

**in touch with the  
deceased: animate  
objects and human  
ashes**

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## ABSTRACT

Despite increasing secularization in the Netherlands, beliefs in an afterlife have not disappeared. Instead, new death rituals have emerged, among which is the practice of enclosing human ashes in objects such as paintings, candleholders, jewelry, and tattoos. Because human matter can now be incorporated into paint, glass, metal, and human skin, the dead become part of daily life and the living become carriers of the deceased. As a consequence, the boundaries between persons and things, and the living and the dead blur. In fact, people's practices with ash objects suggest that these objects are regarded as animate. Though people are not religiously affiliated, their practices suggest beliefs in an afterlife, which we will explore in this article.

**Keywords:** cremation, material culture, religion, secularization, relics, tattoos

After her Masters in cultural anthropology, Meike Heessels conducted PhD research on beliefs about the dead among religiously unaffiliated people. Her thesis entitled "Bringing home the dead. Ritualizing cremation in the Netherlands" appeared in 2012. The research was conducted in the project "Refiguring Death Rites: Post-Secular Material Religion in the Netherlands" at the Faculty of Religious Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen, funded by the Dutch Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).

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## Introduction

In 2005 Dutch folk singer André Hazes died. His death and the disposal of his ashes were ritualized in a series of widely publicized events (Stengs 2009). After a television broadcast of the funeral, the public could follow the serial disposal of his ashes in the newspapers. Not only were part of his ashes blown into the sky with a rocket and scattered at different sites that were meaningful to the family, but his widow Rachel and their two children also had tattoos done with some of André's ashes added to the ink. They all had the same symbol tattooed, which the family called the "together-sign" and which represented their eternal bond. In a newspaper interview Rachel said about her tattoo, while stroking it: "André lives in us and that feels very good."<sup>1</sup> Since celebrities began openly displaying their ash tattoos, this form of commemoration has become increasingly popular among bereaved people in the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup>

In a recurring national survey ash objects were first mentioned in 2006 by 4 percent of the population (Van Keulen and Kloosterboer 2009). Among younger respondents this percentage was 14 percent, so a future increase of this practice is expected. Two developments were of central importance to the emergence of this practice: (1) citizens' initiatives leading to the expanding of the law on disposal, and (2) changes in the religious landscape of the Netherlands. As a result of a severe process of secularization, the group of religiously unaffiliated grew enormously in the past century. In 2006, 61 percent of the Dutch considered themselves religiously unaffiliated as opposed to 5 percent in 1909 (Bernts et al. 2007). Secularization theorists such as Steven Bruce (2002) have long interpreted this movement as a decline in the plausibility of religion in the face of increasing rationalization and modernization. However, while overall church membership has declined in the Netherlands, belief in an afterlife has not (Bernts et al. 2007: 49). Moreover, more than half of the religiously unaffiliated people expressed a need for rituals especially during transitions such as death (Bernts et al. 2007: 30, 85).

Dutch mourners showed an increased interest in the remains of the deceased (Heessels 2012). While ash disposal had long been anonymously conducted by professionals, in the 1980s bereaved people increasingly demanded to be involved. In 1991 it became legal to take ashes home.<sup>3</sup> Officially, however, human ashes had to be saved in their entirety in a sealed urn. Cases were reported of bereaved people pleading with crematorium personnel to fill a matchbox with ashes and of people illegally scattering human ashes. In 1994, crematoriums



seized on these informal practices. Despite regulations, they began selling pendants containing a little bit of ashes. Eventually, in 1998, the Burial and Cremation Act was amended, officially allowing the division of cremation ashes into parts, enabling mourners to give different destinations to the ashes and to scatter ashes themselves. Funeral entrepreneurs and artists have reacted inventively to this development by offering a stream of new objects and services, varying from balloon scatterings to jewels containing human ashes.

While ash objects are known in at least the Netherlands, Switzerland, England, and the United States (Cutting 2009; Davies 2005; Fahrni and Wuster 2000; Gibson 2008; Prendergast et al. 2006), they have not yet received the scholarly attention they deserve. Hallam and Hockey's book *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (2001) thoroughly analyses the physical remains of the dead as memory objects. However, human ashes are only discussed in the context of scattering (2001: 93–7) and not as part of memorial practices at home. In this article, we concentrate on people's use of ash objects by asking: What does an analysis of the interaction between people and ash objects reveal about meanings ascribed to the dead?

A common premise of research in material religion is that objects signify ideas (Woodward 2007: 5). From this assumption, it follows that notions about death and life can be inferred from an investigation of ash objects. However, we agree with authors such as Boivin (2008, 2009) that the material world is not a mere prop for human thought, but actively prompts it. Cultural meanings do not exist in precedence, but stem from human engagement with the material world around them (Boivin 2008, 2009). This means that ideas about the dead evolve in interaction with ash objects. As such ash objects not only express ideas but also *do* something: they co-create meaning.

In this article we will argue that people are searching for meaning through handling ash objects. Focusing on the interaction between things and people helped us to get beyond the separation between material culture on the one hand and ideas on the other. Moreover, in this way we could investigate beliefs about the dead as they are performed in interaction with ash objects.

