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## **Master's Project**

My thesis project consists of this master's thesis as well as eleven photographs that were presented at Kuvan kevät in May 2018. The photographs are the result of the work I have done at the Academy of Fine Arts during my master's studies and the purpose of this text is to give an account of how my work evolved into what became my part of the Kuvan kevät exhibition.

Supervisors: Veli Granö and Tuomas Nevanlinna

Examinors: Fergus Feehily and Satu Oksanen

## Works



Untitled #1, 2018, 80x100cm, ash frame, inkjet print mounted on aluminum with museum glass



Untitled #2, 2018, 60x75cm, ash frame, inkjet print mounted on aluminum with museum glass





Untitled #3, 2018, 60x75cm, ash frame, inkjet print mounted on aluminum with museum glass



Untitled #4, 2017, 40x50cm, ash frame, inkjet print mounted on aluminum with museum glass





Untitled #5, 2018, 60x75cm, ash frame, inkjet print mounted on aluminum with museum glass



Untitled #6, 2017, 40x50cm, ash frame, inkjet print mounted on aluminum with museum glass



Untitled #7, 2017, 30x30cm, ash frame, inkjet print mounted on aluminum with museum glass





Untitled #8, 2018, 80x100cm, ash frame, inkjet print mounted on aluminum with museum glass



Untitled #9, 2017, 40x50cm, ash frame, inkjet print mounted on aluminum with museum glass



Untitled #10, 2018, 60x75cm, ash frame, inkjet print mounted on aluminum with museum glass





Untitled #11, 2018, 80x100cm, ash frame, inkjet print mounted on aluminum with museum glass

## Kuvan kevät Installation Views









## I INTRODUCTION

### Introductory reflections

In the first pages of his novel “My Struggle, Part I” Karl Ove Knausgård gives an insightful description of how difficult it is to grasp not existing.<sup>1</sup> It is easy to think of stories and narratives about death, even one’s own, but the actual sight of a human body that has passed into the world of dead objects is almost unbearable.

We try to keep that which is frightening at a distance. Imagine all the small gestures and the energy we put into staying alive every day. Wearing seatbelts, eating healthy food, feeling bad when eating unhealthy food, helmets, e-cigarettes, crossing the street safely etc. But danger is also fascinating and it is an essential aspect of what we call entertainment.

With the development of science and technology, it seems very likely that in the near future, the human life-span could be prolonged by tens, if not hundreds or thousands of years; longer than we presently expect to live.

Merging with technology could make us invulnerable and I wonder what that would be like. Again we encounter the limits of our imagination. It is easy to think of life continuing longer than we expect but what would it be like to live without limits? To know that life will

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<sup>1</sup> Knausgård, pp. 9-13.

not end and live as an eternal being? In the eighties when the creators of Superman had made him virtually indestructible people lost interest in the story.

Perhaps that is part of the human predicament: existence as a vulnerable being can be unbearable but immortality would be even worse.

## **Creating a Practice**

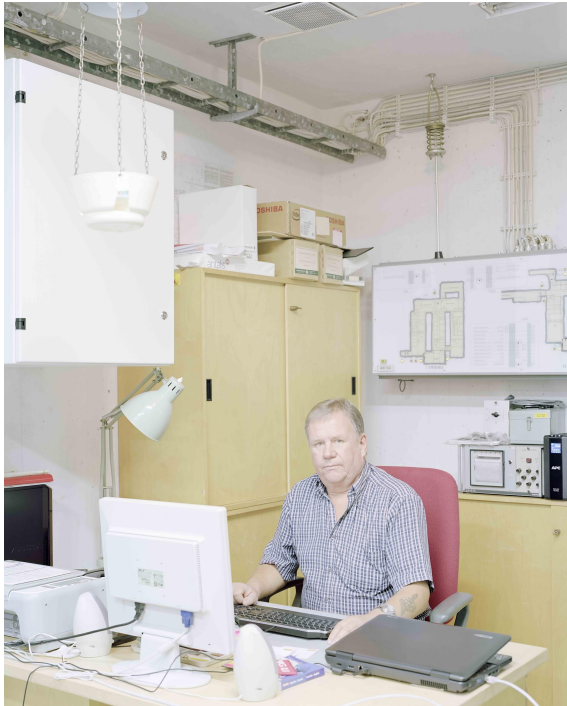
A central theme of my work during my MA studies has been to develop a stable artistic practice and a relationship to art history. What developed into the main subject of interest during this project was the experience of the sublime. In this text my aim is to analyse the process I have gone through during my master studies and the years before starting at the Academy of Fine Arts. My intention is to tease out the themes and questions that interest me as an artist and to find a thread that runs through my own work in order to get a more clear understanding of where I am headed.

