



MORTALITY

DEATH AND THE IMAGINATION

Curated by Steven Gartside and Clive Parkinson
Organised by Zoe Watson and Valeria Ruiz Vargas
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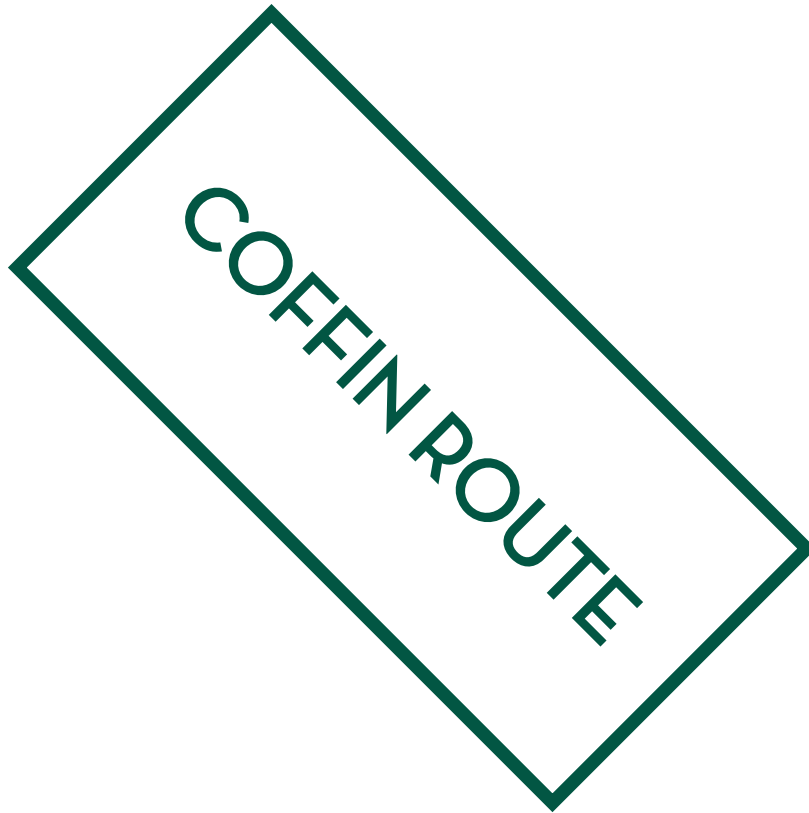
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There is no shortage of art, or indeed literature, which references or reflects upon death. As a way of dealing with the subject there is often a use of strategies such as allusion, metaphor, symbolism, not to mention more oblique approaches. Rather than using death as a blunt end-point, the publication turns its attention to mortality and the ways in which death appears (or is obscured) through being in the midst of life. In art and literature, the range of diverse responses to the theme help to reflect on the formation of perceptions and attitudes, as well as the ways in which death and dying can be kept at a convenient distance. All of the artists brought together for *Mortality: Death and the Imagination* look to explore issues beyond the surface level; examining the degrees of separation between thought, experience and imagination.

The two essays explore a slightly different ground. There is something of an understandable obsession over the unknowable element of what happens after death. It can lead towards the search for some kind of 'truth' or

meaning, which in its turn frequently leads to illusion. Yet, approaches to death can often provide an insight into cultural, social and political attitudes. Some of these require further scrutiny; science is often presented in terms of a set or series of potential answers, the voice of authenticity. Yet, despite offering a sophisticated array of medical solutions, it can also be a catalyst in the degradation of human life, particularly at the point of death. Mortality is though, as much about life as it is about death. The writing questions our presentness and the ways in which we can be diverted from the fragile and tenuous state of our own existence.



THE COFFIN ROUTE
STEVEN GARTSIDE

Mortality is not death, but it is living with death in mind. As death is unknown, it is also excessive. The effects are keenly felt - mourning, loss, emptiness - yet, death itself is an inevitable absence. It is outside of experience. As such, it makes the subject ripe for cultural works of all kinds. As it cannot be documented there is little that can be proven to be false, this lack of evidence generates the imagination. Although life and death indicate a rather straightforward opposition, a choice between black and white, this is not really the case. The unknown offers more of a sea of grey.

An obsession with the beginning and end of things - given the subject - is not surprising. They are the two points which draw the attention, either through the suggestion of how things might be, the pleasure of potential. Or, alternatively, the possibility of conclusion. Fictional narratives may move through experimental forms which alter order, change voices or intervene in the plot. Still, the beginning and end exert themselves as pressure points. The popularity of such genres as crime fiction would seem to rest on structure and resolution. The formula may shift and the lines may blur, yet, at the central core is a summation, a bringing together of loose ends, a desire to satisfy.

The literature of death is plagued with familiar things, the more dramatic the subject the greater the potential pitfall. In the mass of material around death, any starting point can appear random. The notion of the 'journey' is a default explanatory device for anything from funerals to reality television, the immediacy of being on, or having just completed a journey. The Coffin Route of the title is both metaphor and location. There are a number of coffin routes around Britain, their function was simple, it was the path used to carry bodies from a Parish that did not have a place of burial on to one that did.

There is a coffin route in the Lake District which goes from Rydal to Grasmere. The path runs high above the two lakes, providing the kind of views which find themselves filling books, magazines and guides, as well as becoming summary postcards of the Lake District experience. Over time, the coffin route has moved from a functional role to a touristic one. It is fairly easy to walk, though not perhaps if you are sharing the weight of coffin and corpse. At points along the route there are resting stones, alongside these there are now also benches which provide rest for the living. As the view draws the eye, there is also a poetic legacy that intervenes. Wordsworth's late residence Rydal Mount is at the start of the route, the early residence of Dove Cottage is along the way, before the final residence of St Oswald's Churchyard. The harsh realities of death are always softened in some way, through intention, context or just the slow passing of time.



It is not uncommon for a nobly intended metaphor to fall into cliché and sentimentality. This may not always matter if it serves its purpose. Sleep as a stand-in for death is common, it appears as much in literature as it does in the cemetery. Gravestones often note that the occupant below is 'not dead, only sleeping', as an act of pacification (religious or otherwise) it may be a comfort. Yet, any reading

outside of that would fall into a much more disturbing realm. At the core of the problem is a simple unknowability, there have been various responses to this. Sigmund Freud's summation was to note that,

Death is an abstract concept with a negative content for which no unconscious correlative can be found.¹

The impossibility of experiencing death, at least in any way that has a value for the living, means that its place is primarily fictive. Ludwig Wittgenstein brought further pragmatism with regard to the question of absence, noting that, 'Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death.'² The list of philosopher comments could continue, figures such as Freud and Wittgenstein are useful in providing a certain neatness, this is also why the idea tends to recur. The fact that the 'beyond' in death is a construction, does not reduce its power as a subject, nor alter the fear with which it might be associated. If we followed the logic of Wittgenstein then the absence should lead to silence, yet the nature of the subject encourages its opposite, there is no end of discussion, invention and dramatisation.³

To consider mortality is to consider the place of life and death, as well as the process by which we engage and the ways in which we avoid. In Kafka's diaries, there is an entry from December 1914 which contemplates the relationship between death and writing. Kafka worked under a particular assumption, firstly, providing that his own suffering would not be too great he imagined that he might be content on his deathbed. Further to this, he notes that his best writing occurs because of his own capacity to die relatively satisfied, compared with the incapacity of his characters. In effect, the attention of the reader is intensified through the characters,

precisely because of their inability to resolve attitudes towards death. It is an idea which makes considerable assumptions of the reader. Maurice Blanchot discusses the position in the series of essays 'The Work and Death's Space', he is intrigued by the circular nature of the argument and the inherent contradictions,

The work in question is writing. Kafka cuts himself off from the world in order to write, and he writes in order to die in peace. Here death, tranquil death, is represented as the wages of art; it is the aim and the justification of writing.⁴

Kafka does not seek to live in peace, only to die in such a state. This position Blanchot notes, is not the familiar route for the majority of writers. For many, such as Andre Gide, the idea would be to 'write in order not to die'. This is the demand of the work to survive the writer, for the work to 'live on', it is basic, but it is an idea that haunts a considerable number of writers and their work. Blanchot pushes things further to bring in a more extreme aspect of death when he discusses suicide. By its nature, suicide is based on a substantial element of chance. Life may be deemed unbearable, yet it is still to be exchanged for an unknown quantity, this may indeed be nothingness. A link is made to art in the sense that art and suicide aim for something which 'eludes all plans.' This is not the more comfortable position occupied by Kafka, it makes the creative process and a method of death a more radical act, both being derived from a delusional state. The production of art is always in part unknowable and will always remain unfinished - a striving towards what might be possible. Blanchot allows too much generosity, perhaps, to the act of making work.

The solitude of art and literature may well enhance the responsiveness of the viewer or reader. The work is identified as emerging from an intensity of experience (there are dangers of falling into the myths of creative production here, but these will be skipped for the moment). The intensity is seen in the experience of generating the work and does not emerge out of lived experience. That is, the response occurs partially because of an awareness of being in the midst of a fiction. The separation between the two is important. When faced with more material notions of existence, the discussion often returns to questions of validity. Images are not always able to remain purely in an art-world of possibility. Photography often locates itself in relation

COLLECTION OF WILLIAM HOPE
(1863-1933), IMAGES CIRCA 1920



to specific events, it can be used as a point of proof or refutation and be presented as evidence. Even though images can lie with ease and interpretation can mislead, the photograph still has a power which sometimes exceeds its purpose. The area of paranormal activity provides an appropriate example. The Spiritualist movement began in the 1850s, based on the notion that the spirit exists beyond the body. Although it has been a fairly consistent low level presence, there was a stronger interest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As it coincided with the rise of photography, the intersection is of some consequence. It has been an area of the kind of activity in which the photograph has been used to claim truth and authenticity. The image as a demonstration of proof.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York held a show in 2005 entitled, *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*. The aim of the exhibition was to bring together a substantial collection of photographs running from the 1860s right through until World War Two. During this period the paranormal was an extensively debated subject. There was a wide range of public figures who expressed different levels of interest and engagement. Carl Jung completed his thesis 'On the Psychology and Pathology of So-Called Occult Phenomena' in 1903. Henri Bergson was an observer of seances, the British Prime Minister Arthur Balfour held a long fascination with the subject and was particularly interested in automatic writing, amongst other things. For the novelist Arthur Conan Doyle the involvement was to replace writing almost entirely. Conan Doyle continued to make 'appearances' long after his death, spirit photography being the most popular example. Five days after his death a medium enabled him to make a sold-out appearance at the Royal Albert Hall. The list could go on.

