



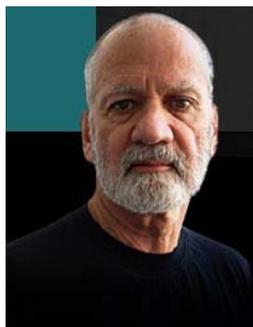
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Death and the Handmaiden: the Photography of John Coplans

Mar 23, 2011 by Peter Plagens



In some precincts of the culture world, it's conventional—sometimes even mandatory—for writers to try to make what they're writing about seem profound by linking it to death. This is particularly true with photography, since every photograph ever taken of a living, breathing human being is arguably a *momento mori*. In short, "photography = death" is a bit of a cliché. Nevertheless, I submit that John Coplans's photographs of his own naked, aging, vulnerable body evidence a particular—and deliberate—concordance with mortality.

But before I examine Coplans's work, let's take a look at photography in general, and the reasons why photography and death are so readily coupled. A photograph is an instant of time visually and (in the colloquial sense of the word) permanently fixed on a flat plane. Once that instant—anywhere from a 2500th of a second to several minutes in duration—is fixed thereupon, it resides in the past. The image has been severed from its context in time—both before and after the photograph was taken—and is, in effect, dead.

Remember what your high school science teacher told you about the stars in the nighttime sky: The light emanating from them has taken millions of years to arrive on your retina and that, for all you know, the star that you think you're looking at "now" could have ceased to exist say, five million years ago. A photograph represents that same phenomenon, albeit compacted into absurdly smaller amounts of time, twice: first, when the light reflected from the subject of the photograph lands on the film (I'll confine myself to film photography here) and the subject has already retreated into the past, and, second, as the photograph continues its existence unaltered (at least in pictorial configuration) while the subject—especially if it's a human being—changes much more radically over time.

This eerie (when you think about it) quality of photographs is why the French thinker Roland Barthes considered photography to have little to do with the quest for spatial realism begun in 15th century Italian painting, and much more to do with the natural sciences in the 19th century.

Then as now, the natural sciences were underpinned by the idea that mechanical instruments tell the truth more accurately than unaided human perception. Thus our assumption—deriving from photography's predominantly mechanical creation and its consequently perceived "objectivity"—that photography tells the truth. A portrait of Abraham Lincoln painted by Thomas Sully, for example, is not nearly the forensic *momento mori* of Honest Abe's having sat in a certain spot on a certain date and time under certain lighting conditions as is a Matthew Brady photograph of him.

The Brady photograph shows—or so we think—what Abraham Lincoln really looked like, while the painted

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portrait shows what Thomas Sully subjectively thought Lincoln looked like and was only imperfectly able to recreate, manually over considerable time, with the messy, inexact medium of oil paint applied, stroke by stroke, with a brush to a canvas. Is it any wonder then that in the modern world, pornography consists of 99.9 percent photographic images (film and video counting here as "photography") and almost zero percent drawings or paintings? Or that newspaper readers are much more interested in courtroom photographs than they are in that almost extinct species, the courtroom artist's sketches?

Part of the frisson of mortality in looking at an old portrait photograph, as opposed to a painted portrait, has to do with the viewer's rather rapid realization (or re-realization) that, though he or she is alive, he or she will one day be the long-dead person in a photograph being looked at by someone else. For those of you who'd prefer this truism uttered by a genuine intellectual, I give you Eduardo Cadava, from *Words of Light: Theses on the Photograph of History* (Princeton, 1997): "The image already announces our absence. The photograph tells us that we will die, [that] one day we will no longer be here, or rather, we will only be here the way we have always been here, as images."

To turn to John Coplans's photographs of his own body: these are—not to put too fine a point on it—photographs of a conspicuously old man. That Coplans's physical age is so evident is, of course, largely a cultural phenomenon. Most of the photographs we see in our daily lives are printed reproductions of photographs commercially produced for commercial purposes—to sell us something in one way or another. And so the people in these photographs are young, attractive, and often downright sexy.

