

MEDICINE & THE ARTS: HUMANISING HEALTHCARE

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

WEEK 6 MEDICINE & THE ARTS – DEATH AND THE CORPSE FORENSIC AESTHETICS

00:00:00

In this session, I'm going to show you how visual representation, specifically photography, shapes our experience of and our ideas about human remains. I'm a multi-disciplinary visual artist who works at the interface of the studio, the gallery, the archive, and the laboratory. Much of my intellectual and professional work occurs within the realm of science, specifically human identification and depiction.

In addition to my academic and studio practice, I'm a qualified forensic artist, so questions of how we represent the dead, both ethically and aesthetically, occupy a central role for me. In some ways, these concerns come together and what Ralph Rugoff and Eyal Weizman have separately referred to as forensic aesthetics. And increasingly with the entertainment media's interest in forensically-themed criminal procedural stories, these ideas have gained significant traction in the popular imagination.



© Kathryn Smith

I take a very curatorial approach to my practice, which is research-driven. And by this, I mean that objects, images, and texts all function as powerful indices through which one can create and shape meaning in the world. In my creative and intellectual work, I'm interested in the authority of the photograph; photography's relationship to ideas of truth, evidence, and objectivity; and the indexicality of the corpse.

Igshaan Adams 1



© Igshaan Adams

For all the cultural, religious, and legal regulations that structure our relationship to the human body, whether alive or dead, you might think it is more appropriate to think about the corpse in symbolic terms.

Igshaan Adams 2



© Igshaan Adams

Think for a moment how differently we might practise burial rights, whether we are Jewish, Catholic, Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu.

Museo de los Momias



© Kathryn Smith

Is embalming, for example, our contemporary version of mummification? And how do we understand cultures who actively live with the dead, such as Madagascan bone turning, or in Mexico the Dia dos Muertos festival?

Precisely because of the complex matrix of beliefs, fears, and even superstitions that we attach to the dead human body, whether whole or fragmented, it is more productive to think of the corpse as an index. In semiotic terms, it is literally so. A corpse maintains a direct and physical link to its referent, in that it represents a specific person. It is also a visual register onto which we project and inscribe our beliefs and indeed also our taboos. So it is a deeply uncanny index. Its meaning or significance is not culturally stable or fixed.

Likewise, photography is the ultimate index. Its technology maintains a direct connection to the object it represents, dark room and digital manipulation notwithstanding. Photography frames our interaction with what is being represented in terms of the real. By the real, I refer to actuality, what we see around us, which the technology of photography allows us to represent in the most direct way, but also what psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan referred to as the "Real with a capital R." His formulation, part of a triad of ideas encapsulating his theory of subjectivity, which includes the imaginary and the symbolic, speaks to experiences which are beyond language, which we cannot articulate, which are deeply and affectively felt, which potentially threaten our sense of a whole self.

The course you're following here embodies transdisciplinarity, which has been described by Doctor Susan Levine as a pedagogy of discomfort. And I couldn't think of a more appropriate description of a first encounter with a dead human body.

