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Tissue to Text *Ars moriendi* and the theatre of anatomy

KAREN INGHAM

Look at the stillness of death. Look closely. What do you see? Gaze beyond the illusion of stasis and you may discern that in death the body reveals itself to be an unfolding text, performing its own corporeal dance of dissolution. But what if this process goes unnoticed? Who then will document the performance and how will meaning become knowledge? What disease or misdemeanour led to this tragedy and how will we close the act if there is no one to direct the drama? What are needed are a theatre where the performance can be staged and an experienced interlocutor to choreograph the proceedings. As Jonathan Sawday (1995), Francis Barker (1995) and Maaïke Bleeker (2008) have postulated, what is required is a theatre of anatomy and an engaging anatomist to transform tissue to text.

The dissection of the dead in order to bring knowledge to the living is a subject I have written of elsewhere (2004 and 2008), but I want to visit this territory anew in order to place the theatre of anatomy and the body therein within a broader matrix of meanings associated with the *memento mori*. I do so as an artist-theorist and my contribution is designed to bring to the reader's attention a number of artistic interventions in theatres of death where performative elements are at play. As Maaïke Bleeker suggests artists are becoming increasingly drawn to this rich area of investigation:

New developments onstage, in contemporary theory as well as in philosophy, suggest the productivity of bringing theatre and theory back into the same room in order to explore alternative conceptions



emerging at the intersection of artistic practices and philosophical, theoretical and scientific ideas. (2008: 14-15)

This is precisely what I have endeavoured to do, to bring theory back into the theatres of the dead and open the doors to the living that they might, if only briefly, experience the drama and the tragedy of these normally forbidden spaces.

ORPHEUS RISING IN ANATOMY LESSONS

The steep elliptical or circular viewing balconies that dominate the historical theatres of the dead are not only the most dominant architectural feature but are also symbolic of the haptic-optic division described by Foucault as 'the triumph of the gaze' (2003: 203). Of wooden construction, and frequently exquisitely carved or illustrated, these steeply tiered balconies enabled the audience to stand in staged arrangements, usually pre-ordained in terms of rank and privilege, that allowed the dissected body to be surveyed from on high, from any aspect of the viewing area. The almost vertiginous balconies of the Renaissance theatre in Padua provide a beautifully preserved example of this

• Fig. 1 Teatro Anatomico, Padua, video still from *Orpheus Rising*, Karen Ingham, 2004.



architectural feature, and no two-dimensional photograph or illustration can quite prepare you for how precipitously steep the balconies are, nor how claustrophobic the space (fig. 1). As the theatre was, and still is, part of Padua (now Padova) University, the audience would have consisted mainly of scholars from the nascent scientific and medical fraternities, artists who were on hand to record and illustrate the proceedings, educated merchants, senior administrators, visiting dignitaries and wealthy tourists. There were even ticket sellers to the event, lending an air of festivity and spectacle to the grisly proceedings (Sawday 1995: 42).

The positioning of the body, in a lowered elliptical shaped pit in the centre of the balconies, gave the spectators a God-like view of the dissection taking place below. This omniscient perspective is embedded in Cartesian perspectivalism, as evinced in many of the key Renaissance illustrations of the anatomical theatre, such as Stephen Calcar's 1543 title page to Vesalius's *Fabrica* (fig. 2). The complex image

of Vesalius conducting a dissection in the original Paduan Teatro Anatomico in the *Fabrica* suggests the allegory of the anatomical act transcended performance and spectacle to create a parable of transience and mutability. But what is not evident in the visual representations of the Teatro at Padua is the dissection pit itself, which can only be entered through a doorway located beneath the tiered balconies.

In this cramped and claustrophobic space the praelector is seated in a special wooden chair (the precursor of the term and position of the University 'Chair' still used today). Invisible to the audience above, the praelector reads from the sanctioned anatomical text as was the case in the Galenic tradition where the chief anatomist did not in fact dissect the body but rather instructed his lecturer who in turn instructed his demonstrator and technician in a hierarchical pyramid that is still in evidence in our present day universities. This is *remote* anatomy, where the body of early modern culture has yet to become the blank page, or *tabula rasa*, that has in time become a kind of palimpsest, capable of being continually erased and re-inscribed. The chair of anatomy at Padua (fig. 3) is most striking in respect of its physical remoteness from the subject of enquiry, the body, and for the fact that it most strongly resembles a chair not of medical knowledge but a chair of execution which, in essence, is precisely what it was, as the body dissected was nearly always that of an executed criminal. In fact, the chair at Padua

• Fig. 2 The Epitome, or title page, to Andreas Vesalius's 1543 *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* by artist Jan Stephan van Calcar. Courtesy of The Wellcome Library, London.



