



DYING WELL – FALSE DEATH

Museum für Neue Kunst, 27. 5. – 24. 9. 2017

Museum für Neue Kunst
Marienstr. 10a
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städtische **museen** Freiburg 
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CONCEPT FOR THE EXHIBITION

Dying Well – False Death (MNK) 27 May – 24. September 2017

News about someone's death reminds us on a daily basis that dying is an inevitable and everyday occurrence. Yet death is not actually a part of life. All that can be said about it is that it lies beyond the scope of what people can communicate as an event or an experience. Thus, for the living, death exists as an empty space about which we can but conjecture based on a series of collective intimations and fears. Every attempt to grasp death is destined to fail. As a result, it is not possible to talk about death as such, but more about the dying and the dead, as well as about the discourse surrounding the event. The exhibition approaches these three aspects from a secular, western viewpoint and excludes death and dying caused by accident, war or violence. Furthermore, it concentrates upon the fact that death and dying are understood nowadays as a task to be discharged very much in keeping with the widespread desire in today's society for the self-optimisation of our bodies and life styles. Equally, the respective qualifiers in the exhibition's title *Dying Well – False Death* suggest conversely that it is possible to die badly and that there is such a thing as a genuine death.

Artists engage with the topic within the scope of their own work. Their motifs are as varied as the outcomes. On account of the outsourcing of the dying and deceased body, we are often deprived nowadays of transparency, a sense of naturalness and concreteness, which, by contrast, is addressed in the artworks. The exhibited works discuss the revulsion to and fascination with death, the tendency to gloss over it all or the desire to get 'up close and personal' with death in the form of the decaying body; the artists behind these works seem to play with the idea of their own deaths or to anticipate it performatively, to caricature it, to

protest about it or simply deny it, to confront it or to objectify it factually.

Dying nowadays has become an issue of self-care in need of mastering in the same way that life has to be mastered. Ideas about 'dying well' were already in circulation in the late Middle Ages. In the literature on dying at the time, the so-called 'ars moriendi' or art of dying, deportment in one's final hours, was viewed as a test which would also have crucial bearing on one's fate in the afterlife. Current debates about euthanasia, pre-diagnosis, organ donation and assisted suicide further these thoughts and ideas – albeit in a secular world and under altogether different auspices – and link them to fundamental ethical and moral questions.

The beginning and end of human life – whereby the rapid breakthroughs in medical research render a definitive determination more difficult of what 'beginning' and 'end' might actually entail – have become an issue of preparedness and creative possibility for people, demanding individual and subjective decision-making. Owing to the lack of a social consensus, death is as individualised as life. The freedom to make decisions goes hand in hand with the compulsion to have to make them.

Since death is happening but cannot be experienced, it goes without saying that all forms of artistic representation of death and dying are fundamentally questionable. They are questionable with regard to the assertions they make, as well as being morally questionable. Besides, they do not generate truth. Getting to grips with finite nature of one's own existence and those we are close to is generally screened out of everyday life, but artists do not shy away from tackling it in partly mer-

celess yet also painful and what might be considered shocking images. Some of the works on show stirred up much debate in broader society at the time of their making centring upon the ethics of showing particular situations or staging them in paintings, etc. and are still to this day the source of controversy.

The exhibition will approach the topic in four chapters – **Loss and dealing with dying and death; The staging of death/dying via the body; Staged death / Fake death; Prolonging life.**



FÉLIX GONZÁLEZ-TORRES
"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers)
1987-1990

1. Loss and dealing with dying and death

Contemporary artists pursue a series of different strategies in order to make a phenomenon visible, which, although it can be experienced by proxy as it were, cannot be 'lived' through one's own body or actually communicated. LINDA MONTANO addresses the topic in her work via an engagement with the death of a beloved person and focuses thematically upon her failure to grapple with it. It seems that video as a medium is also unable to make death comprehensible.