Of course, a relatively random selection of names does not elevate the subject to any higher level, it does perhaps indicate why it was a consistent, and at times influential, presence. The purpose here is not to map out a history, it is to look at what happens when material is placed in another context, in this case that of the role of the museum in relation to authenticity. With the material of the occult and paranormal, photography was used as a demonstration of proof by both sides. Photographs capturing a particular emanation (or release of ectoplasm for example), were presented as hard evidence. Equally, those who were sceptics used photography to fake the same kind of activities. The results are unsurprisingly similar. Separated from any kind of context they appear as clumsy still life fantasies.

For the *The Perfect Medium* the museum chose to take a neutral position. The rationale noted that 'the exhibition presents the photographs on their own terms, without authoritative comment on their veracity.'⁵ This open stance works on the idea that by presenting the viewer with a cross-section of material from an 'historical perspective', then each person is able to draw their own conclusion. The book which accompanies the exhibition fills in the historical context of the period and details around individual works. Yet, the fact that there is a substantial volume indicates the complexities of the subject. Setting a balance is always difficult, but there are significant differences with work which is archival. The images are not produced as art objects, if they drift too far away from their origins then meaning is significantly altered.

Over the course of time perspectives always change. With mortality as a subject, the scrutiny is further increased. The difficulty is the position of where authenticity might lie. As photographs of the paranormal may appear entirely bogus when

considered as material evidence, if they are seen as symptomatic of a quest for meaning then the view is altered. Much of the interest in the paranormal was part of a familiar desire to know what happens after death. It was also about the separation of the spirit from the body and the wish for a continuation beyond the limited usefulness of flesh and bone. What follows could be seen as a number of cases where the separation of mind and body is taken too literally.

VOLTAIRE AT HIS DESK.
ENGRAVING BY BAQUOY, 1795



Before moving on to the body proper, there is a minor diversion to the body mollusc. The essay, 'Voltaire's Laboratory' was written in 1931 and published as part of a collection five years later. In the essay E.M.Forster reflects on the scientific experiments of the writer, philosopher and activist Francois-Marie d'Aroutet, otherwise known by his

pen name of Voltaire. The writing style of the essay leans heavily on Forster's novelistic tendencies. The work is full of detail, description and diversion, but the essence is the focus on Voltaire's search for fixities and facts. Although Voltaire is at points identified as a philosopher, he is also shown to be critical of philosophical investigation and science provided an alternative mode of discovery. The first part of the essay is devoted to an account of the task of trying to weigh fire. The second part, 'Troublesome Molluscs', details a much later investigation.

The eighteenth century inevitably brought tension to the relationship between science and religion, Forster is succinct on where Voltaire found himself,

at no time of his life was he either an atheist or an agnostic, he believed firmly in God, provided God is given nothing to do, and he always insisted that physics must rest upon metaphysics, and that metaphysics are divine.⁶

The stance was neat, problematic, but neat. Voltaire's experiments with troublesome molluscs take place thirty years later than his difficulty in weighing fire. For the experiment, Voltaire has a box of slugs and a box of snails; he does not like slugs, but feels sympathetic towards the snails (partly because of their behaviour, partly because he likes the taste). Still, he snips the heads of both. The purpose is to find out whether they regrow. The results are conflicting.

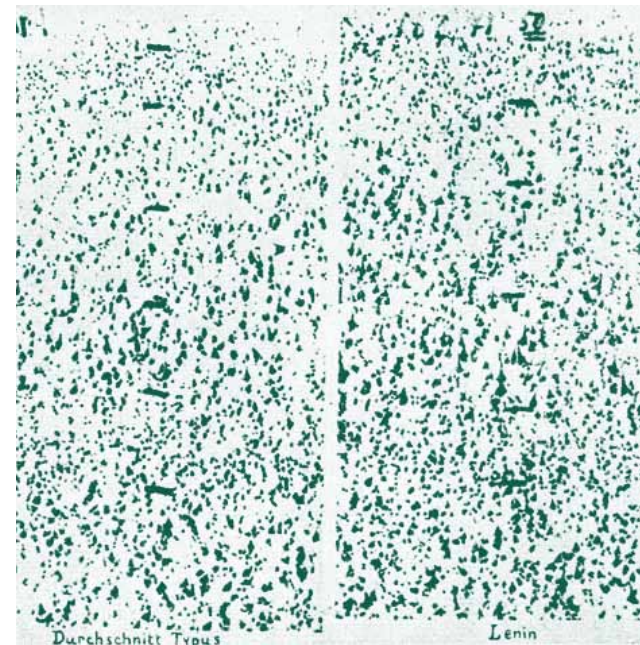
All molluscs lack earnestness of purpose, so to speak - sometimes they die when their heads are removed, sometimes they grow fresh heads and live, sometimes they live without heads. Voltaire is delighted, but puzzled.⁷

It was found that on the whole slugs grow new heads, but snails do not. Forster was as curious about the lack of findings as was Voltaire. The conclusion, of sorts, was only that nature is an admirable thing. Voltaire turns the work in another direction - as a dramatic dialogue - as a way of resisting the findings. Despite the lightness of tone in Forster's writing, his summation is more pronounced and recommends we should see his 'serious' utterances as 'journalism'. For Forster, the experiments were more of a diversion, the way they were written was of more importance than the end result. The work has a 'spurious lucidity', of no real value for the scientist, more impressive for the public. In Voltaire, Forster saw a common problem, to effectively communicate is to simplify; to simplify is to falsify. The benefit of Voltaire for science was as a populariser, it is seen that this - at least for the novelist Forster - is what the literary man can provide.

Voltaire's experiment may seem crude, but it was not unusual. The scientific does not fare particularly well in relation to time. The good things are made use of, the bad mostly forgotten and the ridiculous often become the diverting footnotes of a more substantial history. Any field of activity which uses the experiment is going to have a similarly mixed set of results. Failure is a necessary corollary to success (and the balance is of course heavily weighted towards failure). The points where science collides with other elements can illuminate more significant concerns and agendas. The announcement of Lenin's death in January 1924 generated a number of responses as to how the Soviet leader might be kept alive. Most were in the realm of the metaphysical, others involved such things as cryogenics. There were even elaborate plans to construct a refrigeration unit to preserve Lenin's body (the process did more harm than good).⁸ The poet Mayakovsky

declared that in death Lenin is still 'more alive than all the living' (Mayakovsky was to commit suicide in 1930). A touch of avant-garde art practice was also brought to the occasion with the design of a cubic mausoleum. The shape, for Kazimir Malevich, was symbolic of a fourth dimension, he also suggested cubes should be distributed to Party members so that there might be shrines in the office and the workplace. On Malevich's own death a white cube with a black square was placed on his tomb, mourners were also allowed flags containing a black square (this symbol was an important statement for the artist, a 'degree zero' of art). To return to the death of Lenin though, Malevich had his own perspective which is that his death was not a death as such,

MICROGRAPH OF A SECTION OF LENIN'S BRAIN,
COMPARED TO AN ORDINARY BRAIN



that he is alive and eternal, is symbolized in a new object, taking as its form the cube. The cube is no longer a geometric body. It is a new object with which we try to portray eternity.⁹

Lenin's body became the subject of a number of scientific studies. The brain was of particular interest, after being finely sliced into sections, it was preserved and subjected to numerous periods of research. In 1929 an image was published of a micrograph of Lenin's brain compared to an 'ordinary' brain. The results of a report from 1936 confirmed that Lenin was a thinker of the highest order and his brain showed an 'extraordinary degree of organization.' The mausoleum encouraged the power of the mythology to continue.

The demonstration of the relationship between mind and body is not uncommon, literal though it often is, there is a wish to assert or make a statement of irrefutable truth. In *Life* magazine from February 1951, there is an article, 'Einstein's Brain Waves: They are charted to learn how a genius thinks.'¹⁰ The fact that the scientist was the subject of a piece in a popular magazine was not unusual, his presence often guaranteed media attention. On this particular occasion the photograph documents an 'experiment' of sorts. Einstein is pictured with electrodes attached to his head in order to measure the brain waves. The scientist/thinker is there to leave traces of his mind at work. Einstein is asked to think about relativity and then for his mind to be at rest in order to compare the patterns. The chart was also reproduced, showing increased activity at the point where scientific thinking occurs. Roland Barthes was interested enough to write about the subject in the regular essays he wrote for the magazine *Lettres Nouvelles* between 1954 and 1956

(later collected together as *Mythologies*). The origins of the essays are of relevance, part of the purpose was for Barthes to reflect on current events and the underlying myths of everyday life. The essays often began from 'a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality.'¹¹ The essay was not about Einstein as such, but Einstein's brain. Barthes wanted to explore the paradox in the turning of thought into mechanical activity. The mythology was such that it showed him 'as a genius so lacking in magic that one speaks about his thought as of a functional labour analogous to the mechanical making of sausages.'¹² The appealing element for Barthes was the process by which the 'genius' of Einstein is directed purely to the brain as a functioning object.

ILLUSTRATION FROM HOW TO READ CHARACTER
BY SAMUEL RWEILL, 1870



The word 'genius' tends to complicate. Since Barthes was writing in the 1950s the word has become increasingly degraded. Though, when Robert Musil was writing *The Man Without Qualities* in the 1930s, the main character Ulrich, reflects on the problematic nature of genius. This occurs in a

short chapter with a compelling title 'A Racehorse of Genius Crystallizes the Recognition of Being a Man Without Qualities'.¹³ After contemplating the idea of having once been widely regarded to be 'promising', there is a note of the day in which Ulrich no longer desires to be such a thing. In effect, he is a scientist who no longer believes in science. This coincides with the way the word genius found its way into all sorts of places, not least in sports writing, the defining moment of decline is when it is applied to a racehorse. From this point, the word has no meaning for Musil's character. The appearance of 'genius', even as a contested notion, is often used as reasoning. It is a state, for the most part, which often absents itself from the need for proof.