• Fig. 3 The chair of anatomy in the Paduan Teatro Anatomico, Karen Ingham, from *Anatomy Lessons*, 2004.

bears an uncanny resemblance to the 'electric chair' and is resonant of Andy Warhol's series of photographic silk-screens of the electric chair (1963–80) where he re-cropped and re-coloured the repeated image until it obtained iconic status, emblematic of the dark side of the American dream where transgression, degeneracy and deviance are systematically punished. Peggy Phelan describes the work as spatializing death by entering into the technology of performativity: 'The emptiness of the chair, the lack of the specificity of an embodied subject in the act of dying, suggests that death, like all technologies according to Heidegger, becomes ... stored reserve' (Phelan 1999: 232–3). This is the criminal body as commodity, and the dissection of, and medical experimentation on, the executed human body continues today and can be witnessed in the 'art' of Gunther von Hagens and in the 'science' of the *Visible Human Project*.

If we return for a moment to the notion of the remote body, and to the chair of anatomy at Padua, what is also vivid is the physical remoteness of the anatomical reader from the body itself. The physical distance of the spectators, standing at quite some distance from the cadaver and the anatomical demonstration, reinforces this. Unless one were situated in the first two or three balconies, it would have been all but impossible to see any real anatomical detail, and the links between the spoken text and the corporeal text would have been difficult to follow. In other words, the aspiring surgeon-anatomists would have, at least in the initial stages, have learnt their trade via the disembodied voice of the anatomist, physically dissociated from the anatomical act itself, which was viewed at some distance from the spectator. Not only does this take the haptic-optic divide to its extreme, but it also suggests a radical form of clinical detachment that continues to have consequences on how medicine is taught, reinforcing Cartesian mind-body dualism. This is a legacy that medical historian Ruth Richardson posits has a long history, and although we

associate the theatrics of public dissection predominantly with the Renaissance and Baroque periods, Richardson has demonstrated how the grim evolution of British surgery also played on the performative resonances of the anatomy theatre, stating that 'the element of theatricality implicit in the naming of operating theatres signifies their potential to provide the locus for an action to be performed, a spectacle displayed' (2001: 48).

Artist John Isaacs's video piece *The Cyclical Development of Stasis* (2000), shot in the empty anatomical theatre at Padua, plays with this notion of detachment, spectatorship and subjectivity and is one of only a few examples of contemporary art made in direct response to the anatomical theatre. Isaacs plays with the oxymoronic notion of developmental stasis, which is precisely what the act of dissection suggests: the live and evolving performance and denouement of a corpse. As in my own practice, Isaacs is concerned with the spatial dynamics and hierarchies at work within the realms of dissection and not with the body per se. He inter-cuts the historic Paduan theatre with a contemporary, highly technological, dissecting theatre in Essen, commenting on 'both positions of objectivity and subjectivity, the dissector and the dissected' (Kemp and Wallace 2000: 158). Karen Lang discusses how the transition from an idealized, Kantian subject to a reasoning and tamed subject, is a performance that must be continually performed, a performance that Kant himself would approve of, as it signals 'the movement of nature to reason as a story of progress' (Lang 1999: 12–13). This Kantian movement, from un-tamed subjectivity to reasoning objectivity, is also evident in my own Paduan performance piece, *Orpheus Rising* (2004, see fig.1). The piece alludes to the mythical tale of Orpheus as he descends to the world of the dead in order to find his wife Eurydice and bring her back to the realms of the living, playing with notions of spectatorship and the disjuncture between Kantian notions of the sublime and Foucauldian notions of subjection.

A male figure stands in isolation in the dissection pit in Padua's magnificent Renaissance Anatomy Theatre. The subject of scientific scrutiny, he paces resignedly as he waits for his own dissection to commence. Back and forth, caged by the bar-like structure of the circular ring overhead: a criminal, a prisoner, as indeed he would most likely have been in the days of the original Paduan dissections. This aspect, shot from his perspective, is grainy and rough, and he and the footage appear to be 'untamed' and in need of the civilizing cut of the anatomists blade. The footage shot from the tiered balconies has a more cultured appearance, almost transcendent in style. Absolved and reconstituted by the act of dissection, the subject is, paradoxically, made whole; untamed subjectivity has become reasoned objectivity. The performance was recorded and made into an interpretive video 'document'. It was subsequently shown in various dissecting rooms (see Performance Notes) where it underwent a second transformation as the public were allowed into these usually restricted spaces where the post-mortem body is eviscerated and partitioned before being finally laid to rest as 'cremains'.

