



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Disarticulated bones

**Citation for published version:**

Harries, J 2016, 'Disarticulated bones' *Techniques & Culture*, vol. 65.

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

*Techniques & Culture*

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



## **Disarticulated bones**

**John Harries, Social Anthropology, The University of Edinburgh**

### **A “lost” skull**

This paper began as a project, entitled “the bones beneath the face”, undertaken by a collective of artists, anthropologists and archaeologists at the University of Edinburgh.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of this project was something leftover, abject and neglected. “Waste matter”, if you will – a thing which is surplus to, or in excess of, immediate requirements and so, somewhat perversely, also lacks utility by virtue of its being abandoned by any purposive arrangement that would suggest it being caught up in an intentional project of some sort. That thing was a human skull found in the storerooms of the Edinburgh College of Art. It was discovered amidst bits of disassembled computer equipment, tattered box files, a headless mannequin, loops of electrical cord, yellow post-it notes and discarded sheets of chipboard. Our project, which is described more fully below, was to take this skull and make something of it. To, in effect, recycle it, by creating and curating a series of assemblages within which it would once again have value.

But before all this work there was a “lost” skull. A skull may be a strange kind of waste. We may even be uncomfortable about thinking about it in these terms. Abandoned human remains are, however, not as unusual as we may think. We live amidst a detritus of bones. There are things which were once articulated but now have become disarticulated and so, in a sense, inarticulate. Before returning to our work of re-assemblage and re-articulation, we want to begin with a broader consideration of the matter of disarticulated bones as residue, a remainder and reminder, of projects of scientific gathering which have since been abandoned leaving behind skulls in storerooms.

### **Dis-articulated bones**

There was a time when the scientific fashion was to collect human bones for study and display. During this time tremendous numbers of bones were procured from the bodies of executed, battlefields and graves and particularly the graves of non-Christian indigenous peoples, which could be looted with impunity so long as it was done with some semblance of scientific purpose. These

---

<sup>1</sup> Those involved in the “Bones Beneath the Face Project” were John Harries and Joost Fontein, with Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh, Linda Fibiger and Elena Kranjoti, with Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh, Joan Smith, John Nowak and Diego Zamora from the Edinburgh College of Art and Jane Cheeseman, a consultant with NHS Lothian. For more information about the project please see: <http://jharries.wix.com/skulls-and-faces>

bones became literally and figuratively articulated within complex and overlapping regimes of value and practice.<sup>2</sup> They were literally articulated in the sense that they were joined with other things, other bones to form a skeleton to be sure, but also complex assemblages of words and artefacts. Bones were hooked-up, if not by bolts and wires then by suggestive proximity (as, for example, when skulls were arrayed on shelves and ordered by provenance and a crude logic of racial type) which revealed some truth of human nature or allowed some insight into past lives. So they became articulate in a more figurative sense. As they were hooked-up bones began to give voice to their own natures or the persons they once were or, more collectively, the existence of races, or ethnic groups, or cultures.<sup>3</sup>

Times change. The scientifically sanctioned enthusiasm for bone collecting has been blunted. It became blunted in part because the study of “race” through the comparative analysis of the body and its parts, so central to 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropology, fell out of favour. It also became blunted by a robust ethical critique of the careless ways in which human tissue was enrolled into “academic” projects, a critique which was underpinned by the sense that even post-mortem people had some dominion over the integrity of their body and its treatment and disposal. So scholars do not collect and display human bones with the ease, alacrity and sense of purpose they once did.<sup>4</sup>

But bones, given their largely mineral composition, endure, often out of sight, perhaps largely out of mind, but nonetheless still residing in the nooks and crannies of our public culture. What we are left with is bones as leftovers – a strange detritus to be found in museum storerooms, anachronistic displays of specimens and locked cupboards. In this sense human remains are like any other accretion of stuff, which was brought together for some reason or another and is now abandoned; except that bones, perhaps because they are uncertainly suspended between being subject and object, a *mere* thing and something other than a thing, conjure their abjection not only because they have lost their purpose, but because they retain some spectral sense that they could *be* somebody.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> For an elaboration of the notion of the relational process of articulation see Hallam "Articulating bones: an epilogue" (2010).

<sup>3</sup> For discussions of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century cultures of bone collecting see Fabian *The Skull Collectors: race, science and America's unburied dead* (2010), Luyendijk-Elshout "Opening address: the magic of the skull. 'Commeccium craniorum' in the nineteenth century" (1997), Hight "Body snatching & grave robbing: bodies for science" (2005), and Ricardo Roque. "Stories, Skulls, and Colonial Collections" (2011).

