



Paper Proposal

Session Name: Material/Immaterial: The lives (and afterlives) of objects

Title of Paper: Thomas Eakins and 20th Century American War: Wounded Soldiers and Bodily Restoration in 1915, 1940, 1961

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Abstract text:

This paper juxtaposes two late nineteenth-century works—Thomas Eakins' *The Gross Clinic* (1875) and U.S. Army Surgeon General Reed Brockway Bontecou's photographs of wounded Civil War soldiers—revealing a pathos of collective suffering and fractured bodies that animates their triangulated ghostly afterlife. Eakins' large master canvas went through a meticulous restoration three times: 1915, 1940, 1961, dates almost mesmerizing in their historical salience and synchronously aligned with the three major ruptures of 20th century American warfare abroad. How does a ghostly discourse of anatomical reparations and surgical rehabilitation appear to permanently and latently scour the canvas?

In 1876, these two unusual works of art were exhibited side-by-side at the American Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. In a space designed to resemble Civil War hospital barracks, *The Gross Clinic* and Bontecou's medical pictures together hung, lining the main hall of the Army Medical Museum. *The Gross Clinic* depicts the now infamous Philadelphian Doctor Samuel Gross performing a grisly surgery as a theatrical cohort of medical students look on. Bontecou's cartes-de-visite show his patients, wounded soldiers, in varying states of convalescence and duress. Emerging only years after the Civil War, these objects are replete with staid grief and live on as relics suffocating in their own quietude.

The paper then moves forward to the dawns of both world wars and the destruction in Vietnam, three identical moments when *The Gross Clinic* was restored. What does this pattern of ominous psychic energy teach us about Eakins' painting? How is a premonitory affect of trauma inscribed in the episteme of the canvas—a cosmos perhaps best read as a mummified body, a ventriloquizing token of American warfare? Where do the absent bodies of artist and sitters, viewers and restorers converge?

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