

Death and Life
(Tod und Leben)

Gustav Klimt, 1910 - 1915
oil on canvas
178 x 198 cm



death blindness



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Submitted by BSc Sabrina Rosina Bühn

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*doves exist, dreamers, and dolls;
killers exist, and doves, and doves;
haze, dioxin, and days; days
exist, days and death; and poems
exist; poems, days, death*

[verse from: Alphabet, Inger Christensen]

Declaration of academic honesty:

I hereby declare that this thesis has been created by myself, none other than the quoted sources nor any other aids have been used and I have not drawn on any other type of assistance. My thesis has not in any way been submitted (to a supervisor for assessment) either domestically or abroad and this copy is identical to the assessed copy of my thesis.

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Introduction

I am writing this introduction from the comfort of my sofa at home. My dog is lying at my feet, dozing, and on my windowsill outside lies my griffon vulture, dead. It is the middle of December and luckily cold enough to stop its further decomposition. It is the first thing I see when I look out the window every day to check the weather – which finally feels adequate for the time of the year being. The last ten years have been the hottest since the beginning of records based on NASA data. Accordingly catastrophes related to this change are become increasingly frequent at decreasing intervals. With draughts, forest fires, floods, land slides and not to forget war, death is literally everywhere, so what's the difference if I see it daily on my windowsill? In their work *Celebrations of Death – The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* Huntington and Metcalf opened by claiming “Death is receiving renewed attention in our society.” (Huntington and Metcalf 1989, preface xiii). Even though the authors are speaking about a time more than three decades ago, their claim holds true until today.

Well... kind of. The modern western attitude towards death and dying is rather going through a slow and constant process, nudged again and again by every new catastrophe we encounter – almost too many to bear witness at all times. As a result, desensitisation and apathy towards such heavy topics are manifesting themselves on a societal scale (Adshead et al. 2025; Weintrobe 2012). With this work I aim to collect such symptoms and analyse them under the new term death blindness, or relegated death. Not to inflict even more doom literature, but as a tool to see more clearly how we even got into this state in the first place. Awareness of death blindness could potentially enable us more on all matters of death and dying, which is my ultimate wish and will be discussed in the very end of my thesis.

Death and its rituals not only reflect social values but are a major force in shaping them as well (Geertz 1973, 94–98). This is why I see it from crucial importance to think, talk and act on death awareness on an interspecies level – as a way to shape a future and society liveable for many species. In order to get to this concept of death blindness, I found it helpful for my thinking and writing to (re)define two more new terms: thanatofactory and Roadkill. From all the non-human animals who found their way in between these pages, Roadkill have received a very special attention, guiding my research as well as my artistic practice (as the vulture outside my window bears witness).

To lead through the fog of way too many disciplines, I offer four stories to separate my thesis into four major parts. Any described illegal or gray zone occurrences in these stories I hereby declare as completely fictional. Apart from that: Please don't hesitate to reach out to me, the author and sole responsible person for the selection and representation of contents awaiting you in the following pages, and let's critique, share, question, season or mirage together. And most of all, to lean on

a quote of James Baldwin, let's "lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers".

1. Mirror, Mirror on the wall...

... Who am I to write these lines? I am a white, Caucasian, cis-female person in her thirties. I am born and raised in the conservative backwaters of rural Bavaria in a village where all the social activities and possibilities were either solely provided or deeply influenced by the catholic church. My family went to church regularly and every school day started with a prayer in unison, facing the crucifix installed in every room. In my free time I discussed the bible and its apocrypha together with a local monk I befriended. "Believe" seemed to come so easily to everyone around me (or so my naive child-self thought) and I tried my hardest to grasp it, to fit in. But I never felt religious, only ever drawn to the meta-understanding of it. Looking back on my upbringing I perceive myself like an anthropologist of a culture which was supposed to be my own. I am lifting the veil of the "I" this much to share an understanding of the position I come to settle in right now: struggling with religion, belonging and – most of all – death, the shaping agent of the former two. As estranged as I might feel towards parts of my own heritage, as much am I unable to unthink the roots of these explorations. Consequently I am writing about death from a western, occidental perspective; mainly Eurocentric, but stretching overseas to our colonial relatives in culture as well (mainly North America). I am writing as an answer to an inner searching. Latour¹ says

¹ Deriving context out of An Inquiry into Modes of Existence:

we have never been modern, I say I have never been religious – he asks what have we been then? What has happened to us? I ask myself, what mode of existence is left for me without religious believe? With whom must I be connected to endure this life?

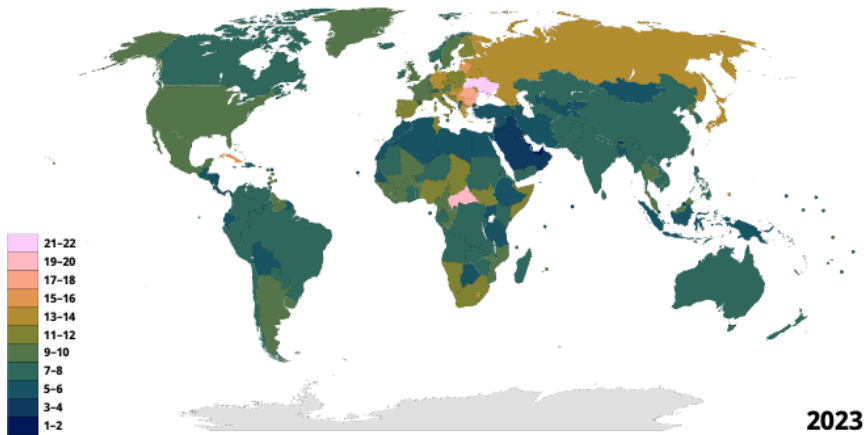
2. Living in Ecocide²

To set the scene for my endeavor of navigating through death blindness, let's make one thing clear from the beginning: We are living in a time of ecocide. Ecocide is defined as “the destruction of large areas of the natural environment as a consequence of human activity” (Merriam Webster Dictionary, “Definition of ECOCIDE”) but what it means is death: Death of humans, extinction of other species, decline of biodiversity and loss of habitat. It is a classical “hyperobject” (Morton 2013), too large to grasp or put an emotional handle on. “Whereas matters of migration, (structural) racism, sexism or inequality (how, and if, the rich should be taxed) frequently lead to emotionally charged discussions in parliaments as well as at family dinners, the ecological problem rather tends to turn is into simulacrum-like zombies.”, how Kilian Jörg explains it simply in *Toxic Temple: An Artistic and Philosophical Adventure into the Toxicity of the Now* (Jörg and Lerchbaumer 2022). This hyperobject of ecocide can be quantified and poured into global statistics, but are numbers even enough anymore? Let's look at some of this data.

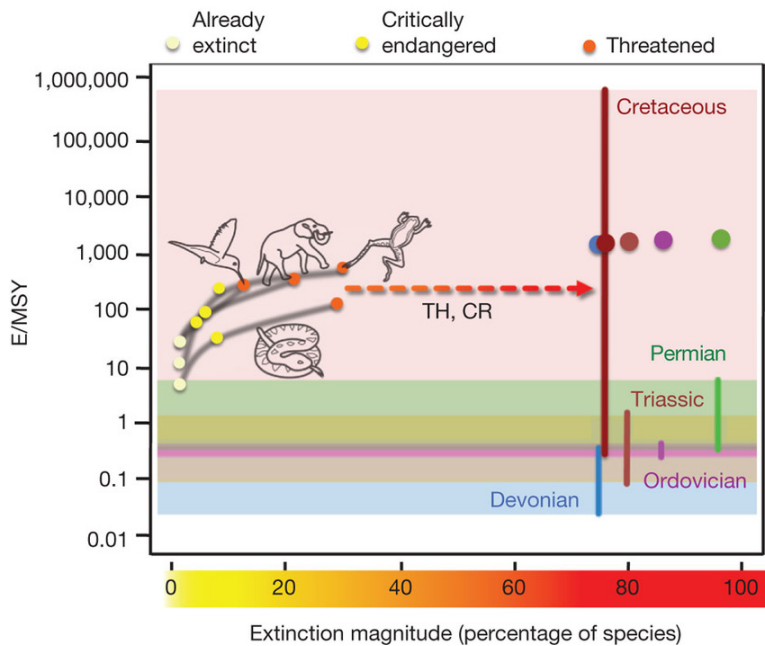
An Anthropology of the Moderns (Latour 2018)

- 2 “Living in Ecocide” is the title of one of the projects my partner Kilian Jörg is currently working on. Since we are often working and thinking in symbiosis, I gratefully borrow this title pre-dating its release.

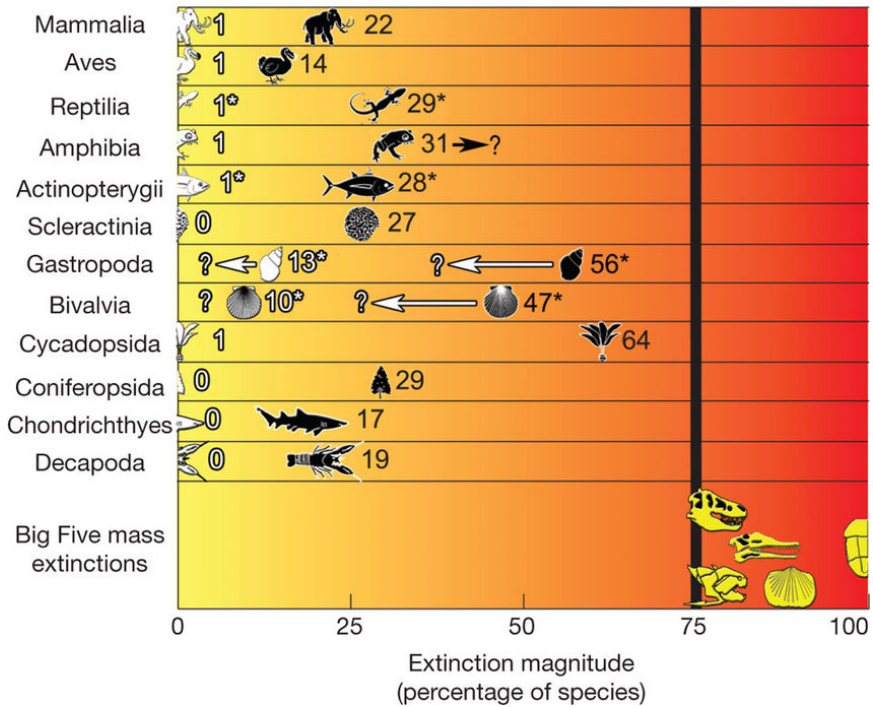
It's a Numbers' Game



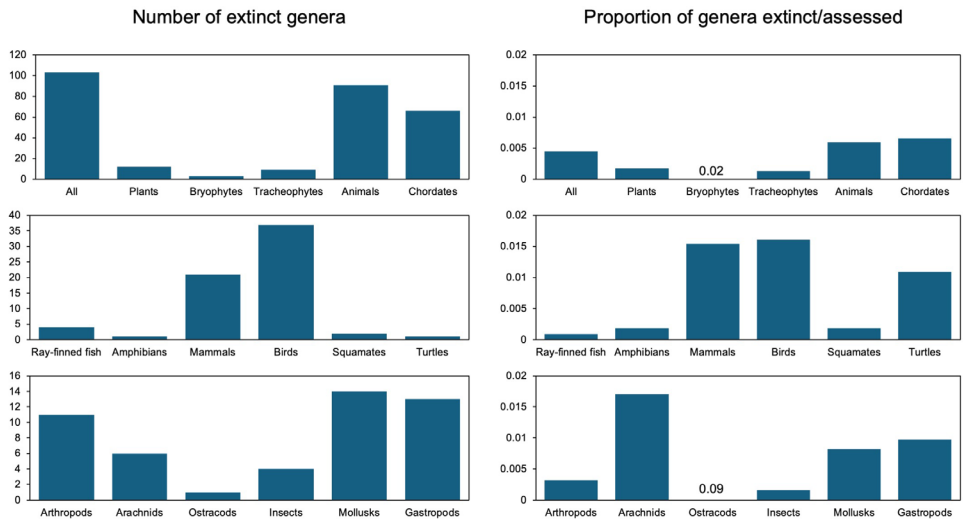
Mortality (death) rates. Data from Population Reference Bureau 2022 & The World Factbook 2023.



Extinction rate versus extinction magnitude. The coloured dots indicate what the extinction rate would have been if the extinctions had happened (hypothetically) over only 500 years. On the left, dots connected by lines indicate the rate as computed for the past 500 years for vertebrates. (Barnosky et al. 2011)

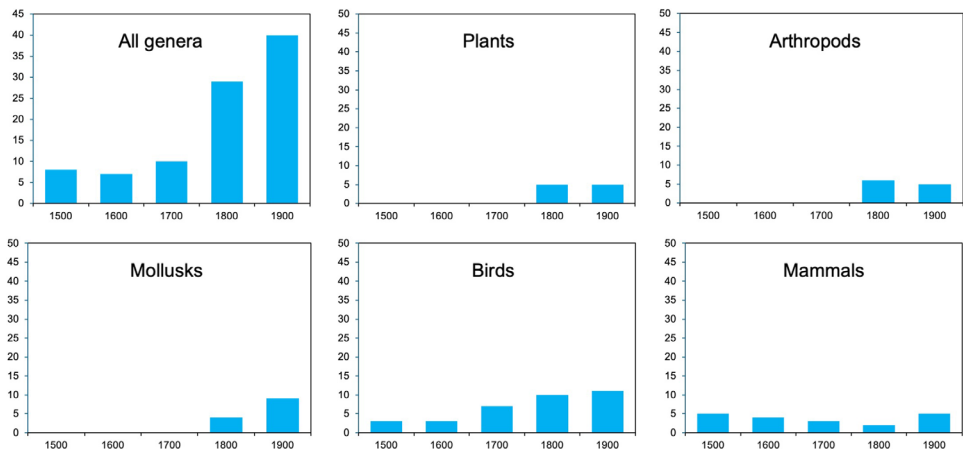


Extinction magnitudes of IUCN-assessed taxa in comparison to the 75% mass-extinction benchmark. White icons indicate species 'extinct' and 'extinct in the wild' over the past 500 years. Black icons indicate currently 'threatened' species; the amphibian percentage may be as high as 43%. Yellow icons indicate the Big Five species losses: Cretaceous + Devonian, Triassic, Ordovician and Permian (from left to right). (Barnosky et al. 2011)

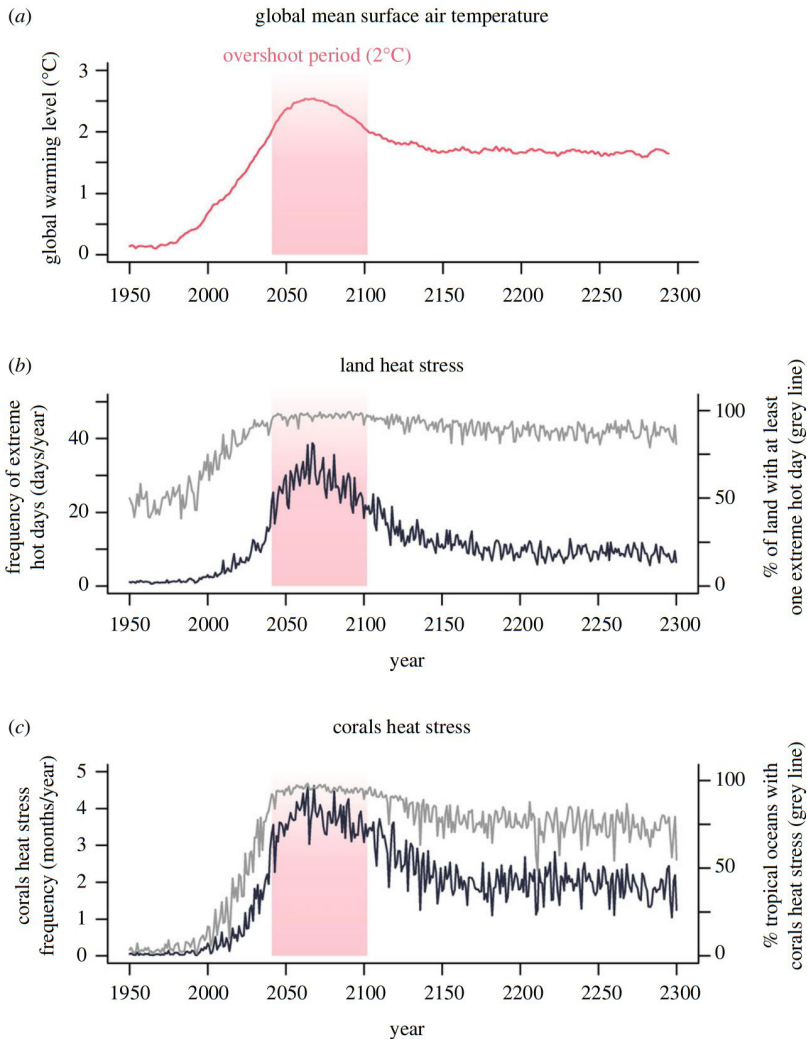


Patterns of recent genus-level extinctions among major groups of animals and plants.

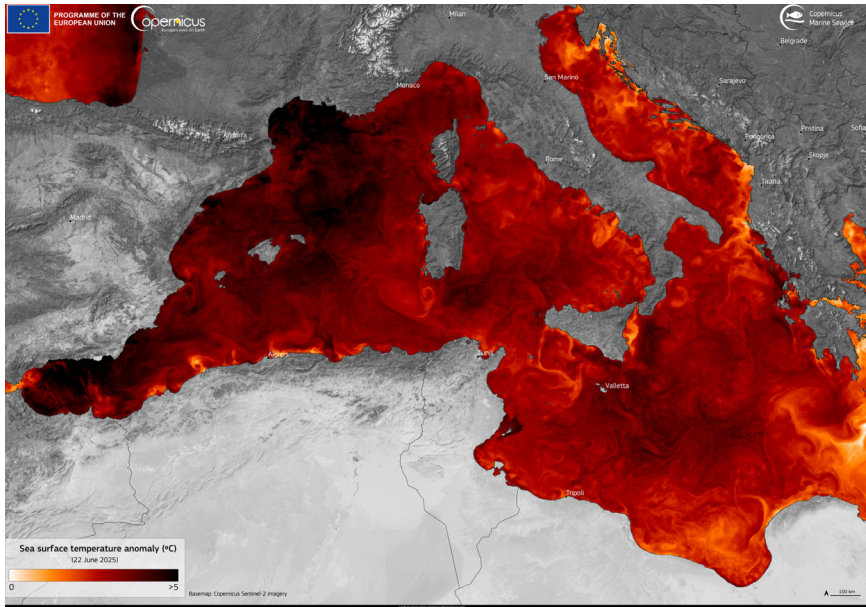
On the left-side column: absolute number of genera that have gone extinct in each group. On the right-side column: the proportion of extinct genera among those genera that have had one or more species assessed by IUCN. (Wiens and Saban 2025)



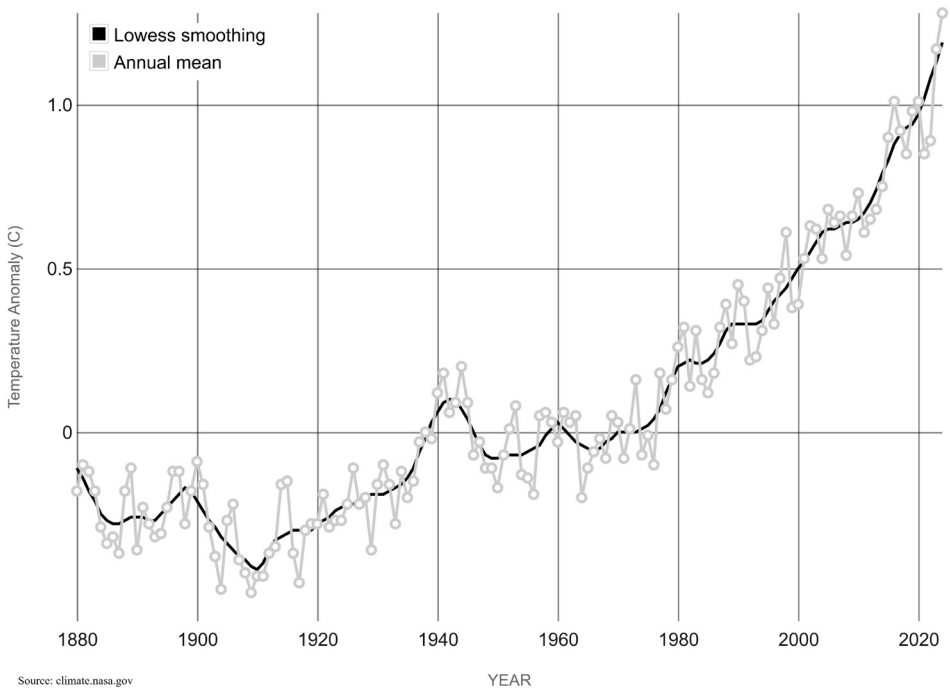
Patterns of genus-level extinctions over centuries. Columns show the number of genus-level extinctions in that century. Patterns only for those groups with the most genus-level extinctions. The 2000s are excluded given that only 25% have elapsed. (Wiens and Saban 2025)



(a) Level of global warming (10-year rolling mean) relative to pre-industrial baseline (1850–1900) calculated based on the median across five global climate models. (b) Frequency of extreme hot days per year (black line) and land fraction with extreme hot days (grey line). (c) Coral heat stress frequency (black line) and percentage of tropical oceans with heat stress (grey line). (Schwarz Meyer et al. 2022)



A marine heatwave is ongoing in the Mediterranean Sea. Sea surface temperature anomalies recorded on 22 June 2025. Areas in dark red indicate temperatures more than 5°C above the seasonal average. The most intense warming was observed in the western Mediterranean basin, including the Balearic Sea and the Tyrrhenian Sea. (Copernicus 2025-06-25)



This graph above shows the change in global surface temperature compared to the baseline average for the 30-year period 1951 to 1980. Earth's average surface temperature in 2024 was the warmest on record since recordkeeping began in 1880 (NASA 2024)

Let's talk about Death

The data from these last pages is informed by wars and by sickness, by catastrophes and by murder, but overall, most people just die of old age and its related illnesses. Which means the process of dying for most people includes a time of preparation to acknowledge the nearing end of life. But even though the way we die is normal, our normal experience with death is a catastrophic one (this argument gets explored more later on in chapter 10). We encounter it as death tolls from wars, pandemic events, nature catastrophes or fatal accidents in our daily news feed. The death we experience regularly is accompanied by terror and fear. To no surprise more and more of us try to implement tools like “mental health days” to regenerate by steering clear of news and social media. Beyond that there is also subconscious action in shielding our psyche from too much terror, too much loss and suffering. We usually avoid the topic of death and dying in our everyday lives, as it is simply making us uncomfortable. Well, the good news is, more than two thirds of the global population nowadays die from “old age” or its symptoms (de Grey 2007) – normal and not very catastrophic. Still feelings of despair, fear and terror take the upper hand when it comes down to facing death – or simply talking about it. And yet 75% of respondents of a study consider it unacceptable that the subject of dying is suppressed in their everyday lives (Heiermann et al. 2020). To constantly (and mostly subconsciously) look the other way, to deflect death and dying in our society and culture is exhausting mental labour. It creates a paradox of needs and wants: wanting to shield oneself from the negative emotions while needing to be able to talk about them. The result is not only the uneasiness with the topic, but also a structural impediment for possible self-reflection around these

uneasy topics – with individual and societal negative consequences. If we learn to actively push against the relegation of death though, we will not only heal parts of ourselves, but also of our society and even ecosystems.

To cite Huntington and Metcalf again: “In all societies, regardless of whether their customs call for festive or restrained behaviour, the issue of death throws into relief the most important cultural values by which people live their lives and evaluate their experiences. [...] Peoples’ customary response to death provide an important opportunity for sensitive probing into the nature of human life.” (Huntington and Metcalf 1989, 2)

3. From the Center to the Fringes

There has been a time when death was normal and non-terrifying, a part of everyday lives and even center of societal life. Philippe Ariès located this time frame from the 5th century A.D. (which also marks, with the end of the roman empire, the change from the ancient world to the early middle ages) until the end of the 18th century. He calls this the time of the “tame death”. But the tame death has become wild throughout the era of enlightenment. The now lost attitude towards death has “been so obliterated from our culture that it is hard for us to imagine or understand it. The ancient attitude in which death is close and familiar yet diminished and desensitized is too different from our own view, in which it is so terrifying that we no longer dare say its name.” (Ariès 2013, 28) Ariès research is subtitled with *The Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death Over the Last One*

Thousand Years – which means the following summary is based on his broader understanding of European culture:

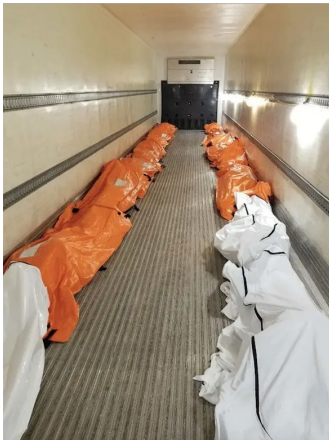
In the ancient world (3000 BC – AD 500) we³ feared the coming back of the dead and kept their graves rather at distance from housing and social life. Cemetery maintenance took place in order to keep the dead content and give them no reason to show their wrath or bring illness upon the still living. This general attitude changed with the beginning of the early middle ages and the influence of the early Christians:

The living stopped being afraid of the dead. Instead they started to accept and even search their proximity, due to the faith in resurrection but also to worship the resting places of martyrs and ask for their protection. It was also believed the saints and martyrs could protect even after death, which made proximity of the graves very sought after. This means being buried in the church (in its walls and crypts) became the highest honor. But as space inside churches is quite limited, soon only the very privileged deceased received this honor, while the others got buried right outside the church. This is in short how graveyards moved to the church itself and became its dooryard. Burials were a private business for the local community for the longest time, and therefore local graveyards were (mostly) sufficient. One of the many exceptions to this rule are events of mass death like epidemics, when the sheer number of victims was too large for the graveyards. Again, only the wealthy and privileged could afford then in these extreme cases to be buried *ad sanctos* while for the common and poorer folk mass graves were dug outside the city – large pits where dozens,

3 “We” here means the majority of Europeans at the time being.