## **II VISITING A FALLOUT SHELTER**

In 2012 I was working in the District Court of the Åland Islands in the city of Mariehamn. The building seems typical for official Finnish buildings from that time: it is made out of white concrete elements with dark green metal doors and window panes. Indoors the building has the same colours with an addition of light green plastic floor tiles. When the building was built in 1980 a large fallout shelter was added to it. The shelter was bored and blasted into the granite rock underneath the building and is built to house the local government as well as up to 1500 citizens in the event of a crisis. The shelter is designed to be used for a long undefined period of time.

When the building and the shelter were ready a man named Lennart was employed as caretaker of the spaces. His workstation has been situated in the same place for almost forty years, tens of meters underground. It is placed inside a mountain surrounded by four corridors that house empty rooms that are planned to function as refuge for the survivors of terrible events. Among other things the shelter has a room size ventilation machine that

cleans the outside air of contaminants such as nuclear particles that are left after an attack or fill the air due a molten generator somewhere in northern Europe.



Lennart



Corridor I

I made friends with Lennart who was eager to show me the shelter. He has been keeping the space in stand-by mode since the beginning of the eighties which is something he seems to be proud of and rightly so; a job well done. Once every second week he runs the large diesel generators that will power the space when the electric grid fails. The shelter is filled with electrical and communications equipment that seem to have been acquired during the late nineties. These pieces of equipment are housed in large metal cabinets that hang from thick springs that are attached to the ceiling so that the cabinets will remain intact during tremors from a nuclear blast. In fact the shelter is designed to withstand a direct hit from a nuclear weapon. The space is cleaned and dusted once every two weeks which means that all materials are in mint condition.





Communications Room



Cafeteria

## Experiencing the Shelter

When I first visited the shelter I was exhilarated. How could something with these outdated aesthetics and this old equipment still be kept in working order? It seemed more like a museum of cooky cold war memorabilia than a functioning shelter. An image that came to mind was of Dr No's lair in the first James Bond movie "Dr No". Slowly, however, a creeping sensation came over me. When facing a crisis this was actually it; this was plan b, our last line of protection against terrors of our own making such as nuclear reactors, -weapons and climate change.

In my mind I strongly questioned the shelter's function as protection against the disasters that it was designed for. It dawned upon me that I had been harbouring a perception in my unconscious that seemed ludicrous when i noticed it: when something terrible would come to pass everything would be alright in the end. My fellow citizens and I could seek refuge in one of the many fallout shelters that are maintained in all Finnish cities. There we could wait until someone who knows what to do would work their magic and we eventually would emerge from underground healthy, intact and ready to move on and rebuild.

Now it seemed like the shelter in reality served a totally different purpose than the one it was designed for. The actual function of the shelter was to protect us from the anxieties we experience from our lack of control over humanity's long term self-destructive behaviour. In my notes I wrote the following at the time:

*Being human can be confusing and scary. We live with our dreams and ambitions in a life that is unpredictable and that sooner or later will end. To protect ourselves from fear and anxiety we create fantasies that do not change our destructive patterns of behaviour but rather serve to convince us of one thing: everything will be alright.*

It was during the Shelter project that I started actively working with questions related to mortality, especially how the vulnerability we experience as humans shows itself in our behaviour and in our mental landscape on levels ranging from individuals to societies. The project was exhibited at Photographic Centre Peri in Turku in 2015 and at Photographic Gallery Hippolyte in Helsinki in 2016.

### **From Shelters to Immortality**

The idea of a shelter seems to serve as a protective barrier to the psychological abyss that human vulnerability opens up before us. I think of this phenomenon as a mental diaper that hinders us from soiling ourselves with fear and anxiety especially when faced with disasters at the unimaginable scale of nuclear war or the enormous chaos brought on by climate change. The idea seems to protect us from the anguish we feel from not being able to stop our collective destructive behaviour.

A few years ago I started to notice comments about extreme longevity and immortality appearing in the media. These were the first examples I saw of the popularization of the idea that advancements in technology in the near future will erase concepts such as natural death and aging. These are ideas that seem to have caught a lot of wind in places



such as Silicon Valley and in 2013 Google co-founder Larry Page announced the launch of a company named Calico (The California Life Company<sup>2</sup>) that has as its mission

*to harness advanced technologies to increase our understanding of the biology that controls lifespan. [Calico] will use that knowledge to devise interventions that enable people to lead longer and healthier lives.*<sup>3</sup>

In a press release given by Google at the time Larry Page stated that

*Illness and aging affect all our families. With some longer term, moonshot thinking around healthcare and biotechnology, I believe we can improve millions of lives.*<sup>4</sup>

