MA by Project Report, Sir John Cass Department of Art, Media & Design

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London, 22-08-2011

Contents

Project aim

My aim is to develop a body of three-dimensional personal work which will deal with the challenge of representing our own death. I will identify the qualities that relate to human death and will try to articulate them into form, material and space. I will use a simple, direct and sincere language that transcends beyond the social and cultural symbolism that conceals the nature of death.

Throughout this project I will investigate the way the elemental parts of making, such as the material, the form, the process, contribute to and influence the communication of the identified qualities of death. This research on the creative process will enhance my understanding of the relationship we build with artworks.

Introduction

There is no greater mystery to the human intellect than death. Our journey in life is shaped by the understanding of our ephemerality and the acceptance or denial of an unidentifiable but approaching end. Though death is registered in the psyche of every human being, it lacks a specific and commonly shared knowledge. Since our only experience of death is that of a survivor of the deaths of others, it is not a surprise that death is a reality different for every human being.

The inherent impossibility of experiencing death and its manifestation as an absolute nothing makes the process of signification and communication of death problematic and challenging. According to the poignant comment made by Zygmunt Bauman,

> death cannot be perceived; still less visualised or represented...Death is an absolute nothing and 'absolute nothing' makes no sense..Faced with such impossibility, the perceiving subject may only delude itself with a play of metaphors, which conceals rather than reveals what is to be perceived, and in the end belies the state of non-perception which death would be. (Bauman, 1992, 2)

Since visual arts are part of society's active industry of symbols, how do we cope with this problem? There is a long history of representations of death which spans from antiquity to date. Does this abundance of artwork really speak of death or about death?

With the help of the advances in science the last two centuries, death has moved from romantic idealism (18th century was described by Philippe Ariès in his landmark book 'The hour of Death' as the "Age of the beautiful death") to abolition and marginalization. Ariès argues that:

> death became dirty, and then it became medicalized... When the last of the traditional defences against death and sex gave way, the medical profession could have taken over the role of the community. It did so in the case of sex, as is attested by the medical literature on masturbation. It tried to do so in the case of death by isolating it in the scientific laboratory and the hospital, from which the emotions would be banished. (Ariès, 1981, 612)

Both extremes reflect the denial of the society to accept death as a natural event. The artistic production from the 19th century sees death either as a romantic ideal or a deep suffering for the survivors. Artworks express feelings towards death and dying, they are records of memories of the deceased; they talk about concepts and beliefs of life and afterlife. In that sense they are celebrations of survival of the living and manifestations of immortality of the social body. Similarly to realistic photo shoots of murdered bodies, they reflect the incessant effort of man to deny and ostracise the

reality and to replace it with symbols and images that help us go on living as immortals.

In the last 50 years there is a revived interest from humanitarian sciences in the nature of death and dying. Sociology, psychology, anthropology and medicine (to mention a few) raised the debate beyond the cultural taboos that marginalised these issues. Ariès suggests that:

> a small elite of anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists has been struck by this contradiction. They propose not so much to "evacuate" death as to humanize it. They acknowledge the necessity of death, but they want it to be accepted and no longer shameful. Although they may consult the ancient wisdom, there is no question of turning back or of rediscovering the evil that has been abolished. They propose to reconcile death with happiness. Death must simply become the discreet but dignified exit of a peaceful person from a helpful society that is not torn, not even overly upset by the idea of a biological transition without significance, without pain or suffering, and ultimately without fear. (Ariès, 1981,614)

In this context, post-Modern art realised the legitimacy and the greatness of this challenge (appearing unparallel due to its inherent impossibility). Artists started recording and documenting the aging process, the degradation of the material, the disease and the agony of dying. In Damien Hirst's installation "A Thousand Years", a large glass case contains maggots and flies that feed off a rotting cow's head (see Image1). I believe that this creative debate around the concept of death is wide open and calls for the public's attention.

Image 1

My project is meant to explore the way of visually communicating the concept of our own death. I am trying to create a three dimensional language that frames and registers death in a realistic way, as close as possible to the elemental character of death. I want to undress death from the social, cultural and religious drapes that hide its simplicity and commonality. I want to bring this work to the public view and test its strength in communicating death. I want the relationship with the viewer to be direct, sincere and disturbing, a reality check of our cognitive structures and clichés.

Research Questions

During the development of this project, my research questions went through stages of change and restructuring.

My initial set of questions was:

- What images, symbols, allegories, and myths do people usually connect to the transition from life to death? What death rituals do they follow?
- How has contemporary art expressed this transition so far?
- How does our mind create perception from sensory information?
- How can symbols, metaphors, analogies for this transition be expressed in a material object?
- What kind of location and space arrangement can enhance the delivery of a message that addresses the issues of life and death?

Early enough it became clear to me that before I try setting up my own system of visual references I should have a deeper understanding on how us humans responded and respond to death, how we perceive it and what is my personal interpretation of the mystery of death. With this in mind my first question changed to:

- How do humans and human societies perceive and respond to the issue of death?

The knowledge of our mortality, which is derived from the experience of others, is a knowledge that cannot be undone. It drives us through our lives, it shapes our beliefs and defines our culture. Bauman claims that

> death makes permanence into a task, into an urgent task, into a paramount task, ...and so it makes culture, that huge and never stopping factory of permanence. (Bauman, 1992, 4)

From the early ages of life we are exposed to the idea of death. As we go through the socialisation process we start creating images of death which are influenced by social symbolism and religious beliefs. The impact of cultural and socio-personal experiences in the conceptualisation of death has been revealed with various studies, such as the ones of Wing-Shan (2004) and Sarah Brabant (2011).

The consciousness of our mortal nature and the inevitability of death gives little comfort at the moment of the loss of life. The fear and stress before the moment of death, the overwhelming feelings of the kin of the dying or deceased person and the

sense of amputation of the social body led to the development of rituals that help individuals and societies to deal with death. Rituals developed within the different societies hand in hand with religious beliefs. The various approaches on the transitional character of death and the continuity of existence in afterlife realms help individuals and groups with their daily tasks without the disturbing thought of an imminent and unjustified end.

As religious beliefs are in retreat in our modern westernised world, science and medicine tried to take over the role of the community, eliminate emotions, pain and guilt and domesticate death. In that same context, the community has no longer sufficient sense of solidarity, retreats from its involvement in the "healing" process and leaves its role to the hands of the institutionalised state. Contemporary people have been deprived of their own death and the public demonstration of mourning is considered inherently morbid. But no matter how strongly death is pushed, it bounces back imposing its weight as the common denominator in everybody's life.

> In the last decades there is an emerging current of doctors, psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists that question the modern stance towards death. Works such as Kübler-Ross's On Death and Dying propose neither denial, nor vilification of death but reconciliation; an exit from the human society in a dignified, peaceful and respectful manner. (Appendix, 49)

My next question is focussing more on the way death appears in works of art.

- What images and symbols do people use to refer to death? How have visual arts represented death so far?