I speak of them as “we”, because our “now-we” consists of their cultural heritage. You are invited to position yourself in- or outside of this “we” depending on the page you are on.

sometimes hundreds of bodies were buried at once. The contemporary witness Giovanni Boccaccio describes the overwhelm of corpses during the Bubonic Plague in 1348: “Such was the multitude of corpses brought to the churches every day and almost every hour that there was not enough consecrated ground to give them burial, especially since they wanted to bury each person in the family grave, according to the old custom. Although the cemeteries were full they were forced to dig huge trenches, where they buried the bodies by hundreds. Here they stowed them away like bales in the hold of a ship and covered them with a little earth, until the whole trench was full.” (Boccaccio 1348) So even with almost 50% of Europe’s population dying, they did not change their burial practices. But it wasn’t the question of physical proximity alone which makes all the difference for our attitude towards the dead today: Back in the Middle Ages until the 18th century the cemeteries also offered the right of sanctuary (read more on that in chapter 13). This meant e.g. for merchants an exemption from taxation and thus turned cemeteries into market places. Graveyards were a place for strolling, socializing, trading, gaming, dancing – in short: the center of social life. Naturally the clergy wasn’t amused by such business and



Body bags stored in truck outside of a hospital
Photo: Anonymous nurse of a New York hospital

tried to control the freedom by announcing prohibitions over the centuries, though with little effect in practice. This lasted until the dawn of the enlightenment, which brought a whole new world view into the picture. To cut short a very complex history of places of burial, basically industrialization

and with it monopolization of living spaces and public services pushed the cemeteries to the fringes of cityscapes (with the exception of preexisting cemeteries, of course).



Coffins stocked in a crematorium in Germany; Photo: Christian Thiel, Imago



Body being loaded into a truck, covered half-half with sheet and trash bag, sealed with duct-tape; Photo: Devin Speak



Military loading coffins in Italy; Photo: dpa/Claudio Furlan

Bodies waiting for transport in India; Photo: Mario Tama



Thus, even in times of epidemics, there is a terrific distinction in how people were affected by the sight of bodies being stocked in the streets, waiting for burial, between the pests of the middle ages and e.g. times of Cholera (several events throughout the 19th century). But we don't even need to look back that far in time with the Covid19 pandemic just around the corner. We certainly didn't have to put our dead on the streets anymore (living space in previous centuries was very limited and the death industry hasn't yet been developed, as will be elaborated in chapter 4), but images of coffins being stacked, awaiting their burial, have gone viral, along with photos of COVID-patients on beds in the hallways of cram-full hospitals and convoys of military trucks stepping in to transport all the dead.

Our society is not equipped anymore to cope with such exposure to death and dying. We can feel the effects until today, as reflection on the events of the past few years is only starting now. Fatalistically I have to admit to have little hope this discourse will cause any change of our normative attitude towards death and dying – which is exactly why I found it intrinsically necessary to write on death blindness. We will have a closer look at the formation of such norms which influence – among others – our resilience towards death exposure in chapter 10 and – in the case of absence of these norms – the psychological terror management in chapter 13. With this outlook I close my introduction and invite you to the first story:

Part I: How I stole my dead father

It was a Friday evening which changed the course of my life. The heat of this early August day seared stuck above the asphalt as I stepped outside of the institute for ecology. The shore of the lake only a few meters away from me, but no cool air. The wheels of my bike made that smacking noise when I moved it out of its parking position – pulling apart tire and asphalt from their molten embrace. I was glad about my bike: at least I could produce some wind in my face on my ride home with it. My grumbling stomach decided on a short detour for groceries before heading home.

I loved my tiny apartment in the heart of the old town – Especially since the thick walls kept the heat out quite well! Dropping off everything on the counter with a big sigh, including my phone, I caught a notification on the lock screen: Mom. “Call me back as soon as you can.” Instantly my stomach twisted – I knew something wasn’t right, the way one never wants to know how

instincts work. It wasn't about the tone of the message, really, as my Mom would ask for "urgent" info ever so often or would often rather drop a plead like this than calling me directly (out of fear she might be inconvenient – parents, right?). But... this time felt different, and my gut feeling transpired to be true as soon as I heard my Mom's voice picking up the call.

My father died as unexpectedly and suddenly as death tends to come. The all too familiar feeling of ones world turning into something grotesquely surreal washed over me and to this day I am still not quite certain if I'll ever dive back up from it again. It was like one of those dreams from childhood, where one or both of your parents or loved ones died. The only comfort in those dream is the certainty, that it must all be just a dream, and soon you're gonna wake up and make sure they are still part of the reality to which you just opened up your eyes to. You're gonna ask yourself questions to make sure of it while the panic will slowly ebb away and off your bed, joining the monsters under it again. I just never woke up from this summer eve. And my father was gone. The last train that day has left the station already, so I found myself staring at the last rays of light of one of the strangest days of my life through the window of the backseat of a taxi. After 300km of not being able to do anything but wait, I arrived at 2 am at my family's village. My mother and my three younger siblings all awaited me in the driveway – but my father was not here anymore. I came all the way to see him and he wasn't there anymore. Some officiants had already taken my father away from home. They didn't wait for me. I only learned later on what happens after you make that one phone call when someone dies. And you will make a phone call, because

you are thirsty to do something, anything! So you call the doctor, or the police, or the funeral service even – it doesn't matter, as the result is the same: As soon as authorities are involved they will take responsibility for the body.

I remember feeling so confused. Overwhelmed by overlapping realities crashing and then folding and then the faces of my siblings... It wasn't the first death of a loved one I had to grieve for, but instead I was raging. They robbed me of seeing my dead father and now I would have to wait until he was "ready for viewing"?

4. A short glimpse into the Death Industry

The Origin of the Death Industry - Or how embalming made the corpse a product

Before death became an industry, funerals were intimate rituals held together by the local communities involved. Churches offered their services and local artisans would craft gravestones or other necessities as a side of their usual business of building furniture. There was not yet a proper industry specialized only on death yet. So how did the professionalization of it all start? To answer this question, we have to take a look at the development of the science and art of embalming. Embalming itself is here defined as a process of bodily conservation which involves any sort of evisceration (like removing the juicy organs and/or draining the veins and arteries from blood) and replacement

of soft tissue with something else. In contrast to mummification, embalming is meant to delay the process of decomposition, not entirely stop it. Thus, our historical excursion does not start with the mummification practices of e.g. Egyptians, but in the 9th century. It is the time period from which first documentation exists of evisceration with embalming with the primary goal to slow down decomposition and reduce the smell of decay long enough for the body to be transported (e.g., for crusaders who died abroad) or to enable extensive funeral ceremonies for the privileged classes without pungent odor. Preceding the 9th century corpses were barely treated with fragrances against the smell of decay (Poux 2009; as cited in Corbineau et al. 2018) – a method which never went extinct, though it isn't exactly embalming. Occasional mentions of embalming during the Early Middle Ages and archaeobotanical data show that “embalming with evisceration considerably spreads and becomes quite usual practice for aristocratic elites from the late 13th century to the early 19th century. Apothecaries prepare aromatic powders including many plant organs and exudates supposed to preserve the body.” (Corbineau et al. 2018) But still embalming did not really exist as a profession of its own. What was more likely the case, according to documentations, was a splitting of the procedure under many professions: The evisceration was executed by surgeons. Then apothecaries would provide the required aromatics to fill the scalloped crooks of the corpse and also anoint its skin. The entire procedure did not change much for centuries! That is, until the discovery – and fame – of embalming via arterial injection⁴.

4 To avoid injustice towards Renouard's predecessors, who laid the groundwork for his later work, they shall be mentioned here: The two William H.s! We have William Harvey, who lived and worked in the first half of the 17th century. He was the first to document experiments during which he injected

Here the founding myth of the death industry truly starts: Between 1861 and 1865 the American Civil War produced around 600.000 dead soldiers. This hitherto unseen death toll on the battlefield stands in direct relation to the contemporary development of the national railway network. Especially the passing of the Pacific Railway Act 1862 was important for increasing mobility, as it provided federal funding for connecting the east coast with the west coast. This accelerated movement of troops enabled bigger battles and, consequently, larger death tolls. Now imagine 600.000 bereaved families expecting their loved ones bodies back for a funeral – which was, thanks to the new railway system, actually fathomable. But at what cost: Decomposing bodies filled entire train compartments and traveled for days, trailing the pungent smell of decay across the country. Some train companies wouldn't even allow the transport of dead soldiers anymore, as they deemed it impossible to carry – and keep sane – living passengers at the same time. The stage was set for Thomas Holmes. At the time Holmes worked in New York as a coroner's assistant where he experimented with chemical preservation techniques. When one of former President Lincoln's dear friends and colleagues, the Colonel Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth, died, Holmes sensed an opportunity and offered to embalm the Colonel free of charge. His work impressed Lincoln, who then commissioned him to help embalm the fallen soldiers for transport. Thomas Holmes later claimed to have single-handedly embalmed over 4.000 soldiers during the Civil War. But

colored solutions into arteries of animal cadavers (this research led him to “discover” the circulation of blood). The second William H. (Hunter) was one generation younger than Harvey and delivered the first proof of replacing arterial fluids with embalming liquid in order to preserve a human body (Britannica, “Embalming - Preservation, History, Rituals”).

Holmes was not the only one who senses a new business opportunity – anyone who was in need for money and wasn't too fainthearted could try to sell the service of embalming by pitching next to the fields of dead soldiers. There was business for everyone – and the trains could be filled again with caskets stocked with now (to varying degrees) conserved deceased loved ones. Embalming truly paved the (rail)way for the rise of the death industry. However, the continued rise and refining of embalming is due to Dr. Auguste Renouard, the so-called father of arterial embalming. He was trained as a medical doctor but discovered his true passion in embalming and chemistry. Renouard collected and refined recipes from Europe which he then published in “The Undertaker's Manual”, an exceptional handbook, as this excerpt shows:

EMBALMING FLUID.⁵

Sulphate of alumina,	4 pounds.
Arsenious acid,	4 ounces.
Creasote,	4 ounces.
Water,	1 gallon.

“To prepare this fluid, an explanation of its constituents is required. There are two different kinds of arsenious acid, the opaque and the transparent. This latter variety (the transparent) should be selected in preference to the other, on account of its greater solubility; the acid

5 One of many example recipes out of “The Undertaker's Manual” (Renouard 1878, 124 ff)

must also be procured in crystals, and not in powder, as it will, in the first place, dissolve quicker, and will not be liable to be adulterated. The water must then be heated to 55°, and the acid dissolved in it. The sulphate of alumina is then to be added, and, after being completely dissolved, let the solution cool off to the usual temperature; then add the creasote, and, after stirring gently, the solution is ready for use. [...] The stomach is then opened, as described in former chapters, and emptied of its contents; the bowels, also, must be subjected to the same process. The trachea is punctured, and the bronchial tubes completely filled with the solution through the opening thus made. The stomach and intestines should also be injected with the solution, and also the surrounding parts.”

These early recipes of modern embalming were all mainly based on arsenic solution. Arsenic is extremely dangerous (as in toxic and carcinogenic) to work with for the embalmer as it would spread through the entire body if it makes its way in through e.g. a minor cut on the hands or if one would wipe their nose without thinking. Even without braking the skin barrier, contact with arsenic causes harsh rashes and skin disease. Luckily this ingredient is obsolete for today's embalming practices. It has been replaced with different recipes for embalming fluids which usually consist of formaldehyde, alcohol and other solvents, with the content of formaldehyde spanning a wide range between 9 and 56% (Embalming device and method of embalming 1991; as cited in Ezugworie et al. 2008).

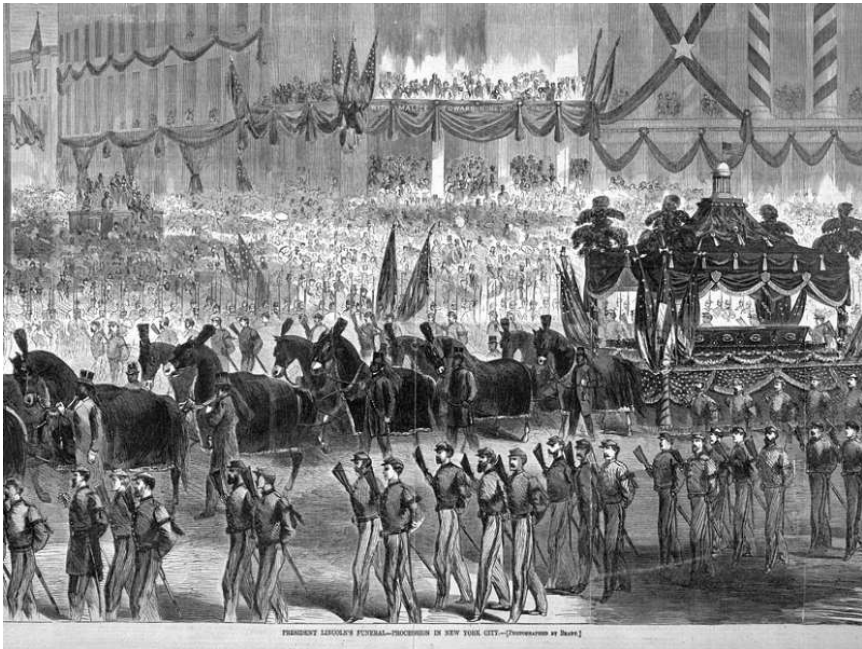
So Renouard refined these early recipes from Europe and made embalming highly accessible as a craft with his publication. Furthermore – and this speaks volumes for the depth of passion he had for the topic – he credited the ancient Egyptians and Etruscans for

“their discoveries in this art have been such that they have commanded the respect of modern savants.” (Renouard 1878, 124 ff). I will pay my own sort of debts towards the ancient crafts of Egypt in chapter 5, as for now we turn our attention back to America and our search for the origins of the death industry. We previously discussed the influence the Civil War on funeral customs, but there is one more historic event which must be acknowledged: The funeral of President Abraham Lincoln⁶. As I mentioned earlier, Lincoln was impressed by the results of modern embalming and naturally ordered to be preserved as well. His wish should come true sooner than expected. He got assassinated in 1865, only five days after the end of the Civil War. To allow the public to cope with such rapid unfolding of events, the embalmed body of Lincoln was ceremonially paraded through seven states and its major cities over the course of three weeks – all without decomposition. At



Lincoln's funeral train route: Source: Smithsonian Institute / www.si.edu

6 The entire history and legends around Lincoln's funeral and his final resting place would go beyond the scope of this chapter. Nevertheless it shall be mentioned to be worth an excursion for the interested.



Harper's Weekly, May 13, 1865; Source: the Library of Congress

the very latest through this display, the art of embalming became more and more popular throughout the entire nation.

The ongoing secularization in the western world drove the turning of the tide in the funeral world further. Yet again it was a war which marks the next chapter: After all the terrible losses of World War I, the desire during the early 20th century was to make death look pretty and clean – or rather: to de-naturalize it even further. From all the early, mercenary death industry capitalists, Hubert Eaton knew the best how to monetize this yearning for the alienated death. 1917 he took over one of the now most well known cemeteries of the world: Forest Lawn, located in California, and turned it into what is known for vast park landscapes full with extravagant sculptures and last home to some of the most famous people of the western modern age

(Walt Disney, Michael Jackson, Humphrey Bogart, Nit King Cole, to name just a few). He transformed Forest Lawn into a “Disneyland of Death”⁷, as a 1959 issue of the “Time” stated (as cited in Doughty 2015). And with the extravagance of graveyards the beautifying of the dead goes hand in hand. Embalming did shift the way the public viewed undertakers. Were they mere coffin makers before, they now held the secret to a mystical chemical procedure which glorified the corpse into something exhibitable. Doughty ponders even that “Art and science where nowhere as expertly combined as during the rise of embalming culture.” (Doughty 2015, 81) And the writer Evelyn Waugh described the practice cynically as “pickled in formaldehyde and painted like a whore, / Shrimp-pink incorruptible, not lost or gone before.” (Waugh 2000) But beautifying the dead is not only a cosmetic trend. To see the face of a loved one one last time becomes potentially traumatizing if it is marked and scarred by the cause of death. Restorative cosmetics as part of the embalming process can ease the pain of the bereaved in impressive manners, but should only be done if the customer asks for it.



Example of unsuccessful restoration of facial features; Emmet Till who was heavily beaten and murdered as a 14-year-old African-American in 1954; Photo: unknown

7

The dark side of this Disneyland: Unfortunately but unsurprisingly people of color were not welcome to be buried on Forest Lawn.



Before and after embalming; Photo: unknown

No matter if embalming, cremation or composting, each funeral practice comes with its own luggage of supporters and critics, each with their own source of motivation. Why are we choosing what we choose? The reasons behind those choices used to be rooted in believe (not necessarily, but mostly religious ones), but – and here again I offer the reason of death blindness as my argument – have now no such fundament anymore. I suppose, as one way to counteract death blindness, to really look into different practices today instead of following what became practice out habit.



Before and after embalming of a woman with major injuries to her face; Photo: unknown



Example of impressive facial restoration; man whose car was hit by a passenger train; Missouri, 1931; Photo: unknown



Even if my father wasn't the first death that shocked me to my core, it was the first death of which I was part of the decision process of what happens next. And I wasn't going to let myself be disappointed and paralyzed like all the "last times". All the funerals I've been to before. They were never helpful to me. The religious stories I was told at the funeral services by priests rather alienated me even more from the new reality of a world without the person who just died. I could not take solace in promises of "heaven" or "staying alive in our hearts" and instead was confused and angry about the ecological aspects which seemed to matter to no one except me. Perhaps, I thought to myself, the science of ecology is

my alternative belief-set I cling to with almost religious fervour, but at least there was more empirical grounding in thinking so. In all ecological aspects the planned procedure of what-shall-happen-next to my dead father appeared absolutely outrageous to me (my emotions might have been heightened, so yes, when I say “outrageous”, I mean it). My Dad wanted to be cremated, that’s what he told us a few months earlier when his father died. So even if cremation is the least “sustainable⁸” procedure for a corpse to go through⁹ – you’re basically burning resources in order to transform another potentially valuable resource into hot air and dead ashes¹⁰ – I accepted that part without restraints. But then to lock away

8 Quotation marks for the irony of sustaining something dead – and also the pseudo-sustainability discourse which is often solely based on carbon emission.

9 Even though all the harmful substances which got accumulated in the body over its lifetime will eventually end up in the soil, inhumation burial is by far the more ecological choice in comparison to cremation. Also the choice of coffin material is a major factor in terms of eco-friendliness. The emissions for production and transportation of coffins and urns remains exists for both procedures, but cremation produces a whopping 250.000 tons of CO² annually in Germany alone, where almost 80% of the population nowadays choose cremation over burial (<https://www.energieforschung.de/>, n.d.).

10 Many believe ashes are neutral or even good for the environment, fertilizing the soil. But ash is not always ash. For example, when one produces ash by burning garden waste or firewood, the majority of the trapped carbon and nitrogen evaporates into the atmosphere, leaving behind ash lacking the organic nutrients or nitrogen (the main fertilizer). The same logic applies to human cremation, with the difference of added toxins and various oxides, but more on that in chapter 5.

these ashes in an urn-wall, completely detached and sealed away from the world, in an air tight, plumbed container sitting in a sealed stone-shelf ... I couldn't grasp the level of absurdity! It felt like a violation against my personal feelings. While I couldn't put into words why it felt like this, the meaning apparently transcribed well enough when I broke down into a tearful anger-fit in front of my mother and siblings. I remember the aftermath of it vividly: Standing in the kitchen with a red face, heavily breathing through a running nose, staring pleadingly through a dizzy curtain of tears at my family seated around the kitchen table: "... I don't know, but does anyone understand?!"

"Sure! Yes.", my brother answered.

"Actually ... yes. I never thought of everything like that, but I get it. And now it somehow also feels wrong to me.", my Mom said to my surprise -and my sister added:

"You know what, after listening to all that, I also don't want Dad locked away anymore."

This felt almost like a cathartic shock to me. All of a sudden I wasn't alone anymore. My feelings were valid. But even more than that: My family just agreed that the ritual which is destined for us, might not be for us after all. But we didn't stop at bonding over funeral-frustration: We came up with an alternative plan on the spot.

"Sooo, what could we do instead? It's illegal in Germany to do anything else with the ashes apart from putting them in a dedicated graveyard.", my sister wondered.

"And all our relatives wouldn't want anything else than the traditional funeral either.", our Mom added.

I looked from face to face, taking in the weight of everything, and then smiled as it dawned to me: We would break the law.

Death Industry today

Aside from religious beliefs, economic reflections and other long-term historical trends, it is also legal codes that are a main influence on how we relate to death today. This chapter explores some examples of legal frameworks and their influences. The focus is mainly on German examples, since the above mentioned story is set in Germany and I am German. Examples on trends and politics in other countries follow at the end of this chapter.

My family and I planned to break the law, as we didn't even have the option to get in possession of the ashes of our Dad/husband – a quite normal thing in many other countries and base of many individual rituals. In Germany one has to get very creative and be persistent if one wants to outsmart the legal system of the death industry. Here in Austria, for example, it is possible to take the cremains^{II} home, even though the law varies from province to province. In Vienna e.g. one can get an official allowance from the MA40 and the property owner to bury the urn in one's own garden – but not to scatter them (source: bestattungwien.at). Also in Germany the laws can have their own variations depending on the federal state. Generally speaking though, Germany has one of the strictest burial regulations worldwide with laws like “Sargzwang” (the imperative of using a coffin or an urn) and “Friedhofszwang” (coercing the final resting place must be a cemetery). Parts of these regulations are still based on a decree issued by Napoleon in 1803! Since quite a few things have changed since then (e.g. a rise religious cultural diversity and secularization) the Federal Association of German Undertakers (BDB) has been lobbying for changes long overdue. Fortunately, things are undergoing an slow

II Cremains are the ashes of a cremated body.

reevaluation, as a recently enacted legislative amendment in two federal states indicates. It is not Bavaria, where my story is taking place, as it will for sure be one of the last states to adapt to the changes of society. But Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt have taken some big strides in October 2025: From now on people can choose the rivers Rhine, Moselle, Lahn or Saar for scattering their ashes. Scattering is an entirely new option and can now even be done in ones own garden. Also the option of keeping the urn at home is now legal (under registration and documentation, of course). The widely repressed ritual of shroud burial is now also finally permitted in those two states, a major relief for Muslims and Jews. The new legislation was introduced by the coalition government of the SPD, environmentalist Greens and the neoliberal Free Democrats (FDP).

These are important steps, but too tiny for the long way ahead still. The general rise in environmental concerns made so-called “green funerals” popular in the last couple of years. And this trend is one to witness on a global scale. From woodland burial grounds to sea-scattering, most of these alternative practices are based on cremains. On the other hand we have the practice of composting gain footing. Natural Organic Reduction (NOR) or also called terramation is different to e.g. shroud burial, is basically composting. The method is still under observation, with institutions like the Institute of Forensic Medicine Leipzig frontiering the research (Schwarz et al. 2024). Terramation is, like cremation, a monitored process where the body is placed in a cocoon-like coffin with a mixture of sawdust and microorganisms (as a base recipe). The cocoon is then marinating in a steady environment of humidity and temperature to provide optimum conditions for a speedy and thorough decomposition, which can be as fast as 40 days. If one would just bury a body, e.g. similar to shroud burial, it will also

disintegrate until it will eventually become fully unrecognizable dirt again. But the time span it takes is relying entirely on conditions of the soil. The use of heavy coffins and occasionally embalming is slowing down this natural process to a problematic extent.

