

Perspective

Memento of the post-mortem

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No conflicts of interest were
declared.

Received: 28 December 2007

Revised: 4 February 2008

Accepted: 7 February 2008

Abstract

When the Department of Pathology of the Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Centre in The Netherlands moved from its old to its new premises, the demolition of the marble post-mortem tables was impending, taking with it the Department's (physical) memory. To keep the importance of this memory and of the post-mortem itself on everyone's minds in the new building, the artist Piet Hein Eek was invited to incorporate these post-mortem tables into a work of art. This became a triptych: the three post-mortem tables were stood upright against the wall behind a mounted double sheet of glass, containing screen prints of enlarged microscopic images. The two emblems of pathology—post-mortem tables and double glass slides containing specimens—were thus united into a fascinating work of art: a true memento of the post-mortem, re-embedded in the contemporary world by its design. Copyright © 2008 Pathological Society of Great Britain and Ireland. Published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Keywords: autopsy; art

Introduction

A post-mortem lays bare to the eye pathological changes in organs and tissues. Being a final examination, it is an invaluable instrument in the quality of the medical care process. In the training of medical students and house officers on their way to becoming medical specialists, it is an inexhaustible source of knowledge and understanding. Its value is never doubted and has repeatedly been pointed out [1,2]. The post-mortem, despite the steady decline in its number, remains a key element in the profession of clinical pathology. Moreover, recent data show that in adult patients, there is still a considerable discrepancy between clinical and post-mortem findings [1,2] and that in fetal patients, post-mortems yield additional diagnostic information [3,4]. In this context, the importance of the post-mortem, also within the field of pathology, cannot be brought to mind often enough.

When the new Department of Pathology was built at the Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Centre (RUNMC), The Netherlands, the old department's (physical) memory needed to be preserved, for pathology is pre-eminently a field in which tradition and innovation go hand in hand. The department's management therefore wished to transfer some mementos from its old to its new premises. The post-mortem tables began to play a major part as an opportunity to visualize these reflections and keep them firmly in

the minds (*memento mori*, *memento obductionem*) of all those who would pass through the new building's corridors: students, house officers, and medical specialists from a variety of disciplines. This led to the creation of a work of art. Here we present the genesis and completion — in early 2005 — of the work of art that represents the reflections outlined above.

Post-mortem tables

The marble post-mortem tables of the Pathology Department had been written off. In the process of demolishing several of RUNMC's old units in 2001, their demolition was also impending, as there would be neither room nor use for them in the new building. Lacking ergonomic specifications and suction facilities, they no longer lived up to contemporary requirements. The loss of the old post-mortem tables, however, really affected some members of staff, who decided to consult RUNMC's Art Commission with a view to their possible preservation. The Commission felt that the tables, stood upright, might serve as a carrier for art, shaped as they were like a Romanesque window, even if they were massive slabs of stone rather than transparent stained-glass windows. Moreover, the post-mortem tables, with their drainage channels for bodily fluids cut into the marble, resembled something of a



Figure 1. Autopsy room in the old building, with the three marble tables in their original places

stylized tree structure, a reference to life, after all. It soon transpired that these tables had the potential to transcend the level of sheer nostalgia and that they deserved to be salvaged and, transformed into an art object, set in the new pathology building. This would immediately provide the Department's memory with both a forceful and an appealing form.

Genesis

An artist who was accustomed to working with refuse materials was invited to come and take a look at the Department and submit a proposal. However, reflecting on pathology in his own artistic way, he failed to find any destination for the post-mortem tables. The then-chairman of the Art Commission mentioned the name of Piet Hein Eek, a renowned Dutch designer, who also worked with refuse materials for the furniture that he designed as well as other objects for the home. In contrast with the artist, the designer proved to have a more serviceable attitude towards his waste materials, while succeeding to generate rich ideas for their artistic use.

