ROSE MARIE SAN JUAN, *VIOLENCE AND THE GENESIS OF THE ANATOMICAL IMAGE*

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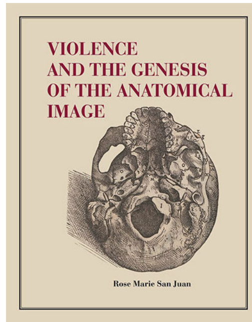

Reviewed by
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Thresholds trouble us. Consider the word itself. Most etymologists liken *thresh* to *thrash* and invoke the trampling of the threshing floor, while the word's latter half, its *(h)old*, refuses consensus. Neither half speaks to the word's contemporary meaning, namely, its status as a boundary. "We are missing", one etymologist notes, "the moment at which the threshing floor [...] began to denote the entrance to the room."[1] Linguistic trouble continues. For the entrance to this "room" is not only architectural but takes a second form – that of the human (or animal) body. Thus, on the one hand, we may stand at *a* threshold; while, on the other, we may find ourselves at *our* threshold. Here, *in extremis*, the boundary condition appears as a subjective one: we feel pain.

In *Violence and the Genesis of the Anatomical Image*, Rose Marie San Juan lingers at the threshold. It was here that anatomical practice and imagery articulated the body in a state of transition: between life and death, subject and object, site and sight of knowl-

1 Anatoly Liberman, Our Habitat. Threshold, in: *Oxford University Press Blog*, February 11, 2015 (March 12, 2024).

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edge. For Vesalius and for many of his contemporaries, as San Juan urges us to consider, the heart was best touched while beating. Certainly, to attend to the body in transition – to touch the still-beating heart – was understood as circumspect. (It still is.) Rather than turn away from this, San Juan asks that we see the anatomical impulse and the circumspection it effected as profoundly intertwined.

In the sixteenth century, to take but one emblematic example, Giorgio Vasari described the morbid fascination of Giovanni Lappoli, the Florentine painter who, according to the biographer, died as a result of his devotion to the bodies he not only anatomized but kept at home. From such proximities, Vasari sought to distance himself. Likewise, even as formally trained anatomists like Vesalius professed to violent desires, historiographic circumspection has tended to follow.[2] San Juan challenges the obfuscation of violence within the history of art and the history of science. "The transition from [anatomical] table to anatomical image", she writes, "always entailed the attempt to negotiate the site of violence" (p. 22). Violence at this threshold was an essential part of the picture. It remains one that we must continue to negotiate, verbally and visually. To this end, *Violence and the Genesis of the Anatomical Image* provides us with an incisive and illuminating guide.

Annibale Carracci's *Study for an Execution*, in which two men have been brought to the gallows, provides a daring place to begin. San Juan's initial object, that which frames her introduction and offers a theoretical grounding for the book as a whole, is *not* anatomical – at least not in the traditional sense. Rather, it pictures the frequent antecedent of anatomical practice: death by execution. Through careful analysis of the drawing, which was most likely completed by Carracci in Rome at the turn of the seventeenth century, San Juan articulates anatomy in an expanded field. The violence of anatomy does not begin with the corpse's dissection. (Nor does San Juan's text.) It starts, instead, with the still-breathing body.

With the inclusion of an anatomical table at right, the drawing gestures forwards. It alludes to further violence to come. The drawing also looks back – back to the time of the execution's unfolding. San Juan brilliantly foregrounds the drawing's filmic dimension, as if the two men on the gallows converge into one figure twice-captured, before and after execution. The artist watches on the viewer's side, while a crowd of passersby strain to see, heads branching out behind a wall. Spectatorship may be strained; but it belongs, the drawing suggests, *within* the image's pictorial borders. The soon-to-be-executed is *himself* made to spectate. He is forced to look upon a small devotional panel, or *tavoletta*, which Carracci renders with a few gestures and which San Juan connects to the remarkable panels

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There are major exceptions upon which San Juan builds. The work of Katharine Park, cited throughout San Juan's text, appears fundamental. See Park, The Criminal and the Saintly Body. Autopsy and Dissection in Renaissance Italy, in: *Renaissance Quarterly* 47/1, 1994, 1–33; and *Secrets of Women. Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection*, New York 2006.

still extant in Rome's Archconfraternity of San Giovanni Decollato. In its exchange of violence and vision, capital punishment and corporeal knowledge, the Carracci drawing thematizes a broader issue at stake for the author: namely, the extent to which the *medical* anatomical image existed in dialogue with images of bodily violence writ large.

