

Thorsten Benkel · Thomas Klie · Matthias Meitzler

Enchantment

Ashes, Diamonds and the Transformation of
Funeral Culture





Thorsten Benkel · Thomas Klie · Matthias Meitzler

Enchantment

Ashes, Diamonds and
the Transformation of Funeral Culture

With 40 figures

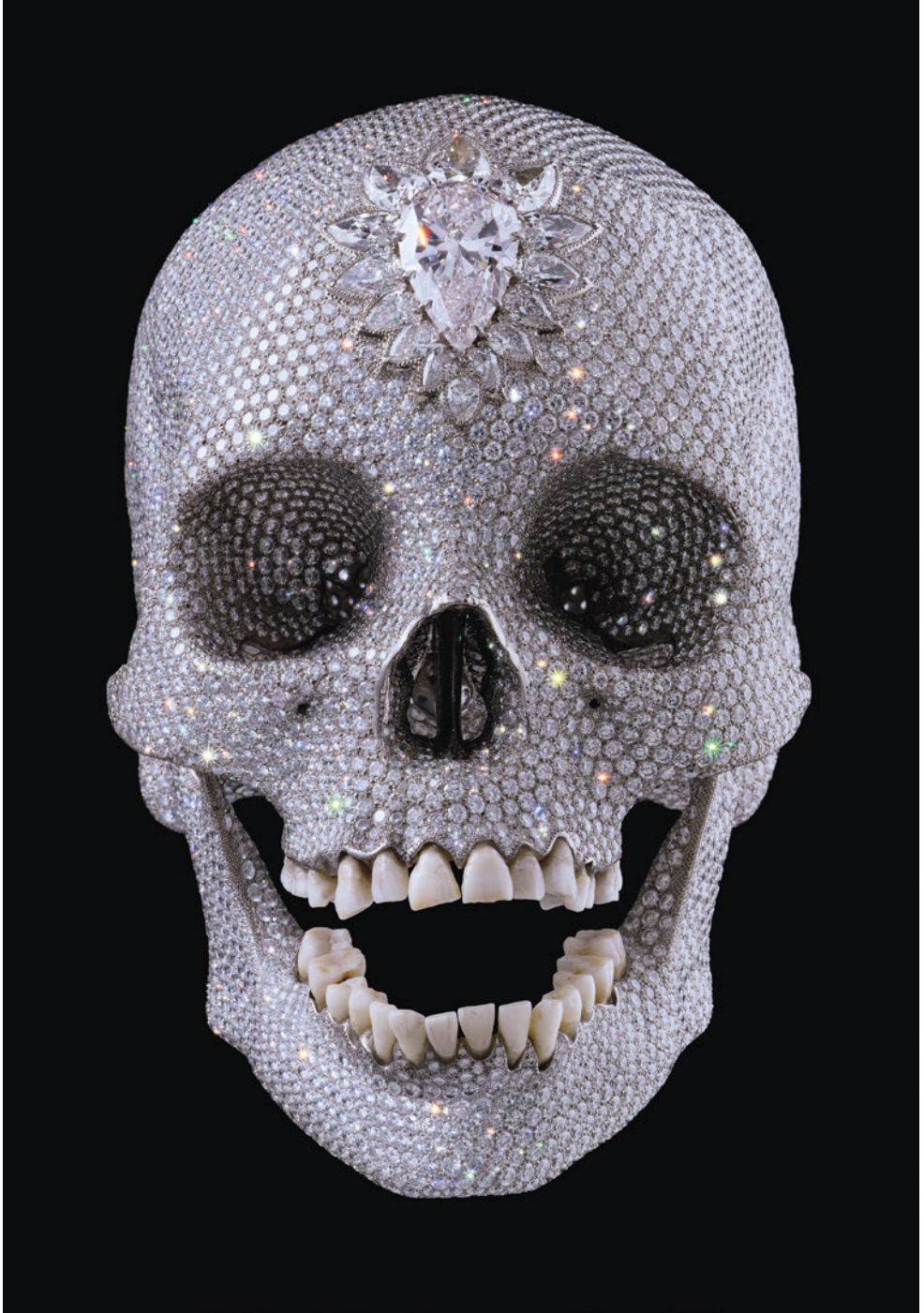
Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

The Brilliance of Life vs. the Brilliance of Death

This sculpture consists of the platinum cast of a real human skull, presumably from the 18th century. The surface of the bone structure is filled with some 8,600 diamonds of varying sizes. The resulting production costs were 14 million British pounds or about 15.5 million €, securing this artistic work a special place in art history, not the least because of its purely economic value.

The title “For the Love of God” seems to imply a religious connotation, also seen in the death motif of the skull itself. This in turn would suggest a connection to vanitas imagery, also situating it within a specific art-historical tradition. The use of precious stones may refer to the literal “value” there is in caring for the dead, also reflected in the title itself – an indication of divine reference that rules over life and death, that determines both our existence and our passing. But “The Love of God” may also determine whose bones are of value after death and whose bones – unlike the hard diamonds – eventually disappear and become dust.

Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God*, 2007
© Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved
DACs/Artimage 2019. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd
VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020



Preface to the English Edition

The translation of this volume into English is a plausible venture since the phenomenon of cremation artifacts has become an international affair. The ongoing changes in the burial culture, the newest technical possibilities, and the rituals surrounding funerary practices are no longer parochially limited to a single cultural area. Rather, the social transformational processes reported in this volume are symptoms of a worldwide tendency toward empowering the individual as active agent, which, of course, manifests itself differently within the respective cultural context.

Our focus here lies on connecting dying, death, and grief with *materiality*, which we discovered exists in two inseparable dimensions: First, the end of life is still a very physical phenomenon, inasmuch as the physiological substrate of the human being becomes a corpse in the moment of death. Many cultures deal with the unavoidable materiality of death by creating diverse traditional rituals, all steered toward making the corpse invisible, be it through a coffin, cremation, or other methods. Yet newer procedures surrounding the dead body provide feasible alternatives.

Second, we are interested in the concrete materiality, in the form of a treasure removed from its original cultural roots. We treat this as a means of enchanting the dead body to become a gemstone, to which end technical mechanisms are necessary. But, especially, it is based on the express desire of the relatives to initiate this transformation event in the first place. So, when complex machines are creatively combined with changing approaches to memorializing the deceased, something brand new emerges. In our example, it is a diamond that comprises human remains and with its radiance outshines death.

For international readers, it is likely informative to learn more about the framework of our research efforts, particularly the legal background and the dissatisfaction repeatedly expressed toward that background. These aspects do not form the focal point of this volume, even though they repeatedly appear on the horizon – especially in the subtext of the extensive interview passages quoting the conversations we had with relatives. A few words are necessary on this matter.

Our study was carried out in the German-speaking countries of Europe, that is, in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Most of those who decided to have a so-called “ash diamond” (a term we like and stick to) made are German citizens. Germany today is divided up into 16 states, all of which have their own laws governing burial. Thus, there are no longer uniform regulations for funerary matters, as was the case before 1945. Rather, there exists a disparate hodgepodge of in part very different legal perspectives concerning what is to be done when burying the dead body. What is common to all 16 German state legal frameworks is that across the board they demand that all corpses (and any parts thereof) be buried in official burial grounds. There are only very few exceptions to this rule.

These legal terms severely restrict the latitude of survivors to grieve for their loved ones – unlike the rules in effect in many other European countries or the rest of the world. In Germany, this institutionally robs survivors of the “power of disposition” regarding their decedent (at least what physically remains of the person in question). This rigorously enforced practice stems from the need to preserve order at all costs. Yet, in times of ever-greater social individualization, people are prone to want to exert more power themselves, particularly regarding their interests, norms, and emotional states. And they are sometimes willing to dodge the legal specifications if they have the feeling that they are morally justified in doing so. The ash diamond is squarely located in just such a gray zone and for many today clearly represents a way to skirt official limitations. Thus, an illegitimate procedure becomes a means of emotional support; the effect is nothing less than to create a physical proximity that extends beyond death – at least to whatever the jewel physically memorializes.

Thus, briefly, the bureaucratic background to our concomitant research project. What interested us the most in this volume will quickly become clear to its readers: What do people who have had a diamond created from the ashes of their loved ones do with that object – and what does the diamond do to its owner?