The anatomists, liberated from their normal dissecting duties for the duration of the installation, were inspired to perform as 'gallery guides' in a Shklovskian play on ostranenie, or defamiliarization, as they experienced their space returned to that of the anatomical theatre where they were once again the 'players'.

The corpse performs its own death, but in silencing the voice of the living are the dead given authority to speak?

NARRATIVE REMAINS AT THE HUNTERIAN MUSEUM

It is not just the dissected bodies of executed criminals that lament their plight in the theatre of the dead. The post-mortem narratives of everyday people may also be heard if only you listen carefully enough, silenced by disease, old age, misadventure, foul play and even by their own hand. Is it possible for the body partitioned to speak its name? *Narrative Remains* (fig. 4), made in collaboration with the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons of England, does precisely that. It reinstates the medical narratives of the dead back with their dissected and anonymized body parts, enabling



• Fig. 4 *Narrative Remains*, Karen Ingham in collaboration with The Royal College of Surgeons of England and The Wellcome Trust, 2009.

them to fictively recount their deaths for a public audience. Loosely based on the tradition of the corpse poem, which Diana Fuss describes as ‘poetry not about the dead but spoken by the dead’ (2003: 1), *Narrative Remains* takes six preserved body organs from eighteenth-century surgeon-anatomist John Hunter’s collection and, through film and installation, imagines what they would tell us if the dead could only speak. Fuss suggests that the Corpse Poem evolved as a vehicle of comedy or tragedy in the nineteenth century, but I would suggest that it was much earlier than this. Edward Ravenscroft’s *The Anatomist*, where an anatomized corpse speaks to the audience in a post-mortem voice, was performed in 1696, and although it was arguably the best known of the post-mortem narrative performances of the time, it was by no means the only one. Prior to the 1832 Anatomy Act, grave-robbing was rife in Britain, and Fuss cites fear of the resurrectionists (the ironic euphemism for body-snatchers) as one of the main themes of the corpse poem.

She gives an example from Thomas Hood (*Mary’s Ghost*, 1827), in which a woman whose body has been stolen and dissected, laments her plight:

The arm that used to take your arm
Is took to Dr Vyse;
And both my legs are gone to walk
The hospital at Guy’s.

(quoted in Fuss 2003: 4)

The popularity of post-mortem television dramas would suggest that the corpse poem has evolved into a bleaker and more cynical form of bodily and medical critique. Denna Jones suggests that when contemporary artists engage with these issues, they ‘reinvent the formal device of tableaux of the dead interacting with their bodily interrogators, thus linking the historical and theatrical legacy of morbidity to contemporary media’ (2004: 58). An excellent example of this can be seen in Mike Tyler’s *Holoman: Digital Cadaver* (1997–8). *Holoman* brings to the stage the surgically dissected and

digitally reconstituted body of executed criminal J. P. Jernigan, the first downloadable ‘digital cadaver’. The performance stages the scenario that Jernigan’s (J. P. Holoman’s in the performance) consciousness has survived to speak to us from beyond the grave via the digital technology that was the *raison d’être* for his dissection in the first place. But *Holoman* is a recognizably whole human being. How can a heart or lung or a rectum ‘speak’? We know of ‘bodies without organs’ but what of organs without bodies? According to Rachel Fensham body bits are metonymic and suggestive of political, psychic and socio-economic structures: ‘With organs that do not promote individuals, nor depend upon a single racialized or national identity, the body-bits become connective tissues aligned with other textual fragments’ (2008: 259).

As a political act, *Narrative Remains* reassigns these ‘connective tissues’ individual voices by projecting textual fragments from the medical narratives with the imagined spoken deaths of the organs’ owners. Public unease over the retention and preservation of body parts is a sensitive subject, and yet as Simon Chaplin, the director of the Hunterian Museum, suggests, this was not always the case. In the eighteenth century the public were much more open to anatomical curiosity and even to the concept of the speaking dead.

Among those who viewed the museum and its serried ranks of morbid bodies was the antiquary and author Horace Walpole. Plagued by gout, he joked blackly to a friend that the ‘chalkstones’ from his suppurating knuckles might find a home in ‘Mr Hunter’s collection of human miseries’.

