Between Subjectification and Objectification

Theorizing Ashes

Dziuban, Z.

Published in:
Mapping the 'Forensic Turn'

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (http://dare.uva.nl)

Download date: 12 Aug 2019
Zuzanna Dziuban

Between Subjectification and Objectification

Theorising Ashes

Disturbing Remains

In November and December 2012, a small, one-person exhibition was held at a private gallery in the southern Swedish city of Lund, capturing rapt media attention and receiving enormous international publicity. Covered globally by a wide range of daily newspapers and online media outlets from Der Spiegel to The Jerusalem Post, Artdaily to Fox News, the exhibition featured one photograph (Red Dawn: Goering’s Hunting Lodge, 2009), a sound installation (The Final Repose of Joan Vollmer Burroughs, 2011), and a cycle of nine paintings (Majdanek (1989), 2010) by Swedish sound and visual artist Carl Michael von Hausswolff. The show was titled Memory Works. The scandal broke soon after the exhibition’s first and only review appeared in the Swedish daily Sydsvenskan: an admonishing article by art critic Tor Billgren, who strongly disapproved of the images on

---

1 The work leading to this publication was supported by the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) with funds from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the People Programme (Marie Curie Actions) of the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) under REA grant agreement n° 605728 (P.R.I.M.E. – Postdoctoral Researchers International Mobility Experience). Many thanks to Kirsten Mahlke, Béla Rásky, Maurycy Zimmermann and Kobi Kabalek (as ever) for their helpful comments.

2 This is a paraphrase of the title of 2015 book edited by Zoe Crossland and Rosemary A. Joyce, based on an interpretive play with the double meaning of the syntagm. Addressing the field of forensic anthropology and archaeology, they write: “The theme of ‘disturbing bodies’ of course has a double meaning, evoking both the work that anthropologists do – the ways in which we disturb the dead – and the ways in which the dead in turn can disturb the living […]” Zoe Crossland/Rosemary A. Joyce, Anthropological Perspectives on Disturbing Bodies, in: Zoe Crossland/Rosemary A. Joyce (ed.), Disturbing Bodies. Perspectives on Forensic Anthropology, Santa Fe 2015, 3-27, here 12.

3 The whole Majdanek (1989) series consists of eleven works.
display; almost all national and international papers took up the story immediately. The outcry centred on a painting van Hausswolff had allegedly created by covering paper with paint made of human ashes mixed with water. The artist had gathered the ashes in the crematorium at the site of the former concentration and extermination camp at Majdanek, Poland, in the winter of 1989, and decided on the spur of the moment to stow them in a matchbox. This information – along with an explanation as to why, in 2010, van Hausswolff had decided to use the ashes collected at the former Nazi camp and taken from Poland to Sweden 20 years earlier – was published on the webpage of the Martin Bryder Gallery, where the works were displayed from mid-November 2011 until the exhibition’s early closure on 10 December 2012.

According to the gallery’s website and the hand-out given to exhibition visitors, van Hausswolff had kept the box filled with incinerated human remains in his Stockholm studio. He did not really know how to handle the box but could not simply throw it away, because “the material was too emotionally charged with the cruelties that had taken place [at the former camp]”\(^4\). Van Hausswolff’s impulse to transform its contents into an artwork was empathy-driven and motivated by a need to both restore the dignity of those exterminated and burned at Majdanek and to confront his own haunting memory of the visit to the concentration camp. In 2015, when I asked van Hausswolff about his trip to Poland and his decision to collect the ashes, he described in detail both his impressions and the general circumstances of his journey to the former camp, which had in fact been the first of this kind he had ever undertaken.\(^5\) Taken during a work-related stay in the country at the invitation of Polish artists, his emotionally charged walk through the site (which he recalled as being embarrassingly unkempt and neglected) culminated in the building that housed the crematory ovens. His decision to take ashes from the camp was catalysed, he claims, by his shock in discovering that “unprotected, abandoned human remains” had been left lying around at the installations used to cremate the people to whom they had once belonged.

The very presence of the box containing human remains in his studio had a troubling and unsettling quality: “It represented something, it was talking to me […] in a very seri-


\(^5\) Since I only learned about the exhibition after it had been closed, in describing it I rely on press coverage, research interviews with Carl Michael van Hausswolff and Martin Bryder, conducted in June 2015, and a (rare) first-hand description of a visit to the exhibition by Tania Norell. See Tania Norell, Remembering Ideological Identities. Transference of Holocaust Memory through Artistic Expression, MA Thesis at the Lund University, Lund 2014 (chapter: Holocaust Memory Transference through Carl Michael van Hausswolff).


\(^7\) Interview conducted by the author, 22 June 2015.
ous way”, van Hausswolff noted. “I knew I should attend to it, something had to be done.” The resulting series of eleven paintings (interestingly reduced to one in press- and media coverage and mistakenly called Memory Works) was itself extremely moving for its author. The abstract images are made of grey and brown strokes on small pieces of paper and could be said to depict crowded, as if trapped, human figures. “When I stepped back and looked at the pictures, they ‘spoke’ to me: figures appeared … as if the ashes contained energy or memories or ‘souls’ from people … people tortured, tormented and murdered by other people in one of the 20th century’s most ruthless wars.” 8 Not a particularly surprising statement, given that the artist is well known for his “endeavours to embrace the other side”9 and (literally) give voice to the material memories inscribed in objects and landscapes.10

9 I owe this formulation to Martin Bryder. Interview conducted by the author, 18 June 2015.
10 Van Hausswolff, a composer and conceptual visual artist working with performance art, light- and sound installations and photography, is know for his experiments with Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP) techniques, aimed at capturing background sounds of obscured origin, and constructed as passageway to otherworld.
The first review was titled *Stolen Ashes Banalise the Holocaust* and framed the painting(s) as a piece of work based on a particularly controversial theft; before long, the description “desecration of the Jewish bodies” was put forward by Salomon Schulman, a prominent representative of the Jewish community in Lund. Pointing out the possibility that his relatives were exterminated at the camp and that their bodily remains were ‘profaned’ by von Hausswolff’s artistic intervention, Schulman, who had not seen the exhibition himself, cast *Memory Works* as both sickening and necrophilic. On 5 December 2012 – less than a week after Billgren’s critical review was published – a private complaint was filed with the local police on charges of “disturbance of the peace of the dead” brought about by the ash painting – a felony carrying penalties under Swedish criminal law. Though authorities dropped the probe after a couple of days (citing lack of evidence and the fact that the deed in question had been perpetrated abroad) it definitely had international resonance. Unanimously condemned by various Jewish communities and organisations both in Israel and abroad, the painting was firmly declared a radical and repulsive violation of respect for the dead, *kavod hamet*, which constitutes one of the fundamental principles of Judaism.

As Abraham Foxman, head of the Anti-Defamation League in New York, put it, “[t]he use of human remains as art is disrespectful and offensive, period, but what makes this so much worse is that Carl Michael von Hausswolff is also doing it at the expense of Hitler’s victims.” In an open letter to von Hausswolff written by Shimon Samuels, director of the European office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, Samuels went so far as to compare the artist’s actions to atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis themselves: “Mr von Hausswolff, you, like the Nazis’ use of human skin for lampshades and fat to produce soap [sic] have similarly twice murdered the bodies that were once the ashes you have desecrated, turning art into abomination. Hitler, as an aspirant painter, would have surely applauded.” In no uncertain terms, he demanded that the painting be brought back to the State Museum at Majdanek and buried in a mausoleum housing the ashes of its victims, erected at the site in 1969. Judy Montagu, a co-editor and columnist of *The Jerusalem Post*, probably not fully aware of the fact that ashes from various concentration and extermination camps had been brought to and buried in Israel, formulated an alterna-

11 Billgren, Stulen aska.
15 Quoted in Siemaszko, Outrageous!
17 A point to which I return shortly.
tive demand: “Instead of desecrating those human remains at rest, von Hausswolff would have done better to first visit the Jewish state, walk through the halls of Yad Vashem and absorb their message, then finally scoop up a measure of Israeli soil and leave it reverently behind him at Majdanek.”