The opposition between mind and body is only ever on the surface level of convenience. Though, it does have its uses as a device. The book *Darkness Visible* is the novelist William Styron's short insightful account of depression. It details aspects of the writer's life, interspersed with snatches of detail from the experiences of others, as well as references to literature and film. The book began as a lecture at a symposium on affective disorders sponsored by the Department of Psychiatry of The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Styron wrote it precisely because of the nature of the disease, describing it as 'a disorder of mood, so mysteriously painful and elusive in the way it becomes known to the self - to the mediating intellect - as to verge close to being beyond description.'¹⁴ The tone Styron adopts is particularly effective, it does not overplay the drama of depression, rather the opposite. It details the way in which depression seeps into mind and body, usually leaving the writer unable to function at even the most basic levels. Within the field of science, Styron notes the significant division between approaches using psychology and those relying on

pharmacology. Although Styron in no way marks literature as an aid to any useful treatment, he does make a parallel in terms of how we might think about such subject. In the book, Styron acknowledges the way in which Albert Camus 'radically set the tone for my own view of life history.' Camus had also read Styron's work and admired it. Coincidentally he also suffered from depression. The two were due to meet in Paris in 1960, when Styron was en route to France he received the news that Camus had been killed in a car crash. Camus wrote the essay 'Reflections on the Guillotine' in 1957, it begins with a recollection of his father deciding to witness an execution and being very badly affected. Styron describes the essay as 'a virtually unique document, freighted with terrible and fiery logic.' Through its thirty-nine pages the arguments in favour of capital punishment are carefully dismantled. The purpose of Camus for Styron was that he was a 'great cleanser of my intellect, ridding me of countless sluggish ideas.' The writing in *Darkness Visible* moves quickly through its subject - the prose is cleansed of extraneous detail and description.

In writing about mortality and death there are inevitable cross-over points. As one writer might mention another, so those more heavily versed in certain themes will continue to recur. There are artists where death makes the odd appearance and those where its presence occupies a more substantial place. As the museum has been frequently compared to the mausoleum or the cemetery, its function might also be seen by some as an attempt to embalm the corpse that is art's history. The purpose of collecting and collections may be about preservation and even identity. Yet, it is also a compulsion, one which covers over the futility of the task. The exhibition fares a little better; selection, contrast and most importantly temporality, all function to

keep thought active. One of the constructive elements about the idea of the exhibition is not about the containment of the subject, often the fascination is in the logic of the selection as well as the things that are missing; the allusions and asides; the distraction and diversion. Attaining completeness in collection and exhibition is a kind of death, what else would there be to say?

Thinking of alternative ideas of narrative can be helpful. Chekhov is reported to have passed on the following advice - he recommended that once a story is written, then the first editorial task should be to strike out the beginning and the end.¹⁵ The reason being that those two points are the places where novelists are most inclined to lie. Chekhov urged brevity. Narrative has a strong hold and does not always encourage reduction. The reader invests in the writer, the writer writes for the reader. It can be difficult for the writer to escape the work. Felix Feneon was known as a literary stylist, even though he never published a book and his writing was mostly anonymous. Feneon was responsible for a series of 'Novels in Three Lines', which appeared in the Parisian newspaper *Le Matin*. The idea was not unique, similar versions of the concise news story, usually involving death, appeared in a number of European publications. Feneon's work, all published around 1906, was particularly distinctive. Rather than describing, is is better to detail,

On the bowling lawn a stroke leveled
M.Andre, 75 of Levallois. While his ball was
still rolling he was no more.

or,

In the woods of Noisiel lay in two parts,
under the elm from which he had hanged
himself, Litzenberger, 70, his head picked
clean by rooks.¹⁶

There is a subtlety in the structure, a distinction combined with a delicacy of touch. The subject is lifted from their fate, but the result is not softened in any way.

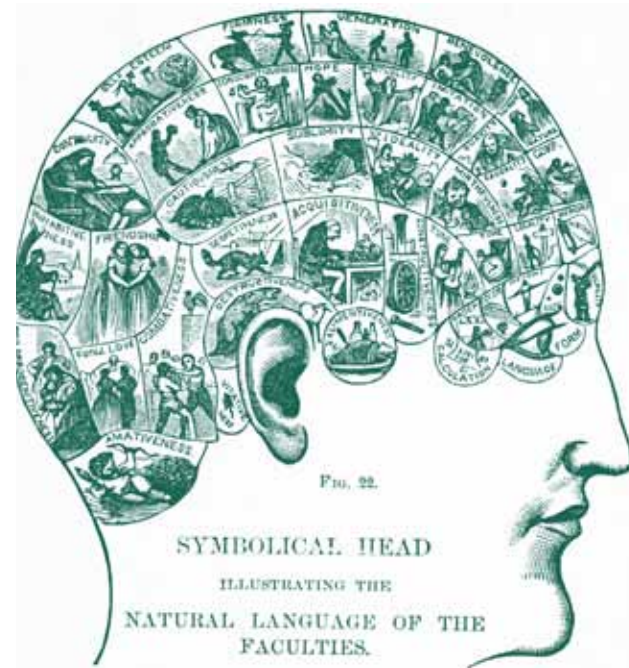


ILLUSTRATION FROM HOW TO READ
CHARACTER BY SAMUEL RWEELLS,
1870

The obsession over extracting meaning from existence and the search for different levels of proof or authentication are fairly consistent themes. The focus may be heightened at particular times, but the search continues. In extremis, the question of mortality and what happens after death are replaced by a much more functional quest for survival. In some ways, any questioning of purpose is more frequent

in times of the ordinary and the everyday, it is then that the demand to know what existence might mean is intensified. Kierkegaard offered a paradox at the centre of the question. He acknowledged that a common understanding of philosophy is that life can only be understood backwards. What Kierkegaard argues, is that what is often forgot is that life still needs to be lived forwards and therefore,

it becomes more and more evident that life can never really be understood in time simply because at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting place from which to understand it - backwards.¹⁷

If this path of logic is followed, then in rather blunt terms, the life lived cannot be understood. There is an implication that the point of death might be the necessary resting place from which to try and determine such a thing, but it still remains unclear. As the unknowability of death remains, we are left with the more familiar impact on life. In Roland Barthes' *Mourning Diary*, published posthumously, he notes that his previous mourning was 'only a borrowed knowledge', something taken from art and philosophy. The death of his mother turns it into his own,

Don't say Mourning. It's too psychoanalytic. I'm not mourning. I'm suffering.¹⁸

Barthes had already published *Camera Lucida*, which is a consideration of photography in the first part and a reflection on the death of his mother in the second. The *Mourning Diary* intensifies theme and details the process of mourning in a series of fragmentary diary entries - a style towards which Barthes had been moving for some time. The diary offers another

paradox though. The English translation comes out in a nicely designed cloth bound edition, it becomes an aesthetically desirable thing. We are seduced by another's experience of mourning and it becomes another act of cultural consumption. The translation - in terms of the whole, not just language - removes the rawness of death.

Whether we choose to dwell on the fact that the coffin route is the inevitable path we follow. The degree of focus remains the choice of the individual. A cursory look at attempts to demonstrate notions of meaning, authenticity and proof in relation to existence and its aftermath suggest a constant and continuous thread. Too much attention to the search for fixities and facts disguises the present in the form of redefining the past, or an imagined future. Tolstoy argued that it is not the job of the artist or writer to solve a problem irrefutably. The proof that might be seen through art and literature may only lie in the need to dwell more substantially in the present.

1

Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XIX (1923-25), London: Vintage, 1961, p.58

2

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London: Routledge, 2001

3

For Wittgenstein, the logical end-point would be the following position, 'whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent', *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London: Routledge, 2001

4

Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1989 (orig.1955), p.93

5

The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2005

6

E.M.Forster, 'Voltaire's Laboratory', from *Abinger Harvest*, London: Edward Arnold Ltd, 1965 (orig.1936.), p. 238

7

E.M.Forster, p.241

8

The wider processes (and implications) around the deaths of both Lenin and Stalin is thoughtfully discussed in John Gray, *The Immortalization Commission: Science and the Strange Quest to Cheat Death*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2011

9

Malevich, as quoted in John Gray, *The Immortalization Commission: Science and the Strange Quest to Cheat Death*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2011, p.162

10

The article 'Einstein's Brain Waves: They are charted to learn how a genius thinks' appeared in *Life* on 26th February 1951

11

Roland Barthes, 'Preface to the 1957 Edition', *Mythologies*, London: Paladin, 1973 (original 1957), p.11

12

Roland Barthes, 'The Brain of Einstein', *Mythologies*, London: Paladin, 1973 (original 1957), p.76

13

Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, London: Picador, 1995 (orig. 1978), p.41

14

William Styron, *Darkness Visible*, London: Vintage Classics, 2004

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This is used as an unsourced quote of a dialogue between Chekhov and Bunin, it appears in Adam Thirwell, *Miss Herbert*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2007, p.299

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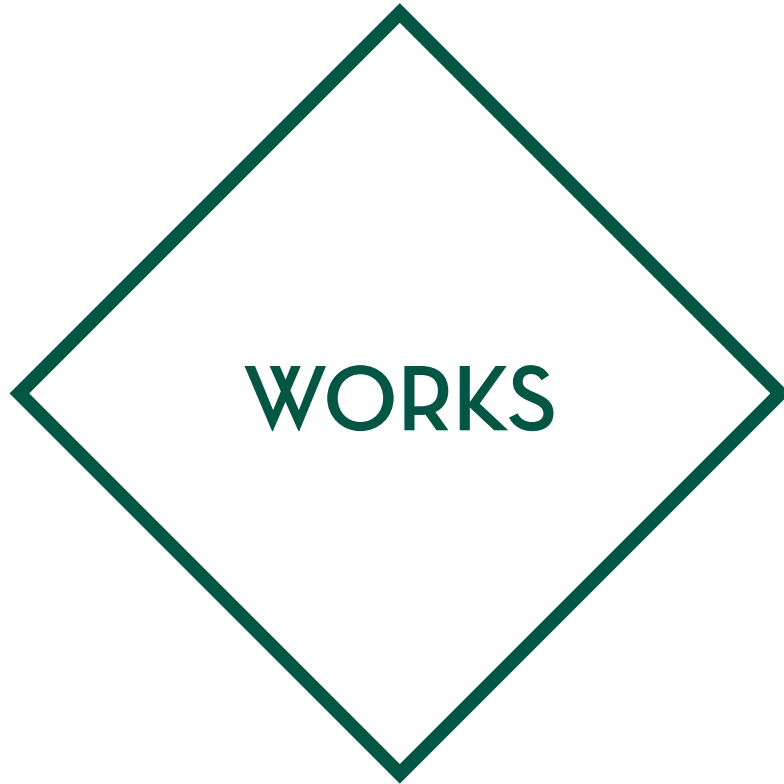
Felix Feneon, *Novels in Three Lines*, New York: NYRB, 2007

17

Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Soren Kierkegaard*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938

18

Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, London: Notting Hill Editions, 2011