As we gain environmental awareness and trends in burial are making their way into the main stream (like processing human ashes into a diamond), I am personally hoping for a comeback of the “Infinite Burial Suit” – a suit with thread from mushroom spores. The MIT-trained designer and artist Jae Rhim Lee selected the fungi species based on their abilities to decompose each body part most efficiently, even removing toxins from our bodies while doing so. Apparently the artist teamed up with an existing company in California, “Coeio”, which already made burial shrouds infused with mushroom spores. Unfortunately the world wasn’t ready for this, as the business seems dead online. Another option could be that they were simply too expensive. Cost is one of the main reasons why more and more people are tending towards the idea of having their body reduced to ash or earth instead of going six feet under via coffin. Urns are distinctly smaller than coffins and therefore require smaller – thus cheaper – burial plots, which need to be rented. The cost of funerals in Germany spans between a whopping 5.000 to 10.000 € and can easily cost more, depending on the details. Cremation is simply cheaper than ground burial. All of this produces a phenomenon called “death tourism”, where people from stricter countries would travel abroad¹² to cremate

12 Of course there is quite the amount of paperwork required to travel with a dead body – and Germany only allows it under the circumstances, that the resulting cremains will be permanently buried at the destination. Which is fortunately a thing out of the state’s reach of control and a loophole for relatives to gain access to the ashes.

their loved ones somewhere with looser laws and return with the ashes hidden in their luggage. On a sidenote: To prevent such death tourism, the mentioned German state Rhineland-Palatinate only allows river burials or taking home the ashes to its current residents. “[Germany’s] rules are predominantly characterized by mistrust and outdated traditions, whereas a much more liberal approach is usual in other countries. Many people simply don’t follow the existing rules,” press officer Alexander Helbach from the Consumer Initiative Funeral Culture Aeternitas e.V. puts it in a nutshell. More and more Germans try to outsmart the system entirely by going for the option of donating their body to science. With its usual costs of 0,00 €, the progression of corpse-donation led already to oversaturation among anatomy institutes – with the bizarre consequence of institutes having to turn down or charge donors (The German Way of Death and Funerals • The German Way & More 2016). How dramatic the burial business can get shows a look at Russia. What has already started during the Covid19 pandemic, only gained momentum with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The overall funeral market grew 12.7% during the first half of 2025, filling the coffers of the state with billions. In Russia, undertakers are part of the state-mafia. Already since the early 2000s up to 60% of the funeral sector revenue circulated in the so-called shadow economy (“Долю нелегальных похорон в России оценили в 60 процентов” 2013). The price for a traditional burial rises with each year: The latest numbers from 2023 locate the average traditional burial cost at about 59,950 rubles – which would translate to 665€, but if I calculate the purchasing power parity¹³ in and compare it to Austria, it is actually

13 I sourced the data for this calculation from the platform www.tradingeconomics.com. The calculation is simply $PPP_{AT} / PPP_{RU} * EUR \text{ amount}$.

closer to 1000€. But this is just the funeral, without the plot of land, the caskets, etc. Again, cremation is the cheaper option with costing only about half the price of a burial. As a result, 60-70% of bereaved families choose cremation today, even though it goes against their religious and cultural preference (Snegireva 2025).

War and its underlying motives are always leading back to extractivism and greed over so called natural resources and build the link between the climate catastrophe and the equally large topic of death and dying. To deal with any of this – ecocide, war, death of someone close – we have to get creative to stay resilient.



It was the day before the funeral. In our catholic church tradition asks for a pseudo-wake, which usually consists of the urn (almost nobody chose the coffin-way-to-go anymore those days) being presented in a funeral parlour or a side chapel on church grounds. People would order grieving wreaths or other floral arrangements with their condolences written on ribbons to be places around the propped up urn or coffin. We set the time of the funeral ceremony in the morning, as this way we could ensure that the florists would have to equip the funeral parlour already the day prior – which bought us necessary time for our plan.

“Yes hello, Monika Bühn speaking. I just wanted to ask when the wake will start exactly? My kids and me would really like to have a few moments alone with my husband before ... Oh, yes ... No you can’t hold anyone out, of course not. ... Aha. Yeah? ... Yes, I’d want to check on the flowers ... Thank you so much! 2Pm it is then.”

My Mom hung up the phone and looked at us: “They really won’t let

anyone be unsupervised with the urn! Wow. That's so typically strict for this godforsaken village. But we can go in already during setup time, when the florists bring the wreaths!"

We celebrated this next successful step of our plan with a drive to the undertaker service next town to pay our bill there in person... and to pick up a special item. The five of us tried to look as grieving and innocent as possible, but I remember vividly the racing heartbeats loud enough to hear each others nervousness. The lady looked at the bill over the top rim of her glasses and back at us: "One moment please." We glanced at each other ... and then I almost let out a sigh of relief as I saw her returning around the corner with an urn in her hands.

"So, two urns on the bill, because you want the same one for yourself to take home, correct?", she blinks again over the rim of her glasses at my Mom.

"Correct! We want to have it as a piece of commemoration, you know?", my Mom hastily explains.

"Ah! How nice! Well, then please sign here – aaand your credit card. ..."

Two days later at 2 pm we are standing on the cemetery watching workers unload wreath after wreath. We smile at everyone our sad-smiles and greet them, trying to hide the tennis-backpack we brought with us – a point at which I'm thinking we should've brought more backpacks, maybe one each, filled with actual sports equipment maybe – but alas one can never be too paranoid in a super conservative village, right? As the workers finished setting up their current load, my Mom approached them politely: "Excuse me, hello, yes, I'm the widow..." and told them the same sad story of how we just want to say goodbye truly alone, if they'd let us

here while they're gone. They agreed of course, but they'd have to leave one of them back with us (it is so so strict here). Once the colleagues of our designated watchman were gone my Mom handed him a 20 € bill and asked if he could just step aside a few meters to give us "space to be alone".

The parlour had one big glass wall, so as soon as he turned his back outside to us, we formed a half circle around our Dad's remains and waited for maybe two minutes to catch our racing hearts.

The next step involved two of us stepping outside to stand watch in both directions and start coughing in case anyone approaches. Remaining inside, with my mum and sister, I opened up my jacket and put my arms around the two of them, pulling the seams of the jacket a bit with me. Anyone passing by would see me awkwardly consoling the two women, as I was shielding their gaze from what they were actually doing: It needed four hands to wiggle the identical urn out of the backpack in mid-air and then, in a swift move, exchange it with the urn sitting on the pedestal. Another five seconds to rearrange the miniature wreath the urn was sitting on, closing the zip back up aaaand done. We walk outside and give each other a real hug this time. At the same moment the florists return – we thank them and quickly head off on our way home.

The Vacuum of Secularization

The scene of this story is a catholic village marked by the existence of a monastery. In the 2000 years since its founding nothing else has ever really happened there. People still practice their religion even if they don't actually believe (a fact only a later version of myself came to terms with). Why is that so? Back in catholic-monastery-

high school I learned that the Enlightenment promised liberation from religious dogma and ritualized thinking. This is the dominant narrative of modernity, whereas secularization is the defining pattern of this progress: A shift toward a disenchanted world in which religion no longer structures collective meaning. But progress, in this case, came with a peculiar side effect: a vacuum where meaning once lived. However, before I continue on this track of thought, let's clarify that the link often drawn between Enlightenment and secularism has to be thought of with a warning label: As Anna Tomaszewska writes, "attributing a secularizing tendency to the intellectual developments witnessed in the "age of reason" is anachronistic" and interprets the history from a singular point of view only (Tomaszewska 2017). And even though the connection between secularization and modernization is a clearly quantifiable trend in Europe (and some Muslim countries), it cannot be replicated in the same way in the US, and certainly not in India, for example. This is being discussed in various fields which include decolonial studies, religious studies, and many more, but the complexity of local differences would go beyond the scope of this thesis and has furthermore yet to be studied more.

Now the vacuum of secularization is not an empty space, but a strangely crowded one. It is filled with the silent remains of rituals that once structured societies' experiences of loss, grief, and transition. This loss is often attributed to secularization alone, yet it is equally tied to the professionalization of care for the dead. Hence death did not disappear from social life: It was outsourced – and thus became relegated, invisible. The act of tending to the dead, of sitting with dying bodies, of washing, dressing, carrying, mourning, and burying, shifted from families and communities into the hands of experts. The emergence of a death industry transformed a relational and communal

process into a service product. Knowledge that had once been collective became specialized. Shared labor turned into a transaction. In this sense, rituals were not only abandoned, but expropriated from their ecologies of origin.

Contemporary sociological data gives this transformation a measurable form. Increasing secularization is no longer limited to traditionally secular Western European regions, but reaches into former religious strongholds. Religious sociologist Detlef Pollack from the Cluster of Excellence "Religion and Politics" at the University of Münster describes how "[t]he proportion of people without religious affiliation in the USA, for example, which remained in the single-digit percentage range throughout the 20th century, has risen to just under a third". Similar tendencies can be observed in Poland, where weekly church attendance declined by ten percentage points between 2015 and 2021 alone. Even in regions often imagined as religiously stable, such as Iran, only around forty percent of the population now identifies as Muslim. These numbers are drawn from unofficial (but independent!) surveys though, as official statistics state otherwise (Pollack and Rosta 2025). The religious infrastructures that once held death inside a coherent cosmology are, in many places, dissolving faster than they are being replaced.

We can observe today that what disappears with religion is not belief alone, but choreography. Burial is an extraordinarily labor-intensive practice. From a purely pragmatic perspective, it would often be far easier to simply abandon corpses: Let them float down rivers, or return them to ecological anonymity in forests, caves, or open fields. And yet, for millennia, humans have insisted on doing the opposite. Archaeological and palaeoanthropological research has long been fascinated by this insistence. Burials appear as some of the earliest

material traces of human self-understanding, precisely because they represent such an apparently “inefficient” investment of time, care, and symbolism (Pettitt 2018). The dead are not simply disposed of; they are staged, accompanied, oriented in space, supplied with objects, marked by gesture.

In the absence of shared religious frameworks, grief becomes a psychological condition rather than a social process. Mourning becomes something to “get through” rather than something to be held. What emerges from this process is not the freedom the Enlightenment promised, but a specific kind of poverty: a poverty of forms. A vacuum of secularization that is filled with improvisation, discomfort, and silence. Where ritual once offered containers for fear, uncertainty, and meaning, there is now the rising demand to cope individually. The dead, once centered in communal life, become administratively managed and spatially displaced. They vanish into institutions, paperwork, and protocols. And yet, the persistence of burial across cultures and millennia points to something that cannot be fully secularized: the human need on marking the threshold between life and death with care. Even when gods disappear, the body remains. The hands that once prayed now sign forms. The candles are replaced by fluorescent light. The vigil becomes a visiting hour.

Rituals In The Void

My partner Kilian has also lost their father, several years before we met. His mother, Claudia, experienced the same need to care for her husband. The ritual-replacements she was confronted with were mostly of the bureaucratic type: Paperwork, one of the only care sectors the bereaved can still acted on. It is not rewarding and rather

alienating, as it is so estranged and has little to do with the actual person one is mourning. When Claudia tried to cancel her husband's phone contract, she was confronted with a form titled "Termination in the event of death", which nevertheless demanded the "signature of the contract holder." A dead man asked to sign his own disappearance. The absurdity of this moment drove her to rage; she found brief relief by calling customer service and collapsing emotionally into the ear of a stranger. This kind of care work is not neutral. It does not soothe; it estranges. It performs distance rather than proximity. It transforms love into administration. The bereaved are not invited into a process of embodied farewell, but into a regime of documentation. Mourning becomes case management.

Anthropological research suggests that what we have lost is not symbolic, but somatic. Across cultures, kin traditionally engaged in prolonged, intimate contact with the corpse: washing it, touching it, carrying it, preparing it for burial. These practices, as (White et al. 2017) argue, provided "veridical cues of death," facilitating the painful but necessary recategorization of the deceased from relationship partner to memory. Without this contact, grief remains abstract and ungrounded. What resonated with me in this insight was not its theory, but its violence. I recognized myself in the absence it described. I had been denied the body! I had been denied the chance to encounter death as such. Instead of being allowed to witness the deadness of the dead, I was presented with a version of the body that was made to resemble peaceful sleep – sanitized, composed, disguised. Not death, but its cosmetic double. I experienced this as a betrayal: of the dead, of myself, and of the possibility of truth. The dead body becomes an object to be managed rather than a threshold to be crossed. A culture that cannot touch its own dead develops rituals of distance instead of rituals of

contact. We learn to look away not because we are weak, but because we are structurally trained to survive by not looking. This blindness is often mistaken for indifference. In reality, it is a structural condition. It is not that we do not want to look, but that we are no longer taught how. The sociologist Katsumi Shimane describes how modernization did not only professionalize death; it aestheticized it. Funerals grew shorter. Attendance declined. Tasks once carried by neighbors, kin, and friends were moved into the hands of paid specialists, as we have learned in the previous chapters. The handling of corpses has become increasingly commodified, outsourced, and technologically mediated (Shimane 2018). Communities withdraw. Institutions expand. The consequences of this shift extend far beyond individual grief. When death is no longer integrated into daily life through ritual, it becomes abstract. And abstract death is easily displaced. From this vantage point, it does no longer seem surprising that climate collapse, species extinction, mass dying and similar phenomena mostly circulate as images and numbers, stripped of bodily encounter (see chapter 2). We have collectively unlearned to be able to have somatic contact with death. Research on climate communication shows that mortality-laden messages can trigger not action, but denial, defensiveness, and even increased consumption (Smith et al. 2022). We are confronted with death “everywhere”, but only in abstract categories. At the same time we are trained to experience it nowhere. The deeper reasons for this condition do not end here. They do not belong only to secularization or modernization, but to a larger economic and political logic that organizes time, bodies, and value. For now, it is enough to say this: the loss of ritual did not make us more rational. It made us more lonely facing the unavoidable ending of everything living. What we once held collectively must now be metabolized privately.



It was broad daylight outside and we felt incredibly suspicious as we pulled down the blinders in our family kitchen. In this village everyone looked into everyone's business whenever possible. So we found ourselves sitting around the kitchen table again. None of us had ever seen the inside of an urn, so we stretched our necks to see what was going to be revealed as my brother slowly lifted the lid off: the ash capsule. I don't know what we exactly expected but it felt comically weird to watch my brother trying to carefully pry open the tin plumbed seal. My mother threw a nervous glance at the covered windows. As if one of the neighbors would pry underneath the shutters to see what's going on in the kitchen of the Bühn's if they are shutting all light out in the middle of the day? "It's open.", my brother declared. After everyone had a chance to glance inside the capsule once, we looked for a bigger bowl. The one we intended to use was too small for how big my Dad still was even after cremation. We carefully poured him into our ginormous salad bowl, the dust of the finest particles dancing in the light of the kitchen table lamp, where they would become part of the dust as they'd settle on the lampshade. In contrast to today, I had no idea of the specific properties of bone ash, other than their complete lack of nutritious minerals for the soil. So we found ourselves pretty dumbfounded about the weight our kitchen scale blinked into the gloomy, still dusting kitchen air: 4,7kg?! That's some dense stuff! My sisters and I collected some stones earlier in the day, but as we started to fill the ash capsule with them, we quickly realized: The stones are too light! We will never be able to replace the weight of Dad's ashes with the same volume of stones!

“Fill the gaps with smaller stones?” - “There are no more smaller stones! And they’re too light, too!” - “Water! We could fill it with water?” - “Oh my god NO, what if it leaks?” - “In the Hollywood movies they always just replace the ashes with coffee grounds! That’s so unrealistic, like who came up with this? Coffee is even lighter than stones!” - “Let’s try the sand!” - “We don’t have sand?” - “The old sand-box in the garden! There’s still a bit sandy ground we can scratch together.” - “And we can make it moist to be heavier!” - “What do you think the neighbors will think we’re doing? First collecting stones, now digging in the garden...” - “They will think we grieve in a weird way, don’t worry, let’s just do it.” - “Well, no going back now...” - “Guys, we still have to bring the urn back in time.”

The Rise of Cremation

The start of the hype around cremation was probably around the 1950ies, when post World War II people leaned into the postwar kitsch aesthetic (as we remember from Hubert Eaton’s “Disneyland of the dead” from the subchapter “The Origin of the Death Industry – Or how embalming made the corpse a product”). Glory and pomp instead of grim and dry funerals were the fashion of the day. But as it goes with all trends sooner or later, they also die down again. The main reason exuberant funerals came out of fashion was that the funeral industry got too greedy: Prices skyrocketed in the 60’ies and led women like Evelyn Waugh, whose opinion we heard earlier already, and the now infamous Jessica Mitford to protest against the absurdly high prices and the entire theater that came with it. Mitford’s book “The American Way of Death” landed like a bomb when it got published

1963 and turned the tide for the funeral industry. She argued that the business of undertaking has become one of unscrupulous charlatans who would do anything to press the last penny out of one's pockets. To no surprise people from all corners and layers of society agreed with her – and followed her example of choosing the much more inexpensive way of cremation instead. In a lucky “coincidence” Pope Paul VI also lifted the Catholic Church's ban on cremation in the same year. Since the early days of Christianity, it was widely believed that only an intact, buried body could rise again on the Last Day. To be burned was to risk metaphysical exclusion – the fear of not rising from the dead worked as a powerful theological technology of discipline (see chapter 3). The pope's green light for cremation therefore marked not only a practical shift, but a deep symbolic rupture. Latest reports on burial and cremation show how complete this shift has become. In the United States, cremation rates are projected to reach over 80% by 2045, while traditional burials are expected to drop into the low teens. In Canada, burial is projected to become almost statistically irrelevant, with cremation rates approaching 90% (National Funeral Directors Association 2024). Europe is expecting similar advances. The reasons for this fundamental shift are mostly pragmatic: cost, environmental concerns, fewer religious prohibitions, and a desire for simpler ceremonies. Beneath these rational explanations though lies a deeper cultural vacuum. Fewer people believe in the tale of resurrection. Or in sacred soil – and therefore the necessity of a body to remain. But back to Mitford's transformative book: Her critique on the death industry went far beyond economics. What she uncovered was an aesthetic regime of deception. The corpse, she writes, “is in short order sprayed, sliced, pierced, pickled, trussed, trimmed, creamed, waxed, painted, rouged and neatly dressed – transformed from a common

corpse into a Beautiful Memory Picture” (Jessica Mitford 1963, 66). This process of embalming and restorative art became so normalized in the United States and Canada that it was often performed without consultation of the customers. Against this spectacle of preservation, cremation appeared as a promise of honesty. Mitford herself framed it as a rational, almost hygienic solution. “Cremation sounds like a simple, tidy solution to the disposal of the dead,” she writes, describing its appeal to nature lovers, rationalists, conservationists, and those exhausted by the “malarkey” surrounding traditional funerals (Jessica Mitford 1963, 161). Fire with its transformative lure was imagined more powerful than soil, ash as more poetic than rot, scattering as more liberating than enclosure in tombs. But this promise, too, belongs to the logic of modernity. Cremation does not outsmart the death industry; it optimizes it. What once took days or weeks of communal labor can now be compressed into hours of industrial process. Cremation therefore is the perfect ritual for a secular age: fast, efficient, individualized, sanitized, flexible.

Cremation Throughout Different Cultural Spheres & as Artistic Practice

Even though cremation is often framed as a modern solution in the Western imagination, it was historically anything but modern. Cremation has appeared and disappeared in cycles, tied to cosmology, to material conditions, and to ideas about what a body would become after death. Where wood was abundant in Europe, cremation once formed the center of carefully staged, communal rituals. Fire was not an industrial tool but a social event: slow, choreographed and full of festivity, deliberately saturated with symbols. In India today, cremation

still functions as a visible, public cosmotechnics¹⁴. In Varanasi, the capital of the dead, between eighty and one hundred bodies are burned each day on the cremation ghats along the holy river Ganges. Fire, water, wood and prayer form a continuous choreography in the midst of society. Yet even here, the logic of access reveals its violence. Traditional cremation requires specific woods, oils, and ritual labor – a costly practice. Those who cannot afford this are forced into compromise. Bodies are released uncremated into the Ganges in the hope that the sacred river will carry the soul toward liberation either way. Whatever happens to these souls, their bodies are left to decompose in the water. They will partially wash back onto the banks, get consumed by animals and continue to drift downstream. The ecological consequences of the mass of corpses have been so severe that the Indian government once in the 1980's tried to manage it by releasing 250.000 flesh-eating turtles into the Ganges (John Stackhouse 1992). The plan to reduce what was officially termed “necrotic pollution”, shifted death management from ritual to biotechnical intervention.

As mentioned above, Western cremation was historically embedded in cyclical ecologies of material abundance. Today it is rather embedded in economies of extraction and loss, as burning a body requires enormous amounts of energy. A body – a dense archive of minerals, histories, and ecologies – is put into furnace and out comes heat, gas and residue in form of cremains. These cremains primarily consist of calcium phosphate in the form of bone ash. Everything

14 Cosmotechnics is a term Yuk Hui derived from Isabelle Stengers' reframing of the entire terminology of cosmopolitics; Cosmotechnics is in short the meaning we give to the aesthetic grounding of a technical culture inside its own locality (Hui 2017).

else turns into atmospheric waste. But even after going through this intense process, human ashes are not neutral or clean. They contain significant quantities of heavy metals such as lead, cadmium, copper, zinc, nickel, chromium and mercury. They also contain inorganic plant nutrients such as sodium, potassium and phosphorus, which, e.g. buried in forest grounds via decomposing urns, actively alter the nutrient balance of these sites (Umweltbundesamt Fachgebiet II 2.6 2019). Despite environmental regulations and filter systems, modern crematoria are responsible for approximately 0.2% of global emissions of dioxins and furans, and they represent one of the largest sources of atmospheric mercury in Europe (Heinrich 2019). The fire that is supposed to symbolize purification has turned out to be a contributor to planetary toxicity.

So why then did I decide to cremate Roadkill in the ceramic kilns? A process which does not only require one firing, but two! As a trained ecologist this doesn't seem to add up at first glance. Usually, animals rot and/or are eaten when they are left alone outside. Even if I would choose bury them, this would serve the narrative of "nature back to nature" – and put those animals outside of the human realm again, following the nature-culture divide. So I'm trying to go against the grain of the expected by developing an extremely labor-intensive cremation-based artistic practice. I give these animals a form of attention normally reserved for human dead. The very creatures we classify as pests are granted time, energy, ritual, and focus. My practice is not about a romantic restoration of nature, but about interruption of habits. Yet the origin of this methodology was not symbolic, but technical: When I learned that the retort of a crematorium reaches temperatures between 760°C and 982°C, something snapped into place. These temperatures are basically identical to those used in ceramic

kilns. Burial and pottery suddenly shared a thermal horizon. The corpse and the vessel belong to the same fire. This was not an aesthetic realization, but an ontological one. What happens to matter at this temperature? What happens to memory? To form? To care? Over the course of the next chapter we move a bit further into this kiln-space.



The funeral of my father was like a fever dream of absurdly empty rituals. I think I dissociated most of the time. A moment of clarity struck me though, as the mass started to move and dozens (or even hundreds?) of people started to squeeze themselves out of the church benches and drop in line of the procession towards the graveyard. The entire community walking in full sobriety and graveness in a slow march, following a garlanded urn filled with dirt, stones and some coffee grounds for good measure – I couldn't help but smile for a moment at the irony that my Dad is actually sitting on our kitchen table right now. The ritual of catholic burial has truly lost all power over me.

A few days after the funeral we packed our bags (including a very certain Ziplock-bag) and hit the road. It was time for our own funeral ritual. My siblings and I got in the car while our Mom took the motorcycle – to take her husband on a last ride together to the place we choose to scatter him.

5. Earth to Earth, Ashes to Ashes¹⁵

Scattering is a powerful image, which bridges the dissonance between the desire for meaningful ritual and the void of religious rituals I have discussed in the previous chapter. As much as the funeral industry tries to camouflage it though, scattering human ashes can be quite problematic. The romanticization of a return to nature is a contortion of reality when it comes to the procedures of cremation and scattering – but as long as we are not legally enabled to compost ourselves, it's the only secularized option we have. And here is why: Human ashes don't have their own ecological niche (yet?). In contrast to e.g. wood ashes, which can be used as fertilizer, cremation ash is far closer to an industrial byproduct. Untreated human ash has a pH comparable to bleach or oven cleaner. Its chemical composition is rich in phosphates, calcium, potassium, and sodium – which may sound vaguely nutritious, but as it is so often the case: The dose makes the poison. And in the case of human ashes the ratios of some of the substances are catastrophically misaligned with the needs of plants. Sodium is the starkest example: Human ashes contain concentrations 200 to 2000 times higher than what plant systems can tolerate. In an experiment conducted to test this theory in practice, plant saplings were directly exposed with either “normal” human ash or the detoxified version of it. The consequences were visible within days. The detoxified ashes were able to be included in the soil biology and the plants looked healthy. The high calcium load of the untreated ashes though interfered with the plant's ability to regulate water and conduct photosynthesis, leading to rapid browning, scorching, and spotting of leaves.

15 (Book of Common Prayer 1549)

The result: Up to 90% of saplings die within two weeks when exposed to untreated human ashes (Green 2021).



