusing corpses and body parts. Witkin was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1939 (Wilson, 2000). His father was Jewish and his mother was Catholic, and he himself is a practicing Catholic. His parents were unable to transcend their religious differences, and the two divorced when Witkin was young (ibid). He lived with his mother but also kept in touch with his father (Coke, 1985: 7). Both sides of the family had little money for much beyond the essentials.

In the mid-1950s, he obtained a twin-lens reflex Rolleicord camera, which he learned to use by reading books on photography. His first assignment was at the age of 16 for his twin brother, who was working on a painting that incorporated freaks. Witkin used models found at a carnival freak show, including a three-legged man and a dwarf called the Chicken Lady. He also photographed a hermaphrodite, with whom he had his first sexual experience. Later in the 1950s, when he did not have available freaks to photograph, he began fabricating environments in which he directed strange events, which he then photographed (ibid).

After high school, Witkin got jobs that would enable him to learn the fundamentals of photography (Wilson, 2000). He worked as a colour photography printer until he enlisted in the Army in 1961, where he served until 1964 as a technical sergeant and worked as a photo technician and a photographer, documenting assorted military accidents and suicides in Europe and Vietnam (Wilson, 2000; Coke, 1985: 9). After the Army, he returned to New York and worked as a professional freelance assistant for technical, medical, and commercial photographers (Wilson, 2000). He earned a BFA studying sculpture, and received a fellowship in poetry from Columbia University (ibid).

After he left the Army, it was Witkin's ambition to make photographs that would help him better understand himself (Coke, 1985: 9). He wanted to create images of God and the divine. His first image was of a five year old boy representing the baby Jesus, photographed naked and playing with a dead bird on an abandoned street in a Philadelphian slum. Later he began using rooftops to stage his photographic events. Rooftops provided seclusion, which was important for the models that he used who were physically unusual (ibid).

In his contemporary work Witkin continues to choose models that are deformed (Fig. 60), maimed, tattooed, obese, or insane; or models that suggest dual realities, such as hermaphrodites (or pre-operation transsexuals), Siamese twins, fetuses, and corpses (Fig. 61) (Heartney, 1997: 35). He combines these models with various objects, landscapes, stage-sets, and backdrops to create bizarre and fantastic photographic tableaux (Celant, 1995: 9). He creates rich, highly manipulated prints, employing a labour-intensive, hands-on process, which includes scratching the negative and bleaching



Fig. 60. Joel-Peter Witkin, *Leda*, Los Angeles, 1986
1986
Toned gelatin silver print



Fig. 61. Joel-Peter Witkin, *Man without a Head*
1993
Toned gelatin silver print

or toning the print (Alevizakis, Buck, 1989). This process gives his work the feeling of a patina brought on by age, and gives the images a sense of history (Coke, 1985: 13). Celant (1995: 9) describes Witkin's photographs as seeming to:

move in a universe of perversity and sacrilege, touching upon all that is taboo, forbidden, hallowed. They draw from the cauldron of life and death, of normality and difference, and make these interchangeable, subjecting the imagery to a kind of diabolical surgery where sacred and profane, pain and pleasure, masculine and feminine are dissolved and transformed, intertwining with one another and creating a forbidden hybrid.

Witkin talks of his work as a path leading to a personal and spiritual goal (Alevizakis, Buck, 1989). Wilson (2000) quotes him as saying his work shows his "journey to become a more loving, unselfish person." He talks of his work as an attempt to find union with God, and from God to discover the meaning of life and death (Witkin, 1976: 49-63). He says, "My art is the way I perceive and define life. It is sacred work, since what I make are my prayers" (Wilson, 2000).

One of the determining factors of Witkin's development of subject matter was an incident that occurred when he was six years old. According to him, he was with his mother when they witnessed a car crash involving three cars, all with families in them (Witkin, 1976: 49). As he watched, the head of a little girl rolled over to where he was standing and stopped before him. He goes on to say: "This, my first conscious visual experience, has left its mark. Out of it I see many roots extending to my visual work in my use of severed heads, masks, and my concern with violence, pain, and death" (ibid). However, it could be argued that this event is just a convenient basis for him to justify his lifelong preoccupation with death and disfigurement.

To maintain a supply of corpses for his work, Witkin was able to make an arrangement with a hospital morgue in Mexico City that allowed him to sift through its daily supply of anonymous bodies picked up from the streets (Wilson, 2000). For one who claims his work to be sacred, to be a celebration of people who are unloved, damaged, and outcast, and to be a journey to becoming a more loving, unselfish person, Witkin demonstrates a disturbing complicity with the notion that anonymous people have no rights after death, deserve no respect, and that their bodies can be manipulated and exploited in any vulgar and undignified manner. While creating the piece *Glassman* (Fig. 62) in 1996, which depicts a dead man in a chair with his stomach and chest sewn up following an autopsy, Witkin explains how he stayed in Mexico City for four extra days “because I wasn’t getting the bodies I wanted”; how he had to ask the morgue workers not to throw the bodies face-first into the trucks as this damaged them; and that the body he finally chose was “was a real punk, nothing good visually” (Sand, 1996).

These sentiments, and his selection of living models for their physical deformities, reveals an attitude similar to that found in the medical world, that people (alive and dead) are specimens, and can be utilized without any solicitude to further a particular end – be it medicine or art. Petherbridge (1997: 96) describes how the ethics of twentieth-century medicine “have determined that the anatomical body should only be displayed in a ‘neutralised’ scientific and scholarly context”, and how contemporary artists are challenging this by “subjecting museological material to new kinds of public display within the aestheticised but critical space of an art gallery.” In Witkin’s case, however, this aestheticization often seems to involve nothing more than a mask and some incongruent props. What appeal his work does hold lies more with the models than his



Fig. 62. Joel-Peter Witkin, *Glassman*
1996
Toned gelatin silver print

treatment of them. It is morbid curiosity that holds the viewer's attention, which would just as easily be held by a more prosaic and unaffected "scientific" depiction of the models.

Feast of Fools of 1990 (Fig. 63) is at first glance a traditional still life, but in amongst the fruit and seafood is placed a dead baby and other human body parts. It came about after Witkin's discovery in the Mexican morgue of a drawer full of bodily fluids with severed arms, legs, eyes, penises and little children floating around in them (Wilson, 2000). He was horrified at this discovery and outraged at the morgue's corrupt bureaucracy that resulted in this organic matter not being properly disposed of (ibid). This, incidentally, is the same bureaucracy upon which he relies for corpses for his subject matter. His horror and outrage at this discovery, however, did not stop him from promptly utilizing the contents of this drawer to create his still life (Wilson, 2000).

Witkin takes advantage of society's taboos surrounding death, sexuality, and deformity to create work that is intended to shock and inspire awe. What he succeeds in creating are oddities and curiosities, which are no more likely to induce deep contemplation on the intricacies of life and death than medical textbook photographs of anatomical abnormalities and dissected cadavers. Wilson (2000) describes Witkin's work as an "intellectually camouflaged, carny peep show".

Andres Serrano

Andres Serrano, an American photographer, is another artist who has explored the subject matter of death by photographing dead bodies, in a series called *The Morgue*. Serrano was born in New York in 1950 (LeBor 1995: 48). His mother was a Cuban and his father



Fig. 63. Joel-Peter Witkin, *Feast of Fools, New Mexico, 1990*
1990

Toned gelatin silver print

a Honduran. Like Witkin, Serrano was raised a Catholic, and many of his works deal with ecclesiastic subjects (ibid). He is quoted in Budney, et al (1995: 68) as saying:

I've always had this connection to religious art, and I've never figured out where that comes from, except for from the distant past of twenty years ago. My Catholic upbringing must have influenced me in a way that I never appreciated until today. I'm like most people who have fallen out with the Church – you know, I was confirmed at 13 and shortly afterwards stopped going. I've always been told that there's a real conflict between religion and puberty, and most of the ex-Catholics that I know also stopped going to church when they hit puberty. But now I find that a lot of religious themes come into play in my work, and I sometimes make references to religious art.

His works often spark controversy, a notable example being *Piss Christ*, 1987 (Fig. 64), a large photograph depicting the crucifix in a warm haze of reds and oranges. As Shea (1994) puts it, many viewers would find the image reverent: the crucifix is bathed in golden highlights and its contours are softened. The image is beautiful, however the outrage stemmed from the title and the circumstances behind the work. To create the image, Serrano immersed a cheap crucifix in a plexi-glass tank filled with his own urine, which he had saved for several weeks. Many saw the work as blasphemous, and it caused a cry to stop public funding for controversial art (ibid).

Other works have included portrait series of members of the Catholic clergy, members of the Ku Klux Klan, and homeless people of New York. Another controversial work was his *History of Sex* series, which include some photographs of graphic sexual acts.

