



COMMON
ACCOUNTS



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The Death Report



The
DEATH
Report

A COMMON ACCOUNT OF THE
ARCHITECTURAL PROTOCOLS OF
CONTEMPORARY DEATH

by

COMMON
ACCOUNTS

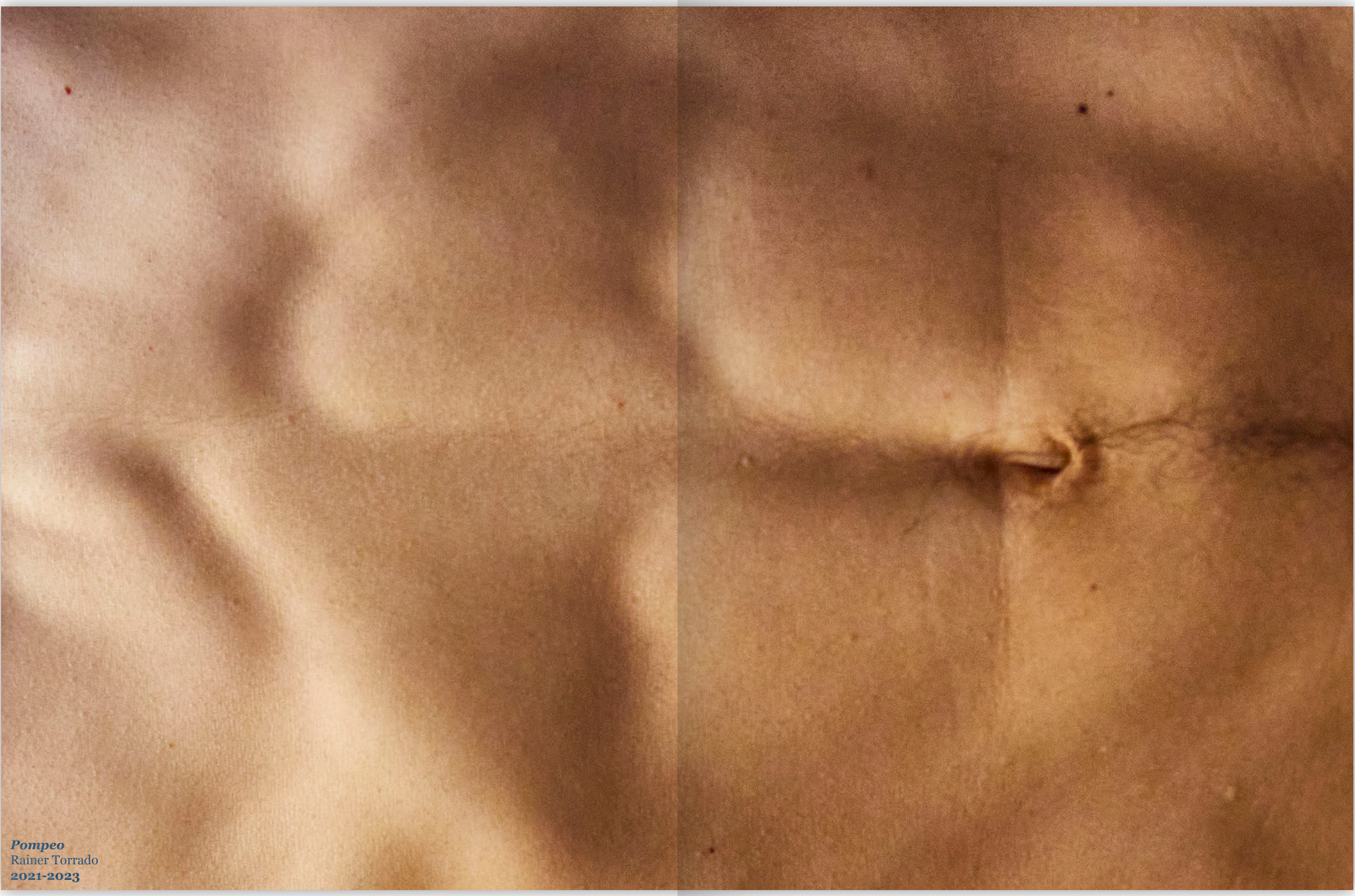
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PARANOIACS REST EASY

CHAIR BY COMMON ACCOUNTS

The following text developed from articles we have published on death and its spin-off cultures over the last eight years. We owe many outlets and their editors credit for helping us advance the ideas presented here. Among them are Princeton University's Pidgin Magazine, UC Berkeley's Room 1000, e-flux Journal, Cornell Journal of Architecture, Fuzz Magazine, and Yale University's Perspecta.

THE **DEATH** *REPORT*

by
COMMON ACCOUNTS

edited by
Charlie Robin Jones

The Future Tense
Russell Perkins
In the exhibition *Tumbling in Harness*
Curated by Erin Reznick
Art Museum at the University of Toronto, 2023
Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid



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THE DEATH REPORT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Death, as we knew it, is dead. New medical and digital technologies are transforming memorial, funeral, and general concepts of what it means to die.
2. Funeral practice has always been a product of environmental and technological circumstance. New technologies demand new rituals.
3. Death is a plastic force. The demise of the body and the construction of the body (physical or virtual) are two poles on a common spectrum of self-design.
4. Architecture equals death. Every concept of the design of the material world has been conditioned by a corresponding concept of death. As new definitions of death emerge, new concepts of architecture follow.
5. Afterlife is all about audience. Eternal continuity after death requires engagement from the living.
6. The digital afterlife is a largely unregulated cultural phenomenon. With it, a new form of bio-power is enacted by social media giants, who now determine who persists posthumously on the internet.
7. Renewed proximity to death brings us closer to untapped value.
8. Distance, blurriness, and smoothness are key parameters that condition an understanding of contemporary death and dying.
9. Industries serving death have produced spin-off technologies that have been atomized into daily life. Death continues to produce spinoff techno-cultures that make it possible to multiply modes of memorialization.
10. Funeral and ceremony take on new significance in this era—a moment obsessed with endings.
11. Data is diary. Our lives are recorded in data, which has become a central feature of “the virtual afterlife.”
12. The Dignified Transfer epitomizes death today. It collapses the logistical with the ceremonial and develops principally a representation of death. It relies on smoothness to process personnel and personal effects.



PRELUDE

The Anthropocene demands ritual. At least that was the central argument of our prior report, *Planet Fitness*. It viewed the existential threat posed by climate change as a driver of anatomical design: as a force for climate fitness. That text was concerned with—and suspicious of—prospective endings, much as this one is. Death, both at scales individual and collective, enacts ritual and modification to the human body. It enacts ceremony and layers it onto daily life. This is the case with the digital afterlife, too. Like *Planet Fitness*, *The Death Report* develops a reciprocity between threat and resilience, and demise and ritual, now in the context of beauty cultures, self-imaging, bio-prosthetics, urban form, and digital environments serving everyday death. Very much aware of the current popular obsession with endings, this report is concerned with the cultural and technological implications of the present and near-future of death as an industry, social practice, and biological event.

INTRODUCTION

Death is an everyday product of design. It is as contingent as your running shoes, your air fryer, your file server, your quads, or your 800-square-foot apartment.

The way we organize death, represent death, and calibrate its visibility manifests spatially. Venues for its formative consequence include funeral, remains disposal, mourning, memorial, and afterlife. The act of dying can be an act of design: like fitness and fashion, its ultimate goal is to construct the individual. And beyond the self, concepts of death have always brought themselves to bear on the material environment.

This is as true for the shaping of daily life as it is for the shaping of cities.

Despite this, death has generally become distant and increasingly less visible in the everyday. Since the early modern period, death has been systematically designed out of the quotidian. There were good reasons for this: chief among them hygiene and disease control, but also religious custom, fear, and political considerations that determine whose deaths we choose to see. Societies have largely surrendered death as a site for design action, because we rarely see it altogether, or because it is deliberately hidden

Two contradictory conditions—death’s widespread influence as a force of design and its progressive inconspicuousness—have today converged in a paradoxical status quo.

Death is able to be managed discreetly, without major interruption for the living. Yet it lurks in the origins of so many parts of our built environment that death is in fact close at hand all the time: in the cool air you breathe in a climate controlled room, in the masonry that assembles your house, and in the treadmill at the gym.



For the purposes of this discussion, we will use the term “death” to broadly describe three intertwined concepts: the anatomical definition of human end-of-life; the social customs it mobilizes; and the digital realm it animates.

Death’s relationship to these sites is undergoing a stress-test. New medical and communication technologies complicate the precision of biological demise and therefore the definition of anatomical death itself. Emerging forms of human remains disposition and memorialization are contesting long-held attitudes around the solemnity of death, and consequently, how we govern death and calibrate its visibility in daily life. In this context, the digital afterlife—the virtual mirroring or extension of life—has emerged as a largely unmanaged force with enormous impact on the cultural and material world.

In the eight or so years that we’ve developed this work, we have largely insisted that our engagement with this subject matter be focused on an ordinary, everyday concept of death. We have been preoccupied more with considerations of unexceptional deaths, whose private tragedy doesn’t make the news: heart attacks, not air-strikes; old age, not trainwrecks. After all, death is challenging enough even when it is anticipated, and our studio gravitates toward the exceptionality of the unexceptional: the paradoxically overlooked norm.

But in that same time frame, public tragedy — pandemics, warfare, now genocide — has returned again and again with a frequency that defies chance. The deep, inconsolable grief prompted by unjust, brutal, and terrible death has become all too common. As Sigfried Giedion, one of our central references

and giant of 20th century modernist architectural theory, observed 80 years ago while writing *Mechanization Takes Command*, the quotidian is indelibly suffused with violence. And so, we must acknowledge and identify its traces whether they remain out in the open or under the radar. Even when it is subtle, once-removed, camouflaged, or idiosyncratic (caskets are lined with cushioning, after all), one cannot talk about death without at least the subtext of killing.

OPENING SALVOS FOR A DIGITAL AFTERLIFE

“Hello John, I ran across your posting and saw your plea. My son, my only child Michael also passed away on Feb 25, 2013... I miss him. But that is OK as long as his videos remain in there forever.” Melinda Hogue, comment on John Berlin’s *My Appeal to Facebook*.

Broadly speaking, death is a wasted effort. Decades of technological progress have distanced the material business of death from everyday life. Sanitation, disease-control, and remains disposition have kept it neat and tidy and out of sight. The contemporary city has obviated many of the urban typologies that once played host to the social activities surrounding death. Still, death is visible in home decor, in fitness programs, and in virtual space. Architecture today has yet to acknowledge the potential posed by the latent social situations and infrastructural networks gathered around death, and recognize these entities as venues for action. The realities of the contemporary urban ecosystem have made the sites of death more ubiquitous yet less evident. The cemetery and the mausoleum are no longer the lone spaces of funerary



ceremony. The arrival of social media roughly two decades ago altered the social sphere, and with it the nature of funeral rituals, multiplying the channels open for remembrance, and changing the very nature of death itself.

New realities around data ownership and the increasing volume at which we build virtual archives re-frame and problematize the image of the body as a device for memorial. Death as we know it, is dead. The deceased no longer occupy only a metaphysical space of remembrance.

They are still our friends on Facebook; their digital presence occupies gigabytes in hard drives and servers; and conditions of ceremony are no longer limited to

traditional funerary rites. As well, the latent potential of the cadaver—its inherent energy, its material worth, and its political value—fraught as it is, no longer remains off limits in the casket. Death has become an inflection point rather than a terminus. In the ritual and the logistical dimension, death presents an opportunity economy.

DATA IS DIARY ¹

24 hours a day, new servers are installed at Meta's Prineville, Oregon data center. A person generates 1.7 MB per second and contributes to 74 zettabytes of yearly data worldwide.² Such is the demand of our digital society: storage architectures expand without end, increasing our draw on carbon-releasing energetic resources and impinging further on vulnerable landscapes at the fringes of the human-occupied world. The electricity consumption in data centers represents 2% of all greenhouse gas emissions today and is rising exponentially, expected to reach 8% by 2030. As humans die, their data mostly remains among the zettabytes of stored digital information accessed by the living. The search for forms of information storage that use less space and energy is an urgent endeavor.

Self-Assembly Lab of CiC Nanogune, in the Basque country, is currently prototyping the future of long term data storage with deoxyribonucleic acid. DNA is nature's way of storing and passing on genetic information. In the same volume of space, DNA can hold at least a thousandfold the information that a flash drive can. Further, it can be stored for centuries in dry and stable conditions. This long durability makes DNA an ideal candidate for "cold" memory, i.e. long-



term, inert information storage. Until recently, this alternative to solid-state drives and hard discs has been merely theoretical. Today, progress in bio and nanoscience has made molecular storage of digital information in DNA a reality. Digital data stored in 0s and 1s can be encoded into a sequence of bases (A,T,G,C) and read back with DNA sequencing tools.

Embedding DNA in polymer materials is an ongoing research frontier with applications in nanomedicine. We could imagine DNA-embedded polymers as building blocks for information-bearing surfaces and objects, a living room data cloud: an interior milieu of DNA-rich furniture. Only a miniscule amount of Self-Assembly Lab's DNA polymer needs to be sampled to access its information. The transformation of everyday objects into storage media follows McLuhan's assertion that "the new media are not bridges between man and nature: they are nature" (*Counterblast*, 1969). Humans have always been interested in depiction, recording, and information storage. At once a canvas, mirror, and hard disk, the walls of the Lascaux cave point to our deep-rooted desire to represent and retain. As if to bring the cave walls with us out into the world, we have long sought object-based means to store data. Clay inscriptions from Uruk (3100-3000 BC) and boxwood tablets from the Uluburun Shipwreck (1400 BC), and their more recent antecedents point to a persistent desire to store information portably, accessibly, and with artifactual attachment. The hieroglyphic walls of Egyptian tombs (3200 BC-400 AD) exhibit an interest in summary retrospection at the point of personal demise, such that history might inform a curious posterity: such that we may continue to speak and continue to be known.

The certainty and quality of information transmission is, in part, a product of an object's capacity for resolution and storage volume. Predating mechanically reproducible media, architecture has in various ways made itself available as a legible medium. Most literally, we can read walls that convey myth, arches that organize historical sequence, and floor plans that denote cosmology. More abstractly, we have seen buildings that elaborate existential concerns, corridors that structure knowledge, and windows that yearn for immateriality. How polymer-embedded DNA is accessed and read may change in the next hundred years, but the information stored within it will ostensibly remain useful and legible into the future.

In his assertion that "The book will kill the building," Victor Hugo recognizes the informational utility of both, and muses on the printed text's capacity for certain, literal expression over architecture's tradition of symbolic conveyance. The prospect of a data-enrobed environment may flip Hugo's polemic, yet reading—in the case of synthetic DNA: sequencing and decoding—remains the bottleneck process to accessing information. Unlike the integral legibility of Notre Dame's narrative portals, bas reliefs, and gargoyles, DNA-containing polymers don't yet project a symbolic form. This is where we believe designers can contribute.

¹ These paragraphs develop the ongoing work by Ibon Santiago of the Self-Assembly Lab at CiC Nanogune with Common Accounts to develop a DNA embedded polymer containing digital material, and used in the construction of everyday objects, furniture, and architecture.

² Irfan Ahmad, "How Much Data is Generated Every Minute?" *Social Media Today*. via Domo. June 15, 2018. ([link to article](#))



Three Ordinary Funerals
Common Accounts
Seoul International Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism
2017



NECRO-LOG: MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2015. LUNCHTIME MEETING IN THE OFFICE OF [REDACTED K].

[REDACTED K]: I'm OK with it, but people are going to ask it anyway... how is this an architectural problem? See, when Semper proposed the funeral car project for Duke Wellington to his architecture students he understood that this was an architectural problem. 3 million people went to the streets of London to the funeral. A body navigating the streets was understood as an architectural and urban issue. [...] Post-modernism was so invested in the cemetery, signaling the death of modernity, but I see that what you are interested in is on the business of death as in the physical rather than its poetics. You want to go back to this idea of death as the massive congregation of the living. Don't forget about the pyramid... and the Parthenon evolving from the mausoleum, and becoming the space for social life. This is something you need when bringing back death to the city, its dual function. [...] You might look at all this narrative around living with the dead. That is Psycho. Not only the character is living with his dead mother but he is also becoming her. But then all this plastic surgery culture is extremely related to death. Because while it tries to avoid death in a very obvious way it's also fetishizing death in terms of keeping a state of your physique frozen.

