

The Forensic Aesthetic in Art

by

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I declare that this essay is my own work
and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by means
of complete references.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

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Introduction

The ‘forensic aesthetic’ presents the viewer with traces and debris – the residue that haunts sites of transgression, violence and death. In his book *Scene of the Crime*, art critic and curator Ralph Rugoff (1997:62) defines the forensic aesthetic as follows:

Inextricably linked to an unseen history, this type of art embodies a fractured relationship to time. Like a piece of evidence, its present appearance is haunted by an indeterminate past, which we confront in the alienated form of fossilized and fragmented remnants.

Through its play on seemingly insignificant details, clues and traces, the forensic aesthetic suggests that meaning is dispersed, fragmentary and uncertain. According to Rugoff (1997:17), the forensic aesthetic “aims to engage the viewer in a process of mental reconstruction”. It compels the viewer to adopt a ‘forensic gaze’: to sift through broken narratives and fragments of information, reading the artwork as one might read a sample of evidence. Rugoff (1997:62) argues that:

[S]uch art insists that ‘content is something that can’t be seen’ ... it requires that the viewer arrive at an interpretation by examining traces and marks and reading them as clues. In addition, it is marked by a strong sense of aftermath. ... Taken as a whole, this art puts us in a position akin to that of [the] forensic anthropologist or scientist, forcing us to speculatively piece together histories that remain largely invisible to the eye.

One might argue that some of the earliest known examples of the forensic aesthetic in art presented themselves in the Renaissance period in the form of the pseudo-forensic anatomical drawings of Leonardo da Vinci. In his *Studies of the Hand* (fig. 1), for example, Da Vinci methodically represents the underlying structures of the human hand in a series of drawings that are scattered intermittently across the page. The

remainder of the page is covered with hand-written notations. In this work, the artist approaches the human body with a scientific, almost forensic, gaze. Here the body is presented in fragments, rather than as a whole. According to Rugoff (1997:86&88), the forensic aesthetic addresses the body “not as a coherent whole but as a site of prior actions ... as a dispersed territory of clues and traces”. When read in terms of the mode of the forensic aesthetic, Da Vinci’s *Studies of the Hand* may be said to look at the human body as forensic object. In this way, this work may be said to speak of the manner in which the forensic gaze operates in the context of the artwork.

Throughout the following essay, I discuss the various ways in which the forensic aesthetic manifests itself in art. I have necessarily been selective in the artworks that I have chosen for discussion, as this topic is very broad indeed. In Chapter One, I explore the tradition of the forensic aesthetic in art by way of a select number of artworks. This chapter focuses on investigating the way in which these works, whether consciously or unconsciously, speak of associations between violence and representation through the mode of the forensic aesthetic.

The contents of Chapter Two concentrate on the work of South African artist Kathryn Smith. Smith’s work may be said to possess a forensic quality, in that it references forensic practices and techniques. Her work has not been the topic of a lengthy monograph, but it has been considered in various exhibition catalogues, reviews¹ and articles. For example, an essay by Colin Richards entitled ‘Dead Certainties’ (2004)

¹ Reviews by Brenda Atkinson include ‘Phantom Presences’ (2000) and ‘Dealing in Death’ (1998), both of which were published in the *Mail & Guardian*. Similarly, reviews by Nina Johnson, which appeared in the *Sunday Independent*, include ‘Existential Enigmas and Mortal Malapropisms’ (1999) as well as ‘Prepare to be shocked, then bask in beauty’ (1998). A short article by Colin Richards, which focuses on the *Euphemism* exhibition, is included in the book *10 Years 100 Artists* (2004). A number of reviews have also appeared on the website www.artthrob.co.za, one of which is Sean O’Toole’s ‘I’ve got you under my skin’ (2004).

investigates the forensic quality of Smith's imagery in terms of its play on notions of the trace. Similarly, an article by Maureen de Jager, entitled 'Evidence and Artifice' (2004), examines the manner in which Smith's work transgresses the boundaries between 'forensics and fantasy'. In her book, *Through the Looking Glass* (2004), Brenda Schmahmann addresses Smith's *Still Life* series (figs. 9, 10, 11) in relation to the issue of self-representation, exploring the relationship between the 'self' and the body as 'other'. Lastly, a review by James Sey, which was published in *Art/South Africa* (2004), considers Smith's work in terms of its aesthetic appeal, which serves as a framing device for the uncomfortable subject matter that informs the bulk of her imagery.

My reading of Kathryn Smith's work departs from and expands on the available literature in that it focuses on the manner in which her images comment self-critically on the act of representation. I have chosen to focus on Smith's work in particular, as it uses the mode of the forensic aesthetic to speak of the field of artistic practice – a motif that runs throughout my own body of work as well. Moreover, Smith's work, like my own work, may be said to engage with the forensic aesthetic in a South African context. In Chapter Two, I compare a number of Smith's works to the artworks discussed in Chapter One, and examine the manner in which they speak of the links between art and crime. Chapter Three concentrates on outlining the ways in which my own work reads off the conventions of forensic investigation. In this chapter I discuss the manner in which my work, by way of a forensic approach, draws parallels between the medium of photography and the mechanisms of trauma. I focus on works that have been included in my Master's exhibition, *Vigil* (2005).

The following essay is a study in representations of violence in art. In the course of this essay, I contextualize the forensic aesthetic as a mode of representation, as well as address the manner in which the forensic aesthetic seems to allow for, even facilitate, self-conscious reflection on the practices of representation itself.

Chapter One

The Historical Mode of the Forensic Aesthetic

In this chapter I discuss a number of artworks that may be said to adopt a forensic aesthetic. I explore the way in which these works absorb the viewer in a reconstructive process of meaning production, as well as investigate the manner in which they speak of the parallels between criminal and artistic practice. In so doing, I hope to contextualize the historical mode of the forensic aesthetic more thoroughly, as well as to introduce specific themes that will be expanded on in my reading of Kathryn Smith's work in Chapter Two.

A forensic aesthetic is by no means limited to contemporary art, and Rembrandt van Rijn's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (fig. 2), for example, is a key example of its manifestation in the seventeenth century. This painting represents the dissection of the left hand and forearm of a man named Aris Kindt – a criminal who was executed for committing robbery (Clark 2005). The surgeon, Doctor Tulp, is shown seated on the far side of the corpse, surrounded by a crowd of students and spectators, many of whom are referring to a large medical book that rests at the foot of the dissecting table. The dissection depicted in this painting can be read as a staged performance – a public spectacle structured around the spectator or onlooker. Art historians Martin Kemp and Marina Wallace (2000:23) note:

Dissection of the human body ... was for much of its history not primarily a technical process conducted for teaching, research or autopsies. Nor were dissections most commonly undertaken in the privacy of dissecting rooms in medical institutions. Rather, the opening up of a body was a ritual act, a

performance staged for particular audiences within carefully monitored frameworks of legal and religious regulation.

The theatrical quality of the subject matter in *The Anatomy Lesson* may be said to draw the viewer into the artwork. For example, two of the figures depicted in the painting look directly at the viewer, making the viewer seem like a confidant. One might argue that the viewer becomes a member of the crowd as s/he stands before the painting. This dialectic between the artwork and the viewer, however, is paradoxical in that the viewer is simultaneously conscious of his or her absence from the event. As Rugoff (1997:84) notes: “We are left to ponder a realm of ‘live’ experience to which we have no direct access but can only know through different types of traces, all framed by theatrical artifice.” One might argue that it is this simultaneous sense of removal and immediacy that allows for an objectivity or impersonality that lends itself to the forensic gaze.

At the same time, however, the combined feeling of removal and immediacy, or intimacy, enables the viewer to adopt a voyeuristic gaze.¹ During the period in which *The Anatomy Lesson* was painted, dissection of the human body was considered a violation not only because of the incisions made by the surgeon’s scalpel, but also because of the piercing gaze of the public (Kemp & Wallace 2000:27). As a result, dissection was regarded as a punishment fit only for those who were convicted of serious crimes (Kemp & Wallace 2000:27).² Cultural theorist Mark Seltzer (1998:1) speaks of “the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma and the wound”. He argues that

¹ Feminist writer Laura Mulvey (1989:16) defines voyeurism as a “pleasure in looking”, involving “taking other people as objects [and] subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze”.

² In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Michel Foucault (1975:124) observes that “[p]athological anatomy had had no more than a shadowy existence, on the edge of prohibition”.

in “the pathological public sphere”, public spectacle becomes a means of realizing private desire (Seltzer 1998:31). The crowd depicted in *The Anatomy Lesson* conveys this sense of morbid fascination and, in so doing, draws attention to the invasiveness of the viewer’s voyeuristic gaze.