Saplings with untreated human ashes; Source: Green 2021



Saplings with treated human ashes; Source: Green 2021

As mentioned above, the funeral industry is generally trying its hardest to sell the image of “returning to nature” and green funerals, thus there is little similar research to be found. The majority of my search results ended on websites of funeral providers claiming the ashes would

“gently join the soil”. In Hong Kong, where scattering has long been more established than here in Europe, a study led by Sai-Leung Ng though shocking results. To evaluate the environmental sustainability of the practice of ash scattering, “[T]wo complementary methods were employed to study the vegetation performance of a scattering garden which had been open for ash scattering for six years. The results indicated that, overall, approximately half of vegetation was degraded to either unhealthy or bare soil due to ash scattering.” (Ng 2022)

In general I found non-European undertaker companies appear more aware and outspoken of the ecological problems human cremains create. A Californian company provides the following information on their website to inform on sea-scattering: “[...] when ashes are dispersed in water bodies, they can contribute to water pollution, affecting aquatic life and water quality. In natural habitats, the long-term impact may not always be immediately visible, but it can create lasting changes to the surrounding environment, leading to biodiversity loss or disruption of ecosystems.” (“Understanding Ash Scattering and Its Environmental Impact,” n.d.) Some companies (e.g. “Mornington Green” in Australia) even take the extra step of detoxifying the ashes before burial or scattering. I am hopeful this practice will somehow make its way to us, because cremation is here to stay – for now.

Vessels For The Dead, Shaped By Hands¹⁶

Looking back in time, cultural and religious changes led to cremation practices coming and going. Which leaves us with a rich history of

16 The sources for this excursion into history are various, but I found especially the blog post *Urns: Their History and Collectibility* by (Boschetto 2022) quite helpful.

urns. Strictly speaking, an urn is a container for funeral ashes and can be of almost any material. Typically though, it is made of pottery, porcelain, metal or stone. It comes to no surprise that the history of urns correlates a lot with the history of cremation. I introduced the modern history of cremation in earlier chapters, but it is actually one of humanity's earliest ways of dealing with the dead. The earliest traces of urns lead us to China 7000 B.C., where urns were mainly created for children – though some exceptions from this rule were also found. The practice of keeping cremains in ceramic vessels traveled around Europe in 3000 B.C. The urns found from these times belonged to the Slavic peoples in western Russia and the Near East. Cremation reached North America, the British Isles, Spain and Portugal during the Bronze Age (2500-1000 B. C.). Cultures shifted, but the history of fire and clay remained the same. We already know a little bit more about the background of the rituals from the Mycenaean World (1000-800 B.C.), when urns were used to symbolically honor the dead and protect the living. The Greeks had to come to a more pragmatic approach, as with numerous wars the death toll was generally high. It deemed most sanitary to cremate the bodies and store them in urns to honor them. In the Roman Empire (27 B.C. to 396 A.D.) cremation was embraced with much decorum. The urns were placed in some kind of a columbarium building. The rise of Christianity though reversed the flame. The promise of bodily resurrection demanded bodily integrity; urns fell out of favor, surviving only in times of plague and war. Also Muslims, orthodox Jews and eastern orthodox churches found that cremation was against their religion. For centuries, burial became the norm and fire the exception, until modernity rekindled the flame: During the late 19th century rational and sanitary approaches were a welcome alternative. Ludovico Brunetti invented the first commercial

cremation chamber, shown at the 1873 Vienna Exposition, which transformed a ritual into a machine. At almost the same moment, the Cremation Society of England began advocating cremation as the cleaner, safer, modern practice. Urns persisted over time as they answer a human need that outlives doctrine: the need to hold on.

Nevertheless, they can appear in various alternations, depending on the cosmology they originated from. The ancient Egyptians have already been mentioned earlier with their almost-embalming practices; Let me draw another parallel here to an almost-urn practice: During the mummification process organs were removed and then embalmed separately in ceramic vessels called canopic jars. This practice can be traced since the 4th dynasty, the Old Kingdom (2620 bis 2500 v. Chr.).

In Pre-Columbian Central America, Aztec rulers were cremated, their ashes gathered carefully and kept as sacred relics of political cosmology.

Another very special almost-urn are the tsatsa. In Tibetan Buddhism cremation is rare, but when practiced, ashes of Lamas may be mixed into clay to form tiny stupas – the tsatsa. Tsatsa remain as devotional objects connected to the Lama.



Tsatsa in the form of a Stupa; Source: Orchontal Visual Museum

Eventually one principle is consistent across cultures: From the first smoky pyres of prehistory to the polished memorial shelves of modern apartments, urns have persisted as a way to keep the dead near without denying that they are gone.



The five of us – my brother, my two sisters and our Mom – were standing on the “Edelweiß” mountain top, anxiously waiting for a moment the other tourists would leave for a moment. Then my Mom finally unzipped her backpack to reveal the plastic zip-lock with my fathers cremains. What neither of us knew, was that the fine, gray matter was not the “natural” residue after cremation, but again a beautified, homogenized version of it. When bodies burn, the bones only partly disintegrate. They become incredibly brittle, so the finer ones will break down by the process itself, but it is quite normal to have quite a few larger bones on the tray when it comes out of the furnace. For this issue bone grinders exist. Imagine an oversized coffee grinder: That’s where the bones get grinded down to a fine, white flour, which then joins the rest of the ashes again. The result is this unique grainy, gray substrate, that I was sticking my hand into now. Who would have thought it is so hard to grab a handful of human ash? Unlike sand, flour or earth, it mostly runs right through the tiniest gaps of your fingers as there is nothing to hold it together anymore. I hesitantly threw my small fist full onto the steep slope below us. As we watched with teary eyes and most earnest sincerity my first gesture unfold, a slight but constant breeze did not cooperate with the Hollywood-esque scenario we had envisioned. Half of my Dad’s residue blew right back at us! At that moment I was lucky I couldn’t hold much of it in my hand. Unbothered my brother went next to dive into the bag. We desperately tried adjusting our scattering angle and timing, but it was overall quite messy. After every single one of us had several somber attempts at dramatic scattering, there was still SO

MUCH left in the plastic bag! 4,7kg of human ashes are not exactly a small amount. I find it baffling how we managed to carry on feeling so solemn and not burst out crying with laughter by the time we actually had to shake out the plastic bag. With a permanent noise carpet of dozens of motorcyclists going up and down the serpentine, I played on my guitar for a bit, we took a weird photo and then went back down the platform. My sister bought a cap from the tourist gift shop and we browsed the isles looking at plush toy versions of the animals which were hiding from the noise. It might seem a bit ironic, to choose a mountain top which was mostly transformed into a parking lot, next to what is basically a highway through the largest National Park of Austria, Hohe Tauern. But it all made perfectly sense for the kind of person my father was.



Material legacies

Anthropologists today draw their conclusions on the societal rank of someone's found remains by interpreting the burial evidence they encounter. Be it mortuary constructions such as temples, pyramids, graves, urns or stories told or written, the traces the dead leave behind hold information about the ideologies and values of their societies of origin.

But the material itself is already a kind of quiet archive: The sedimented clay consists of stem from weathered ecosystems and eroded mountains. Every handful of clay we dig from the ground is a memory of an entire landscape that had to die, geologically speaking, to become what I am now working with. My practice therefore carries a double temporality: The immediacy of the Roadkill I found and the rich history of the clay material. Beyond this poetic indulgence this is also a reminder that every object I continue to create this way requires a geography of extraction. I also intentionally choose this medium as it has the potential to stay. To outlive me and my cultural embedding. Because as soon as clay gets fired and vitrified, it gets removed from the cycle of dying and recycling, becoming something almost eternal. Ceramics have such a longevity, it was decided on as material for humanity's archive via the project MOM ("Memory of Mankind," n.d.). Martin Kunze, a certified ceramist, founded the MOM archive in 2012. The initiative has set itself the task of preserving a selection of humanity's most important documents as analogue images, fired onto ceramic tiles in the salt mine in Hallstatt. As current data storage media like DVDs, hard drives or even microfilm have a very limited lifespan¹⁷,

17 Currently the life span of said materials is about 100 years for DVDs, 10-30 years for hard drives and 400-500 years for microfilm.

much of what we ever created would be lost forever in case of a major disaster. So to prevent another burning-of-Alexandria situation, Kunze developed a ceramic microfilm with a thickness of only 1mm – which can still be read with magnifying glasses! Speculating already about some future

researchers, decoding our society: I imagine an anthropologist, generations away from me. If they would find one of my urns for a sewer rat (and could identify it as such), which kind of suggestions for our relationship with them would they draw up? Maybe they would apply thermoluminescence to determine the age of the silicate in the urns. Silicate changes its chemical structure when heated above 600°C and with thermoluminescence it can be determined when this last happened (Komarova et al. 2011). Therefore my hypothetical researchers from the distant future could determine the exact year a particular animal died simply by reading the thermoluminescent clock embedded in the vessel. My practice inevitably produces artefacts with timestamps. Additionally I collect and connect data to each urn, thus forming a small counter-archive to the mass invisibility of non-human death:

- the species of the animal
- its IUCN Red List status
- the location where it was found
- in some cases, a photograph of the body as it entered my care

Roadkill is usually a non-event, a kind of infrastructural background noise. By attaching metadata to the vessel, I insist that this individual life was locatable and consequential. The urn becomes a material witness to a life otherwise unrecorded.

Part II: How I spent a summer in the asylum

Every day the news were speaking of wildfires in the arctic tundra and that it will get even hotter than last week. A day under 30°C is a memory of the past which seemed so long ago, I forgot other seasons exist. I breathed in the dry, siring air which smelled of dust and concrete, although the areal of Steinhofgründe was grassland and shrubs. I've been coming to this spot since a bit more than a week now – since I gained the label “free to go on walks alone” from the caretakers here. From up here, at the border between the Otto-Wagner-Areal and the public park Steinhofgründe, one can see almost all of Vienna on a clear day. But as I was blinking through the sweat which ran down from my brows, I only recognized the same distortion of reality as every day through the heat haze. But the view was not the reason I came up here today. I was supposed to meet a friend! And as we were living in times of all sorts of crisis management attempts, the whole areal got fenced in to protect the

patients from Covid19. To be able to visit, one would have to present a negative PCR-test from the same day. We had free PCR-tests, but it wasn't reliable when you'd get the result back, so to be able to visit, especially on the weekends, one would have to pay around 80 € for a test done at a pharmacy. The porters at the entrance gates would check everyone coming in for the daily test certificate and we, the residents, got tested every week on site. So I found myself wandering with my newly awarded freedom and found a manageable gap in the hoarding where they must've run out of connecting bolts – and waited for friends to visit.

6.COVID effect on Death Awareness / The Dying of the masses

Not everyone was lucky enough to find holes in fences or similar backdoors to sneak around restrictions when it came to visiting loved ones in hospitals during times of lockdowns. People dying alone in hospitals or community and family not being able to mourn together during funeral – I don't know what would be worse to experience. Thoughts like these paired with images of piled up coffins shared by the media pushed death awareness to heights the current sixth mass extinction (Wagler 2011) was unable to achieve. Even though the rise and spread of Covid19 was undeniably an effect of the climate crisis (Beyer et al. 2021), the long list of other death inducing global warming events didn't get primetime slots in the news and live tickers breaking down state actions and best practice updates. Not only are the images

of patients waiting on beds in hospital corridors lined up with photos of military stepping in to transport the dead much more imminent than the loss of soil, but a virus also makes an easier enemy, an easier story to tell. But as the virus adapted and the vaccinations spread, society found it's way back to the old norm fast, convinced to have tricked Death once again.



Joel was an expert in tricking Death. He had learned through experience how to outsmart his will to die again and again, thriving more colourful and shining brighter after each depressive episode in his life, as he came back with a new passion, a new hobby or new travel stories. He used to visit me at least once a year, wherever I was at that time. So when he came passing through Austria that summer, he came to meet me at the fence of the psych ward. We awkwardly waved at each other through the bars and I gestured him to follow me towards the shrubs, where I showed him the gap. He ripped his shirt a bit, trying to squeeze through.

“Oh, I’m so sorry about that. It’s a nice shirt.”

“Ah, now it’s even better with this memory!”, he beamed back at me with the biggest smile and we hugged. We spent two hours together, slowly walking over crunching grass and plucking yew fruit – already ripe this year. Sucking its honey-like juice we talked about how we would like to die one day if we would chose to do so and then spat out the highly toxic stones as far as we could.

“Maybe we will just die in one of the forest fires, you know.”

“Okay, but it would be because we squat the forest to protect it from logging and the fire was actually set by the investors.

News headlines will only talk about a tragic spread of natural forest fires, though.”

“Haha, that adds up: global warming accidentally covering up for lobby interests!”



We are currently experiencing the sixth mass extinction event in the known history of the planet, yet we are not. An experience can be had on several levels – separately or simultaneously – individually or collectively – bodily, emotionally, intellectually, physically, spiritually etc., you get the point. But what kind of experience is the sixth mass extinction for us¹⁸, if not a purely intellectual one? We understand what is happening. We listen to the news. We read about numbers of species dying and see graphs depicting scales of biodiversity loss. But apart from that intellectual processing of information, which can lead to all kinds of emotional responses (the field of climate anxiety is currently researching the whole bandwidth of that), we are not really experiencing anything visceral. The imbalance of the biodiversity network impacted by the sixth mass extinction is simply too complex, too obvious, too far away or too omnipresent to stand out to us in everyday western life. I am making these big claims from a very generalizing point of view, of course, being aware that there are indeed several individuals being directly affected by or trained to read the effects of the extinction event. I myself was once actively collecting data about species in their biotopes, so there certainly are ways to perceive, to see, to investigate, but ... to feel on a bodily level? Take a look again

18 Again it is up to the reader to decide whether to place themselves in or outside of this “us” and “we”.

at chapter 2 “It’s a Numbers’ Game” and remember how it felt having a look at this chapter with all its graphs for the first time and you might have a slight idea about your momentary state of ability to emotionally process what I want to discuss.



Installation and Photo by Brandon Ballengee of his work “collapse”

We do have a cannon of references in the arts reflecting on that question, such as Brandon Ballengee’s works on the collapse of ecosystems and other eco-artists. But I have to come to the conclusion, that the ongoing loss of entire species is something I cannot witness. And for something one cannot witness, cannot even grasp as a single moment, how can one grieve all those deaths? Which acts of care are possible? I guess I am personally still on the lookout for at least a ritual which can give these emotions a framework to hold onto, as I have no answers to these questions. Only the terrifying truth of ongoing, omnipresent dying in a scale which is peaking even the extinctions which came before.



It took a concoction of psychotropics to calm my nervous system down enough to be able to think clearly again. And when I managed to swim to the top of my personal swamp, it only needed one look at a calendar to understand the fundament of my panic: The anniversary of all the people I have loved and who then died was near. Very near. I told the therapist and then went on my daily walk and told the deer grazing on the same spot as most days. Then I checked the news for the first time in days or weeks. New Covid-numbers, new bomb attacks in Ukraine, activists executed in Myanmar – I looked up from my screen and the deer was gone. I needed to do something to convince myself nobody I loved was going to die this time on that day.



If you have a smartphone, you have all the news in the world ready at the palm of your hand at any time of the day or night. If you have pop-ups enabled, you might even be stunted by the latest news on your lock screen when you actually just wanted to check the time: The very resources enabling your smartphone feeding the war in Congo; another femicide in your neighbourhood; dozens of boats with refugees drowning in the sea, again and again – not too long ago death even greeted us on public radio with every full hour, when the news moderator started off with the current number of death victims of the Corona Virus so far. Again, no matter the emotional reaction or numbness one might feel, it is not possible to really take into active care. And no – donating money or sharing a post on the grid is not the

care I am speaking of here. It is again about bodily, visceral care. These deaths are far away – in space, time or possibilities. Where to put it all, if we cannot help recover bodies, wash them, dig burial mounds or collect wood for a pyre?

My best guess why I came to find a practice of physical care for the dead bodies around me is, that this is exactly what I was personally always lacking of in all the other deaths I experienced in my life.

When my best childhood friend died at only 17 years of age, she was in a hospital in Italy and I never got to see her body changed from death. When later in life, in my mid twenties, my then best friend died, she was also abroad and I did not get to see her body before she was cremated. My father was the beginning of the confirmation of a hunch I had about that topic since years already: I did get to see his body. But: He was already prepped for a showing, he was in his coffin, peacefully arranged, moisturized, make up on, like in a deep sleep. I did not see him in his natural state of death, but in a preserved and cosmetically enhanced state. Still, it helped to see and touch the body. But I learned the difference it made then and there.



Even though it was the death day of my friends and my father, I couldn't bear to do more than one letter to him. A letter as a ritual. To say something, anything – to not keep it all in. And then I burned it at the foot of a yew tree. Burning something is viscerally understandable as a gesture of release. And when it comes to rituals, cliché and kitsch are almost a must. Yet, there was just a mere bland memory of the feeling of cringe I expected to sense during this little ritual. It exhausted me enough though. But I

strongly suspect that my desire for rituals, which might actually enable me to deal with grief, are not unparalleled. There it was again, the discerningly small gap in between doing something out of belief or out of practice. And I kept trying to squeeze through it like my friends through the fence.

Lost in those thoughts I stared at the dusty ash remains of the letter I just burned, trying to spot any glimmer, smoke, any sign of remaining danger to the forest. It was strictly forbidden to light any kind of fire outside as the risk for wildfires in the drought of those past weeks was insanely high. So I just poured the water I brought with me on the spot anyways, for good measure of safety. The sound of the water hitting the rustling leaves triggered someone else's attention and I just saw a shadow diving into the shrubs as I quickly turned around. I decided to follow the shadow and went down on my knees. We crawled for a few meters, the badger and I. Once I joined him in the undergrowth I quickly recognized which kind of species I met. The badgers living here are kind of used to humans in their habitat and especially during Covid, were really accepting towards my visits. So we trotted for only a few meters, me always a few steps behind, still on all fours, when the badger suddenly stopped to sniff something. I couldn't see what it was. The badger made a small circle around the spot. Sniffed again. Stayed still. And finally moved on. On the forest floor lay a dead crow.

7. All my animal friends

Encounters like these draw one easily into to trap of anthropomorphization. We see the badger sniffing the crow and, depending on our own cultural and scientific background and simply mood of the day, would interpret this encounter as something like: “Aw, it is sad/startled/worried about the dead animal.” But the actual level of perception of death in non-human animals is still a wide field of which only some islands have been mapped out yet. In the world of peer-reviewed science, the research on death and dying is called thanatology. The field of thanatology is quite interdisciplinary, spanning from medicine, biology and forensics over to psychology, sociology, history and further. Throughout all those disciplines the central research topic remains the perspective on the end of life – in most cases though the research object is as a matter of course human (see Anderson 2016). At the base lies the proposition that humans are the only kind of animal, which hosts the ability of being aware of its own mortality. This argument though is not backed by a scientific discourse, it is rather simply a dogma based on process of elimination of facts. Every phenomena we cannot pin-point, recreate and peer-review, does not hold up to scientific standards – which leads to the conclusion in regards of non-human animals, that they host “at most an agnostic position.” (Griffin 1981, 104f)

As I find myself couching next to roadkill throughout my artistic practice, I have to keep asking myself though: How do the other pigeons perceive their co-specimen unalived on the asphalt? How do non-human animals feel about dead or dying individuals? How do they respond to them – internally and externally? Do they experience

something like grief? Is the reaction the animal shows informed by the social role the other dead animal once had (e.g. if it has been a family member, a group member, a stranger etc.)? As I was contemplating and scooping up their bodies, I ensuingly learned that these kinds of questions are affiliated with the domain of comparative thanatology¹⁹.

Comparative Thanatology - or Unlearning Ocularcentrism

The kind of questions I ask myself already tell you that I am convinced animals are at least aware of death. In thanatology, the graspable concept of death consists of four components: inevitability, irreversibility, non-functionality and causality. In other words: All beings will die sooner or later as a result of the loss of important bodily functions and they will not be able to come back from the dead and cannot perceive us in any way (like hearing or seeing us), act or think anymore. Human children usually grasp this level of understanding around the age of 10 years (Anderson 2016) – personally I doubt this number a little bit, as I was already obsessed with the inevitability of vanishing in kindergarden. And I am hardly a prodigy in this regard; the conviction that humans are uniquely aware of their own mortality is one of the most persistent claims across various disciplines²⁰. Though

19 The term comparative thanatology is found already in papers from 1926, but merely used to descriptively label specific research on e.g. death rates in marine organisms. The term was then coined 2010 in an approach to define an area of research in itself which developed out of data sets documenting chimpanzee reactions to death (see again Anderson 2016).

20 One of the most famous philosophers Voltaire claimed once: “L’espèce humaine est la seule qui sache qu’elle doit mourir, et elle le sait que par

what interests me more in this chapter is by which sense we human and non-human animals come to know about death – or rather by which perceptual hierarchy. Our species is a deeply ocularcentristic one and our relationship to dying is profoundly shaped by this order of

“What is an idea? It is an image that paints itself in my brain [...] I’ve ideas only because I’ve images in my head.” (Voltaire 1764)

the senses. As Hans Jonas reminds us, the visual sense has always been understood as the most excellent or noblest of senses in the realm of traditional occidental philosophy (Jonas 1954; as cited in Jörg 2024b) – one well-known example being Plato’s analogy of the cave. Sight was presumed to be the sense of intellect while the other senses were mere animal baggage.

Modernity doubled down on this hierarchy: during the Enlightenment literally en-lightened the world (Jay 1993 see chapter: Dialectic of EnLIGHTenment). Everything was to be illuminated, clarified, rendered visible. Kilian Jörg even argues that “[m]odernity would have

l’expérience.” - “The human species is the only one that knows it must die and it only knows it by experience.” The latter part of this alleged quote is less popular known, but important for the argument, which much later e.g. Heidegger picked up onto, who is unfortunately way more popular than Voltaire nowadays. He says to experience oneself versus the other and being able to draw the conclusions out of this (a “worldbuilding process”) is the key stone for humanity (Heidegger 2006); But also other disciplines support basically the same argument, which can be followed upon more e.g. in “The worm at the core: on the role of death in life” (Solomon et al. 2015) or the classic “The Denial of Death” (Becker 1997).

taken a completely different shape if it were not as ocularcentric as it was.” (Jörg 2024b, 74) He further concludes, that if sight was the most privileged sense in occidental culture, smell was the most repressed one (Jörg 2024b, 77). It is hard to imagine in which kind of society we would live today, if this hierarchy would have been turned opposite; if we would first and foremost understand our worlding embedded in arguments based on smell. Smell dissolves boundaries; it refuses to give us objects, clear lines, safe distances. “We are always in smells, much as in our ecologies.” Jörg writes. He speculates, that we might be able to develop a more profound ecological awareness if we trained our modes of being to be more smell oriented (Jörg 2024b, 78). Wouldn’t this unlearning of ocularcentrism though be kind of reactionary? Evolutionary speaking we humans are affected by a gradual improving of vision and a decline of smell receptors. Over time our snout progressively demagnified and our eyes moved from the sides more to the center of our faces to improve depth vision (Jones et al. 1992). Resulting from this logic, we humans have retold ourselves – scientifically, culturally, almost mythologically – that our sense of smell is inferior compared to that of other mammals. Genetic studies proof fewer functional olfactory receptors along the primate lineage, therefore seemingly confirming this narrative. But as Gordon Shepherd argues, this story collapses once we shift perspective. If we look beyond gene counts toward the actual architecture of human olfaction – the structure of our nasal cavity, retronasal smell, the extensive real estate dedicated to olfaction in our brains, and, not least, our capacity to name and narrate odors – humans emerge not as olfactory cripples but as uniquely equipped smellers (Shepherd 2004). Maybe it was never our noses that failed, but our cultural commitment to sight that made us blind to our own olfactory capacities. Nietzsche intuited this long

before neuroscience: In his idea of a world based on olfactory stimuli instead of vision, we would be able to reconnect with our long repressed animality and thereby free ourselves from the tyranny of visual intellect (Nietzsche 1892; as cited in Jörg 2024b). Now the science of comparative thanatology pays huge attention to the sense of smell, as it is understood to play a major part in the recognition of death throughout different species. This field of research is focusing on the relationships non-human animals have with death. And while we have trained ourselves to see death, most animals detect it via something I call thanatolfactory perception – the olfactory recognition of death – and it goes back at least 420 million years (Yao et al. 2009). Resulting from the substantial progress in animal behavior sciences over the past decade, the stand-alone position of humans' cognitive abilities around death (the four parameters I mentioned in the beginning of this subchapter) gets gradually challenged. Animals might rather possibly than not deal with death and dying of their own as well as other species in very conscious and partly peculiar ways. This kind of research is invaluable, as the way humans and non-humans treat our dead and how we respond to their death is telling us heaps about their culture, belief-sets and even biology and medicine. Responses to death can be triggered by many various senses, but in this chapter we are taking a closer look into – or rather a deep whiff of – thanatolfactory. Thanatolfactory involves diverse pheromones, called necromones, complex chemistry and learning. We humans though are still quite the ocularcentrist species. With the exception of those, who are living without their sense of sight, we mainly perceive and react in the world through our eyes. When I'm walking my dog, I use this difference to her to my advantage by looking ahead of our way. Being able to spot Glassshards or bits of food on the sidewalk before she

smells it in the diffuse cloud of immediateness is a great advantage as a guardian of a dog. But it also works the other way round: Björk, my dog, quickly learned that I have a weird special interest in roadkill. Even though I have already developed quite the hypervigilance towards roadkill as part of my artistic practice (which goes as far as mistaking weirdly shaped trash out of the corner of my eye for an animal), I still happen to overlook them sometimes – the downside of being an ocularcentrist. Björk on the other hand could never “oversmell” a roadkill, so she makes sure to stop me in my tracks by drawing my attention towards the unalived animal. I unintentionally trained her an unusual reaction towards roadkill. Most other animals, after taking the necessary information to recognize another dead animal, the animal would reply very probably by either of these options: necrophobia (avoidance, removing oneself; useful to avoid predators or pathogens), necrophagia (feeding on the corpse) or necrophoresis (transporting the corpse away)(Gonçalves and Biro 2018). These reactions are oftentimes triggered by chemical signals the animal picks up olfactorily. From apes to insects, animals use what I have learned to call thanatofactory to detect death: sniffing it out. An entire cocktail of death chemicals is reliably occurring with decomposition and consists mostly of fatty acids, necronomes, cadaverine and putrescine. Gonçalves and Biro took a closer look at honeybees, ants and termites, as they all show a variety of responses to these “death scents”, which are influenced by cause of death and time passed since. Social insects share the responsibility of keeping the hive alive. This motivation is likely so deeply wired in, that the response to a dead conspecific²¹ happens subconsciously and

21 Conspecifics are simply members of the same species. I have been warned to refer to too specific vocabulary, but in some cases it is simply more helpful than hindering.

immediate. Even though there are e.g. highly specialized undertaker ants in ant colonies, any other ant will also participate in necrophoresis, making sure the dead ant leaves the hive as soon as possible (López-Riquelme and Fanjul-Moles 2013).