The prompt response issued by the Polish museum authorities, although conspicuously lacking in strong religious or political undertones, was also unequivocally critical of von Hausswolff’s actions. The theft of human remains is as serious as stealing the Arbeit macht frei sign from the entrance gate to Auschwitz I, the official statement suggested, but it also grounded the exceptional grievousness of the deed in its mishandling of the bodily remains of camp victims. Moreover, it claimed, “[i]t is certain that the Swedish artist did not come into the possession of the Majdanek ashes in a legal way”. Building on this, the State Museum of Majdanek also filed an official complaint with the public prosecutor’s office. Thus the resulting Polish investigation, opened in early January 2013, centred on two intrinsically entwined allegations accusing the artist both of the theft of the human remains from the site of the former camp in 1989 and of their resulting profanation in 2010. Under Polish criminal law, the artist might have faced two years of imprisonment for the latter offence alone. And yet the Polish investigation was also dropped in April 2013. The crime was considered beyond Polish jurisdiction because the statute of limitations for crimes committed in 1989 had long since expired, and the painting was created by a foreigner outside of Polish borders. Both van Hausswolff and Martin Bryder, the owner of the gallery where the work was exhibited and whose art gallery was not the first or the last to show the Majdanek (1989) cycle, informed me that the paintings were never secured and examined as forensic evidence. Whether this decision was based on the conviction that unequivocal identification of the ashes was practically impossible or on the fear that such an examination would itself be framed as violation of Jewish religious law, is uncertain. Still, the paintings were not brought back to Majdanek for reburial as the Wiesenthal Center requested, and remain in the possession of their creator to this day.

20 Kodeks Karny, Art. 262, Par. 1. “Kto znieważa zwłoki, prochy ludzkie lub miejsce spoczynku zmarłego, podlega grzywnie, karze ograniczenia wolności albo pozbawienia wolności do dwóch lat.” [The Polish Criminal Code Article. 262, Paragraph 1. “Whoever profanes a corpse, human ashes or a place of repose of the dead shall be subject to a fine, the penalty of restriction of liberty or the penalty of deprivation of liberty for up to two years.”]
22 Later that year, the cycle was shown in the Stockholm Gallery Niklas Belenius, which also housed it in 2011 before the scandal broke out.
The scandal surrounding the controversial work did, however, have some tangible results. In February 2013, a new protection system was established in the crematorium preserved at the site of the former camp in Majdanek. This consisted of transparent glass curtains blocking visitors’ access to the furnaces in which the bodies of its victims were burned. Nonetheless, even these belated attempts to protect the residues of ash remaining at the installations only further highlight an inescapable reality made obvious by von Hausswolff’s work (and confirmed by the representatives of the State Museum at Majdanek): “[W]hen the camp was operational, human remains were scattered over the whole area of the camp.” Moreover, while Majdanek was still operating, Nazis had used the ashes to construct roads and fertilise plants, as they had in other camps. Provisionally buried after the liberation of the camp in a mound created in the immediate vicinity of the crematoria, and in the late 1960s transferred into the newly erected mausoleum – in which they are permanently exhibited and, for the purposes of protection, covered with annealed glass on an annual basis –, the bodily remains of the victims of the camp were never entirely “at rest” (as Judy Montagu would wish). They could still be found in the camp’s crematorium, and, most probably, linger to this day as sediment on the surfaces of various material structures remaining at the site, or resurface from mass graves as a result of processes of natural exhumation (as is/was the case at the sites of former extermination camps at Belżec, Sobibór and Treblinka). The challenging unpredictability of the affective and practical responses to this disturbing presence is, presumably, directly proportional to the uncontainability of the burned remains themselves.25

---

25 Here one could quote another highly contentious case, that of German journalist and activist Lea Rosh, who, upon her visit to the former extermination camp in Belżec in 1988, found at the ground and took with her a tooth of one of camp’s victims. Rosh carried it with in her purse until 2005, when the decision to show it to the people gathered at the opening ceremony of the Berlin Monument for the Murdered Jews of Europe, into which the tooth was to be, according to Rosh, incorporated, caused uproar and an international scandal. On the request of Polish museum officials, in 2006 Rosh brought the tooth back to Belżec and reburied it next to the mass grave at the memorial site. For a detailed discussion of this case see Zuzanna Dziuban, (Re)politicising the Dead in Post-Holocaust Poland. The Afterlives of Human Remains at the Belżec Extermination Camp, in: Jean-Marc Dreyfus/Elisabeth Anstett (ed.), Human Remains in Society. Curation and Exhibition in the Aftermath of Genocide and Mass Violence, Manchester 2016, 38-65.
Ontological Multiplicity of Human Remains

In *Anthropological Perspectives on Disturbing Bodies*, Zoe Crossland and Rosemary Joyce write of the ways in which human remains can and do trouble the living, forcing them to act and to react. They do so “by their material qualities; through hauntings, dreams and other forms of presence; and through political claims and challenges often articulated around them.” By listing these diverse and seemingly unrelated modalities of ‘disturbance’ (operating in and/or through the realms of materiality, affect and politics), Crossland and Joyce hint at the ambivalent and liminal status of dead bodies – or better yet, at their complex, multi-layered ontology. Among its many articulations, establishing at the heart of ontological characteristics of human remains the collapse of distinctions between past/present, present/absent, animated/inanimate, nature/culture, human/animal, person/thing, the latter has proven particularly prominent in theorizing the power the dead exert over the living (especially when encountered in their corporeal presence) and in addressing the emotive impact they have, triggering emotions from fear or disgust to an urge to care and protect. This lies, first and foremost, in the specificity of human remains as “the kind of objects from which the trace of the subject cannot be fully removed”, to quote Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman. The suspension between the state of being a person (a human and social animal) and a thing renders dead bodies disturbing and invites varying responses animating (and, in turn, animated by) affects, cultural and religious sensitivities and political interests. On the level of theory and scientific practice, this translates into Crossland’s “categorical instability of the corpse.”

Following this conceptual trajectory, various scholars have attempted to unpack the power human remains hold over the living on an individual, social and political plane. Thomas Laqueur writes of “the work of the dead”, their ability to organise imagination, structure existence, and make social worlds, and states that “the relationship between the two conceptions of the dead – mere matter, on the one hand, and beings who have a social existence on the other – is what allows bones, ashes, and names to do their work.” Howard Williams, building upon Alfred Gell’s theory of the “agency of inanimate objects”, attributes the agency of dead bodies to the fact that they embody and carry on, not only the memory of the dead, but also their “deferred” intentionality. “The physicality and materiality of the dead body […] can be seen as an extension […] of the deceased’s

---

26 Crossland/Joyce, Anthropological Perspectives, 3-27, here 12.
personhood, actively affecting the remembrance of the deceased by the living and structuring social action.31 Joost Fontein, John Harries and Cara Krmpotich push the discussion one step further in their exploration of the implications of this dual ontology of human remains both as things (objects) and as extensions of once living human beings (subjects) in terms of their ambivalent and uneasy subjecthood/objecthood.32 “Being neither one nor quite the other”,33 human remains, paradoxically, act and affect as both: as tokens of deferred human agency and as things in their idiosyncratic and specific physicality.

