

TROPHIES AND TALISMANS: THE TRAFFIC OF HUMAN REMAINS

TROPHIES AND TALISMANS: THE TRAFFIC OF HUMAN REMAINS

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## Abstract

This dissertation examines how human remains are circulated as material culture in contemporary Western society. It is based on an extended period of research and fieldwork carried out from September 2011 to June 2013, in addition to forensic-related research conducted from 2007 to 2010. Through interviews with individuals who handle human remains and an analysis of popular culture via social and mass media, I pose the question: How and why have the undisposed dead been made to occupy a variety of spaces in contemporary Western society; for personal use, education, sale, or veneration?

Interviews conducted with Roman Catholic clergy confirm not only the contemporary importance and influence of human relics, but the Church's ongoing relationship with the dismembered body. This research thus offers a counterpoint to the usual positioning of the Church as anti-science and as imposing a religious taboo toward human remains. I argue instead that the Catholic Church historically has had an important influence on the practices of anatomical dissection, and the deeply embedded Western traditions of making the undisposed dead necessary, popular and culturally acceptable.

As an extension of my analysis of the Catholic Church's traditions and policies around the use of human remains, I examine the institutional handling of the dead in various types of museums and compare this with how human remains are celebrated and circulated in popular culture. Lastly, I explore the work of five controversial visual artists who use human remains in their art.<sup>1</sup> Through extensive personal interviews, conducted in their homes and studios, I demonstrate how Catholic bodies, images and symbols have profoundly inspired (rather than discouraged) these visual artists in their personal, as well as artistic narratives.

My research shows that, contrary to the academic literature, human remains are neither imbued with fear, nor with notions of violence or taboo; neither are they deployed to symbolically encounter death. In the hands of either institutional or personal collectors, I argue that human remains are valuable commodities through which membership, identity, and knowledge are expressed in contemporary Western society.

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Martin Belger, Al Farrow, Andrew Krasnow, Mark Prent, Joel Peter Witkin

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

This dissertation examines how human remains are processed and circulated as material culture in contemporary Western society.<sup>1</sup> It is based on an extended period of research and fieldwork carried out from September 2011 to June 2013, in addition to forensic-related research conducted from 2007 to 2010.<sup>2</sup>

I pursued this research primarily because much of the scholarly literature advances the idea that human remains are inaccessible to the general public and are rarely found outside the boundaries of institutions such as museums, laboratories, universities, and morgues. Lutz (2010:127-8) insists, for example, that it is “no longer common practice to hold onto the remains of the dead” because such practices were part of a Victorian relic culture that “found its demise by the start of the Great War”. Krmpotich et al (2010:373) state that “for the layperson, encounters with bodies and bones often point to the exceptional, as consequences of violence, disease and poverty, and may be demarked by feelings of extreme unease and estrangement”. Walter (2009) suggests that the dead can only be viewed through mediating institutions which make it possible to filter, accept and understand death. My research challenges these assumptions; instead, I contend that the

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<sup>1</sup> By contemporary Western society, I am referring to current trends in North America, and western and eastern Europe unless otherwise stated (see for example Kurth 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Forensic-related research took place during various workshops, sessions, and consultations with the Toronto Police Forensic Identification Services, the Ontario Provincial Police, and Durham Regional Police.

use of the undisposed dead has become an emblematic feature of contemporary Western culture<sup>3</sup>, that human remains circulate widely outside of the institutions believed to contain them, and that they travel through vast networks of buyers, dealers, and artisans increasingly connecting through social and mass media.

Celebrated in popular culture through activities like “dark tourism” (Durkin 2003; Stone 2006), Goth fashion, art, photography, and private collecting, human remains are, in fact, everywhere.<sup>4</sup> My research shows, moreover, that contrary to the literature on dark tourism, human remains are neither imbued with fear, nor with notions of violence or taboo; neither are they deployed to symbolically encounter death. In the hands of either institutional or personal collectors, I argue, human remains become valuable commodities that are transformed into trophies of power, membership, and knowledge. They express narratives of identity, rather than societal anxieties about death. The collection, use, and display of the undisposed dead in contemporary Western culture reveals an embedded tradition that reflects what Slemon (2011:11) facetiously refers to as the cadaver’s “lust for an audience”.

The Roman Catholic Church (hereafter referred to as “the Church”) and Western medicine, two seemingly opposed institutions, play historically important roles in defining the significance accorded to human remains, in delineating the proper treatment of the undisposed dead, and in controlling their disposition. I suggest in this thesis that

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<sup>3</sup> The term undisposed dead refers to human remains that have either been exhumed, or processed into an array of objects, such as wet or dry specimens, relics, war trophies, artwork, jewellery, or any type of prop.

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘dark tourism’ suggests that individuals in Western society are generally insulated from death (Durkin 2003) and as such, will seek out images of death in mass media, or visit the places where death and suffering occurred (see pgs. 120-127).

each has promoted and established a very similar type of commoditization and commercial aesthetic of the cadaver. This study also takes issue with the contention that the Church is anti-science because of a purported revulsion for the dead human body, supposedly defined in a 13th century papal edict by Pope Boniface VIII; my interviews with a Cardinal and several clergy confirm the vital importance of human relics to religious practice today, underscoring the Church's on-going, intimate relationship with the dismembered body. I argue, moreover, that the Church not only has had an enormous influence on the medical practice of anatomical dissection but that it laid the foundation for the deeply embedded Western tradition of making the undisposed dead powerful, necessary, and culturally acceptable.

As an extension of my analysis of the Catholic Church and Western medicine's traditions around the use of human remains, I examine the work of five controversial visual artists who use human remains in their artwork.<sup>5</sup> My analysis of their work demonstrates how Catholic bodies, images, traditions and symbols have profoundly inspired (rather than discouraged) the personal and artistic narratives of these artists. Though their work is uniquely crafted and distinct from religious art *per se*, the strong connections to Catholic notions of death, dismemberment and resurrection emerged during interviews conducted in their homes and studios. The role of biomedical personnel and institutions in the traffic of human remains for uses other than medical or scientific (in this case, in the service of art) also emerged through these interviews. All of the

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<sup>5</sup> Wayne Martin Belger ([www.boyofblue.com](http://www.boyofblue.com)); Al Farrow ([www.alfarrow.com](http://www.alfarrow.com)); Andrew Krasnow ([www.andrewkrasnow.net](http://www.andrewkrasnow.net)); Mark Prent ([www.pinkhouse.com](http://www.pinkhouse.com)); Joel-Peter Witkin (<http://www.edelmangallery.com/witkin.htm>).

participating artists obtain human body parts through medical sources and scientific facilities, indicative of the central position these institutions occupy in the circulation of the undisposed dead. Expensive commodities easily purchased online or through auctions, dealers, and black markets, the undisposed dead serve as the raw material, the ‘craft medium’ infused with a talismanic quality that transform the objects created by these artists into personal narratives about identity, power, society, and culture.

My research therefore emphasizes an important distinction between the disposed and the undisposed dead not apparent in the literature. While the disposed dead are most often the subjects of death, grief, loss, and memorialization, the undisposed dead have become the material objects through which institutional and personal identity are expressed in contemporary Western society. It is within this context that I examine a broad range of theoretical frameworks through which to understand the multiple ways and places in which human remains are used. This thesis addresses the dual domains of sociological studies of the intricate relationships that the living maintain with the dead (Rojek 1993; Lennon and Foley 1996; Seaton 1996; Laderman 2003; Stone and Sharpley 2008; Walter 2009), and anthropological perspectives on the study of human remains as material culture (Sheppard et al 2000; Johnston 2002; Castner 2002; Spence et al 2004; Jandial et al 2004; Rubenstein 2007; Sofaer 2006; Krmpotich et al 2010). I challenge some of the paradigms from philosophy and history, drawing on the work of Ariès (1987), who contends that the remoteness and imminence of death arouses our “fascination” and thus death is “fetishized”, and Harrison (2003) who insists that society is “necrocratic”. In addition, this study combines both interpretive and historical analyses

in order to challenge or enhance current theories on the role of the dead in contemporary Western society (Foltyn 2008; Walter 2009; Stone and Sharpley 2008).

The discussion of and distinction between the disposed and undisposed dead begins with Chapter Two. I argue that the Catholic Church and Western medicine have assumed historically significant roles in the handling, trading, purchase, and veneration of human remains, and that both institutions have established distinct traditions of dissection, preservation, and display. I highlight the fact that both institutions still maintain an essential and powerful role in making human remains necessary and available in both private and public domains.

Chapter Three is a review of the literature and an informal survey of popular culture where I scrutinize the discrepancies between the management of human remains within various institutions and the use of human remains in the public domain. This chapter also offers a comparison of the institutional and the general public's relationship with the dead as I explore the many places where human remains can be seen, bought, and visited in contemporary Western society.

In Chapter Four, I explore various online resources that offer human remains for sale or exhibit, and which have effectively normalized the commodification and availability of human remains for the general public. I also examine the changes in laws, and their increasing ambiguity relating to the sale and traffic of the undisposed dead. Against this backdrop, I discuss how human remains are positioned as both the medium and the message in the hands of the living.

Chapter Five continues this discussion by specifically considering the

transformation of human remains into objects of art, in the hands of five contemporary visual artists who integrate human remains as a medium in their artwork. Through observation and personal interviews, I examine how and why these individuals have come to use the dead, what sort of messages they are seeking to convey, and how these objects of art have been received by viewers and various venues worldwide.

Finally, Chapter Six concludes the thesis with a discussion of the common themes of power, authenticity, and identity, all of which emerged during the research and in the interviews conducted with various clergy and artists. I reemphasize the connections between the use of human remains and the projection of both institutional and personal identity, and restate the central position of my thesis that the Catholic Church and medical institutions have played a vital role in circulating human remains, and providing some of the intrinsic features evident in many of the narratives imposed on the dead body. I end this section with a suggestion for future research. There are major gaps in the academic literature that reflect inherent tensions and confusion over the fact that human remains are in high demand in a variety of domains, and yet are subjects of anxiety, ethical dilemmas, and constantly changing policies. Consequently, there are still many areas of this topic that beg further research and investigation.

## Chapter Two

### **Institutional Bodies: The Church and Western Medicine**

Two seemingly opposed institutions of Western culture have each contributed to the access to, and interest in the display of the dead. These institutions are the Roman Catholic Church (the Church), with its rich tradition of making and displaying relics, and the field of medicine in its creation and promotion of anatomical specimens.<sup>6</sup> These fundamental Western establishments, both sanctioned by and representing powerful forms of authority, have been using, processing, and displaying the dead human body over as many centuries as they have been active.<sup>7</sup> But rather than representing two separate and distinct philosophies with respect to the human body, the Catholic Church and Western medicine have each promoted and established a very similar type of commodification and commercial aesthetic of the cadaver. Both have also created forms of spectacle around the dismemberment and display of human remains, which remain comfortably embedded in Western culture.

In this chapter, I argue that the Catholic Church and Western medicine assumed historically significant roles in the handling, trade, purchase, and veneration of human

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<sup>6</sup> I use the terms Western medicine, biomedicine, and dissection anatomy interchangeably since they share the same historical traditions, which I discuss at length. For comparative purposes, I focus on anatomical specimens, specifically dissected parts of the human body that have been preserved wet and dry. I do not include other scientific or other living biomedical specimens such as blood, DNA, cell lines and tissue, since these are not items that are generally processed and displayed for the public.

<sup>7</sup> Given that the governments in many Western countries support the field of medicine through various Anatomy Acts, funding, policies and legal structures, I refer to the field of medicine as the domain of the 'State' when comparing it with the Roman Catholic Church, which has its own governing body, separate and distinct from its host government.

remains, and that both established distinct traditions of dissection, preservation, and display. Furthermore, both institutions still maintain an essential and powerful role in making human remains ever more popular and culturally acceptable. Geary (1994:3) claims “modern society is uneasy with death and still more with the dead”; however, the Church and Western medicine uphold various means of interaction that effectively keep the dead undisposed for specific purposes: as forms of cultural capital, objects of veneration, and fetishized, or aestheticised diversion.

Underscoring my discussion is the concept that Western culture’s dual fascination and repulsion with the corpse expresses an inherent paradox regarding the dead body; that it is a sacred entity with rights that must be protected at the same time that it is a useful commodity that can be cut up, distributed, bought, or sold. Relics and specimens exemplify and highlight this paradox in that they are culturally constructed objects that are considered at one and the same time to be both subject and object, a person and a thing. While they provide various forms of attraction, power and benefit for the living, they are permanently contained, their use restricted, and access to them is highly regulated through Church or medical authorities.

The early practices of dissection and display within the Catholic Church are mired in controversy and debate, especially when viewed alongside the rising field of anatomy. In order to illustrate how and why both areas were fully intertwined with the other’s approach to the cadaver, it is essential to explore how the practice of gifting, trading and displaying the dead, in the form of both relics and specimens, became a lucrative practice that led to the establishment of very distinct property laws, all of which allow both the

Catholic Church and the field of anatomy to maintain legally exclusive access to human remains, and to circulate them as important commodities.

Both Western medicine and the Catholic Church continue to have selective claims to the preserved dead body for use and display. These claims do not compete or conflict, but enhance and sustain their respective power in contemporary Western culture. As well, both institutions continue to provide culturally sanctioned encounters with the dead, while indirectly promoting various unsanctioned means and channels for purchasing human remains. This is especially evident in the use of human remains as art objects which is discussed further in Chapter Five.

### **Papal versus Popular Anatomy**

A curious debate around a 13th century Papal decree regarding dissection, dismemberment, embalming, and the transport of human remains is evident in the literature on the history of the relationship between the Church and science. Interestingly, an apparent misinterpretation of the decree is used to advance the notion that the Catholic Church has historically interfered with the advances of science, and that Christianity has an inherent ‘taboo’ and revulsion towards the dead human body. A variety of authors, citing the decree of Pope Boniface VIII in 1295, referred to as the *Bull de Sepulturis* (Walsh 2003[1908]; Tanner 2011), declare that dissection was made illegal throughout Europe from the 13th century onwards, and that this reflected the inherent beliefs throughout Christendom that the cadaver was a source of horror, contamination and repulsion. These scholars argue that the decree was an attempt by the Catholic Church to

thwart the rise of anatomy schools, and hence science, during the Middle Ages (see Pouchelle 1990; Lawrence 1998; Mafart et al 2004; Santoro 2005; Ducasse et al 2006; Westerhof 2008; Walsham 2010). Walsham (2010:21) for example, states that the “instinct” to collect the remains of “martyrs” was “at odds with the inherited taboos about corporeal remains as sources of contamination”. Ducasse et al (2006:603) insist that “all practices including cutting up of corpses, blood effusion or dissections were forbidden and condemned by clerical rules”. Likewise, Westerhof (2008:22) discusses at length the “sensory attack of the cadaver”, which was “abhorrent” to medieval Christians. Many authors declare that dissection during the early to late Middle Ages was covert, highly restricted, and considered an unpleasant and disgraceful practice (see also Richardson 2001; Glick et al 2005). A recent statement by a United States senator, in response to the opposition of a religious group to stem cell research, cited Pope Boniface VIII’s decree as evidence that Catholics continue to negatively interfere with research on human remains.<sup>8</sup>

There have been numerous attempts to argue against the insistence that dissection was made illegal in the 13th century, and to clarify Pope Boniface VIII’s original decree. In a lengthy essay for the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Merrigan (1907) states clearly that there was no such decree, and the declaration that the development of anatomy was prevented by ecclesiastical authorities is founded on “nothing more substantial than a misunderstanding of the purport of a decree of Pope Boniface VIII” (Merrigan 1907:

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<sup>8</sup> To illustrate his point that religious leaders have always interfered with scientific progress, United States Senator Arlen Specter, a Democrat from Pennsylvania, stated on the senate floor in 2006 that: “Pope Boniface VII [sic] banned the practice of cadaver dissection in the 1200s. This stopped the practice for over 300 years and greatly slowed the accumulation of education regarding human anatomy” (Specter cited in O’Brien 2006).

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01457e.htm>; see also Park 1994; Siraisi 2001; Giegerich 2001; Glick et al 2005; Klestinec 2011; Hannam 2011). The following year, in 1908, an extensive counter-claim was published after the release of Andrew White's popular attack on the Catholic Church (White 2010 [1896]). In his scathing 700 page history of the "warfare of science with theology in Christendom", White claimed that "anatomical investigation was made a sin against the Holy Ghost" which delayed and hampered science for centuries, and that only a few brave men, such as the early 16th century anatomist Vesalius, "at great personal risk broke through this Church opposition" (2010[1896]:56). Walsh (2003 [1908]) responded to White's claims by stating that he [Walsh] was able to secure a copy of the original papal decree. Rather than cite an incorrect reference to the *Bull* as White had done, Walsh was able to address White's claim, and thus prove that the *Bull* had in fact nothing to do with prohibiting anatomy or dissection.

As part of his rebuttal, Walsh (2003[1908]) published the original decree, titled "On Burials" which refers to individuals "distinguished by birth or position" who have died in "foreign lands". The decree stresses that their bodies should not be disemboweled, boiled, dismembered or separated from their flesh and carried back for burial, as was customary for the thousands of casualties of Europe's early 12th and 13th century Crusades. Apparently fearing a new plague, and attempting to discourage the arrival of more festering animal skins filled with the dismembered remains of knights, clergy and nobility, Pope Boniface VIII preferred that bodies be first "reduced to ashes or otherwise" and then brought back "to the place where they wished to be buried" (cited in Walsh 2003

[1908]:33).<sup>9</sup>

Despite this very early clarification in the historical record, more recent authors on this subject are still attempting to correct “the persistent misconception that there was in medieval and Renaissance Europe a deep seated "taboo" connected with corpses and the closure of the body” (Park 1994:3; see also Siraisi 1995; Cregan 2010; Hannam 2011). Glick et al (2005:33) state that “there was nothing intrinsically degrading about having one’s body opened or intrinsically un-Christian or impious about dissection”. The New Catholic Encyclopedia (2010: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01457e.htm>) maintains that the myth of Catholic anti-dissection “is to be found in nearly every history of medicine published in English, and has been made much of in books on the supposed opposition of science and religion”. Nevertheless, as Park (1994), Siraisi (1995) and Hannam (2011) claim, this myth has proven to be “protean and impossible to kill” (Park 1994:4).

Whether a total misunderstanding (O’Brien 2006; Hannam 2011), an outright misinterpretation (Park 1994), or perhaps a product of Post-Reformation changes and current sensibilities around the treatment of the dead (Lawrence 1998), Pope Boniface VIII’s decree is highly relevant when examining the paradox prevalent in contemporary Western approaches to the cadaver, and the modern decoding of medieval Catholic beliefs. Those who believe there was an anti-dissection decree maintain that the Church

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<sup>9</sup> Walsh ([1908] 2003) begins his treatise by describing the issues that arose after a medical school at the Jesuit run Fordham University opened in 1905. Students and professors seemed distressed and confused at what they thought would be Catholic imposed transgressions, or excommunication if they participated in dissection. Walsh attempts to clarify the Church’s position, which does not officially prohibit human dissection.

was anti-science, and that medical advances arose separately from, and in spite of, any form of Church involvement (see for example Santoro 2005; Ducasse et al 2006); the ‘body’ of the Church and the ‘body’ of medical science were separate and distinct entities. Those who claim that the Church was not anti-dissection see a long and involved relationship with the cadaver that naturally gave way to anatomical learning (see for example Giegerich 2001; Klestinec 2010; Hannam 2011; Sugg 2011).

The fact that the papal decree addressed the acts of disemboweling, dismemberment and boiling indicates quite clearly that it was a common funerary practice at the time, and that enough people were engaged in it across Europe and the Middle East to merit the Pope’s attention. Nevertheless, the decree was not directed at Christian laity, the clergy, or the rising class of anatomists, but at the practice of long-distance transportation of war casualties (Merrigan 1907; Walsh 2003 [1908]). Local attitudes and practices around dismemberment and display seemed not only to have continued unabated, but flourished rapidly just after the decree was published (Walsh 2003 [1908]).

### **Relics and Resurrection: God and His Body Parts**

A closer look at the historical record, and the vast amounts of human remains and cadaver imagery in Catholic churches around the world, reveals quite the opposite of a “taboo” connected with corpses, or anything resembling an anti-dissection complex. The historical picture in fact points to a religious tradition that derives much of its liturgy from death and resurrection, and the intercession of an assortment of saints represented by an array of dismembered human remains (see Cruz 1977; Bynum 1990; Castelli 2004;

Delaney 2005; Marinelli 1993). Furthermore, these traditions do not contradict modern interpretations. For example, a recent Catholic blog entry ([www.fisheaters.com/relics.html](http://www.fisheaters.com/relics.html)) describes the common method of processing relics, asserting that: “The heads, hearts, and various limbs of other saints were sometimes removed - not by their enemies, but after death by their adherents - and enshrined separately”.

The stories of the early Christian martyrs (1st to 5th centuries AD) not only form a “critical building block of Christian culture” (Castelli 2004:4) but the physical remains of these martyrs, and many other saints, rulers and religious leaders over the last several centuries, have become an integral part of religious veneration, and the Church’s architecture, expansion, and wealth (Crook 2000; Osborne 2003; Walsham 2010).

The lives and deeds of these early martyrs varied but they were united in sainthood by their violent deaths, subsequent exhumations, and the ‘translation’ of their bodies into relics (see Castelli 2004; Marinelli 1993).<sup>10</sup> Many of them, such as St. Cecilia, St. Pascal, St. Agatha, and St. Xavier for example, are described as living a life “expressed by the Coliseum and the catacombs” (Foxe and Forbush 1978:11). While they are said to have secretly met and worshipped in Roman burial caves, a sacred place where they collected the bones, hair, teeth, and dried flesh of their dead brethren for reverence, the ground above was a place of torment and prosecution for practicing what was then an illegal

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<sup>10</sup> The word relic is from the Latin *reliquiae* (pl.) meaning remains. For human remains to be ‘translated’ into relics, assuming they were authentic, they were first carried by the clergy in a public ceremony as an act of recognition designed to distinguish them from their original burial place below ground, to their new status above ground. Translation occurred in the elevation of their body, in a ritual called *elevatio corporis*, that sanctified any and all parts of the remains. The remains could then be placed in a reliquary and made visible to the public, or later in the 14th century, when full bodies were preserved, they would be placed in glass coffins or various cases (Cruz 1977).

religion. After their own “triumphant” deaths, always by lengthy torture and execution, their bodies became the potent substance of holy relics that established the foundations for Catholic churches across Europe and the Americas (Cruz 1977; Castelli 2004; Delaney 2005). These saintly relics also provided the necessary capital for rapid ecclesiastical expansion (Goodson 2010; Walsham 2010).

The shedding of blood through an agonizing martyrdom dominated the protocol for establishing the precepts around belief, truth, and the embodiment of Jesus Christ, who himself had been tortured and executed (Marinelli 1993; Delaney 2005). For medieval people, asserts Merback (1999:19), the experience of “seeing and imagining a body that was ravaged and bleeding from tortures inflicted upon it, lay at the centre of a constellation of religious doctrines, beliefs, and devotional practices” (see Figure 2:1 and 2:2). The prayers and meditative devotions to the tortured and crucified Christ required a



**Figure 2:1** Crucifix. Algarve, Portugal 2008 (Image © M.Nafte)



**Figure 2:2** Scene from Passion Play, London, UK. March 2013 (Image © J.Doucette, all rights reserved).

form of “contemplative immersion in the grisly details of His affliction” (Merback

1999:19). The language of pain, suffering, and violent death in the various legends of Christian martyrs, “played to the same fascinations” (Merback 1999:19).

The wounded and dismembered body of the martyr, like the Saviour’s, was evidence of ‘a good death’, the struggle in the resistance against faithlessness and evil; it therefore became a sanctified body that would be resurrected spiritually whole (Fuxe and Forbush 1978; Cruz 1977). Thus, after a martyr’s death, divine power encompassed the body, as well as anything that the body part had come into contact with; this holy contagion offered followers an opportunity to commune with God, send messages, ask for protection, and be healed (Marinelli 1993; Osborne 2003; Goodson 2010). The body could exist as whole and undecayed, referred to as an “incorruptible”, a sign that its purity was untouched by the natural processes of death and decomposition (see Cruz 1977), or as dried clumps, bone, teeth or hair. These body parts, even in fragments, were not symbolic of sainthood, or indicators of a divine presence, but the absolute physical embodiment *pars pro toto* of the departed (Walsham 2010).<sup>11</sup>

As such, relics were powerfully charged, sacred items that radiated divinity even when highly fragmented (Ward 1987; Osborne 2003). There are numerous tales in many of the historical documents that describe the infectious power of relics, a power so great that everyone or thing within their presence would be affected (Thurston 1911; Ward 1987; Wilson 1983). This drew hordes of worshippers and pilgrims across the continent, especially on ‘feast days’ when various saints would be made accessible to the laity

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<sup>11</sup> The physical remains of a martyr or saint are known as ‘first class relics’, whereas ‘second class relics’ are all of the non-corporeal items that had come into contact with first class relics, including any containers or materials that had touched it, or anything the person may have owned, worn or carried while alive or after death (Cruz 1977; Geary 1986).

(Smith 2010).

Brown (1981:4-5) states that the “dead bodies of holy men and women, confessors and martyrs” directly influenced Christendom politically, economically and culturally for well over a thousand years. Likewise, Crook (2000:9) declares that human remains have been integrated into all of the eastern and western European Catholic churches, basilicas and cathedrals over the last several centuries, and therefore “played a significant part in their architectural form and internal arrangement”. Thousands of human remains, vials of blood, sachets of hair, skin, teeth and nails have been put into the stones and walls of these buildings, and placed on or below specially sculpted altars and shelves, to imbue them with power, sanctity and divinity (see Figures 2:3 to 2:6, 2:9 and 2:10).

The power of these human remains extended well beyond church walls and altars. They emitted a “kind of holy radioactivity which bombarded everything in the area” (Finucane 1995:26). Monks dipped relics into wine and water for healing the sick and prolonging life; armies carried them into battle; kings collected them to establish the divinity of their lineages; and whole papal empires were built on the capital they provided (Geary 1986; Finucane 1995; Osborne 2003; Smith 2010; Goodson 2010).

By the late Middle Ages, it became church law (known as *Canon 1237*) that relics must be used in the consecration of a church, and be placed permanently beneath its altar (Crook 2000; Beal et al. 2002). There were no restrictions on how many a church could acquire or display, but the canon emphasized that “the relic should be of a size sufficient for them to be recognized as parts of human bodies; very small relics may not be used”

(Beal et al. 2002:1439).<sup>12</sup>

Not surprisingly, by the 5th century AD a lucrative trade in the body parts of early Christian martyrs was firmly entrenched in Europe and the Middle East (Smith 2010). Most of these items are documented as originating from Rome and Constantinople, two very powerful seats of Christianity vying for autonomy and sovereignty (Geary 1986; Walsham 2010). Itinerant traders, travelling clergy, pedlars, and knights engaged in the market for typical (and easily preserved) items such as bones, dried appendages and hair. These relics were competing against items that became increasingly extraordinary such as the lips and skull fragments from St. John the Baptist's severed head; St. Peter's beard; the arm of St. George; St. Agatha's severed breasts; and the famous St. Veronica's veil, the cloth that had touched the bloodied face of Jesus as he stumbled to his crucifixion (Geary 1986; Bynum 1990; Crook 2000; Osborne 2003).

The placing of such powerful relics into a variety of containers established them as sacred objects, and thereby increased their value (see Figure 2:3 and 2:4). They were easily transformed from spiritual and religious entities to economic capital (Geary 1986; Finucane 1995). Relics were wrapped in silk, encrusted with jewels and contained in gold casings; small ones could be placed in larger reliquaries, and old coverings could be replaced with new ones "at will" (Smith 2010:73). They became more opulent and ornate depending on the religious sponsor or royal affiliate, and provided the foundation that was

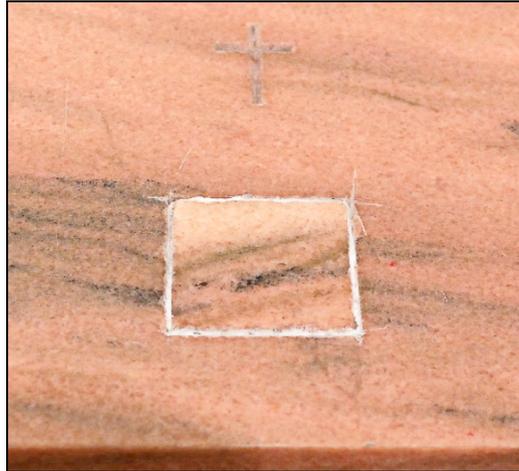
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<sup>12</sup> In every Catholic church there is a central altar (among many other side altars) which can be moveable or fixed. Traditional practice required the altar to be constructed from a single piece of natural stone, often a marble or granite. Carved into the altar stone-known as the *mensa*-is a cavity-the *capsule*-within which a first class relic is placed and sealed, to consecrate the altar and to recall the early Christian martyrs' tombs (see Figures 2:5 and 2:6). If the altar stone is moveable, it can thus be transported outdoors where it can be used for mass (see Vatican Archive-Libreria Editricea Vaticana).

central to dynasty building (Smith 2010; Walsham 2010).



**Figure 2:3** Reliquary containing the skull of St. Jean Brebeuf, at the Church of the Martyr's Shrine, Midland, ON.  
**Figure 2:4** St. Antonius, Archbishop of Florence (1459) displayed in the Dominican Church of San Marco  
(Images © J.Doucette)



**Figure 2:5 and 2:6** The stone altar *mensa* and *capsule* where first class relics are placed (images © M.Nafte)

As both spiritual and economic capital, relics were used to create power in the region, reshape the landscape, and consolidate family lineages (Smith 2010). New churches, basilicas, monasteries, and family estates were established or expanded at the sites of these relics. They became the focus for crowds of supporters wherever they were placed, stored, or displayed. This increased the wealth, prestige, and political power of those who controlled their use (see Crook 2000; Spaak 2009; Smith 2010). As such, their portability, their sacred contagiousness, their economic value, and their legitimacy were

all mutually reinforcing (Walsham 2010).

Spaak (2009) discusses the powerful pull of the dead when describing the evolution of the burial place of the remains of Saint Denis, Saint Rusticus and Saint Eleutherius.<sup>13</sup> The spot began as a simple shrine to the 3rd century martyred body of St. Denis, who was decapitated along with his priest companions, and buried on a hill north of Paris. The remote shrine drew crowds of pilgrims and eventually became a monastery in the 5th century. This attracted the Merovingian and Carolingian kings, who sought the church as a burial site for their family lineages. By the Middle Ages, the church of St. Denis was one of the most powerful Benedictine Abbeys of the region, complete with massive cross-ribbed arches, rosette carvings and stained glass windows. It was the sacred place for all of France, a ‘living’ necropolis that created a physical and spiritual link between the heroic martyred saints and the French aristocracy (Walsham 2010). In effect, St. Denis is designed, like many monasteries of its time, as a giant reliquary housing human remains (Crook 2000). A total of almost 200 bodies lie within its walls and around its altars.

Spaak (2009:441) maintains that the cathedral of St. Denis, ‘a giant tomb’, is a classic example of the “antinomic relationship between power and death”. Within the context of Catholic doctrine however, the relationship between power and death is not as contradictory as Spaak (2009) would suggest. Christian martyrdom is the result of maintaining one’s faith in Jesus Christ while enduring pain, and a violent death. The dead

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<sup>13</sup> St. Denis, the patron saint of France, was considered the first bishop of Paris. In the early 3rd century, Pope Clement I sent him from Rome to Gaul on a mission where he was executed due to a still active edict suppressing Christianity. He and his priest companions were all decapitated after lengthy tortures. According to legend, after St. Denis’s head was cut off with a large axe, he miraculously picked it up and walked for several miles singing hymns and preaching (Cruz 1977; Delaney 2005). In art, he is often depicted as carrying his own head.

bodies of the faithful who have suffered are thereby imbued with ‘power’ to intercede on behalf of the living. They can cause miracles because they ‘live’ within the presence of God. Technically, or spiritually, canonized martyrs (saints) were neither dead, nor considered disembodied, but flesh embodied spiritually, waiting to be resurrected (Marinelli 1993). They are also set apart as a category distinct from angels, who were never corporeal, and are associated with bringing messages and the blessing of spaces (Rivard 2009). Saints were and remained corporeal, and as Brown (1981:1-2) states, they were the dead human bodies that “joined Heaven and Earth”.

The manufacture of relics was an integral part of their trading and circulation. After Byzantium and Rome ceased to be the main sources of these relics due to ongoing warfare, and political turmoil from the 6th century onward (Geary 1986; Grant 1998), various European kingdoms, villages and centres began to make and trade their own relics, gathered from the remains of local saintly people, the clergy, and nobility (Crook 2000; Walsham 2010; Smith 2010). They quickly became items of prestige and the most sought after political and religious artifacts across Europe that could be bought, stolen, exchanged or gifted (Geary 1986). Relics were an essential element to important royal collections, they formed the foundation of every church in the Middle Ages, and were the powerful, mystic treasures of conquering armies and dynasties (Osborne 2003; Walsham 2010). Thousands of body parts – dried clumps of flesh, skeletal fragments, blood, organs, hair, full bodies and amputated limbs, placed in a variety of ornate containers – conveyed protection, sovereignty, wealth and status in an ever-expanding Catholic empire (Smith 2010; Spaak 2009).

Hence, the so-called “taboo” connected with corpses and their dismemberment seems entirely inconsistent with the fundamental role that human remains played in the rapid and vast expansion of the Catholic Church, in its architecture, its laws, its liturgy and its associated rituals.

### **Saintly Bodies: The Division of the Corpse**

According to the secular and religious literature concerning the lives of saints and their relics, the act of opening up the body, referred to as the ‘division of the corpse’, and taking out various organs for preservation, veneration, and/or separate burial, was commonplace in the Middle Ages (see Cruz 1977; Brown 1981b; Bynum 1990; Park 1994; Osborne 2003; Glick et al 2005; Hannam 2011). The ‘division of the corpse’ was the preferred funerary practice reserved for saints and martyrs, all of the kings of France, many of the kings of England, some of the kings and queens of Spain, and every pope until the mid-20th century (Bynum 1990; Park 1995; Binsky 1996; Lawrence 1998; Mafart et al 2004; Barilan 2005; Régnier 2009).

Siraisi (1995) states that non-human anatomical dissection existed for a brief period in ancient Greece, and even more briefly in the 2nd century AD with Galen, the Greek physician-philosopher who demonstrated only non-human animal dissection. The “reappearance” of the practice in medieval Europe, she claims, is “certainly a striking cultural development” (Siraisi 1995:6). However, given that the division of the corpse and the manufacture and trade of relics were rampant by the AD 1100s, and the fact that thousands of human remains had already been integrated within churches throughout

Europe and the Middle East, contrary to Siraisi's claim, human dissection is unlikely to have been a "striking" cultural development. Brown (1981b), Finucane (1982), Park (1994, 1995), Crook (2000), Barilan (2005), and Régnier (2009), among many others, assert that dead nuns, clergy, knights and kings had their bodies cut open, their heads cut off, their organs removed, and their bodies embalmed in private homes, convents, churches and courtyards on a regular basis during the Middle Ages, and well into the 18th century. Furthermore, opening up the bodies of a holy person and the saintly also entailed examining them extensively for certain marks, signs or religious symbols (Cruz 1977; Brown 1981; Glick et al 2005; Régnier 2009).

Stories abound in the Catholic and secular literature of physicians, priests, and nuns peering into the freshly opened bodies of the holy and seeing signs of wonder and miracles (see Cruz 1977; Foxe and Forbush 1978; Park 1994; Crook 2000; Castelli 2004; Gallonio 2006). Marks of evil, curses and illness could also be determined by looking at the entrails of the dead. Sainthood and criminality were understood to lie within the flesh, and the search for a cause of death thus heralded the concept of the autopsy (Bynum 1990; Park 1994; Lawrence 1998).<sup>14</sup> According to Park (1995:115), dissection and dismemberment "had long since been domesticated" in the manufacturing of relics, "while the stories of the dismembered martyrs had surrounded the practice with a charismatic, if somewhat anxious, glow". The act of peering into the splayed open cadaver in front of an assortment of curious witnesses, while narrating various wonders and signs, was as much a religious act as it was the beginning of formal anatomical

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<sup>14</sup> The word *autopsy* is derived from the Greek word meaning "to see with one's own eyes".

training.

Even more indicative of the intense relationship between the Church, human remains, and anatomical learning, is the fact that prior to the construction of formal anatomy schools and theatres, churches were the main venues for medical, criminal, and saintly ‘divisions and dissections’ (see French 1978; Klestinec 2010). Since the Church controlled the manufacture and translation of relics (Cruz 1997), and sought to “control the dispensation of healing” because it deemed disease and pestilence the action of “evil angels and demons” (Rivard 2009:180), it was naturally presumed that the handling of dead flesh was appropriate and within its realm (Park 1995). In addition, altars were constructed as continuations of gravesites and transi-tombs (Crook 2000); and cutting open a cadaver in church was neither out of the ordinary nor transgressive but “itself resembled a sacrament, the penultimate act in a potential drama of redemption” (Park 1995:116).

It is difficult to determine when or whether there was a formal split between the study of anatomy and the Catholic Church prior to the 16th century Reformation. Medievalists Bynum (1990), Park (1995), Binsky (1996), Merback (1999), Siraisi (2001), and Simon (2008) see a seamless continuity where the Church maintained a ‘hands-on’ approach to the division and display of the dead, while at the same time supporting the establishment of anatomy schools across Europe.<sup>15</sup> Giegerich (2001:204) maintains that

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<sup>15</sup> Anatomy schools were first established between the 13th and early 16th centuries in the large mercantile and papal centres of Italy, primarily Bologna, Padua, Venice, and Florence. By the 17th century, many opened in other cities in Europe (Paris, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Prague and London, for example) and were still closely affiliated or funded by the Catholic Church prior to the Reformation (Park 1995; Siraisi 2001).

dissection had to have been sanctioned by the Catholic Church primarily because “the accurate portrayal of saints, and in fact, Christ himself could only be accomplished through visual documentation of human anatomy”. That the first anatomical images made in Europe used for educating early anatomists and surgeons were copies of the *gisants*—images of cadavers gathered from mortuary art and transi-tombs (Hecksecher 1958), and that private anatomy lessons often took place in churches even after anatomy schools had been established (Klestinec 2010), indicate that Catholic involvement in anatomical learning was fundamental and indeed continuous.

In Medieval and Renaissance Europe and the Middle East, human dissection was not occurring in Jewish or Islamic contexts due to a clearly documented religious taboo against handling cadavers (Prioreshi 2006). These religious institutions practiced medicine widely and disseminated anatomical teachings, but without demonstrating or attending to the division of the corpse (Prioreshi 2006; Pormann and Savage-Smith 2007). It could therefore be concluded that autopsies and dissections, as Walsh (2003[1908]) and Glick et al (2005) suggest – and I would add the widespread circulation and display of these remains – were products of the Medieval Christian world.

Physicians, priests, nuns, anatomists and artists from at least the 13th to the 18th century seemed to converge around the opened cadaver, taking out various parts, preserving others, and illustrating their respective narratives with an assortment of engravings, relics, mortuary art, frescos and paintings (see also Basta and Bastova 2012). God, dismemberment, and veneration appear to overlap comfortably during this era, exemplified by an influx of religious anatomical treatises, and an easy transition from the

eneration of relics to the collecting of anatomical specimens.<sup>16</sup>

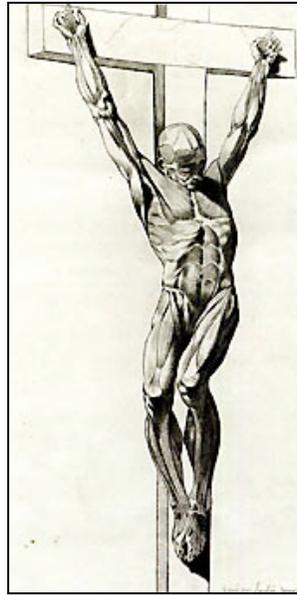
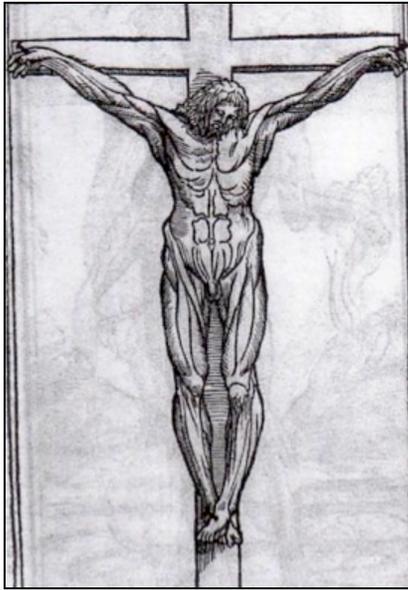


Figure 2:7 Da Carpi's image of the flayed Christ (see *Isagoge Breves* 1959 [1535])

Figure 2:8 Jacques Gamelin's image of flayed Christ (1779)

### Sinful Bodies: Dissection and Diversion

European universities began teaching human anatomy in the late medieval period, around the mid-14th century, as part of a broader philosophy of medicine that included

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<sup>16</sup> The first illustrated anatomical treatise, considered to be Jacobo da Carpi's (1460-1530) early 16th century *Isagoge Breves* (see Pioreschi 2006; Park 1995), depicts the musculature of the limbs and abdominal wall on an engraved image of the crucified body of Christ (see Figure 2:7). It is also at this time that the flayed anatomical body, a direct reference to the flayed martyred body of St. Bartholomew, makes its first appearance. It succeeded in illustrating various muscle groups and their movements, while paying homage to the saint of medicine and hospitals. The flayed Christ becomes a common motif in medical drawings (see Figure 2:8). There is also an intense focus on the heart, the immaculate and the sacred, in the Catholic Church (see Figures 2:9 and 2:10). Rendered as a vital and important relic, it inspired what Régnier (2009) refers to as "cardiac cults" across Europe, from the 12th to the 20th century (see also Mafart et al. 2004). The separate burials of the hearts of kings and popes extended the boundaries of their empires, and created sacred sites of worship. Study and preservation of the heart, while religious in practice, also provided some of the most accurate illustrations and descriptions of blood flow, valves, and circulation (French 1978). Currently, the heart of King Richard I (1157-1199), which had been embalmed and encased in a lead box after his death, is being examined by forensic pathologists to discern a possible cause of death, and to study early Medieval methods of embalming (see Charlier et al 2013).

astronomy and botany (French 1978; Ferrari 1987; Duff 2010). Though a degree or formal training was not required to be a practicing physician, the art of ‘anatomizing’ the dead was expected to fulfill the minimal requirements (Brown 1981; da Carpi 1959 [1510]).