MORTALITY: DEATH AND THE IMAGINATION
VALERIA RUIZ VARGAS AND ZOE WATSON

IAN BREAKWELL

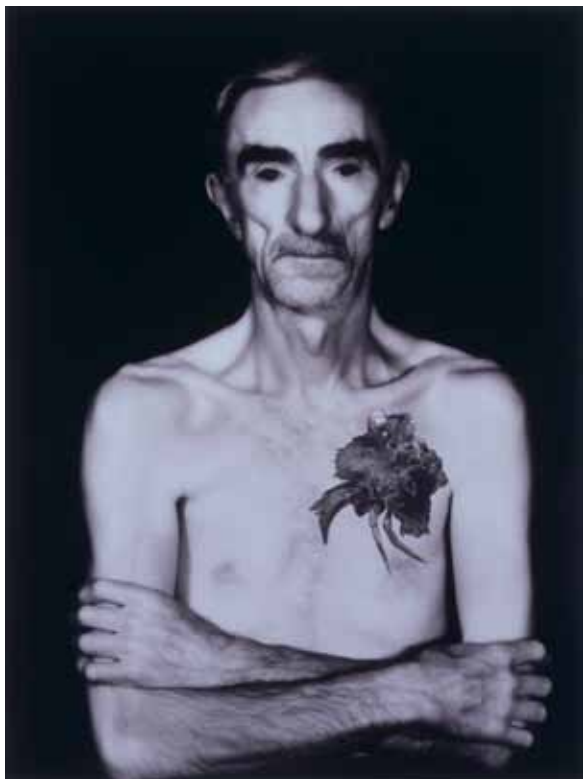


IAN BREAKWELL, *THE OTHER SIDE*, 2002
 COURTESY OF THE ESTATE AND ANTHONY REYNOLDS GALLERY, LONDON.
 PHOTO: STEPHEN WHITE

In much of Ian Breakwell's work there is a fascination with the observation of everyday life, through film, photography, collage and painting he documented ordinary people from a detached perspective. The artist was a compulsive diary keeper - a habit he began in 1965 and continued for forty years - the diary entries were not typically about his own personal experiences. The voyeuristic language of his diary pages took the form of deadpan humour, but the content would relate to ordinary situations with an emphasis on the mundane elements of daily life.

The Other Side (2002) was commissioned as part of a one-year residency at the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill, East Sussex. The piece takes the form of an installation using two videos

projected onto opposite sides of the same wall, with one showing four elderly couples waltzing in slow-motion on the balcony of the pavilion and the other depicting the view over the balcony without human presence. This is overlaid with a soundtrack comprising of waves breaking and the calling of seagulls, combined with a fragment of Franz Schubert's 'Nocturne in E Major'. The title of the piece implies a deathly context, highlighting the age of the dancers with the setting sun in the background making the piece a poignant reflection on the inevitable passing of time.



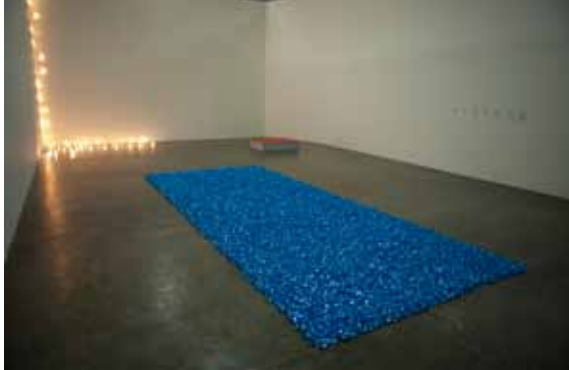
IAN BREAKWELL, PARASITE AND HOST, 2005
COURTESY OF THE ESTATE AND ANTHONY REYNOLDS GALLERY, LONDON

Breakwell was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2004 and responded to the news with an outbreak of productivity. His work from this period demonstrates an obsession with his imminent death, including the series of collages *Diagnosis Drawings* (2004) made immediately after discovering his expected prognosis. He died the following year at the age of 62.

Parasite and Host (2005) was one of the final works Breakwell produced, a self-portrait that stares unblinkingly at his terminal condition. The artists'

skeletal, naked torso emphasises his frailty, and exposes the image of a crab, which has been placed deliberately over his lung. The crab represents the parasite, whilst the artists' role is to host the cancer that will eventually kill him. Breakwell deals with the harsh reality of cancer head-on in this haunting image.

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, UNTITLED (BLUE PLACEBO), 1991
COURTESY OF ASTRUP FARNLEY COLLECTION, OSLO, NORWAY

The work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres often makes use of ideas of repetition and re-production, as well as exploring social and political themes. The work *Untitled* (1991) is a black and white photograph of an empty double bed showing the traces of the previous presence of two occupants. This image was blown up onto six billboards around New York City, the content of the work considered the nature of public and private space as well as sexual politics. The use of different sites aimed for the work to reach a wider demographic than that of the familiar gallery setting, thus inviting a range of responses.

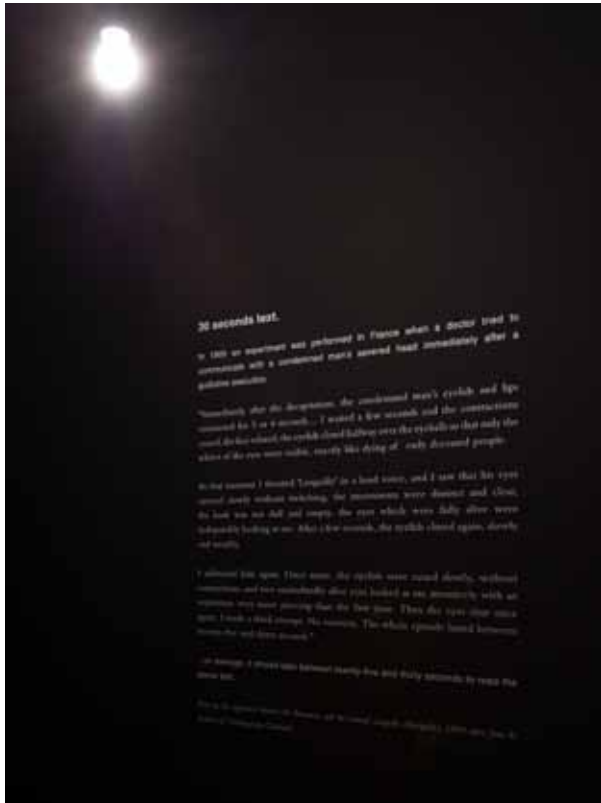
The work of Gonzalez-Torres often encourages the audience to take an active role in their relationship with individual pieces. In many of the installations the viewer physically interacts with the work transforming the aesthetic as well as the physical nature of the work. As a result, the audience takes the role of an artistic collaborator, with each interaction, or non-interaction, playing a key part in the piece.

Mortality is a resonant theme in his 'candy spills', and as the name suggests the work consists of a mass of sweets. These can take form in a variety of displays, a pile in the corner of a gallery, or set out on the floor in a geometrical shape. *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*

(1991) was a very personal work for the artist to due to the fact that the weight of the sweets are the same as his partner Ross Laycock's healthy weight. The artist's partner suffered and died from AIDS-related illnesses and the installation represents a metaphor about his decline at the end of his life.

Untitled (Blue Placebo) (1991) is another 'candy spill', in this instance wrapped in blue transparent cellophane. Through the action of eating the sweets, *Blue Placebo* suggests the impermanence of life whilst taking numerous shapes and opening the dialogue to various themes. The audience interaction is also important for the title of the work. The use of 'placebo' refers to taking medicine, specifically medicine without any actual healing properties, given to a patient in order to deceive them in the hope of inducing improvement through a 'placebo effect', or simply as part of the control group of a medical study. Perhaps this refers to Gonzalez-Torres and his partner's struggles and ultimate death from AIDS-related complications, and how taking medicine for the condition does not provide a cure but only serves to prolong the inevitable. The audience assumes the role of a patient, eating the sweet becomes the act of taking a placebo.

DOUGLAS GORDON



DOUGLAS GORDON, 30 SECONDS TEXT, 1996
 COURTESY OF STUDIO LOST BUT FOUND / DOUGLAS GORDON / VG BILDKUNST BONN, 2013.
 PHOTO: STUDIO LOST BUT FOUND / FREDERIK PEDERSEN

Douglas Gordon's art often demonstrates an interest in the qualities of language. Namely, he explores the ambiguity that may be created using sentences with multiple meanings and groups of words that comment on the complexities of the English language.

Gordon's use of text forces the viewer to play an active role through the process of deconstructing the language, considering the sounds and grammar of the words. He has made use of films such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, respectively altering the speed and running time of the film or using repetition to create a new work *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) and *Through a looking glass* (1999). In *Through a looking glass* he modifies the atmosphere of the climax by placing two opposite screens with the same scene in the former and prolonging the time in the latter. Through the work, the artist plays with the viewer's perception of duration and memory.

Gordon pursues themes related to mortality in works such as the installation *Croque Mort* (2000). The photographs in this installation are images of his daughter playfully chewing her feet and fingers, but the addition of the title forces the work to suffer a morbid

transformation. The origin of the term reveals that it refers to someone whose role was to bite the cadaver in order to confirm that the individual was deceased.

30 Seconds Text (1996) is an installation in a darkened room, here the viewer encounters a text detailing an experiment performed during the French Revolution where the bodily reactions of a guillotined prisoner were measured in the moments after his decapitation. The head, separated from the body, was said to have reacted for a further thirty seconds after the beheading. Douglas Gordon re-presents a text of the documentation from the experiment, the single light bulb operates on a timer giving the viewer just thirty seconds to read the text. These parallels in the work connect the moment in the present when the viewer is reading and the moment in the past when the experiment was performed. In a similar way the restricted light works as a tangible connection between the viewer and the condemned man, encouraging an unexpected and subtle confrontation with their own mortality. In addition to this, the piece explores significantly changing attitudes towards scientific discovery and medical experimentation.

JULIAN OPIE



JULIAN OPIE, GRAVESTONES, 1994
COURTESY OF JULIAN OPIE AND LISSON GALLERY

Julian Opie is a sculptor, painter and installation artist whose work often investigates the concept of representation and the ways we understand images. The work has a formal consistency with a strong graphic and reductive style. Drawing inspiration from culture and consumerism, his influences range from road signs and urban architecture through to Japanese prints and traditional portraits. From these sources, Opie has refined a distinctive language, one that reinterprets and manipulates objects of everyday life into a symbolic vernacular of signs and iconography. Opie's signage takes form in a variety of media including LEDs, CD covers, vinyl and billboards. The genre of portraiture is approached with a similar aesthetic, by reducing the body and face to only necessary lines and block colour; at a glance the portrait may look like a non-specific figure, yet just enough detail of the features is given to be able to distinguish individuals.