<sup>4</sup> For overviews of the changing treatment of human remains in bioarchaeology and biological anthropology see Walker "Bioarchaeological ethics: a historical perspective on the value of human remains" (2011), and Turner *Biological anthropology and ethics: from repatriation to genetic identity* (2005).

<sup>5</sup> For reflections on the ambiguous and relational status of human remains as being both subject and object see Leighton "Personifying objects/objectifying people: handling questions of mortality and materiality

In other words, bones are remainders because they at once do not mean so much anymore but still mean too much. Put more prosaically, their condition of abandonment exists in part because we cannot use them, but neither can we destroy them. Their value is gone, or at least diminished, but they must have value. In this sense human bones constitute a peculiar kind of waste. Like the detritus of industrial ruins explored by Tim Edensor, these abandoned things have become out of place. Once they were hooked-up, held in stable association with other things and so “situated with a web of normative meanings and practices” which served to “reproduce and sustain dominant cultural values” (2005: 312), but now they unmoored, adrift as the attachments that held them in place fall away through neglect. However, unlike the bits of pipe, wires and tubes which as a building decays become “waste matter”, human remains, even as they become disconnected from the regimes of value which once held them in place, still resist categorisation as that which “is irrelevant, dirty and must be disposed of.” (Edensor 2005: 315)

What we have then is an accretion of leftover bones that linger in cupboards and storerooms. These bones, we would suggest, have become dis-articulated. The assemblages within which they were once articulate and articulated by being enrolled into projects of knowing have fallen apart. You can still see traces of their having been hooked-up to other bones, to ideas, to artefacts – some faint writing, a blob of wax or the head of nail – but these associations have now faded to suggestive traces. Yet, even as they are disarticulated, they do find company. Strange juxtapositions of things emerge and new associations are created if only by virtue of accident and proximity. In this strange company dis-articulated human bones, to quote Jane Bennett (who writes of instead of “trash” encountered on a city street), “appear more vividly as things, that is, as entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics.” (2004: 351) Shorn from the associations which rendered them articulate and intelligible, human bones nonetheless retain a quality of affective presence which metonymically evokes the possibility of things that may have once been said.<sup>6</sup>

To carry forward Jane Bennett’s theorisation of the “force of things”, the “unearthing” of bones, their (re)discovery and (re)emergence as objects of attention and concern, may be considered as a process by which we render *things* articulate through techniques of objectification and/or

---

through the archaeological body” (2010), and Sofaer “Touching the body: the Living and the dead in osteoarchaeology and the performance art of Marina Abramović” (2012).

<sup>6</sup> For an elaboration of the notion of the affective presence of human remains see Krmpotich, Fontein and Harries “The substance of bones: The emotive materiality and affective presence of human remains” (2010).

subjectification.<sup>7</sup> We do so by drawing them into new associations, thereby resolving their ambiguities and stabilising them as forms of identifiable presence, which then may enter into a politic of recognition and status within existing regimes of value. So by considering the existence of dis-articulated bones, we are in fact addressing that which is anterior to a process of articulation and raising the possibility that this curious form of waste matter, mute yet haunted by the memory of speech, may once again find a “voice”. Central to this consideration is, then, a concern, at once technical and theoretical, with the capacity of human bones to “speak” and, in speaking, what they may tell us.

### **The voice of things**

The notion that bones can speak has some contemporary currency. Bones, nowadays, are being drawn out of the cupboards and storerooms and encouraged to reveal their secrets. They speak to us. They tell us of past lives. Or perhaps, more to the point, past lives speak in and through bones; for the story of these lives is imminent within, and so may be revealed through the study of, the very form and substance of human remains. Moreover, bones do not only speak of the people whose animate being once enfolded them; they speak to attachments and associations that bind the past to the present. Webs of relationships are constituted as the voice of bones becomes audible and attended to. In scenes of violence bones name the guilty and demand redress or allow reconciliation.<sup>8</sup> In scenes of territorial dispossession bones may reassert the rights of indigenous peoples, often through the work of repatriating human remains that had been exhumed and expropriated so as to restore the communion between the earth, ancestors and living peoples.<sup>9</sup> Bones tell of and so constitute their kin networks; speaking of long forgotten couplings and

---

<sup>7</sup> In this context the “unearthing” refers not just to the archaeological process of uncovering that which is buried, but more generally any situation in which bones which bones (re)emerge into the public domain and become, once again, objects of concern and significance. For a further elaboration of the notion of “unearthing” see Filippucci et. al. "Encountering the past: unearthing remnants of humans in archaeology and anthropology" (2012).