Heessels and Poots qualitatively studied ash objects, as people made and treasured them, by spending time in the workplaces of professionals as well as the homes of mourners. To grasp the ideas of professionals Heessels and Poots observed and interviewed fifty-two funeral professionals at their workplaces.<sup>4</sup> They conducted a qualitative content analysis of 114 websites of artists,



jewelers, and online shops promoting ash objects.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Heessels and Poots conducted forty in-depth interview with mourners at their homes.<sup>6</sup>

### **Professionals Inscribing Ash Objects**

By ash objects, we mean anything in which a small amount of ash is incorporated. As such, ash objects differ from urns in which all the ashes are kept. On the websites of producers, ash objects are called remembrance objects, memory objects, remembrance relics, ash relics, or urn objects. We have chosen the term “ash object” as it is the most matter of fact. Instead of stating the memorial or relic-like qualities of these objects, this term enables us to question these features.

When inquiring into the process of creating meaning, one has to take into account objects as well as the people handling them. First, the properties of an object have an impact on its meaning and use (Boivin 2009: 273; Keane 2005; Suhrbier and Raabe 2001). The characteristics of an object, such as its size, material, shape, weight, and texture, determine the possibilities of human interaction, for example whether it can be taken up in our hands or whether an object feels soft or rough.

Second, as objects become part of interactions between people, they become part of human relations (Komter 2001; Kopytoff 1986; McDannell 1995; Miller 2008). In the life course of an ash object different people ascribe different meanings to it when it is produced, bought, discussed, cherished, hidden, given away, inherited, or fought over. These meanings can build on each other, but can also differ and may even exclude earlier meanings.

Before being put to use by mourners, ash objects are produced and promoted by artists and entrepreneurs who ascribe certain qualities to these objects. We argue that this process influences the reception of ash objects. In order to detect the ascribed function and characteristics of ash objects, we located 114 websites promoting ash objects and subjected these to a qualitative content analysis. We grouped the ash objects into five categories, citing the number of analyzed websites after each category:<sup>7</sup> jewelry (73),<sup>8</sup> cuddle stones (13),<sup>9</sup> paintings (5),<sup>10</sup> small sculptures (7),<sup>11</sup> and tattoos (16).<sup>12</sup>

In general, companies producing ash objects vary from one-person businesses selling handmade articles to online shops offering a variety of prefabricated goods. More than half of the businesses are online shops that advertise their products on the Internet and through crematoriums and funeral parlors. Their goods are generally delivered without direct contact with clients. A little less than a third



of the companies have only a handful of employees. In these cases, personal contact with producers is possible, but not the rule. Finally, approximately one-fifth of the cases are one-person businesses, often run by artists that create, promote, and sell their goods in direct contact with their clients.

The sale and promotion of ash tattoos is not so evident. We found only sixteen Dutch forums dealing with ash tattoos and no online salespoints. The incorporation of ashes into objects was legalized in 1998, but ash tattoos are still not legally permitted. In the Netherlands the ink used for tattooing has to be 100 percent sterile. Consequently it is forbidden to add extra material to the ink.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, professionals involved in placing ash tattoos do not advertise this service. Instead, the bereaved themselves act as “hands-on” experts advising each other on forums on the ins and outs of ash tattooing.

From the content analysis followed that ash objects are ascribed the following qualities: “uniqueness,” “proximity,” “tangibility,” “discretion,” “emotionality,” and “holiness.” We found that producers primarily praise ash objects as exclusive, handmade, and one of a kind; hence, unique. The promotion of glass objects by Kroes Glasblazerij illustrates this perfectly: “The objects are blown and shaped by hand into a product that has a *unique* character, making every object *unique*, just as every person is or was *unique* [our italics].”<sup>14</sup> Some funerary artists strive to create a unique product for every client and apply this ideal to their way of working. For example, goldsmith Annabelle describes her method of working as follows:

the designs come into being after a conversation with the bereaved about the deceased. In this way every jewel acquires its own unique character that reflects the relation with the deceased.<sup>15</sup>

While the products made by one-person businesses could be considered unique, since the creation process varies each time, the procedures of medium-sized companies—and those of bigger online shops even more so—are less true to this ideal.

In the case of ash tattoos a unique design is less overtly emphasized, as the unique character of a tattoo seems self-evident to the people involved. Ash tattoos are considered unique by their wearers, as they are placed on an individual. In addition, the fact that it is hard to find information about ash tattoos adds to the unique character of this practice, as the following question posed in a forum illustrates: “Does anyone have more information



FIG 1

Ash painting by Renate Rolefes (2010).



about using ashes in tattoos? I cannot find anything, as it seems that I am kind of *unique* in what I want” (our italics).<sup>16</sup>

The second common denominator that we defined is proximity. All ash objects have in common that they are designed with the idea that bereaved people can treasure them in their homes or on their bodies. Sculptures, paintings, and cuddle stones are explicitly manufactured to be kept at home. (Figure 1 illustrates an example of an ash painting.) Jewelry is meant to be worn on the body of the bereaved, the object directly touching the skin. Tattoos are inherently “close,” as they become part of the body itself.

