

## Epitaph

*Janice Andreae*

### Épitaphe

*Janice Andreae crée un anti-monument funéraire pour un ami mort du SIDA. Refusant la forme statique du statuaire qui s'oppose absolument au présent transitoire du procès, dans son installation elle projette une image composée de fragments métonymiques – le 'Dead Christ' du peintre Hans Holbein qui revient de l'inconscient et sert de point d'intersection entre le corps émacié de l'ami et une terreur personnelle de l'amaigrissement ; une vue de l'environnement physique qui devient symbole de la souffrance de l'ami ; quelques mots d'André Breton chargés de ses propres intentions. L'ami est ainsi inscrit dans une zone de contact intime qui garde le mouvement accidentel et imprévisible du présent.*

*text of project/project of text:*

re-membering, remembering 'other'

surface / body / landscape / text

framework for loss layering of images / different

frames of reference becoming monument / testament

meeting, making tangible/intangible possibility

touching other bodies materials objects experiences

unknown relations

*projection*

### context

In 1987 two people very close to me died. As I watched their bodies slowly waste away, I also became more and more conscious of the very intense degree with which they struggled to hang onto each day and each moment. Their endurance and their desire for life were in a paradoxical relation to their emaciated bodies and their physical exhaustion. With each death, it felt strange to be without their presence, although the

bodies remained. Still. Unstirred by pain. Each time I was left with contradictions. Emotional. Physical. Spiritual. Contradictions which I could neither communicate nor comprehend.

That spring, I began to visit Eugenia Falls on the Niagara Escarpment, where there is an old monument to soldiers who died in the First World War. It is hard to find Eugenia Falls and its small hidden conservation area if you have not already been there. I found myself making visits there at different times of the day, at different times of the year. I kept coming back to look at the precipice where the escarpment falls steeply away from an evergreen wooded edge. Here, trees strain stark, sun-bleached roots to straddle the crumbling limestone rock face falling headlong into a deep valley below. From my viewing position, nothing lay beyond the cliff.

Coming upon that steep rock face so unexpectedly in the wooded area with its own echoes of lives past, with its cultural inheritance from a socially condoned struggle of aggression, somehow made sense of my own experiences with life at the moment of death. I returned frequently to this place. (Now it has become more and more difficult for me to go there but I access this site through juxtaposing images, by making installations that recall the immediacy of my experience of this geographical location.) I saw the ongoing struggle of the trees as a sign of life. A struggle of making. That critical edge of the precipice located my reality. From my position at the edge, I did not know what lay beyond. This was a place of possibility.

### landscape

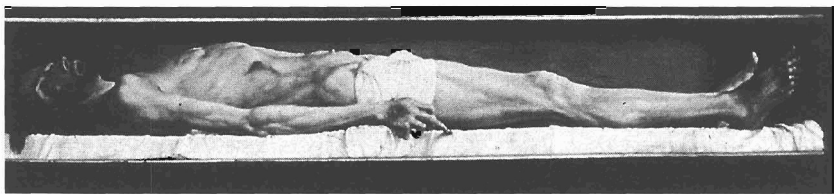
memory sketches from leaves and veins  
 with water all water  
 a monday morning of spiral in september  
 between the real and what flows from it  
 night is passing leading me  
 into the chemistry of the waters the women  
 pass through

– Nicole Brossard, *Lovers*

**body**

My father dies of prostrate/bone cancer. Matt's death from AIDS-related complications occurs seven months later. Each is obsessed with gaining weight to sustain energy, to counteract the ravishing presence of rapidly progressing disease. When I eat with them, keeping them company in what is often, for them, an unpleasant task requiring discipline, I unconsciously assume these associations. Eating combats death. I consume. I gain weight. They do not.

In the spring of 1990, when I decide to lose weight, I begin to experience feelings of panic accompanied by the image of an emaciated body stretched out on a slab. I do not see the face, only the mid-torso area. The body is male, different. It is familiar, but unspecific. Dead and emaciated with pronounced articulation of the rib area through chiaroscuro. I do not lose weight, but gain. I possess no words to describe this experience and this image. Fearful and fleeting. Disturbing my self-control, it appears and disappears, a visual 'flash,' a slide. A memory. More tangible because visible. It refers to something unknown. I feel trapped in a body that seems 'other.' Not my own. Eventually, I find words to speak about this image. The same afternoon I buy *Black Sun, Depression and Melancholia* by Julia Kristeva which I am to read for a seminar. I open the text.