Woman with Bag (2012) is part of a series of works depicting walking figures. The styles of these works are coherent with previous portraits, by simplifying the figures to such an extent they resemble generic icons. The artist has developed his practice

by making an intentional decision to portray unknown figures from the streets of London, rather than selecting specific people to model for his works, which he had done previously. The anonymity of the characters in these later works puts an emphasis on the autonomous rather than the specific. Any representation of the human form invariably makes us think of ourselves, *Woman with Bag* deliberately asks us to fill in the gaps of the image with parts of ourselves. The use of a generic form means the viewer naturally projects themselves onto the image. The woman is presented on a backdrop of a slab of white marble, with the gravestone iconography leading us to contemplate our own mortality.

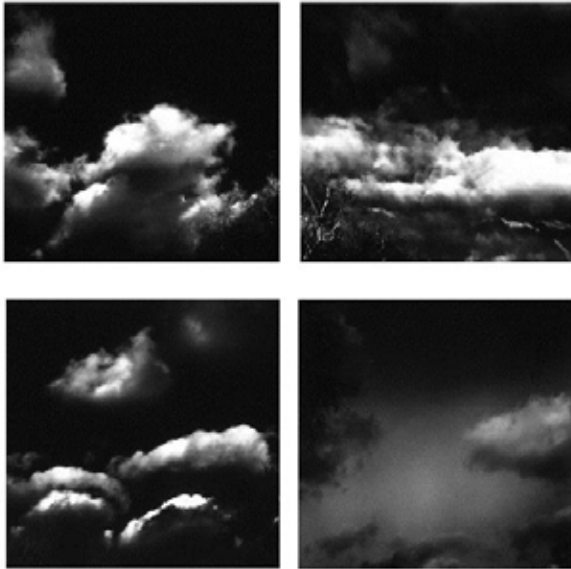
Gravestones (1994) is an earlier piece of work which exemplifies Opie's investigation into the minimal amount of information required for us to form associations and understand signs. The artist's work tends to be a response to real life situations; this sculptural work comprises of 15 slabs of stone that uses a language taken from the graveyard vernacular. Similar to *Woman with Bag*, the work is not about the particular, but about the general concept that we are buried. The work has a conceptual quality about it by removing all of the text and detail that is usually present on gravestones, but the essential material and form of the sculptural pieces prompts us to make an obvious connection to gravestones. The blank stones may be an invitation to impose your own name onto them, to consider your own burial. The arrangement of several blank gravestones brings to mind the logistics of funeral planning with the almost absurd, yet perfectly real concept of blank gravestones being sold wholesale;

while we add details of the deceased to the blank stone, it still comes from a warehouse full of identical stone slabs, all of which will end up with a name of their own. All of this enforces the idea of mortality as something that we all inevitably have to deal with, whether it is our own or that of a loved one. The artist may seem to have an impersonal strategy, but the abstract quality of the work permits us all to engage.



JULIAN OPIE, WOMAN WITH BAG, 2012
COURTESY OF JULIAN OPIE AND LISSON GALLERY

CORNELIA PARKER



CORNELIA PARKER, *AVOIDED OBJECT*, 1999
 COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND FRITH STREET GALLERY, LONDON

In the work of Cornelia Parker there is a strong interest in deconstructing objects so that the end piece of work results in a transformation, something that alters the viewer's perception of the original object. *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991) involved blowing up a garden shed and suspending the debris in an arrangement that recreated a still-shot moment of the explosion itself.

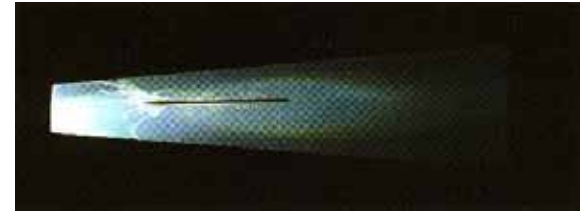
In a number of installations the use of light and shadows is an important element, allowing the objects within the work to merge into the space and onto walls creating an immersive atmosphere. Parker's interest in the qualities of light and contrast is also apparent in her drawings and photographs, and the associations that are suggested to the viewer. Parker's work often begins with, and is then nurtured by conversation, as the works progress and are finalised the aim is to generate dialogue. Consequently, the relationship between title and work is an essential indicator of the complex pro-

cess behind the making of the work.

Although Parker allows scope for free associations, the titles of the works nonetheless affect the viewer's perception of the work. *Avoided Object* (1999) is a set of four photographs taken with the camera of Rudolf Höss, commandant of the Nazi concentration camp in Auschwitz. The photographs may at first seem like ordinary images of clouds void of any meaning, but the subtitle provides the necessary information ensuring that the viewer is aware of the historical context, inevitably affecting their emotional reaction. The photographs were taken above the Imperial War Museum; the location is important to the work as it reinforces the context of war. The open sky and the contrast between the shades of black and white may suggest that the photos were taken in memory of the victims of Auschwitz.

Feather from Freud's Pillow (1996) similarly employs a seemingly autonomous object, which is in fact embedded with cultural history, as the feather originates from the couch in Sigmund Freud's London home (the couch is - in effect - the site of Freud's psychoanalysis). This is part of a series of feather pieces by Parker, with other feathers from the Tower of London, the attic of Benjamin Franklin's house, and the South Pole. The title in this piece may reference the relationship between Freud's theoretical writings on dreams and the tangible object as a vestige of his life.

CORNELIA PARKER, FEATHER FROM FREUD'S PILLOW (FROM HIS COUCH), 1996
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND FRITH STREET GALLERY, LONDON



BOB AND ROBERTA SMITH



BOB & ROBERTA SMITH, 13 DECEMBER 06, OUR MOTHER HAS HAD A STROKE, 2008
COURTESY OF HALES GALLERY, LONDON

Through the use of materials commonly associated with producing shop signs, Bob and Roberta Smith uses this ordinary material to explore social and political themes that have an impact on everyday life. The artist has developed a distinctive, recognisable aesthetic by employing glossy sign writer's paint to depict bold statements onto found timber or board. Central to the work is an element of satirical and wry humour, whilst employing the language styles of artificial political sloganeering or alternative protest movements. Slogans vary from the light-hearted and everyday – *I Believe in the Clash* (1998) – to the direct and political messages – *I Wish I could have Voted for Barack Obama* (2009).

The project *The Art Party* in 2011 set out to advocate the importance of the arts in spite of the current worldwide financial crisis and funding cuts. The collection of home-made protest ephemera was presented with short, demanding phrases including *FREE MOMA* (2011) and *Artists, Poets, Dancers and Architects built America and they will Rebuild America with Art at its Center* (2011). The utilitarian methods and direct messages challenge aesthetic elitism and established authority, encouraging a creative and critical discourse about art. *The Death Penalty*, 2011 employs a distinctly political aesthetic similar to

protest boards in order to stress clear messages, in this case opposing the death penalty.

I am a Living Sign is a series of works that are much more reflective of the life of the artist; these large-scale 'diary paintings' were based on personal experiences. The work acknowledges the fact that all people experience low moments, and these confessional dialogues encourage the viewer to try to understand the stories that make up our own lives. Many of these works explore mortality through commonplace means; *I went to the Chinese Doctor* (2006) lists everyday illnesses, emphasising modern society's obsession with personal health and a growing tendency towards hypochondria. *Our Mother has had a Stroke* (2008) deals with his mother's degenerative illness, but the frank and light-hearted tone in which it is addressed makes it accessible to the viewer, who in turn, considers their own approach to similar experiences. *All my Friends are Killing Themselves with Drugs, Fags and Booze*, 2007 is from the same collection of diary pages, the spiral arrangement of the lettering implies a lack of control (i.e. the phrase 'spiralling out of control') and gives a feeling of vertigo and is reminiscent of Saul Bass's design work for the film of the same name.

SAM TAYLOR-WOOD



SAM TAYLOR-WOOD, STILL LIFE, 2001
COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

Sam Taylor-Wood's work uses photography, film and installation to illustrate emotional encounters and explore social and psychological conditions, including isolation and vulnerability. Taylor-Wood has investigated aspects of the human condition in works such as *Crying Men* (2004), a series of photographs that also combines her interest in celebrity culture. The work depicts individual portraits of renowned film actors including Willem Dafoe, Michael Gambon, and Robert Downey Jr. who appear to be experiencing an emotional breakdown. Although the actors are performing, under directions by the artist, the misery and anguish portrayed is genuine, thus exposing a collectively vulnerable masculinity. *David* (2004) is another voyeuristic film portrait, a single hour long shot of David Beckham sleeping. The filmic portrait is a single hour long shot of David Beckham sleeping. The camera is set up in close proximity to him, offering an intimate encounter between Beckham and the viewer, providing a compelling observation of the football icon.

Still Life (2001) is a video piece that employs the visual language of the painting genre of the same name. This contemporary memento mori deals with themes related to transformation and death through the staging of fruits that rot to the point where they become unrecognizable. Each of the fruits

undergoes the same process; however, each one decays at different, but accelerated rates. Using time as the principal tool in this work, Taylor-Wood explores the idea of the individual dying within a society, treating the themes of death and mortality in relationship to other factors and not only as an isolated episode. As a result, the work deals with mortality through the idea of a transformation – rather than as a final end-point, opening – a dialogue about issues such as the length of the process and its consequences. In contrast, the only object that remains the same while everything else (even the light) alters, is the blue plastic pen.

A Little Death (2002) is another homage to still life painting, and it borrows its title from the English translation of the French idiom 'la petite mort', a phrase used as a euphemism for an orgasm. This highlights the intrinsic link between sex and death, where sexual intercourse is a Dionysian act for those involved, as well as having the potential to create new life, trying in vain to prevent the inevitability of death. Ideas of life and death also arise when considering the actual content of the work, the rotting carcass of the rabbit. The flesh of this once living being now provides sustenance for maggots, demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between life and death.



PRESENT-TENSE

PRESENT-TENSE
CLIVE PARKINSON

In the face of our own mortality, what relevance do the contemporary arts have: moreover, what might artists and art tell us about our own attitudes to life and death in a society where we are told wellbeing is dependent on happiness and that like any other commodity, health can be purchased. Through an exploration of artists encountering their own mortality and by unpicking secular notions of the numinous, this essay will set the scene for a new dialogue in arts and health, one that attempts to understand how art might inform our attitudes to mortality.