As death cannot be directly experienced it becomes an elusive idea of a situation of total absence and negation of what we all understand as life. A directly figurative sculpture or a photo of a dying or dead man may bring to us memories of other people's deaths along with the emotions of sympathy and pain which unconsciously arise. But when it comes to visualising our own death and describing the way we conceptualise it, then the imagery becomes less figurative, less precise. In the research by Sarah Brabant (2011) in a group of 946 university students asked to draw what comes in their mind when they think of death, the majority 43% used abstracts (shapes, colours, symbols, mixed). In the same research it became evident that the imagery was highly differentiated and personalised:

> no two drawings were identical. Even when the student colored the page in one color, the brush strokes differed. (Brabant, 2011, 222)

It is not a surprise that since death is not a tangible idea every person has a different way of visualising it. Similarly, anthropologists have argued that despite death's universality, its expression through the death rites is subject to great variation, mainly

culturally induced. The elusiveness of death and its perplexing and variable cultural manifestations, led Rivers to claim that:

> Death is so striking and unique an event that if one had to choose something which must have been regarded in essentially the same light by mankind at all times and in all places, I think one would be inclined to choose it in preference to any other, and yet I hope to show that the primitive conception of death…is different, one might say radically different, from our own. [Rivers, W. H. R. 1926. Psychology and Ethnology. London: Kegan Paul] (Metcalf and Huntington, 1979, 58)

Within the process of signification, man has created words, symbols, euphemisms and metaphors to speak about death. Death was deified, anthropo and zoo'morphized, objectified in skulls, skeletons, hourglasses and inverted torches. As vehicles of communication, these symbols present a tremendous variety influenced by culture, social and religious beliefs. We could argue that they have less to do with death and more to do with life, as reaffirmed by the survival of the mourners and the continuity of the social body. As James Elkins observes:

> what are hourglasses, young women looking into mirrors, skulls, candles, decaying fruit, withered flowers, and old books, if not ways of making death visible without discomfort? In art history, we say an hourglass is a memento mori, a reminder of death – but it isn't; it's a way of not thinking about death, not looking at it and not thinking about it. (Elkins, 1997, 108)

Funerary art and architectural evidence from different periods in history speaks so little about the truth of death and so much about our desire to repress it.

> The astonishing Egyptian funerary pyramids paid more tribute to the power and the symbol of the Pharaonic kingship and the necessity to unify the Upper and Lower Kingdom under a common cultural establishment than were actually used as tombs. (Appendix, 50)

The illusionary and aesthetic beautification approach to death through elaborate tombstones and pompous cemetery monuments assists our desire to ban and hide the banality of death and celebrate the victory of immortality through our collective memory. Edwin Heathcote argues that:

> funerary architecture represents the quest for immortality (in the minds of the living) and is a concretisation of the notion of death as a rite of passage, where the tomb is both a transitory resting place in which the body undergoes the beginnings of the journey to the next, more real sacred world, and a monument to that world's existence. (Heathcote, 1999, 8)

Visual arts in the 20th century initiated an alternate approach to the mortality issue by distancing themselves from the previous struggle to resist decay, to resist formlessness, to celebrate human creation as victorious against nature. This was aided by the appearance in western art of abstraction, the emergence of the deconstruction of the form and image and the embracing of brute and natural drives against structure and reason.

In the "Casagemas in his coffin" painting (image 2), Picasso ceases to use the colour to represent what he sees but the colour is used as a vehicle of feelings, a reference to emptiness, absence and sorrow. The figure is limited to an outline, an empty form; the message is driven by the degradation and desaturation of colour.

Image 2

Alberto Giacometti's "point a l'œil" (image 3) sets a macabre play where the skeletal figure is menaced by what it sees coming. Is that the imminent fate of death or the banality of life? The fear and agony is not represented by actions of violence but it is derived by the fragility and incertitude of the system.

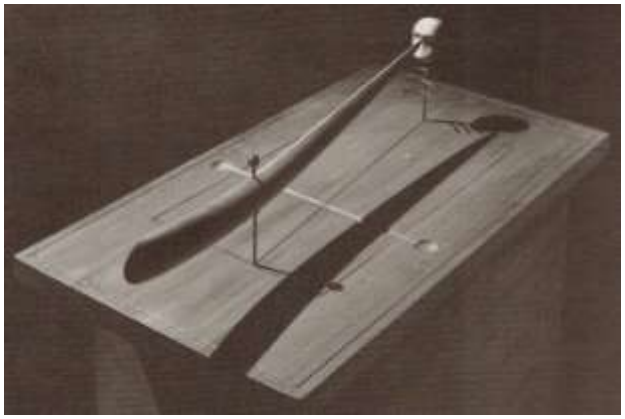


Image 3

In his tormented and decomposed figures, Francis Bacon (image 4) reflected mortality as a basis of our physicality. He put his finger in the wounds of our purposeless existence and tried to reveal that there is nothing beyond our flesh and bones.

Image 4

The continuous ostracising of death from our complex, urbanised and fast moving modern life does little to stop it from coming to surface in post-modern artworks. No matter how far death is pushed away, it is centripetally pulled in the core of art research. It is in the heart of the human condition; art would not be needed without death.

The aspect of death permeated most of Joseph Beuys's work. Beuys thought that:

> to "experiment with death" must be considered the province not just of the individual but of a society, a political system, and any rigid institution; in other words, death is one more situation in which exists the possibility of transformation. (Rosenthal, 2004, 80)

The post-modern shift towards a sculpture as an immaterial "thing", as a concept, legitimatised the liberation of this experimentation from the traditional object. Following the steps of Duchamp and Beuys, Gregor Schneider intends to "exhibit" a dying person in a museum. The sculptural praxis is justified by the dislocatedness, by the uncanny existential instability generated by the displacement of the context. Does the sculptural action in this case equals with reality and if so, what are the moral and social implications? Can any act be considered as artwork regardless of the motive of the design?

As the limits of the context blur, the association between the artwork and the viewer is weakened. My intention is to keep the message defined and the artwork accountable for transmitting it.

My next question is:

- How do I perceive death and what characteristics do I think it has?

I think of death as a momentary absence. A gap in time when everything is erased and nothing exists. It is a change agent that imposes on anything material in an irreversible way. It defies the perception of existence since it is the absolute negative of being. It is a liminal situation, an in-between space where our intellect is denied access. It is universal, equal and it is the measure of everything. In its simplicity and justice, death is our daily companion in understanding and evaluating life. Our instinctively negative idea about death derives mostly from our sympathy to the death of others. Most studies show that when people are asked to personify their own death the majority have picked a gentle and comforting persona. In both researches of Jonathan Bassett (2008) and Robert Kastenbaum (1997), the most common personification of death within their study group was the image of the "gentle comforter".

The last two questions aim to narrow my research down to the level of my personal work.

- What are the characteristics of death that I want to transpose to a three-dimensional object? What qualities should the work have?

The characteristics of death that I want to transpose on a three-dimensional object are those of directness (derived from the physicality, the reality and familiarity of death), of ordinariness (experienced as banality and triviality) and of otherness (related to its character of absence, change and unknown). This transfer can be effectively accomplished by including into the making process actions that reflect such characteristics.

Similarly, the physical and symbolic/cultural attributes of the material of choice will need to relate with the above elements. The qualities I am looking to achieve in my work are these of immediacy (to attract and capture the first impression; to excite the curiosity), of familiarity (to recognise forms, symbols, landscapes; to relate), ambiguity (to recognise several meanings; to imagine different scenarios, to reflect) and contemplation (to consider with attention, to involve mentally, to engage).

- How can a series of objects with the above qualities link together in a common display that deals with death? What characteristics should they share in order to become a unitary experience for the viewer?

Objects need to follow similar processes in their making. The way of making transposes on the character of the object and objects made within the same limitations reflect the same set of internal values. Also, a consistent vocabulary of materials provides a common language of form and act. A productive dialectic between object, material and space ensures that the spectator is exposed to an experience that provokes specific association with the gravity and universality of death. The staging needs to be specific in a sense that the dimensions and conceptual boundaries of the group of objects comfortably inhabit the space without being absorbed, silenced or misinterpreted. Object and reality should not be divided. The viewer and the objects should inhabit naturally the same space and face each other as equals. The viewer is lured into a relationship that is situated outside conventional time which gives rise to a moment of contemplation and possibly to the start of a debate regarding the concept of death.

Research methods

The methods I have used so far include:

Reflective methods:

- A Journal registering death events and compiling thoughts on the making process

- Bibliographic research regarding death in the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, psychology, medicine, art history.