In this context, images of John Coplans's body—aged, sagging, overweight, uncosmeticized, and unflatteringly lighted—are startling. The first reaction to them of most people I know is something along the lines of, "Coplans sure had a lot of guts to put his own aged, sagging, naked body out in public like that!"

Coplans—who was, whatever else you care to say about him, a brilliant man—certainly knew that such a reaction would be the first and most common one among viewers, even blasé, jaded, sophisticated, deconstructionist-minded viewers from the hardcore art world. The second reaction among most viewers (except, perhaps, movie stars, fashion models, professional athletes and bodybuilders) is the realization that their own bodies—if similarly photographed—would appear only slightly less...what shall we say? Ordinary? Homely? Grotesque? Coplans knew that, and that is part of the gift to us of his photography—a *memento mori* encased in strangely beautiful photographs, and therefore a generous, even kind, *memento mori*.

Coplans turned to photography comparatively late in life, especially for an artist taking up a new, technically demanding medium with a history somewhat separate and different from art history. Coplans told me that when he decided to give up being a curator, art critic, museum director, professor and magazine editor and return to being an artist (he had started out as an abstract painter in London in the 1950s), he realized that he didn't have the time to make the number of mistakes in painting that he'd have to make in order to produce an art-historically significant body of work.

(Coplans was all about art historical and cultural "significance," and hardly at all about "personal expression," which he considered rather self-indulgent.) Photography, he said, was the only medium in which he could make thousands of mistakes—i.e., bad photographs—in a short amount of time, in order to arrive at something significant.

Within a few years Coplans had progressed from his own version of "street photography" à la Robert Frank, William Klein, and Joel Sternfeld to double portraits of friends, to the autobiographical—or perhaps we should say "autophysiological"—work for which he's so justly renown. The speed with which Coplans went from street photography to the work culminating in *Body Parts* reveals that Coplans probably had "autophysiology" in mind, or in some subconscious part of his mind, from the beginning. He knew, I would guess, that photography being the last chapter in the book of his cultural life, his photographs would soon be seen posthumously. That is, he knew—to reinvoké the the astronomy metaphor—that the light we see from his star would be the light from an already extinguished body.

I knew Coplans personally, although not intimately, for a long time. I met him in 1966 when, back in Los Angeles for the summer from my first college teaching job at the University of Texas in Austin, I drove down to the gallery at the University of California, Irvine, to see if I could pick up some work—any kind of work, from typing labels to mudding sheetrock. I'd already started writing for *Artforum*, of which John was a founder and future editor, and so had in common with him an art-critical interest in the art scene in southern California.

Over the years, I kept in touch with him from his time as director of the gallery at UCI, through his curating at the Pasadena Art Museum, his going to New York to assume the editorship of *Artforum*, his sojourn to Akron, Ohio, to run the art museum there, and to his return to New York and starting all over again as a photographer.

He liked me; he thought I was a nice, bright interesting kid, if also a naïve, soft and domesticated one. Except for the time he came over for dinner shortly after my wife and I had moved to New York and rudely expelled Laurie from her own kitchen so he could proceed to finish cooking the chicken his way (with an orange; it turned out very good), I never personally suffered his infamous bluntness that bordered on cruelty. But on

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several occasions, I witnessed it in action.

I saw him, at a cocktail party, tell a pretentious visitor from another continent who said he'd come to America looking for "suitable projects": "I'm sorry, there's nothing for you here." On a sub-zero night at two a.m., after a long dinner party at Coplans's New York apartment during which everyone present had consumed at least a whole bottle of wine each, a New York painter questioned whether Coplans had ever really "contributed" anything at all to art on the West Coast. Coplans stood and, bellowing, ordered the man to leave immediately.

On the other hand, I saw him physically accosted by an angry Richard Serra at a Museum of Modern Art opening, and I listened to Coplans's account of his lying on his apartment floor for thirty-six hours with his back muscles clenched in paralysis by the stress of dealing with the politics of running Artforum. I've heard the details of his summary sacking by Artforum publisher Charles Cowles, and I know full well the grief he took in an ingrate southern California art world because he tried to teach it by example that a real art scene thrives on genuine criticism and disagreement, and only dies from a diet of mutual admiration and public relations fluff. In other words, Coplans got as good as he gave.