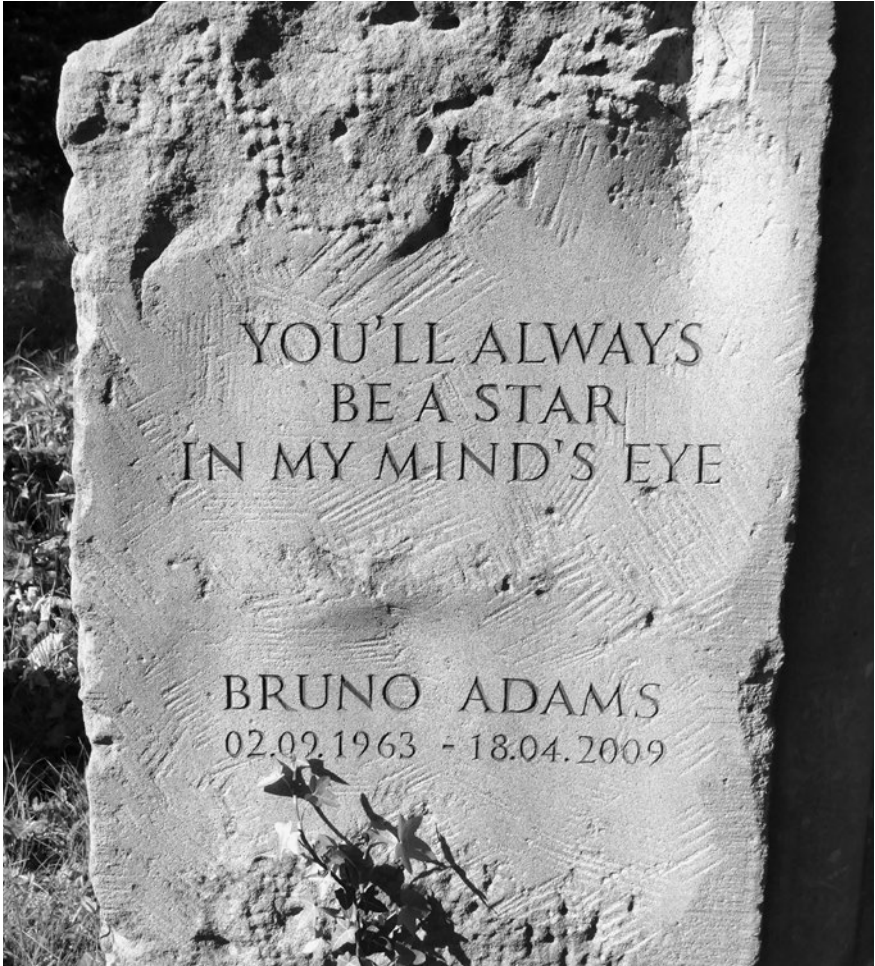


Table of Contents

<i>The Brilliance of Life vs. the Brilliance of Death</i>	4
Preface to the English Edition	6
1 Artifact and Commemoration: Transforming Materiality in the Context of Grief	11
<i>Thorsten Benkel, Thomas Klie, Matthias Meitzler</i>	
2 Case Analysis I: “She didn’t like the idea of being buried”	27
<i>Thomas Klie</i>	
3 Levels of Inorganic Life and the Human. Metamorphosis Between Sociality and Materiality	33
<i>Thorsten Benkel</i>	
4 Case Analysis II: “He still protects me”	57
<i>Matthias Meitzler</i>	
5 The “Invincible” Brilliance of Life	65
<i>Thomas Klie</i>	
6 Case Analysis III: Letting Go. A Story of Artifact Abstinence	77
<i>Thorsten Benkel</i>	
7 Autonomy as Legitimization. Professional Dealings in the Context of Ash Artifacts	83
<i>Matthias Meitzler</i>	

8	“So that’s my wife ...?” The Presentation of an Ash Jewel	113
	<i>Thorsten Benkel and Matthias Meitzler</i>	
9	Living with the Diamond. Voices from Everyday Life	121
	<i>Thorsten Benkel, Thomas Klie, Matthias Meitzler</i>	
10	Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds. Insights and Outlooks	189
	<i>Thorsten Benkel, Thomas Klie, Matthias Meitzler</i>	

Appendix

“That is true love.” Interacting with the Ash Diamond from the Perspective of a Survivor	199
“Yvonne wanted it that way.” Letters from Survivors	213
“Get up, child, get up!” The Document of a Loss	221
References	231
Illustrations	237
The Authors	239

1 Artifact and Commemoration: Transforming Materiality in the Context of Grief

Thorsten Benkel, Thomas Klie, Matthias Meitzler

Well, if this house were to be burning down, I'd first let the cats out, then get the diamond and run for it. All the rest, forget it [*laughs*].
A female interview partner (26M)

If you were to run into her, you would not notice right off the jewelry hanging around her neck. Upon closer inspection, however, this jewel would come to strike you: The polished light-blue stone draws your attention to it and becomes a topic of conversation. Yet, it was not purchased in some jewelry store, and its value cannot be weighed in money, for the diamond this woman wears around her neck day and night is a unique piece of jewelry. It didn't get mined somewhere from the earth but was created in a factory. She paid a price for it befitting a diamond. And yet the real price was paid long ago, by someone else. The jewelry she is wearing was created from human remains, the cremation ashes of her husband from which the carbon was extracted in a technically elaborate process, and which was then pressed into a diamond under very naturalistic circumstances. It was then handed over to her during a ceremony, and she has not let it leave her body since. She does not – this is her conviction – have something dead hanging around her neck; rather, she wears the remembrance of the time she and her husband spent together in the material form of jewel nearly the size of one carat. For her, this artifact is a gem that represents what physically remains of her beloved husband. She enjoys that nearness to her body.

1.1 Corpses “to go”?

What role do diamonds play in the grief process survivors go through who decide to have the cremated remains of their deceased loved ones turned into a crystalline object to be preserved? That, in short, is the question that motivated this volume. As part of an empirical research project entitled “Artifact and Commemoration,” the authors (two sociologists and one theologian) decided to address this matter – and discovered many surprising answers. But before the

owners of such “ash diamonds” reflect on their specific experiences, the special type of mourning they went through, and the impact of their living with these glittering relics, we would first like to study this rather recent phenomenon of creating objects of jewelry from human remains, especially in connection with the newest changes going on in the funeral and burial culture.

In modern society, it seems to be of particular relevance to give one’s memory of someone a special, material form. The desire to retain a memory or memories is clear and present, and yet we are all aware of how fleeting memory and how painful the undesired effects of forgetting in fact can be. For this reason, humans have come up with any number of objects and rituals. The feeling of living in an ever-faster-moving present, of dealing with unstable relationships, of being confronted with the contingencies of life itself has moved people to desire some *material* form of remembrance. We seek things and scenes that have staying power, that are exempt from the cycles of coming and going. And what better way than to create a diamond that imparts to its owner some sort of eternal splendor. At the same time, it reveals the need to “go public” with one’s existential cares and feelings without exposing any true intimacy. Death and love enter here into a visible and tangible union, expressed in private rituals not privy to others (cf. Fechtner/Klie 2019, pp. 14f.).

