

Too Real to be Alive. The Veristic Image of the Corpse and Contemporary Sculpture

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The image of the recumbent dead body, the corpse on the catafalque or deathbed, caught in the moment after life has ended and with the visible signs of death, is present in a good number of oeuvres by contemporary artists. These are images, sculptures or installations that clearly demonstrate the artists' desire to give their binding commentary or interpretation on the contemporary tabuisation of death – which is being driven out of the consciousness concerning the end of life, and seems to have become merely a part of a clinical, distant experience.

The development of the relationship towards death in the society of the 1930s, and then in fully established form from the mid-20th century, was namely based on transferring the place of death to the hospital, and swapping the location of the rooms of the dying, which was moved from the private home to the public institution. Along with this change in the location of death, also a sense of the inadequacy of grief appeared which was supposed to be managed and pushed aside, as well as a ban of some sort on anything that would draw the attention to death in public. The third stage of the inversion of death in our time, however, was complete medicalisation. This transformed the traditional, historical idea of confronting death as something that was a part of everyday life and omnipresent.

Phillip Ariès concludes that today neither society nor the individual are strong and stable enough to accept death, which has of course not abolished death or the fear of it (Ariès 2008, pp. 350-51). Over the last thirty years, however, a focus on the images of death that somehow overturn this denial and lack of awareness of death in society can be discerned in the art of this time, in various mediums, from sculpture to photography. Such works often transform the artworks of older periods by interpreting them in unique ways and conferring new meanings onto them, or else transforming the existing meaningful dimensions of the older artworks and documents. Searching for the sources and the history of the motif

itself – which dates back to the period of transition to the Early Modern Period – is therefore certainly interesting and important for the interpretation of these types of works.

One of the most prominent examples in the field of modern sculpture is the work of Paul Thek, namely his installation *The Tomb – Death of a Hippie* produced in 1967, which is now only available as photographic documentation, since it was completely destroyed (Bishop 2005, pp. 28-32). Staged inside a kind of a ziggurat, lying on a bunk bed, there was a self-portrait of the figure of the dead artist, which highlights his own image as a kind of sacrificial figure and, as often in the work of this artist, refers to the older, otherwise heavily transformed and reconstructed works of Christian iconography. It particularly refers to the iconography of the Passion, the images of the dead Christ, and also contains the syncretic combining of elements from other religious and mythological systems. «In Thek's work the underwater world as well as the cave or grotto recur as emblems, both motifs closely tied to the idea of the refuge as well as that the transience» (Catoir 2014, p. 65).

Paul Thek tried to present his art also as a kind of Christian sacrament, with the museum experience supposedly being a mass dedicated to creation, death and resurrection from the dead (Weintraub, Danto & McEvilley 1996, p. 234). Such works, which deliberately relate to the history and art of the past, directly refer to comparisons with earlier periods.

The comparisons that provide an insight into the transformation of examples of the sequence of images depicting a dead person on a deathbed can be started with the period of the Renaissance and the work of Andrea Mantegna, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, a painting produced in around 1480 (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan), in which the body of Christ is greatly foreshortened (de Nicolò Salmazo 2004, pp. 193-94). The corpse is mourned by Saint John and the Virgin Mary, but there is also a fragmentary image of another person, probably Mary Magdalene. The painting was most probably intended for private devotion and remained in the artist's possession until the end of his life. In any event, it is a typical example of a staged close-up of the dead body of Christ, which highlights the potential for worship and meditation to the viewer of the image.

Four centuries later, the body of the dead Christ was similarly staged by Édouard Manet in the *The Dead Christ with Angels* of 1864 (Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York) (Guégan 2011, p. 160), where the transformed late Gothic and Renaissance iconography of the motif of the *Imago pietatis* with the body of Christ being carried by the angels, is also

evident (Belting 1985, 1990). It is certainly also apparent that this painting from the time of early modernism is a completely plain, even merciless view of the dead body.