In an interview with Melvyn Bragg in 1994, the terminally ill playwright Dennis Potter (1935 -1994) described the process of creating new works, knowing that they would be his final pieces of writing and as such, his memento mori. Speaking with lucidity and eloquence, Potter set out the plots of two near-parallel works, *Karaoke* and *Cold Lazarus* (1996), whilst drinking champagne and morphine, and chain-smoking.

It was a bravura performance, a swan-song peppered with acerbic attacks on the media and delivered with compelling charm: an interview which Bragg inevitably anticipated with ‘...an overwhelming sense of apprehension.’¹ A key moment occurred as Potter attempted to explain his acute awareness of being in the present moment: something he suggested, that you can only really experience when you are facing your own mortality.

We’re the one animal that knows that we’re going to die, and yet we carry on paying our mortgages, doing our jobs, moving about, behaving as though there’s eternity in a sense. And we forget or tend to forget that life can only be defined in the present tense... that nowness becomes so vivid to me that,

in a perverse sort of way, I'm almost serene. You know, I can celebrate life. Below my window ...the blossom is out in full now. It's a plum tree, it looks like apple blossom, but it's white, and looking at it, instead of saying, 'Oh, that's nice blossom', looking at it through the window when I'm writing, I see it is the whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom that there ever could be...The fact is that if you see the present tense, boy, do you see it! And boy, can you celebrate it.²

Poignant and succinct, and with a 'luminous power,'³ Potter captured something that incessantly flits across the minds of the worried-well, but that can't really be understood until it confronts us: we are mortal. No clinical intervention can alter the fact, we have a finite life, but Potter offers us an opportunity to explore something intriguing and seemingly

DENNIS POTTER, COURTESY OF ITV



implausible: in the face of impending death, some kind of wellbeing might be attainable and expanding on Potter's own example, culture and the arts may offer us a way of exploring this.

In the face of our own mortality, what relevance do the contemporary arts have? Any investigation that explores that liminal space between the arts, health and wellbeing runs the inevitable risk of being labeled instrumental and at worst, social engineering. The community of arts and health of which I am a part, is awash with faux psychology and miracle cures, typified by sensational headlines such as, 'Can Creativity Cure the Sick?'⁴ which the BBC ran to accompany a recent article extolling the impact of the arts on children with leukemia. This misleading evangelical stance typifies some of the polarities in this field of enquiry, where attempts to understand the potency of the arts, are reduced to a meaningless 21st century, pseudoscientific cultural phrenology.

BEYOND UTILITARIANISM

The 'lifestyle' and 'self-help' shelves of high-street bookshops, are groaning under the weight of positive psychology best-sellers like Rhonda Byrne's *The Power*,⁵ in which every conceivable problem can be solved: 'perfect health, incredible relationships, a career you love, a life filled with happiness, and the money you need to be, do, and have everything you want, all come from *The Power*' arguably the ultimate consumer dream.

The claims of culture and the arts to cure the sick are misleading and ultimately self-destructive. This is not to say that the arts have not got a place in medicine and public health: on the contrary, the

evidence base is growing and a new generation of clinicians and public health strategists understand the place of the humanities in the health and wellbeing agenda. Hospitals the world over, are benefiting from a 'make-over' and participation in the arts is contributing to active wellbeing. But here is the crux: our glass and steel hospitals, with all their considered public and participatory arts projects are still infected with systemic target culture that has allowed neglect and abuse to incubate alongside an ever-evolving spectrum of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

As creators, as audiences and as participants, the arts offer ways of understanding our individual and collective experiences of the conditions of our existence and perhaps ways in which we might question our lives and make changes. In his apparent serenity approaching his own death and through the creation of his work, Dennis Potter offers us a useful way of understanding art beyond utilitarianism. *Karaoke* and *Cold Lazarus* are two, four-part plays filmed as a single production by the same team, but co-produced by BBC and Channel 4 at Potter's request. In *Karaoke*, dying, alcoholic screenwriter Daniel Feeld, in moments of aesthetic psychosis, begins to think people in real life are starting to imitate characters in the play he has written. *Cold Lazarus* is a direct sequel to *Karaoke*, but is set 350 years in a dystopian future, and explores memories contained in Feeld's cryogenically frozen head. Whilst a considerable output of Potter's television dramas were autobiographical, the circumstances of these final plays offer the playwright an opportunity to create more than nostalgic tableaux, and to assert what traces of himself, he would leave behind.

In interview, Potter rails variously against organised religion based on fear and control, and the pernicious power of the media with its commercial

strangle hold on the arts, but it is through his drama that we get near to experience something of Potter's own self realisation. As the abrasive and often unsympathetic character Daniel Feeld approaches his own death, he achieves some kind of resolution through a moment of Potter's own darkly self-referential bravura. Selecting option number 27 on a karaoke machine, in some dank London nightclub, Feeld croons the sublime 'Pennies from Heaven',



more than echoing Potter's most commercially successful drama of the same name, and preceding the darkest moment of *Karaoke*, a calculated murder.

This act of singing and our witnessing the reverie of this dying man, in full knowledge of the murder he will go on to commit, engenders a confused mix of anxious bliss and offers those of us that are deeply immersed within the moment, something similar to what theologian Rudolf Otto (1869 -1937) described as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.⁶ Otto describes this as an overwhelming sense of

excited fear, when we are exposed or drawn to some manifestation of the divine, here on earth. In this sense, it may be interesting to delve a little deeper into this idea of the terror, attraction and fascination that deep immersion in the arts potentially offers.

In his essay, 'On the Knocking at the Gates in *Macbeth*' (1823), Thomas De Quincey (1785 - 1859) introduces the idea of abandoning intellect and rational thought when confronted by absolute artistry. Exploring his own 'great perplexity' at the moment in *Macbeth* when there is a knocking on the gates of the castle, where moments earlier in the play, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have murdered King Duncan.

Those asking for entry to the castle go on to discover the murder scene and during these pregnant moments, De Quincey described the effect on him as a 'peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity; yet, however obstinately I endeavored with my understanding to comprehend this, for many years I never could see - why - it should produce such an effect.'⁷ He urges the reader,

...never to pay any attention to his understanding when it stands in opposition to any other faculty of his mind. The mere understanding, however useful and indispensable, is the meanest faculty in the human mind, and the most to be distrusted; and yet the great majority of people trust to nothing else; which may do for ordinary life, but not for philosophical purposes.⁸

Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce⁹ (1866 - 1952) echoes this, claiming that all we know, can be reduced to logical and imaginative knowledge with imaginative thought preceding all other thought, and this to Croce, places the arts above science or metaphysics.

De Quincey's focus in this essay builds on his own physical and emotional response to the play and of the artistry of such a murder - something beyond a simple sympathy for the victim and suspension of disbelief - and closer to the depth of artistic intensity, of 'some great storm of passion, - jealousy, ambition, vengeance, hatred - which will create a hell within him; and into this hell we are to look.'¹⁰

By conjoining contemporaneous murders in Victorian London, and imbuing them in poetic form, De Quincey undertook what could be considered an early psychoanalytical postmortem of his own *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* to art in both aesthetic and non-religious terms: terms which he would develop further in, *On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts* (1827)¹¹. This is not too far away from Potter's own murderous device and its impact on the viewer/witness, as Feeld croons a potent love song so deeply rooted in the playwright's own life. It does not however, account for Potter's heightened sense of the here and now and his appreciation of



that frothy white plum-blossom. Perhaps mysterium tremendum et fascinans with its paralysing fear-associations, is not the best way of describing this near serenity. Considering Potter's cynicism towards organised religion, and his description of God as 'just a rumor,' and religion as 'the wound not the bandage,'¹² a subversion of religious language for a secular age, may provide a neat sequitur through Christopher Hitchens' (1949 - 2011) use of the numinous,¹³ liberating it from its religious roots, moving beyond fear and towards feelings of awe and wonder.

THE NUMINOUS

Hitchens advocated a separation of the numinous from the sole preserve of religion, believing that the overwhelming feelings we sometimes experience in the presence of a beautiful landscape, of a star-peppered sky, or being moved by human endeavours or artistic achievement, should be freely interpreted without the need of a divine or supernatural basis. This appreciation of something profound, elevated or reduced, to the intimate, is not too hard to imagine. When Aldous Huxley (1894 - 1963) experimented with the hallucinogenic mescaline, which he vividly described in *The Doors of Perception* (1954),¹⁴ he concluded that the transformative effect of the drug was helpful to free the intellectual mind from words and symbols and experience the intrinsic value of perception. This is perhaps reflected in club-culture's marriage of ecstasy (MDMA) and music that taps into patterns that build incrementally only to fall into a euphoria inducing 'drop', something similar to what has been experienced by participants and audiences of all musical genres.

Astronauts, so moved by the experience of see-

ing earth from space frequently describe their experience in terms of the numinous, typified by Dr. Edgar Mitchell, captain of Apollo 14 in 1966 who described what has come to be known as the 'overview effect.' Following his nine hour moon-walk and describing his experience of observing the entirety of the earth from space, Mitchell tried to make sense of his experience, commenting that, 'I could find nothing in the science literature about



it and nothing in the religious literature...you see things as you see them with your eyes, but you experience them, emotionally and viscerally as with ecstasy and total unity.'¹⁵

Hitchens argued that the numinous experience offers the opposite of the supernatural and in fact should be the focus of humanity, enabling solidarity with each other and the natural world and a deeper relationship with the arts. Polarising the faith versus science argument in extremis and even when facing his own death, Hitchens acerbically attacked those who tried to hector him into a deathbed conversion. It could be argued that his extreme hostility

to religion and his own faith in science and reason, represent the blind removal of one theology with another, replacing a 'false god' with the true god of science. Does this avoid meaningfully tackling human consciousness and our intrinsic need for social interaction and the desire to learn, create and grow in relation to our own and others pasts and imagined futures? Developing this idea that the arts might offer something of a numinous experience, I would suggest that we have compelling evidence to show that appreciation of, and participation in the arts, contribute to the very factors that underpin well-being, but a key to this hovers somewhere in that fraught space between what can be evidenced, and what is subjective and unknowable.

If we allow ourselves to imagine an illiterate 15th century pilgrim's arrival at a great cathedral like Notre Dame, its 'divine' artistry and sheer scale would undoubtedly have induced *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, after all, this was a period in our evolution where religion had largely maintained control of the arts, through stained-glass, song, parable and painting. In this way, established doctrines could be pedalled to the masses for a heady prescription of control and solace. So too, in the shadow of the Black Death, we can imagine the deathbed of the fearful and pious in the face of their infinite destiny: heaven or hell.