In an interview with the Washington Post the billionaire Silicon Valley investor Peter Thiel stated:

*I've always had this really strong sense that death was a terrible, terrible thing. I think that's somewhat unusual. Most people end up compartmentalizing, and they are in some weird mode of denial and acceptance about death, but they both have the result of making you very passive. I prefer to fight it.*<sup>5</sup>

Nick Boström, professor of philosophy at the University of Oxford, has described death as human kinds greatest challenge to tackle. In his paper “The Fable of the Dragon Tyrant”<sup>6</sup> he describes death as a hateful dragon that torments humankind:

*Once upon a time, the planet was tyrannized by a giant dragon. The dragon stood taller than the largest cathedral, and it was covered with thick black*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.calicolabs.com/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> <http://googlepress.blogspot.com/2013/09/calico-announcement.html>

<sup>5</sup> See Cha.

<sup>6</sup> <https://nickbostrom.com/fable/dragon.html>

*scales. Its red eyes glowed with hate, and from its terrible jaws flowed an incessant stream of evil-smelling yellowish-green slime. It demanded from humankind a blood-curdling tribute: to satisfy its enormous appetite, ten thousand men and women had to be delivered every evening at the onset of dark to the foot of the mountain where the dragon-tyrant lived. Sometimes the dragon would devour these unfortunate souls upon arrival; sometimes again it would lock them up in the mountain where they would wither away for months or years before eventually being consumed.*<sup>7</sup>

To me there is something very similar between these statements and the idea of a fallout shelter. Both the idea of the shelter and the idea of immortality seem to give a feeling of control in the face of danger and death; a sense of safety when facing the abyss of ceasing to exist as a human being. I can imagine the dream of immortality is as old as humankind and who knows, maybe even earlier humans dreamed of endless life in some shape or form. These statements, however, seem to hint not only at a dream or an article of faith but at a certainty that death can be overcome in this very life and more importantly: that it would be a good thing to live forever.

As mentioned above Karl Ove Knausgård masterfully points out how frightening and difficult it can be to contemplate what it is like not to exist.<sup>8</sup> For me the fear of ceasing to exist or the fear of death has been a continuing presence ever since an accidental death occurred within my family some years ago. In my experience this fear shows itself as follows: When I am awake it is present in the body as a tension in the shoulders and stomach and at times it shows itself in the form of chilly trembling sensations throughout the body. It is accompanied by a feeling of fear that lingers constantly on the edges of my conscious experience and that colours my thoughts. Thoughts of accidents are present much of the time and I find myself continuously scanning the surroundings of myself and my loved ones for possible danger. Occasionally, when the fear and the accompanying tension get intense, I feel like I want to wrap my whole body around something stable like a tree or a pole in the ground and hold on as hard as I can.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> See page 1.

I sense elements of my desperate wish to hold onto something in both the idea of a fallout shelter and the idea of immortality through technology. It seems to me that building a shelter or choosing to actively fight death instead of accepting it as part of the human experience is a reaction to fear much in the same way as cramping and wanting to freeze at the foot of a tree. All three reactions-- seeking shelter, active fighting and panicking -- seem like different symptoms of our limited ability to deal with the fact that life ends.

### **III ENCOUNTERING THE SUBLIME**

There are thinkers that suggest that the goal of human scientific endeavours should go as far as eradicating suffering altogether, i.e. in humans, animals and wherever else it occurs. In 1998 David Pearce co-founded the World Transhumanist Association, today called Humanity+.<sup>9</sup> Pearce has spent much time thinking about the ethics surrounding technological development and he states that it is the duty of humans to use technology and science to eradicate suffering wherever it exists:

*The abolitionist project is hugely ambitious but technically feasible. It is also instrumentally rational and morally urgent. The metabolic pathways of pain and malaise evolved because they served the fitness of our genes in the ancestral environment. They will be replaced by a different sort of neural architecture – a motivational system based on heritable gradients of bliss. States of sublime well-being are destined to become the genetically pre-programmed norm of mental health. It*

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<sup>9</sup> <https://humanityplus.org/about/advisors/>

*is predicted that the world's last unpleasant experience will be a precisely dateable event.<sup>10</sup>*

When reading texts like this one I find that I am quite critical of seeking to bring about extreme longevity and the eradication of suffering through manipulating human biology. This being the case, how do I face the evidence that suggests that the development of technology actually is part of human evolution? An idea that has been floated around for some time and that seems to be getting more traction is that the development of the more evolved brain of Homo Sapiens in comparison to earlier humans was made possible through cooking.<sup>11</sup>

From observing the events taking place in their surroundings our ancestors learned to manipulate objects such as rocks for making sparks, dry grass for use as tinder and wood for fueling a fire which in turn was used to cook their food. In other words, the evolution of the modern human came about through the use of technology by our ancestors. This presents what is human as part of the timespan of an ongoing process: earlier humans evolved into us and we in turn will evolve into something else.