The notion of proximity is directly linked to the third common denominator that we identified, namely tangibility. Ash objects are promoted as “tangible memories.”<sup>17</sup> Producers match the properties of ash objects, such as material and shape, with this ideal. Cuddle stones, jewelry, and sculptures are polished to make them feel soft. Often, ash objects are shaped to fit the hand. One type of cuddle stone called *Voelvormen* (Sensing Shapes) by the Dutch artist Sofie Boonman combines tangibility with uniqueness by adapting the stones to the exact shape of her clients’ hands.<sup>18</sup> In a leaflet promoting her product, the artist explains the importance of touching ash objects as follows: “Saying goodbye, letting go and the sensation of missing someone are intangible feelings. The longing for the tangible is actually a translation of these feelings of loss.” Her ideal is that cuddle stones make the intangible tangible. Other producers of cuddle stones suggest that the small stones can be carried around in a purse or pocket.<sup>19</sup> In sum, most ash objects are explicitly manufactured with both tangible and transportable properties, as the producers assume that their bereaved clients will feel the need to touch these objects and keep them close. Only ash paintings do not conform to the ideal of tactility and transportability, which might explain why they are the least popular of all categories of ash objects.

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The fourth characteristic that we discovered is discretion. Most ash objects are explicitly designed to conceal the ashes. Ashes are contained in objects by means of two techniques: they are either mixed with metal, pottery, glass, paint, or ink, or they are saved in a hollow in the object. As a result, in almost all cases the appearance of ash objects does not give away their content and, with that, their meanings to outsiders. LifeGem, a company that makes remembrance diamonds out of cremation ashes, advertises the product as “a discreet way to keep your loved one close.”<sup>20</sup> Or, as glass artist Cor Van der Schaaff explains on his website:

We do not design a so-called sad mourning relic that shocks every one. On the contrary, we design a glass object that is a pleasure to look at ... No one but you needs to know. It is your little monument. And to outsiders, it is a beautiful glass object matching your home interior.<sup>21</sup>

While producers expect ash objects to receive a central place in their clients' homes, they are also convinced that the objects should not confront other visitors. In the crematorium, employees selling ash objects echo the importance of discretion. In conversations with bereaved families, certain ash objects were praised for the fact that they did not show their contents. One employee explained that she liked the colorful ash jewelry best, “as it looks young and trendy. This is not recognizable as an ash pendant, in contrast to the metal ash cylinders that are more common nowadays.”

Discretion is also a key characteristic of ash tattoos. In a forum from women's magazine *Viva* a bereaved mother posted a question about the proper place for her ash tattoo.<sup>22</sup> Reactions varied from “I would choose a place for yourself, such as your belly, your groin or maybe your upper arm” to “To me this seems like a tattoo that you do not want to show to everybody.” In line with the producers and artists creating “non-confronting” ash objects, the participants in the forum advise the bereaved mother to hide the tattoo from the view of other people. Ash tattoos are “censored” by choosing a place that can be covered or by using personal symbols of which the meanings are only known to the bereaved themselves.<sup>23</sup>

A fifth characteristic that producers attribute to ash objects is emotionality. The objects are labeled “jewels full of emotion” or “paintings with emotional value.”<sup>24</sup> The makers of ash objects proclaim that their products can be of assistance in the mourning process. For example, goldsmith Annabelle advertises her jewels as: “A lasting memory of your loved one in the shape of a jewel. You will carry him or her with you always and that provides comfort



and strength in hard times.”<sup>25</sup> Or as the maker of Sensing Shapes claims in the description of her product: “Sensing Shapes are designed as something that people can hold on to and find comfort in during the lonely process of letting go.”<sup>26</sup> As such, producers not only attribute memorial qualities to ash objects, they also ascribe an active, comforting function to them.

We maintain that this attitude among producers reflects the prevailing psychological model of grief called “continuing bonds” (Klass 2006; Laderman 2003; Stroebe et al. 1992; Walter 1999). This model is in stark contrast to the view of grief throughout the twentieth century. During that period, mourners were stimulated to break the ties with the deceased as enduring relationships between the living and the dead were viewed as problematic (Stroebe et al. 1992). Instead, within the current psychological paradigm on mourning, it is assumed that bereaved people are helped by keeping their deceased loved ones close. Moreover, the influence of these scientific theories expires beyond psychological practices affecting the views of professionals in related branches. From the statements of professionals in the funeral business follows that theories of grief are used to underline the worth of their products. As one employee said to a client: “I would like to compliment you for the fact that you have come for the scattering, despite the difficulty. I think it is very brave and that it will help you in the grieving process.” Sometimes these theories might be used as a sales pitch, but very often professionals are personally convinced that bereaved are helped by actively engaging in death rituals.

We labeled the sixth and last characteristic of ash objects holiness. With this term we do not mean that ash objects are “holy,” but that producers link ash objects to religious traditions. For example, glass sculptures with ashes are called “mourning relics that translate the feelings of the bereaved into a unique memorial” and jewels are labeled “relics with great emotional value.”<sup>27</sup> The term relic evokes associations with remains that became objects of veneration in various religious traditions, in the Netherlands in Roman Catholicism in particular. These remains were considered powerful, because they belonged to or had been touched by holy people. In the term “relic” several other characteristics of ash objects converge: uniqueness, tangibility, proximity, and emotionality.

By referring to ash objects as relics, producers link their goods to a tradition of sacred objects carrying human remains, even though these handicrafts are novelties. The term has also been applied as a sales gimmick by companies selling religious items to give mass-produced articles an aura of authenticity (McDannell 1995: 45).