Perhaps I'm projecting retrospectively here, but it seems to me that through all of this—during which most of my contact with Coplans consisted of fairly serious discussions about reviews and essays being edited—he emanated a vibe that seemed to say that he knew—in spite of his genuine love of art and in spite of his responsibility to deal with real life as it was presented to him and not to take refuge in "spirituality" or feel-good talk about the art world as a "community"—that most of what we in the art world considered very important was ultimately smoke-and-mirrors, if not just plain bullshit. He hinted with his eyes and posture and great exhalations of cigarette smoke that he realized all is ultimately vanity, that death, paradoxically, is really the only thing worth knowing anything about.

(A parenthetical aside: It's funny, how when you hear such a sentiment spoken aloud by a sensitive The Sorrows of Young Werther type, you tend to dismiss it as so much youthful posturing, but when you see it emanating from a hard-boiled, workaholic, worldly man, it's much more convincing.)

Now, let us consider that part of Coplans Coplan's life—the greater part of it—that either lies outside my personal purview or envelopes it. Coplans was an extreme outsider, a quadruple outsider. His childhood, with its shuttling back and forth between England and South Africa, made him a kind of alien to his own family. His being a Jew made him an outsider to the societies of both South Africa and England. His being a South African made him an outsider in England. And his being a de facto Brit made him an outsider in America.

He chose to exacerbate all of that in his cultural life. In the San Francisco Bay Area art world in the early 1960s, Coplans chose not to be one of the many warm and fuzzy, "community of artists" bohemians. He let them know that he, an experienced man of the world, thought the local artists quite provincial, and stayed on the critical edge of the Bay Area's art world. In Los Angeles in the mid-1960s, Coplans picked out the few artists he thought were any good—artists who he thought could hold their own in the history of modern American art (which was being written mostly in New York)—and openly dismissed the rest.

Again, his forthrightness pushed him to the fringe of the Beverly Hills lawn party circles who, moneywise at least, ran the L.A. art world. In New York, in the early 1970s, he was a virtual foreigner who'd paid no gritty New York dues and who sat, nevertheless, at the helm of the the country's most influential contemporary art magazine, which could make or break an artist's career. And when he turned to photography circa 1980, he was saying, in effect, that all you needed to be a good photographer was a brain and some talent, that you didn't need a long, sentimental involvement with the likes of Ansel Adams or Edward Weston and the romance of fine custom printing. Needless to say, the mainstream photography world considered Coplans a particularly impolite outsider.

The outsider, almost by definition, is more conscious of mortality than the person who is surrounded and cushioned by a community engaged in a common enterprise, or better, holding the notion that the enterprise—contemporary art, in this case—can be better served by everybody working together. Coplans was on his own, by both dint of circumstances and choice. If it wasn't actual, real, physical death that lurked around every corner, it was a kind of a career, or critical death that he refused to pad himself against. And I think that stance, that attitude seeped steadily into Coplans's photography.

But Coplans's ethnic, national and cultural lives are nothing, in terms of a palpable connection with death, compared to Coplans's military life in World War Two. The Second World War was the war in Iraq times one hundred, the war in Vietnam six times over. The equivalent of September 11th, 2001, happened every day in London and Coventry for months on end; the continent that gave birth to modern art contained a hundred Ground Zeros.

I, myself, have been shot at in anger only once (in Tennessee, a reckless college kid trying to find a still from which to sample moonshine, and that was probably only a warning shot), and the closest I've ever come to mortal combat was being at home eight blocks from the September 11th terrorist attacks when they happened. Coplans, on the other hand, experienced over the course of several years in very nasty conditions in Africa and Asia, the constant threat of a violent and painful death. He lived a life of anesthesia through whiskey and amnesia through prostitutes, all amidst lots of blood, vomit, dysentery and—crucially—dead bodies.

