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Research in Practice

Birth, Mortality, Ageing

human-condition

Noun

1. The characteristics, key events, and situations which compose the essentials of human existence, such as birth, growth, emotionality, aspiration, conflict, and mortality.

(Your Dictionary, n.d.)

For as long as humans have existed, we have been considering the meaning behind our lives and the fundamental characteristics of our existences. These themes have been explored throughout history in many contexts, such as religion, philosophy, art, psychology and literature, each with different perspectives and beliefs regarding the human condition. For my dissertation I would like to consider how the notions behind the Human Condition have been represented through art, in both a modern and historical context and how these compare to each other. I have chosen this theme as my own practice often explores these topics, using art as a means to explore and process my own human experience. Within this essay, I intended to explore how art practitioners explore this theme through the three keywords: Birth, Mortality and Ageing.

Keyword one: Birth

Birth and being born is essentially the first fundamental event in anyone's life; every human on this earth was born. Pregnancy, Birth and fertility has been represented within art throughout history, representations of these notions have been discovered from the pre-historic periods. For example, Venus Figurines are small statues of Female figures, measuring between five and twenty centimetres, crafted during the pre-historic period

believed to be representing fertility and pregnancy. Fig. 1 depicts an example of these figurines, The Venus of Willendorf, estimated to have been made 30, 000 BCE. This representation has continued throughout history with Talismans, hand painted trays depicting healthy children in the days after birth, being displayed in homes during the Renaissance period hoping to encourage positive thoughts to the mother during their pregnancy and birth. While art intended to encourage and incite positivity regarding these notions was seen throughout art history, it was rare that pregnancy and birth were actually depicted especially during portraits from the 16th-19th centuries. Art Historian Karen Hearn has researched and written extensively on the subject, in an interview with Artsy Hearn explained that the absence of these portraits was linked to the taboo of sexuality; “It’s a condition that, of course, makes it obvious that a woman has engaged in sexual activity, which was not something people wanted to think about; it’s complicated.” (Hearn, 2020).

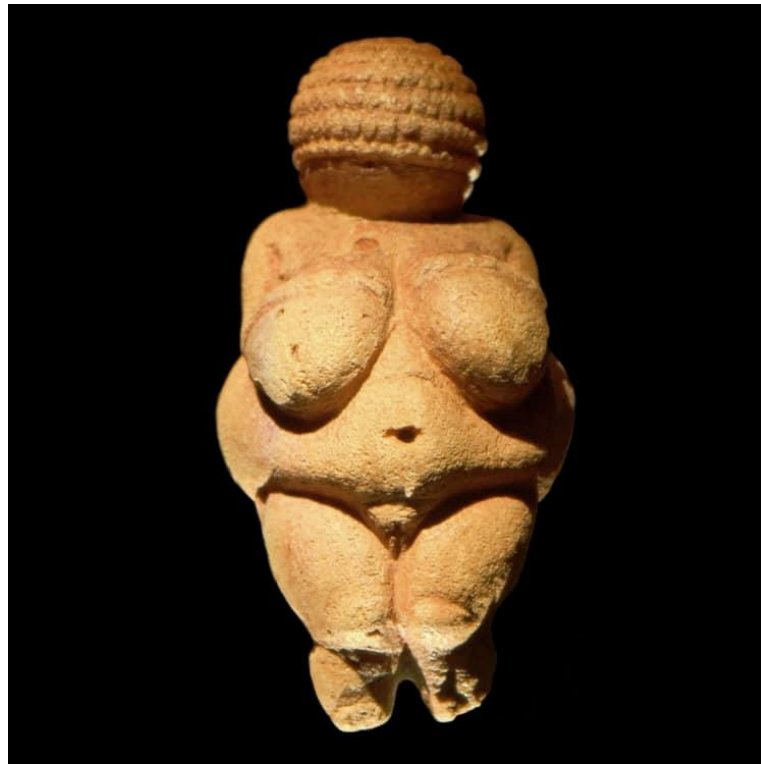


Figure 1.

When considering depictions of pregnancy and birth in relation to modern art, depictions of these notions while more frequent are still rare. Hearn in the article explains; “only in the last 20 years, as women have begun to interrogate their own pregnant bodies and represent them in art and visual culture, that the taboo around the topic has started to shift”.