### **The Sublime Appears**

While pondering questions related to large ideas that are very difficult to imagine and conceptualize, such as death, immortality and the development of life I noticed that my interest started to shift from the actual substance of the questions to what it was experientially like to be at the limits of my conceptual thinking. This shift is what turned my interest in the direction of the sublime. Ruminating on the specifics of what eternal life would be like as opposed to experiencing a natural death started to seem utterly futile and I started to find it interesting how difficult it was to imagine either situation. I found it impossible to wrap my head around neither what ceasing to exist would be like nor what

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.hedweb.com/welcome.htm>, last visited August 13th, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/food-for-thought-was-cooking-a-pivotal-step-in-human-evolution/>, last visited August 13th, 2013.

it would be like to live forever. I could not incorporate either option into my conceptual thinking.

Eventually I decided to drop all the reading I was doing on subjects such as transhumanism and the phenomenology of artificial limbs and focus on this mental space beyond conceptual thinking: the sublime. My experiential understanding of the sublime seems to correspond to Immanuel Kant's description of it, that is, an experience that occurs due to a conflict between reason and imagination<sup>12</sup>. On a level of reason we can formulate an idea but we are unable to construct a concept for this idea through our imagination. This inability to form a concept stimulates the mind intensely and produces a state of mind that in itself becomes the reference for the idea we are trying to imagine.

In my experience encountering the sublime can be colored by strong feelings such as joy, a sense of belonging, fear, sorrow and deep gratitude. However, there always seems to be a sense that the sublime experience is deeply meaningful and that it points to something about the human condition that is very hard to put into words. It gives me the sense that the human experience has very much to offer beyond the conceptual understanding that we are able to shape in our minds.

### **Working with Prosthetics**

In the beginning I spent a lot of time thinking about the combination of organic and artificial and especially what happens when natural and man-made substances are combined. The idea of merging the human body with technology made me curious about prosthetics and as a result I contacted a specialist in reconstructive surgery who works a lot with amputations and prosthetics. When the circumstances before an amputation allow it the surgeon plans the operation together with the technicians that will be making the patient's new prosthetic arm or leg. This way the patient's body and the new artificial limb function together as seamlessly as possible.

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<sup>12</sup> Saarinen, p. 41.

My discussions with the surgeon opened up a network of people that work with prosthetics and it was through an encounter with a physiotherapist that teaches people to use myoelectric hand prosthetics that I came into contact with Pekka. A myoelectric prosthesis is an artificial limb that can be moved through the electric signals generated naturally by the body's muscles and Pekka had just begun the process of learning to use one.

Pekka who was in his early sixties had lost his arm below the elbow in an accident in his teens and he had now been offered the possibility to receive a new myoelectric hand. Pekka is a painter and at the time of our first meeting he was learning to draw with his new prosthesis. He was interested in discussing the experience of learning to use a new hand and he agreed to come to my studio to draw for a few sessions so that we could discuss and make observations about his experience.

What quickly became clear was that it was very difficult to define a border between Pekka's natural body and the new tool that he was using as a hand. Physically this was quite easy: he inserted the stump of his right arm into a socket and the stump was held in place through the suction created by the vacuum that was formed between the stump and the socket. However, the neural pathways that were formed in Pekka's brain when he used his right hand in his childhood and early teens still exist and he can sense the presence of what used to be his right hand through the nerves that he used to move it. In other words where his right hand used to be he can still sense a hand which is a phenomenon called a phantom hand.

In order to move his robotic hand Pekka would use his feeling of a hand, that is, his phantom hand. To open the prosthetic hand he would bend the phantom hand upward and to close it in order grab onto something he would bend the phantom hand downward. The problem was that the prosthetic hand and the phantom hand were not in sync. When focusing on something or when lost in thought Pekka had the habit of tapping the fingers of his phantom hand which caused the artificial hand to move. Because of this, when Pekka was holding a brush or a pen the artificial hand would drop the pen just when Pekka started to get into his work. He would snap out of his focused

state and clumsily try to open the hand in order to grab hold of the pen again and because he was frustrated and unable to shift his mind into using the robotic hand the prosthesis would twitch and make eerie mechanical sounds. This became another exercise for me in approaching the sublime: trying to conceptually pin down the border between Pekkas natural body and his artificial limb. I found it quite impossible.<sup>13</sup>



Untitled #6

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<sup>13</sup> In the book “Phenomenology of Perception” Maurice Merleau-Ponty offers an analysis of the phenomenological characteristics of a phantom limb. It seems to me that the complexity of this analysis serves to prove how difficult this phenomenon is to grasp. See pages 78-85 of Merleau-ponty.