**Figure 2:9** Relic of the sacred heart of St. Camillus de Lellis touring the world (2013) (image © G. Edwards, all rights reserved)  
**Figure 2:10** Procession with the sacred heart of St. John Vianney, Boston 2006 (image © Cardinal Sean's Blog 2006)

The establishment of large anatomy theatres in universities across Europe and the increased size of the audiences attending certainly indicate that there was a growing interest in human dissection and that it was by no means, a covert practice. From a few private students watching an anatomist in the local church (Klestinec 2010) to a few hundred crammed into a gallery (Ferrari 1987), a dissection craze swept up doctors, students, artists, and the public. A sudden hunger for cadavers escalated the demand for bodies beyond the “meager but regular trickle” supplied by the gallows, and poor families “swayed by the prospect of a free funeral” (Park 1994:15).

Cadavers were suddenly in high demand, and though the gallows offered up the

bodies of executed criminals, charitable hospitals provided the majority (Cunningham 1997; Park 1994; Cregan 2010). Poor “foreigners and others without families to worry about their funerary rites”, and all of the unknown individuals dead from illness, murder or mayhem, were considered the ‘legal bodies’ earmarked for dissection (Park 1994:16). Artists, students, and anatomists were soon gathered around dead bodies in hospitals and theatres to participate in regular dissection demonstrations, or to conduct their own. While there, they bartered with midwives and physicians for various body parts and established ‘contracts’ for future supplies (Bynum 1990; Park 1994; Lawrence 1998).

Having one’s hands physically explore the inner realms of the dead body represented the critical shift of this particular period from relying on the presumptions of authority to empirical observation (Ferrari 1987). Renaissance anatomist Jacobo da Carpi (1460-1530) emphasized in his early anatomical treatises that “the utility and necessity of anatomy needs to be known...and let those who write books on anatomy also not trust the authorities but in their sense perception as I do” (da Carpi 1959:13 [1510]).

The work of the anatomist was still very much an extension of the clergy’s in terms of authority and religious sanction (Bynum 1990). Dissection granted the anatomist and his audience the opportunity to observe first hand whether God or the devil had caused various marks, illnesses, and pathologies. Most importantly, however, anatomizing the dead was “a complex ceremony” (Ferrari 1987:50), a very Catholic demonstration of martyrdom that provided a form of ‘purification’, like torture and impalement (Barilan 2005; MacDonald 2005; Rifkin and Ackerman 2011). It was an important opportunity for redemption on behalf of the soul of the deceased, and the process of dissection allowed

the anatomist to act as the redeemer (Merback 1999). Such an elevated task invoked the anatomist's reverence for, and authority over "the masterful workings of the Creator" (da Carpi 1959 [1510]; see also Jones 2004:439).<sup>17</sup>

Revealed before God, the anatomist's eyes, and an ever-growing audience, the dissected cadaver exerted a new sort of 'pull' distinct from the religious relic, but one that was just as powerful. Dissection ritualized the practice of anatomy as a necessary expansion of the law, and established the anatomist's absolute right to uncover God's handiwork, as well as his own talents in cutting and revealing (Cunningham 1997; French 1999). Akin to the charismatic sermons and rituals of certain priests, the cutting up of the body and the pronouncements of miracles, disease and evil by anatomists made them increasingly popular, theatrical and much sought after events (Klestinec 2010; Rifkin and Ackerman 2011; Margósy 2011).

While the clergy maintained their practice of the division of the corpse as a more private, solemn funerary ritual designed to generate canonization and prized relics, which ultimately attracted the crowds (Geary 1986; Park 1995), public dissecting galleries allowed for a more festive style of making *memoria* through dismemberment, what Enders (1999:15) declares was the "human thirst after spectacles". Public dissection during this period was marked by its own brand of celebration and theatre. The huge growth in the number of anatomy theatres with risers, rotunda seating, and galleries for observation evinced more of a desire for dissection as performance than an opportunity

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<sup>17</sup> Renaissance physician Benivieni (1443-1502) declared that bodies were 'sites of special power'. At his public anatomizing lectures he demonstrated his ability to uncover signs of 'cowardice, evil or godliness' when he held up various body parts, such as the lapsed uterus of a hanged woman and the "hairy heart" of a thief (Benivieni 1954 [1507]).

for student engagement (see Figure 2:12, and Ferrari 1987; Enders 1999 ).<sup>18</sup> Just as popular as the feast days of saints when relics were brought out for veneration, anatomizing became an established European social tradition, one that offered the additional attractions of drinking, the wearing of masks, and the opportunity to view naked flesh (Ferrari 1987; Cavalcanti et al. 2009).

During winter, when cold temperatures helped to preserve cadavers, the fashionable elite, and members of the court jammed into dissecting theatres with student physicians; all paid a hefty sum to watch the anatomist pull out organs and cut up limbs (Brooks 2006; McDonald 2005; Roach 2003). Far from a solemn procedure, large candelabras were lit, musical oratories played, and refreshments were sold. These were great occasions, like public executions and religious confessions, for the wealthy and the working class to participate in a form of “ceremonial carnival” for the deconstruction of the dead (Ferrari 1987:50). Fittingly, Simon (2008:141) proposes that we reconsider the rise of various sciences in the Enlightenment “not with respect to scientific discovery and progress, but looking instead at science as spectacle and its various audiences”.

### **Dismemberment and Display**

Representations of the cadaver in art and medicine naturally increased during the Renaissance (14th to 17th centuries), a period defined by and described as, “the flowering of anatomical interest” (Park 1994:11). Engravings of dissected bodies in the large

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<sup>18</sup> Alessandro Benedetti, a 16th century anatomist at the University of Padua, noted that the public “anatomizing” of the dead always attracted the “hordes” and that “there must be guards to restrain them as they enter” (Cited in Ferrari 1987:56-7). Deploring the raucous, surging crowds at his lectures, da Carpi commented, “the true anatomist worked in private surrounded only by a few chosen students” (da Carpi 1959:13 [1510]).

anatomy theatres of Europe made fashionable gifts and souvenirs, and graced the covers of most 16th and 17th century anatomical treatises. Also popular was the genre of the Anatomy Lesson portraits that began appearing in university halls and the chambers of aristocrats and merchants.<sup>19</sup> Illustrations of the cadaver in anatomy manuals changed dramatically with the first printing of Vesalius's *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* in 1543, and though there were still religious overtones pertaining to death, resurrection, and *memoria*, there were no overt associations with martyred saints or the crucified Christ.<sup>20</sup> Where once the flayed, anatomized body was a direct reference to the martyred St. Bartholomew, this practice came to signify a new approach for the use of cadavers. Holding their own flayed skin, dismembered limbs and organs, and often the dissector's knife or a hangman's noose, cadavers and skeletons stare at themselves or beyond, metaphorically complicit in their own dissection (see Figure 2:11).<sup>21</sup> The cadaver's seeming complicity, or active participation in its own anatomizing, displays the credo of the period leading to the Enlightenment, one that is often cited in many anatomy plates and dissecting manuals as *mortui vivos docent*: the dead teach the living.

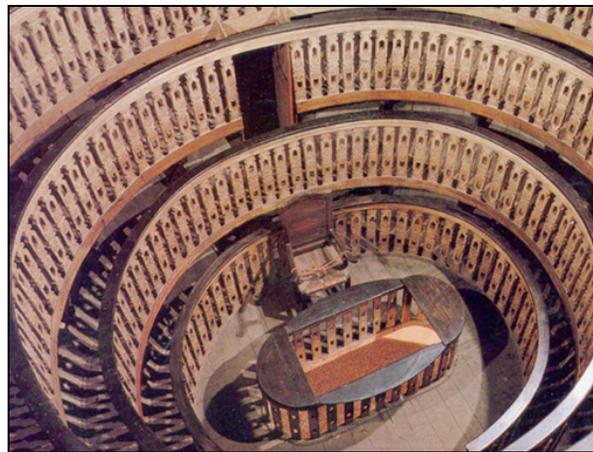
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<sup>19</sup> The Anatomy Lesson was a popular title for this style of portrait, completed by many Dutch artists, namely Pietersz (1550-1612), van Mierevelt (1567-1641), Rembrandt (1606-1669), Denys (1610-1670), and Bernaerts (1648-1677). In these large oil paintings, commissioned by wealthy patrons, Europe's elite are portrayed seated or standing around a dissected cadaver. Though the body is often bloodied and cut open, the men are clean and staring at the viewer or the cadaver. Their style of clothing and professionally detached demeanor convey their status and privileged access to the central figure of the anatomist and his corpse.

<sup>20</sup> The popular *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* by Vesalius (1514-1564) is often referred to as the first complete anatomical handbook. It makes great use of self-dissection imagery (see Garrison and Hast 2003). Waxworks and whole body specimens constructed as *écorchés* begin appearing by the late 1600s (Degueurce 2010; Hoffman 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Anatomists such as Estienne (1504-1564), Amusco (1525-1588), and Eustachi (d.1574), for example, used this style of self-dissection art, a trend that continued well into the late 18th century.

During such a ‘flowering’ of anatomical interest, there was inevitably fierce competition between anatomists, students, physicians, and artists over access to fresh cadavers. Furthermore, Richardson (1997:85) asserts there were always profits to be made at every stage of dismemberment, where parts of the human body could be “quarried and sold” to wigmakers, dentists, specimen makers and the ‘articulators of bones’. The dead body was also a vital source of healing, according to Sugg (2011), who gives an extensive outline of the many uses of ‘corpse medicine’ popular from the Middle Ages through the Victorian era. Recipes for curing epilepsy, headaches, nosebleeds, and plague included fresh blood drawn from an executed prisoner, and everything from the



**Figure 2:11** Flayed body from de Amusco *Anatomia del Corpo Humano* 1559 (see Dream Anatomy: [http://www.nlm.nih.gov/dreamanatomy/da\\_g\\_1-B-2-01.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/dreamanatomy/da_g_1-B-2-01.html))

**Figure 2:12** University of Padua anatomy theatre 1594 (image © University of Padova)

dried ground skulls of those who had died a violent death to the mummified limbs of the ancient dead.

Not surprisingly, grave robbing was common and continued for many centuries, but

various decrees across Europe attempted to control whose funerals and graves were illegal to plunder, and whose bodies were legally accessible (Park 1994; Richardson 2001).<sup>22</sup> For anatomists vying for access to the freshly dead, it became more advantageous to keep as many parts of the dismembered corpse as possible (Richardson 2001; Lawrence 1998).

As the anatomist's skill became increasingly refined, and the spectacle of pulling out organs was replaced with more solemn instruction (Klestinec 2010), preservation of the integrity of body parts improved. Methods of preserving these parts evolved alongside anatomical dissection methods (Chaplin 2008; Simon 2008; Lawrence 1998). Anatomists who desired to display their skills, instruct future students, and keep a variety of human remains experimented with various and effective ingredients available at the time (MacDonald 2005; Simon 2008).<sup>23</sup> Competition for cadavers, an increasing preoccupation with internal anatomy, and effective methods of preservation gave rise to the anatomical specimen, a new form of cultural capital that quickly became, like its religious counterpart, increasingly sought after, collected, and displayed (see Stephens 2007; Moore 2005; Margócsy 2011).

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<sup>22</sup> A Venetian decree in 1550, like many other decrees of the time, prohibited grave robbing and desecration, but its primary aim was to prevent the interruption of funeral services, and the plundering of graves belonging to wealthier and established citizens (Park 1994). There were no formal acts until England's Murder Act was established in the mid-18th century, which stipulated that only the bodies of executed criminals could be used for dissection; but since demand outstripped supply, this was amended in the Anatomy Act of 1832 to include bodies of the poor and the anonymous (Sappol 2002).

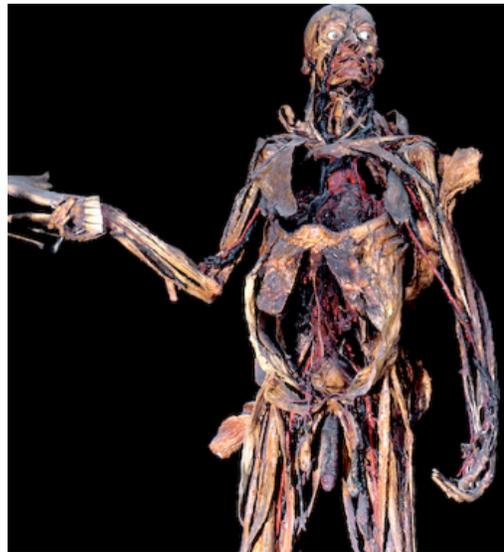
<sup>23</sup> Since the clergy was also experimenting with a variety of methods for organ and whole body preservation, many of the same ingredients and methods were being used. However, the amount and combination of ingredients, such as mercury, wax, salt, turpentine, myrrh, and alcohol, were closely guarded secrets (Chaplin 2008; Margócsy 2011; see also Hansen 1996; Simon 2008; Stephens 2007; Laderman 2003). In a highly competitive market for the best specimens and the bodies of "incorrupt" saints, recipes were stolen, specimens tasted, anatomists spied on, and naturalists called upon to hide defects and share their resources (Hansen 1996; Simon 2008; Cavalcanti et al 2009; Degueurce 2010).

Specimens immediately served a number of purposes: they provided resources for anatomical instruction, provided proof of the anatomist's 'discovery', and they entertained, warned and educated the masses. Chaplin (2008:135) suggests that specimens also served to "legitimize dissection as a mode of natural history inquiry" that by extension defused many of the "social and moral" anxieties surrounding anatomical learning. Specimens, moreover, represented a new 'body' of meaning for the viewer, one that was separate and distinct from the bodies of the sacred. Chaplin (2008:140; see also Stephens 2007) refers to this new body of meaning as a "tripartite autoptic system" of understanding the human body, whereby anatomists, students and lay-people could simultaneously look at a specimen, a cadaver, and a living body, and acquire "practical knowledge".

Unlike relics, anatomical specimens forged a conceptual link between anatomy and a more permanent death, rather than a resurrection; they reflected powerful fears about disease and a form of suffering that was very different from religious martyrdom (Hoffman 2010). They also provided the raw material to describe relevant cultural metaphors, effectively conveying the credo to 'teach the living' a different form of redemption. No longer a criminal, transient or prostitute, the specimen could be posed as classical sculpture, biblical figure, or the manifestation of societal vices to shock and frighten the pious (Chaplin 2008; Brooks 2006; Hansen 1996). In the collections of specimen-makers Ruysch, Desnoués, Hunter, and Fragonard for example, a child's hand holds up her own eye; syphilitic arms and legs make bouquets of flowers; Samson is

posed to beat the Philistines with the jawbone of an ass; and the horseman of the apocalypse straddles a flayed horse (see Figures 2:13 and 2:14).<sup>24</sup>

Dissecting theatres, medical schools and private collections quickly filled up with these objects of anatomical conquest. A number of buildings throughout Europe were



**Figure 2:13** Ruysch's 'Arm Holding an Eye Socket' -18th century (image © Rosamond Purcell, all rights reserved)

**Figure 2:14** Fragonard's 'Samson Battling the Philistines with the Jaw Bone of an Ass' ca.1794. Image courtesy of the Fragonard Museum, all rights reserved)

soon overloaded with human remains (Moore 2005; Chaplin 2008). At the same time however, during the 16th and 17th century period of the Reformation, the Catholic Church was being sacked of its relics (Cavalcanti et al. 2009). As part of a Protestant campaign to rid Christendom of its saints and “discredit the cult of relics” (Walsham 2010:121), Martin Luther announced his rejection of “idol worship” (Luther, cited in

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<sup>24</sup> Famous anatomist-physicians like Holland's Frederik Ruysch (1638-1731), France's Guillaume Desnoués (1650-1735) and Honoré Fragonard (1732-1799), and England's John Hunter (1728-1793) were most renowned for their permanent and colourful preservation techniques, as well as the thousands of specimens they amassed for display. Preserving human and animal remains in various poses, as *écorché* (flayed), and as part of elaborate tableaux, each of these anatomists maintained a very distinctive style. As Chaplin (2008) claims, their specimens served to project a very personal identity onto a growing public audience.

Koerner 2004:154) and John Calvin wrote tracts heaping scorn on what he termed “a filthy pollution” and “a most perverse kinde of superstition” (Calvin, cited in Walsham 2010:121). Churches were ransacked and relics destroyed “in compelling spectacles of desacralization” (Walsham 2010:123), mostly in England, Holland, Germany and France (Finucane 1995). As Catholic churches were being emptied of their “idolatry” (Calvin cited in Walsham 2010:121), anatomical specimens were increasing in number and value, showcasing the rise of the dissector’s skill, and the latest preservation methods in these very same countries.

In the new Lutheranism, “the disembodied, interiorized religion of the word” (Rublack 2010:144), human remains for worship in church were “sources of ideological anxiety and potential scandal” (Walsham 2010:143). Yet within the context of medical learning, the specimen as a disembodied part of the interior world seemed to mesh well with the growing disdain for relics. The Reformation altarpiece would not be a continuation of a gravesite, but a “scaffold for writing” (Koerner 2004:20). Changes within the Reformed church also coincided with changes in attitudes towards dissection, and in the profession of anatomy itself (Sappol 2002). Less a religious calling and more of a pursuit of ‘making order’ and rational thinking, anatomical learning began to distinguish between the voice of reason and the higher self, and the lower ranks of disorder, emotions, and superstitious awe (Sawday 1995). By cutting open the body, taking out various parts, and naming them, Sappol (2002) contends that the anatomist began to set himself above and outside bodily existence in order to become detached, clinical, and empowered. Specimens were the products of this ‘reform’; extensions of the

dissector's hand and mind that easily replaced relics as the new types of body parts to utilize, display, worship, and circulate.

Chaplin (2008) asserts that anatomical specimens were objects valued not only for their commercial worth, but also for their ability to hold and project forms of knowledge and skill. As manufactured objects, they represented the rise in specialist knowledge and came to foster a community of owners, collectors, and viewers (Bates 2008; Chaplin 2008; see also Roach 2003). They were bought and sold at private sales and public auctions, and treated as legal property in wills, gifts and bequests (Margóscy 2011; Chaplin 2008). Massive collections were established, housed in private homes, universities and public museums. At the core of these collections were the “intertwinings of anatomy, art, pedagogy and theatrical staging” (Hoffman 2010:1) that created a powerful relationship between spectatorship and institutional identity (Abt 2006; Chaplin 2008).

Post-Reformation followers of the new religion would not be met with human remains in their churches, but they could encounter the dead in places where liturgy had been replaced with the products of observation, suitably detached from the “sensuousness of Catholic doctrine” (see Rublack 2010:144). In stark contrast to relics, that were for veneration of the celebrated, the spiritually embodied, the powerful, and the famous, anatomical specimens eventually came to denote anonymity, powerlessness, and the disembodied. Anatomical specimens were the products of the rational mind separate and distinct from God and personhood. Nevertheless, like relics, specimens had compelling features that radiated power well beyond their place of containment. They were the

remains of dead persons and yet, objects that could be amassed for education, trade, entertainment, gifting, and personal wealth (see Moore 2005; Anderson 2008; Sappol 2002). Furthermore, like their religious counterparts, they provided the necessary capital for establishing institutions, in particular anatomy schools, private museums, and research labs, within prestigious colleges all over Europe and North America.

### **Canonization and Commodification: The Corpse as Private Property**

The Catholic Church and the field of medicine (via the State) regulate and restrict access to their respective human remains. Relics and specimens are not items that can be made, bought, or sold outside the boundaries of either institution without legal sanctions. Old and current laws protect the rights of the Church and medical institutions to maintain and circulate their private collections, acquire new ones, and destroy those no longer deemed suitable or useful. Though religious and civil law have sanctioned the possession and use of human remains for proprietary use, these laws are based on premises that are quite opposite from one another, and reflect, once again the inherent paradox that extends to the value, ownership, and use of the cadaver.

An example of the institutional differences regarding ownership and use of the cadaver can be seen in Church and State laws pertaining to the notion of property. Manufacturing, protecting and maintaining human remains as relics, are based on a rigid ‘identified property’ rule. According to Church canon (1281-89), relics and all associated saintly and human remains (of the non-laity) contained within, and below Church property belong to the ‘body of the Church’, that is, all Catholic churches in good

standing (Beal et al 2002:1413).<sup>25</sup> Relics can circulate to other churches, be borrowed for religious functions, and travel to other venues for veneration. They can be built, placed on, or contained within altars (in fact they *must be* according to Church law), and placed anywhere within the Church's structure (see Figure 2:15). However, according to revisions made in the 1960s (referred to as Vatican II), relics can no longer be bought or sold, within or beyond Church property (Tanner 2011).<sup>26</sup> Since relics are the sole and private property of the Catholic Church, ownership and use cannot extend past its spiritual and physical boundaries (Tanner 2011; Beal et al 2002).

The *canon* is an important extension of this property rule and refers to the list on which the names of saints and beatified individuals have been recorded. Relics must be the identified remains of saints or holy individuals who appear on this official list, which is owned and approved by the supreme leader of the Catholic Church, the Pope (Tanner 2011).<sup>27</sup> Relics must also come with historic or current documentation, signed by the Holy See, describing their contents, their origins, and the name of the saint.<sup>28</sup> These forms of authentication verify and maintain them as Church property. Only the remains of individuals authenticated through this process can be placed within altars, carried in

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<sup>25</sup> The Catholic Church is described as a “living body with cells and units; a communion of communities, where Christ is present” (Yang 2006:116), and which represents an entire communion of churches that are unified by the Holy See (Yang 2006).

<sup>26</sup> The head of the liturgy office in the Diocese of Rome states “Relics absolutely cannot be bought or sold because they are sacred objects, they have no price” (Msgr. Frisina cited in <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0705484.htm>).

<sup>27</sup> The term *canon* is another word for list. Being canonized therefore means the person's name has been added to the list making them a holy person or saint.

<sup>28</sup> The Holy See refers to the central government of the Catholic Church, which is a sovereign entity headed by the Pope (Tanner 2011). The Holy See approves or denies sainthood, acts on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church, and politically represents the entire organization through its main offices in the Vatican.

procession, maintained on Church property, and brought out for feast days (see for example Figures 2:15 to 2:19).<sup>29</sup>

In contrast, laws governing the medical use of cadavers aim to protect the rights of the dead, to maintain their anonymity, and to regulate the flow of bodies for study. The premise guiding the various Anatomy and Tissue Acts in North America, for example is the ‘no-property’ rule of a corpse. The Anatomy Act, originally established in England in 1832, was designed to protect the rights of the dead from body-snatching, unlawful dissection, and the ‘competing claims of widows’ (McDonald 2005; Kennedy et al 2001). The law only allowed for the use of bodies that were anonymous and unclaimed. This ideally prevented anyone who was not next of kin, from claiming to own the rights to a body.



**Figure 2:15** Relics of the bones of St. Peter the Hermit, placed under the central altar. Trevi nei Lazio, Italy (image © Bishop Dowd, 2012)

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<sup>29</sup> Not to be mistaken for an outdated decree, the most recent construction of the altar of a Catholic church in Krakow, Poland contains crystal vials of the blood of Pope John Paul II who was beatified in May 2011 (see <http://www.fjp2.com/en/news/world/13532-relic-of-pope-john-paul-ii-venerated-in-krakow-church>). His body was exhumed for his beatification, and was then placed under the altar in the church of St. Sebastian in Rome (see Pullella and Hornby 2011).



**Figure 2: 16** Pope Benedict XVI carries the relic head of St. Wenceslas, Prague, 2011.

**Figure 2:17** Clergy surround the body of St. Anthony of Padua, 2010 (images courtesy of St. Peters Basilica.org, all rights reserved).



**Figure 2:18** The relics of the newly canonized St. Kateri (Images © J.Doucette, all rights reserved).

**Figure 2:19** Procession with the relics of St. Kateri, Midland, ON. 2012

Most importantly, however, the Act also established a regulated legal system for the supply of cadavers for anatomical dissection and study (LRCC 1992). A variation of the no-property rule persists in all of the subsequent Anatomy Acts, and pertains to body and organ donation. When a person willingly donates his or her body for scientific or medical use, the rule upholds their wishes and cannot be challenged by spouses or next of kin.

An important distinction is also made between owning a body and being in possession of it (Whaley and Stigas 2009). The law does not recognize ownership of a body, or its remains. As it does not recognize ownership of another human being while

the person is alive, the law is extended after death. A body can only be in the possession of another for the purposes of disposal, which must be done and paid for by the person making the claim (Whaley and Stigas 2009). A counter claim of possession must prove that the person making the counter claim has the right of possession.

All Anatomy Acts in North America stipulate that it is illegal for any approved personnel (coroners, medical examiners, physicians, and undertakers) to use, keep, dispose of, or distribute the bodies of unclaimed unidentified individuals, unless the manner of death has been established as natural causes, or accidental. This allows for any suspicious deaths to be investigated, and for the *corpus delicti* to be established in the event of a homicide (Moran 2003).<sup>30</sup> In the province of Ontario, for example, the law distinguishes clearly between identified unclaimed remains, identified claimed remains, and unidentified unclaimed remains (see Ontario Anatomy Act 2002). If an identified body (the name, sex, age, birthplace and last place of residence must be recorded) has not been claimed after death, is intact and not in a state of decay, organs, tissues and any other useful parts can be distributed for use (see Ontario Trillium Gift of Life Network Act 1990). This is considered to be the routine process for procuring human remains where no consent is required (LRCC 1992; Jacob 2003).

Alternatively, if an identified body is unclaimed but too elderly or diseased for living organ transplant, the Anatomy Act stipulates that the local inspector or coroner “may deliver the body to a teacher of anatomy or surgery in a school, for the purpose of anatomical dissection” (see Ontario Anatomy Act 2002 - <http://www.e->

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<sup>30</sup> The *corpus delicti* rule maintains that in the event of a homicide, a body must be present and identified, and there must be evidence on that body that a crime against it has been committed (see Moran 2003).

[laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws\\_statutes\\_90a21\\_e.htm](http://laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_90a21_e.htm)). This Act also states that once the purpose of the body has been served, the school must dispose of the body at its own expense (see also Whaley and Stigas 2009). These remains are not considered to be the property of the coroner, or the anatomy school, but remains that are in their possession until the time they are to be disposed, or until someone else proves that they have more of a ‘right of possession’ over the remains (Ontario Anatomy Act 2002). In case of such last minute claims by next of kin, or in the event of the coroner’s request for an inquiry regarding a suspicious death, there is a compulsory fourteen-day waiting period that must be observed by the anatomy facility before any dissection or specimen preparation can be obtained.

The notion of property, enmeshed with concepts of the body and identity, once again highlights the contrasts between human remains as relics versus specimens. Veneration of human remains as relics implies adhering to the basic doctrines of the Catholic faith: the belief in resurrection, the belief in the intercessory power of saints, and the notion of truth in the connection between saints and adherents (Delaney 2005). The Church only procures and uses identified human remains that have been elevated in status; that have been translated into powerful and mythic spiritual forces that provide the structure, the direction and focus of veneration and prayer. Their very presence serves to maintain loyalty, attract membership, and is “important and significant in the life of the Church” (Saunders cited in Mangan 2003 - <http://catholiceducation.org/articles/religion/re0331.html>). No matter how many parts and fragments there are of the remains, or that have been lost, damaged, or dispersed, each part is considered the equivalent of an

entire body that will eventually be reconstituted after resurrection (Cruz 1977). To be a relic is to be sacred, owned, renowned and venerated, based on one's identity, behaviour, and actions during life, and long after death.<sup>31</sup>

Far from being an outdated custom, or irrelevant to modern Catholics, relics are inherent to the continuity of the Catholic Church, an integral part of the ecumenical dialogue between communities of churches all over the world. They still provide the foundation for every mass, feast day, ceremony, and ordination (see Figures 2:20 and 2:21).<sup>32</sup>

In contrast, anatomical specimens demonstrate what Morgan (2009:7) describes as the “social production of anonymity”. As part of a long established tradition that has been legally sanctioned, scientific and medical investigation actively promotes the use of anonymous bodies for cutting up, disemboweling, and labeling, despite the extensive, current debates over its pedagogic value (Dyer and Thorndike 2000; Mclachlan and Regan De Bere 2004).

Dissection is still seen as an important part of the identity of medicine, the grand performance that is a necessary and exclusive rite of passage during which students acquire the clinically detached ‘medical gaze’, or as Foucault states “the domain of

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<sup>31</sup> Pope John Paul II, for example, died in 2005 and was beatified in May 2011. Shortly thereafter, he apparently caused the “miraculous healing” of a French nun who had suffered from Parkinson’s disease (Pullella and Hornby 2011). He was officially canonized in April 2014.

<sup>32</sup> The ordination of every pope and archbishop requires the bestowing of the pallium - a sacred vestment that is worn over the shoulders. Prior to the ordination, palliums are contained in a coffer which has been placed over the relics of St. Peter for at least 24 hours, officially making them third class relics (personal communication Cardinal Collins 2013). They can also be placed over, near, or beside the remains of other relics in order to infuse them with increased blessing, sanctity and power (see Figures 2:20 and 2:21).

experience and the structure of rationality” (Foucault 1975:17). The making, use, and acquisition of specimens extend the scientific relationship further by establishing a



**Figure 2:20** The pallium of former Pope Benedict XVI, placed over the full body relic of St. Celestine during the Pope’s visit, 2012.  
**Figure 2:21** The niche holding the coffer of palliums over the relics of St. Peter (images © St. Peters Basilica.org, all rights reserved).

“pedagogy for learning to see who exists in the world” (Haraway 1989:177) in terms of species rather than individuals (Morgan 2009).

Leder (1992), Frank (1995), and Sappol (2002) describe the medical school relationship to the cadaver as one that strives to be clinical, rather than personal. The living body is the subjective, personal ‘experiencing’ body while the corpse is the objective, impersonal ‘scientific’ body. The medical cadaver is the defunct machine that can be taken apart, analyzed, and studied for the benefit of clinicians, researchers, and students. Anatomical specimens, as products of medical investigation, represent both the control of knowledge and the control of the body, living and dead. Dissection, as its ‘mode of production’, is the critical deconstruction that represents the “triumph of mind over obdurate matter” (Sappol 2002:258). The intact body in Western medicine is

unrevealing and can have no answers for the anatomist other than the identity of the individual, which hinders rather than promotes the exploration of the machine's parts (Sawday 1995).

Exploring the dichotomies surrounding relics and specimens, in terms of identity, property, and use also reveals many interesting parallels. They both have come to be important and valuable commodities that highlight the structure and function of their respective institutions. Relics and anatomical specimens both offer a possibility of healing and intercession when manipulated by the powers of clergy or anatomists, and they are highly regulated and restricted objects that represent a long history of ritual and public performance in the 'taming' of death (see Ariés 1987). Furthermore, despite being the sole property of the Church, and possessions of the State, relics and specimens have been made popular and available to the general public, offering up a form of encounter with the dead that can be experienced in a variety of ways. Whether religious or secular, Catholic or Protestant, contemporary or historical, human remains have become absolutely integral to various forms of prayer, pilgrimage, research, and education.

### **Cadaver Synod**

The use of human remains as specimens and relics has come to reflect not only a paradox inherent in the Western legal, religious, and medical treatment of the cadaver, but illustrative of a persistent cultural tendency to keep the preserved human body, and many parts of it, within arm's reach. Both forms of the dead human body are part of culturally constructed and deeply embedded traditions that are still quite relevant, and currently the

main sources for the display of, and access to undisposed human remains. However, both seem to represent two conflicting states of ‘being’ in terms of their status within Western culture: where relics are the spiritually embodied parts of the socially active dead that offer healing, guidance and power, specimens are the disembodied, anonymous parts of the permanently dead that convey detachment. Where one body of belief and veneration comes out of the pre-Reformation period of absolute papal rule, the other is an upshot of post-Reformation and Enlightenment beliefs around the dissected body, and the absolute role of science. Yet despite this paradox and the historic socio-religious fallout between Church and State, both relics and specimens continue to represent the ways in which the undisposed dead are kept in their rightful place, as a *synod* for the living.<sup>33</sup>

Today thousands of human specimens can be found showcased, or gathering dust in a variety of museums around the world. In current medical schools, pathology labs, and morgues they sit next to preparations of cell lines, bone extracts, and DNA. The narrative of medical authority, with its unaccountable access and privilege, allows specimens to sit undisturbed for the continuous use or gaze of the scientist. Many of these collections have been secreted away, or are restricted to the public. Some have been more recently destroyed, legally disputed, or repatriated when found to be of Indigenous origin (see Hoffman 2010; Jenkins 2008; Nelkin and Andrews 1998). Many more collections are opened to the public for education and entertainment, and are the sources of props for

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<sup>33</sup> The term *cadaver synod* is used here to mean an assembly of the dead for the use of the living, but it also refers to an historic ‘meeting’ that took place in 897 AD, between Pope Stephen VI and the dead body of Pope Formosus, who had died several months earlier. The body of Pope Formosus was exhumed, dressed in papal robes and placed on a throne for trial where he was denounced for perjury and excommunicated. His body was dragged through the streets and then thrown into the Tiber River (see Wilkes 2001).

fashion shoots, art shows, books, and calendars. Medical museums like the Mütter Museum in the Philadelphia College of Physicians and Surgeons, the Hunterian Museum in London's The Royal College of Surgeons, the Alabama Museum of Health Sciences in the Birmingham Medical Center, and the Federal Pathological-Anatomical Museum in Vienna, to name just a few, offer the viewer hundreds of thousands of human remains to contemplate. These institutions provide guided tours, photo ops, and online resources for research on these specimens.

As they are located within the physical boundaries of well-established institutions, or are affiliated with large hospitals, these specimens have been rarely, if ever, contested; neither have there been ethical debates over their acquisition, use, or function (Linke 2005). Except for cases when remains are identified as Native or Aboriginal (see Jenkins 2008), or when their ownership is challenged (Nelkin and Andrews 1998), the vast majority of them remain part of what are considered important historical collections.

The numbers of anatomical specimens for public consumption are easily matched by the many thousands of human remains as relics spread out and built within Catholic churches, basilicas, and cathedrals around the world; they are the result of manufacturing, collecting, and trading, for almost two thousand years. Pilgrimages, tourism, and religious feast days still attract crowds, compelled by the bodies of the dead who offer healing, miracles, and personal intercession. Relics are the focus for the consecration of old and new churches; they bind disparate communities, provide the basis for calendar events, and mobilize populations to build and visit various religious sites. For those individuals who cannot travel to witness and venerate the power of particular saints, a more recent trend is

the traveling ‘road show’ of relics.<sup>34</sup>

In the context of both relics and specimens, there are no competing claims for one another’s cultural capital, but rather a mutually beneficial relationship where one governing body does not interfere with the other’s property or possessions. Though neither of these institutions maintain human remains as a function of their main *raison d’être*, both Church and State offer a culturally and legally sanctioned means of venerating, contemplating, and looking at the undisposed dead. Priests and anatomists have a long history of recognizing the value of cadavers for their respective communities. As such, the bodies of the famous and the anonymous – the ‘saints and the sinners’ – provide a perpetual nexus for religious, academic, and commercial enterprise.

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<sup>34</sup> One of the more popular road shows is known as the “Treasures of the Church” organized by a group of North American priests headed by Father Carlos Martins. The group offers access to 150 relics by invitation only. Its purpose is to “give people an experience of the living God through an encounter with the relics of His saints in the form of an exposition” (see <http://www.treasuresofthechurch.com/who-we-are>).

## **Chapter Three**

### **Bodies of Literature: An Overview**

This chapter examines some of the broad and often conflicting perspectives on the presence of the undisposed dead in contemporary Western culture. In exploring the many venues where human remains are encountered, it becomes apparent that the dead exist as various institutional ‘bodies’ and are readily accessible to the general public. Nonetheless, there are major gaps in the academic literature on this subject. That human remains are ‘items’ that can be easily purchased, sold, and exhibited by the general public outside the boundaries of established institutions – such as museums, universities, labs, and Catholic churches – is a subject that has largely been ignored.

The objective of this chapter therefore is to scrutinize these discrepancies through a review of the literature and an overview of popular culture, as a means of comparing the institutional versus the general public’s relationship with the undisposed dead. I explore the many places where human remains can be seen, bought, and visited in contemporary Western society including public museums, science centers, Catholic churches, and social media in order to assess what the dead represent and how they are represented. I examine whether there is inherent tension or ambivalence associated with these representations when the dead are utilized by the living within and beyond institutions.

I conclude with an examination of the sociological literature on ‘dark tourism’ (Rojek 1993; Lennon and Foley 1996; Seaton 1996; Stone 2008; Walter 2009; Skinner

2012), in an attempt to situate the contemporary use of human remains within this theoretical framework. Current theories of dark tourism, however, primarily address the institutional mediation of the dead and death, and as such, have not included analyses of the commodification of human remains. Hence, underscoring this discussion is the argument that the use of human remains outside institutional venues may not express fear, violence, taboo, or the motivation to symbolically encounter death as suggested in the literature on dark tourism, but pertain more to concepts of power, status, and identity exemplified by the institutional management of human remains.

### **Hic est Corpus**

An informal survey of popular culture and mainstream media of the last ten years (2003-2013) in Western society reveals a consistent level of interest in revitalizing and fetishizing the dead human body.<sup>35</sup> Books, museum exhibits, retail shops, websites, and art shows maintain a steady use of human remains as display objects, source material or background theme (see Figures 3:1 to 3:4). In ever more colourful and larger venues, the general public's interest in looking at, interacting with, and integrating the dead body is reinvigorated within a variety of cultural contexts.

Rather than providing socially embedded warnings that death is imminent, as in the traditional *vanitas* and *memento mori*, many of these installations are designed as

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<sup>35</sup> To select elements of popular culture for analysis, I used online sources through various search engines like Google, Bing and Yahoo, social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Tumblr, and a variety of print media such as national newspapers, and popular fashion magazines.



Figure 3:1 Italian Elle Editorial 2008 (© Ruven Afanador).



Figure 3:2 J.G.'s Facebook page Cabinet of Curios Wonders (image © J.G. Cabinet of Curios Wonders).

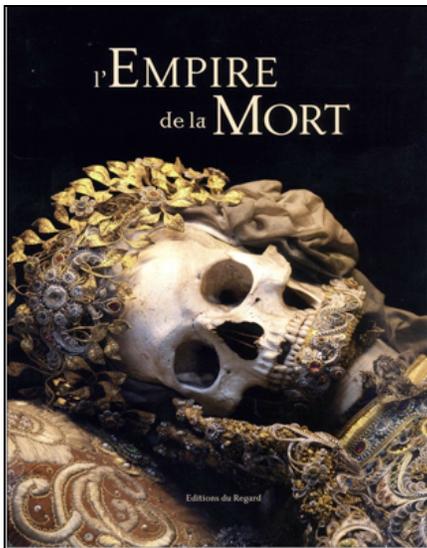


Figure 3:3 Book cover from Empire of Death, 2011 (image © P. Koudounaris).

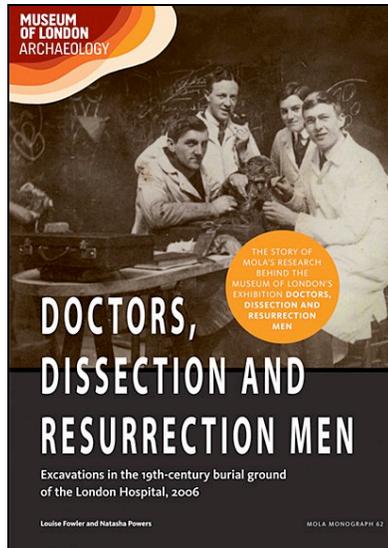


Figure 3:4 Poster for Museum of London Exhibition 2013 (image courtesy of Museum of London media, all rights reserved).

forms of diversion and entertainment, with human remains staged as props, or sold as retail items (see Figure 3:5 and 3:6). There are currently, for example, at least twelve international traveling exhibits of plastinated human remains<sup>36</sup>; hundreds of thousands of

<sup>36</sup> Eight of these exhibitions are von Hagens's ever popular Body Worlds. Please see pg.79 for a more thorough discussion of this phenomenon.

anatomical specimens on display in hospitals, morgues, museums, and private exhibits; trendy boutiques selling human remains, décor, and jewellery made from human bone, teeth and hair; a plethora of photography books, blogs, and websites on relics and charnel houses; a variety of religious relic exhibitions worldwide; and large-scale museum shows featuring human remains juxtaposed with artifacts, paintings, and sculpture.<sup>37</sup> These are but a few examples that reveal some of the ways in which human remains have been made to occupy the spaces of the living.



**Figure 3:5** Human remains for sale at the Bone Room, California 2012 (image © M. Nafte).

**Figure 3:6** Human remains for sale at Obscura Antiques, New York City 2013 (image © J.Doucette).

There is a special issue of *Mortality* (2008) dedicated entirely to the corpse, an entity said to have a “cultural significance” that “has captured our attention as never before” (Foltyn 2008:100). Even though Bradbury (1999) insists that the corpse is an ambiguous ‘thing’ with no relation to the living world, according to Foltyn (2008), the 21st century finds the cadaver comfortably integrated in modern secular societies, infused with social meaning, and comprising a site for social, political, and legal trends (see also Verdery 1999; Renteln 2001; Troyer 2008; Morgan 2009; Sanders 2009). Through the

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<sup>37</sup> The Museum of World Culture’s exhibition of several hundred human skulls opened in Mannheim, Germany in 2011 (*Schädelkult*), followed by the recently premiered exhibition of antique dealer Richard Harris’s private collection of human remains at the Wellcome Museum in London, England.

dead body, we apparently come closer to understanding ourselves, and as Verdery (1999:17) asserts, its materiality is critical to its symbolic efficacy; it can evoke a variety of understandings and has the advantage of “concreteness” which “transcends time, making the past immediately present”. Writing about bog bodies, Sanders (2009:219) suggests that those well-preserved remains were both “estranged from us even as they mirrored us”, and emerged as corporeal ‘time capsules’ that soon hosted a variety of our own cultural metaphors and concerns.