In this, the representatives of the Bone Collective take the power of the dead as a vantage point and critically engage with their one-directional theorisations, most notably the ideas proposed by Katherine Verdery in her *Political Life of Dead Bodies*, where human remains are constructed as multivocal and politically efficacious but mute “symbolic vehicles”, invested by the living with various cultural and political meanings.34 In relocating the focus from politics of the dead as practiced by those who are still alive to the effects of encounters with human remains beyond or below their intention and control, this slant works against reductive conceptualisations of dead bodies that still, to a certain extent, guide the interpretations of Thomas Lacquer and Howard Williams. It is, after all, not only through the lingering presence of a deceased’s personhood as individual with social and political existence that the material remains can act upon people. The very material presence of human remains (bones, skulls, fleshy or decomposing bodies) and the properties they embody (visuality, textures, smells) entail their own forms or modes of agency, calling forth and shaping the responses of the living. Yet if the ability of human remains to disturb rests precisely in their inherent and irreducible excessiveness – grounded equally in “their ‘emotive materiality’ as human substances, and their ‘affective presence’ as dead persons who continue to make demands on society”35 – it also, almost inevitably, invites the urge to make them into either one or the other. Unfolding through “techniques of subjectification and objectification”,36 the hegemonic closure of the meaning of human remains (re)constitutes them either into mere objects or into

“appropriately meaningful” subjects: be it an “evidence of a crime” or an “object of mourning”, “corpus delicti” or “political subject”, an anonymous victim of a concentration camp or the material basis of an artwork.

Notwithstanding this, the controversies surrounding von Hausswolff’s *Majdanek* (1989) – to a great extent stemming from the fact that the work cut across and, in this way, somewhat blurred the line between the objecthood and subjecthood of human remains – speak to more than just the palpable tension generated by the direct juxtaposition of both. The case of the contentious ash painting also enables an illustration of the problems brought forward by the specific materiality of ashes and burned human remains, as distinct from that of bones. The reduction or transformation of the human body into inorganic matter, a coarse and shapeless material composed of pulverised bone fragments and elements, constitutes a radical intervention into its material register, rendering the formerly living being indistinguishable and almost intangible as subject. Reduction to ash also affects the material composition of remains in their very thingness – their substance and shape – leading to the de-constitution of the corpse as an object, with an easily identifiable and recognizable form. In *The Holocaust Object*, Bożena Shallcross notes that "turning the body into ashes transforms its previous, visually defined form into its lack, into formlessness". The formlessness of ash – something the Nazis were well aware of and purposefully exploited to full advantage – renders both the subjecthood and objecthood of human remains much less detectable or perceptible. Turned into a pile of ashes, mixed with that of others, the human corpse not only loses all traces of its individuality (as subject) – which bones and skulls always bear, at least to a certain extent, but also oscillates at the “borderline between [material] being and nothingness”, as Winfried Georg Sebald put it. The indeterminacy and material evasiveness of ash may, therefore, present difficulties not only for forensic scientists but also for the very techniques of subjectification and objectification. Both subjects and tangible objects are not easily made from the “enigmatic materiality” of ash.

38 The first conceptual distinction was paged and deconstructed by Ewa Domańska in her *Towards the Archaeontology of the Dead Body*; the second was introduced by Thomas Laqueur in *The Dead Body and Human Rights*. Both point to the tension between the juridical dimension, in its common precedence in establishing the subjectifying/objectifying trajectories of human remains and deciding on their fates (including inscription of collectivised identities), and the ownership claims put forward by the relatives of the dead. Ewa Domańska, *Towards the Archaeontology of the Dead Body*, in: Rethinking History 9 (2005) 4, 389-413; Thomas Laqueur, *The Dead Body and Human Rights*, in: *The Body*, Cambridge 2002, 75-93.
Subjectification

Discussing the responses to the new and considerable challenge posed in the aftermath of the Srebrenica genocide by the method of disposal of the remains of its victims – after initial burial, soldiers from the Army of Republika Srpska exhumed and reburied the bodies in secondary and tertiary mass graves in order to hide all traces of their crimes – Sarah Wagner establishes the resulting comingled and disarticulated remains as emblematic of the destructive, unsettling aftereffects of political violence. "In embodying both presence and absence – that which is found and that which remains lost", she writes, "partial remains illustrate both the legacy of violence and the necessarily insufficient nature of repair." By this reference to repair, Wagner makes the case for a broad understanding of the practices performed in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars by forensic scientists tasked with the identification of fragmented and intermingled remains – namely, that these were inevitably enmeshed in a dense network of social and political relations. “What is lost is not merely the anatomical order and organisation of the body but also, critically and specifically, the wholeness and separateness of the individual”, she states. Taking this view, the process of reassembling disarticulated remains – in the case of Srebrenica greatly facilitated by the unprecedented implementation of DNA technology – is as much scientifically driven as oriented towards re-establishing these remains as individual, social and political beings. DNA biotechnology simultaneously serves as a techno-scientific tool, an instrument of governmentality, and a technology of repair – constructed as a means to counter the dehumanising effects of (double) violence inflicted upon the dead by the perpetrators and to pave the way to closure for their relatives. Yet given the scattered, dispersed and barely recognisable materiality of dead bodies, the process is not only rendered incomplete and possibly indefinitely deferred, but also "compel[s] improvisations in the social and scientific care of the dead". If this holds true for partial and comingled remains, then the ashes – which result from mass incineration and are caught within a political/religious context in which exhumation and (forensic) identification are essentially not permitted – have the potential to stretch the existing practices pertaining to the dead almost to breaking point.

43 In July 1995, more than 8000 Muslim Bosnian civilians (men and boys) were killed by the units of the Bosnian Serb Army of Republika Srpska, a Serbian dominated region of present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina. For a detailed account see Sarah Wagner and Admir Jugo’s chapter in this volume.
45 Wagner, The Quandaries, 119-139, here 121.
46 Ibid., 120.
47 Frances Torres makes a similar point in relation to human remains resulting from the 9/11 attacks, which constituted an integral and disturbingly undistinguishable element of the grey dust that for months covered the streets and buildings in the vicinity of Twin Towers, but also of the so called composites – the
In the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, this was made particularly manifest in the radical reconfigurations of individual and collective practice related to the dead and in the culturally and religiously informed redefinitions of what, in fact, constitutes a dead body. The challenge posed by ashes of the victims of concentration and extermination camps – burned by the Nazis *en masse* in sophisticated indoor machines of mass incineration or in makeshift outdoor crematoria and subsequently disposed of in rivers, instrumentalised for industrial or agrarian purposes, or mixed with sand and buried in mass graves – disturbed, first and foremost, the letter of the Jewish religious law. The proscription against cremation – of central importance for halakhically sanctioned mortuary ritual – draws a fine distinction between the body of the dead and ashes, which were considered impure, of an essentially different nature and were generally not admitted for burial at the Jewish cemetery. 48 Robert Jan van Pelt notes that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the issue of cremation established a firm line (a “boundary maker” of sorts) separating the religious Jewish community from its secularising and Christian neighbours, who increasingly embraced it. The practice of mass or multi-corpse incineration performed by the Nazis could, therefore, “be interpreted as a symbol of the particularity of the German assault on the Jews”. 49 Although perhaps not intended as such, the practice of dispossessing concentration and extermination camp victims’ bodies in an attempt to erase evidence of crimes resulted in various redefinitions of religious duty pertaining to buried remains as a way of undoing the double violence of de-subjectivisation, with measures including, amongst others, innovative rabbinical rulings.

