INTRODUCTION

What do a seventeenth-century Mughal painting, a Tolstoy novella, a series of modern memorials, a contemporary photo series by Walter Schels and Beate Lakotta, and images of bathtub corpses have in common? Their authors all share the desire to record death. A Mughal emperor, fascinated by the demise of a close court official whose body is emaciated by years of alcohol and opium abuse, has his portrait commissioned. In Tolstoy's portrait of Ivan Ilyich, the dying protagonist's fear of death becomes the novella's pivotal topic. Contemporary memorials create a physical locus to focus grief and commemorate death; their designers often capture loss by building spaces of absence. Photography may similarly seek to capture death: while Schels' and Lakotta's portraits of people just before and just after dying do not show death explicitly, images of violent deaths in bathtubs, both forensic and artistic, make its presence unmistakable. As the five articles in this issue of the *Journal of the LUCAS Graduate Conference* demonstrate, death inevitably prompts us to relate to it.

A variety of the resulting artworks, literature, and artefacts were introduced and investigated during the second LUCAS Graduate Conference (January 2013), on the theme of *Death: The Cultural Meaning of the End of Life*. The conference aimed to explore different ways in which conceptualizations of death, from classical antiquity to the present, have transformed our understanding of this universal, inescapable event. Organized by PhD researchers

at LUCAS (Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society), the conference included nearly fifty graduate speakers from universities around the globe. Framed by keynote lectures by art historian Joanna Woodall (Courtauld Institute of Art, London), and philosopher Rosi Braidotti (Utrecht University), the conference featured a wide and interdisciplinary range of subjects and fields.

Eight of the best papers presented at the conference have already been published in the second issue of this journal, titled *Death: Ritual, Representation and Remembrance* (February 2014). Its collection of articles focused on two different ways of engaging with death in the period from the late Middle Ages to the early 1900s: personal, intimate rituals of mourning, and more abstract modes of relating to death as occupying a space at the fringes of life and spirituality. The five articles of the current issue of the journal extend these concerns into more recent times, while introducing new ways of negotiating the topic of death. As in the previous issue, and at the 2013 LUCAS Graduate Conference where the articles were first presented, this third issue demonstrates the ambiguities of death as expressed across a variety of cultural representations.

While the current collection of articles took shape, it specifically brought to the fore the interplay between absence, anxiety, and aesthetics. An illustrative example is Jadwiga Kamola's comparative analysis of Walter Schels' portraits of hospice patients shortly before and just after death. Reading Schels' work in the context of other images of illness and death, Kamola argues that the portraits' monochrome and the arrangement (incorporating the deliberate division used in medical images) of 'before' and 'after' photographs, together with an absence of the "aesthetic anathema" of the opened or gory body, allow us to consider motifs of death in a new light. Kamola argues that Schels' portraits effectively perform a visual rhetoric of *dissimulatio*, showing death by not showing it, through obscuring the moment death sets in.

Veronika Riesenberg likewise reflects on visual representations of death, with a focus on the unconventional motif of the 'dead man bathing', that is, cases

of death in a bathtub. Riesenberg investigates the history of crime scene imagery through the lenses of science, journalism, and art, and discusses the contentious aesthetic appreciation of photographs of violent death, by using images – historical and contemporary, forensic and artistic, documentary and staged – that have never before been selected for comparative study. Two major pictorial traditions are identified, both originating from famous bathtub deaths of public figures shown post-mortem: Jean Paul Marat (1743-1793) and Uwe Barschel (1944-1987). She traces these iconographical axes through the work of numerous historical and contemporary artists, and illustrates that, again, death can be shown without being shown, residing in highly suggestive absence.

Similarly, contemporary memorials often address the representation of a difficult memory with spaces of absence as the most tangible answer to loss and trauma. To understand this memorial trend, Sabina Tanovic offers an enlightening analysis of the function and architecture of contemporary public memorial spaces such as the Atocha 11M Memorial in Madrid, as well as designs for planned memorials in Oslo and Utøya. She argues that memorials are more powerful when they engage the visitor through personal interaction with the site and offer a sense of vacancy, as opposed to simply offering a commemorative monument or structure. Tracing this development back to the Second World War, Tanovic shows how designers faced with representing the tragedy of the Holocaust delivered radical approaches to spaces of memory, in many cases promoting oblivion in place of commemoration, or memorializing loss through symbolic and physical spaces of absence.

In contrast, Cheryl Ann Palyu' s analysis of the visual representation of death in an Eastern royal court transports us back to early modern times, and to one man' s fascination with death. A preparatory drawing and a painting, both titled *Dying Inayat Khan* (1618), depart considerably from conventions of Mughal court portraiture in their meticulously detailed rendering of a gaunt, ghostly pale, opium-addicted courtier. Commissioned by emperor Jahangir, whose interests in natural and preternatural wonders were

renowned, the works reflect the interconnected yet ambiguous conceptualizations of nature, imperial (im)mortality, and political potency described in Jahangir's own memoirs, the *Jahangirnama*. Palyu explains how the emperor's Sufi spiritualism sustained his self-perception as a divinely ordained ruler. In Palyu's analysis, Inayat Khan's agonizing demise foretells personal and political anxieties for its patron, revealing the entanglement of private death and public politics, and the timeless concern with death and immortality.

In the closing article of this issue, Nur Soliman traces the materialization and visualization of death by means of representations of the home. Comparing Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886), famously portraying a man facing his own imminent death, with Stanislav Zhukovsky's painting *Room in the Brasovo Estate* (1916), Soliman analyses the nature and function of space as a narrative device. Her comparison illustrates that Ivan Ilyich's fear of death is initially kept at a distance and concealed by means of his beautiful home – a gilded, bourgeois interior similar to that depicted by Zhukovsky. Yet as his health deteriorates, death creeps in from the uncontrollable outside world through the dark corners of his house, establishing a

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tension between the conscious and unconscious that underscores and emphasizes the novella's pivotal theme of anxiety – a tension that is also present in Zhukovsky' s painting.

Each interacting with themes of absence, anxiety and aesthetics, together the articles in this issue illustrate how humankind devotes a considerable part of its cultural production to grappling with the end of life, through visual art, architecture, and literature. As a cross-cultural phenomenon, the end of human life fascinates us, scares us, and puzzles us, but never leaves us indifferent. We paint and photograph its victims, we write about its process, we detect patterns in the ways people meet the end of their existence, and produce lasting works of art in the process. Nonetheless, it continuously escapes our grasp, even if we actively seek to take hold of it. Death, with all the attempts to capture it in images, words, objects, or built structures, remains the great unknown.

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Before we continue to this issue's articles, grateful acknowledgement is due to those involved in producing this third edition of the journal. First and foremost we would like to thank our publisher, Leiden University Library, for its continued assistance and enthusiasm after the journal's successful launch in 2013. We owe particular thanks to Birte Kristiansen at Leiden University Library and to Joy Burrough-Boenisch for their kind help and advice in the fields of publishing, information technology, and academic editing. We are also grateful to all speakers who submitted their conference papers, and particularly to the five authors selected for this issue for their patient cooperation and hard work in the revision and editing process.

We also would like to thank our fellow PhD candidates at LUCAS and research institutes elsewhere who acted as peer reviewers, and Nenke van Wermeskerken for this issue's layout design. A final word of thanks goes to Frans-Willem Korsten, former Director of Education of LUCAS and author of this issue' s foreword, and to the LUCAS management team, Kitty Zijlmans, Thony Visser, Geert Warnar, and Korrie Korevaart, for their continued support.

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