

---

# Editorial Introduction

## Medical Tabulae: Visual Arts and Medical Representation

ALLISTER NEHER, DAWSON COLLEGE, AND MIREILLE PERRON, ALBERTA COLLEGE OF ART + DESIGN

---

As the guest editors of this theme issue of *RACAR*, we invite readers and viewers of eight scholarly papers and seven artists' projects to explore the possibilities opened up by the creative interplay of art and medicine. In the past two decades interest in the interaction between the history of art and the history of science has shown a marked increase. Publications that touch on aspects of their relationship are no longer rare. Publications on the history of the visual arts and medical representation have been less common, but that too is changing. One of the most visible signs of this change is the support of art and art-related research by organizations such as the Wellcome Trust in London and the Osler Library of the History of Medicine in Montreal, to mention two institutions that have been important to the research of many of our contributors.

The impetus for this special issue of *RACAR* was a highly successful session on the history of visual arts and medical representation, at the annual conference of the Universities Art Association of Canada, in 2005, at the University of Victoria. When the session was advertised it quickly attracted a large number of submissions by academics and by artists whose work was related to medical practice. In the end it ran an entire day in a small auditorium full of people. It was apparent from the discussions during and after the session that it was time to devote an issue of *RACAR* to this subject. We approached the journal's editors and, once they had accepted our proposal, we issued a broader call for submissions in order to expand the scope of the publication.

The papers in this special issue discuss past and contemporary artists and scientists from Canada, Europe, and the United States. Even though they provide a variety of studies on how the history of art and the history of medicine have intersected, the papers can be grouped thematically into two general categories, with individual papers often falling into both. The first category is comprised of more historically oriented papers that address questions about art and anatomy in the nineteenth century. In the second category are papers devoted to contemporary artists who use art as means of exploring questions of identity, illness, and treatment.

One of the prominent themes in the medical humanities during the past two decades has been the role of artistic representations in the construction and dissemination of medical concepts and the frameworks that give them meaning. This is a theme that connects all of the papers in the first category.

Mary Hunter's paper, "'Effroyable réalisme': Wax, Femininity, and the Madness of Realist Fantasies," is a multi-faceted investigation into the use of wax models in French medical schools in the late nineteenth century. Central to Hunter's investigation is an analysis of how the striking realism of coloured wax models, cast directly from patients, was used as a visual

rhetorical device to construct and legitimate the claims to objectivity and truth being made by medical researchers of the era. Realism and its association with discourses of truth and objectivity in the medical sciences has become a significant issue in art history; Hunter's contribution is to enlarge the field of this type of inquiry by extending it to the use of medical wax models in France at this time. While Hunter's broader analysis applies to such models in general, her more specific interest is in representations of the female body, especially female genitalia, and how such representations were determined by the prevailing conceptions of femininity in nineteenth-century France. Because the wax models were often of diseased body parts that were frightful to the general public, and because wax models were also associated with the spectacle and fantasy of wax museums, the medical representations created "bodies that fluctuated between the real and the ideal, sickness and health, sentience and unconsciousness, beauty and horror."

Cindy Stelmackowich's paper, "Bodies of Knowledge: the Nineteenth-Century Anatomical Atlas in the Spaces of Art and Science," adds a new facet to our understanding of the union of visual art and medical doctrine in the anatomical atlases of this era. Stelmackowich explores not only how the techniques and codes of illustration in nineteenth-century anatomical atlases helped advance the understanding of the body and the teaching of medicine, she discusses as well how they helped to secure credibility and authority to the profession of medicine itself. The extraordinary realism, technical mastery, and beauty of these atlases gave them the appearance of being unmediated declarations of scientific objectivity: declarations that conveyed transparent scientific truths revealed by a new clinical medicine grounded in empirical inquiry. Stelmackowich's interests do not end there, though, for she also sets out how such illustrations had a role in establishing a representational regime that underwrote developing modern concerns about public health and its administrative control. On the question of realism and its association with discourses of truth and objectivity in the medical sciences, Stelmackowich's and Hunter's papers are useful complements to each other.