Fig. 1. Andrea Mantegna, *Lamentation Over the Dead Christ*, ca. 1480

The drastic appearance of the non-idealised corpse of Christ, the denial of any lofty rhetoric and naturalistic tone that Manet bestowed upon this otherwise old topic, spurred the writer of a review in the «*La Vie Parisienne*» newspaper to the spiteful and sarcastic comparison that invited the public to view Manet's paintings at the 1864 Paris Salon: «Do not miss Manet's Christ, or 'The poor miner dragged from the coal mine', painted for Renan» (Nochlin 1971, p. 57).

The secular atmosphere of the scene and the desecralised style of the painting, which also otherwise omits the usual rhetoric of empathising with the sacred persona, undoubtedly leads to the core of Manet's personal style, within which the distanced realistic approach represents a

completely innovative and fresh contribution to the development of painting at that time.

Precisely ten years later, in 1874, the painting *Christ Taken Down from the Cross* by Wilhelm Trübner was produced (Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart), which also makes subject of the foreshortened dead body of Christ (Bahns 1994, pp. 21-22). Besides Mantegna's main influence in the creation of this painting, this realistic painter from the "Leibl Circle" in Munich was also influenced by Rubens, since the painting was produced during Trübner's stay in Belgium, where he studied the painting of *The Lamentation Over the Dead Christ* by Rubens in Antwerp. Trübner's *Dead Christ* somehow lures the viewer's gaze into the depth of the pictorial space and then leaves him alone in the confrontation of the corpse of a dead man and in a sort of dialogical relationship with the image of the dead body.

In the artworks of this sort, one of the most important starting points or precursors is certainly the famous painting *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* by Hans Holbein the Younger dating from 1521/22, kept in the Kunstmuseum in Basel (Marek 2007, pp. 295-314). The painting was produced as a sort of transfer from sculpture into the medium of painting – and a reduction of the sculptures, showing the image of the dead Christ in the grave, which were rather popular at the time and were positioned at the foot of the altar. With this image, however, Holbein the Younger also presented a close-up of the shocking image of the deceased God in a tomb, his body in a narrow and shallow burial niche, with visible wounds and half-closed mouth and eyes that no hand had put to rest. This is certainly an unprecedented and undoubtedly memorable pictorial interpretation, whose actual original function, however, still remains open to question.

Perhaps it was a predella of an unpreserved altarpiece, although this is not backed up by sources, whereas the view of the body from below, which controls most of the image, also speaks against this. Or perhaps this painting was just a constituent part of one of Holbein's unfinished works or a larger whole. This painting was also seen in conjunction with the iconography of the Holy Sepulchre, where this was supposedly a kind of cover of a niche housing a sculpture, which is also questionable. A recent theory is the fairly plausible presumption that this painting was originally an integral part of the epitaph on the tomb of the Amerbach family located in the small cloister of the Basel monastery (Lindemann 2006, pp. 257-59).

But it is precisely this enigmatic painting that is one of the greatest influences on the art of the twentieth century and the present, since Holbein's model is brought up incredibly often when addressing death during this period. A typical example is the painting by Marlene Dumas, who has created a whole series of paraphrases of the painting by Hans Holbein the Younger in her oeuvre, like for instance *Gelijkenis I & II* produced in 2002 (van den Boogerd 2009, pp. 190-191).



Fig. 2 . Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 1521-22

Numerous works have thus been produced in contemporaneity that contextualise the image of the corpse and include it into a narrative whole. The latter, however, is at the beginning of the 21st century most often completely secularised, given that it is no longer concerned with an explicitly Christian theme, but rather with the images that have become firmly established within popular culture or deeply imprinted in the collective memory. Despite this, however, the connotations of the almost martyred death of the depicted persons are nevertheless present, who have sacrificed themselves in one way or another, were prominent personalities of certain ideologies or art movements, and have in such a way ended up in the collective memory and imagination. Within that, they have taken up the position of iconic figures or characters, whose aureatic, personal life path's mission and sacrifice for specific ideological, artistic or political goals has made them into some sort of modern image of martyrdom, adapted to the time. It is without doubt that images of corpse have a special meaning: «The primary experience of death included the idea that in death, the body became not only a corpse but also an "image" of the deceased. The original image of the deceased was his own corpse» (Assmann 2005, p. 105).