In *The Anatomy Lesson*, the surgeon is shown holding a pair of tweezers in his right hand, while his left hand demonstrates the anatomical workings of the corpse’s left hand. By way of this gesture, the left hand of the surgeon mirrors the left hand of the corpse, and places further emphasis on the intricate mechanisms of the human hand. Kemp and Wallace (2000:25) state that for the surgeon, the hand was “revered as the ‘instrument of instruments’”. One might argue that, through this imagery, Rembrandt allegorizes the practice of painting. That is to say, he draws parallels between the surgeon’s hand and the painter’s hand, between the surgical instruments and the brush itself.

In his book *Courbet’s Realism*, art historian Michael Fried (1990:105) proposes that the work of Gustave Courbet contains “displaced or metaphorical representations of the painter-beholder’s hands engaged in the act of painting”. He argues that Courbet’s work may be interpreted as “representing, indirectly or metaphorically, the painter-beholder’s physical and psychical engagement in the activity of painting and, ultimately, his desire to transport himself as if bodily into the work taking shape before him” (Fried 1990:152). Fried expands on this argument in his *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration* (1987) by way of an analysis of Thomas Eakins’ *The Gross Clinic* (fig. 3). *The Gross Clinic*, like *The Anatomy Lesson*, depicts a surgical procedure being carried out before an audience. The surgeon, Doctor Samuel David

Gross, stands beside his patient holding a bloodied scalpel in his right hand, while his assistants perform the operation itself. Fried (1987:15) notes that “Gross’s stance and demeanour may be seen as analogous to those of a painter who, brush in hand and concentrating hard, has momentarily stepped back or turned partly away from a canvas on which he has been working”. Fried (1987:15) goes on to argue:

In this connection the startlingly illusionistic depiction of the bright red blood on Gross’s right hand may be taken as alluding to – almost as representing – the actual crimson paint that was a primary means of that illusion, as if blood and paint were tokens of one another.

When viewed in this context, *The Gross Clinic* may be said to speak allegorically of the act of representation, or more specifically, of the act of painting. As Fried (1987:88) notes: “[The scalpel] poised in Gross’s sanguine right hand and bearing on the tip of its blade a touch of blood ... refers, by means of an irresistible analogy, to that of painting.” One might conclude that in the works of both Eakins and Rembrandt, the metaphorical representation of the painter is translated through the link between the marking of canvas and the marking of flesh – the “archaic” act of inscription (Leader in Smith 2004:23).

Similarly, in Jacques-Louis David’s *The Death of Marat* (fig. 4) – considered to be “one of art history’s most famous crime scenes” – the lifeless figure of Marat is shown suspended in the act of writing (Rugoff 1997:94). As in *The Anatomy Lesson*, and indeed *The Gross Clinic*, the viewer’s attention is drawn towards the figure’s hands. He holds a blood-stained piece of paper in his left hand and a quill in his right hand, which rests on the floor next to the murder weapon – a knife. A striking contrast is created between the quill and the knife due to their close proximity. Similarly, the

blood from the wound on his chest merges with the ink on the pages that lie scattered around his corpse.³

Seltzer (1998:39) speaks of “[t]he commutability of the scene of writing and the scene of the crime ... the blurring of the frontier between word counts and body counts”. He argues that the scene of the crime often discloses “a series of promiscuous substitutions between bodies and representations ... between, most literally, ink and blood” (Seltzer 1998:45&46). In *The Death of Marat*, the act of committing a crime becomes bound up in the act of writing and, by extension, in the act of painting. This work, through the merging of paint, ink and blood, speaks of the act of inscription, the act of making a mark on a surface, whether it is canvas, paper or skin. The French writer and artist Henri Michaux (in Baudrillard 1996:1) stated: “The artist is ... the one who, with all his might, resists the fundamental drive not to leave traces.” *The Death of Marat* may be said to self-reflexively examine this impulse in the context of the crime scene.

By contrast, Marcel Duchamp’s *Etant Donnés* (fig. 6) may be read as an example of the way in which sexualised depictions of the female body are sometimes realized through the mode of the forensic aesthetic. This work represents the naked figure of a mannequin sprawled across a mound of dried branches and leaves. The lush greenery that forms the backdrop of this work contrasts strongly with the stark scene that occupies the foreground, and serves to emphasize a sense of death and decay. The figure of the mannequin itself has been cropped. Its head and limbs are obscured from

³ The manner in which David depicts Marat’s wounded chest is somewhat reminiscent of Caravaggio’s depiction of the wound in Christ’s side in *The Doubting of St. Thomas* (fig. 5). In *The Death of Marat*, it is almost as if the viewer, like Thomas, is invited to pierce the folds of the painting’s skin. Art historian Mieke Bal (1999:6) refers to this style of painting as a “baroque engagement with surface”.

the viewer by the peephole through which one is forced to view the work. By including this device, Duchamp creates a 'keyhole aesthetic' that encourages the adoption of a voyeuristic gaze (Jay 1993:289).⁴ In his book *Transgressions: The Offences of Art*, Anthony Julius (2002:67) states that "*Etant Donnés* ... is a savage restatement of that dual rite of voyeurism and aesthetic contemplation".

Under the viewer's voyeuristic gaze, the female nude becomes the fetishized object that appears in this work.⁵ One might argue that the voyeuristic gaze of the viewer fragments the object to the extent that the object is rendered lifeless by this gaze. In this sense, both the artist and the viewer/voyeur are implicated in the 'crime'. As Rugoff (1997:96) notes:

It is as if by simply watching a violent assault ... we become identified with the perpetrator's actions so that they seem to enact our own secret impulses. ... We are indirectly reminded here that on one level the crime scene functions as a hub of pleasure.

In his *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno (1974:111) stated that: "Every work of art is an uncommitted crime." In so doing, he drew attention to the manner in which the artwork allows for the expression of the transgressive or violent. For example, in Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed* (fig. 7) the act of painting begins to resemble the act of committing a crime. The paint-splattered surfaces of the sheets, pillow and quilt become traces of the violent gestural strokes of the artist – as do the ink scribbles that line the upper edges of the bed. The paint takes on a blood-like quality, and the

⁴ In his *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre (1966:319-320) wrote a famous account of the voyeur shamefully caught looking through the keyhole. Visual theorist Martin Jay (1993:289) refers to this account in discussing Duchamp's *Etant Donnés*.

⁵ Mulvey (1989:10) notes that, in Freudian terms, fetishism "involves displacing the sight of woman's imaginary castration onto a variety of reassuring but often surprising objects – shoes, corsets, rubber gloves, belts, knickers and so on".

bed takes on the appearance of a crime scene. In speaking of Rauschenberg's *Bed*, Rugoff (1997:67) draws attention to "the idea of art as a residue of violent activity", and states: "Savagely besmirched, the bed evoke[s] an arena of prior turbulence, even terror." As in David's *The Death of Marat*, this work confuses the boundaries "between flesh and blood and symbol" (Seltzer 1998:186). The merging of paint, ink and blood is realized through the defacing or branding gestures of the artist – a marking or inscribing of the canvas/skin.

What all of these artworks may be argued to share is their allegorical or metaphorical reference to the "rapport between death and representation" (Seltzer 1998:37).

Through the motif of the wounded body, each of these works speaks allegorically of the nature of representation: of inscription and erasure. One might in fact argue that it is precisely in this "double movement" of inscription and erasure that the artist and the criminal find common ground (Seltzer 1998:36). Julius (2002:225) observes: "Were they not artists, one might say, these men ... might have made superlative criminals. Art works substitute for crimes. The uncommitted crime is the realized artwork."

The relationship between art and crime may be said to serve as a leitmotif in the work of Kathryn Smith. In Chapter Two, I discuss the manner in which the overlaps between violence and representation are explored in a number of Smith's works, as well as examine the way in which such explorations enable Smith to comment self-reflexively on the nature of representation itself.

Chapter Two

The Aesthetics of Violence in the Work of Kathryn Smith

In speaking of the *Euphemism* exhibition (2004-2005) in an interview, Kathryn Smith (in De Jager 2004:29) commented:

My work, contrary to popular belief, does not deal exclusively in death. ... It does respond to violence, whether social, historical, cultural, aesthetic and so on, but is actually fundamentally concerned with representation.

In the following chapter, I examine a number of Smith's works in relation to the artworks discussed in Chapter One, elaborating on certain themes, among them: theatricality, the marking of the canvas/skin, voyeurism and the trace. In so doing, I hope to systematically address the manner in which Smith uses the mode of the forensic aesthetic for the purposes of her own investigations of the link between art and crime/murder. Moreover, I hope to emphasize that Smith's work, while exploring numerous issues and motifs, is ultimately about representation, as she herself notes. As many of the works included in *Euphemism* arose from the performance piece *Jack in Johannesburg* (fig. 8), it seems appropriate to begin the chapter with a discussion of this work.

Jack in Johannesburg took place in the Luytens Room of the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2003. It explored the claim – made by crime writer Patricia Cornwell – that Walter Sickert, a nineteenth-century British painter, was Jack the Ripper, the first

serial murderer to be documented.¹ During the performance, Smith's upper left arm was tattooed with the phrase 'Never look for unicorns until you've run out of ponies'. Handkerchiefs bearing a monogram that matches those of both Sickert and the Ripper were used for blotting the tattoo. The cast, dressed in Victorian fashion, moved about the gallery documenting the spectacle by means of photographs and video footage.