“... a complete, comprehensive understanding of odor ... may not seem a profound enough problem to dominate all the life sciences, but it contains, piece by piece, all the mysteries.” (Thomas Lewis 1985)

But how do we know it is the “death scent” which triggers the removal of a corpse? Couldn’t it also be other information? Animals do reply to a death even before decaying could have started, so there is for sure a mix of information which is all playing together. But we can be quite certain at least about the power of oleic acid (a fatty acid): When researchers applied oleic acid to healthy ants or inanimate objects, the colony immediately removed the target from the hive and onto the designated graveyard area (López-Riquelme and Fanjul-Moles 2013).

Most vertebrate species capable of thanatofactory though react to these cues of decay with aversion: Zebrafish, sea lampreys, sharks, sea lions and many rodent species all show variations on avoidant behavior²². Whenever though an animal shows a different behavior set, e.g. engaging with their dead conspecific in any way equivocal to grieving, we tend to jump to anthropomorphization. For example rats have the endearing habit of holding burials for dead rats. Studies have

22 (Hussain et al. 2013; Oliveira et al. 2014; Bals and Wagner 2012; Hart and Collin 2015; Prounis and Shields 2013; Peterson, Richard S. and Bartholomew, George A. 1967; all as cited in Anderson 2016)

shown though, that a rat would also bury a wooden dummy if it is sprinkled with putrescine or cadaverine, our identified death chemicals (Pinel et al. 1981). Another interesting group of species to investigate is the Corvus family (raven-like birds). They are widely acknowledged as highly intelligent birds with a complex social life. Numerous studies and experiments researched the relationship of corvids and death – but emotions are hard to “peer-review-proof”, which subsequently means there is no scientific proof yet that these birds grieve or hold funerals, even though the behavior they show is often associated with it. As biology is about survival, the researchers agreed upon the motives of the birds being solely based on gaining information: on potential risks in the environment and the identity of the dead bird, which is conclusively information on changes in territory and mating options (Swift and Marzluff 2015). So... is grief even evolutionary necessary? Some scientists tried to link necessary hormonal regulations with the occurrence of grief in researching primates, our closest relatives. But there are too many examples of chimpanzee mothers continuing to care for their dead infant long past the usual hormonal drop related to the loss of their child and too many examples on the other hand where mothers abandon the corpse of the child much prior to this hormonal drop (Boesch 2012). To no one’s surprise, Chimps respond to death in a wide range of behaviors, from grooming to shaking, dragging and beating the body out of frustration (Stewart et al. 2012). But there is one thing all animals seem to share in their response to observing death: They do smell it. Chimps do. Mice do. Fish do. Bees do. But how do we humans realize someone is dead? We don’t sniff the body. We look at it. It is exactly this particular distinction which led me to the title of this work and the definition of the phenomenon I call death blindness.

I will elaborate more on that later in chapter 14 and guide you know slowly away from the hard-wired, functional responses towards death. We can after all acknowledge that grief is a pattern which follows its own rules – which are much harder to study. So what does comparative thanatology say, do animals experience grief? Many authors agree that large-brained mammals (most notably primates and elephants) are grieving. Some, like Barbara J. King, go further and even acknowledge chicken grief. After recent developments in neurosciences, the role of the psycho-neuro-endocrine system in our body gets more attention and is accepted as a driving factor for e.g. immune responses and other mysteries of life – like grief. I therefore want to go even further and place my own standing firmly on the believe-set that simply all beings with a psycho-neuro-endocrine system are able to experience grief. Grief, like smell, collapses hierarchies. It is relational, atmospheric, leaky. It refuses clean categories. And maybe that is where our ecological awareness begins-not with sight, but with the senses we were taught to distrust.

“Goat grief, then, is not chicken grief. And chicken grief is not chimpanzee grief or elephant grief or human grief. The differences matter. But differences between species may be rivaled by differences among individuals of the same species.” (King 2022, 7-8)



I still wondered what the badger thought of the dead crow when the timer on my phone went off and pulled me back to my own reality. I had to report back in my pavilion, otherwise the staff

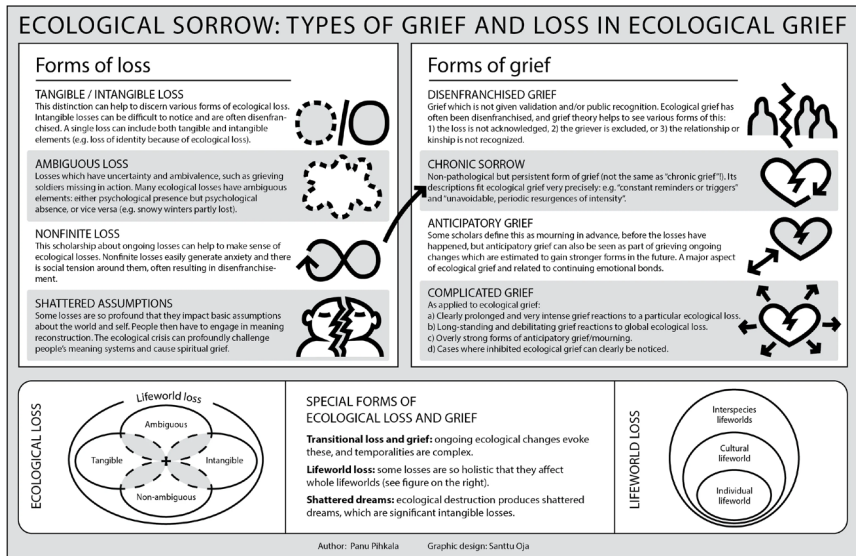
would start assuming the worst – and I would loose my solo-walk privileges, also the worst. There was little I cared about those weeks, so I just crawled out of the bushes on the other side and was back on the asphalt road, which one could probably still fry an egg on, even though dusk was slowly settling in. On my way to my station I always have to pass the pavilion V which nowadays hosts an exhibition on “The War Against the “Inferior”:

On the History of Nazi Medical Crimes in Vienna”. More than 7500 people were murdered on this area during the Nazi regime, 800 of them children. With eyes weary of grief I glanced past it. The corridors inside look the same as in my pavilion. “What a weird place to deal with grief, eh?”, I say to a crow watching me from an already defoliated copper beech.



View of the inside of pavillionV; Photo: DÖW

What grief has to do with survival



Source: Pihkala 2024



I woke up the day after my dreaded death-anniversary with panic. I reached for my phone to check for the unavoidable reality that yet another beloved person had died over the course of yesterday – and even though, opening app after app, I found nothing to feed this reality from, I was haunted by the fear of this incoming call, telling me who died, over the next couple of days still. One of the first persons I told about my paranoia was my friend Demi, who visited my in those days after. We had initially more fun things on our itinerary for her stay in Vienna than hanging out at the psych ward, but it is also somehow very fitting. Vienna is an incredibly morbid city after all.

“Why did people leave all this stuff behind? Isn’t that weird? Look, a

kid's pool!", Demi exclaimed delightedly as she skipped over rubble towards the pale blue plastic saucer kind of pool.

"Probably too rich to care. If you have a garden lot up here I bet you come from money." I crouched down next to the bleached plastic mussel and peeked down: Shriveled up algae and dead insects crowded the ridges of the bottom. I emptied the rest of my water bottle onto the dead plants. Demi was already exploring the next lot and tested the sound our pine cone collection would make on different surfaces. Almost all the walls and fences were torn down already. "It's kind of weird they fenced all this in with the suicidals, isn't it? I mean, there are so many glass shards and sharp objects in the rubble, I could kill myself easily.", Demi giggled. "That's why they won't let people who are suspect to self-harming behavior roam around, I guess. I'm more worried one of my friends will kill themselves!", I tried to joke. "My dear, I would never do that to you. And even if, I'd make sure to choose another date.", she winked at me and laughed.



Playing in the ruins of bourgeois is a hobby I seem to have in common with archaeologists. What is most interesting to me though, is of course the field of Paleolithic archaeology – also called Palaeoanthropology. To understand the link as well as differences between human and non-human animal grieve, one has to look at their mortuary practices throughout history. Paul Pettit has explored the funerary activities from the Middle and Upper Paleolithic to trace how funerals came into being from mere chemistry and emotion. He proposes "that the most profound innovation of the hominins was the incorporation of places

into the commemoration of the dead” (Pettitt 2018) – aka a graveyards. Pettit even has a theory on why this habit was of importance to our ancestors: “Given the attention Paleolithic groups inevitably paid to the temporal landscape-the periodic waxing and waning of resources over the course of the foraging year-it would not be surprising if the agency of the dead had similar, temporary and repeated manifestation, according to the natural order. ” (ibid.) He suggests that such “landscapes of the dead” have become incorporated into social systems. In contrast, our society nowadays tends to distance the dead from their social system and graveyard culture or the keeping of shrines are in waning. This short excursion here should fill the last gaps of an understanding of why I decided for my artistic practice to honor the roadkill by inviting them back into our living spaces instead of setting them outside again. As we meet the urn sculpture on the bookshelves or on the coffee table, they remain seen. Even subconsciously this makes a difference – it matters if we think about death:

„Over the course of human history, the terror of death has guided the development of art, religion, language, economics, and science. It raised the pyramids in Egypt and razed the Twin Towers in Manhattan. It contributes to conflicts around the globe. [...] Death makes us uncomfortable with our bodies and ambivalent about sex. Awareness of the inevitability of death could easily contribute to our own extinction if we don't change how we deal with it.“ (Solomon et al., 2015, p. 8)

Understanding that death has occurred, that the corpse may be a source of contamination and hence threat, and consequently distancing it from the living are clearly important for survival (Boesch 2012). And yet, throughout evolutionary history, distancing was never total. Life and death are situated, as thanatologists remind us, in a dynamic interplay often conceived as an “immunity-building exercise”

accompanied by cultural imaginaries and material affordances (Karpouzou & Zampaki 2024). What we fear, we ritualize. What we ritualize, we integrate.

To view necrophoresis - the instinct to care for the dead, move them, cover them, honor them - as immunity-building helps explain how the base layer of grief itself is formed. As already laid out through chapter 4, the practice of human necrophoresis was carried out by the communities itself in pre-modern societies. Neighbors carried bodies, dug graves, built pyres – funeral labor was mutual aid²³. Only in very recent history humans have become relatively isolated from the once ubiquitous, visceral experience of death, decomposition, and butchery of both conspecifics and prey (Taylor 2008). We outsourced our dead, and with them, some of our capacities to metabolize grief. Within only a few centuries, human disposal practices transformed from simple abandonment outside the group, to ritualized interments, to the modern choreography of crematoria, cryogenic fantasies²⁴, and even the launching of ashes into space (Shimane 2018). It remains necessary though to grief as communities! The evolutionary biologist Randolph M. Nesse says that grief is useful for coping with bereavement and

23 The theory of mutual aid is a concept Peter Kropotkin derived from a lecture given by the Russian zoologist Professor Kessler in 1880. Kropotkin provided with his work a scientific basis for communism countering the historical materialism of the Marxists. Kropotkin says, mutual aid is the factor for survival and prosperity – and he applies this theory over an interspecies spectrum throughout history. (Peter Kropotkin 1902)

24 Cryogenic freezing is a technology that uses extremely low temperatures (below -150 °C) to preserve biological materials such as cells, tissues, embryos, food, or even entire bodies after death – in the latter case usually combined with the hopes of future resurrection.

has an adaptive function “by signalling others, by changing goals, by preventing future losses, by reassessing priorities and plans and other relationships” (Nesse 2000). Satomi Nakajima, professor at Musashino University, Japan, extends this by offering a perspective on grief as a process through which a person rebuilds a world altered by absence of the deceased- akin to post-traumatic growth, not despite the pain but through it (Nakajima 2018).



Post-traumatic-stress instead of growth is what probably brought me in this situation in the first place. Demi had to leave already and I found myself alone again – well, almost: I was sitting in the asylum’s dining room surrounded by two dozen other lonesome existences. We had bread with either cheese or sausages again. Like every evening. I kept fiddling with the little figurine Demi and I crafted together out of pine cones and sticks while the noise started swelling. The alcohol addicts in recovery get the most agitated during dinner, as the benzoids effects from lunch were waning and the next dose only got served after. The increasing chatter from people talking to themselves mixed with the hearty laughs from the benzo-table; I kept fidgeting the pine cone animal. My tongue felt too dry to eat. The only thing that is worse than a panic attack, is the fear of approaching another panic attack. In an instant I was out of my chair and pacing the hallway instead – and finally decided to face my fear to text the one person I couldn’t stop thinking about: “Hey! How are you?” It was the first exchange since more than two years, but my heart was convinced this person would be the next death.

Me reaching out to that person led eventually to a rekindling of our friendship. Years would go by without another friend of mine dying. Until Joel finally took his own life in spring 2025. I admit my first thoughts were: Did he take the yule tree seeds, like we discussed? And why didn't he call me to let me know, like we discussed? And, finally: Thank you Joel, for picking a different goddamn day.



Retrospectively reflecting on my own suicidality, I come to the conviction that I was never truly endangered to commit. Because I simply thought about it too much. At least that is my interpretation of the following statistics: In a survey of 306 Chinese patients hospitalized after suicide attempts, 35% had contemplated suicide for less than ten minutes, and 54% for less than two hours (Hvistendahl 2012; as cited in Humphrey 2018). Further studies support the argument that most suicides happen spontaneously, successful or not. I guess Joel is the exception to the rule then.

8. Roadkill

Scientists describe the living communities around the dead as the necrobiome - and in this necrobiome, disturbingly, the car is a keystone species (Goldfarb 2024, 181 ff). Roads have become, writes Rebecca Solnit, the “architecture of our restlessness” (Solnit 2014, 365). Scientists have discovered that sometime during the 20th century roadkill surpassed hunting as “the leading direct human cause of

vertebrate mortality on land.” (Forman and Alexander 1998, 212) And that is not because we stopped hunting, but because we built so many roads. Roads draw hard corridors through once-continuous territories and either fragment or eliminate entire habitats. “Park your car on the shoulder and bushwhack half a mile into the woods and you’ll still see fewer birds than you would in an unroaded wilderness. Hike two miles more, and you’ll still see fewer mammals”, scientists of a meta-study on the effects of infrastructure proximity on mammal and bird populations conclude (Benítez-López et al. 2010). Though before we dive entirely into the chapter on Roadkill, I need to point out that even roads, like most infrastructures, select winners as well as losers. A surprising array of species found their ecological niche along

“The very word roadkill degrades animals by combining many deaths in a single category, discrete lives lumped into a squashed collective.” (Goldfarb 2024, 238)

roadsides: Vultures and ravens, for example, grow fat on carcasses. Some rare butterfly species find their last milkweed refuges in the scrappy margins of asphalt. Even bats find habitat in crevices under bridges, seemingly unbothered by the seismic thumps caused by the cars overhead (Goldfarb 2024, 12). This so-called “soft estate” is an accidentally created habitat in late-capitalism logic. For the rest of this chapter though, we will pay attention to the losers’ side.

Origins of the term roadkill & new definition

In the age of the Anthropocene – or, how I find more fitting, the Homogenocene²⁵ - our co-critters out there are dying as a result of the worlds we have created for us. Mostly unaware that these habitats - yes, even the cities - are not entirely of our own making, but also shaped by the many other species living there, the anthropos goes blind for the existence of these co-critters. But the rats, pigeons, foxes – all of them constantly reshape the shared atmosphere of urban life. Animals, Amir writes, fight for their ideals just as humans do, and they don't need to necessarily be aware of it to do so," riffing on Marx's dictum that ideology functions regardless of one's awareness of it (Amir 2018). Yet our blindness to them is a state not only produced out of ignorance, but also out of comfort and even necessity. To see an urban fox as a political subject, or a pigeon as a historical actor, is simply too much for many. What we could at least try, though, is perceive them as the individuals they are.

The term roadkill found its definition in North America, where until today the most likely encounter with e.g. a wild coyote is one flattened on the side of the road. In car-centered societies, one of the most likely ways to encounter shy species is by meeting them with the hood of your car – or post-mortem baked into the asphalt. I myself have learned a lot about the local biodiversity of some places by getting stopped in my tracks from roadkill – minus the car. I walk. I bike. I am slow enough to see. Which consequently means I do not meet the classical

25 The concept of Homogenocene was coined by Charles Mann even before Crutzen's Anthropocene, as "a label for the modern world, characterized by unprecedented, and accelerating, flows of people, pests, crops, and forms of political domination." (Mann 2011)

roadkill very often, as I am not part of norm-core road traffic. Instead I meet the smaller critters I share my everyday environments with. Lots of flattened pigeons in the narrow streets of Vienna. But the more I payed attention, the more I saw and learned. I admired bats and green lizards walking in the occupied lands of the ZAD²⁶ in France, learned about one of the population hot spots in Austria for ground squirrels by commuting to Donaufestival²⁷ via bike and train instead of car and got stunned by a dead representative of the only waterfront population of griffon vultures in Croatia (more on that later in Part IV). In an almost humorous way I think I learned almost more about local fauna through working on my death blindness than over the years I worked as a vegetation ecologist. I have to admit the reason I chose plants as my ecological focus in the past career is, as I used to joke, that they couldn't run away from me like animals do – thus giving me all the time I need to study them. A trait Roadkill share. Similar to the car-owners

26 ZAD is a french play on words: Activists appropriated the acronym ZAD, which originally stands for “zone d'aménagement différé” (deferred development zone, aka a construction site incoming), into “zone à défendre” – a place to defend. Even though there are many ZADs today, the most infamous one is the ZAD NDDL (Notre Dame des Landes), where “[...] on 4000 acres of wetlands, fields and forests [...] 250 people in 80 different collectives live together without the state, occupying the land against the new airport project for the city of Nantes. On January 17th 2018, the French prime minister canceled the airport project but vowed to evict the laboratory of commoning that is the ZAD. [...] The movement has agreed that the ZAD as a new commune for the 21st Century must remain, in all its diversity and with its land run outside of the state institutions.” (“What is the zad ?” 2017)

27 The Donaufestival is an annual event series for avant-garde and contemporary art and music in lower Austria.

who try to trump each others roadkill-stories by boasting about mad accidents, claiming to have run over lynx or that the antlers of a deer were stuck in their car's grill for weeks, I also tell my various Roadkill-stories here.

For heuristic purposes, I defined a difference between the two ways of spelling I have established so far: roadkill vs Roadkill. The (non-) capitalization is not by mistake. Within this work of mine I aim to redefine the term "roadkill" – I almost want to claim to modernize it. Whenever I talk of roadkill it is meant to be understood as the original definition: Being an animal being killed on the road by motorized traffic. Brian Ladd has given a much more nuanced definition of the term, which I would like to share here: "In the American ideology of heedless progress, "roadkill" has also become a label for anything and anyone standing in the way of the relentless march of destiny. The fate of these obstructionists is unvarying: the speeding locomotive – or rather, the speeding car – of progress will flatten them."(Ladd 2008, 13) In contrast, the capitalized version of Roadkill I like to use is to be understood as far more than just victims of cars on the road: It marks a broader systemic condition of animal deaths produced by the infrastructures of late capitalism. The plastic waste killing animals on land and sea by entrapping them either from the outside (e.g. birds being trapped in plastic shreds) or inside (e.g. straws stuck in the orifices of turtles or cattle eating plastic bags) is one example. Also circumstances like noise pollution can lead to Roadkill, like fireworks causing ear drum ruptures in birds – who thereby immediately loose all sense of gravity and balance, leading to them either die by the fall or the painful injuries after. Heart attacks are another immediate cause for death for many species during fireworks or similar, but also the extreme rise of cortisol levels caused by the noise stress can kill wild

animals quite fast (i.e. starvation as a direct corollary of stress [quote references here]). I could go on into numerous examples here, but I hope I got the point of my interpretation of Roadkill across already, which is: It still has to be a kind of accidental death. Active killing, such as the slaughtering and farming of animals for food production, are no Roadkill, even if some of these practices are not less cruel. But these are other phenomenons and other, much better books have been written about them²⁸. Now one might say, that accidents have always happened and always will – but there is a certain threshold for when something happens at a large enough scale, it is no longer a pure accident, but part of a system.

During the time of industrialization deadly accidents for the local fauna became so common with the rise of the automobile, that the term roadkill entered the vernacular with the same speed as most infrastructural changes linked to the automobile industry. Those infrastructure changes were not only physically/external structures, but also psychologically/socially, which led to the accidental kill becoming less and less extraordinary. Roadkill became background noise. This already illustrates the phenomena of death becoming invisible, less acknowledged, overlooked, swept down the roadside.

28 I can recommend *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer and *Das Schlachten beenden! - Zur Kritik der Gewalt an Tieren. Anarchistische, pazifistische, feministische und linkssozialistische Traditionen* by Leo Tolstoi, Clara Wichmann, Elisée Reclus, Magnus Schwantje u.a.

The Perpetrator Paradoxon

We usually find a blank space instead of a relationship with the animals we kill. Not the animals we²⁹ slaughter with intention, though, as agriculture at least grants the role of the butcher – but the countless beings whose deaths we cause simply by existing in modern infrastructures. For this diffuse, distributed killing there is no role in society, no ritual, no designated mourning. And where no framework for responsibility exists, numbness flourishes. Our collective inability to acknowledge these killings on the small scale feeds into the incomprehensible scale of the sixth mass extinction we are currently living through.

Studies from across Europe estimate that our roads here kill ~194 million birds and ~29 million mammals every year. Some species manage to absorb the losses; others will likely be driven toward extinction by traffic alone (Grilo et al. 2020). Car infrastructure kills indiscriminately. Measures designed to mitigate the damage, like green bridges, underpasses, fencing, might help small segments of life, but the larger patterns remain. I vividly remember a specific lecture during my time in driving school as a teenager: Our driving instructor repeatedly impressed upon us that traffic regulations stipulate that you **MUST NOT** brake when encountering wildlife, but rather keep your foot on the gas. The logic behind this law is, that in such moments of brief encounter one does not have the time to check the rearview and oncoming traffic – consequently it is not safe to go into full braking. Full braking is only encouraged if other human lives are endangered. Animal lives on the road, anthropologist Jane Desmond observes, have in many societies almost no assigned worth: “These animal lives

29 This time the “we” includes every human carnivore.

have little value for most of the [people] in the United States, as these animals are unowned, lacking in monetary or emotional value, not pets or livestock, and without the charismatic following that megafauna like elephants and lions in zoos receive.” (Desmond 2016)

If adding wildlife-tunnels and fences only mitigates the damage and traffic regulations even demand from us to overrun animals crossing, what could be a strategy to inhabit instead? Perhaps we can learn to acknowledge the discomfort more consciously and by doing so, create moments in which death blindness is sidestepped. Next to my own artistic practice, I will introduce a few others working on roadkill: The biologist Bram Koesse documented a full year of roadkill along a commuter road near his home: 650 dead animals in twelve months, among them protected and rare species. After appealing to the municipality to restrict traffic without success, he staged a kind of guerrilla memorial. Before sunrise, Koesse planted 650 small white



Some of the 642 handmade shrines by Bram Koesse, marking roadkilled animals along a Dutch commuter route; Photo: Bram Koesse

crosses along the roadside together with members of his community. Each cross was placed exactly where an animal had died, carrying an image and a link to its documented death. By morning, commuters drove through what looked like a stretched-out mass grave. By evening the installation had been destroyed, but the point had already travelled through local and national media. The pressured from the wide media response, municipalities finally closed the road down to non-residential traffic. A temporary memorial led to an enduring change! Then there is the eco-artist Brian D. Collier, who established a similar practice: He builds roadside shrines for animals, complete with the date of death and a color picture of the deceased. Something I wish I would have found earlier during my own artistic practice is the field guide to “Flattened Fauna” by Roger Knutson. The guide provides species-specific diagrams to recognize the two-dimensional shapes of pancaked animals – plus a “death list” on the last pages to tick off the ones already spotted. Next level dark humor is the trilogy of Buck Peterson, consisting of the “Original Roadkill Cookbook,” the “International Roadkill Cookbook,” and the “Roadkill USA Coloring and Activity Book.” (I found the majority of these examples in *The Urban Naturalist* by Schilthuizen and Nussbaum 2025).