NECRO-LOG: WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 2015. THESIS DECLARATION, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE. FACULTY PRESENT (CLOCKWISE, FROM IGOR BRAGADO): [REDACTED C], [REDACTED D], [REDACTED E], [REDACTED F], [REDACTED D'S TEACHING ASSISTANT], [REDACTED, NOW CANCELED], [REDACTED G], [REDACTED H], [REDACTED I], [REDACTED J]

IB: How can death be actively evolved as an architectural technology to more fully serve society today?

[REDACTED C] rolls her eyes.

Don't Let Me Be Lonely
Common Accounts
Photo by Christopher Sherman
2021



Technological obsolescence is of some consideration here. If the data encoded into our environment is meant to be preserved for the long term, then the objects it embeds in must outlive us. Further, we tend to want to transmit data and move it around, so equipping it with a scale at which it can travel would be helpful in ensuring its portability and exchangeability.

We could imagine a future where information is stored close at hand, in one's environment. Mundane data, secret data, forgotten data, new data—the cloud may soon be within arm's reach: not in a remote server, but in the milieu we inhabit. We will live with our data. But, what opportunities and behaviors might flourish when our heirlooms, artifacts, and furnishings enjoy an expanded capacity for storage and storytelling. With casual, at-home Covid-19 testing strips, biochemistry began to enter the domestic realm for millions of people. Soon enough, science in the home may further atomize into the everyday, making the synthesis and decoding of DNA a normal function of daily life.

DNA and data are the constituent materials of which all publics are now composed, and each of us has an innate stake in the provision of and access to either. We must understand their capacities in order to develop consensus around their use.

The idea that humans—personhood, consciousness, cognition—can survive by digital means past a host's biological demise is based on a separation of bodies from *beings*: as if the realm of matter can only sustain meaning when thought runs through it. But the material self is critically important when thinking about the afterlife. We retain agency in life to design ourselves in death (to be cremated,

made up with cosmetics, adorned in jewelry, remembered in digital albums) if we wish to, such that even the corpse—as a disposal problem, as an image, as a proxy to personhood—is a site to enact one's idea of self.

IMMORTALITY GALORE

You know you've made it when your waxy double is standing in Madame Tussaud's. But wax melts and cancellation erases. Perpetuity is a false promise at best, even for the pros. For instance, preservation is the core business of the funeral industry. As much as some people may wax poetic over the enduring architecture of antiquity, cemetery operators who are legally bound to offer services "in perpetuity"—like the Mount Pleasant Cemetery Group in Toronto³—won't touch marble, for fear of acidic rain eroding relatively soft stone monuments like bars of soap (which does indeed happen over the right timespan). The truth is that we have only a rudimentary concept of time beyond our own lifetime, and eternity is so far beyond what humans experience that we are simply unable to either grasp it or plan for it. After all, what is Meta's plan to keep the lights on in Prineville a thousand years from now? "Perpetual" things need only outlive you, at which point they become someone else's problem. Perpetuity is forever-ness. Immortality assumes perpetuity is available to you. In order to discuss immortality, one first has to define what it is for a person to die. And, of course, one also has to decide what about a person (identity, consciousness, body) holds personhood. Some of those attributes could be preserved in perpetuity by digital means. Would that constitute a form of immortality?



Today, the definition of biological death is perhaps better described as a threshold rather than a single, sudden moment. As medical technology advances, the threshold between being alive and being dead is ever expanding. Distance, then, constitutes a key new parameter to develop an understanding of contemporary death and dying.

Closeness to death in biological demise is emblematic in the near-death-experience (NDE). As resuscitation techniques developed over the last few decades, it became possible for physicians, cardiologists, and psychiatrists to account for experiences of patients who were close to death. Since the 1970s, recorded NDEs became regular, and with them, secular western academic discussion of

afterlife took off. Parallel to the growth of metaphysics in 1970s architecture, mysticism was also infused in otherwise scientific thanatological work. Writers like psychiatrist Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1926-2004), considered an authority on deathcare studies with an extensive career counseling terminally ill patients and the mind behind the "five stages of grief" asserted, as scientific argument, that "people don't really die." The author of the book *On Death and Dying* concluded, after researching thousands of NDEs, that there is another existence beyond the light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel.⁴ Among the most consistent features of NDEs is that people are profoundly *changed* by them. New conceptions of death re-frame life for the individual and for society.

What was decades ago considered a deceased body might now be considered alive. "New devices (heart-lung machines, for example)... have shifted attention away from such fairly simple issues of whether a body is breathing or a heart is beating, to the complex issue of whether a brain is still functioning," said thanatologist Lyn H. Lofland in *The Craft of Dying: The Modern Face of Death*, in 1978.⁵

3_ "In this Act... 'perpetual care' means the preservation, improvement, embellishment and maintenance in perpetuity in a proper manner of lots and plots in a cemetery or of compartments in a mausoleum or columbarium..." Ontario (1960) "c 47 Cemeteries Act," Ontario: Revised Statutes: Vol. 1960: Iss. 1, Article 50, p. 433. ([link to article](#))

4_ Dr. Sam Parnia, Associate Professor of Critical Care Medicine and Director of Critical Care and Resuscitation Research at NYU School of Medicine asserts that "there are millions of people who have gone to the point of death and beyond." And NDEs are frequently similar. # "People who go through death and come back to life have recalled universal and consistent features" according to Dr. Parnia.

5_ Lyn H. Lofland_The Craft of Dying_1978



With the advent of digital technology, death's nature has been altered yet again. As our behaviors, interactions, desires, aspirations, emotions, and bodies have become quantifiable and replicable data patterns, it is not that the construction of our algorithmic alter egos have extended our existence over time, but that our own afterlives are taking over. We are dying on a double-plane of existence, first: as our digital actions are performed in real-time; and second: as they are instantly recorded and ostensibly, eternalized. We are actively keeping the binary running toward infinitude one click at a time, both building out and living our digital afterlives.

Cleverbot, a 2011 Turing test-passing chat site, served as a milestone with respect to this new definition of afterlife. Developed by British programmer Rollo Carpenter, Cleverbot is a human-to-bot text software, where human prompts are answered by an AI-generated, ever-growing archive of human-to-human text conversations. When chatting with Cleverbot, the user gets a response prompted by data left by another human, currently alive or possibly dead. Though rudimentary, Cleverbot pointed to the possibility of death-extending devices, making archived sets of data from the dead readily available for eternal consumption. Conceivably, a single DM written by one lover to another in 2010, might be adapted or spat out again in 2024, in 2050, or in 2100, making the moment of initial type entry the moment of construction of an eternal participation.

In "Be Right Back," Season 2, Episode 1 of *Black Mirror* (aired on February 11, 2013), a woman makes use of AI to bring back to life her deceased partner, whose avatar is animated by his immense social media history. The

episode was inspired by its writer Charlie Brooker's discovery of actual products that promised to do the same. StoryFile, launched by Stephen Smith in 2018, is one technology with similar aspirations. Smith has said that he and his wife and co-founder "were concerned about the preservation of Holocaust survivors. How do we ensure that important piece of history is preserved for future generations? We wanted to be able to have a conversation with the past."⁶ His partner, Heather Maio-Smith, says on the company's website: "I just wanted to be able to sit across from an individual who might not be with us anymore and feel like I was having a conversation with them!"⁷ Such an encounter after the given subject's death might qualify to many as inauthentic – or be devised with a greater concern for the living than the deceased. The "virtual afterlife" that products like StoryFile bring to market is not some elysium for the dead, but an animate repository of their personal effects, images, and messages resuscitated for the living. The "afterlife," according to that imaginary, is akin to persistence among the living. It may simply be that Silicon Valley's idea of Nirvana is the internet. Or that the higher priority goal may simply be life extension, generally. Either way, the best bridges big tech have yet built between the living and the dead seem predicated on 20th century notions of behavioral cloning.

*The virtual afterlife
is predicated on
a basic, shared
valuation of memory
and its perpetuation.*



*If we are data—or
at least accounted by
it⁸—our existence
is contingent on the
lifespan of the servers
perpetuating it.*

According to Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics* "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die." Vis-à-vis the digital afterlife, Mbembe's assertion triggers a chilling reflection on the ever-growing power of present and future tech giants. That ultimate sovereignty will reside in which big-tech will pay the bills, air condition, and dust your server, or if they'll simply pull the plug and re-write your disc space.

The Covid-19 pandemic has only accelerated our becoming data. As lockdowns were enforced the world over, many of those with internet access broadened their usual use of services. Total internet users grew from 4.1 billion in 2019, to 4.9 billion in 2021, according to the International Telecommunication Union. Improvised digital funerals and online mourning also became indispensable for families during the pandemic, but they obviated the already long casuistic of sophisticated virtual rituals, which have proliferated over the last two decades mostly below the radar of architects, designers, and commercial deathcare providers. On social media, mourners have designed new forms of posthumous homage, have

dilated the duration of mourning, have carefully considered the physical spaces that support digital counterparts, and have addressed problems of privacy, ownership, and exploitation.

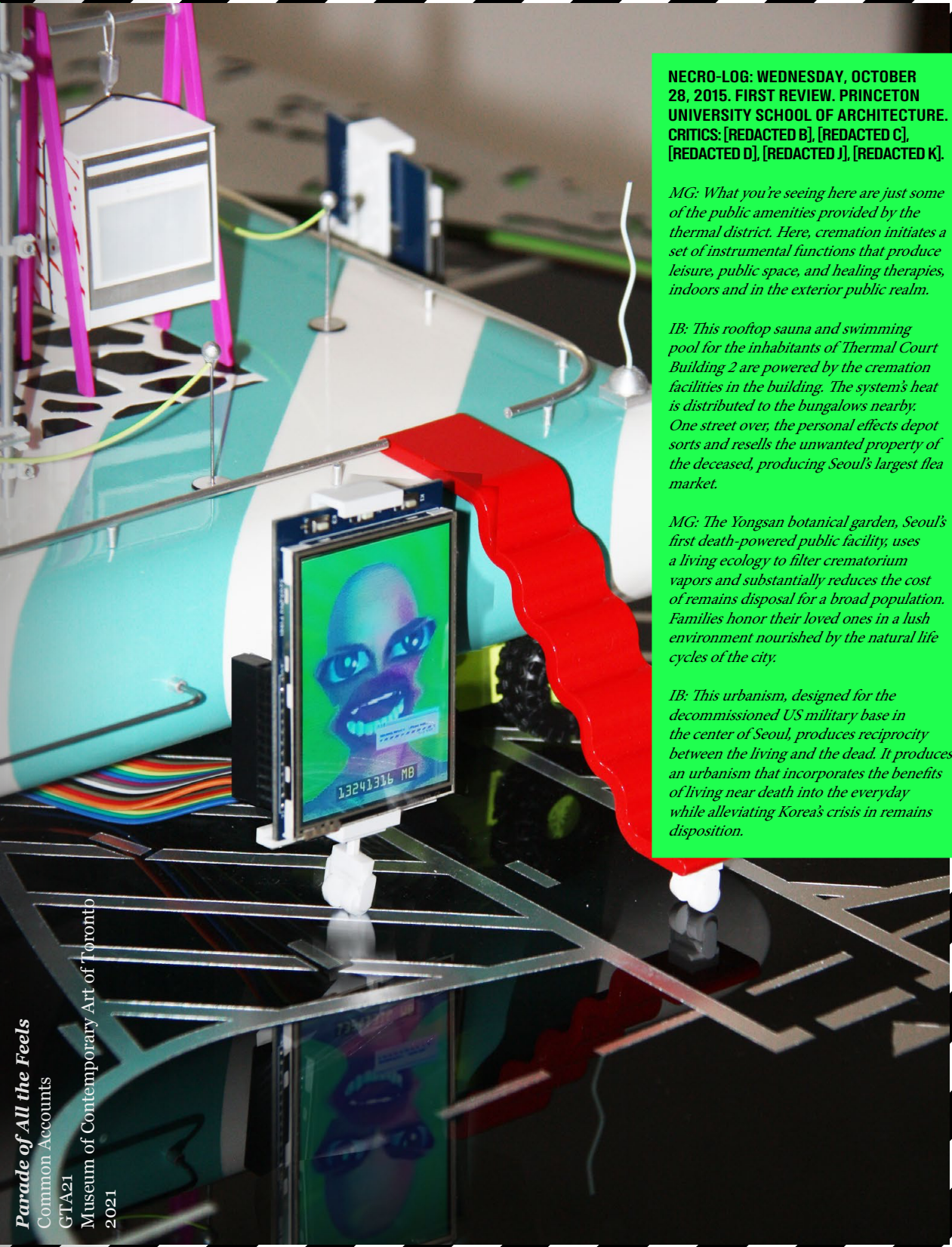
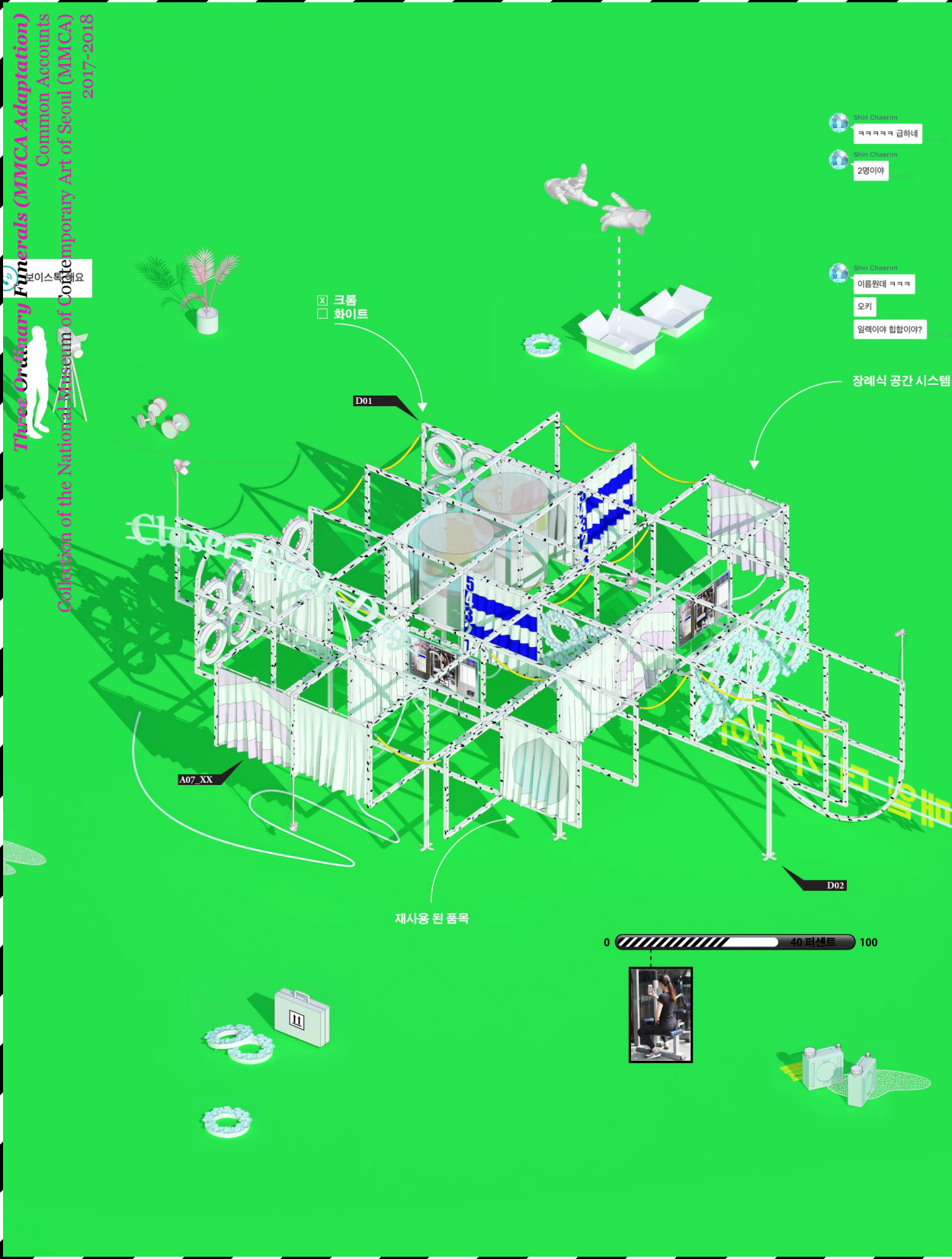
This is how we have come to propose that virtual remains be stored through our own funerary projects like Refresh, Renew (a funerary fitness catafalque we first built in Rome in 2019) and Three Ordinary Funerals (a prototypical funeral home we assembled for the Seoul International Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism in 2017). Both projects theorized "black box" servers, modeled on existing notions of afterlife: sites where something continues to exist, but inaccessibly and invisibly. Visitors to these sites would make lasting contributions that would never be seen again.

