

# Memento Mori: The Last Trace of Life in Toni R. Toivonen's *Portrait of a Hare (No. 14)*

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Decay and rot are established motifs in art history. They address transience and disgust, as well as contemplation, devotion, and humility through the tradition of *memento mori*. In contrast to pure motific depictions of decay, Finnish artist Toni R. Toivonen (\*1987) arranges deceased animals and creates works in which organic components such as fur, muscle, flesh, and blood decompose until dissolution. As Antti Nylén stated in 2017, “[...] Toni R. Toivonen makes art out of dead animals.”<sup>1</sup>

*Exitus letalis* is a state where all life-sustaining features are extinguished and life is understood as finished. Organic decomposition, ‘the last trace of life,’ refers to death as the ultimate manifestation of immateriality and impalpability. This is apparent in Toivo-

nen's object *Portrait of a Hare (No. 14)*. The arcane moment between life and death becomes clear in the physical transformation of an animal's cadaver. Decay through time is not the only change affecting the body; it is additionally broken down by bugs and bacteria. The last traces result in a hazy portrait of the protagonist: the field hare. Toivonen's contribution reflects the motif of a hare through art history and iconography, considering the representation of dead animals in art.

Contrasting his method, Toni R. Toivonen was educated with a focus on painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki. In 2019, he completed the object *Portrait of a Hare (No. 14)* as a part of a series.<sup>2</sup> Since 2014, he has worked with fragile brass plates in combination with organic materials. Because Toivonen primarily uses deceased animals, brass, and copper plates, the organic pro-

cesses serve as protagonists and negotiate the quality of life and death.<sup>3</sup> Essential for Toivonen's artistic process, as well as an underlying statement, is the fact that no animals were harmed in the creation of his artworks. Initially, he would only pick up animals from the streets that were run over by cars or those his dog found in the forest. Toivonen would likewise use dead pets brought to him by their owners. In this regard, neither *Portrait of a Hare (No. 14)* nor any other of his works carries the underlying violent act of killing for the purpose of art creation. This approach expresses respect for living creatures and reflects Toivonen's term ‘realism of the material.’<sup>4</sup>

As the central object of this analysis, *Portrait of a Hare (No. 14)* brings to light facets of material transformation, as well as the interlinkage of art historical references, different epochs, and motific traditions. Procedural



materials and quotations with centuries-old connotations are valid as conceptual components in Toivonen's artistic work. With the use of the hare motif on a glossy golden base, iconographic parallels to Christian and pagan pictorial elements are obvious. Concerning reception, motific traditions of *memento mori* and *vanitas* in the history of still-life painting are as essential as the iconography of gold-ground<sup>5</sup> panel painting, a tradition present in European art from the Middle Ages until today. By contrast, the integration of organic transforming and dissolving materials implies a radical turning point from role models of *vanitas*, where motifs remain as mere painterly depictions.

Toivonen quotes motific traditions on the one hand and counteracts them with his selection of artistic materials on the other. In this context, the motif of a hare and the reality of a cadaver are physically linked with the brass surface, which in turn serves as a "picture carrier" and an iconographic element. The interlocking of art historical perspectives and ephemeral materials, as well as the process of decay, are of central interest in Toivonen's work, a further development of Art of Decay,<sup>6</sup> an art technique with its start

in the 1950s. Allusions to Joseph Beuys' performances, Dieter Roth's multiples, Sonja Alhäuser's reference to rabbits in motif and material, but also James Elaine's *Animal Books* (beginning in the 1980s) serve as fruitful comparisons to Toivonen's concept of transformation.

Artworks like *Portrait of a Hare (No. 14)* show the dualities of life and death, abstraction and figuration, materiality and immateriality. Taking this ambiguity as a basis, this essay further questions the extent to which Toivonen's material radicalism actually breaks with art historical norms. The derived thesis claims Toivonen's approach is a further development of *memento mori* as well as offers criticism of the *vanitas* still life in connection with the material turn in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Last Trace of a Hare's Life and "Realism of the Material"**

The title *Portrait of a Hare (No. 14)* already refers to what the object shows—a portrait of a field hare. The rabbit seems to be in motion, dancing and waving its fur (Fig. 1). With shimmering golden nuances, it dynamically swings and turns around its own axis.



Figure 1. Toni R. Toivonen, *Portrait of a Hare (No. 14)*, 2019. Brass, original substances of a dead animal (no animals were harmed or killed for the production of the works), 38,5 x 32 cm. Private Collection, Hamburg.