During a working visit, Piet Hein Eek was shown around the old pathology building. Besides being shown the three post-mortem tables, he was also introduced to the clinical practice of the pathological discipline. He had a razor-sharp awareness that the post-mortem tables (Figure 1), together with the double glass slides used to frame cell smears or tissue scrapings — the former in their singularity and the latter in their compound lamination — had always been the two emblems of this discipline. Moreover, as an artist, he was susceptible to the visual power and beauty

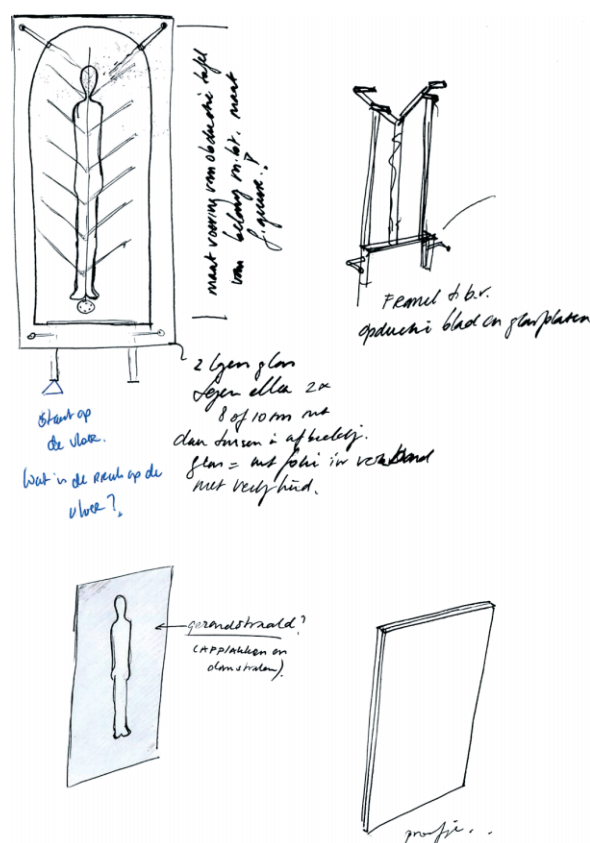


Figure 2. Sketch from the artist Piet Hein Eek, based on which the pieces of art were created

of the microscopic image: a richness of colours and shapes that several artists before him had already used as a source of inspiration. He knew at once that the combination of these two was to be the starting point of his artistic design. Gradually, he began to conjoin the post-mortem tables and the world that emerged



Figure 3. The three pieces of art from the three floors of the Department of Pathology, showing impressions of a human figure made up of cytological and histological images (a) On the floor where the laboratories for cytology and electron microscopy are located, the piece of art consists of a background of a Giemsa stained cytological specimen. The human figure consists of variety of histological images chosen for texture and color with magnifications that show mainly cells, but tissues are difficult to recognize. (b) On the floor where the research laboratories are located, one sees both cytological specimens (background) and histologies, where a glomerulus is recognizable in the area of the brain; this reflects two of the research groups, one on glomerular diseases the other on neuro-oncology. (c) The histology laboratory and residents are situated on the floor where the human figure is placed on a Giemsa stained bone marrow histology, reflecting the focus on hematopathology, with recognizable histology in the human figure (skin and brain tissue) mainly based on H&E staining, the core stain of any pathology department

when enlarged under the microscope: the massive and the minuscule (Figure 2). Such daring, if not unfeasible, confrontations between life and death, big and small, hard and soft, petrified and organic, impenetrable and transparent can be very productive and fruitful in art. And this, indeed, they proved to be.

The human element

The dimension of disease and the sick human being, typical of the domain of pathology, was not lost in this process. It was an undercurrent that emerged as an irrepressible theme. In talks that the artist had with pathology staff in the course of his commission, his work with the post-mortem tables repeatedly proved to be a sensitive issue. To the pathologists concerned, these tables were the locus of many a poignant and touching moment, and some therefore felt it was confronting, dismal, or even downright bizarre to use these tables to make art out of them and to be constantly reminded of them in the new building, even if this new building was to be off-limits to patients.