- Visits to galleries, exhibitions and museums to consider the way installations work

- Mind mapping

Evaluative methods:

- Group "Readings" and viewer opinions on the actual work

- Critical appraisals and Tutorials

Creative methods:

- Observation

- Sketchbook

- Drawings

- Photography/ Image manipulation

Material experimentation:

- Material testing (clay, plaster, wood, metal wire, papier-mâché)

- Space configuration testing (hanging, positioning, building constructions)

Results

As death is an elusive idea of total absence it could not be figuratively represented. A directly figurative sculpture or a photo of a dying or dead man could be so distractive due to the emotions of sympathy or pain it would arise that it would unconsciously block any thoughts on the actual event and facilitate the denial process. A directly figurative representation misses the opportunity to create within the spectator's mind the necessary narrative that will gradually unfold the layers of repression that hide the reality of death. Elkins suggests that:

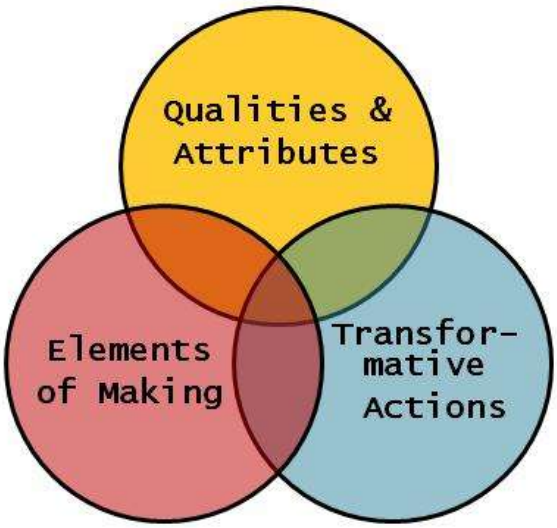
> in order for us to be able to stand in front of an image and experience the kind of richness of feelings that we associate with art, the image must be able to speak in several registers. These images (...photos of moments of death, executions and cadavers) shout all other images down: they are harsh and importunate, so that they are not only hard to see; they also make everything else hard to see. (Elkins, 1997, 116)

An abstract approach to the representation of death is justified not only by artistic criteria regarding the effectiveness of the desired outcome but also by the affinity with the abstract concept of death itself. As we are sensually deprived of rehearsing a death experience, it comes naturally to think of death in terms of an idea than a realistic image. The preference in abstract imagery on death was also demonstrated in Sarah Brabant's research (see page 9).

My forms will keep referencing to elements linked with the experiences of death and dying. These features will provide the spectator with clues that will anchor him to reality and facilitate its connection with the artwork. These references will not be direct and I will avoid using symbols and social signifiers as they may carry messages strongly diversified and personal.

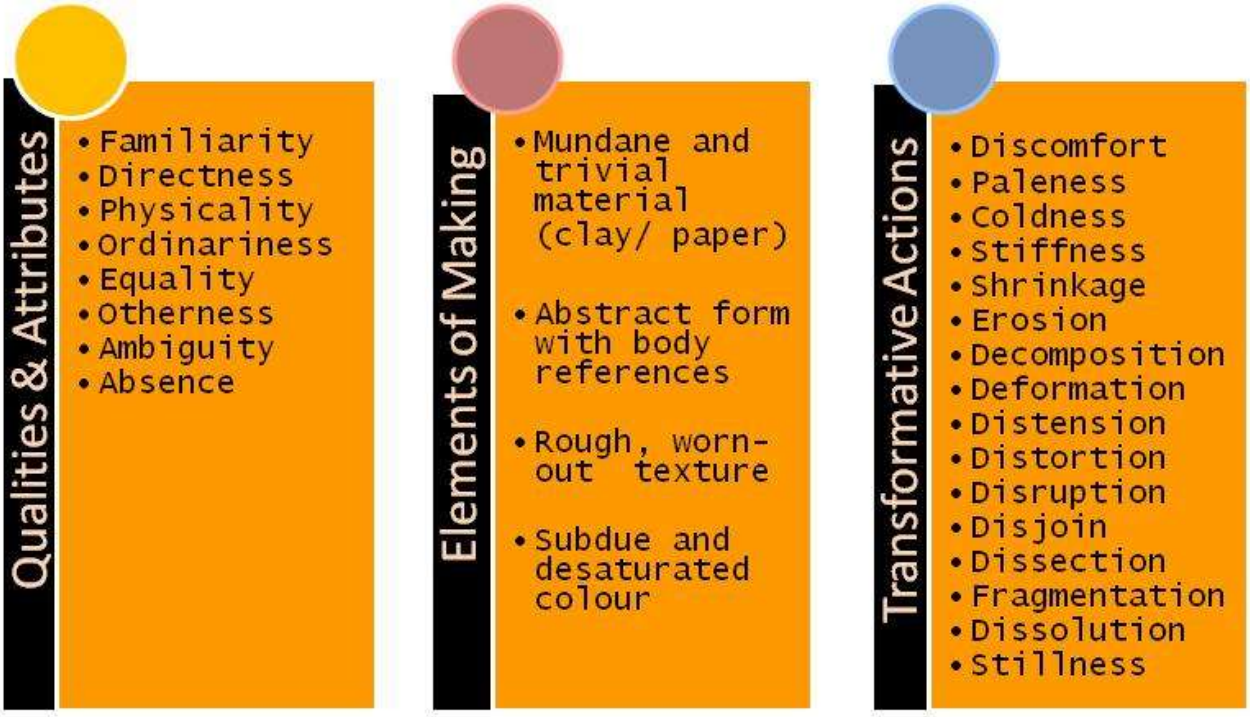
The objects that I experimented with are records of the interaction between three parts. One part is the "elements of making", as I would call the physical characteristics of the artwork (such as material, form, colour). Second part is the "transformative actions" which refer to the actions that take place during the making process or events that alter the condition of the work during its lifecycle (such actions could be the loss of shape, colour, unity, volume, identity, status). The third part is the "qualities and attributes" characterising the concept behind the artwork (such qualities could be directness, ambiguity, familiarity, astonishment, confrontation, etc). The more complementary these parts become, the more important their overlapping is. The more the relationship between these parts is meaningful, the more eloquent the object becomes; the stronger the gravity of the message is.

In the following schema (1) I have mapped this tri-partite relationship.



Schema 1

In schema (2) I have included my choice of elements, actions and qualities that I believe would be needed in the case of representing death:



Schema 2

The interaction and the resulting choice of elements were not clear to me from the beginning of my experimentation. I begun experimenting with clay, paper, wires, strings, plaster and fibres using wooden or metal tools. Clay was the first choice material for two reasons. Firstly, because of its ability to perform all the above transformations with simple manipulation through the use of water and fire. Secondly, because of the earthly character and the symbolic link with the human body and its destiny (dust to dust).

I started creating objects by joining separate parts that have been thrown on the wheel (see images 5 and 6).

Image 5

Image 6

During the throwing the clay is pinched, cut, twisted, pushed and forced to break (see images 7, 8 and 9).

Image 7

Image 8

Image 9

These actions are used to reproduce the transformations that occur to the human body after death. The loss of vitality and firmness of the body is followed by deformation, shrinkage, fragmentation, decomposition and erosion.

At the finishing stage (colouring, glazing, firing), a palette of subtle and pale colours is used, along with textures that associate with stiffness, glassiness and coldness. In different parts of the same object, different finishing qualities are applied in order to suggest different levels of degradation, tension and erosion, with the aim to enhance the sense of ambiguity. Some of the objects are not glazed and instead are finished by burnishing with wax and oxides (see image 10) in order to give a resemblance with the human skin and the glassy look of the dead body (as seen in embalmed and preserved body parts in museums, image 11).