In 1992 he obtained permission to take photographs of corpses in one of New York City's morgues, on the condition that the photographs did not reveal the identities of the

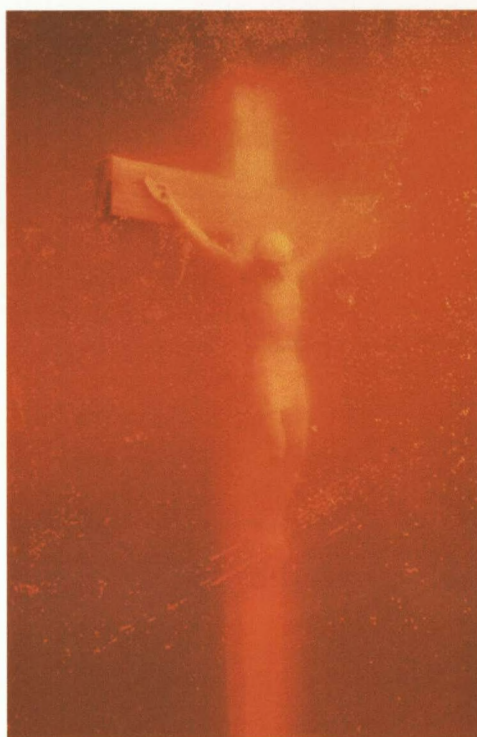


Fig. 64. Andres Serrano, *Piss Christ*
1987
Cibachrome, plexi-glass, wood frame

deceased (Mullins, 2002). The works are simply titled, describing the subject's cause of death. Included in this series are *The Morgue (Burnt to Death I)*, 1992 (Fig. 65), *The Morgue (Burnt to Death II)*, 1992 (Fig. 66), *The Morgue (Pneumonia Due to Drowning I)*, 1992 (Fig. 67), *The Morgue (Pneumonia Due to Drowning II)*, 1992 (Fig. 68), and *The Morgue (Rat Poison Suicide I)*, 1992 (Fig. 69).

Serrano's works are intended to bring you face to face with death, but his treatment of the corpses in his photographs is markedly different from that of Joel-Peter Witkin. Witkin's manipulation and exploitation of corpses in bizarre and voyeuristic tableaux is contrasted by Serrano's quiet, muted, and elegant compositions, and his almost tender treatment of the subjects. The pieces have been criticized as being too beautiful, and for aestheticizing and romanticizing death, but Dorosh (2002) argues that Serrano is calling attention to Western society's attempts at beautifying death. This is particularly true in America where the trend in funerary rituals is to disguise death by embalming and cosmeticizing corpses. Serrano's photographs, however, while presenting a beautiful image, do not attempt to conceal the fact of death. The viewer is confronted with the suddenness, loneliness, and finality of death (Dorosh, 2002). LeBor (1995: 49) quotes Serrano as saying, "Some critics hated the 'Morgue' pictures ... They felt they were too beautiful, too aestheticized ... I suppose some people want their dead people to look a certain way – grisly and grimy and bloody and dirty." Despite this aestheticism, Serrano manages to convey to the viewer the harsh reality of death, while avoiding turning death into something dirty and shameful. He achieves with subtlety and discretion what Witkin fails to do with shock and extravagance: to stimulate in viewers a contemplation of death and their own mortality.



Fig. 65. Andres Serrano, *The Morgue (Burnt to Death I)*
1992
Cibachrome, silicone, plexi-glass, wood frame

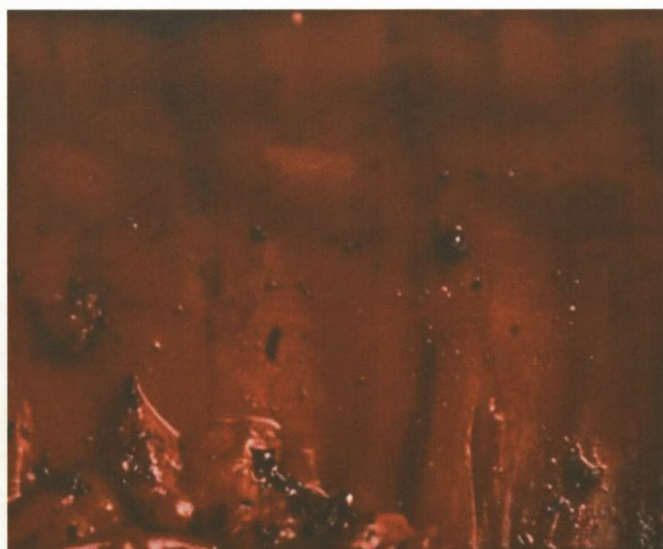


Fig. 66. Andres Serrano, *The Morgue (Burnt to Death II)*
1992
Cibachrome, silicone, plexi-glass, wood frame



Fig. 67. Andres Serrano, *The Morgue (Pneumonia Due to Drowning I)*
1992

Cibachrome, silicone, plexi-glass, wood frame



Fig. 68. Andres Serrano, *The Morgue (Pneumonia Due to Drowning II)*
1992

Cibachrome, silicone, plexi-glass, wood frame

Serrano's attitude towards the dead that he worked with also shows a distinct contrast to Witkin's. Budney, et al (1995: 72) quotes him as saying of the bodies at the morgue, "I think the spirit was still there in all of them. That was the first thing that struck me when I went into the morgue." He goes on to say, "even though these people may not have looked the same when they were alive, I really felt I was dealing with human beings. People who still had a human presence. I never referred to them as corpses" (ibid). He does, however, acknowledge that it was necessary for him to develop a clinical detachment to be able to continue working at the morgue (LeBor, 1995: 49). He had to learn not to become emotionally involved, rather like professional morgue workers who have to deal with corpses on a daily basis (Serrano, 2002).

One similarity that Serrano and Witkin share is their Catholic upbringing. Unlike Witkin, however, Serrano is no longer an adherent of the faith, although he says he is still a Christian (Budney, et al, 1995: 72). He stopped going to church when he reached puberty and it was not until many years later that he realized the influence his Catholic upbringing had on his work (ibid: 68). Lippard (1990: 239) quotes him as saying his work is informed by "unresolved feelings about my own Catholic upbringing which help me redefine and personalize my relationship with God. For me, art is a moral and spiritual obligation that cuts across all manner of pretense and speaks directly to the soul." The religious influence in *The Morgue* series is evident in the stigmata-like wounds in *The Morgue (Rat Poison Suicide II)*, 1992 (Fig. 70), *The Morgue (Knifed to Death I)*, 1992 (Fig. 71), and *The Morgue (Knifed to Death II)*, 1992 (Fig. 72), and in the shroud-like drapery in pieces such as *The Morgue (Gun Murder)*, 1992 (Fig. 73), and *The Morgue (Fatal Meningitis II)*, 1992 (Fig. 74).



Fig. 69. Andres Serrano, *The Morgue (Rat Poison Suicide I)*
1992

Cibachrome, silicone, plexi-glass, wood frame



Fig. 70. Andres Serrano, *The Morgue (Rat Poison Suicide II)*
1992

Cibachrome, silicone, plexi-glass, wood frame



Fig. 71. Andres Serrano, *The Morgue (Knifed to Death I)*
1992
Cibachrome, silicone, plexi-glass, wood frame



Fig. 72. Andres Serrano, *The Morgue (Knifed to Death II)*
1992
Cibachrome, silicone, plexi-glass, wood frame



Fig. 73. Andres Serrano, *The Morgue (Gun Murder)*
1992
Cibachrome, silicone, plexi-glass, wood frame



Fig. 74. Andres Serrano, *The Morgue (Fatal Meningitis II)*
1992
Cibachrome, silicone, plexi-glass, wood frame

Serrano explains that he used the people's cause of death in the titles of the works in the series simply because he knew nothing about the people when they were alive, and that all he knew about them was their cause of death (Serrano, 2002). However, further significance can be inferred. As Davies (1997: 69) argues, the desire to attribute a specific cause to the death of a person is part of the modern phenomenon of medicalizing death. Giving a specific reason for the death of someone is one way of trying to control death, and many find a degree of comfort in having this named cause of death. Perhaps a medical cause of death answers part of the human need to know why someone died (ibid).

The *Morgue* series has received its share of unfavourable criticism. Steihaug (2002) describes the combination of "extreme photographic realism and high-art aestheticism" and the "unspeakable, *real* horror of sickness, violence and death" as disturbing and disquieting. He goes on to accuse the works as being "glossy, shiny and expensive art commodities", and condemns the "voyeurism of the pictures, their depiction of dead people who could not defend themselves against the appropriating eye of the camera" (ibid). However, Steihaug admits that the images stirred a curiosity that made him continue to look and to try to "comprehend the incomprehensible and uncanny reality of death" (ibid). The reaction to the works in different parts of the world is revealing of the prevailing attitudes to death in those areas. In an interview with Budney, et al (1995: 71), Serrano states that "generally in Europe *The Morgue* elicited more serious criticism than in America ... people tried to place it in a more historical context, and discussed my work in relation to other artists that have used death as a theme. In the States the criticism was more sensationalistic." This suggests that in America, more than in Europe, death is seen

as a subject that should not be discussed or displayed openly, and as something unclean and vulgar.

In *The Morgue* series, Serrano explores the contemporary attitude of hygienically separating death from daily life (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2002). He exposes us to the hidden face of death, and shows us that, while perhaps not pleasant, it is something that we need not be afraid to confront. The works serve as *memento mori* in that they cause us to remember our mortality and the frailty of the flesh, and by doing so remind us to live our lives while we have them.

Like Hirst, Serrano is seeking through his work to understand death. He is trying to remedy a lack of awareness about death that exist in modern Westernized society. Catapano (2001) quotes him as saying, "I wanted to see death myself ... First and foremost I want to see things for myself, and find other ways to see it, too." LeBor (1995: 49) suggests that the works could be seen as voyeuristic, and that some viewers are made uneasy by being placed in the role of voyeur. Serrano's response to that is, "I would not have a problem being called a voyeur. We all vacillate between being spectators and participants in the arena of life. It's natural to want to see, and to be curious. We are not bad people because of that." (ibid)

Donna Sharrett

Donna Sharrett was born in 1959, and lives as an artist in New York. Following her mother's struggle with cancer and subsequent death in 1989, she began to address death in her work, creating obsessively crafted serial objects using materials with personal and

cultural significance, such as dirt, beads, various fibres, hair, flowers, and wax (Rice, 1998). With her latest completed series, *Arrangements*, she continues the process in response to her brother's death in 2001. Gomez (2002) quotes her as saying, "There should be some way to memorialize. All of a sudden, someone is gone. You go back, and life continues. Something seemed wrong. I felt there should be a placeholder to remind us."