San Juan proceeds, then, to widen the frame of anatomy itself, moving from the spectacle of public punishment to the violence enacted or imagined through images of martyrdom and cannibalism in Europe and its colonies. The frame expands over five chapters. The first two center on anatomical prints, beginning with Andreas Vesalius's *De humani corporis fabrica* (*On the Composition of the Human Body*, 1542) and followed by Juan de Valverde de Amusco's *Historia de la composición del cuerpo humano* (*History of the Composition of the Human Body*, 1556). The third turns, boldly, to the cannibal as the "anatomical body's troubling double", and one that, in its doubling, challenges fixity in any singular cultural or geographical context. Expanding upon her work on early modern mobility within *Vertiginous Mirrors. The Animation of the Visual Image and Early Modern Travel* (Manchester 2011), the chapter reflects on the formation of European anatomy in dialogue with new forms of knowledge and cultural exchange.

The fourth and fifth chapters shift from the two-dimensional print to the three-dimensional model. San Juan first analyzes Gaetano Zumbo's wax head and Anna Morandi Manzolini's wax self-portrait. Through them, she considers the extent to which matter could substitute – and violence, transform – corporeal forms and processes (p. 32). The fifth chapter turns to Bologna's Institute of Sciences and the first full-scale anatomy cabinet of wax models installed in the 1740s. Here, the threshold returns in its most incisive, and reflexive, form: as wax models appear to perform their own dissection besides a model of Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise. Through a reparative reading of the Fall, San Juan argues for Eve's anatomical primacy.

The interrogation of images as dimensional objects remains central throughout. Indeed, the dimensionality of the body of artwork *and* the body of anatomical knowledge assert their mutual presence as the book's constant. Violence, San Juan makes clear, emerges through and upon the body. It emerges in relation to the material formats through which the body may be imag(in)ed and via the effects of those images upon beholders. Such anatomical images remain emphatically affective. While San Juan does not engage directly with the literature on pain, her book may well be read in concert with landmark texts in the history of emotion and of pain specifically, such as Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* and Javier Moscoso's *Pain. A Cultural History*.[3]

[3] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford 1988; Javier Moscoso, *Pain. A Cultural History*, transl. by Sarah Thomas and Paul House, Basingstoke/New York 2012.

San Juan aims to widen the anatomical lens and give images their full due. It is worth bearing in mind that the history of anatomy has prioritized an "iconographic" approach to its objects – reflecting anatomists' identification and labeling of parts. Contrary to claims made against surgical practitioners, anatomy conceived itself as a highly literary discipline. As Andrea Carlino emphasizes in *Books of the Body*, anatomists' reverence for classical texts reinforced their disciplinary positioning within natural philosophy.[4] In *Forbidden Knowledge*, Hannah Marcus has further emphasized the iteration of anatomical knowledge through texts read, censored, and rewritten – often by other physicians.[5]

On one end, then, the anatomical table could be taken for "a table", that is reduced through words to tabulation. Barthélémy Cabrol's *Alphabet anatomic* (*Anatomical Alphabet*) of 1594 illuminates this disciplinary impulse. A surgeon based in Montpellier, Cabrol had written an immensely popular book (eleven editions published in the seventeenth century) within which a series of tables graphically condensed the parts of the anatomized body. A prefatory encomium made explicit the value of such a work for its readers: "Ce qu'observe Cabrol de ses doigts très-experts, / Au plus beau bâtiment de tout cet univers, / En ce qu'il a réduit l'anatomie en table."[6] The anatomized body appears "reduced" or "redirected". The praise speaks volumes. For the anatomist's authority emerges in accordance with the body's conformity: the extent to which the body may itself be anatomized through print and into table and text. The analyses of both Vesalius's and Valverde's anatomical images resist reduction by graph and letter. Pain is part of that resistance, since it is "in the representation of pain", as Moscoso argues, "that the emotional and epistemic meet".[7] San Juan permits images the capacity to "perform" – to reflect upon and to interrogate – anatomy itself.

Emphasizing transformation – animation, in the case of Vesalius's bones, skulls, and skeletons; mutation, in the case of Valverde's muscle, flesh, and blood – San Juan allows the anatomical print to breathe once more. The print's complexity as a material artifact comes to parallel the anatomist's perception of the body itself. The body's perceived finality (its death) turned increasingly tenuous in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It was the very

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Andrea Carlino, *Books of the Body. Anatomical Ritual and Renaissance Learning*, transl. by John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi, Chicago 1999.

