

Michael Stetz

CAML – CINE-GT 3049

Assignment 1

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Pandemic GLAMs:
Death and NOT Loving It

“CLASS #1: Memory and Death,” printed bold atop the syllabus for the class which this very paper is written, gave a macabre tone for a course I was told would focus primarily on the culture of memory institutions. At first, I found the topic of the introductory class surprising, but when tasked with this paper, in which I had to compare two Galleries, Libraries, Archives, or Museums (GLAMs), the notion of death with regards to them seemed inseparable, particularly at a time when the past year has been characterized by death due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only was the fear of contracting this deadly disease ever present, but the idea of comparing two GLAMs, a task best done in person, was at odds with my pandemic neurosis of entering public spaces. Thankfully, it was possible to complete the assignment online, yet I found it heartbreaking, reminding me of times before this “new normal,” before every day was full of reports of ever-increasing fatalities from this infectious disease. How could a “virtual” GLAM-going experience translate under these circumstances?

So, with death on the mind, it seemed serendipitous that a virtual tour from the New Museum, a contemporary art museum located in New York City, found its way into my inbox titled, *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*. With my interest piqued, I decided to compare the experience of this virtual tour with that of the Mütter Museum, a Philadelphia-based museum which showcases the history medicine with specimen, tools, and abnormalities, such as Grover Cleveland’s jaw tumor and a human skull collection. Without being too clinical, I wanted to examine how the “user” experiences compared, analyzing how these institutions handled exhibitions during COVID.

The New Museum’s *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*, was originally conceived by renowned curator Okwui Enwezor, and its purpose was to “address the concept of mourning, commemoration, and loss as a direct response to the national emergency of racist violence experienced by Black communities across America,”¹ with the free virtual tour taking place in a large Zoom call of a hundred attendees, rather than a stream. Although the format allowed for audience interaction, my social anxiety had me promptly turning my camera off as soon as I joined the meeting. We started five minutes late due to technical difficulties, but were then greeted by a New Museum teaching fellow named troizel. troizel conducted the tour from what looked like an office at the museum, mask-less, as they seemed to be the only one present, utilizing a PowerPoint presentation. I was disappointed as I had hoped that it would be more akin to a virtual walking tour, seeing the inside of the museum, but the technical

¹ "Virtual Tour." <http://www.newmuseum.org/calendar/view/1713/virtual-tour> (accessed Mar 10, 2021).

restrictions of strapping a Go-Pro to a tour guide's head, in hindsight, seems unfeasible, if not disorienting for the viewer.

troizel began the tour asking what grief and grievance meant to the tour group. Suddenly, there was a silent flurry of activity in the chat, with members of the group offering their own insight. troizel engaged, trying to read off as many of as they could. This experience proved to be pleasant, seeing human interaction in a digital setting, providing a democratic experience for those wanting to participate, whereas the in-person alternative would only result in a cacophonous symphony of opinions. Setting an open platform for discourse, troizel segued into showing a clip from a short film by Garrett Bradley titled *Alone*. Although the segment was mired by some technical shortcomings as seen when playing streamed videos through Zoom, i.e., stuttering, drop in audio volume, heavier than normal pixilation, etc. the quality was still good enough for the audience to view and provide feedback on what they had just watched.

Next, troizel began utilizing slides of the interior of the current exhibition, first showing us Nari Ward's sculpture entitled *Peace Keeper*, a sculpture of a burnt out looking hearse, tarred and covered in peacock feathers, enclosed in a cage. Cognizant of the platform on which we were viewing, troizel thoughtfully provided close-up shots of the vehicle, allowing us to see the up-close details of the work, emulating an in-person experience. troizel again turned to the audience, asking for any insights or feelings provoked by the piece, and again, the chat had much to say. As if leading us down a hall, the next slide was of an empty performance space, normally used to house Okui Okpokwasili's performance art piece *Poor People's TV Room*. While they did not show us the performance itself, they used the photo of the space in which the performance is held to help contextualize the next work, which could be seen hanging in the background of the current photo.

