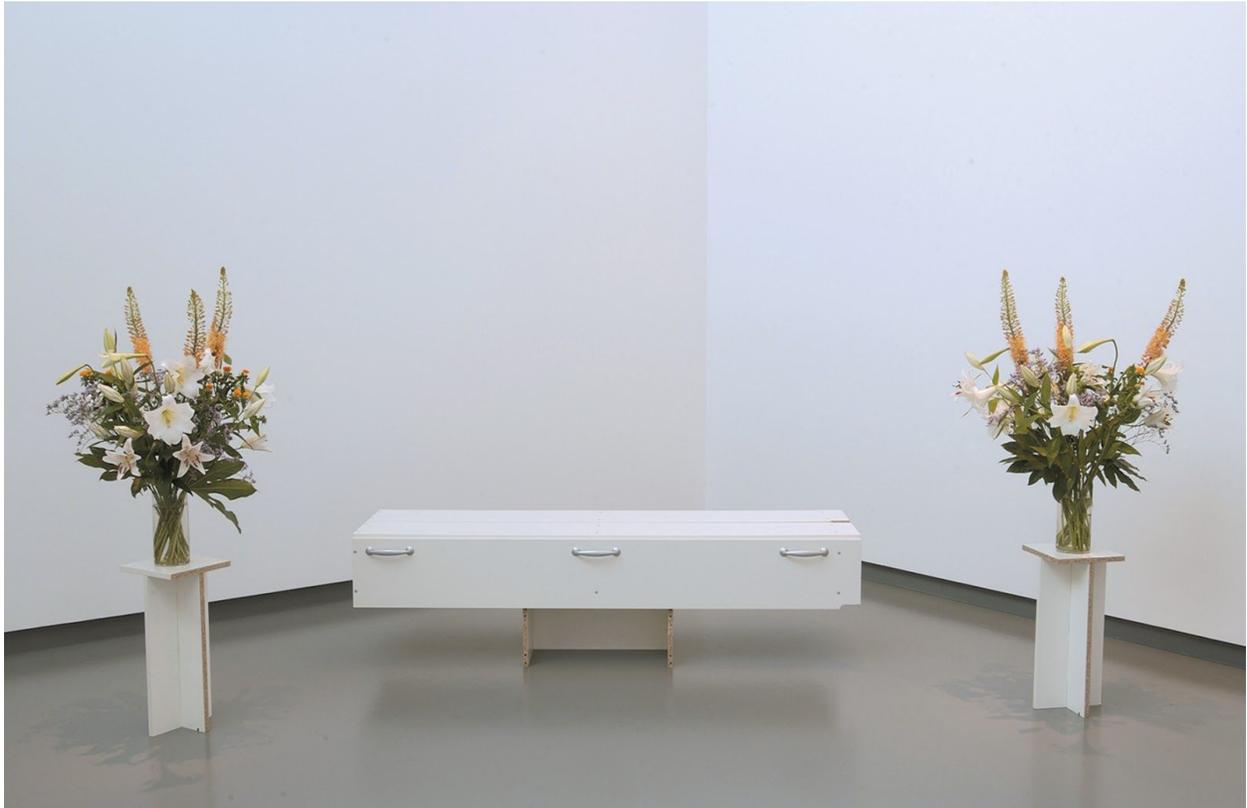


DIY: A Scrapbook on Waste Management and Death



“Death: I don’t believe in it, because you’re not around to know that it’s happened.”
—Andy Warhol, From A to B and Back Again

Dale Carnegie has written that in the lexicon of the successful man there is no such word as “failure.” So have the funeral men managed to delete the word death and all its associations from their vocabulary. They have from time to time published lists of In and Out words and phrases to be memorized and used in connection with the final return of dust to dust; then, still dissatisfied with the result, have elaborated and revised the lists. Thus a 1916 glossary substitutes “prepare body” for “handle corpse.” Today, though, “body” is out and “remains” is In.

This rather basic list was refined in 1957 by Victor Landig in his *Basic Principles of Funeral Service*. He enjoins the reader to avoid using the word “death” as much as possible, even sometimes when such avoidance may seem impossible; for example, a death certificate should be referred to as a “vital statistics form.” One should speak not of a “job” but rather of a “call.” We do not “haul” a dead person, we “transfer” or “remove” him— and we do this in a “service car,” not a “body car.” We “open and close” his grave rather than dig and fill it, and in it we “inter” him rather than bury him. This is

done, not in a graveyard or cemetery but rather in a “memorial park.” The deceased is beautified, not with makeup, but with “cosmetics.” Anyway, he didn’t die, he “expired.” An important error to guard against, cautions Mr. Landig, is referring to the “cost of the casket.” The phrase, “amount of investment in the service” is a wiser usage here.

—Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death*

—How, they asked,
Feeling we have wings
Shall we quit our vile bodies?
—Die, they said.

—Raymond Roussel, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, 1935

I hope it has the innocence of those baroque crypts in Sicily; their initial effect is so stunning you fall back for a moment and then it’s exhilarating. There are 8,000 corpses—not skeletons, corpses—decorating the walls, and the corridors are filled with windowed coffins. I opened one and picked up what I thought was a piece of paper; it was a piece of dried thigh. I felt strangely relieved and free. It delighted me that bodies could be used to decorate a room, like flowers. We accept our thing-ness intellectually, but the emotional acceptance of it can also be a joy.

—Paul Thek, “The Wonderful World That Almost Was,” *Artnews* (1966)

Mr. Joyboy was debonnaire in all his professional actions. He peeled off his rubber gloves like a hero of Ouida returning from stables, tossed them into a kidney bowl and assumed the clean pair which his assistant held ready for him. Next he took a visiting card—one of a box of blanks supplied to the florist below—and a pair of surgical scissors. In one continuous movement he cut an ellipse, then snicked half an inch at either end along the greater axis. He bent over the corpse, tested the jaw and found it firm set; he drew back the lips and laid his card along the teeth and gums. Now was the moment; his assistant watched with never-failing admiration the deft flick of the thumbs with which he turned the upper corners of the card, the caress of the rubber fingertips with which he drew the dry colorless lips into place. And, behold, where before had been a grim line of endurance, there was now a smile! It was masterly. It needed no other touch.

—Evelyn Waugh, *The Loved One*, 1948

The two 9-to-0 decisions on assisted suicide last week saw the Supreme Court tell the American people to cultivate the issue themselves. “Throughout the nation, Americans are engaged in an earnest and profound debate about the morality, legality and practicality of physician-assisted suicide,” Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist wrote in validating state criminal laws against the practice. By declining to find any Federal constitutional barriers to such laws, he wrote, “our holding permits this debate to continue, as it should in a democratic society.”

—*The New York Times*

In the 1870s, cremation advocates campaigned on a number of fronts for legality and public acceptance of their practice. They published expository material urging support for their cause; they experimented with various types of furnaces; they went so far as to cremate each other in defiance of the authorities, thus subjecting themselves to public censure and even to criminal prosecution. It was not until 1884 that they won a court decision declaring cremation to be a legal procedure, but there was still much opposition from church and public; police protection was sometimes necessary when a cremation was to take place. In short, acceptance of cremation as a sensible and also a respectable disposition of the human dead was only won as the result of a hard-fought, uphill struggle.

—Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death*

Traditionally, old-time carpenters brushed together all of the sawdust and shavings accumulated from making a coffin and placed these scraps inside it.

—Margaret Coffin, *Death in Early America*

Among the aboriginal New Zealanders a man was buried in his own house with everything it contained. The doors were sealed shut and no one ever entered it again, with the result that in many villages half of the houses belonged to the dead. A wasteful practice, it is by no means unique; among the Eskimos “when a person is evidently dying, they place him with everything which can soothe and comfort his last moments, and then leave the igloo, or house, which they close up, thus converting it into a tomb.”

—Bernard Rudofsky, *The Prodigious Builders*, 1977

Coffins can be the costliest part of a funeral, yet few people are willing to settle their loved ones in a plain pine box. Instead, most honor their dead in coffins made with fine

wood, ornate carving or moldings, and expensive hardware. That can bring the cost to thousands of dollars. Of course, once the coffin is buried it is never seen again.

Now, Roy Minton and Douglas Barker, both of Jonesboro, Arkansas, have come up with a reusable coffin. Mr. Minton and Mr. Barker have designed a plastic capsule that fits inside a traditional, decorative coffin. After the funeral, the capsule is buried. The decorative shell can be used again.

“It’ll be the only waterproof casket on the market,” Mr. Barker said of the capsule made of PVC plastic. “The only thing that can hurt it is sunlight, and that’s not likely to be a problem . . . It has handles and is pretty decorative. It’s a coffin looking thing. It doesn’t look like a Tylenol.”