Yet beneath the jokes, the discomfort persists. And in the small practices of commemoration I recognise an attempt to inhabit the role of the perpetrator differently. Not to absolve ourselves, but to take responsibility for witnessing.

Part III: How I euthanized a mouse

My partner Kilian and I were enjoying a sunny afternoon on the balcony of their shared flat, when we heard someone knocking on the front door. A flatmate opened the door to their sweet landlord and soon the worried tone of their voices drew us inside. Alexandra, the owner of the house, looked at us with distress as we joined their conversation: “I was just asking if maybe one of you could kill a mouse for me somehow. I found this little mouse in the garden, half dead, suffering! I already stood over it with a log in my hands but I couldn’t do it! I just can’t end its suffering!” Alexandra had tears in her eyes. The flatmates shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot: “Phew, errr... we can try to, I mean... I never did such a thing. Actually I’m not sure.” – “Ooof, maybe Sabrina?”, Kilian turned expectantly towards me. Of course. In matters of death, I’m their obvious choice. I gently touched Alexandra’s arm and started explaining what I could do instead of smashing the poor mouse

to mousse: “Oh dear, I understand this is a hard choice! I’m glad you didn’t try to smash it and came to us. Let me think... I can kill it but I wouldn’t do it like that. Kilian, can you fetch me your sharpest kitchen knife, please? Or a Stanley-knife? Anything close to a scalpel! And a piece of cheese, chocolate, whatever you can find!” I wanted to give the mouse a last offering and cut its neck spine in a smooth, fast glide, so it would immediately lose consciousness and die as peacefully as possible in this state. I didn’t know any better at this point, it just seemed more “humane” than clubbing it until it didn’t squeal anymore, which remarkably revoked Alexandra to tears. She seemed extremely relieved and thanked us all elaborately and apologized all the way downstairs to the garden for “dragging us into this situation”. Surprisingly I noticed that I felt entirely at peace, as if indeed in my element: Calm, collected, empathetic and somber. Alexandra guided me underneath the big walnut tree: “There it is... I didn’t know what to do, I couldn’t do it!” On the ground a small, brown, fluffy being tried dragging its half limb body around without success. The mouse was moving slowly, fighting uncontrollable spasms, while its lower body half was completely unaffected by its efforts and limb. I was taken aback in surprise that this mouse was in fact not “half dead” already, but very much conscious and suffering. Upon careful inspection I found it is a female with no apparent wounds on its body apart from where the mouse nibbled its hind legs bloody – I guess in agony of them either hurting, not being able to move them or something along the lines. Too inexperienced to offer a proper diagnosis (I couldn’t tell if this mouse was experiencing effects of poisoning or if its abdomen and hips got e.g. smashed by external force), I couldn’t tell if the mouse was indeed on its death bed already or if it had a chance to heal

under care. This changed my plan entirely.

We called the ambulance for wild animals and described the colours of its fur, size etc. to them, as I couldn't tell the exact species – I'm a vegetation ecologist after all! Alexandra and I were both super relieved to hand over this responsibility into some experts' hands, but were disappointed upon arrival of their van: One person quickly jumped out, glanced at our patient and shrugged apologizing: "Well, we can't take this one with us. It's a common rat. We thought because it's brown it might be another species, or even someone's house rat maybe, but this one is just a regular street rat. We're not allowed or supposed to treat those. Sorry." – "And what are we supposed to do now?" – "I don't know, if you care you can try the vet!" And off they went again. We were stunned – after driving all the way to us, they'd just leave again? I'm still glad this service exists, but the inherent speciesism³⁰ left a hard lump in my stomach area. "They're right. Why not go to the vet?", I turned to Alexandra. At this point she felt utterly responsible for the mouse and answered: "Of course! There's a vet around the corner. I can take care of it, but..." She glanced uncomfortably at the Pizza box we put the mouse as a makeshift transport box into, so I quickly added: "Great, so you want to join me? I'll have to go back upstairs first though to get my wallet." – "Oh no need, I have mine on me – plus, I'd really like to pay for this. I'm just so grateful you're doing this with me. Are you sure you have the time?" I wasn't even surprised anymore by the different reactions individuals have towards dying or even dead bodies. The myth of cadaveric poisons,

30 Speciesism is the practice based on a believe-set that the human species is morally above members of other species and consequently has the right to exploit them.

which for sure fed a lot into these feelings, has long been debunked, but still most people are left with an irrevocable distrust or disgust to touch a dead body. I asked myself then and there for the first time, if this correlates with the loss of the cultural norm of holding or visiting wakes. Holding the pizza box even closer to me I smiled at her: “Of course.”

9. The Wake & Uneasiness of Touch

It surprises me far less today when people reject to look at dead animals, or refuse to touch them. But I often wonder where these feelings of disgust or even fear stem from. What is so disturbing about facing and touching death? Maybe the repulsion most people feel when encountering a rotting corpse can be framed as something almost universal, rooted in our lost sense of thanatofactory. Maybe I just never learned the appropriate distance towards matters of decay. Or maybe it has also something to do with what I learned to call death blindness. As I have shown in previous chapters we have slowly lost touch with our dead over the last few generations. This time, let's look at this in a literal sense. The death industry has taken over the handling of the dead in its entirety, leaving no room for uncertainty, the uncanny or uncomfortable, but neither for the comfort that last acts of care can potentially provide. One of the losses in our societal construction of norms is the holding of a wake. The wake in its classical sense consists of presenting the deceased in the comfort of their home while watching over their body. The details of the duration vary from a few hours to days, the customs of praying, singing, drinking or

wailing in grief together also heavily depend on the regional standards and even societal rank of the bereaved. It is a quite ancient tradition which has its European roots probably in Celtic religion. Wakes are well documented since the early Middle Ages and prevailed in some forms up until the 19th century – but then it got practiced less and less. The ritual was practiced by Catholics, Jews, Muslims and many other confessions, almost everywhere people felt the need to witness. In her dissertation *Keening the Dead: Ancient History or a Ritual for Today?* Mary Mc Laughlin concludes: “Customs may change and beliefs may shift, but the essential need of humans to express emotional pain at different levels will always remain.” (Mc Laughlin 2019) Nowadays the tradition of holding wakes is mainly practised in Northern Ireland – but also in Northern Scotland and generally in areas of big catholic influence and little population density. I wonder if the ritual of the wake would have prevailed throughout our secularization, if it wouldn't have been for the enforcement of burial laws. In most states of Germany or Austria, the body has to be handed over to institutions after 24 to 48 hours (some municipalities offer smaller, some larger time windows). After all, rituals have already often been disentwined from their original believesets – like Christmas (which used to be winter solstice), Easter (which used to be a celebration of spring-aequinox) or literally any other church-holiday. Similarly burial rituals were too strongly rooted in societal practices to be overcome – so they were just transformed and reframed with more contemporary cultural and religious codes.

Admittedly, hygienic considerations were also playing their part in creating those laws to move the bodies out of their homes and into the hands of undertakers or under the roofs of churches faster, but as we've already learned, there's hardly anything contagious going on in a

decomposing body. It is mainly the smell, which triggers the repulsive idea (Just imagine a cozy wake in some living room, all relatives and neighbours squeezed around propped up, waxen Gran'pa on the sofa, whose bodily gasses are slowly filling the air on a hot summer afternoon...). But then again, I ask myself, isn't repulsion something we could be able to overcome? If I ask among my friends who recently became parents, they long moved beyond being puked at or shat on by their beloved new family member. I also have to admit of being rather unimpressed when discovering – due to the additional warmth on my fingers – that the bag I'm using to pick up my dog's poop has a ripped corner. Relative closeness to the subject does outweigh disgust, but so does exposure. But how much exposure to the daily dying around us can we bear? Hold that thought for chapter 13!

Not every culture today prefers to keep their distance from their dead, though. Robert Hertz, an early pioneer of modern comparative sociology, studied the ambiguous relationship towards decay across cultures. In Borneo, for example, a person is not alive and then dead, there is an in-between state which is minimum the length of the rotting process of the corpse. It is also quite necessary for the community of the deceased to have this extra in-between time as they need to acquire all the food and stuff for the elaborate feast to celebrate the passing into the dead state. The Dayak³¹ believe, that as long as the body is rotting, it is “repulsive and uncomfortable”, therefore the connected soul is “uncomfortable and restless”. The rotting of the flesh is therefore necessary to stop the soul from wandering around, as it could possibly bring illness upon the living out of spite (because it feels so uncomfortable). As soon as there are only bones left, clean and unchanging/unrotting, the soul is free to pass and the living celebrate

31 Dayak is the name of the indigenous population of the island Borneo.

that passing with a big feast.

I can relate to the Dayak to a certain degree, when I find myself crouching over another Roadkill: Wanting to free its body from the pitiful state of half-decayed, half-baked. Although my ritual looks a bit different. To stop the decay, my first act of care is always to bring it as fast as possible to my morgue, where it can rest and wait until its time for the release of its soul, as the Dayak would maybe feel it. I don't know if I believe in souls, but I certainly perceive it as soothing to reduce the rotting flesh to clean ashes and bones in the kiln. When they come out of the ovens, they look pristinely white. In contemporary Japan, the bones have a special role to play during the funeral process. Mourners gather around the cremation machine awaiting the bones coming out of the furnace. The cremated body is pulled out and laid as it is on a table where the family then starts the kotsuage ("the gathering of the bones"). Instead of throwing the bones in the big version of a coffee grinder, like we do in Europe, the relatives carefully start picking them up with long chopsticks and place them in the urn, starting at "the feet, working their way up toward the head, so that the deceased person can walk into eternity upright." (Doughty 2015, 23)

There are countless interesting examples to explore, but let me only share a last one from a non-human animal's perspective, as other species seem to navigate the territory of wakes in ways uncannily familiar. Chimpanzees, for instance, have been observed to remain with the body of a dead group member for hours, touching, grooming, guarding. High-ranking individuals keep watch while others are kept back; siblings approach gently, inspecting hands and faces, performing gestures that look very much like care. (Boesch 2012, 155–56)

Perhaps that is all a wake really is: an insistence that the body still belongs among us for a while. And maybe our discomfort with

touching the dead comes not from fear of the body itself, but from ambiguity about the time and care it demands of us.



Alexandra and I got stopped in our exchange of polite pleasantries when we arrived at the vet's: Closed! More confused than disappointed we exchanged glances: It was a ground floor medical practice – Haven't we seen lights and movements inside? Upon taking a step closer to the windows it looked like people were working inside... I must have peeked in too obviously to go unnoticed: A young doctor caught my gaze and gestured with a nod for us to head to the door again. Back at the main entrance we were greeted by an assistant who explained to us, that they're actually just doing back office stuff today, but if its urgent they can squeeze us in. We explained him our rat situation and after a quick check-in with the doctor, he waved us through to her with a smile. I handed over the half open pizza box which we had also equipped with a dishtowel in the meantime. The vet routinely touched and held the mouse and confirmed after her quick examination my fear that this rodent has indeed been deadly poisoned. I asked if there's anything we can do for her, upon which she offered to put her to sleep here right now. "It's the same process we use for pets like dogs or cats. The first injection is just to sedate them gently, the mouse will drift off into a deep sleep. In this sleep state then I give the second type of injection, which is shutting down the entire nervous system, the one that kills. She won't feel anything at this point anymore." Alexandra had already tears in her eyes again. Yes, that's what we wanted to do. The mouse lay curled up in her towel,

still heavily twitching, as the vet gave her the first shot. I cupped her with my hand, stroking her again softly with my thumb – the spasm got lighter ... and lighter. Until she drifted off into sleep-like state. I continued stroking her even until the second injection made her body relax so entirely, I could feel her final breath. The vet and I smiled at each other in the silence a death requires. We asked to keep the body of the mouse. “Of course.” And when we wanted to pay our doctor waved it off and said not to worry about it, she’s simply glad we came to her. I felt my inner peace restored after our previous speciesistic encounter with the wild animal ambulance. Much lighter in our hearts we talked about how to continue with the tiny body that’s left of the mouse’s life and Alexandra immediately agreed to have her cremated within my artistic practice – as long as she’s invited to the ceremony.

10. Speciesism is about Death

Know that through lucid knowledge
one sees in all creatures
a single, unchanging existence,
undivided within its divisions.

(Bhagavad-Gita)

Pets vs Stock vs “Wild” vs Pests & How We Kill Them

How we use and abuse animals is directed by unwritten laws on the ethical hierarchy among non-human animals that sit beneath the legal ones. We have animal's rights which get decided on via parliamentary decrees (it is apparent those rights often don't translate into real protection, though) and religions which restrict certain animals from being eaten as food or restrict eating animals for certain time periods. Parallel to these cultural or political regulations, we still love dogs and let them sleep in our beds, we still keep cows tethered for months or lifetimes and eat them, we still admire deer and then shoot them for sports, we still put toxic bait out for the rats and slap at the mosquitoes bothering us in summer nights. Though it is maybe easier to reveal the absurd power speciesism has over the norms of society not by describing it directly, but by observing moments where it is rejected. During one of my research trips to anarchist communities in France I was surprised to not meet any animals in the city-squad of Dijon, the Lentillieres. In many other rural communes, forest occupations and autonomous zones, animals are part of the ecology of resistance: goats for milk, horses for hauling timber, dogs for company and so

on. Here in the quarters of the Lentillieres it was long discussed if it would be possible to keep chicken or geese in the garden to help keep away smaller critters and maybe have eggs. But the consent was that it is not possible to give the poultry the freedom they deserve, as even if they'd be free to roam the entire squad, as soon as they'd leave the anarchist island they'd be exposed to the dangers of roads. The ethical consequential thinking ended at the conclusion that one cannot decide for an animal to live under life threatening conditions, even if their intentions were good.

The consequence of our inherent speciesism is a relegation of the livelihoods of animals to the fringes of our society. Even their deaths become marginalized. Studies show, how a majority of consumers doesn't consider the source of the animal based produce sitting the supermarket shelves (Onwezen and van der Weele 2016). Again, this kind of death blindness is for the majority produced by the conditions late-capitalism entangles us in. So we don't see the face of the animal the neatly foiled ground meat once was. We don't smell the stink of the slaughterhouses, full of fear, excrement and blood. We don't even taste the antibiotics and fatteners the stock was forcefully fed, when we put their meat into our mouths. Without sensory evidence, how could we possibly acknowledge their deaths? Furthermore, how could we bear to truly faced the scale of dying around us? We are not built, psychically or culturally, to withstand the constant awareness of lives extinguished for comfort, convenience, or trivial necessity. So the hierarchy of speciesism steps in: some animals are shielded with intimacy, others disappear into industry, still others become background casualties of urban life. But those boundaries we draw (between pet, stock, wild, pest...) are spatial fictions. The realities of urban ecologies ignore them with ease. Studies from Munich's Technical University found

more species and more diverse habitats in major European cities than in national parks or nature reserves. Berlin hosts two-thirds of all bird species known in Germany; Zurich has ten times more foxes, hedgehogs, and badgers per square kilometre than the countryside around it. “Part of the explanation is that cities offer a mosaic of habitats and microclimates, from pond-filled gardens to industrial brownfield sites and, of course, city forests.” (Konijnendijk 2008, 111) In the contradiction of such proximity with too little care (which translates into intimacy without recognition) lies the architecture of our speciesism: a system that shapes how we encounter, classify, and kill the others who move among us.



Back at the house I disposed of the pizza box and as I climbed the three stories upstairs, cradling the rat’s body in my hands, the next steps of what had to be done became clearer to me. My artistic practice asks for a full anthropomorphisation of the subject in order to provoke an easier emotional access towards the whole interspecies awareness and at the same time enough relative distance to the “other animal”, the non-human. So I would try to follow the western protocol. I needed to preserve the rat’s body from decay before her official cremation ceremony: So I put her in a bag, labelled it, put this bag in a box, labelled it, and put the box in the freezer.

Just as I opened the freezer’s door, I got interrupted by Kilian, who has been watching me with a dark presentiment rummaging around in the kitchen in full undertaker-mode for the last couple of minutes:

“Errr... Excuse me, but what exactly are you intending to do right now?”

“Put the rat in the freezer?”, I answered perplexed.

“No. No! You can’t do that here!”, Kilian insisted. Still holding the rat-box in one hand and the freezer half open with the other and a puzzled look in my face I asked dumbfound:

“Why?” Kilian sighed. Becoming exasperated with my non-understanding of such norms, they exclaimed:

“Well, because! Maybe I don’t want a dead rat in my freezer?” Admittedly I was verrry taken aback and had to interrogate further:

“Okay... but... it’s just a Tupperware? I’m not putting anything unhygienic in there, see? It’s double-wrapped! It’s sealed air-tight! I labelled it!”

“That doesn’t matter, I just don’t want it in there! You’ve got to find another place for it.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, I would be very grateful in that case if I could just leave it in there to freeze a bit before I take it home to my place then, so it doesn’t get cooked in the summer heat on the way.” And that’s what we compromised on then. Successfully sidestepped a potential relationship conflict.

A few days later I was welcoming Luca at my apartment. He would be my subletter for the summer months, while I’d be abroad for an artist residency. We were sipping tea at my kitchen table while going through some formalities, when Luca asked:

“Okay, great! Is there anything else that would be good to know? Like weird neighbours, special ways to handle plants...?” I looked around, pondering:

“Hmmm... not really. We already talked about everything so far. You even made photos of the plants health status, haha! Maybe let’s look at the fridge together before I leave to check if there’s anything inside you don’t want to use and I should throw out.”

“Ah, I can also do that, but yeah, why not.”

“These jars are all kinds of sauces... ah, and the wine is for you anyways... and of course you’re welcome to use up all the frozen veggies, too... Oh! Maybe don’t open this container here, there’s a mouse inside...”

“Wait what?! A mouse?”

“... some more cabbage... mh?”

“You said there is a mouse in the freezer?”

“Yes? Oh, don’t you worry! It’s in an airtight container! And in that container she is also airtight wrapped in a plastic bag, in case someone accidentally opens the box. So all is safe!”, I smiled at him confidently.

“Aha. Errr... any more things like this around here? Would be kinda good to know...” Luca didn’t smile back.

“Oh my, yes, sure! Sorry it didn’t occur to me that this is important, but of course, haha, so over here in the shelves, do you see that box?” I guided him back to the sofa and pointed to the shelves above.

“Yeeeah...?”, Luca answered hesitantly and squinted at the box. “What’s inside?”

“About sixteen darkling beetles and a number of giant mealworms – all dead of course. Did you know this is how they look like through their stages of development? Look I even have a pupa here, unfortunately not all of them made it to imago, but that’s quite normal.”, I happily blabbered, presenting the opened box of insect

corpses to my subletter. A quick look up at his face led me to quickly closing the box again and it began to dawn on me that Luca isn't exactly comfortable with dead beings around in the flat. So I quickly added:

"And maybe don't use this cup here, there's a curled up slowworm inside. It's bone-dry, though.", almost only mumbling now, "Otherwise it'd need to be in the freezer, too. And here on this shelf are chemicals you shouldn't open either, but they are labelled, so basically don't touch anything with the skull symbol on it, yeah. Oh and in those vials there's some crude oil, not labelled, wait, I better put those out of sight for you."

Luca let out a sigh that sounded like a half-assed laugh and went:

"Okay. I won't touch any of it!"

"But hey, as I've already said: Please use anything and make yourself at home!", I tried to bring back the tea-mood from before.

"Sure, thanks..." We politely parted our ways and I felt eager to leave town.

The very next day I received the following text message:

"The only favour I ask you, really important to me,
can you remove the dead animals from the house?

All of them, maybe put it in the basement?

Sorry for that but is the only things I can't deal with it."

Damn. I should have known from his reaction that this is gonna become a problem. Why was I always remaining blinkered about the tabooisation of death? Nobody would find it weird or worrying to share a flat with living animals, but heaven forbid if they're dead. I didn't really understand why Kilian banned the mouse from his

freezer, but there seemed to be a pattern here: Luca didn't want it in the freezer, either. I brainstormed for a solution as I was already entering the subway to head back to the apartment: The dried bodies could go in the basement storage, they aren't gonna decompose further stored away in their boxes. But what about the frozen mouse? Would one of my friends offer her shelter in their freezer? Upon discovering this pattern of general disgust, I wasn't so sure about asking them for such a spontaneous favour. I might bring my friends in an uncomfortable position where they'd probably want to refuse. Time was running, my train would leave soon and I didn't want to lose my subletter just as I was about to leave the city.

Luca wasn't home when I arrived and went to collect my corpse-pets. It occurred to me just then, when I picked up the labelled Tupperware: Alas! I am still a student at the University of Applied Arts. And we do have a freezer in our art studio's kitchen!

When Does a Body Become Waste?

Vienna is home to an estimated 50.000 to 60.000 pigeons, according to a counting carried out in spring 2025 (Wien.gv). I asked myself, what happens to all of those, who end up flattened on the streets? Or more precisely: What happens to those I don't find to take care of myself? Usually, if a wild animal dies in Vienna, the *ebswien tierservice* (an animal rendering service) is officially responsible. But as I had to learn with the mouse we tried to rescue from Alexandra's garden, smaller, common wild animals don't really count as wildlife, but as vermin. Animals like deer, boar or foxes get treated, but what happens to the others? To confirm a suspicion of mine, I conducted my own

small street survey, again supported by my dog Björk, who is an easy conversation starter. Whenever so often I saw a municipal worker on their job of cleaning the street with their little wagon, I slowed down enough for them to comment on the cuteness of my dog (which just happens naturally). There was usually a bit of animal talk before I then asked the MA48 worker what happens to the little dead animals they find on the streets? They mostly just gesture towards the closest bin. When I then come with the follow-up question: “Oh, but isn’t the ebs Wien responsible for that?”, they just laugh. Small animals become trash by default, folded into the undifferentiated flow of municipal waste.

The management of this kind of “waste” has a long history (“Tierservice – Ebswien,”). Before the modern rendering plant existed, dead animals were handled by the Wasenmeister, a figure who held an extraordinary double role. He disposed of animal carcasses and served as the city’s executioner. The same man who hauled decomposing livestock beyond the city walls also tortured prisoners and carried out public executions. His lodging was provided by the city, his pay meagre, and neither job afforded dignity. He was expected to earn his living by selling the remains, like skins, horns and fat. Death was his resource. Eventually, at the end of the 19th century, the medieval pits for animal corpses were replaced by a “thermochemical factory” the precursor to today’s tierservice. But the function stayed the same: Get the bodies out of sight and turn them into something useful.

The institution itself was repeatedly renamed over the last century, each iteration washing away the uncomfortable association of death a little more³²:

32 Translation of the accented terms in descending order: Flaying house, carcass utilization, carcass disposal, animal service.

- 1916 „Gesellschaft zum Betrieb der städtischen
Wasenmeisterei und Thermochemischen Fabrik in
Wien“
- 1940 „Tierkörperverwertung und Thermochemische Fabrik
Gesellschaft m.b.H.“
- 1990 Umbenennung in „Tierkörperbeseitigung Wien“
- 2010 Umbenennung auf ebswien tierkörperbeseitigung
Ges.m.b.H. Nfg KG
- 2013 Umbenennung auf ebswien tierservice Ges.m.b.H.Nfg KG

This urge to find euphemisms for matters of death is based on the desire of sanitising the very vocabulary it consists of. The legislation of handling dead animals followed the same logic: The disposal of “animal by-products and dead animals” was regulated by the Tiermaterialiengesetz (rule of animal materials) until it got replaced in 2011 with the sanitized terminology Hygienevorschriften für nicht für den menschlichen Verzehr bestimmte tierische Nebenprodukte und die dazugehörige Durchführungsverordnung (hygiene regulations for animal by-products not intended for human consumption and the associated enforcement directive). (“RIS - Tiermaterialiengesetz - Bundesrecht Konsolidiert” 2025) In bureaucratic language, there are no animal corpses anymore, only waste or resources. The website of the animal rendering plant describes what is done to the animals there in an almost apologetic tone:

We do not decide on the method of processing, but adhere to the strict EU guidelines. The incoming materials are first crushed and

then dried. After drying, the fat is mechanically separated from the meal. The end products are pressure sterilized, which guarantees the elimination of any germs. We also return the heat generated during the processing to the cycle. We use this energy in our operations. We recycle 50,000 tons of input material annually. And we do so with virtually no residue. The final products in category I are intended exclusively for thermal utilisation. The animal fat obtained is used in biodiesel and energy production. Meat/bone meal is mainly used in the cement industry as a substitute fuel. Our meal has a similarly high calorific value to lignite. Avoiding the use of fossil fuels helps to reduce CO₂ emissions. (“TKV Gruppe: Verarbeitung,”)

All of the above does sound very reasonable in terms of resource responsibility. Recovering fat and meal to substitute fossil fuels is materially efficient. But if efficiency is the moral baseline, why not apply the same logic to the human body as a natural resource? I sense an unspoken economic reason behind all this facade of ecological uprightness: Any body processing plant – whether crematorium or animal rendering - needs tons of energy, as we have learned in earlier chapters; We humans pay for this cremation service, therefore keeping the cremation plants lucrative; But for cremating the waste of slaughterhouses or giving roadkill a ceremony no individual company or driver would pay. The revenue must come from somewhere else. Thus a product on the other end of the furnace has to replace the absence of emotional value. In this case: animal meal and fat as valuable resources for further production. Isn't it ironic that we use ground-up animals to produce even more concrete? To concretize the very system that killed them even further?