Sharrett trained as a painter, and used to produce abstract landscapes, but after her mother's death she began to utilize the traditional needlework techniques she learned as a child (Gomez, 2000: 2; Martin, 2001: 18). The return to needlework came about while she was caring for her mother in the last months of her life (Gomez, 2000: 2). Partly to pass the time, and partly to give her mother an opportunity to fulfil the role of mother in their relationship – even though Sharrett was now the caregiver – they got out her mother's unfinished needlework projects and set out to finish them. During this process her mother taught her some complicated stitching techniques. Gomez quotes Sharrett as saying of this time: "I came to enjoy the repetitive work; doing it literally lifted me to a higher, meditative place. It was therapeutic" (ibid).

When her mother died, Sharrett was deeply moved and abandoned her current art projects (Martin, 2001: 18). Months later when she started working again she sought, through her art, to honour and memorialize her deceased loved one (Gomez, 2003). She did research on Victorian-era *memento mori*, such as bracelets and lockets made with locks of hair from the deceased, and became inspired by these and other cultures' customs and rituals of remembrance (Gomez, 2000).

She did not immediately discard painting from her work. In 1993 she completed a series called *Housecoat Epitaphs*, in which she repeatedly represented a housecoat or dressing gown in conventional painting and collage format (Rice, 1998). The presentation is frontal, sinuous and painterly. The housecoat is a garment worn by elderly, housebound, or chronically ill women, or by patients in a hospital. The artist renders the image as a simple silhouette, and emphasizes the collar and the vertical centred opening, which, according to Rice, causes the image to read as a flower, another object that can be associated with illness and death.

Sharrett initially incorporated a broad range of colours in the housecoat collages, but as she progressed she honed her palette down to white, black, and red, and sometimes added a little soil from her garden. The red is concentrated around the neck of the dress or along the front opening, and sometimes both. Rice suggests that this makes the collar not only flowerlike, but also wound-like, and that the centred vertical line suggests exploratory surgery, autopsies, and embalming. Sharrett elaborated these shapes with woman's traditional handiwork: embroidery and crochet, popular hobbies of nineteenth-century women, which again suggest time spent indoors by those who are not well enough to participate in other activities – those who would likely to be wearing housecoats. In some of this needlework Sharrett had begun using doll's hair, which may remind the viewer of hair lost by people suffering from cancer and other illnesses, as well as Victorian nostalgic objects woven of hair (ibid).

The *Housecoat Epitaphs* led Sharrett to make a series called *Memorial Collars* (Fig. 75). Rice (1998) explains that Sharrett began to separate the flowerlike collar from the painted surface and creating small embroidered works, metaphorically plucking the

flower (ibid). This prefigured her later use of actual flower petals sewn onto the surface in similar doily-like arrangements. In some of the pieces, the collar is a complete circle like a memorial flower (Rice, 1998). Each work is encased in a covering made up of melted wax, layered drop by drop by the artist from burning candles in an almost ritualistic process.

Another serial work Sharrett completed is *Solitaire* (1994). She made a series of fifty-two playing cards, embroidering onto dirt-covered felt four suits of her own devising: anatomical hearts, white gloves (Fig. 76), locks of hair, and arm bandages. Each playing card is edged with black lace crocheted from synthetic hair. Rice quotes Sharrett as saying of this work, "One thought is of the predetermination of our situations – the hand which we are dealt. Another is the true solitude of life, particularly when we are faced with sorrow or death" (ibid).

Sharrett continued creating her *memento mori* pieces in memory of her mother, and in 2000 exhibited a series of works called *Mementos*, incorporating dried rose petals, glass seed beads, and ash-blond synthetic hair crocheted in elaborate patterns (Honigman, 2002: 66). They are flat and geometric, resembling large doilies, rose windows, or mandalas, and allude to treasured objects from folk or religious rituals (Gomez, 2002). Like Victorian *memento mori*, fashioned from the hair of the deceased, they are enshrined in boxes lined with black velvet (Martin, 2001: 16). Each work has a detailed, poignant title, such as *There is no explaining it, you have to live it: The 32nd Memento*, 1999 (Fig. 77), and *There are times when I desperately need one good, loving friend: The 35th Memento*, 2000 (Fig. 78), which Sharrett took from letters her mother sent to her over the years (Gomez, 2000: 2; Dalton, 2000).



Fig. 75. Donna Sharrett, *Memorial Collar IV*
1993
Lace needlework, felt, wax



Fig. 76. Donna Sharrett, 'Solitaire' (detail, one of fifty two)
1994
Dirt, felt, lace, synthetic hair, cotton

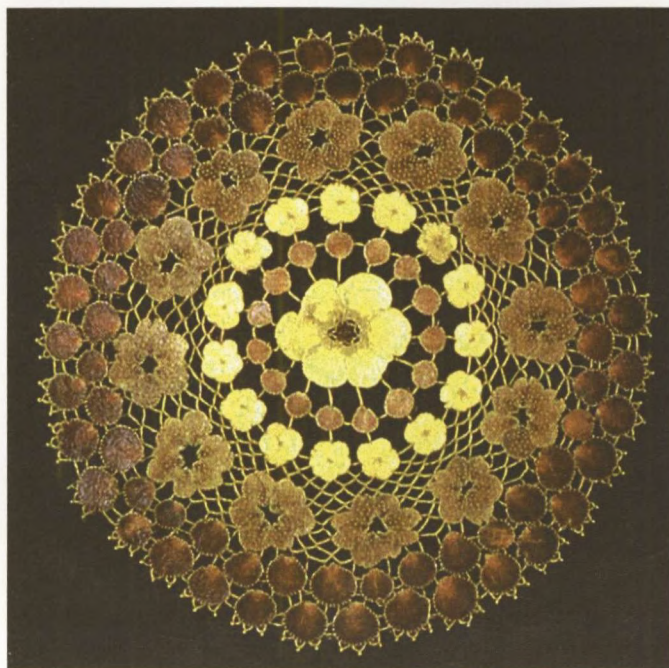


Fig. 77. Donna Sharrett, *There is no explaining it, you have to live it: The 32nd Memento*

1999

Velvet, rose petals, synthetic hair

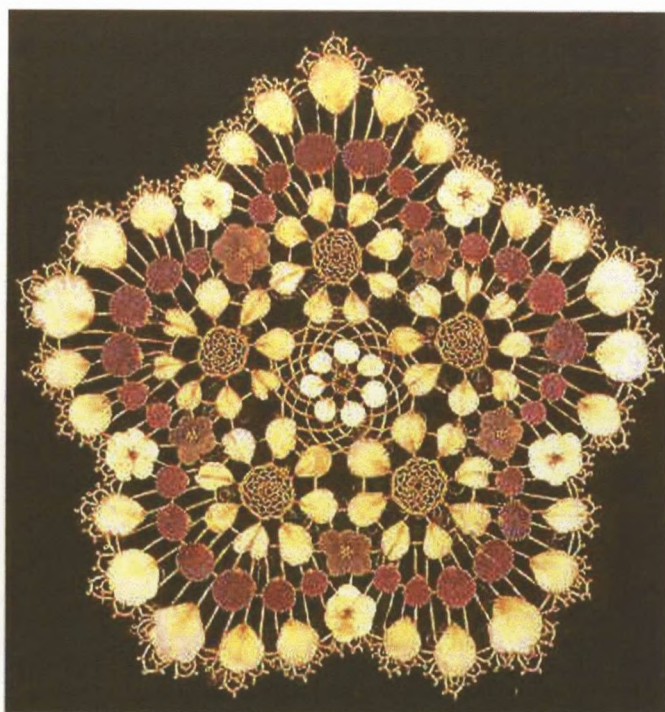


Fig. 78. Donna Sharrett, *There are times when I desperately need one good, loving friend: The 35th Memento*

2000

Velvet, rose petals, synthetic hair

Martin (2001: 16) describes the works poetically: "Like pressed funeral wreaths, the faded color (*sic*) of the petals and the delicate skeletons of lace have a whispered wistfulness, tinged with a hint of the macabre, for the petals are pierced, with a sharp needle, and splayed, like a scientist's butterfly in a specimen box." The veined petals have a skin-like quality, and the needlework stitches seem like sutures. Martin (2001: 16) sees something uncanny in the way the natural flower has been taken apart and then reassembled by human artifice.

Sharrett's needlework techniques are primarily the buttonhole stitch and the French knot, techniques learned from her mother and maternal grandmother (ibid: 16-17). Her mother once told her that the sign of a well-made garment was hand-made buttonholes (ibid: 17). Sharrett's *Mementos* are built up of thousands of these buttonhole stitches, connecting the rose petals, and punctuated by French knots and seed beads. The countless stitches in these pieces are a record of the repetitive performance of thousands of identical gestures (ibid). Gomez (2002) recounts Sharrett as saying that the repetition in these works, and the way it relates to so many cultures with their repeating customs, rules, and cycles, is more meaningful to her than the abstract paintings she used to make. She adds: "Maybe there's something very spiritual and necessary about this kind of repetition, or else we wouldn't have been doing it for generations" (ibid).