However, while depictions of pregnancy within art have become more common, depictions of actual birth are still taboo and rare. With the rise of modern technologies, there has been a distinct rise in photographing birth as a form of documentation but there is little created in the context of art.

The physical act of childbirth, that most primary element of human experience, has rarely been explored in fine art, even while other socially taboo bodily experiences are now regularly depicted and communicated for their ‘shock value’. Most taboo it seems is the actual physical event, the moments of separation when the mother is pushing the child out of her body.

(Tyler and Clements, 2009, P.134)

One artist who creates works examining the moment of childbirth is Jessica Moore who during her own pregnancy realised the lack of depiction of birth within art. Moore began asking women for images of themselves giving birth which she would then use to paint a series of realistic oil canvas paintings depicting the taboo moment. Fig. 2 depicts a painting from the series, *Ines and Luka*. With the rise of modern technologies, there has been a distinct rise in photographing birth as a form of documentation but there is little created in the context of art. One photographic artist who photographs childbirth in an artistic context however is Heji Shin, who’s 2016 series *Baby* depicts the moment a baby’s head emerges (Fig 3.)



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

Within my Individual Enquiry Document, I intend to analyse the notions of birth within art further. Exploring the lack of representation; considering the historic, cultural and religious reasons behind this and how current artists, like Jessica Moore and Heji Shin have attempted to rectify this. A key text I have identified surrounding this subject is *Portraying Pregnancy: From Holbein to Social Media* by Karen Hearn, which examines the representation of Pregnancy through art history.

Keyword Two: Mortality

Mortality, like birth, is another fundamental event in anyone's life; every person born will at some point die. Again, mortality and death have been represented throughout art in history. The representation of mortality within art was extremely popular during the medieval period, especially through Vanitas paintings. Vanitas paintings are still life artworks that served to remind the viewer of their mortality and the worthlessness of worldly goods, the works often depicted skulls, rotting fruit, decaying flowers and hourglasses all used to represent different aspects of death. For example, the rotten fruit was used to symbolize decay. Figure 4 depicts an example of a Vanitas still life by Pier Francesco Cittadini, painted in 1681. Closely related to Vanitas, was the genre of Memento Mori. A Latin phrase meaning 'remember you must die', the artworks again aimed to remind the viewer of their own mortality and the fragility of human life.



Figure 4.

A rise in these styles of art can be particularly noted during the medieval period due to the outbreaks of the Plague that tormented Europe during the period. Other art from the period often depicted funeral processions or death bed scenes, as well as the modern depictions of the Grim Reaper first being seen.

Virtuous-themed art still remained an artistic focus during the fourteenth and fifteenth century; however, a noticeable shift can be seen toward vulgar images of the afterlife laced with the realistic transformation of the body after death. Though the concepts of memento mori and ars moriendi existed prior to the fourteenth century, these genres became popularized due to the overabundance of death that suffocated Europe as a whole.

(Brumlik, 2012)

While the outbreaks of the plague directly influenced influx of death depicted within art during the medieval periods, the same was not mirrored within art during later Pandemics. For example, there is a distinct lack of art responding to the 1918 outbreak of Spanish Flu.

Many art historians cite the reason for this being that the Spanish flu took place at the same time as World War 1, and though the death toll for Spanish flu was higher than the war, the political and social implications of the war meant that it took president for artists.

Depictions of death within photography have been heavily present since the invention of photography. During the Victorian era death portraiture, also known as Memento Mori photography (Figure 5), was common. The practise entailed photographing a recently deceased person, in many of the images the deceased's family are posed with them. During this era, illness such as measles, diphtheria, scarlet fever and rubella suffused life and in turn, life expectancy was low with 25% of people dying before they were five. Before the advent of photography, many families could not afford to pay to have their portraits painted and thus would have no visual memento of their loved one after their passing. During the mid 1800's, photography became more affordable but was still a once in a lifetime luxury, and thus began the trend of photographing a person after death. The advent of cheaper photography and the snapshot soon ended the phenomenon.



Figure 5.

In modern society, the topic of death and mortality has become somewhat of a taboo subject. Artist Gregor Schneider was heavily criticised for his proposed art installation which entailed a person dying naturally in a room specially created by the artist. However, there are many artists and photographers creating work examining death. Photographer Cathrine Ertmann's photo essay "About Dying" explores a morgue, documenting the stages of death from Rigor Mortis to autopsies to burial and cremation (Figure 6). Another photographic project exploring death is Walter Shel's Life Before Death, in which Shels photographed the terminally ill in their final days and then after their death (Figure 7) . Shel's collaborated with his wife Beate Lakotta to interview the patients in an aim to learn about dying.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.