It should be no surprise then, that Coplans developed a rather combative view of modern and contemporary art. Not just in the personal sense that he subscribed to, and practiced, the painter Barnett Newman's dictum that an artist should "get out there and elbow," but in a broader, cultural sense. Coplans believed that art is a kind of battleground. To him, the best artists were those who examined the best work of the established artists around them, sussed out the unresolved "issues" left on the table by such art, are proceeded, with their own work, to try to resolve those issues.

Of course, the work of those artists would, in turn, leave other unresolved issues on the table for still other artists to take up, and so on, ad infinitum. While Coplans may not have been a Marxist (in fact, he thought that the possibility of humanity's ever evolving into a peaceful share-and-share-alike species was quite remote), he was certainly a de facto dialectical materialist: an artist created a "thesis" with his work which was then addressed by the "antithesis" of a subsequent artist, which then, in combination, left behind a "synthesis" to be addressed by a still subsequent artist, and so on, ad infinitum.

For example, Coplans said in an interview, "When [Carl] Andre said his work deals with the real world through being on the floor, the next generation comes along and says, 'What do you need the floor for? We'll dig the floor up.' And you got the earthworks." The prize for artists in this struggle is getting to determine the short-run future of art history. That the artists who pick the most salient issues and provisionally "resolve" them in the best way, are the artists who get the most favorable critical attention from the best critics, the museum shows, the catalogues, places in well-known collections, and ink in the history books was, to Coplans, generally just.

But, I once asked him back in the '60s, what about the artist who simply stays in the studio, makes the best art he or she can, and derives satisfaction from simply that? "Kienholz [probably the most combative artist in L.A. at the time] goes out in his pickup truck at night to find them," Coplans said only partly rhetorically, "and run them down."

Coplans also said, "Let me give you an example [of what I think art criticism needs]. There was that Richard Serra show [of huge, curved steel walls] at Gagosian



downtown. I read all the reviews because I was interested in the show, and no one—no one—connected Serra's piece with the Bruce Nauman corridor piece of twenty years ago that was about precisely that kind of compression of space that you got with the Serra piece." In other words, Coplans thought that whatever the esthetic quality of Serra's sculpture, its real importance was its dealing with an "issue"—a sculpture's compression of space—left on the table by Nauman.

To Coplans—who was once referred to sarcastically by a Bay Area detractor, the art historian John Fitzgibbon, as "a man of many cities"—New York was the place an ambitious artist had to be because it was the big table on which most of those unresolved issues lay, and where ambitious artists would try to resolve them. He once said to me when I still lived in Los Angeles and came east only a few times a year, "You people out in L.A. think that the continent of art is America, with New York on the eastern edge and L.A. on the western. But it's not. The continent of art is the Atlantic Ocean, with New York on the western edge and the European cities on the eastern. You guys in L.A. are Australia."

Coplans believed, in a tweak of Barthes's idea, that photography derived not from painting—that is, it wasn't another link in the chain of the visual technology of getting realistic pictures on a flat plane—but rather from sculpture. "Sculpture is really about the play of light and dark, and so is photography," Coplans said in an interview. "Brancusi is one of the great photographers of the century; his photographs of his sculpture stand independently as rather amazing ideas." Unsurprisingly, Coplans thought himself not a photographer per se—because for him the designation carried with it too strong an association of searching for ready-made pictures—but "an artist who uses photography as an alternative medium." The difference, he explained, is that photographers "run around looking for an opportunity, hoping something will turn out. I have my subject in mind. I set it up and shoot."

What subject did Coplans have in mind? "My work," he once said to me, "is actually a kind of joke, or a hoax. I use my own body to travel in time, down the gene path." To see what he meant by that rather hyperbolic and cryptic statement, we must return to Barthes. In *Camera Lucida*, his tract on photography, Barthes writes that a photograph is "...the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts—the Real and the Live. By attesting that the object [depicted in the photograph, in this case Coplans's body] has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past ('this-has-been', the photograph suggests that it is already dead." Nothing is more "this-has-been" than the gene path, which in terms of being knowable, always leads backward, into the past, toward that which is already long-dead.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes sets out what he sees as three levels of photographic meaning. The first is the "informational" level, which is simply what the image appears to be, e.g., an old man's foot, or parts of an old man's arms and legs posed and cropped in



a mildly-difficult-to-decipher way. The second is the “symbolic” level, on which the meaning of the first level is connected to our common understanding—but, I caution, not universal understanding—of what these things mean. In Coplans’s case, these have to do with nudity, aging, beauty and ugliness, the etiquette of confession and, in a few photographs in which Coplans uses a young woman’s body in conjunction with his own, the objectification and/or exploitation of the human body.