We have to draw emotional borders around bodies, commit to speciesism, otherwise we would go insane. But the gap is widening

ever more between the both ends of the range of sensitivity for our co-critters. The animals we perceive as companions, like dogs or horses, receive cremations, ceremonies, even designated cemeteries like the one beside Vienna's Zentralfriedhof. Pet-death is a whole other sector of the death industry we didn't really pay attention to in this text so far. And it is booming, with more and more companies jumping in on the business opportunity to offer services for people mourning a companion animal. But there is no ritual for the regular Roadkill. No rites for lab mice. A pigeon on the asphalt becomes waste the moment no one cares for its body. A dog becomes a stiff body to mourn over because someone does. Between them lies only the thin line of attention.



The semester was about to start again and I was already back in the studio in an attempt to clean my table. I collected two pre-summer break coffee cups from my chaotic corner and picked up three more from around the studio space, making my way to our collective kitchen. I dropped off everything in the dishwasher and turned towards the giant fridge, eager to check upon my mouse in there. I opened the lower freeze drawer. Entirely empty. A slow panic rose inside my guts. I opened the other freeze drawer. They were all empty! I stared in shock. Opened the fridge. Almost empty. The cleaning staff, or someone, must have been given the order to clear everything out before the next academic year starts! What else would make sense? The freezer drawers were all full with private stuff, leftovers of food etc., until a few weeks ago. In that very moment my growing panic turned around into grief. I was

deeply struck by the loss of the rat's body. A body I promised to take care of. A body I have felt dying in my hands. A body linked to a promise I made to Alexandra. Regret washed over me and mixed into the grief and panic at the thought of Alexandra, who would have buried the rat in her garden had I not offered the cremation ritual. The would-haves and should-haves accumulated as the regrets piled up in my head: Was it wrong to trust into the studio space? Could I have not found another freezer space? Was it not labelled clearly enough? I put my name on it. I didn't put my department on it! But it was the department's kitchen, why would I need to add this info on it? Why would they throw away something with my name on it? Was there maybe an e-mail about it I didn't read? I could have checked my mails better! There was always so many unread junk, I kept losing too much important info in this mess! If I only would have had a better system! ... Feeling dizzy I sat down. I don't remember for how long I sat there. When I finally stood up again I mainly felt ashamed. Ashamed that I got so deeply affected by a lost dead rat – and tried to go on about my day.

Normality as catastrophe³³

A man is walking along a road through an empty landscape when he comes upon a car with its hood open, smoke rising from the engine. As he gets closer, the car's driver – a woman – comes into view. The man approaches and asks gently, "Can I help you, lady?" "No, you can't help me – no one can help.", as her voice is growing louder and faster, she continues: "I'm trying driving with my lights on, I tried sounding my horn, I'd scream out the window - I'd roll the window down and play public enemy real loud!" Her words are tumbling out of her mouth and she briefly pauses to catch her breath. The man nods sympathetically. She goes on: "I have prayed to Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Christopher, to what the heck," – and she can't refrain from screaming the following again: "I have tried everything a person can do and still every week - I plow into at least one deer! I have hit thirteen deers in seven weeks driving down this road, Mister – and I have to drive down this road every day 40 miles back and forth to work! I HAVE to drive to work and I HAVE to drive home!" She lets out a long, guttural sound of despair, then turns around to stare out into the empty landscape. Her voice turns sober again, asking: "Where do they come from?", as she scans the horizon as if looking for them. Then her eyes drift down to the deer she has just run over. Claspings her hands over her head, she stifles a sob and walks toward the animal. She kneels beside the dead body and touches it gently with

33 This is another "borrowed title" from my partner Kilian Jörg. He wrote the chapter "Normalität als Katastrophe" in his book *Das Auto und die ökologische Katastrophe - Utopische Auswege aus der autodestruktiven Vernunft*. Here our thoughts collide again and I draw a lot out of his chapter and our talks about it for my text here.

both hands, sighing deeply – only to pull her hands away a moment later as if snapping out of something. Standing up and stepping back, she says, “He’s dead.”

Then, throwing the protagonist a final, anguished look, she cries out: “AND I LOVE DEER!”

The man is still nodding sympathetically. She gets into the demolished car, sobbing as she starts the engine. With a roar and screeching tires, she drives off into the distance, leaving the deer and the man behind.



Screenshot from “The Straight Story”, David Lynch 1999

I transcribed this scene from about 55 minutes into “The Straight Story” – a movie written by John Roach and Mary Sweeny and directed by (David Lynch 1999). The slow catastrophe of ecological collapse carries a similar senselessness like the previous scene, which is the perfect metaphor for this entire chapter. The ongoing ecocide produces grief that is isolated, suppressed and rendered unreasonable – a quiet emotional downward spiral that rarely finds form. The drivers desperate outcry in Lynch’s movie, “AND I LOVE DEER!”, captures this dissonance: having to exist within the systems that kill what we

claim to cherish. The status quo is forcing us into complicity, to hold up the scaffolding this very system is based upon. This is the catastrophe we are going to talk about in this chapter.

A catastrophe is usually understood as a break with normality. But to recognise normality itself as disastrous requires a speculative distance from the very ground we stand on. And yet our modern ground is built on extractivism. It is the cosmology of a world that can only exist by drawing down the worlds of others – non-human species, marginalised humans, future generations, entire ecosystems. This normality is dependent on extractivism enabling its own mode of existence (to borrow from Latour's ontology again). It spreads by forcing people into the implicit and explicit laws of global capitalism: the free flow of goods, traffic, data, desire etc. In the Homogenocene everyone is compelled to align with this capitalist rationality – or risk disappearance. This is what the philosopher Kilian Jörg uncovers over the course of an entire section of chapters titled “normal” in his publication on car infrastructures as one of the ecological problems. Catastrophe, he claims, is not a single apocalypse but a slow unworlding: the erasure of ways of being from the Earth. Biodiversity collapses alongside cultural diversity; many worlds end quietly, without the spectacle of the catastrophes Hollywood has trained us to perceive as such. But modernity has been able to relegate its own destructiveness by outsourcing it spatially and socially. The negative effects disappear beyond the edges of the visible, into supply chains, sacrificed landscapes and marginalized communities. Jörg argues, that postmodern theory, largely urban and Euro-American, often couldn't imagine these events on a level of “deep time”; therefore, he continues, the loss of normality has rather been interpreted as chaos than as the resurfacing of what had been concealed beneath the smooth surface of “the modern” (Jörg 2024a).

This concealment is what makes the regime of normality so durable. It renders an ecologically disastrous, racist, and sexist order as “natural”, aka a “normal” and therefore unquestionable.

Roadkill – the most banal of ecological crises – emerged as another chapter in a long history of human-driven extinctions. In the 19th century hunters and trappers persecuted bison, beavers, and wading birds for their pelts and plumage; in the beginning of the 20th century extinction, once a heretical impossibility, had become an unavoidable fact. At that stage early road ecology involved little more than counting carcasses on road trips, to earn publication in journals (Goldfarb 2024, 29f).

Even today, deer collide with cars so frequently that, “a deer meets a car every eight minutes in New York State alone” (Goldfarb 2024, 34) writes. He further points out that automobility turned deer into North America’s deadliest “wild” animal. Deer didn’t become super deadly because they changed, but because normality did.

Not only the car and its infrastructure reshaped our normality, but the advent of nuclear weapons had a similar effect on our psyche. Charles Glicksberg analyzed the literature of this era, the 1950’s, and noted a “monomaniacal emphasis on the inevitability of death”, which causes a feeling of overwhelm of ones “own insignificance in a world ruled by malignatomic energy” (Glicksberg 1977). The very idea of a meaningful death eroded with the bomb’s capacity to annihilate without dignity and turning individuals into “ridiculous grains of dust in a mass extinction.”, how Spencer Weart analyses in “Nuclear fear: a history of images”. The fear of this unprecedented level of possible extinction left only an “unspeakable void” at the core of life itself (Weart 1988, 392 f).

“We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried. Most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita; Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty, and to impress him, takes on his multi-armed form and says, ‘Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.’ I suppose we all thought that, one way or another.”
(Oppenheimer 1965 reflecting on the first atomic bomb test)

The problem with the catastrophe of the normality is not merely its unimaginable scale, but its invisibility. “Catastrophe has become the background hum of existence.”, as (Jörg 2024a) concludes. To describe normality as catastrophe is therefore not rhetorical exaggeration, but a factual diagnosis. We live in a world where the ordinary is structurally deadly and where imagination struggles to exceed the limits of what feels “normal”. The question is no longer how to return to normality after disaster, but how to train ourselves to look this disaster within normality in its face. Maybe it means to step out of our cars, fuck this job and instead care for the deer on the road. Maybe each of us has to find out their own way of looking into the unspeakable void.

Part IV: How I Smuggled a Griffon Vulture Across Borders

The early March-sun was already scorching my skin only half an hour in on our hike along the southern coast of the island Krk. I forgot to put on sunscreen this morning! Kilian and Björk, my trusty adventure buddies, were already playing again with some stick they'd found on the maybe fifth beach already since we started our walk. "How is it possible after every cliff, every beach just gets prettier and prettier?", I thought to myself as I spotted a group of three women sitting in the gravel. "Hey there, excuse me! I was wondering if anyone of you happens to have some sunscreen with you I could use?" As I was saving my face from burning I was too distracted to notice it at first, but as it is so often the case Björk was first to detect Death. I don't know if I'd even recognized it, the dark mass behind a bunch of beach-trash, or so it seemed. Kilian

was second as they watched Björk inspecting: “Oh! Wow, poor one. Look.” The dark mass was of feathers and sun-leathered skin, a beaked head thrown back on a long neck in the typical dramatic vain way. As I was stumbling closer over the gravel slope the bunch of trash turned out to be ... part of this huge bird? It was... I fell onto my knees, realizing: a vulture. At that point I wasn’t even sure if it could possibly be one, given how scarce they are. I was already crouching over it, admiring its beauty, until I once again realized that, like most people would, Kilian staying at a kind of respectful distance from the corpse. “Could it be a vulture?”, they guessed from the shape and size of its body. More often than not, the obvious conclusion is correct.

“I don’t know, but some sort of eagle for sure. If it’s a vulture that would be even more tragic... look at this, it must have died from exhaustion or dehydration or... oh it must have been horrible.”, I almost whispered. The right shoulder of the bird was strangulated in layers of plastic bags, stretched and woven together by weather into an impossibly tear-able contraption. The conglomerate of plastic bags must have been accumulated with the help of the coastal winds in the treeline close by.



This bird here must have chosen the wrong tree to land – or maybe it all happened in a different order, my forensic expertise is not really allowing for more than assumptions.

I came to this forensic conclusion as an entire branch, thick as my arm, was also tied up with the bird. Our vulture must have ripped the branch off, tied to it, with incredible strength in its attempt to free itself.



11. Dying in Ecocide

As I have established earlier, not only being mowed down by a car makes one a Roadkill, but also other forms of falling victim to the proliferations of modernity's progress. The stray plastic bag being one of them, has come to haunt me at the beach. Quite fitting if we look at the following statistical numbers: Plastic waste is already polluting about 88% of the global sea's surface. And if we take a look deeper than surface level, 80% of all trash in the oceans is plastic. The plastic bag is a quite common species in these murky waters, as roughly 10%

of all plastic bags produced end up in the sea (Plastikmüll im Meer 2022). I could go on quoting devastating numbers, but the point is: They cause Roadkill. And we are generally unable to witness it or take responsibility for it. These deaths happen outside of the realms of our abilities to witness. It seems impossible to train our senses to perceive the ongoing dying in ecocide – not only due to contrasting habitats (we are land animals after all and won't meet many fish from our day-to-day) but also due to the mere scale of it all! The dying in ecocide consists of “countless tragedies happening all at once and at the same time stretched out over a time span so large, it becomes imperceivable by the single human lifespan.” (Jörg and Lerchbaumer 2022) as Kilian Jörg sums it up in his essay “Ecology beyond numbers”. Over a million seabirds get killed by ocean plastic every year – and here I am crouching next to one of them.



“Oooh, Sabrina, please be careful...”, Kilian said with this worried tone I knew all too well, as I immediately started to carefully turn it around to further inspect the state of decay and – most of all – to get a better idea of how to free the bird postmortem from its deathtrap. Also knowing all too well what my partner actually worries about, I answered: “Thanks, but I don’t think I have anything to fear here. You know that corpse poison³⁴ is a fairytale,

34 Even if the term corpse poison has long been scientifically disenchanted, an uncanny association is activated in our brain when we smell decaying bodies. The various gases which develop while decomposing (such as neurin and hydrogen sulphide) can indeed be toxic, but the concentration in the atmosphere is too low. Only if ingested intoxication

right? There is no such thing. And also given the dryness of the sand and the heat in the sun, there's no mold growing. Looking at its belly ... my best guess it is dead since probably one or two weeks, so any disease it might have had is also long dead. I won't get any infection from it, don't worry! I'm not eating it, just touching..." I elaborated, as I dug my fingertips underneath loops of plastic, ripping hole after hole. As I looked up to check if my dog is staying close by (she did) I saw not only Kilian looking down at me in apparent disgust and worry (although I wasn't sure if they were more worried about my health or about the looming idea of what would happen next), but also the small group of four women a bit further down the beach, who I approached just minutes earlier to ask for sunscreen eyeing us suspiciously from afar. I tried to shake off the awkwardness and went on hooking and ripping and overexplaining to calm down my partners nerves: "... and look, right now I don't have any open cuts or wounds on my hands, so I won't catch anything like that either... damn, how many layers of bags can there be?" Once the bird was finally free, I carefully turned it around to inspect the level of decay and also how intact the structure of its body still was – because I already knew: This is Roadkill. And I would have to take care of it now. "Sabrina... please!", Kilian was pleading at me, reading my mind, "We wanted to go for a hike today!" – "I know... But I'll have to come back for him." And so we changed the route of our planned tour in a way we would meet the coastline again at exactly this beach.

and infection occurs, mostly caused by bacteria in the corpse. The bio-warfare of e.g. catapulting dead bodies over town walls to poison the wells of the enemy fed into the belief of a corpse poison – when in fact introduced bacteria in the water would have been to blame.

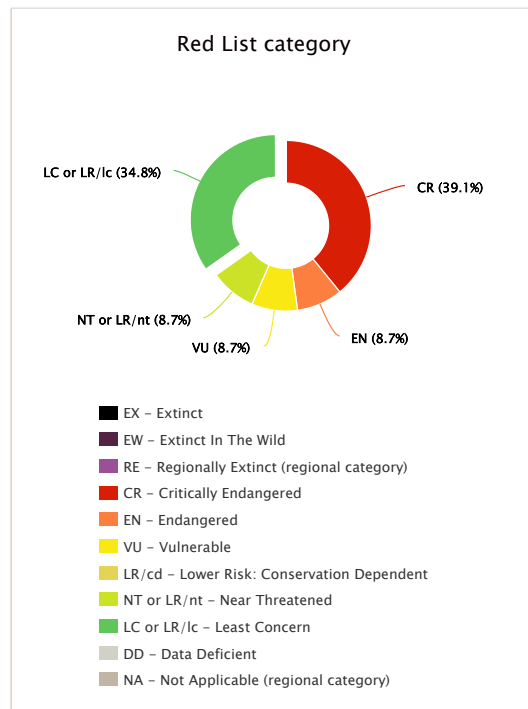
12. Undertaker Under Threat of Extinction

What I didn't know back then on this island is, that it actually wasn't so unlikely to encounter a griffon vulture on Krk. Krk belongs to the Kvarner Islands, where it hosts together with Cres and Pag more than 152 nesting pairs (this number was documented 2024). Griffon vultures are highly social animals and live together in colonies to feed, rest and nest together. Not all vultures exclusively rely on carrion for food, but the *Gyps fulvus*

does – unfortunately this knowledge and led to vultures being hunted into almost extinction. Now add the constant loss of habitat and the fact that people actively put poisoned carnage out as traps for coyotes and such to “protect”

Geographical Scope **Global** ✕

Include **Species** ✕



Status of global vulture population; Source: IUCN

their stock animals (Buechley and Şekercioğlu 2016) and you have the result of about 65% of vultures worldwide currently endangered or threatened of extinction (IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2025). In the 21st century efforts to reintroduce this important group of species into the ecosystems which benefit from them have already shown success. The Griffon vulture came back from the brink of extinction with its numbers rising – which is a huge success considering the female vulture only lays one egg per breeding season and only if the conditions are right! From incubating over hatching and then learning to fly, the parental pair is occupied with care for the offspring for one entire year. As soon as the young are ready to fly, they start their coming of age mission and go on a tedious migration towards Africa (though some migrate across Europe to e.g. Spain). They return after four to five years when they reached sexual maturity to their parents habitat to look for a lifelong partner to bond with. Overall only roughly 25% of all young Griffon vultures survive those first five years, which makes the resurgence of the population in the Kvarner colony even more impressive.

Vultures during jhator;
photo: Wikipedia user FishOil



In a sense I was devastated for this encounter on the beach not only because of the gruesome and unnecessary death of the vulture, but also because it felt like meeting a distant colleague. Not only do vultures feed from carcasses, they are funeral workers in some cultures and have become a symbol for death. The probably most well-known vulture centered funeral ritual is being practiced in Tibet, where it is also performed the most. The name for the ritual, jhator (tibetan: རྩམ་ཁོར་, means something along the lines of “to be spread among birds” or “giving alms to birds”, which is already descriptive of what is happening: The Ragyapas, basically funeral officiants, make sure to lure some vultures to the place of ceremony already prior to the arrival of the body with offerings. When the ceremony then comes to the phase where the body arrives at the site, the Ragyapas dismember it and leave it to the vulture to be partly eaten on site and carried off into Bardo, the realm for the souls to await rebirth. Another example of so called sky burials is still partly practiced in Mongolia and by other nomads of the steppe. These rituals looks quite different (e.g. the body staying intact and laid down in the steppe) to the tibetian version, with their own symbols and believes stemming from Shamanism. With the death of the Bogd Gegen Khan 1924, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism in the Bogd Khaganate, the soviets took advantage by claiming there was no reincarnation to be found and effectively stopped the following of another Khan, establishing a republic state. But the sowjets didn't only change the political regime, they also forcefully europeanized mongolian culture with the effects, that earth burial is now the most widespread burial practice and sky burials have become a rare occurrence. Other examples would lead us to Persia or India, where Zoroastrists lay their deceased on platforms of “towers of silence” to be eaten by vultures. The cultures and religions vary, but

the practice of feeding the corpses to vultures stems from one common factor: The lack or scarcity of grounds which are able to compost bodies (or even able to be dugged into) and the scarcity of wood for funeral pyres. Sky burial rituals have developed out of the lack of one kind of resource (wood) and presence of another (vultures). These burial practices are not only symbolic, but ecological. And it is exactly this ecological resource-the vultures themselves-that is now vanishing. This is why the dead bird on the beach felt even heavier to me. An adult griffon vulture is never just an individual; it is one half of a lifelong pair, one element in a colony that survives only through cooperation, patience, and improbable luck. Its death represents therefore not only the end of one life but the quiet collapse of a relational world. Europe's griffon vulture population may look stable on paper: Roughly 35,000 to 40,000 breeding pairs, the majority clustered safely on the Iberian Peninsula, but the eastern population remains heartbreakingly thin. Only about a thousand pairs survive in Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Croatia combined (Vulture Conservation Foundation 2022). Numbers that, once mapped onto the realities of poisoning, habitat loss, and a 75% juvenile mortality rate, suddenly look much less like stability and much more like a precarious balancing act. And within this already fragile geography, the Kvarner colony is an anomaly. It is the only place in the world where griffon vultures nest directly above the sea, raising their single offspring on cliffs that drop straight into water. Everything about their survival here appears improbable and absurdly delicate to me. And so the bird lying in the sand in front of me was not just a victim of misfortune; it was a reminder of how losing one vulture, we lose a thread in a much larger weave – a weave we still depend on, even as we pretend not to see it.



After hours of hiking we finally exited the gorge opening into the beach where our vulture was waiting for us. Kilian already declared they will have nothing to do with it, as they cannot handle the smell of decay, but then not discouraging me from my practice and even changing route is more support than I could ask for. So as Kilian played with Björk on the beach, I carefully put the vulture in an almost intact trash bag (also found on the beach) and then strapped the harness of my dog around it to have a grip for carrying it without tearing the thin layer of plastic. With this bizarre contraption in blue and neon yellow in my arms we hiked over the cliffs for one hour until the car. I cannot remember when I was last so tired from a hike. My arms wanted to fall off, my feet were heavy as of lead. But Kilian made it pretty clear that they will not ride in the car with the carcass. So I hid the bagged bird in the bushes and dropped Kilian off at the closest bar before going for my crime scene hunt in the next Hypermarket. I acquired cat litter, dishwasher salt, trash bags and a large carton box, drove back to the bird, treated it with everything and was back to pick up Kilian – all in less than an hour (Hire me for my services!). With open windows and the music blasting we happily drove back to our caravan home. It would be the last night before the trip back to Vienna, so ... two nights and three countries for the bird in the box. The first night we hid the box underneath the car. The second night, we spent in the same house as on our way to, so I knew there is an inner yard with basement compartments. This is where I hid the box the second night and where I also changed the litter-salt-mix for a fresh one. Already quite a few larvae have decided to hatch

and escaped the body in this process. It is not without irony for me to “care” for one body while evicting another species of its food source. But alas, that’s not the point of my artistic practice here. That night I dreamt of the murky basement areal and maggots.



Maggots are another underappreciated group of critters I want to give a brief highlight on: They play a key role in forensic pathology, a field of science I learned on an amateur level in order to determine the cause and approximate times of death of my Roadkill. The so called PMI (estimating time since death) is where the maggots shine: By paying close attention to the maggots’ stage of development, the type of species (*Calliphoridae* usually are the first to inhabit a corpse by laying their eggs) and the temperature of the carcass (rot causes heat, so does large accumulations of critters), Forensic entomologists can draw their conclusions on the PMI. My own entomologic abilities are rather limited, so I mainly only draw from the number and size of maggots and their general developmental stadium when I attempt to estimate since how long someone was already lying there, unwitnessed.



I never truly questioned what I was doing, when I took a Roadkill under my care. So the entire illegality of my endeavour to transport a carcass of a protected species across multiple nation borders was never really harrowing. This wasn't even the first time I smuggled somebody dead across national borders – admittedly though, my father was easier to conceal as he was already cremated. I have drafted an elaborate plan to hide the stench of the vulture's decaying body, which included even more salt, but made the bundle unfortunately heavy. My technique of smell contraption miraculously worked extremely well and so the three of us, my partner, my dog and I, traveled comfortably by train with our additional luggage of a large cardboard-box. The logistical problems only began once back in Vienna: So far all the little bodies I picked up fitted well in my freezer compartment at home. But a vulture was a whole different scale. I called and emailed several butchers, catering companies and even our university's facility management – any option I could think of which could possibly have a large freezer chest and give me access to it. It became pretty clear pretty soon that I would need my own freezer. Scouting a second hand freezer and getting it dropped off at the shared studio space happened in less than 24 hours after arrival in Vienna. The vulture was ready to move into the new morgue. My colleagues were extremely supportive and helped many times with carrying the freezer chest, as it had to be relocated three times in the period of its use – but I had to face once again the realities of concern and disgust when it came upon hosting a morgue for Roadkill. Every studio collective I asked disapproved having a freezer full of bodies in their space. The department allowed it to stay for two and a half months. A colleague had interim studio space available for three

more. And as I was already planning on removing my sofa from my flat to make space for the morgue, I stumbled across a house in my neighborhood with boarded up ground-floor windows and a graffiti which read “This house is ready for squatting!” ... which turned my innocent dog walk into skirting the edge of legality once again. In Vienna it is easy to access most resident buildings if one is in possession of a “z-key” – the key system mainly used by the local postal delivery. It is not illegal to own such a key and I could enter the vacant property without damage. Which led to me squatting a gorgeous fin-de-siècle house with my very own morgue. Looking back at this development it makes quite sense to discover another layer of my activist persona interlinking with my artistic practice. Instead of compromising or giving up on the vulture and sticking to small and manageable animals only, I would be able to conserve the vulture long enough until my skills in sculpting would be developed far enough to give it the funeral it deserved.