Image 10

Image 11

Other objects like the one presented below (image 12), are build around a structure made of metal wire using a mixture of clay, glue and papier-mâché. The body is wrapped with thread and cavities are left open.

Image 12

The roughness and dry texture of the surface is close to the skin of the deteriorated mummified bodies. The twisted body and the thread pieces make reference to torture or wrapping of bodies during burial rituals (see image 13).

Image 13

The wrapping and tying of the human body as reference to the suffering of death was successfully used by Jürgen Brodwolf (see image 14).

Image 14

The results of the group "readings" of these objects are the following:

- The objects are perceived as unusual, ambiguous and interesting. They created a sense of degraded and incomplete organic matter. Their internal space and the recorded tension in the joints of the parts give away a sense of motion and internal force which is restricted. This is considered as a characteristic linked with dying as observed by James Elkins:

  > Too much motion has long been identified with death. The most horribly twisted are bodies that have perished from their suffering".

> Things that came up to the viewer's minds were guts, internal organs, hybrids, pods, bones, foetuses, remains. (Elkins, 1997, 110)

- The comments regarding the surface and the medium reveal the importance of the material in people's apprehension. Although the objects made by unfired clay (image 12) are perceived as unfinished, disturbing, natural and antique, the glazed ones (images 5, 6) are mostly seen as artificial, manufactured, and expensive. The finishing and glazing of the object hides the message of the physicality and banality of death.

The limitations of the firing and glazing on the significance of clay as a metaphor for the mortal body are becoming obvious. The use of the unfired clay seems more appropriate. The raw and later dry clay-earth reflects the transient character of the human body. It remains mundane, fragile and brittle, deprived of living characteristics.

The next question that calls for investigation regards the way the objects can be displayed. Should they lie on the floor? Should they be on a plinth, in a box or hanged on the wall? If they are staged together in one space what is the common reference that would join these objects into a single situation? Is there a linking element that could be used as a reference to death?

In this direction, I suspended the object inside a box. On the top of the box there is a mechanism that allows water to drip through the object and later to be collected in a bowl underneath the object (see image 15). The setting makes reference to life that abandons the body.

Image 15

The results from the “readings” are the following:

- The box is perceived as obstructing to the view and creates a sense of distancing; in the same way as the displays of specimen work in museum exhibitions.

- The liquid dripping required a mechanism that drives attention away from the object and the meditating sound of the dripping water overwhelms the viewers and overshadows any message driven by the object. The object is perceived more as alive than dead.

Consequently, I removed the box structure and replaced it with a frame (see images 16, 17)

Image 16

Image 17

Framing is introduced as a way of setting the objects within the boundaries of a realm beyond our perceived reality. As icons of saints or pictures of deceased relatives, the frames are used to enhance the perception of the objects refer to lives that perished.

The “readings” clearly demonstrate that the role of the frame becomes disproportionally important:

- The objects are perceived as distant, belonging to another world. They create the sense that their message is “framed” away from us.

- The frames become another object equally important. With their historical connotation they create a fake assumption on the artistic value of the framed objects. The objects lose their truth and transform to gallery pieces.

Frames proved to be very effective in isolating and attracting attention. However, they managed to remove death out of the ordinary and to place it too far into the "land" of otherness. They work in a same way as the cemeteries in separating the world of the living from the world of the dead.

It is important to bring death back into real terms with the viewer and in order to do so the access to the object needs to be direct and unobstructed. Suspension provides an excellent solution to this but the object needs to remain independent from frames and cages. In this way, the act of suspension can be perceived as a positioning in a liminal space between the ceiling and the floor, a reference to the liminality of death as a point between the real world and an imaginary afterlife. Defying gravity adds to the otherness of the pieces and brings them face to face with the spectator.

In this direction, I removed the frames (image 18) and linked the objects with shadows and outlines on the walls (images 19, 20). This setting creates an ambiguity on what is here and what is gone, and questions our understanding of materiality.

Image 18

Image 19

Image 20

Image 21

In a simpler setting, I will be suspending the object over a pile of dust (image 21 above) or simply over a lump of clay or a pool of mud. Having the mundane mud or dust in juxtaposition with a completed object, removes the emphasis from it and balances the preciousness and possible attractiveness of it. The fired and "immortalised" object opens a dialogue with its raw primordial self. The viewer is caught in between and lured into a conceptual game of what is death and where the transformation of matter begins and ends.

By reviewing the results described previously, I drew the conclusion that I have to revisit my approach in my making. Looking back on the Schema 1, I have to take into account the qualities of death that I want to transpose and ensure that they are respected by the material, the making process and the actions involved.

In this direction, I decided to proceed with a separate elementary process which would keep the work more coherent and would simulate the way death makes itself visible and present. The irresistible truth about death is that it manifests incessantly as an everyday effortless and unpredictable event. With this in mind I started gathering newspaper cuts with reports and announcements of deaths from daily newspapers. These cuts are collected on a weekly basis and added in a journal (see Image 22).

Image 22

This repetitive action is quite revealing of the true character of death. Deprived from its emotional load, the personal links and the cultural connotations, death is an event; repetitive, regular and irreversible, decent, equal, haphazard, casual and natural as life is. It's only dimension is arithmetic and ignores assumptions on reason, logic and justice. I want to register this serial occurrence of death in a basic, modular object which has abstract characteristics that could be reproduced at a very basic level. This object will be used as a metaphor of the unitary and personal event which despite its unique character, it reproduces incessantly in line with the recordings of the journal.

This elementary object shall have the form of the square. The square has the qualities of equality, solidity, modularity. It is basic, unpretentious and simple. Its equal sides are used in dice and make references to the haphazard, just and unpredictable character of death.

On this square, I am capturing some of the characteristics of the human skull. This could unquestionably link the object with an age-long, instantly recognisable symbol of death. My intention is to keep the figurative elements minimal, fragmented and partial. As can be seen below (image 23) in this 7000BC plastered and decorated skull (one of the earliest efforts to maintain the memory of the deceased), the eye sockets and the nose opening are more than enough to strike a resemblance to human remains.

Image 23

I build the cube with clay slabs, retaining its hollowness. In this way the viewer can apprehend the absence by looking through the openings. On one of the sides of the square the eye and nose cavities are curved on the fresh clay (Image 24, below). The mouth is omitted as unnecessary, since it would then be a direct and full representation of the skull elements. Moreover, the lack of mouth refers to the silence and anonymity of this piece. Mouth links to expression and sentiment and these objects are not meant to be emotionally charged. Its omission enhances the ambiguity. In this way, the object stays in the borderline between laughter and cry. It is the situation that we usually find ourselves when we hear about a fatal disaster; a balance on the edge of relief and sorrow.

Image 24

This cube-skull will not be fired or glazed. The raw and later dry clay-earth reflects the transient character of the human body. The loss of water becomes a metaphor for the loss of life. Clay remains mundane, fragile and brittle, deprived of living characteristics. The spectator should be able to feel and smell the dry earth.

The making of these cube-skulls takes place on a weekly basis in line with the updating of the journal. The only restriction rules for the making are the following (taken from the journal):

- The form which will be used for all the objects is the cube
- The material used for the making will be unfired clay
- The cube will be hollow
- One side of the cube will bear the cuts that relate to the eyes and nose openings of the human skull
- The object should be completed the same day
- The object should be made without any other thought/preoccupation/restriction apart from the above rules and of course the specific conditions of the day/place of the making
- The object should be dated

These objects are made without any conscious effort of aesthetic interference and were finished within the day. The making simulates a manufacturing process that minimised the uniqueness of its object.