In this regard, the articles in *Mortality* (2008) emphasize the inherent power summoned by the presence of human remains, ideologically charged and informed by layers of complex social, legal and political relationships. Despite its ubiquitous presence in popular culture and professional institutions, the dead body is still regarded with tension, a tension that encompasses a veritable paradox of “displaying and hiding it, revering it and defiling it, viewing it as useful and useless; a source of amusement and somberness” (Foltyn 2008:100).

Consequently, the literature emphasizes what ought to be done with dead bodies. Embedded in these discussions are several questions about who can best represent the dead body, protect the dead body, study the dead body, and display the dead body in appropriate ways. Since the dead have been made into several types of ‘human remains’ based on their institutional, political, and socio-cultural affiliations, they have become valuable, dangerous and powerful in a variety of ways. Old and new conflicts thus continue to unfold between particular institutions, and within the public and private domains, that do not necessarily reflect a fear of death and dying, as suggested by Walter

(2009), but rather draw attention to concepts of ownership, advocacy, stewardship, and appropriation.

### **Biomedical Bodies and The Rights of the Dead**

Much of the social science literature addresses the power and paradox of the dead, largely within the context of socio-legal and biomedical concerns related to organ transplants, biological materials, and stem cell research. Since these are considered the most popular and profitable uses for dead bodies, these concerns are often the preamble for a much larger debate on ‘the rights of the dead’. The use of the dead body for corporate profit becomes the source of anxiety when in the hands of a possibly unchecked medical or scientific establishment (see Jones 1995; Nelkin and Andrews 1998; Renteln 2001; Lock 2002; Munson 2002; Wilkinson 2002; Scheper-Hughes 2004; Nwabueze 2007; McHanwell et al 2008; Cantor 2010; Lenk et al 2011).

There is a general consensus that the dead human body is indeed a valuable resource and commodity, and laws recognize its value for scientific communities, research, and commercial gain, more so with the rapid progression of biotechnology and genetic engineering (Nelkin and Andrews 1998; Nwabueze 2007; Hardcastle 2007; McHanwell et al 2008). Increasingly, there is a premium set on the use of fresh human tissue, blood, and prepared specimens. This is often countered with a balance in those same laws that define the use of certain remains over others, restrict who can handle the remains, and where these remains can be transferred and stored. However, as Nelkin and Andrews (1998), Renteln (2001), Jacob (2003), and Nwabueze (2007) demonstrate, there

have been many cases where there were ‘misinterpretations’ of these laws, as well as breaches of trust and consent.<sup>38</sup>

The dead body is defined as ‘sacred’, or should be so, according to these authors, given that cemeteries and memorials are considered sacred places that contain, or refer to the dead, and are legally protected. Nevertheless, there are competing claims for, and sentiments about, the dead body that make it subject to conflicting beliefs and contradictory representations (Laderman 2003). Hardcastle (2007:2) adds that the dead are not only a site for “powerful and intersecting individual, medical and societal interests” but a source of controversial profit (see also Nwabueze 2007). Such conflicting beliefs and controversy are reflected in an overall lack of policy and clear boundaries on the treatment of human remains, despite established laws and acts (see Nelkin and Andrews 1998; Renteln 2001; Lock 2002; Munson 2002; Scheper-Hughes 2004; Hardcastle 2007; McHanwell et al 2008; Lenk et al 2011).

Pathologists and researchers often assume it is their legal right to take human

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<sup>38</sup> Einstein’s brain was extracted, dissected and stored by his pathologist without any prior consent from Einstein or his family (Nelkin and Andrews 1998; Lepore 2001). Apparently kept in mayonnaise jars for over 40 years, the brain tissue was not used for any research purposes until a neuroanatomist saw a picture of the pathologist sitting next to a cardboard box on his desk containing Einstein’s brain (Lepore 2001). However, this version of events is radically different from the more recent reports that Einstein’s son gave consent, and that the pathologist did pursue research (Falk et al 2012). Stories of many other “celebrity remains” and of others that were accessed, stored or transferred, without any meaningful research or proper disposal, abound (see Nelkin and Andrews 1998; Renteln 2001; Nwabueze 2007). More recently, a consortium of investigative journalists (icij.org) uncovered an international ring of buyers, dealers and processors of human remains for biomaterials (see <http://www.icij.org/human-corpses-are-prize-global-drive-profits>). Apparently the “business of recycling dead humans into medical implants is a little known but lucrative trade” according to the organization’s website. However “proper consent” was not always given say the European journalists, who produced a four-part series (Skin and Bone) on the global networks that trade in the ‘human ingredients’ taken from cadavers for medical and dental products. On the topic of the commodification of human remains see also Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant (2002), and Scheper-Hughes (2004).

tissue – and profit from it – out of a cadaver without prior consent, if an autopsy were already permitted. Consent to open the body, however, does not equate with consent to retain organs or tissue from the body, as some doctors have learned after charges were laid by next of kin of the deceased (Renteln 2001; Hunter 2001).<sup>39</sup> Likewise, once an autopsy is completed, what to do with the body and its parts are assumed to have been legally defined under anti-mutilation and anti-desecration laws. However, these old laws may be irrelevant to pathologists who have already dissected a cadaver into many pieces. As an acceptable method of disposal, they may think it is appropriate to sell them, or even bag and throw the pieces into a dumpster, as was the case at the UCLA medical school (see Nelkin and Andrews 1998:276; Croasdale 2004; Reuters 2007).

The literature that outlines the important and necessary considerations of the rights of the dead exemplifies the contradictions that emerge whenever medicine and science encounter a corpse. On one level, the biomedical tradition, which is legally sanctioned and self-regulated, maintains that corpses can and should be of use to science, and whenever necessary this overrides ethical or moral concerns on behalf of the dead, specifically during a forensic autopsy and medical dissection. The medical community's stance in the published literature on this subject takes an "extremely pro-autopsy

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<sup>39</sup> There have been several post-mortem retention scandals that have ultimately led to prosecution and major revisions in law. One recently involved a few hospitals in the UK that for several decades (1940s-1990s) were removing organs, body parts, and glands post-mortem from patients, mostly children, without permission or consent from kin (Hunter 2001). In 1998, when a woman learned that her child's heart had been removed and stored in a facility after autopsy, she raised concerns and lobbied for an inquiry into such hospital practices. After several reports and investigations, it emerged that well over 500,000 organs and tissue samples, as well as the entire bodies of fetuses and stillborn babies, had been taken and stored "illegally" (Hunter 2001; The Royal Liverpool Children's Inquiry 2001). These reports have led the UK to revise laws on the use, disposal and storage of human remains referred to as the Human Tissue Act 2004 (see Human Tissue Act 2004-<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/30/contents>).

position” (Renteln 2001:1006). On another level, the body is considered sacred and should be left intact, and there are long-standing laws protecting this right, as well as more recent laws allowing for various religious perspectives that prevent cutting into a dead body. These laws often supersede the needs of science and involve notions of identity, integrity, and personal injury (see Nelkin and Andrews 1998; Renteln 2001).

As many legal cases have demonstrated, biomedical, cultural and religious perspectives will inevitably collide in high-profile disputes, lawsuits, and changes in policy when the boundaries around and within the body have not been made clear, or were perceived to have been transgressed. When facilities and individuals are sued for mutilating a corpse, or selling body parts, for example, the action is based on “psychic injury” to living relatives rather than injury or harm to the dead (Renteln 2001:1006). Aptly illustrating biomedicine’s expectations of the preeminence of scientific over religious authority regarding post-mortem organ retention, Scheimberg, a pediatric pathologist, states that religious leaders need to do more to assuage the fears about “the effect on their souls of losing a little piece of liver or spleen or whatever” (see *Conversations with Pathologists* 2010: [http://www.pathsoc.org/conversations/index.php?option=com\\_content&view](http://www.pathsoc.org/conversations/index.php?option=com_content&view)).

Accordingly, the very clear message from the socio-legal community, highlighted in many of these discussions, is that biomedicine and science need to be monitored and controlled because such institutional power, and unlimited access to the dead, may result in disrespect, neglect or mishandling, especially in the absence of living relatives (see for example Nelkin and Andrews 1998; Renteln 2001; Lock 2002; Munson 2002; Jacob

2003; Scheper-Hughes 2004).

Alongside discussions of the rights of the dead, other perspectives have emerged on the use of the cadaver outside the parameters of biomedicine, primarily after anatomist Günter von Hagens's exhibitions opened in the late 1990s (see pg.79). Von Hagens's exhibits raise questions about whether society has the moral and legal right to use and view the dead as display objects, or in other capacities that create controversy and ambiguity, such as "spectacles" for entertainment (see Walters 2004; Linke 2005; Barilan 2006; Stern 2006; Tanassi 2007; Burns 2007; Connor 2007; Jones and Whitaker 2009; Stone 2011).

Generally, it is considered acceptable to use human remains within specific medical contexts, and within very clearly established legal and institutional parameters, as in autopsies, organ donorship, research, and for biomedical products. If this boundary is breached and human remains are used as a means for blatant profit, or are disposed of in unusual ways, the tension and arguments escalate fiercely (see Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant 2002). An example of the ire raised by using cadavers outside the medical establishment can be seen in the current debates raging in the UK over the use of energy created by bodies burned in crematoriums. Several 'eco-friendly' projects aim to use such energy to heat public swimming pools, chapels, funeral homes, and power grids (see The Telegraph Feb. 2012; The Telegraph Jan. 2011). Several communities across England have suggested that these plans are 'ghoulish', and the thought somewhat 'horrifying' that they were swimming in pools or sitting in rooms heated by dead bodies. Though the projects were shown to be clean and highly cost-effective, notions of contamination,

coupled with a sense of disrespect for the dead, seem to intensify the unease over such deliberate recycling of cadavers.

We are apparently fascinated with the dead, yet there is still some level of trauma, revulsion, and taboo associated with touching and being within arm's length of them, especially when the remains have already begun decaying, leaking and smelling foul (Hertz 1960 [1907]; Kristeva 1982; Ursano and McCarroll 1990; Hallam et al 1999; Walter 2004b). Sharing a prolonged length of time and space with cadavers apparently threatens the natural order (Kristeva 1982), changes the nature of the spatial relationship between the living and the dead (Laderman 2003), and most often creates a sense of dread, especially in contemporary society where the dead are presumably physically and conceptually separated from the living (Walter 2004a:472). Any transgressions of physical boundaries between the living person and the dead body are treated with suspicion, as the corpse is seen as a contaminant, the purveyor of more death, and an ambiguous entity that causes chaos among the living (Bradbury 1999). Thus, according to Laderman (2003), funerals serve to mediate the spatial relationship, keep boundaries firmly in place, and contain and dispose the dead in a quick and meaningful way.

However, even when the dead are finally separated from the living, the body is seen as containing an inherent power, but paradoxically, is depicted as powerless and in need of protection (Foltyn 2008). Bodies can no longer own property or be considered property (Renteln 2001), but they have rights and posthumous interests (Wilkinson 2002). They are no longer members of society, yet they must be secured a 'future' that is dignified, out of the manipulative hands of the scientist (Nelkin and Andrews 1998), and away from the

gaze of the public (Lohman 2006).

### **Indigenous Bodies<sup>40</sup>**

Ethnographic and archaeological publications contain rich discussions of human remains as material culture (see Rosaldo 1980; Brown et al 1993; Sheppard et al 2000; Johnston 2002; Castner 2002; Spence et al 2004; Jandial et al 2004; Rubenstein 2007; Knudsen and Tung 2008; Owsley et al 2008; Chacon and Dye 2008). However, many focus on early tribal societies in Africa, Melanesia, and North and South America. Human remains, as prehistoric artifact or as “widespread craft medium” (Seeman 2008:173), are ascribed meaning through the context of their use by various tribes, warriors, shamans, and elders. Described as elements of elaborate trade networks, war rituals, “culturally patterned violent conflict” (Owsley et al 2008:124), and ancestor worship, human remains were used to convey triumph over enemies, control of the spirit world, revenge, humiliation of the defeated, and the worship of loved ones. The goal in most of this research has been to produce archaeological inventories of human remains that have been made into a variety of decorative and useful implements. These inventories are integral features of larger discussions of patterns of prehistoric Indigenous warfare and ritual behaviors. However, as Chacon and Dye insist (2008:5), such research is not meant to “denigrate” these customs and beliefs, but to “respectfully and dispassionately shed light on” behaviours that led Indigenous people to make a variety of items out of human body

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<sup>40</sup> In this section, the term Indigenous generally refers to the First Nations and Inuit communities of North America, and the Aboriginal populations of Australasia. Within the context of NAGPRA, Indigenous remains refer more specifically to the First Nations communities of North America.

parts.

Regrettably, this area of research is limited to ethnohistoric descriptions, which assiduously avoid comparisons with the use of human remains as a feature of Western culture. Despite the “near universality of trophy-taking throughout human history” (Chacon and Dye 2008:7), the manufacture of human remains as material culture is recorded as a distant and past tradition belonging to the prehistoric Indigenous ‘other’, not easily or readily associated with current Western trends.

The anthropological literature that examines the contemporary owning, trading, and displaying of human remains is essentially a consolidation of material on laws, guidelines, and ethics, involving institutions, specifically when the remains are thought to be of Indigenous origin (see for example Lohman and Goodnow 2006; Jenkins 2008; Nash and Chanthaphonh 2010; Brajer 2010). The current practice of displaying and studying such remains is seen as highly controversial and exploitative, regardless of their location.

The public museum, the focus for most of the anthropological writing on the use of Indigenous human remains, has for many years served as the staging ground where competing claims for the undisposed and exhumed dead have dominated the discourse (see for example Lohman and Goodnow 2006; Jenkins 2008; Nash and Chanthaphonh 2010; Brajer 2010). In North America, the initial impetus was concern about the differential treatment of Native remains at archaeological and historic burial sites, as well as challenges to the use and display of their sacred objects. Up until the late 1980s, whenever historic settler remains were unearthed accidentally, or for research or relocation

purposes, they were always reburied, and often with some form of consultation or ceremony, for example, in the case of pioneer cemeteries and military graves (see Brooks and Brooks 1984; Owsley et al 1985; Williamson 2005). In contrast, when Native remains were exhumed, these were carried off for research, trade, and/or display without any intention of reburial (see Simpson 1996; Echo-Hawk and Echo-Hawk 1996). The fact that there was anywhere between one hundred thousand to 2.5 million Native remains and grave goods held in museum collections by the 1990s made these spaces sites of contention and of intense social, political, and legal confrontation (Walker 2008; Seidemann 2008; Conn 2010).

The rights of the Indigenous dead became a focal point as various Native groups became increasingly politicized in the 1960s and 1970s. Protests and boycotts took place throughout North America as part of a pan-Native sovereignty movement that rallied around some of the more prestigious collections of human remains (see Janes and Conaty 2005; Hill Sr. 2006; Sleeper-Smith 2009; Echo-Hawk 2010). Members of various First Nations protested at excavation sites, courtrooms, and museums insisting that their dead be accorded the same rights of protection as other citizens. In the early 1970s, for example, the Union of Ontario Indians (the Anishinabek) protested en masse at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto and placed archaeologist Walter Kenyon under a citizen's arrest for his excavation of a Neutral Indian burial mound (see Hill Sr. 2006).<sup>41</sup> In another case, Sioux Native 'Running-Moccasins' took the State of Iowa to court to challenge the

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<sup>41</sup> The case did not proceed to court or prosecution but agreement was apparently reached that the human remains would be reburied. The associated artifacts were split between the ROM and the Native-run Woodland Cultural centre (Hill Sr. 2006).

differential treatment of Native skeletal remains after they had been uncovered near a pioneer cemetery. The pioneer remains were quickly reburied while the Native remains were put in a box and sent to an archaeologist (Krapfl 2002; also Simpson 1996).<sup>42</sup> For most of the subsequent decade, a few museums worked with various groups to return human remains, grave goods and sacred objects well before any formal legislation was in place.<sup>43</sup>

Many more museum curators, anthropologists, and archaeologists balked at the notion of returning what they considered to be important and priceless collections. Human remains often constituted part of a museum's treasure and purpose, with the museum serving as both guardian and protector (Meighan 1994; Walker 2008; Nash and Chanthaphonh 2010; Conn 2010). The majority of museums across Europe, for example, had no intention of participating in a repatriation program that would essentially empty their storage rooms and display cases (Jenkins 2008; Durand 2010).<sup>44</sup> Academic careers, curatorial positions, and museum reputations rested on these items, and returning them was seen as a disaster (Meighan 1994).

As Indigenous remains and their associated grave goods were considered hot commodities that commanded scholarship, lavish displays, and hordes of visitors, by the

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<sup>42</sup> Running-Moccasins won her court battle and the State of Iowa was thereafter, the first State to enact a law protecting Native burial sites. She was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 2002 for her work on NAGPRA (Krapfl 2002).

<sup>43</sup> The Museum of Anthropology at the University of Michigan, the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, The National Museum of Canada, the University of Minnesota, and the Smithsonian Institute are among the few institutions that returned various collections to Native representatives prior to 1990 (see Hill Sr. 2006).

<sup>44</sup> This is seen to be slowly changing as more European museums have been engaging with Native and Aboriginal groups to discuss collaboration and repatriation claims (see Fienup-Riordan 2007 and Durand 2010).

late 1980s there was a noticeable panic over their potential loss. Streams of letters, articles, and reports issued by scholars and museum anthropologists warned of great academic and scientific loss if repatriation laws were established (Meighan 1994; Walker 2008; Nash and Chanthaphonh 2010). Revealing their own fears around turns in the market for tribal art, dealers and private collectors with profit-driven agendas issued statements in various magazines asking people to petition against upcoming legislation.<sup>45</sup> Auction houses and estates scrambled to collect and catalogue priceless human artifacts that were soaring in value (personal communication Jamieson, May 2010; see Figure 3:7, see also Mihesuah 2000). Such was the power of the Indigenous dead that by the time the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was signed into United States federal law in 1990, the mood was “dark” and many in the profession insisted that it “spelled the death knell of museums and science” (Nash and Chanthaphonh 2010:99).

NAGPRA (1990), Canada’s Task Force Report (1992)<sup>46</sup>, and the Australian Government Indigenous Repatriation Policy (2011), are nevertheless the culmination of

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<sup>45</sup> An editorial in *Prehistoric Antiquities and Archaeological News Quarterly* (formerly known as *The Indian Relic Trader*) states that it is best not to assume that repatriated items will be retained or even reburied. Suggesting a devious Native scheme at play they ask, “If some are resold, what is to prevent their re-repatriation, or their re-re-repatriation?” (Volume 10, 1990:2).

<sup>46</sup> In Canada, a very different process unfolded. Rather than federal intervention and Supreme Court decisions, resolutions were seen to be possible through a series of discussions and negotiations on more local fronts. In 1988, a working conference between Native Canadians and museums came together after boycotts and disruptions around a planned museum exhibit. This conference focused on the role of Native Canadians in collaborating on, and creating museum exhibits that reflected their present day participation in Canadian society, rather than as “vanished peoples” of the past (personal communication - Nicks 2010). Central to this was the acknowledgement that the material artifacts in the possession of museums were still very important sources of continuity, pride and self-esteem to Native Canadians (personal communication - Nicks 2010; see also Janes and Conaty 2005). Museums were thereby not legally required to return Indigenous remains but were ‘encouraged’ to do so.

years of protesting and legal recourse against what Indigenous people feel has been the appropriation of their remains, heritage, and identity by Western cultural institutions. These laws and acts offer a restitutorial framework that ultimately reconfigures the public museum as a different type of ‘contact zone’ (see Clifford 1997). Western treatment and perspectives of the Indigenous dead have thus been radically altered over the last three decades, primarily within the academic and museum community.



**Figure 3:7** The late Bill Jamieson, private collector/dealer of tribal art and human remains, 2009 (image © J.Doucette).

**Figure 3:8** Indigenous remains at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford University, 2012 (images © J.Doucette)

Collecting and displaying the Indigenous dead are now fraught with social, legal and political ramifications. Yet, surrounding these Indigenous bodies are various public agencies, academics, and Native groups, along with an assortment of treasure hunters and antiquities traffickers, that are still competing for access to and control of what have become even more rare and prized commodities (McManamon 2006; Conn 2010). According to Conn (2010:59), Indigenous remains continue to be used as “proxies” for fights over larger issues, such as land disputes and corporate profits from resources, and are positioned as the objects of control, ‘like children in custody battles’. The fact that

there are still significant collections in major museums and universities, and an array of decorated remains in showcases around the world, attests to their unrelenting popularity and value (see Figure 3:8).<sup>47</sup>

### **Museum Bodies**

As a result of these alterations to the legal framework, along with England's Human Tissue Act (2004),<sup>48</sup> major changes have taken place in how museums and inevitably, universities and science centres purchase and display human remains. The issue of repatriation initiated more direct and vehement reactions to and from the public museum, and created a tipping point (Nash and Chanthaphonh 2010; Durand 2010; Fienup-Riordan 2007). However, as Indigenous remains have been repatriated, or curated (put away in storage), and more European museums have begun to participate in this process, the focus of attention has turned to other human displays held by museums and academic institutions.

Laderman (2003) asserts that the social order depends upon putting the dead body in its proper place, ritually and physically. But what constitutes a 'proper place' is a question that is vigorously grappled with when certain types of human remains appear in the public domain. Currently, bog people, mummies and prehistoric skeletons have become the source of new debate and scholarly anxiety, primarily around the 'ethics of display' (see Lohman 2006; Goodnow 2006; Giles 2006; Morgan 2009; Brajer 2010;

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<sup>47</sup> According to McManamon (2006:48) there were approximately 152,000 sets of unidentified Native American remains reported in over 1000 museums in the United States alone, for the year 2006.

<sup>48</sup> See Human Tissue Act 2004 (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/30/contents>).

Walsham 2010). Sheets have been placed over the faces of the dead, mummies hidden in back rooms, lights dimmed in showcases, warning signs posted for viewers, and casket lids closed on a variety of historic remains (see also Giles 2006; Jenkins 2011).

Terms such as ‘respect’, ‘dignity’, ‘sensitivity’, and ‘stigma’ highlight discussions of new museum policies on the exhibited dead (Levitt and Hadland 2006; Lohman 2006; Orr and Bienkowski 2006). The overriding concern is how to emphasize serious scholarly approaches to the display of the dead without creating spectacles in public spaces.

Walsham (2010:62), among many others, asks “are these legitimate objects of scientific scrutiny and antiquarian curiosity, or is our interest in them disrespectful, ghoulish, and voyeuristic?” Giles (2006:8) warns that digging up and displaying the dead have implications for both archaeologists and viewers in that “our sense of identity, and attitude towards the past, is transformed by our encounter with it, sometimes disturbingly so”. Lohman (2006:23) is adamant that cadavers in their coffins, bog people, bright lights, showcases that are garish, and sets that tread an uneasy line between “humour and seriousness” all create a “theatre of morbidity” that “far outweighs the academic justification” of displaying the dead.

Not surprisingly, the resulting changes to many of the remains and displays have, according to Jenkins (2011:6-10), been driven more by “oversensitive” museum staff, and “professional insecurity” than public demand. Bioethics professor Holm (2011:30-31) argues that the removal of long dead, anonymous bodies from the museum is based on a “warped notion of respect”. If there are no descendants to harm, or reputations to affect, issues of consent, respect, and dignity are “irrelevant”, given that scholarship and

research are already carried out in professional ways (Holm 2011). Both Holm (2011) and Jenkins (2011) agree that there are no strong social movements external to the museum that are calling for the hiding away of mummies and bog people, but senior curators, directors and other ‘actors’ within the museum that are making human remains a problem.

Much of the tension and ‘oversensitivity’ among museum staff regarding the display of the dead, reflect the trend toward a ‘new museology’ within the public museum (see Stocking 1985; Karp and Lavine 1991; Vergo 1991; Pearce 1993; Ross 2004; Macdonald 2006). As critical theorists heavily influenced by post-structural and post-modernist thought, many of the new museologists continue to demand a deconstruction of the museum space and its collections. They argue that public museums still impose a narrative of race, empire, nation and class, and should no longer be about objects but experiences and ideas. This philosophy has been met with great tension and resistance within museums as many directors, curators, and designers insist that museums are all about revered and authentic objects, and that their role is to educate the public while preserving and displaying the past.

As with previous arguments for and against repatriation, what to do with the non-Indigenous museum dead has become the subject of controversy, pitting curators and academics against each other and museum visitors. Scores of museum and government reports have been published in an attempt to outline clearer policies for directors and museum staff, or to offer up guidelines mostly aimed at mitigating the potential for legal and social repercussions (see for example CMA Ethical Guidelines 1999; Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2005; British Museum Report 2006; Cassman et al 2007;

Guidance for the Care of Human Remains 2011). These reports generally consist of lengthy descriptions of what defines human remains, and how museums should create and maintain an ethical framework, followed by a firm reminder of how all museums are required to follow relevant laws and codes of ethics issued by a variety of museum councils and organizations. All confirm that the possibility of conflict of interest and offence are constantly present when housing the dead for research and public exhibit.

While academics are wrestling with legal and existential questions about how and whether to display the dead, museum visitors are apparently demanding that mummies be put back on display, and bodies better lit and positioned for viewing (Swain 2006; Jenkins 2011). According to museum polls and surveys, the majority of visitors are not repelled or offended by exhibits of human remains, but find them educational, interesting, and would prefer they remain accessible in museums (see for example Swain 2002; Kilmister 2003; Swain 2006; Research into Issues 2009; Life and Reburial Poll 2006; Avebury Reburial Poll 2010; Smith 2012).

Goodnow (2006) acknowledges that museums are not going to change the general public's fascination with viewing the dead, despite policy changes and efforts to conceal exhibits. She offers up suggestions for museum staff and curators on how best to mediate their own anxieties around displaying the dead while attending to the needs of museum visitors, many of whom seem to enjoy the displays. Goodnow (2006) maintains that spaces between the living viewer and the displayed dead need to be contextualized with predictability, knowledge, and information, and above all, these spaces must be made "reverential". Mummies, bog people, prehistoric skeletons, and historic remains in

caskets should not be part of the general museum space, as if they are just other ‘objects’, but exhibited in a separate and “carefully crafted, almost religious, space that allows the spectator to come into contact with the body” where its meaning can be “regulated” (2006:128).

Essential to Goodnow’s (2006) recommendations is that “containment” of the dead be accomplished in acceptable and meaningful ways. Glass display cases, dim lighting, and a hushed atmosphere create important emotional and physical boundaries, as do wrappings and partial containment of the body itself. She asserts that unwrapped bodies, disfigured faces, skin, hair and nudity have the potential to invoke horror; thus “some form of containment must be created, a form that prevents us from being overwhelmed by the feelings generated by looking” (2006:129). While curators and staff need to understand the “viewer’s perspective” and learn how to “build on the fascination but contain the horror”, the spatial relationship between the living and the dead still needs to be rigidly maintained (Goodnow 2006:129).

Goodnow (2006), like Lohman (2006) and Giles (2006), warns that there are inevitable ‘trade-offs’ in viewing the dead, both for ourselves and the anonymous individuals we are looking at. Their “sanctity” (Lohman 2006:21) is at risk while we are being allowed to see “that which is normally hidden or forbidden” (Goodnow 2006:125). Accordingly, the museum’s role, like religious and medical institutions, is to mediate the spatial, physical, and spiritual relationship between the living and the dead (see also Walter 2009), while modifying, regulating and controlling viewers’ reactions.

As curators continue to question the ethical and moral purpose of displaying human

remains, Kilmister (2003:58) admits that they have become “unduly sensitive”, and are paying little attention to the needs and wants of their main stakeholders. At present, they appear resigned to providing a ‘safe’ cultural outlet for confronting the dead, while teaching society how to do so in respectable ways. In short, we may be perpetually fascinated by the dead, and are compelled rather than repelled by displays of dead bodies, but our experience of them must be institutionally supervised. Many of the new museologists (see also Handler 1993; Lohman 2006; Sherman 2008; Janes 2009) suggest moving the museum away from the fetishization and aestheticization of objects, most especially human remains, to a place where ideas and concepts are explored. Because of the inherent “politics” and “poetics” of museum exhibits, where objects are burdened with meaning, nothing is considered ideologically neutral (Karp and Lavine 1991). Smith (1991:9) contends that ultimately a museum’s neutral space is “nullified” as soon as it is used for exhibits because of things like conservation practices and the juxtaposition of certain objects with others. In this scheme, museums produce a misleading environment for interpretation based on the fact that objects housed in museums immediately change in context and meaning. Goodnow (2006:128-9) adds that despite the “unsettling discrepancy” that can exist between a museum’s display and its implicit message, viewing the dead must be intricately and expertly managed so that we are not simply “curious, morbid voyeurs” but beings “in awe of something greater than ourselves”.

### **Medical Museum Bodies**

Beyond the public museum, and amidst debates and philosophical musings on the

ethics of displaying human remains, encounters with the dead, wet and dry, can be had at hundreds of medical museums, morgues and exhibitions worldwide. A number of books, conferences, and calendars showcase thousands of human specimens from all over Europe and North America, and promote various tours, events and shows (see Figures 3:9 to 3:11). There is no limited access to, or shortage of, information on medical specimens, anatomy museums, or the history of anatomical dissection. In fact, over the last decade there has been a major resurgence of interest in the medical museum, one that encourages enthusiasm and avid exploration (under very bright lighting) of historical collections and interactive websites.<sup>49</sup>

While the academic literature on anatomical collections is largely limited to the history of where and how they were amassed (Sappol 2002; Moore 2005; Rhode and Connor 2007; Morgan 2009; Alberti 2011; Stephens 2011; Margocsy 2011), dilemmas

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<sup>49</sup> Due to limited space, I could not possibly list all of the museums and exhibitions that are currently open to the public and offering human remains to view and study. The more popular of these include: The Mütter Museum, which recently hosted an exhibition of Albert Einsteins' brain ([www.collphyphil.org/site/mutter\\_museum.html](http://www.collphyphil.org/site/mutter_museum.html)); an anatomical exhibit of hundreds of human skulls recently opened in four medical museums in Germany, along with a catalogue and film (see [www.schaedelkult.de](http://www.schaedelkult.de)); Leiden University in the Netherlands hosted an international conference on anatomical collections ([hum.leiden.edu/icd](http://hum.leiden.edu/icd)); the University of Edinburgh revamped its anatomy museum and opened its doors to the public for the first time (<http://www.ed.ac.uk/news/all-news/anatomy-180112>); the University of Melbourne's Medical school hosts regular events and lectures around its collection of over 10,000 human specimens (<http://mdhs.unimelb.edu.au/harrybrookesallenmuseum/collection>); the Wellcome Museum in London hosted the well-advertised show "Brains: The Mind as Matter" where real human brains were displayed alongside artwork, medical scans, images and implements (<http://www.wellcomecollection.org/whats-on/exhibitions/brains.aspx>). This was accompanied by a short documentary film on dissecting a real human brain (<http://www.wellcomecollection.org/whats-on/exhibitions/brains/dissecting-brains.aspx>); the National Museum of Health and Medicine Armed Forces Institute of Pathology offers over 5,000 pathological skeletal specimens and 8,000 wet specimens for unrestricted public viewing (<http://wwwcf.nlm.nih.gov/hmddirectory/directory/collections.cfm?id=85>); lastly and most currently, the Museum of London is hosting an exhibition of the human remains of individuals excavated from the 19th century burial ground at the Royal London Hospital. These were individuals who had been dissected by medical students, autopsied or their bones wired together for teaching (see <http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/London-Wall/Whats-on/Exhibitions-Displays/Doctors-Dissection-Resurrection-Men/>).

regarding the ethical or moral issues of displaying human remains seem to be absent. The support and passion for anatomical museums can be seen in the outcomes of a recent conference on anatomical collections, which have been published as a “declaration”. Addressed to “those responsible” for anatomical and pathological collections around the world (see University of Leiden Declaration 2012:1-2), participants urge medical faculties worldwide to “mobilize all possible means to protect and preserve the important academic, medical, institutional, scientific and cultural heritage these collections represent”.



**Figure 3:9** Tea at the Alabama Museum of Health Sciences  
**Figure 3:10** Specimens at the Museum Vrolik, Amsterdam Netherlands (images © J.Doucette)

All agree that these collections are priceless, and need to be maintained with the utmost care and professionalism, because “they are no less important than world famous artworks like the “Mona Lisa”, the “Venus de Milo” or Michelangelo's ‘David’ ” (Leiden Declaration 2012:2). Affixed to the document are the names of well over 300 doctors, professors, and doctoral students supporting the campaign.

Public museums may be struggling with whether they should dim the lights and cover the faces of the dead, but their anatomical counterparts are not despairing over any such concerns. In fact, the opposite is occurring. More and more once-private anatomical

collections that had either been closed, or reserved for doctors and medical students, are now inviting the public to participate in membership, group tours, and lectures. Social events like fundraisers, conferences, poetry readings, book launches, and art exhibitions are increasingly taking place in medical museums, which are seen as dynamic venues that draw large crowds (see Figures 3:9, 3:11, and 3:12).<sup>50</sup>

The anatomy museum's very different approach to the treatment and display of human remains, compared with that of the public museum, is not a new, or unusual phenomenon.<sup>51</sup> By the 18th century, anatomy museums were already well-established across Europe as places for entertaining the masses, an extension of the theatrics of public dissection. Whereas, the public museum, which was the domain of the natural historian, came to represent the "bourgeois public sphere", a place where the lower classes could be "enlightened", and where the wealthy could demonstrate their authority (Bennett

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<sup>50</sup> For example, The National Museum of Health and Medicine hosts a weekly "Medical Museum Science Café" where lectures and workshops on various themes are held (<http://www.museumusa.org/museums/info/14522>); the Mütter Museum launches books relating to the collections on a regular basis (<http://www.collegeofphysicians.org/mutter-museum/exhibitions/>), and hosts poetry readings, balls, and art exhibits, along with a YouTube "Mütter Museum Minute" where curators highlight various collections and specimens (<http://www.youtube.com/user/Themuttermuseum>); the Royal College of Physicians Museum is currently hosting an exhibition of paintings by medical artist Peter Cull (<http://www.medicalmuseums.org/Royal-College-of-Physicians/>); while The Hunterian Museum housing thousands of anatomical specimens is celebrating its bicentenary with a free exhibition, a conference on "Exhibiting Human Remains", and an opportunity to see "hidden objects brought out" of their stores" (<http://www.rcseng.ac.uk/museums/hunterian/exhibitions>).

<sup>51</sup> By the mid-18th century, medical collections of wet and dry human specimens eventually became more distinct, and were largely absent from natural history collections. This was primarily due to the growing divide between natural history and comparative anatomy. Huxley (2003) suggests that this divide reflected the general notion that studies of human morphology and dissection methods were perceived by naturalists as "limiting" because they ignored the classification systems of the natural world. Specimens were the products of a profession that was largely outside the realm of natural historians. Bates (2008) on the other hand, argues that the distinction emerged to separate the newly rising class of 'gentlemen naturalists' from the lower class of barber-surgeons. Yanni (2005) agrees that natural history was part of a complex social practice, rather than a single set of ideas, and became a formal discipline apart from anatomy because of social and political differences. Surgeons and anatomists were simply not drawn from the ruling class of gentlemen collectors.

1995:21). Natural historians were, for the most part, drawn from a class of educated and cultured elites, and though they recognized the value of dissection, they were reluctant to perform it (Chaplin 2008:138).



Figure 3:11 The Facebook page ad for the Mütter Museum's 2013 fundraiser Ball (Image © The College of Physicians of Philadelphia and Mütter Museum).

Curiously, the critiques of the new museology did not extend to anatomy museums. The products of dissection still remain separate and distinct from the natural history collections of public museums, as if untouchable, despite the anatomy museums' darker past. Rather than a place that narrates histories of exploitation, racism and violence, the anatomy museum is posited as a space that represents important 'occasions' where professionals and show-people constantly renegotiate their right to exhibit the anatomized body (Stephens 2011).<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Hoffman (<http://filter.org.au/in-other-words/wandering-in-the-company-of-skeletons-imaginaries-of-the-body-across-anatomy->

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<sup>52</sup> Though both public and anatomy museums have funding issues and are faced with the challenges of attracting crowds, anatomy museums seem to be responding more to the demands of a curious public than to any anxieties from their curators or staff regarding the use of the dead. However, given the *raison d'être* of anatomy museums, anxieties over displaying the dead would seem inherently contradictory. Weil (2004:288) is most apt when he declares that "museums live under constant threat that any perception of wrongdoing may jeopardize funding". Therefore, as is illustrated, both public and anatomy museums will continue to change to reach new and different audiences, accommodate differences, commit its spaces for public functions, and adapt to current ideas and alternative expressions of culture.

and-art/) insists that as “corporeal spectacles for the eyes”, anatomy museums are vital because they provide historic intersections of art and medicine, and they help us document “what drew the bodies of real people into institutional spaces and movement around cities”

Indeed, the modern medical museum appears to employ a good mix of doctors, scholars, and entertainers who all agree that viewing human remains is important, popular, and necessary.<sup>53</sup> Through colourful websites and social media, curators



Figure 3:12 University of Glasgow Museum of Anatomy website page for upcoming events In 2013 (image © University of Glasgow Museum)

and staff beckon the public to visit their museums, many of which are free and advertised in online images, blogs and video clips. The medical museums all emphasize the importance of their collections, the privilege of being in proximity to human remains, and

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<sup>53</sup> The Mütter Museum currently offers the public opportunities to “adopt a skull” in an effort to raise funds for their maintenance and repair. For an annual fee, donors will have their name acknowledged on the skull mount of their “chosen skull”, and have opportunities to visit it as part of the wider collection. The catalogue of skulls provided online, lists many of the individuals’ identity, their origins, and the cause of death (see <http://www.collegeofphysicians.org/saveourskulls/>).

above all, the educational benefits of viewing them.<sup>54</sup>

While most medical museums and private anatomy collections have been established for centuries, their sudden popularity with the public, generated by a number of books, websites, and exhibitions, is relatively recent. I contend that this phenomenon was initiated by Dr. Gunter von Hagens's pivotal exhibition of plastinated human remains in the late 1990s, referred to as BodyWorlds (see [www.bodyworlds.com](http://www.bodyworlds.com)). There are currently no less than 20 travelling exhibitions of human remains and preserved cadavers across North America, Asia and Europe, despite the considerable controversy that BodyWorlds elicited when it first premiered, most especially among von Hagens's European colleagues (Biskup 2007; Jones and Whitaker 2009). The gradual shift in attitude, along with major gains in the popularity and acceptance of BodyWorlds, has seemingly ushered in a new era of close encounters with the dead body, outside of its sanctioned place within medical schools and labs.

### **Plastinated Bodies**

When the dead are exhibited for display, the socio-cultural and emotional divides between the public museum, the anatomy museum, and more recently the science museum, become more discernible. Nowhere is this more evident than in the recent exhibitionary phenomenon of plastinated cadavers called BodyWorlds. While the public museum has been redefining its role regarding human remains, and the anatomy museum

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<sup>54</sup> During an informal interview in London, England (June 5, 2013) Dr. Sam Alberti, director of the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons stated that it was “an honour to be associated with a collection such as this” and that the point of the collection was to “promote esteem” for the College.

has maintained its steadfast tradition of displaying collections of the dead, the science museum has emerged as the new venue for a unique brand of what Stone (2011) refers to as a “cadaveric carnival”.

BodyWorlds is the name of a series of public exhibitions featuring plastinated human cadavers created by Berlin-born Gunther von Hagens. ‘Plastination’ refers to the preservation technique he developed in the late 1970s. As an anatomist and scientific assistant at the Anatomical Institute of Heidelberg University, he began experimenting with improving the quality of human specimens (von Hagens 2002). After a great deal of trial and error on hundreds of organs, the process of infusing a polymer resin into human tissue resulted in a successful preparation method. For the first twenty years, however, plastination would only be used on small specimens, sent via airmail to various anatomy schools for educational purposes only (von Hagens 2002).<sup>55</sup>

By the early 1990s, the equipment to create whole body plastinates was developed and von Hagens refined his methods with a notion to display whole bodies for public viewing.<sup>56</sup> In a published letter about von Hagens’s *hauptbeschäftigung* (preoccupation), Kriz (2007) states that von Hagens’s fascination with whole body specimens for the

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<sup>55</sup> With the patenting of his technique, von Hagens founded a company named BIODUR, and shortly after in 1986 established the International Society for Plastination. Supplying dry, odorless, anatomical dissections to anatomy departments around the world, earned him status in the field and academic accolades (von Hagens 2002). I personally recall our anatomy professor (McMaster University 1991-2) enthusiastically unpacking a large box that had been shipped from Germany. As we surrounded him, he passed around plastinated hands and feet for us to examine. They were odorless, perfectly coloured, and well-textured. We all agreed that they were so much better to handle and study than the older wet specimens in formaldehyde, all of which were corroding and very smelly.

<sup>56</sup> The increasing supply of “donated bodies primarily from Russia and China” (von Hagens 2002), allowed von Hagens to experiment with a variety of methods. One involved removing bodily fluids and soluble fat from intact fresh cadavers – in large vats – and then pumping reactive resins and elastomers into the bodies through vacuum forced impregnation. A mixture of light, heat and gases ‘cured’ the bodies, making them rigid and permanent (Pashaei 2010).

layperson was influential in creating the goals and themes for future shows that would travel the world. His stated mission was to “democratize anatomy”, to reveal information about health, life and death that had once been the monopoly of the medical profession (Kriz 2007; von Hagens 2002).