Crucially, producers do not directly label their objects religious, which could offend their mostly religiously unaffiliated clients. Instead, producers ascribe relic-like qualities to their goods. In that way, they aim to give ash objects a special status, anticipating that the objects will be set apart in the home. As such the objects are fabricated to be taken out of commercial circulation, a process that Kopytoff (1986) calls de-commodification or singularization.

To sum up, producers, sellers, and hands-on experts invest ash objects with meanings by labeling the objects unique, close to the bereaved, tangible, discreet, emotional, and relic-like. However, the ideas of producers are not the only determinants of the meaning of ash objects. In fact, these products have come up in the first place after citizens' initiatives to take some ashes home in a matchbox. As the objects circulate from the factory to the home of the clients, they become the principal actors in the meaning-making process. In an interview Martha, a 26-year-old woman who has lost her mother, reflected on the meaning of her ash object: a small copper sculpture in the shape of a human heart. The artist who designed the object used copper, because that material would be warmed by her touch. While Martha anticipated touching it often, she did so only sporadically. Instead, she constructed a place for the heart in a cupboard dedicated to her mother. Around the object she collected items that once belonged to her mother or that reminded of her. Every day Martha devoted a moment to her mother there, lighting a candle or letting her mind dwell upon memories. Her practices show how the meanings and functions that producers attribute to the objects beforehand can be elaborated on, adapted, or ignored when mourners actively engage with the objects in their everyday lives.

### **Living Dead Matter: The Meaning of Ash Objects for the Bereaved**

Since the 1950s the Netherlands has become a highly secularized country. When cremation was legalized in 1955 and secularization set in, cremation flourished as many people who had left the church opted for cremation. Still, most of the religiously unaffiliated people prefer cremation over burial.<sup>28</sup>

The problematic relation between cremation and religious institutions was reflected in the interviews. Most informants were quick to emphasize that they were not religious and that they, as the Dutch like to say, led a *nuchter* (down-to-earth) life. At first, their insistence blinded us to the transcendent dimensions of their stories. However, a close reading of the interviews showed that by



non-religious most of the informants primarily meant non-churchgoing (Heessels 2012).

Disaffiliation thus does not necessarily mean disenchantment. While mourners' views do not correspond with institutional religious teachings and are fairly diffuse, their practices have one thing in common: all the informants considered ash objects to be more than "ordinary stuff." They considered the objects to be inalienable, meaning that their value exceeds and cannot be fully translated into monetary or exchange calculations (Gibson 2008: 54). The objects were described as special, personal and by some mourners even as animate.

As sociologist Margaret Gibson (2008: 48) puts it, for mourners objects of the dead can transform into quasi-subjects, meaning that objects gain value over time, as objects come to represent and recall a relationship, experiences, and memories. We call this process subjectification. Objects become subjectified as they are associated with a particular person causing objects to attain characteristics of the person.

In the case of ash objects, the process of subjectification is generally immediate and more pronounced than in the case of objects that become associated with a deceased as a result of prolonged contact. In somewhat simplified terms, the difference is experienced as follows: "That is grandmother's chair," meaning the chair she used to sit in, as opposed to "That chair *is* grandmother," as her ashes are incorporated into the stuffing. From the moment that an ash object is filled with ashes (by professionals or by the bereaved themselves) the borders between object and person blur.

For mourners the distinction between an ash object and the person from whom the dead material derives is not clear-cut. As Gibson (2008: 104) emphasizes, things are not only associated with the deceased, they are also part of the substance of their very being. In fact, for some mourners there is no difference between the ash object and the person. In interviews, informants often interchangeably referred to ash objects by the name of the object and by the name of the person or, in the case of the tattoo reproduced below, a beloved pet. Daniëlle, a 37-year-old civil servant, has four memorial tattoos of her dead dogs, two of them containing ashes (Figure 2). While showing her ash tattoos, she referred to them as tattoos, but also directly by the names of the dogs. "On my wrist I have the tattoo of Max. And this star, that is Brammetje." Daniëlle said that she instantly thinks about Max when she looks at the tattoo and that it gives her the sensation that he is nearby. In the eyes of bereaved owners, ash objects evoke a real sense of presence.





**FIG 2**  
Daniëlle shows her ash tattoo  
commemorating bulldog Max.  
Photograph: Fleur Poots 2010.

In many ways the bereaved treat ash objects as they treated their deceased loved ones, by touching the object and talking to it. Maria, for example, a 59-year-old widow living in the southern Netherlands, lost her husband when he was 48. Like many informants, Maria distributed her husband's ashes among several places. She kept the greater part of his ashes in an urn in her bedroom. She also scattered the ashes that did not fit into the urn on the crematorium field where her parents' ashes were scattered. Finally, Maria has two ash objects: a bracelet and a small jar bearing her husband's name.

The jar has a prominent place in Maria's house on a shelf in the corner of her kitchen. The shelf is decorated with a candle, fresh flowers, and a picture of her deceased husband. "And another crazy thing always lies there ...," Maria said, "... a pen. I have a pen lying there so he can write to me, I always tell my friends jokingly." During the interview Maria often referred to the "corner" by her husband's name, Martien, while looking towards the shelf. She explained that every day when she comes home, she greets her husband and kisses his picture. Then she lights a candle and checks if the flowers need freshening. She described how she keeps him informed of her sorrows and pleasures throughout the day. When Martien was still alive they used to go on many trips with their mobile home. Today when she goes on a holiday Maria takes the jar with her, continuing his company on the trips. Symbolically as well as quite literally, Maria maintains the bond with her husband by conducting practices with his ashes.