The terminus of our becoming digital seems to be the complete preservation of both mind (full brain scanning, neural upload) and body (prosthetics, stem cell regeneration), and the replacement of an *afterlife* with an indefinitely extensible actual life. Today's efforts toward posthumous digital consolidation may one day appear quaint in their ambition of offering only an imperfect approximation of personality. Perhaps even more naive is the notion that we would leave behind unencrypted traces or loose ends unsecured by firewalls.

6_ Pix11 News. Sep 4, 2023. [\(link to article\)](#)

7_ About StoryFile. [\(link to site\)](#)

8_ So says Nadim Samman citing Johannes Thumfart in his 2023 book, *Poetics of Encryption: Art and the Technocene*: "defacto real is what can be calculated by computers." Our thanks to Emilie Tamtik who drew our attention to this text in her graduate thesis research at the Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design at the University of Toronto.



NECRO-LOG: WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2015. FIRST REVIEW. PRINCETON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE. CRITICS: [REDACTED B], [REDACTED C], [REDACTED D], [REDACTED J], [REDACTED K].

MG: What you're seeing here are just some of the public amenities provided by the thermal district. Here, cremation initiates a set of instrumental functions that produce leisure, public space, and healing therapies, indoors and in the exterior public realm.

IB: This rooftop sauna and swimming pool for the inhabitants of Thermal Court Building 2 are powered by the cremation facilities in the building. The system's heat is distributed to the bungalows nearby. One street over, the personal effects depot sorts and resells the unwanted property of the deceased, producing Seoul's largest flea market.

MG: The Yongsan botanical garden, Seoul's first death-powered public facility, uses a living ecology to filter crematorium vapors and substantially reduces the cost of remains disposal for a broad population. Families honor their loved ones in a lush environment nourished by the natural life cycles of the city.

IB: This urbanism, designed for the decommissioned US military base in the center of Seoul, produces reciprocity between the living and the dead. It produces an urbanism that incorporates the benefits of living near death into the everyday while alleviating Korea's crisis in remains disposition.



Indeed, if the general sense of optimism before Cambridge Analytica's 2018 private data breach scandal encouraged us to post and upload content unreservedly for all to see, a virtual Styx may well increasingly come to separate the living from the megabytes that we leave behind: for fear of unwanted exposure, our files entombed for posterity in a mausoleum without a key.

MUSCLE MEMORY

Bodies are no longer confined to the ground, but sublimated to the cloud too. In examining Facebook's first significant encounter with death, we observe a case of memorial enacted through the transformation of the mourner's body, facilitated by an architecture of domesticity. In January 2012, John Berlin was a middle-aged, married father of three living in a trailer home in Arnold, Missouri. On January 28, his twenty-one-year-old son Jesse died unexpectedly in his sleep of unknown causes. Soon thereafter, Berlin started a YouTube channel and began uploading videos of his day-to-day activities, many of which featured his kids. *Experiments with Traffic Control* ("Just another day at work," February 15, 2012, 305 views), *Trippy Cat* ("She's cool man, she just kinda trippy," July 23, 2012, 1,189 views), and *Rubber Face* ("Just me and a leaf blower," Oct. 22, 2012, 6,602 views) documented the aftermath of Jesse's death and the subtle ways that it started to mobilize changes around the Berlin family home.

A few months after his son's death, Berlin discovered the 'Insanity' physical fitness program developed by California-based Beachbody, LLC. Confronted with death, Berlin turned to exercise

in hopes of reversing the effects that a largely sedentary lifestyle had had on his 44-year-old body. On September 15, 2013, John uploaded his first fitness-oriented video, which showed him competing in an obstacle course race. One month later, he began uploading videos of 'Insanity' workouts in his trailer home's living room. By December, he announced he was taking on clients as a trainer in that same living room (21,809 views), which had been outfitted with an ad hoc memorial to his son on the room's back wall.

Two years after Jesse's death, Berlin posted his first viral video, *My Appeal to Facebook* (February 5, 2014). It was a plea to Facebook for a video of content from his dead son's account. In it, a visibly emotional Berlin asked Facebook to release a "Look Back" video—an auto-generated slideshow of greatest hits from a user's data—using material from Jesse's profile (which he did not have access to). After his plea received 2 million YouTube views in a matter of days, Mark Zuckerberg called Berlin to grant his request and announced an immediate review of Facebook's memorialization policies governing the accounts of deceased users.

In the background of Berlin's plea video (3,051,927 views, 59,884 likes, 646 dislikes), his living room appears further transformed: his son's memorial wall is replaced by floor-to-ceiling mirrors, revealing sports equipment behind the camera that confirms the space as a gym—and Berlin as a fitness buff. The viewer, in turn, becomes a participant in Berlin's mourning, and Berlin's Facebook page and YouTube video comment feeds effectively operate as social platforms for others to commiserate and mourn deaths within their own families.



The catalogue of curator Lisa Taylor and architect Hans Hollein's 1976 exhibition *MAN transFORMS* asserted that "there are mainly two fields of man's activity: to survive during life and to survive after life." The reason we engage design, Hollein proposed, is "to live and to die and possibly to live beyond death." This presciently described the desire for self-preservation at the core of contemporary notions of the virtual afterlife. But it also described the way in which technologies foster transformations of the body indiscriminately, in both life and death. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a structuring cloud diagram for Hollein's exhibition oriented itself around the central figure of the "BODY." Among the few "interrelated subjects" orbiting around it were "redesigning the man," "bodybuilding," and "death." Self-design, according to the frame of the exhibition—is among those transformations that provide the extension of life after death: the replication, transmutation, or enhancement of the body.

Etruscan funeral practices, which featured athletic performances around catafalques,⁹ or Jewish ceremonial baths that took place near tombs in 3rd and 4th centuries AD, demonstrate the human desire to relate death to bodily maintenance and enhancement across cultures and time. More recently, writer Michael Anton Budd's *The Sculpture Machine* argues that a reciprocity between the construction of the body and existential vulnerability was a basis for imperial body politics. A form of *eudaimonia*, in the sense of investment in self-perfection, was triggered by encounters with death in the episodes analyzed by Anton Budd, both at the scale of the individual and at the scale of the species.

*Healing and decay
coexist along a
fluid scale of self-
design and inhabit
many of the same
artifacts, spaces and
technologies. Death
is therefore a plastic
force, like beauty,
hygiene, and desire.*

German architect and historian Gottfried Semper (1803-1879) identified the plastic practice of ceramics as one of "vessel making" and pointed to the reciprocal origins of the tub and sarcophagus as well as the urn and the canopic vase, claiming them as simultaneously archetypal instruments of death, ritual, sustenance, hygiene, and self-design. Such trans-biological instruments, now working in the domestic space, are links between the living and nonliving.

Back in Missouri, the transformation of Berlin's body mirrored the programmatic promiscuity of his living room, in transition from gathering space to gym. Both manifest as acts of memorial.

9. "Catafalque" is a word that shares a common root in Italian with scaffold. A catafalque is a usually temporary ceremonial structure, once common to European imperial metropolises, used to remotely mark the deaths of important figures in absentia.



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MG: Our project is framed within the postwar context of diplomatic, military, and industrial activity between the US and Korea in the construction of transnational death. The military's intrinsic connection with death continually translates death technologies and protocols to civil society and in so doing constructs death as a social reality.

IB: This thesis poses a new urban protocol for everyday death in the city focusing on the Yongsan Garrison as our first test case.

MG: What are the death infrastructures that might travel to the civilian milieu? An examination of the US military's lone port mortuary in Dover, Delaware, illustrates the impossibility of handling mass death without technological trans-scalarity.

IB: The tarmac, the turning radius, and the operation room...are all organized in a codependent hierarchy. Even the most basic infrastructural operations are imagined through the lens of ceremony to excavate value from death.

MG: We are hacking into existing necro-technologies to produce a multi-scalar arsenal of urban typologies for city-building.

IB: Part of our work now is to reproduce the logistical rigor of Mortuary Affairs in the context of Yongsan and to give architectural form to the urban protocol we speak of.



This points to the fact that death has long since moved beyond the cemetery, with new ceremonial protocols, and a new public of mourners to take part in them. Death is now perhaps most evident today online, where a lack of design regularly brings it to the fore in ways that are increasingly unresolved for the living. The fluidity of the body between material and digital domains serves to foster its own self-reflexive agency as a transformative instrument.

AFTERLIFE IS AUDIENCE

“Eternal continuity in the hereafter required co-operation on the part of the living.” Sigfried Giedion, *The Eternal Present: The Beginnings of Architecture*.

*In death,
one’s continued
participation in
society is what
ensures survival,
fosters memorial, and
proves existence.*

In the case of digital continuity, the dead maintain a presence in spaces of social and political engagement through the same channels and platforms inhabited by the living. The afterlife endures as long as it enjoys the support of those with a pulse. In the current state of techno-social affairs, the deceased can only be preserved if they are able to stay

productive. Social media are capital-driven platforms, after all, and their profitability is a product of ad buys, which anticipate a living audience. Continuing to feed the algorithm post-demise will guarantee a digital gravestone in the form of server space at Meta data centers. Your content may not need to be recent to be relevant.

Not only is one’s own afterlife a design project within the domain of the living, its very existence is predicated upon access to and influence over virtual and material channels: in other words, fame (micro or macro).

While the case of John Berlin operates through contemporary mechanisms of audience engagement, Semper provides a corresponding case of urban afterlife audience engagement from the early industrial period. His and Richard Redgrave’s 1852 design of a hearse for the funeral parade of Field-Marshal Arthur Wellesley, the 1st Duke of Wellington, re-materialized the war hero into a mobile architectural vessel at the heart of one of modern Europe’s largest urban funerals to date. This is not so much an example of a “common” death (though to be sure, even the extraordinary meet ordinary deaths), but of death and the commons. Semper and Redgrave’s design re-presented the spoils of the Duke’s greatest triumph, “eighteen tons of bronze from cannons captured from his victory at Waterloo,” which were melted down to create the body of the carriage. The Duke was re-instantiated as a mobile architecture that equipped him with a literal visibility appropriate for the celebrity he had enjoyed in life as



war hero and public figure. The parade drew an audience of over a million (more or less on par with Berlin’s initial viral viewership) and spawned spin-off celebrations and markets that sprang up along its course.

An 1852 drawing of the Duke of Wellington’s funeral published in the *Illustrated London News* depicts his procession in zig-zag in order to fit it all in to the available real estate of the page.¹⁰ There is striking resonance in this with the queue of mourners that wound its way along the Thames in central London in September of 2022, as they waited to visit Queen Elizabeth II lying in repose in Westminster Hall. Then and now, death coalesces publics and materializes cities through the monuments, crowds, and traditions it mobilizes. The queue even precipitated its own weather report from the BBC: the social practice of mourning thus mobilized as an act of place-making and record keeping: the fundamental responsibilities of monument.¹¹

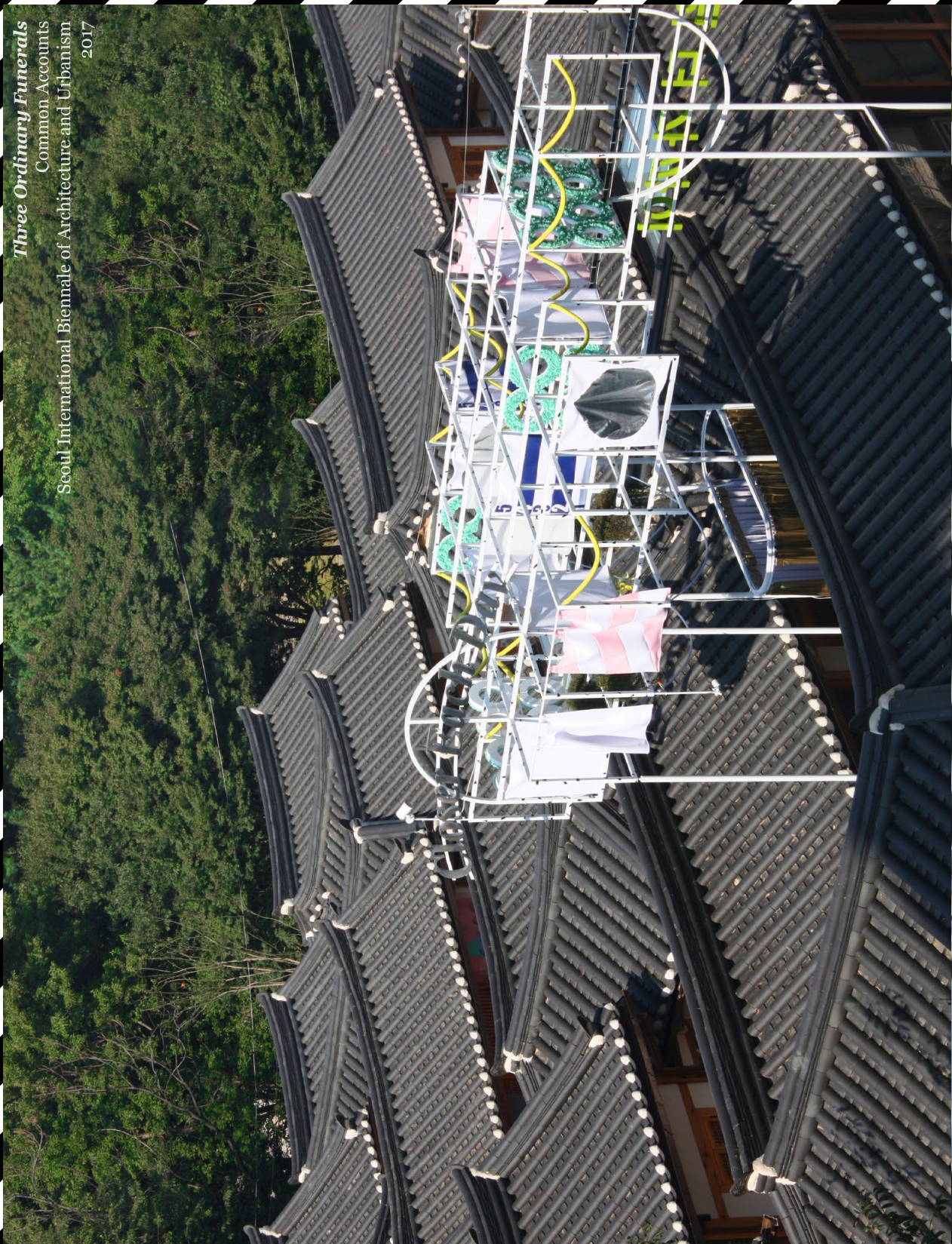
The first manifestation of a global, multi-and mass-media funeral may be the 16th century Roman *apparato* (Italian for assemblage of funerary artifacts). These were early examples of funeral ceremonies that addressed audiences across the globe, and negotiated the deceased body as media, as urban event, and as a situation with political utility. In the early 16th century, Roman mortuary chapels (*camera ardente*) used for state funerals underwent a series of typological alterations. Ceremonies transitioned from small-scale events that took place inside temples to urban

events centered around temporary constructions scattered throughout the city. Among myriad funerary artifacts was the funerary book: an embellished account of a given *apparato*, which would be disseminated to local and national libraries, as well as those of distant nations, establishing historicity as it projected ceremonial authority further afield.

