

ARNULF RAINER: IMAGES OF CONFRONTATION

by John T. Paoletti

(From the catalog)

“As a human being [death] is the great confrontation. As someone who believes in nothing and everything it is here that seek to understand religion.”

Arnulf Rainer's investigation of death is the most unblinking and the most extensive in contemporary art since Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross* paintings of 1958–66. In his corpses, mummies, death masks, and Christ figures of the last decade, Rainer seems to have looked at all phases of death: its immediacy and its physical prolongation over time in the corpses and mummies; its precise delineation and seeming rejection in the case of the death masks (themselves curiously and deceptively so similar to life masks); and its fictive re-depiction in centuries of Christ images. In his nonfigurative paintings, prints, and drawings of crosses, Rainer has also made images of a universal sign of death, a reverberating echo of inevitability and finality. Within these various subgroups into which he has divided his work, Rainer moves from images of actuality to invented simulacra, as if the issue of death must continually be faced and reconsidered, even when the obviousness of its re-depictions blunts the very reality that Rainer wishes us to confront.

It is precisely the difficulty of comprehending death that Rainer underscores in his work. His overdrawn photographs are either poor illustrations from art books, as in the Christ figures, or photographs of other printed images, enlarged so that the dot screen creates an overall pattern on the surface of the print. Details of the figures are thus slightly blurred; although remaining readable, they also question their own legibility. On top of this veil of dots, or over the tonal haze created through the mass-reproduction process, Rainer adds his own screen of agitated markings, further obscuring the images—in fact, totally blotting them out on some occasions. Just as we have an emotionally or psychologically difficult time coping with death in its immediate form, here we have a visually difficult time merely reading its representation.

Rainer's obsessive markings—vibrant, reactive, and sometimes even destructive to the image—float on top of the figure because of their color, sheen, or matte quality, all of which differ from the particular smooth surface of the original photographic prints that the artist has overworked. Even when Rainer's drawing conforms to the physical definitions of the body depicted, as it does in a number of the corpses where his lines function almost as embalmer's sutures, it still detaches itself from the image by being on a surface behind which the figure is encased, relic-like, for contemplation (fig. 7). The differing levels of existence between the form represented and Rainer's intervention are notable in the crosses as well, although no figure appears; there, the overpainting or overdrawing either floats freely within the pictorial shape or it is decisively cropped by the boundary of the cross, as if the energy of the abstract drawing really extends laterally, beyond our ability to see. Just as Rainer's various choices of imagery, from the corpses at one end of a line of reality to the crosses at the other end, move us farther and farther from the actuality of death, so the overdrawings distance the image to the point that we consider not the depiction of death but Rainer's own reaction to the event. This raw intrusion of personal animus attempts to counter death's immutability, yet it remains very much on the surface of the photographic reproduction, unable even to approach the counterfeit that seems to lie in a space beyond. It may well be Rainer's attempt to break through this barrier that has caused him to gouge through the photographic print in so many instances.

Rainer's investigations of the subject of death reach back to the very beginning of his career. In 1949, he drew himself as a decaying figure being looked at by a young man, a drawing redolent of Dorian Gray. In 1955, he posed as a dead man for a photograph, which he subsequently overworked. Such personal references developed into the now famous *Face Farces*, overdrawn photographs of himself, depictions suggesting either hysteria or terminal spasms before death. These demonic self-portraits, deliberately posed to give a manic energy to the body, can perhaps best be compared to the overworked mummy images, in which the bodies, through the normal processes of desiccation and shrinkage, seem to be caught in distorted poses similar to the *Face Farces*. Although Rainer's own image has disappeared from his recent work, his presence is nonetheless still clearly felt through the ferocity of his lines and the corrosive stains of his pigments.

Unlike the *Face Farces*, Rainer's current figures of death masks and corpses are frozen in a rigor mortis of silence. In the case of the mummy, the figure has already defied the normal processes of time. The curious distortions of the face, caused by collapsing eye sockets and tightened musculature and flesh around the mouth, add an expressive, if occasionally ghoulish, quality of movement after death, a physical transformation often underscored by Rainer's drawing. Rainer's overdrawing is itself the very antithesis of lifelessness. Sometimes, its wildness seems simply to be a demented refusal to deal with the finality of death, a scream of repression and denial that leads to obliterating the image. At other times, Rainer's frenetic overdrawing follows the physical structures of the figures, particularly the eyes and the mouths, their most obviously stilled features, an attack on the senses of sight and sound; it is as if he were demanding that the figure look at and speak to us again, and willing sensation to shudder through the form again. Even in the images of corpses, the newly dead, Rainer's marks distend the sensual cavities of the eyes and the mouth. Here, however, Rainer often shows a reticence to disturb the still-warm body with the slashing strokes he uses in his other forms. Instead, his activity occurs around the face, almost as if the hair and the beards were still growing, aureoles of black that lift the lifeless heads off their pillows and bring them more forcefully into the viewer's space. His overdrawing thus serves to deny that the individual histories of his figures have been cut off. Rainer's friend Günter Brus, an artist with whom he has occasionally collaborated, has said that a "successful drawing (sunk deep but profound) is like a shock right to the joy center. It shocks the sufferer back into life. IT ETCHES DEATH AWAY." For artists such as Rainer and Brus, growing up in a Catholic country like Austria, in a religious tradition that maintains that death is merely a transition to another (and more perfect) life, the undeniable physical fact of death is in clear opposition to spiritual teaching. It is here, for Rainer, that religious belief meets its severest test.