Asked if she considered herself religious, Maria responded: "I am not a regular churchgoer." With this statement Maria initially distanced herself from the church, as did most informants. However, subsequently she asked herself out loud: "But I do believe in something. I often go to a small chapel to venerate Mary. And I always have this candle burning for Martien, with the ashes and his picture. What do I actually believe? I don't know." She got up from her chair and made some more coffee. After a while she said: "You just do these things, I suppose. Yeah, why? Just because I believe he is here and that we will be together later. I know that some people do not believe that, but why would they want to take that from me if it comforts me?" While the practices are central to her daily life, Maria felt uncomfortable explaining "the ideas" behind her practices.

The ambivalence about the practice with the ashes of a deceased loved one accounted for several other informants. Henny, a bereaved woman in her sixties, lost her mother after taking care of her in her old age. Henny scattered most of her mother's ashes in front of the house



where she was born. She also kept a little bit in a small silver heart-shaped box. Henny carefully preserves the heart in a glass cupboard upstairs, together with her mother's rosary. For the interview she specially brought the objects down to the living room. In the interview sessions Henny explained that when she missed her mother she took the box in her hands. She said: "Sometimes it feels weird that she has been here so long and that she is gone now. Then I rub the silver or when the silver tarnishes I polish the heart." After a short pause Henny added: "I guess I do these things at moments when I long for contact with her. Then I have her in my hands again. I take the heart in my hands and gently shake it as if I fluff up her pillow. Sometimes I even tell her jokingly that I want to wake her up." Then Henny was quiet for some time and eventually added: "I don't mind that I do these things. Oh no, I am the first to admit it. Even though it may sound weird, as I do not believe that she literally is in the object." Despite emphasizing not *believing* that her mother is really present in the object, Henny treasured the object and looked after it very carefully. She remarked: "Imagine, it is so important to me that I even put the heart box in the safe when I go away for a long period as I am scared that it might get damaged or stolen."

Both Henny and Maria expressed their ambivalence about the ideas behind their practices explicitly, but also more indirectly by using words such as "jokingly," "guess," "suppose," and "weird." We argue that interviewees feel uncomfortable for two reasons. First, these practices are considered very private. They are performed in the home. Sometimes they are not even discussed in the household, let alone with more distant relatives, friends, or outsiders. Second, mourners perceive their practices as central rather than the presumed ideas about the dead that scholars are keen on. While the interviewer was "digging" for ideas that informants abstracted from these objects, for mourners the meaning lies in the actual practices, in the fact that the object is symbolically as well as literally their deceased loved one. Their continued relation with the deceased is experienced in the time of the doing and not so much in the abstraction of it afterwards. The assumption that the ideas behind the practices can be lifted out and explained outside of the practice itself blinded us to what was actually bodily performed and tentatively expressed in words.

While not considering themselves institutionally religious, their practices bear witness to beliefs in some sort of afterlife. In daily, lived practices there are no clear borders between the religious and the non-religious. In fact, people do not care about categories, but rather about



the experienced effectiveness of their practices (McGuire 2008; Heessels 2012), in this case a feeling of comfort and care for the dead.

This realization corresponds with Bloch's (1995) experiences during his research on wood carvings in Madagascar. When Bloch asked his informants about the meaning of wood carvings he received the same answer over and over again: "to beautify the wood." In the end Bloch realized that the carvings do not *represent* something. They *are part of* the task of making a wood carving, of making a house and thus of the growth of a marriage. Similarly, the meaning of ash objects is intrinsic to the interaction with the object. It is not because informants cannot verbalize their ideas or that they do not know what they are doing; the connection with the deceased is simply expressed in a different language. It is a material and bodily expression of a continuing bond with a deceased person, of feeling close to this person and of honoring the relation.

In this light, the ash objects can be perceived as solidified forms of reunification. Practices with ash objects connect the body of the deceased with the body of the bereaved. The objects not only contain material that once was part of the deceased's body, they are also worn on the body or held in the hands of the bereaved. By wearing, holding, or touching the object the bereaved bodily express their bond with the deceased. By wearing an ash jewel or carrying a cuddle stone in one's pocket the object moves along with its owner.

In the case of an ash tattoo, the bodies of the deceased and the bereaved are literally interconnected. The border between living and dead matter is crossed as cremated remains become part of a living body. When the bereaved touch their tattooed skin they also touch the remains of their deceased relative. Moreover, in their intended permanency tattoos counteract the transience of life (Poots 2009). Hennie, a mother in her forties, who lost her 18-year-old son Stefan in a car accident, explained that she values her ash tattoo because it can never go away—"it feels as if he is always with me." Hence the bond between the bereaved mother and her deceased son is perpetuated physically as well as in her mind.

Mourners' practices bear witness to a this-worldly belief in a bodily reunion at that moment, by means of touching an ash object, but also to a reunion at a later stage. Gibson, who interviewed bereaved people in Australia, also found that most of her religiously unaffiliated interviewees held some concept of spiritual life after death. She states that to the religiously unaffiliated, for whom institutionalized notions such as the departing soul are less

clear, corporeal notions of the connection between the living and the dead can be more poignant (Gibson 2008: 163). Underlining her findings, we found that the desire to reunite with loved ones was central to the stories of our informants.