Snubbed by the more prestigious metropolitan museums across Europe and North America, von Hagens appealed to various science and technology centers. By rebranding his work as ‘science’ and representing the body as a ‘machine’ with parts to look at and learn about, his exhibitions suddenly gathered momentum (von Hagens 2002; see also Lantos 2011). In 1995 an invitation to display these whole plastinated body specimens from the Japanese Anatomical Society led to von Hagens’s first exhibition – Körperwelten /BodyWorlds – at the National Science Museum in Tokyo. The show consisted of several cadavers in athletic poses: kicking soccer balls, skateboarding, playing rugby, and mounted on gymnastic equipment (see Figures 3:13 and 3:14).



**Figure 3:13** The Rugby Player, BodyWorlds 2009 (image ©BodyWorlds Inc). **Figure. 3:14.** Contact Sport, BodyWorlds 2009 (image © J. Doucette).

The exhibition was very well received by the Japanese public, but in Europe von Hagens’s plastinates raised the ire and outrage of his colleagues when the show first premiered in Germany two years later – to sold out crowds (Biskup 2007; Jones and

Whitaker 2009).

Despite the content of the displays and the air of performance within every BodyWorlds show, the fact that the exhibits take place primarily in science museums seems to diminish the sense of theatrics, while establishing their credibility and prestige. The science museums chosen are newer, more interactive, and free of the “politics of recognition” and the “representational critique” of the older metropolitan museums (see MacDonald 2006:3). They show how things work, demonstrate gadgetry and explore current themes through tools and technology. Most importantly, they also tend to be “unabashed crowd pullers” that appeal to entertainment in a sort of theme-park, modernist manner (see Prior 2006:514-15) since they are competing fiercely with other venues.

A BodyWorlds exhibit conforms to what would be considered a “blockbuster” exhibition in that it is a “performance of the visual apparatus of the commodity form” (Prior 2006:514), in short, a spectacle. Rather than playing on the fantastical and “the confusion of representation and reality” inherent in a spectacle (Prior 2006:515), the science center as a venue for BodyWorlds, promotes and legitimizes the dead body as educational, scientific, and thereby self-improving. As Jones (2002:439) observes, anatomy must be “educational” or else it is “unacceptable ethically”. However, the educational moment may be problematic and illusory when visitors are faced with cadaver parts that have been splayed open, wired into shapes, and artificially layered. The vast array of cadavers, and more recently, the flayed animal-human plastinates, confront the viewer as a type of modern *wunderkammer* composed by von Hagens to represent the fluid intersections of art, medicine and science.

BodyWorlds has been an ‘unabashed crowd puller’ since its arrival, and has been met with very little controversy and ire from the average visitor (see Leiberich et al 2006; Pashaei 2010; Lantos 2011). The societal tensions aimed at von Hagens’s plastinated bodies were mostly initiated and played out by medical professionals who were the first to publicly disapprove of his work. Many felt as if the human specimens had “nothing to do with the dissecting room” and found the unconventional public displays “offensive” (Jones and Whitaker 2009:771). BodyWorlds was officially censured by the German Anatomical Society in 1997 (Kühnel 2004) and soon after representatives of the Anatomical Society of Great Britain and Ireland, the British Association of Anatomists, and the Anatomical Society of France voiced their professional dismay in a series of letters and publications. It was felt that BodyWorlds would trivialize human dissection and reduce it to a spectacle for entertainment, to the detriment of medical education (Boyde et al 2002; Jones and Whitaker 2009; Pashaei 2010).<sup>57</sup>

Rather than appealing to his fellow anatomists for recognition, which was not forthcoming, von Hagens decided his goal was to provide the public with privileged access to hundreds of cadavers and body parts, all of which have apparently been donated to him through an international donor program. Von Hagens’s achievements have netted him more than \$40 million USD between 1997 and 2006 (Goldman 2006:69) and prompted him to observe, “I courted the favour of my peers but found the approval of normal people” (Biskup 2007:220).

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<sup>57</sup> The increasing fascination of the public with his specimens, combined with the alienation of fellow anatomists who felt that the displays contravened “the essential features of their discipline” (Jones and Whitaker 2009:771), compelled von Hagens to leave Germany in 1997 for a professorship at the Dalian Medical University in China. While there, he established the Institution for Plastination and began to launch his BodyWorlds exhibitions worldwide.

Since the huge and continued success of BodyWorlds, the topic of processing and displaying modern human specimens for nonmedical, Western consumption has been the source of much heated debate (Connor 2007; Stephens 2007; Tanassi 2007; Linke 2005; Stern 2006; Moore and Brown 2004; Stern 2003), increased support and enthusiasm (Slemon 2011; Bleeker 2008; Enquist 2007; Pashaei 2010), and inspiration for a renewed interest in the dead human body (Slemon 2011; Stone 2011; Morgan 2009; Lombard and Selverian 2008; Hirschauer 2008).

The academic literature is rich with discussions on defining and contextualizing plastinated bodies – are they wet or dry, objects or persons, educational or unethical? – whenever new shows premiere. For the past decade, the von Hagens’s ‘plastinate’ has generated multiple perspectives around themes of disembodiment, identity, violence, life and death, presenting its own variety of power and paradox for millions of viewers.

For many scholars, these now famous cadavers represent a range of cultural motifs, as expressed by their maker who has imposed his ‘privileged’ medical access to, and notions of, the dead body on contemporary society. Stephens (2007), for example, asserts that von Hagens’s “anatomical art” must be experienced, viewed and contextualized within the long tradition of public anatomy. In a similar way to the well-established 16th and 17th century anatomists who preceded him, the anatomical significance and mysteries contained in the dead body can only be revealed by removing its skin, and exposing its interior. Moore and Brown (2004:8) maintain that von Hagens’s displays of flayed cadavers reflect a disturbing fusion of Goethe’s (1947) literary figures – the *prosektor* and

the *proplastiker* – in his story about the ambivalent anatomy student Wilhelm Meister.<sup>58</sup>

The deep tension between these two forces (to cut up and destroy versus the need to restore), according to Moore and Brown (2004), appear to play out in the hyper-real anatomy of von Hagens's work. The use of real dead human bodies, compels our fascination, fear, and repugnance yet this is balanced by the use of chemicals, silicones, rubber and plastic, which remove all semblance of death and decay. The bodies may be dead but they are clean, odourless, and posing as if alive. Like Goethe's *proplastiker*, von Hagens has made the "dead more alive" through art and science.

Inherent in both Stephens's (2007) and Moore and Brown's (2004) discussions is the idea that the dead body has been disengaged from all notions of reality, removed from the horrors and foul smells of the dissecting room, and placed in large-scale exhibitions designed to heighten the awareness of life, as opposed to death and decay. Pashaei (2010:1076) agrees that "the intention has been to get away from presenting dead bodies in their deadness". Since the cadavers in a von Hagens's exhibit are shiny and plastic, with parts that move and parts that can be removed, with glass eyes wide-open, mouths agape as if breathing, they appear to be in motion (Stern 2003). Unlike museum bodies that are contained and untouchable, the 'living-dead' specimens surround the viewer, placed strategically in the very centre of walkways and paths to provoke direct encounters and tactile contact (see Figures 3:15 and 3:16, also Linke 2005).

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<sup>58</sup> Goethe's (1947) the *prosektor* is a character driven by a mad scientific vision, willing to tear and cut up the human body on a quest for knowledge while the *proplastiker* is in awe of life "wondrous even in death". His ideal is to restore human dignity by creating realistic models of the human form rather than dissecting and "deforming still further the splendid production of Nature" (Goethe 1947:234).

These dead bodies are accessible, uncontained and have no spatial boundaries between themselves and the viewers. Though they are well-established fixtures in the science museum calendar, they continue to provoke a sense of unease in the academic literature.

Jones (2002) comments that plastination appears to be a move away from the cadaver to a far more anonymous object. It is not a person but a dead representation of a once living one, made to participate among the living. Stephens declares (2007:316) plastination is the “de-realisation of the body’s materiality”; the individuated-self is stripped away, and replaced by synthetic components in “illusory poses”.



Figure 3:15 and 3:16 Exploring plastinated cadavers at BodyWorlds, Toronto 2009 (Images © J.Doucette)

Hoffman insists it is more akin to “fairground anatomy” (Hoffman 2010: <http://filter.org.au/in-other-words/wandering-in-the-company-of-skeletons-imaginaries-of-the-body-across-anatomy>) and sees von Hagens’s work as a continuation of the spectacle of death and dismemberment no different from the public anatomizing of the 16th and 17th centuries. Connor (2007) suggests that the plastinates are better

characterized as a private anatomical collection made public, part of a traveling roadshow where von Hagens makes the occasional appearance offering celebrities private tours, and where the masses can buy t-shirts and mugs.

In contrast, Linke (2005) supposes a more sinister agenda in the set of motifs that mark the transfiguration of the cadavers in von Hagens's work – white skin, Caucasian facial features, a muscular body and heroic pose – suggesting “a return to a disturbing fascination with fascist masculinity” (Linke 2005:18). For Linke (2005:18), the bodies are aestheticised objects that promote “the amputation of feelings and the erasure of memory” suppressing any evocations of violence, victimhood, or history. They are posed to make us forget not only the nature of their own lived lives but of Europe's violent past.

Von Hagen has often stated emphatically that his specimens are not about death but about life. The exhibitions of plastinated human cadavers are not meant to be “illegal cemeteries”, “places of mourning” or “post-mortem museums” but “places of enlightenment and contemplation, even of philosophical and religious self-recognition” ([www.bodyworlds.com/en/gunther\\_von\\_hagens/life\\_in\\_science.html](http://www.bodyworlds.com/en/gunther_von_hagens/life_in_science.html)). He emphasizes the educational component of his works, and stresses the need for people to learn about the “insides of the human body”. In this way, traditional ‘spatial boundaries’ (Walter 2004) are disregarded because the dead are conveying “descriptive knowledge about life”, and are allowing a “deeply impressive encounter” with the ‘interior’ of their bodies ([www.bodyworlds.com/en/store/BW\\_store.html](http://www.bodyworlds.com/en/store/BW_store.html)).

Transforming the science museum into a dynamic theatre of life has removed the repugnance of death and, according to Stern (2003), allows us to remain “detached”, which Goodnow (2006) fears will occur if we look too long upon the museum dead. As

Walter states (2004b:484), the nature of the exhibits, and the context of their display make possible a type of “proto-scientific gaze” that lacks the emotional complications of the dissecting room. So instead of shocking viewers with an array of cadavers as “abject corpses”, plastination renders these bodies safe and unthreatening. The ‘wet’ aspects of the dead, the bile, urine, saliva, blood, guts, feces, and the purge fluid of decay have all been drained and kept away from the public.

Von Hagens’s rapid rise to fame, wealth and notoriety is a good indication that the public is very eager to see uncontained, splayed-open cadavers, to the surprise and dismay of many scholars. His pioneering methods of preservation have allowed the public to view the human body actively disembodied from its own death and decay, thus making it “far easier to feel so close to the specimens, as if they are one of us” (Pashaei 2010:1077).

Furthermore, von Hagens’s phenomenon has created a generation of individuals excited to donate their bodies for plastination, the ultimate new form of ‘recycling’ (Walter 2004). As stated on his website, von Hagens currently has registered well over 13,000 donors worldwide. It has been such a successful program that registration has now closed due to such an extensive backlog of individuals asking to be plastinated ([www.koerperspende.de/en/body\\_donation/the\\_body\\_donation\\_program.html](http://www.koerperspende.de/en/body_donation/the_body_donation_program.html)). Rather than embracing the inevitable fate of physical decay and obliteration that death entails, thousands of donors are opting to have their bodies transformed into permanent objects with a second life, on display for the masses to touch, and photograph.

Unsurprisingly, the scorn of fellow anatomists has slowly been replaced by tacit acceptance, or unabashed support, and an abundance of interdisciplinary debates. After seeing a BodyWorlds exhibit in Berlin, Schulte-Sasse (2006:369) stated emphatically that Americans would never accept such work since they were “too Christian”, and “too sentimental about death to grant von Hagens’s whole, unholy plastinations even a tourist visa”. However, after a “wildly enthusiastic welcome” and accolades from every major city in the United States, Schulte-Sasse (2006:370) admitted that she “couldn’t have been more wrong”. To date, there have been well over 35 million people who have attended a BodyWorlds exhibit, and according to their website, it has changed the view of “personal corporeality” more than any other exhibit of its kind ([www.bodyworlds.com/en/store/BW\\_store.html](http://www.bodyworlds.com/en/store/BW_store.html)).

While it appears that von Hagens has attained the approval he once courted, as well as the reputation of being a pioneer in the field of preservation (Walter 2004; Pashaei 2010; Lantos 2011), other pressures have become apparent as new exhibitions premiere. In order to maintain an industry that has grown to over 450 laboratories around the world, a staff of thousands, and yearly international exhibitions, von Hagens has had to appeal to a constant demand for cadavers in new and original ways. Clean, dead bodies in athletic poses are no longer massive draws after almost 20 years, especially given the sudden appearance of ‘copycat’ exhibitions by other organizations, and so his displays have become more sensational.<sup>59</sup> But rather than scaring off the crowds, the current themes

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<sup>59</sup> Currently there are several copy-cat exhibitions displaying preserved human cadavers: Bodies... The Exhibition; Body Exploration; The Amazing Human Body; Mysteries of the Human Body; Bodies Revealed; Our Body-The Universe Within; Corps Ouvert.

continue to draw even larger audiences and more international venues (see [bodyworlds.com](http://bodyworlds.com)). The Buffalo Science Museum, hosting Bodyworlds for the first time in 2013, demands that you “Come See BodyWorlds!” ([www.sciencebuff.org](http://www.sciencebuff.org)) because “34 Million Visitors Can’t Be Wrong”, implying that the shows are highly praised and attended by a majority of people all over the world. There are no calls for censorship or cancellations as a run up to the show in local Buffalo news, but rather video clips on science museum websites of ecstatic visitors, including children, describing the show as “spectacular”, “fantastic”, and “awe-inspiring” (see <http://sciencebuff.org/bw/>).<sup>60</sup>

The backlash, once again, originates with von Hagens’s colleagues within the medical profession, as well as from social scientists. Much of the current controversy no longer reflects his colleagues’ agitation over revealing the tools of the trade, or lowering the standards of anatomy, but centers on the handling and placing of human remains in “newly offensive” ways (see Stephens 2007; Barilan 2006; Stern 2006; Pashaei 2010).<sup>61</sup>

### **Religious Bodies**

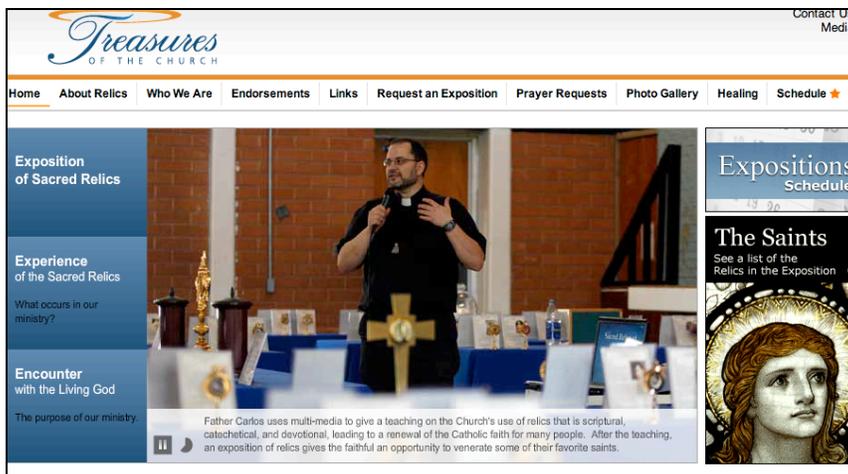
Human remains as relics in Catholic churches are not only common sights and occurrences, but are legally required, according to church laws (Beal et al 2002; Tanner 2011). Surprisingly, there has been very little scholarly material written on the historical or contemporary uses of relics in the Catholic Church. A rich religious, hagiographic

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<sup>60</sup> According to a survey conducted by Leiberich et al (2006), 94.3 % of visitors to a BodyWorlds exhibit in Munich pleaded *against* prohibiting future shows.

<sup>61</sup> The plastinates in more recent shows have displayed sexualized females with their nipples reattached, splayed open in erotic poses on swings; bodies situated in sexual intercourse; males with retractable penises; bodies that have limbs swinging backwards; human body parts grafted onto animal parts; and costumed bodies posed at parties and elaborate tableaux.

treatment nevertheless continues to celebrate and catalogue some of the more popular saints: their relics, their feats, their biographies and their circulation histories (see for example Cruz 1977; Walsh 1982; Cruz 1984; Rufus 1999; Farmer 2004; Mangan 2003; Delaney 2005; Gallonio 2006; Rivard 2009; Craughwell 2011). There are also numerous websites and personal blogs extolling the virtues of relics, calling for a revival in the veneration of relics, and advertising traveling expositions of relics (see Figure 3:17, and also [fisheaters.com](http://fisheaters.com); [treasuresofthechurch.com](http://treasuresofthechurch.com); [st.petersbasilica.org](http://st.petersbasilica.org); [ichrusa-saintsalive.com](http://ichrusa-saintsalive.com)).



**Figure 3:17** Treasures of the Church traveling exposition of relics website (image courtesy of Fr. Carlos Martins, all rights reserved)

There is, however, a dearth of academic writing on relics outside of religious circles. Brown (1981) and Geary (1986) are considered pioneers in this field of research (Walsham 2010), yet they focus exclusively on the historic processing, use and trade of relics within various Catholic churches across a medieval Europe. They also tend to identify relics as a cult-based phenomenon of the Middle Ages, which is said to have ‘lost’ its heady power after the Reformation (see also Wilson 1983; Crook 2000; Osborne

2003).

Similarly, more recent scholarship, though it too discusses the scarcity of material on this subject, highlights only the historical trade, politics and ‘worship’ of relics from a variety of theoretical frameworks (see Walsham 2010; Smith 2010; Rublack 2010; Spaak 2009; Woolf 2003). Scholarly discussion on the current processing, circulation, and displaying of relics appears almost nonexistent. Relics are presented as historical artifacts that have “cast off their religious associations” since the post-Reformation era (Walsham 2010:140). Any discussion of relics in contemporary practice situates them as antiquities (see Woolf 2003). This perspective is also evident in the catalogue highlighting the British Museum’s 2010 exhibition of relics from medieval Europe, “Treasures of Heaven” (in participation with the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Walter’s Art Museum in Baltimore: see Bagnoli et al 2010), and the 2012 exhibition at the Paris Museum of Medical History (Exposition Le-recours-au-ciel-saints-protecteurs-et-guerisseurs). Despite a lengthy treatise on sainthood and devotional practices, the Reformation is seen to mark an end to the veneration of saintly relics. Thereafter, the veneration of relics is relegated to the status of “cult”, and though there are no human remains in either of the exhibits cited above, the gilded reliquaries, chalices, and other “treasures of heaven” that once contained them are displayed as beautiful artifacts from the past.

There appears to be an interest nonetheless in visiting and photographing the thousands of human remains contained in Catholic churches around the world. Personal (and mostly secular) blogs, websites, Facebook pages, and books depicting charnel

houses, ossuaries, and cathedrals as places to visit the dead are becoming ever more popular (see Figure 3:18, also *Morbid Anatomy*; *Cemetery Travel*; *KutnaHora*; *Atlas Obscura*; Quigley 2001; Quigley’s *Cabinet*; Koudounaris 2011; *Memento Mori*; *Cabinet of Wonders*; *Mausoleum Girl*; *Death Salon*; *The Chirurgeon’s Apprentice*; *Mumbly-Jumbly-Mumblety-Peg* ).



**Figure 3:18** Atlas Obscura webpage advertising the ‘best’ ossuaries to visit (see: <http://www.atlasobscura.com>).

The tradition of making and displaying relics, and their contemporary importance to the Catholic church, are not included in secular blog discussions and coffee table books, many of which blend motifs from popular culture such as tattooing, art, and fashion. Some of the secular websites also provide links to medical museums, private collections, and to shops where human remains can be purchased, representing a type of online constellation of venues for the dead.

Many of these sites convey the sense that relics are no longer religiously relevant for Catholics. For the most part, relics are portrayed much as they are in the academic

literature, as medieval curiosities whose worth is bound to how they are displayed for viewing. The most popular relics are those deemed ‘bizarre and unusual’ (see [www.listverse.com](http://www.listverse.com)). For example, the website [forteantimes.com](http://forteantimes.com), which is dedicated to describing “The World of Strange Phenomena”, features a section dedicated to richly decorated Catholic relics, referred to as “Bones with Bling”. Their lavish handiwork accompanied by tales of suffering and death are explained as ‘the main attraction for tourists’. As for the relics’ religious significance for practicing Catholics, the author maintains that “they represent a curious and largely forgotten piece of Catholic history” (see [http://www.forteantimes.com/features/articles/5560/bones\\_with\\_bling.html](http://www.forteantimes.com/features/articles/5560/bones_with_bling.html); also Koudounaris 2011).

In a similar blog (see [www.allthesaintsyoushouldknow.com](http://www.allthesaintsyoushouldknow.com)), there are colourful images of saint’s relics and opulent reliquaries. The writer known as Cadaver Formosus introduces a new entry on the ‘mortification of the flesh’ with a large image of a crucified and bleeding Christ, stating:

I’ll admit to a certain macabre fascination with mortification of the flesh, the Catholic practice of using self-inflicted pain as form of penance. I started reading about it because along with relics, it occupies a weird little niche in the Catholic faith: things that are absolutely part of Church doctrine and even crucial to the history of the Church, but really aren’t talked about in polite company anymore.

Catholic social media however, express a very different relationship with the dead. Relics, ossuaries, charnel houses and churches are not considered tourist destinations, or described as ‘cool places to go’, but as sites for pilgrimage and veneration. Many websites advertise pilgrimages while in others, clergy and laypeople record their personal experiences, describe their particular pilgrimage, and offer prayers and images (see for

example: [www.206tours.com](http://www.206tours.com); <http://www.salesians.org/>; <http://bishopdowd.net/blog/>; [www.bestcatholic.com](http://www.bestcatholic.com); [www.fisheaters.com](http://www.fisheaters.com); [catholicrelics.wordpress.com](http://catholicrelics.wordpress.com)). In one such blog, the secular disregard for Catholic relics is noted, and described as ironic considering the level of ‘sacredness’ and power attributed to celebrities and their apparel. Tracy “Vox Clamantis” of [www.fisheaters.com](http://www.fisheaters.com) states:

It's funny to me how a culture that is filled with autograph hounds and those who clamor to be around those glittered with "star dust" can consider the Catholic veneration of relics as a joke. We pay \$20,000 for a \$200 jacket worn by Jacqueline Kennedy, faint at Beatles concerts, engage in riotous behavior to get our hands on one of Elvis's scarves, but when a relic of St. Catherine is mentioned, people snicker.

To many Catholics expressing their faith online, it is apparent that relics are vital and necessary to the function of the church and its community, even though Geary (1994:3) insists that these bodies “ceased to be members of the human community” after the Reformation. In many of my interviews with clergy, and during informal discussions with practicing Catholics, there was a very strong sense that relics serve to immediately connect them to particular saints who could respond to their prayers.<sup>62</sup> Cardinal Collins (personal interview, June 2012) stated that “relics are still very crucial, they are the foundation of the Catholic church, the living remnant of the body of Christ”. According to pastor Galea, of St. Maria Goretti Parish in Scarborough, Ontario, relics are important because they are “saintly bodies that transcend time and space, and can guide us, and answer our prayers because of their intimate relationship with Christ” (personal

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<sup>62</sup> I had several informal discussions with people who described themselves as practicing Catholics, during research in the US and Canada, and during two veneration ceremonies. The first was in May 2012 during the arrival of the relics of St. Maria Goretti, at a parish in Scarborough, Ontario, and the second was during the canonization ceremony of St. Kateri, in October 2012, in Midland, Ontario.

communication, May 2012). On the use of relics, Fama (2009:33) states, “From the earliest times, miracles have been associated with their use. God chooses to work through them to testify to the holiness of the individuals they came from”.

Father Carlos Martins (see Figures 3:18 and 3:19), an organizer for the popular travelling exposition of relics throughout North and Central America (see [www. treasuresofthe church.com](http://www.treasuresofthechurch.com)), responded to Geary’s quote during our interview by stating that “saints through their presence in the bodies they have left behind, will always be members of the human community”. While in his chaplaincy office at York University in Toronto (September 2012), he discussed his personal experiences with relics over the last 15 years, in terms of how he has collected and distributed them to parishes. He described the current demand for them as “overwhelming”:

After an exposition when I leave a parish, I am flooded with requests from the Bishop’s office. I can’t keep up with the requests that come to me for relics. I can’t keep up. So what I’ll do is I’m given relics by religious communities who want to promote their own saints and blessed. I have reliquaries that have come to me for repair purposes and so forth, and I can divide those, I can take what is inside those and enshrine them within a new *theca*, a new case, and then issue them with an affidavit, a license for them to be used for liturgical worship. The relic is not worshipped, but in the worship of the mass, the relic plays a large part of it. I have three desks at home filled with requests that I can’t even touch. A notebook filled with what I still need to get done. And this is not just for local parishes. It is international.

Relics contained within altars, reliquaries, and tombs continue to be central to the everyday functioning of the contemporary Catholic Church. All manner of first class relics, from particles to full bodies move within the church and between communities and parishes (see Figure 3:20), and have even been smuggled into countries for the secret consecration of new churches in war zones and “countries hostile to the Catholic Church” (Fr. Martins interview September 2012).



**Figure 3:19** Father Carlos Martins packing up relics after an exposition, 2011 (image courtesy of Fr. Carlos Martins, all rights reserved).

The translation of new relics can be seen around the world via satellite during canonization ceremonies in Rome (see [vatican.va/holyfather/benedict/canonizzazioni/](http://www.vatican.va/holyfather/benedict/canonizzazioni/); also <http://www.vatican.va/video/index.html>), while the power of very old relics was made evident when the outgoing Pope Benedict XVI venerated the full body remains of St. Celestine (see Figure 3:21, also [www.taylormarshall.com/pope-benedicts-devotion-to-saint.html](http://www.taylormarshall.com/pope-benedicts-devotion-to-saint.html)) just before the incoming Pope Francis prayed to the remains of St. Peter.<sup>63</sup>

Beyond the Catholic Church, a black market flourishes in the buying and selling of stolen relics as valuable commodities (see [www.ichrusa.com](http://www.ichrusa.com)), and they can also be had in antique stores and online auctions (see [www.ebay.com/sch/Relics](http://www.ebay.com/sch/Relics); [www.ichrusa.com/saintsalive](http://www.ichrusa.com/saintsalive);

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<sup>63</sup> The former Pope Benedict XVI's "growing devotion" for St. Celestine apparently revealed his desire to resign, according to Marshall ([tonymarshall.com](http://tonymarshall.com)). St. Celestine was the last pope to resign in 1294. Dr. Marshall, Chancellor of the College of Saints John Fisher and Thomas More, in Texas, stated in his personal blog ([tonymarshall.com](http://tonymarshall.com)): "Think about it for a moment. If you were a Pope and completely overwhelmed and feeling inadequate, to whom could you turn? Who could possibly understand the pressures of the Papacy? Who could rightly guide you in this difficult decision? The simple answer is, no one on earth. So instead, our Holy Father has turned to Saint Celestine - the *only saint in Heaven who has experienced what Pope Benedict is experiencing.*" (italics Dr. Marshall).

russianstore.com).<sup>64</sup> While there is virtually no discussion in the (secular) academic literature of their contemporary socio-cultural, religious or political value, saintly relics continue to exert their presence as socially active members of the Catholic community.<sup>65</sup> Despite the apparent divide expressed in the academic literature and on the internet, relics thrive with both power and meaning, garnering followers and collectors within a variety of religious and secular contexts.



**Figure 3:20** The remains of St. Maria Goretti shipped from Italy, arrive in Scarborough, ON. May 2012 (image © M.Nafte).



**Figure 3:21** Former Pope Benedict XVI venerating the remains of St. Celestine shortly before his resignation, Rome 2013 (image courtesy of www.taylormarshal.com, all rights reserved).

<sup>64</sup> Burke, writing in Forbes.com (2009) states: “Trade in religious relics – actual pieces of the bodies and artifacts of Catholic saints – has boomed recently. Though Catholic canon law forbids the sale of relics, collectors can buy them through dealers, auction houses and eBay (nasdaq: EBAY - news - people ). Some buyers feel it their duty to “rescue” relics by getting them off the market and returning them to churches or to other sacred sites, where they can be venerated by the devout”.

<sup>65</sup> According to Dr. Ellen Badone, regarding her experiences in Brittany, France (see Badone 1989) Catholic relics may not be relevant for the average practicing Catholic (personal communication, November 2013). However, in my discussions and interviews with a variety of Catholic clergy, nuns and members of the Catholic church in Ontario, Quebec (Montreal and Quebec City), Albuquerque, New Mexico, San Francisco, California, and London, England, I was told consistently that saintly relics were relevant and still venerated during feast days and various ceremonies, and in the saying of mass as a requirement of the liturgy. In describing the proper veneration for a relic after mass, a Catholic news agency reporting from Rome states, “Although no longer mentioned in current legislation, the custom of making a genuflection (bending down on one knee) before a publicly exposed relic of the True Cross or another relic of the Passion remains in force” (see <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/venerating-relics-at-mass>). All of the clergy I spoke to, as well as two female members of a convent in Toronto, Ontario had their own personal first-class relics which they displayed on private, or home altars, or which they kept in decorative cases and took out for regular veneration and prayer. There is also an online series on the meaning of Catholic relics produced by Columbia Catholic Ministry (see [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQT\\_UGe6Zug](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQT_UGe6Zug))

**Bodies and Popular Culture:  
“It’s Not a Party Without Shrunken Heads”**

Though the value of human remains for research purposes, biomedical use, and religion has been underscored above (see also Seidemann 2008; Walker 2008; Katzenberg and Saunders 2008; Giles 2006; Sofaer 2006), when there is a question of collecting human remains for personal use, it is seen as unethical and incompatible with the notion of a modern ‘healthy’ society (see Gill-King 1992; Huxley and Finnegan 2004; Malone 2004; Alberti et al 2009; Harrison 2012). Here there are no ‘respectful or dispassionate’ analyses (Chacon and Dye 2008) of the personal trophy-taking, purchasing, or collecting of human remains. The academic literature, though largely silent on contemporary practices, affirms that this is morally and ethically wrong whatever the context may be (Huxley and Finnegan 2004; Harrison 2012).

Nonetheless, the taking of human remains as personal souvenirs and ‘trophies’ in contemporary Western society seems to be a long, established tradition. Trophy-taking was not always frowned upon, or condemned, but viewed as an acceptable practice, one that still has a far reaching impact. One example of this is the military trophy. Skulls and other human remains are increasingly turning up throughout the United States and Europe as personal items taken during World War II, and during the Vietnam war (see Sledzik and Ousley 1991; Weingartner 1992; Quigley 2001; Wiley and Leach 2009; Dirkmaat 2012; Harrison 2012). Many elderly GIs who have recently died had remains in their possession, some of which had been passed on as family heirlooms (Sledzik and Ousley 1991; Weingartner 1992; Iserson 2001; Harrison 2006). So many of these war trophies

have been uncovered over the last several decades that a subfield of forensic anthropology has been established to identify and repatriate them (Quigley 2001; Harrison 2012).

According to US war correspondent Edward Jones (*Atlantic Monthly* 1946), as well as Iserson (2001) and Thayer (2004), skulls were enviable and prized commodities during World War II. Marines “boiled the flesh off the enemy skulls to make table ornaments for sweethearts, or carved their bones into letter openers” (see [www.theatlantic.com/past/unbound/bookauth/battle/jones](http://www.theatlantic.com/past/unbound/bookauth/battle/jones)).<sup>66</sup> Severed body parts, such as ears and finger bones, were worn on belts and made into necklaces, and skulls were shipped home as keepsakes (Harrison 2006). In a post WWII poem, Winfield Townley Scott wrote a detailed description of processing skulls for trophies (cited in Goldstein 2002).<sup>67</sup> In later years, during the Vietnam War, ears and fingers were commonly taken because they were easier to transport, and skulls were being confiscated after the bags of returning soldiers were searched (Sledzik and Ousley 1991).

Echoing many of his peers cited earlier in this chapter, Harrison (2012:3-5) asserts

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<sup>66</sup> Here Jones is referring to the *Life Magazine* Issue of 1944 “Picture of the Week” of a woman photographed looking at a skull set on a table. The caption with the photograph states: “Arizona war worker writes her Navy boyfriend a thank-you note for the Jap skull he sent her. When he said goodbye two years ago to Natalie Nickerson, 20 a war worker of Phoenix, Ariz., a big, handsome Navy lieutenant promised her a Jap. Last week Natalie received a human skull, autographed by her lieutenant and 13 friends, and inscribed: “This is a good Jap – a dead one picked up on the New Guinea beach.” Natalie, surprised at the gift, named it Tojo. The armed forces disapprove strongly of this sort of thing.” *Life Magazine* 5/22/1944.

<sup>67</sup> Townley Scott (cited in Goldstein 2002:59 ) writes in his poem “The US Sailor with the Japanese Skull”: Bluejacket, I mean, aged 20, in August strolled Among the little bodies on the sand and hunted Souvenirs: teeth, tags, diaries, boots; but bolder still Hacked off this head and under a Ginkgo tree skinned it: Peeled with a lifting knife the jaw and cheeks, bared. The nose, ripped off the black-haired scalp and gutted. The dead eyes to these thoughtful hollows: a scarred But bloodless job, unless it be said brains bleed. Then, his ship underway, dragged this aft in a net Many days and nights—the cold bone tumbling Beneath the foaming wake, weed-worn and salt-cut Rolling safe among fish and washed with Pacific.

that trophy-taking in warfare was common around the world in various prehistoric and historic eras; furthermore it was “a central element of warfare” where “enemy body parts had an important ritual value”. However, according to Harrison (2012:2-3), modern 20th century “military” trophy-taking is an “aberrant form of collecting”, specifically for Europeans and Americans. Although US Marine Marion (quoted in Thayer 2004:186) stated that “we learned savagery from the Japanese” and trophy-taking was apparently just as popular among the Japanese, Chinese, and Vietnamese during both wars (Dower 1986; Thayer 2004), Harrison maintains that it was “more transgressive” among Americans because it was inseparable from, and linked to, a “history of racism” (2012:4). It is curious that only European and American military trophy-taking are considered racist pursuits, especially in light of the extensive trophy-taking decades earlier in Europe and during the American Civil War where enemy troops were more racially homogenous and where even women participated in visiting battle fields to collect ‘souvenirs’ (see Laderman 1996; Nudelman 2004; Juzda 2009). Harrison’s (2012) assertion not only disregards the intimate association between warfare and the ritual value of the human trophy, described so often in the anthropological literature (e.g., Jandial et al 2004; Rubenstein 2007; Knudsen and Tung 2008; Owsley et al 2008; Chacon and Dye 2008), it suggests that Western soldiers and civilians cannot possibly have any other motive or reference for collecting human remains. In other words, Europeans and Americans evolved from such ‘tribal’ traditions; thus any form of trophy-taking implies deviant behaviour. Inevitably, this sentiment tends to end any further discussion on, or comparison with, contemporary practices.

In a similar vein, the personal use of human remains as *memento mori* in Western culture is generally seen as irrelevant and unacceptable in contemporary society, as it is often interpreted as an expression of the religious and social convictions of the past (see Tarlow 2001; Pike 2004; Delorme 2004; Nudelman 2004; Brett 2006; Pottier 2008; Lutz 2011).<sup>68</sup> Photographs of the dead, hair wreaths, and death masks that once maintained memory, marked grief and the period of mourning for loved ones, are said to be reminiscent of the 18th and 19th centuries. The notion of collecting parts of the dead for memory and worship is claimed to have been left behind as part of a “Victorian relic culture” that “found its demise, by the start of the Great War” (Lutz 2011:128).

Fuss (2003) maintains that *memento mori* and what she calls “corpse poetry” reflected the ‘art of being dead’, a response to industrialization and the inevitable ‘end of death as death’ (Fuss 2003:2-4); however, photographs of the dead, hair wreaths, and human bone jewelry have made their way into current art and photography books, museum exhibits, and online sources of curios and commodities (see Figure 3:22 and 3:23, also Brett 2006; Beloff 2007; Luthi 2008; Giachetti 2007; [www.paulfrecker.com/collections.cfm?pagetype](http://www.paulfrecker.com/collections.cfm?pagetype); [www.hairwork.com/leila](http://www.hairwork.com/leila); [www.burnsarchive.com](http://www.burnsarchive.com)). Memorial photography has never quite disappeared. Many photographers such as Todd Hochberg, Jane Eaton Hamilton, and services like *Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep*, offer bereavement photography services, especially for stillborn or dying children in homes and hospital

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<sup>68</sup> *Memento mori* is Latin for “Remember thy death”. In the Edwardian and Victorian traditions, it denotes the practice of maintaining parts of the body as keepsakes, namely hair and bone, as well as a death mask, fabric, coffin hardware, and later in the 19th century, photographs of the departed.

rooms.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, according to Dery (2010:56), referring to the availability of antique postmortem photos online:

“The traffic in dead babies is booming on eBay. There are daguerreotypes of dead babies, ambrotypes of dead babies, tintypes of dead babies, cartes de visite of dead babies, cabinet cards of dead babies; dead babies from the Victorian era, the Edwardian era, and the roaring ‘20s”.

There is still a very strong interest in contemporary forms of relic culture, and the more traditional forms of *memento mori* can now be created with current technologies, such as ‘cremation jewelry’ and ‘DNA diamonds’.<sup>70</sup>



**Figure 3:22** Post mortem photography website (see [www.paulfreckler.com](http://www.paulfreckler.com)) **Figure 3:23** Leila Cohoon’s collection of Victorian and modern hair wreaths and jewellery (image courtesy of L.Cohoon).

There are also many private dealers and collectors of *memento mori* along with a firmly established cult of followers known as Goths who array themselves in dark clothing and

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<sup>69</sup> Photographer Todd Hochberg and private collector Stanley Burns recently had a joint exhibition featuring Todd’s current photos of dead or dying children, alongside Victorian and early 20th century images of memorial photos and coffin hardware ([burnspress/SleepingBeautiesMemorialPhotographsFromTheBurnsArchive](http://burnspress.com/SleepingBeautiesMemorialPhotographsFromTheBurnsArchive)). See also figure 3:23.

<sup>70</sup> Cremation jewelry is offered up as *memento mori* worn as “art that celebrates life” (see <http://www.funeral-urn.com/view-all-cremation-jewelry.aspx>). Rings, pendants, brooches, and lockets made from a variety of materials such as gold, silver, wood and glass contain the ashes of the departed. Another online company offers to take the hair, ashes or bone (termed “personal carbon”) of the departed and convert them into diamonds! It is promoted as an heirloom “filled with what matters most” and one that “encapsulates forever, your love and memories” (see <http://dna2diamonds.com/>).

heavy make-up. Goth culture in Western society is described as the “shock tactics of punk



Figure 3:24 *Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep* Website page offering services for bereavement photography (nowilaymedowntosleep.org).

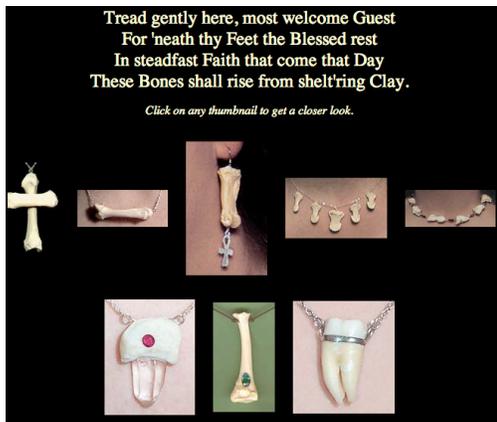
shifted toward the macabre” (Punter 2012:350). Individuals appear “eerie, melodramatic, and unafraid of intellectual posturing”, while they picnic in cemeteries and embrace “the beauty of decay” (Spooner 2012:350).

The literature on Goth culture discusses the movement in terms of its music, fashion, gender roles, and its tendency toward anarchy (see Hodkinson 2001; Goodlad and Bibby 2007; Brill 2008; Issitt 2011; Punter 2012; Spooner 2012). The collecting, wearing, and displaying of *memento mori* in the movement is highlighted as one of the integral features of their lifestyle and philosophy. Liisa Ladouceur, an acclaimed Queen Goth, and author of *Encyclopedia Gothica* (2011), and *How to Kill a Vampire* (2013), stated in an informal interview via email (February 2013) that:

Goth is a mix of the sacred and the profane, and there is something both sacred and blasphemous about touching, or even owning another person's remains, especially if you personally removed it from a grave.

Human remains as fashion accessory is an important part of Goth culture, and collecting human remains is a very “popular idea” (Ladouceur, February 2013). Goth

artisans often purchase small human bones “in bulk from the internet” for use in jewelry and other crafts (see Figure 3:25 and 3:26). Liisa (February 2013) claimed “I myself have a lovely necklace of garnet stones and a metacarpal bone”. They are considered talismanic, powerful and indicative of one’s beliefs, an adherence to “all things Goth” (Ladouceur February 2013). If they are not readily available, however, Liisa maintains that looking at human remains in a museum is “completely desirable”, visiting ossuaries “a dream vacation” and photographing human remains “completely normal as well”.



**Figure 3:25** Colombine Phoenix’s Homepage advertising her human bone jewelry (<http://churchyard.biz/>).



**Figure 3:26** “Jewellery Made From Dead People” Webpage ([www.vice.com/en\\_uk/read/jewellery-made-from-dead-people](http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/jewellery-made-from-dead-people))

With Goth culture’s emphasis on death, its romanticism with cemeteries, the drinking of blood, and a dark, ‘subversive’ lifestyle, it is considered to be a fast growing subculture in Western society, rather than the fringe counterculture it once was (Goodlad and Bibby 2007; Issitt 2011).