The application of the above restrictions still leaves room for elements of unitary expression to unfold making every object different. This uniqueness is in accordance with the highly personalised imagery of death as described in page 9 and it is satisfied by the following conditions

- of the material:

  cubes are made from any type of clay available at the specific day of the making. In a lot of the cases this is recycled clay, heavily mixed and uneven. This leads to varying colour and surface appearance.

- of the form:

  the square form has no specific size. Also, the use of different available tools and the need to complete this within the same day leads to very basic structures with uneven surfaces and elements of texture.

- of the features**:**

  the face cavities are cut randomly with only a general design in mind. Different available cutting tools and different levels of softness in clay lead to variety in features which could be interpreted as different "expressions" of the cube-skulls.

- of the Process**:**

  the freedom in the choice of materials and the variety in the available tools and making time, affect both the external visual elements of the object as well as the strength and durability of the cubes. Tools lead to unintended markings on the surfaces. Poor and hurried making may lead to parts breaking or sides lifting during the drying of the clay. Also the transportation of the cubes from one place to another and the different drying conditions may lead to damages. However, these damaged cube-skulls are not rejected but they still remain as evidence of the recording process.

The group of objects created via the above process have the characteristics of a three dimensional death registry. Their seriality is based on common making principles, equal for all. They are universal; they are generic figures of the mortal character of humanity. At the same time each record maintains a personal character consistent with the unique place death maintains in every person's mind.

The point at issue is how these objects will be placed as a group. The group becomes a space itself that can extend in various directions. In the same way as death events maintain a calendar order and are recorded within different social registration systems, these cube-skulls require a specific order in space that serves best the aim of this project. The staging of the cube-skulls needs to create a single situation for the viewer. The intention is for the spectator to engage physically (be present, be inside the frame of the installation) and mentally (to reflect, to question, to debate). He is expected to fill the philosophical space created by the relationships between the objects and the characteristics of the site.

A horizontal placement of the cubes on the ground floor facing up as shown on Image 25, follows a similar setting with the “Field” installation of Anthony Gormley (Image 26).

Image 25

Image 26

The direction of the cubes suggests gravestones facing up and the number and variety in sizes and colour aims to overwhelm the viewer with its amplified voice of “silence”. The actual number of cube skulls which are needed to create this feeling of mass is directly linked to the dimensions of the site. The impressive power of the numbers is eloquently shown in the images of the Cambodian genocide (Image 27).

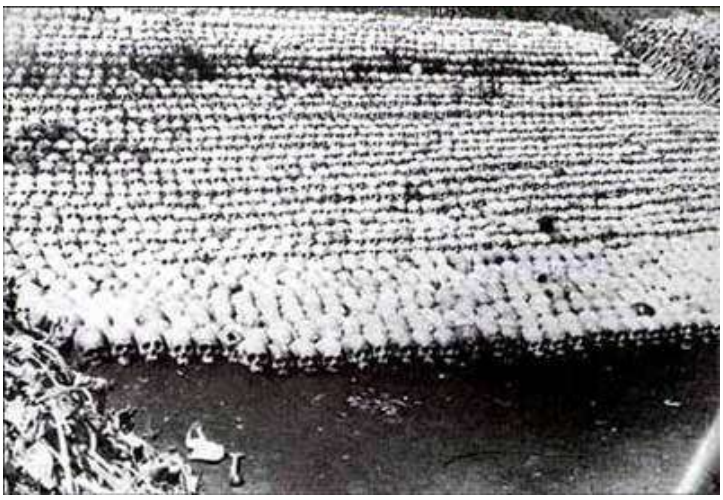


Image 27

Similar settings use the cubes randomly scattered or build in rows and walls (images 28, 29).

Image28

Image 29

The powerful ability of the cube skull to be used as a building element opens up the prospect of extending the work to dimensions that could challenge the outdoors environment and the urban architecture. Using digital manipulation of images, I visualised the positioning of these groups into the city landscape. The images 30, 31 and 32 show their arrangement in front of the tube station, outside the school and among the ruined gravestones of an old cemetery in the Altab Ali Park.

Image 30

Image 31

Image 32

The possibility of challenging the Londoner directly in his daily environment is so tempting. These objects can be used to interrupt, to surprise and momentarily disturb the continuous flow of the superficial day-to-day reality. They claim the opportunity to question the certainty of existence and help us contemplate the idea of temporariness. Being unfired, these objects are subject to the weather conditions for surviving. This vulnerability and fragility takes the message of our mortal materiality even further.

These elementary objects can be also used in building a monument that would bear witness to the banality of death, to the ordinary event that waits to the corner of every life, of every human being. There are various historical examples of the use of the skulls in the architecture of churches, ossuaries and catacombs (see images 33, 34).

Image 33

Image 34

My intention is to create a simple construction that projects the unpretentious and ephemeral character of the material. Keeping the dimensions on the human scale facilitate the acceptance of death as a natural event. The use of the shape of the column makes reference to the archaic stelae which was used for thousand years in funerary commemoration. As seen in the image 35 below, the various newspapers that I have gathered for the purpose of the journal archive of the news of death are now used as a binding material in the interstices between the cubes.

Image 35

The newspaper, a two dimensional carrier of events integrates into this three dimensional death registry not as an informative and meaningful text but as a familiar material that reminds us of our hyper-real daily exposure on what is happening around us. The way we speak and write of disasters, calamities, horrors is being crushed and cornered from the actual presence and volume of the most natural and trivial event, death. This column has the form and volume of a solid statement that cannot be ignored and at the same time is a fragile construction that defies permanence. It is a puzzle where the uniqueness and diversity of each elementary piece is lost in a pattern of commonality, equality and certainty.

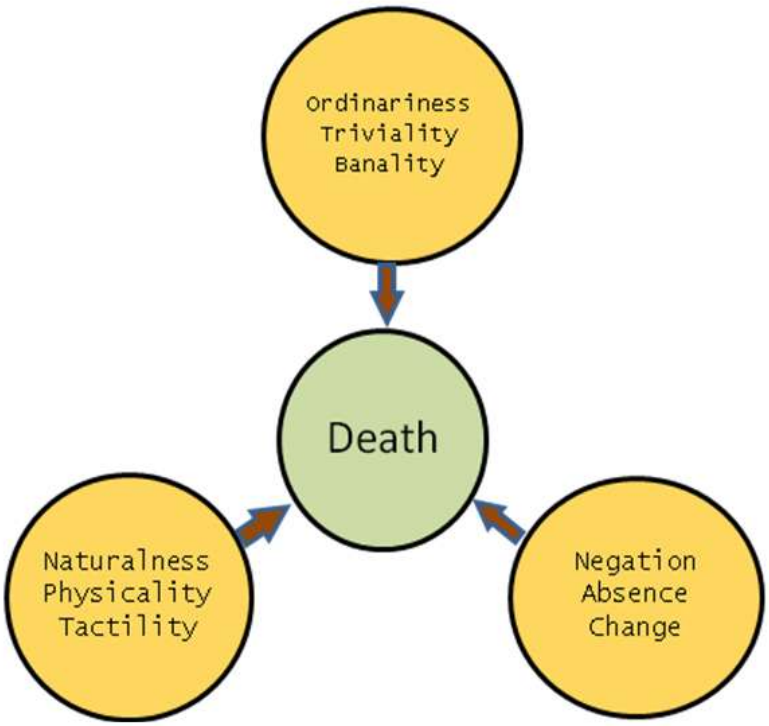
Conclusions

This exploratory journey into the representation of the concept of our own death opened up for me the possibility of investigating into:

- The potential of representing a totally abstract and highly personalised idea
- The interaction mechanism between the material, the actions and the concepts
- The potential of acquiring diverse results and qualities by using clay in different states
- The importance of the relationship between the different objects that inhabit the same space and the way this relationship shapes our apprehension of the artwork.