The creation of a diamond through high pressure and high temperatures is without parallel among the many facultative ways death and burial are celebrated. Nevertheless, this development takes place within a complex social context that goes far beyond this rather unusual form of *nonburial*. The novel part lies in the deceased person retaining *materiality* in the form of an artifact that triggers memory. But it is also novel in that it is a form of grief and remembrance that significantly attaches to wearable and flexible signs of death, even though death often involves a multitude of memory artifacts (photos, items of clothing, everyday objects, souvenirs, etc.). Yet, these things only represent the deceased person; theologically, they are simply so-called “contact relics.”¹ There is nothing new to the religious exaltation of bodily parts as relics, which can be traced back in Christian history to the 2nd century AD. However, in contrast to relics taken from a body part of someone who died a natural death (largely bones) and imbued with a special sort of sacredness, ash diamonds are artifi-

1 The Catholic Church differentiates between three different classes of relics: First-class relics consist of bodily parts of saints, particularly of their skeleton (Latin *ex ossibus* – from the bones), but also hair, fingernails, and blood. With martyrs who were burned at the stake or cremated, their ashes are also considered first-class relics. Second-class relics (“contact relics”) are objects that saints touched while alive (e. g., garments, instruments of torture). Finally, third-class relics are objects that have had contact with first-class relics (Angenendt 2000; Laube 2011).

cially estheticized artifacts that substantially, technically, and ideally symbolize the deceased in the “second derivation.” The metamorphosis of the human remains takes place in a transformation not only of the *material*, but also of the *form*. Esthetically, it is a complete transformation: Nothing remains of the original physical form; nothing reminds us of the person represented by the diamond. Rather, that person effectively *is* the diamond.



To some extent, from an art-history perspective, such transformations are not really new. When cremation first became technically feasible at the end of the 19th century, a new and dynamic phase in burial culture commenced, which was to change the way the dead body was viewed in some very long-lasting and irreversible ways (Uhrig 2017). The accelerated metamorphosis of the body through cremation “objectified” the practice of caring for the dead: It allowed human remains to be physically handled and re-formed (Klie 2017).

What is new is that, when ordering the diamond compression, the customer can accumulate and mix different options. Since the creation of industrial diamonds generally requires only part of the cremated ashes, the following variations are possible: (1) Creation of several diamonds, (2) creation of a single diamond (the remainder of the ashes are then scattered in Switzerland), (3) creation of one or more diamonds, with the family taking the remainder of the ashes with them (this is presently the case in Germany, where it is demanded that the ashes be buried according to the respective state laws). Ash diamonds (as well as rubies and sapphires, which are created with slightly different tech-

nical means from ashes) thus do not necessarily contradict traditional means of burial in a cemetery.

All of the above-mentioned methods are also possible using only the hair or other carbon-rich artifacts of the deceased. The spectrum of services offered even extend to the living, who can donate their hair in advance. Should the amount of carbon mass be insufficient, one can complement it with other materials important and dear to the deceased. Even the deceased's diaries have been known to be used for this purpose.

A presently unsolved legal problem (at least in Germany, though not in Switzerland) is the particularization of the ashes. The obligation to bury human remains demands that they be placed securely at some specific and immobile location (mandatory cemetery burial, violation of graves) and stands in contrast to the mobility necessary to create a diamond: One first has to commission the creation of a diamond and then retrieve it in order to wear it on one's body as jewelry, meaning the remains are no longer located only at one place or even on one person.

The desire to circumnavigate or somehow avoid the (German) demand that burial take place in a cemetery has been the topic of discussion for some time now (Benkel/Meitzler 2013; Benkel 2016a). The individualization of modern lifestyles and the pluralization of life paths have generated a reality that fails to see the necessity and suitability of disposing of human remains in an immobile cemetery. The more mobile society becomes, the more restrictive and overregulated this static method of immobile arrangements seems. And this has long included how we perceive the cemetery. In this regard, Aleida Assmann concludes: "In an age of modern mobility and constant renewal, the idea that the memory of a place is necessarily connected to some certain piece of real estate is obsolete" (2010, p. 326). Yet, even if one does not share this opinion, it is still clear that visiting the cemetery is losing its social character and may in fact be rejected precisely because of the compulsory nature and the inflexibility of the rules that characterize it. In turn, more dynamic places of burial are enjoying growing attractiveness since they offer alternative approaches and remembrance formats. Burials in natural settings, virtual cemeteries on the internet, urns as jewelry cases, receptacles deposited at interim locations – these and other concepts lie within the gray legal area, much like the creation of diamonds from ashes.² Add to that tree burials, ashes being integrated into paintings or glass

2 On the borders of legality lies the practice of some funeral homes to provide part of the cremation ashes in a "mini-urn" (to take home) or in a "ash pendant" (such as jewelry for private purposes).

sculptures, or pressed onto the surface of a record album and we can see how far the burial culture has been forced to adapt. The traditional cemetery is not only losing its role as the place of mourning, it is no longer considered even the place of burial. Of course, any such development creates its own antagonists and repercussions: Contradictory developments occur parallel; traditions and innovations overlap.