## A Renewed Perspective on Art History

At this point I had started taking photographs around the theme of prosthetics and surgical tools but I felt like I was fumbling in the dark. On an intuitive level I felt there was a connection to the theme I had started to work with, i.e. technology, science and the wish for eternal life, but in my work I was getting nowhere. At this point I stumbled on the photograph “The Destroyed Room” by Jeff Wall.



Jeff Wall, The Destroyed Room

Previously this was a picture that I had passed when flipping through books of Wall's work. As I recall what finally made me stop and look at the picture was that it seemed staged and it made me wonder why he would go through building something that seemed like staged destruction. There was the diagonal composition from the upper left



down towards the right that gave a sense of ordered chaos. The red colored walls gave me a sense of lust, violence and loss of control. The setting made me wonder about the significance of the small dancer that seemed to have survived it all. When I started looking into Wall's work I quickly found that the picture of the destroyed room was a reference to Eugène Delacroix's painting "The Death of Sardanapalus" from 1827.<sup>14</sup>



Eugène Delacroix, The Death of Sardanapalus

Through Wall's way of making specific references to art history in his photographs it dawned upon me that I could actively explore my own interests in the works of others. This thought simply had not occurred to me before. By working with the articulations of earlier artists I could approach interests and questions that were present to me merely as intuitions in my mind; things I had not been able to articulate on my own. I could now approach ancient topics such as death and the wish for eternal life through art history by working with specific works that appealed to me.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/jeff-wall/jeff-wall-room-guide/jeff-wall-room-guide-room-1>

## Still life and Observation

In my early twenties I started working with photography as a way of discovering and getting to know my own psychology. Having a camera gave me a reason to jump in the car and simply drive around in random directions, stopping whenever I saw something interesting. It could be a landscape or a detail in a landscape, a house, people or something else and I would observe whatever it was for a while, take a picture and then drive on. One summer when I was working half time and had quite a lot of time to spare I drove almost 6000 kilometers. Eventually I started taking photographs in order to investigate specific themes and with hindsight it was quite natural that my interest started veering towards human fragility once my fear of death appeared.

A few years ago dutch 17th century still life painting started to fascinate me. I learned that this tradition within painting, especially the Vanitas theme, often functioned as a reference to mortality and the impermanent nature of all living things.<sup>15</sup> I understood that these paintings were meant to be reminders of life's limitations and that looking at them could serve as a practice to contemplate vulnerability. When I started taking still life photographs I noticed that the experience of carefully arranging the objects and observing them was a very similar but stripped down version of the experience I had in my twenties when driving around and stopping to observe things. I find that observation in itself can be pleasurable and the investigation of the fleeting nature of awareness deeply meaningful. Observing awareness can be accompanied by varying feelings such as grief, fear, joy and glee and joined with the feelings I often find a sense of belonging or connection. It is this sense of connection that keeps drawing me back to taking photographs. The experience is hard to describe but Mark Doty does it beautifully:

*A painting of asparagus, a painting of gooseberries, a painting of five shells arranged on a shelf. Exactitude, yes, but don't these images offer us more than a mirroring report on the world? What is it that such a clear-eyed vision of the particular wishes to convey? A way to live, perhaps; a point of view, a stance towards things.*

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<sup>15</sup> Petry, pp. 232-233.

*Let me try to elaborate.*

*First a principle of attention, simply that. A faith that if we look and look we will be surprised and we will be rewarded.*

*Then, a faith in the capacity of the object to carry meaning, to serve as a vessel. For what? Ourselves, of course. I mean that the objects depicted are, ultimately soulful. Are anything but lifeless. Of course they have lost their particular contexts, all the stuff of narrative, the attached human stories that would have placed them in some specific relation to a life, but they are nonetheless full of that life, suffused with intimacy. Louise Glück has written that poetry is autobiography stripped of context and commentary; this statement is true of still life as well - how else could these few things on the table before us, arrayed against the dark, glow with such fierce warmth?*

...

*And yet there is something more here, and that something is what nags at me to write this book, what tugs at my sleeve and my sleep. Why, if all the personal has fallen away, should these pictures matter so? Why should they be alight with a feeling of intimacy? Interiority makes itself visible. In my imaginary still life, the “context and commentary” of my experience would be gone, but something would remain, something distilled and vibrant in the quality of attention itself. Is that what soul or spirit is, then, the outward-flying attention, the gaze that binds us to the world?”<sup>16</sup>*

Inspired by the eye-opening experience I had when looking at Jeff Wall’s “Destroyed Room” I decided to start working on the theme of death anxiety and the wish for immortality by experimenting with still life compositions. My idea was to start out building and photographing compositions that resembled those of 17th century dutch paintings such as “Vanitas - Still Life with Books and Manuscripts and a Skull” by Edwaert Collier or “Vanitas - Still Life with Bouquet and Skull” by Adriaen van Utrecht.