Zooming in on the next slide they showed us a multimedia piece titled *Strange Fruit (Pair 1)* by Kevin Beasley. The work was a sculpture, characterized by a hanging pair of Nikes, which took in ambient noise from the surrounding rooms (Okpokwasili's performance space included) and played it back as an eerily remixed drone. troizel was able to play us a prerecorded sample, despite a few false starts due to Zoom difficulties. Once launched, it helped build the world around us, imitating the museum space that, by this point, I was wishing I were in. We then virtually rounded another corner to the next piece, Howardena Pindell's *Autobiography: Water*, a collage piece depicting a person floating in water, next to a slave boat, with embedded photos and clippings of people and text. While striking at a distance, the collage resonated even better when again troizel provided us with photos zoomed in on the text and images plastered into the light blue canvas. This experience was reminiscent of standing in a gallery six inches away from a piece of artwork, a sensation that had felt quite foreign to me during the pandemic.

Nearing the end of our forty-five-minute tour, the final slide shown was of Rashid Johnson's *Antoine's Organ*, a multimedia structure lush with potted plants, books, fluorescent lights, and an upright piano. It was at this point I was brought back to the somber reality of the Zoom tour, as there was no music to accompany the piece, the smells of the greenery were not present, and scope of the piece appeared miniscule on my 19" monitor.

After the final slide, troizel turned off their screen sharing, wrapped up with a few thought-provoking words, well wishes, and ended the Zoom conference, leaving me to reflect on how I felt about the whole experience. As I had feared going into this assignment, the headaches of yet another Zoom meeting, the presence of technical difficulties, and the physical location of my living room (a room I had grown ALL too familiar with), mired the experience, reminding me again of this new normal that I had not grown to accept. I never forgot that my experience was trying to emulate the feeling of being at a museum, which made me more nostalgic for the museum itself. That being said, troizel was an utmost professional, knowledgeable in their field and the exhibit, and it was a relief to say I actually did something new within the confines of my apartment. The pieces were beautiful, and it was indeed a learning experience, exposing myself to new artists through powerful imagery. Most importantly though, an exhibit focused on grief and grievance was able to provide a space for mourning, something best done in a communal setting, albeit through a Zoom chat.

My time “at” the Mütter provided a different experience, yet also some similarities given the remote nature of my “visit.” Hoping for a comparable experience, I scoured the Mütter’s website for a virtual tour under their “Events” section, only to be disappointed with their only offering: a tour of rarely seen specimens in their storage area, locked behind a museum membership. Being the *exceptionally* frugal person I am, I ventured to their exhibits section to find an alternative. I was greeted with an “Online Exhibits” section nestled near the bottom of the drop-down menu.

The most engaging online exhibit offered by the museum was entitled *Memento Mütter*. Per the Mütter’s description, “the name for the exhibit comes from the Latin *memento mori* – ‘remember that you shall die,’”² and the goal of the interactive show was to “[stimulate] reflection on the diversity of the human bodily experience and our attempts to understand our physical selves.”² Finally, a place I could quietly ponder death amidst a pandemic.

The landing page of the exhibit was adorned with a crimson red banner entitled “Memento Mütter” on a stark black background with the question “What does it mean to be human?” placed at the top. Scrolling down I was greeted with chilling images of ovarian cysts, preserved appendages, and collections of medicinal tools which looked more like medieval torture devices. The high-resolution photos were accompanied by playfully morose titles like “Intestinal Fortitude,” which labeled a colon of a 29-year-old deemed “defective” by doctors and “Joined Forever,” describing a jar of conjoined twins. I could not help but think back to Marita Sturken’s *Tangled Memories*. If memorials like the AIDs quilt are a “place where survivors can find and speak to the AIDs dead,”³ is *Memento Mütter* a place that allows us to joke with them? Selecting an image presented a brief history of the drawing or specimen, as well as a button labeled “Explore.” Clicking it once more provided an even larger, interactive photo, which I could rotate three hundred and sixty degrees. It quickly became a truly haunting experience looking into the eyes of the conjoined twins, their sorrow preserved in formaldehyde. There were buttons in the bottom right of the page, titled “Heart”, “Hidden”,

² “Memento Mütter.” <http://muttermuseum.org/exhibitions/memento-m%C3%BCtter/> (accessed Mar 17, 2021).

³ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA & London, England: University of California Press, 1997), 10-11.

“Dissection”, and “Sadness,” which enhanced different portions of the jar, reminiscent of troizel’s closeups of the burned-out looking hearse, and provided a melancholy blurb describing them.

After looking at a few more specimens of the exhibit, I found myself satisfied (and sufficiently grossed out), and, like most interactions I have these days, I unceremoniously closed the window, leaving me time to contemplate my experiences with the Mütter, and how they compared to the New Museum.