Berlin’s memorials to Jesse—the portraits on the wall, the “Look Back” video, his YouTube uploads, and his own improved body—were enacted through the father and son’s participation in online social networks. They each agreed to terms of service when first navigating the virtual platforms to which they would become subscribers; they agreed to produce content and to commit their casual labor toward the tacit promise of their own self-documentation (and perhaps, eternalization); they are online and proven to have existed. Now, Berlin and his son are as present in the distributed data banks of the internet as they are or were in Arnold, Missouri. Their family trailer home exists multiple times over: in the real, as an architectural type rich in its allusions to transition and change, and as a backdrop in John’s home videos. And Jesse’s memory has been irreversibly shaped by his father’s actions, the events following his untimely death, and the media coverage surrounding John’s virality.

10_ “Preparations in St. Paul’s Cathedral for the Funeral of the Duke.” *The Illustrated London News*. (3 November 1852): 384.

11_Jack Wright, Matt Powell, and Harry Howard. “Now the queue has its own weather forecast! BBC reveals it is 7C in the Elizabeth Line where mourners are facing a 14-hour wait to pay their respects to the Queen.” *Daily Mail*. September 17 2022. [\(link to article\)](#)



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2015. FIRST REVIEW, CONTINUED.

[REDACTED C]: You're looking at moments where death became a model to think about the city. What would this logic look like in other contexts, with and without other programs?

MG: If we consider Haussmann's Paris plan, hygiene, death, and military mobilization were driving forces. The plastic revision of the city initiated changes in value, scenography, and daily life, too. We see this as a useful analogue.

[REDACTED C]: But you need to diversify the topic. The military has been historically a way to translate knowledge to a general population. Cross-cultural contamination. But it also goes both ways. I only see a one-way vector here. The handling of death... The military becoming paramilitary. Death and the military seems to be easily translated into an axiomatic. Is this a micro-historical project or is it broader?

[REDACTED D]: ...Or is it coincidental? I think your idea is stronger when applicable to other contexts.

IB: Using anecdotal material is methodological. We want to reject the idea that architecture can only be produced from the center, spreading outwards... and that these designs can be universally applied. We are not interested in typology and abstraction. We think death is also methodological: a theory. It is a subject matter so personal, individual even, and so culturally dependent, that it can only be tackled with non-universal, non-typological designs. So... yeah... I think death is a method. But at the same time there are forms of trans-temporality. Much of the anecdotal, contemporary material that we are showing is rooted in deep histories. Like with contemporary mourning through bodybuilding: there exists an ancient history of such traditions.



Celebrity, imagined or real, micro or macro, has long been a feature of social media culture.

On the internet, everyone can be a main character, whether in fact or as delusion. For many, death presents the last opportunity to claim fame or cement one's own presentation to the world, and thus becomes the ultimate project of self-realization, whether self-authored or materialized by community.

THE DIGNIFIED TRANSFER: A THEORY OF SMOOTHNESS

"A Dignified Transfer is the process by which, upon the return from the theater of operations to the United States, the remains of fallen military members

are transferred from the aircraft to an awaiting vehicle. The remains will then be transferred to the mortuary facility located at Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations, Dover AFB, Del. The dignified transfer is not a ceremony; rather, it is a solemn movement of the transfer case by a carry team composed of military personnel from the fallen member's respective service. A dignified transfer is conducted for every U.S. military member who dies in the theater of operation while in the service of their country." Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations, *Dignified Transfer*.

Dover Air Force Base hosts the US Military's lone port mortuary in the continental United States. It is operated by Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations (AFMAO) and receives and processes soldiers killed in conflict theaters. At Dover, AFMAO is responsible for identification and medical examination, the organization of personal effects, and the preparation of the body for funeral.

All this takes place in the logistical suburbanism of Dover Air Force Base: a low-density, industrial park characterized by open-air parking lots, closely shorn lawns, and generous turning-radii that sprawl between the airport apron and Delaware's Route 1 highway. It has housed a mortuary since 1955.

AFMAO is the unit that organizes the Dignified Transfer procedure: the solemn unloading of soldiers who have died in combat, from the aircraft that has transported them back to American soil from the theater of operations in which they served. It is officially identified as a procedure rather than as a ceremony, but it is fundamentally ceremonial. The



sequence begins with the packing of human remains amid bags of ice, inside of an aluminum transfer case that is then shrouded with a neatly pressed American flag and loaded onto an aircraft. These flights often make a stop at Ramstein Air Base in Germany before carrying on to the United States. The process culminates with the arrival at Dover, often on Lockheed C-5M Super Galaxy or Boeing C-17 Globemaster III transport aircraft. The Transfer will make use of a mechanized cargo loader or simply an extendible ramp to offload the case to the honor guard of six white-gloved personnel who await it on Dover's tarmac apron.

The Dignified Transfer is the strategic adjustment of an ordinary logistical procedure such that it becomes ritual. It is enacted through the elaboration of theater (handle held with gloved hand, vehicle doors opened in synchronized gesture, feet forward and "this side up") in the performance of everyday mechanics. The military's global reach is animated by infrastructural protocols like it that understand bodies as part of an arsenal of logistical units¹² and in so doing, mobilize from them political, aesthetic, and ceremonial value.

Dignified Transfer is a compound term—an operational innuendo: "Dignified," denoting honor and esteem; "Transfer," conveying the logistical and the bureaucratic. Simply put, the Dignified Transfer is a systematic protocol that layers ceremony onto operational process toward the production of logistical solemnity. In this procedure, heroic remains are transported in heroic containers in heroic vehicles

through heroically smooth channels of infrastructure.

American soldiers who die in combat—for instance, 58,220 in Vietnam; 4,410 in Iraq—are retrieved, identified, cataloged, returned, and processed according to the protocol of the department of Mortuary Affairs. One of the unit's diagrams articulates the order of things: storage; photography; personal effects; finger/foot printing; full body x-ray; dental oral surgery; dental x-ray; dental exam; pathological autopsy exam and records analysis; identification; cleaning and preparation; embalming; casket; holding; uniform; storage; shipment. Depending on the manner of death, remains may include incomplete fragments of the service member in question. In an article by Matt Sedensky published by the Associated Press in 2021, Air Force Col. Alice Briones was quoted saying that, "all we receive may be a hand or a leg... But with every remain, whether it's a fingernail, a hand, or the whole torso, it's the same dignity, honor and respect."¹³

At the site of the death, frontline Mortuary Affairs operatives gather the soldier's remains when possible. To do this, they are equipped with a Mobile Integrated Remains Collection System (MIRCS): a proprietary model of refrigerated shipping container that

12_ Dover is a key fulfillment site for military transports. "Seventy percent of all normal cargo headed for contingency operations overseas originates from Dover Air Force Base, Delaware." Airman 1st Class Jacob Morgan. "More in a Day than Most in a Month." Dover Air Force Base. ([link to site](#))

13_ Matt Sedensky. "Afghan war's end quiets chaplain's litany of funeral prayers." AP News. July 20, 2021. ([link to article](#))



preserves remains as they are returned to the nearest base. MIRCS, produced by military technology contractor Guild Associates Inc. since 2005, can be deployed on the back of a truck, or dropped into a remote site by helicopter. It adheres to international intermodal transportation standards, which means that the logistical reach of Mortuary Affairs' collection process is not only global, but that the proprietary designs devised for today's militarized death operate in harmony with the same systems of commodity production that deliver most commercial goods.

Tarmac orients the circulatory and philosophical culture at Dover. Depots, hangars, offices, commissaries, chapels, and restaurants, each equipped with a parking lot rivaling its counterpart building in footprint, appear to be largely ambivalent about their proximities and neighbors within Dover's network of continuous asphalt surfaces. The facilities related to Mortuary Affairs, however, are sequestered in the southeast end of the base. The Joint Personal Effects Depot is next to the Charles C. Carson Center for Mortuary Affairs, which in turn is located near the end of one of the narrow taxi runways so that bodies can be ferried directly to a loading dock. The Air Force Base flower shop—for those looking for a memorial spray, perhaps—is located one lot west of the mortuary cluster. The base's streets are constantly interrupted and merged. Each building is an island buffered with grass and encircled by road. In some cases, streets take the product names of familiar military symbols and technology. Lockheed Martin's transport aircraft lends its moniker to "Galaxy Street," and further north you may

find yourself on "Chevron Ave." In this way, instruments of the technological paradigm are honored and personified. At Dover, infrastructure is indiscernible from daily life.

Dover operates on a principle of continuity: like any logistical operation, interruption is anathema.

Once a visitor makes it past the front gates, the tarmac below their car enables smooth continuous driving to staging zones, aprons, and runways. Cargo, equipment, ordnance, and human remains can't move themselves. At Dover, freight is hence rolled on cars, trucks, pallet jacks, and loader vehicles. Extra care must be taken with sensitive, explosive goods, and so Dover runs on smoothness. Loading bays receive goods at truck level. Any differences in height are managed mechanically. Most buildings are single storey. Fittingly, ensuring the smooth movement of goods is the 436th Aerial Port Squadron Ramp Services Shop.

Dover exemplifies just one form of anatomical design enacted by the US military. The armed forces operates one of the most advanced funeral services programs in the world, and has to be among the largest physical fitness



enterprises going. It is dedicated to body processing in both life and death, and beyond the anatomical, is engaged in the fashioning of virtue and heroism as an image.

In the Dignified Transfer, bodies glide: across conveyor belts, over wild terrain and asphalt, onto planes and off of them, on wheels and on tires. Like other logistical processes, interruption and delay spells disaster, further intensified by a concern for natural decomposition of precious cargo.

AN EDEN IN DELAWARE: LIFE IN EAGLE HEIGHTS

At the opening of his 1965 essay, *The Great Gizmo*—a text that incriminates portable, small devices as instrumental to the American colonial project—Reyner Banham quotes MoMA Curator of Architecture and Design, Arthur Drexler: "the purpose of technology is to make the dream a fact... The end is to make the Earth a garden, Paradise..." Eagle Heights, the base housing adjacent to Dover AFB, is a perfect model of the suburban American "paradise," and reminds us of ordinary technology's fundamental proximity to violence and death. It is a suburban enclave operated by Hunt Military Communities (HMC)—a private business that functions in close collaboration with the military—that makes abundantly visible the historic proximity between military industry and the domestic. At first glance, its cul-de-sacs and beige single-family homes could belong to any subdivision in America today. It is the minor differences that are the most telling about the neighborhood's

military thematization. These are the details that exaggerate the ways in which daily life in American suburbs is fundamentally linked to military protocols for security, discipline, and aesthetics.

For starters, the Eagle Heights' home types—Stratofreighters, Stratotankers, Constellations, Globemaster IIs—are ordinary enough in their appearance, but bear the names of the Boeing and Lockheed tech stationed on the AFB apron nearby. Notably, the nomenclature in other Hunt Military Communities is largely generic. At most, houses are named after trees (Maple, Douglas Fir, Mimosa), and at the least, they resemble catalog numbers or relate to personnel rank (A, 3C-2, SNCO 4BR). The neighborhood is defended by a perimeter fence and unlike other gated communities, its access points are supervised by active personnel. Up until recently, being on active duty was a prerequisite for a household looking for tenancy in Eagle Heights, and though HMC has opened up access to civilians in response to declining market demand (in lock step with recent lower general military enlistment in the United States), thorough background checks for all occupants remain mandatory.

"At Eagle Heights Family Housing, your family's service and sacrifice is at the heart of everything we do."¹⁴

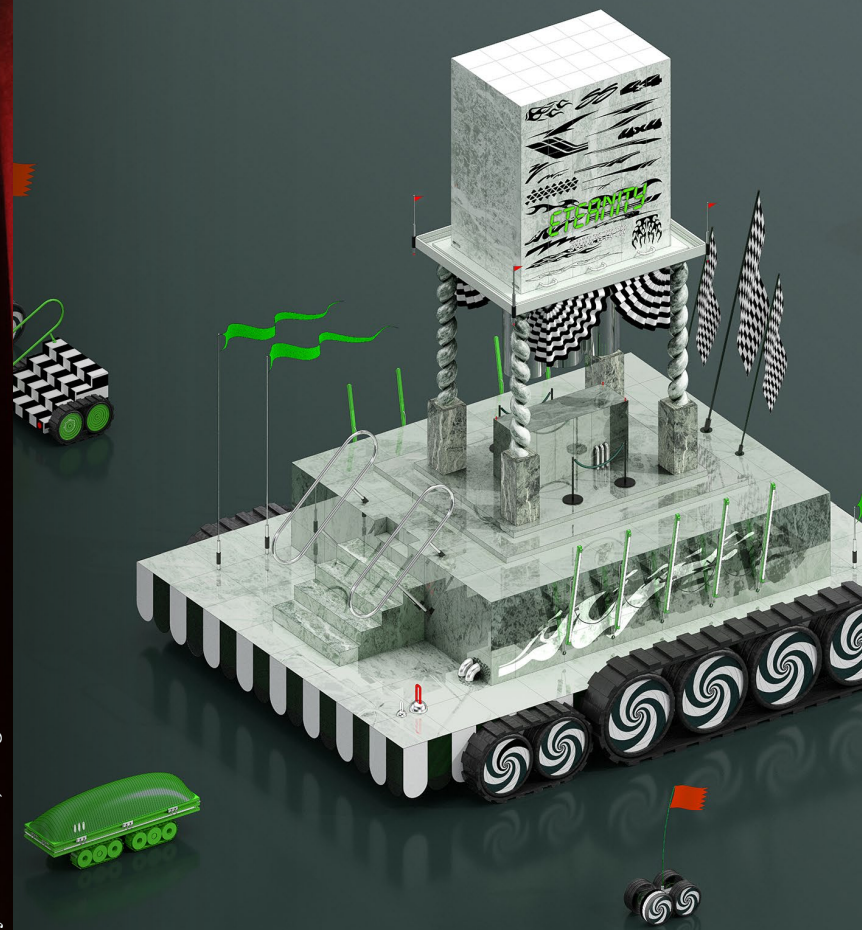
You'll never need to mow your lawn as a resident at Eagle Heights. Like the bootcamp buzzcut, closely shorn lawns

14_Hunt Military Communities flyer advertising houses for rent in Eagle Heights. Posted to several HMC listings. ([link to site](#))



You Are Well Liked in Your Community
Common Accounts
Tumbling in Harness, Curated by Erin Reznick
Art Museum at the University of Toronto, 2023

Parade of Remote Rituals
Perspecta 54: Atopia
2022



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[REDACTED J]: Ok, but, at the same time it's about the everyday. Then why the military? Are you talking about the mundane in the military death?

[REDACTED D]: Ok, so this is a prototype.

[REDACTED J]: Can I get a piece of necro-technology?

[REDACTED C]: How do you know when somebody is dead?

[REDACTED D]: Get it out of Seoul.

[REDACTED B]: This idea of the "alliances," between military and domestic, between countries, is leaving death in the periphery. Your work is not about the poetry of death. Canned meat is death. People having surgery is death. Don't be apologetic. Choose your words wisely because they induce a methodology. The military is killing people and at the same time is constructing death as a social reality. How do militaries calculate death? What is their vocabulary? ... For example, these funeral homes you've shown that are being thematized can be seen as military weapons. That's your focus.

[REDACTED D]: Now I understand this pairing. You need to translate that intention.

[REDACTED C]: How does death become a cultural project? The performance of death.



are enforced by a dedicated landscaping staff. Most outdoor spaces in Eagle Heights are communal or (maybe more accurately) unclaimed. Most houses have no enclosed yard, and those that do border them with such low fences that passersby in the neighborhood can see over them. Eagle Heights enforces a realm of expanded sightlines and exposure—enabling surveillance of its interstitial pastures.

Eagle Heights is in many ways a normative example of American suburbs generally, which makes all the more pointed its connection to Dover. It rehearses a domesticism mobilized in service to death. Its constituent houses are named for the airborne carriages that facilitate the Dignified Transfer, and so all residents of Eagle Heights are participants in its ceremonial logic.

ARCHITECTURE EQUALS DEATH

Architecture equals death. Every conception of architecture has been and

15_ To name one, “the rise of stone architecture can, in the first instance, be attributed to the Egyptian conception of the nature of death” as stated by Sigfried Giedion in *The Eternal Present*, Volume II, *The Beginnings of Architecture*, 1964.

16_ Sigfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command*. pp. 246.