This ephemeral presentation embodies both the organic material and motific impression of a real animal. A shadow or flit of a hare's physique, upright and in half profile, appears on the gold-ground. The structure of its fur, its small, light golden snout, and the dark right eye are clear to see. Its right ear is obvious as it points diagonally downwards. Its left paw seems to float to the left side of the body. The shimmering fur structure resembles the animal's soft coat and appears fluffy, due to shades ranging from bright gold, metallic and reflective, turquoise, and brown to almost black. It seems like the body and fur are equally in motion, surrounding the field hare as the colors flow into each other. Even if the outline of the animal clearly stands out from its surroundings, the motif persists in its abstract shape. The background is drawn by a network of organic surfaces. Fine lines run through brass, characterized by spotted, dotted areas. These formal aesthetic patterns animate the slide—a highly sensitive brass plate—in which the central figure is embedded.

One thing I am concerned with is the realism of the material. For example, the brass work you see here in the studio is not an image of [an animal], it is the [animal]. [It] leaves its own

liquids, salts, grease, and blood which leave stains and conserve the [animal's] presence. For me that is important. [...] Another aspect is the duality of life that I believe in. You need to have shadows in order to understand the light. You need this balance. You need to see death to understand life in a way. I think the realism of the material and these questions of existence are connected.<sup>7</sup>

The duality of artistic themes is the starting point of this analysis. It aims at an art historical and theoretical examination derived from the motif and material iconography of *Portrait of a Hare (No. 14)*. Despite its apparent two-dimensionality, the portrait is neither a painting nor a drawing or print and so not a mere depiction of a hare. Rather, it is a delicate relief whose structure is based on actual organic decomposition. The underlying concept of materiality is divided into two categories with different characteristics: the hare and the brass plate. Decaying elements (fur, meat, bones, and organic fluids) and their organic properties are defined through their ephemeral materiality. The small body transforms, liquefies, and loses its defined shape, while the metal is etched with putrefactive fluids. The second component, the brass plate, is associated with firmness and coolness, into which the cadaver etches itself. Thus, a

physical amalgam of the hare and the metal plate is formed. Through decomposition liquids, the animal's death physically and symbolically inscribes itself into the shiny golden brass plate. As such, the metal describes the second form of materiality, documenting the nature of death as something that cannot be shown—the last trace of an animal's life.

The modular and formal arrangements are determined up to a point where the passage of time and coincidence overtake artwork creation. Toivonen places the deceased body on the metal plate. The rotting secretions, as well as scavengers, then inscribe themselves into it. These finally appear as an animal imprint, surrounded by fine lines and structures in the background. This transformation takes place in nature, since Toivonen arranges the field hare in a box with the brass plate, under a cover, set up in his garden.<sup>8</sup>

During decomposition, usually within a few days, bodies secrete liquids, come into contact with the metal and further etch themselves into it. Depending on the season, temperature, and scavengers, however, works shape themselves in time. Toivonen observes the progress and allows the creatures to rot longer or shorter, depend-



ing on the desired color intensity on the plate.<sup>9</sup>

I compose the work. It leaves a stain immediately. Over time, I have acquired a good understanding of how the decaying process of a specific animal will affect the outcome, of how salt, grease, and other fluids will make a chemical reaction with the brass plate. There are other factors too, including temperature and humidity. I constantly have to monitor it. I check on the animals several times during their decomposition and decide when I will end it.<sup>10</sup>

After placing the dead animal in a box, Toivonen retreats and allows the natural processes to unfold. Time and coincidence sustain a decisive relevance, as they determine the object's transformation, as well as its appearance. The invitation of external influences such as insects or scavengers is in expectation of coincidences, which serve as collaborators in artwork creation. Swiss artist Dieter Roth (1930–1998) already considered chocolate beetles as “collaborators,” and such unpredictable forces are of comparable relevance in Toivonen's objects. During conservation, insects, usually understood as parasites, are self-evident actors in both Roth's and Toivonen's art of decay.

Although external influences, temporality and coincidence are important in relation to

decay and, thus, the pictorial process; the latter initiates and directs the process until the end of object creation. Organic inscription of the dead animal into the golden carrier results in a positive on a brass plate, which further develops into a negative imprint and relief. Consequently, the persisting organic traces depict not only the hare in motif but also the process of creation in its several states.<sup>11</sup>

Following Hanna Baro's considerations on the aging of art and references to Aristotle's concept of *hylê*, thus the matter itself, Toivonen's work can be understood through a liminal perspective.<sup>12</sup> The threshold describes less the aging of a finalized artwork than that of its components—the hare and the brass plate. From the hare's death to its fixing on a metal plate, aging is understood as transitory and temporal, as time-based decomposition results in changes in physical states. The hare decays and slices into the golden brass plate. The process is stopped after the sensitive plate is cleaned and fixed with coating, thus preventing any further decomposition. Conservation achieved with the final layer of varnish leads to the continuation of the hare's existence. At the same time, it cap-

tures the liminal moment of death, of bodily dissolution and the ephemerality of passing away.<sup>13</sup>

The interaction of materials (brass, rabbit), temporality (rot, decay), coincidence, and chemical processes brings the specific aesthetic and beauty of *Portrait of a Hare (No. 14)*. The interplay of rot and glaze results in shimmer, its underlying morbidity becoming clear only after taking the processes involved in the work's creation into account. The development from material to immaterial—stopped and fixed in a certain state—implies the symbolical duality of life and death.