<sup>8</sup> There is an extensive and growing literature concerning how the work of unearthing the remains of victims of violence is enrolled into contemporary politics of remembrance, recrimination or perhaps reconciliation. See, for example, Major “Unearthing, untangling and re-articulating genocide corpses in Rwanda” (2015), Fontein “Remaking the dead: uncertainty and torque of human materials in northern Zimbabwe” (2014), Renshaw *Exhuming loss: Memory, materiality and mass graves of the Spanish Civil War* (2011), Crossland “Violent spaces: conflict over the reappearance of Argentina’s disappeared” (2002) and Paperno “Exhuming the bodies of Soviet Terror” (2001).

<sup>9</sup> There is also an extensive literature concerning the ethics and politics of repatriation and reburial both in general and particularly with reference to the remains of North American native peoples. See, for example, Kakaliouras “An anthropology of repatriation” (2012), Krmpotich “Remembering and repatriation: the production of kinship, memory and respect” (2010) and Mihesuah (ed) *Repatriation reader: who owns American Indian remains?* (2000)

dispersals. Above all else, bones speak so that the dead may be heard and in being heard come to act in the present.

This concern with what the bones tell us is no longer, in fact never was, confined to those in the scientific community who study the form and substance of human remains: anatomists, forensic anthropologists and osteoarchaeologists. It has become the stuff our popular, political and legal culture. A few years ago the Native American writer and activist Gerald Vizenor (1986) mooted the idea of “bone courts” in which the testimony of tribal bones would be heard and their narrative rights recognised. In making this suggestion Vizenor may have been playing the postmodern trickster, seeking to disrupt and unsettle the authoritative “monologues” of cultural anthropologists and archaeologists; yet, in many ways bones have come to speak and be heard. Their testimony is heard not only in courts, or in other quasi-judicial processes by which those in the present are held to account for the deeds of the past, they also speak in newspapers and magazines, in television programmes and documentary films.

It may be suggested, however, that bones in fact say nothing. It is we who make them speak, or who speak for them. Bone is simply stuff: inert dead matter which depends of the work of living, thinking humans to give it meaning. This view is predicated on what Eric Olson (2012) labels an “annihilationist” premise, which assumes that at the point of death we cease to exist and the body was once animated by our existence becomes matter devoid of personhood, a premise which, Geoffrey Scarre (2003) argues, underpins archaeological practice. Human remains are like ventriloquists’ dummies: they seem to possess agency, to be able speak of their own accord, but they are in fact simply a medium through which we the living speak so as to tell our own stories and to sort out our own affairs in relation to each other whilst evoking the authority past. This, it could be argued, has been the dominant assumption with socio-cultural anthropology, which implicitly or explicitly has held that the matter of bones is immaterial to our understandings of the various ways and means by which human remains become animated by the concerns of the living, whether these concerns be understood as psychological, cultural, political or some complex combination of all these factors.

Yet recently, a diverse array of scholars have been suggesting a more symmetrical approach to understanding the entanglements of human and nonhumans and, in so doing, arguing that “things” do, in a manner of speaking, speak.<sup>10</sup> One of these is Don Ihde. Ihde argues for an expansion of

---

<sup>10</sup> The “return to things” (Domańska 2006) which foregrounds the “agency” of matter is a diverse, complex and contradictory movement which draws theoretical inspiration variously and sometimes idiosyncratically from a broad spectrum of philosophical traditions. In contemporary archaeology one may find various versions of these arguments in Hodder. “Human-thing entanglement: towards an integrated archaeological perspective”

hermeneutics, the techniques by which we reach understandings of others (or *the* other) through the work of interpretation, to material processes more generally and the material processes associated with scientific enquiry more specifically. He illustrates his argument with reference to “Otzi”, the name given to the remains of a body discovered by two Alpine hikers in 1991. There were, of course, many questions about the body: Who is (or was) he? When and how did he die? How long ago did he live and die? The intriguing thing for Ihde is that these questions were answered through a series material process by which we came to better understand “Otzi”. For example, thanks to an analysis of isotopes via mass spectroscopy, we discovered that Otzi lived in two different areas at two different times in his life, and through carbon 14 dating we learned that he lived and died roughly 5300 BP. So it is, Ihde argues, that in these processes of material assemblage “things are given voices: pollen, grain, metal, and tooth enamel have all ‘spoken’ in spite of being situated in a context that itself is without proper linguistic phenomena.” (2009: 72)