17_ ETH Zurich, GTA Sigfried Giedion Archive: Folder S16, Subfolder “First index and ideas;” Folder S18 “Preliminary Layouts and Indexes;” Folder S19 “Unpublished First Conclusion;” Folder S23 “First Typescript in German;” Folder S22 “Second Typescript in German;” Folder S23 “First Typescript in German.”

18_ Such importance was given to the chapter on death that the cover of *Mechanization Takes Command* was produced with material collected by Giedion for that same chapter. The cover, originally designed by Stamo Papadaki and depicting a bloody piece of meat, was lost in the mail and did not arrive in time for publishing, as the correspondence present in the Papadaki Archives at Princeton University testifies.

19_ Paula Young Lee, “Hide, Seek, Slaughter, Meat: The Slaughterhouse as Site.” *Food & History*, vol. 3, n° 2, 2005.

is directly shaped by its relationship to death, be it through ideals of the afterlife, metaphors related to health and illness, links to war, or the material management of the dead. Quintessential architectural traditions have been born out of our relationship with death.¹⁵

Death has been a vehicle to not only to think about the city, but to think about histories of architecture.

Those histories are shaped by conceptions of death and some of its associated conditions (vulnerability, violence, degradation), from Alberti and Filarete all the way to Sigfried Giedion and Tony Vidler. And so, as death itself is redefined, architecture follows.

French-Swiss historian Sigfried Giedion (1888-1968), widely regarded as an essential protagonist in the modernist movement, was among the first generation of historians to acknowledge the role of death-related industries as sources of architectural invention and critical contributors to the construction of the American landscape and modern European cities. His texts established death and its spinoff technologies within the realm of the quotidian. For Giedion, death is found in the washing machine, the fridge, canned meat, the sink and the vacuum cleaner. That is, death could be found in every domestic object that



helped distance people from abject organic matter and hazards that they might otherwise have to deal with. He argued that this class of technology had induced in humans a neutrality towards the implicit threat of violence masked by machines.

After emigrating to London in 1934 to escape Nazism, Giedion, of Jewish descent, landed at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design in 1937, invited by then Dean Walter Gropius. In 1942, while still in the US, Giedion started to write a book on the impact of mass industrialization on daily life in North America. The book would be called *Mechanization Takes Command* and it included a chapter called *Mechanization and Death: Meat*, which presented a modern history of the abattoir and its social and material implications. One can surmise analogies between animal slaughter and human death, given the mechanized, mass extermination of Jews in Europe concurrent with the book’s production. The urgency of this analogy emerges in later manuscripts of the chapter, which communicate an increased gravity. “This neutrality toward death may be lodged deep in the roots of our time. It did not bear itself on a large scale until the War, when whole populations, as defenseless as the animals hooked head downwards on the traveling chain, were obliterated with trained neutrality,” says Giedion.¹⁶ More recent accounts, like Enzo Traverso’s *La Violence Nazie*, argue that the nature of Nazi exterminations was founded not only in Germany’s colonial imperialist aspirations, but also in industrial rationality and technical serialization of early-to-mid century western economies. Before settling on the final chapter title, “Mechanization and Death: Meat,” Giedion’s apparent uncertainty around

the framing of this text yielded various alternatives. Draft titles varied from “Butcher,” to “Meat,” to “Death,” and “Killing.”¹⁷

In no other chapter in *Mechanization Takes Command* is technological progress, rationalism, and their social consequences as fiercely challenged as they are in *Mechanization and Death: Meat*. Giedion’s allegiance to modernism cannot be understated—the historian was the first Secretary-General of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM), an organization founded with the purpose of disseminating Modernist Architecture. But in the conclusion of this book, Giedion remarks: “Future generations will perhaps designate this period as one of mechanized barbarism, the most repulsive barbarism of all.”¹⁸ Modernism always self-consciously grappled with the ethics and visibility of the abattoir, violence, and death.

The food historian Paula Young Lee points out in her paper “Hide, Seek, Slaughter, Meat: The Slaughterhouse as Site,” that before the consolidation of killing and processing in the slaughterhouse, the urban meat industry was dispersed across market stalls, kiosks, butcheries, and quartering sites operated by specialized vendors. Reliability of food supply drove both the organization and enlargement of these sites into centralized facilities, often at the peripheries of the urban center. Public *tueries* (slaughtering places) had been imagined by French architects from the 1750s and were the subject of academic design competitions sponsored by the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1768 and 1786, but wouldn’t materialize until the early 19th century.¹⁹



Eventually, the influential architect Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand published a design for an unbuilt slaughterhouse in his *Precis des Leçons d'Architecture*, a series of lectures given at the newly opened Ecole Polytechnique, which included a proto-modern compendium of diagrammatic plans, modules, and strategies for the efficient design of civic architecture—much needed to support the state-building project of modern France.

Durand argued for a modular, rational approach to design labour, such that design could be reduced to a systematic process of reasoning and formal selection. This was rooted in a concern for economy with benefits for the modern state: design work could be sped up, and if architecture's schematization was standardized, then its utility could be ensured, and its construction sped up.

In that spirit, Durand presented a typological diagram for the slaughterhouse with provision for slaughter and butchering, depot stalls, a tree-lined precinct for contact with buyers and outside markets, and a hidden channel for waste fluids to a drain to an adjacent riverway. Durand also proposed to locate his prospective slaughterhouse on the outskirts of the city, contributing in his words, to the “cleanliness and health of the city” and to “the security of its citizens.”²⁰ This is indicative of a broader, modern inclination to distance death—of animals and of humans—from daily life, pointing to growing awareness of science, safety and sanitation.²¹

Over the course of the 19th century, publicly funded abattoirs were built: first by Napoleonic decree, and later, at an even larger scale, by Georges-Eugène Haussmann.²² All of these were located

at or beyond the outskirts of the city, to limit their contact with the public, which was interested in eating more meat, but increasingly uninterested in being exposed to the industry of slaughter. In their location, one can observe a calculated coordination between death's visibility and its service.

The more death is mechanized and systematized, the more it is distanced from daily life.

GAUSSIAN BLUR

As we type, Palestinian civilians are being killed en masse in Gaza. iPhones have shrunk the space between us and sites of industrialized violence like it. But death, which is widespread in reality and online, is being managed discreetly, distanced by high-speed swiping and “algorithm training” to foster a less graphic feed. It is as Paula Young Lee says when reading Giedion: “the mechanization of death repudiates the gaze.”²³ On Instagram, the swiping of the thumb repudiates death. Of the slaughterhouse, Giedion wrote, “Death cries and mechanical noises are almost impossible to disentangle. Neither can the eye quite take in what it sees.”²⁴ Instagram's Sensitive Content algorithm is a tool designed to generate distance between daily life and representations of death and violence. The image tagged as “sensitive” is made illegible by reducing brightness and applying a “Gaussian blur.”²⁵ 2D blurring scrambles pixels until

the image content is unintelligible to the eye. Similar features are deployed by other tech giants like TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, for sensitive content on their platforms. The software company Adobe defines Gaussian Blur on their website as a “vellum on top of the image” which “smoothes uneven pixel values”. This form of digital *veil*, named after German mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss (1777-1855), is a process which creates a normal distribution of pixels through a function called *convolution*. Violence slides in the smoothness of the interface of Instagram, lubricated by the smoothness of the image itself. Both the flow and the content of the media stream are smooth. The friction brought by definition—by noise, by detail, by sharp edges—by *unveiling* death would constitute an interruption no logistical apparatus built on the continuous provision of pixels could afford. The requisite “distance” that Instagram has determined must separate representations of violence from users is measured in smoothness: a 50 pixel radius blur and 50% darkening.²⁶

Paradoxically, smoothing and blurring are also tools to increase definition. In image processing and machine learning, techniques like Gaussian blur are applied to enable a computer's detection of image content. Smoothing and blurring are often used to reduce noise and allow the more structural elements of a photo to take priority.²⁷ “Smoothing and blurring is one of the most important preprocessing steps in all of computer vision and image processing. By smoothing an image prior to applying techniques such as edge detection or thresholding we are able to reduce the amount of high-frequency content, such as noise and edges (i.e., the “detail” of an image). While this may

sound counter-intuitive, by reducing the detail in an image we can more easily find objects that we are interested in.”²⁸

The calibration of smoothing and blurring can augment or diminish an image's clarity: these can be tools for definition as much as for obfuscation. Considerations of blur, noise, and target identification are central to military lethality in the 21st century.²⁹ As warfare and oppression become increasingly managed by computer vision, calibration of smoothing and blurring may become the instrumental function that determines life and death.

20_ Paula Young Lee, “Hide, Seek, Slaughter, Meat: The Slaughterhouse as Site.” *Food & History*, vol. 3, n° 2, 2005. p.246.

21_ Giedion uses the history of the abattoir to record humankind's propensity for violence generally. The postscript of *Mechanization Takes Command*, which was published just a few years after the conclusion of World War II, makes this plain when it considers the ethics of mechanization.

22_ In 1807 Napoleon issued a decree to build five abattoirs near the outer limits of Paris, and in 1810 to build one in every city of France, beyond each city's limits. Sigfried Giedion, “Mechanization and Death: Meat,” *Mechanization Takes Command*, p.210.

23_ Paula Young Lee, “Hide, Seek, Slaughter, Meat: The Slaughterhouse as Site.” *Food & History*, vol. 3, n° 2, 2005. p.243.

24_ Sigfried Giedion, “Mechanization and Death: Meat.” *Mechanization Takes Command*, 1948. p.246.

25_ Erin T. Simister, Victoria M. E. Bridgland, Paul Williamson & Melanie K. T. Takarangi (2023) *Mind the Information-Gap: Instagram's Sensitive-Content Screens are More Likely to Deter People from Viewing Potentially Distressing Content When They Provide Information About the Content*, in *Media Psychology*, Vol. 26.

26_ By our own calculation.

27_ “Blurring is the averaging or integration process in that high spatial frequencies are attenuated. Thus blurring can be corrected by the use of differential operations. Smoothing is essentially concerned with noise removal.” V.V.D. Shah, “Image Processing and its Military Applications.” *Defense Science Journal*, vol. 37, no. 4, October 1987. p.459.

28_ Adrian Rosebrock, “Open CV Smoothing and Blurring.” *PyImageSearch*, April 28 2021. ([link to article](#))



Smoothness has always been a tool to calibrate the visibility of death and violence in mechanized society. Smoothness describes the consolidation of meat distribution to the outskirts of the city. Smoothness describes the flow of assembly lines and conveyor systems.

Smoothness describes the ambitions of the Dignified Transfer in transporting a fallen soldier from aircraft to tarmac. Smoothness describes the softening of potential interruption to the otherwise inoffensive flow of pixels on social media.

Smoothness is challenged by foul stench and fugitive risk. Smoothness

29_“Ground military target recognition plays a crucial role in unmanned equipment and grasping the battlefield dynamics for military applications, but is disturbed by low-resolution and noisy-representation.” Fan-jie Meng, Yong-qiang Li, Fa-ming Shao, Gai-hong Yuan, Ju-ying Dai, “Visual-Simulation Region Proposal and Generative Adversarial Network Based Ground Military Target Recognition,” *Defence Technology*, Volume 18, Issue 11, 2022, Pages 2083-2096.

is challenged by friction and snag. Smoothness is challenged by error and obtrusion. Smoothness is challenged by attention and double take.

NECRO-RENDERING AND THE INVENTION OF THE LIVING ROOM

In a preparatory script for a lecture summarizing his chapter on death, Giedion not only showed a new stance towards rationality vis-a-vis the mechanized death, but emphasized the importance of its representation: “These designs [for butchering machinery] have the sole purpose of illustrating the patent claim as clearly as possible. Yet if we look at their endless continuity, impartially, unconcerned with their technical significance, they strike us as pictures of a modern ‘dance macabre’. Their rigid, matter-of-factness is more sincere & direct, and therefore more terrifying than the works of art of the 19th century dealing with the relationship between life & death... The more mechanization is being refined, the more contact with death is banished from life.”

Precisely, the project of making death invisible from the quotidian was arguably the biggest representational project of modernity. The rationalists’ key driving principle that buildings were “machines for living in” implied that dead bodies were left out as irrelevant subjects to serve and conform to.

This attitude exists equally today. Rachel Carson’s 1962 “Silent Spring” and Rob Nixon’s 2011 “Slow Violence and the



Environmentalism of the Poor” have argued for the importance of making patent the presence of death in daily life and the domestic. Existential threats like the climate emergency make it critical to make visible those upper-middle-class-western quotidian household elements which are relentlessly and invisibly exporting death to geographies beyond their own, from the aerosol can to Trump Steaks.

At the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, death was rendered out of domestic spaces.

The detachment of death from daily life and household items, and the search for an abstraction from death was designed, styled. Although death’s overt presence was pushed out of the home, it left traces.

The contemporary “living-room” emerged as spaces that bore a direct connection with death were removed from the domestic realm in North American households. Previously, *parlors* were the rooms in the home for the dead. Located in the most prominent areas of the house—near halls and entrances in

suburban abodes, and against the main facades of metropolitan apartments—parlors hosted domestic rituals: funerals, weddings, and highly formal social encounters. Most of the time, parlors sat vacant and unused, the fireplace cold and its doors closed to daily life. Disease control, an increasingly informal society, and the professionalization and bureaucratization of the death care industry demoted the parlor’s ceremonial priority in the domestic realm and saw it further developed elsewhere, in particular, in the commercial *funeral* parlor. The very first uses of the term “living-room” in the American home décor magazine *The Ladies’ Home Journal*—a publication which at the beginning of the 20th century had one million subscribers—were used precisely to advocate for the improved livability of the parlor.

An 1888 issue of the *Journal* included an article by A. R. Ramsey titled “The Parlor” that resented the abandonment of these rooms: “shut up dark and tight when no company is present... this is not what the parlor ought to be.” Displeased about the lack of warmth and usability in daily life, Ramsey followed by arguing that the parlor did not constitute “a genuine, cozy, ‘living room’.” In 1894, another of the handful of early articles to use the term “living room” stated: “If she can only bring herself to convert—and I use the word almost in its Scriptural sense—her closed-up parlor into a genuine living-room, where the boys and girls can entertain their friends, she will be doing much to secure the future happiness of her home.”



During the decades of 1880s and 1890s, trendy homes published in the *The Ladies' Home Journal* often feature parlors. Towards the late 1890s and early 1900s, the parlor disappeared from the featured houses, and more spacious, bright, living rooms populated the magazine. Over the century, as the death care industry became increasingly bureaucratic and secular, a new form of detachment from death would flourish, this time by means of poetics.

GODLESSNESS: PERIPHERY

In the 1970s, death for many in the west had become gradual: a process conditioned more by decay than by drama. According to *The Craft of Dying* author, thanatologist Lyn H. Lofland, medical and technological advancements dramatically extended the period between diagnosis of a terminal condition and actual biological demise from the mid-20th century onward. The 1970s marked a shift: whereby extended, procedural deaths—largely managed by institutions rather than by kin—would be experienced by a considerable population in the west.³⁰ This meant that people were dying for a longer period of time, in hospitals or hospices, due mostly to safer work environments, earlier detection of diseases, better treatments for illness, and advanced palliative care.³¹ In this context, death became localized to the old and to the peripheries of society.

Around the same time, influential architects like Aldo Rossi, Carlo Scarpa, Superstudio, John Hejduk, and Hans Hollein produced inspired

designs of cemeteries, ossuaries, and crematoria. In this period, characterized by architecture's historicist and metaphysical turn, otherworldly projects like the Tomba Brion (Scarpa, Altivole, 1968-1978), San Cataldo Cemetery (Rossi, Modena, 1971-1978), and Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought (Hejduk, Venice, ca. 1975) did nothing to delay or acknowledge the arrival of new administrative institutions that began to regulate the business of death in the West from the mid 1960's onward as a hygienic, capitalist enterprise. In their representations of sites of death and funeral, these architects largely obviated the material and technological realities of such spaces—ironic for a bunch of godless Post-Modernists.

For them, death became an island apart from daily life, in the realm of the metaphysical. In fact, during this time the discipline centered death as a canonical area for intensified speculation.