Interestingly, both death masks and crucifixes are objects that extend human histories beyond the moment of death. In the first case, the simulacrum is artificially reconstructed on the body of the dead person, with the specific intention of retaining the memory of the idiosyncratic features of the deceased. Yet, Rainer obscures these personal peculiarities of the face by his overdrawing, as if the specific individual was of no concern to him (although he has used images of famous people and carefully identified them on the reverse of the sheets). Rather, he wishes to confront the inevitable fact of death itself, regardless of whose face it takes. All Rainer's images bear the stamp of the universal, even if they are particular historical figures. He has said, though, that he sees a difference between the physiognomies of the soldiers and politicians and the saints and artists he has depicted; in the images of men who wield power, Rainer claims that we stand before what he calls "another death." That "other death" of tyranny and unchecked political power Rainer briefly investigated in 1982 with a small number of works derived from Hiroshima photographs. He abandoned this series, most likely, because the cause of death was so specific and because the political implications would have overridden the universal event of death itself. The cross as a commonly understood symbol of death is a pervasive form in Rainer's work, appearing as early as 1956–58 in an etching, *Covered Cross*, and a lithograph, *Overpainted Cross* (1957). As a symbol open to a wide variety of interpretations, the cross provides the source for some of Rainer's most powerful imagery. It was out of his work with the crosses that Rainer first began to depict images of Christ. Almost as though he were afraid to move from the

universally abstract form of the cross and the nonfigurative overdrawings he superimposed upon it, Rainer appropriated Crucifixion imagery from other artists, and in so doing appropriated as well a long history of human attempts to understand that event.

Among the first of these were the overworked prints of 1981, showing details of Grunwald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, a particularly gruesome depiction of the familiar narrative scene. Rainer apparently no longer feels the need to select such images of gross mutilation as the Christ of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*; in his recent overpainted photographs (taken from illustrated art history books), he shows a wide variety of rather majestic late-medieval and Renaissance images of the dead Christ. On the other hand, Rainer's overpainting of these photographs has become considerably more animated than in his earlier explorations of this subject. Clearly, if the medieval artists did not explore the existential questions raised by the cross in their figurations, Rainer has felt compelled to add that dimension to the discussion of the event in his own drawn interventions. These images should be thought of in terms of the entire tradition of Christian religious art, to which they make such explicit and insistent reference. Short of the absoluteness of Barnett Newman's abstraction, their contested figuration may now be the only way to depict the historical event at the heart of Catholic theology; they depict the specificity of the event, however stylized by the earlier artist's own personal vision, challenged by Rainer's explosive emotional reaction in the overdrawn lines, almost as if the event depicted were so gross a perversion of normative human action that one had to attack its imaging. Such direct attacks are notable, in fact, in some Italian altar pieces of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, in which images of the devil or of soldiers in a Crucifixion scene have been scratched out with a sharp instrument in what must have been some manic, albeit misguided, paroxysm of piety by a local worshiper, as if erasing the image of evil could undo its original occurrence. Rainer's overdrawings possess the same obsessive quality, even if they are more specific in the areas that they mark. The power of the image to represent the event, to make it actual, rather than historical, is one that makers of artifacts have sought from earliest times. It is just such power that Rainer recalls in the crucifix images. Yet, in their gross inversion of the Pygmalion myth, wherein the artist willed his beautiful creation to life, Rainer seems to be willing a reversal of the history of the Crucifixion, a canceling of its horror, by his feverish overdrawing, even if in so doing he denies the very possibility of salvation that event is meant to guarantee.

The event for Rainer is life and not death, regardless of how gruesome his individual images may be. In speaking of his death masks, he remarked that, rather than being large-scale painted images, they are more modest in size, because a "major work is impossible unless one considers the possibility that death could be [the] main event." But, as Rainer says in another place about the crosses, "Originally there was an encounter, the encounter between someone and an event." It is the encounter, not the event itself, that is important for Rainer. These images, whether of corpses of the recently dead or of depictions of Christ by other artists, record that encounter and give it meaning.

Rainer's challenge to death and finality in his images was curiously characterized by a story he included in his statement for the catalog of the 1972 Documenta exhibition:

"I was the toad in the old story that fell into the milk and thought it was drowning. In its fear it created a storm in the milk glass and with its thrashing feet a couple of lumps of butter."

About Recherché

Founded in 1983, Recherché is one of the longest standing independent artists' cooperatives in the city of Philadelphia.

From the catalog:

Recherché is an organization of African American artists born of a reaction to attitudes of exclusion. It is a group encompassing several styles and approaches to the creative process, and its purpose is clear: to make our work visible as a collective and to make viable the reality of its quality and relevance. Recherché exists to affirm the universal struggle of *all* artists in expressing individual sensitivity to order and form.

The challenge for the African American artist is the same as it has been historically for all artists: a search for a means of expression relative to the time and place and culture in which he or she lives. It is a testament to the human creative impulse that the black artist has continued to create in the face of discouraging odds.