Of course, the remains of Otzi did not in themselves speak. Indeed, to suggest this possibility would be to assume that these remains possessed some *a priori* status as a distinct subject/object that constituted a site of speaking as an entity possessed of voice or indeed “agency”. As Tim Ingold argues (2010: 94-5), no entity, human or nonhuman, can *possess* agency as quality or attribute of their own being; rather agency is always an attribute of an unfolding relational process and cannot be abstracted from this process. So it is that things can only come to “speak”, to communicate to others, as part of an assemblage, in this case a technoscientific assemblage of humans and nonhumans, and through a process of material hermeneutics by which the voice of the other comes to be constituted and made “audible” through DNA analysis, carbon 14 dating, mass spectroscopy and other such-like processes. Although Ihde seems to bestow a peculiar status to these peculiarly technoscientific processes, we would suggest that one need not confine this approach to the work of those in laboratories. It is quite possible that the same analytic can be extended to other processes such as divination, funerary rites and arts-based interventions, including that one to be discussed below, by which we draw human remains into new associations and constitute new assemblages.<sup>11</sup>

From within these assemblages bones come to speak. They speak of the past life and the circumstances of death of the individual whose bodily remains we have discovered. Assuming that

---

(2011), Olsen. *In defence of things: archaeology and the ontology of objects* (2010), Knappett and Malafouris. *Material agency: towards a non-anthropocentric approach* (2008), Witmore "Symmetrical archaeology: excerpts of a manifesto" (2007).

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the possibility of extending an analytic which recognises the material agency of bodily substances to funerary and divinatory practices, particularly in the African context, see Fontein and Harries "The vitality and efficacy of human substances" (2013).

these remains were deposited with thought, care and some evidence of intention, they also speak to the ways in which a people may have thought of life and the afterlife and how to mediate between the two by best arranging the disposal of mortal remains. In this sense they give voice to the “dead” and, in so doing, it could be argued that bones may indeed testify and so the dead may become participants in ethical debates concerning how best to deal with human remains found high in Alpine pass or, for that matter, in the Edinburgh College of Art.

### **The bones beneath the face**

As described above, our specific engagement with disarticulated bones began with a skull that was found in the storerooms of the Edinburgh College of Art. It came with no label and no record of where it came from or how it had been procured. The best we knew, or could surmise, is that it had been with the College for many decades, likely over a hundred years. It was wholly disarticulated both from the rest of the bones that once made up the scaffolding of a living body and from any kind of association which may have indicated the identity of the person whose skull this once was (or still is). The skull was also disarticulated from any intentional and ongoing project. It was, effectively, doing nothing except waiting and keeping strange company with other things that may have once been enrolled in the work of making art, but were now hanging around, haphazardly kept with a view to the future possibility that someone may for some reason or another may do something with them.

The skull itself still retains some traces of having once been articulated within the intentional projects of anatomists and artists (see image 1). Its cap has been neatly sawn off and removed and is now lost, but a metal hook on one side indicates that once the cap had been attached. It is a pale creamy white in colour, which, according to Linda Fibiger, suggests that it was prepared post-mortem as an anatomical specimen by having the flesh boiled from the bones, rather than having been exhumed from the earth. There are smears of paint – red, blue and black – across the forehead and blob of pale wax in one of the eye-sockets which attest to it having been actively caught-up in artistic work of some kind or another. The curious thing is that these traces, these faint indications of past entanglements, conjured the skull's state of abjection more profoundly. Like the scarves and gloves found muddied and neglected on city streets that inspire David Bissell's reflections on “inconsequential materialities”, the skull found at the Edinburgh College of Art seemed to have fallen out of “outside networks of consequence and significance.” (2009: 112) Yet, as with the lost bits of clothing, the skull may “invoke the possibility of other complex webs of relations” (2009: 104) – as revealed in the marks left the by the blade of a surgeon's saw, the hook and smears of paint –



within which it was once articulated, but which have now receded, leaving it abandoned amongst its unlikely companions.