His choice of words suggests a different way of looking at Hunter’s preparations, not with the restrained and emotionless medical gaze but with a lively literary eye that invested objects with their own narratives – something that characterized Walpole’s own work as a writer and collector. For a well-read spectator, Hunter’s museum offered a rich source of novel sensation, a physical embodiment of the sublime terrors of contemporary gothic fantasies such as William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786),

with its abundance of 'hump-backs [and] wenny necks'. The imagined ability of inanimate preparations to speak their own stories echoed the literary vogue for 'novels of circulation' - the titillating narratives of everyday objects that provided a scurrilous glimpse into the private lives of others. (Chaplin 2009: 11-12)



The challenge of bringing dissected body parts 'back to life' is that we must see beyond what at first glance appear to be still dead objects to reinvest the object with a metonymical integrity that enables it to perform narratively a (fictive) first-person account of its own demise. For example, in a scene from the film, a large, pale, bodily organ in a preservation jar is, quite literally, transformed from meat to meaning. Once we learn that the organ is the cancerous rectum of Thomas Thurlow, the Bishop of Durham (fig. 5), we see beyond the diseased tissue and can imagine the organ returned to the site of origin, and beyond this we may perhaps project an image of the Bishop, bloated and bleeding from piles and rectal cancer, lamenting his plight in the realization that what was once food for the body is now only food for thought 'for save this part of me, the body has long since gone' (Ingham 2009: 44). And what of the throat of Marianne Harland (fig. 6) renowned for the beauty of her singing until tuberculosis stole first her voice and then her life.

Not a sound. Not a whisper. Nothing escapes the tortured confines of my diseased throat. Where once there was song there is now only rasping. Where once there was speech, silence. Where once there was beauty, pain ... I am enclosed in a world of perpetual silence, my throat opened and displayed for all the world to see. All that is left of me.

(Ingham 2009: 52)

• Fig. 5 The Bishop of Durham's Rectum, from *Narrative Remains*, Karen Ingham, 2009.



• Fig. 6 Throat of Marianne Harland, from *Narrative Remains*, Karen Ingham, 2009.

Six body organs 'speaking' in turn, each portraying a painful death followed by dissection, their organs removed and preserved 'for all the world to see'. In the extraordinary atrium space of the Hunterian's Crystal Gallery, where row upon row of morbid remains sit silent and passive in specially made 'pots', these few voices whisper their tales of woe to the museum's visitors. They are a reminder of the true meaning of the *memento mori*; that we too are mortal and our time is brief.

VANITAS AT THE WAAG, AMSTERDAM

Investing objects with their own post-mortem narrative is a long-established tradition of the *memento mori*, and in particular the *vanitas* with its ubiquitous skull and skeleton: think of Holbein's *Dance of Death* woodcuts or the

Mexican Day of The Dead festival. Even the *vanitas* still-life painting is a time-based performance in its own right. The painting is a perfect record of an imperfect world, a moment of transience and mutability captured in oil and later by photography (see Ingham 2006) in its gradual progression from life to death, from movement to stillness. It was the contradictory nature of the *vanitas* that I sought to explore through a durational live-art networked performance in Amsterdam's Waag Theatrum Anatomicum, now part of the Waag Society. The Waag Society will be well-known to many performance artists as a space for experimental theatre and networked performance. The Waag postulates that the computer and its attendant components are part of a matrix of technological dramaturgies. As the listed anatomical theatre is normally closed to the public because of



• Fig. 7 'The Anatomy Lesson of Professor Moxham', in *Anatomy Lessons*, Karen Ingham, 2004.

conservation concerns, utilizing networked performance strategies is an astute way of reaching a wider audience than would otherwise be possible. The Waag's anatomical theatre has a great significance for me. The theatre's links with Rembrandt's 1632 painting 'The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp' is deeply embedded in contemporary readings of the body, particularly so in the work of Francis Barker (1995) and Jonathan Sawday (1995). It is also a key image in my own practice (fig. 7) and writing (2004 and 2008). Therefore, the opportunity of working as artist-in-residence in the theatre allowed me to play with both historical and contemporary readings of the *vanitas memento mori* and its relationship to death, memory, and the body.

The installation for the Waag drew on the building's rich history while referencing the new-media work of the Waag Society. I was interested in the building's anatomical links with not only the Tulp painting but also with the anatomist Frederik Ruysch. Additionally, the building had been used as a site of execution (the links between execution and anatomy being clearly intertwined.) Death is inscribed in the very fabric of the Waag. But life is also present in the building's relationship to the various guilds and in its historical (and present) proximity to a flower market. Ruysch was renowned for his incredible anatomical specimens (particularly his bizarre fetal 'dioramas'), and flowers and bulbs are also referred to as 'specimens', the Tulip being the obvious 'specimen' of choice in Amsterdam's long cultural history. The anatomical or botanical specimen is an object that defies time, something to be collected, classified and preserved. Many of Ruysch's most famous specimens consist of the heads of stillborn infants, and in portraits of Ruysch he is often seen holding a skull. Ruysch's daughter Rachel helped him in the preparation of his dioramas and preservations and was a renowned still-life painter in her own right.