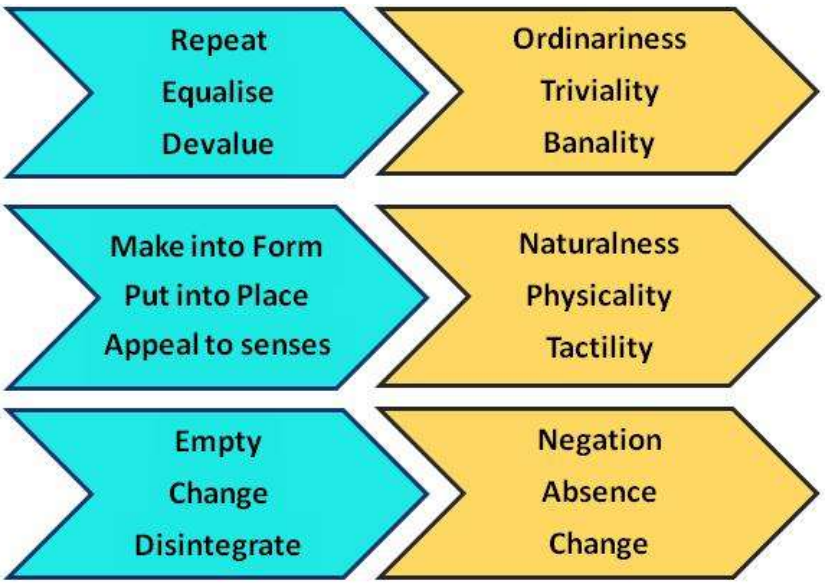
Death as an idea triggers different thoughts and beliefs within people but has some basic characteristics that I could hold on to and effectively incorporate n an artwork. The one is the undeniable reality of death which is present in front of us on everyday basis. The other one is the materiality of death; its inherent connection with the workings of time on the nature of matter. In my view, these characteristics call for a three dimensional representation and the usage of a very natural, 'physical' and ordinary material. The three-dimensional object occupies the same space with the viewer, shares the same reality and calls for a face-to-face confrontation. Very common and abundant materials like clay and paper, are used for these objects to lure the viewer into accepting that death is a natural consequence of life. Stripping the artwork of signs, of symbols and of social & religious imagery minimises the risk of initiating personal beliefs and experiences that could be highly disorientating and diversified. Equally, the use of photos or videos that depict dying or dead people is a way of looking away without seeing much; hence I avoided using them. By defining this limited set of rules, I have tried to make my artwork as simple, universal and honest as possible. Death is acknowledged as a fact and presented as an event, a disturbing but necessary reality.

If I would draw a skeleton of the qualities that this fundamental human condition is based upon, I would come up with the following schema (3):



Schema 3

Each group of qualities that characterise death can be generated by a list of actions as represented in the schema 4 below:

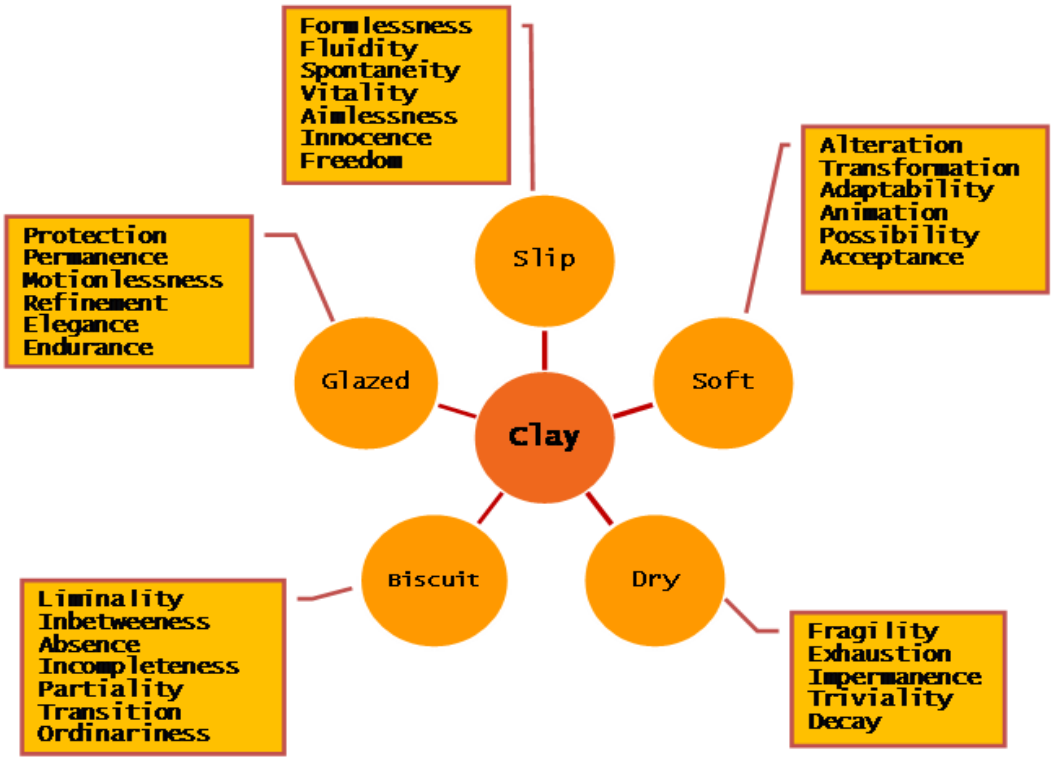


Schema 4

By applying these actions during the making process or during the final staging of the objects in space, I try to affect our perception of the object and create a sensory experience that transpires the qualities of death. In that direction, material objects were made in series or through repetitive process. The form of cube is suggestive of

equality and the preparation is very basic and unpretentious. The rough texture and subdue colour suggests physical degradation and natural decomposition. Fragments, cuts and traces are clues to the alteration process. The skull cubes and the suspended objects are hollow vessels; records of absence. Clay smells earth and as it transpires, it transubstantiates into dead matter. The setting of the objects in the space demands our attention. The objects are suspended challenging the view at eye level and the cubes gather in constructions that obstruct, divide or surround.

In this discourse, clay has a pivotal role. It is present as liquid slip (mud), as raw and soft malleable material, as dried and brittle lump, as hard but fragile low fired form (biscuit) and finally as hard, resistant and long lasting high fired and glazed ceramic. Each different state has different qualities to offer in the making as seen in the schema 5 below:



Schema 5

This versatile character of clay helped me in generating different messages according to the state of the material. Metaphorically, we could consider this as the use of punctuation in a sentence. The final meaning is dependent on where the dot is placed, on the point that I decide to stop the processing and manipulation of clay. This ending point decides how much vitality or stillness is left with the material, how much firmness or shapelessness, how much temporariness or immortality. Within the same freedom of choice, placing together (or next to each other) different states of

clay creates a dialogue of before and after, of beginning and end of object and non-object.