(*The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, Hans Holbein the Younger, 1522.)

I find my referent. The image is buried in a body of art historical knowledge acquired nearly twenty years before as a fine arts student. A stray image without title, without a signified – an image which I had, literally, incorporated. I begin to work on my seminar project and to

speak about what this image means to me, its representational links to my life. When I return again to the precipice at Eugenia Falls, I feel a connection between my experience of this place and the *Dead Christ* image I carry within. I discover that this site and the visual image, the landscape and the body, have the same significance for me. Recollecting this realistic depiction of the dead Christ's body, metaphorically describes the real space I occupy at the edge of the precipice. Encountering transitions which occur despite human intervention, despite struggle. Defying the strength of love, faith. Then, there is loss. I begin to lose weight. I begin to feel pain. I am healthier. The pain is still there but I know what it is.

### text

Studying the connections between surrealism and feminist cultural production in Quebec, I came upon a compelling statement by André Breton in *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*. I did not understand it but I felt that this was his intention. He challenged linear, rational, logical ways of seeing, doing, thinking. No closure. Only that human desire for concrete ending. Control. In the political interventions of the 'automatistes,' painting was liberated from representation, from boundaries and borders. Gesture signified possibility. The frame no longer existed to contain experience. Surfaces continued, pulsated with energy, spread everywhere.

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the uncommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions.

From my position at the precipice the contradiction remained. There was a transition between life and death that I could only confront, neither comprehend nor change. My desire to resolve this contradiction was materialized in gestures marking endings, in forgetting, in the

adoption of codes of memorialization: wearing black, attending funerals, writing letters of bereavement, erecting monuments, saving objects, photographs, memories. *Leave the past. Get on with the present.* But conventions failed me.



I am asked to participate in *Gathering: The Memorial Project* (curated by Clamorous Intentions art collective at A Space Gallery, Toronto, November 1992), an exhibition of visual art produced in response to artists' experiences of losing loved ones to AIDS-related illnesses. The project is to de-construct the concept of the memorial by introducing the subjective experiences of loss and grief. To construct memorials which challenge the traditions of Western culture associated with objectifying experiences of death and dying through representational art and artistic conventions such as portraiture and public monuments, elegies and epitaphs. My project is to reconstruct/reconceptualize/rematerialize this record of lives, of the 'other,' in a material form that expresses my experience of their presence.

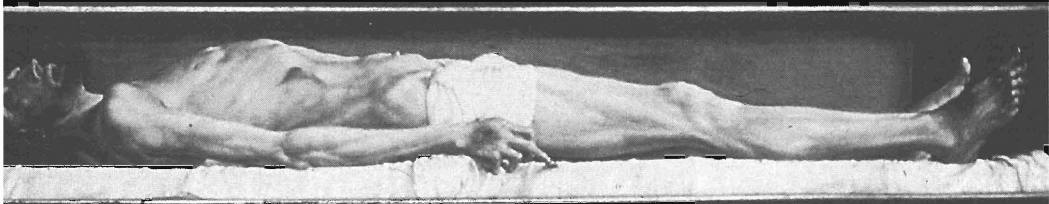
In the installation, the viewer's location is determined by the position required for reading two excerpts zeroxed from Matt's journal. They are

laid out under plexi-glass on a podium which also houses a projector. The podium is directly in front of a multi-layered image projected on the gallery wall. This positioning necessitates the viewer's entry into the structure of the installation to read the journal extracts. Here, s/he faces, head on, the intangible surface of the slide image. Responds. Makes associations. Connects the complexities of loss with visible references. Fragments. Different meanings. The image resists two-dimensional framing, linear perspective, the fine arts canon, descriptive interpretation, easy comprehension, closure. Making intangible experiences real, absence present, subjective associations concrete for others, giving memories tangible forms, involving the gaze subjectively in the production of meaning(s).

*His other agonies today are  
general aches & pains in the lower  
back & all through his legs,  
which is all attributed to his  
lack of meat covering the now  
tender bones & his inability to move  
about*

### project/ion

cast a body into space go out of oneself into another's feelings cause image to be visible cause idea to take shape or become known project throwing thrusting forward projection unconscious transfer of one's own impressions or feelings to external objects or persons to form a project projector apparatus for projecting rays of light/image/surface



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