Most profoundly, and before and after all suggestions of its post-mortem career as an object of interest and significance, the skull invokes the absent presence of the face of a living person. This assumes a material hermeneutic of course, the capacity for invocation being realised only in the embodied and affective encounter, but compared to the elaborate technological interventions considered by Ihde, this is a simple hermeneutic of recognition realised in the act of coming face-to-face and seeing that this thing is reminiscent of the form of our own heads and, in this sense has a face even as the face itself as the animate face of flesh no longer exists. We may possibly, out of some empathy with the faceless face of the skull, touch our own faces, pushing hard at those places where the bone lies close to the skin, along the ridges of our brow or the tops of cheek bones, to find the shape of the skull beneath. So before and after the realisation that it was once articulated and articulate within the projects of artists and anatomists, there is the more primordial and uncanny feeling that this skull was enfolded into the being of another person and so retains something of their lively being even as this lively being has been withdrawn from the possibility of encounter, as evidenced by the very fact that skull has appeared as object existing beyond the fleshed body.

Having found this “lost” skull, our project was designed as an exploration about how disarticulated human bones may become (re)articulated. In essence we are engaged in the work on “unearthing”, if we adopt a more expansive sense of this word to include all “those curious and sometimes uneasy moments when, by intention or accident, human remains re-emerge, fleetingly or more persistently, to enter social circulation, calling forth emotions, responses, and elaborations.” (Filipucci, Harries et al. 2012: 199) Our particular concern in undertaking this project was with the capacity of human bones to become articulate, to speak, to communicate, whilst recognising that this capacity is only realised in the work of material hermeneutics as described by Ihde. This was, in other words, an experiment into what bones can say but also, in this, what they do not or cannot say and how, in speaking, these evocative things may suggest the opaque trances of human life, yet resist our efforts to render them intelligible and, therefore, how they may speak to a presence that is withheld even as it is made manifest.

The focus of our project was on the material processes of reassembling, of hooking things up, of bringing things together. In particular we laid two processes of reassembling side by side. We did not assume that either of the processes had a prior or privileged claim to understanding the skull; rather we wanted to be attentive to the work of understanding as being indivisible from material processes

of gathering and attachment. One was a work of osteological analysis, similar to that described by Ihde (although admittedly much less lavishly funded). Led by Linda Fibiger and Elena Kranioti, this processes deployed thin section CV scans, human touch and 3D imagining technology to try and discover something more about the person whose skull this once was (and perhaps still is). So, for example, through the educated touch of Linda Fibiger, the form of the cranium – the pronounced “suborbital ridges” and the prominent “nuchal crest” – suggested that this was the skull of man, while a close look at the teeth revealed that this was the skull of an adult who did not live to an old age, perhaps dying before he was thirty. Although their initial investigations revealed no pathology, the teeth showed signs of “linear enamel hypoplasia”, “groves of decreased enamel thickness on the external surface of the tooth crown” (Palubeckaitė 2001: 76), which are read as evidence of some nutritional, pathological or psychological stress experienced the childhood of a man who died fairly young and whose skull was found in a storeroom of the Edinburgh College of Art. (Fibiger 2014) Beyond this, and pending further investigations and the construction of more elaborate assemblages, we know little else. This is all the bones have to say about the person.

Or is it? The other process, which we will address in the last section of this paper, was an interactive installation, entitled *The Bones Beneath the Face*, based on a suggestion by Jane Cheeseman and developed, designed and “curated” by Joan Smith, John Harries, Joost Fontein and John Nowak. The installation was run as a “fringe” event of the meeting of the Association of Social Anthropologists, hosted at Surgeon’s Hall in Edinburgh in the summer of 2014. The idea was simple. On a wooden table with a scarred black surface, there was the skull, sitting alone on a plinth of grey-painted wood. On another similar table there were an array of objects chosen with little thought other than they may be, in one way or another, interesting and perhaps evocative. There was a bunch of red plastic roses, an empty glass coke bottle, an old map of Ireland, the skull of sheep, some shark’s teeth and sea shells, a framed picture of a young woman and another framed picture of an older woman, a pine cone, a folding ruler, a fossil of a trilobite, an old book bound in worn leather (*The Rambler*, volume II, by Samuel Johnson, printed in London in 1791), a plastic anatomical model of the human head (complete with removable brain and eye socket), a set of keys, some clear glass cubes and so on. Those who happened by the installation, mostly students and academics attending the conference but also a few people who came in off the street, were, in the words of the signage at the entry to the installation, invited to “spend some time with the skull, interact with it however you please” and “take some minutes to think and feel what this skull is or may have been.” Then, choosing from the array of things – the pine cone, clear glass cubes, shark’s teeth and so on – they were invited to “create an installation, which includes the skull” and which “should in some way suggest or express what you feel this skull to be or have been.” After they assemblage was created a

photograph was taken by Caroline Douglas and the visitor was encouraged to write “a caption or some “signage” which you feel to be appropriate to your installation.” In all, over the course of the day 30 people spent some time with the skull, looking at it, turning it in their hands, and then created a still life from the skull and other objects.