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<sup>16</sup> Doty, pp. 47-50.



Edwaert Collier, "Vanitas - Still Life with Books and Manuscripts and a Skull"



Adriaen van Utrecht, "Vanitas - Still Life with Bouquet and Skull"



When I started to get a grasp of the objects and their relation to one another I would work towards my own way of looking and try to develop a way of working with the objects I was arranging that felt like my own.



Untitled #5



Untitled #2

As inspiration I also had artists such as Wolfgang Tillmans who in his work used references to the still life tradition but did it through his own perspective.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See Tillmanns.



Wolfgang Tillmans, *Astro Crustro*, a

## **Mortality and Photographs of Skulls**

My experiences while working with the surgeon at the hospital were also a strong inspiration to steer towards the vanitas theme. The surgeon took me on a tour of the surgical ward for reconstructive surgery<sup>18</sup> and showed me spaces such as the operating theaters and a room where burn patients are cared for. The room had rails in the ceiling that were used for fastening chains and the doctor explained that people that have suffered extensive burns are put to sleep whereafter large hooks are inserted through their wrists and ankles so that their limbs can hang freely suspended in the air. This way the burned areas of the patient's body are kept free of contact to any surface which means that a patient's risk of suffering infections is much lower. I asked how people usually receive bad burns and he answered that there are many ways but that sometimes

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<sup>18</sup> Reconstructive surgery is defined as surgery that is performed in order to restore function or normal appearance by remaking defective organs or parts. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reconstructive%20surgery>

accidents happen with hot water in saunas and that one quite common reason is attempted suicide through self-immolation.

During the tour the surgeon apologized for being a bit tired and unconcentrated. He explained that he earlier that day had operated on a mother who had been infected with a common and usually harmless infection that was transmitted to her by her young child. The mother's immune system had faltered which led to a sudden blood poisoning and as a result both her arms and legs had to be amputated. He told me that he is doing the job that he has dreamed of doing all his life but that being close to the horrors that take place amidst our everyday lives has made him emotionally hardened. I got the sense that he worries how this affects him as a father and husband. Ironically, this hardening and the pain it causes within his family originates in the compassionate wish to see less suffering in the world. Somehow this seems descriptive of the human condition: no matter how well intentioned our efforts may be we act according to our wishes and desires in an existence that is far too complex for us to grasp. This seems to make the long-term consequences of our actions very hard to foresee.

While walking around I noticed bookshelves that were filled with what looked like life-size human skulls and parts of skulls. I was told that these were replicas of skulls that were used for planning difficult surgical procedures. When a complex operation has to be performed on a patient's face a 3D picture is taken of that patient's head and a 3D print made of the skull so that the surgeon doing the operation can get a better understanding of how to perform a procedure where part of the skull needs to be removed or replaced. Essentially, these were photographs of people's skulls and I found it peculiar that some of these people were still alive compared to the skulls of deceased people in Vanitas themed paintings from the 17th century. The 3D pictures were made of persons that at the time when the picture was taken most likely were ill, afraid and hoping to live whereas the vanitas paintings contained skulls of persons who had already gone through the process of dying.



Untitled #4

## Sublime Surgery

The surgeon offered me an opportunity to observe an operation with a possibility to take photographs during the procedure. While watching the operation I had an experience that I would almost describe as spiritual which I will try to explain.

The atmosphere in the operating theatre was calm and friendly during the whole operation and the surgeons and assistants had an air of professionalism about them that was on a level that I had not witnessed before. Watching the movements of the surgeons when using the scalpel and their other instruments presented a level of skill that was akin



to watching ballet. The thousands of hours that these people have spent working and training to do what they do could be seen in their calm and secure handling of the surgical instruments, their hand movements when making incisions, scraping tissue or wiping bodily fluids from the wound, and in their ability to focus so intently for a long period of time. The calm atmosphere and the sense that all this professionalism and perfected skill was directed towards the body lying on the operating table, not the individual but the ill body they were trying to cure, gave the situation a peculiar feeling of devotion and ceremony.

The purpose of the operation was to remove a tumour from a thigh and with a calm and fluid movement of the surgeon's hand the first incision was made. He continued to slowly make the thigh muscle visible and whenever blood started to appear in the wound the assisting surgeon burned the bleeding blood vessel shut with a pair of electrical tweezers and wiped the wound clean with a cloth.