Jack in Johannesburg was a theatrical performance, staged within a fantasy space that was carefully constructed around an audience. The muted lighting, the elaborate costumes and the dramatic setting served to draw the viewers into what Richards (2004:16) describes as a scene of "quiet, perverse pleasure". One might argue that *Jack in Johannesburg*, like *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (fig. 2), allowed for a merging of public spectacle and private desire.² As such, this work may be said to mirror the Ripper case itself. As Seltzer (1998:9) notes:

Only two things are known for certain about the Ripper case. There was for a time a series of torn and opened bodies of too public women on the public streets. ... And there was a series of more than 300 letters (none authenticated) mailed to the London press, signed Jack the Ripper. In such cases, the boundaries come down between private desire and public life, along with the boundaries between private bodies and the public media.

Jack in Johannesburg explored this blurring between the public and the private through a kind of 'dark tourism': a delving into the transgressive or violent which has

¹ Cf. Cornwell, P. 2002. *Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper, Case Closed*. London: Time Warner Books.

² It should be noted, incidentally, that in terms of its subject matter, *Jack in Johannesburg* bears a striking resemblance to both *The Anatomy Lesson* and *The Gross Clinic* (fig. 3). In this context, Smith's body begins to read as a corpse being inscribed and dissected by a voyeuristic gaze.

become commonplace in a culture in which serial or 'signature' killers attain celebrity status.³ Seltzer (1998:1) argues that:

Serial killing has its place in a public culture in which addictive violence has become not merely a collective spectacle but one of the crucial sites where private desire and public fantasy cross. The convening of the public around scenes of violence – the rushing to the scene of the accident, the milling around the point of impact – has come to make up a *wound culture*.

In *Jack in Johannesburg*, as in *The Death of Marat* (fig. 4), connections between paint, ink and blood proliferate – most notably in the tattoo inscribed on Smith's left arm. Here the act of tattooing literally transforms skin into canvas, blurring the boundaries between representation, writing and corporeal violence. Similarly, the monogram on the handkerchiefs used to dab the blood and ink from Smith's arm, is itself a kind of tattoo. The monogram, like the handwriting used in the tattoo, was sampled from one of the letters thought to have been written by the Ripper (Richards 2004:18). It is important to note that a number of the Ripper letters are stained with blood. In the *Dear Boss* letter – received by the Central News Agency on September 27, 1888 – the writer actually makes reference to his use of "red ink" (Ryder 2005). When read in this context, the act of tattooing speaks of the compulsion to make an inscription or mark. In discussing this compulsion, Smith (2004:23) quotes a passage from Darian Leader's *Stealing the Mona*

Lisa (2002):

The pressure ... is to make some sort of mark, suggesting that at those times when we have an experience of being overwhelmed, it is not simply a question of making sense of it, of giving it a meaning, but just of making an inscription.

³ The phrase 'dark tourism' was coined by Malcolm Foley and John Lennon in their book *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* (2000). In this book, Foley and Lennon raise questions as to why sites associated with violence and death – such as Auschwitz or Hiroshima – become popular tourist destinations.

Obviously human beings respond to painful circumstances by trying to make narratives out of them, but this notion of inscription is far more archaic. Something can be fixed or arrested by making a mark.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Smith's earlier *Still Life* series (figs. 9, 10, 11) – photographs in which she projected forensic images of dead victims onto her own seemingly lifeless form. In this series, as in *Jack in Johannesburg*, Smith's body becomes a canvas; she appropriates the bruises, scars and wounds of others and transcribes them onto her own skin. These photographs, moreover, may be said to speak of the manner in which the gaze of the viewer/voyeur inscribes the object of its attention. As Richards (2004:11) notes: "There is also a very real sense of flaying skin in these images, suggesting not so much passive vision but vision that penetrates and cuts into the visual field." One might argue that this series, like Duchamp's *Etant Donnés* (fig. 6), suggests a type of looking that is inherently violent. In discussing the voyeuristic gaze, James Elkins (1996:27) states: "This seeing is aggressive: it distorts what it looks at, and it turns a person into an object. ... Here seeing is not only possessing ... seeing is also controlling and objectifying and denigrating. In short, it is an act of violence and it creates pain."

Similarly, the *Still Life* series may be said to explore associations between the camera's capacity to fix or arrest motion and death itself. In this work, the frozen immobility of the photographic image is brought into stark contrast with the lifelessness of the corpse. In his book *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes (1984:32) comments: "Photography is ... a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead." Barthes (1984:14) argues that when one poses for a photograph, one is in the process of becoming an image, an object, and, as the camera's shutter clicks, one experiences a form of death. Barthes (1984:14) makes

this point emphatically: “what society makes of my photograph, what it reads there, I do not know ... but when I discover myself in the product of this operation, what I see is that I have become Total-Image, which is to say, Death in person.” One might argue that in the *Still Life* series, Smith self-reflexively comments on the nature of photography by “imaging herself made up as death” (Richards 2004:11).

In her *Memento Mori* (figs. 12, 13), a work that was included in *Euphemism*, Smith portrays herself in much the same way. Her inert figure spreads across a number of panels, which makes it appear fragmented or dismembered, much like the figure in Duchamp’s *Etant Donnés*. Her skin has been darkened with make-up in order to convey a sense of decay. Similarly, her body is covered with tiny bronze insects, signifiers of death and decomposition.⁴ The monogrammed handkerchiefs used in *Jack in Johannesburg* also appear in this work, as traces or clues in a crime scene – as does the Victorian nightdress and the tattoo. In one of the *Memento Mori* photographs, the artist clasps a bunch of grapes in her hand; in another, the grapes are shown resting beside her feet.⁵

In *Memento Mori*, as in the *Still Life* series, the dominating imagery is that of death and decay, and the corpse itself is central to this imagery. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin (1998:216-218) argues that the corpse is

⁴ Here Smith makes reference to the *Vanitas* tradition in the Dutch still life paintings of the Baroque period. These painters would portray “objects that could be interpreted as reminders of human mortality: most commonly, a human skull; perhaps a candle or an oil lamp sometimes with its wick still smoking, an hourglass, or a pocket watch; or emblematic or biblical references” (Muller 1997:431).

⁵ It has been suggested that Jack the Ripper offered his victims grapes in order to convince them to accompany him, as grapes were difficult to come by in nineteenth-century London and were considered an indulgence of the wealthy upper classes (Vanderlinden 2002). According to Richards (2004:12), the grapes in *Memento Mori* may also be read as an allegorical reference to Caravaggio’s self-portrait, *Satyr with Grapes* (fig. 14). Caravaggio himself, it has been noted, led a “life full of violence and conflicts with legal authorities” (König 1998:6).

fundamentally empty and meaningless, and, as such, is profoundly allegorical in nature. Benjamin (1998:217) states:

[I]f it is in death that the spirit becomes free, in the manner of spirits, it is not until then that the body too comes properly into its own. For this much is self-evident: the allegorization of the physis can only be carried through in all its vigour in respect of the corpse.

Benjamin argues that allegory is realized through a sublime mortification of beauty and semblance which he terms the 'expressionless' (Menninghaus 1993:167).⁶ He emphasizes that it is only in this "process of decay" that one encounters "multiplicity of meaning" (Benjamin 1998:177&179). For Benjamin, the corpse, as a mortified object, is an embodiment of the expressionless (Menninghaus 1993:167&168). In an essay entitled 'Walter Benjamin's Variations of Imagelessness', Winfried Menninghaus (1993:167) states: "As the alive body is the model of beautiful semblance, so is the corpse that of the 'decline of semblance'." One might argue that the lifeless figure that appears in Smith's *Memento Mori* is the product of this "critical demolition of living beauty" (Menninghaus 1993:167). Indeed this figure may be said to point to the viewer's own involvement in this critical process, and draw attention to the manner in which he or she produces meaning. As Menninghaus (1993:170) notes: "In Benjamin's sublime, death turns from a tribunal of terror into a moment of critique."

In Smith's *Psychogeographies: The Washing Away of Wrongs* (fig. 15), the viewer, by contrast, is confronted with an absent or missing body – a motif that is also explored in Rauschenberg's *Bed* (fig. 7). In this series, Smith investigates the manner

⁶ In Benjaminian theory, the term 'semblance' refers to the *appearance* of beauty and aliveness; it is a state of "touching and bordering upon life" (Menninghaus 1993:167).



in which spaces recover from being sites of violence or trauma by documenting the former homes of British serial killer Dennis Nilsen: his apartment at 195 Melrose Avenue, Cricklewood, which he began renting in 1975; the nearby Gladstone Park, which he frequented with his dog 'Bleep'; and finally his attic room at 23 Cranley Gardens, Muswell Hill (Ramsland 2005). Nilsen, who incidentally drew sketches of his victims, was convicted for the murders of six young men on November 4, 1983 (Ramsland 2005).