The broad differentiation of such possibilities means that traditional forms seen antiquated, especially when, in the experience of those affected – the mourning survivors – no institutional offers are being made to assist in the grieving phase, only prescriptions. Scientifically speaking, it becomes clear that this creates dissatisfaction, not the least in light of a critical look across the border to the more liberal approaches in neighboring countries. The desire to experience autonomy has long become part of the modern lifestyle and is today integral and popular. This trend will increasingly also extend to the realm of death, dying, and grieving. Large parts of the population have come to think that how and where one chooses to mourn the death of a beloved person (if at all) should not be dictated by laws or moral directives laid down many decades or centuries ago. Rather, any such actions should occur in accordance with one's own individual preferences, at most in consultation with the deceased's family or their immediate social environment (cf. in detail Benkel/Meitzler/Preuß 2019).

1.2 Pluralization and Forced Decision-Making

That burial culture is going through major changes is evidenced in the basic tenor found in many publications on this topic over the past two decades. Even a couple of generations ago, burial seemed to be a hard and fast rite that appeared to be able to withstand the phenomenon of cultural acceleration. Today, the opposite is the case: There is hardly another segment of culture where changes in form and habit, interpretation, and behavioral motives of moral and taste have so clearly changed as our attitudes toward the dead. Today, people are no longer satisfied with outdated approaches and are on the outlook for more contemporary forms of funerary stagings for their deceased loved ones. Instead of normative conventions, we find the Janus-faced seduction of other options. With great self-confidence, modern mourners skirt perceived and factual specifications. Gray areas become green areas; the interplay between esthetics and the lack thereof is on the increase. Opulent earth burials, anonymous spreading of ashes, common burial spots for urns, woodland burial sites – all these alternatives and more give the impression that the rules are being revised from burial to burial.

In light of what is both imaginable and doable today, burial culture is learning to adapt to the laws of the marketplace. Various ideological horizons are on the increase and becoming networked to boot. The role of economics has always been a factor in dealing with corpses, but for many centuries it stood largely in the background. Today, that is no longer the case (Akyel 2013): Relatives have become *customers* to be courted, since both in families and in society in general the cultural knowledge about how to approach both the dead and their survivors is rapidly disappearing. The rituals of having someone lie in state at home (“wake”), of washing and dressing the corpse have become seldom. Yet, when traditional approaches lose their ritual plausibility, they make way for the rise of uncertainties. It is “impossible to escape this dilemma, nor can you simply retransform [these feelings] into a silence you can live with. [...] Considering, regarding, planning, choosing, negotiating, determining, revoking [...] those are the imperatives of engaging in the ‘risky freedoms’ that modern life confronts us with. Even deciding not to decide, the blessing of just enduring, is not available” (Beck/Beck-Gernsheim 1994, p. 18). Today, one can choose from a multitude of possibilities – indeed, one *must* choose. The decision described to engage in bold self-determination seems logical against this background, but it too remains somehow attached to overall social developments. This does not mean that the survivors have more reflexivity, but rather a strange sort of continuity: The inner attitudes emerge in the context of the end of life where they particularly strongly reveal their independence – not detached from the dominating patterns of the culture in which they developed. Seen in this way, individualization is not the opposite but the modern equivalent of earlier approaches that celebrated collectivity.

1.3 Cemetery Obligation and Cemetery Exodus

In Germany, by law, every deceased person must be buried – in one form or another. The dead are thus disposed of in a very traditional way. Burial systematically and dutifully withdraws them from the sight and the access of the living (Benkel 2013a; Meitzler 2017a). This generally happens in a cemetery, where the corpse must remain in the grave for a set period of time – regardless of whether it is an earth burial or a cremation. This formalized period is explained (biologically) by the time it takes for a corpse to decompose and (culturally) by the traditional legal tenet of caring for the dead. Minimum burial times depend on the type of burial and the cemetery in question; urn burials often demand shorter times than earth burials. This period is set by the local cemetery operator, the

respective municipality, or the local church. Because the respective federal state has been responsible for legislating burial rights for many decades, burial times can vary widely. Local circumstances (such as the soil conditions of the burial field) can also account for differences in this regard (Roland 2006).

Theologically speaking, cemetery burial stems from the idea of still lying in one's grave on Judgment Day. The sounding of the "last trumpet" (cf. Rev. 8–9 and 11,15; 1 Cor. 15,52) serves to awaken the dead and transform the living. Thus, headstones may be removed and the graves leveled, but the mortal remains should not be removed from the grave. In Jewish cemeteries, on the other hand, no graves are supposed to be disturbed or reused; this means "eternal peace," with the burial plots being permanently "fraught with reverence." The same is true for the graves of Muslims, which sometimes means transferring the dead to their homelands to avoid conflicts with the German graveyard restrictions. Today, however, the latter two groups receive some concessions representing a compromise between religious and administrative necessities. Of course, compromises always mean that those involved – both sides – would in fact prefer something else.