Aldo Rossi's San Cataldo Cemetery found creative traction in the otherworldly. It was thought of as a city for the dead,



apart from the city of the living. In a now famous aerial perspective drawing of the San Cataldo cemetery in Modena, Rossi presented an impressionistic glimpse of the city's spires in the far distance, with the cemetery itself bound like a *hortus conclusus* in a void plane elaborated with only a few cursory strokes of turquoise pastel. In a 1979 article on the cemetery, New York Times architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable wrote that "repeated voids of blank, empty windows suggested a place from which all life had fled forever... Its spare, surreal geometry invokes a haunting and timeless symbolism of death and the eternal with an extraordinary intensity... Entering [Rossi's] world through his projects and drawings—there are only a few executed works—is like going through the looking glass, leaving reality behind for something that transcends it."³²

Before being awarded the commission for San Cataldo, Rossi had been injured in a car crash: a brush with his own mortality that he credits with having transformed his approach to architecture. "I saw the skeletal structure of the body as a series of fractured parts to be reassembled,"³³ he wrote in his autobiography in 1981. That idea would give form to San Cataldo's skeletal assembly. "The central concept of the cemetery was perhaps my realization that the things, objects, buildings of the dead are not different from those of the living."³⁴ But rather than bringing the world of the dead into that of the living, Rossi brought the living into the poetic, metaphysical domain of the afterlife. Another car crash, in 1997, would take his life.

*Postmodern architecture's concern for the poetics of death was perhaps a reaction to a new context, wherein government, medical institutions, funeral homes, and insurance companies increasingly came to regulate the "design" of the technical aspects of dying.*³⁵

30_ For instance, in 1966, the leading causes of death in the US were heart disease (39.3%), cancer (16.2%) vascular lesions (11.0%), accidents (6%), influenza and pneumonia (3.4%), according to Monroe Lerner's *When, Why, and Where People Die*.

31_ "Palliative Care Extends Life, Study Finds." Donald G. McNeil Jr. *The New York Times*. August 18 2010.

32_ Ada Louise Huxtable. "Architecture View: The Austere World of Rossi." *The New York Times*. October 7 1979.

33_ "In April of 1971, on the road to Istanbul between Belgrade and Zagreb, I was involved in a serious auto accident. Perhaps as a result of this incident, the project for the cemetery at Modena was born in the little hospital of Slawonski Brod, and simultaneously, my youth reached its end." Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*. p.11.

34_ Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*. p.39.

35_ "The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) is one of three federal agencies responsible for managing national cemeteries... While not officially designated as NCA until 1998, its administrative birthday is 1973 when Congress passed the National Cemeteries Act." "National Cemetery Administration," U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. ([link to article](#))



Among the main preoccupations of managers of urban cemeteries today, as is the case with one of Western Europe's largest cemeteries, Alameda Cemetery in Madrid, is precisely the urge to bring together spaces for the dead and for the living. Prompted by greater public comfort in discussing once taboo topics, the incorporation of multi-cultural funeral customs, and renewed debate around the design of death, there exists an emergent desire to reconcile the dead with the living: a movement that finds some resonance with what Lofland describes as "the happy death movement," which rejects death as taboo. According to her, the risks of death-phobia and the consequences of an aversion to engaging with thanatology as a society are "exorbitant funeral costs and barbaric funeral practices, inhumane handling of dying in hospitals, ostracism of the dying from the living, inauthentic communication with the fatally ill, an unrealistic, mechanical, non-organic view of life, and so forth."³⁶

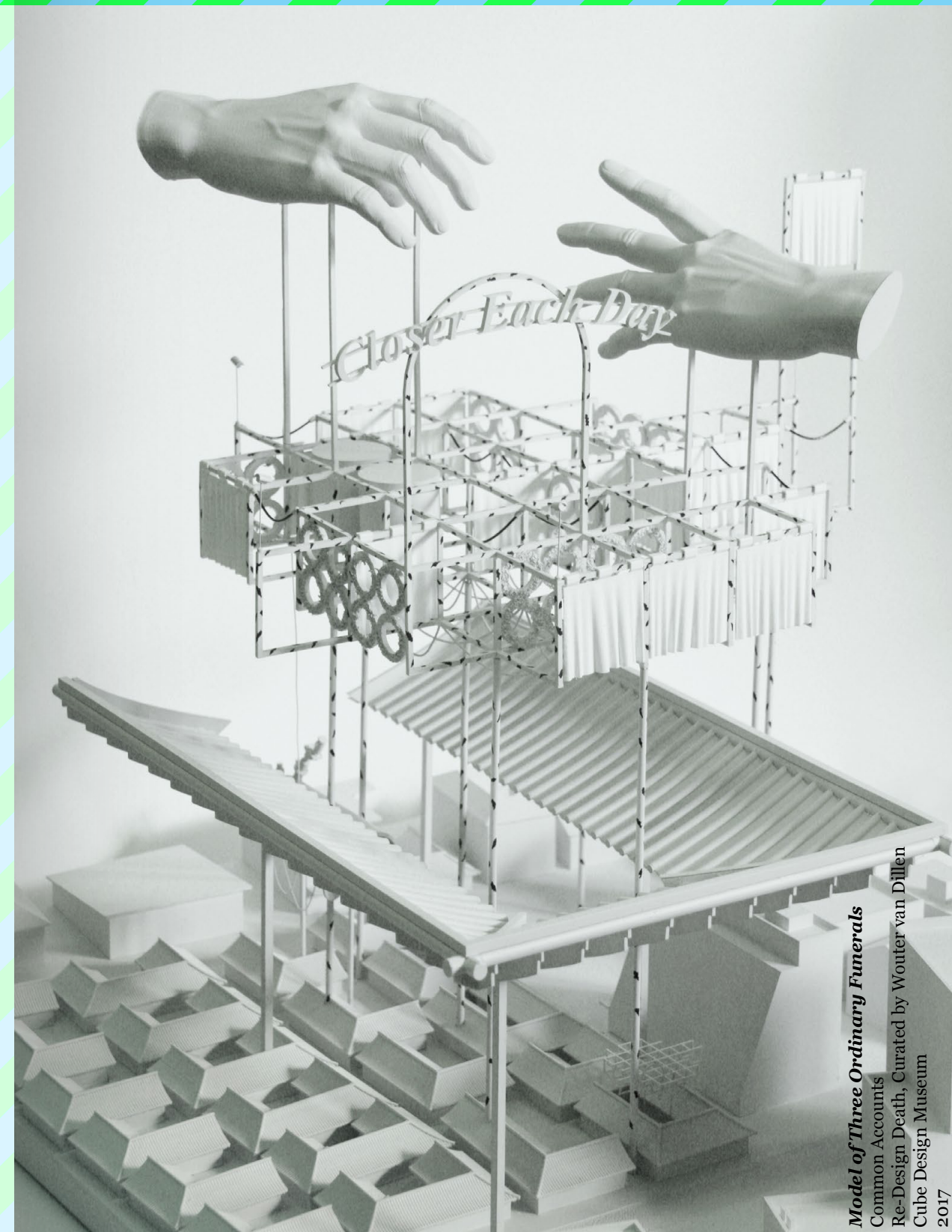
BLESSINGS

Death is ubiquitous but often, invisible. Nonetheless, it is a driver of plastic transformation. Protocols dedicated to the material business of self-design—of bodies dead and living, physical and virtual—present pragmatic tools for city-building that architecture has yet to harness.

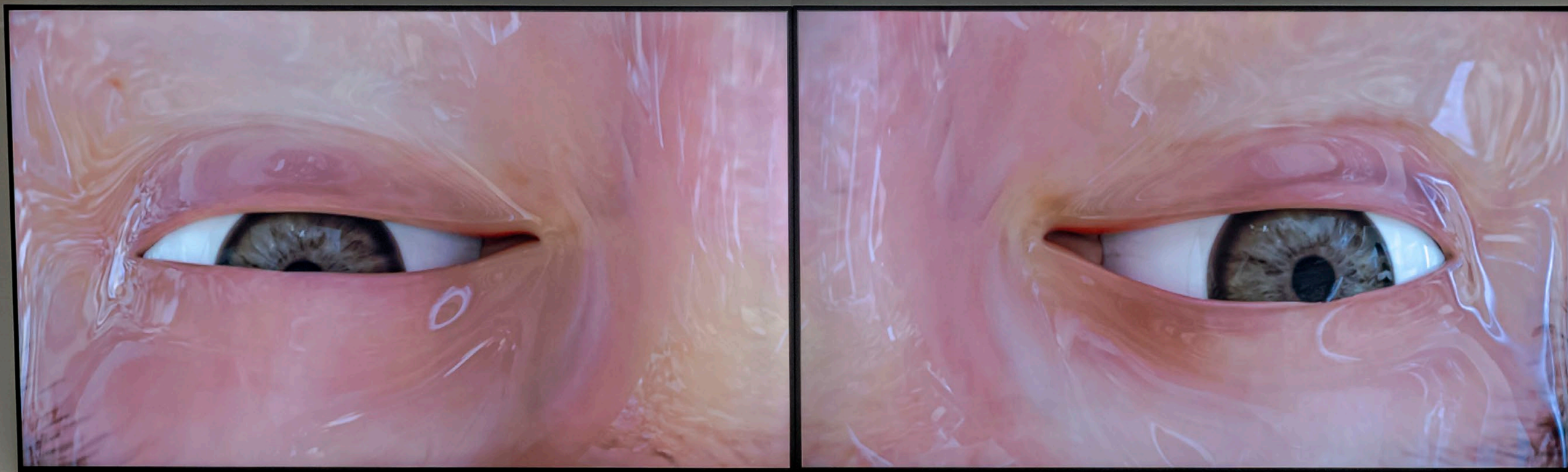
As a social practice, death continues to produce techno-cultures, and everyday technologies in which death is embedded have engendered a new human body: one that contains within itself opportunities for ritual and memorial.

At crucial moments in architectural history, death has occupied a discursive centrality that it has all but surrendered today. And yet, with death, everyone's a client. This report argues for the value—social, ecological, material—that we might gain from its reconsideration and close proximity, and brings back to the fore a subject matter so often made invisible by design. ■

36_ Lyn H. Lofland, *The Craft of Dying*, 1978.



Model of Three Ordinary Funerals
Common Accounts
Re-Design Death, Curated by Wouter van Dillen
Cube Design Museum
2017



Suspended Vision

Stine Deja

Tumbling in Harness, Curated by Erin Reznick

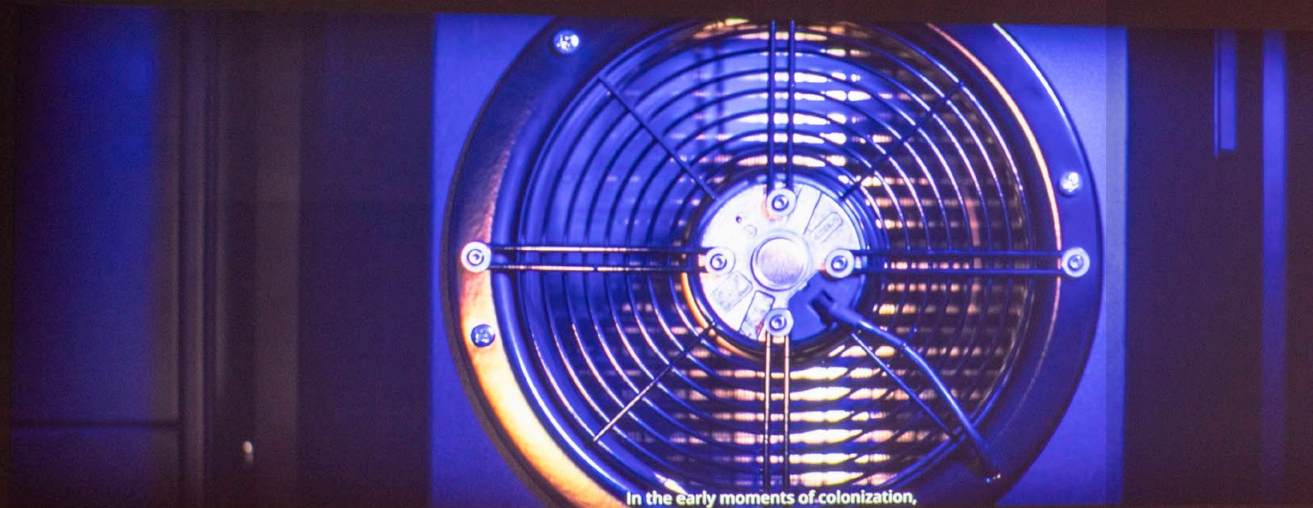
Art Museum at the University of Toronto, 2023

Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid

<p>1969</p> <p><i>On Death and Dying</i></p> <p>Elisabeth Kübler-Ross</p> <p>The Macmillan Company</p>	<p>1970</p> <p><i>OMEGA: Journal of Death and Dying</i> is founded</p> <p>Amityville, New York Baywood Publishing Co.</p>	<p>1975.10</p> <p><i>Toward a Sociology of Death and Dying</i></p> <p>Edited by Lyn H. Lofland <i>Journal of Contemporary Ethnography</i> volume 4 issue 3</p>	<p>1976.09.26</p> <p><i>F.T.C. Studies the Cost of Dying</i></p> <p>Ron Chernow The New York Times</p>	<p>1978</p> <p><i>The Craft of Dying: The Modern Face of Death</i> is published</p> <p>Lyn H. Lofland</p>	<p>1982.05</p> <p><i>Funeral Roles: Ritualized Expectations</i></p> <p>Tillman Rodabough <i>OMEGA: Journal of Death and Dying</i> Volume 12 Issue 13</p>
<p>1985.12.27</p> <p><i>After 3,854 Graves, No More at Shiloh National Cemetery</i></p> <p>Associated Press</p>	<p>1993.09.20</p> <p><i>The Virtual Community: Home-steading on the Electronic Frontier</i> is published</p> <p>Howard Rheingold Addison-Wesley</p>	<p>2000.04</p> <p><i>When is a Funeral Not a Funeral?</i></p> <p>James H. Gadberry <i>Illness, Crisis & Loss</i> Volume 8 Issue 2</p>	<p>2004.12.21</p> <p><i>Yahoo Denies Family Access to Dead Marine's Email</i></p> <p>Jim Hu CNET</p>	<p>2005.04.22</p> <p><i>Yahoo Releases Email of Deceased Marine</i></p> <p>Stefanie Olsen CNET</p>	<p>2007</p> <p><i>Death Customs: An Analytical Study of Burial Rites</i></p> <p>Effie Bendann</p>
<p>2011.01.05</p> <p><i>Cyberspace when you're dead</i></p> <p>Rob Walker The New York Times Magazine</p>	<p>2011.01</p> <p><i>Does the Internet Change How We Die and Mourn?</i></p> <p>Tony Walter et al. <i>OMEGA: Journal of Death and Dying</i> Volume 64 Issue 4.</p>	<p>2011.01.07</p> <p><i>Facebook and death: A love story</i></p> <p>Jared Keller The Atlantic</p>	<p>2011.09.09</p> <p><i>After Death: 8 Burial alternatives that are going mainstream</i></p> <p>Stephanie Pappas Live Science</p>	<p>2011.01.24</p> <p><i>For Funerals Too Far, Mourners Gather on the Web</i></p> <p>Laura M. Holson The New York Times</p>	<p>2011.01.31</p> <p><i>The Conversation: Death in a Digital World</i></p> <p>ABC News</p>
<p>2012.02.16</p> <p><i>Whitney Houston Fans to Follow Funeral on Internet</i></p> <p>Nekesa Mumbi Moody Associated Press</p>	<p>2012.05.22</p> <p><i>Should One Attend the Funeral of a 'Virtual Friend'?</i></p> <p>Edward Collier The Guardian</p>	<p>2013.02.11</p> <p><i>'Be Right Back' original air date</i></p> <p>Written by Charlie Brooker Directed by Owen Harris <i>Black Mirror</i> Channel 4</p>	<p>2013.04.11</p> <p><i>Yes, there is Google after death: Control your digital afterlife</i></p> <p>Larry Magid Forbes</p>	<p>2013.04.11</p> <p><i>Before death, Google helps you get your digital affairs in order</i></p> <p>Jessica Guynn Los Angeles Times</p>	<p>2013.09.01</p> <p><i>How to manage your Digital Afterlife</i></p> <p>Carrie Arnold Scientific American</p>
<p>2013.10.23</p> <p><i>Suit made of mushrooms helps decompose body</i></p> <p>Ignacio Garcia KXAN NBC News</p>	<p>2014.02.04</p> <p><i>Facebook turns 10 and gives you a Look Back at your memories</i></p> <p>John Llewellyn Martin K94.5</p>	<p>2014.02.05</p> <p><i>Father's emotional video plea to Facebook goes viral</i></p> <p>Paul Szodra Business Insider</p>	<p>2014.02.05</p> <p><i>Facebook agrees to create 'Look Back' video for grieving father</i></p> <p>Justin Massoud K94.5</p>	<p>2014.02.06</p> <p><i>Facebook reviews family memorials after dad's plea</i></p> <p>Dave Lee BBC News</p>	<p>2014.02.06</p> <p><i>Facebook grants father's wish to see dead son's video</i></p> <p>Lisa Maria Garza Reuters</p>