LINDA MONTANO: Mitchell's Death, 1978, video, 22'20"

Félix Gonzáles-Torres's two clocks running in synch immediately trigger a number of questions in the mind of the visitor regarding the meaning of time: on the one hand the two identical clocks placed side by side make us aware of the essentially relative nature of time, the 'clocks' tick

differently in New York compared with Paris, our internal clock doesn't always correspond to the beat of the *zeitgeist* – on a personal level, they symbolise the feeling of being exactly in synch with the times or to be synchronised with another person's body clock – yet one of the clocks will inevitably start to tick more slowly than the other and ultimately stop altogether ...

In his video work *I Will Die*, YANG ZHENZONG focuses upon the incomprehensibility of dying. He asked people from different parts of the world to say the words 'I will die' into the camera in their own language.



YANG ZHENZONG: *I Will Die*, 2000 (ongoing), Video- Installation

2. The staging of death/dying via the body

Artists such as DAMIEN HIRST or STAN BRAKHAGE confront us directly with a scientific view of death. This happens in places not normally accessible to the general public, such as morgues or autopsy rooms. A targeted incursion into the intact body has led to these images being kept from public view. The objectification of death through the lens of scientific reification and the sober eye of the pathologist doesn't appear to bridge the abyss of non-comprehension.



left: STAN BRAKHAGE: *The act of seeing with one's own eyes*, 1971, video
right: DAMIEN HIRST: *With Dead Head*, 1999, photograph



VIA LEWANDOWSKY provokes the museum-goer with a functional killing apparatus for the purpose of suicide. He is indirectly posing the question about a self-determined death, be it suicide or euthanasia.

ADRIAN SCHOORMANS avails himself of modern medical research and recreates his own skeleton in computer-generated ceramic plaster via digital reproduction and reconstruction.



ADRIAN SCHOORMANS, *Body Incoming*, 2000, Installation with video



VIA LEWANDOWSKY: *Bona Fide (Drowning)*, 2001

3. Staged Death / Fake Death

HIPPOLYTE BAYARD photographed himself as a drowned man, ADRIAN PACI arranged a premature funeral wake, ROBERT GOBER managed to sneak a fictional report about his death into the newspaper – many artists are interested in the performative quality of the transition from life to death. These works play on the 'as if' aspect and do not conceal the staging itself, but function via the constant oscillation between reality and fiction, between fact and image. What constitutes reality here, what is mere illusion, depiction? When PACI suddenly rises up from his deathbed, he undoes his whole staging – thus the death we see pictured, i.e. in the video, is not final.

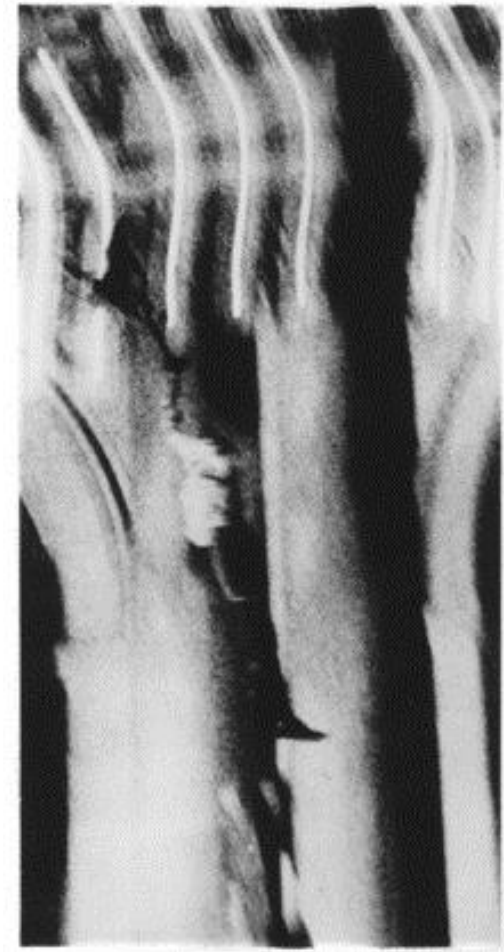
SARAH CHARLESWORTH captured images of people falling from high buildings long before 9/11. The photographs from the series *Stills* are metaphors for the sheer incomprehensibility of death and dying.