Hyperrealist images such as the sculpture *Woman on Bed* by John de Andrea dated 1974 (Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna), in a unique, very evident manner also illustrate the illusionary power of the deception of the eye since they are depicted to appear as if they were alive. The artist himself stated that he wants to create figures that seem so real that they could be breathing (Franzen & Neuburger 2011, p. 216).

This volition for creating an approximation of the living human, the artist's desire therefore to create an almost living thing, can certainly be discerned in the so-called Pygmalion effect, which involves both the magic of the transformation of the sculpture into a living being, as well as the art technique that established the simulacrum as a transgressive artistic creation (Stoichita 2008, p. 203). In the last decade this simulacral desire has even increased in the work of some extremely realist artists. Excellent examples are contemporary sculptors Kristian Burford with his *tableaux vivantes*, and Kazuhiro Tsuji with his hyperrealist portraits.

Such hyperrealist works are, however, as written by the members of the Irwin group, becoming an increasingly convincing corpse with the aging of the material from which they are made (Vogelnic 2016, p. 72). In this way, the artist's desire for creating eternal, living works is overturned, since these age and reveal their transience, just like living beings.

Hyperrealistic depictions of the naked body, as created by John de Andrea, somehow found their focus and transgression in the image of *Dead Father* (or *Dead Dad*) by Ron Mueck produced in 1996-97, which is now part of the Saatchi collection (Bastian 2003, p. 71). It also includes a depiction of a naked body, this time a man, which represents a relentlessly merciless image of the artist's dead father, whose figure the artist transposed into silicone and acrylic without any hesitation. He exhibited it, using the piece to connect «life and transformation, reality and representation, referentiality and relic» (Frohne, 2002, pp. 422-24), and merging in the artistic medium the arbitrary with the systematic, the continuity of life with the contingency of death. The transition between animated and dead matter, between the realistic "living" image and the dead corpse is typical for Mueck's work.

The questions incessantly posed by Mueck's sculptures surprise us since they query what distinguishes living matter from dead matter, what is the essence that brings substance to life, or what is the spark that creates life (Greeves & Wiggins 2003, p. 47). Such a genuine, unforgettable image of an actually horrifying experience makes the viewer confront the abject, discarded image of reality, where this precise record somehow evokes a potentially infinite pain and tragedy of loss, therefore trauma.

As written by Hal Foster about the image of the corpse in the art of the early 1990s: «If there was a subject of history for the culture of abjection, it was not the worker, the woman, or the person of color, but the corpse» (Foster 2015, pp. 24-28). These numerous traumatic confrontations with the corpse are undoubtedly typical for the art of the time. Ac-

According to Foster, these images are a result of artists' dissatisfaction with the postmodern image or text, its illusion and simulacrum of reality, given that the corpse in this form returns quite realistically, which was marginalized in the poststructuralist version of postmodernism, and thus returns in its traumatic form.

The thematisation of transience and death of the artist, or any other celebrity that illustrates the crumbling, disappearing of the body, as well as the aura that spreads around the image of the dead person, however, speaks of the relationship that contemporary society and particularly mass culture have with death. The tabuisation of death in contemporaneity is certainly a point at which artists overturn the dispelling of the end of life from consciousness, given that they have provided a relentless confrontation with the images of the dead, may they be famous icons of contemporaneity or their own bodies.