<p>2014.02.06</p> <p>Facebook helps grieving parents look back at son's life</p> <p>Stephanie Grimes Las Vegas Review-Journal</p>	<p>2014.02.06</p> <p>Dad pleads with Facebook to see his deceased son's Look Back</p> <p>98.1 KHAK</p>	<p>2014.02.06</p> <p>Dad asks Facebook: Please let me see my dead son's Look Back video</p> <p>Metro News UK</p>	<p>2014.02.06</p> <p>Facebook to create Look Back video of man's dead son</p> <p>Jolie Lee USA Today</p>	<p>2014.02.06</p> <p>Facebook answers father's plea to see dead son's 'Look-back' video</p> <p>Irish Examiner</p>	<p>2014.02.06</p> <p>Missouri man gains access to late son's 'Look Back' video on Facebook</p> <p>Irving Dejohn USA Today</p>
<p>2014.02.06</p> <p>Facebook creates heart-breaking 'Look Back' video for 21-year-old who died in his sleep after emotional plea from his father</p> <p>Daily Mail</p>	<p>2014.02.06</p> <p>Dad tearfully begs Facebook for access to dead son's "Look Back" video</p> <p>Taylor Berman Gawker</p>	<p>2014.02.07</p> <p>Facebook to change policy after father's emotional plea</p> <p>The Week</p>	<p>2014.02.07</p> <p>Facebook fulfills movie request from grieving Missouri man</p> <p>The Kansas City Star</p>	<p>2014.02.07</p> <p>Father 'in shock' over response to Facebook plea</p> <p>NBC News</p>	<p>2014.02.07</p> <p>Can Facebook help us grieve?</p> <p>Mary Elizabeth Williams Salon</p>
<p>2014.02.09</p> <p>Facebook answers desperate father's plea</p> <p>David Williams Future Five</p>	<p>2014.02.09</p> <p>Facebook answers Dad's plea to see dead son's video</p> <p>Liz Fields ABC News</p>	<p>2014.02.09</p> <p>Watch: After plea, Dad shares dead son's 'Look Back' video</p> <p>WTVR CBS 6 News</p>	<p>2014.02.09</p> <p>Facebook answers Dad's wish to see dead son's 'Look Back' video</p> <p>CTV News</p>	<p>2014.02.09</p> <p>John Berlin thanks Facebook for late son's 'Look Back' video</p> <p>Huffington Post UK</p>	<p>2014.02.10</p> <p>Dad shares dead son's 'Look Back' video after Facebook answers plea</p> <p>Matt Knight WTKR CBS 3 News</p>
<p>2014.02.10</p> <p>Facebook answers grieving dad's emotional plea</p> <p>Brandon Griggs CNN</p>	<p>2014.02.10</p> <p>Dad releases late son's Facebook 'Look Back' video</p> <p>Stephanie Mlot PC Mag</p>	<p>2014.02.10</p> <p>Grieving dad gets 'Look Back' video for dead son from Facebook</p> <p>Paresh Dave Los Angeles Times</p>	<p>2014.02.11</p> <p>How to edit Look Backs on Facebook : Here's 3 worth watching</p> <p>Mellisa Tolentino Silicon Angle</p>	<p>2014.02.21</p> <p>Facebook will make 'Look Back' videos for deceased users</p> <p>Kurt Wagner Mashable</p>	<p>2014.12.26</p> <p>This is what—now—happens when on Facebook when you die</p> <p>Gordon Kelly Forbes</p>
<p>2014.12.29</p> <p>Facebook forced to apologize after year in review feature brings up bad memories</p> <p>Paul Tamburro Mandatory</p>	<p>2015.02.12</p> <p>From Facebook to a virtual you: Planning your digital afterlife</p> <p>Emma Bowman NPR</p>	<p>2015.02.13</p> <p>How to prepare for your digital afterlife</p> <p>Sharon Gaudin Computerworld</p>	<p>2015.05.05</p> <p>Life after death: the science of human decomposition</p> <p>Mo Costandi The Guardian</p>	<p>2015.09.17</p> <p>Death, taxes, and our digital afterlife</p> <p>Melanie Baker Communitech</p>	<p>2016.01.28</p> <p>Mushroom burial suit turns dead bodies into clean compost</p> <p>Katie Herzog Grist</p>

<p>2016.02.16</p> <p><i>This mushroom suit digests your body after you die</i></p> <p>Fiona MacDonald Science Alert</p>	<p>2016.09.13</p> <p><i>Your digital life after death</i></p> <p>Karen Frances Eng Ideas.Ted.Com</p>	<p>2016.09.14</p> <p><i>Plan your digital afterlife and rest in cyber peace</i></p> <p>Suzanne Bearne The Guardian</p>	<p>2016.09.26</p> <p><i>I went to my own digital funeral</i></p> <p>Doree Shafir Buzzfeed News</p>	<p>2017.04.16</p> <p><i>When death comes, survivors cope with digital afterlife</i></p> <p>Jessica Prokop The Columbian</p>	<p>2017.08.22</p> <p><i>How your digital self could 'live' on after you die</i></p> <p>Suzanne Bearne BBC News</p>
<p>2017.09.07</p> <p><i>Dissolve the dead? Controversy swirls around Liquid Cremation</i></p> <p>Devin Powell Scientific American</p>	<p>2017.11.29</p> <p><i>The digital afterlife is a mess</i></p> <p>Naomi Cahn Slate</p>	<p>2018.08.29</p> <p><i>Facebook still needs to work on what to do when users die</i></p> <p>Amanda Luz Henning Santiago Mashable</p>	<p>2018.10.19</p> <p><i>Ageing Japan: Unclaimed burial urns pile up in Japan amid fraying social ties</i></p> <p>Kaori Kaneko Reuters</p>	<p>2019.04.09</p> <p><i>Making it easier to honor a loved one on Facebook after they pass away</i></p> <p>Sheryl Sandberg Facebook</p>	<p>2019.12.11</p> <p><i>What happens to your Facebook and Twitter accounts after you die?</i></p> <p>Edward C. Baig USA Today</p>
<p>2019.12.19</p> <p><i>The Movement to Bring Death Closer</i></p> <p>Maggie Jones The New York Times</p>	<p>2020.04.08</p> <p><i>The digital afterlife</i></p> <p>Brian J. Barth The Walrus</p>	<p>2020.06.01</p> <p><i>The misunderstood funeral tech that's illegal in 30 states</i></p> <p>Steph Panecasio CNET</p>	<p>2020.08.09</p> <p><i>Social media afterlife: What happens to Facebook after you die?</i></p> <p>Mel Buttigieg Bare</p>	<p>2020.12.31</p> <p><i>Appeal court decision opens door to controversial form of liquid cremation</i></p> <p>Andrew Duffy The Ottawa Citizen</p>	<p>2021.02.05</p> <p><i>The green death: How environmentally friendly options are changing the way we bury our dead</i></p> <p>Andrew Duffy The Ottawa Citizen</p>
<p>2021.02.14</p> <p><i>The digital afterlife industry is here to help you plan your death</i></p> <p>Marianne Bray Rest of World</p>	<p>2021.07.21</p> <p><i>Virtual funerals and online memorials: How funeral homes continue to adapt to the digital revolution</i></p> <p>Andrew McGee Canadian Funerals</p>	<p>2021.11.17</p> <p><i>You just died. Is your digital afterlife in order?</i></p> <p>Kenna Castleberry The Debrief</p>	<p>2021.12.16</p> <p><i>What happens to your Tik Tok account when you die?</i></p> <p>Quina Baterna Make Use Of</p>	<p>2022.01.02</p> <p><i>What is aquamation? The process behind Desmond Tutu's 'green cremation'</i></p> <p>Agence France-Presse The Guardian</p>	<p>2022.01.28</p> <p><i>How to write a digital will</i></p> <p>Scott Nover Quartz</p>
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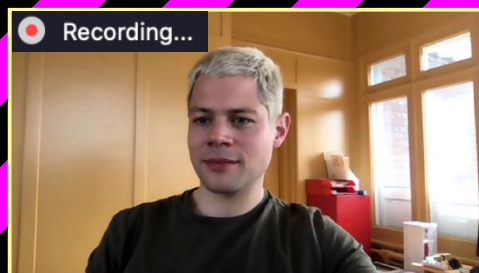


Computational Compost

Marina Otero Verzier

In collaboration with Donostia International Physics Center (DIPE)

Tabakalera, San Sebastián, 2023



An
 April 2021
Interview

Antoni Miralda, Barcelona
 Igor Bragado, Madrid
 Miles Gertler, Toronto

with
 May 2023

Antoni
 Antoni Miralda, Valencia
 Igor Bragado, Valencia
 Miles Gertler, Valencia
Miralda

MG: So, where are you now, Antoni?

AM: I am in Barcelona, in my working place. And behind me is the archive, which I am not showing you now because we would need three hours just to make a tour...

IB: Let's do that tour soon! Miralda, when we were students, *Cenotaphes* and *Chrysanthemus* resonated tremendously with us. Although different series, they both seem to overlap thematically.

AM: Yes, *Chrysanthemus* is a small series, maybe less known. I was working with the little toy soldiers.

IB: Could you tell us a bit more about that project? In Spain, Korea and many other places the chrysanthemum is a flower that connotes funeral, memorial. Were *Soldat Soldés* and *Chrysanthemus* toying with ideas of death and rituals?

AM: Well, I started to work with *Chrysanthemus* at the same time that I was doing, or planning on doing, the *Cenotaphes*, which was 1969, more or less. Chrysanthemums, beyond the connotation with funeral and memorial in our part of the world, are, in Japan for instance, more about energy and purity. There, there is a chrysanthemum day, where the flower is celebrated. As you know, those things change depending on where you are. I started to work on this idea of the chrysanthemum as a symbol, but also as a camouflage, for soldiers to evade attack behind this beautiful flower. And of course, I worked with the white chrysanthemums. It had to do with an action I was doing in '69 of putting material in public space, so I did that in a few places. In gardens I was leaving flowers around with soldiers inside, camouflaged. So, I was leaving these in public space waiting for a reaction. It was in this period where the soldiers first entered my work. The first action was organized around the green of the soldier turning to white. I washed away the green. At the first installation in '65, people were asked to bring the invitation, which contained a phrase by Pierre Restany and a little green soldier, like a typical American Soldier in

Vietnam: a cliché. People were told to bring that invitation to the gallery and were told to put it in the washing machine. The washing machine was running throughout the exhibition, and the green plastic soldiers were washed and lost their colour and became all white. That was an intervention on the colour of camouflage, and all that. It was taking away all the symbolic meaning of green and khaki. And later on, what I wanted was to go from white to black, working with cyanotypes and the ashtray monuments and tombs (*Cendrier-Tombeau*, 1971-1975). It was kind of a colour code. The chrysanthemums represent a very small period, but yes, I was very much involved in the research on death, and spaces of death. I was very interested in the unseen and in documenting cemeteries. So, I have good photos of Genoa's cemetery and in Paris, Montparnasse and Père Lachaise, and Forest Lawn in LA. You know, going to other countries where the cemeteries are like going into another world. I was very interested in iconography.

MG: And it is one of the first projects that we have found where you begin to use the acrylic dome as a plastic encasing. Where did that come from, and what was that for you?

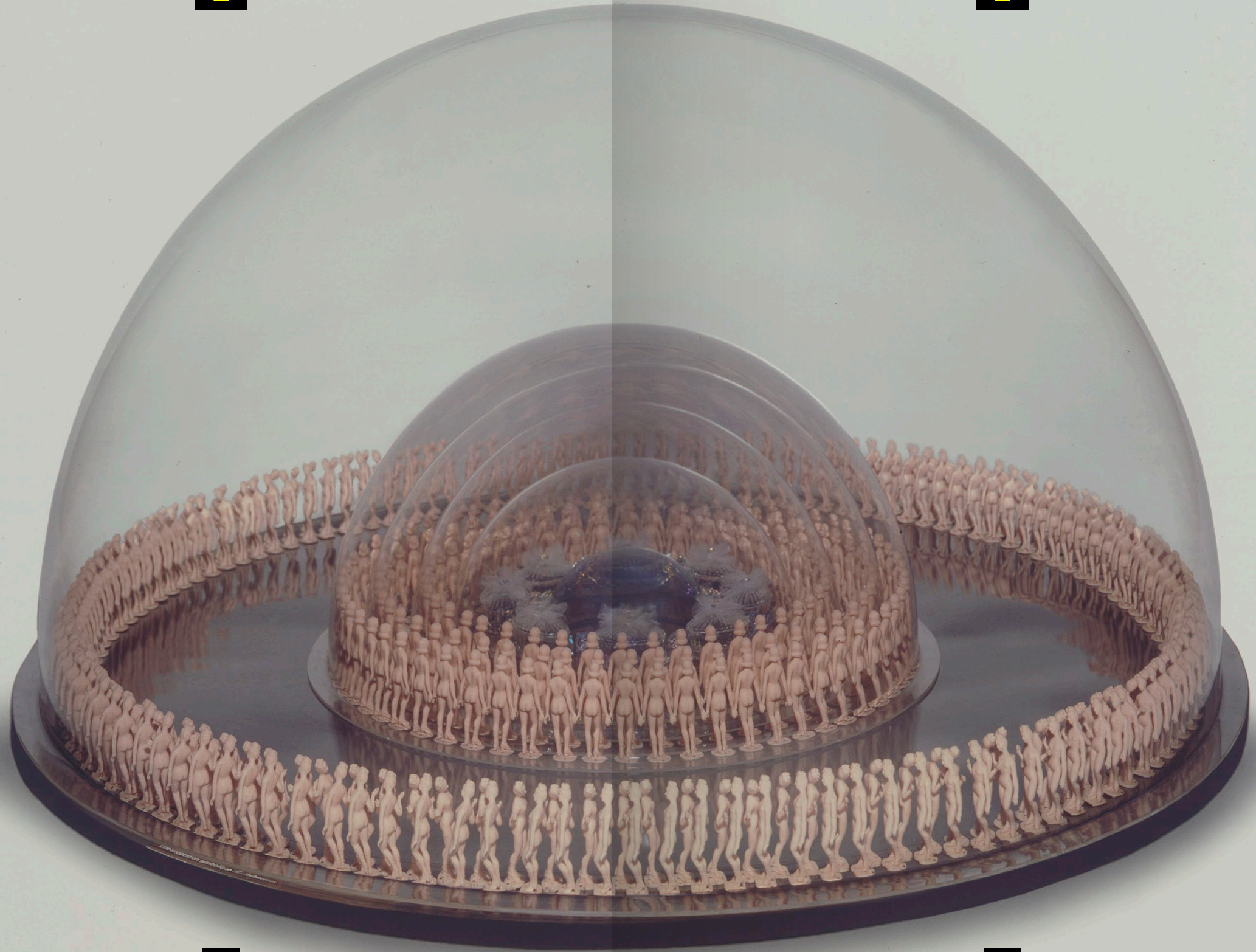
AM: Well, for me, there is a geometric simplification when you are working on a three-dimensional piece, and you are thinking about a sacred, pagan place. The dome came about because that is what it was: that sort of micro-climate situation. Because most of the *Cenotaphes* were meant to turn —the way they are presented in the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia— they were on a turning platform. So, they were like a diorama, like a spectacle. Since you cannot be inside because we are talking about a maquette, you know. There is a kind of physical approach about this idea of a dome where the sound and the iconography relate. All this also belongs to a very classical way to think about monuments. Ledoux and his wonderful pieces—he is a part of this iconography. But what happened when I built those cenotaph pieces is that they became touristic spaces. It was perfect, because there were two floors, one floor for the lipsticks of the lovers of the general, another one for the dog of the general or the turtle soup (...because he was hunting

Cenotafio de las Queridas del General

Antoni Miralda

1969-1975

Image courtesy of Archivo Miralda / FoodCultura



turtles). Each piece has its own imaginary, of course. And the way to represent it was very simple, because I was a kid and I would just imagine how I was going to get inside of this madness and to listen to the general. All this iconography is quite dramatic, of course, but at the same time it is a wonderful dream of the history of the ashes that are not present. (On a cenotaph you don't have ashes, so are they fake ashes, or real ashes?) And that is when I started to work with ashes and I started to get really involved with the ashtray monument, you know, because I was moving from this impossible, grandiose, five floor, six floor, with elevators and lasers to something much more private, calm, domestic, a little bit more pagan. So that was the idea of having your own monument for your own ashes: cigarette ashes. Over there you could keep all the butts of the cigarettes, and you mix the iconography of the invented general, or the real general, with your own smoking. So, the fact then is that the smoke and ashes covers the image of the general. Little by little, your own domestic use of the ashtray makes the monument disappear. You change it. And then you empty it, to use it again in your own private home. The idea was to move from something ideal, to something much more realistic and connected to your domestic environment. And the iconography was similar, you know the calendar of the battles, the different seasons, the boots of the soldiers, all the private lives and souvenirs... But of course, I never built any. It was too complicated. I couldn't convince anyone.