The following advice came from Rabbi Menahem Mendel Kirschboim of Frankfurt am Main as early as 1939, in the wake of mass arrests of German Jews during the wave of pogroms that swept throughout the country on 9 November 1938: responding to families who had received the ashes of their loved ones sent to them by the concentration camps’ administration for burial, the rabbi said that the urns with burned remains should be buried in the exact same way as they would inhume a coffin. 50 Nevertheless, it

---

was precisely the impossibility of individualising the victims and separating the dead from one another after multi-corpse incineration that, according to David Deutsch, particularly troubled the post-war rabbinical responsas and their outlook on the status of ashes. In the absence of precedence and clear guidelines regarding mass burial and reburial, religious authorities acted in a condition of “forced innovativeness” often structured along the lines of political and ideological interest.51 This pertained especially to the question of exhumation and reburial of ashes and their religious classification.

While the rabbis representing an ultra-Orthodox stance hesitantly considered exhumation and reburial of burned remains if not impermissible, then at least devoid of immediate religious value (as Rabbi Yehosuha Greenwald did in his ruling concerning Auschwitz-Birkenau, recommending the scattering of ashes around the grave containing complete bodies and casting the inhumation of ash as non-obligatory but permissible),52 others welcomed and actively supported survivors’ initiatives to rebury incinerated remains at the local Jewish cemeteries.53 Orthodox rabbis with Zionist political orientation often openly advocated for mass reburial of burned remains from the camps, mass graves and execution sites in the newly established Jewish state. Such was the stance of Rabbi Shimon Efrati, who in the late 1940s argued that the duty to protect incinerated remains and bring them to Israel for burial was an obligation as religious as it was political. In the words of David Deutsch, “Efrati took advantage of the unprecedented nature of post-war mass graves and his Zionist ideology to link reburial with national identity.”54 Likewise, in the political logic of the state, national identity was linked with the reburial of these ashes belonging to ‘holy martyrs’. Confronted with the Holocaust and the unprecedented scale and nature of disposal of the human remains through cremation – erasing the individuality of the dead – the outcomes of the religious and political project to re-subjectivise remains, rendering them clearly defined, collectivised subjects (undoubtedly also in the interest of the community and the state), sometimes coincided.

The fact that this religiously and politically driven process of making the ashes of Holocaust victims into “appropriately meaningful” subjectivities was, in fact, highly complex, multi-layered and at times controversy-ridden, was made abundantly clear by

52 See Deutsch, Exhumations, 90-112, here 100-102.
53 The ceremonial reburial of ashes collected at the site of former extermination camp in Chelmno/Kulmhof am Ner, which took place in 1945 in the city of Kutno, was presided over by the Chief Rabbi of Polish Armed Forces, David Kahane. Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, who survived the Holocaust in Lithuania, not only supported but also initiated searches for and reburial of human remains. See Gabriel N. Finder, Final Chapter. Portraying the Exhumation and Reburial of Polish Jewish Holocaust Victims in the Pages of Yizkor Books, in: Elisabeth Anstett/Jean-Marc Dreyfus (ed.), Human Remains and Identification. Mass Violence, Genocide, and the ‘Forensic Turn’, Manchester 2015, 34-58.
54 Deutsch, Exhumations, 90-112, here 96.
historical studies recently carried out by Doron Bar and Jean-Marc Dreyfus. Both locate their analyses against the backdrop of struggles over political legitimisation and community-making evolving and revolving around human remains from the Holocaust in Israel. The struggles were epitomised by a long-standing conflict between two centres of Holocaust commemoration – the Chamber of the Holocaust, founded in 1949, and Yad Vashem, established 1953 – over the right to gather and rebury the ashes of the dead and to construct their ‘sanctity’ in either religious or merely civil terms (secular Yad Vashem ultimately proved more successful). Both Bar and Dreyfus nevertheless point to the central importance of this remarkably widespread, grass-roots practice through which diverse actors, individual and collective (survivors, their relatives, families of the victims, associations of former inmates and representatives of various social, political, religious, cultural Jewish institutions) collected ashes from the sites of former concentration and extermination camps in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust – also for the development of this national commemorative idiom.

There is, in fact, rich documentation recounting ways in which private individuals and Jewish community organisations, both in Israel and abroad, came into possession of what they thought to be burned human remains, collected in the vicinity of mass graves or in the camps’ crematoria and carried from the sites in boxes, bags and makeshift urns. Many visited the sites of mass murder before emigrating from Poland, Germany or Austria; others travelled to those countries with the sole purpose of paying their respects to the dead and collecting human remains. The ashes were smuggled illegally or transferred through diplomatic channels. On many occasions, Polish authorities – including the heads of the State Museum in Majdanek – sent remains gathered at the camps at the request of Jewish community organisations, religious associations, municipalities, and survivors. With time, the phenomenon took on a more organised form and was handled

---


56 It is virtually impossible to establish whether the collected ‘remains’ if fact contained ashes or merely soil and dust. Only is the case of small fragments of charred bone, which still resurface from the ground at the former extermination camps, the material and visual composition enables easy recognition of their origin. For this reason, I should perhaps retain quotation marks around the words pertaining to burned human remains when describing the practices of transfer of ash and, for that matter, also van Hausswolff’s ash painting. In not doing so I intend to give justice to premises on which people collecting ashes and burned remains, in fact, acted on and through whose practices they materialised as such.

57 According to a representative of the Majdanek Museum, “[t]he State Museum at Majdanek has in the past received requests to send the ashes from various organizations and private individuals. They were to be located in various memorial chambers. We often respond positively to such requests. […] We nevertheless never sent the actual ashes. It was the soil form the premises of the camp.” She nonetheless immediately adds that during the war the ashes were scattered throughout the whole area of the camp. Agnieszka Kowalczyk quoted in Wirtualny Sztetl, Szokujący obraz z prochów ofiar [A Shocking Painting made of Victims’ Ashes], in: Wirtual Sztetl, 12 June 2012; http://www.sztetl.org.pl/pl/cms/aktualnosci/2998, szokujacy-obraz-z-prochow-ofiar/ (5 June 2015).
mostly by collective bodies. In 1950s Israel it became centralised under the auspices of the Ministry of Religious Affairs with Mount Zion (and later Yad Vashem) designated as the sole location at which to bury the ashes – which, interestingly, were brought to the site as late as the early 1970s, not least by individuals who had kept the remains in their private possession for over two decades.58

Yet even before the religious/political codification of the treatment of Holocaust ashes, the inhumation of burned remains at local Jewish cemeteries and in the newly erected monuments unfolded mostly within the emergent communal patterns of memorialisation, called forth by the very commonality of the practice of collecting ash. As in Europe, in Israel “the burial of ashes […] in various locations, including cemeteries, often served as a basis for the construction of monuments near places where members of the community lived, thereby providing a focal point of remembrance and sanctity around which community members gathered”.59 This corresponded with the way in which the dead were constructed through those dislocated surrogate mortuary rituals, performed in the absence of bodies and proper burial sites. Indistinguishable, formless and vulnerable, the ashes simultaneously stood for once living individuals (relatives, loved ones, friends) and, as Dreyfus put it, “represent[ed] the victims as a collective whole” in death.60