### **Vanitas in Motif and Material?**

In the history of art, a hare functions as a Christian symbol, depicted in representations of vices as a symbol of light, in Marian symbolism, as well as an attribute and allegory in a far-reaching motific tradition.<sup>14</sup> In the Old Testament (Leviticus 3 and 5), the hare is, due to the high fertility of the small game and the lust associated with it, considered unclean. By contrast, attributes such as vigilance and attention, as well as symbolization of the fearful human soul, are positively connoted.<sup>15</sup> The motif's popularity is seen in



famous examples such as Albrecht Dürer's *Field Hare* (1502) and many others.<sup>16</sup> In reference to Giovanni Bellini's (ca. 1430–1516) painting *Resurrection of Christ* (1475/79), the brown and white rabbit is a symbol of resurrection and transformation (Fig. 2).<sup>17</sup> On its left, the painting shows a dark hare inclined to the ground, while a light-colored one runs up a hill. The counterbalance of the pair with the burial and resurrection of Christ symbolizes transcendence. *Portrait of a Hare* (No. 14) presents a play of colors, oscillating between a variety of light and dark tones. As an implication of both the light and the dark hare, an attribution to the Christian reading and the resurrection symbolism is conceivable. The usage of such an established motif and the interplay with traditional values of gold-ground suggest the artist's reflection on such iconographically charged arrangements. Yet, concrete statements on explicit quotations and references to artistic models of early Christian, medieval, or later depictions in Toivonen's repertoire of motifs remain open.<sup>18</sup> What role do they play in terms of motifs and materials? How can death function as a carrier of meaning up to the pres-



Figure 2. Giovanni Bellini, *Resurrection of Christ*, 1475–79. Oil on panel, transferred to canvas, 148 x 128 cm. Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.



ent? Perhaps a brief comparative analysis will shed light on the subject.

Internationally, Dutch, French, Spanish, and Italian painters<sup>19</sup> charged the *vanitas* still life with a variety of meaningful attributes, further enriching its contemplative and ambiguous qualities, such as the state between the bounds of life and the infinity of death. Besides dead animals as symbols of hunting, various types of clocks, terrestrial and celestial globes, book illustrations, scores or instruments, crowns and scepters, smoking utensils, fruits, flowers, and other motifs epitomized the *vanitas* and *memento mori*. They symbolized the finiteness and the transitory qualities of profane matters such as wealth and power, travel and geography, the natural sciences, and theology.<sup>20</sup> Although these motifs were carried through centuries, a shift in artistic intentions and iconographic attributions is seen in their contemporary examples. As a symbol of human mortality, the transience of earthly existence, and the nothingness of all profane being, a skull has been prominently depicted in the European tradition of *vanitas* since the 15th century. To take a contemporary example, Berlin-based artist Marc Brandenburg (\*1965) focuses on

this tradition, connecting to its socio-political reading. His untitled drawing (2006) shows the figure of death “as a camp table dancer in a Kreuzberg backyard,”<sup>21</sup> in an ambiguous pose, leaning out of an open window (Fig. 3). Brandenburg presents a figure in reference to examples found in art history, counteracted by the androgynous appearance in “bikini, pumps and gold chain.”<sup>22</sup> As an offset to traditional figures of death, Brandenburg’s icon defies heteronormative civil ideals, concurrently addressing questions of identity and social diversity. It is a reference to Berlin in the 1990s—the exuberance and excess of a city on the move in the face of an emerging HIV epidemic and the resulting death.<sup>23</sup>

The Dutch still life *Dead Hare and Birds*, which Jan Weenix (1642–1719) created in 1681, clearly emphasizes the motif of a hare as small game (Fig. 4). On the one hand, it is connoted as a trophy, prey, and territorial marker.<sup>24</sup> On the other, in the juxtaposition of aesthetic representation, the rabbit marks a tribute to life in the visualization of death. It symbolizes the finiteness of all existence and the passing of time. Using painterly means, the field hare is shown in the center, next to dead birds, its fur changing from light, almost



Figure 3. Marc Brandenburg, untitled, 2006. Pencil on paper, 74,2 x 39 cm. © Marc Brandenburg.