The inventors received patent #5,481,785.

—Sabra Chartrand, *The New York Times*, 1997

Most of the stone a nation hammers goes towards tombs only. It buries itself alive. As for the Pyramids, there is nothing to wonder at in them so much as the fact that so many men could be found degraded enough to spend their lives constructing a tomb for some ambitious booby, when it would have been wiser and manlier to have drowned him in the Nile, and then given his body to the dogs.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854

Where would it be more meaningful to represent the cycle of the year . . . than on the walls of a tomb that is meant to impart eternity to its inmate? If he could thus watch the year come round and round again, the passage of time, the all consumer, would be annihilated for him.

—Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*

Robert Smithson: The museum tends to exclude any kind of life-forcing position. But it seems that now there’s a tendency to try to liven things up in museums, and that the whole idea of the museum seems to be tending more towards entertainment. It’s taking on more and more the aspects of a discotheque and less and less the aspects of art. So, I think that the best thing you can say about museums is that they really are nullifying in regard to action, and I think that this is one of their major virtues . . . I’m interested for the most part in what’s not happening, that area between events which could be called the gap. This gap exists in the blank and void regions or settings that we never look at. A museum devoted to different kinds of emptiness could be developed. The emptiness

could be defined by the actual installation of art. Installations should empty rooms, not fill them.

Allan Kaprow: Museums tend to make increasing concessions to the idea of art and life being related. What's wrong with their version of this is that they provide canned life, an aestheticized illustration of life. "Life" in a museum is like making love in a cemetery.
—"What is a Museum?," *Arts Yearbook*, 1967

Just how soon should one get going on the embalming? One author tells us, "On the basis of such scanty information made available to this profession through its rudimentary and haphazard system of technical research, we must conclude that the best results are to be obtained if the subject is embalmed before life is completely extinct—that is, before cellular death has occurred. In the average case, this would mean within an hour of somatic death." For those who feel that there is something a little rudimentary, not to say haphazard, about this advice, a comforting thought is offered by another writer. Speaking of fears entertained in early days of premature burial, he points out, "One of the effects of embalming by chemical injection, however, has been to dispel fears of live burial." How true; once the blood is removed, chances of live burial are indeed remote.

—Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death*

In 1843, Christian Eisenbrandt of Baltimore claimed the invention of a "life preserving coffin in case of doubtful death." Advertised as a "new and useful improvement on coffins," it was equipped with an arrangement of wires and pins which allowed a spring lid to fly open if there should be movement within the box. A casket with a similar purpose had a flag that unfurled above ground in case of movement below.

—Margaret Coffin, *Death in Early America*

A Study in Bronze: When Robert Fulton said he could propel a boat by steam his friends were sure he was mentally deranged—that it could not be done. When Benjamin Franklin said he could draw electricity from the clouds his acquaintances thought he was crazy—that it could not be done. When our designing and manufacturing departments said they could and would produce a cast bronze casket that would be the peer of anything yet developed, their friends and associates shook their heads sympathetically, feeling that it would be a hopeless task. All three visions have come to be realities—the steamboat, electricity, and the Hilco Peerless Cast Bronze Burial Receptacle.

—D. H. Hill Casket Company, *Catalogue of Funeral Merchandise*

Disposal of the dead falls rather into a class with fashions, than with either customs or folkways on the one hand, or institutions on the other . . . social practices of disposing of the dead are of a kind with fashions of dress, luxury and etiquette.

—A.L. Kroeber, *American Anthropologist*

Montreal, July 22—Everybody who passes through the gates of the Olympic stadium has seen the coffin just outside. They've also noticed it has wheels. And a shower. And a dog. And a nightly occupant who's standing beside it, looking like Colonel Sanders gone to seed. His name is Alan Duquette and he's a sixty-five-year-old Montreal resident who bills himself as "King of the Walk." For the last ten years Alan has pulled his coffin, decorated with news clippings and mementoes from around the world, 140,000 miles through eighteen countries.

"I can't sleep anywhere but in my coffin," Alan said. "I hate hotels. And I love cemeteries. Anytime I find a cemetery, I jump at the chance of sleeping there. . . . I've seen it all, met all the dignitaries—Nixon, Trudeau, Haile Selassie. It's a free, interesting life."