The above mentioned dialogue extends between one object and the other, between the viewer and the objects and finally between the objects and the surrounding space and architectural elements. Relationships are built or ruined according to the relative distance, the relative homology and the relative function between these elements. The separation of the objects from their environment due to the use of a cage or frame was proved to be inconsistent with the aim of engaging the viewer to a real event. The community of descent of a lump of clay with the ceramic object helps create an invisible link that persists, despite the contradictory qualities seen in the Schema 5. The suspended objects maintain a space which is unfamiliar and opposing to gravity. It is a liminal space of doubt and uncertainty likening to the ambiguous character of death. On the other hand, the construction of a column from the cube skulls suggests a solidity and certainty that is inevitable. It stands as a pillar, an anchoring column where our reach for cultural immortality begins and our material existence ends. I have orchestrated the objects and their setting in ways that the viewer is confronted by them but not overwhelmed. There is no intention to create fascination or fear. I expect the work to create a meaningful statement on our ephemeral existence; to create an argument that death is there for us to accept and not to deny. As Sigmund Freud claims, death merits our understanding:

> would it not be better to give death the place in actuality and in our thoughts which properly belongs to it, and to yield a little more prominence to that unconscious attitude towards death which we have hitherto so carefully suppressed? (Becker, 1973, 11)

Have I succeeded or not in making a work of art that serves the purpose of creating a sublime moment as described by Jean Baudrillard? A work which is

> made for stopping, in the end it is made to interrupt something, to arrest the gaze, to arrest contemplation. (Gane, 1993, 147)

It is utopian to believe that I can prove that this objective was reached. It could be further more non important to search for such a proof. What I find important is the possibility of creating a connection where it did not exist before, the possibility of proposing a set of rules that draw the outline of a visual metaphor on death. By defining a link between the properties of clay, the actions of making and the character of death, I introduced a system that is realistic, believable and meaningful.

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Illustration List

Image 16. Personal work, photo of the artist (2010)

Image 17. Personal work, photo of the artist (2010)

Image 18. Personal work, photo of the artist (2011)

Image 19. Personal work, photo of the artist (2011)

Image 21. Personal work, photo of the artist (2010)

Image 22. Personal work, photo of the artist (2011)

Image 23. Photo of Plastered skull, Jericho, Israel, about 7000-6000 BC [online image]
http://www.britishmuseum.org/join_in/using_digital_images/using_digital_images.aspx?image=ps031489.jpg
(Accessed on 08.05.2011)

Image 24. Personal work, photo of the artist (2011)

Image 25. Personal work, photo of the artist (2011)

Image 26. Gormley (2004), "Field" [online image]
http://www.tate.org.uk/liverpool/exhibitions/gormley/
(Accessed on 08.05.2011)

Image 27. Photo of Cambodian genocide [online image]
http://terminategenocide.com/html/genocide_coverup.html
(Accessed on 16.08.2011)

Image 28. Personal work, photo of the artist (2011)

Image 29. Personal work, photo of the artist (2011)

Image 30. Personal work, photo of the artist (2011)

Image 31. Personal work, photo of the artist (2011)

Image 32. Personal work, photo of the artist (2011)

Image 33. Photo of the Catacombs of Paris [online image]
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Catacombs-700px.jpg
(Accessed on 22.07.2011)

Image 34. Photo of the Templo Mayor, Mexico City [online image]

http://www.shutterstock.com/pic-38288491/stock-photo-skull-sculpture-in-templo-mayor-mexico-city-the-main-temple-of-the-aztecs-in-their-capital-city.html
(Accessed on 05.08.2011)

Image 35. Personal work, photo of the artist (2011)

Appendix

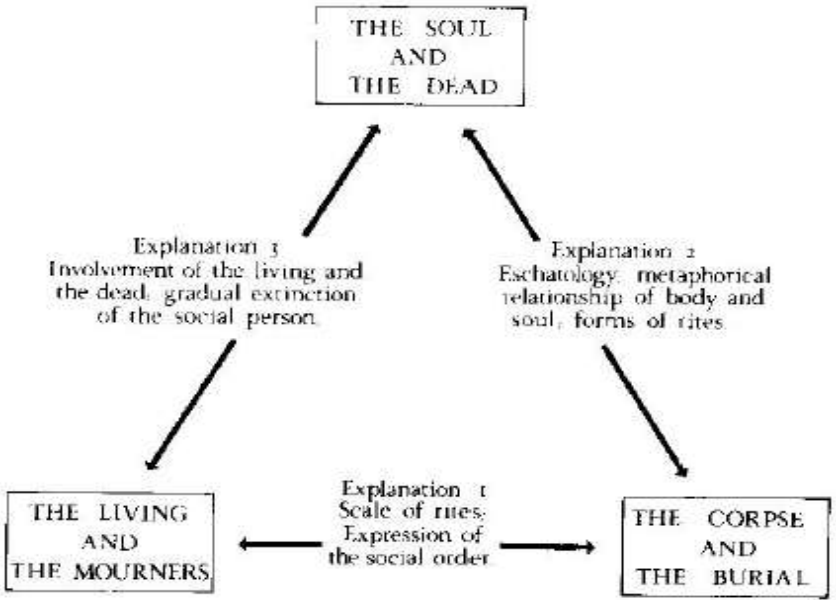
Rituals of death

The consciousness of our mortal nature and the inevitability of death gives little comfort at the moment of the loss of life. The fear and stress before the moment of death, the overwhelming feelings of the kin of the dying or deceased person and the sense of amputation of the social body led to the development of rituals that help individuals and societies to deal with death.

Although one could argue that the fear of death is universal, its expression through the death rites is subject to great variation, mainly culturally induced. The elusiveness of death and its perplexing and variable cultural manifestations, led Rivers to claim that:

> death is so striking and unique an event that if one had to choose something which must have been regarded in essentially the same light by mankind at all times and in all places, I think one would be inclined to choose it in preference to any other, and yet I hope to show that the primitive conception of death…is different, one might say radically different, from our own. [Rivers, W. H. R. 1926. Psychology and Ethnology. London: Kegan Paul] (Metcalf and Huntington, 1979, 58)

Despite the various conceptions of death, death rituals around the world follow the general framework of Life-cycle rituals. They share a tripartite structure which involves the separation from one status, the intermediate liminal (in-between) phase and the final incorporation into the new one. The liminal period is the one when the Living have to "prepare" the newly deceased for their transfer to the world of the dead. The interrelationship is schematically presented below:



Schema from the *Celebrations of Death* (Metcalf and Huntington 1979, p.8)

The mourning wakes and séances were designed to assist the mourners in acknowledging the wound that death entails to the living but also to celebrate the triumph of the society which reasserts its continuity. In this transitional period of the ritual, the corpse plays a pivotal role as a symbol and evidence of our materiality. The disposal of the corpse is necessary to complete the ritual and permit the re-establishment of the normality on everyday life. As Merrifield writes, 'throughout the world there are three basic methods of disposal: by exposure and consumption by scavengers…; by burial…and by cremation.' (Merrifield 1988, p.61). The way the corpse is treated is directly linked with the different beliefs about the "after-life". These can vary from the need for a complete dissolution of the polluted body to prepare the soul for the other life, to the embalming of the body and its preservation for the other world.

Another widespread symbolism is the journey that the soul needs to take in order to reach the land of the dead and often this journey is depicted as crossing the sea or the river. During the death ceremonies of the Berewan societies (central northern Borneo) described in the *Celebrations of Death*, the songs which are sung to the coffin with the dead body 'instruct the soul to go to the river and wash…then descend to the canoe and paddle upstream…up to a plateau which is considered as the ancestral homeland of the tribe. As the soul travels upriver, it not only travels toward the dead, but also backward in time. It moves from the mundane to the sacred.' (Metcalf and Huntington 1979, p.72)

The ritual's role is to ensure that the mourning and exchange with the deceased will ultimately find closure and everyday life returns in order. The liminal ambiguous status is considered anomalous and is one of discomfort and danger if it does not come to a closure. The deceased is accompanied with all necessary elements that will ensure that the journey is completed. In a lot of cases the corpse is treated with offerings and food during the ritual, it is guarded to secure a return to the world of the Living and it is accompanied in the burial place with money or gifts for its journey to the land of the Dead. As Merrifield notes, in extreme cases of kings or chiefs, the deceased was accompanied by sacrificed human beings in order to 'enter the next world with attendants, guards and concubines as befits his rank. The great death pit of Ur is a notorious instance, in which an early dynastic ruler of about 2500BC was accompanied in his grave by 59 people…' (Merrifield 1988, p.65). Elsewhere, the decapitation of the corpse and the occasional partial dismemberment suggest a precaution against the re-animation of the dead.