The third level Barthes calls—at least in translation—the “obtuse” meaning, which is a bigger, wider, deeper continuation of “symbolic” meaning, and one that you can’t readily prove by pointing to the photograph. In other words, that the “symbolic” meaning of Coplans’s photographs has to do with aging and the issue of ugliness is pretty obvious. That their third, or “obtuse” meaning has to, as I contend, with death, isn’t that obvious. You could argue that I’m jumping to the facile conclusion that photographs of an old man’s body parts are necessarily about “death.” No, I’m asserting that Coplans’s photographs of his own old man’s body parts are about death, because they are a) autophysiological, b) unflinching and uncensored, c) printed large, so that all the slings and arrows that flesh is heir to are visibly obvious, and d) part of the oeuvre of an artist with the specific personal history of John Coplans.

Coplans was a voracious viewer who was acutely cognizant of other artists’ work. He was also aware of the history of photography, an art form in which artistic masterpieces are sometimes created by photographers who don’t announce themselves as artists. Although we never spoke about it directly, I think Coplans’s work is intensely influenced by journalists’ photographs of the dead bodies in the Holocaust’s concentration camps—pictures that are almost unbearably about death and annihilation. In them, human bodies appear obscenely dead partly because the stacking and piling of them has made them seem mere physical material, devoid of human identity. In Coplans’s work, the face—that universal expressor of human personality and, therefore, life—is never shown. (Morgue photographs often likewise exclude the face.) By excising and metaphorically decapitating his photographed body, Coplans objectifies it and pushes it closer to seeming like so much dead meat. Finally in this regard, it’s helpful to remember that Coplans was a Jew, and that he saw combat in the war against the Nazis that brought an end to the Holocaust.

As to the esthetic quality of Coplans’s photographs, I can’t think of anybody else’s quite like them—and, in modern and contemporary art, originality counts for a lot. They’re technically impressive—big, elegant, precise and well-crafted—and in contemporary art those things still, sometimes, count for something. Coplans’s photographs are also, prosaically put, well-designed: the positive and negative shapes knit together intriguingly, the flip-flop they manage between (mostly) figuration and (momentarily) abstraction is fascinating, and the tactility they generate is powerful.

In his latter days, Coplans turned somewhat into a formalist conservative fighting a rear-guard action against what he considered gratuitous shock value in contemporary photography. He said:

“Now, were I to sit down and write an article on what I think is the state of photography in America, I would talk about what I consider to be a kind of false avant-garde which has taken over photography. A number of figures who have artificially put themselves in a position where, whatever their merits as works of art, their photographs primarily shock the public. It begins with Mapplethorpe. It runs through the guy who does those things with women with three breasts who shows at Pace-MacGill—Joel Peter Witkin. And the guy who does the Christ in urine, where the photograph does nothing, it’s just the title. And with Cindy Sherman’s recent work. I say it’s false because it’s based on upsetting certain values.”

Why, Coplans is asked, does that amount to a “false avant-garde”? “Because,” Coplans answers, “it’s forced.”

John Coplans is dead. He died on August 21, 2003. His physical body is now ashes. Knowing this, we viewers who are still alive and breathing and looking at his photographs, think about the link between aging and ashes. Mortality is the real and deep subject of his work, and we see it in Coplans’s choosing to photograph his own body in old age, and in the way poses and lights and crops and prints his photographed body. In the end, perhaps the most important thing about the autophysiological photography of John Coplans is that—for all its staging and composing, for all its physical size and emphatic production values, and for all its fierce public combat with the mortality of human beings—it’s not forced. The photography of John Coplans derives from a deep and terrible place within the artist, a place which, if we can muster the bravery to recognize it, is also a deep and terrible place within every one of us.