Perhaps the most striking metaphorical framing of the subjectifying dynamics behind the practice of collection and burial of the ashes comes from Simon Wiesenthal, co-founder of the Jewish Historical Documentation Centre in Linz (1947) and survivor of several concentration camps. In 1949, on behalf of the Committee of Austrian Jews and the Association of Former Concentration Camps Inmates in Austria, Wiesenthal himself arranged for the most spectacular transport of burned human remains. Gathered at concentration camps and execution sites in Austria and said to belong to “200,000 Jews who had been murdered in the Holocaust”,61 the ashes were brought to Israel in a glass coffin containing 30 urns decorated in the colours of the Israeli flag. For Wiesenthal, the decision to inhume these remains outside Austria was motivated first and foremost by a need to demand accountability from Zionist leaders in Palestine for their fail-

---

58 As noted by Doron Bar, survivors from Vilna brought human remains to Yad Vashem as late as 1972. In 1968 an inhumation of ashes, taken from Treblinka by a private person in 1947, took place in Yad Vashem Hall of Remembrance. It was nevertheless in the late 1950s and early 1960s that the perspectives on the exhumation and reburial of Holocaust victims shifted towards prohibition to further disturb the graves, including those containing ashes. The conflict over the exhumations at Bergen-Belsen’s Hohne cemetery, quoted in the introduction, could be seen as a symbolic turning point in the politics towards the Holocaust dead. See Jean-Marc Dreyfus, Conflit de mémoires autour du cimetière de Bergen-Belsen [Memory Conflict on the Bergen Belsen Cemetery], in: Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire 2 (2006) 90, 73–87.
59 Bar, Between Chamber, 195–227, here 198.
61 The figure refers to the number of Jewish victims of National Socialism in Austria as estimated in the early postwar year. Nowadays, the number is set at about 67,000. Wiesenthal symbolically collected small amounts of ash at many locations that witnessed Nazi terror. Tom Segev, Simon Wiesenthal. The Life and Legends, London 2010, 1.
ure to act during the Holocaust. Nevertheless, the ashes were received in Israel with a series of politically and religiously coordinated public events in which tens of thousands of people participated, re-forging his critical initiative to suit state interests. The display of urns housing the ashes of Holocaust victims drew crowds both in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, where the glass coffin was eventually inhumed: people wept, many brought along small containers filled with remains from the sites where their relatives or communities were killed; others approached the coffins as though they contained the corporeal remains of their loved ones who died in concentration camps in Anschluß Austria. Reflecting, in retrospect, on the affective, political and symbolic power of the glass box holding the burned remains of anonymous victims of the Holocaust, now forming a collective brought together by death, Wiesenthal observed:

“The glass box has suddenly become a kind of looking-glass, in which the faces of many, many could be reflected – friends from the ghetto, companions from the concentration camps, people who had been beaten to death, died of starvation, been hounded into the electrified fence. I could see the panicked faces of Jews who were whipped and clubbed into the gas chambers, chased from behind by human animals devoid of conscience or feelings, who would not hear their lone plea: let them live.”

And yet, perceiving the formless and undistinguishable ashes through Wiesenthal’s looking-glass allowed for more than simply projecting memories of the known and unknown dead onto them. It also irrevocably transformed ‘mere matter’ into human remains of once living people and communities. This occurred in spite of the fact that no radical shifts in the remains’ material register could actually be detected, apart from those brought about by the attempt to contain the corporeal remains pulverised into dust by putting them into boxes, bags and urns. Thus the (re)constituting (or materialisation) of the inorganic matter, chunks of unidentifiable, desiccated bone, soil and debris into human ash, unfolded first through the performative gesture of collecting it from the sites of former camps and mass burial – an expressive, although often purely instinctive act of protection and care. This imposed a further set of practices, many of which, in the absence of clear prescriptions and guidelines, had yet to be invented. Thus, even before there were clearly defined frames for articulating the collectivised identities of the dead (such as ‘holy martyrs’ or ‘Jewish bodies’), the transfer and burial of the ashes to cemeteries and monuments throughout Europe and Israel was as much an act of grief as an ethical and political project within which the re-subjectification of remains served to undo the work of double dehumanisation carried out at the camps. It is only afterwards that the looking-glass came to reflect (or better yet, enact) the gaze of the state, grounding its own legitimacy in the politics of dead bodies.

---

It is unsurprising, from this particular perspective, that von Hausswolff’s contentious artistic endeavour to conjure the ghosts of the people incinerated at Majdanek – by giving shape to shapeless, abandoned remains and making them into the bodily remains of humans – bears more resemblance to religiously and politically charged discursive and performative strategies framing the material from which his paintings were made as “desecrated Jewish bodies” than anyone would like to admit. In both cases the basic intention is, after all, to restore the dignity of the dead by separating the “undistinguished ashes into individual beings”\textsuperscript{63} or into “dead (political) subjects”,\textsuperscript{64} to borrow a phrase from Joost Fontein. There are obviously many reasons why van Hausswolff’s privatised politics of the dead, performed beyond or below established religious and political attributions, was, from the outset, doomed to meet with condemnation and criticism – the most conspicuous being the breaching of Jewish religious law, of the law in general, and claiming ownership of the remains. Yet I would argue that it was, more than anything, the obscenity of the gesture (in Slavoj Žižek’s sense of the term) constructing the ashes

\textsuperscript{63} Shallcross, The Holocaust Object, 82.
\textsuperscript{64} Fontein, Remaking the Dead, 114-140, here 127.
simultaneously as bodily remains of anonymous victims of a concentration camp and a material basis of an artwork – the engagement with both the subjection of and objecthood of ash – that unlocked its disturbing potential. In van Hausswolff’s looking-glass, the remains transpired to be both subjects and objects, mere matter and social (collective and individualised) social beings exposed in their categorically unstable subjecthood/objecthood.

Objectification

On the other hand, it is perhaps not without reason that the vast majority of critical voices directed against van Hausswolff’s work relied upon the image of profanation and ultimate instrumentalisation of human remains as a basis for their argument – a practice to which the ashes of Holocaust victims, indeed, fell victim. After all, it is not so much the forensic gaze which transforms human remains into objects of evidence or scientific study and also, as Wagner notes, essentially partakes in the identity politics-driven processes of subjectification (through technolegal production of identities)\(^65\) that can most convincingly be located on the opposite side of the subjectification/objectification spectrum. From this perspective, the crude, largely historically incorrect, and widely misplaced comparison Shimon Samuels draws between van Hausswolff’s artistic endeavour and the radically dehumanising ultimate utilisation of the victims’ bodies that evolved in the Nazi concentration and extermination camps not only gave voice to the culturally/religiously/politically structured contention against the reduction of human remains to objects. It also offered a glimpse into a particularly disturbing mode of objectification – effectively depriving human remains of their personhood or ‘human’ component – unfolding as a politically charged undoing of subjectivities.