Sharrett's use of circles in her work alludes to the cycles of the seasons and the cycles of life – the interconnecting rings of birth and death (Martin, 2001: 18). The use of the circle also has spiritual connotations. In many human ceremonies circular patterns demark sacred space (ibid: 17). Likewise, delicate and finely-worked fabrics are used in many

rituals, for example veils and curtains for weddings and funerals (ibid: 17-18). Both cloth and flowers feature significantly in the liminal states of various important junctures in life, such as weddings and funerals (ibid: 18). A woman goes from maid to wife in the one, and from wife to widow in the other. Further spiritual significance can be inferred by Sharrett's choice of mediums in their relation to household shrines. It is usually a small delicate cloth that transforms a profane space into sacred space, by turning a bureau or kitchen table into an altar, with its sacrificial flower arrangement (ibid).

Sharrett's *Mementos* have attracted viewers who have found their allusions to death more intriguing than repellent, according to Gomez (2002). He quotes Sharrett as saying: "They make people remember something, even if they don't know exactly what it is" (ibid). Honigman (2002: 66) says, "Set against black velvet, this somber (*sic*) piece reads as a poetic, tenderly anachronistic response to death's omnipotence and memory's fragility."

Sharrett's most recent series, *Arrangements*, was developed to honour her brother, a musician, who died in 2001 (Sharrett, 2003a). Like her earlier *Mementos*, they are needlework constructions that are part textile and part sculpture, elegant geometric abstractions that recall artefacts from folk or religious rituals (Gomez, 2003). They are set against a subtly coloured ground of dirt, and in addition to materials used in previous works have metal beads from the ends of her brother's guitar strings, friendship rings, and beads made from rolled up rose petals sewn onto the surface. They are titled after her brother's favourite songs, or after songs that he had composed himself (ibid). Examples are *Changes*, 2002 (Fig. 79), *Wish You Were Here*, 2002 (Fig. 80), *Faded Memory*, 2003 (Fig. 81, 82), *Wild Horses*, 2003 (Fig. 83), and *I Think of You*, 2003 (Fig. 84).

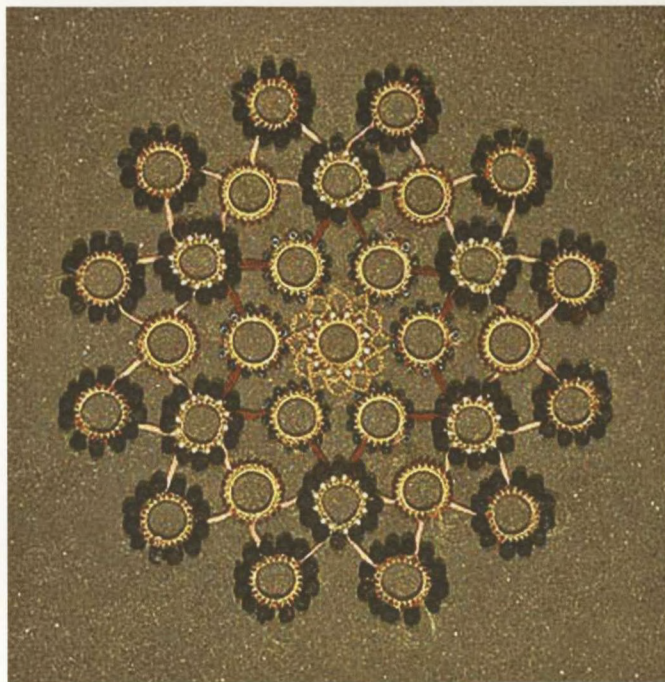


Fig. 79. Donna Sharrett, *Changes*
2002

Rose beads, guitar string ball ends, beads, synthetic hair, cotton floss, friendship rings, sewn onto a dirt base

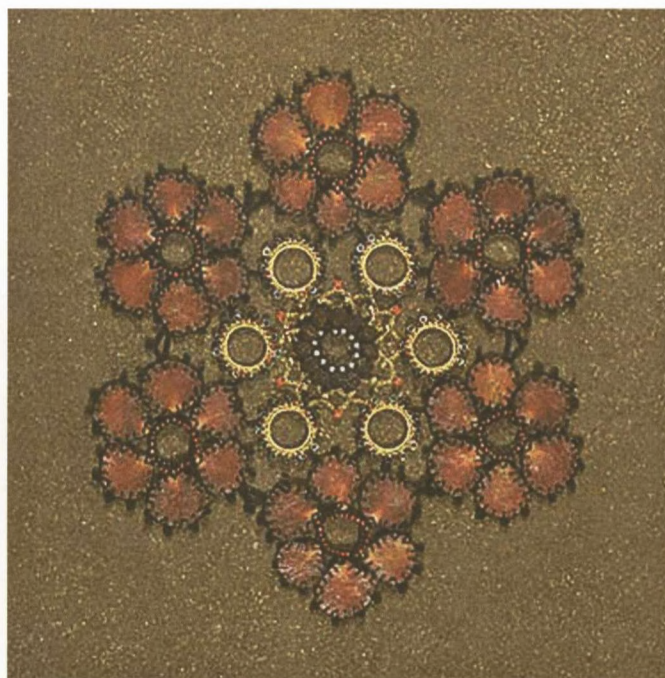


Fig. 80. Donna Sharrett, *Wish You Were Here*
2002

Rose petals, rose beads, guitar string ball ends, beads, synthetic hair, friendship rings, sewn onto a dirt base



Fig. 81. Donna Sharrett, *Faded Memory*
2003

Rose petals, rose beads, guitar string ball ends, beads, synthetic hair, friendship rings, sewn onto a dirt base

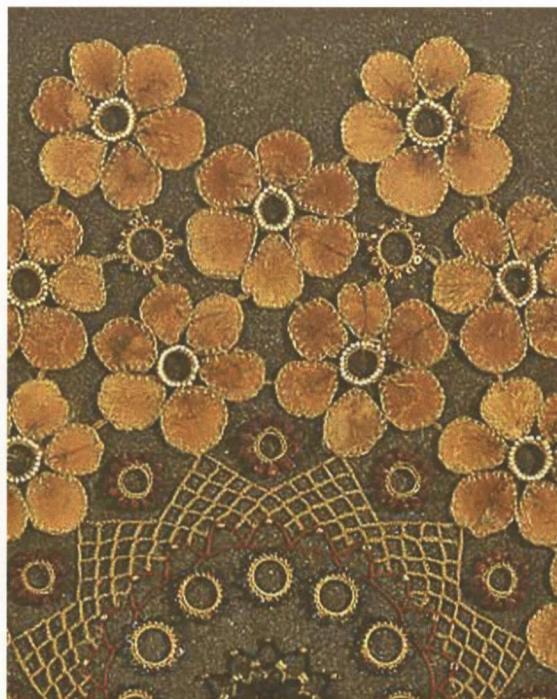


Fig. 82. Donna Sharrett, *Faded Memory* (detail)



Fig. 83. Donna Sharrett, *Wild Horses*
2003

Rose beads, guitar string ball ends, beads, synthetic hair, friendship rings, sewn onto dirt base



Fig. 84. Donna Sharrett, *I Think of You*
2003

Rose petals, rose beads, guitar string ball ends, beads, synthetic hair, friendship rings, sewn onto a dirt base

Sharrett (2003a) says, "This new series of work, while still referencing forms such as mandalas & rose windows, is additionally influenced by music, rhythm and a deeper sense of ritual." Her discovery of hundreds of the metal beads saved from the ends of her brother's used guitar strings provided the impetus for the work (ibid). The cycle of life that emerges from and later returns to the earth, friendship, memory, ritual, and longing are some of the themes that Sharrett's work addresses (Gomez, 2003). Sharrett (2003a) explains, "The need to mark the loss of loved ones transcends the confines of economic, political, religious, cultural and national boundaries. The work responds to the beauty of rituals developed to satiate this fundamental urge."

Throughout her work, Sharrett has succeeded in putting back ritualized beauty into experiences that have become mechanical and shallow in the contemporary world (Rice, 1998). Her works are meditations that celebrate grief, not as something to be overcome or an illness to recover from, but as a rich and important experience to be treasured (ibid). In the modern world there is a lack of ritualized mourning with which mourners can engage their grief. Instead grief is treated as something that mourners should try not to focus too much on while they wait for it to pass. Sharrett addresses this in her work by reviving and dignifying the rituals of mourning, and recasting them in original and personal terms (Rice, 1998). She refuses to be ashamed of her grief or to keep it hidden, but instead shares it openly with viewers. By doing so she reminds them that in times of mourning they need not suffer silently either. As Gomez (2003) says, "Viewers of varied ages and backgrounds have responded to the emotional energy and meditative character of Sharrett's art, and to the inescapable touch of the artist's hand that is visible in each labor-intensive (*sic*) piece".

Gerhard Richter

In 1988 Gerhard Richter created a series of fifteen paintings entitled *18. Oktober 1977*, commemorating the imprisonment and death a decade earlier of members of the West German terrorist group who called themselves the Red Army Faction (Usselman, 2002: 4). The works are painted in grey monochrome, a technique known as grisaille, and are based on police and news photographs taken at the time (Schjeldahl, 1990: 249-50).

Gerhard Richter was born in East Germany in 1932, in the town of Dresden (Hübl, 1989: 122). During the Second World War both his father and his uncle were members of the Nazi party (Rosenberg, 2002: 3). He survived the bombing of his home town by Allied forces in 1945 (ibid). From 1952 to 1956 he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Dresden, where Socialist Realism was the official school of painting (Hübl, 1989: 122). In 1961 he moved to West Germany, two months before the erection of the Berlin Wall. There he studied Abstract Expressionism at the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf (ibid).