Each of the photographs in the *Psychogeographies* series is accompanied by a page of handwritten notes which detail Smith's initial impressions of these locations. It is interesting to note that none of these texts mentions Nilsen by name. Similarly, the blank facades of the seemingly ordinary suburban homes documented by Smith in her photographs, give no indication that Nilsen once lived and committed his crimes within their vicinity. In her search for traces of the killer and his crimes, Smith encounters a marked absence or lack thereof. In her notes, she writes: "All I've got is façades. I need more depth to this exercise" (Text from Panel 10: *Front Door, 195 Melrose Avenue, Cricklewood*).

By way of this statement, Smith seems to suggest that one's attempts to capture the trace are always already marked by a certain impossibility. In his *Speech and Phenomena*, Jacques Derrida (1973:156) suggests: "The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces and refers beyond itself." In this sense, one might argue that Smith's attempts to trace Nilsen's traces through her photographs and notations effectively displace or efface all traces of the killer himself. As art historian Charles Merewether (1999:170) notes: "The tracing of

traces is accompanied by [a] simultaneous effacing. ... It is a re-marking that leaves a spectral trace, or ... the trace of a trace.”

In the *Psychogeographies* series, as in her other works, Smith explores processes of inscription and erasure by way of the relationship between the artist and the killer. Her work speaks of a desire on the part of both the artist and the murderer to make an inscription or leave a trace. In Smith’s work, representations of violence become a means of speaking of representation itself. This referencing of forensic methods and techniques as a means of commenting on artistic practice is an important motif in my own body of work. I develop this theme further in a discussion of my work in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three

The Photography of Trauma

In his book *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*, art historian Ulrich Baer (2002:4) observes:

The medium of photography seem[s] to furnish evidence – by means of magnification, shutter speed, and lighting – that the world of appearance is not continuous. ... Instead, it seems to reveal a world in which time is splintered, fractured, blown apart.

By way of the forensic aesthetic, my own body of work attempts to explore the links between the mechanisms of trauma and the manner in which the camera records the site/sight of violence and death. I have played on this parallel in my work by conveying a sense of mechanical or compulsive repetition, which speaks of both the workings of the camera and the mechanisms of traumatic memory. Similarly, I have drawn on the sense of fragmentation that is characteristic of the forensic photograph, and indeed all photographs, as a means of articulating the fragmentary nature of traumatic memory. In the following chapter, I discuss the ways in which my own work speaks of the act of photographing as a repetitive and ultimately impossible activity within the realm of trauma. In so doing, I hope not only to provide a thorough reading of my own work, but also to extend my reading of the forensic aesthetic further.

In the previous chapter, I briefly discussed Derrida's notion of the trace. In this chapter, I expand on this discussion by exploring the concept of the trace in relation to my *Untitled I* series (fig. 16), a collection of six hundred Polaroids displayed in a grid

format. In his *Speech and Phenomena* (1973) and *Of Grammatology* (1976), Derrida offers a critique of the terms traditionally privileged by metaphysical speech and language – terms such as ‘Being’, ‘Presence’ or ‘Consciousness’.¹ Derrida (1976:62) argues that in any binary opposition, one term will always come to the fore while the other recedes, and goes on to note that “the [dominant] term ... would not appear as such without the difference or opposition which gives [it] *form*”. Derrida (1973:140&141) emphasizes that in a hierarchical opposition, the dominant term does not appear in and of itself, but relies on this “play of difference” to lend it appearance. He argues that the dominant term will always carry a trace of the term that is not presented, and, as such, is neither wholly ‘present’ nor ‘absent’ (Derrida 1973:142&143). For Derrida (1973:150), the trace is always associated with “an impossible presence”. Derrida (1973:154) argues:

[W]e must allow the trace of whatever goes beyond the truth of Being to appear/disappear in its fully rigorous way. It is a trace of something that can never present itself; it is itself a trace that can never be presented, that is, can never appear and manifest itself as such in its phenomenon ... the trace is never presented as such. In presenting itself it becomes effaced; in being sounded it dies away.

One might argue that this notion of the trace is particularly pertinent in the context of the crime scene, in that it implies a sense of ‘absence’ or loss. According to Derrida (1973:151), the trace is a mark of the other that is not presented – that can never be presented – and may be equated with “the occurrence of absolute loss, with death”. In my *Untitled I* series, I have attempted to explore the sense of loss associated with the crime scene through the forensic trace. Each of the photographs in this series documents the traces or markings found in various spaces, both public and private:

¹ Derrida (1973:147) defines the Western tradition of metaphysics as follows: “The privilege accorded to consciousness ... means a privilege accorded to the present. ... This privilege is the ether of metaphysics, the very element of our thought insofar as it is caught up in the language of metaphysics.”

tyre tracks on a highway, bent blades of grass in a field, stains on a carpet. In the field of forensic photography, the Polaroid offers an instantaneous means of recording fleeting traces – particularly those found on the body – and was used by the South African Police Service in crime scene investigations before digital photography became a viable option.² The Polaroid is simultaneously, however, a physical trace in itself, a tangible object that places the photographer at the scene.

The traces documented in this series allude to prior actions or occurrences that nonetheless remain obscure. Moreover, the traces themselves are not presented as such in that they only ever appear as traces of traces, in the form of the Polaroid. Much like Smith's *Psychogeographies: The Washing Away of Wrongs* (fig. 15), this series draws attention to the ephemeral nature of the trace, and speaks of the manner in which one's attempts to "lay hold of it" result in its inevitable erasure (Derrida 1973:138). As Merewether (1999:167) notes, "the very language ... use[d] as a means to preserve the object and bring its past to life, is implicated in the loss of that object and its original meaning".

By the same token, The *Untitled I* series may be said to speak of the manner in which the compulsion to leave traces is often realized through a violent or invasive gesture, an etching of oneself onto something else. I have continued this theme in my *Untitled II* series (fig. 17), a collection of photographs documenting the administrative stamps, seals and insignia found on the evidence packages formerly used by the South African Police Service. Prior to the use of plastic evidence bags in forensic investigations, the evidence would be placed in a brown envelope which was then sealed with red wax to

² In July of 2004 I visited the South African Police Service Forensic Science Laboratory in Port Elizabeth, and spoke with Senior Superintendent André Horne, commander of the Ballistics Unit in the Eastern Cape, about the field of forensics.

prevent tampering.³ Each of the wax seals documented in this series has been imprinted with the Gauteng emblem, and, due to variations in the patterns made by the wax, may be said to resemble the ‘spatter patterns’ found at a crime scene. Similarly, the ink stamps that appear on these envelopes suggest a kind of tattooing – a marking or inscribing reminiscent of that in Smith’s *Jack in Johannesburg* (fig. 8). This series looks at violent crime, or more specifically the wounded body, through the procedural marking and sealing of evidence in a criminal investigation. Here the forensic processes of cataloguing and archiving become a means of speaking of the relations between violence, trauma and memory.

In his *Archive Fever*, Derrida (1995:11) argues that “the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory”. He notes that the archive acts as a supplement to memory, a “recording and memorization apparatus” (Derrida 1995:19). Derrida (1995:11) emphasizes that the archive is not memory “as spontaneous, alive and internal experience”; rather, it is marked by exteriority and repetition. One might argue that the structure of the archive is in many ways similar to that of traumatic memory, and, like the mechanisms of trauma, the process of archiving may be said to “produce as much as it records the event” (Derrida 1995:17). As Derrida (1995:16) notes:

[T]he archive ... is not only the place for stocking and conserving an archivable content *of the past* ... the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future.

³ Horne: personal communication.

In this sense, the *Untitled II* series – like the *Untitled I* series – may be said to comment on the way in which one’s attempts to record or preserve are simultaneously bound up in processes of re-inscription and re-presentation. By way of the “shifting figure” of the archive, this series speaks of the slippages or fissures that occur in the realm of trauma (Derrida 1995:29).

I expand on this motif in my *Untitled III* series (fig. 18), a collection of twenty black and white infrared photographs. Each of the photographs in this series portrays the forearm and hand, my own, in such a way as to make reference to photographs found in forensic and medical journals.⁴ Similarly, these images call to mind artworks such as Andres Serrano’s *The Morgue: Knifed to Death I* (fig. 19), Leonardo da Vinci’s *Studies of the Hand* (fig. 1), Rembrandt van Rijn’s *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (fig. 2) and, of course, Kathryn Smith’s *Still Life* series (figs. 9, 10, 11). Infrared film allows one to photograph the veins that lie just below the surface of the skin; it is applied, for this purpose, in the field of medical photography. Similarly, it is used in forensic investigations to examine documents and artworks for signs of forgery.

