



Source: AFP, 'Muslim students angry at headscarf remarks', Breaking News, *The Australian online*, 26/11/06.

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Sebastian Crow owned the largest collection of instructional massage videos in the world. Tapes, disks, spools and cartridges lined row after row of inbuilt shelves in the many-walled room where he spent all of his time. And I mean all, save for the rare occasions when porters would pack him securely in his velvet-lined travelling case and carry him to see someone or something in person.

Supposedly, not a single video was pornographic, although some were, he admitted, erotic. I'm not sure I really believed him, but the one that was playing when I entered his fastidiously structured room was of the typical educational variety. A pair of hands glided over the olive-skinned back of a young woman in a slow, firm effleurage movement, causing the tissues of her flesh to ripple gently. Sebastian, as always, watched from his alcove, his lean face expressionless, his eyes only occasionally blinking. It was not, he said, a form of vicarious living. It was about the idea of touch. Not the visceral sensation, or even perhaps the evocation of a sense-memory, but simply the beauty of touch as an idea to be played with in his mind. Like an abstract painter playing with form and light and colour, it was something that he allowed to ricochet in his head, weaving connections.

Or maybe that was just the story he told himself. A way of tricking himself into believing that he didn't feel pangs of hunger for the sensations of physical contact, a means of squashing those feelings into a cold little corner of his big fat brain, where they could fester and boil and feed disconsolately off the imagery on the screen. If so, I almost felt sorry for him, because images were all the nourishment that those feelings would ever get. Because Sebastian Crow was a head in a jar, and he would never touch anyone ever again. The jar in which he was housed was perfectly cylindrical and made of glass. The cleaner came once a day to carefully wipe it over with non-abrasive cloths and very mild chemicals, so it was always sparkling. The liquid that bathed Sebastian Crow's bald, pickled head had an almost imperceptible green tinge to it, and miraculously it had never been changed. The pickling had been undertaken by Mrs Mamiko Yamakawa in 1871, and she had taken the secrets of the process to the grave. Mrs Yamakawa had been famous for the quality of her tsukemono (pickled things), especially her umeboshi, but obviously no one had suspected just how far her talents extended. Apparently, she always regarded Sebastian as her greatest accomplishment, and given that he was still alive, if alive is the right word, I suppose you would have to agree with her.

People encountering him for the first time displayed all manner of reactions, from fascination to outright revulsion. But the most interesting was the sense that some people had upon meeting him that he was something wrong, not as an individual being, but as an idea. His mere existence was an insult to their reality. Death is just as important as life when it comes to getting

a sense of what it is to be human, and the fact of Sebastian threw a big wooden clog in the machinery. Sebastian hadn't died, perhaps would never die, so what place did he have in humanity?

Sebastian's earthshakingly simple answer to all this was that he didn't give a flying fuck (although he didn't actually phrase it this way, because he never used obscenities). Ultimate detachment was something that he had always desired, and now he had it. For Sebastian, everything and everybody was an abstraction to be played with. Observation, objectivity, the purity of thought. His plain glass jar was a null-point from which to look out at the world, or look down on it, like watching an ant farm. The whole world rebuilt and manipulated inside his head, which was all he had left, and maybe all he wanted. I had never asked him if he had any regrets about his pickling, because I was warned when I first got the job as his amanuensis and all-round link to the physical world that any such inquiries would result in my immediate termination. The way the man at the recruitment firm enunciated the word made it sound like I would be summarily atomised.

The hands on the screen were moving on to circular kneading motions as I reached for the button to stop the video. I sat down in the Regency armchair that faced Sebastian's alcove. The height of the chair meant that I had to look up to meet Sebastian's eyes, which was no doubt intentional on his part.

'What do you want?' he snapped.

The best way to deal with Sebastian's personality when he was in that kind of mood was to ignore it completely, so I launched into the details that had been arranged for one of his rare outings in the velvet-lined box, to view a Kandinsky exhibition later in the week. He asked a few pedantic and tersely worded questions, and then, protesting that it was late, wished me goodnight. Since he rarely slept, this was his idea of an adroit way of getting rid of me under the guise of consideration for my welfare.

'Put the video back on', he said as I got up to leave. I went to the screen and pushed the button, and the hands resumed their therapeutic kneading of flesh.

'The flow of this one is excellent', said Sebastian. 'It is reminiscent of the Hawaiian lomi lomi style.'

I looked back to the alcove, where the image from the screen was weakly reflected in the glass of Sebastian's jar, and beyond the glass his unblinking eyes gazed through the almost-green fluid and briefly caught mine.

'Don't you think?'

I left.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Gavin Sladen.*