Though different, both these undertakings could be considered as an experiments in “material hermeneutics”, that is the socio-technical-perceptual processes by which we come to know, or sense, or feel, the lives of others in the traces of their being. The osteological study and the interactive installation where unfolding processes of rearticulating that which had been disarticulated, or revaluing that which had been devalued; of *unearthing* in the sense that something, which had slipped beyond our “networks of consequence and significance”, had become revealed and drawn back into these networks and, through processes of assemblage, had come to possess a capacity to speak and be heard.

### **Turning the skull to face**

We have described the interactive installation as an “experiment” in material hermeneutics in which the skull, as an abject thing, as waste matter of a peculiar sort, re-enters networks of signification and subjectification through the work of re-assemblage and so becomes rearticulated. What if, any, were the results of this experiment (if indeed one can consider such a process in so positivistic terms)?

Let us begin with what seems the most basic gesture in this undertaking – the turning of the skull to face something or someone. The notion of “turning the skull to face” suggests both the orientation of the recognisable human “face” of the skull (the side with visible teeth, eye-sockets and a triangular hole where once there was a nose) within the purposive act of assemblage, but also, in that turning, a transformation of the skull as a *mere thing* into a skull as a *thing with face*. The act of turning, of changing orientation and perspective is, as Rose Marie San Juan argues with reference to early modern *Memento Mori*, integral to the process of representation by which the “volatility” of the skull – as an ambivalent thing situated between life and death, subject and object, presence and absence – is brought under “control” and so (re)enters and is fixed with regimes of signification. (2012: 961)

This line of argument draws inspiration the concept of faciality as it is elaborated by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Within their theorisation, faciality does not refer so much (or at all) to the face as a physical face, but is a name given to the site where “deterritorialised signs affix themselves” and so “marks the limits of their deterritorialstion.” (2004: 127) The face, in this sense, a terrain where the

“signifier has substance” (2004: 129) and in having substance becomes possessed of or by a “voice”. (2004: 127) This locus of speech is constituted at the “axes of signification and subjectification”, described, on the one hand as a “dimensionless white wall” and on the other as a “formless black hole”. (2004: 187) The face emerges as “black holes distribute themselves on a white wall, or the white wall unravels and moves towards a black hole”. (2004: 187) In this sense the face itself is an assemblage, a coming together of black holes and white walls, of limitless chains of signification and the “pitiless darkness” of our consciousness and passions (2004: 186), who in their association take the form of a presence endowed with the capacity to speak.

Maybe this is to take the notion of faciality and this figurative language of black holes and white walls too literally, but the fact is that seen from a certain aspect the skull takes on the appearance of a pale near-smooth surface, unperforated by gaps and black holes. It is in turning the skull so that the black holes of the eye sockets, the nasal cavity and the gap between its teeth may be seen and come together in association with one another, that it becomes a face and in becoming a face territorialises process of subjectification and signification and so gains a voice (see image 2). It is then telling that, without exception, the skull in the installations was positioned so as that we could see its “face”, that is a pale surface on which are arrayed black holes. In some cases this face was seen in profile. In other cases the skull faced us, the camera, and so we came, as it were, face-to-face.

These different positions, however, suggest a certain tension between processes of signification and subjectification, which were revealed in and through the work of assemblage by which the skull turned to face enters into association with other things so as to speak articulately. In some of the tableaux the skull appears as a sign which became intelligible in reference to other objects (see image 3). In particular, at least three of the assemblages specifically addressed the very issue of signification and foregrounded the problem of our capacity to speak, more suggestively in the tableau entitled “Aklo<sup>12</sup> signs of winter” (see image 4) and more obviously in another gathering things entitled “culture is about symbols” (see image 5) as well as in the still life entitled “work of mouth”, in which the skull, now facing, appears positioned above an open book and a box of movable wooden blocks stamped with letters (an object which also appears in “culture is about symbols”). In other assemblages the skull, in the tradition of the *memento mori*, becomes articulate within a

---

<sup>12</sup> Having not discussed the meaning of this caption with its author we can only speculate as to the significance of Aklo, but it could well refer to a “made-up language” that features in some supernatural horror fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (most notably the works of H. P. Lovecraft). It is a primordial language, coming from before the time of men, which, being primordial is profoundly, but inchoately, powerful and therefore unspeakable. (Rogers 2011: 5-6) The reference to Aklo, therefore, may suggest an entry into a realm of signification which is beyond or before articulation.

meditation of the “transformative potential of death” (Juan 2012: 961), which plays on the ambivalence of the distinction between subject and object to evoke the absent presence of a storied life that is both immanent within and occluded by the dead face of the skull.