In this series, the characteristic graininess of the infrared photograph may be said to evoke printing technologies – such as the photocopy or fax – used to assemble docket in a criminal investigation. When read as such, these images speak of the reproducibility of the photograph – of the photograph as facsimile. Similarly, the mechanical repetition of the forearm and hand suggests associations between the

⁴ Cf. Williams, R. & Williams, G. 2002. ‘Medical and Scientific Photography’, <http://msp.rmit.edu.au/>.

operations of the camera and the compulsion to repeat.⁵ As Barthes (1984:4) notes: “What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.” Paradoxically, however, this movement of repetition produces discrepancies or slippages which manifest themselves in the *Untitled III* series, for example, in the shifting positions of the hand. Here the hand evokes a kind of sign language that with each gesture conveys varying narratives. In this way, these images may be said to articulate the manner in which the facsimile or copy, and by extension the memory, threatens to erase itself through repetition and reiteration. By way of the facsimile, this series speaks of trauma’s “repeated imposition as both image and amnesia” (Merewether 1999:171).

In my *Untitled IV* series (fig. 20), I explore the mechanisms of trauma further by way of the wall maps that are used in police investigations to pinpoint the locations of significant sites.⁶ I have mounted a series of pages from a map book on wooden boards, which, when assembled, form a fragmentary map of the city of Johannesburg – its streets, metropolitan area and surrounding suburbs. The intricate network of lines that spread across the map’s surface mirrors the network of veins that run under the surface of the skin in the *Untitled III* series. I have inserted red map pins into various locations on the map in order to signify acts or occurrences of violence.

In this series, the rigid structure of the map’s grid format suggests a sense of order and control, and, as such, may be said to function within what Jacques Lacan (1988:29)

⁵ It should be noted that in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud (1953:44) associates the repetition compulsion with the ‘death drive’, which he defines as a desire to return to an inanimate state. Freud (1953:44) argues that the death drive may be attributed with “a conservative, or rather retrograde, character corresponding to a compulsion to repeat”.

⁶ Horne: personal communication.

terms the Symbolic order: the register of language, law and all forms of symbolic representation.⁷ In piercing the surface of the map, the pins, by contrast, interrupt or disrupt the ordered structure of the grid, and in so doing draw attention to the frailty of the Symbolic. In his book *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan (1991:55) argues that the Real is that which disturbs the Symbolic and insistently makes its existence felt without ever being directly experienced. Lacan (1991:55) goes on to note that the Real presents itself in the form of trauma. To cite an example that Lacan (1991:56) himself uses, it is a knocking at the door which interrupts a dream. When read as such, the pins in the *Untitled IV* series speak of the traumatic event as an abrupt disturbance in the systems of the Symbolic. Moreover, through their tactility, these pins may be said to articulate the manner in which the trauma is felt rather than consciously experienced. As Baer (2002:8&10) notes: “Traumatic events ... exert their troubling grip on memory and on the imagination because they were not consciously experienced at the time of their occurrence. ... Trauma imposes itself outside the grasp of our cognition.”

In my *Untitled V* (fig. 21), a video piece, I explore the sense of ritual that may be associated with both the crime scene investigation and the repetitive workings of traumatic memory. As art historian Peter Wollen (1997:24&25) notes:

[B]y striving to be impersonal, forensic photography takes on the quality of a ritual act ... [and it] is given an added power by the ritual characteristics of the crime scene itself. Carefully delimited by police tape, the crime scene appears to us as hallowed ground.

⁷ According to Lacan (1988:29), the Symbolic order constitutes the social field in its most all-inclusive sense. Lacan (1988:29) emphasizes: “The symbolic order from the first takes on its universal character. It isn’t constituted bit by bit. As soon as the symbol arrives there is a universe of symbols ... they imply the totality of everything which is human. Everything is ordered in accordance with the symbols.”

This video is comprised of a series of black and white surveillance clips of my own home in Johannesburg. The entire video plays on a loop, with each clip running for a period of thirty seconds. The word 'vigil', defined as a period of staying awake through the night to keep watch or pray, stems from the Latin word for surveillance, *vigilia*, meaning sleeplessness or wakefulness (Tabor 2002:123). By extension, the word 'vigilance' refers to an awareness of potential danger, and suggests caution, watchfulness or alertness. In speaking of the act of surveillance as a ritualistic and repetitive watching, this video draws attention to the somewhat ritualistic way in which traumatic events repeat themselves in the memory. Similarly, in looking at the way in which the surveillance or security camera functions, according to Philip Tabor (2002:125), as a "disembodied eye", this video points to the removed or detached manner in which the traumatic event is 'experienced' by the individual. This work speaks of the surveillance camera as an unblinking eye that, when placed in the context of the home, points to the extremes of vigilance.

Throughout my body of work I have attempted to draw attention to the links between the photograph and trauma. Indeed my work may be said to speak of the photograph as trauma insofar as it presents the viewer with a series of fundamentally fragmented and inassimilable moments. As Baer (2002:1&7) notes, "photographs compel viewers to think of lived experience, time, and history from a standpoint that is truly a *standpoint*: a place to think about occurrences that may fail, violently, to be fully experienced. ... Photographs can capture the shrapnel of traumatic time".

In this way, my work, like the works discussed in previous chapters, may be said to use the mode of the forensic aesthetic as a means of commenting on representation. It is this point that I would like to consolidate in my conclusion.

Conclusion

James Elkins (1995:822) observes that: “Art history lacks a persuasive account of the nature of graphic marks.” Marks, traces and inscriptions, however, are the very essence of representation itself. The act of representation is defined by processes of inscription and erasure, by the leaving of traces. One might argue that the forensic aesthetic, insofar as it concerns itself with the graphic mark or trace, offers a fitting means of speaking of artistic practice. Similarly, the forensic gaze, as Rugoff notes (1997:18), provides a way of reading the artwork in terms of its “cluelike and contingent status”.

I have attempted to do just that in my reading of the works discussed in Chapter One. Each of these works may be said to illustrate the varying ways in which the links between violence and representation are made manifest in the artwork.

Rauschenburg’s *Bed* (fig. 7), for example, may be said to draw attention to parallels between the marking of canvas and the marking of flesh. In Duchamp’s *Etant Donnés* (fig. 6), one is made aware of the violence of the voyeuristic gaze and the manner in which it operates in relation to the artwork. Similarly, David’s *The Death of Marat* (fig. 4) may be said to draw associations between paint and blood – as does Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lesson* (fig. 2) and Eakins’ *The Gross Clinic* (fig. 3). When read by way of a forensic gaze, these works may be viewed as unconscious representations of the act of representation itself.

Similarly, the work of Kathryn Smith may be said to speak allegorically of artistic practice by way of the motif of serial murder. In Smith’s work, murder becomes a

means of exploring and commenting on the artist's tendency towards a compulsive leaving of traces. Here the adoption of a forensic aesthetic is self-conscious. For Smith, the forensic approach is a means of self-reflexively looking at the production of art. Smith (2005) writes:

My work is informed by connections between artistic practice and forensic investigation, particularly the psychological aspects of criminal activity and creative endeavour. These critical and aesthetic conjunctions owe much to the forensic investigator's ability to recreate compelling narratives from seemingly meaningless debris, creating connections between events and people that, in turn, tell stories.

In my own body of work, the forensic aesthetic becomes a means of exploring the links between the photograph and trauma. In playing on the trace-like qualities of the photograph, my work speaks of the act of photographing as a repetitive attempt to return to the site of trauma. Moreover, through its focus on the trace, my work attempts to understand the impulses behind the gesture of making a mark or inscription. As Merewether (1999:164) notes: "To think the trace is to pursue its trail either back or forward, to see it alternately as attachment or detachment, re-presentation or erasure, proximity or distance, a return or a leave-taking."

To conclude, one might argue that the mode of the forensic aesthetic provides a particularly appropriate medium for the self-critical analysis of the practices of art, in that it brings to our attention the very elements of representation that comprise the artwork: gestural marks, strokes, inscriptions and traces.