Richter is well known for his varied painting styles, which alternate between abstract, photo-realist, and conceptual motifs in his work. An example of his abstract work is *Abstract Painting*, 1987 (Fig. 85), while *Reader*, 1994 (Fig. 86), exemplifies his photo-realist style. For a period of seven years, from 1968 to 1975, he produced paintings that were grey on grey, which, according to Hübl (1989: 123), were conceptual works that reduced the picture to its "barest means while provoking the questions, What does the viewer seek in pictures? and Why does one paint them?"



Fig. 85. Gerhard Richter, *Abstract Painting*
1987
Oil on canvas



Fig. 86. Gerhard Richter, *Reader*
1994
Oil on linen

Because Richter regularly appropriates media imagery, and because he sometimes mechanizes his technique by wiping the wet canvas with a straight-edged implement to blur the image, his work has often been compared to that of Andy Warhol (Leight, 2003). It is notably Warhol's death series to which the comparison is made (Schjeldahl, 1990: 254). Richter's *Eight Student Nurses*, 1966 (Fig. 87), is an example of a work that prompts this comparison. The eight paintings show eight young nurses who could have been posing for a school album (Rosenberg, 2002: 3). The works were in fact painted from photographs that appeared in newspapers after the eight women were brutally murdered by a serial killer (Leight, 2003).

Apart from his photo-based paintings Richter has also produced several still-lives of objects such as candles and skulls, for example *Skull*, 1983 (Fig. 88). With their sombre, muted colours these works invite solemn contemplation, and act as *memento mori*. However, Richter, referring to the 18. Oktober 1977 series in an interview with Magnani (1989: 97), says, "There is actual death now; the skulls were just quotations."

The 18. Oktober 1977 paintings revolve around four imprisoned leaders of the Red Army Faction terrorist group, popularly known as the Baader-Meinhof group. The group, which emerged from Berlin in the late 1960s, was the most significant terrorist group in post-war Germany (Magnani, 1989: 94). They practiced violent urban guerrilla warfare, including bombing, kidnapping, murder, and bank robbery in order to undermine the apparent stability of German capitalism (ibid). They initially received the support of a majority of the German intelligentsia, but their actions, as well as the police countermeasures, brutalized and sometimes nearly paralyzed West German society (Magnani, 1989: 94; Schjeldahl, 1990: 250).



Fig. 87. Gerhard Richter, *Eight Student Nurses*
1966
Oil on Canvas

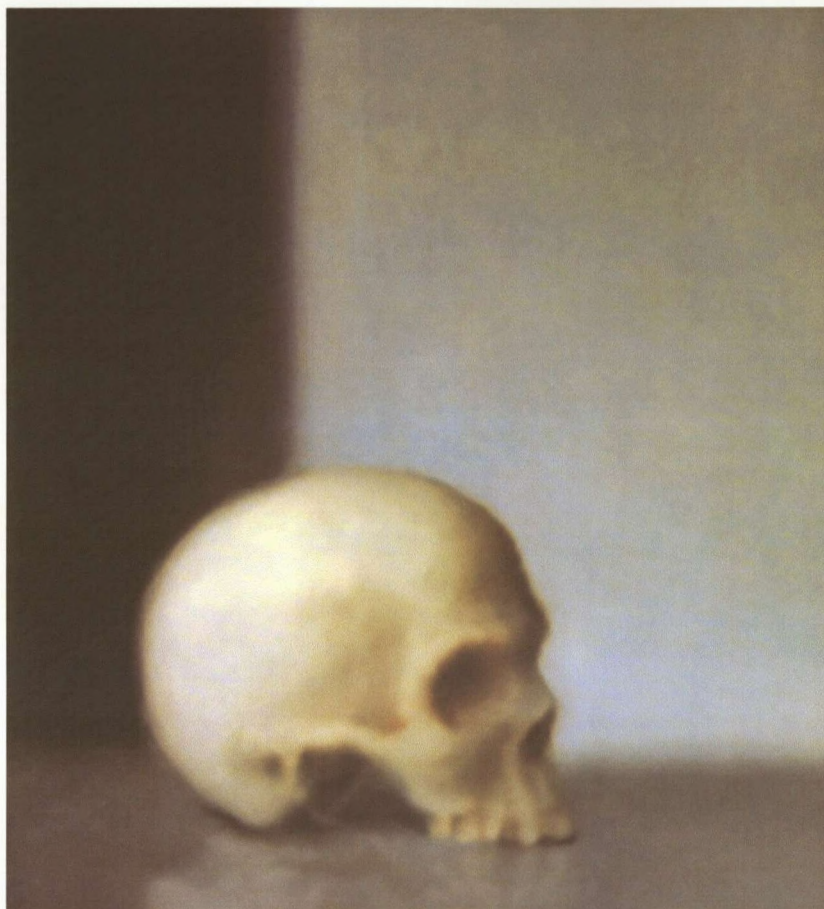


Fig. 88. Gerhard Richter, *Skull*
1983
Oil on canvas

The imprisoned members of the group featured in Richter's series were Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, Ulrike Meinhof, and Jan-Carl Raspe, all of whom were arrested during June and July of 1972, and who were serving life sentences for various acts of terrorism, including murder (Schjeldahl, 1990: 250). Baader and Ensslin, his girlfriend, were the leaders of the group, while Meinhof and Raspe were among the second tier of leadership (Huffman, 2003a). They were incarcerated in separate cells of a specially constructed block of the Stammheim prison (Magnani, 1989: 94). After four years in prison Meinhof had grown increasingly depressed as the other gang members ostracized her (Huffman, 2003a). She allegedly hanged herself in her cell on 9 May 1976 (ibid).

The title of *18. Oktober 1977* refers to a date that is etched in German history, but one which may not mean much in the rest of the world. It was on this date when terrorist efforts to win freedom for Baader, Ensslin, Raspe, and another member, Irmgard Möller, failed (Schjeldahl, 1990: 250). Four days earlier, Palestinian terrorists, allies of the Red Army Faction, had hijacked a passenger plane in Mogadishu, Somalia, in an attempt to force the release of the four prisoners (Usselman, 2002: 7). Just after midnight on 18 October 1977 a special commando unit of the West German Border Police managed to close in on the plane and attack. The raid was successful and all eighty-six passengers were freed and three of the four hijackers were killed.

A few hours later, according to German authorities, prison officers at Stammheim making their breakfast rounds discovered that the four prisoners had all attempted suicide – three successfully – after hearing the news of the failed rescue effort. Andreas Baader had shot himself in the back of the neck; Gudrun Ensslin had hanged herself with a loudspeaker

cable; Jan-Carl Raspe had severe injuries from a gunshot wound to the head, and died later that day; and Irmgard Möller had stabbed herself repeatedly with a sharpened bread knife, but survived (ibid). However the official version presented many unanswered questions, and many claimed that the prisoners were murdered (Magnani, 1989: 94). To this day the matter remains unresolved, as does the death of Meinhof the previous year (ibid).

For viewers who do not know the history behind Richter's series of paintings, the works offer tantalizing and seemingly random glimpses of a violent, yet mournful, narrative. This impels the viewer to seek out the story behind the images. As Usselman (2002: 5) says, there is no set order to the works to guide the narrative. Chronologically, in terms of the events depicted, *Youth Portrait*, 1988 (Fig. 89), would be the place to start. The painting was taken from an image (Fig. 90) generally believed to be a glamour photograph of Ulrike Meinhof as a young girl, but according to Huffman (2003b), Meinhof's former husband has indicated that the image is in fact a publicity photograph taken when Meinhof was thirty-six years old, in anticipation of the release in 1970 of a television movie she had written. Two weeks before the movie was intended to air Meinhof assisted in the escape of Andreas Baader from prison, her first criminal act, and the movie never aired (ibid).

Viewers knowing the background of the images might compare *Youth Portrait* with *Dead 1*, 1988 (Fig. 91), *Dead 2*, 1988 (Fig. 92), and *Dead 3*, 1988 (Fig. 93). These are successively smaller paintings taken from the same photograph (Fig. 94) of Meinhof after she had been found hanged and had been cut down (Huffman, 2003b). There is a certain gauntness about the features that hints at decay, suggesting that the image is probably a



Fig. 89. Gerhard Richter, *Youth Portrait*
1988
Oil on canvas



Fig. 90. Source image for *Youth Portrait*



Fig. 91. Gerhard Richter, *Dead 1*
1988
Oil on canvas



Fig. 92. Gerhard Richter, *Dead 2*
1988
Oil on canvas



Fig. 93. Gerhard Richter, *Dead 3*
1988
Oil on canvas



Fig. 94. Source image for *Dead 1*, *Dead 2*, and *Dead 3*

morgue-slab shot taken some time after death (Schjeldahl, 1990: 251). The viewer's eye is drawn to the dark band around her neck where the cord had cut into her flesh.

There is a delicacy to the execution of the paintings; the use of chiaroscuro in the works conveys the look of a blurred photograph or a poor television image (ibid). The softening of details in the paintings by Richter's signature blurring technique does away with some of the grimness of the original image. Schjeldahl (1990: 251) points out that the way Meinhof's head is flung back to expose her throat gives the works a sense of intimacy, instilling a feeling of transgression in the viewer. He adds that this is compounded "by a fascination with the charm of this particular victim" (ibid). This feeling is heightened when the viewer relates these three paintings back to *Youth Portrait*.