Needless to say, the practices of exploitation of human remains as a raw material, the prospecting of the bodies of gassed victims in search for valuables, the industrial utilisation of ashes and human hair performed by the Nazis when the camps where still operational,\(^66\) were not exceptional in enacting the “ontological scandal” based – to borrow a phrase from Bill Brown – on “the slippage between person and thing.”\(^67\) The following quote comes from a man who lived in the vicinity of the extermination camp at Belżec

---


in occupied wartime Poland. In a testimony given in 2004, he recounted that soon after
the camp had ceased to operate, human remains and ashes buried at the site were han-
dled as a resource by the local populace, its grounds treated as a reservoir of ‘fertiliser’ for
the nearby arable lands:

“In 1943, my father, who worked in a manor in Potoki, was, along with some
other farmers, tasked with transporting […] fertiliser from Belżec […]. Upon
arrival in Belżec, at the spot indicated by the manor’s administrator, they dis-
covered that […] the fertilizer consisted of small fragments of charred human
bones […]. It became apparent that the ashes mixed with bone fragments were
the remains of the camp, where the Germans had exterminated the Jews, and
which had been liquidated some weeks before. The farmers transported the
ashes to local arable lands and dispersed them over the fields […].”68

In the same testimony, the man refers to yet another objectifying practice to which
corporeal remains of Belżec victims were subjected after the camp had been dismantled
in 1943, and which lasted deep into the 1940s. “I remember that once when I visited the
former camp with a group of friends, I encountered several hundred people prospecting
the site.”69 They were looking for valuables buried in mass graves along with the inciner-
ated remains of the camp’s victims. In fact, immediately after the Nazis in authority had
left the site, local non-Jewish Polish villagers engaged in a transgressive act of robbing the
graves, mining “wedding rings, […] necklaces, earrings, dental bridges and crowns”70
from among ashes and decomposing human remains and systematically sifting through
pulverised bones to extract jewellery and gold. The activity that evolved at the sites of all
former Nazi extermination camps in Poland and – according to historical research –
drew crowds, effectively transformed the sites of mass burial of people persecuted as Jews
into “gold mines”.71

Although still conceptualised as such to date, when approached from the analytical
angle of subjecthood/objecthood of human remains, the looting of mass graves can

68 The Archive of the Bełżec Memorial Museum [PMM-B], Relation 10, anonymised.
69 Ibid.
70 PMM-B, relation 16, anonymised.
71 For a detailed account of the practice, see Jan Tomasz Gross/Irena Grudzińska Gross, Golden Harvest. Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust, Oxford 2012; Martyna Rusiniak, Oboz zagłady Treblinka II w
pamięci społecznej (1943–1989) [The Extermination Camp Treblinka II in Social Memory (1943–1989)],
in: Dapim. Studies on the Holocaust 29 (2015) 3, 154-172; Marta Zawodna, O porządkowaniu poobozo-
wego świata. Sposoby postępowania ze szczątkami ludzkimi na terenach bylego obozu KL Auschwitz-
Birkenau od momentu ostatecznej likwidacji obozu do powstania muzeum [On the Clearing of the
Post-camp World. Ways of Handling of Human Remains at the Former Concentration Camp Auschwitz-
Birkenau from the Final Liquidation to the Establishing of the Museum], in: Zagłada Żydów. Studia i
Materialy (2012) 8, 145-175. The grave robberies at the Einsatzgruppen killing sites in Ukraine were doc-
umented in: Patrick Desbois, Holocaust by Bullets. A Priest’s Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the
hardly be reduced to a solely economic undertaking. Instead, the quality of the dead as uneasy subjects/objects invites a consideration of the actual forms of engagement with charred bones and ashes evolving at the former camps and sites of mass burial as techniques of objectification, rendering human remains essentially nonhuman. The looting of mass graves must, after all, have been greatly dependant on the ability to arrest the unsettling ontological multiplicity of human remains and on the perception of remains of murdered Jews as mere objects, deprived of their posthumous subjecthood. Based upon the construction of bodily remains of the nationalised other as a matter or resource, grave robberies were as much dispossession of property as a practice of alterity and dehumanisation. It was through stripping mortal remains of their human component, undoing the subjecthood of the dead, that the looting of burial sites took on a firmly political dimension – it gave voice and enacted the pre-war and wartime regimes of othering and the exclusionary status of the ‘Jewish body’. In a disturbing reversal of the identity politics-driven processes of subjectification, the looting of mass graves transpired as an instance of identity politics-driven de-subjectification.

The spectre of grave robberies performed by Poles at the sites of mass extermination, although not directly thematised, could be seen to have loomed large over an immediate outcry against the desecration of ‘Jewish bodies’ sparked by van Hausswolff’s Majdanek (1989). Unlike the violence inflicted upon human remains when the camps were still in operation – an integral part of the Nazi politics of annihilation – the disturbance and profanation of mass graves also unfolded, in this case, in the aftermath of the war and despite the official reframing of the sites as places of burial where corporeal remains could finally be ‘at rest’. Instead, the ashes were dispersed over nearby fields, transferred to forests, and subjected to various man-made operations, contributing to their continuous displacement and dissemination. Yet as much as the radical difference in the politics of making human remains into subjects or into objects that underlie the practices of making use of them renders the comparison between van Hausswolff’s actions and the ultimate de-subjectivation of the Holocaust dead highly problematic, so does their (implicit) take on the materiality of remains. The practices of utilisation and grave robbery could be seen as stabilising or, better yet, neutralising the excessiveness of ash, both as matter and as scattered, dispersed and barely recognisable materiality of dead bodies, thus also blocking out its disturbing potential. Van Hausswolff’s work, in turn, brings to the fore its inherent and unsettling indeterminacy and evasiveness that rest precisely in

---

72 I develop this argument in: Dziuban, The Politics of Human Remains.
73 According to one witness, the ashes were transported to the forest and there meticulously sifted through in order to prevent discovery by the police. Interview conducted by the author, 23 September 2014. Also animals’ activity effectuated travels of corporeal remains, supposedly also of the people buried at the camp. As noted by an inhabitant of a small village near Belżec, “during the occupation, the dogs would bring to our yard from the forest fragments of human remains [...]. My father would take them away form the dogs and throw into the river or a nearby pond.” MMP-B, relation 44, anonymised.
the particular material configuration and material trajectories of ash as ash, captured in a threshold condition between subjectification and objectification.

To illustrate this point, which serves both to foreground the uncontainable materiality of ash (always) resisting transformation into a full and fully controllable “object”,74 and to reassert its discrete ontological agency, I would like to instance yet another work of art. The famous photograph Lee Miller in Hitler’s Bathtub by David Scherman, significantly devoid of the performative dynamics of subjectification, makes manifest that the trajectories of the material afterlives of human remains can, indeed, be very unexpected. Taken in Adolf Hitler’s Munich apartment on the evening of 30 April 1945, after Miller’s and Scherman’s working day as photographers at the concentration camp in Dachau, this dense and multilayered image could be seen, as Martin Bryder convincingly pointed out,75 as the first (probably largely unintentional) presentation of the ashes of Holocaust victims in contemporary art. Miller’s boots, standing on the mat in front of the legendary bath, in which the American photographer was trying to “wash the odours of Dachau away”, were, according to Anthony Penrose, still covered with dust from the concentration camp.76 Obviously, it is impossible to determine whether the boots really bore traces of desiccated bones reduced to ash. Nevertheless, the very possibility that they did brings into sharp focus that “ash sediments in unpredictable ways and according to material trajectories that are beyond or unrelated to, human control and intervention”,77 to slightly paraphrase Bjørnar Olsen.