I was disappointed that I was unable to attend one of the Mütter’s virtual events, as it would have been a proper direct comparison with the New Museum’s, but at the time of writing this, I see there is another event posted for next month (a free one at that!), so I am happy that both institutions are finding a way to engage the community given the circumstances. I would much prefer programs like the New Museum’s tour, as the social interactivity helped me feel much more engaged with the content, even though I was hidden behind a disabled camera. That being said, *Memento Mütter* was a truly unique exhibit, which turned out to be a surprisingly intimate experience when rotating and zooming in on the specimens. It provided a quiet time to examine each piece at my own speed, choosing what I wanted to look at, much like I would in an in-person setting. The more time I spent with each display, the more the whole experience started to mirror a typical day of doom scrolling Twitter or Reddit, unable to look away at the shocking COVID headlines, diving deeper into the details. I wish I was able to spend more time with the works at the New Museum as the tour spanned a very quick forty-five minutes, and, at times, it felt rushed. However, considering the New Museum does not have permanent installations, the time and person-power required to take three hundred- and sixty-degree hi-res photos of each piece seems unfeasible.

So, with all this in mind, was there a qualitatively better experience? While reflecting on my visits, I was again reminded of Sturken’s writings in *Tangled Memories*, in which she describes the AIDs quilt as one of many “technologies of memory in that they embody and generate memory and are thus implicated in the power dynamics of memory’s production.”⁴ The motif of the New Museum tour, coupled with the Mütter’s fixation on the human bodily experience, especially with regards to death, exemplify Sturken’s idea of monuments helping engender the memory of the dead. The New Museum virtual tour allowed attendees to view and reflect upon powerful works, which highlighted the loss of African American life at the hands of institutional racism. This tragic cause of death is something we as a society are still dealing with today, and so the virtual tour, notably the chat, is needed to create a space for attendees to not only have an important discourse, but also mourn those lives lost. Yet the exhibit was also testament to creating art and beauty in the face of adversity.

While *Memento Mütter* was not as politically motivated, death was just as inescapable. Preserved body parts exhibiting horrific ailments are monuments of sorrow for those long since passed, and one can only sympathize with the pains they must have endured. Perhaps that is why some specimens were labeled so glibly. Life can be so horrific and harrowing at times, that

⁴ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA & London, England: University of California Press, 1997), 10-11.

humor proves to be the best coping mechanism. Although, while comical, *Memento* was also very clinical, unsurprising given it was curated by the College of Physicians. It is impossible for a viewer to discern race or sex from a skull, a toe, or an intestine trapped in a jar, creating a distilled human experience. So, unlike the New Museum's tour which was set up to mourn the dead, *Memento* reminds the user that they too will die. While a lonely experience versus the New Museum's community driven exhibit, scrolling through *Memento* created a quiet space for reflection, brief sadness, and laughter.

And what of the medium of virtual exhibitions themselves? Stripped of their content, the idea of a remote tour is still a memory of life before we all became trapped indoors. Attendance to both exhibitions is in and of itself a monument to what we used to do before the pandemic, trying to capture the memory of a social experience and recreate it in a digital setting. Gone is the vibrancy of walking into a new gallery or film screening, the room electric with excited attendees. I mourn the loss of seeing people's faces and reactions to works in a museum, which to this day are still hidden behind masks, expressionless. And I miss the R train ride home back to Brooklyn, sitting on a cramped bench, able to reflect on the works I had just seen. What I loved had been replaced with awkward Zoom calls and sitting in silence, peppered with the sound of a few mouse clicks, jumping to a new image.

Sturken reflects on Roland Barthes lamentation that the image has replaced the monument, stating, "that the monument/memorial has not been replaced by so much as it has demanded the presence of the image"⁵ to which I agree. Images have not made these pieces or specimens any less powerful when exhibiting loss, grief, and death, but we certainly require the images if we are to cope during a time when visiting these monuments is impractical and isolation is key to survival. So, while both experiences proved to be slightly saddening events, I am thankful for the hard work put into them, and grateful that both institutions created a space to make things seem as normal as possible. As I write this, more and more people are acquiring the vaccine for COVID-19, so, if anything, both exhibits had helped whet my appetite for newer in-person cultural experiences and served not just as reminders of what had been lost, but they became monuments of great things to come.

⁵ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA & London, England: University of California Press, 1997), 10-11.

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