

Tobias Lander:

Last Things - The Representation of Death in Art since 1960

Death is a main topic of art, on the one hand because each work of art with its desire for immortality fights against decay and therefore art itself is inseparably connected with death, and on the other hand because death is the last and absolute limit of everybody's life: it is essential for the claim of art to relevance that death as a fundamental constant factor of human existence was and is accompanied artistically. Yet the conditions seem to have changed with the transition from the requirements-based society to the modern consumer society: Death was a permanent and familiar companion in the western world until late in the 20th century, but today our relative prosperity enables us to lead a long and secure life in which death isn't natural any more: Death has replaced sexuality as the last social taboo. In contrast our modern world of media confronts us permanently with news and especially pictures of tragic and violent deaths. This ambivalence between the repressed death of the individual and the coexistent fascination for death shown in the mass media is the social background against which also art raises the topic.

For example, when Andy Warhol put photographs of car crashes or suicides by jumping via silk-screen print on canvas, he unmistakably commented dying in the age of mechanical reproduction. The pop artist shows death as a part of consumption and by taking the thousands of circulating representations of death in the mass media into the domain of fine art, he forces the sensitized viewer to go into this phenomenon. The video-artist Ene-Liis Semper shows in *FF/REW* (1998) a female suicide caught in a time warp who permanently repeats her different suicides. Not least because of the encore presentation of the unique moment of suicide which is



Ene-Liis Semper: Film stills from *FF/REW*, 1998,
Video-Loop, b/w, stereo-sound, length: 7 min. 7 sec.

possible in cinematic media and photography, Semper also reflects Warhol's repetitions of pictures: the interest in the reproduced death still exists today just like half a century ago. In a more conceptual and political way Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin typify the loss of truth in the mass media in regard of the death on the battlefield: The artists laid a long band of photo paper for a fixed time duration in the sand of Afghanistan, arguing that the truth of this abstract photo, made



Ron Mueck: *Dead Dad*, 1996-97, silicon und acrylic, 20 x 102 x 38 cm.

by sunlight and environmental effects, outvalues those of the combat journalism (*The Day Nobody Died*, 2008).

However, although socially put under taboo, also the individual death is still present in art, for example when Bill Viola in his *Nantes Triptych* (1992) opposes his son's birth to his mother on the deathbed, or when the photographer

Walter Schels portrays persons in the tradition of memorial photography shortly before and shortly after their death (since 2003). In a far more striking way Ron Mueck handles this topic in 1996 when he exhibits a sculpture of his naked dead father – smaller than life but true to detail and very authentic – in the legendary London art exhibition *Sensations*. Whereas these artists try to come closer to the nature of death they also get the death out of the sanctuary of privateness and force the viewers to give their opinion on an invisible dying which is often also a lonely one.

Gregor Schneider, honoured at the Venice biennial, has something like this in mind, when he announces he wants to present a dying person or a just deceased in a room built by himself. It is due to the social taboo of death that all works of art which deal with death coram publico easily become a scandal, all the more if like in Schneider's case a dying human turns into a morbid *ready made*. Even if the artist takes care to look into our dealing with dying in a social context the legitimate question is whether it's appropriate and reverent. But when the debate here deals rather with the dignity of the dying, also the person opposite, the viewer, is concerned: By presenting an authentic corpse – as a real body or as an image appearing with the photograph's claim of authenticity – the problem of reasonableness becomes evident. Because they aren't just deads who, even if they might have existed, are finally historical, religious or mythological subjects: If historicity as a category of alienation disappears – as photography does with its indifference of time – we're affected by death. This is especially drastic in the works of artists like Teresa Margolles, when she for example forces the visitors of a gallery to breathe in finely sprayed water which was used before for the washing of corpses. Death, which is always the death of the other, is now becoming literally one's own affair. Even if you take the artist's central American

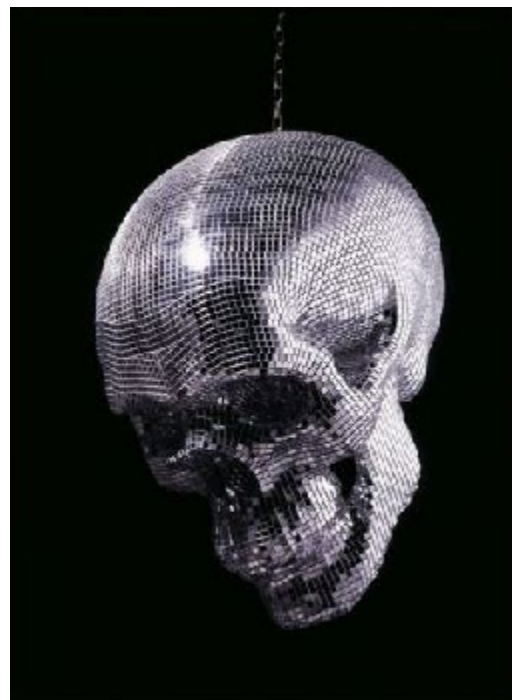


Andres Serrano: *The Morgue (Rat Poison Suicide II)*, 1992, cibachrome, silikon, plexiglass, wooden frame, 125,7 x 152,4 (framed 139,1 x 165,7) cm.

cultural background with its distinct death culture into consideration it is certainly not wrong to assume that Margolles plays also with the disgust of the recipients.

Other artists try to moderate this consciously provoked scandal of presenting a corpse by the beauty of the picture and iconographical references, for example if in Andres Serrano's *The Morgue (Rat Poison Suicide II)* from 1992 the foot, bedded on a white sheet with the cut caused probably during the autopsy, seems to be a mirrored detail of Holbein's *Der tote Christus im Grabe* (1521). Serrano's photograph raises the question, whether it can be morally justifiable to categorize the death of a human being in terms of aesthetical points of view. The same can be said e. g. for the photos of Stefanie Wille, whose *Splash of Death*-series deals with the beauty of the violent death, or Cariña Booyens, whose *Thanatology*-series oscillate between realism and abstraction.

And, of course, also the postmodern and contemporary art make use of the well known symbols of vanity: With his work in the crypt of the Salzburg cathedral, Christian Boltanski revives the medieval *danse macabre*, and the human skull as a memento mori exists in the oeuvre of Warhol, Gerhard Richter, Damien Hirst or Christoph Steinmeyer. The latter's skull in *Disco Inferno* (2002) is a disco ball throwing light reflections on the art consuming audience with sort of fin de siècle decadence postponed to the beginning of the new millenium: This death is a relative of that one haunting the pleasure-seeking ball guests in Edgar Allen Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death*.



Christoph Steinmeyer: *Disco Inferno*, 2002, coated plexiglass on rigid PVC, elektric motor, watch chain, 55 x 50 x 65 cm.

Up to now this topic has been dealt with in exhibitions like *Six Feet Under – Autopsie unseres Umgangs mit Toten* (Kunstmuseum Bern 2006/2007), *C'est la vie! Vanités de Caravage à Damien Hirst* (Musée Maillol Paris 2010), or currently *DEAD_Lines* (Von der Heydt-Museum Wuppertal 2011/12), but we are still waiting for a complete art historical research on the representation of death in art since 1960 – especially regarding the socio-cultural context. With my research I want to fill this gap: Therefore apart from other aspects it's necessary to interpret the manifold artistical approaches against the background of our consumer and media society – but also with regard to the thanatos obsession of some modern subcultures – and to follow the art historical tradition lines. You have to ask for an artistic medium that is appropriate to this topic as well as for the relevance of art works in regard to *Betroffenheitskitsch* and the convention of the art scandal.