Among such works we find one of the most prominent installations by the Irwin group entitled *Corpse of Art* produced in 2003. Depicted in this installation is the dead painter Kazimir Malevich on a catafalque. The great personality of the historical avant-garde lies on his deathbed, with some additional objects that indicate a spatial context, namely white lilies in a vase, the lid of the coffin and a picture over the headboard. The whole was produced on the basis of photographic records documenting the scene of the dead painter in an open coffin, including the iconic image of Suprematism, or the avant-garde in general – Malevich's painting *Black Square*, which hung on the wall behind the head of the deceased.

The reconstruction of the whole solemn atmosphere in the Leningrad House of Artists in 1935 with the image of the dead artist in the coffin, which was designed by Nikolai Suetin, Malevich's student from Vitebsk upon his wish, is a unique sort of homage to the avant-garde artist by the retro-garde painters (as they used to call themselves), given that his work was one of the fundamental components of many paintings by the Irwin group. It is at the same time, however, also a kind of return of the traumatic, displaced image of the avant-garde artist, whose radical ideas have undeniably marked the art of the 20th century, even though his basic ideological structure was also fabricated and subjected to manipulation.

This, last "art project" by Malevich, as the members of the Irwin group have described the image of the dead protagonist of the Russian avant-garde in his coffin, or rather as a unique, ultimate installation, is thus recapped in repetition and appropriation almost seventy years after his

death, hence at a time when his oeuvre has undoubtedly become one of the most convincing and most significant artistic comments of the greatest turning points, ideological transformations and changes brought along with the 20th century.



Fig. 3. Irwin, *Corpse of Art*, 2003

For the members of Irwin this was (only) the staging of the dead painter, as written by Borut Vogeljik, perhaps his "final exhibition", besides holding a view that it was precisely «Malevich who truly conceived the installation that his corpse is a part of» (Vogeljik 2016, p. 73).

In essence this was therefore a sort of a *tableau vivant*, in which the distant, lofty and venerable figure of the great artist was staged, who, however, was no longer living, but was a corpse in a "living painting". This original *tableau vivant* by Malevich, immortalized in photographs, became in the hands of the Irwin group a means of repetition, a recurring "living painting" with the image of the dead main protagonist, which is a kind of a third degree image captured in the staging of the image of the

artist's dead body. On the basis of photographs, they thus created another complex piece that, in the style typical of the period of transition into the 21st century, highlights the denial and elimination of the boundaries between image and body, as stated by Horst Bredekamp, which is further heightened with the practice of the *tableau vivant* (Bredekamp 2010, p. 112).

The thematisation of the iconic images of the modern and contemporary era has otherwise resulted in several sculptural creations, in which the desire to examine and critically consider the cult image of contemporaneity can be recognised, or else simply emphasise the mythical status of some famous but tragically deceased persons of the present time or else the 20th century.

Death of Che, a sculpture produced in 2000 by Gavin Turk, where the image of the dead revolutionary is the self-identificatory contextualization of the image on the famous photograph, offers the viewer a kind of uncomfortable confrontation with the iconic image of Che Guevara, who has long since become a part of popular culture and the individual's image (Moszynska 2013, p. 21). The corpse or wax image of Che is placed on a stretcher, which is placed on some sort of concrete sarcophagus reminiscent of minimalist artwork, whereas the whole is conceived on the documentary photograph from 1967, which shows also several uniformed and armed soldiers beside Che Guevara's dead body.

However, Gavin Turk created an image of his own self in the place of the dead revolutionary, since the sculpture bears his facial features. In this way the sculptor also exposed his identification with the icon of revolutionary spirit of the second half of the last century and mass culture (Collins 2007, pp. 46-47; Collins 2013, p. 11; Moszynska 2013, pp. 21-22). Principally at work here is the strict use of appropriation of an image of a celebrity, which is a strong constituent part of mass culture, whereas the sculptor uses this famous image in a unique way to overturn the concept of the individual's identity, since he discloses it as fragmented and diverse.