In these later cases the storied life and the circumstances of death are suggested in the gathering of other objects. A “butterfly who died too young!” reads one of the captions, and arrayed around the skull is a small case of butterflies pinned and displayed on a white background, a set of keys, a strip of tablets, part opened and emptied, and a greeting card showing the Virgin Mary beneath a canopy of stars (see image 6). “We felt dawn set felt sunsets glow ... loved and were loved” reads the caption of another still life composed of the skull, the bouquet of plastic red roses and the framed picture of the young woman (see image 7). In some instances, the tableaus did not just memorialise the passing of life in general, but the passing of the life of specific person known to the creator of the installation. One installation was composed of the skull at the centre surrounded by the photograph of the young woman, the red roses, the plastic brain removed from the anatomical model of the head, a folded scarf of brown material and gold thread, the battered map of Ireland, the set of keys and other stuff besides (see image 8). The text provided by the creator of the assemblage reads:

This is about my aunt (father’s elder sister) now 101 – wooden frame: she was a wood-worker + tool – scarf + wooden measure: also made and repaired clothes – model of brain: she has dementia – artificial flowers: these now decorate her room – photo of young woman: looks rather like she did – map of Ireland: as a girl and young women went [there] for her holidays – brass fire iron: similar object in her house – keys: we sold her house.

Here processes of subjectification comes to fore in the emergence of the face. Things gather around the face as so many signs which become reterritorialised in the work of assemblage, even as the skull becomes a face and begins to speak of life once lived through its association with those things which are themselves rendered articulate in that act of speaking. In this case, as is all other cases where it came to be the site of subjectivity, which evoked the presence of living person even as that presence is withheld, the skull is positioned so as to face the camera, to look upon us or to return our gaze.

So it is that in assembling these installations the skull is transformed from being “waste matter” – a lost thing found abject, disarticulated and inarticulate in a storeroom of the Edinburgh College of Art. By turning the skull to face and so drawing it into association with other things, ideas and voices

emerged and the bones come to speak. Yet even at that, even as Bennett (2004) suggests, such processes also reveals a remainder which exceeds and is insufficient to our work of re-assemblage and revaluation. There is a stubborn thingy quality to this skull which is both insufficient to and in excess of our attempts to render it articulate as a subject/object. For what has been assembled is transient and becomes disassembled. The book in its worn leather binding lies on my desk. The grey box on which the skull was placed is on top of an adjacent cupboard. The keys, photographs and the other things that people gathered around the skull, have now been scattered, returning to other associations and functions, or just lying in boxes and desk drawers forgotten and unnoticed. The skull itself has become once again disarticulated, returned to safe storage, now in the temporary keeping of the Surgeon's Hall Museum in Edinburgh, perhaps awaiting its unearthing. This before and after of disarticulation haunts the coming together of things and the territorialisation enabled by the turning to face, so even as the thing comes to speak it speaks of that which cannot be articulated.

## References

- Bennett, Jane. "The Force of Things Steps toward an Ecology of Matter." *Political theory* 32.3 (2004): 347-372.
- Bissell, David. "Inconsequential materialities: the movements of lost effects." *Space and Culture* 12 (2009): 95-115.
- Crossland, Zoe. "Violent spaces: conflict over the reappearance of Argentina's disappeared." *Matériel culture: the archaeology of twentieth-century conflict*. Eds. John Schofield, William Gray Johnson and Colleen M. Beck. Routledge, 2002. 115-131.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Continuum, 2004.
- Domańska, Ewa. "The return to things." *Archaeologia Polona* 44 (2006): 171-185.
- Edensor, Tim. "Waste matter-the debris of industrial ruins and the disordering of the material world." *Journal of Material Culture* 10.3 (2005): 311-332.
- Fabian, Ann. *The Skull Collectors: race, science, and America's unburied dead*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Fibiger, Linda. "Short Report on the Cranium and Mandible from the Edinburgh College of Art (ECA)." 2014. TS. University of Edinburgh.
- Filippucci, Paola, John Harries, Joost Fontein, and Cara Krmpotich. "Encountering the past: unearthing remnants of humans in archaeology and anthropology." *Archaeology and anthropology: past, present and future*. ASA Monograph 48. Ed. David Shankland. Berg, 2012. 197-218.
- Fontein, Joost, and John Harries. "The vitality and efficacy of human substances." *Critical African Studies* 5.3 (2013): 115-126.
- Fontein, Joost. "Remaking the dead: uncertainty and the torque of human materials northern Zimbabwe." *Governing the dead: sovereignty and the politics of dead bodies*. Ed. Finn Stepputat. Manchester University Press. 114-140.
- Hallam, Elizabeth. "Articulating bones: an epilogue." *Journal of Material Culture* 15.4 (2010): 465-492.
- Hight, Megan J. "Body Snatching & Grave Robbing: Bodies for Science." *History and anthropology* 16.4 (2005): 415-440.
- Hodder, Ian. "Human-thing entanglement: towards an integrated archaeological perspective." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17.1 (2011): 154-177.
- Ihde, Don. *Postphenomenology and technoscience: The Peking university lectures*. SUNY Press, 2009.
- Ingold, Tim. "The textility of making." *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 34.1 (2010): 91-102.
- Juan, Rose Marie San. "The turn of the skull: Andreas Vesalius and the early modern memento mori." *Art History* 35.5 (2012): 958-975.
- Kakaliouras, Ann M. "An anthropology of repatriation." *Current Anthropology* 53.S5 (2012): S210-S221.