Figure 4. Jan Weenix, *Stilleben mit totem Hasen*, 1681. Oil on canvas, 123 x 110,5 cm. Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main. Source: Jochen Sander ed., *Die Magie der Dinge. Stillebenmalerei 1500-1800* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 233.

white tones to golden brown. The animal is attached by the right hind leg to a pole. The head and torso lie on the ground, framed by the shaft of the richly decorated shotgun and hunting horn, which in turn refer to hunting and the prosperity of social hunting circles. The left hind leg falls lifelessly to the side and opens the view to the soft fur and the vulnerable, lifeless body. In addition, one sees a latently threatening landscape with a dark red sky, which again underlines the passage of time. The idealized representation of hunting is obviously envisaged, based on the ideas of *vanitas*, serving as a symbol of prestige to its prospective audience.<sup>25</sup> Numerous copies of the motif further show its high demand on the art market.<sup>26</sup> Captured game was one of the popular subjects of *vanitas* still lifes. Although the appearance of such paintings moved away from the merely allegorical and emblematic, and the painterly quality became more important than its formal structure, the communicated message remained the same. Requests for images of contemplation, humility, and the visualization of death remained.<sup>27</sup>

Symbolizing a *moment of devotion*, a dead hare is also the protagonist in Toivonen's

portrayal. The carcass in his object entirely differs from Weenix's depiction. While in traditional *vanitas* elements such as hares, skulls, and others are depicted with pictorial means, Toivonen focuses on the actual moment of death and the liminality of metaphysical and physical transitions. While still-life painters used dead animals as models for their paintings, Toivonen confronts his audience with carcasses, radically and literally.

Equally to Toivonen's "truth to material,"<sup>28</sup> the US artist James Elaine's (\*1950) animal works are subject to a comparable understanding of materials in art and the duality of life and death. Elaine picks up dead animals run over by drivers from roadsides, with an aim to commemorate them in his "Animal Books." There, Elaine first displayed mice, birds, and reptiles, which he picked up in Denton, Texas. *The Andes of Equador*, for instance, shows a dead mouse placed on the color board of an art book. Elaine positioned the mouse upside down in the Andes landscape. Disregarding image quality, Elaine had purchased the art catalogue and used it as a basis for his work. The bodily fluids leaking and rotting while pressed formed an aureole around the small mouse. In tones of



brown, yellow, and green, the aureole surrounds the shaggy animal and ornamentally blends with the landscape. Elaine's "Animal Books" are comparative to Toivonen's work through the tribute paid to the run-over and carelessly forgotten animals. Toivonen allows the secretions to inscribe themselves in metal plains; Elaine composes, arranges, and presses the animal carcasses in books. As Meta Marina Beek suggests, "for [Elaine] pressing of an animal as a special moment or poetic gesture has the same significance as the pressing of plant. As a place of preservation, he chose art books, for example a book with reproductions by Botticelli."<sup>29</sup> Preservation and documentation play a particular role here. In his choice of material, the artist decides to give a presence to living beings that have been killed and forgotten as a gesture of appreciation and inclusion. "[Elaine's] approach was rather to create art that is beautiful and does not try to exclude anyone."<sup>30</sup> A morbid aesthetic goes hand in hand with the found, dead living being: "They all have previous lives, which give them more depth. To me the most beautiful body in the world is the one that has scars."<sup>31</sup> The link between Elaine and Toivonen is apparent through this

quote. It is not only the dead animals but the underlying intent of remembrance that connects both artistic positions.

Toivonen reveals physical traces of time and the hare's past life. This is different from hunts shown in still-life painting, as the artist does not cause the animals' death to incorporate them into his works. In taking the lifeless bodies into account, Toivonen pays tribute to the already deceased animals, their life and death an emblem of the existential cycle of birth, growth, and passing away. For his work to be correctly interpreted, the usage of symbols related to hunting and prestige is unnecessary. Instead, *Portrait of a Hare (No. 14)* deals with the duality of life, ambivalence between abstraction and figuration, materiality and immateriality, expressed through the dead animal and the brass plate. The deceased animal as a primary material implies a radical difference from *vanitas* motifs, and, instead of serving as a representation, it physically transforms through decomposition. Nevertheless, Toivonen uses the tradition of *vanitas* in its motific shape and comparable semantic attribution, while the allusion to the interface of life and death points to specific references in art his-

tory. The radicalism of his materials is related to 20th century practice and contradicts a pre-modern art canon. The material decays, smells, and evokes disgust in the viewer by itself. Thus, the radicalism refers to the inclusion of dead animals and their decomposition, instead of a motific representation, such as in traditional fine arts. In order to understand life, we need to see and experience death.<sup>32</sup> This becomes clear in Toni R. Toivonen's *Portrait of a Hare (No. 14)*. For him, the connection of two components—animal and metal—is further extended by an additional element. He describes the third component as the occurrence between the dead body and the surface. "In my art metal is a place of action, or a mirror/a seeming opposite of the flesh, a pedestal for 'the brutality of the fact.'"<sup>33</sup>

### **Gold-ground as a Stage for Representation and Its Controversy**

Toni R. Toivonen uses brass to inscribe the last traces of his subjects' organic existence. The association and connotation of gold seem important to the artist. Its shine is revealed at the moment of exposure to light and ranges between gold and shades





of black and brown, while organic decay inscribes turquoise and green. Patina of the oxidized metal determines the etched color structures. This is verdigris, formed in the process of decomposition and oxidation and caused by contact with animal secretions. At the same time, the color values indicate the material as other than gold, as gold oxidizes differently. The gilded shine, however, is as essential to Toivonen's objects as the iridescent colors. Therefore, the integration of actual material (e.g., a gold leaf) is not an alternative. Thus, it becomes clear that the artist is not interested in material value but rather in playing with color, material hierarchies, and iconographies of material power.<sup>34</sup> The background in *Portrait of a Hare (No. 14)* is elemental in relation to art history, as it provides the motif with an auratic effect. Bruno Reudenbach explains material hierarchies and the attribution of gold as a precious resource in the Middle Ages, based on the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville (after 600).