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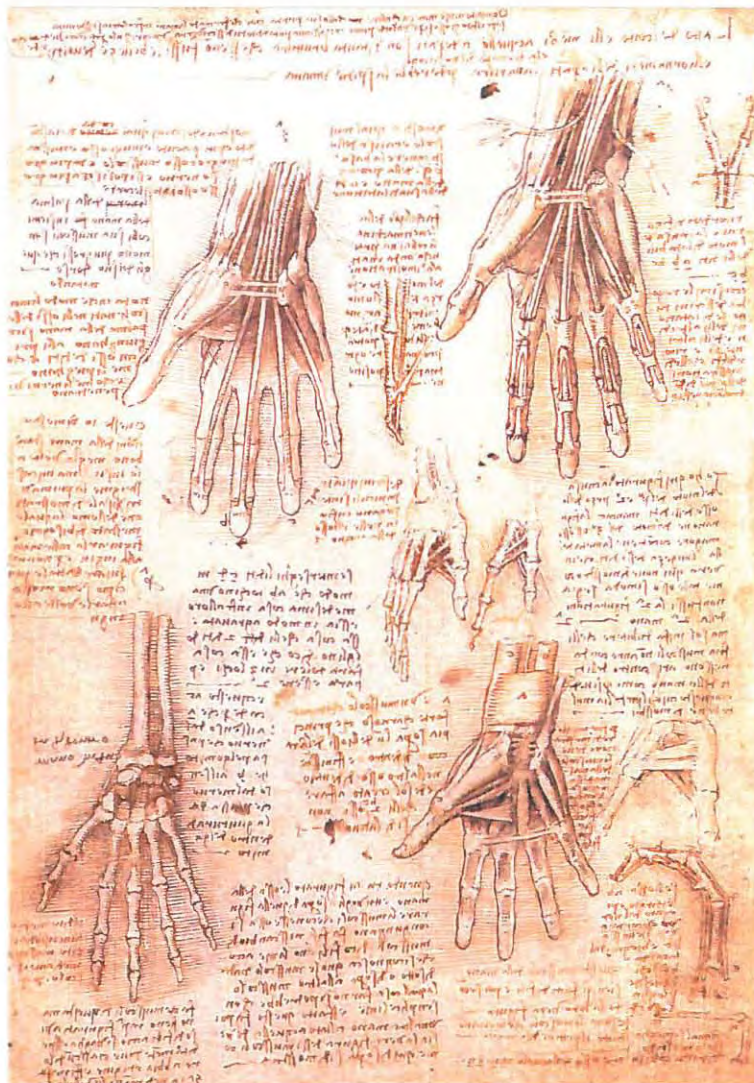


Fig. 1. Leonardo da Vinci, *Studies of the Hand* (c.1510), pen and ink with wash over traces of black chalk on paper, 28.8 x 20.2cm, Royal Collection of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.



Fig. 2. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (1632), oil on canvas, 100 x 134cm, Amsterdams Historisch Museum, Amsterdam.

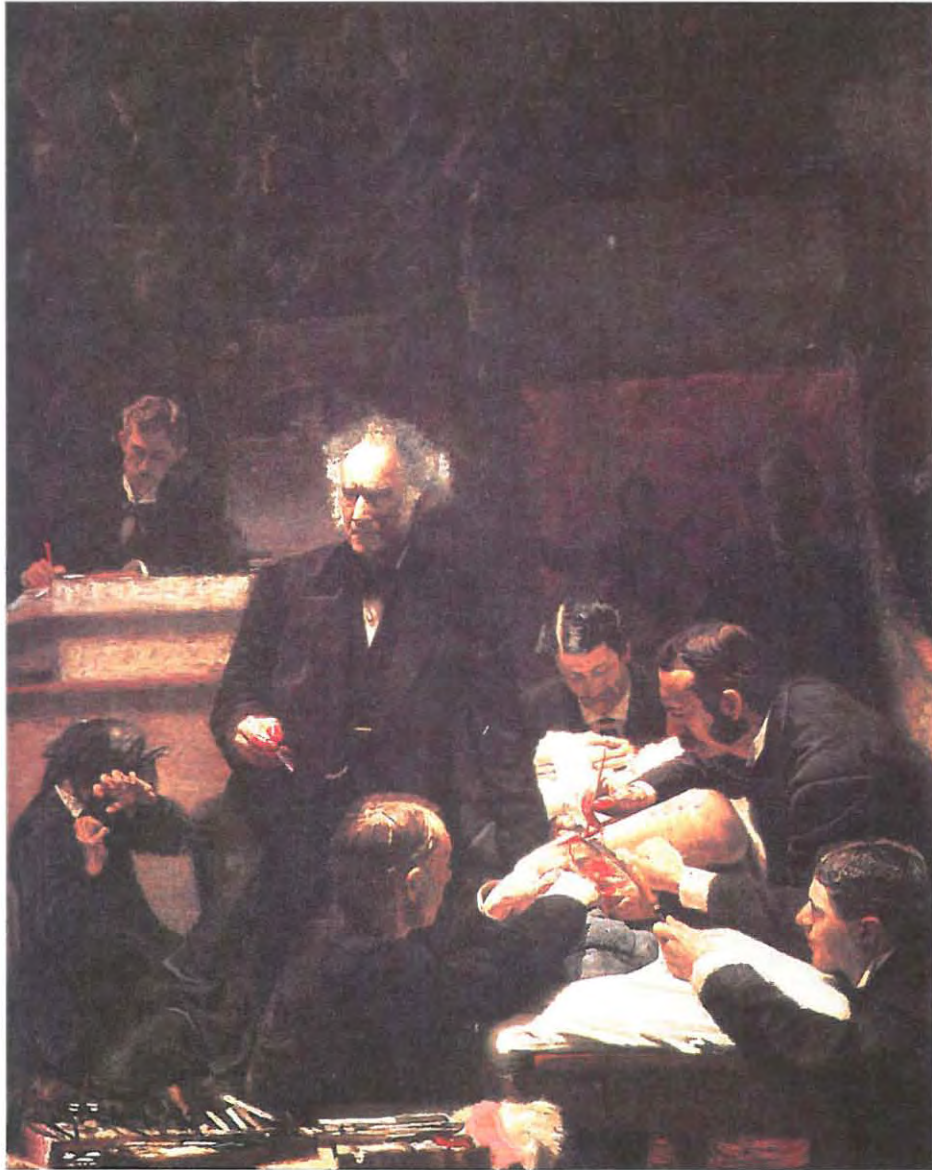


Fig. 3. Thomas Eakins, *The Gross Clinic* (1875), oil on canvas, 243 x 198cm, Jefferson Medical College, Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia.

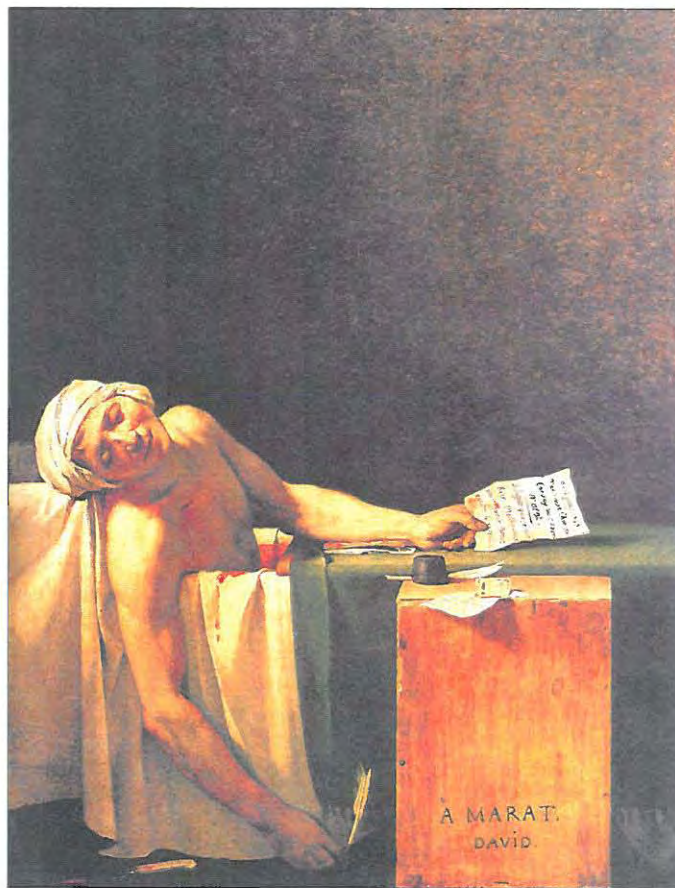


Fig. 4. Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Marat* (1793), oil on canvas, 165 x 128.3cm, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels.