The church conveniently provided an instructional Latin text¹⁶ on how to die well. What became the *Ars Moriendi*¹⁷ (The Art of Dying) offered advice on the protocols and procedures of a good Christian death. Whilst reiterating that death isn't to be feared, (as the dying person undoubtedly would be lying in a state of fear and probable discomfort) the *Ars Moriendi* would remind you how to avoid the five temptations in your final moments; of lack of faith, despair, impatience, spiritual pride and ava-

rice. The guidance offered advice to those around the deathbed including appropriate behaviour and prayer and of course, consoling you through Christ's example and redemptive powers.

Was this guide effective in offering solace to the dying and their families? Like the earlier writings loosely described as the Tibetan and Egyptian Books of the Dead, it is unclear from contemporaneous accounts what pacification was offered, but it can be imagined that the comfort that it offered, is similar to that which different faiths offer some people today. But what might a contemporary *Ars Moriendi* look like - designed to look past what the poet Philip Larkin described as, 'that vast moth-eaten brocade, created to pretend we never die,'¹⁸ particularly in the light of a secular and arguably science-obsessed society? First, let's think just a little, about our faith in science and how it is described through the language of sensation, often co-opting the arts to tell its story to an impact-hungry public, spoon-fed a diet of sound-bites and conflated possibilities. In the case of medicine this is often cast in the language of battle-lines and of a war on disease that is mediated by a complicit relationship between the pharmaceutical giants and impartial research.

THERAPEUTIC NIHILISM

The general practitioner and former president of the Royal College of General Practitioners, Iona Heath, highlights the rise of preventative health technologies, in which we are witnessing what she describes as 'a new arena of human greed, which responds to an enduring fear.'¹⁹ This fear of our own mortality and commodification of wellbeing is reflected

in the way that, ‘more and more of life’s inevitable processes and difficulties—birth, sexuality, ageing, unhappiness, tiredness, and loneliness —are being medicalised’, Dr Richard Smith, one-time editor of the *British Medical Journal* argues that ‘medicine alone cannot address these problems and that common values and attitudes towards the management of death, whilst well known about in scientific circles, have yet to be acted upon because of lack of imagination’.²⁰

Whilst the modern version of the Hippocratic Oath urges clinicians to avoid the ‘twin traps of over treatment and therapeutic nihilism’, it also stresses that ‘there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon’s knife or the chemist’s drug’,²¹ and urges a focus on the human being, not the illness. Smith suggests, that the arts might just be the vehicle to address these points.

It could be argued that blind religious belief is being replaced by a misplaced faith in technology and science and a new age of consumer miracles, with just the possibility that every new intervention, however traumatic, might add extra time and defer death. What then, are the contexts in which plural versions of a contemporary *Ars Moriendi* might emerge? Perhaps the 21st century evangelist and the 21st century atheist could meet somewhere in the middle and explore their humanity, an exquisite corpse conjoined by some equally deluded apotropaic ritual. The obsequious unblinking fanatic, hell-bent on life eternal through votive offerings or a life of sacrifice, videoed and uploaded to youtube. The ultra-Darwinist, stubbornly denying human fallibility and imagination in favour of physical evidence - of pounds shillings and pence, but succumbing with age, to some obsessive compulsive traits, born out of a fear of the unknowable.

Both sides of the coin appear to be a little lost and arguably, a little deluded in their unmovable ideologies, when the inevitability of death could be explored more in terms of humanity rather than near-psychotic posturing.

The physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living is an interesting title for a mildly sensational piece of work, but as an idea, it offers something useful to play with in terms of a real conversation about how we think about our own mortality. Unlike our Victorian ancestors and fellow humans in war-torn areas of the world, a Western experience of death seems sanitized and divorced from day-to-day mortality, mediated by a mix of carefully edited news footage, or else digitally enhanced for a new generation of child soldiers addicted to shoot-em-up virtual reality.

Divorced as we are from an intimacy with death, I would argue that death’s physical impossibility is not unimaginable for most people - what is perhaps unimaginable to those with religious beliefs and atheists alike, is the possibility of our own person-ality being gone - our soul or spirit: whatever we think of as the life spark that makes us who we are - eternally extinguished. Perhaps this is why, of all the deaths from disease possible to us, dementia seems so cruel, in its prematurely taking away something of our essence.

READY FOR ENORMITY

Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University, Robert Nozick (1938 - 2002) usefully questions our asymmetrical fear of death in relation to the eternal time prior to our birth and asks, ‘Is the crucial fact about death not that it makes us finite or limits our future, but that it limits the possibilities that we can

realize?’²² Nozick explored the possibility that death deprives our lives of meaning because in some small ways, we all aspire to have made a difference of some sort, and by leaving ‘traces,’ we want to believe that our lives have had some impact beyond fleeting transience.

Artists provided us with traces of themselves and fractured biographies of others: Steve McQueen in *For Queen and Country* (2007)²³ confronts us with the faces of ‘fallen’ soldiers killed in Iraq between 2003 - 2008 on postage stamps. Sylvia Plath (1932 - 1963) through one of her final poems, *A Birthday Present*, offers a now post-mortem warning of her own self-destruction through the quiet declaration: “I am ready for enormity.”²⁴

These memeto mori, however, are not the sole preserve of artists - the internet is awash with a heady mix of confessional cancer-blogs and martyrdom videos and highways the world over, are littered with faded roadside memorials to countless victims of road traffic accidents and street crime. For those people charged with helping us through our deaths - the nurses and doctors, those palliative and where needed, spiritual guides - offer seemingly impossible support in the face of the void. The task of encouraging conversations around dying is fraught with difficulties.

In the UK, the National Council for Palliative Care is attempting to engage people to take part in conversations about end of life, through its Dying Matters²⁵ campaign, which focuses on ‘things you can do to live and die well,’ which it lists as: making a will, recording your funeral wishes, planning for future care and support, registering as an organ donor and telling your loved ones your wishes. These are all realistic and important things and probably avoided by the vast majority of people, until we are facing a serious health crisis.

The place of creative therapies are well accepted

in this context and participatory artists and designers have a well-established role in the humanising of hospice environments. The creative delivery of celebratory funerals and the production of fiction, poetry and drama that explores bereavement and encourages communication is gathering wider credence.

But this essay is concerned with the numinous potential of the arts and how the contemporary arts in more oblique ways, might influence, provoke and inform us. Let us leave the caring and gentle instrumentalists to nurture and enable people in the here and now, whilst we unpick what this contemporary *Ars Moriendi* might look like and think, how might we have a good death? When Philip Larkin asks ‘what are days for?’ - and answers, ‘to be happy in,’ he’s quick also, to remind us of the shadowy specifiers of the priest and the doctor.²⁶

A GOOD DEATH

The English artist Keith Vaughan (1912 - 1977) was a copious keeper of journals, which he kept from the 1930’s until the day he died in 1977. Following a diagnosis of cancer, his journals portray inevitable anxiety, but also his sober ruminations on existence and a determination that he should be in control of his destiny: in particularly, the manner in which he would die. In his entry on 22nd October 1975, Vaughan writes,

The possible, or indeed likely, proximity of death does not worry me. But I do want to make a graceful exit. Not in pain or prostration. And alone, alas, because I can see how good it would be to die holding someone’s hand. But I do not know anyone to whom this

would be agreeable.²⁷

Almost a year later, Vaughan was ruminating further on a friend's attempt to reassure him about the afterlife. On the 13 August 1976, he comments, 'Immortality of the soul is without a trace of meaning to me. What is a 'soul'? An invention of people who dislike the idea of oblivion. Oblivion holds no terrors for me.' Describing his span of life as 'a tiny dream in an eternity of non-life,' Vaughan echoed the meditations of many before him, eloquently captured almost 2000 years earlier by the Roman playwright and poet, Seneca, (ca. 4 BC - 65 AD) who suggests, 'it is not a question of dying earlier or later, but of dying well or ill. And dying well means escape from the danger of living ill.'³⁰

The very thought of choosing the manner in which we die is as potent a dilemma as can be had, because its inference is that we have a legal choice and the methods in which to end our lives. Language around passive and assisted suicide and the polarity between the Commission on Assisted Dying on one hand, and organised religion on the other, seems to be dominated by the extremes of bigotry and self-righteousness with the dying individual with a desire for self-determination, forced to flounder in the media spotlight. The need to engage people in intelligent dialogue about death and dying is significant and difficult. At the moment, it appears restricted to genteel conversations about writing a will or organ donation and certainly not aimed at children. The disagreeable notion of death in the minds of the living, that Vaughan alluded to, seems indeed, to be the norm.

Any serious conversation about mortality could be explored as part of personal, social and health education within the school curriculum, but critically as a dialogue with young people, not a standardised

nanny-state formula for prescribed 'good' and 'bad' behaviours and their consequences. Perhaps an early journey into ethics and a contextualising of killing by the state; through war and through suicide might help, but whilst rates in children's and young people's suicide are rising,³¹ any attempt to meaningfully discuss suicide, can cause outrage. In France, attempts by one teacher recently, to facilitate conversation about suicide, resulted in his suspension, following knee-jerk public outrage. In an exercise designed for 13 - 14 year olds, the following prompt was given.

You've just turned 18. You've decided to end your life. Your decision is definitive. In a final surge you decide to put in words the reason behind your decision. In the style of a self-portrait, you describe the disgust you have for yourself. Your text will retrace certain events in your life at the origin of these feelings.³²

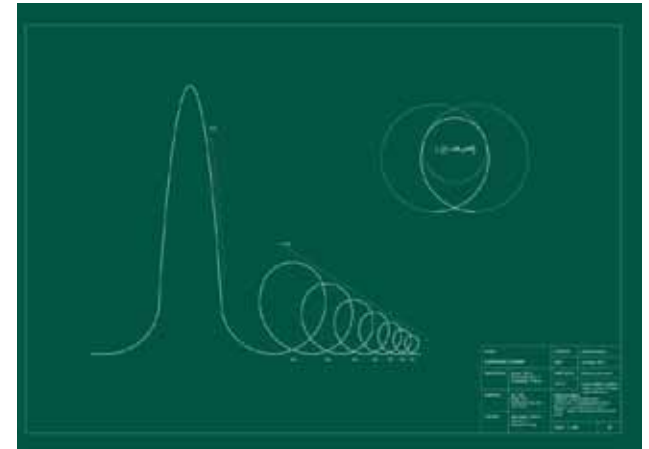
It could be argued that addressing these issues might best be tackled as part of the school curriculum, instilling in future generations, the need to normalise conversations around how we live and die. It seems the French approach was perhaps handled insensitively, but with the right preparation, sensitive delivery and appropriate support, discussing suicide and understanding the factors that lead to it, would seem healthy. However we choose to describe ourselves, this secular, multi-faith world with its 140 character interactions and dreams of infinite wellbeing, is seeing the architecture of Notre Dame competing with Disney-inspired theme parks and IMAX cinema's vying with museums and galleries for blockbuster shows. That said, any meaningful conversation around mortality should begin with the imagination.