Shiny materials shine and glow – the duller and darker, the more worthless. [...] From a theological perspective, this means: shining materials reflect the splendor of God; gold can thus become the *color coelestis*.<sup>35</sup>

The use of gold in artistic and cultural goods dates to around 2000 BC. It was seen in Chinese, Persian, and Greco-Roman art before gaining popularity in Central Europe.<sup>36</sup> The fascination with gold and its brilliance goes back to antiquity, when its glow was equated with the rays of the sun.<sup>37</sup> The material received transcendental significance in Christianity, for example in the reflection of 'divine' light in sacred spaces,<sup>38</sup> from the medieval gold-ground to the rediscovery of the material in prints and paintings<sup>39</sup> and its increasing popularity in the mid-19th century. Its artistic use extends from the 20th to the 21st century so that gold with its materiality and iconographic qualities plays an ongoing role in art.<sup>40</sup> Paintings such as *Wrapped Peacock* (2020) by the Hamburg-based artist Robert Hoffmann (\*1982) refer to the style by suggesting gold-ground in combination with large-format, handwritten or painted letters and their allusion to Christian iconography (Fig. 5). Hence, these elements form cultural and historical references. In his current series, the artist uses gold-colored rescue blankets, which he incorporates into his "paintings" as one of many overlapping layers. By sanding down the superimposed color,



Figure 5. Robert Hoffmann, *Wrapped Peacock*, 2020. Acrylic, rescue blanket and varnish on wooden board, 120 x 110 cm. © Robert Hoffmann.

Hoffmann destroys previously applied materials and brings to light layers of varying golden intensity, differing in their luminosity. Golden shine is of primary concern, as it symbolically charges the image, such as with a reflection of divine light. The shimmering shades of gold concurrently provide the work with spatial depth. The grinding process, the uncovering of gold and its destruction, is an intended component in the object's creation, further proved by the artist's active intervention.

Sanding leads to deconstruction in Toivonen's work.<sup>41</sup> However, his artistic process is not an active act of deconstruction or comparable to the artistic positions such as those of Max Ernst (1891–1976) or Niki de Saint Phalle (1930–2002) or to Lucio Fontana's (1899–1968) slashed canvases.<sup>42</sup> Arito Rüdiger Sakai mentions Ernst's grinding as the earliest evidence of destruction in painting. In these, Ernst superimposed layers of oil color, only to scrape them off. The structures were created by cutting away the color, thus destroying the painting's layer.<sup>43</sup> Lucio Fontana's works since the late 1940s, on the other hand, have been characterized by the piercing and cutting of canvas as a destructive act.<sup>44</sup> Niki de Saint Phalle's shooting pictures could be

described as reliefs on which bags of color filled under layers of plaster are fixed. After constructing them, the artist would shoot them with a gun. So she damaged the respective picture, at the same time subverting the act of violence, as the explosion of color would complete the object.<sup>45</sup> *Portrait of a Hare (No. 14)* does not imply a comparable act of destruction or violence. The method of using a dead hare as material, whose putrefactive secretions are inscribed in the metal plate, is characterized more by the artist's detachment and the overtaking of the creative process by time-related factors.

As artistic references, both hares and gold-ground appear as materials in 20th and 21st century art. After witnessing them in the works already at the turn of the 20th century, mid-century and late 20th century positions specifically influence Toivonen's iconography and artistic process, with relevant examples being works by Joseph Beuys (1921–1986) and Dieter Roth. The interface between the two components (hare and gold) is impressively demonstrated by Joseph Beuys' performances *Friedenshase (Hare of Peace, 1982)* and *Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt (How to Explain Pictures to a*

*Dead Hare, 1965)*. *Friedenshase* took place at Documenta 7 in Kassel in June of 1982 (Fig. 6). In the course of the action, Beuys publicly melted down a replica of the Tsar's crown of Ivan the Terrible. The hare and sun sphere cast from the crown are kept in a welded safe made of plexiglas, together with its broken off gems. Beuys understood the hare as a symbol of peace, which he used in place of the ruler, and the melting of the Tsar's crown as an act of purification. With reference to Beuys' *Friedenshase* and the idea of incarnation, Claudia Postel explains that this "[...] creates a connection between the heart as a life-giving organ and gold as the influence of the sun, [and] with the second object cast from the gold, on the earth."<sup>46</sup>

In November 1965, Beuys staged the performance *Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt* in the rooms of the Düsseldorf gallery Schmela (Fig. 7). The gallery was closed for visitors during the three-hour performance. The action, however, could be followed through the shop windows. Beuys prepared his head with the help of honey, gold leaves, and dust in order to symbolically express his thinking.<sup>47</sup> He would hold a dead hare in his arms, through which he suggested





Figure 6. Joseph Beuys, *Friedenshase*, 1982. Gold, precious stones, pearls, slag, steel safe with bulletproof glass, 33,5 x 33,5 x 10,5 cm. Staatsgalerie Stuttgart. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020.