Allister Neher's paper also pursues the question of realism. "Sir Charles Bell and the Anatomy of Expression" takes up the question of realism and the depiction of the human form from a more philosophical perspective and from the other side of the English Channel. Sir Charles Bell (1774–1842) was an eminent British anatomist and neurologist with a background in art and a substantial interest in the art theoretical issues of his day. He brought his groundbreaking medical research to the art world in *The Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression as Connected with the Fine Arts*, which was first published in 1806. The book was

very well received but it has all but disappeared from current art history, which is unfortunate in view of the success that it enjoyed, and considering that Bell's work provides a first-rate example of how the interests of science and art can be brought together. The principal goal of *The Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression* was to bring Bell's research in anatomy and neurology to the aid of artists who were attempting to create naturalistic depictions of bodily expressions. Bell believed that there was an actual language of expression in which physical manifestations of emotion were correlated with psychological states in a way that made them readable by all. Bell believed that the reason that representations of emotion were often ambiguous or indeterminate was that artists did not know the natural language of expression well enough. What they needed was a deeper understanding of anatomy, and Bell provided them with explanations of how the various systems of the body function, the limits they impose on the representation of the body, and the basics of the language of expression. Neher's paper has two main objectives: the first is to clarify Bell's theories and facilitate his return to the world of nineteenth-century British art theory; the second is to argue that the fundamental idea that underlies Bell's project—that there is a way of codifying representations of psychological states—is unachievable because it is philosophically flawed.

In the second group of papers, Andrea Fitzpatrick's "Reconsidering the Dead in Andres Serrano's *The Morgue*: Identity, Agency, Subjectivity" directs our attention to American artist Andres Serrano's series of photographs *The Morgue* (1992), which consists of large-scale Cibachrome photographs of unnamed corpses in an unspecified morgue. The series became very controversial when it was first exhibited, especially in relation to questions concerning consent and the exploitation of the dead. The impetus for Fitzpatrick's paper comes from these controversies but her questions are more specific. When the subject of a photographic representation is dead, how does the work of the photographer construct (or contort) the identity of the deceased? How does the context in which dead subjects are photographed predispose them to the effects of certain gazes and the attribution of institutional identities rather than biographical ones? What historical precedents exist for contemporary representations of the dead when they are depicted in a morgue, and how do the various legacies of subject matter, coupled with composition and photographic connotation (in particular, the choice of titles used to "name" them), situate the work so that specific meanings are inscribed? Following Judith Butler's writings, Fitzpatrick argues that the dead should be granted a form of subjectivity and that they are "vulnerable to representational violence" when others choose the categories through which their identities are given. Fitzpatrick's analysis is accordingly of interest to anyone concerned with the ethics of representing human beings, living or dead.

To provide her questions with a tighter focus Fitzpatrick restricts her discussion to three works of the series: *The Morgue (Knifed to Death, I)*, *The Morgue (Knifed to Death, II)* and *The Morgue (Jane Doe, Killed by Police)*. She argues that in all the works Serrano's approach to the representation of the figures creates a sense of degradation that ignores their biographical identity and material reality. In the invasiveness of his approach Serrano thus associates himself with the early history of anatomical illustration, in which corpses typically belonged to convicted felons and were destined for the use of dissectors, and in which artists had few concerns about the identity and personhood of their subjects. In the end, the representational presuppositions and historical allusions that structure Serrano's images, and that invoke the practices of phrenology and physiognomy as well as pathology, almost automatically condemn his subjects. In Renaissance and Baroque anatomy theatres it was assumed that the subjects' criminal status was the warrant for their spectacular public treatment. The question for Fitzpatrick is: What sanctions Serrano's treatment of his subjects?

Tamar Tembeck's "Exposed Wounds: The Photographic Autopathographies of Hannah Wilke and Jo Spence" is an investigation of the practice of self-representation in physical illness, through the consideration of selected works from the 1970s to the 1990s by Wilke and Spence. As Tembeck points out, the history of autopathographic images can be traced back to objects, such as amulets and talismans, that were invested with restorative powers. However, they were and are also part of a history of the representation of illness in the West: a history that has colluded in the stigmatization of illness. Autopathographic images, then, can be potent combinations of hope, fear, and fascination. As sufferers with terminal cancer, Wilke and Spence wanted to use this potency to transform their subjective experiences of illness while undermining the stigma attached to illness and its representation. Both women invented approaches for self-representation that presented viewers with a complex task in the comprehension and interpretation of their images. As is often the case with autopathographic representations, the artists use visual rhetorical devices that guide the beholder's affective response. Autopathographic images thus have a performative dimension, and Wilke and Spence used it to construct images of themselves that undercut conventional expectations about the depiction of female bodies and traditional portrayals of illness. In so doing they also provided new ways in which others can reconceive their own illness and the effect it has on their identity, while regaining some control over their experience and agency.

