

Large Text

Tumbling in Harness

Curated by Erin Reznick

May 3–July 22, 2023

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

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Works by Oreet Ashery, Common Accounts,
Charlie Engman, Stine Deja,
Russell Perkins, and Vunkwan Tam

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This exhibition is produced as part of the requirements for the MVS degree in Curatorial Studies at the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, University of Toronto. It is presented in partnership with Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival.

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Tumbling in Harness

Tumbling in Harness inquires into the sociopolitical, practical, and emotional implications of online death in the age of platform capitalism—a phenomenon that has only recently emerged and, for the moment, the consequences of which are yet to be fully understood. As the world has become increasingly integrated with online media, the temporal and spatial boundaries of digital memorialization complicate the notion of what remains of a life after death, and how the bereaved “gather” in the absence of physical bodies. In the moment of death, a person’s social media profile transforms from an attestation of their vitality to a public archive imbued with meaning, occupying a liminal space between remembrance and forgetting, and material and spiritual. These profiles house the digital remains of the deceased—articulating their digital assets, their digital bodies—carving out new avenues that influence what is remembered and how, and through which rituals and practices the dead are commemorated.

For most in Western societies, death today is no longer a familiar or first-hand experience, as it was for most people just a century or two ago, but it is now something increasingly filtered through media screens. Social media users participate in online grieving processes shaped by the social media platforms in play. Representations of death, dying, and grief become harnessed—selected, edited, revised, and revalued according to a particular digital interface—within the framework of a managed website with existing commercial provisions. The nature of these

platforms reflect their engineers' economic motivations; they are designed according to algorithmic logic rooted in the measurable value of popularity. As death is increasingly ritualized through social media platforms, where the posthumous online self persists, the promise of digital afterlife becomes a sought-after commodity. *Tumbling in Harness* brings together a group of artists whose work considers how rituals of death and dying intersect with online technologies that are ultimately determined by consumerist and algorithmic assumptions.

In *Untitled (The traffic noise arched over a bubbling mass of public conversation and pattering footsteps on concrete)* (2021), Vunkwan Tam lays out two black body bags across the floor, conjoined and flattened. With a kind of matter-of-factness, Tam speaks to the internet age, which often reduces conceptions of death into a single consumable mass. Devastating events of political, social, or ecological violence are frequently circulated as shareable, sometimes marketable, photographs and videos, prompting fractured and apathetic online expressions of sorrow. Social media users are more accustomed to visual representations of mortality than they are to death's corporeal reality. The emptiness of Tam's sculpture implies the absence of a body, pointing toward the paradoxical state many of us inhabit: simultaneous physical being and digital disembodiment.

Online intermediation has recontextualized how photographic practices of death are both distributed and produced. In his photographic series, Charlie Engman uses text-to-image generating software to explore how artificial intelligence compresses the complex notion of digital death

into a visual image. By feeding the program textual prompts, Engman attempts to understand the software's visual lexicon on the theme of death and dying, generating samples compiled from pre-existing image data. The resulting images produce an aesthetic of transition and dislocation; of human figures caught in a state of transmorphosis, escaping their mortal container by growing wings or dissolving into a wash of pixels. The uncanny, hyperrealist avatars constitute a posthuman reimagining of the digital ghost, whose personhood remains, although their body is abandoned.

Stine Deja's *Suspended Vision* (2019) displays a fragment of a human figure hung upside down within the frame of a screen, suspended outside of space and time—a ghost in the machine. Inspired by the practice of cryogenic freezing, Deja projects Western society's wide-eyed optimism about technology's potential to preserve life, encircled by a cold commitment to allowing material inequalities to dictate who can harness such potential.

Russell Perkins engages with artificial intelligence to extend the labour of mourning. His multi-channel sound installation *The Future Tense* (2021) presents an AI application that modifies the first movement of Johannes Ockeghem's Requiem (c. 1460), the oldest surviving polyphonic funerary choral mass. The application is guided by the real movements of people: it sources GPS data recorded across the first year of the pandemic from a marketing solutions company offering "mobility insights" to help marketers anticipate human behaviour. This data accumulates whenever a cell phone moves. A rest in the requiem indicates the absence of information, the absence of movement, altering the

composition so that the three voices of the funeral mass never reach harmonic resolution, singing into eternity.

The online data a user leaves behind has been theorized to comprise a kind of virtual afterlife, and novel technologies in death-care open new frontiers in how memorial might take shape today. In *You're Well Liked in Your Community* (2023), Common Accounts (Igor Bragado and Miles Gertler) explore the macroscopic and ritual aspects of online death as they imagine bridges between the physical and the virtual. An LED sign exhibits death-care industry slogans, messages left by mourners in YouTube comments, and measures of datasets of internet users—virtual bodies sublimated to the cloud. In contrast, a vessel containing fluid from alkaline hydrolysis is present: the effluence of a new ecological disposition method that proposes to mitigate many of the limitations and disadvantages of burial and cremation. As social media platforms become digital cemeteries, Bragado and Gertler respond to the plural material realities of death online and IRL* and envisage death's atomization into daily life.

Oreet Ashery's *Revisiting Genesis - Episode 8: Bambi, Online Death* (2016) offers a critical perspective on the commercialization of death services. Her online web series, developed in consultation with medical and online death experts, focuses less on the traditional funereal arts than on the emergent virtual afterlife, exploring new industries that manage the longevity of one's posthumous avatar via social media services, digital safety boxes, legacy vaults

*Internet shorthand for "in real life".

for personal information, and imaging and video messaging.

These works examine the mediated, ritualized space of online death, where digital legacy obfuscates finitude; where self-identity persists beyond the physical body, and the dead lie not in cemeteries but in our very palms. In this digitized world, the dead wait patiently, forever harnessed in a state of suspension for the swipe of a finger, the click of a mouse, or, importantly, when the algorithms dictate, to conjure them back into existence. Social media platforms provide a new socially situated space to grieve; one that enables the proliferation of posthumously persistent profiles and offers the promise of immortality by way of a digital afterlife.

About the Curator

Erin Reznick is a curator and publisher whose research tends to the sociological space around the assembly of community, specifically negotiating the social space that occurs in both public and private domains. Erin is the co-Editor in Chief of Phile Magazine.

Curator's Acknowledgments

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