

Blood in Modern and Contemporary Art

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Art practices that involve human blood have a long and controversial history. Blood has often been considered shocking, despite the ubiquity and frequently benign presence of blood in everyday life. Since at least the 1970s, artists have used blood to open up debates about gender identity, disease, racism and violence. These works draw upon blood's potency as both metaphor and physical matter. A resolutely liminal substance, blood can convey life and death, masculinity and femininity, nutrition and threat. Blood has also been used by artists to explore issues of inheritance, memory and history in relation to racial, class and national identities. Blood can be seen as separating and demarcating communities but also as erupting across and disrupting boundaries.

This session seeks to examine the distinct capacity of blood to explore the multiplicity and complexity of identities and histories being articulated in art and culture today. At a moment when art's histories are increasingly discussed in interdisciplinary and comparative terms, blood is well positioned as a meeting point between art history and many other fields, such as the medical humanities, cultural studies, anthropology, religious studies and performance studies. The four papers in this session reflect the interdisciplinary potential of examining blood, and will explore the role of blood, artists and art as, respectively, related to national and international traumas, menstruation, disease, and bio-technology.

Speakers and Abstracts

What Else Could We Talk About? The trauma of Mexico as international pandemic

Leah McBride (University of Glasgow)

Since the early 1990s, Mexican artist Teresa Margolles has made use of the corpse and its parts as artistic materials to shed light on the rampant violence and state-sponsored silence caused by the War on Drugs in Mexico and across the border in the United States. Margolles used her position as an autopsy technician in the city's morgues to legally obtain human remains through those loopholes in legal statutes designed to downplay a sharp rise in violence that had led to the near-constant overflowing of Mexico's morgues, highlighting her own complicity in the corrupted state institutions that actively contributed to the perpetuation of cartel violence. When Margolles represented Mexico at the 2009 Venice Biennale, her use of the blood of murder victims took on an international context. By employing a Mexican worker to mop the floors of the exhibition space with the blood, hanging blood-soaked cloths found wrapped around bodies in mass graves in the northern Mexican desert, and bringing yet more cloths into the public space to be embroidered by volunteers, Margolles made use of the real threat of contagion to point to the epidemic of violence in Mexico caused in part by international demand for recreational drugs, which pass through port cities like Venice. This paper will focus on Margolles Biennale exhibition and other works that make use of the blood of murder victims to locate a critique of the international view that narco violence is a Mexican problem rather than an international one.

Performing Periods: Challenging menstrual normativity through art practice

Bee Hughes (Liverpool John Moores University)

The paper discusses my interdisciplinary research, which combines art practice with socio-cultural analysis to develop artworks as spaces of resistance to the social stigma still often associated with menstruating. My artmaking practice is an exploration of the continued rippling effect of encountering menstruation as stuck between the medical sphere and the languages of advertising built upon maintaining the secrecy of the event of menstruation. I will outline my practice-led methods, centring upon the project *Cycles* (2016–17). This project utilised expanded printmaking to document how I deploy my body in performative gestures that illustrate a menstrual cycle that does not conform to normative notions of menstruation. I will also present an example of cut-up poetry and collaborative sound-works that appropriate and re-present online medical advice about menstruation. My practice will be further contextualised in comparison to selected examples

of recent historical and contemporary art that engage with the subject matter of menstruation. In the context of a broader movement of consciousness-raising and positivity around menstruation, menstrual art may be read as celebratory. However, foregrounding the celebration of menstruation can perpetuate essentialist readings and maintain rigid gender stereotypes, rather than break them. Instead, I argue that these artworks have greater power if understood as revelatory, drawing on a range of visual and performative strategies to eschew taboo and afford insights into the usually private phenomenon of menstruation.

'Drunk on Blood:' A visual and verbal artery through Robert Smithson's corpus

Suzaan Boettger (Bergen Community College)

'Blood, Blood, Precious Blood, Blood, Blood.' The opening chant of his first of 21 'incantations' written in 1961 calls up, like a sorcerer's invocation, not just Christ's Sacred Heart but an obsession coursing through Robert Smithson's visual and verbal corpus. His declaration at line 23 of 78, 'Here is the eye that cracks into rivers of blood' serves as an allusion to both ocular haemorrhage and his contemporaneous paintings *Eye of Blood* and expressionistically bloody crucifixion images. By inserting a plea from a 13th-century hymn of the sorrowful Virgin, 'Let me be wounded with his wounds, let me be inebriated by the cross and your Son's blood' in an essay, albeit in Latin, Smithson at once disclosed and disguised maternal blood drunkenness. With *The Eliminator* in 1965 he hoped to do exactly that to his persona as painter, yet the mirrored zigzags of red neon with which he debuted as sculptor evoke spurting veins. Five years later his by then underground flow erupted in the 'churning orbs of blood' he fantasised upon discovering in the roseate bay of the future Spiral Jetty. Carl Andre astutely characterised his bar-room and earthworks pal as 'Transylvanian', birthplace of Dracula; otherwise, the vampiric ideation in Smithson's visual and verbal productions has hardly been recognised. This paper denotes blood as a familial marker that stained Smithson. I will trace Smithson's blood count to a leukaemic family crisis and expose this fluid's vitality to a creative process he explicitly recognised, 'From a ruptured/Blood vessel/Comes a prayer.'

Bleeding Data: Blood, art, and bio-capital in the postgenomic age

Fiona Johnstone (University of Warwick)

As an artists' material, blood is often considered in terms of its brazenly literal corporality; consider the performances of Hermann Nitsch or Ron Athey. However, many contemporary artists, working in response to advances in bio-technology and DNA sequencing, are increasingly exploring the significance of blood as a source of bio-genomic information. The relatively recent ability to extract vast amounts of data from blood and other tissue has posed the problem of how to make sense of this deluge of information, and raises questions about the ethical complexities of data ownership and sharing. The tension between the visceral, blooded body and its impersonal expression as numbers and code is a recurrent theme in the artists' practices considered here, including Katy Connor's other-worldly installations, which derive their form from a digital scan of the artist's blood; Jeroen Van Loon's *Cellout.me* (2015), which charts the transformation of blood into DNA data to be auctioned to the highest bidder; and Tom Corby's *Blood and Bones* (2013–16), which visualised the results of the blood tests used to track the progress of the artist's Multiple Myeloma. This paper forms part of a larger interdisciplinary research project, *People Like You*, which is exploring how concepts of the person and personhood are constructed in relation to data collected on their behalf, with a focus on the emergent practice of 'personalised' medicine. Bringing together perspectives from art history, social sciences, and medical humanities, this paper makes a strong case for the value of art historical knowledge in interdisciplinary research.