Many of the shops, blogs, and websites visited by Goths have been made popular by their continued support and promotion, ensuring that several of these venues have become

lucrative and mainstream.<sup>71</sup> Some shops now have their own affiliated ‘reality-shows’ such as the popular hit Oddities “pop culture’s Mecca of the macabre”, the Midnight Archive, and Treasure Trader. These shows feature an array of people who are either looking for strange items to purchase (often mummies, various curios, human skeletal parts, taxidermy, or old medical devices), or who need assistance in determining the provenance of what they already own.

A mingling of Goth and Goth-like collectors, shop owners, and bloggers photograph their pieces, post images on social media, advertise venues that cater to their interests, and document social events where there are almost always human remains on display. For example, Morbid Anatomy blogger, private collector, and ‘ossuary enthusiast’, Joanna Eberstein, (March 2013) visited crypts in Palermo, Italy, posting images of herself and colleague Evan Michelson (star of the show Oddities), posing with various skeletal remains and relics (see Figure 3:27 and 3:28). Though not a Catholic, she wrote in her blog (Morbid Anatomy, March 2013):

Saint Rosalia is the Patron Saint of Palermo; I would also like to nominate her as patron saint of Goth women. Why? As a young, beautiful woman, bedecked with a crown of roses, reading a book in her solitary lair with only a human skull for company, or clutching a human skull in her black robe it simply does not get more Goth than that.

Fellow New Yorker Ryan Cohn, who sells “antique human remains” through his website ([www.ryanmatthewoddities.com/](http://www.ryanmatthewoddities.com/)) and is often on the Oddities show, hosts

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<sup>71</sup> Shops such as Evolution ([www.theevolutionstore.com/](http://www.theevolutionstore.com/)); Obscura ([www.obscuraantiques.com/](http://www.obscuraantiques.com/)); 5Hand Curiosity ([5handscuriosities.tumblr.com/tagged/medical](http://5handscuriosities.tumblr.com/tagged/medical)); Maxilla and Mandible ([www.maxillaandmandible.com](http://www.maxillaandmandible.com/)); The Bone Room ([www.boneroom.com/](http://www.boneroom.com/)); Necromance ([www.necromance.com](http://www.necromance.com/)); Radio Guy ([industrialanatomy.wordpress.com](http://industrialanatomy.wordpress.com)) and Skulls Unlimited ([www.skullsunlimited.com/products](http://www.skullsunlimited.com/products)) all offer human remains for sale at their stores or online.

parties and events at his home attended by various celebrities and artists. The caption on an image of himself at one recent affair, surrounded by his private collection of human remains, reads “It’s not a party without shrunken heads” (see Figure 3:29).



**Figure 3:27** Blogger and collector Joanna Eberstein with Evan Michelson, holding relics in Naples, Italy, March 2013  
**Figure 3:28** Evan Michelson touring catacombs in Italy, March 2013 (images courtesy of Joanna Eberstein, all rights reserved)

Institutional collecting and displaying are well-established pursuits which offer a wide range of research opportunities and attract diverse forms of scholarship. The *Journal of Material Culture* aptly expresses this dynamic by dedicating an entire issue in 2010 to an exploration of why human bones provoke “emotional, political, visceral and intellectual responses from those who encounter them” (Krmptich et al 2010: 371). The series of articles integrate the experiences of a broad range of scholars, primarily historians, museum curators, ethnographers and archaeologists who all agree that human remains are potent material with both transferring and transforming properties. It should therefore be no surprise that personal collecting, though described as “aberrant” (Harrison 2012), elicits similar encounters, and reveals the same ‘emotive and affective potential’



**Figure 3:29** Ryan Cohn center, with Shaun Lennon (left) and Charlotte Kemp Muhl. “It’s Not a Party Without Shrunken Heads” (see [facebook.com/ryan.m.cohn](https://www.facebook.com/ryan.m.cohn) March 2013)

(Krmptich et al 2010: 372) of human remains in the hands of the living. The lack of discussion of the personal collecting of human remains in the academic literature, however, suggests that this practice does not exist.

Furthermore, the issues facing institutional collectors versus those facing the general public clearly reflect the nature of the relationship that each has with human remains. In public museums and universities, the dead are ‘subjects’ of scholarly debate and anxiety largely because of overriding ethical, political, and legal concerns, framed through a highly politicized post-modernist lens. Within popular culture, however, human remains are seen as ‘things’ infused with aesthetic and talismanic qualities that lend authenticity to products, exhibits, and events. The question of their legality or provenance is of no concern, as many dealers and collectors openly advertise their human inventories without any legal or social recourse (see Figures 3:29 to 3:33).

The very different concerns about displaying human remains held by museum curators are illustrated by Alberti et al (2009:134):

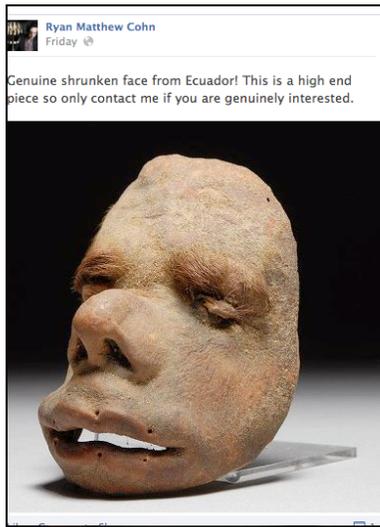


Figure 3:30 Ryan Cohn’s Facebook page advertising a shrunken face for sale, April 2013 (see Ryan Cohn-www.facebook.com/photo).



Figure 3:31 The Bone Room Facebook page, advertises sale of human remains (see www.facebook.com/pages/The-Bone-Room).



Figure 3:32 Alex G’s blog page advertising human specimens for sale (see www.alexg.com/blog/).

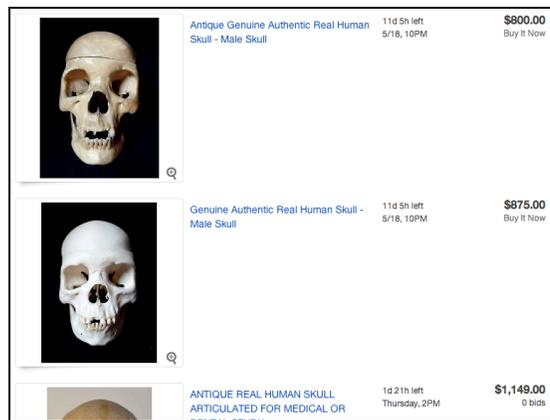


Figure 3:33 eBay site for auction of human skeletal remains (see www.ebay.com/sch/i.htm).

“It is clear that there are widely variant circumstances in which human remains can be displayed in museums: of acquisition, of geography, of age, of purpose, of cultural context. But the question remains: should they be displayed at all?”

On the other hand, in a recent episode of the Science Channel’s *Oddities* (see “Crafty Skulls” March 2013 - science.discovery.com/tv-shows), the challenge is to find an interesting ‘prop’ for a photoshoot. The hosts wander into a private collector’s house in New York City where he stands surrounded by shelves and cabinets of human remains.

The hosts explain their dilemma:

“We really want to punch things up a bit for a photo shoot we’re doing. So we are looking for 1 or 2 pieces of something beautiful or strange that we can use”.

The collector leads them into another room stating “I have a bunch of new stuff in there”, where more human remains are contained in cabinets and on shelves. The hosts point out a human skull on a top shelf that is decorated with dried flowers and moth pods, a piece the collector describes as “something” he “just put together”. The hosts exclaim: “That would be perfect!”

Except for cases of military trophy-taking, the idea that human remains would even be accessible to the general public beyond institutional boundaries, is not considered in the academic literature. However, human remains are not only available to the general public but are the products of vast networks of buyers, dealers and artisans increasingly connecting through social and mass media (see [www.ryanmathewsoddities.com](http://www.ryanmathewsoddities.com); [www.thenautilus.it](http://www.thenautilus.it); [www.oddmonton.com](http://www.oddmonton.com); [www.obscuraantiques.com](http://www.obscuraantiques.com); [www.thespecimensofalex.com](http://www.thespecimensofalex.com) cf-<http://alexcf.com/blog>; <http://www.human-skulls.com>; [www.5handscuriosities.tumblr.com](http://www.5handscuriosities.tumblr.com)). Moreover, online and television venues such as the Science Channel and the Discovery Channel, promote the use of human remains within both institutional and public domains, and confirm that visiting, and collecting them are not transgressive or unethical acts, but popular, trendy, and lucrative pursuits that garner praise and attention.

### **Thanatological Bodies**

The issue of whether or not death is a taboo topic in contemporary Western society,

and questions around why “contemporary society willingly or unwillingly increasingly consumes both real and commodified death” (Stone and Sharpley 2008: 580) are popular subjects in the sociological literature (see Gorer 1955; Ariès 1987; Walter 1991; Mellor and Shilling 1993; Mannino 1997; Bryant and Shoemaker 1997; Lemming and Dickinson 2002; Lee 2002; Harrison 2003; Durkin 2003; Tercier 2005; Stone and Sharpley 2008; Stone 2011b). Many scholars attribute the sequestration of death in contemporary society – via medicalization and privatization – to explain the West’s cultural fascination with it (Stone 2008).<sup>72</sup> This sequestration has apparently created a paradox. Like the cadaver, death has been removed from contemporary society while it is still very much present (Lee 2002; Durkin 2003).

Bryant and Shoemaker (1997:2) argue that “thanatological themed” entertainment is a “pervasive cultural pattern” that reveals the sequestration paradox.<sup>73</sup> While the physical process of dying and death is hidden, death is everywhere, expressed in cinema, music, images, literature, recreation and tourism, primarily as a means of confronting it. Durkin (2003:46-7) suggests that since individuals are insulated from death, such insulation

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<sup>72</sup> The sequestration of death refers to assertions, beginning with Gorer (1955) and Ariès (1987) that modern Western society (from World War I onward) refuses to acknowledge death and death rituals, and has difficulty handling, expressing and discussing bereavement. According to Ariès (1987), the 20th century, defined by individualism and secularism, no longer values important death rituals and thus denies death or tries to hide it. Death becomes more “remote and imminent” with the rise of rationalism, science and reason. It in turn arouses horror, fascination and is eroticized, becoming a savage force untamed. Gorer (1955), maintains that because the subject of death has become so taboo, psychological problems inevitably emerge, indicated by an obsession with death in the media and arts, such as news reports of disasters, horror films and war movies. Blauner (1966), however, insists that death is not taboo within a modern society, but for the most part is not as important or tragic due to the change in demographics. Modern medicine has prolonged life and has made death a rare event, therefore elaborate rites of passage and death rituals are no longer needed.

<sup>73</sup> Thanatology refers to the study of death, derived from the Greek *Thanatos*, a mythological figure with wings and a sword who personified death.

produces a level of ‘craving’ for information and insight. Death themes inevitably reemerge in popular culture where they are “rendered into humour and entertainment”. As a result, death is “socially neutralized” and ultimately becomes “innocuous and thus less threatening (Durkin 2003:47).

In a similar model, sex and death are superimposed in popular culture. Words such as ‘macabre’, ‘haunted beauty’, ‘corpse chic’, and ‘gothic’ are often used to describe the sexualization of death, illustrated by various fashion trends and media that use images of cadavers or human remains (see Gorer 1955; Foltyn 2011). Bronfen (1992), like McIlwaine (2005) and Foltyn (2011), echo Gorer (1955), and Ariès (1987:608) who contends that when death becomes more “remote and imminent” it in turn arouses our fascination and is fetishized. All insist that since the cycle of sex, death and rebirth are the most consistent and widespread in terms of ritual associations, it is thus commonplace for sex and death to “mix in our imaginative minds and surface in art and popular culture” (Foltyn 2011:383).

Exploring the intricate relationships that the living maintain with the dead in contemporary culture is collectively defined as “dark tourism” (Rojek 1993; Lennon and Foley 1996; Seaton 1996; Stone and Sharpley 2008; Walter 2009). The growing literature on this theme concentrates primarily on understanding why and how sites where death and suffering took place seem to attract ‘hordes’ of visitors.

Rojek (1993) and Lennon and Foley (1996) consider the sites where death and suffering occurred to be places of post-modern attractions that serve to create and prolong nostalgia, sensation and memory. They are situated as post-modern because these sites are

largely dependent on contemporary media and other forms of communication technology to report and promote them. Seaton (1996), however, suggests that dark tourism is not a post-modern invention, but a continuation of what he refers to as the ‘thanatopic traditions’ of the Middle Ages, that is, contemplating death and collecting *memento mori*. Hence thanatourism – the traveling to sites where death occurred (Seaton 1996) – is an extension of such thanatopic traditions where the motivation is to symbolically encounter death rather than experience it. Seaton (1996) contends these traditions increased during the 18th and 19th centuries, whereas Walter (2009) maintains that dark tourism represents an array of institutions, along with religion and mass media, that mediate death for the living. Such mediation in turn enables a number of ‘relationships with the dead’ that form part of a continuum. These include education, remembrance, guidance, haunting, intercession, entertainment and care (2009:4-9). It is through these symbolic relationships, according to Walter (personal communication December 2013), that the narratives of modernity and culture are challenged, or reconstructed. The more tragic kinds of suffering and death are filtered, through the involvement of various institutions, in order to “protect us from the directness of the experience of death”.

Though Stone and Sharpley (2008:575) maintain that the literature on dark tourism is still “eclectic and theoretically fragile”, the business of understanding the cultural fascination with the ‘places where death happened’ is thriving much like the dark tourist industry itself. Recently, for example, Stone and Sharpley established the Institute for Dark Tourism (iDTR) as an online resource program (see Figure 3:34, and <http://lgn1331135353.site-fusion.co.uk/>).



Figure 3:34 The Institute for Dark Tourism Research Website (see <http://lgn1331135353.site-fusion.co.uk/>)



Figure 3:35 The Institute for Dark Tourism Facebook Forum (see [www.facebook.com/darktourism?fref=ts](http://www.facebook.com/darktourism?fref=ts))

Claiming to be a ‘world leading academic center’, the site has become a hub for scholars, researchers and industry providers to collaborate internationally, with an aim to “advance knowledge about the act of visitation to tourist centers of death, disaster or the seemingly macabre”. According to iDTR, dark tourism sites are increasingly popular, numerous and ‘vary enormously’. Thus, any attempt to understand such sites and attractions require “effective and appropriate development, management, interpretation and promotion” (see <http://lgn1331135353.site-fusion.co.uk/about-us>).

Amidst images of dark tourist sites like Auschwitz and the Murambi Technical School (the site of the Rwanda Genocide Museum), this website neatly illustrates the role that the media and communication technology have not only in generating and maintaining interest in the sites where death occurred, but in advertising and filtering these experiences for public consumption, in this case scholars, industry providers, and anyone who visits the site.

Creating yet another constellation of sites for the dead, the website also refers readers to the Dark Tourist Forum with a link to their Facebook page (see Figure 3:35).

Here individuals can join in discussions and post images of their field trips and research. Unsurprisingly, the Forum and Facebook page have become virtual dark tourist sites where members can view an array of human remains, see places where death and suffering occurred, and read the latest news and events.<sup>74</sup> It has also become a venue for understanding how to market your own dark tourist site. For example, Zusman (see [http://usabilitygeek.com/dark-tourism-website-user-experience/April 2013](http://usabilitygeek.com/dark-tourism-website-user-experience/April%2013)) looks at websites that advertise dark tourist sites and analyzes them as a website user to ascertain their effectiveness. The research is designed for industry providers to “shift” their business structure in order to “provide a better user experience”; Zusman ([http://usabilitygeek.com/dark-tourism-website-user-experience/April 2013](http://usabilitygeek.com/dark-tourism-website-user-experience/April%2013)) explains:

Rather than the beaches of Crimea, lovers of dark tourism seek out the desolation of Chernobyl. Instead of the Statue of Liberty, the dark tourist wants to see Ground Zero. Forget about the Louvre, Alhambra, and Rodeo Drive. Dark tourism promotes Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and the slums of Mumbai. The experiences of death, disaster, destruction, and darkness show another side of humanity, but how are they promoted? While Disney World can create fantastical websites and hotels can show high class luxury living, how do you promote Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Ground Zero, Chernobyl, and convince tourists to take a walk through the nastier parts of Mumbai?

This particular research model on dark tourism, generated by its website and forum, is a good example of the increasing cross-over from the academic literature to popular culture regarding the dead. Here images of human remains provide the eye-catching advertisement for their events, products, and research indistinguishable from the

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<sup>74</sup> A member posted an online news article on the plans for the Kingston Penitentiary, a jail in Ontario, Canada, to become a museum and tourist site once it has closed down as a prison, while another member has posted an article about the upcoming play *The Trial of the Pendle Witches*, about to take place in “the very building where the women were imprisoned and tried four centuries ago in the biggest-ever group execution for witchcraft” (see <https://www.facebook.com/darktourism?fref=ts>).

Goth assortment of blogs and online shops mentioned earlier. The bejewelled relics referred to as ‘Bones with Bling’ (see [www.forteantimes.com](http://www.forteantimes.com)) for example, make their appearance on the Dark Tourist Facebook page (see Figure 3:35), as well as on numerous other sites that sell books, tattooing, or illustrate personal musings on funerary customs (see [www.forteantimes.com](http://www.forteantimes.com); [www.huffingtonpost.com /2012/11/12/ burial-practices-future\\_n\\_2088731.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/12/burial-practices-future_n_2088731.html); [http://now-here-this.timeout.com/2011/10/23/ empire-of-death’/](http://now-here-this.timeout.com/2011/10/23/empire-of-death/); [www.pinterest.com/katejstone/squid-row-ink/](http://www.pinterest.com/katejstone/squid-row-ink/)). Similarly, sites of imprisonment, death and torture are promoted on various other sites alongside images of anatomical specimens, and ads for antiques and art exhibits (see the Facebook pages of Morbid Anatomy; Nautilus; Oddities; The Clink Prison Museum; Oddmonton; Dissecting Art /Intersecting Anatomy; Chirurgeon’s Apprentice; Death Salon).

Whereas various theories for dark tourism contemplate the public consumption of real and commodified death (Stone 2008 and Sharpley: 580), they do not include discussions of the traffic of commodified human remains, within or beyond dark tourist sites. The constant reference to the ‘cultural fascination with death’ suggests that notions of death are made abstract, sensationalized, and then neutralized or mediated by visits to the places where death occurred. This is also implied by the focus on the ‘representations’ of the corpse in modern media. Along with these descriptions in the academic literature are contemplations of societal violence, fear of death, and issues of gender to explain ‘society’s fascination with death’, and for sites where death occurred, as opposed to the actual traffic of the corpse and its parts (see also Goldstein 1998; McIlwaine 2005; Burfoot and Lord 2006; Foltyn 2008).

If dark tourism is one of many buffers against the harsh reality of death (Walter 2009), is the concept of death further neutralized if individuals sell, collect, or display dead body parts? Is death considered innocuous when human remains are turned into material culture? When the actual corpse is in the hands of an artist, a personal collector, or on public display, is its “cultural moment” (Foltyn 2008:100) represented by a narrative of death and suffering, or rather, does it assume the identity of its affiliated institution, venue, or owner as in for example “the Mütter Collection”, “the Hunterian specimens”, or “von Hagens’s plastinates”?

The thanatological bodies, like the medical bodies, the Indigenous bodies, the museum bodies, the plastinated bodies, the Catholic bodies, and most especially the bodies of popular culture, may reduce the impact of death and socially neutralize it, but more importantly they seem to legitimize and increase the value of the ideas, beliefs, and services within which they have been integrated. When paired with scholarly research or social media for example, human remains ‘punch things up’, drawing attention and revenue from a culture that seeks to own or see them. Various levels of power and identity have become an inherent part of their presence among the living.

Thus, I would suggest that the absent, disposed dead are the reminders of mortality, inevitable grief and loss, while the undisposed dead among us have become the material objects of identity, the souvenirs of power, status, and victory. They no longer represent a person, or a family member but have become mediators infused with a new role expressed by the narrative of their owners. Like the pantheon of Catholic saints and their relics, human remains in the hands of the living become emblematic when they are

transformed into trophies of prestige, membership and knowledge that seem to have very little to do with the contemplation of death.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Bodies: Oddities and Commodities**

In this chapter, I examine online resources that offer human remains for sale, and which have effectively normalized the commodification and availability of human remains for the general public. I also scrutinize the changes in laws, and their increasing ambiguity, relating to the sale and traffic of the undisposed dead. The inconsistent policies and considerable variations in legal frameworks across North America and Europe pertaining to the use of the cadaver seem to facilitate the proliferation of human remains for sale to the general public on the one hand, while creating conditions for a thriving black market trade on the other.

Against this backdrop of normalization, trafficking, and ambiguous legalization, I discuss how human remains are positioned as both the medium and the message in the hands of the living. Contrary to the literature on dark tourism, I contend human remains are neither imbued with fear, nor with notions of violence or taboo; neither are they deployed to symbolically encounter death. In fact, because the undisposed dead are being used to express and convey very contemporary narratives of identity and power, both personal and institutional, they have become prized possessions, items to collect, trade and sell, and property in their own right; hence, their movement, integration, and use continue to be vigorous.

### **“Serious Inquiries Only” Buying and Selling Human Remains**

Currently, there are fundamental legal, physical, and sociocultural transitions that a cadaver must make before it, or parts of it, can be used, displayed, or venerated.<sup>75</sup> These transitions are legitimized, and heavily regulated by either the Catholic Church regarding first-class relics, or State laws and directives guiding various medical, academic, and scientific institutions (see pgs. 38-45). Moreover, there are laws in place to protect and maintain the right to make the undisposed dead available for institutional consumption as, for example biomedical material, anatomical specimens, archaeological remains, skeletal collections and Catholic relics.

All Anatomy and Cadaver Acts in North America, as well as England’s Human Tissue Act 2004, and the European Union’s Organ Donation Directives, for example, stipulate that it is illegal for any approved personnel (coroners, medical examiners, pathologists, and undertakers) to use, keep, dispose of, or distribute the bodies of unclaimed, unidentified individuals, unless the manner of death has first been established as accidental, or due to natural causes (see Moran 2003). This allows for investigations to proceed in the event that the death was suspicious, or a result of ‘foul play’ (see Coroner’s Act RSO 2009).

However, as mentioned in Chapter Two, aside from donating or bequeathing one’s body, the routine procurement of human remains in North America, and in some parts of Europe (see McHanwell et al 2008), and where consent by the individual is not formally

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<sup>75</sup> Here, I am confining my discussion to the processing and use of human remains for collection, display, artistic use, exhibition and largely decorative contexts as opposed to the use of human remains for biomedical purposes.

required, is through the use of identified but *unclaimed* bodies (the name, sex, age, birthplace and last place of residence must be recorded). In this case, organs, biomedical materials (skin, blood, tissue, cells, and bone), and bodies for research can be distributed to medical, pharmaceutical, or dental institutions.

In most of the Anatomy, Cadaver, and Tissue Acts in North America and Europe, there is an acknowledgement that death can occur in a variety of places including charitable institutions, hospitals, prisons, jails, and churches, and there may be no next of kin to claim the dead, or no person able or willing to pay for the body's removal and disposal. In those cases, the body must be transferred to a licensed physician or coroner who then decides, based on the condition of the body and the level of demand, where the body is to be disposed of or stored. Generally, if the body is intact, free of a communicable disease, and not in a state of decay, organs and any other useful parts can be distributed for biomedical use, as well as for anatomical, biological or mortuary science (see for example The Law Reform Commission of Canada 1992 Procurement and Transfer of Human Tissue and Organs; B.C. Anatomy Act 2013 [1996]; Ontario Anatomy Act 2002; Anatomical Gift Association of Illinois; New York Unclaimed Cadavers Act; McHanwell et al 2008; UK Human Tissue Act 2004). If the next of kin do intervene to deny procurement of organs, or any use of the cadaver, they are then required to officially claim the body, and pay for its removal and disposal.<sup>76</sup>

In light of the apparent 'piling up' of unclaimed bodies in morgues and funeral

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<sup>76</sup> In the United Kingdom, a report is encouraging the National Health Service to consider the idea of paying for funeral expenses for those willing to donate their organs (and bodies) after death in response to an overall decrease in donorship (see Nuffield Council on Bioethics Report 2011:9-10).

homes across the United States (see KRGV.com; CNNMoney.com; KPLCtv.com; Detroitnews.com; see also Edmonton Journal; Office of the Chief Coroner), old laws are being reinstated to allow medical schools unrestricted access to unclaimed bodies (O'Reilly 2011).<sup>77</sup> Many morgues are shipping cadavers to medical schools across the United States (after just 24 hours of being held, in the case of New York State, and ten days in other major cities as regulated by the State) rather than being buried at the public's expense after a waiting period of several months (O'Reilly 2011). Jones and Whitaker (2011) find this practice “dubious” and “unethical” and insist that anatomists should cease using unclaimed bodies because it exposes vulnerable populations to dissection without their consent.<sup>78</sup>

The informed consent debate has also been unfolding in parts of Europe for the last decade. Some medical schools now insist on only accepting bodies for dissection that have been willingly donated, and which have a written statement declaring this donation by the deceased. Though countries like Austria, France, and Germany legally allow anatomy schools to accept unclaimed bodies for dissection and instructional use, many of these institutions are apparently rejecting these bodies due to their own “ethical policies of informed consent” (McHanwell et al 2008:3-6). To then deal with the shortage of

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<sup>77</sup> According to the Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario, there were 1,090 unclaimed bodies between 2005 and 2011, many of which were transferred to anatomy schools (see [www.mcscs.jus.gov.on.ca/english/DeathInvestigations/office\\_coroner](http://www.mcscs.jus.gov.on.ca/english/DeathInvestigations/office_coroner)).

<sup>78</sup> Another area where ‘bodies’ have been unclaimed, or rather “abandoned” is in the fertility clinics. A number of fertilized embryos are sitting in liquid nitrogen storage because former patients have lost touch with the clinics after a series of IVF treatments. According to Tonkens (cited in Blackwell 2013), many of the unwanted embryos are now used in stem cell experiments and “other research” if clients consent to it. But apparently there is “nothing legally or morally preventing clinics” from donating the unclaimed embryos for scientific and biomedical use if they have been “willfully abandoned”.

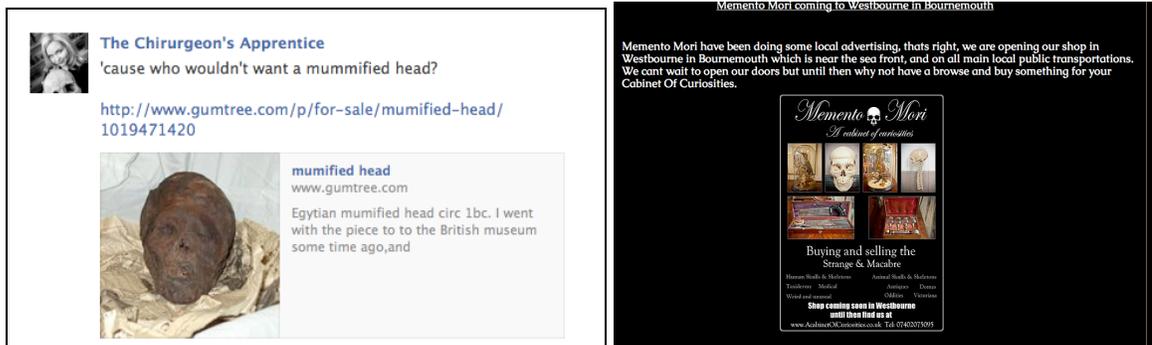
bodies that has ensued from such policies as well as an overall decrease in donorship, the anatomy departments of medical schools are increasingly hosting “open houses” and creating blogs and web pages for potential donors where they can learn about and “see how students and researchers benefit from these gifts” (see McLeod 2010; [www.medicure.org](http://www.medicure.org); [www.anatsoc.org](http://www.anatsoc.org); [www.sciencecare.com/blog](http://www.sciencecare.com/blog)).

Laws governing the use of cadavers for medical dissection also maintain that once the purpose of the body has been served, the school must dispose of the body at its own expense (see for example British Columbia Anatomy Act 2013 [1996]; Ontario Anatomy Act 2002; Whaley and Stigas 2009). These remains are not considered to be the property of the coroner, or the anatomy school, but are in their ‘possession’ until the time of disposal, or until someone else proves that they have a greater ‘right of possession’ over the remains. Countries such as Spain, Romania, and Serbia, however, have more specific laws concerning storage and the removal of cadavers, with more flexibility given to the use of unclaimed cadavers by medical and anatomical institutes (see McHanwell et al 2008). Furthermore, in Spain and Portugal everyone is a potential organ and body donor unless they specifically opt-out during their lifetime (McHanwell et al 2008).

Despite a range of legal frameworks and policies to regulate the movement and use of the dead, bodies nonetheless find their way beyond the parameters of graveyards and institutions, and end up in a variety of venues. In addition, there is still a thriving industry that continues to harvest and sell human remains for trade in spite of laws that specifically legalize the profit from the retention of biological materials without informed consent (see Kirby 2012; Carney 2007; also [www.icij.org/tissue](http://www.icij.org/tissue)).

As demonstrated in Chapter Three, human remains are everywhere, celebrated in popular culture through activities like dark tourism and reality shows. But are there social, political or legal implications of this type of celebration? Are current laws regulating or restricting the increasing proliferation of human remains once they are on the market?

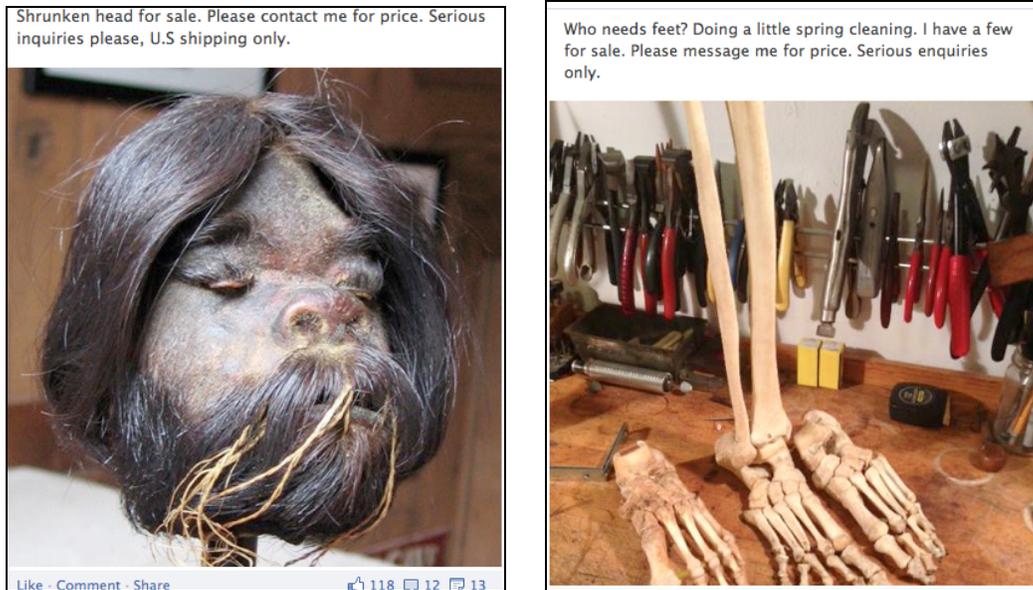
Scrutiny of various online sources reveals that human remains can be easily obtained through an assortment of dealers without any apparent legal repercussion. There are ample opportunities to buy or sell human body parts ranging from fetal skeletons to shrunken heads (see Figures 4:1 to 4:4).



**Figure 4:1** The Facebook page of “The Chirurgeon’s Apprentice” offering a mummified head for sale (see <https://www.facebook.com/TheChirurgeonsApprentice>).

**Figure 4:2** Memento Mori Antique shop in England advertising their sale of ‘goods’ (see <http://www.acabinetofcuriosities.co.uk/>).

Though specific Acts and laws (for example Canada’s provincial Anatomy Acts, the UK’s Human Tissue Act 2004, the European Union’s Organ Donation Directives, and the United State’s Uniform Anatomical Gift Act) restrict organ trafficking, and the procuring of cadaver tissue for sale to the public, they do not govern the buying, gifting or selling of ‘older’ anatomical specimens, non-Native archaeological remains, remains considered



**Figure 4:3 and 4:4** Screen shot of dealer Ryan Cohn’s Facebook page offering a shrunken head and skeletal appendages for sale (see: <https://www.facebook.com/RyanMatthewCohn>).

African, Indonesian and Latin American ‘tribal art’, or mummies from various regions. In Europe, these can all be considered “cultural property” (See EU Ministry of Education, Culture and Science -[http://www.erfgoedinspectie.nl/uploads/publications/minocw\\_erfgoed\\_eng\\_download\\_v2.pdf](http://www.erfgoedinspectie.nl/uploads/publications/minocw_erfgoed_eng_download_v2.pdf)).

As well, human remains considered to be of ‘educational use’ are frequently bought and sold simply because they are listed as “educational” or “medical”. On eBay for example, their Human Remains and Body Parts Policy (see <http://pages.ebay.com/help/policies/remains.html>) states very clearly that: “We don't allow humans, the human body, or any human body parts or products to be listed on eBay”, but the policy then states “Sellers can list items containing human scalp hair, and skulls and skeletons intended for medical use”. However, there is no indication that the seller must prove that the remains

are commercially prepared medical specimens, or are going to be sold for “medical use”. Furthermore, determining the origins of commercially prepared medical specimens can be challenging once they have been bought and shipped through diverse networks.

Journalist Scott Carney, writing about the underground trade of human remains in India for Wired magazine ([http://www.wired.com/medtech/health/magazine/15-12/ff\\_bones?currentPage=all](http://www.wired.com/medtech/health/magazine/15-12/ff_bones?currentPage=all)), states that even though India banned the export of human skeletal remains for medical schools in 1985 due to the alarming numbers of bodies acquired illegally “there are signs the trade never ended”. In small villages and large cities, bodies are apparently being dug up, de-fleshed and then delivered to distributors “who assemble them and ship them to dealers around the globe” ([http://www.wired.com/medtech/health/magazine/15-12/ff\\_bones?currentPage=all](http://www.wired.com/medtech/health/magazine/15-12/ff_bones?currentPage=all)). According to Carney, the “medical trade” in specimens is highly profitable, and dealers continue to have ample incentives supplying many of the most distinguished medical schools around the world.

A survey of the human remains for sale on both eBay and Craigslist reveals that distinguishing a ‘medical’ specimen from what may be forensic evidence can be next to impossible, especially if the skeletal material has been cleaned, which eBay lists as a requirement.<sup>79</sup> In addition, neither site allows Native American remains to be sold. Since 1990, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in the

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<sup>79</sup> In 2011, a skull was purchased at a garage sale in Arizona for \$1 USD and then listed on Craigslist for \$300 USD. After the buyer gave a television interview about his new purchase and put it for sale on Craigslist, his phone apparently ‘did not stop ringing’ with offers. Police were notified however and soon after seized the skull. They later determined it to be that of a 12 to 14 year old girl and were in the midst of investigating it further (see [http://www.abc15.com/dpp/news/region\\_phoenix\\_metro/central\\_phoenix\\_valley-man-selling-human-skull-on-craigslist](http://www.abc15.com/dpp/news/region_phoenix_metro/central_phoenix_valley-man-selling-human-skull-on-craigslist)).

United States is the only federal law which prohibits the sale of Native human remains, but determining what are Native versus non-Native remains, and if either are medical, plundered, or forensic remains, is virtually impossible for laypeople venturing to buy skeletal material on the Internet. Seidemann et al (2009) examined a human skull seized from eBay by the State of Louisiana and concluded that it was a Native American, middle-aged female, but provenience data such as geographic origin and time and place of burial were largely unknown. According to Seidemann et al (2009:1251) “The illicit sale of human remains shows no sign of abating” (see also Huxley and Finnegan 2004; Murad and Murad 2000). Huxley and Finnegan (2004:17) analyzed photographs of human remains for sale on eBay and concluded that “there were several different types or categories of skeletal materials – older recovered prehistoric, historic, commercial and perhaps even modern forensic”. Their study was thus directed at archaeologists and forensic investigators to help identify and hence, further regulate such trafficking online. Since the selling of human remains has become a lucrative business, they claim auction sites such as eBay “may generate an interest in stealing from graves, mortuaries, hospitals, county morgues, or other sources” (Huxley and Finnegan 2004:20).

Once human remains are skeletonized and processed, they can easily conform to the aesthetic values of ‘medical’ and ‘educational’ materials, after which they can be shipped all over the world bypassing customs laws. Across Western and Eastern Europe curiosity shops and flea markets sell an array of human remains that could have been acquired from plundered graves, morgues, or museum collections (see for example: [www.atlasobscura.com](http://www.atlasobscura.com); [www.thenautilus.it/](http://www.thenautilus.it/); [www.ladykentmores.com](http://www.ladykentmores.com);

[www.acabinetofcuriosities.co.uk](http://www.acabinetofcuriosities.co.uk)).<sup>80</sup>

The well-established company Skulls Unlimited International, Inc. offers a good example of the ambiguity and inconsistency in laws that supposedly restrict the sale of cadaver parts to the public for profit. The company also provides an important glimpse into the demand for human remains among professionals such as anthropologists, dentists and physicians. Listed as the “World’s leading supplier of osteological specimens” (see: [www.skullsunlimited.com](http://www.skullsunlimited.com)), the company is a family-run business in Oklahoma, U.S.A. that receives human (and animal) remains from “donation programs” around the world, and processes them in their own on-site facility.<sup>81</sup> The company began as a very small “home based business” processing and cleaning human and animal remains out of a kitchen sink, but by 1992 “fueled by local and worldwide enthusiasm” they rapidly expanded and became Skulls Unlimited International, Inc. The company is very popular among individuals who want to buy a wide range of skeletal remains for ‘educational’ use, along with t-shirts, books and fossils. According to the owner (Jay Villemarette) “a self-confessed skull junkie” (see <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com>), they have also become the major supplier for physical and forensic anthropologists, and museums around the world.

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<sup>80</sup> Several sources including Ron Cauble from the Bone Room, artist Wayne Martin Belger, the late private collector Bill Jamieson, antique dealer Yank Azman, the late forensic pathologist Barry Blenkinsop, and private collector /artist John Doucette have stated on the record that wet and dry medical specimens, archaeological remains, and human remains from plundered graves in North America and Eastern Europe often ‘find their way’, or are smuggled, into antique fairs, personal collections and private sales, locally and across international borders.

<sup>81</sup> National Geographic featured the company in a program series titled “Taboo: Skulls Unlimited” (June 7, 2012) highlighting their rapid rise as one of the largest suppliers of human remains to museums and scientists around the world (see <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/channel/taboo/videos/skullsunlimited/>; see also figures 4:5 and 4:6)

Though their online mission statement informs buyers that the company is “committed to providing legally and ethically obtained natural osteological specimens” (see [http://www.skullsunlimited.com/index\\_aboutus.php](http://www.skullsunlimited.com/index_aboutus.php)), the website does not state where the donated cadavers originate; neither is there a published vetting process declaring their source as, for example, Dr. von Hagens was required to do when he began processing human remains for display.<sup>82</sup> Based on the footage from the National Geographic series (<http://channel.nationalgeographic.com> - June 7, 2012), it is evident that Skulls Unlimited International processes human cadavers and skeletonize the material on site (see Figures 4:5 and 4:6). However, in a previous Chicago Tribune interview (2006), the owner is quoted as saying that all of their skeletal material originates from China and that they are “most likely merchants and travelers who died along the road” (see <http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2006-10-25/features/061024040>).

Perhaps the market for human remains has outstripped the supply from China, and therefore part of the Skulls Unlimited expansion has included processing donated cadavers onsite. This becomes more apparent when examining the range of specimens now available to professionals around the world. On the Skulls Unlimited website, a fetal skull can be purchased for \$950 USD, while a fully articulated human adult skeleton costs \$5000 USD. For “research purposes” there is “a wide variety of human skulls with various pathological, dental and anthropological characteristics” available for sale, but if the potential buyer does not see a particular specimen to ‘suit his needs’ they are

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<sup>82</sup> Review boards and ethics committees in California and Germany vet all of von Hagens’s donation applications, contracts and agreements (see [http://www.bodyworlds.com/en/body\\_donation.html](http://www.bodyworlds.com/en/body_donation.html)), but they are not in a position to dictate what he can do with these bodies once they arrive in his lab.

instructed to contact them directly by email (see [http://www.skullsunlimited.com/record\\_family.php?id=266](http://www.skullsunlimited.com/record_family.php?id=266)).

Despite very clear laws governing human remains in various Anatomy, Cadaver, and Tissue Acts in the United States, Europe, and Canada which state that profits cannot be made from the public buying and selling of “donated” cadavers, incorporated companies like Skulls Unlimited International Inc., and online auction sites like eBay and Craigslist continue to flourish along with many antique stores, shops and flea markets.



**Figures 4:5 and 4:6** Screenshots of the National Geographic program “Taboo: Skulls Unlimited” aired June 7, 2012. Images show human cadavers being de-fleshed and processed at the company’s family-run facility (see <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/channel/taboo/videos/skulls-unlimited>).

This is not to say that investigations have not been conducted, nor that criminal charges have never been laid when individuals or institutions were found to be in breach of the laws governing the use of post-mortem material (see Nelkin and Andrews 1998:276; Croasdale 2004; Reuters 2007; Renteln 2001; Hunter 2001).<sup>83</sup> In fact, the many

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<sup>83</sup> In 2001, approximately 100 wet specimens from the University of Toronto’s Pathology department were deemed no longer “medically relevant” and destined to be cremated and buried at the University’s cemetery as required by law (see <http://www.museum-security.org/02/131.html#5>). A University of Toronto lab technician working in the Pathology department stole some of these specimens and sold them privately to various dealers and private collectors. One of these buyers was an antiques dealer who purchased “four

cases that have been investigated and subsequently tried indicate that not only is there an interest and a viable, thriving market for the buying and selling of human remains, but that the laws supposedly governing their protection are not always upheld (Nelkin and Andrews 1998; Renteln 2001; Hunter 2001).