Figure 7. Joseph Beuys, *Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt*, 1965. Performance with a dead hare, gold and honey, Gallery Schmela, Düsseldorf. Source: Uwe M. Schneede, *Joseph Beuys, die Aktionen. Kommentiertes Werkverzeichnis mit fotografischen Dokumentationen* (Bonn & Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 1994), 110.



the way the art shown should be conveyed. The connotation of gold in this performance goes hand in hand with the sun, light, and, equivalently, spiritual exaltation and thinking. In Beuys' understanding, the iconography of a hare stands for incarnation in the sense of burying in the earth what is not possible for man.<sup>48</sup> Incarnation and the circulation of life, as attributions and embodiments, further affected the work *Karnickelköttelkarnickel* by Dieter Roth (Fig. 8). The artist developed this small-format sculpture in 1970 as a multiple in an edition of 210 copies and produced it in 1972 as an edition for Daniel Spoerri's Düsseldorf *Eat Art Gallery*.<sup>49</sup> The hare is made up of rabbit droppings and straw and, in such materiality, implies the intake of food, metabolism, and excretion at the same time. Its outer form, as do its insides, marks the eternal cycle of physical existence, from food intake to defecation, from birth to death.<sup>50</sup> By giving the object an appearance of a chocolate rabbit, Roth plays with the idea of edibility, thus giving the object a humorous reading, characteristic of his oeuvre. In turn, Dieter Roth's rabbit droppings inspired Sonja Alhäuser (\*1969) and her work *Kaninchentisch (Rabbit Table, 2010)*, a piece based on drawings of



Figure 8. Dieter Roth, *Karnickelköttelkarnickel*, 1970. Rabbit straw, rabbit droppings, 21 x 10 x 19 cm. © Dieter Roth Foundation, Hamburg, Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.

motion sequences and anatomical views of rabbits (Fig. 9). Alhäuser supplemented these with rabbit droppings, which she formed from chocolate, placed on the drawing and offered to the audience as snacks.<sup>51</sup>

Both the rabbit and gold seem to be elementary in 20th century art. Toivonen unifies

both, and, through the process of decays, approaches them reflectively. The suggested value of the gold-ground contrasts the material value of gold. The golden color depicts the lost life and the intimate act of dying. In addition, Toivonen understands aesthetics as a central aspect of his conceptual art.<sup>52</sup> The imitation of gold, together with coloration through rotting, significantly contributes to understanding *Portrait of a Hare (No. 14)*. Here, the attribution and traditional reception of gold and its material properties, as well as the material hierarchy discussed by Reudenbach, are important factors. On the one hand, it is a question of the duality of heaviness and lightness. The field hare dances and radiates lightness caused by its fluffy fur and iridescent golden nuances. This contrasts not only with the weight of the material but also the theme's heaviness; since all colors consequently trace death, the viewer is confronted with the strain of fading life.

### In the End...

In coining the term "realism of the material," the significance of the material turn is revealed. This is clear when observing Toni R. Toivonen's abandonment of the hare's pure





Figure 9. Sonja Alhäuser, *Kaninchentisch*, 2010, Detail. Watercolour, pencil on paper, chocolate droppings. Temporary installation on a table by Heinz Stoffregen Ø 74 cm.

representation in order to reflect on finiteness, only using the animal's body as material. Nevertheless, the reference in Toivonen's works to a variety of art historical traditions is immanent. As was outlined, these range from the tradition of gold-ground in antiquity and the significance of the hare in *vanitas* to its subversion in the 20th century through radical upheavals involving organic materials and living beings. The latter is effectively demonstrated through examples such as those by Joseph Beuys, James Elaine, and others.