He has no interest whatsoever in seeing any Olympic events, just in the foot traffic they generate. He gets a handout, they get a snapshot, and free enterprise rolls on.

—*The Associated Press*

Tomb furniture achieved apparently contradictory ends in discarding old things all the while retaining them, much as our storage warehouses, and museum deposits, and antiquarian storerooms do.

—George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, 1962

Art is still and dead.

—Vija Celmins, *Artforum*

About this drawing of the sailor—I'll try to explain it: This really happened—you see the little arrow in the drawing pointing to that after-gun? Well I was the gunner there of that time. One morning early a lone Japanese Kamikaze attacked us from the rear at about a 45-degree angle. We knew it was a kamikaze immediately. All of us who could

bear on the guy naturally fired at him when he came within range—I saw my tracers going into the god-damned thing but he kept coming down anyway (all this happened very fast). Well he hit up forward just aft of the #1 elevator, which was up at the time + his plane exploded in the elevator pit. It blew our elevator 400 feet into the air (10 tons) + they don't know whether it was still going up or coming down when they snapped a photograph of it from another ship. Well it was a terrific explosion + many people up forward were killed + wounded + there was a terrific fire up there. They did get the fire put out finally + that night (+ it was a full moon). I was on watch back there on my gun position. I looked down on the fantail of the ship + they had all the dead people stacked there like cordwood. It was a pretty ungodly sight. Well the moon was bright + the dead sailor on top of the pile was a good pal of mine. That's him in the drawing. I recognized him immediately—he was naked + on his chest was a huge beautiful tattoo of an eagle that he was so proud of. In fact that tattoo hadn't quite been finished as we had to leave port suddenly a couple of years before. Well the next morning they placed each dead man in a mattress cover with a 5" projectile tied between his legs + and we buried them at sea. He was a very sweet guy. The best to you Tom + everybody involved with the show + my thanks.

—H.C. Westermann, *Letter to Tom Armstrong (The Dead Young Sailor—1945)*

Dennis lay quite still and the girl came within a yard, and knelt down in the same shade and prepared to recline beside him before she said "Oh."

Dennis sat up and turning saw the girl from the mortuary. She was wearing very large, elliptical violet sunglasses which she now removed to stare the closer and recognize him. "Oh," she said, "pardon me. Aren't you the friend of the strangulated Loved One in the Orchid Room? My memory's very bad for live faces. You did startle me. I didn't expect to find anyone here."

"Have I taken your place?"

"Not really. I mean it's Mr. Kaiser's place, not mine or yours. But it's usually deserted at this time so I've taken to coming here after work and I suppose I began to think of it as mine. "I'll go someplace else."

"Certainly not. I'll go. I only came here to write a poem."

"A poem."

He had said something. Until then she had treated him with that impersonal insensitive friendliness which takes the place of ceremony in that land of waifs and strays. Now her eyes widened. "Did you say a poem?"

"Yes. I am a poet, you see."

"Why, I think that's wonderful. I've never seen a live poet before. Did you know Sophie Dalmeyer Krump?"

“No.”

“She’s in Poet’s Corner now. She came during my first month when I was only a novice cosmetician, so of course I wasn’t allowed to work on her. Besides she passed in a street car accident and needed special treatment. But I took the chance to study her. She had a very marked Soul. You might say I learned Soul from studying Sophie Dalmeyer Krump. Now whenever we have a treatment needing special Soul, Mr. Joyboy gives it to me.”

“Would you have me, if I passed on?”

“You’d be difficult,” she said, examining him with a professional eye. “You’re the wrong age for Soul. It seems to come more naturally in the very young or the very old. But I’ll certainly do my best. I think it’s a very, very wonderful thing to be a poet.”

“But you have a very poetic occupation here.”

He spoke lightly, teasing, but she answered with great gravity. “Yes, I know. I know I have really. Only sometimes at the end of the day when I’m tired I feel as if it was all rather ephemeral. I mean you . . . write a poem and it’s printed and maybe read on the radio and millions of people hear it and maybe they’ll still be reading it in hundreds of years’ time. While my work is burned sometimes within a few hours. At the best it’s put in the mausoleum and even there it deteriorates, you know. I’ve seen painting there not ten years old that’s completely lost tonality. Do you think anything can be a great art which is so impermanent?”

—Evelyn Waugh, *The Loved One*

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