In the western culture, the death rituals raised to a peak of celebration and romantic idealisation during the Enlightenment and fallen to the lows of modernity and denial of the 20th century. The emergence of individualism as a core value for transforming the world led to a great interest in death which ranged from fascination and love to

resentment and fear. The eighteenth century was called by Philippe Ariès the "age of the beautiful death" because beautification was used to mask the physical decay and loss and repress the terror. An emphasis in perpetuity and commemoration ensured the denial of finality. Curl in the *The Victorian celebration of death* mentions that during the Victorian era in Britain a funeral for "persons of rank" could cost from £800 - £1500, a fortune for that time, and 'almost every commentator deplored the extravagance (often ruinous in the case of poor families) of funerals, the rapacity of undertakers, the expense of mourning, and the amounts of costly materials that were consigned to the grave'. (Curl, 2000, 197)

In the twentieth century the approach to death and the importance of death rituals is reversed. The widespread conviction (at least in Westernised societies) is that the public demonstration of mourning is inherently morbid and it should be suppressed. Contemporary people have been deprived of their own deaths, due to the hospitalisation and medicalisation of death, but also are gradually deprived of the right to mourn the deaths of others. As religion and beliefs in the morality of evil are in retreat, science and medicine tried to take over the role of the community, eliminate emotions, pain and guilt and domesticate death. In that same context, the community has no longer sufficient sense of solidarity, retreats from its involvement in the "healing" process and leaves its role to the hands of the institutionalised state.

Yet the imminent void of the event of death does not disappear, no matter how persistently we avoid the exposure to its face. In the last decades there is an emerging current of doctors, psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists that question the modern stance towards death. Works such as Kubler-Ross's On *Death and Dying* propose neither denial, nor vilification of death but reconciliation; an exit from the human society in a dignified, peaceful and respectful manner.

<u>Funerary art - Representations of death</u>

The inherent impossibility of personally experiencing the bodily sensation of death, is at the basis of the difficulty in representing death. We can not perceive something which only manifests as an absence, as the opposite of life. As Bauman observes 'Death can not be perceived; still less visualized or "represented"... there is no "something" which is death; nothing in which the stretched intention of the subject struggling for perception would rest, where it could cast its anchor. Death is an absolute nothing and "absolute nothing" makes no sense.' (Bauman 1992, p.6) This elusiveness of the notion of death and the way it leaves its mark on the matter is also described by Joseph Beuys in Harlan's edition *What is art?*:

> 'it is this stopping point or finite growth point within a predetermined form, which is so incomprehensible from a physical perspective. The laws of physics function differentially without exception. There is no such thing as laws functioning in space and time, which will continue to operate in the same way for ever…Thus it is truly incomprehensible

> why and how it [cell division] should come to a halt after may thousands of repetitions, and why it should do so in a way which creates a very specific form – a jagged leaf…there is nothing comparable in the physics of dead matter. A piece of dead matter can take on any form and size.' (Harlan, 2004, 82-83)

Since we only experience death through others, as a narrative or visual image, its representations are influenced by culture, social and religious beliefs. We could argue that they have less to do with death and more to do with life, as reaffirmed by the survival of the mourners and the continuity of the social body. They serve as evidence of the absolute order and stability of culture that goes beyond the temporal and ephemeral existence of its members. Symbols of vanity, transience and impermanence such as skulls, skeletons, the hourglass, the inverted torch are commonly used in funerary art. Similarly an illusionary and aesthetic beautification approach to death through elaborate tombstones and pompous cemetery monuments assist our desire to ban and hide the terror and ugliness of death and celebrate the victory of immortality through our collective memory. Heathcote argues that 'funerary architecture represents the quest for immortality (in the minds of the living) and is a concretisation of the notion of death as a rite of passage, where the tomb is both a transitory resting place in which the body undergoes the beginnings of the journey to the next, more real sacred world, and a monument to that world's existence.' (Heathcote, 1999, 8)

The architectural evidence from different periods in history speaks so little about the truth of death and so much about our desire to repress it. The astonishing Egyptian funerary pyramids paid more tribute to the power and the symbol of the Pharaonic kingship and the necessity to unify the Upper and Lower Kingdom under a common cultural establishment than were actually used as tombs. In the ancient Greek and Roman cultures the tomb played both the role of assisting the death rituals and the beliefs regarding the afterlife and also the role of commemorating the memory of the deceased to later generations. A great attention was given to decoration and inscriptions on the sarcophagus, steles, urns, edifices and epigraphs to link with the identity of the deceased. Large tombs, mausoleums, columbaria and catacombs were built during Hellinistic and Roman times and continued to be a part of the funerary customs in the Early-Christian times.

During the middle ages, the tombs became anonymous and the inscriptions and the representations of the deceased disappeared. The funerary customs have changed to the point which Ariès notes that 'by the eighth and ninth centuries all that remains is floral or abstract decoration or religious scenes and symbols. To borrow Panofsky's terminology, the eschatological tendency has prevailed over the commemorative impulse, at least in the main.' (Ariès, 1981, 203) The ancient sarcophagi were gradually replaced by simple shafts covered with slabs and then with wooden or lead coffins permitting also the transportation of the body. With the exception of saints and kings, by the 10th and 11th century the visible tomb as a monument of

remembrance has disappeared and 'it was no longer necessary, either for the salvation of the deceased or for the peace of mind of the survivors, that the container of his body be exhibited publicly or even that its exact location be indicated'. (Ariès, 1981, 215)

The reappearance of the funerary inscription starts after the 12th century and we start seeing gradual return to the classical approach and imitation of the Greco-Roman elaborate style reaching its peak in late Renaissance. The man of the Enlightenment, with his romantic belief in human power over the natural world, found in the face of death the most fascinating enemy. As death could not be tamed it became an idealised realm, a place of beauty and desire. Death is represented in art and literature as scenes of beautiful, virtuous and innocent women dying, while the funerary monuments and mausoleums are designed as mythical places of an idealised and impossible past. Heathcote affirms that 'the romantic interpretation of the grave has its roots in the memento mori in classical art, but with the sentimentality and fashion for melancholia which defined artistic feeling in the nineteenth century, images of art and death became as closely intertwined as ivy covering an ancient tombstone'. (Heathcote, 1999, 31)

The 20th century saw a scientific approach to death with functionalism and sterilisation replacing the atmospheric melancholy of the mausoleums of the 18th and 19th century. As death started to be seen as an ugly and unclean condition it has been banished from our society and this changed dramatically the death rites and showed a decline in the consideration of funerary art as a subject worthy of attention. Cemeteries as places for the contemplation of death have been moved out of the heart of the cities and the few examples of interest in modern funerary architecture are the war and holocaust memorials.

Modernity declared all constraints illegitimate and offensive and went on to break them down one by one. We witnessed the liberation from sexual taboos, of race, of religion, of political correctness. Mortality, the ultimate offense against human reason was deconstructed into unpleasant diseases that medicine promised to tame. Visual or written evidence of death is momentarily lost in the "time-hole" of today and life moves instantly in future chasing the next project.

In this context of liquidity and evanescence, post-modern art started to question the nature of death and tried to put a mirror in front of our mortal condition. Artists such as Bill Viola, Gerhard Richter, Christian Boltanski, Paul Thek, Damien Hirst and many others have documented the degradation of the material body, the agony of dying, the emptiness and absence. Allegories and cultural symbolism were used extensively and sometimes the effort to fascinate and capture the attention of the people was given more value than the actual dealing with the issue of death. The equally cold and decent face of death remains hidden and the knowledge of the impossibility of its revelation makes the challenge as fresh as the mosaics of Pompeii.

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