The reference to Olsen’s notion of sedimentation is not incidental here. It is exactly through this concept that, in his In Defence of Things, the archaeologist articulates the capability of materiality to affect and shape human realities and actions and invites us to attend to this as a never fully controllable and foreseeable affair. Sedimentation describes, on the one hand, the “durability and ‘in-place-ness’78 of things that materialise continuity of the environments we inhabit and ensure continued material gathering of the past. On the other hand, it establishes this continuity as constructed by a variety of historical and material processes driven as much by human activities as by dynamics dictated by differential qualities and capacities of the myriad of things that surround us. It is for this

74 I signal here the importance of the conceptual distinction, developed within the discursive field of post-/non-human studies, between objects as passive articulations of the subject-object divide and things as active forces imbued with their own forms and modes of agency. In Jane Bennett’s phrase, things are “vivid entities not entirely reducible to contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics”. Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things, Durham/London 2010, 5.
75 Interview conducted by the author, 18 June 2015.
76 For a detailed account of circumstances in which the photograph was taken, see Antony Penrose, Lee Miller’s War, New York 1992.
78 Ibid., 160.
reason, Olsen claims, that "this gathering itself allows for processes and outcomes that, to some extent at least, are unpredictable and subsumed to material trajectories that create their own statements of crucial significance [...]", and adds, "this enduring materiality is – by itself – largely indiscriminate, also carrying for the traces of the discarded and what is made redundant [...]".79 Inspiring a greater sense of the extent to which things (objects, landscapes, spatial structures) constitute and partake in the production of social worlds, the concept of sedimentation simultaneously points back to the differential modes of agency and variations in the ability of things to exert their force that hinge on their mater-

79 Ibid., 160 and 173.
rial qualities and continuous material transformations, operating below or beyond human intention and control. Due to the specificity and uniqueness of its material configuration, ash establishes a particularly powerful articulation of the dynamics of material endurance captured by the notion of sedimentation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it could in this be seen to share many characteristics with dust.

Despite variations across theorisations of dust developed in seemingly disparate fields of intellectual inquiry (philosophy, art criticism, cultural history, or, more recently, new materialism and the theory of the Anthropocene), some threads have remained recurrent throughout. Firstly, dust – as an amalgam of fine particles of matter of various provenance, including dirt, soil, fibres, minerals, deposits of pollution, traces of all inanimate and animate beings, plant pollen, animal and human matter – is brought into existence by a constant process of death, degeneration and decay: its presence testifies to a continuous transformation of things and bodies, their slow but unavoidable disintegration into undistinguishable particles within a shapeless and amorphous substance. This process of transmutation of things from solid into pulverised matter inevitably involves the dissolution of their clearly defined forms and outlines, of their material integrity and wholeness, or, in other words, of their identity as objects. In the words of Adam Jasper, dust “consists of objects that have long since lost their identity. Things that have dried out, decomposed, powdered and shifted in the way that makes their true identities indiscernible.” Secondly, the powdering and dematerialisation of things that feeds the crumby materiality of dust renders dust into a medium of continuous diffusion, exchange and intermingling. Dust is and operates through a collective flow of “atomistic remains” of most disparate substances/beings and, even if it does not necessarily obliterate all traces of objects from which they originated, it makes differences between them obsolete and immaterial. Thirdly, as elegantly framed by Michael Mader, the “communities of dust”, as they cut across and revoke many rigid distinctions (organic/inorganic, animate/inanimate beings, human/animal, etc.), “presuppose the lowest common denominator: materiality”. What this means is that they “spring up from the terminable existence of material entities and the endurance of materiality itself”. Indiscriminately gathering together that which remains from the processes of un-becoming and de-materialisation, dust forms a formless but also remarkably vibrant and resilient material presence – one that can never be entirely dispersed or eliminated.

---


82 Michael Mader, Dust, New York/London 2016, 74-75.
It is in this sense that Carolyn Steedman writes about material imperishability and *not-going-away-ness* of dust.83

Operating at the threshold of visibility and effectively precluding full human control, dust, in its quality of *not-going-away-ness*, is rendered into a vital and transformative force and a potent illustration of the agency of matter. After all, through its dynamic, uncontainable, residual materiality, dust not only discretely partakes in the continued material accumulation and endurance of the past (offering a powerful, if somewhat paradoxical, marker of Olsen’s sedimentation) but also persistently affects human realities and actions. As it flows around and through us, dust acts as a pollutant, allergen, and carrier of disease; as it layers on every surface and penetrates every crevice, it repeatedly forces us to take action – of removing, of wiping, of dusting. From this perspective, in turning into dust (through processes of decay and disintegration), things and bodies become endowed with a renewed, if not quintessential, capacity to exert material agency. In slightly ironic terms, Michael Mader writes, about dust as a guarantor of beings’ “second lease of life”: “Dust is things’ next generation, their mode of surviving, achieved at the cost of their identities and identifiable outlines.”84

To be sure, contrary to the implications of the ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust’ formula, relating the elusive and agentive materiality of dust to that of burned and pulverized human remains does not necessarily entail comparing like with like. Also, as exemplified by controversies surrounding van Hausswolff’s *Majdanek (1989)*, the very quality of humanness attached to ash has the ability to render such an equation fragile and vulnerable to ethically and politically inflected resistance.85 Yet instead of polemically engaging with a one-directionally subjectifying strand, I would rather see the juxtaposition of ash and resilient material modality of dust as indicative of a way in which to push forward a conception of ashes’ modality of disturbance as both material and political. In translating into political terms the ontological configuration of ash – its uncontainability, de-identification, comingling, circulation, and specific mode of *not-going-away-ness* –, the space can be opened for articulation of its discrete and unobtrusive political agency, one that eludes capture by identity-driven techniques of subjectification and/or objectification.

---

83 Steedman, Dust, 165.
84 Mader, Dust, 38 and 43.
85 Here again, a comparison could be drawn between the challenging materiality of unidentifiable, pulverized remains of Holocaust dead and those of many of the 9/11 victims. I am referring here, first and foremost, to the controversies surrounding the contentious “fines” that slipped through the screens through which material remains of World Trade Center had been sifted at the Staten Island Fresh Kill Landfield, and which contained debris, soil but also desiccated and cremated human remains. Regardless of the strong objections voiced by victims’ relatives and survivors of 9/11 against the treatment of “fines” as merely “undifferentiated dirt”, only objects bigger than a quarter-inch were constructed as human remains and subjected to forensic investigation. See Aronson, Who Owns the Dead?, 53-72; Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh, ‘The Disappeared’. Power over the Dead in the Aftermath of 9/11, in: Anthropology Today 27 (2011) 3, 5-11.
fication. The point is, after all, to give justice to the inherently excessive and unsettling subjecthood/objecthood of human remains and to render manifest how – in their uneasy oscillation in the intermediary zone between man-made and materiality-driven – they can become endowed with the power to exert their own politics of dead bodies.

The Politics of Survivance

In addressing the unobtrusive political agency of ash as it rests in its inherent "ontological in-betweenness" – its unsettling (neither/nor) subjecthood/objecthood and material oscillation between being and nothingness – I loosely follow the conceptual trajectory instantiated by Jacques Derrida in Cinders. In this short book, which contains a philosopher’s deliberation on and in response to the Holocaust, the figure of cinder offers a unique approximation to the theme that, according to Derrida, had engulfed his entire work. It speaks of the way in which the Holocaust haunts philosophical discourse, designating cinders (ashes), "the incineration of the holocaust", as the (non)place from which the work of deconstruction begins. In Robert Eaglestone’s words: “The cinder underlies deconstruction and the cinder is the cinder of the Holocaust. [Deconstruction] is always already involved with, responding to the Holocaust. It is also the philosophy of cinders, reflecting on and engaging with the events of the Holocaust.”

In this historicising view, deconstruction becomes a locus of impossible mourning for all those others burned in the crematory ovens of the extermination camps and a long-term obsession with violence (of othering, exclusion, ordering, and categorization), of which the Holocaust is obviously not an isolated instance, and with philosophical complicity in this violence. At the same time, cinder establishes an emblematic example of Derridean trace – it names “what remains without remaining from the holocaust, from the all-burning, from the incineration [...]”. It is nevertheless not so much the very deconstructive dynamics of “remaining without remaining”, nor the status of ashes in and for deconstruction, that is of interest here as the power Derridean reflection on cinder endows to ash.