Knappett, Carl, and Lambros Malafouris. *Material agency: towards a non-anthropocentric approach*. Springer Science & Business Media, 2008.

Krmpotich, Cara, Joost Fontein, and John Harries. "The substance of bones: The emotive materiality and affective presence of human remains." *Journal of Material Culture* 15.4 (2010): 371-384.

Krmpotich, Cara. "Remembering and repatriation: the production of kinship, memory and respect." *Journal of Material Culture* 15.2 (2010): 157-179.

Leighton, Mary. "Personifying objects/objectifying people: handling questions of mortality and materiality through the archaeological body." *Ethnos* 75.1 (2010): 78-101.

Luyendijk-Elshout, Antonie M. "Opening address: the magic of the skull. 'Commercium craniorum' in the nineteenth century." *International Journal of Osteoarchaeology* 7.6 (1997): 571-574.

Major, Laura. "Unearthing, untangling and re-articulating genocide corpses in Rwanda." *Critical African Studies* 7.2 (2015): 164-181.

Mihesuah, Devon Abbott, ed. *Repatriation reader: who owns American Indian remains?*. University of Nebraska Press, 2000.

Olsen, Bjørnar. *In defense of things: archaeology and the ontology of objects*. Rowman Altamira, 2010.

Olson, Eric T. "The Person and the Corpse." *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death*. Eds. Ben Bradley, Ben, Fred Feldman, and Jens Johansson. Oxford University Press, 2012. 80-96.

Palubeckaitė, Žydrūnė. "Patterns of linear enamel hypoplasia in Lithuanian Iron Age Population." *Variability and Evolution* 9 (2001): 75-87.

Paperno, Irina. "Exhuming the bodies of Soviet Terror." *Representations* 75. 1 (2001): 89-118

Renshaw, Layla. *Exhuming loss: memory, materiality and mass graves of the Spanish Civil War*. Left Coast Press, 2011.

Rogers, Stephen D. *The Dictionary of Made-Up Languages: From Elvish to Klingon, The Anwa, Reella, Ealray, Yeht (Real) Origins of Invented Lexicons*. Adams Media, 2011.

Roque, Ricardo. "Stories, Skulls, and Colonial Collections." *Configurations* 19.1 (2011): 1-23.

Walker, Phillip L. "Bioarchaeological ethics: a historical perspective on the value of human remains." *Biological anthropology of the human skeleton*. Eds. Anne M. Katzenberg and Shelley R. Saunders. John Wiley & Sons, 2011. 3-39.

Turner, Trudy R., ed. *Biological anthropology and ethics: from repatriation to genetic identity*. SUNY Press, 2005.

Scarre, Geoffrey. "Archaeology and Respect for the Dead." *Journal of applied philosophy* 20.3 (2003): 237-249.

Sofaer, Joanna. "Touching the Body: The Living and the Dead in Osteoarchaeology and the Performance Art of Marina Abramović." *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 45.2 (2012): 135-150.

Vizenor, Gerald. "Bone courts: the rights and narrative representation of tribal bones." *American Indian Quarterly* (1986): 319-331.



Witmore, Christopher L. "Symmetrical archaeology: excerpts of a manifesto." *World archaeology* 39.4 (2007): 546-562.