This reunion is not ultimately about the abstraction of spirit from matter or about a spirit going to another world. The afterlife is not experienced as a faraway place with a God, but rather as a place where the dead “come home.” In some cases, the dead are reunited with the living by literally bringing them home or by disposing them in a place where they felt at home. In other cases, the dead are reunited with other dead, by disposing them at the place where other dead were scattered or buried. This this-worldly spirituality is mediated through practices with the remains of the deceased.

Next to the bond between the living and the dead, the bond among mourners can be emphasized through practices with ash objects. This is the case with a group of ten friends of a young Dutch soldier, Timo Smeehuijzen, who died in Afghanistan. All his friends have the same ash tattoo: two small round dots carefully located on the chest over the heart (Figure 3). The two dots symbolize their friend Timo in several ways: they represent his small eyes after a night of partying, which they jokingly called “lizard eyes.” Besides, when all the tattooed dots are added up, there are twenty-two dots: Timo’s age when he died. The tattoo gives them a sense that they all carry him with them. The shared character of the tattoo emphasizes the bond they have with Timo and with each other, remembering their shared time and their shared loss.



**FIG 3**  
Nick with ash tattoo for Timo.  
Photograph: Fleur Poots, 2009.

### **Bones, Hair and Ashes: Ash Objects As Modern Relics**

Ash objects bring to mind a historical tradition of other objects that contain human remains, such as relics, fetishes, and hair ornaments (Heessels 2010). All these categories of objects are regarded as special and in some ways powerful. These objects are attributed characteristics that are otherwise ascribed to human beings. Fetishes for example are regarded as animate, even empowered to act on others (Pels 1998). As a result, the borders between object and subject blur. These objects are considered a category apart; in between dead and living matter and in between things and persons. By comparing the use of ash objects with relics, hair ornaments and fetishes the ambivalent character of ash objects can be further clarified.

The term “relic” stems from *reliquiae*, meaning “remains.” In Christian culture primary relics were



understood to be something that was once part of the body of a saint or martyr, such as bones or blood (Van Cauteren 1985). Clothing or other objects that had been in contact with a saint or with a saint's relic were called secondary relics (Van Cauteren 1985). Christians venerated relics as physically representing people who led exceptional, spiritual lives (McDannell 1995: 42). Just as ash objects, relics of saints were considered more than lifeless objects. The often extensively decorated remains were viewed as means of direct contact with the hereafter (Van Cauteren 1985). As saints were believed to be present both in heaven and on earth, they were deemed capable of intervening among the living. Since the body of a saint once carried his or her righteous soul, it was believed that after death the body still possessed a certain holy power (Geary 1986: 169; McDannell 1995: 43; Rooijackers 1996; Van Cauteren 1985: 11). By touching Christian relics believers sought to participate in their powers.

Bereaved relatives who possess an ash object also touch it with a certain intention. We have seen that Maria and Henny touch these objects and talk to them in a way that resembles their relation with the deceased during life. Through touching ash objects the bereaved materially and bodily experience their connection with a deceased. Sometimes mourners have a goal other than just making contact. A case in point is Hennie, who lost her 18-year-old son in a car accident three years ago. She and her husband wear pendants containing some of their son's ashes. During the interview she emphasized that they put them on and have never taken them off. While talking she held the pendant every now and then. She explained that she is always in close physical contact with it. The pendant touches her skin and if she feels worried or upset, she takes it in her hand. She said that it makes her feel at ease. In the absence of her son, she finds comfort in touching the object with his remains. To her the object is connected to his presence and his positive character. In a similar fashion Dreetje, the son of folk singer André Hazes, said that he looks at his ash tattoo every time he has to do something important. He then thinks about his father and feels supported by him.<sup>29</sup> Touching an ash object or tattoo can give the bearer a feeling of calmness, positivity, and empowerment.

A difference between medieval relics and contemporary ash objects is that the persons symbolized by ash objects are not famous figures such as saints. Medieval relics were continually or periodically displayed in public (Geary 1986). In fact, in order to be deemed powerful a medieval relic had to be recognized by the devotees as well as by the church.<sup>30</sup> The Catholic Church

issued certificates recognizing the authenticity of a relic, naming the source and finding place. Even lay relics, such as scapulars that are carried individually, are meaningful to a community of devotees (Spaans 2003).

By contrast ash objects do not have a public function. These objects are designed to conceal rather than exhibit the human remains. Ash objects are considered private objects. The ashes in contemporary relics are hidden behind glass, stone, or metal or rendered invisible in ink or paint. In that respect ash objects resemble hair ornaments (Heessels 2010). Hair objects became popular in Europe in the seventeenth century (Holm 2004; Pointon 1999). Often a lock of hair was hidden behind a (photographic) portrait or concealed in a locket or pendant, the contents being known only to the wearer (Batchen 2004). As a consequence, even when wearing hair ornaments in public or when displayed in the living room, the owner could choose whether to share the story behind the object (Heessels et al. forthcoming; Postema et al. 2012).