Framed by Derrida as a tomb of that which had been consumed by fire and reduced to ashes, cinder is, simultaneously, a synonym for an erased past existence and for a discrete
and residual presence, a haunting “excess of life which resisted annihilation”.90 As it remains “from what is not, in order to recall at the delicate, charred bottom of itself only non-being or non-presence”,91 cinder testifies to a complete and irrevocable destruction of what is no more, but also to the reality of something that lingers on, is there, as the only thing that outlasted incineration: “something material”, though fragile and elusive. “Someone vanished but something preserved her trace and at the same time lost it, the cinder. There the cinder is: that which preserves in order no longer to preserve, dooming the remnant to dissolution.”92 Reintroducing to the discursive game some further uneasy oscillations – between being and nonbeing, presence and absence, life and death – the deconstructive figure of cinder, therefore, intrinsically entwines the evasive materiality of ash with another Derridean concept, that of the afterlife: survivance.93

Connoting excessive life that exceeds and follows death – living-on or over-living – the concept of survivance, as distinct from that of survival, effectively revokes the opposition between life and death, pointing out the possibility of “survival that is not”:94 an impossible and excessive non/survival in the form of a spectral, enigmatic trace. In this manner, survivance, as constructed by Derrida, subtly differs from the conceptualisation of the term as proposed by George Didi-Huberman. While the author of Images In Spite of All evokes survivance as a relic, one that effectively rescinds or denies life, Derrida ‘defines’ it as “survival that is neither life nor death pure and simple”.95 Heterogeneous to both, survivance cuts across the life-death continuum and invests the resilient material modality of cinder – its “remaining without remaining” – with a second lease of (impure and unsimple) life: a life that carries traces of death from which it originated, without preserving (the identities of) those incinerated. It is in this sense that, as James Mackay claims, for Derrida, “the cinders of the incinerated bodies of Holocaust victims provide a metaphor for this double movement of non/survival, an ineradicable trace of eradication”.96 In slightly reversing the logic of this argument, I would argue that survivance

91 Derrida, Cinders, 21, italics in original.
92 Ibid., 15-17.
94 Derrida, The Beast and the Sovereign, 194.
95 Ibid. In Didi-Huberman’s interpretation the condition of survivance pertains not to human remains but to four images taken in the extermination camp Birkenau by a member of Sonderkommando. He writes: “To snatch four images from the hell of the present amounted […] on that day in August 1944, to snatching four shreds of survival from the destruction. Of survival as relic [survivance], I would say, and not of survival in life [survie]. Because nobody, in front of or behind that camera […] survived that to which the images bear witness. So it is images alone that remain with us: they are the survivors.” Georges Didi-Huberman, Images in Spite of All. Four Photographs from Auschwitz, Chicago/London 2008, 45.
could, in turn, yield a frame through which to evince and reassert discrete (political) agentivity instantiated by *not-going-away-ness* of ash.

As an afterlife of a persistent remnant of past existence, *survivance* could, in fact, be read, as Derrida himself suggested, as a discursive play on (and of) “survival and *revenance*”\(^97\). Yet, the excessiveness of the non/survival of ash also evokes the politically charged interplay of “survival and resistance”\(^98\). The latter concatenation comes to the fore in the interpretation of this multivocal notion proposed by Gerald Vizenor. Building upon and further developing Derrida’s dispersed reflections on *survivance*, the Native American literary critic frames it as something more than mere endurance: it is “an active presence over absence, deracination and oblivion”\(^99\). The term, referring in Vizenor’s work to textual strategies employed in contemporary Native American literature – bearing traces of and calling forth the shadows (or cinders) of reality eradicated through violent processes of colonisation – does not, however, mean the return to, or literary fetishisation of, traditional ‘Indian’ cultures. On the contrary, *survivance*, which does not revoke this eradication but only “subtly reduces the power of the destroyer”,\(^100\) constitutes, according to Vizenor, a domain of ‘post-Indians’: self-hybridising subjects creatively and deconstructively reappropriaing dominant (white) identity discourses. As Joe Lockard elegantly puts it, *survivance* incorporates a consciousness with which one lives with terms of self-reference imposed by a dominant culture: it places quotation marks around identity references”\(^101\). As such, it involves an ironical play with the ideologies of identity entangled with, and serving as, a rationale for violence, to which *survivance* testifies and which it resistantly over-lives.

Furthermore, art could inspire the way in which thinking on the political agentivity of ash can be pushed forward, translating Vizenor’s textual *survivance* into resilient, enigmatic materiality of ash.\(^102\) In the photographic series *The Odd Place* (2003–2004), Polish artist and scholar Elżbieta Janicka took on the topic of material endurance and

---

\(^97\) In *Living On*, he writes about “survival and *revenance*, living on and returning from the dead: living on goes beyond both living and dying, supplementing each other with a sudden surge and a certain reprieve”. Derrida, *Living On*, 75–175, here 108, italics in original.


\(^102\) Here, I reiterate and further develop an argument advanced in the closing section of my article devoted to material, political and affective afterlives of human remains at the former extermination camp in Belżec. Dziuban, (Re)politicising the Dead, 38–65. For a detailed analysis of the quoted artwork, see Zuzanna Dziuban, Polish Landscapes of Memory at the Sites of Extermination. The Politics of Framing, in: Estela Schindel/Pamela Colombo (ed.), Space and the Memories of Violence. Landscapes of Erasure, Disappearance and Exclusion, Houndmills/New York 2014, 34–47.
tacit circulation of incinerated human remains above the sites of the former Nazi extermination camps in Poland. The six large-format photographs, taken at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, Treblinka, Sobibór, Chelmno, and Belżec, capture the air drifting above their grounds, penetrated for years by the ashes as they lie on surfaces as sediment and resurface from the graves. Showing white surfaces within black frames and supplemented with inscriptions stating the exact dates of the pictures being taken, the images hint at the on-going relationship between the living and the dead, mediated and sustained through this uncontrollable circulation. “The ashes flow in the air. We breathe this air. […] The ashes are in the soil, in the rivers, on the meadows, and in the forests – subjected to constant recycling, in which we participate”,¹⁰³ Janicka writes.

Taken as an artistic commentary on the survivance of the ashes of Holocaust victims, Janicka’s work should, therefore, be read as more than a somewhat unsettling assertion of the already obvious not-going-away-ness of material traces of extermination. The reference (suggested by the title of the work) to the discriminatory policy of ghetto benches introduced at Polish universities in 1937, which spatially and symbolically separated ‘Jewish’ students from their ‘Polish’ colleagues, makes clear that The Odd Place critically engages with the problem of Polish antisemitism and with the selective regimes of othering, enclosing and differentiating people, living and dead, along national lines. Bringing both imageries together – that of (symbolic and physical) violence of exclusion and that of material circulation and comingling –, her work exposes the vulnerability of the former vis-à-vis material configuration and material trajectories of ash. After all, as it works beyond or below identity politics-driven processes of subjectification and/or objectification, the constant, uncontainable flow of the remains establishes an exchange between the dead and the living ‘Jews’ and ‘Poles’ (at least as corporeal and processual bodies) that blurs the ontological and identity-based divisions separating them, and discretely “places quotation marks around identity references”. In this, the material survivance of human remains as uneasy objects/subjects oscillating at the borderline between being and nothingness best speaks to the deconstructive “asystemacity of the cinder”: asystemacity which not only, in Cary Wolfe’s phrase, “forces us to rethink [those divisions] on the basis of a logic that is not essentially human,”¹⁰⁴ but also constitutes the unobtrusive agency of ash as a locus of a differently orchestrated politics of dead bodies.