In the era of the media, faces are namely the constant object of consumption and as stated by Hans Belting, it could be argued that the faces of the media have supplanted the natural face. Media faces are actually used as a mask, recorded by the camera and transferred to the screen. And the mass media again serves the audience with the facial clichés whose task it is to represent a specific person in public (Belting 2013, p. 214).

Gavin Turk has hence created a unique commentary with this sculpture adding to this infinite consumption of faces in the media, typical for contemporaneity, when he depicted his own face on the body of the infinitely reproduced, iconic face of Che Guevara. The faces of the contemporary media society indeed clearly correspond to the logic of advertising and politics, and the innumerably reproduced image of Che Guevara's face is undoubtedly somewhere at the intersection of the two fields.

The mass media acquire faces as goods and at the same time as arms, in which the interplay between the prominent faces that are persistently circulated by the media, and the anonymous faces of the crowd, is quite obvious. By implementing his own face, the sculptor therefore created a kind of double game of self-identification with one of the most popular images and faces of contemporaneity, at the same time also causing the alienation of this media figure.

Maurizio Cattelan, on the other hand, dated his sculpture *Now* with the year 2004, which depicts the dead body of President John F. Kennedy on his deathbed, and was probably produced as a response or as a direct succession to *Corpse of Art* by Irwin, which was created just a year earlier (Rugoff 2014, pp. 70-71). For the artist himself, the rather comical and caricatured image of the slain statesman, dressed in evening dress, but without shoes, is supposedly a symbol of optimism, since, as he claims himself, the fact that there was someone like him raises hopes that there is another person like him somewhere.

It is interesting to note that this sculpture sports a distinct, quite clearly drawn smile on the face of the departed, which eloquently illustrates the fact that in contemporaneity private or personal images of the deceased, who are not public figures, still remind of loss in the face of death, whereas dead public figures, as formulated by Hans Belting, smile again at the moment of death solely for the media. The faces of these people did not become masks only at the time of their death, because they were already masks during the course of life, stored in the image archives of media companies (Belting 2013, p. 215).

In most cases, these sculptures of the dead are works showing well-known or even famous media personalities, so these installations or sculptures are actually artworks that thematise the dichotomy between the public or media image of people as well as their fragile intimate existence, which is interrupted by death. This type of staging of a dead person – be that after one's own image like in the case of Paul Thek, the image of the father as with Mueck, or the well-known figures in the other

mentioned works – reveals the desire of art to imprint into the consciousness of its contemporaries the very images of the dead individuals that we are somehow dispelling from our consciousness in contemporary society, banishing them to the edge of memory, and trying to forget them in the contemporary cult of youth and vitality.

The thematisation of death is certainly not a very common motif within contemporary art, which to some extent reflects this forgetting and dispelling of the end of life from the consciousness of contemporary society. Hence, in the field of contemporary art, some extremely effective and relentlessly direct contributions and works, or even life oeuvres, have been produced, addressing the contradiction between the end of life and the individualism of contemporary man.

The discussed works are largely determined by their different starting points, but are inter-related by one key point. This is namely in the very visualization of the artist's confrontation with the subject of death, which seems to be an extremely fascinating area for artists particularly. Many of the works by these artists directly, quite explicitly, address the representation and perception of death in contemporary society, within which the latter is increasingly perceived as the death of the other, as formulated by Philippe Ariès, therefore death that is dispelled from consciousness, moved to an indistinct and distant domain of the other.

Death does thus not touch upon the existence of the individual in an era in which everything in Western society is subordinated to forgetting death. Society does not know of any break. The disappearance of an individual no longer interrupts its continuing course and the life of a metropolis functions as if nobody dies anymore (Ariès 2009, p. 326). These artists, with their reflections, make us face the various forms of death in contemporaneity, in the various presentations of medium, and in the various spectacular images. And of course, in a unique way, they also contort the forgetting and tabuisation of the end of life, which is being completely superseded from consciousness by the gaudy, glittering mass of sensations and spectacular images with which we are constantly being confronted.

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