Toivonen's *Portrait of a Hare (No. 14)* shows it as the protagonist, acknowledging its existence as an essential part of the work. Consequently, the artist breaks with the semantic connotation of the hare as a prestigious symbol, such as in Dutch still-life painting. Toivonen primarily deals with the finiteness of life and therefore refers to *memento mori*. *Vanitas*, in an art historical sense, plays a role in contextualizing the hare motif, while in analysis, apart from its palpable elements, it takes a secondary place. Comparable is Dieter Roth's *Karnickelköttelkarnickel*, dedicated to the cycle of birth and passing away, radically expressed through the for-



mation of a hare with rabbit feces. In this respect, Toivonen simultaneously refers to art history and material developments of the 20th century. The inclusion of the dead hare (as exemplified by Beuys) and animal carcasses (comparable to Elaine's approach) are clearly definable precursors of the Finnish artist. Accordingly, *Portrait of a Hare (No. 14)* counteracts pure representation as a traditional motif by using a corpse to honor life. In this way, Toivonen's "realism of the material" signifies a material radicalism, as death is not used only to represent an animal's carcass but is also incorporated and fixed in the physical form of an artwork.

The starting inquiry, the question of the extent to which Toivonen's material radicalism actually breaks with art historical norms, the core thesis of his approach further developing *memento mori* and a material criticism of *vanitas*, in connection with the material turn in the 20th century, is therefore affirmed and granted.

## Notes

1 Antti Nylén, *Johdatus filmiaikaan. Kirjoituksia valokuvaamisesta* (Helsinki: Siltala, 2017), 186–7.

2 The artist dedicated himself to the hare in a series of portraits, which are numerous originals due to the processing of material. Therefore, the hare motif is by no means the result of an arbitrary decision. In the Vienna exhibition *Madness Invited* at Collectors Agenda (Sept. 13 to Oct. 12, 2019), for example, several field hares were exhibited, including *Portrait of a Hare (No. 14)* and *Portrait of a Hare (No. 15)* (Fig. 10). The hare is not only a coincidental find. As such, the artistic practice and understanding of Toni R. Toivonen's term "truth to materials" is particular. Concerning "truth to materials," cf. Toni R. Toivonen, e-mail to the author, June 15, 2020.

3 Toni R. Toivonen, e-mail to the author, June 15, 2020.

4 Cf. *ibid.*

5 Gold-ground is a traditional process that involves applying gold leaf to a wooden panel and using a burnisher to create a resplendent shine. The technique has been common in Western and Byzantine book and panel painting since the 4th century AD.

6 Art of Decay refers to all materials used in visual arts and characterized by negative organic processes. Flesh, blood, fat, or food and their corresponding liquefaction, fusion, and drying but also dissolution, instability, volatility, fermentation, etc. play essential roles as materials in art.

7 Toni R. Toivonen, in an interview with Toni R. Toivonen and Florian Langhammer, Hämeenkoski, Finland 2018, <https://www.collectorsagenda.com/en/in-the-studio/toni-r-toivonen> (accessed May 25, 2020).

8 Toni R. Toivonen's studio is envired by several boxes in the garden containing decomposing animals.

9 Cf. *ibid.*

10 Toni R. Toivonen, *ibid.*

11 Toivonen handles hares and mice as well as birds, a horse, and other living creatures or organic elements. He also has used his own pets, as long as they died a natural death. It is especially important to Toivonen that no animal is ever killed for his work. Furthermore, Toivonen also has used other organic elements. In the artwork *Sunflowers 2* (2018) he arranged original substances of a human placenta in a composition inspired by van Gogh's sunflower motif. Cf. Toni R. Toivonen, *Sunflowers 2*, 2018, brass, original substances of a human placenta, 126 cm × 100 cm. Concerning *Sunflowers 2*, cf. Nylén, *Johdatus filmiaikaan*, 186–7; <https://www.collectorsagenda.com/de/in-the-studio/toni-r-toivonen> (accessed May 25, 2020).

12 Cf. Hanna Baro, "Spuren der Zeit: Alterungsprozesse und ihre Körpermetaphorik in der Kunst," in *Prozesse des Alterns. Konzepte – Narrative – Praktiken*, ed. Max Bolze et al. (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015), 109–31.

13 Moreover, these processes of material change are not conducive to the core idea of the object discussed here but will become relevant in the course of conservation issues in collection and market contexts. "[Toivonen's] work has been exhibited in Finland, London, and New York, and his work can be found in public collections such as the MOCAM Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow, the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, the Saastamoinen Foundation, the Sara Hildén Museum of Art, the Heino Art Foundation Collection and Vantaa Art Museum Artsi, and he has won The Art of Basware 2014 global competition, held for artists under 30 years old." <https://www.collectorsagenda.com/en/in-the-studio/toni-r-toivonen> (accessed May 25, 2020).

14 Wolfgang Kemp, "Hase," in *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie* (LCI) vol. 2 (Freiburg i. Breisgau: Herder, 1994), 222–25.

15 Götz Ruempler, *Tiere in der plastischen Kunst des Mittelalters* (Münster: agenda, 2017), 37–39.

16 Albrecht Dürer, *Field Hare*, 1502, watercolor and



opaque colors, brush, raised with opaque white, 25,1 × 22,6 cm, Albertina, Vienna.