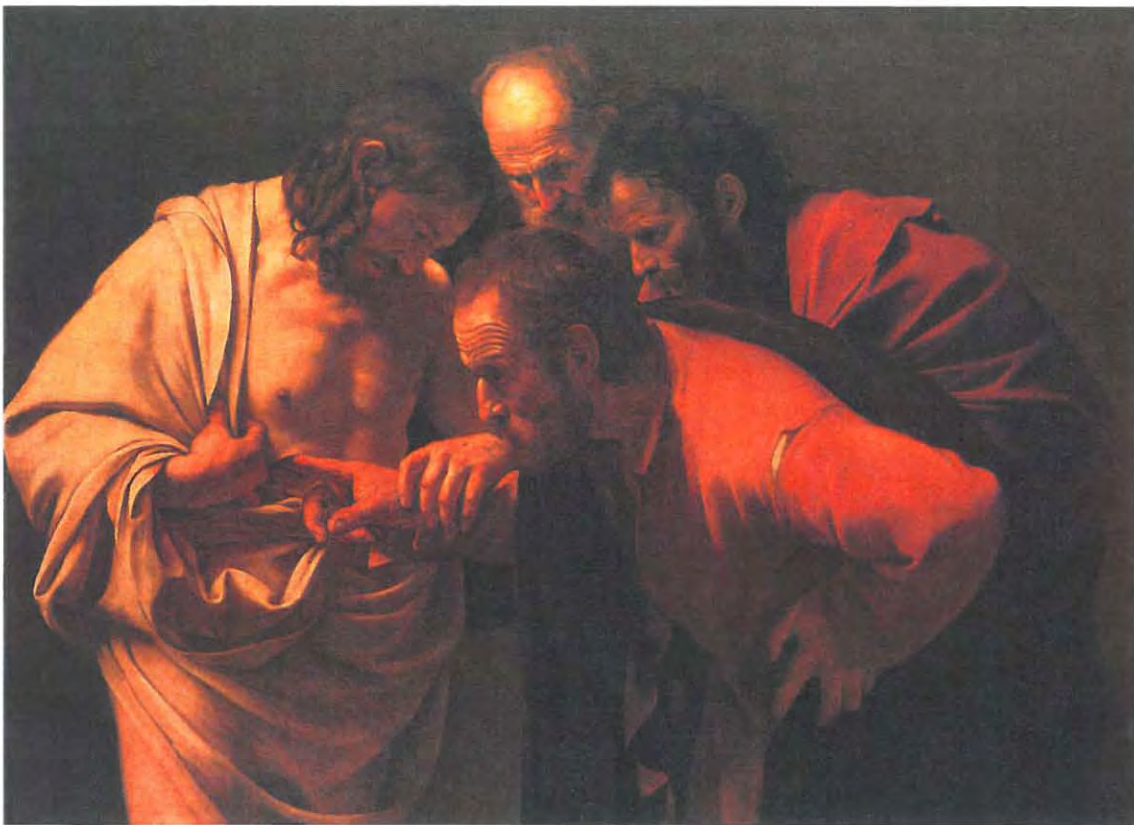


Fig. 5. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Doubting of St. Thomas* (1600), oil on canvas, 107 x 146cm, Schloß Sanssouci, Potsdam.



Fig. 6. Marcel Duchamp, *Etant Donnés* (1946-1966), mixed media assemblage, 242.5 x 177.8cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

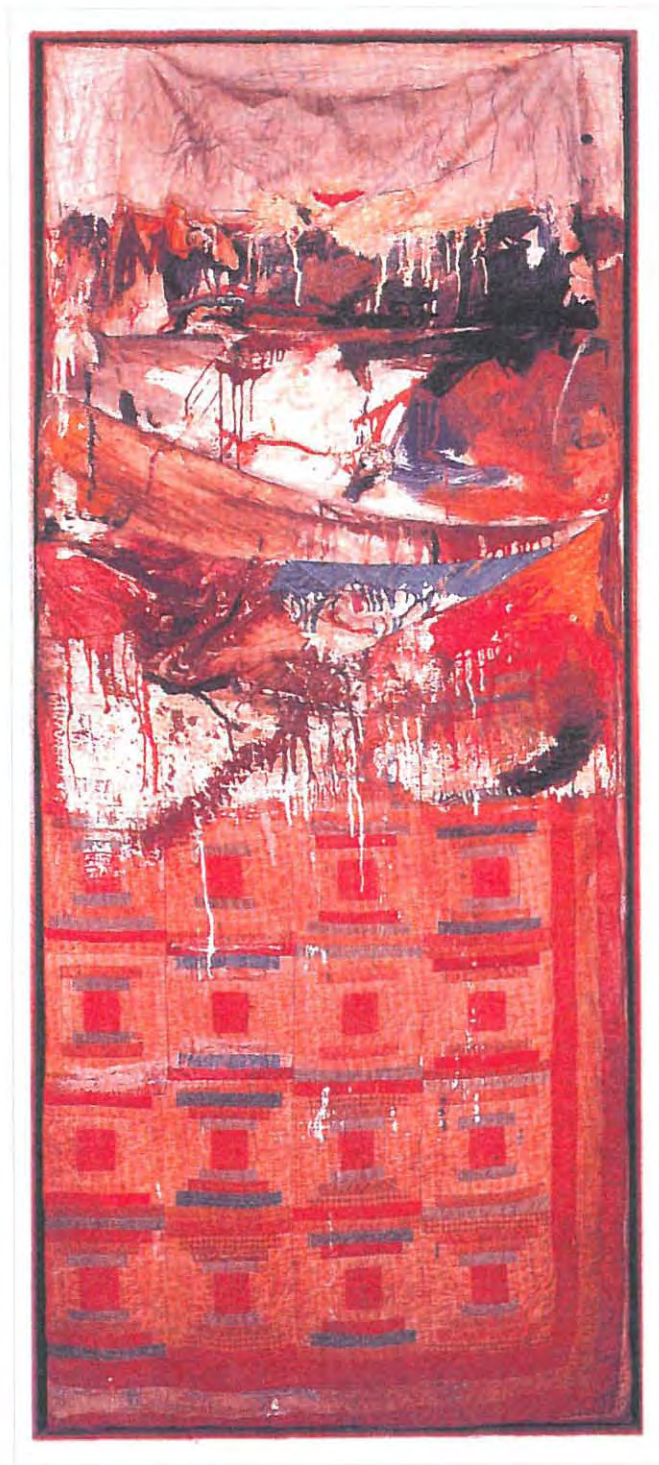


Fig. 7. Robert Rauschenberg, *Bed* (1955),
combine painting: oil and pencil on pillow, quilt and sheet on wood supports,
191.1 x 80 x 20.3cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 8. Kathryn Smith, *Jack in Johannesburg: production still* (2003), pigment print on cotton paper, 76 x 150cm.



Fig. 9. Kathryn Smith, *Still Life #1* (1997), lambda photograph, 50 x 70cm.



Fig. 10. Kathryn Smith, *Still Life #6* (1997), lambda photograph, 50 x 70cm.



Fig. 11. Kathryn Smith, *Still Life #2* (1997), lambda photograph, 50 x 70cm.



Fig. 12. Kathryn Smith, *Memento Mori #1* (2004),
lambda print on Kodak metallic paper, 45 x 57cm.



Fig. 13. Kathryn Smith, *Memento Mori #4* (2004),
lambda print on Kodak metallic paper, 68 x 85cm.

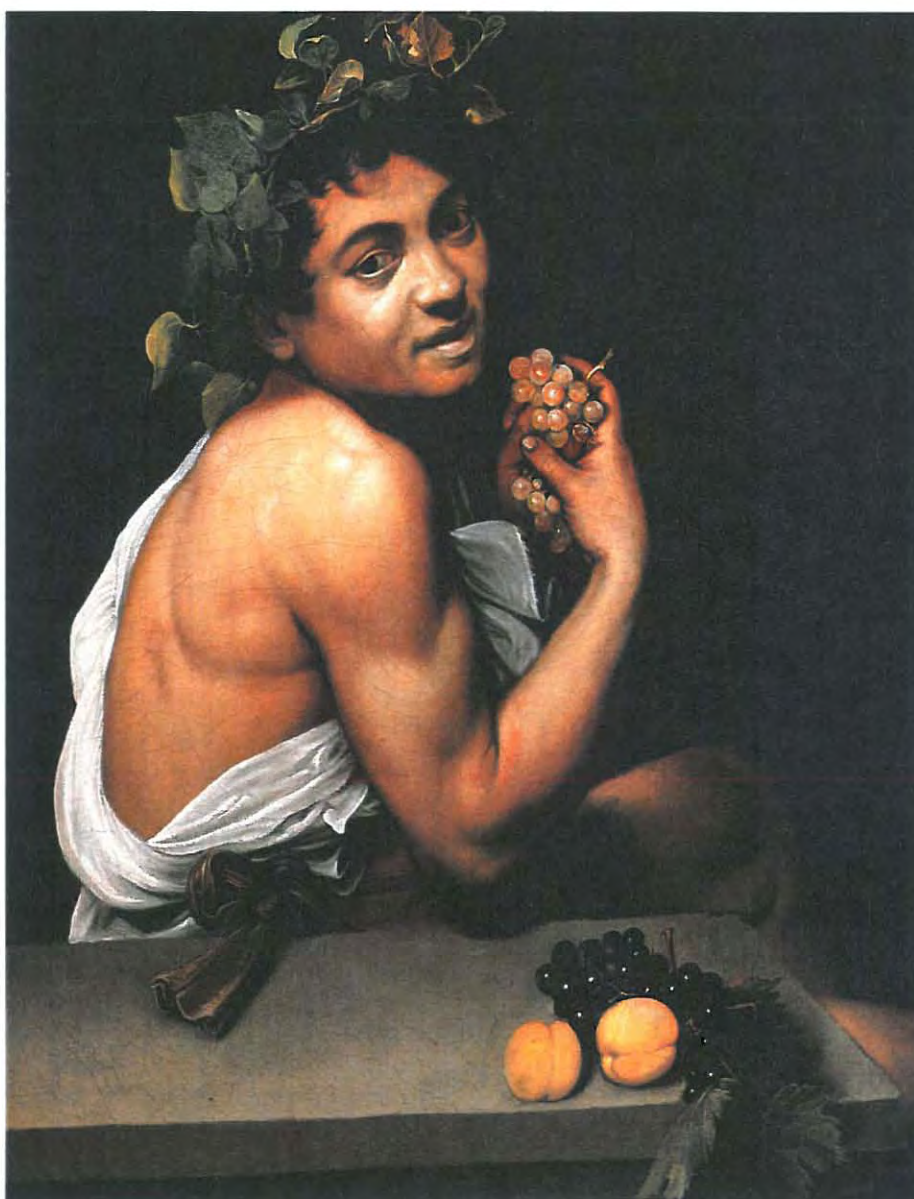


Fig. 14. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Satyr with Grapes* (1592-1593), oil on canvas, 67 x 53cm, Museo Galleria Borghese, Rome.