There is another side to the performative character of such images. Tembeck puts forward a compelling analysis of how the autopathographic process has an ethical dimension and "provides an occasion to collaborate with others in a symbolic or

ritualistic manner, and to engage in a mutual bearing witness to the paradoxes of human life, the most striking of which is the fact of mortality.” In this way the images are in opposition to Serrano’s images of his subjects, and they offer us an emphatic perspective in the discussion of the ethics of representation.

In “Theodore Wan and the Subject of Medical Illustration,” Christine Conley dissects a network of issues that connects Wan’s various artworks that use or reference the visual language of medical illustration. Theodore Wan was born in Hong Kong and in 1967, when he was thirteen years old, his family immigrated to Vancouver. He studied art at the University of British Columbia but his artistic interest in medical imaging only came to the fore when he moved to Halifax to attend the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design as a graduate student. Wan got work as a medical photographer in Halifax and made an arrangement with the Dalhousie University Medical School that gave him access to the operating theatre, the facilities of the medical school, and the cooperation of the nursing staff. From this arrangement Wan also derived photographs that he exhibited: large-format, black-and-white images that mimic the technical precision and visual codes of medical illustration. With Wan himself as the patient, the photographs stage diagnostic or preparatory procedures actually used for surgery. While the photographs appear clinical they also function as a form of self-portraiture. Conley argues that Wan’s self-inquiry took this form in response to the hold that Conceptualism had on the 1970s art world. Conceptualism’s determination to focus attention on intellectual investigations that examined art and its languages left little room for those who wanted to include personal history and the greater social and political world in their artwork. A critical response to Conceptualism had been initiated by feminist artists and Wan, Conley argues, was intrigued by feminist strategies. Conceptual art played down aesthetic contemplation to promote a type of looking that made inquiry and learning part of the production and consumption of art. Wan created work that gave the appearance of taking part in the conceptual project but that in fact undermined it. The compositions of his photographs slyly force the subjective reality of the artist into any consideration of them. In the end, Conley maintains, Wan’s self-portraiture through medical science is less about self-revelation than it is about, to use Julia Kristeva’s notion, the articulation of a “subject-in-process.” Wan puts before us a set of significant questions about the visual practices embodied in medical illustration, recent art theory, and the contemporary understanding of the subject.

Hélène Samson’s “Figuration et esthétique de l’identité génétique: Autour de l’*Autoportrait génétique* de Gary Schneider” engages the questions of identity and self-representation in a fashion that expands them and that problematizes the idea of identity itself. As the fundamental concept of portraiture, iden-

tity has been rethought in recent art, especially through Gary Schneider’s work on genetic identity. Samson considers how Schneider’s genetic self-portrait pushes the conceptual presuppositions of identity portraiture—photographic objectivity and bodily attributes of identity—to the extreme. On one hand the idea of portraiture is put to considerable strain because there is no visible resemblance to the individual; on the other, the subject is confronted with a new, scientific, identity alien to lived experience. Contemporary science has both expanded our self-understanding and made it more difficult. What saves this approach to self-portraiture from being completely alienating, according to Samson, is its polysemic character, which allows it to return figuratively to the familiar cosmos and the history of visual culture.

Samson is acutely aware that the aim of “reading” the body to reveal the self has a long history in both science and art, connected most notably to physiognomy and its concern with discerning character and fate from signs on and in the body. Samson’s discussion of Gary Schneider’s work, and the work of other artists who have taken up the question of genetics and identity, adds a new layer to our understanding of this old and well-established connection between art and science. The genetic self-portrait was constructed in collaboration with a team of scientists; it consists of fifty-five monochromatic photographs of various sizes produced by different medical techniques: “Toutes ces images sont d’une qualité photographique exceptionnelle.... Les agrandissements de substances microscopiques sont d’une précision des détails inouïe.” What results is a rapprochement of science and the artistic sublime. This connection was even a reason why some of the scientists decided to collaborate with Schneider: they hoped that the breathtaking qualities of the images would favourably influence the public’s idea of science.

The last paper in this group is Florence Vinit’s “Histoires d’enveloppe. Considérations médicales et artistiques sur la peau.” This essay is a reflection on skin as “envelope” and as a representation of the idea of the limit in the occidental world. At the same time it is a meditation on skin as a condition of our subjective existence and a mark of our human finitude. By referencing the works of certain contemporary artists—Pat Moore, Helmut Newton, Sterlac, Simon Costin, Orlan, Gina Pane—Vinit discusses some of the strategies humans have taken in our imaginary engagement with the skin as the limit of the body and with how contemporary biotechnological possibilities have given people ways not to accept as part of their destiny the skin with which they came into the world. Vinit’s work takes up and extends reflections on these matters drawn from such writers as Claudia Brenthien, Norbert Elias, David Le Breton, Didier Anzieu, Muriel Darmon, and Christine Détrez. Vinit casts their discussions of skin and the occidental world in a new and productive light not originally intended by these authors,

and in ways that productively resonate with the papers on the history of anatomical illustration in the first group of essays in this issue of *RACAR*.