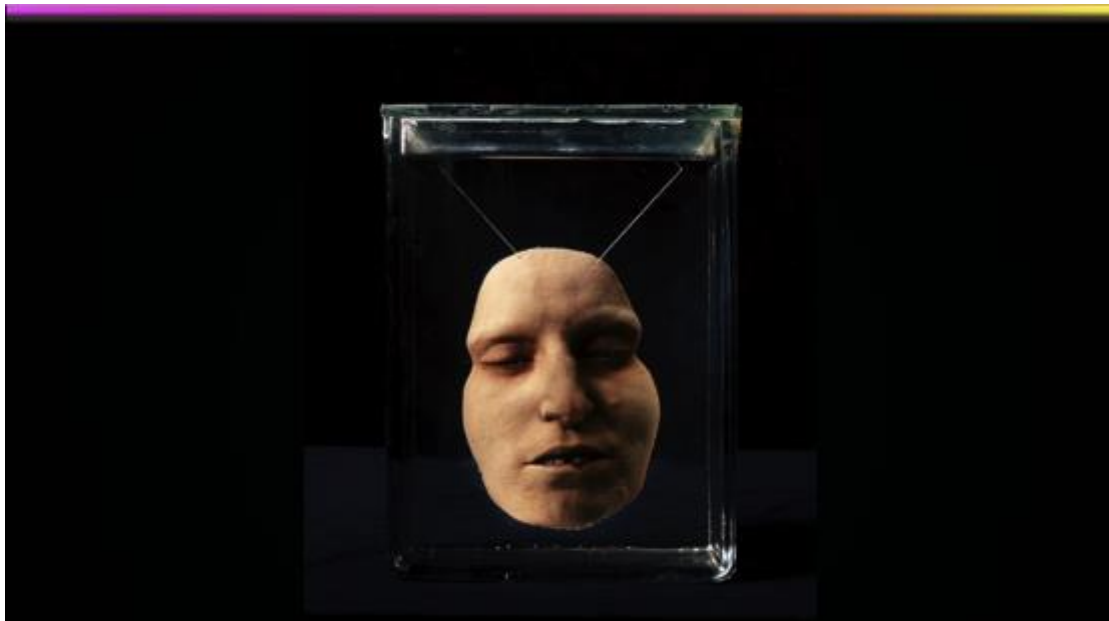
Hungary # 17



© Jack Burman

So how to approach the subject of the corpse? Or is it an object? We are first faced with the issue of naming. Do we refer to a corpse, a cadaver, a patient, or even a silent teacher, as I was trained to do in my anatomy lectures? All speak to the unruly aspects of this thing, whether encountered whole or fragmented, that was once a living human being.

USA #5



© Jack Burman

That the corpse is neither subject nor object, not even in legal terms, accounts precisely for its precarious status and why we are so concerned with regulating our encounters with it. In terms of subject versus object, we are also engaging questions of power, which is embodied in the gaze. Who looks, and who is being looked at? To gaze is to objectify, perhaps even to subjugate.

Thinking along these lines, representation has political ramifications. Not all bodies are equal. The context

Body farm



of encounter, therefore, shapes our experiences of the dead human body, that is if we experience the dead human body at all. For most people, unless we are a doctor or a paramedic, an anatomist, a pathologist, or a mortician or an undertaker, or otherwise involved in preparing bodies for burial or cremation or even display, it is not an everyday encounter. And even if our professional lives engage death in very direct ways, we tend to be dealing with the immediacy of the task, and not thinking about the aesthetic, philosophical, cultural, or political aspects of how human beings represent death and human remains.

Body of a courtesan 1



© Kobayashi Eitaku

So what is a corpse? According to psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva, the corpse is in fact the embodiment of abjection, the quintessential abject object, the thing that we must push away, that we must reject in order to maintain our sense of integrity, of selfhood. Whether subject or object, the corpse represents a limit. It's the limit of life and death. It's a limit of ethics and aesthetics. It's a limit of tolerance, but most importantly a limit of language. And as a limit, it is also potentially an excess.

Body of a courtesan 2



© Kobayashi Eitaku

Body of a courtesan 3



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Body of a courtesan 4



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Body of a courtesan 5



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Body of a courtesan 6



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Body of a courtesan 7



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Body of a courtesan 8



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Body of a courtesan 9



© Kobayashi Eitaku

Forensic Sculpture Frank Bender



In representing the dead, whether as scientific specimens or illustrations or in art, there seems to be a continuum or a sliding scale between an emphasis on the subjectness of the deceased individual and the objectness of the corpse itself. This is particularly true of photographic representation.

Lovers, accidental carbon monoxide poisoning



Death, like photography itself, transforms a once living body from a subject to an object.