IB: I always saw the *Cenotaphes* and *Cendrier-Tombeau* as their own pieces, not as models for actual construction. Was the idea that these be built at full scale?

AM: Yes, of course. Instead of the Reina Sofia maquettes, I see actual cenotaphs. Yeah, I mean, it was about holding history, and another way to see these patriotic values, and to have a chance to rewrite those icons. Monuments, you know, are part of making us believe or think... they connect to all our bad memories or good memories. Depends on where you come from. But yes, there was a bit of this idea of how to condense a maquette or model from what could be a building. And how to see it with life, inside of a city. As entertainment. As a tourist attraction.

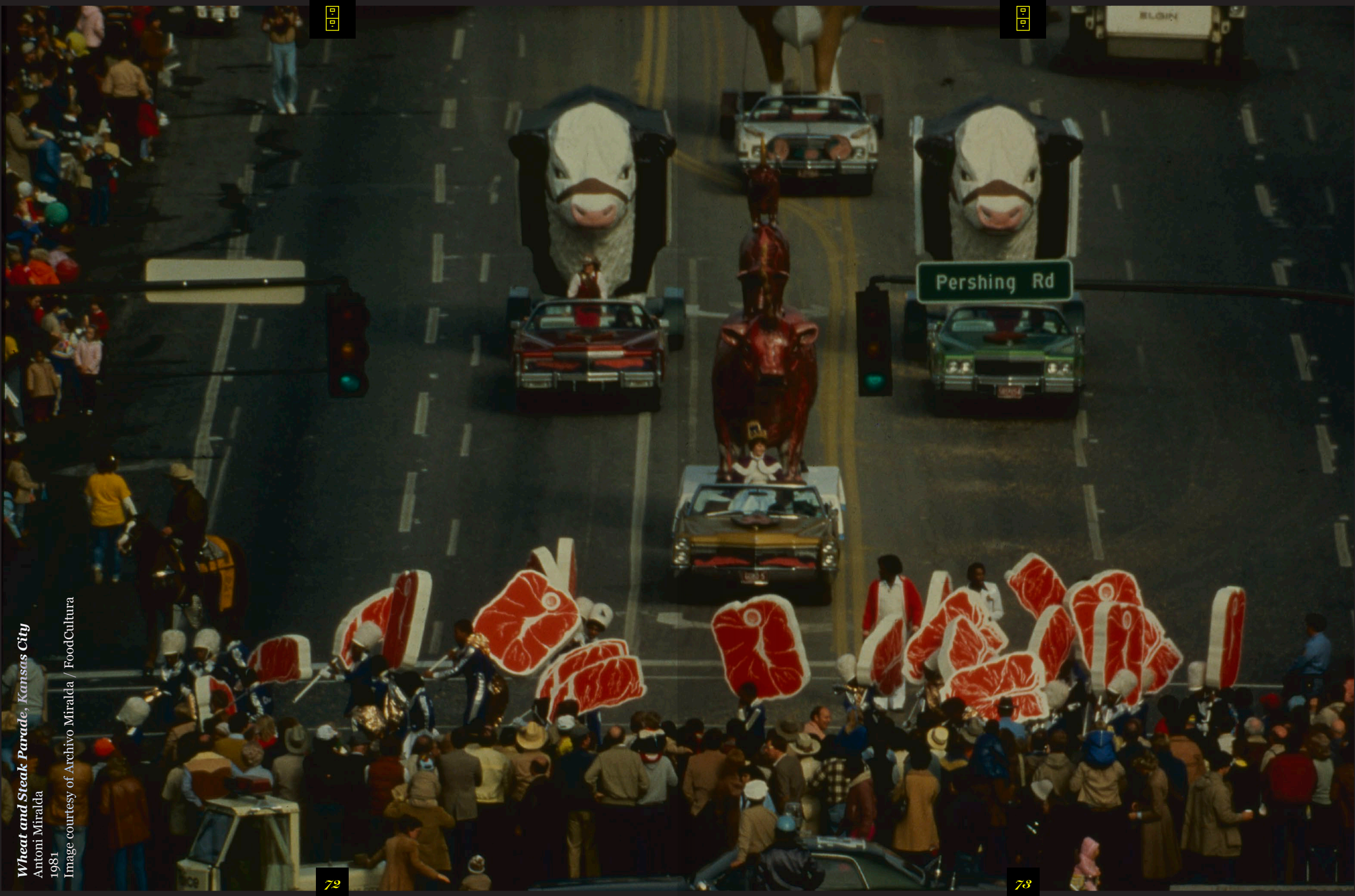
MG: It makes sense that you planned to build these at 1:1, because your work quickly scales up and becomes extremely large. The acrylic dome becomes the actual dome of the heavens, the atmosphere, the sky, the globe.

AM: Yeah, with a different connotation, but yes. I have always been fascinated by the connection to public space. From the very beginning. My first exhibit with soldiers was in Paris at Galerie Zunini in 1965, and I took tables—big tables—like a game, disrupting the rules, and I took all these pieces into the street, on Boulevard Montparnasse, and I had them there for two or three hours. Totally illegal of course. We didn't know the words illegal or legal at that time, and there were people there asking about it. That was sort of the first approach to public space and getting feedback.

MG: When you began to produce these large events, and things became participatory and public at an ambitious scale, how did you manage the inputs and contributors? What makes for a good public event?

AM: Let's start with the last question. I think that a better public event is one that becomes public almost right away. But that is the most complicated thing to create. Today, in many contexts, that is impossible because you have bus lanes, the police at the top, and the legalities under the table. Public space has become much more controlled—of course, we know that. So, when there is that chance of getting to that true point of publicness, I want to be there. That's when it works. But I have never been interested in style over creating a provocation, a happening. I have always been more interested in getting feedback and getting people on my side. You need to be able to express yourself and visualize your creation very well. I have been working very much on visual language. I can't work if I am not drawing.

IB: This leads very naturally into the discussion of parades, but there is one thing that I want to go back to on *Cenotaphes* for just a moment, which has to do with the publicness and ordinariness



of the funeral ritual that promotes a kind of closeness to death. The cenotaphs contained recipes, cooking classes, tasting events... These were part of mourning ceremonies that are extremely radical. Architects at the time were not thinking of mourning or funerals in these terms. You had Aldo Rossi or John Hejduk, just to name a few contemporaries to Cenotaphes, who were much more interested in poetics, and in a type of language that was disengaged from the public sphere. Were you aware at the time of those architects, and their work on cemeteries and mourning? And more generally, what were the references for you to imagine that funerals could be that ... that a lipstick could be part of a funeral or that a tasting event could be part of a funeral?

AM: You know, when I started to work, I didn't have any references, or maybe I was just not interested enough to have references. I understood Rossi and other contemporaries to him, but at the time I really didn't know them. In terms of structure, and geometry, perhaps I had some references, but I was much more interested in funeral homes. How boring they were and how the street is so boring. How it is possible to come to these places to say goodbye, to say your last goodbye, and you find yourself in those environments. Of course, right away I was much more interested in Mexican rituals than European. Or later on I was interested in Chinese offerings with the papers burnt for one's ancestors, or to make an after-life extension. Because those create some sort of sensation—in your skin—meaning, you feel it. I started to think about why these things had changed. I thought to myself in the 1960s, if I could find myself a partner, I would go into business (probably a bad business). But, you know, I talked to somebody, about starting a chain of funeral homes, which would be totally un-funeral homes—completely reversed! It would be like building the home starting from the roof. I was just interested in people. From the very beginning. People, through souvenirs like the cigarette with the lipstick left on it, which once touched the lips of the lover. Like a relic. It is all about how we can do some piece of art that belongs and speaks directly to people—not only for people who know the theory of the arts. And the rest came little by little. I remember I did a small project that didn't happen about a boat: a last cruise. People

would get on the cruise and they write their wishes. For instance, they get to see the sun rise on the palm trees in an exotic place. Thinking about how life sort of becomes an extension of memories. But those cenotaphs and the ceremonies were the result of a team. There were meetings in Paris with other artists which created a platform of friends who shared certain ideas and knowledge. We had the idea to create public space and ask people to participate and built those action by serving food or creating gestures.

IB: Many of the parades and events that you organize take on a global scale, and yet there is always space within the project for smaller communities to make contributions. How in your work—whether it was a ritual dinner, a school procession in France, or an agricultural parade in Kansas—do you connect with these communities and even begin to propose a collaboration?

AM: I understood that there were things you could not change when you approached existing communities. With the groups I worked with connected to things like carnivals or craft traditions, it was important to keep those roots. Maybe they had never been in a museum context before, and nobody had sat in front of them and said, "Listen, this is possible." You need to show them something. If you don't show them what you mean, they won't understand. It's all about language and timing—a lot of it is timing. And it is absolutely necessary to have the right link with a place's history—the right person on your side who can introduce you and open doors for you. Because people will think, "What are you doing here? What planet are you coming from?" I would ask the same thing. You must reinvent the process every time. It depends where you are and who you're speaking with. Sometimes it doesn't work. It's easier if people are willing to open themselves up. It's very common that people are afraid. In the United States I find it easier to communicate, because people are more direct. Europe is much more complicated.

MG: Tell us a bit more about this issue of communication. We've read that for *Wheat and Steak* (1981), it took you two years simply to establish connections and relationships with local communities, and then two years on-site to produce the parade itself. How did you communicate performance ideas to collaborators?

Wheat and Steak Parade, Gold Taste ceremony at the Kansas City Board of Trade

Antoni Miralda

1981

Image courtesy of Archivo Miralda / FoodCultura



AM: So for instance, when I worked with the 23rd Street marching band, The Cobras, it was about rhythm [snap, snap, snaps fingers]. They were very connected to the drums and African American culture in Kansas City. I admired them, and they were very easy to work with... I would love to get into the street and into the stadium with them and to be a part of that band [snap, snap, snaps fingers again]. We talked about bringing a piece of meat, a steak — and this is the cow city — and I said, "You're going to have a steak to use as a piece to create movement through the downtown. You're going to animate the city with it." And they just got it and said, "We'll do it!" So, it really depends how you approach these things. Of course, there are many elements that need to be considered. And you need people for that. For example, you need people to anticipate that it's going to be windy. You need people to think about the topography, or that you can't have the Boy Scouts hold a piece of bread ("Oh no, they can't do that — it's forbidden!"). Once we had to stall the whole thing, the whole flow, because they couldn't hold the piece of bread. We had to stop everything, but I would not go home. I brought gloves on the corner and kept the parade going! So, you have to deal with confrontation and with things going wrong.

IB: It's interesting to consider the definition of the author that you are proposing in these public, participatory projects. You establish a platform for certain conversations and dynamics to happen, but there must be a point where things fall out of your control in a productive way.

AM: I have always been interested in getting different inputs through different collaborations because some of these things are not done with a one-man-band. That's not the idea. This is not a Hollywood production. In Birmingham, when we did a piece there for *The Honeymoon Project* in 1991, many artists collaborated on different pieces as a part of a parade. I was more like a director. There was a lot of dialogue with everyone, and without that, it becomes something like a collective exhibition. If the feedback and conversation create distortion, it adds something. This sometimes happens when you're in the rhythm of things. It is a confrontation and a dialogue that becomes spontaneous. All this comes from

that idea of orchestration: to get people to think about what you're doing, what you're doing it for, and to get their reaction. Sometimes this doesn't happen because there are last minute things that pop up. Like with a recent project in Miami, they said, "You can't take the whole street. The buses need to run there." So, if I don't have the street, what do I do? I said, "You have the street behind it, take Ocean Drive. Leave me Collins Avenue!" But we couldn't compete with those guys and the city. So, perhaps that was less successful. But what is success? The important thing is that the main elements were there. Often what was more frustrating wasn't losing control, but the lack of belief or understanding in what we were doing.

MG: Antoni, we have to ask: what is the best party you've ever been to?

AM: The best one that I ever did, that I was part of?

MG: That depends if the best one was one you planned.

AM: Well, it's difficult to select just one. But usually it's the last one that I remember most. Right now the last one was *The Miami Global Banquet*, and it was a very good one—well, the best. It was about the alligator and the lost ingredients in the nutrition of Floridians from before the Spaniards came. The seven ingredients of America—the *real* America. Alligator was one. The alligator was there, roasting, and pulled by a limousine. We shared the roasted alligator with everyone. It was a barbeque action, and very delicate one because alligators are pets, but at the same time, this initiated a conversation about survival. The best parties might have to do with survival. I forgot about the other parties.

MG: A good party can also be one that you forget.

AM: Very good, yes. It's the cycle, and at the end of the cycle, it goes away. After the metabolization. ■





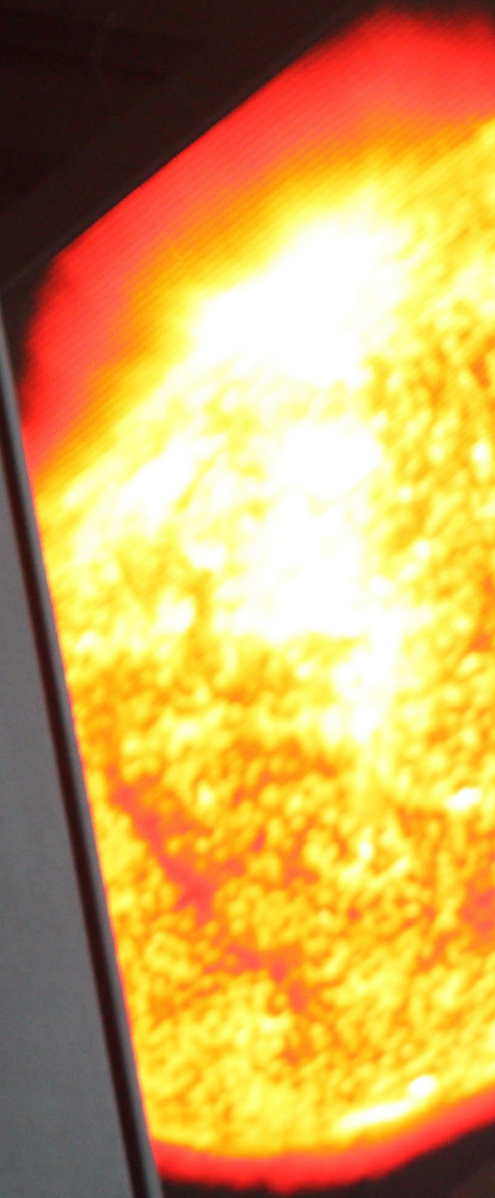


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THE DEATH REPORT

CONTEMPORARY DEATH
ARCHITECTURAL PROTOCOLS OF
A COMMON ACCOUNT OF THE

by

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The Death Report



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