left: HIPPOLYTE BAYARD: Autoportrait en noyé, 1840, photograph



right: ADRIAN PACI: Vajtojca, 2013, video



SARAH CHARLESWORTH: Jerry Hollins, Chicago
Federal Courthouse, 1980, photograph

Suicide certainly represents an extreme form of self-styled death as a specific human propensity for personal autonomy with regard to one's own life. In her small-format series of paintings, VALÉRIE FAVRE places depictions of enacted suicides side by side, thereby robbing them – in this juxtapositional arrangement of fictional, historical and quotidian examples – of any vestige of pathos.



right and left: SAM SAMORE: The Suicidist (continued), 2003, photographic series



VALÉRIE FAVRE: Suicide Series, 2003-2013, oil on canvas

The boundaries between abstraction and figuration are fluid in this tonally muted set of paintings, with the effect that a need for information and understanding is generated as a result of the discrepancy between legible titles and abstract/illegible depiction.

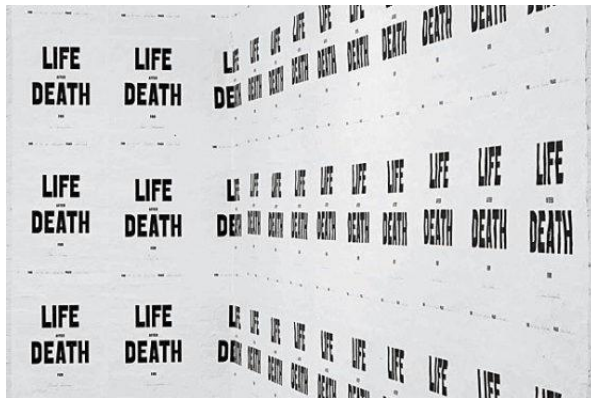
The artistic treatment of one's own death and those of others became a key issue in the wake of the HIV/AIDS crisis in New York and elsewhere. The artist AA BRONSON printed a portrait of his deceased friend, Felix Partz on his deathbed onto a hoarding and thereby made an intimate situation 'public'. The intention is to establish a 'public archive of feeling and retrospection' via a range of artistic means and methods. As a result, creative design and self-staging of the dying person are often indivisible.



AA BRONSON: Felix, June 5, 1994, 1994/1998, lacquer on vinyl

6. Prolonging life

The preoccupation with death on the part of artists goes hand in hand with the overcoming of death creatively and artistically. In conclusion, artworks dealing with the possibilities of prolonging life are to be allowed a voice, thereby also pondering what it is to be human with a finite lifespan. The artist KRIS MARTIN's work 'Life after Death' invites this kind of speculation. Visitors to the museum will be issued with a 'life after death' certificate. MARCEL MIETH offers to elongate our lifelines artificially, whereas TARYN SIMON photographs topical cryopreservation units that promise a chance of escaping the ineluctable through the preservation of the body at very low temperatures.



left: KRIS MARTIN: Life after Death, 2006, print on paper
right: MARCEL MIETH: Corrected Life Line, 2006, photograph



TARYN SIMON: Cryopreservation Unit, 2007, photograph, from the series: An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar, 2007

Participating artists

Hippolyte Bayard, Stan Brakhage, Gregor Bischoff, AA Bronson, Sarah Charlesworth, Simon Dybbroe-Møller/Jacob Dahl Jürgensen, Valérie Favre, Therese Frare/Life Magazin (requested), Robert Gober, Damien Hirst, Holger Keifel, Erik Levine, Via Lewandowsky, On Kawara, Kris Martin, Marcel Mieth, Linda Montano, Adrian Paci, Chloe Piene, Julia Charlotte Richter, Sam Samore (requested), Adrian Schoormans (requested), Taryn Simon, Oliviero Toscani (requested), Yang Zhenzhong

Concept and idea:

Leonhard Emmerling, Catherine Garet

Curated by:

Leonhard Emmerling, Catherine Garet, Christine Litz, Finn Schütt