The burial obligation has been in force in Germany since the Middle Ages. Originally, the Church was responsible for burying the dead, which meant every individual church had its own graveyard surrounding the church building, the so-called churchyard. The Church was also responsible for burying the destitute. But over the centuries, the cemetery business changed; especially the Reformation introduced a new and innovative spirit to things. The administration of the cemetery was no longer monopolized by the Church but gradually shifted to the responsibility of the municipality. The dead were no longer buried in the churchyard – likely the middle of the respective village or town – but instead in areas lying outside of the city walls.³

In 1806, the State of Prussia issued its "Allgemeine Preußische Landrecht" (General Prussian Land Law), which included statutes governing burial grounds. For example, for hygienic reasons, it was forbidden to bury someone near inhabited locations. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the other German states have issued their own burial laws. The central "Feuerbestattungsgesetz" (lit. fire burial law = cremation) – an Imperial Act – is from the year 1934; for the first time, it declared that earth and fire burials (cremation) were equally possible, which addressed the fact that cremation had been forbidden since 785, when

3 The various "compass point" cemeteries, still found in some large cities, are witnesses to this movement and their present innercity location the result of city sprawl. The congruence that long existed between Church, burial spot, and place of mourning thus successively dissolved.

Charlemagne officially banned the ancient practice from the burial cultural repertoire. During the Renaissance, at the latest during the 19th century, however, the call was increasingly being made to allow this space-saving, cost-efficient, and above all hygienic alternative to earth burial (Thalmann 1978; classical: Caspari 1914). In 1878, the first crematorium on German soil was erected on the grounds of the Main Cemetery in Gotha, followed by similar facilities in Heidelberg (1891) and Hamburg (1892). Cremation then advanced to become a sign of progress, pragmatism, and cleanliness – although the overall number of cremations remained modest. Today, the situation is very different: The high number of cremations may be considered the “funerary signet of a modern society” (Fischer 2011, p. 132).⁴ Although cremation has become a highly standardized method with few deviations, it does mark the beginning of manifold developments for handling the ash remains of the dead (cf. Benkel/Meitzler 2013, pp. 252 ff.).

The law regulating cremation is still relevant today, though not completely binding. Despite the upgrade cremation has received (see above), the law still requires a second postmortem medical examination immediately before the actual cremation as well as the relatives to bury the urn in an approved cemetery. Yet there are some exceptions that, upon closer inspection, do seem to be somewhat more modern than many stipulations still on the books in the state burial laws (Spranger/Pasic/Kriebel 2014).

This was the legal background and the social “common sense” solutions valid up until about the year 2000. From the vantage point of cultural history, it seems reasonable to take the turn of the millennium as a sort of saddle period of funerary customs in Central Europe: Shortly before the year 2000 and thereafter some extraordinary innovations in this field appeared.

In 1985, the Cemetery West in Rostock allowed the anonymous scattering of ashes. This occurred before the fall of the Berlin Wall and was still part of East German burial culture, reaching the general German consciousness only after 1989. Other German states soon adopted this practice as well.

Around 1990, the first headstones appeared in cemeteries with pictures of the deceased person, who had otherwise been made physically invisible to the viewer. This slowly revived a practice used since about 1840 in Central Europe, frowned upon during National Socialism and in the time thereafter still considered undesirable in many cemeteries. It would appear that especially photos of

4 Depending on the respective region and the sociostructural characteristics, the number of cremations varies widely. Nationally, some 70 % of all burials in Germany (2017) are cremations (according to *the Gütegemeinschaft Feuerbestattungsanlagen* e. V. = National Association of Crematoriums, data from July 2018). In some parts of former East Germany, the rate exceeds even 90 %.

deceased children in their special graveyards were the vanguards of this development: Since the time the children had spent with their loved ones was limited, at least their place of rest should be adorned with their countenance. In addition to professionally produced formats (oval-shaped porcelain frames), we also find improvised and replaceable images, including at some point everyday snapshots. The breakthrough came when travelers began to experience the burial and cemetery customs in Southern Europe or South America. Today, adding photos to the burial sites is among the most common, well-known, and also intimate means of posttraditional remembrance (Benkel/Meitzler 2014; Meitzler 2017b).



Since 1995, the initiative *Memento* offers common burial grounds for AIDS victims at the Ohlsdorf Cemetery in Hamburg. This meant that, instead of the biological family, for the first time a posttraditional community – a self-determined community of fate – became the common theme. And this community tended to take leave from their dead in special ways: by sipping prosecco and using balloons as part of the funeral or memorial service. This new development was soon imitated in other settings.

An invention of the 1990s is the internet cemetery. With the click of a mouse, so-called virtual burial plots can be garnished with digital flowers or receive

condolences. Parallel to the physical burial spot of the deceased, this creates an alternative address for “immaterial” mourning, including the online posting of photos, videos, and music as well as links and all other sorts of interactive elements. These contributions in turn can be reached from anywhere in the world – as long as there’s an internet connection (Stöttner 2018; Offerhaus 2016).