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Hannah Marcus, *Forbidden Knowledge. Medicine, Science, and Censorship in Early Modern Italy*, Chicago 2020.

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"For Cabrol observes with his very expert fingers, / in the most beautiful structure of the entire universe, / the anatomy which he reduced into a table." Barthélemy Cabrol, *Alphabet anatomic*, Lyon 1594, xii.

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Moscoso, Pain, 19.

separation of the body that increasingly suggested the possibilities of its (re)assemblage.[8] Likewise, fragmentation is not an end, but manifests as a beginning. Reflecting upon Vesalius's *Skeletons*, San Juan emphasizes such images' capacity to project through emotion the possibility of an after-, or artificial, life. Made ever more malleable in print, bone could wallow in instability. Where the force of anatomical alteration appears foregrounded, as in the *Skeletal Figure Hanging from Rope*, the figure continues to create an "illusion of generating new life from death" (p. 57). Far from static, this skeleton screams.

San Juan's approach to Valverde provides an enlightening reevaluation of the Spaniard's anatomical project. The breadth of scholars has continued to foreclose Valverde's work as derivative. San Juan, however, reveals his careful engagement and conscientious remediation of the Vesalian oeuvre in material and somatic terms. Valverde himself insisted upon medium specificity, comparing the "affordances" of his copper engravings to Vesalius's woodcuts. Like the transformation of images across media, the body's structure becomes liable to change. For Valverde, San Juan insists, "bodily sensation, especially pain, is part of a body that bleeds, digests, expels, feels and perceives" (p. 66). Drawing upon a broad critical apparatus – Agamben, Kristeva, Deleuze and Guattari, among others – this chapter charts a path towards the pictorialization of sensation itself.

Transformation and transit remain dominant themes within the analysis of the "cannibal image". While the chapter turns to anatomy in the "New" World, the image remains a predominantly European one – centered upon Theodor de Bry's volumes on America and, in particular, on images of Brazil's Tupinamba. San Juan describes the cannibal image as one of concatenation as multiple bodies are brought together. The very figure of the cannibal becomes the anatomist's double: Vesalius's instructions for the preparation of a skeleton, by boiling, come to parallel de Bry's scene of Tupinamba women preparing soup. The images themselves provoke questions of commensuration between the cannibal/anatomist.

Turning to the wax models of Zumbo and Morandi, the question of commensuration becomes one of material similitude. How, and to what extent, could an anatomical image stand in for its model? Artistic and anatomical experiments begin to dramatically intersect with the preparation of living bodies and wax injection. Wax, what Georges Didi-Huberman has called "the material of all resemblances", emblematizes anatomy's threshold state.[9] In Zumbo's wax head, the separation between face and flesh, between

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Joan Landes, 'The Anatomy of Artificial Life.' An Eighteenth-Century Perspective, in: Jessica Riskin (ed.), *Genesis Redux. Essays in the History and Philosophy of Artificial Life*, Chicago 2007, 96–116.

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Georges Didi-Huberman, Wax Flesh, Vicious Circles, in: Museo La Specola Florence (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Anatomica. A Complete Collection of Anatomical Waxes*, Cologne/London/Madrid/New York/Paris/Tokyo 1999, 64–74, here 64.

anatomical knowledge and corporeal sensation, appears actively undone (p. 137). Likewise, Morandi's *Model of Touch* emphasizes a similarly "unbreakable enfolding" as wax hands touch wax flesh – and dissection dissects itself.

In the final chapter, the anatomical threshold receives extensive analysis through the figure of Eve. The female wax model, San Juan argues, turns away from potential perfection and towards everyday life and death. Here, concepts of Eve's postlapsarian status – philosophical, theoretical, medical – lead to a powerful distinction. If the "fragmented body divests itself of embodiment through violence to reveal the force and animation of the body's structure, the natural body reveals violence within internal mechanisms that constantly confront pain, deterioration, and death" (p. 162). Eve's formation from Adam's rib offered an essential challenge and provocation to early modern anatomists. For the anatomical image which suggested the possibilities of the body's de- and re-formation is gendered feminine. "The female wax model", San Juan concludes, does not merely resemble but is "a placeholder for the future changes of anatomical knowledge" (p. 184).

Violence and the Genesis of the Anatomical Image will be essential reading for historians of art and science, as well as historians of gender, religion, and the emotions. In its exhilarating breadth and its acute observations, San Juan's most recent book will, I suspect, set forth increasingly interdisciplinary approaches to early modern anatomy – approaches in which the threshold, wherein violence and its effects appear, will no longer be off-center.