Richter achieves a similar "before and after" effect with Gudrun Ensslin, but this time has three paintings of her alive and one of her dead. *Confrontation 1*, 1988 (Fig. 95), *Confrontation 2*, 1988 (Fig. 96), and *Confrontation 3*, 1988 (Fig. 97), are images cropped from three consecutive full-bodied photographs of Ensslin in police custody. They show her appearing, turning to grin at the camera, and then walking on. Huffman (2003b) believes the photographs are of her entering the courthouse especially built for the Baader-Meinhof trial on the grounds of Stammheim prison. *Hanged*, 1988 (Fig. 98), is painted from a photograph (Fig. 99) showing Ensslin dead in her prison cell. She had purportedly taken a speaker wire, threaded it through the wire mesh on her window to form a noose, which she put around her neck, and kicked aside the chair upon which she was standing (Huffman, 2003b). Richter's painting is darkened and heavily blurred, showing only a figure-like apparition hovering by a window.



Fig. 95. Gerhard Richter,
Confrontation 1
1988
Oil on canvas



Fig. 96. Gerhard Richter,
Confrontation 2
1988
Oil on canvas

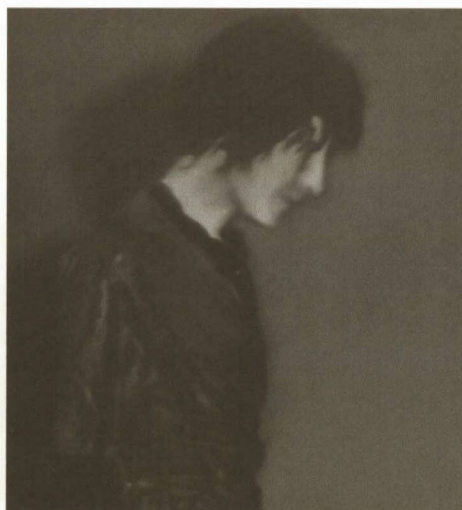


Fig. 97. Gerhard Richter,
Confrontation 2
1988
Oil on canvas



Fig. 98. Gerhard Richter, *Hanged*
1988
Oil on canvas

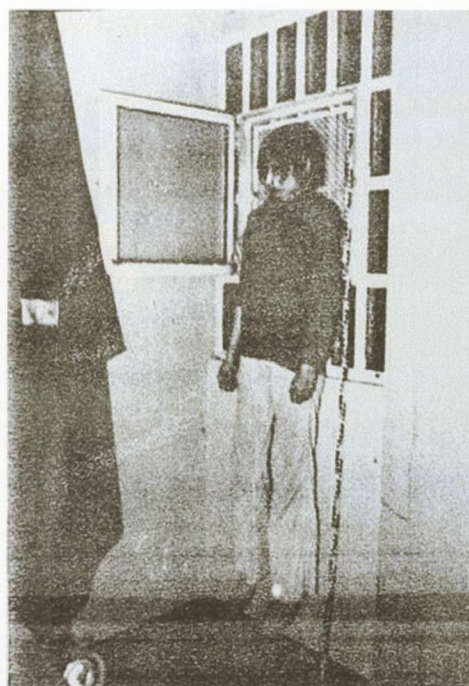


Fig. 99. Source image for *Hanged*

Richter does not paint a live portrait of Andreas Baader to compliment the two paintings of him dead in his cell. However, *Arrest 1*, 1988 (Fig. 100), and *Arrest 2*, 1988 (Fig. 101), show scenes that led to his imprisonment. The two paintings are derived from images that most Germans at that time were familiar with (Huffman 2003b). They show the setting of the capture on 1 June 1972 of Andreas Baader, Jan-Carl Raspe, and another member of the group, Holger Meins, who died before the events of 18 October 1977 as the result of a hunger strike (Schjeldahl, 1990: 249). The German public intently followed the events of the day on their televisions (Huffman 2003b). Police captured Raspe early on, but Baader and Meins managed to escape into the garage of a building, where they remained holed up for much of the day. A sniper managed to shoot Baader in the leg, which led Meins to surrender. Later the police stormed the garage and pulled the wounded Baader out (ibid). Richter's treatment of these scenes is again heavily blurred, rendering them almost indistinguishable to anyone unfamiliar with the images.

Four other paintings in Richter's cycle relate to Baader. *Man Shot Down 1*, 1988 (Fig. 102), and *Man Shot Down 2*, 1988 (Fig. 103), show Baader sprawled on the floor of his cell after receiving a fatal gun shot wound to the back of the head. Officials claimed that the gun had been smuggled in by Baader-Meinhof lawyers, and had been hidden by Baader in his cell (Huffman 2003b). Baader's posture on the floor, with his head thrown back and his neck exposed, is reminiscent of Meinhof's position in the three *Dead* images (Schjeldahl, 1990: 251). The vulnerability suggested by the pose is more pronounced in the original image (Fig. 104) than in Richter's reworking of it. By obscuring the image – more drastically in the second of the two – Richter seems to be deliberately denying the viewer access to this vulnerability, and to be protecting the prostrate figure from the unwelcome attentions of the voyeur.

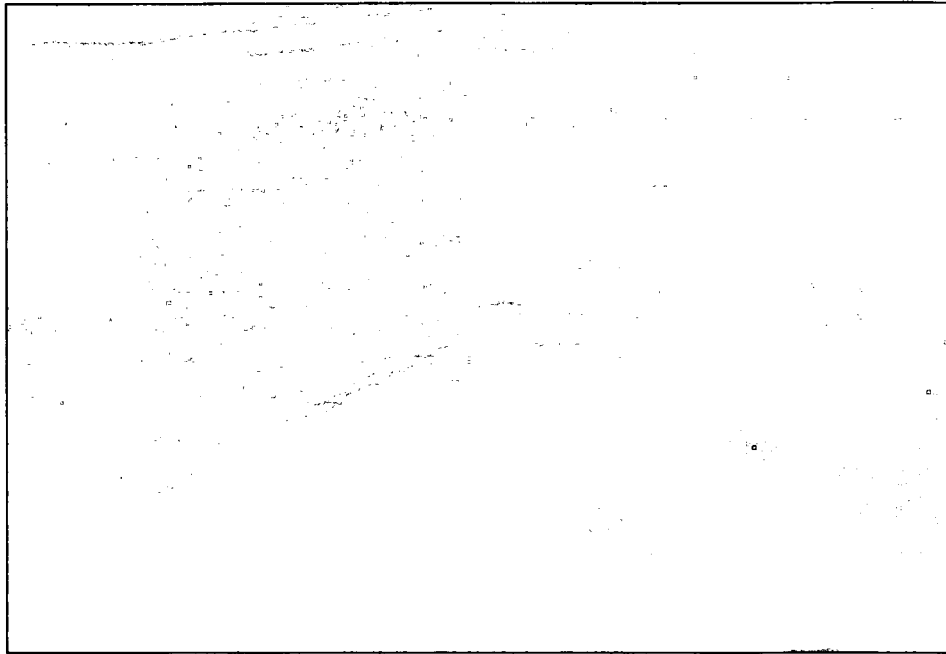


Fig. 100. Gerhard Richter, *Arrest 1*
1988
Oil on canvas

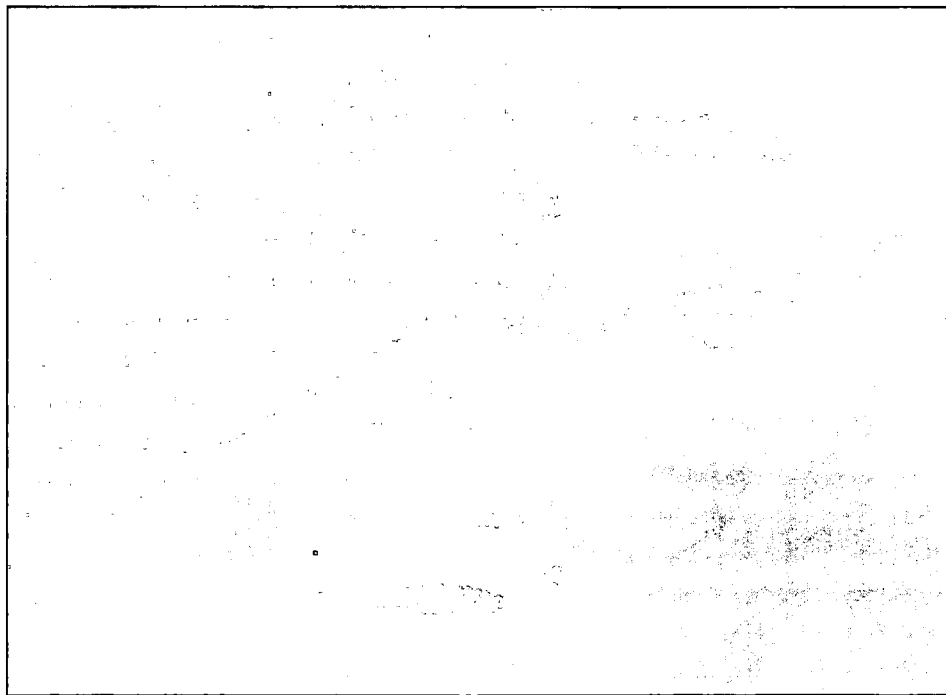


Fig. 101. Gerhard Richter, *Arrest 2*
1988
Oil on canvas



Fig. 102. Gerhard Richter, *Man Shot Down 1*
1988
Oil on canvas



Fig. 103. Gerhard Richter, *Man Shot Down 2*
1988
Oil on canvas



Fig. 104. Source image for *Man Shot Down1*, *Man Shot Down 2*

The other two paintings relating to Baader are scenes of his cell after his death. The first is *Cell*, 1988 (Fig. 105), showing a view of Baader's cell dominated by a wall-to-ceiling bookshelf. Huffman (2003b) says this reveals that Baader was more of an intellectual than commonly believed. The other painting is *Record Player*, 1988 (Fig. 106), taken from a photograph of Baader's record player after his death. Richter may have included this image, along with *Cell*, to show the liberties enjoyed by Baader in prison (ibid). However, it may have more significance in the narrative, as prison officials claimed that it was in the record player that Baader had hidden the gun he used to kill himself (Schjeldahl, 1990: 252).