The first *Körperwelten* (Body Worlds) exhibition was opened on 30 October 1997 in the Landesmuseum für Technik und Arbeit (aka the Technoseum) in Mannheim. This exhibition relativized the concept of not violating a grave in an open and esthetic way. The dead body became visible and accessible (Schärfl 2011), albeit in a rather solemn and sober atmosphere devoid of the show effects that later came to characterize this kind of display.

On 7 November 2001, a part of the Reinhardswald, a 200 km² stretch of forest in the northern part of the State of Hesse, became the first German “Friedwald” (burial forest, also called green burial, natural burial, or green cremation). This made it the first legal alternative to conventional cemeteries, a phenomenon well known in Switzerland: burial in natural surroundings, initially without any markings on the trees.

Since 1 January 2004, the so-called *Sterbegeld* (death benefits) is no longer part of the customary catalog of benefits of the statutory health insurance companies. This makes any funeral and burial more expensive to the relatives, which in turn made the cost factor a prominent criterion in the burial behavior of many citizens.

The same year saw the dedication of the first modern church columbarium. The pioneer in this area was the Old Catholic Parish Church *Erscheinung Christi* (The Appearance of Christ) in Krefeld. A relatively simple columbarium wall was established during renovations to the lateral chapel. Initially, it was foreseen as a space for public viewing, but the lack of demand caused this plan to be discarded. Then the decision was made to create an inexpensive but personal form of safekeeping urns as an alternative to anonymous burials (cf. Sparre 2017, p. 71).

Also in 2004, the firm of Algordanza in Switzerland first began manufacturing so-called “memorial diamonds” from cremation ashes. Here, industrial processes imitate the complex methods nature normally needs to create diamonds. The production of mobile remembrance artifacts to represent the deceased in very special ways to their relatives is both a technical innovation and a revolutionary step in dealing with cremation ashes.

There are several other indications that support the thesis that the year 2000 experienced an acceleration in the changes to the Central European burial culture, culminating in a long-lasting and gradual development that was already in progress: the withdrawal of direct interaction with a dead body from the private

sphere and its delegation to the professional sphere. Whether in a hospital, in a nursing home, or in a hospice – the deceased are handled primarily by hired personnel, picked up, dressed, and put into a coffin by undertakers. Today, in earth burials the coffin remains largely closed, for “reasons of reverence”; with cremations, the relatives rarely ever actually see the ashes. Even pastors generally never come into contact with the corpses they are ritually blessing and burying.

To enable relatives to create a distance between themselves and their dead loved ones, modern society has outsourced and institutionalized the work steps involved. Except for the (relatively rare) cases of accidents, death appears on our immediate horizon only when it affects our own age group. Such moments of the “proximity of death” (Benkel 2017, p. 277) are then felt to be tragic and painful precisely because they so acutely interrupt our daily routines – much different than the situation in the Middle Ages, for example, where confrontation with the end of life was, for various reasons, not uncommon (Ariès 1982).

Today, death and dying are culturally invisible acts. The higher life expectation goes, the lower child mortality sinks, the more the harbingers of death, aging, and disease are displaced from everyday life, the more we late-modern subjects are irritated at experiencing the fact of human demise (cf. Drehsen 1994, p. 204). Non-life has experienced a great loss of reputation: Instead of imagining that death provides life with some meaning, and that life is lived from the end backward (cf. Psalms 90,12, “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom”), an end that, according to some religious beliefs, is only a transitional state, today we strive to avoid any interruption of the “ego-hunt” (Gross 1999) and the resulting confrontation with the productive aspects of the end of life. Perhaps that is the problem with modern society: It fails to include death in any meaningful way and thus loses sight of its value.

1.4 The Diamond as a Commemorative Artifact

Analogous to the biological transformation of the corpse in the grave, the process of creating a diamond is removed from the direct observation of the relatives. This metamorphosis occurs on several levels since, before the carbon content of the cremation ashes can be turned into the “raw materials” necessary to create a diamond, the dead body must first be oxidized to a heap of ashes. Yet, only the invariant final product – the diamond – is available to our sense of touch and sight. Quite different from the case of the immobile grave in the cemetery – and even quite different from the ashes from cremation – this piece of jewelry is an object of remembrance that can be held and handled by the rel-

atives. It is, in the truest sense of the word, presentable: It can adorn the body; it can be stored in a representative container; it can be integrated into daily routines. Thus, relatives become owners. More than just an idea and a production commission, *purchasing* the diamond becomes a formalized way of reappropriating the deceased. The dead come home once again, albeit not to their Heavenly Father, but the owner's private quarters. They are present not just as thoughts and memories, but as an acquired object in the possession of those who used to be their friends, family, and partners.

When, as part of the diamond creation process, the survivors choose refinements to setting the stone, they increase the complexity of the relationship between the person and the object, opening up new forms of coordinating artifacts. In the interviews we carried out, it was of special interest to discover how and where the diamonds were worn, which arrangements were preferred, and how these concerns influenced the mourning process. We also paid close attention to whether safekeeping the jewel at home caused any unusual practical concerns (e. g., keeping it a secret from guests, hiding the presence of the deceased at home, fearing fetishism). Does the home environment become a private cemetery? Does the mourning person wear the piece of jewelry close to the body now as some sort of "burial custodian"? By eliminating the fixation of a name, life data, and place (e. g., on a headstone in a cemetery),⁵ by eliminating all identification and all localization, the survivors themselves become the living sign of death: They are the only ones who can provide information about the unburied deceased person.