### **“It Speaks to Me”: Dead Body Parts and Personal Narrative**

As far as the sociocultural implications of buying and displaying human remains, there appears to be an increase in acceptance, especially among individuals who continue to promote a rich visual culture of the undisposed dead featured in photographs and a variety of events (see Figures 4:7 to 4:12; also Figures 3:26 to 3:28). In many, if not all of the images, there is a personable atmosphere, and a level of self-promotion, pride, and a good deal of comfort. The position and placement of human remains, often in close proximity to the owner or model, does not convey fear or traditional motifs of death and mourning, but fun, scholarship and even playfulness.

A recent episode of the Science and Discovery Channel’s program *Oddities* (<http://science.discovery.com/tv-shows/oddities/videos/eye-popper.htm>) reveals the

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brains, a hand and a foot” for \$500. The wet specimens were displayed in his booth for sale at a market in Toronto one afternoon, and were seen by someone familiar with the collection. The police were called and they arrived with a coroner to confirm that the specimens were human. The dealer was arrested with “possession of stolen goods” but no charges were laid that had anything to do with selling human remains. When he led the police to the lab technician, his charges were withdrawn and the technician was ultimately charged with “theft”. Another charge of “indignity to human remains” was added but only after it was discovered that the technician had thrown all of the remaining wet specimens into a dumpster when he was notified that police were pursuing him (see <http://www.museum-security.org/02/131.html#5>). It is interesting to note the very clear cultural and legal boundaries in place between the institutional handling of human remains versus that of the public. The act of owning and disposing of remains as commodities outside the parameters of the medical establishment is not legally or ethically sanctioned. This is especially evident when the remains are disposed of in ways that are considered an “indignity” in this case, dumping them into a garbage bin rather than institutional cremation and burial.

intimate connections and personal relationships that can arise between human remains and the living that are not necessarily related to death, or memorialization. The episode also provides some insight into the use of human remains for purposes other than “medical” or “educational”.



**Figure 4:7** From medical historian Dr. Lindsay Fitzharris’s website page (see <http://thechirurgionsapprentice.com/who-is-the-chirurgions-apprentice/>).

**Figure 4:8** Dr. von Hagens posing on his website with one of his ‘plastinates’ (see [http://www.bodyworlds.com/en/gunther\\_von\\_hagens/life\\_in\\_science.html](http://www.bodyworlds.com/en/gunther_von_hagens/life_in_science.html)).

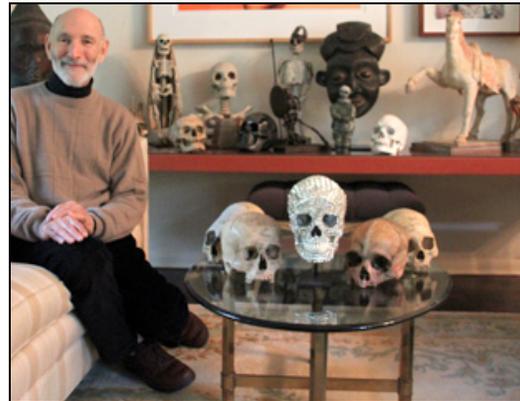


**Figure 4:9** Getting married at the Mütter Museum (see [mylifeasajar.blogspot.com](http://mylifeasajar.blogspot.com)).

**Figure 4:10** Neuropathologist Lucy Rorke -Adams posing with a section of Einstein’s brain (see [philly.com/2011](http://philly.com/2011)).



**Figure 4:11** Private collector Edward Meyer with his collection of shrunken heads (see [smashinginterviews.com/interviews/authors/edward-meyer-interview](http://smashinginterviews.com/interviews/authors/edward-meyer-interview)).



**Figure 4:12** Private collector Richard Harris at his home with his collection of human remains (see [www.richardharrisartcollection.com/welcome-london](http://www.richardharrisartcollection.com/welcome-london)).

The show opens with a middle-aged gentleman visiting the antique shop *Obscura* in New York City. He explains to the host that he had been there previously to purchase “an ear, nose and throat” as a “gift” for his ear, nose and throat specialist. Flash backs show various glass jars of anatomical specimens being exchanged by what looks to be a pathologist in hospital scrubs, indicating that the buyer had been successful in finding such specimens. This time, he claims he has come in for something a little more personal, something “ocular related”. The host asks why, and the gentleman explains that as a young boy he lost an eye after a baseball injury. He then explains to the camera that he is looking for something “to be a little bit of an inspiration” for himself, “something extreme, over the top” that will make him “enjoy the world of eyes again”. The host asks if he can see his artificial eye, at which point the gentleman proceeds to pop it out on camera. After appreciating the “real look” of the artificial eye, the host tells the gentleman that he has “a piece that can be construed as a little grotesque, but it might be perfect for you”. The gentleman replies: “Give me all you got”, after which the host pulls out a small

jar with something grey floating inside. “Any idea what that might be?” he asks the gentleman. Both are jovial and in response the host answers: “It is actually a cataract human eye”. The gentleman replies “Oh my gosh.” Then, to the camera the host explains what a cataract is, in what appears to be the requisite educational moment for the show, and he emphasizes that the eye “came out of a medical collection”. The gentleman examines the jar closely with his good eye and seems to appreciate the information. He states: “It doesn’t repel me, it speaks to me”. The host says “Cool man” and the gentleman asks what the price is. He gives him a price of \$275 but when the gentleman hesitates, the host reduces it to \$250 and the deal is made. They shake hands and the segment is over.

There are two salient points in this episode which highlight the nonmedical use of human remains in contemporary Western culture. The first point is that any part of the human body can be easily and publicly obtained without legal or social repercussions. In fact, the entire format of the show normalizes the nonmedical acquisition of human remains for personal use, even though most of the remains acquired are said to be old medical specimens. The second point is that the body part, once purchased can be readily and symbolically adopted as an emblem of personal identity, and oftentimes of victory as in the case of the gentleman who had lost his eye.

During the course of purchasing a dissected human eye, a personal narrative of loss, and triumph over that loss, is relayed to the host and viewers. The buyer has now become inspired and interested “in the world of eyes again” due to owning not an artificial eye, but the cadaveric eye of another human. His own identity prevails while the

individual whose eye he has purchased, is not discussed. His or her name, place and time of death, and the circumstances around his or her dissection are unknown. The severed body part, small, grey, shriveled and floating in old formaldehyde, is now the medium through which the owner conveys his own memory and history, and ultimately his own message of healing and inspiration. The dismembered part of someone else's body allows him to feel 'whole' again and to gain a sense of redemption after his personal loss. He can therefore move beyond a painful and traumatic childhood experience with not only the symbol, but the embodiment of his loss, in his possession once again. Surrounding this important exchange, the buyer was given the opportunity to share his narrative, and experience his redemption in front of a supportive and appreciative audience.

In Harrison's (2003) philosophical treatise, he defines humanity as "necrocratic", asserting that we follow in the footsteps of the dead. Rather than simply thanatological-themed entertainment reemerging in popular culture, Harrison declares that all of Western culture is perpetuated through the power of the dead, who are its 'foundational authority'. It is their posthumous laws, principles and ideas, as well as their presence in our thoughts and memories, that create "the manifold relations the living maintain with the giant family of the dead" (2003:*xi*).

Though we may choose to ignore or reject their authority, Harrison states that humans ultimately 'surrender themselves' to the dominion of the dead: "We inherit their obsessions; assume their burdens; carry on their causes; promote their mentalities, ideologies, and very often their superstitions" (2003:*x*).

However, in light of the contemporary and vigorous use of the dead I would challenge Harrison's notions that the living 'surrender themselves' to the dead, by suggesting that in fact, it is the dead who are usurped by the living. Rather than 'inheriting their obsessions', we are imposing our own and thus creating new meanings, relationships, and narratives. Memory is an inherent part of what Harrison (2003) claims are the laws, principles and ideas through which the dead maintain their power. Whereas the actual use of human remains as commodities, as research material, and as socially active individuals invested with our needs and wants, erases memory, and elicits a form of servitude. In the hands of the living, the undisposed dead are thereby forced to surrender to the ideas and actions of the living, at the same time that their symbolic power is harnessed. The authenticity of personhood and death, described as creating "an uneasy ambivalence" in the viewer (Krmpotich et al 2010:372), combine to create a source of 'supernatural' material that can be reshaped and displayed as objects of the self. Nowhere is this made more evident than in the use of human remains as art.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Bodies of Art: The Pull of the Dead**

In this chapter, I consider how a cadaver, despite its ability to arouse fear and notions of contamination (Saraswat et al. 2008; Sappol 2002), can become an aestheticized object, and a repository of power, identity, and value, specifically in the hands of contemporary artists. As discussed in the previous chapter, there are several networks of buyers and collectors of human remains, as well as a large underground network of black market dealers. Alongside these networks, there are visual artists who are providing yet another means for the living to confer with and own the dead. At the same time, however, these artists are creating and expressing a variety of personal narratives through their use of human remains and thus, they have come to exemplify my contention that the living usurp the dead, contrary to Harrison's assertions (2003) that humanity is "necrocratic", led by its memories and fears of the dead. In similar ways to the institutions examined in Chapters Two and Three, the methods by which these artists process and aestheticize the cadaver provide good examples of how human remains are transformed into powerful and valuable items infused with new meaning, for both popular and institutional consumption in contemporary Western society.

In this chapter, I examine the work of five contemporary artists who integrate human remains into their art: Wayne Martin Belger, Al Farrow, Andrew Krasnow, Mark Prent, and Joel-Peter Witkin. Due to constraints of time and space, I have not included other artists such as Teresa Margolles and Sigrid Sarda, who have recently begun to use

human remains in their work, or artists Andres Serrano, Francois Robert, Steven Gregory and John Doucette, who have, at some point in their careers, brought major attention to their work by integrating human remains, but have not done so on a regular basis. The artists I chose to interview have used parts of the dead human body as an integral component of their art for well over 20 years; they are well-established and internationally known, having had their work exhibited in contemporary art museums and commercial galleries across North America and Europe.<sup>84</sup>

My discussion of these artists and their work is based primarily on personal interviews, visits to their studios, photographs of their art, and their own explanations for why and how they began using human remains as an art medium. This chapter is not intended to be a critique of their work, nor a description of the genre in art history. It is an examination of the artists' personal experiences, their influences, their artistic methods, and the narratives they seek to convey through their use of the undisposed dead.

What follows is an exploration of my interviews with the artists, in the order I met them, illustrated with excerpts and photographs from our conversations that took place between July 2012 and February 2013. With the exception of Andrew Krasnow, who I interviewed in a diner, I met each of the artists in their studios, and interviewed them according to a question guide that I had emailed them several months prior to the interview (see Letter of Information/Consent pg. 216). However, because their work, lives and experiences were all very different, most often many of the questions were

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<sup>84</sup> Although some of the artists know of each other's work, and all of the artists know Joel-Peter Witkin's work, none of them have worked together, nor do they know one another personally.

spontaneous and based on information that I was learning during the interview process, rather than on what I had previously read in art critiques and reviews. All of the artists have subsequently previewed their sections, and have given their final approval prior to completion of the final draft of this thesis.

### **Repulsion and Beauty: The World of Mark Prent**

I had heard a lot about sculptor Mark Prent well before meeting him for the first time in July 2012. Since the early 1970s, he has often been portrayed as having “a dark vision” (Greenwood 1979), “deeply disturbing work” (Bottenberg 2007), “obscene displays” (CBC Radio Archives 1972) and as “a pariah for public exhibition venues” ([www.markprent.com/main](http://www.markprent.com/main)).

His work has always been surrounded by some form of controversy, foremost as a result of the impact of his first exhibition in 1972 at the Isaacs Gallery in Toronto. The opening for it was “packed, filled to capacity with extra staff and security” – and featured Prent’s series on the human body (Mark Prent, personal communication July 2013). The exhibition included very realistic displays of body parts made out of fiberglass and polyester resin, prepared as food, set on a lavish dinner table complete with candles and wine, and for sale over a delicatessen countertop, jarred, bottled, binned and skewered on rotisserie rods (see Figures 5:1 and 5:2, also [www.markprent.com](http://www.markprent.com)).



Figure 5:1 “The Last Supper”, 1971. Polyester resin and fiberglass (image ©Mark Prent).



Figure 5:2 “And is there anything else you’d like Madame?”, 1971. Polyester resin and fiberglass (image ©Mark Prent).

Police attempted to shut down the exhibition, and charged the owner (Av Isaacs) for the display of ‘disgusting objects’ (see Walker 1979).<sup>85</sup> Though the charges against Isaacs

<sup>85</sup> After lengthy and costly court appearances, charges against Av Isaacs were eventually dropped. Many gallery owners, art critics and artists at the time, donated funds to support Isaac’s legal defense and the gallery’s right to display the work (see Burstyn 1976; see also Greenwood 1979; Walker 1979). According to Isaacs’ biography (see Isaacs Seen 2005), Av Isaacs was the first person in Canada to ever be charged with exhibiting a disgusting object under section 159 of the Criminal Code.

were eventually dropped, two years later the police attempted to shut down Prent’s next show at the Isaacs gallery where the human figure, once again made out of fiberglass and polyester resin, was portrayed in various environments, for example in a butcher shop refrigerator, splayed open on a surgical table, and seated in an electric chair (Mark Prent, personal communication July 2012; see Figures 5:3 to 5:6).<sup>86</sup>



**Figure 5:3** “Hanging is Very Important”, 1974. Polyester resin, fiberglass and animal bone (image ©Mark Prent)



**Figure 5:4** “If Brains Were Dynamite You Wouldn’t Have Enough to Blow Your Nose”, 1974. Polyester resin, fiberglass, mixed media (image ©Mark Prent).

Prent believes the police involvement and the ensuing controversy “destroyed” his career even though his work has been exhibited internationally in art museums and commercial galleries, and he was awarded the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship in 1979. He has also had several government grants, media recognition, and profitable sales of his work (see [www.pinkhouse.com/about-mark-prent](http://www.pinkhouse.com/about-mark-prent)), yet he is still

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<sup>86</sup> In the piece titled ‘Death in the Chair’, viewers were invited to pull down a handle which created a loud electrical buzz and caused the figure to convulse as if electrocuted. Though police were in the midst of filing charges against Isaac under the same criminal code, according to curator Martha Black, there was a two hour line up for viewers to have their turn at pulling the switch (see Burstyn 1976).

left with a sense that he has not been “successful”.

Despite, or perhaps as a result of the controversy, at least three documentary films have been made about Prent and his work (see Burstyn 1976; McNeil 1980; Ethier 1997). Successful sculptors, scholars and curators have praised his work and have acknowledged his influence in the art world. Joseph Green, Dean of the Faculty of Fine Art at York University (from 1973 to 1980), Alvin Balkind, curator of the University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery (1962 to 1973) and renowned sculptor Edward Kienholz (1927-1994) strongly praised the quality of Prent’s art, his concepts and his vision (see Burstyn 1976). Patterson Sims, associate curator of the Whitney Museum (1976-1987) stated that Prent had the “splendid” and “remarkable ability” to “express the depth of depravity of fantasies and fears” (cited in McNeil 1980). Walter Hopps, curator of the Smithsonian Institute (1974 to 1977), claimed that Prent “displays such an order of skill, craft, and perfected technique” (cited in McNeil 1980). Karl Ruhrberg, director of the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany added that “Prent’s work has a particular kind of beauty” that makes us “voyeurs, witnesses of what happens in our midst as we have made ourselves comfortable in a world of atrocities” (cited in McNeil 1980). It is clear that Mark Prent was and is very well known, and has influenced a generation of sculptors.

Currently, the 66 year-old artist teaches private workshops at his studio in Vermont, takes on several public and private commissions, and teaches part-time as a technician at Concordia University in Montreal. Furthermore, at the time of our interview he had just been notified that one of his pieces was being loaned out by the National Gallery of Canada for an upcoming show at Toronto’s Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art

(MOCCA), curated by film director David Cronenberg (see [mocca.ca/exhibitions/upcoming-exhibitions/](http://mocca.ca/exhibitions/upcoming-exhibitions/)).

While working on an earlier project in 2008, I contacted Prent through his website ([www.markprent.com](http://www.markprent.com)). He was very amiable and talkative, and immediately agreed to loan images and discuss his work. We had a few telephone conversations, and several long email discussions in which he described his work, thoughts, and influences, prior to my arrival in July 2012 at his home in St. Albans, Vermont to interview him for this thesis.



**Figure 5:5** “Death in the Chair”, 1973. Polyester resin and fiberglass (image ©Mark Prent).



**Figure 5:6** “Laughing Pathocyclists”, 1974. Polyester resin, fiberglass and human bone (image ©Mark Prent).



**Figure 5:7** “Aspects of an Aspic”, 1985. Mixed media, fetal skull, steel frame (image © M. Prent).



**Figure 5:8** “I, Within Myself”, 1992. Mixed media with gold electroplated fetal skull (image © M.Prent).

One of the first things Prent made clear, and reiterated throughout the interview, is

that he surrounds himself with objects that he loves and with which he works. This was very apparent while I was sitting in his large Victorian home where there are ‘things’ everywhere: antique furniture, Catholic images, sculpture, hats, dolls, shelves of books, animal and human skulls, vases, and installations from some of his older shows. I soon learned that he is exuberant, highly energetic, passionate and intensely involved with the process of making art, which, for him, always begins with interesting objects. We sat for well over five hours at his dining room table on a Sunday afternoon, then walked through the rooms and halls of his rambling house where he pointed out various art pieces, old and new.

As we began to talk about the first Isaacs Gallery shows in 1972 and 1974, Prent asserted that his vision is not at all “dark” or “violent”, contrary to how he has often been described:

“This is the unfortunate thing when working with the human figure and changing it in some way. People react to that sometimes. But I am always comfortable in taking the human body and changing it. I love distortion. To me most, but not all, conventional forms of beauty are boring.”



**Figure 5:9** “Calibrated Man”, 1978. Mixed media with electroplated adult human skull (image © M. Prent).



**Figure 5:10** “Peppy The Clown”, 1996. Mixed media, fetal skeleton, gold electroplated fetal skull (image © M. Prent).

Ironically, Prent's art was not deemed controversial because he used actual human fetal, adolescent and adult skeletal remains, but primarily because the life-like sculptures of the human body featured nudity, torment, blood, and decomposition (see Figures 5:1 to 5:6). His work has always been graphic and very realistic, or as Greenwood (<http://ccca.concordia.ca/c/writing/g/greenwood/gre011t.html>) characterized it, "virulently realistic". However, many of the pieces contain skeletal parts (see Figures 5:6 to 5:10) that are often overlooked, and even labeled as "mixed media".

None of the three documentaries, art reviews, and gallery catalogues where Prent discusses his work, and where his pieces are critiqued and highlighted, mention that real human remains are used in many of the pieces. In one scene of the documentary "Mark Prent's Universe" (Ethier 1997), Prent's six year-old son Jesse is shown playing with a piece titled "Peppy the Clown", a marionette made from a partial fetal skeleton contained in an arcade (see Figure 5:10). In another scene, Prent is interviewed while he is taking apart a piece that reveals a real human skull (see Figure 5:9). The interviewer asks about the glass eyes, the material of the sculpture and the method of colouring fiberglass, but does not ask about the human skull, which has been electroplated in gold. I asked Prent about this aspect of his work. He laughed and stated that most people are "too freaked out about the body stuff" that they don't really notice the internal structures. When asked why he would use real human remains if they are not even noticed, he explained:

"It's really about an aesthetic. I find objects that I like, from human skulls to whatever, inanimate things. Then I try to make a relationship, an aesthetic relationship between those objects and the human figure. The challenge is to make something where the object and the figure are so perfectly integrated it could not exist any other way. So it's really a personal decision"

Looking around his dining room, I saw an adolescent human skull on a shelf sitting with a large crocodile skull. Prent explained that he is in the midst of putting together his latest piece, based on objects bought some years ago. As he took down the skulls he began to put them together to illustrate his idea for the future piece (see Figure 5.11), and enthusiastically explained how his inspiration for art begins:

“I surround myself in the studio and in my home with objects that I like and I can’t tell you why I like them other than by the nature of their form, or colour, or the shape I find intriguing. And a skull would be a perfect example of that. It’s very intriguing, just as a form. A fetal or adolescent skull I find more intriguing than an adult skull because of the scale. Those things have a particular attraction to me and I collect those things.”



**Figure 5:11** Mark assembling a piece with a crocodile skull and an adolescent human skull – July 2012 (image J.Doucette)

Asking for his interpretation or the ‘meaning’ of the work elicited resistance. For Prent, to ascribe meaning inhibits the creative process. He emphasized that what he does is all about the process of *making* the art, rather than trying to achieve a goal. I asked him if it is important and relevant to use real human remains:

“It *is* relevant. It’s important that it’s real. You cannot divorce yourself completely from knowing something about that, without it having some kind of affect on you. Like other objects with meaning I keep these things around. I don’t wonder or I don’t dwell on the emotional part of who it was. The emotional part is that it was human. Not who this person might have been. None of that affects me. Yes it does affect me that it is a real human skull but I’m not tied to who it might have been. That is irrelevant to me”.

He went on to explain that incorporating skeletal remains into his work make it more “authentic and powerful”.

“I can’t really say why or how, it just does. I am somewhat emotionally struck by it and I am much more careful with it than if I had made a cast to use. There is something different about working with it. I can easily reproduce one and make it look real. But for me it’s a combination of an easier solution and yes having the real thing is far more, far more authentic”.

Since many of the remains Prent has used were acquired years earlier, I asked him where he purchased them and he talked excitedly about his early acquisitions:

“There was a place called Canadian Anatomical Specimen Supply Company in Toronto. They had a catalogue, well not a catalogue but a bunch of pictures stapled together. They had a list of different things. I ordered skulls from them. He had tons of stuff, all clean but dirt cheap and perfect specimens. They were getting them from India. Sometimes you find places that have fantastic stuff and you think that you’ll always get to have it. My only regret is that I did not buy more. I should have bought everything he had. I had Canada Council Grants. I could have bought tons of this stuff and I should have”.

For Prent, his sculptures always “tell a story” and human remains, like all of the other objects he uses, help to tell that story. Many of the bodies he depicts are decomposing with maggots, are bloodied, cut open, or disabled. I asked if those stories are about death.

“Yes and no. The figures always seem to be struggling against death, and some form of suffering but ultimately they prevail. They survive and move on.”

Prent stated that he never sees these figures as struggling “without hope”. Despite its gruesome nature, the decay and the elements of pain, torture and bondage, the message

of the art is “positive and humorous”. He admitted however, that he offers up the work for other people’s interpretations “as long as they don’t tell me what they think I mean and impose some sort of meaning on my own work”.

Midway into the interview, Prent described his early years. He was born in Poland in 1947 to a Jewish father and a Catholic mother. Though they were not religious, he grew up in a reformed Jewish environment in Montreal, after arriving in Canada a year after he was born. He asserted that his childhood was “solid, fun, and unencumbered” although his father had a strict sense of what was “appropriate”, for example, “wearing clean clothes, being polite, and using inoffensive language”. Asked if his background, his parent’s war experiences, the fact that he had lost so many relatives in the Holocaust, has seeped into his work at all, he claimed it has not. Despite his parents’ experiences, his father was a strong presence who taught that if you were optimistic enough you could survive anything. He laughed when I mentioned that he seems to be restating this philosophy in so much of his work, in that his figures always seem to be suffering but somehow they prevail.

Though Prent was raised in the Jewish faith, learned Hebrew, attended Temple services during Jewish holidays, and had a bar mitzvah, many of his pieces display obvious Catholic symbols, including the crucifixion. Catholic symbols and images are scattered about his home and studio but no Jewish symbols or references appear in any of his work, house or studio. When asked to explain this, he says:

“I love churches. I’ve been to many churches not out of religious feeling but because they are so rich in colour and art. It’s inspiring, totally overwhelming in terms of the art.”

Referring to a piece (see Figure 5:12) that quickly brought a flow of tears to his eyes, he continued:

“My most favorite piece is the fetal skeleton crucified. It’s perfect. It’s all about something that is very fragile, and when you take that and put it in a crucifix that by itself is very powerful, the crucifix is very powerful even without a religious context, it’s still a powerful image. I wanted to pay tribute to that and add a preciousness to the piece so I electroplated the skeleton in gold”.

He explained that the arrangement of the crucifix with “a real and complete fetal skeleton” made the work more “powerful” and “emotionally compelling”. When asked what made him cry, he responded that it was a “combination of nostalgia and sentimentality”, that the experience of putting the pieces together, even the special beveling of the glass for its final coffin-like covering, was very moving:

“The fetal skeleton, it’s an image of fragility, beauty and power, the whole aesthetic experience of the Catholic Church. Something that small that can have such power brings tears to my eyes. It is what I consider to be perfect”.



Figure 5:12 “Baptism for a Pessimist”, 1982 (image © Mark Prent).

Prent discussed the important influence on his art of tours he took of Catholic churches and anatomical museums while he was living in Europe in the 1970s and early 1980s. Pointing to several of his pieces that resulted from these experiences, he described

his early work as projecting “power and authority mixed with vulnerability, distortion, and some element of struggle and suffering”. His work is not about “realism” he adds, and “not even about death” but about looking “realistic, even if it’s not, and evoking an emotional response from the viewer” (see Figure 5:13). Even though he insists he is not religious in any way, the Church has inspired many of his ideas and concepts pertaining to the human body, “the art and the aesthetic of the opened body, even the distorted, suffering, and diseased body”.

In a final and very revealing statement Prent made as we concluded the interview, he asserted that he has “entirely removed God from the Church” in terms of its influence over him, much as he has “removed death” from his work.



**Figure 5:13** “Wherehad Possessor been Possessed” 1977. Mixed media, water, skeletal remains (image M.Prent).

“It’s the display of the body that is critical. Not the death of the body. That’s not what I’m after. When people are experiencing repulsion to my work, I am hoping they also see it as beautiful. Repulsion and beauty, they are one and the same. It’s really the same thing. My attempt is to create a harmony between both in a work of art”.

Asked if the work ultimately reflects notions of self and identity as much as it does his ideas, Prent offers:

“Well the objects, the journey of finding them and then the process of putting them together, and the aesthetic problem-solving...the fact I am working entirely intuitively, and not knowing what will come of it. That is all wrapped up in my identity. That *is* my identity”.

### **Layers of Meaning: Andrew Krasnow**

Contemporary art museums and galleries in the United States and Europe have featured the works of American installation artist Andrew Krasnow since the early 1980s. However, I first heard about him in 2009, through a review in the British newspaper, *The Independent* (see Johnson 2009). Krasnow’s show, “Of the Flesh”, was premiering in London and was stirring up controversy in the UK.<sup>87</sup> Johnson’s article described Krasnow as an artist who had “spent the last 20 years making sculptures out of human skin” and warned that people would find the show to be “shocking, macabre, echoing the worst allegations of Nazi atrocities” and furthermore, that: “Günther von Hagens may have caused controversy with his BodyWorlds exhibition of human corpses, but Krasnow goes a step further” (see [www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/body-art-literally](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/body-art-literally)).<sup>88</sup>

The story was picked up by several online sources and claimed that the show consisted of “lampshades made out of human flesh very similar to items found in the Buchenwald concentration camp” (Butty 2009) and labeled it as “Horrific Human Skin

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<sup>87</sup> Krasnow’s work had appeared in the same London Gallery (GV Art) the year before in 2008, but had been available for viewing by appointment only. The gallery had at that time acquired a license to display human tissue and, according to the press release, was “the first private UK gallery” to do so (see [http://www.gvart.co.uk/of\\_the\\_flesh\\_introduction.html](http://www.gvart.co.uk/of_the_flesh_introduction.html)).

<sup>88</sup> While it might be that “Krasnow goes a step further,” it’s worth noting that Krasnow was exhibiting work that incorporated human body parts, in museums nearly ten years prior to the “BodyWorlds” exhibition of plastinates.

Art”. Santoso (2009) went even further and equated Krasnow with “Nazis” and “serial killers”. In contrast, in a PETA blog article (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), Bennet (2009) asked what all the fuss was about. She insisted that the people “howling in protest outside the gallery” are wasting their time because “using human skin *donated* (emphasis hers) to medical science to make a nice pair of boots is a use of flesh that we should all throw our weight behind!” (see [www.peta.org/b/thepetafiles/archive/2009/05/28/human-skin](http://www.peta.org/b/thepetafiles/archive/2009/05/28/human-skin)).

Intrigued, I examined the press release and images issued from the London gallery online (see [www.gvart.co.uk/press/of\\_the\\_flesh\\_of](http://www.gvart.co.uk/press/of_the_flesh_of)), but it was evident that the show contained no lampshades made from human skin, nor were there any references to Buchenwald. There were metal-based lamps displayed containing light bulbs, but no lampshades in place anywhere (see Figure 5:17). Apparently, the notion of lampshades was implied.<sup>89</sup>

“Of the Flesh” was Andrew Krasnow’s retrospective of works made between 1988 and 2004, and indeed featured art all made from human skin. There were large American flags, a pair of cowboy boots, an array of figures, and maps exhibited in a central London gallery, which had premiered in galleries and art museums across the United States (see Figures 5:14 to 5:17). The gallery press release assured that the art

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<sup>89</sup> Nonetheless, shortly after the opening, Andrew wrote a clarification on his website directed to the author of the original article in the Independent (see [www.krasnow.net](http://www.krasnow.net)). It emphasized that the work “absolutely does not include lampshades” and attempted to define the exhibition: “In part it examines American exceptionalism and its religious origins, in part it is a critique of hate; its tribal, racial, and ethnic antecedents, and more broadly it delves into unfamiliar areas, areas where each individual viewer is left to assess the human condition, its priorities, and its collective psyche. Neither is the installation propagandistic. Rather it is heavily layered”.

“evokes important social and political issues including the dangers of extreme nationalism, the horrors of war and man’s continued inhumanity towards man” (see [www.gvart.co.uk/press/a\\_k](http://www.gvart.co.uk/press/a_k)). In the gallery’s interview with Krasnow (see [www.gvart.co.uk/press/a\\_kinterview.pdf](http://www.gvart.co.uk/press/a_kinterview.pdf)), he states that his American Flag was shunned by some museums in the US because “in the lead up to the Gulf War when this work was first conceived and created, there was a climate of flag-waving and patriotic fervor”.



**Figure 5:14** “Apollo Series ” from Of The Flesh, 2009 (images © A. Krasnow)  
**Figure 5:15** “Shitkickers” from Of The Flesh, 2009 (images © A. Krasnow)



**Figure 5:16** “Palette” from Of the Flesh, 2009  
**Figure 5:17** “Lampshade Series” from Of the Flesh, 2009 (images © A. Krasnow)

In his work from 1990, “Flag Poll”, the viewer “approached a podium, they put

their arm in a well, making a gesture that was reminiscent of a Nazi salute whereupon the flag would run up an I-beam and snap to attention”. This piece alluded to blind allegiance to the flag with obvious allusions to Nazism. However, Krasnow stated (personal communication, August 2012) “My hope was no American would ever engage it to see the flag. It was, conceptually, about making an interactive piece that no one would actually activate.”

When his show premiered in London in 2008, many viewers admitted to being initially agitated and uninformed prior to seeing the work, and then having seen it, being moved emotionally. On the Art Rabbit website ([www.artrabbit.com](http://www.artrabbit.com)), for example, viewers commented: “Whatever expectations I had of Krasnow's work were shattered by this unsettling, confronting yet intensely beautiful installation” (Alexander 13.11.08); “I was deeply touched by this exhibition in a way that I was not expecting. A gentle, visceral, spiritual experience. Courageous and sensitive” (francis9. 08.11. 08); “This exhibition has left me awestruck and speechless” (Aval 03.01.09); “When I first heard that Andrew Krasnow had made a collection of art entirely from human skin, I was irritated assuming it was just another shock-tactic to get publicity. I was wrong” (Lara Masters 01.07.09). Contrary to the dire warnings issued in the *Independent* (Johnson 2009), viewers did not find Krasnow’s work to be “shocking, macabre” and “echoing the worst allegations of Nazi atrocities”.

For Krasnow, human skin from the bodies of donated cadavers is a “powerful medium” that allows him to create and express various narratives of pain, loss, illness, war, racism, and memory. The work “is layered like skin itself” (see

[www.gvart.co.uk/interview](http://www.gvart.co.uk/interview)). Born and raised in New York to a Jewish family, Krasnow's journey towards making art out of human skin reflects what he calls a "lengthy trajectory" (personal interview, August 2012). The use of body parts and skin creates an "inner conflict" that he finds isolating at the same time that he believes it "universalizes" his art (personal interview August 2012). While the work has, for the most part, marginalized him from mainstream galleries and museums, it has also defined him as an artist who, according to art critic Toby Crockett (2007), "has the ability to shape this ever-present and overlooked material into richly challenging ideas" (see [www.artcritical.com/2007/03/01/andrew-krasnow-of-the-flesh-skin-works](http://www.artcritical.com/2007/03/01/andrew-krasnow-of-the-flesh-skin-works))

I first contacted Krasnow in May 2011 through an email to his dealer Robert Devcic, founder and curator of the GVArt gallery in London ([www.gvart.co.uk](http://www.gvart.co.uk)). I described my research and the topic of my thesis. Devcic forwarded my email to Krasnow, who immediately replied:

"Of course I was delighted to hear about a thesis such as yours because my work has engaged the individual in this way for many years now, and it hasn't always been the easiest place to bring people to, even those interested in the search for authentic-self, given the preconceptions and misconceptions many people have before viewing the work. Once viewing the work, however, there is a change."

We met for an interview in August 2012 in Los Angeles, where he currently resides. At first, he asked to meet informally, without taping or note taking, in order for him to decide whether he would actually agree to a formal interview. He wanted to meet me first before delving into his personal life and work. Trust, it seemed was an issue. I readily agreed and since he lived in Pasadena he asked to meet half way at Victor's Diner, a quiet spot located in Hollywood.

During this initial two hour meeting Krasnow talked about the controversy surrounding his exhibitions, and how it has died down over the years; about the negative feedback from critics who had not seen the work, how “misunderstood” his work is until it is actually viewed, and finally, where he sources the human remains for his art.<sup>90</sup> At some point, Andrew got up and went outside to his car and came back with a small package taped up in bubble wrap. It was a small American flag (approx 6 x12 inches) made out of human skin painted in the flag colours, and mounted onto a mirror. He allowed me to hold it, which indicated that he trusted me with the work and had thereby agreed to be more formally interviewed.

As I looked at the piece closely, I saw the fine skin, hair, and pores of human tissue and found this to be unsettling. It looked like the back of someone’s hand and this immediately brought to mind Walter’s (2004a:616) comment that certain features on the surface of a cadaver, when revealed, “produce personal identity”. The American flag did not look like leathered animal skin, or even canvas as the images of the work suggested, but *someone’s* skin. The piece, readily identified with human features still intact, suddenly became more complex. It retained a whole trajectory of life, personhood, and death, at the same time that it had transitioned from a person to an object. Rather than simply forming a malleable substance, it projected a dynamic interaction of the past, present, and future; it was the material evidence of both an individual’s fate and the artist’s intention, and thus had a great impact. I immediately understood why Krasnow’s

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<sup>90</sup>Andrew stated that he acquired human remains, including brains, body parts, and skin, over 25 years ago, from donated specimens in various labs in California, through a distributor called California Biological. He asserted that back then “it was pretty easy”. One source, Carolina Biological, is still operating according to Krasnow.

work resonated so deeply with many of his viewers.

Andrew agreed to meet the next day at his friend's studio space where I could tape our interview and take notes, but he explained that the bulk of his work was in storage in the UK, and that his installation "Core Texts of the Mind", which contained five human brains (see Figure 5:18), had been vandalized and badly damaged while in its storage facility in Utah.<sup>91</sup>

Most art critics and writers have been highly positive about Krasnow's work. They describe it as "extraordinary" (Crockett 2007 - [www.artcritical.com /2007/03/01/andrew-krasnow-of-the-flesh-skin-works](http://www.artcritical.com/2007/03/01/andrew-krasnow-of-the-flesh-skin-works)), "a deeply critical view of American politics and culture" (Clothier 2008:14), "crafted with care and respect and carefully displayed" (Dorocinska 2009 - [www.thelondonword.com/ 2009/01/of-the-flesh-the-art-of-andrew-krasnow](http://www.thelondonword.com/2009/01/of-the-flesh-the-art-of-andrew-krasnow)), and "iconic" (Kemp 2012). Fitch (2008:25) states:

"From the beginning, I was impressed by the depth, the seriousness and dignity of the works, the way the materials forced us to consider the objects on a far more profound level than if they had been made from anything else."

Since I could not see the work *in situ*, Krasnow and I viewed the images together at the diner. What emerged was a multi-layered, emotional discussion on how and why he uses human remains.

The world of Andrew Krasnow was a stark contrast to the visually rich and organized clutter of Mark Prent's space, with its life-sized renditions of the distorted

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<sup>91</sup> At a friend's studio space the next day, an hour's drive north of Los Angeles, Andrew decided that it was too hot to stay inside without air conditioning. The studio space was more of a garage-type shop containing power tools. It was cluttered and dark so we drove up the street to a diner where Andrew hauled a box load of articles, images, and a laptop to show me some of his pieces and installations. Unfortunately, it was too noisy in the diner to tape the conversations.

human figure, splayed open in some form of struggle. There was no home or studio to visit, and Krasnow was a very contemplative individual struggling to explain his work in a noisy diner. I soon learned that the artist, in his early fifties, has had three heart attacks and was on a variety of heart medications. He stated early on that he felt he didn't "feel grounded anymore" or have "any real clarity".



Figure 5:18 Core Texts of the Mind, 1988 (image © A. Krasnow)

Nonetheless, what eventually emerged was a long narrative about his family and their experiences with injury, death, and illness.<sup>92</sup> Krasnow was born shortly after the death of his sister, into a family beset by health issues, primarily his father and older brother's congenital heart conditions. He described memories he had as a child:

"I remember having nightmares as a child after seeing the scars my parents had on their bodies from skin grafts. How the memory of my sister's accident felt very present in the house on October 31st, my brother's birthday. And later, my father

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<sup>92</sup> Before Andrew was born, his sister was severely burned at the age of 12 when she took her little brother and a neighbour out for Halloween. Their costumes quickly caught fire after one of the boys grazed against a candle in a Jack-o Lantern. In attempting to help the boys extinguish the flames she suffered third degree burns to the lower half of her body, and was hospitalized. Thereafter, Andrew's parents underwent several procedures to donate their skin, hoping to save their daughter, but unfortunately she died of infection a few months later: "It was the 1950s", Andrew said "and there were only 'burn baths', and no antibiotics to really help contain the infections".

explaining to me what had happened to his heart, the surgeries he had had, and my drawing pictures of it for him”.

Krasnow showed me images of art work that reflect and capture these experiences.

“The Hollow Muscle” (see Figure 5:19) and “The Widow Maker” (see Figure 5:20), both allude to the human heart.<sup>93</sup> The third piece, “Thou Shalt: The Ten Commandments Abstracted” (see Figure 5:21), made from several lengths of human skin, appears to be in the shape of bent and broken tablets with script falling downward.



Figure 5:19 “The Hollow Muscle”, 1999



Figure 5:20 “The Widow Maker”, 2000 (images © A.Krasnow)

Asked about how this particular piece is reminiscent of his father’s heart condition.

Krasnow stated:

“It reminds me of the shape of his chest, the cracks and the scars on my father’s chest. I have early memories of resting my head there, hearing his heart beat and feeling the grooves and patterns of those scars. The piece is wired together like my father’s sternum after it had been cracked open in surgery. My father was a humanist and cared about health and safety. For example, he was deeply moved by seeing children with rickets in Biafra and organized relief efforts there. There are meanings here relating to all this. I am reminded of my father, yes, his body, his

<sup>93</sup> Andrew told me that the term ‘Widow Maker’ also refers to the nickname given to a very narrow left main coronary artery. If it ruptures, it can cause sudden death, which is what occurred with both his father and brother.

heart, but also his love and his humanity. He was a very kind, loving man who always gave me permission to think.”



Figure 5:21 “Thou Shalt: The Ten Commandments Abstracted”, 1998 (image © A.Krasnow)

Krasnow explains that his father died of a heart attack at the age of 49 when he himself was nine years of age; some years later his older brother died at the age of 39, which he still finds devastating. I asked him if his work is about their deaths. He was adamant that it is not.

“No. No, it’s actually not. My father understood the tanning process intimately since he started out designing and making leather goods before moving into manufacturing safety belts and safety products. This included a burn blanket, which you could throw on yourself, to douse yourself if caught in a fire. It was, in a sense, like skin itself, something that contains life and protects it like a shield. When people sense that the work has elements of a warning or is concerned with war, it reminds me of my father and my brother. My father vehemently opposed the war in Vietnam and believed strongly that urgent intervention was necessary. My brother enlisted in the army at the height of the war, at 24”.

After Krasnow's third heart attack at the age of 45, he placed a medical catheter within "The Hollow Muscle", where it projects from the side of the piece (see Figure 5:19). A symbol of triumph, I asked? He answered:

"In a way, or perhaps a resignation to my own fate? Nonetheless there are layers of meaning and these involve personal notes in my work that remain undisclosed to the viewer. "The Hollow Muscle" is the exception because I wrote about it at my gallerist's behest. However, even without disclosure, the viewer may sense that it's a heart turned inside out, of strength now diminished, and that it (The Hollow Muscle) can both give and take away life and the love it stores -- and that its not merely an object for object's sake".

Throughout the discussion it became apparent that Krasnow's experience of human remains, by way of flaying, processing, and shaping them, allows him to "feel connected to an authentic self", but it was a difficult and painful process:

"Yes, I had and knew how to work with the material but I found it emotionally daunting. It was draining but I felt compelled to do it. After my brother's death there was more of an urgency to do art. Faced with mortality can lead one to this work".

I asked Andrew why there was such an urgency. He was quiet for a long time and then laughed a little.

"Pain. I think I needed to reconnect somehow. To work through the vulnerability when I was so exposed. I thought about how skin is resilient, it's strong and durable. It's also delicate and sensitive to touch. On the outside it connects all of us but can also be so divisive."

I mentioned that so much of his work has been interpreted by critics as "political" based primarily on the American Flag series, and yet in our discussion politics played a very minor role. His family, however, seems to be very present in the work itself:

"Yes, there is a psychological connection with the skin work which was very difficult for me at times but the work also exists apart from my personal history and apart from me. For example "Soul Loss" may have been brought on by feelings I had prior to, and in doing this work, but it also echoes Michelangelo's St.