Within my Individual Enquiry Document, I intend to analyse the notions of mortality within art further. Exploring the reasons why the way it is represented within art has changed. I would also like to explore whether the Covid-19 outbreak and subsequent deaths has an impact on the modern depictions of morality within art, questioning whether as a society we have moved past the need to depict morality in the same ways as Renaissance and medieval artists. I intend to further explore and examine artists exploring the subject, such as Walter Shel's, Cathrine Ertmann and Gregor Schneider.

Keyword Three: Ageing

Ageing is again an inevitable part of life, from the second we are conceived we begin to grow and age until the day we die. Looking throughout art history there seems to be a lack of art focusing on the notions of growing up and ageing, there are many depicting childhood and many depicting old age but none depicting the process itself. The reasoning behind this itself might be that life expectancy was lower and thus the process of growing and ageing

was shorter. Another reason may be that there is little way to depict the process through a singular still image.

However, art preoccupied with the notions of ageing are thrive in modern society. One example of this is a body of work by photographer Jamie Livingstone in which he took a polaroid every day for 18 years until his death in 1997, beginning on March 31st, 1979.

While not every polaroid depicts Livingstone himself, with some documenting his friends, family and daily life, the passing of time is implied. Through the polaroid's we witness Livingstone age through his 20's and 30's; eventually watching his battle and eventual succumb to the illness with the last polaroid depicting his death on his 41st birthday. Figures 8, 9 and 10 depict one of the first, middle and last self-portraits within the series. Similar projects have become popularized in recent years, with the idea of a "selfie a day" becoming somewhat of a social media phenomenon. One of the first to do this was photographer Noah Kalina in his project entitle "Everyday". Beginning in January 2000, the ongoing project now has over 7000 photos, documenting Kalina from age nineteen to thirty-nine. (Figure 11).



Figure 8, 9 & 10.