I had been afraid that the experience would be ugly and gory but it was actually quite the opposite, the wound was clean and all the tissues could clearly be seen. The experience was in fact aesthetically quite pleasing. What made the experience challenging was to see inside a human body, that is, to suddenly perceive the body in front of me not as whole but in parts.



Untitled #8

The surgeons are able to view the inside of the patient through the lense of their professional empirical knowledge and are this way able to anticipate and understand what they see with the help of known and mastered concepts<sup>19</sup>. For me as an inexperienced observer, however, this was not possible. What almost made me faint during the operation was to experience my notion of a human body dissolve into skin, fat, blood, muscle and so on. The body in front of me changed from a whole concept into many smaller ones whereupon the individual in front of me disappeared and all that I perceived of what had been a person were different parts and tissues that were bound together.

As an extension of that experience the concept of my own body disintegrated and I saw myself as parts, both mental and physical but merely as parts. Observing the operation

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<sup>19</sup> Nevanlinna.

brought me into an intense contact with the sublime and put me face to face with my inability to grasp my own nature when my conceptual understanding of myself as an individual was put into question. All I could do was marvel at this experience while moving between fascination and fear as it went on.

## **The Concept of Human**

What happened in the operating theatre has made me think about how much my experience of myself is a reflection of my culture, my upbringing, my life experience and so on. I wonder how the idea of what it is to be human must have changed through the ages. For example, how did human individuals experience themselves as hunter gatherers before the dawn of our modern civilizations or as subjects of a strict god during the middle ages in Europe? How were the concepts they had of themselves packaged? From a historical perspective the idea of humans as part of a stream of development or what we know as evolution seems to be a comparatively new one.<sup>20</sup> The idea may be clear but I find it quite difficult to form a concept of myself as part of a stream of development without beginning that at some point in time formed a single celled organism in the primordial soup. This process developed into branches and gave rise to our ancestors, the food they hunted and grew and to ourselves.

I sense that my picture of what is human is very limited. What would a more truthful concept look like and where should its borders be drawn? Using the ability of the surgeon to extend the concept of the individual should it be extended to the fire that was used to cook the food that made the development of Homo Sapiens possible, or the spears used to hunt food or to the tools I use that will be part of shaping the human process? Have we as humans been merged with technology all along? Following this line of inquiry into what is human I quickly become aware of the endless possibilities and of the impossibility of a clear answer. Here one finds an opportunity to encounter the sublime.

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<sup>20</sup> See Darwin.



Untitled #10

## Homeostasis Begets Confusion

It seems to me that the difficulty to grasp the whole picture of existence as a human being is ever more present to us in the intense confusion of everyday life. One phenomenon that shows the complexity of the reality that we inhabit are the news feeds that are updated almost in real time. Instead of presenting consumers of news with a unified understanding of events web based platforms do almost the opposite by presenting views that are tilted towards the likings of their consumers.<sup>21</sup> The confusion that this phenomenon causes among groups of people with different understandings of what is going on around them is one element that strengthens my understanding that we as humans in large groups are poorly equipped to cooperate and to know what is good for us.

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<sup>21</sup> See description of “the filter bubble problem” on <http://www.readacrosstheaisle.com/>, last visited August 20th, 2018.

In his new book “The Strange Order of Things: Life, Feeling, and the Making of Cultures” the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio makes the case that not only our biology but our experience stems from the first living single celled life forms through the process of homeostasis<sup>22</sup>. Homeostasis drives living beings to stay alive and shows itself in our experience through negative and positive feelings. A simplified explanation is that positive feelings arise when we do things that keeps our body alive and negative feelings occur when we do things that are bad for us. Damasio explains how homeostasis directs our behaviour through feelings:

*Why should feelings succeed in moving the mind to act in such an advantageous manner? One reason comes from what feelings accomplish in the mind and do to the mind. In standard circumstances, feelings tell the mind, without any word being spoken, of the good or bad direction of the life process, at any moment, within its respective body. By doing so, feelings naturally qualify the life process as conducive or not to well-being and flourishing.<sup>23</sup>*

In other words we are driven by a biological force that signals to us how to behave, what to like and dislike, without us being consciously aware of being directed to act. According to Damasio it is very hard to make the signals of homeostasis correspond in large groups of humans so that conflicts do not occur.<sup>24</sup> In other words, it is hard to change the feelings of others so that they correspond to your own.

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<sup>22</sup> In the Cambridge Dictionary “Homeostasis” is defined as “the ability or tendency of a living organism, cell, or group to keep the conditions inside it the same despite any changes in the conditions around it, or this state of internal balance”, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/homeostasis>, last visited August 20th, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Damasio, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> Damasio podcast, 48:00 - 50:30.