Bartholomew, and what America has suffered in failing to acknowledge the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima, where the skin of the victims literally sloughed off. I am not here to define this work. This goes beyond me. At most, I can say that the frozen expression of “Soul Loss” is familiar to me.”

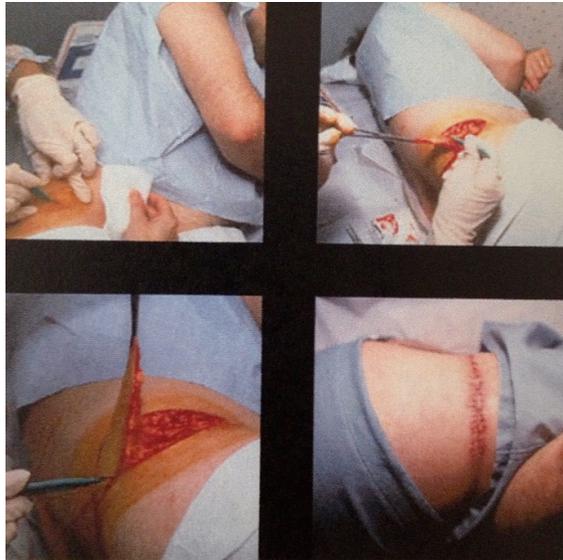
I asked if by working with human remains he is able to work through his sense of loss and re-establish a connection to his family, his beliefs and his ideas. He answered “yes and no”. He told me that he does not like to “impose” his own experiences on the viewer and therefore when the art is on display there is very little personal information about what he was going through while creating the piece. He avoids telling the viewer what to think and how to feel. Rather, he “offers an encounter”. He stated that he has used his own skin as well in order to literally embody some of his ideas (see Figure 5:22). During the interview Krasnow agreed that he was “ownership averse” with much of his art, and declared that some of his work he would never sell. For example, the piece “Bank Note”, a ten dollar bill made from human skin, “would lose all meaning in its commodification”. The point, according to Andrew, is not to commercialize his work nor sensationalize it.

I asked Krasnow to talk about the installation “Core Texts of the Mind” (see Figure 5:18), when he first decided to use human remains in his artwork.<sup>94</sup> His urge to “understand and experience” led him to create the large installation containing five human brains. As he described “Core Texts of the Mind”, which was first exhibited in 1988 at the Gayle Weyher Gallery in Salt Lake City, he suddenly looked tired and saddened. He explained that he is still reeling from the loss of this piece. Since the work

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<sup>94</sup> This piece, according to Andrew seems to have been “critical” in consolidating many of his ideas formed during his years at the University of Utah (1976 – 1981), and soon after with earlier art installations involving artificial representations of the human brain. He took a year off from his studies during which he made repeated visits to a psychiatric hospital in New York, where a friend had been committed.

had been badly vandalized, he was struggling to leave it behind. He wants to try to rebuild the piece but realizes that the costs will be great. He then put on a short video clip of the installation (see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLRK9aOjIek&feature=player](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLRK9aOjIek&feature=player))



**Figure 5:22** The artist having his own skin removed surgically, to work into his art, 1992 (images © A.Krasnow).

\_embedded) and explained the concept of the work.<sup>95</sup>

The installation was apparently “not controversial at all” but very well received and attended when it first opened. It went on to the PS 1 exhibition space in New York City (now affiliated with the Museum of Modern Art). Ironically, when the piece “Flag Poll” was first banned in 1991 by the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati for being “too

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<sup>95</sup> Krasnow states: “There are five life-size, or human scale copper and wood casks mounted on a raised dais. On the top of each there is a glass container. These casks are filled with water and at about the height of where the heart would be there is an opening, a disc where the viewer approaches and blows into it lightly. This triggers a light to go on inside the glass, and there you see a brain slowly rising up within this part of the chamber. Each brain is suspended within a different colour (purple, blue, green, magenta, and gray) and below each brain a symbol is attached that dangles below to identify a particular application of brain activity, like speech, abstract thought, etcetera”.

anti-American”, not because it was made out of human skin but because of the “controversial use of the American flag” (personal interview August 2012), Krasnow agreed to show “Core Texts of the Mind” instead. In the videotaped interview from 1989 (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kCIY22Y9IA&feature=share>), Krasnow is seated in front of the “Core Text of the Mind” installation and answers questions while the TV interviewer is off-camera. She asks:

“Why was it important to you for people to have a confrontation with a real human brain?”

A young, wide-eyed Krasnow, in his mid-twenties at that time, responds:

“Well I wanted them to confront it and hopefully a recognition response, an introspective kind of response, would occur. I really wanted to change the orientation of how we perceive the brain. It’s something that can be seen as beautiful”.

The interviewer asks where he acquired these brains and for how much. Andrew explains:

“Biological laboratories in the sunbelt sell brains as commodities for a wide range of uses. The brain’s list price cost \$200 apiece. I called up a distributor locally and asked them to have the brains sent”.

The surprised interviewer asks him:

“Is it difficult to get them? What kind of restrictions or qualifications did you have to meet?”

Krasnow replies “None. Zero. No restrictions”. She then asks what the installation is supposed to be. He quietly explains:

“Each unit is human, it’s anthropomorphic. They have so many subtexts to them, it’s kind of difficult to answer the question just like that. Basically they’re brains in something which has a human form that people interact with, through breath, through life force and underneath each brain is an icon which symbolizes a specific process, like thought and speech and memory.”

During my interview, it was evident that the work still resonates with Krasnow. He talked about the labour-intensive process of creating the pieces; the months that it took to make the copper urns aesthetically right and mechanically sound, the wood and the glass containers, and the time spent researching and experimenting with the chemical ingredients of the preservative for the brains:

“I spent a lot of time optimizing the solutions, particularly testing a number of new components and mixtures as well as preservation methods used hundreds of years ago for anatomical specimens. I wanted the brains to be suspended in a bubble of color where the dye would not fade or harden into flakes. You see a lot of older specimens are grey and the fluid is cloudy or discoloured. Mine were for the most part stable. The liquid stayed translucent and the dye intact. You could even see light through a deep purple.

Krasnow appeared to hold this particular piece in reverence, as if it encompassed many of the ideals he had hoped to achieve and communicate through his art:

“Yes. There were so many levels to it. As pure encounter with the brain as the other and the self. It demanded interaction through breath so it could be brought to life.”

He indicated that he has made many other pieces of art from human remains that have never been shown and remain in storage. When I asked him why he uses human remains as a medium, he replied:

“I’ve only used these materials when they are appropriate for the work, but it’s not the only material I use. If a material, any material is doing something not easily realized I’ll consider it, but with human remains I feel that extra consideration must be given. Maybe it is a time of war, where there is a sense of urgency, or it demands authenticity, to be the “thing in itself” for the viewer to get it. In other instances I feel as though the work merits its use because the work delves into an area of the human experience that is otherwise ineffable, inexplicable. Here I would say, much like I did for Core Texts, that the purpose is an aesthetic one and a philosophical one. The encounter has to be real, authentic and that’s what makes

it powerful. It would not resonate with me or the viewer if there was a plastic replica of a brain, a limb or a heart. It wouldn't connect.”

I asked whether the identity of the individuals ever interferes with his work:

“Holding any part of the deceased, especially a brain which once held consciousness, of course it crosses one's mind, who was this person? As does, one would hope, those who find themselves in anatomy classes in direct contact with entire bodies of the deceased. In the eighties there was a preoccupation with maintaining the anonymity of the donors. Today it seems the emphasis is shifting away from this, regardless...If it had been about the identity of the individuals, that would have been part of the piece. They are there and are essential to the meaning of each work but this work is symbolic. It's about identifying with each other through our collective experience. What it means to be human. There is a certain reverence for the body but it's not an explication of it. I am not trying to define it, or dissect it.

Before the end of the interview, Krasnow pressed a book into my hands (Kemp 2012), and told me that there is a mention of his work in one of the chapters. “The book is a small gift, and it's a great read” he said, and thanked me for my interest in his work. He paused and then said wistfully, “I realize I have probably not been as articulate as I'd like. It's difficult to just talk about the art. You have to see it to really understand it”.

### **Bodies of Power – Bodies of Violence: The Work of Al Farrow**

Days after interviewing Andrew Krasnow in Los Angeles in August 2012, I went to meet and interview sculptor Al Farrow who lives just outside of San Francisco, in San Rafael. I had initially contacted Al through his website ([www.alfarrow.com](http://www.alfarrow.com)) after reading about his show at the de Young Museum in San Francisco, in November 2008. The show was widely praised, and featured his models of reliquaries, and large scale cathedrals, mosques and synagogues made from parts of guns, shot, and bullets (see Burgard 2008). Many of the pieces contained human bones and teeth so I sent an email requesting an

interview. Farrow immediately responded positively, and indicated he would prefer a face to face interview. His work was complex, diverse, and required proximity. After a few emails we arranged to meet at his studio space in San Rafael, in-between shows that he had lined up in Belgium and New York City during the coming months.

In many of the reviews of Farrow's work (see for example Liberatore 2008; O'Sullivan 2008; Cross Gans 2010; Cameron 2011), the emphasis is almost exclusively on the fact that he uses real guns and bullets to construct his pieces, which are interpreted by the reviewers as statements on the violence and power of organized religion. Like Mark Prent's sculpture, the fact that Farrow also integrates real human remains seems inconsequential to reviewers, and is not often mentioned or discussed. For example, after his successful show at the de Young Museum, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco issued a press release announcing that they had purchased one of Farrow's largest pieces for their permanent collection (see [www.famsf.org/pressroom/pressreleases/fine-arts-museums-san-francisco-announce-acquisition-al-farrow](http://www.famsf.org/pressroom/pressreleases/fine-arts-museums-san-francisco-announce-acquisition-al-farrow)). "The Spine and Tooth of Santo Guerro" (2007) is described in the press release as his most important work:

"At first glance, this elaborate construction appears to be primarily a beautifully crafted scale model of a European Gothic cathedral, albeit not one that is historically identifiable. Closer examination reveals that nearly the entire structure is fabricated from deconstructed gun components, as well as bullets and steel shot, thus giving powerful and provocative form to the enduring resonant theme of religion and violence".

Within the cathedral, on a very visible red velvet cloth however, is a complete human spinal column; mounted above it in a small glass window is a human molar, hence

the title of the piece (see Figures 5:30 and 5:31).<sup>96</sup>

Upon meeting with the 69 year-old artist, I was taken on a tour of his studio and gallery. While we walked around the immense garage-like space located in an industrial area of San Rafael, Farrow talked about his work spanning almost 40 years, his political activism, his intense love of craft, and his own private collections of African art, rare antiquities, and human remains. It was immediately apparent that Farrow loved his artifacts, which blend seamlessly in with his own artwork, and he talked at length about their meaning and value. Like Mark Prent, Farrow is a sculptor who finds inspiration in many of the objects he collects and can spend several months working on the details of a piece. Catholic images and crucifixes sit on his shelves and table tops, next to human remains and other materials, ready for future assembly into his work (see Figure 5:23).

His studio gives way to a small gallery space where many of his early bronze sculptures and reliquaries are on display. He let me look around, touch objects, pick them up and photograph them freely while asking him questions about his ideas, methods, and sources for human remains. For Farrow, the medium is most certainly the message, and his message is very political.

We began the interview in his office, tucked just below his gallery space. It was also crammed with African sculpture, masks, human and animal skulls, and ancient weaponry that his son buys and sells (see Figure 5:24). His business office is upstairs, above Farrow's studio. As I set up the tape recorder, Farrow walked around to point out and pull things off shelves and discuss them, including a few skulls and human bones. I

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<sup>96</sup> Farrow explains that the term 'Santo Guerro' is his "made up saint". The word *guerro* is Spanish for war.

found him to be candid, intense, hard working, and sharp. As he picked up various objects, he was keen to express his ideas and politics which ultimately find their way into, and out of his artwork.

For Farrow, it's about “making people think” as much as it is about captivating and holding the viewer “in place for as long as possible”.



**Figure 5:23** Catholic images and icons amid skeletal remains on a shelf in Al Farrow's studio, August 2012 (image © M.Nafte).

To achieve that goal, his work is very intricate, designed to invite viewers to look inside of it, as well as around, and underneath it.

As Farrow showed me an old, damaged skull he was considering for his next piece, he claimed he could get a toothless one for \$300 and that would be “just as effective”. I asked him why he used human remains and how that trend began. His answer was unhesitating:

“Power. The power of the object. If I used a plastic skull in a sculpture, it could even be a beautiful reproduction, nobody would react knowing that it was plastic. But the fact that they are looking at the remains of an actual human being puts a

chill in the piece, it affects the viewer and it's that that I'm after because its compelling. It's the same with the guns. That's the sort of thing that infuses the power into the object”.



**Figure 5:24** A Shelf of human and animal remains, African art, and the artist's sculpture. Al Farrow's office, August 2012 (image © M.Nafte).

Before he discussed how his interest in using human remains began, Farrow took me back to his “roots” claiming that I needed to understand this aspect first. He was born in 1943 in Brooklyn, New York, one of six sons. I was surprised to hear that he had been raised Jewish given all of the Catholic images and crucifixes strewn about on shelves in his studio. Although he had formally turned away from Judaism and all formal religions after his bar mitzvah, he finds “artistic inspiration” in the Catholic Church.

As Farrow likes to point out things while he talks, he was quick to show me the details of one of his pieces in progress, a cathedral (see Figures 5:25 and 5:26) made out of gun parts, steel shot, glass and bullets, and containing human remains. He showed me extensive drawings, explaining that he was trained as a draftsman in structural

engineering. His love of architecture, combined with his political stance on organized religion, creates these large scale “statements of war and violence”.



**Figure 5:25** Cathedral in progress, Al Farrow’s studio August 2012 (image ©M.Nafte )

**Figure 5:26** Detail of human skull visible through the magnified glass lens above the entrance (image ©M.Nafte)

After years of working as a draftsman for various companies, Farrow “gave it all up” to become an artist when he moved his wife and first born child to California. Shortly after his second son was born, his marriage broke up, and he found himself homeless, living out of his car for well over a year. Doing odd jobs, borrowing money, and taking art classes at night, he slowly got his “sense of self” back. “It has always been a struggle” he explained, insisting that art was something he had no choice but to do. Despite the upheavals, he was dedicated to working at his craft which progressed from painting and sculpting to making reliquaries. I asked him how the reliquary series began after years of making sculptures (wood and bronze) of dancers and African-inspired art (see Figures 5:27 and 5:28). Farrow sat down and once again his answers were quick and unhesitating:

“I was traveling in Italy and everywhere I went of course, you come across reliquaries because the churches hold a lot of the art. I was in the Medici chapel in Florence where they have this big room and off of that room left and right, there were two reliquary rooms. I saw these incredible reliquaries and I was just really, really moved by so many aspects, the sculpture, ornamentation, jewellery, so many aspects but also by what was in them. And then when I went to the underground

part, there was a finger reliquary. It still had flesh on it and it was a tiny little thing, in a silver case. And this finger, it literally triggered my brain. And I thought trigger finger. I need to find some violent materials and make a trigger finger reliquary. So that was my concept. That would have been in 1994. That's when I started going to The Bone Room getting stuff like that. And I got bone from other sources as well but that was the beginning”.



**Figure 5:27** “The Arm Bone of Santo Guerro”, 2011. Human bone, gun parts, bullets, shell casings, glass (image ©M.Nafte). **Figure 5:28** “Skull of Santo Guerro II”, 2011. Human skull, artillery shells, bullets, gun parts, steel, and glass (image © A.Farrow)

Farrow encouraged me to talk to Ron Cauble, owner of the Bone Room in Berkeley, California, when I asked how easy it was for him to acquire the skeletal material for his art. He told me that “Ron always has material” for him but that it has gotten expensive over the years.<sup>97</sup> He motioned to a shelf in his office containing skulls, and a complete articulated skeleton:

“I’ve also been given lots of skulls. I mean people, when they know that you’re

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<sup>97</sup> I met with Ron Cauble shortly after my interview with Al Farrow, and had a few discussions regarding his business of buying and selling human remains. Early into one of our conversations Ron stated “at least once or twice a day I get a call for the human stuff, mostly skulls”.

serious and very deeply involved in an effort that they respect, they end up giving you things. I've been given a lot of skulls. I've been given guns. I've been given all these things. It's great to receive things like that".

Looking at the complex structures of his art, the details in and around the large churches, mosques, and synagogues, and his reliquary pieces, it is obvious that Farrow is opposed to both war and religion. There is also no mistaking that the work is exquisitely crafted, ornate and beautiful. I asked him if these are the messages he wants to convey. He smiled and stated that: "There is beauty on the one hand and violence on the other and it's a wonderful juxtaposition". In terms of his stance on religion, he stated:

"I'm against organized religion for their abuses. They're just power structures to me and they're just like governments. They want control. They get wealthy. They have control by what they will support and won't support, by engaging people in conflict. One religion against the other. It horrifies me that we are going in those directions after the 60s where I was a political activist. In the 60s, there seemed to be so much idealism and growth. My idealism has been dashed".

I asked him if by integrating human remains into his work he brings in an element of death and memorialization along with his political themes. He stated:

"I am using these symbols of death just as a suggestion of the potential outcome of the weapons that are employed. The weapons are part of the architecture. The architecture is the structure and all of that involves religion in the sense that the religion is behind the structure and behind the conflict. So I'm trying to at least symbolically suggest that religion is involved in violence that leads to death. These are very political pieces".

Given that Farrow has had several museum and gallery shows, and the fact that the de Young Museum in San Francisco has purchased one of his largest pieces containing human remains for \$150,000 (see Figures 5:29 to 5:31), I asked if there has ever been any controversy about, or negative feedback toward his work. He replied there has been "nothing but positive feedback" and that his work has always stimulated discussion:

“I create a lot of questions in my work for the viewer. I don’t have the answers. They have to do that themselves and my aim is to get their attention, get them involved, and seeing what are the crazy juxtapositions of life and death, and symbols of violence and death. That is where the power is necessary. It is using actual human bones.”

Farrow loves that his work is looked at for long periods of time and reiterates that his goal is to draw people in and hold them there for as long as possible.

“My whole purpose is for people to think. I don’t really care *what* they think. I only care that they think. So here is my ploy. I’m using beauty as a hook. That’s why beautiful architecture is my hook. You have to get really close to discover and when they discover, ‘Hey wait a minute this is a gun, hey, oh the roof is covered in bullets,’ all of a sudden they’re caught. Then they start looking for more. It’s like a treasure box. You have to get very close. It was by watching how people look at art that helped me come up with a plan on how to capture a viewer against all odds in these modern times”.

After some time pondering his latest works, he admitted that guns, bullets and bones are a good combination to draw people in and keep them talking, looking, and discovering. When I asked about his private collection of human remains, that seems to be everywhere in his studio and office space, he replied:



**Figure 5:29** At the Catharine Clark Gallery with a crowd around “The Spine and Tooth of Santo Guerro” 2007 (image © A.Farrow).

“Almost every artist I know has them. They like having them, they like having them

around. I like having them around. Skeletons are a part of your interior. When you're dealing with structure it's the foundation. That's why artists are attracted to them whether they are painters or sculptors”.

I countered that many artists do not actually use human remains in their art and asked why he does:

“Once you see it you react. It's right in your face and the response is immediate. Some people are repelled but many others are attracted to it. But they react. That's what I'm after. As soon as that little bit of emotion comes up I got them. That's part of capturing the viewer and the communication that these remains elicit. I love it when people stand around the work and talk to each other about it. Total strangers start engaging. The remains are authentic so they're going to pull out emotions that are real. It's raw. That's what I'm after”.

When I mentioned the amount of crucifixes in his work and studio space, he stated that he has been “heavily inspired” by the Catholic Church in his most recent body of work, and during his transition from bronze sculpture to reliquaries. He claimed:



**Figure 5:30** Detail of human molar from “The Spine and Tooth of Santo Guerro” 2007 (image © A.Farrow). **Figure 5:31** Detail of human vertebrae within “The Spine and Tooth of Santo Guerro” 2007 (image © M.Nafte).

“For me, it all started with the Catholic faith, all the incredible ornamentation, the wealth, the art. The Catholics are so ornate. There is so much to be inspired from. The images are powerful. The body, the cross, all the relics, all of the bones, the bodies, the stories, the violence, the history, it's all there. I want to convey that in my work.”

At the back of his studio I noticed a life-sized wooden sculpture of a headless pregnant female, with a hollowed out abdomen (see Figure 5:32). I asked Farrow about this piece since he seemed to avoid it during my initial tour. He led me to the piece and encouraged me to look inside the abdomen which has small glass windows for the viewer to see inside, and contains photographs, small toys, and a variety of objects. Farrow explained that the idea of relics “remains alive and strong” in him and inspired this piece, a memorial to his youngest son who was killed in a car accident in 2001. He pointed out the small objects of his son’s childhood, and the carefully placed photographs of him from birth to young adulthood. He was 26 years old at the time of the accident. Farrow teared up talking about the fact that he cannot seem to finish the piece, and that his former partner, the mother of his youngest son, refuses to give him some of his son’s ashes to place within the sculpture. He hopes she will eventually change her mind.

Pointing to the small glass panels that serve as windows, he told me that he had the original pieces of glass from the accident scene that he had collected on the night of the crash. He stated that he intends to integrate them when he feels he can return to working on the piece. Though the sculpture is sad and haunting to look at, Farrow maintained that it celebrates his son’s life rather than memorializes his death.



**Figure 5:32** Untitled. Sculpted redwood, glass. Collection of the artist (image M.Nafte)

Farrow insisted that his son’s death did not change or infuse his artwork thereafter. Relics were already a prominent theme in his work so naturally, his method of celebrating his son’s life gave way to a life-sized relic containing his favorite objects and images through the years. For Farrow, the glass will “infuse the work with that raw emotion. It is the last thing he would have touched, that would have touched him.”

After almost five hours of discussion with Farrow, we discussed the pieces he was preparing to ship to Belgium for a show scheduled for November 2012. As we said goodbye, he encouraged me to visit the de Young Museum to see his largest piece on display and to let him know my impressions. I promised to visit the piece the next day and as I thanked him for his time and his willingness to discuss his work, he put on a pair of gloves and headed back into his studio.

The next day I visited the de Young Museum in San Francisco to look for Farrow’s piece. There, in a large gallery space containing a variety of paintings and large

installations, a crowd of about 15 people was gathered around “The Spine and Tooth of Santo Guerro”. They were up close, peering inside windows, walking around the immense piece, and pointing out details in the architecture. I heard one person ask whether the “backbone” laying inside the church was real. “Oh yes” someone replied, “all the guns and bones are real”.

### **Altars and Shrines: The Art of Wayne Martin Belger**

In 2008, I had seen an image online of a 4x5 inch pinhole camera made of glass, steel and copper. It was described as containing HIV positive blood, enclosed in small vials around a chamber. Along with the image of the camera, there were portraits of HIV positive individuals, each one surrounded by a reddish haze, having been photographed through the blood diffused as a filter.

I looked up the photographer, Wayne Martin Belger, through his website ([www.boyofblue.com](http://www.boyofblue.com)), and saw that he had constructed many other types of cameras that also integrated human remains. At the time, several art and photography reviews described Belger’s work as “life-giving” (Giarla 2006), “fantastic” (Pitnick 2007), “dreamy existence-affirming” (Freer 2007), and “evocative” (Block 2006). I contacted Belger and asked if he would be interested in discussing his work and lending me images of his art. He happily agreed and forwarded his telephone number so I could better explain my project and the possibility of meeting him for an interview.

We finally met in Tucson, Arizona in November 2012, in Belger’s studio space. He is the youngest of the artists interviewed for this project, and was born in 1964 in

Pasadena, California. He is the most active on social media and gives many interviews to television stations, radio and print media, and has been busy with “quite a few commissions” (see also [www.boyofblue.com/news.html](http://www.boyofblue.com/news.html)).

According to Belger he has a “backlog of work” and had just received a very generous three year stipend from a major corporation to create a working camera for a museum of photography.<sup>98</sup> He pointed out the camera in progress and discussed the artifacts that he will place in chamber windows within the camera itself. He describes this piece as “a shrine” to the corporation’s founder that will contain “mementos of his life and death”.

Belger projects a very sunny disposition. He is friendly and enjoys discussing his ideas, his methods, and his spiritual philosophy, all of which appear to blend effortlessly into his life and work. He is heavily tattooed on his arms and chest with script and images that reflect a variety of beliefs that range from voodoo to “heretical gospel teaching”. As he showed me around his large factory-like studio that he shares with cabinet makers, I noticed the boxes, shelves, and displays of crucifixes and Catholic imagery in almost every corner (see Figure 5:33 and 5:34). I asked Belger about these and he laughed knowingly, pulling out more boxes and pointing out more images of saints, Christ, and crucifixes. “Wait ‘til you see my house” he warned.

We sat down for a recorded interview in his darkroom and I was struck by the variety of objects and art-in-progress surrounding us in such a small work space. On one wall, there was a human placenta contained in clear fluid and pinned with tiny *milagros*;

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<sup>98</sup> Belger has been asked not to reveal the corporation, or the details of his current project so this information has been omitted.

on another there were the renowned red-hazed portraits of HIV positive subjects; and on shelves there were vials of human blood, jewel encrusted human skulls, and his infamous cameras (see Figures 5:35, 5:36).<sup>99</sup> His energy is calm and meditative, but it is also intense and sharply focused. Ironically, he does not consider himself an ‘artist’ but a machinist, a toolmaker and foremost, a photographer.

As we began the interview, Belger pointed out various pieces and, like Al Farrow, got up to talk about them. It was quite apparent that he is busy and his work has become very popular, especially within the last five years. Currently, he is organizing solo exhibitions across the United States, as well as workshops, lectures, and new projects, all while raising his ten year-old daughter. His work has sold to private collectors for tens of thousands of dollars, and the prints from these cameras are highly sought after.<sup>100</sup>

Looking at some of the cameras on display, I asked why he has integrated human remains in so many of them. Belger described how he came to this process, emphasizing his Catholic upbringing and his love for ritual, shrines, and magical thinking.

“Visual communication in the church was very strong. The services were in Latin so I couldn’t understand anything but I could connect with the imagery, the body of Christ, the sacred heart. The priest at the altar was like a wizard performing magic. I made altars and shrines when I was younger, in our backyard. I still make them.

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<sup>99</sup> Milagros are religious votives or folk charms that come in a variety of shapes and sizes depending on the intended purpose (see Thompson 2011). The term *milagros* is Spanish for ‘miracles’.

<sup>100</sup> Belger explained that he has made “an amazing deal” for himself by selling the cameras but getting the owners to loan them back for future exhibitions and photo shoots. Wayne gets to sell the photographs from these shoots, but gives the owners a print from any photographs he has taken with their camera. He says it’s a “win-win situation”.



**Figure 5:33** A stash of crucifixes in a corner of Belger’s studio, November 2012 (image M.Nafte).

**Figure 5:34** Images of Catholic saints, rosaries, and sacred heart icons in Belger’s studio, November 2012 (image M.Nafte).

My cameras are these shrines, they are altars. One of my first pieces is the infant heart camera. A gallery owner had the heart in a jar, and gave it to me. The baby had died at birth. The heart was in an anatomy lab back east but it went under in the 1930s and ended up in a garage for years. The gallery owner gave it to me at a time when I was having issues in my life”.



**Figure 5:35** Human placenta in fluid and an acrylic container, pinned with *milagros*, Wayne’s studio darkroom, November 2012 (image M.Nafte). **Figure 5:36** Various cameras and portraits in Wayne’s studio darkroom, November 2012 (image M.Nafte).

Belger explained that at the time, approximately 20 years ago, his mother and grandmother encouraged him to undergo a ceremony involving a santero (healer). Having been raised in a largely Hispanic community in Los Angeles, Belger, who has an Irish-Scottish background, was very used to a Latin and Native American fusion of Catholicism.

“It was a strange time where I kept getting into near fatal accidents. My mother and my grandmother are all believers that something else was going on. I went, and the first thing the santero told me was that I had a twin brother who was trying to unite with me, that he was trying to bring me back into his world because he thinks we’re still one. My mom later told me I actually did have a twin that died at birth. I never knew that but I always felt like there was something missing in my life. Anyway, I went through the whole ceremony to separate me from my twin. Fire, purging, people singing and praying and spitting rum on me. I felt exhausted but it really seemed to change things”.

Belger stated that the ceremony was very real for him, part of what has been an “ongoing journey” to discover his spiritual connections to art and to the subjects that inspire it.

“The heart came to me soon after that ceremony. It came to me out of the blue. I had never used human remains before. I kept it for quite a while and felt I should have it. I did some paintings from it, inspired by it. The heart is so meaningful in a lot of my work.”

I asked him how it came to be integrated into a camera (see Figure 5:37) and he pointed to where the camera was sitting on a shelf in his darkroom. He is currently using it to photograph pregnant women:

“I wanted to study the place where I lost my brother. And so I created the camera. Also the heart was in this messed up weird little jar and it didn’t feel right to keep it in there, so the camera became an altar, or a shrine to this heart. I wanted it to be beautiful and really clean and out of this ugly container. I made a beautiful place for it. It was pretty interesting my first shot with it. I was really concerned about how this woman was going to feel about it. Here she is in a very vulnerable position, she’s just about to give birth and here is this dead baby’s heart that we are doing the photo series with. It was exactly the opposite of what I thought it would be. Nobody was freaked out by it. The mother became almost nurturing towards the camera

which I thought was really, really interesting. Since using it I found that expectant mothers love it. I haven't had one woman express discomfort, or tell me this is weird. You think you would. I don't know if it was the energy that was there, or the fact that it was another little heart in the room. I've shot around 60 very pregnant women with this camera and it has always been amazing and positive”.



Figure 5:37 Infant Human Heart Camera (2004). Acrylic, titanium, aluminum, formaldehyde, infant heart (image © W.Belger).

I asked him why he only photographed pregnant women using this camera.

“Well I had two hearts beat when I was in the womb and so I wanted to go to the place where my brother wasn't anymore. I felt like my brother had a connection to me this way. He died at birth much like this baby's heart. It all made sense when I heard that”.

I asked Belger if all of his cameras that integrate human remains have some sort of connection to the dead. He answers that it is “not the object or death” that he connects with, but primarily “the subject”. He first pursues a subject and then collects pieces as a form of research, blending spiritual and visual symbols as part of what he calls a “holy trilogy”.

“In my work, my trilogy is science, spirituality and the earth, the organic matter of the earth. That feels very unified and these are always elements that are present in my pieces. The work is active, alive and moving”.

We looked at some of his other cameras all of which have intricate mechanisms, ornate

details, and decorative elements including one made from a human skull (see Figure 5:38).



**Figure 5:38** Third Eye Camera (2005). Aluminum, titanium, brass, silver, gem stones, adolescent human skull (image © W.Belger).

“I had an idea to do this project with a human skull. I didn’t have one then but a friend’s father had an old anatomy specimen in England in the attic. I bought that one. It is the skull of a girl who was maybe 13 or 14 years old, cause the sutures are pretty wide. He sent it to me. It was covered in years of dust. I cleaned it out and I really just fell in love with the whole beauty of it, and the idea of decay. Like a lot of my projects, I held onto the object for quite some time before I started it. And then I started getting clear visions on how things were going to be. So the camera actually has a third eye, it’s a pinhole camera where the light comes in. It creates the image on the inside. The main focus of what we photograph with this is the beauty of decay”.

Each camera is designed with, and as, a particular subject, after which Belger decides what he will shoot with the camera. When he talks about his cameras, he often refers to them as individuals:

“When I shoot with her I never really know what I’m going to get. There’ll be these weird patterns. The first time I used this camera, a child’s head appeared in the clouds, in the upper right hand corner of the shot. I thought it was a messed up negative. I’ll first shoot with a Polaroid which will produce a negative. The gel will corrode eventually and then I’ll print it. With the first one I did of this camera, a boat on a lake, that little girl’s face came out in the clouds above the boat. The face was made inside the skull of that 13 year old girl. I do believe it is part of that collective energy. If that is true then even the chemical process is a part of that

energy. She becomes part of everything”.

To Belger, human remains are powerful, spiritual “conductors of energy” that help to create, and even transform the images that come out of his cameras. The material has to be real and cannot be replaced by imitation or “fake things”. Only the “real human parts of the body” can “transform the people and objects” he photographs. His exhibits are elaborate installations that involve the camera, the photographs from that camera, and any artifacts that may relate to the construction of the camera. He also offers to photograph visitors during certain exhibitions.

“These are tools to express my beliefs. The installations are like shrines. The cameras are only a part of that like an altar. You can break it down like the altars in church. Whether its Santeria, Voodoo, or Catholic, the compositions are like my installations. There are the images, the camera, the installation around it, three separate, powerful experiences. Another sort of holy trilogy”.

I asked about the themes of blood, the ‘sacred heart’ and the body that seem to be in all of his work, and whether they reflect his Catholic upbringing and his beliefs.

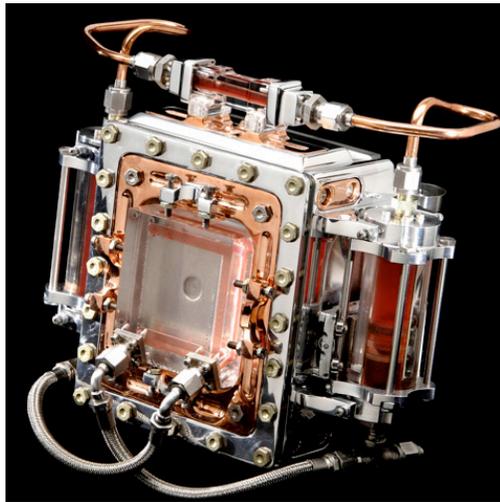
“Yes. Making altars implies all of that and brings it all together. I love the imagery, I love the body but I also am very influenced by the themes in voodoo, the fusion of everything Native, African, and Catholic, and symbols from so many different places and sacred rituals. In my work, my intention is to learn and to bring together people to a type of altar, and to recognize each other there”.

The camera that Belger made after the skull camera (referred to as The Third Eye) is called “Untouchable”. This is the camera containing the HIV positive blood. He explained the inspiration for it while unpacking the camera:

“One of my good friends, we were surfing one day in Hawaii. He just found out he was HIV positive back when it was a death sentence. Living in San Francisco he was pretty well shunned. He got to be a part of the gay community but was shunned there too because he wasn’t gay. My fascination was with the fictitious us and them. That was something I wanted to learn about. David was put into that category

without wanting to be. It came from a study of that. So I flew him to Tucson, and my friend, who is a nurse, withdrew his blood”.

Belger pointed to the elaborate construction of pumps and gears that push the blood into the chamber and up into a filter (see Figure 5:39). An astonishing piece of engineering in gleaming copper and titanium, it has produced large, beautiful, haunting images. He claims the camera has transformed his notions of HIV disease, his observations of individuals afflicted with it, and his experiences with viewers who come to his exhibitions:



**Figure 5:39** Untouchable HIV (2006). Aluminum, titanium, copper, acrylic, and HIV positive blood (image W. © M. Belger).

“The response has been all over the place. Incredibly positive in the HIV community. I have never heard negative feedback from art critics or people in the gay community. One woman fell down crying, she was incredibly touched by it because her brother had died from HIV. When I had the exhibit in the middle of Grand Rapids, a really conservative town, people came out of the woodwork and wanted to be photographed by it. Here they were announcing to everyone that they had HIV, and I did public photoshoots in the middle of the museum of these people. They found partnership and likeness because of this project. Blood in this space, in this camera was the sacred illumination”.

Along with Untouchable, there is Yama, a camera made out of an adult human skull

that he purchased some years ago in Beijing, at a roadside stand. Belger explained that he was told the skull was Tibetan and over 500 years old. He shipped the skull home, then later decorated it with elaborate jewels, stones, gold and silver (see Figures 5:40 and 5:41).

“I wanted to make the camera so that the eyes see again and thought about going back to India and photographing the Tibetan refugees. I call the camera Yama, who is the Tibetan God of the Dead. He is not like the Grim Reaper but is the deity that has seen everything in your life. So I wanted it to be an entity that would see again. He will photograph modern incarnations of Asian deities. It’s like the cycle of reincarnation viewed through 500 year-old eyes”.



**Figure 5:40** Yama Camera (2007). Titanium, silver, brass, gold, gem stones and an adult human skull (image W. Belger).  
**Figure 5:41** Wayne Martin Belger discussing his work with Yama, Tucson, AZ. 2012 (image M.Nafte).

Belger described his ideas for future pieces. He plans to construct a camera integrating human skin to “photograph sex workers”, complete an installation of the infant heart camera with a human fetus which he is saving up to purchase, as well as a three-skulled camera “representing family”.<sup>101</sup> Each camera has a narrative about what it contains and who it will photograph that Belger describes as “tools for connecting the

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<sup>101</sup> Belger recently informed me that he had in fact purchased the fetus and was in the midst of designing an installation for its display.

universal dots”. I asked if the remains of dead people infuse the camera and the work with some element of death. After all, these are parts of a cadaver. He shook his head.

“Not at all. These pieces are not about death. No. I’m such a huge fan of life. These are connections to life. Using parts of the body offers me more of a connection to my subject, what I want to learn about. We are not really different from God or nature. We are all one and the same around this altar. When I exhibit the work, people want to touch the cameras. They are really drawn to them. I’ve had people at my shows tell me they have never touched a human skull before. But what I found in so many of my projects was an amazing amount of joy in life, an awe and an appreciation for it”.

Several months after my interview in Tucson, Belger contacted me by telephone and was excited to tell me that he had just been shipped a box of human remains, sent to him by a friend. The box contained a preserved ear, whole fingernails, and a tooth, and were apparently “trophies” collected when his friend’s father was serving in Viet Nam. I asked Belger what he had planned to do with them and he described his ideas for a 4x5 inch camera integrating the remains in various windows and chambers. He said he wants to learn about war, possibly photograph war zones and become “connected through these body parts” to what it means to be in conflict, and how “we create the notion of an enemy through projections of us versus them”.

### **Redemption and Resurrection: The Work of Joel-Peter Witkin**

In contrast to the other artists, the process of contacting photographer Joel-Peter Witkin was a lengthy and near impossible one. For well over four years, beginning in 2007, my emails were intercepted by his Chicago dealer, who insisted that Witkin would neither be interested in participating in my project, nor in being interviewed. However, one evening in 2012, I received a call from Mr. Witkin himself, stating that he had not

heard anything about my project and was “outraged” that he had not been informed of it earlier. He had finally been forwarded an email by his dealer. To my great surprise, he agreed to be interviewed in his studio in New Mexico at a mutually convenient time. We finally met in February 2013 at Witkin’s studio, set on his ten acre ranch property in a remote area of Albuquerque.

I had known about Joel-Peter Witkin for many years, having seen a number of essays and articles about his work (see Samaras 1993; Villaseñor 1996; Schwenger 2000; Samson 2001; Millett 2008), books on his life and art (see Parry 2001; Urban 2011; Biroleau 2012), one of his photography exhibitions, and two feature-length documentaries about him (see Missolz 1994; Ricco/Maresca 1997).<sup>102</sup> Though his work has been described as “highly controversial” (Palmer 1997), “deviant” (Wilson 2000), and “transgressive” due to the nature of his photographs, he is an internationally renowned artist having exhibited in major galleries and museums all over the world.

There is no mistaking a photograph taken by Joel-Peter Witkin. The highly processed, often scratched or aged, black and white photographs featuring severed body parts, skeletal remains, and cadavers amidst fruit, flora, hermaphrodites, the diseased, the deformed and the disfigured, had already become iconic in the 1980s. By the time the popular *Vanity Fair* fashion magazine did a feature spread on the artist in 1993 (see Woodward 1993; also Figure 5:42 and 5:43), he had amassed a large cult following.

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<sup>102</sup> There are currently two more documentaries set to be released before the end of 2014 (see Marino 2012; and Joel Peter Witkin personal communication, 2013).

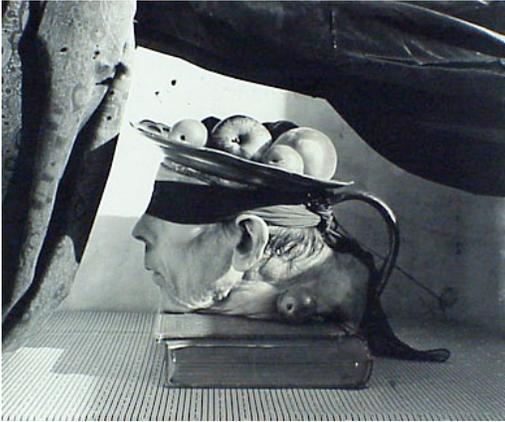


Figure 5:42 “Story from a Book”, 1999 (image © J.P.Witkin)



Figure 5:43 “History of the White World: Arabia” 2008 (image © J.P.Witkin)

In many articles, he is said to be reviled but is ultimately lauded and praised by those who claim to understand the underlying themes of his work. For example, Palmer (see [www.metroactive.com/papers/sfmetro/10.97/art1-97-10.html](http://www.metroactive.com/papers/sfmetro/10.97/art1-97-10.html)) states that:

“the initial reaction to his display of the disfigured, the deceased and the deranged is often disgust, but for those who understand Witkin's determination to find wonder and beauty in people whom society has deemed wretched and frightening, his photographs are often extraordinary”.

Beyst (2006 - <http://d-sites.net/english/witkin.htm>) describes him as “the saint in the morgue” while Millett (2008:8), writing about forms of disability celebrates Witkin’s use of the disabled body in his work because his “controversial and excessive photographs disrupt medical models for disability by presenting disabled and disfigured bodies as objects of art, design and aesthetic magnificence”. As often as he has been condemned for his deviant imagery (Wilson 2000), he has been highly regarded and rewarded on an international level.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> His gelatin silver prints fetch between \$10,000 to \$80,000 USD each at auction (see <http://artist.christies.com/Joel-Peter-Witkin--51540.aspx> ).