Richter's treatment of the two female characters in this drama is much more personal than that of the males. His choice of imagery relating to the events around Baader has a cold, crime-scene feel to them. Apart from the arrest scenes Richter does not feature Raspe at all. This shows a concern of his about the death of female figures that goes back to his earlier works, as in *Eight Student Nurses*. Schjeldahl (1990: 254) cites Edgar Allan Poe's remark that the most poetic of all subjects is a young woman who dies.

The final, and by far the largest, image in the series is *Funeral*, 1988 (Fig. 107), showing the funeral of Baader, Ensslin, and Raspe on 27 October 1977 in a Stuttgart cemetery (Usselman, 2002: 23). It was a demonstration of defiance and anger with hundreds in attendance, many masked in balaclavas, and under the surveillance of armed policemen (ibid). Cemeteries were reluctant to bury the terrorists, but the mayor of Stuttgart magnanimously decided that they must be allowed to be buried in a Stuttgart cemetery, saying, as cited by Huffman (2003b), "After death, all enmity must cease." Richter's



Fig. 105. Gerhard Richter, *Cell*
1988
Oil on canvas



Fig. 106. Gerhard Richter, *Record Player*
1988
Oil on canvas



Fig. 107. Gerhard Richter, *Funeral*
1988
Oil on canvas

painting is described by Schjeldahl (1990: 250) as a "panorama of the three terrorists' funeral cortege: three coffins glowing wanly white in crepuscular surroundings whose details were all but obliterated when Richter smeared the entire painted surface horizontally."

Perhaps by so drastically blurring these paintings, Richter is condemning the coarse media exploitation of the deaths of these figures. Death is a personal and private thing, but media representations expose it and make it cold and lurid. These deaths should be mourned, not sensationalized. By obscuring the details of the images Richter shields the characters from the critical gaze of the viewer, and at the same time renders the images mournful and solemn.

In May 1999, 18. Oktober 1977 left Germany; it had been bought by The Museum of Modern Art in New York (Usselman, 2002: 4). The question raised was how a modern American audience, less aware of the significance of that date and the events behind it, would receive the works (ibid). Usselman (2002: 24) suggests that for the paintings to be accessible to a non-German audience an explanatory text may be necessary. However, he goes on to argue that perhaps the series transcends the traumatic events that inspired it, and is transformed into a non-specific work of mourning. In an interview with Magnani (1989: 94) Richter explained, "I had no sympathy for the ideas, or for the ideology that these people represented. I couldn't understand, but I was still impressed. Like everyone, I was touched." Neither is he concerned with whether the deaths were as a result of murder or suicide. He says, "I painted a victim. Not a victim of a particular ideology or power, just a human victim" (ibid: 97). Elsewhere he adds, "There is sorrow, but I hope

one can see that it is sorrow for the people who died so young and so crazy, for nothing.”
(ibid: 95)

These works speak against the contemporary detachment from death, especially death portrayed in the media, which is so clinically removed from our own lives. They remind us that no matter what the ideologies and principles of a person were in life, we should still mourn the death of that person. They recall the medieval admonition that in death all people are made equal.

Jo Ractliffe

Jo Ractliffe is a South African artist who draws on a range of practices, such as installation, video, and photography – including snapshot, documentary, forensic, and studio photography (Ractliffe, 1999). Much of her work explores loss and its relationship to identity, memory, desire, and death (Axis Gallery, 2003).

Ractliffe was born in 1961 in Cape Town, where she went on to obtain her Master's degree at the Michaelis School of Fine Art (Atkinson, 2000: 15). She now lives in Johannesburg, where she is a lecturer in Fine Art at the University of the Witwatersrand (Murinik, 1999). In 1999 she won the FNB Vita Art Prize, South Africa's premier national art competition, for her video installation *Love, Death, Sacrifice and so forth*, 1999.

Ractliffe is best known for her photographic work. Atkinson (2000: 34) cites her as saying that for her photography is largely about guarding against loss. She goes on to

explain that in *Shooting Diana*, 1991-95 (Fig. 108) she was trying to hold on to a fleeting, transitional moment. She adds that one cannot arrest the moment in a photograph, but one can capture the sense of it. She says for her, "much of *Shooting Diana* was not about photographing a thing, but was trying to have that moment just before it's passed" (ibid).

Shooting Diana was a series of about sixty black and white images that Ractliffe photographed using a cheap plastic toy camera (Williamson and Jamal, 1996: 74). Her professional equipment had been stolen, so she went to her collection of toy cameras and selected one from the sixties, brand-named Diana and still in its original cardboard box (ibid). According to Friedman (1997), the limitations of the toy camera "presented themselves as opportunities to free photographs from the conventions of narrative and resurrect the fluid, less concrete aspects of memory and the imagination." The resultant images showed gritty fragments of urban and domestic spaces, strangely familiar yet impossible to interpret as a complete narrative (Atkinson, 2000: 32, 33).

In 1997 Ractliffe created a series called *Guess who loves you* (Fig. 109), consisting of nine colour photographs of toys chewed up by her dog Gus (Atkinson, 1997). Unlike the photographs in *Shooting Diana*, these images were carefully composed in the studio against a white background and taken using professional photographic equipment (Atkinson, 2000: 32). Gus, who died the day after the works were completed, was Ractliffe's companion for ten years, and would present these mutilated toys to her as offerings whenever she arrived home (ibid: 40, 41) The series reads as a forensic cataloguing of objects that have very specific personal value and meaning to her. Again



Fig. 108. Jo Ractliffe, **Shooting Diana**
1991-95
Silver prints on fibre paper, glass, steel



Fig. 109. Jo Ractliffe, **Guess who loves you**
1997
Colour photographs, glass, steel

she uses her work as a means of guarding against loss – the loss of the bond with her pet, and the passing of a particular period in her life.

In 1999 Ractliffe put together a project called *End of Time* at the Ibis Gallery in the Karoo town of Nieu Bethesda (Atkinson, 2000: 48). Ractliffe (2003) explains that the show was inspired by a particular incident in 1996 in the Karoo while she was travelling from Cape Town to Johannesburg. She was making a photographic record of the road – which she would later use in *End of Time* – when she came across three dead donkeys at the side of the road. When she stopped to investigate she found they had been shot (ibid). Dodd (1999) quotes her as saying:

I stood there looking at them and it just seemed very bizarre - a really strange kind of gratuitous violence. I've always associated donkeys with the Karoo. They seemed to be a constant part of the landscape that remains innocent in the way that you look at it because it's unchanging.

She photographed the donkeys, and then later tried to find information about the incident, but was unable to find anything specific (ibid). However, the area is a well-known travelling ground of the *karretjiemense*, a community of itinerants who travel in their donkey carts from farm to farm seeking work, mainly as sheep shearers (Ractliffe, 2003).

It was a year after this incident, in 1997, that Ractliffe's dog died. Dodd (1999) quotes her as saying, "for completely unknown reasons I suddenly felt compelled to go back and find the site of the donkeys again." She says that she has travelled back to the place a number of times since,

to recover something that might allow me to make some sense of this incident. Each time there was nothing; no bullet shells, or bones, or fur, or smoothed patches of

sand or grass to reveal where the donkeys might have lain. Nothing but empty space and my desire. (Ractliffe, 2003)

Later in 1997 there were press reports of the *karretjiemense*, discussing issues such as declining employment, poor wages, and farmers evicting them, sometimes threatening to shoot their donkeys if they do not leave immediately (Nicol, 1999: 3). In a discussion with Dodd (1999), Ractliffe talks about how the livelihoods of these people are taken away when their donkeys are shot, and about donkeys becoming the focus of a specific kind of cruelty. Dodd (ibid) points out, however, that Ractliffe's use of donkeys in *End of Time* is less to do with the particular politics of the *karretjiemense* and the Karoo farmers than it is to do with "her own subjective world and her response to death."

Ractliffe first presented *End of Time* early in January 1999 in Nieu Bethesda (Nicol, 1999: 3). It was put together as a happening, one that the guests were participating in before they even arrived at the Ibis Gallery (Atkinson, 2000: 48). The location of the gallery in Nieu Bethesda meant that guests, invited from Johannesburg and Cape Town, had to first drive for about seven hours along the same road Ractliffe was travelling on in 1996 when she found the dead donkeys (ibid). Near the turn-off to Nieu Bethesda Ractliffe placed two billboards featuring a larger-than-life black and white photograph of a donkey (Figs 110, 111) (Nicol, 1999: 3). The donkey in the photograph stands in a Karoo landscape, with its head turned questioningly, or even accusingly, towards the viewer.