#### IV ROMANTICISM AND CERTAINTY

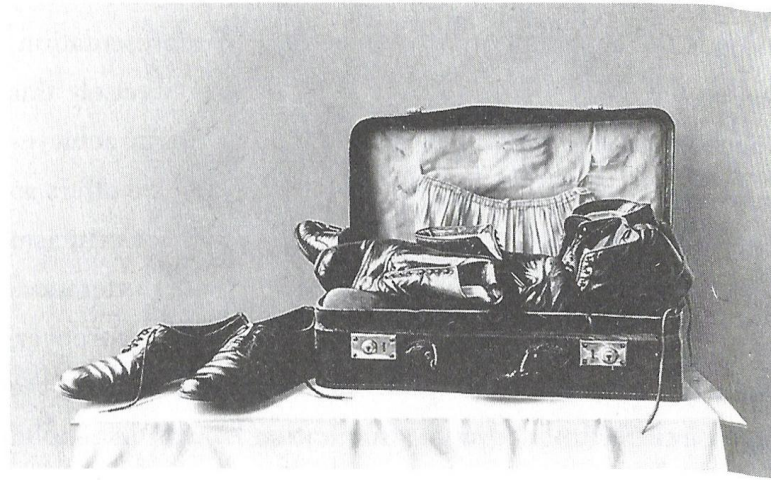
An interesting ingredient in the cocktail of confusion that is the human experience is our capacity of rational thinking which seems to tell us that we are in control and that we know what we are doing despite the underlying biological forces that have a strong impact on our behaviour. Rationality seems to be part of the voice that is telling us that we are acting out of our own free will and that how we are behaving makes perfect sense. Of the human capacity of rationality W.G. Sebald makes the following observation in his writing on the work of artist Jan Peter Tripp:

*Even the most recent portraits of respected incumbents of positions of economic and political power have (without the slightest defamatory intention) a tortured self-consciousness and a slight air of derangement about them, and so share a secret affinity of the definition, arrived at in Weissenau, of the human individual as an aberrant creature, forcibly removed from its natural and social environment. The obverse of this depiction, of a race growing ever more monstrous in the so-called process of civilization, are the deserted landscapes, devoid of all human presence, and in particular the still-lives, in which, far removed from the world of events, only the motionless objects are left to bear witness to the former presence of a strangely rationalistic species.<sup>25</sup>*

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<sup>25</sup> Sebald, p. 168.

father's so-called Russian suitcase lie the shoes of the son;



two dozen slates and a few faded scribblings evoke an entire vanished class of schoolchildren—images of the past, of the Painting of Tripp as presented in W.G. Sebald's "A Place in the Country"

As living beings we are driven to stay alive and as self-conscious humans we have the capacity to fathom that life is limited and that it will end. This can be a tortuous conflict and it seems to me a noble endeavour to try to limit the suffering that it causes. However, in light of what seems to be a human inability to understand the big picture that is reality I am deeply suspicious of the air of certainty that is present in the voice of thinkers such as Nicklas Boström in his "Fable of the Dragon Tyrant".<sup>26</sup> Boströms writing gives me a sense that he seems certain that it is a good thing for humankind to take evolution in our own hands and develop ourselves to become immortal creatures. This sense of certainty makes me suspicious.

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<sup>26</sup> See p. 8.



## Final Reflections

My scepticism towards certainty and the important role of feeling in the human experience as presented by Damasio expanded my interest from 17th century Dutch still-life painting to the romantics and their reaction towards rationalism. Exploring romantic artists such as Caspar David Friedrich and how their work can inform my interests is the direction that my practice is heading in at the moment.



Untitled #9



Caspar David Friedrich

Given the complexity of reality and the inability of the human individual to foresee the long-term consequences of her actions I wonder how a high level intellectual like Boström can be certain that his vision for the future of humankind would be good for us? My



suspicion could of course be misplaced. Perhaps my scepticism of his vision is a consequence of my inability to expand my concept of what is human to correspond with the fact that we have always been a species merged with the technology that was part of the stuff out of which we were born. Maybe a species of immortal cyborgs is a natural consequence of evolution and homeostasis.

Earlier in the text I mused that the idea of a fallout shelter, an active fight against mortality and panic have something in common. To me it seems all three reactions end up with the same result: death. Living in a fallout shelter while life above ground has been destroyed is a kind of death in that life as we knew it is over and must be rebuilt supposing there is something outside to which we can return. Immortality through science and technology is a form of death because it means we must evolve into something which we cannot recognize as human. This leaves panicking which takes us nowhere. However, panic can hopefully be overcome through wisdom which can be gained through practices such as taking the time to contemplate a painting.