A difference between ash objects and hair objects stems from the origin of the material. While hair can be cut during life as well as after death, ashes always originate from the whole corpse. The fact that a hair ornament could be a mourning object as well as a token of ongoing love or friendship (see Batchen 2004: 67) added to the “invisibility” of its meaning. While the relics of saints were accessible to the whole community and had to be publicly viewed to strengthen their cult, the identity of ash objects is anonymous to all but their intended bearer and his or her intimate circle.

For an ash object, public recognition is not necessary to be effective. As a bereaved mother explained in a forum: “I have a little butterfly in my groin, precisely there, because it is my tattoo and I really have it for myself. There are only very few people who know that I have it and that is good. It is my memorial for Rick and not for the people around me.”<sup>31</sup> In fact, the meaning of a memorial object can change or even disappear if it is recognized by an outsider, as the following incident illustrates. Betsie, whose adolescent daughter died of anorexia, took off the small heart-shaped pendant containing her daughter’s ashes after a neighbor asked her if it was an ash pendant. Betsie felt as if suddenly everyone knew what the necklace meant to her. Instead of an incentive to share a personal story of loss, as the objects were during interviews, in everyday contact ash objects are generally interpreted as private. Another interviewee considered concealing or even erasing the memorial tattoo on her wrist, because she was unpleasantly surprised by confrontational questions of patients about her tattoo during her work as a nurse.



The function and meaning of ash objects can change as a result of reactions from outsiders, but also as a result of inner processes. The transformation of value can be expressed by moving the objects within the private spheres of households and/or back into public spaces or commercial domains (Gibson 2008: 47). This is illustrated by Daniëlle, who besides having ash tattoos owns three pyramid-shaped urns that hold her dogs' ashes. At first she placed the urns in the living room, then in the bedroom, and some years later they were moved to the attic. Conversely, objects can also be taken up again.

The meaning and power of an ash object does not exist in isolation, but only in interaction with the bereaved owner. So, when the owner of an ash object loses it or dies without sharing its intimate significance, the meaning of an ash object can get lost. Some bereaved people, like Henny, take explicit measures to prevent the object from getting isolated and running the risk of becoming a commodity again:

I have already told my husband that when I am not here anymore, one day, you never know, if nobody asks for it [the little heart-shaped box with her mother's ashes], to entrust it to me in my grave. Imagine what I am thinking about already, only because I do not want anything to happen to it.

Henny recorded in her will that when she dies and none of her kin claims the care for the object, the ash heart will be buried in her grave. In this way, she felt that her mother's ashes would be secure and their singular status guaranteed.

## **Conclusions**

Objects are not hollow vessels to which people ascribe meanings that can be abstracted and described for research purposes. Elaborating on the work of Bloch (1995) and Boivin (2008, 2009) we maintain that the ideas about objects are to be found in the practices and in the way these are experienced. This means that mourners' beliefs about the deceased do not exist in separation from their interactions with the ash objects. As such, people's beliefs about the dead can only be investigated by considering not only what people say, but also what they bodily and materially express through their practices with ash objects.

From the ways people deal with ashes and ash objects in the Netherlands follows that they are not merely objects to them. Ash objects occupy a liminal category of animate "thing-beings" that strongly connect a dead and a living person. The objects do not merely represent the dead

symbolically. People relate to a person's ashes as they related to that living person by means of touching an ash object, talking to it and assembling certain objects around the ashes or the place of disposal. The intimate interactions with ash objects, hence with the deceased, suggest that a sense of animation is attributed to the ashes.

Comparable to relics and fetishes, ash objects are endowed with a power to influence the bereaved as much as the bereaved influence the objects. Real presence is implied by their actions. Contact with an object in which the remains of a deceased loved one is incorporated is a literal, material, and bodily continuation of a bond. It is by building a home shrine, keeping a small box with ashes safe, and by touching the tattooed skin that the dead are given a presence on earth.

## notes and references

<sup>1</sup> As cited in: Het geheim van André Hazes. Weduwe Rachel vertelt zijn waarheid in biografie "Typisch André," *De Telegraaf*, August 13, 2005. In an interview with Poots the widow elaborated: "The fact that André is not only in our thoughts and hearts but also in our bodies was what appealed to us most."

<sup>2</sup> Xandra Brood, the widow of artist Herman Brood, who died in 2001, and her daughter Lola were the first celebrities to publicly show their ash tattoos.

<sup>3</sup> Cremation was prohibited in the Netherlands until 1955. Nowadays cremations outnumber burials. While in 1955 only 2 percent of dead bodies were cremated, this percentage rose to 55.7 percent in 2008 (see <http://www.lvc-online.nl/viewer/file.aspx?FileInfolD=37>).

<sup>4</sup> Heessels conducted fieldwork in four crematoriums in the Netherlands for a period of approximately six months, observing among other things

mourners discussing the purchase of ash objects, and interviewing forty professionals involved in cremation, ranging from crematorium employees and undertakers to funerary artists. Poots interviewed twelve Dutch tattoo artists about memorial tattoos.