17 Cf. Ambrose, Hex. V 33 (PL 14, 252), quoted after Kemp, "Hase," 222.

18 Cf. *ibid.*

19 Cf. *ibid.*, 153.

20 Cf. Fred. G. Meyer, "Vanitas- und Bankettstillleben," in *Die Magie der Dinge. Stillebenmalerei 1500–1800*, ed. Jochen Sander (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 149–155, here 150.

21 Oliver Koerner von Gustorf, "30 Jahre deutsche Einheit. Pop Life," *Monopol*, December 28, 2020, <https://www.monopol-magazin.de/pop-life> (accessed December 29, 2020).

22 *Ibid.*

23 Cf. *ibid.*

24 Cf. Ursula Härting, "Jagdstillleben. Beginn und Blüte," in *Die Magie der Dinge. Stillebenmalerei 1500–1800*, ed. Jochen Sander (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 215–223, here 217.

25 Cf. *ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*, 219.

27 Cf. Meyer, "Vanitas- und Bankettstillleben," 150.

28 Cf. Toni R. Toivonen, e-mail to the author, June 15, 2020.

29 Meta Marina Beeck, "Objects from the Dying Salon," in *Anohni – My Truth. James Elaine. Peter Hujar. Kazuo Ohno*, ed. Friedrich Meschede (Cologne: Walther König, 2016), 423–437, here 431.

30 *Ibid.*, 426.

31 Quote from personal communications or e-mails from James Elaine with Meta Marina Beeck, author of: *ibid.*, 431.

32 Cf. Toni R. Toivonen in an interview with Toni R. Toivonen and Florian Langhammer, Hämeenkoski, Finland 2018, <https://www.collectorsagenda.com/en/in-the-studio/toni-r-toivonen> (accessed May 25, 2020).

33 Toni R. Toivonen, e-mail to the author, June 15, 2020.

34 Cf. *ibid.*

35 Rudolf Suntrup, "'Color coelestis.' Himmel,

Ewigkeit, und ewiges Leben in der allegorischen Farbendeutung des Mittelalters," in *Cieli e terre nei secoli XI–XII. Orizzonti, percezioni, rapporti* (Milan: Miscellanea del Centro di studi medioevali vol. 15, 1998), 235–260, here 253–254; Dominic James, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), esp. 74f., quoted after Bruno Reudenbach, "'Gold ist Schlamm.' Anmerkungen zur Materialbewertung im Mittelalter," in *Material in Kunst und Alltag*, ed. Monika Wagner (Hamburger Forschungen zur Kunstgeschichte vol. I; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002), 1–11, here 4, 6. Paragraph translated by the author.

36 Cf. Claudia Postel, *Hintergründiges aus Gold. Untersuchungen zum Goldgrund im 19./20. Jahrhunderts* (M.A. Dissertation, University of Hamburg, 1999), 5–7; John Gage, *Kulturgeschichte der Farbe von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, trans. Magda Moses & Bram Opstelten (Ravensburg: Maier, 1994), 5.

37 Cf. Postel, *Hintergründiges aus Gold*, 40.

38 Cf. *ibid.*, 5.

39 As references, Postel drew from William Blake, who included gold leaf in his prints in 1794, and Philipp Otto Runge, who referred specifically to medieval gold-ground in his painting. Cf. *ibid.*, 1.

40 Cf. *ibid.*, 1.

41 Arito Rüdiger Sakai presents an art historical overview of destruction and deconstruction with a focus on artistic positions of the 20th century. Cf. Arito Rüdiger Sakai, "Schneiden, Reißen, Brechen, Zerstörung und Dekonstruktion in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts," in *Kreative Zerstörung. Über Macht und Ohnmacht des Destruktiven in den Künsten*, ed. Wolfram Bergande (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2017), 132–154.

42 Cf. *ibid.*, 132–154.

43 Cf. *ibid.*, 137.

44 Cf. *ibid.*, 137–138.

45 Cf. *ibid.*, 143.

46 Postel, *Hintergründiges aus Gold*, 85.

47 Cf. *ibid.*, 85; Martin Müller, *Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt. Schamanismus und Erkenntnis im Werk von Joseph Beuys* (Alfter: VDG, 1993), 79.

48 Cf. Müller, *Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt*, 64.

49 Cf. Dirk Dobke, *Melancholischer Nippes* vol. 1/2 (Cologne: Walther König, 2002), 87.

50 Cf. *ibid.*, 87–88.

51 The artist describes the reference to Dieter Roth with regard to her exhibition *Sonja Alhäuser – Cupido. Zeichnungen, Skulpturen und Gebäck* (Museum Brot und Kunst, Ulm, from Nov. 22, 2020 to March 7, 2021). Alhäuser's drawing and Roth's multiple are exhibited together there for the first time.

52 Cf. *ibid.*



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Figure 10. Toni R. Toivonen, *Portrait of a Hare (No. 15)*, 2019. Brass, original substances of a dead animal (no animals were harmed or killed for the production of the work), 38,5 x 32 cm. Private Collection, Hamburg.