TOWARDS A RITUALISED DEATH MACHINE

Lithuanian artist, Julijonas Urbonas offers us an unlikely dystopian segue through his *Euthanasia Coaster* (2010). Putting the ethical question whether euthanasia should be legalised or not, to one side, Urbonas investigated highly clinical approaches to GP assisted suicide in countries where it is, or has been legal. This has typically been through the intravenously administered sedative, sodium thio-pental to induce a coma, followed by pancuronium which stops breathing and causes death.

For Urbonas, the well-intentioned interventions of clinicians seem devoid of ritual or meaning. Where Australian physician Dr. Philip Nitschke³³ developed the sterile, but effective ‘Deliverance Machine’ to help individuals take their own lives, Urbonas explores Gravitational and Fatal Aesthetics arguing that churches and shrines are being replaced by theme parks. Describing the *Euthanasia Coaster* as ‘a hypothetical euthanasia machine in the form of a roller coaster, engineered to humanely – with elegance and euphoria – take the life of a human being,’³⁴ Urbonas has created a 1:500 scale model of what would be a 510 meter high, 7544 meter long rollercoaster that through a maximum speed of 100 meters per second and a g-force of 10g, would ‘induce various unique experiences: from euphoria to thrill, and from tunnel vision to loss of consciousness, and, eventually, death,’³⁵ through cerebral hypoxia: the lack of oxygen supply to the brain.

Urbonas provokes us into questioning what we are seeing: is this real? His research is multidisciplinary and through robust collaboration with engineers, scientists and clinicians, the impact of his design



would no doubt, be effective, but for now can safely be ‘interpreted as a social design fiction.’³⁶ However he does more than provide us with an aestheticised deliverance machine, he offers us a poetic platform to discuss the most difficult conversation, with arguably the blackest of humour, which, he suggests

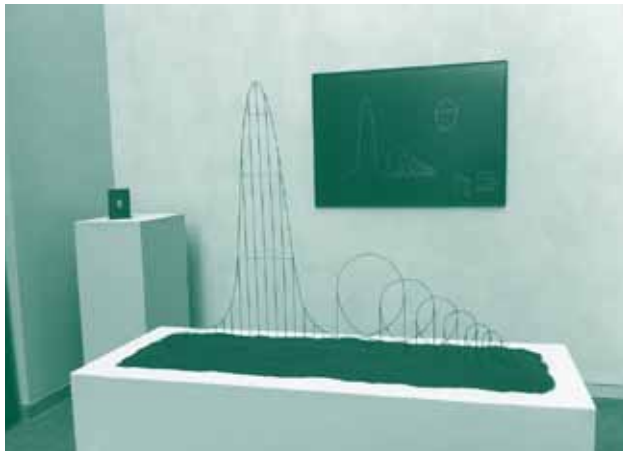
‘...might be desirable, because, first of all, humour is a powerful tool to talk about painful topics, to challenge preconceptions, but also to make the contact with the public more intimate, design becomes less didactic and less elitist yet open to more serious contemplation to those who are willing to do so.’³⁷

In a society where the dying are hidden away and where those who contemplate taking their own lives are subject to the full weight of the law and emotive public scrutiny, the *Euthanasia Coaster* offers us a potent symbol to enable conversation: a heavily loaded *Aesthetic Third*³⁸ that potentially mediates be-

tween those considering taking their life and those in a supportive position, but more critically, enables public discourse.

TRACES

Classes in writing suicide notes and a 'ritualised death machine,' seem some distance from Potter's near serenity facing his own death, as does that exposure to a numinous artistic moment described by De Quincey, but any conversation about how we might achieve a good death, needs to engage beyond the confines of the Hippocratic oath or deathbed confession and embrace imagination. That



Urbonas proposes a machine that induces euphoria prior to death, could be exactly the numinous death that a terminally ill, thrill-seeking atheist would desire. Whilst the internet offers its darkest corners

to explore suicide, it is on one hand liberating, and on the other dangerous and pitiful, with chat rooms for the terminally ill, who through frustration and fear, discuss self-suffocation and where they might purchase lethal poison.

Potter shows us the creative potency of an artist driven by his terminal condition, in comparison to Seneca who illustrated vividly that gladiators, rather than enduring the sordid degradation of mortal combat in the arena, would take their own lives with honor, rather than live a protracted and undignified death sentence.

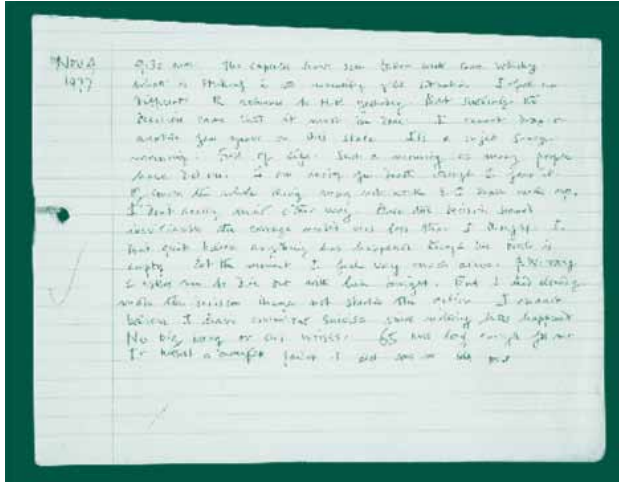
It is with the artist Keith Vaughan that I begin to draw this essay to a close. His final journal entry was made on the 4th November 1977 at 9:30 am and appear to be the words of a fully sentient man, written after he had in effect, committed suicide through the consumption of prescription pills and alcohol. In this short entry, he begins:

The capsules have been taken with some whiskey. What is striking is the unreality of the situation...Once the decision seems inevitable the courage needed was less than I thought...I cannot believe I have committed suicide since nothing has happened.³⁹

Author William Boyd, in his essay 'The Book of Life', captures something of the intimacy of Keith Vaughan's reflections towards his moment of death, recording his final moments of conscious life.

I had the opportunity once to see the manuscript and the sight of that final page with the words tailing off into weakening squiggles, freezes the soul. It is as if the terminal downward slash of the pen scarring the page (as his hand went limp and slid away) symbolises

the fall into the void that Vaughan longed for and had at that moment entered.⁴⁰



Boyd sees the cessation of Vaughan's marks in a fundamental way, commenting: 'we keep a journal because we want to leave a trace of some kind. Like the prisoner who scratches the passing days on his cell wall, or the adolescent who carves initials into the trunk of a tree, or even an animal depositing his spoor, the act of writing a journal seems to say: I was here - here is some record of my journey.'⁴¹

Executor of Vaughan's estate, Veronica Gosling describes seeing him, 'sitting slumped over his table in the studio, carefully dressed, and wearing a brown jacket, soft material. His pen is still in his hand...'⁴²

FINAL PAGE: KEITH VAUGHAN JOURNAL S(1912-1977). © THE ESTATE OF KEITH VAUGHAN. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. DACS 2013. PHOTO CREDIT © TATE, LONDON 2013.

CODA

Perhaps we can learn something about our own mortality from the creation of art, glean something from the quiet dignity of Vaughan's journal, experience something of the numinous through our deep immersion in others vision - learn something deeper than fact, and independent of a deluded dependency on supernatural governance. Potter saw any notion of spirituality as what separated humans from, 'the purely animal in us...why we sing and dance and act, why we paint, why we love, why we make art.'⁴³ But this thing we call art, can be brutal and challenging too and the way we attempt to understand its meaning in terms of the language of value, quality and excellence is utterly flawed in relation to mortality, after all death is seen as the ultimate failure of science and of medicine. Larkin again poetically measures this - the ultimate of deficits - as, 'nothing to think with, nothing to love or link with.'⁴⁴ Death by natural causes or by our own hand, is inevitably perceived as negative and Julian Barnes, in *Levels of Life* reflects: 'grief is the place where statistics run out...the needle goes off the dial; the thermometer fails to register; barometers burst.'⁴⁵ Perhaps in one sense, this allows us to understand the value of the arts in relationship to how we die, in a way that is removed from blinkered cost-benefit-analysis.

In this context, any attempt at meaningful conversation is skewed by bigotry and prejudice. If religion commences with disappointment and is designed to make us 'fearful and afraid and servile'⁴⁶ and ultra-Darwinism tempers inevitable human imagination in the face of mortality, then perhaps art born of an essential humanism, offers us at least the chance to question dominant ideologies and make sense of our brief lives. A new humanist perspective presents a

way of being in the here and now, promoting sentience alongside individual and communal accountability and action, but not at the subjection of free will, or as a simple counter-blast to rigid orthodoxy.

Imagination enables us to construct scenarios in which we might die, but our logical selves cannot process our eternal non-existence and we fall into the default position of myth and superstition - or empirical evidence - both, arguably controlled by wider political interests. Our contemporary *Ars Moriendi* will take note of what unfamiliar possibilities artists might show us and of course, our ever-evolving technology might be part of this resilience armoury, as opposed to merely being a tool to prolong our protracted deaths. Perhaps our children should not only learn about suicide, but be encouraged to keep a journal to explore their own unfolding autobiographies. Perhaps those same children might design apps and officiate at their own virtual funeral, a Second Life that enables them to hear



their obituaries and reflect on their contribution to society and explore grief, the harshest consequence of death.

Perhaps constructing your own roadside memorial might encourage you to create an advanced directive and like the birth-plans familiar to expectant women, a death-plan might become normal. Perhaps these young and emerging minds might dare to have conversations we can barely imagine. Perhaps finally they may even come to understand grief more deeply and in some small way, be more prepared for it than those of us who are repressed by science and religion.

Dignity and choice in the way we die, must be central to the concerns of a civil society, regardless of our moral and intellectual standpoint, after all in terms of wellbeing, a good death is the positive outcome of a life well lived.

Before Keith Vaughan's hand slipped from his journal on that clear November morning, he left a small poetic trace of himself that illustrates his sentient clarity of purpose and above all, the complete normality of dying.

It's a bright and sunny morning. Full of life. Such a morning as many people have died on.⁴⁷

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