<sup>5</sup> Heessels found seventy-three websites selling ash jewels, thirteen selling cuddle stones, seven selling glass sculptures and five selling ash paintings. The search was systematized by reviewing the first six pages of hits on the browser Google (April 12, 2007; April 3, 2009; July 15, 2010). The following terms were chosen: *assieraden*, *urnsieraden*, *gedenksieraden*, *herdenkingssieraden*, *herinneringssieraden*, *rouwsieraden*, *as schilderijen*, *as glas*, *as beelden*, *as sculpturen*, *knuffelsteen as*, *steen as*. Heessels and Poots systematized the search for ash tattoos by reviewing the first six pages of hits on the browser Google (January 5,



2010). They found sixteen forums mentioning and discussing ash tattoos. They chose the following terms using different ways of writing the word "tattoo" and the terms "cremation," "ashes," and "cremains": *tattoeage crematie*, *tattoo crematie*, *tattoeage crematie-as*, *tatoeage crematie-as*, *tattoo crematie-as*, *tatoeage as*, *tattoo as*, *tattoo as*.

<sup>6</sup> Heessels conducted qualitative interviews with thirty-one bereaved people about the cremation and ash disposal of their relatives. Poots conducted qualitative interviews with nine bereaved people with memorial tattoos. The bereaved people in this article are named with their first names only. This way, they and their loved ones' real names remain and their stories are recognizable for themselves, as for some his research has become part of memorial practices. Yet as many others bear these names, their privacy is secured. The artists that publicly sell their goods and advertise with their names on the Internet are called by their full names.

<sup>7</sup> There are some other, less common ash objects on the market such as picture frames, candleholders, adorned bags, cuddly toys, and boxes for ashes that we leave out of our analysis for reasons of space. Out of the five categories, jewelry is the most widespread category. This might be due to customers' preferences, but ash jewels were also the first type of ash objects manufactured in the Netherlands, so they have the longest history and are most common. Moreover, commercial factors also play a role in the circulation of ash objects. Some producers have better contacts with the main distributors such as crematoriums and funeral parlors.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the American company Lifegem <http://www.lifegem.nl/> and the Swiss company Algordanza <http://www.algordanza.nl/>.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, <http://www.senses-design.nl/> by Sofie Boonman.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, <http://www.doodgewonezaak.nl> by Renate Rolefes.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, <http://www.kroesglasblazerij.nl/> or <http://www.asbestemming.com/>.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, [http://forum.viva.nl/forum/Overig/Tattoo\\_voor\\_mn\\_meisje/list\\_messages/36252/0](http://forum.viva.nl/forum/Overig/Tattoo_voor_mn_meisje/list_messages/36252/0).

<sup>13</sup> See *Warenwetbesluit Tatoeagekleurstoffen* (Law on colorings for tattoos) dating from July 14, 2008 and *Hygiënrichtlijnen voor tatoeëren* (Hygiene instructions for tattooing) from the National Centre for Hygiene and Safety, March 2007.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.kroesglasblazerij.nl/>.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.annahbelle.nl/annahbelle.html/>.

<sup>16</sup> <http://partyflock.nl/topic/842655/PAGE/1.html/>.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.annahbelle.nl/annahbelle.html/>.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.senses-design.nl/>.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.zonnevogel.nu/assortiment/herdenken/>.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.lifegem.nl/index3.php?p=5-25-73/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.asbestemming.com/>.

<sup>22</sup> [http://forum.viva.nl/forum/Overig/Tattoo\\_voor\\_mn\\_meisje/list\\_messages/36252/0/](http://forum.viva.nl/forum/Overig/Tattoo_voor_mn_meisje/list_messages/36252/0/).

<sup>23</sup> On other forums, we have also found more negative reactions on the practice by people stating their disapproval of the practice as a whole, considering it scary, dangerous or dirty. Reactions ranged from "Personally I think it is scary, as if the deceased is not freed yet" (see [http://miamiinktshow.hyves.nl/forum/3850503/kkr7/tattoo\\_met\\_as/](http://miamiinktshow.hyves.nl/forum/3850503/kkr7/tattoo_met_as/)), "The idea alone disgusts me, but still it is dirty" (see <http://tattoo.startpagina.nl/prikbord/9053217/tatoeage-met-as#msg-9053217>). These reactions disclose the cultural ambivalence surrounding ash tattoos, transgressing the borders between subject and objects and living and dead.

- <sup>24</sup> <http://www.annahbelle.nl/annahbelle.html/>, <http://www.asinglas.nl/> and <http://www.eternalpaintings.nl/>.
- <sup>25</sup> <http://www.annahbelle.nl/annahbelle.html/>.
- <sup>26</sup> <http://www.senses-design.nl/>.
- <sup>27</sup> <http://www.kroesglasblazerij.nl/pagina/producten.htm>, <http://www.uitvaartwinkeldevlinder.nl/home/1>, <http://www.lancar.nl/nl/asrelikwieen.aspx>, <http://www.herdenkingssieraden.nl/>.
- <sup>28</sup> These data were kindly provided by our colleague Joanna Wojtkowiak, who studies identity in relation to death. For more information on her work, see for example, Wojtkowiak and Venbrux (2009).
- <sup>29</sup> Uit het hart. Dreetje: "Ik heb nog steeds steun aan mijn vader". *De Telegraaf*, September 23, 2007, p. 11.
- <sup>30</sup> Even though there are numerous relics which were not officially recognized, yet which are greatly venerated (Orsi 2011).
- <sup>31</sup> <http://achterderegenboog.nl/forum/viewtopic.php?t=3516>.
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