Our study showed that persons confronted with the diamonds create their own interpretations that sometimes change over time, even up to the point of precipitating individualized or ritualized "disposal." The presence of memorial diamonds generates in any case new (familial) contexts where the artifacts can exist in their own special space and be put in relation to other objects, behaviors, and perceptions. Most customers foresee the diamonds being passed along to their children and grandchildren. But what forms of personification are chosen? For example, is the diamond still a "he" or a "she" – or rather a matter-of-fact-like "it"?

What is obvious is that the clear interest in not leaving the mortal remains of loved ones to some public space such as a cemetery or forest grave is creating new forms of private funerary rites. For some time now the idea that death is a public event has been disappearing from our consciousness (Benkel 2013b; Meitzler

5 As it turns out, every ash diamond carries an industrial marking that reveals its origin. In addition, if the relatives choose to, they can have the name, life data, or any other desirable information engraved within the diamond. This is done with the help of very precise laser technology and is invisible to the naked eye.

2013). One's death, mortal remains, and the whereabouts of those remains are increasingly coming to be seen as an intimate issue. The dead and the preservation of their memory in a ceremony, in a burial rite, and at the place of death are generally now considered to be concerns of the "relatives," the "survivors," those in "deep sorrow" – and no one else. Public processions from the final residence to the final resting place, in which the community collectively takes part (or at least where this is simulated), occur, if at all, only in rural areas. The production and reception of death announcements have always been things that depended on the available time and the mentality of the survivors, but today neither condolence nor wrench are fitting public expressions. Against this background, who would be surprised to see that modern obituaries, if they appear at all, often contain the request that "expressions of sorrow and sympathy" be avoided at the gravesite, inasmuch as the burial does not take place solely in the presence of the "close family" or the deceased are "quietly laid to rest."

Mourners no longer enjoy a special status; some may in fact wear black only on the day of the funeral: "What has been lost and irreversibly severed in bereavement is also in great need of being exhibited only discretely, out of the sight of others. That may be the reason behind the increase in anonymous burials, as it were, the sailor's grave within an urban ocean" (Drehse 1994, p. 206). One might presume that the individualization of death means alienating it from the surrounding society. But the new means of appropriating and participating in the mourning context described in this volume are nothing more than the echo of very "vibrant" social relationships. Despite the presumed withdrawal to individual privacy, they have the potential to unfold macrosocial effects; whether this potential can be exploited remains to be seen.

In October 2018, a project was initiated by the University of Rostock (Practical Theology) and the University of Passau (Sociology) to examine the relationship between artifact and remembrance using the example of jewelry created from or related to cremation ashes. The memorial objects thus constructed represent, one might say, the counterpart/continuation of the physical presence of those whose loss is being symbolically compensated for. In addition to field research in the production facilities of such artifacts in Switzerland and Austria as well as interviews with experts, the database of this publication relies on conversations held with 49 persons who chose to realize this unusual but apparently increasingly popular form of coping with their bereavement. Further, we had at our disposal some in part very extensive written descriptions of cases and experiences of other affected persons (cf. the Appendix).

What do they report about their expectations, their motives, and their interests? We think any scientific analysis cannot ignore the perspective of

those affected, even if grief is a highly private and subjective emotion. To this end, in Chapter 9 we let people who have gathered their own experiences with ash diamonds speak directly. Three particular case examples illustrate specific approaches taken from the spectrum of possible approaches. This is framed by considerations of the cultural concept of the term “diamond,” of research into the mindset of the diamond manufacturers, and of reflections on the intrinsic value of the symbolic resource that lies at the center of this study.

That the carbon content of cremation ashes can be pressed to create a diamond, and that there exist diverse ways of handling this object which not only do not correspond to traditional burial practices but in part also cross the line to a legal gray area, does not mean breaking completely with conventions. Rather, the transformation described above in the context of death, dying, and grieving creates space for new forms that society desires and demands – despite all legal and political directives that dictate the opposite. Not the mourning individuals will have to adapt to social institutions, but in the long run, the institutions will have to adapt to the feelings of the population (and the clearly manifold different approaches they take). The social change described here and elsewhere cannot be stopped by mere concerns about life or the end of life. Forming a diamond from cremation ashes may sound rather avant-garde, but in fact it is nothing but an interim step on the way to greater developments that will most certainly come – and that we perhaps cannot even envision today.

We would like to thank everyone who took the time to tell us about their experiences or to present documents from their personal history of mourning. We received valuable support from *Leonie Schmickler* (University of Passau) and *Juliette Ströfner* (University of Rostock), who provided reliable collaboration as part of the research project. We further thank the firm of *Mevisto* for the revealing information they provided. Our thanks also to the firm of *Algordanza*, in particular *Frank Ripka* and *Rinaldo Willy*, for their extensive commitment and willingness to provide us with insights into the actual production of diamonds.