Not only is the head the seat of learning, but the brain is where memories are created, stored and retrieved. Flowers also have a strong



• Fig. 8 Installation shot of *Vanitas: Seed-Head* at the Waag, Amsterdam, Karen Ingham, 2005.

historical and pharmaceutical relationship to memory, and the new-media work of the Waag Society is very much concerned with creating new techno-neural networks of communal memory. The Waag has become a site inscribed by ghosts and virtual presences, by historical memories now communicated to the public through the twenty-first century's mediated metaphor of memory, the Web. In response to these histories I created a live-streamed *Vanitas* (2005) still life in the anatomical theatre. The still life genre originated in the Netherlands (particularly in Amsterdam and Utrecht), and the *vanitas* still life, with its emphasis on the all-too-swift passage of time and the impermanence of the human condition, was symbolized through the use of skulls and flowers, an allegory of death and mutability. Over the period of a week, two baroque flower arrangements were videoed as they enacted the botanical process of bloom and decay.

Adjacent to the floral arrangements were specimen preservation jars in which the fallen petals were collected and stored. The collection was a daily ritual enacted by myself, which formed part of the videoed performance. Simultaneously, a participatory Web gallery and comments blog was built for the project, enabling participants to add their own *vanitas* images and memories.

The final element of the performed installation was the erection of a large projection screen just below the domed ceiling where the various guilds have their painted coats of arms and the screening of my time-based artwork *Vanitas: Seed-Head* (2005-6, fig. 8). Three genetically linked faces morph within an x-ray of a bulb-like skull, linking generation to generation in a technological vacuum of eternal life. Questions of genetic transmission, explorations of consciousness, and allegories of transience and mutability are explored through digital morphing techniques and video dissolves of anatomical x-rays of the skull. *Vanitas* developed from discussion with neuroscientists and stem-cell researchers during my AHRC Sciart

Research Fellowship with Cardiff's Neuroscience Research Group. All cells of the brain are formed from a single initial pluripotential cell. A 'stem' cell is a cell early in this hierarchy that retains the capacity to reproduce copies of itself.

My response was to create a series of transitions between the faces of myself, my partner and our son, a replicating lineage. These were then overlaid with an x-ray of our son's skull (following a head injury) and projected against the 'coma blue' of the medical teaching screen. The notion of the stem cell is transcribed to the Dutch floral *Vanitas*, alluding to an actual plant stem and bulb, referencing the notion of the seed continuing a genetic inheritance even as the parent/plant withers and dies.

But as body, mind and self become increasingly fluid definitions, and emerging Promethean technologies promise to modify mind and matter, will the mutability of the *vanitas* cease to represent death as we know it?

The *memento mori*, often assumed to be anachronistic in our biotechnological age, will continue to evolve new forms and performative nuances. As Jonathan Dollimore posits:

[C]ontemporary theory evades the classical philosophical problems of ontology and epistemology, and this is because we do not have the conviction of our residual desire for the pre-cultural real; yet we desire it nevertheless, reconstruing it even as we dissolve it. Death, of course, disallows the evasion. (1998: 127)

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

Orpheus Rising was staged in 2003 in the Teatro Anatomico in Padua. The video document of the performance was edited as a DVD loop and was played on the teaching monitors at the dissection tables in Guy's / King's College London Dissecting Rooms, Cardiff Dissecting Rooms and the Edinburgh Anatomy Museum in 2004 and 2005, during which time the anatomical spaces were open to the public as part of the Anatomy Lessons intervention. Simultaneously, it was also shown at The Old Operating Theatre Museum in

London and The National Museum and Gallery of Wales Cardiff. The project was funded by the Wellcome Trust and the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Narrative Remains was an interdisciplinary site-specific film installation and photo-sculptural exhibition in the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons of England in London, October–December 2009. Funded by the Wellcome Trust and the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

Vanitas at the Waag Theatrum Anatomicum, April 2005. The installation was part of my artist's residency with the Waag Society, supported through Wales Arts International. The project involved three interdependent elements: the live webcast of a still-life floral vanitas with performative elements, a continuous DVD looped projection of Vanitas: Seed-Head on a large screen erected in the theatre, a specially constructed website with participatory elements.

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