Inside the gallery was the series of twenty eight black and white photographs that Ractliffe had taken through the car windscreen every 100km while travelling on the N1



Fig. 110. Jo Ractliffe, **End of Time** (billboard installation)
1999

Black and white photograph on billboard



Fig. 111. Jo Ractliffe, **End of Time** (billboard installation, detail)

route from Cape Town to Johannesburg (Figs 112, 113) (Dodd, 1999). It was on this journey in 1996 that she discovered the donkeys at the side of the road. The piece is entitled *N1 Inventory (Every 100kms)*, and presented viewers at the gallery with images of the same stretch of road that they had just spent several hours travelling along.

Hanging opposite to these images was a large black and white photograph showing the head and shoulders of a donkey lying on the ground (Fig. 114) (Atkinson, 2000: 53). It is called *End of Time*, and is a photograph of one of the donkeys that Ractliffe found shot on the side of the road. Interestingly, Ractliffe chose to show the image rotated ninety degrees to the left. Viewed on its side, as it originally would have been, the finality of the collapse of the large animal on the ground is evident; it is something formerly solid and upright that has fallen irrevocably down, never to rise again. The dark patch below it is clearly the animal's fur that has started to fall off the skin, and the dark patch by its mouth reads as blood. One ear hangs out limply, casting a shadow on the ground. Viewed as Ractliffe hangs it however, the image seems to tell a different story. One can believe that the donkey is standing erect, perhaps up against a wall nuzzling at the strange dark growth growing on it. The shadow of the ear on the ground now seems to be the ear's companion, and together they stand up in alertness. The strength and vitality of the beast can still be sensed in the upright fullness of its neck. The illusion does not last long, but it is there.

Perhaps when Ractliffe chose to rotate the image it was for purely formal reasons, and it was not her intention to give the donkey the semblance of life. It could, however, be read as an unwillingness to accept death. It brings to mind the way a child, unfamiliar with



Fig. 112. Jo Ractliffe, *N1 Inventory (Every 100kms)*
1999

Installation of 28 black and white photographs



Fig. 113. Jo Ractliffe, *N1 Inventory (Every 100kms)*(detail)



Fig. 114. Jo Ractliffe, *End of Time*
1999
Black and white photograph

death, might prod and move a dead pet in a futile attempt to get it going again. It could be seen as a reluctance to accept the expiration of a previously vital being.

Another important component of the show was a work called *Love's Body* (Figs 115, 116), which is a large colour transparency of Ractliffe's dead dog (Atkinson, 2000: 48) It was displayed on a lightbox set into a staged floor in a separate, darkened room (ibid: 53). The image shows Ractliffe's dog, Gus, lying in his grave where he had been buried and then later uncovered. The work's placement on the floor forces the viewer to look down on it from above, as if looking into the grave itself (ibid). The viewer is left wondering whether the image was the result of an intensely emotional moment when the artist returned to the grave of her beloved companion to uncover him and gaze upon him one last time, or the result of a detached artistic decision to take advantage of a photographic opportunity. The warmth of the image and the way Gus's head has been lovingly haloed by the burial shroud argues in favour of the first scenario, as does Ractliffe's earlier exploration of her relationship with her dog in *Guess who loves you*.

The exhibition was accompanied by two texts. The first was a limited edition book written by novelist and critic Mike Nicol, presenting a fictional account of the events that led to the killing of the three donkeys (Atkinson, 2000: 48). The other was a piece about loss and longing written by Brenda Atkinson to accompany *Love's Body*, and which shares the same name (Dodd, 1999). On the opening night of the exhibition two video pieces were projected onto the wall of a disused church across the street from the Ibis Gallery (Nicol, 1999: 3). The first was *Balaam*, 1997, a short video examining the lives of the donkeys that belong to the *karretjiemense*, and Ractliffe's first work dealing with the



Fig. 115. Jo Ractliffe, *Love's Body*
1999

light box installation (colour transparency set into constructed floor)



Fig. 116. Jo Ractliffe, *Love's Body* (detail)

incident with the dead donkeys. The second video was a grainy film speaking more directly about the menace behind the killing of the three donkeys (ibid).

Ractliffe's focus on loss and longing in her work could perhaps be read as an uneasiness with death, the result of living in a society that no longer adequately prepares its members for loss. Her reluctance to accept loss is demonstrated in *Love's Body*, when she returns to the grave of the one she has lost. This shows not only an unwillingness to let go, but also a difficulty in accepting the fact of death. This need to go back to check and affirm the death in her mind could be ascribed to the inability of contemporary burial and mourning rituals to firmly establish the fact of death in the minds of mourners and, by doing so, aid acceptance. This is perhaps why when her dog died she felt compelled to return to the site of the donkeys, seeking some way to make sense of the incident. This need to make some kind of sense of death is symptomatic of the contemporary discomfort with death, and is the result of the distancing from the natural acceptance of death as part of the cycle of life.

CONCLUSION

My objectives in this research were to examine contemporary attitudes towards death in Westernized societies, and to show how these attitudes are reflected in the work of contemporary artists. I started out by showing that there is a strong historical precedent in the relationship between attitudes towards death and death as subject matter in art. I outlined the changing attitudes towards death in Western history, and then discussed death as a subject matter in Western art history, showing that the treatment of death in different periods was determined by the attitudes towards death at the time. For example, deathbed portraiture became popular during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, coinciding with the shift in attitudes towards death from the concern for one's own death to a concern for the death of the other person, which led to the desire to memorialize the deceased.

I then discussed contemporary attitudes towards death in Westernized societies, showing how in the twentieth century death became a taboo topic. This was largely due to the increasing medicalization of death, which has resulted in the transplantation of the processes of dying and grieving from the social sphere into that of the institution. I also examined how funeral rituals and disposal practices have changed to reflect the alienation from death, concluding that they are no longer a means of engendering a state of acceptance in mourners, but rather a means of hiding and ignoring death. I showed how these attitudes towards death also exist in South Africa, particularly among the more Westernized segments of society.

I went on to examine death as a subject matter in the work of selected contemporary artists. I demonstrated that while there are some artists who have a puerile, voyeuristic approach to death in their work, there are other artists who through their work endeavour to gain and promote an understanding of death. I believe Joel-Peter Witkin would fall within the first category, and to a lesser extent Damien Hirst. I argued that despite Hirst's in-your-face approach to death, there is a genuine attempt to understand and come to terms with death. His shock tactics are a means of forcing people to face issues that have become suppressed. Andres Serrano also attempts to gain an understanding of death through his up-close examination of dead bodies.

The work of artists such as Christian Boltanski and Gerhard Richter serve as non-specific works of mourning. They remind us that we live in an age in which death is often relegated to a brief media sound bite, and that we have become indifferent to the death of those people not close to us. Boltanski's works evoke sorrow for the anonymous multitude that die, each taking with them a singular identity and set of memories. Richter's series shows that the death of four terrorists deserves sorrow and respect, and not the cold transgressions of the media.

I also showed that art can be a means of dealing with grief. Donna Sharrett's labour-intensive, ritualistic process of art-making is for her a way to remember her loved ones and celebrate her grief. She shows that grief is not something to be ashamed of, or to be kept hidden, but rather something to be cherished and explored. Jo Ractliffe also uses her work to mourn loss, that of her pet and faithful companion. She also mourns the death of animals by the hand of man, and expounds on the added poignancy of the death of animals, because of their innocence and defencelessness. I also demonstrated through

Ractliffe's work that an artist's attitude towards death can inadvertently be reflected in that artist's work. In Ractliffe's case her work revealed an unwillingness to accept death, the result of a deficiency in mourning modalities in contemporary society.

I believe that the research has clearly demonstrated that there is a relationship between attitudes towards death in society and death as a subject matter in art. I have concluded that death is being explored by artists who seek to both understand death, and to foster awareness of the issues surrounding attitudes towards death in contemporary Westernized societies. The prevalence of the medium of photography in the exploration of death in contemporary art is a research finding not anticipated at the outset.

To limit the scope of my project I decided to only examine well-established contemporary artists who dealt with death as a major theme in their works – in other words artists who repeatedly came back to death as a subject matter, such as Damien Hirst, or artists who dealt with death in a complete body of work, such as Andres Serrano. When I realized that most of the artists I was discussing were photographers, or were using photographs in their work, I tried to find a painter that met the criteria I had established earlier. I struggled to locate such an artist until I identified Gerhard Richter, a painter who draws his subject matter from photographs.

Perhaps the prevalence of photography in exploring death is due to the contemporary denial of death in society. To speak against this denial, art today needs to call attention to the reality and the immediacy of death, and photography is the perfect medium to do this. As the photojournalist James Hamilton, as cited by Schjeldahl (1990: 250), says, "Death is the perfect subject for photography". When presenting a dead body, a photograph

possesses a veracity that comes from having recorded a real event. Painting cannot do this. Any death portrayed in paint is a fictional death invented by the painter. Andres Serrano's photographs of corpses bring home to us the devastation wrought on the flesh by death, whereas David's *The Death of Marat* is a dramatized staging of a death, mediated through the artist's hand. However, because of photography's veracity it is also a potentially transgressive medium. Serrano is careful to avoid this happening in his *Morgue* series, while Witkin seems to make no attempt to avoid it. Richter's *18. October 1977* series is drawn from transgressive media photographs, but he subverts them first by rendering them in paint and then by obscuring the image.

To conclude, I have shown that there are many problematic issues in contemporary attitudes towards death in Westernized societies. I have also demonstrated that contemporary artists living in these societies are effectively addressing these issues in their work.

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