When Piet Hein Eek decided to introduce the human figure into this emotionally charged context, he knew it should not be a realistic one. The human figure drawn by Piet Hein Eek was therefore not a realistic representation, but an elongated, stylized, life-size abstraction in a relaxed posture with arms dangling down. It appears silhouetted on a plane that is fully covered by a blow-up of a microscopic image: a bluish web of more or less matching rounded blurs. The human shape itself, in turn, was filled in with a multitude of similar microscopic images in reddish tones.

Pathologists are capable of reading and interpreting such images. It strikes them that the enlarged microscopic images of parts of the body have not been situated in their proper places in the body, which, incidentally, was neither possible nor intended, due to the process used by the artist. In the position of the brain, for example, one finds kidney tissue. The resulting anomalies give the sculpture a pathological slant where a layman will only read purely anatomical references. However, the layman also receives an additional reference to pathology as the represented body also shows some dark spots, indicating disease.

The work of art

As Piet Hein Eek had the disposal of three post-mortem tables, he made a kind of triptych: by emphasizing first cells, then tissues, and finally organs, each domain of pathology was given its own sculpture (Figure 3). Spread over the three floors of the new pathology building, each placed in its own sub-department, these three parts refer to each other and thus make up a single unit.

In terms of composition, the artist applied a screen print to one sheet of glass and covered it with another to laminate it between the two, an evident reference to a microscopic specimen: a thin tissue specimen on a glass slide, covered by another one. This double sheet of glass is of the same size as the post-mortem table and has been fitted a few inches away from it. Both glass and marble together have been placed upright against the wall. Because of its rectangular shape, two corners of the sheet of glass protrude outside the post-mortem table, which has a rounded top. On the one hand, the post-mortem table, serving as the carrier of the work of art, has not been reduced to this function of being just the carrier but continues to be an essential component of the overall work. On the other hand, it is somewhat shielded by the sheets of glass, while continuing to be dimly visible through it. This interplay between the two components of the work tones down the confronting effect of the post-mortem table, which some members of staff feared that it might have. And yet, it also gives rise to a parallel between observers looking at the work of art and pathologists looking at their subject matter: whatever is there only reveals itself and its meaning if the beholders make an effort of concentration and observation.

In this work of art by Piet Hein Eek, many of its elements enter into close relationships: a kind of tree of life, cut into and part of the marble post-mortem tables, and the stylized human figure, mounted between sheets of glass; the shape of a Romanesque window frame fitted with glass, screen-printed rather than stained. Solidity and refinement, massiveness and transparency, observation and reflection: this is the space where they meet. This is also how the new building incorporates a remnant of the old one, and the past is involved in the present. Art and learning go hand in hand, which gave this work of art its title: *The Case*, a case for either domain. This composition is thus raised into a true memento of the post-mortem.

Conclusion

Now that the new pathology building has been in use for 3 years and the staff have grown accustomed to the section of the triptych that they pass every day, people hardly ever remark that it makes them feel dismal. Rather than this being just a matter of habituation, there is a widely shared feeling of endorsement that this work of art has been commissioned. Staff do, however, mention that the post-mortem table — ‘fortunately’ — is not too prominent a presence, carefully shielded as it is by the double sheet of glass.

This is precisely what representatives from artistic circles, on the other hand, raise as a mild objection when they come to take a look at the work of art: why not have the post-mortem table displayed more prominently? Perhaps this is a typical feature of building-specific or, more generally, site-specific art:

to what degree is art autonomous in its relations with its designated site, and what degree of prudence can artists muster without violating their artistic integrity? Or, from the clients' point of view, if they define the domain and the conditions for artists to operate in, can they still allow them to exercise their talents to the maximum and expand their oeuvre in new ways?

Be that as it may, Piet Hein Eek has succeeded in keeping the significance of the post-mortem permanently on our minds and — at the Pathology Department — visible to us. Aware that the number of post-mortems is dwindling, the artist has responded not with admonishments and moralizations but, referring to the emblems of pathology, artistically. The quality of the work of art comes first and, in a wider sense, invites and inspires us, by way of the post-mortem, to look and reflect with care and concentration. All this is what the Pathology

Department has decided to give pride of place in its new building.

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