Before sitting down for an interview in his large studio, Witkin took me on a tour of his house where I immediately noticed an array of Catholic images and symbols. As in Belger and Farrow’s studio spaces, crucifixes are piled on shelves, in corners, and mounted on walls (see Figure 5:44 and 5:45). Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1939, Witkin explained that he is religious, attends church every Sunday and that he was primarily raised Catholic. His father was Jewish but his parents separated when he was quite young; he and his two siblings went to Catholic school as children. He emphasized that his work is very informed and strongly influenced by his “notions of God”, the “concept of sin”, “what it means to be an outcaste” and “the beauty of redemption”. According to Witkin, nearly all of his photographs carry variations of these themes and often mimic the shape, feel, or posture of the “body of Christ”.

When discussing the process of photographing human remains, Witkin emphasized many times throughout the interview that his work is not about death but “primarily about ideas”, “transformation” and “personal truths”:



**Figure 5:44** Joel-Peter Witkin pointing out some of the Catholic images and icons adorning the walls of his home, 2013 (image M.Nafte). **Figure 5:45** Sketches for an installation piece, Joel-Peter Witkin’s studio, 2013 (image M.Nafte).

“My work is about life! Whether I am photographing the dead or the living, the inspiration is always a visual one. I look for the idea, and how this can be visualized. Sometimes it’s a profound study of character. There are character traits I want to explore, in terms of purity, honesty, strength, the good things, the admirable traits and yes even the bad, like weakness and evil. I see these traits in the dead as much as I do in the living. It is about clarity and purpose to my work, a type of purification. My purpose in life, my duty in fact, is to show how wonderful life is, the fact that we are all interconnected, like branches of a tree, it’s all interrelated and profoundly beautiful no matter how horrible it is to look at”.

Witkin is passionate, explicit, generous with his time and ideas, and chatty. While describing how he first came to photograph human remains, he cited poetry, showed me photographs and told stories about his childhood experiences that he claims have effectively normalized his relationship with both the living and dead subjects of his art:

“To me, it is my duty to make a photograph based on something that is taboo, or frightening. To me it’s not frightening. It’s beautiful. It’s real. I want to convey that phenomenal experience. My earliest recollection as a child, and I am not even sure it happened, but I was told that it happened and I vaguely remember that it did, was seeing a car accident from my front stoop, holding my mother’s hand. A child was decapitated, and I swear I saw the head roll towards me to the curb. My mother grabbed me and my twin brother and rushed us inside. But what I do remember very clearly as a child in Brooklyn, is that my mother used to clean my grandmother’s leg every morning. She had gangrene, so first thing in the morning I smelled coffee and I smelled her gangrenous, rotting leg. Those smells, those experiences of life and rot are synonymous with my family”.

Curiously, Witkin has a sense, very much like Mark Prent, that his career has not been successful because he has been too reviled in the media. Though his work sells for tens of thousands of dollars in galleries and auctions, celebrities collect his work, musicians make videos inspired from his images (Woodward 1993; Kushner 2013), and he is one of the only American artists who has received four National Endowments for the Arts awards, he feels that negative press has hindered his career.

“The world and the culture is basically against what I believe but that’s not my problem. It wasn’t a problem of the early martyrs either. It ended their lives sooner but it was their challenge. It’s a negation of life, and that is so unbelievable to me. My work celebrates the sanctity of life, the sacredness of the body in all of its forms. I photograph people with conditions but those are human conditions. It is mankind”.

While touring his studio, Witkin took out large images that depict human remains and described in detail some of the objects, ideas and body parts he uses to visualize a variety of themes (see Figures 5:42 to 5:49). He said he first began photographing the dead in 1982 with the image “The Kiss” (see Figure 5:49), which instantly became iconic and thereafter, it was often used illegally in a variety of ways over the last thirty years.<sup>104</sup>

He first photographed human remains in Europe in 1986, an experience he described as religious:

“I went to a small research hospital prepared to find something that would mirror some part of my reality. A female technician showed me some specimens but I wasn’t interested in those. I’d seen of all these before. The director then brought out some packages wrapped in brown paper and string. The technician unwrapped them and one was an arm and another was a leg. I said I could photograph these and then asked if I could use the skull on the director’s desk. He told me I could use a room nearby to shoot but that I only had a little time. The technician gave me a dark stained laboratory apron because I needed a cloth I could drape. It began to rain, and the light coming in from the window was crisp, harsh, winter light. I placed the severed arm in front of the leg. I was making a visual collage of human flesh, of time and history, on this altar of a shelf, in this dark, holy light. To me it symbolized the millions that perished during the Wars. It was an incredible experience. I called it Poet: From a Collection of Relics and Ornaments”.

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<sup>104</sup> The image was photographed in a morgue in New Mexico with permission from the attending pathologist. Witkin placed the severed and sectioned head of a cadaver at the mouth, so that both sides were fixed and appeared to be kissing (see Figure 5:49). Witkin explained how often the image has been illegally copied for use on T Shirts, in fashion magazines, on album covers, and as advertisement for products like chocolates and lipstick. He has often had to issue warnings and lawsuits over copyright infringement. He claims he cannot keep up with the illegal use of his work.



Figure 5:46 “Poet: From a Collection of Relics and Ornaments” 1986 (image © JP.Witkin)

Though the images can be quite disturbing or somber, Witkin often smiled and laughed as he recalled the processes involved in setting up shots in morgues across Europe and Latin America. He spoke more extensively about the challenge of using available lighting and setting up props rather than handling cadavers. I asked him how he manages to lean, dress up, and position dismembered and often fresh remains, and not be affected by them. He insisted it is a “glorifying experience” that allows him to reach out to the viewer:

“It’s phenomenal! You want to extend the idea of the image in a profound way, with meaning and purpose to basically elevate life. It must elevate life. If it doesn’t, what good is it? It is possible to create something that will outlive yourself because work has the power to be imbued with the artist’s soul. This is my soul. People who love my work, they know what I am making and understand it, they see beyond their own emotional reactions. They connect with my ideas. The work enters the consciousness and the soul of the viewer”.

I asked Witkin why and how photographing human remains “elevates life”. He insisted that he is telling a story, a narrative that is “rooted in mythology and history”, that “connects the past and the present and opens up emotions”. The human body is “the

core”, it is the means by which he “reveals truth”. He has no qualms about handling the dead body and using it because he is engaged in the process of “handling truth and reality”, assembling it, and capturing it on film. For Witkin, it is a calling:

“The allusion of fashion as art, the standard forms of beauty and the realm of normal or idealized beauty do not interest me at all. The grotesque, the deformed, the dead, they are far more interesting to me. The highest plane of reality for me is religion and the second is art. In art, you need to be a critic of culture, you want to show this in the medium that you are choosing, through your work, through yourself. That is my calling but it has to be real. It has to be profound or it is all meaningless”.

As he talked about the many bodies and body parts that he has had “the privilege of using”, it is apparent that Witkin photographs according to the narrative he wants to portray, which is often dictated by the props he has brought along with him. For example, if he purchased an antique goblet, a chair, or a piece of interesting fabric, he would develop a scene incorporating these items and then position a body, or a dismembered part into the setting. Sometimes, he admitted, the process is spontaneous but more often he comes up with an idea and develops it through a detailed sketch. Pointing to a photograph of a cadaver balanced precariously on a gurney in front of a painted backdrop (see Figure 5:47), he avidly described the creative process:

“I found this incredible 19th century gurney in a hospital in France, and this man had his head removed and I said let me use it before you take the brain out. I had this background painted and I thought this would be great. It’s like Shakespeare said “life is a stage”. He’s being wheeled off the stage of life. And I went out and got this Venetian mask and this eye came out of a book which makes his head look even bigger. I had his chest écorché. You know I am up at night working constantly and I made this little ladder. I found this little goblet and I brought in flowers that day, and thought I’d put two sets of testicles on him. They had a pile of testicles there that were removed I don’t know why, but I told them I wanted to use two of them. I had gloves on so I took out two and put them on top of him. It’s a crazy looking shot but I love it”.

Surprised at the level of freedom that Witkin experiences in so many morgues and hospitals around the world, I asked him if the staff at these institutions often let him bring in props and equipment, and then give him the time and space to shoot while allowing him to pick and choose body parts.



Figure 5:47 “Aleph” 1997 (image © JP Witkin)

“Yes, yes. I have never had a problem. And I mostly shoot on a Sunday, so it’s quiet and nobody is there. I always have permission and I take hours doing what I do. There are different facilities, and of course different people you have to contact, and as long as you treat it all with respect. They know my work. They see my work in books and museums. But there is one thing, these are all anonymous individuals. I never use people who have family or loved ones there, these are all unclaimed bodies who have been in storage for a long time, sometimes years”.

Witkin took out more large-format images and discussed how they came to be created, stepping back from the photographs, smiling and reminiscing. He picked out a portrait of the dismembered lower half of a young male body (see Figure 5:48).

“I met a pathologist when I had a show in Eastern Europe. The image is called Corpus Medius. I love this, I love, love, love this image. I sent faxes to this pathologist describing a body that I wanted to photograph, a body that had been cut in half. Well they had this man who had died and he was found in the street and he was autopsied and they were about to burn the body, and I asked him if it was possible to cut the body in half and he said sure. So I went back to the morgue. I had this fabric with me and I picked up another piece from a fabric store on the way to photograph him. It was fantastic! I shaved some hair off the legs, and I would not have photographed him if he was circumcised. The fact that he wasn’t circumcised made this ageless, and the incredible thing too is that the whole thing looks like a fish. So, it’s very Christ-like. For me, it’s a very sacred picture of life, religion and art”.



Figure 5:48 Corpus Medius, 1998 (image ©JP Witkin)

There are hundreds of images to look at, taken over three decades. Witkin has vivid memories attached to each one, and to many of the dead and living models he has used, as if they are all part of an “extended family”. For Witkin, dead bodies are just as powerful as the hermaphrodites, the disfigured, and the damaged, they are “sacred”, they are “part of what composes a photograph from the inside out”:

“My work is a composition of meaning, a form of construction, its aesthetic, it’s physical and it’s psychological. I find the person, I find the objects and they become part of me but its not diaristic. It’s creative, a discovery made through another soul that I feel a connection, that I feel connected with”.

Months before our interview, there was a very large retrospective of Witkin’s work

at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, France, accompanied by the publication of a large book of his prints from the show (see Biroleau 2012). I mentioned that the show and the book signing event were featured in the trailer to Witkin’s latest documentary, and that it looked as if both had been very well attended (see Marino 2012). In the trailer, critics are praising his work, and people are seen looking at his images and talking passionately about them and the artist. Witkin brushed this off, claiming that it’s not important that he gets the crowds, not even important that he is accepted. What is vital to him is that his work is tied to his vision, his beliefs, his life experiences, and most importantly to his “relationship with God and truth”:

“The singular thing that makes art through the artist is what the artist posits in presenting that personal truth. And if it’s not personal truth or something that doesn’t have depth, then it’s always going to be nothing. It will always amount to nothing. I thank God everyday that I’m a photographer”.



Figure 5:49 “The Kiss” 1982 (image ©JP Witkin).

## **Epilogue**

Examining the aestheticization of human remains, and their transition into objects of power, identity and value in the hands of contemporary artists, not only provides an opportunity to understand the manifold relations the living maintain with the dead (see Harrison 2003), but reveals that there are similar correlations and strategies employed by both institutions and individuals who harvest and harness human remains. In both realms, the undisposed dead are seen to impart and invoke strong notions of identity, authenticity, and truth. As such, they have come to be an important source of materials that contain an intrinsic ability to transform the space within which they are placed.

As discussed in previous chapters, the Catholic Church and Western medicine established and sanctioned the tradition of cutting open, dissecting, and displaying the dead. Out of this tradition, various forms of information, value, wealth and power have been created that continue to circulate in both public and private domains. The contemporary artists discussed in this chapter have become yet another type of participant in this tradition, but they occupy a unique niche since they are acquiring and processing human remains for purposes other than religious, academic, or medical use. However, in their work, the dead are seen to contain just as much value, wealth, and power as they do in an institutional context, and can therefore be used to project similar forms of identity and authenticity.

Throughout my interviews with these artists, the influences of both the Church and Western medicine on the artists' concepts and resources were very apparent, and indicative of the central position these institutions still occupy in not only the circulation, but the interaction with,

and empowerment of the dead body. In this regard, sharing a prolonged length of time and space with human remains, outside of a funerary context, does not seem to threaten the natural order (Kristeva 1982), or change the nature of the spatial relationship between the living and the dead (Laderman 2003) primarily because their presence, as both relics and specimens, has been well established for several centuries. Thus, the value and status accorded artwork that contains human remains, is ultimately a reflection of the ‘natural order’, as well as the acceptable ‘spatial’ relationships between the living and the undisposed dead body within contemporary Western culture. In other words, these very old methods and traditions of keeping the dead undisposed and in service to the living, continue to find modern forms of expression, in this case as art, and are recurrently and inadvertently sanctioned in a variety of ways. These legitimizing processes include the display of the undisposed dead within established institutions like museums, universities, galleries, and mass media; through their purchase by the general public, and both private and public institutions, and finally, through the government grants, and corporate funding of the artists who use human remains.

In all of the art, human remains were harvested from unclaimed, anonymous bodies whose identities had long been lost. The bodies themselves had been dissected and discarded. They have since been reshaped to inhabit and convey new information, very much like their institutional counterparts – relics and specimens – and invested with new biographies and pedigrees, charged with meaning by the artists who have integrated them into the objects and subjects of their work. Thereafter, the only identities possible are those of the artists who own the remains, the institutions that store and display them, and quite possibly those of the viewers who ascribe their own personal significance and meaning in response to the artwork.

For Mark Prent, Andrew Krasnow, Al Farrow, Wayne Martin Belger and Joel-Peter Witkin, human remains are the medium, the precious resource that becomes the physical embodiment of their ideals and ideas. At the same time, these remains are also the ‘superconductors’ of organic matter that can broadcast the narrative, amplify the vision, connect the art to the artist, and the viewer to the artist, while empowering the space within which they have been positioned. Whether they are contained in a sculpture, processed into a flag, placed in a camera, or photographed as an image, the dead permeate the work with a dualistic sense of a life once lived and a second life that is now in service to both artist and viewer; a form of resurrection and reanimation of self, memory, and meaning that only and entirely belong to the living.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Conclusions**

“Trophies and Talismans: The Traffic of Human Remains” introduces the topic and the current practices – both institutional and personal – of using and displaying the undisposed dead in contemporary Western society. The study examines a variety of spaces where human remains are found to be ‘in service’ to the living, and integrates multiple voices through personal interviews, analysis of scholarly literature, and scrutiny of social media. My research draws from a broad range of theoretical paradigms in sociology, anthropology, history and philosophy to discuss, or challenge assumptions about the presence of the dead within various institutions (Rojek 1993; Lennon and Foley 1996; Seaton 1996; Laderman 2003; Stone and Sharpley 2008; Walter 2009), the use of the dead body as material culture (Sheppard et al 2000; Johnston 2002; Castner 2002; Spence et al 2004; Jandial et al 2004; Rubenstein 2007; Sofaer 2006; Krmpotich et al 2010), and the sequestration and fetishization of death in modern society (Gorer 1955; Ariès 1987) .

In many of the areas I sought to investigate, however, there was little existing work upon which to draw. For example, although Walsham (2010:62) insists that it is necessary to underline the ambiguities that surround the retention of bodies and bones in museums, and their presentation to the public at large, she does not mention the ambiguities surrounding the sale of those ‘bodies and bones’ in art shows, online, or in shops around the world. Likewise, though Goodnow (2001) states that we can look at the dead in

museums because they are unknown, and we have no direct connection with them, Walter (2009: 39-40) suggests that we can only look at the dead through a variety of mediating institutions, in order to filter, accept and understand death. Neither Goodnow (2001) nor Walter (2009) discuss the individual processing, owning, or selling of the dead, and how these can be used to project identity, membership and value. As well, Harrison (2012:4-5) describes modern forms of trophy-taking during war, as an “aberrant form of collecting” based on racism and a colonialist legacy. In so doing, Harrison (2012) maintains that Western soldiers (and civilians) cannot possibly have any other motive, or references for collecting human remains. Hence, my research seeks to provide other possible explanations for how and why the bodies of the dead are seen as valuable and necessary, no matter where they have been acquired.

By interviewing Catholic clergy, artists, collectors, museum personnel, and shop owners, I was able to observe complex networks that operate beyond the contours shaped by the scholarly literature, most especially in the private, black-market, and quasi-legal collecting of human remains. The interviews with artists who use human remains in their art provided an exceptional opportunity to make the connection between the institutional and private use of human remains while allowing me to see first-hand how the dead can be transformed into objects of meaning that engage the living. Several themes emerge from my observations, discussions, and interviews, that reveal new perspectives on why human remains are utilized so broadly and successfully in contemporary Western society.

The first and most general theme that emerged from this research is that power and authenticity are associated with the undisposed dead, especially when their remains

are used to impart a particular idea, belief or narrative.<sup>105</sup> If one's aim is to project human emotion, knowledge, or experience – whether through artwork, a museum display, a holy relic, or a specimen – integrating the 'real' dead body, or parts thereof, will immediately impart the message with authority and credibility. All of the artists insisted that they could not use plastic, or other representations of the human body in their artwork, which would, as Krasnow stated, "create a false encounter". Like first-class Catholic relics, only real human remains have the ability to infuse their materials with a form of "truth", one that permeates their work with a type of 'sacred contagion' (Durkheim 2008[1912]), and which could better convey their narratives. Al Farrow claimed that the dead body part is the "hook" that draws his viewers in and keeps them there, and what Witkin explained is the "core" that opens up "emotions", connecting the past to the present. For the gentleman on the show *Oddities* (see Chapter Four), the cadaveric eye "spoke" to him, allowing him to erase a traumatic experience of the past and enjoy his future. Linke (2005:15) pondered the possibility that the sensory access to corpses, as in a von Hagens' exhibit, must nourish a "late modern longing for an authentic reality". For von Hagens, the realism of his specimens is what "contributes enormously to the fascination and power of the exhibit" (von Hagens cited in Linke 2005:15).

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<sup>105</sup> In discussing authenticity I am referring to the fact that the human remains used by the artists are biologically real, and not replicas made from plastic, or other materials. I have set them apart from other objects *per se*, and as such, I have not included a discussion of the authentic in the literature (see for example MacCannell 1999; Saumarez-Smith 2011; Caygill 2013; Bruner 2005) as it relates primarily to tourism, nonhuman objects, and other experiences of history, like re-enactments and interpretive museums. However, Benjamin's discussion (see Caygill 2013) of the so-called "aura" radiating from historical objects in terms of their uniqueness, their presence, and their "historical testimony" can certainly enhance our understanding as to why 'real things' are more meaningful and powerful than reproductions.

The dead body – or a portion of it – is seen to be inherently authentic because it was once a living human who has experienced an irreversible death. Part of its power thereby resides in the fact that having passed the threshold of death, it can be resurrected with new meaning and made ready to “speak” again, effectively to *vivos docent*.<sup>106</sup>

Fitch’s (2008:25) claim that Andrew Krasnow’s pieces “force us to consider the objects on a far more profound level than if they had been made from anything else” highlights the complex relationship and interaction that unfold between the viewer and the art. Indeed, the undisposed dead compel us to look at them in ways that ‘other objects’ do not, primarily because they were persons at some point in time but have now become dead ‘things’ who continue to engage the living. This interplay between life and death, highlighted above, reveals that the dead undeniably maintain a “cultural significance” (Foltyn 2008:100), a “concreteness” which “transcends time” (Verdery (1999:17), and which bear an “emotive and affective potency” (Krmpotich et al 2010: 372) that can host a variety of our own metaphors and concerns (Sanders (2009).

Along with the socially constructed power and authenticity that the dead maintain as both ‘persons and things’ (Geary 1986), whether they are turned into artwork, relics or specimens, their association with powerful people and institutions yields yet another form of value. Referring to objects in museums, Gosden and Marshall (1999) state that it is not necessarily the aesthetic or intrinsic quality of the object that makes it significant, but its interaction with, and association with those who have economic assets and power. The fame of objects and the renown of people are “mutually creating”. I would thus add that

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<sup>106</sup> Latin for “teach the living”, from the anatomy creed “*mortui vivos docent*” - the dead teach the living.

collections and other types of human remains, whether they are located in museums, labs, churches, or in artwork, have both the intrinsic quality of ‘personhood’ in that they are human, but also gain their value through links to powerful people. Through possessing them, people, in turn, become powerful (Gosden and Marshall 1999:170).

This type of interaction and association with powerful people is evident in the circulation histories of Catholic relics and anatomical specimens, as well as in the careers of the artists I interviewed. Many of the artists found their art to be controversial early in their careers, because they integrated human remains into their work. At the same time however, this very controversy increased their notoriety and attracted particular institutions and galleries to exhibit their artwork. The public promotion and exhibition of the art quickly increased its value and granted both artist and artwork an air of legitimacy. Preziosi (2011:50) refers to this phenomenon as passing the “exhibitionary threshold”, and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998:51) calls it the “museum effect”, whereby objects, and by extension everyone associated with these objects, acquire “prestige” and “pedigree” simply by being contained in established institutions such as museums and galleries. The artists in turn, became even more renowned, and their work more valuable once it had been purchased, written about, and circulated by people in positions of power, such as curators, collectors, and celebrities.

The fact that there are real human remains in the art has subsequently garnered less controversy, or even attention, as evident in many of the artists’ reviews, documentaries and critiques, primarily because the value and fame of the art (and artist) are currently derived from their interactions and associations with the powerful people

who own, maintain, or display the work. Belger's HIV and skull cameras for instance, were originally considered "shocking", but since they are now owned by a wealthy private collector after having been displayed in a variety of museum galleries, and featured in the media, the price for prints made from them has risen considerably, and they are now "collectors' items" (personal communication Belger, November 2013). As well, Al Farrow's large-scale cathedral was purchased by an established public museum, as were many of Mark Prent's sculptures. None of the museums' press releases or catalogues acknowledge that they contain human remains, since the artists and their art have acquired a substantial pedigree through networks of buyers, museums and commercial galleries, and are thus no longer controversial but highly valued.

The second theme to emerge from this research is the concept of identity, a consideration that has been left out of the literature as it relates to human remains as contemporary, material culture. As discussed in Chapters Two and Three, there is a rich treatment of the topic regarding social identity and historical anatomical collections. Sappol (2002), Anderson (2008), Chaplin (2008), Bates (2008) and Margóscy (2011), for example, examine how people's bodies were made into 'things', specimens that could be amassed for education, product development, personal wealth, and gifting in highly competitive markets and exchange networks. Specimens were valued for their commercial worth but mostly for their ability to project the knowledge, skill and identity of their makers, and ultimately the institutions they represented. In the "cultural poetics" of anatomy (Sappol 2002:2), the appropriated bodies became the 'trophy' of scientific methodology, medical achievement, and the rational mind (see also Sawday 1995).

In the case of Catholic relics, identity is paramount to their translation and authentication.

Anonymity is not permissible for sainthood, or for the translation of a saint's remains. Only identified individuals, with some form of a recorded life and death history – and where there is 'evidence' that they have been socially active after death by performing miracles – can be canonized (see Chapter Two). They thus qualify to have their remains placed within altars, carried in procession, maintained on Church property, and brought out for feast days. Relics are also projections of the identity of the Catholic Church. As the bodily remains of Catholic saints, relics are part of the greater 'body' of the Church, what Cardinal Collins said are "the physical presence of faith and the holy spirit" (interview June 2012) that perform a necessary and important function in its everyday life. The many bodies and body parts of saints and martyrs are the focus for the consecration of old and new churches; they bind disparate communities, provide the basis for calendar events, and mobilize populations to build and visit numerous religious sites.

However, as outlined in Chapter Two, despite the strong connections to, and projections of various forms of identity, relics and specimens represent two conflicting states of 'being' in terms of their status within Western society. Whereas relics are the spiritually embodied parts of the socially active dead, that offer healing, guidance, and intercession, and which have maintained their 'personhood', specimens are the disembodied parts of the inactive, anonymous and permanently dead who have become 'things', what Sappol (2002:2) described as the "iconic representations of matter".

Through this examination of the trajectories of artists and their art, it is evident that there is a curious mix of both powerful relic and anonymous specimen informing their work. All of the artists processed and used the dead bodies of anonymous individuals as material, a medium to

infuse their artwork with potency. At the same time, this material became subsumed by the identity, beliefs, and ideas of the artist, and henceforth was rendered socially active in its capacity to convey a living narrative, or more concisely, a new artistic biography. This mix of both medical and Catholic models is even more apparent considering that so many of the artists have been inspired by Catholic representations of the dismembered and flayed body while directly (or indirectly) accessing the dead through medical sources, such as morgues and biological distributors. For all of the artists, especially Mark Prent, Wayne Martin Belger and Joel-Peter Witkin, God, dismemberment, and veneration overlap comfortably, much as these concepts and practices did during the Renaissance era (see Chapter Two). Like relics and specimens, Mark Prent's sculptures, Al Farrow's relics, Wayne Belger's cameras, Andrew Krasnow's skin works, and Joel-Peter Witkin's images are the physical and symbolic embodiments of their beliefs; the dynamic representations of ideas, personal desires, histories, and memories, presented to the viewer, to guide them, heal them, connect with them, warn them, or entertain them. In a contemporary context, these forms of art continue the institutional discourse of both relic and specimen, in that they are powerful, expensive, authentic objects to own and amass for wealth, trade and display. Moreover, these works of art renegotiate forms of acceptable spatial relationships between the living and the undisposed dead body, whose boundaries have become limitless in the hands of artists. Within the artworks, the human remains are anonymous yet they project identity, and they are charged with political, social and cross-cultural meaning. Finally, like relics and medical specimens, these artworks are trophies of achievement and objects of veneration.

The third theme to emerge from this research, not apparent in the scholarly

literature, is the important distinction that needs to be made between the disposed dead and the undisposed dead. While the disposed dead are most often the subjects of death, grief, loss and memorialization, they are less subject to projections of personal and institutional identity. These are the dead that Harrison (2003) declares are the “foundational authority” of Western culture to which we “surrender” ourselves, following their ideologies, their principles and their posthumous laws. Since one cannot own, or display dead bodies that have been disposed of, it is therefore the undisposed dead who have become the objects of material culture, and through which institutional and personal identity are expressed in contemporary Western society. The undisposed dead no longer represent a person, a family member, an ancestral line, or the parts of someone’s body with memory and identity intact, but are deployed to allow us to experience a wide range of human events and emotions, that are not necessarily related to dying, nor reflect our fears of death.

Despite having integrated parts of the dead body into their work, in all of the interviews, the artists proclaim that their art is “not about death”, but intended to further our “appreciation of life”, to “celebrate our differences” and stimulate “transformation”. Similarly, von Hagens claims that his exhibitions of plastinated cadavers are not meant to be “places of mourning” or “post-mortem museums” but “places of enlightenment and contemplation” (see [www.bodyworlds.com/en/gunther\\_von\\_hagens/life\\_in\\_science.html](http://www.bodyworlds.com/en/gunther_von_hagens/life_in_science.html)), much like the Hunterian museum is not a gallery of dead bodies but a place to “promote esteem, knowledge and education” (Alberti, personal communication June 2013).

Indeed, death may have been “banished” from modern society (Ariès 1987; Walter 2009:39), more specifically from displays of art containing the dead, from museums housing specimens, and from Churches holding relics, but the undisposed dead have not been subject to such removal. They are present to serve, and they are useful, not because we need them to mediate our inevitable deaths, or because they represent a form of filtered death (see Foltyn 2008; Stone and Sharpley 2008; Walter 2009), but because they have become expensive and important commodities that can be infused with a range of motifs, ideas and beliefs, and which can be made to symbolize a variety of pursuits.

We are still gathered around these bodies, creating and imposing individual narratives, with an expectation that they will perform and reenact these narratives for the living. These ‘persons’, these ‘things’ inhabit all of the spaces that have been defined and created for them, the shelves, containers, and showcases abundant in Western society. Hence, museum bodies, anatomical specimens, relics, Goth jewelry, plastinated cadavers, war trophies, private curios, and art pieces may not reflect a preoccupation with death and dying, but more of a need to put the undisposed dead in spaces where they can be revitalized for our entertainment, our education, and our own continuity.

### **Corpora Futurum: Potential Areas of Research**

This research strives to provide a broad historical and contemporary overview of our relationship with the undisposed dead body, but there are still many areas that beg further analysis and investigation. There are major gaps in the academic literature that reflect inherent tensions and confusion over the fact that human remains are in high

demand and yet, at the same time, are subjects of anxiety, ethical dilemmas, and constantly changing policies. As well, there are major discrepancies between the management of human remains within various institutions and the use of human remains in the public domain, where, as my research shows, these remains are popular and ubiquitous.

That human remains are ‘items’ that can be easily purchased, sold, and exhibited by the general public outside the boundaries of established institutions is a subject that has largely been ignored. Hence, the networks that process, sell, and trade human remains are rich areas to explore and uncover because they include a multitude of participants with worldwide impact. There are Catholic nuns who continue to manufacture human relics for contemporary use (at the Monasterium Santa Luciae in Silici, Rome: personal communication Fr. Carlos Martins, 2012), anatomists and biomedical technicians who make specimens, new and emerging artists who are using the cadaver in a variety of ways (for example Teresa Margolles and Sigrid Sarda – see Art Daily.org; sigridsarda.blogspot.ca), shop owners whose businesses and networks have expanded with increased sales of human remains, as well as nefarious traders who have created modern forms of ‘bodysnatching’ (see Chapter Four; also [www.icij.org](http://www.icij.org)).

There are still many areas in need of research regarding the modern use of relics for practicing Catholics. Scholarly discussion of the current processing and circulation of relics appears almost nonexistent. More often than not, relics are disregarded, presented as historical artifacts that have long ago “cast off their religious associations” (Walsham 2010:140). Any discussion of relics in current day practices situates them as antiquities

(see Woolf 2003), and not as the vitally important, representatives of socially active members of the Catholic Church.

Lastly and most notably, while so many anthropologists are involved with the examination and exhumation of human remains, the literature on the discipline's relationship with the dead body, within and beyond institutional parameters, is not as robust as, for example, the literature on the history of medicine. For well over a century, public and private museums and universities across Europe and North America were the storerooms housing osteological collections, archaeological bodies, and Indigenous remains, amassed through anthropological fieldwork and research (Lurie 1981; Stocking 1985). Like medical anatomists, many anthropologists have dissected, studied, and collected the dead. Those anthropological bodies, the dead and the living, the criminal and the exotic, were compelling sites of meaning where violent intent, race and evolution were measured and portrayed. Furthermore, it was apparent that many anthropologists, like anatomists and artists, had their own private collections of human remains, some of which were donated to universities and museums (Urry 1989), used as displays for conferences (Gibson and Rafter 2006; Kaluszynski 2006), or sold to fund projects outside the interests of their employers (see Stocking 1985). An exploration of some of these historic and personal collections, how they were acquired, and where they ended up, would contribute to the literature on the history of anthropology, as well as to an understanding of why human remains have come to be an inherent part of physical anthropology's institutional identity. It would also be important to note how anthropology has contributed to at least part of the institutional discourse on the significance of the

dead body in terms of its spatial relationships among the living, notions of power, value, and identity, and its movement within extensive exchange networks worldwide.

Despite this long and intense relationship with the undisposed dead, anthropological discussions of human remains as material culture tend to be largely ethnohistoric descriptions of tribal, warrior and funerary rituals. The practices of trading, displaying, and collecting human remains are recorded as past traditions belonging to the prehistoric, or historic ‘other’. These descriptions persistently avoid comparisons with the current use of human remains as a phenomenon in Western culture, and least of all, within the discipline itself. Nevertheless, current archaeological, forensic, and osteological practices still rely on amassing the human remains of their subjects, and these certainly amount to increasing one’s knowledge, membership in professional networks, and prestige. Even within a post-NAGPRA era, collections of Indigenous remains are still considered vital though fraught with political issues (Nash and Chanthaphonh 2010; Durand 2010), while historic cemeteries, old museum collections, and new laboratory specimens continue to provide important research data. Moreover, there are university collections across North America housing remains that are racially and socially biased, with missing, or incomplete records of their origin, and which are still used to derive forensic data (Komar and Grivas 2008; Hunt and Albanese 2005).

In light of the ubiquity of human remains within and beyond institutional boundaries, another valuable question would be to ask anthropologists what their own spatial and cultural relationships are with the dead bodies they are exhuming, collecting, and studying, and how these continue to shape and define their discipline. According to

Jay from Skulls Unlimited International Inc. (see [www.skullsunlimited.com](http://www.skullsunlimited.com)) and Ron Cauble of the Bone Room (personal communication August 2012), anthropologists continue to be their most popular clients, purchasing a variety of skeletal remains as educational tools, as well as for “personal use”. Thus, rather than the ethnohistoric descriptions of the tribal ‘other’ involving human remains as trophies and talismans, Western anthropologists have a rich field to explore at home among the complex exchange networks of which they are themselves inherently a part.

## Appendix I – Certificate of Ethics Clearance

MREB Clearance Certificate

Page 1 of 1

 <p><b>McMaster University</b> Leading Innovation and Discovery</p>	<p><b>McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB)</b> c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support, MREB Secretariat, GH-305, e-mail: <a href="mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca">ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca</a></p> <p><b>CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS CLEARANCE TO INVOLVE HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH</b></p>		
<p>Application Status: New <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Addendum <input type="checkbox"/> Project Number: <input type="text" value="2012 081"/></p>			
<p><b>TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT:</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Trophies and Talismans: The Art of Human Remains</p>			
<b>Faculty Investigator (s)/ Supervisor(s)</b>	<b>Dept./Address</b>	<b>Phone</b>	<b>E-Mail</b>
A. Herring	Anthropology	23915	<a href="mailto:herring@mcmaster.ca">herring@mcmaster.ca</a>
<b>Student Investigator(s)</b>	<b>Dept./Address</b>	<b>Phone</b>	<b>E-Mail</b>
M. Nafte	Anthropology	416-322-3056	<a href="mailto:naftem@mcmaster.ca">naftem@mcmaster.ca</a>
<p>The application in support of the above research project has been reviewed by the MREB to ensure compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the McMaster University Policies and Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants. The following ethics certification is provided by the MREB:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The application protocol is cleared as presented without questions or requests for modification.</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The application protocol is cleared as revised without questions or requests for modification.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The application protocol is cleared subject to clarification and/or modification as appended or identified below:</p>			
<p><b>COMMENTS AND CONDITIONS: Ongoing clearance is contingent on completing the annual completed/status report. A "Change Request" or amendment must be made and cleared before any alterations are made to the research.</b></p>			
<b>Reporting Frequency:</b>		<b>Annual:</b> <input type="text" value="May-22-2013"/>	<b>Other:</b>
<b>Date:</b> <input type="text" value="May-22-2012"/>		<b>Chair, Dr. Br. Detlor:</b> 	

## Appendix II – Letter of Information/Consent: Artists

### LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT A Study of Human Remains in Contemporary Art

**Principal Investigator:**

Myriam Nafte  
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**Supervisor:**

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Department of Anth.  
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Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am currently underway with research for my PhD dissertation at McMaster University. The working title of the thesis is: **Trophies and Talismans: The Traffic of Human Remains**, and I would very much like to include discussions of your work, along with the works of Joel-Peter Witkin, Mark Prent, Wayne Martin Belger, Andrew Krasnow, and Al Farrow.

My research will entail an interview with you (the length of time to be discussed), and ideally include images of your work and studio space. My dissertation attempts to highlight your work by emphasizing that it is part of a culturally embedded tradition of displaying the undisposed dead. Since your artwork integrates human remains, it provides a rich context in which to examine my theories regarding the contemporary use of human remains in Western society. Upon your request, I will provide you with an overview of my research, as well as any material I write that discusses your work, in an agreed upon format.

With this in mind, let me know your thoughts, and if this is at all feasible. If you do agree to an interview, I have included a Letter of Consent that will need to be signed, or verbally agreed to, prior to the interview.

If I cannot get to you for a face-to-face interview, I hope a telephone, or Skype one will be suitable. Any material that I collect from our interview and research, including photographs and transcripts, will be kept secure and not destroyed, unless you request this. I intend to use your real name unless you request anonymity.

The proposed start date is June 1<sup>st</sup> 2012 until the end of December 2012. Please let me know if there are any dates in between this time that will be suitable. The time allotted for an interview will be based on your availability, and time constraints. If there are issues around scheduling an interview between these dates, we can make alternative arrangements that are more suitable.

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance.

If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the research is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat  
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142  
c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support  
E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)

Thank you.  
Myriam Nafte

**CONSENT**

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about research being conducted by Myriam Nafte, of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this research, and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree to participate in this research, I may withdraw from the project at any time or up until approximately December 01, 2012.
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- I agree to participate in the research.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant (Printed): \_\_\_\_\_

| 1. I agree that the interview can be audio recorded.  
... Yes.  
... No.

2. I agree that my real name can be used in the research and dissertation  
... Yes  
... No

3. I agree that images of my art work can be used in the dissertation in association with the research and interview  
... Yes  
... No

4. Yes, I would like to receive a summary of the research results.

Please send them to this email address: \_\_\_\_\_

or to this mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

... No, I do not want to receive a summary of the research results.

| 5. I agree to be contacted about a follow-up interview, and understand that I can always decline the request.  
... Yes. Please contact me at: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix III – Letter of Information/Consent: Clergy

### LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT

#### A Study of Human Remains in Contemporary Society

**Principal Investigator:**

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**Supervisor:**

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Dear (Member of the Clergy),

I am currently underway with research for my PhD dissertation at McMaster University. The working title of the thesis is: **Trophies and Talismans: The Traffic of Human Remains**, and I would very much like to include discussions of religious relics.

My research will entail an interview with you (the length of time to be discussed), that focuses on the relevance of relics in contemporary life within the Catholic Church and among parishioners. It will also ideally include images of any relics that may be within your church, or part of its history. My research attempts to highlight the importance of religious relics as part of a culturally embedded tradition in Western culture, as opposed to one that has long been discarded.

With this in mind, please let me know if you are interested in being interviewed for this research. If you agree to an interview in person, I have included a Letter of Consent that I will ask you to read and sign after you've had a chance to ask any further questions. If it is more convenient for you to be interviewed by telephone you can verbally consent to participate prior to the interview.

Any material that I collect from our interview, including photographs of relics and transcripts, will be kept secure and not destroyed, unless you request this. I intend to use your real name unless you request anonymity.

The proposed start date is July 1<sup>st</sup> 2012 until the end of December 2012. Please let me know if there are any dates during this period that are suitable to you. We can conduct the interview at a mutually agreeable time and location. The length of time allotted for an interview will be based on your availability, and time constraints. If there are issues around scheduling an interview between these dates, we can make alternative arrangements that will work with your schedule.

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance.

If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the research is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat  
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142  
c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support  
E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)

Thank you.  
Myriam Nafte

**CONSENT**

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about research being conducted by Myriam Nafte, of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this research, and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree to participate in this research, I may withdraw from the project at any time or up until approximately December 01, 2012.
- I have been given a copy of this Letter of information and Consent form.
- I agree to participate in the research.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant (Printed): \_\_\_\_\_

- | 1. I agree that the interview can be audio recorded.  
... Yes.  
... No.
2. I agree that my real name can be used in the research and dissertation  
... Yes  
... No
3. I agree that images of relics in my church can be used in the dissertation in association with the research and interview  
... Yes  
... No
4. Yes, I would like to receive a summary of the research results.
- Please send them to this email address: \_\_\_\_\_  
or to this mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- ... No, I do not want to receive a summary of the research results.
- | 5. I agree to be contacted about a follow-up interview, and understand that I can always decline the request.  
... Yes. Please contact me at: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix IV – Questions for Artists

### Questions for Individual Interviews

*Examples of Leading Questions for the individual artist:*

*\*please note that these questions will all hinge on specific details about each artist.*

- 1) \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ described your work as both ‘horrifying and mesmerizing’. What do you think of this description? Why would he find it horrifying?
- 2) Your work was banned from \_\_\_\_\_. Why? What do you think about this? Why do you think it caused such an uproar?
- 3) Your gallery website describes you as ‘obsessed with life’. Can you describe this connection between your work and life?
- 4) Much of your work has a great deal of religious symbolism. Why?
- 5) What is the symbolism of the \_\_\_\_\_ (name of the body part used in the work) in your piece titled \_\_\_\_\_?
- 6) Describe your latest work (series) titled \_\_\_\_\_.
- 7) Tell me about the show in \_\_\_\_\_. How was it received? How do you think it went?
- 8) Do you think your work helps people cope with death? How might it diminish, or enhance their understanding of death?
- 9) How do you feel about your work?
- 10) How do you feel about handling human remains?

*Examples of Open-ended and Closed-ended Questions and Probes*

- 1) Is this piece about life or death?
- 2) How long have you used human remains in your work?
- 3) Why do you use human remains in your work?
- 4) Where do you get these remains?

- 5) Are they purchased? If so, are they expensive? Are they easy to procure?
- 6) Is your work regarded as controversial? Has the reaction to your work changed?
- 7) What inspired you to use human remains in your art?
- 8) Do you think these remains make your work more powerful? Why? Why not?
- 9) Is there more of a fascination with your work when human remains are used? Why do you think this is the case?
- 10) What statement are you making with this particular piece?
- 11) What do you think is different about your work when you integrate human remains?
- 12) What sort of feedback have you gotten from the public over those pieces containing human remains?
- 13) Do you intend to continue using human remains in your work?

## **Appendix V – Questions for Clergy**

### **Questions for Individual Interviews (Catholic Clergy)**

*Examples of Leading and Open-ended Questions for the individual:*

- 1) Does your church contain relics?
- 2) Are relics important to your church and congregation?
- 3) If so, how are they important?
- 4) What function do relics serve in your church?
- 5) Can you describe why relics were, or are, so important?
- 6) Are there relics in the altar of your church? If so, why? How many?
- 7) Do you venerate saintly relics? If so, why?
- 8) What is important for non-Catholics to understand about the contemporary use of relics?
- 9) How do you feel about relics in your church?
- 10) How do you personally feel about handling human remains?

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