If one follows Roland Barthes, death is intrinsic to the photographic image, and indeed the very act of photographing a person. "Take" and "shoot" are both part of photography's taken for granted grammar of expression, a description of action that carries with it a violence that refers to Barthes' conception, and of course also Susan Sontag's readings of the photographic image. Death's complicity in the photograph is so well articulated it's almost a cliché. Nevertheless, this complicity is sublimated to the point of total invisibility, a kind of non-presence in our consciousness.

Tattoo Specimen

Tattoo specimen



© Kathryn Smith

What I would like to share here are some thoughts and images surrounding the photographic representation of human remains, both in historical and contemporary art, culture, and science, many of which were included on an exhibition project called "Between Subject and Object, Human Remains at the Interface of Art and Science," which was hosted at Michaelis Galleries at UCT and accompanied a conference focusing on the medical humanities in Africa. The exhibition confronted the question of displaying, which is to say representing, human remains in the context of art and science. This will allow me to map a topology of interests, investments, and concerns that can be framed as a series of questions or provocations, the primary one being, what is at stake when we put human remains on display and in what context? An art gallery, a dissection hall, and a museum are all different spaces which set up different kinds of expectations.

Tattoo Specimen

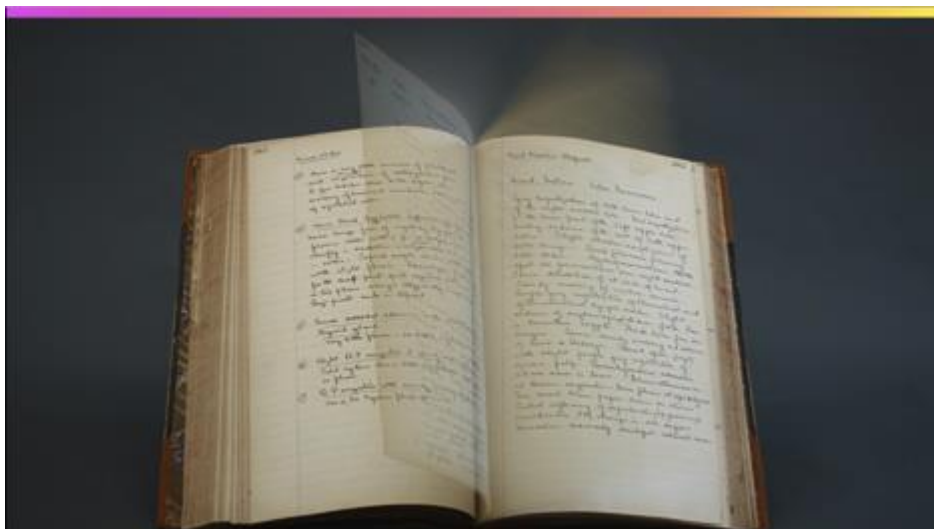
Tattoo specimen



© Kathryn Smith

In the exhibition we sought to draw attention to this continuum as an analytical tool to explore each work and to deepen discussion, drawing out similarities and differences between photographs, illustrations, and objects of scientific and cultural interest, but always making reference to the photographic, whether action, artefact, object, or subject. This entails a direct encounter with the relationship and tensions between ethics and aesthetics. For Theodor Adorno, these were one and the same. But as this exhibition put forward, are they really?

Post-mortem Ledger



© Kathryn Smith

The photographic image is in itself a form of an artefact, a form of human remains that itself has shifted from being collected in albums to be now stored as data. It is both material and immaterial. What the digital has also foregrounded is photography's rather loose relationship to the truth. Images can easily be faked, and indeed have been since the technology of photography, which means "drawing with light," was first invented. One could argue that it was first and foremost a technology of magic and the imagination, which has been disciplined into a technology of objectivity.