The second part of this special issue of *RACAR* consists of seven projects by contemporary Canadian artists dealing with medical representation: Jeffrey Burns, Nathalie Grimard, Nicole Jolicoeur, Eveline Kolijn, Ingrid Mary Percy, Mireille Perron, and Cindy Stelmackowich. The aim of this section is to support a broader dialogue between art and medicine. The role of artistic representations in shaping the construction and dissemination of medical representations remains the common ground for all the artists' projects and essays in this issue. The projects mirror themes found in the essays. Each artist was asked to submit a project consisting of three to six images and a short text.

Jeffrey Burns and Nathalie Grimard investigate issues of identity and illnesses. Eveline Kolijn and Ingrid Mary Percy playfully expand the potential of digital medical imagery, while Nicole Jolicoeur, Mireille Perron, and Cindy Stelmackowich make direct references to specific moments that shaped the history of medicine.

The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925–95) holds, in his writings on Francis Bacon, that artists habitually think in terms of percepts and affects rather than concepts (the latter being the practice of philosophers). For Deleuze, concepts (in the form of writing) and affects and percepts (in the form of art works) enter into relationships of mutual resonance and exchange, the two worlds folding into each other to create new knowledge. This “folding” is made evident by Cindy Stelmackowich's contributions. Stelmackowich is both an artist and a scholar and she has contributed a paper and an artist's project. Nicole Jolicoeur's and Jeffrey Burns's contributions were made explicitly for this thematic issue. The other artists' projects present ongoing bodies of work that saw their origins prior to this publication.

Jeffrey Burns's series of three drawings uses diverse sources of imagery that recall the interior of the human body through microscopy. The drawings are in gouache and ink on paper. Burns's work is a poetic investigation of the intricacy and vulnerability of the body's interior landscape using aspects of human physiology and pathology.

Nathalie Grimard's *Autopsie d'une identité à la dérive* explores self-representation at the intersection of medicine and photography. The artist mimics scientific processes in her meticulous organization, classification, and documentation in order to manifest the alienation of the self inherent in images and descriptions from the social and medical fields.

Nicole Jolicoeur's composite photographs, conceived for this issue of *RACAR*, are titled *Plaie-image: taies*. Jolicoeur is well known for her multidisciplinary work that makes extensive

use of her research in the medical archives at la Salpêtrière. This French hospital's fame is derived in good part from its association with Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–93). Charcot is often cited as the founder of modern neurology. His reputation as a teacher was linked to his display of hysterical women patients during his lessons. Jolicoeur's ongoing manipulation and interpretation of archival material underline the impossibility of reading the body accurately as a sign. Jolicoeur's images of a woman's fading face, punctured with black holes, can metaphorically stand for medicine's failure to know her.

Eveline Kolijn presents an excerpt from a folio of prints based on an ambitious collaboration with poet Christian Bök. Kolijn made visible Bök's proposal to translate a poem into a sequence of DNA to be implanted into the genome of a bacterium. Kolijn did extensive research in order to make a believable scientific representation of the “first poem to be alive.”

Ingrid Mary Percy's drawings from the series *Spiro Viro* are playful and at first glance deceptive. They borrow the scientific structure of microscopic and cellular organisms but they are created with a Spirograph, a children's toy. These images recall, among other things, a child's first fascination with the notion of the unseen world of scientific imagery.

Mireille Perron's series *Savoir-vivre et autres galanteries* revisits models from famous medical and anatomical collections. Perron's series stresses the art-historical models used as references in the making of the anatomical models. Her work makes apparent the politicized nature of the long and complex history of the female body in art and in anatomical dissection.

Cindy Stelmackowich's work summons us to reconsider the authority of medical knowledge. Her sculptural assemblages incorporate laboratory equipment with medical texts and diagrams. Several operations of *détournement* allow the failures of medical language to become the subject of scrutiny of the artist's gaze. As with the other artists' projects, Stelmackowich's work manifests an ability to offer alternative readings to the authority of medical imagery by using poetic strategies that do not offer closure, and that thus remain more inclusive.

The editors would like to thank the Marion Fund for Innovation in Research and Teaching at the Alberta College of Art + Design for a generous grant that supported the publication of this special issue of *RACAR*.