Fig. 15. Kathryn Smith, *Psychogeographies: The Washing Away of Wrongs* (2003-2004), embossed pigment prints on cotton paper, 45 x 33cm each (12 panels).



Fig. 16. Natascha Spargo, *Untitled I* (2004-2005), Polaroid instant film, 10.7 x 8.8cm each (600 photographs).



Fig. 17. Natascha Spargo, *Untitled II* (2004-2005),
colour photographic prints, 37.8 x 25.4cm each (12 photographs).

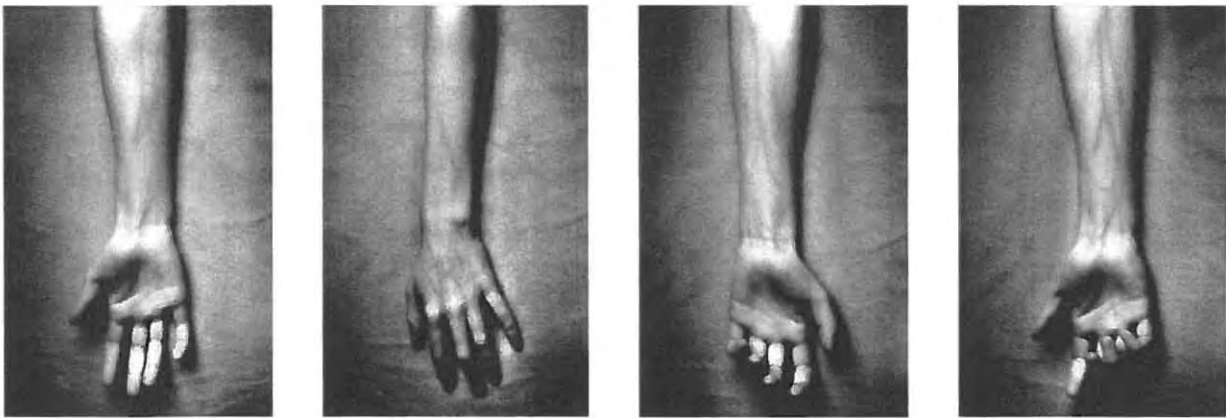


Fig. 18. Natascha Spargo, *Untitled III* (2004-2005),
black and white infrared photographs, 29.4 x 18.4cm each (16 photographs).

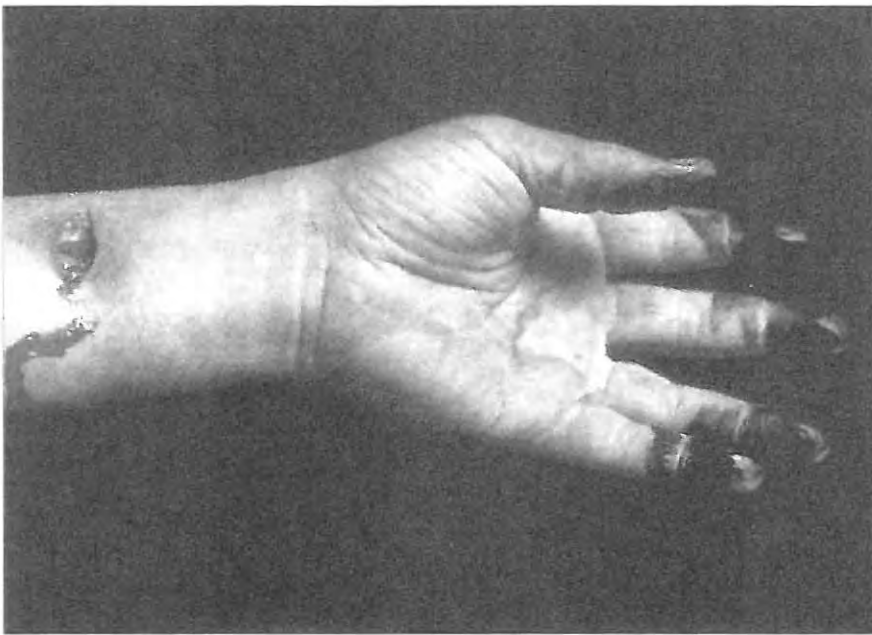


Fig. 19. Andres Serrano, *The Morgue: Knifed to Death I* (1992), cibachrome, silicone, plexiglass, wood frame, 125.7 x 152.4cm, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

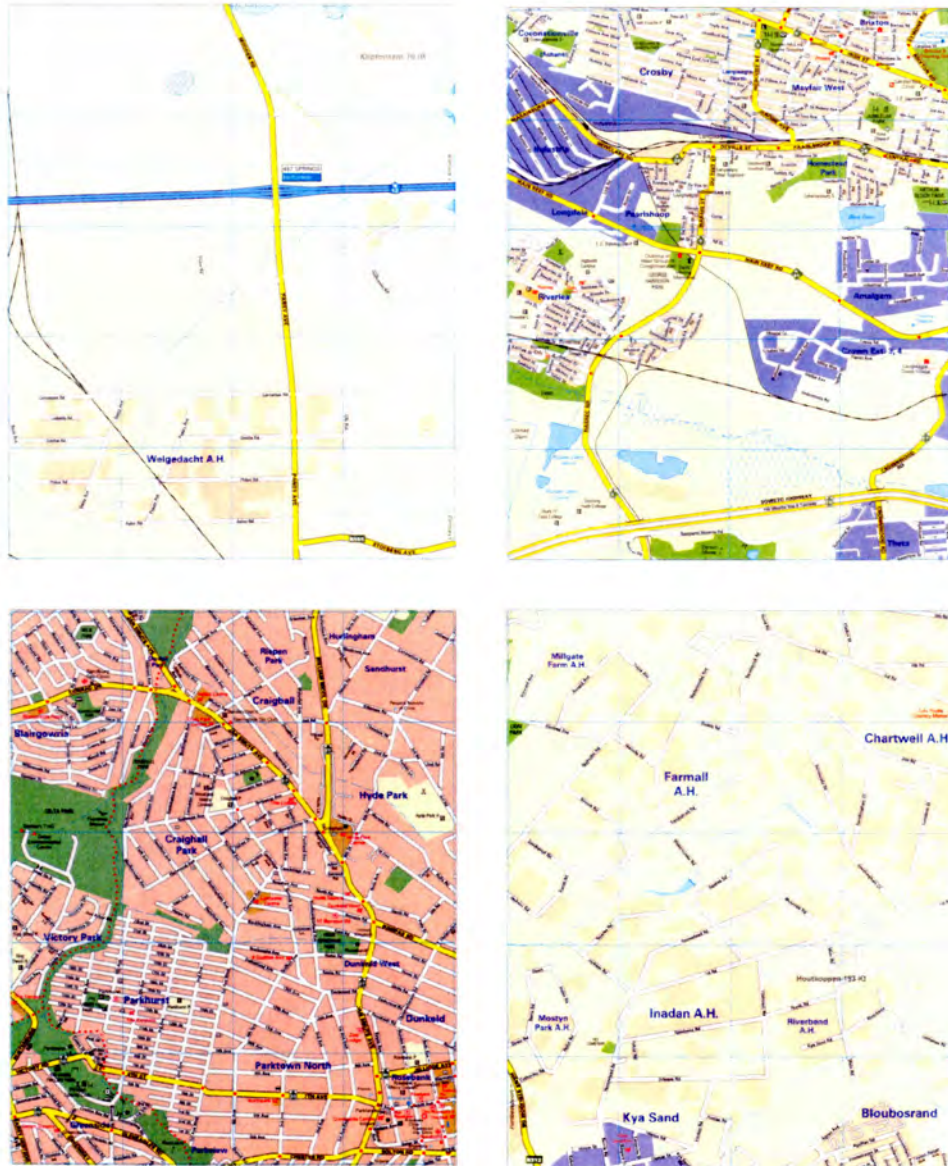


Fig. 20. Natascha Spargo, *Untitled IV* (2004-2005), mixed media assemblage, 23.3 x 19cm each (181 panels).



Fig. 21. Natascha Spargo, *Untitled V* (2004-2005),
DVD, length: 9min 20sec.