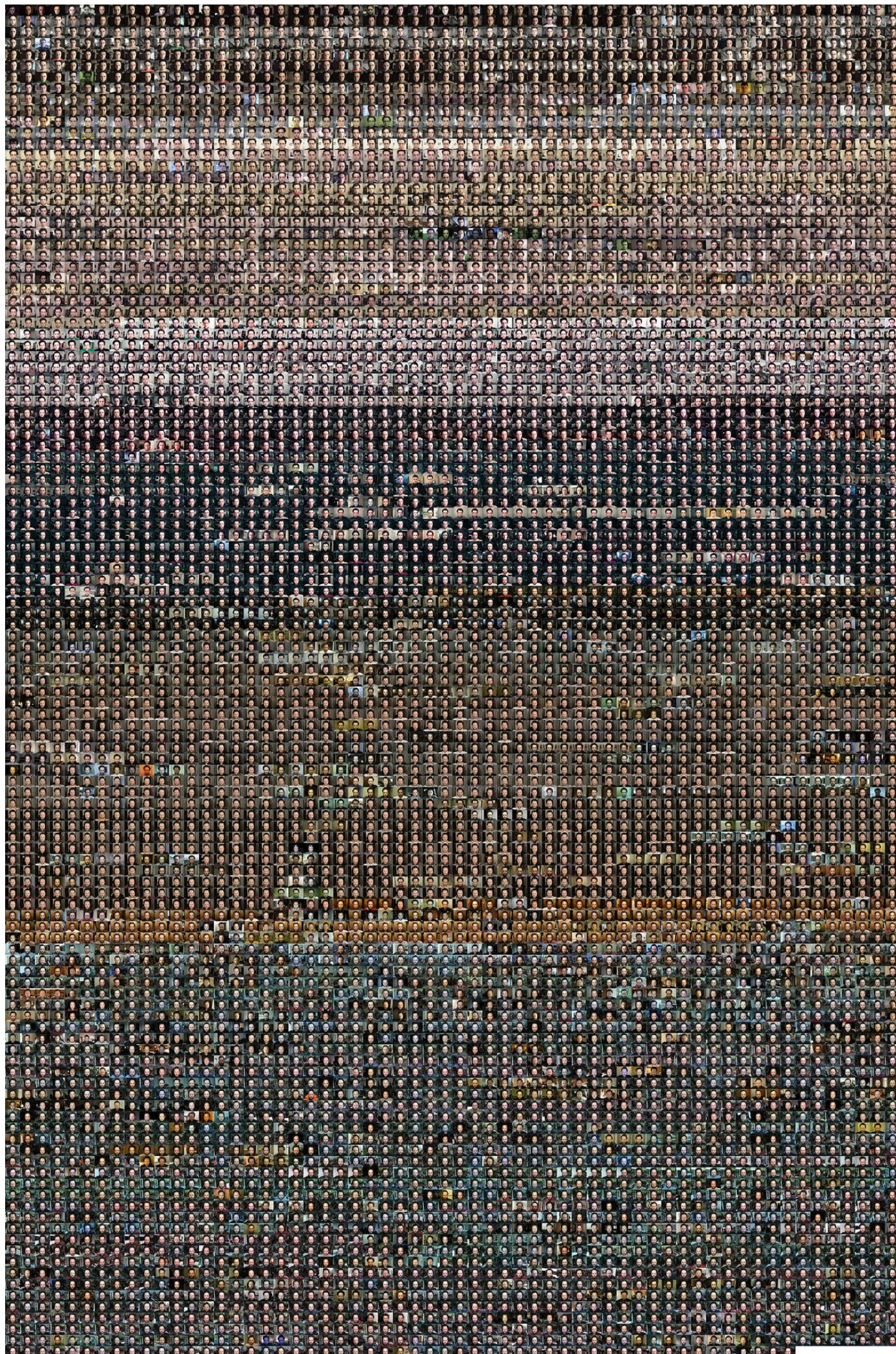


Figure 11.

Another artist who demonstrates the process of ageing within his work is Bobby Neel Adams in a project entitled Age Map. Adams adopts a process in which he calls photo surgery- using analog darkroom techniques to alter and combine portraits of the same person at different ages. The resulting images document the passing of time within one image, aiming to "telescope the slow process of aging into a single picture." (Adams, 2012). Figure 12 depicts an example from the project, Kevin, *ages 3 and 33* which documents a 30-year time passage in a creepy Frankenstein esque style.



Figure 12.

Within my Individual Enquiry Document, I intend to analyse the notions of ageing within art further. I intend to explore the artists mentioned further, and also discover other artists preoccupied with the notion. I also intend to compare the differences in depictions to the three key words, raising questions as to their importance as a topic within art. I also intend to research artists who aim to document all three within their work, for example Bill Viola. Working using Video, installation and sound technology, Violas work focuses on human experiences such as birth, death, afterlife and consciousness.

Believing that art is a spiritual exercise, Viola's works are like a meditation on life, death, transcendence, rebirth, time and space. Proposing a new way of seeing while painfully aware of the brevity of life, his digital images give insight into these fundamental questions of human existence and demonstrate the universality of his work, which transcends all art movements and styles. His radical engagement in the exploration of human beings' multiple dimensions is expressed through a sharp conscience and a mastery of the possibilities of technology. His videos are always conceived as inner metaphysical experiences for him and for the viewer.

(Mun-Delsalle, 2015)

One example of this is *Nantes Triptych* (Figure 13) (1992), a 29-minute artwork that played on a loop which was displayed in a seventeenth-century chapel in Nantes. The work comprises of three projected videos arranged based on a triptych altarpiece; the left panel depicts a woman during labour and the birth of her baby, the middle screen depicts a body floating in water representing life and the right panel depicts Viola's mother dying. The triptych is accompanied by sounds of crying, water and breathing.



Figure 13.

Conclusion

Upon exploring the three keywords, Birth, Mortality and Emotion and how these notions of the human condition have been explored throughout art history, the working question proposed for my Independent Research module is “How have notions of the human condition, such as Birth, mortality and Emotion, been depicted and represented within art throughout history and how does this compare to how they are represented in modern times?”. Numerous sub-questions that could be explored within the document include ‘As artists do, we have a responsibility to represent taboo notions within our work?’, “Should sensitive subjects, such as the moment of death or birth, be photographed?”, “Has the role of art in society changed throughout history?”, “Did the dominance of men as artists influence the depiction of notions such as childbirth and pregnancy within art?” “Did religion impact what was represented in art and how has this changed since the decline of religion?”, “What are the similarities and differences between the depictions of each keyword withing art?”.

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