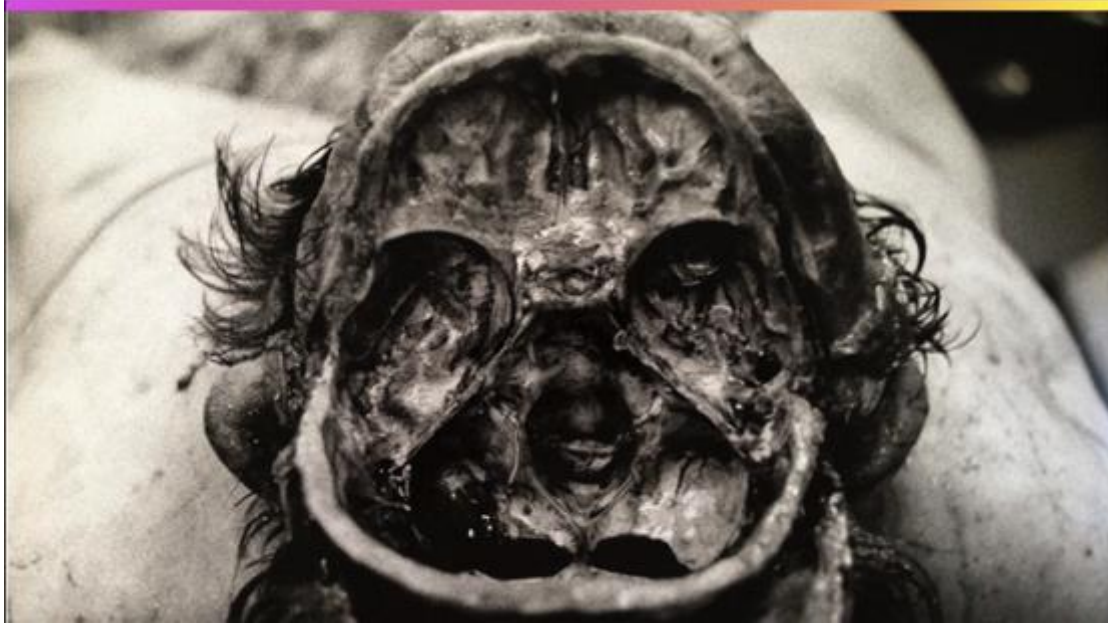
Still Lives



© Jeffrey Silverthorne

From a critical visual studies perspective, we are very aware of the evidentiary status of photography as a failed ambition. However, in forensic and police photography, where barring obvious artefacts of the technology or the operator, lens distortions, poor lighting or focus, it is accepted as objective.

Death Mask



© Sue Fox

Philosophically and conceptually, I would like to hold onto this idea that cameras can travel to where the eye cannot, even as technology is facilitating a closing of the gap between imagination and actuality. I'm interested in the translation of illusionistic power into affective feeling, that photographic and photographically informed representation can achieve, and most particularly when the subject of photography, its object of inquiry, is the human corpse.

Victorian death portrait



© Gustav Borgen

The corpse is arguably constructed as subject when presented as if a living individual, as was the practise in 19th century post-mortem memorial portraiture. A counterpoint could be the anthropological photograph, collected as evidence of a type, or the medical photograph, possibly a bodily fragment, that is recorded to document a specific condition or an anomaly.

Further, the forensic photograph describes the body as the object of medical legal scrutiny. Yet even here, the photograph is a cypher of an investigative process that is deeply specific, pertaining to the singular circumstances and mechanisms of the death of an individual. Somewhere in between we can locate various examples of photojournalism, including scenes of crime photographs and war photography.

AM/PM



© Walter Schels

The continuum and vacillation between subject and object operates then to varying degrees within post-mortem or medical photographs of the body, and with various affects. There seems to be no full zero degree measure, as there is no clearly defined separation where either object or subject can easily be located.

Post-mortem photography, then, is the embodiment of the dead subject and the murderous actions of the photographic image maker.

In the illustration of bodily fragments, whether made in the service of scientific depiction or creative enterprise the artist performs two acts, one of revelation and one of concealment. This introduces an additional aspect to the continuum between subject and object, that of a creative agent who determines what to foreground and what to elide. If not alive exactly, the corpse possesses a dynamism. It is uncomfortable, challenging analogy to our live selves.



Kathryn Smith, 2015

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