13. Death Blindness

Definition of death blindness; (following the conceptual layout of plant blindness) a state of our western society produced by late-stage capitalism which systematically relegates death and dying leading to: (a) the inability to recognize the regular death and dying in the biosphere and in human affairs; (b) the inability to come to terms with feelings of disgust, repulsion and fear in the face of death; and (c) the speciesist, anthropocentric perspective on dignity of the living and the dead, leading to further exploitation and the most unkind ignorance - alternative terms: relegated death

The Necrocene: Habitat of the Wild Death

One of the most pervasive gestures of the present is the practiced looking away. We avert our eyes from the scenes where our lifestyles most clearly materialize—industrial slaughterhouses, trawling nets, poisoned rivers, oil-slicked coastlines, the mass graves of non-human others. Ecocide is rarely experienced directly; instead, it is dislocated, outsourced, and scrubbed from perception by design. Death blindness protects the smooth functioning of extractive capitalism. To truly witness the scale of killing required for our comforts would be intolerable. So we don't. And this not-witnessing creates the perfect ecological niche for what Philippe Ariès called the wild death. To understand how this habitat emerged, it helps to recall that Western relationships to dying were not always so estranged (how I discussed in chapter 3). Ariès describes the long era of the tame death – from roughly the 5th to the 18th century – as a time when dying was communal, ordinary, and largely unhidden. Cemeteries were vibrant social spaces where the dead and the living mingled as part of a shared world. The cemetery, Ariès writes, served as “a public meeting place, a place to socialize, at times even to inhabit permanently. [...] The church was the town hall, and the cemetery the public square” (Ariès 2013, 64 f). Private houses were generally small and overcrowded and thus there were no other public spaces apart from the churchyard and the streets – which were simultaneously the waste dumping area. At the cemeteries the people could gather and just exist, with the benefit of the protection of the saints – which was believed to not only be reserved for the dead. “Cemeteries have always been places of asylum.” (Du Change; as cited in Ariès 2013) The tame death was not spectacle but everyday life. What Ariès carefully traces is a centuries-long drift

from familiarity toward alienation. As the dying and dead bodies moved into professionalized care, and cemeteries to the outskirts of cities, what was once tame became something wild. Wild death, as I build upon Ariès' theory of the tame death, thrives in the shadows modernity produced: in factory farms, mass extinction events, toxic landscapes, and the invisible casualties of extraction. This era now of the wild death is called the Necrocene. It is coined by theorist Justin McBrien, who sketches the beginnings along the "unification of the globe by disease" (Le Roy Ladurie 1981; as cited in McBrien 2016). Death accelerated to unnatural levels under the terrors of colonialism, as the collapse of indigenous populations was not an accidental "virgin soil epidemic" (Crosby 1986), but genocide. The Necrocene, so McBrien, is a reframing of the history of capitalism's expansion through the process of becoming extinction. Becoming extinction is not only meant in the same sense as species go extinct, but also, how I just claimed with the word "genocide", in the sense of extinguishment of cultures through force or assimilation and the murdering of people. The Necrocene is "the extinction of the earth in the depletion fossil fuels, rare earth minerals, [...] it is ocean acidification and eutrophication, deforestation and desertification, melting ice sheets and rising sea levels; the great Pacific garbage patch and nuclear waste entombment; McDonalds and Monsanto." (McBrien 2016, 116 f)

Death blindness is what allows the Necrocene to proceed uncontested and slowly cancel future after future.

As we are nearing the final stages of my argument for the concept of "death blindness", let's recapitulate briefly my critique of ocularcentrism here and how it connects to the habitat of the Necrocene. Modernity idealized a regime oriented toward clarity, control and distance, which are precisely the conditions under which

death can become abstract, manageable and ultimately displaceable. This is why I argue that death blindness offers a necessary concept for contemporary critical discourse. It situates our current ecological catastrophe within a longer history of perceptual disciplining. In the next chapter I will discuss the problems my proposed terminology bears.

On Plant Blindness & Politics of Linguistics

Before I started my artistic practice, one of my ways of sharing my enthusiasm for ecology and engaging in discourse was hosting workshops or guiding thematic walks. Whenever I was asked to hold a talk or a presentation, I tried to turn it into a walk outside – and I still do today. The outside just provides a whole other level of awareness, attention and inspiration to pick up from, compared to sitting in a seminar room, listening to another panel talk, or browsing over another worksheet bent over a desk while receiving instructions. Even though these are suiting arguments for leaving the indoor environment, my underlying mission of all the walks and talks I gave outside was admittedly not really of proactive care for the participants, but rather my eagerness to test the concept of “plant blindness” in the field. The term “plant blindness” was coined 1999 by Wandersee and Schussler and what they wanted to conceive with that is

“the inability to see or notice the plants in one’s own environment-leading to: (a) the inability to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere, and in human affairs; (b) the inability to appreciate the aesthetic and unique biological features of the life forms belonging to the Plant Kingdom; and (c) the misguided, anthropocentric ranking of plants as inferior to animals, leading

to the erroneous conclusion that they are unworthy of human consideration”.

The way I like to “test” the prevalence of this condition of plant blindness is e.g. oftentimes a simple exercise, during which I ask my participants to count the number of species they see from where they are positioned right now. Usually they will report a pigeon they saw, a dog being walked on the other side of the street and enthusiastically share their findings of ants and beetles in the nooks and crevices of the asphalt. What remains generally unmentioned though, is the tiny moss with which they share those crevices as habitat, the weeds which widen those cracks on the sidewalk and even the obvious tree reaching some of its branches over the corner. A simple five-minute-score like this never failed so far in changing the levels of perception of my group for the entire rest of the walk. Before I come to possible methods of undoing what I have learned to call death blindness though, it is necessary to consider the exact terminology it is based on: The term plant blindness didn’t age well since the 90’s. Many critical thinkers have since passed judgement on plant blindness for relying on a disability metaphor and thereby equating the disability of blindness with negative traits (like being unaware and apathic toward plants) (McDonough MacKenzie et al. 2019). As Sami Schalk points out, disability metaphors are oftentimes derived from the assumption that abled bodies are the default way of existence. But neither do all people sense the world in the same way and nor do disabled bodies have any lesser experience of life (Schalk 2013). The precise critique on plant blindness is, according to this discourse, that it negates the possibility that blind people can cultivate complex, multisensory relationships with plant life which are no less meaningful than those of sighted individuals (McDonough MacKenzie et al. 2019). I am unmeasureably

grateful towards Alexis Shotwell, who initially guided me towards this critical discourse. She insists that we should actively avoid metaphors that reproduce the hierarchies we claim to dismantle.

“Language is so central, so fundamental to social interaction, to our becoming who we are that no one interested in influencing and inflecting their society can ignore it.”

(Margaret Gibbon 2018)

However, if I try to apply the same critique of plant blindness on my proposed terminology of death blindness, I risk collapsing two distinct issues: the inaccuracy of using disability as metaphor and the urgency of naming a structural phenomenon that exceeds individual responsibility. In contrast to plant blindness, which – among other meanings – speaks of personal inattentiveness, I am not diagnosing an individual lack of attention. I am rather interested in describing a condition produced and maintained by the temporal, economic, and perceptual regimes of late capitalism. In other words: What I want to name is not a failure of care at the level of the individual but a mode of existence produced and cultivated by the structural conditions of the status quo.

When I went out to search for alternative terms, Alexis Shotwell proposed to reframe my theory into the opposite: to positively name the wanted mode of existence instead of making a statement against death blindness. I engaged within several problems with this approach: First of all, all our alternative terms oriented toward awareness, attention, or consciousness tend to place the burden back onto individuals. They obscure the machinery that manufactures the blindness in the first place. And secondly, this machinery is deeply

sensory in nature. As outlined in chapter 7, our culture is structured by a rigid hierarchy of the senses: Sight is simply the main narrator of our wordly understanding. Our language drips with visual metaphors, making it hard to find the same precision in drafting a metaphor without it. In that regard, my use of the term death blindness is intentionally situated. It emerges from – and must remain compatible with – a broader discourse spanning philosophy, cultural anthropology, biology, ecology and more, all of which describe human perception as culturally sculpted rather than biologically predetermined. As Chapter 7 explored, we humans are deeply entangled with an ocularcentrism, which stems from the modern project of enlightenment. It is precisely against this backdrop that the term death blindness gains explanatory force. It does not describe a universal biological limitation – animals, after all, are not affected by death blindness. Nor does it describe the perceptual experience of blind individuals. Instead, death blindness names a distinctively produced condition: the sheer impossibility to perceive the scale of ongoing death and dying, no matter if of humans, other species or entire ecosystems, in any sensory way.

In her essay “Remembering in Our Amnesia, Seeing in Our Blindness”, the Professor of ecology and evolutionary biology Ingrid Parker also makes use of the term blindness. She speaks of an ecological blindness, but in her case it is applied literally: She argues that “ecological patterns – the diversity, composition, and overall structure of ecosystems – are often driven by factors that we cannot see.” (Tsing et al. 2017, M161). Parker also points out that throughout advancing technologies in science we have been able to learn to e.g. “see” microbial DNA in soil; we have also learned “seeing” interactions / ecological patterns through manipulative experiments that reveal what cannot otherwise be observed. The history of the scientific field of

ecology is, she concludes, a history of expanding perception. Parker's use of blindness names the brute fact that many ecological processes are literally invisible even to fully sighted bodies (e.g. soil microbes, bacteria or nitrogen-fixing rhizobia). These kinds of blindnesses – death blindness as well as Parker's ecological blindness – are therefore not a condition in the sense of disabilities.

And then there is the question of “the gaze” itself. As Fahim Amir writes, “Im Blick liegt prekäre Macht”/there is a precarious power in the gaze (Amir 2018, 159). The saga of Oedipus illustrates this statement: After sleeping with his own mother Oedipus was confronted with the horror of his own actions. But instead of castrating himself (which would have been the more thorough approach of self-damnation), he swore to never lay eyes upon a woman again. In Sophokles' version he even stabbed his own eyes out to make sure of that! It was the gaze that demanded punishment, not the body. Our metaphors of vision have always been charged.

The philosopher and biologist Kathryn M. Parsley though offers an alternative to the term plant blindness, with which I started this discussion. She notes that the term plant blindness bundles several phenomena – attention, attitude, knowledge, interest – into one metaphor, which may be too ethically expensive to keep. If we managed to already shift in the past from zoochauvinism to plant blindness, she further argues, we can shift again to another term – her proposition: “plant awareness disparity” (PAD). I salute to Parsley's noble approach by eventually offering an alternative term for those, who I may have not convinced yet with my preceding arguments: “death awareness production” (DAP): a deliberate anagrammatic echo of Parsley's PAD and a poetic reversal of death blindness into an evocation of the opposite.

Lastly, Alexis Shotwell may still have the higher moral ground on her critique over my choice of terminology, but I will remind myself of her own writings on being “Against Purity”: The discussion I have created here is deeply entangled with the messiness of this oppressive and unjust world (Shotwell 2021). By artificially trying to remove all complicity with the historical context I have drafted up over the course of this thesis, I would feel myself remaining stuck in purity politics. I hope my friend forgives me for laying out her work and advice in such consequences and will abide from being overly strict with the framework of my thinking in order to stay able to move with it somewhere else.

Sensing and Caring for Interspecies Empathy



Found installation of a tissue paper taped on the sidewalk, reading “Funeral of a bumble bee! He shall rest, forever!!!”

My terminology needs to stay flexible enough to find points of contact and impact on levels of interdisciplinary meta layers. This is how thanatofactory is able to fold into death blindness – without these shared conceptual ties, this way of thinking would not make as much sense anymore. And in this chapter, we need those ties!

I want to ask in almost naïve fashion: Is it possible to train thanatofactory? In a world which is oriented primarily around smell (as explored in chapter 7), the implications of this possibility

are important. As Kilian Jörg suggests, smell, with its refusal of distance and its dissolution of boundaries might nourish ecological consciousness (Jörg 2024b). We might after all be able to develop profoundly different relationships to dying and ecological processes if we could relearn to apply thanatofactory to our ways of being in and with this world.

If other animals have honed the olfactory recognition of death signals over hundreds of millions of years in order to survive and gain resilience, could humans cultivate an echo of this practice? The first association that springs to mind in response to this question is a certain olfactory exercise that I used to do regularly a few years ago when I lost my sense of smell for several months due to Covid. Not being able to smell anything lessened the quality of my life experience so enormously, that I left no stone unturned looking for ways to relearn how to smell. What I finally found was a mix of sensory physiotherapy and deep attention training: Every day I would choose an object of a very distinct smell, which I could clearly remember. I chose to start with lemon. The exercise is then focussing on the lemon by cutting it, then smelling it over several minutes while conjuring the memory of its smell; at the same time naming what is happening, repeating the word lemon and its olfactory description out loud. With the help of this exercise I helped rewire the neural pathways for smelling over the course of only three weeks back to almost “normal”.

This olfactory training can be interpreted and attuned towards wherever your associations might lead you. Training thanatofactory is only one proposal on how to actually deal with death blindness, but its meta-meanings can yield a general range of ways: spanning from attention to action, they all lie on a scale of forms of care. Attention on the one end of the spectrum is already care, even before it transforms

into any gesture. Action can be care, especially when performed with an attunement to the vulnerabilities of the more-than-human world. My own artistic practice is therefore also forms of caring against death blindness – by noticing Roadkill (smelling it out!), picking it up and drafting an elaborate burial practice for them.

As the collective “Unstable Bodies” precises, to develop “a broader appreciation of the myriad ways that perceptive attention can be configured and through modes and morphologies that are currently unfamiliar to us [...] challenges humancentric assumptions about the what and where of perception and encourages a more curious approach to things we thought we knew.” (Unstable Bodies 2023) The conditions of the Homogenocene demand this. Without developing interspecies empathy, our attempts to understand the ecological crisis of our time remains anthropocentric / ocularcentric. To engage seriously with the more-than-human world, we must become curious again about things we thought we knew already. After all, a way of better surviving – aka a better living and better dying – is a process of acknowledging and respecting each other (Solnit 2014) – across species boundaries!

Sometimes, though, knowledge in combination with imagination can allow us to achieve the impossible, to restore ecosystems whose agents were once invisible to us, as Ingrid Parker reminded us before. If the entire history of expanding our ways of perception shifted already so much in our understanding of what a world can be and who composes it, there lies great possibility in the promise of broadening our ways of perception (Tsing et al. 2017) That such an expansion could generate new forms of care, feels like one of the few hopeful trajectories available to us. If death blindness is a narrowing, then interspecies empathy is a widening. Perhaps the work ahead is to practice widening:

attentively, repeatedly, and with the knowledge that every new sense we train changes the way we live alongside others, and the way we meet the inevitability of dying. A sudden revolution of the hierarchy of senses, will not happen overnight. It requires little acts of care everywhere, as well as the painstaking work of reconciling our personal death-related traumas and those sedimented at sociological and ecological scales. It's a vast terrain of care work.



It has been several weeks since I moved my freezer chest full of Roadkill into the empty fin-de-siècle building around the block. In the meantime I kept crafting urns for the smaller creatures, slowly building my repertoire of techniques in the hopes to later on produce a worthy shrine for my griffon vulture. I spent weeks upon weeks in the glaze kitchen of the ceramic studio, adjusting my own recipees and sending dozens of test tiles in the kiln. Until I came to check upon my morgue again, only to realize: The building's lock got replaced. Unable to sort through all my triggered feelings at once, my body decided to stay calm, but my thoughts were racing up and down every possible path of how to enter this building and save my animals. I would need to find a way to break in. My "z-key" opened the neighbouring house. I went straight through to its backyard – confirmed: On the other side of this backyard's wall is the backyard of the empty house. To not raise more suspicion than necessary, I decided to come back during the night and avoid neighbours having to watch me climb their walls. Who would have thought being an undertaker would become so stressfull? Several hours later I was dressed in black with a cap pulled down low over my

face on the way back to my morgue. I entered the neighbour house again without problems and climbed the wall easily with the help of the garbage dumpsters. It was maybe two-and-a-half meters high – I needed to get down fast before my vertigo would kick in and freeze me right up there, exposed to anyone who would glance out their window! With shaky legs I landed in the yard – only to realize, that whoever exchanged the lock on the front door, did also close the backyard's door. After carefully examining all windows on yard-level, they were not an option. Boarded tightly shut with a generously applied nail gun. But there was another, smaller door, screwed shut. With screws I could work. After twenty minutes I was back at the door, this time with my cordless power drill. Slowly and gently I removed every screw – only to be met inside with the next obstacle: This part of the basement was drywalled shut from the rest of the houses lowest floor. After throwing myself repeatedly with all my weight against that wall and even practicing my high-kicks on it for a while, I sank down to the floor in exhaustion.

Mortality Salience & Terror Management Theory

If we would ever achieve something like a total and constant awareness of all dying around us at all times, I guess we couldn't even function anymore, ridden by exhaustion. Being able to take a step back, sit down in the rubble of chaos, is vital for our nervous system to cope. So isn't a certain degree of death blindness even good? Along with evolution our brains developed filters which help us to sort through the overwhelming amount of non-stop sensorial information. They work reliably but unnoticeable in the background of our subconscious. Of course we can impose a certain level of influence over what gets filtered

out and what does get attention of the hippocampus, e.g. an architect who subconsciously picks up more information on the buildings surrounding him, a street cleaner who notices the accumulation of waste on the sidewalk even off-duty – or a happily expecting woman who suddenly sees Babies everywhere! ... Or maybe myself, who sees Roadkill even more often since I started writing this thesis. This process of shifting filter-priorities is called “priming” in neurosciences (Schacter and Buckner 1998). Yet some filters no longer serve us. I claim that death blindness falls under the category of “not useful” for further survival in the ongoing Ecocide. Because overcoming death blindness does not have to mean to crush under the grief of everything, nor to suffer the consequences of all the losses there are. Instead research shows that positive existential growth can emerge when individuals face, rather than deny, their mortality (Cozzolino et al. 2014). The thesis of positive change through engagement with mortality salience transfers also to other fields: Our current death-denying value systems are tightly entangled with unsustainable social practices, with consumption acting as a distraction strategy to buffer anxiety. In experiments conducted by ecological economists it was proven “that a direct confrontation with death often leads to fundamental and long-lasting behavioural and value changes. These changes are in line with those emphasised by ecological economics as the possible basis for sustainable societies.” (Király and Köves 2023). So why did I claim we might still need a certain degree of death blindness, if all this sounds so promising? In 1986 the social psychologists Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski, and Sheldon Solomon coined the term “terror management theory” (TMT) based upon Ernest Becker’s ideas, who has already been often referenced in this thesis. TMT argues that human behavior is deeply shaped by the need to cope with the

awareness of our own mortality. To manage this paralyzing existential terror, humans have evolved psychological “buffer systems”:

“Cultural worldviews and self-esteem help manage this terror by convincing us that we are special beings with souls and identities that will persist, literally and/or symbolically, long past our own physical death.” (Solomon et al. 2015) When mortality becomes salient, these defenses first suppress death thoughts, only to rebound later with intensified worldview protection (Arndt et al. 1997). Even within climate-change research, scholars argue that TMT must be better integrated to understand how mortality salience influences environmental attitudes and behaviour (Smith et al. 2022). But there is yet more research to be done in order to guide climate communications and to generate the comprehensive cultural and behavioral changes needed to address societies’ climate problems based on TMT.

All of this suggests that death blindness is obstructive in undoing the Homogenocene. But to succeed on our way there, we need to consciously avoided to foster just another mindfulness trend, as those tend to turn all too quickly into new levels of capitalist spirituality (Purser 2019). So instead: Let’s act upon intentions – I ask for more than “mindfulness”! For attending, naming, caring, relearning how to die. As Scranton states, when he writes about learning how to die in the Anthropocene: “Learning to die as an individual means letting go of our predispositions and fear. Learning to die as a civilization means letting go of this particular way of life and its ideas of identity, freedom, success, and progress.” (Scranton 2015, 24)

In other words, as I have already argued in the beginning, if we learn to derelegate death and dying, we will not only heal parts of ourselves, but also of our society and even entire ecosystems.



I was still sitting in the rubble and dust in front of the wall that separated me from getting to my Roadkill-morgue. Over the last twenty minutes my nerves have calmed down as I sat in silent meditation. Until, upon what I can only call a higher intuition, I started to dig around in the rubble in front of me. At first, hesitantly: broken shards of Vodka bottles appeared, trashed cans of food – but then... something out of metal? I unearthed an actual crowbar! From all the things that the universe could have sent me that night, the crowbar was my sign that I really deserved to finish my artistic practice. After more patience and sweat and a final high-kick, the wall finally fell with a sound, so extraordinarily out of place at 2 am in a residential area, that nobody could have known what to even tell the police; so nobody called. The dust hadn't even settled yet and I was already flying up the stairs to my freezer, praying it was still there.

It was. But... somebody must have discovered it. Plastic bags and paper boxes were ruthlessly scattered around the freezer chest – my heart dropped. And yet... it was still running? Why didn't whoever discovered my squatting and repaired all the locks also turn off the electricity again? I held my breath as I opened the chest: The vulture, there! The toads, the pigeons, all still there. The falcon, also there. As my gaze glided over all these poor creatures, silently assessing their completeness, it dawned to me what must have played out here: Unexpectedly finding a freaking freezer full of carcasses in their otherwise empty property, properly made the person do a verrry rushed inspection, ripping open every sealed bag, hoping not to find any human body parts, and then leaving

the scene in shock – and therefore not thinking anymore about eventually switching off the fuse again. I chuckled to myself and decided then and there to not take any further risks and take them all home with me. In the still intact bags and boxes I hauled every creature back over the wall, rescrewed the door back shut and vanished like the spook had never happened.

Welcome to the Chthulucene

The Anthropocene is a time of extinction, increasing genocides³⁵, and – perhaps most damningly – a vast refusal to acknowledge our own implication in these catastrophes or cultivate responsibilities for it. Donna Haraway names this as the defining gesture of our era: an epoch of “unprecedented looking away” (Haraway 2018, 54 f). It is exactly this kind of “looking away” which I diagnose here as death blindness. In “Staying with the Trouble”, Haraway counters the Anthropocene with a speculative invitation: the Chthulucene. It is not merely another epochal label but a mode of inhabiting the world otherwise. An age of mutual awareness and respect in between all species, where “critters” of all kinds care of each other in knowing that the other is always entangled with oneself. Some texts only get fully digested long after they have been consumed for the first time. “Staying with the Trouble” is one of those to me. Several years later I can feel the urgency beneath the call for the Chthulucene. It is not just another fancy neologism

35 Environmental violence is amongst the main driving forces of collective violence. According to contemporary research, “climate change will dramatically increase the likelihood of genocide occurring in areas at risk.” (Zimmerer 2014)

for a simple state of mind – being aware of sympoiesis³⁶ in the world – but an ethical horizon. So how do we turn the Anthropocene / Homogenocene / Necrocen toward the Chthulucene? As I have argued throughout this thesis, overcoming death blindness is one crucial step. And only through collectively working on undoing the structural scaffolds keeping death blindness stable, we can form the sensibilities required for a Chthulucenic worlding.

Xintian Liu, an associated professor at the Shandong University of Arts, helps illuminate this transition with her notion of humanistic care. Opposed to the medical care that is more commonly used in daily life, she situates this humanistic care in the humanities as a kinship between humans and non-humans (Liu 2024). Yet this humanistic care is not sentimental; it is world-making. Eco-art can operate as a form of aesthetic education that helps heal mental trauma and cultivate ecological literacy (Inwood 2007; as cited in Liu 2024). Liu concludes: “In the practice of artistic creation, any reflection and expression on life and death ultimately [...] can be used to shape the ecological consciousness and a new ecological civilization.” Hence my artistic as well as my theoretical practice is in the sense of cultivating a Chthulucenic future: learning to attend to death, decay, and interdependence with the same tenderness we extend toward life. Overcoming death blindness is not the solution but the beginning through which the Chthulucene becomes thinkable and, eventually, real.

36 Sympoiesis is a term first coined by Beth Dempster and later made popular by Donna Haraway. It is, like the Chthulucene to the Anthropocene, an opposing theorem to autopoiesis. Instead of assuming everything is an making of ones own, it calls out the interdependence and relationality of the world and its parts. (Dempster 2000)

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Further Mentioned

James Baldwin

(Introduction)

Plato

(Comparative Thanatology – or Unlearning Ocularcentrism)

Eating Animals by Jonathan Safran Foer

(Origins of the term roadkill & new definition)

“Das Schlachten beenden! - Zur Kritik der Gewalt an Tieren. Anarchistische, pazifistische, feministische und linkssozialistische Traditionen” by Leo Tolstoi, Clara Wichmann, Elisée Reclus, Magnus Schwantje u.a.

(Origins of the term roadkill & new definition)

Bhagavad-Gita

(Speciesism is about Death)

(Normality as catastrophe)

Isabelle Stengers

(Cremation Throughout Different Cultural Spheres & as

Artistic Practice)

Karl Marx

(What grieve has to do with survival)

(Origins of the term roadkill & new definition)

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Appendix



Eclectic Roadkill



Urn pre bisque-firing with Corvid Roadkill



Process Documentation

Glaze development notes

~4g

0,15	0,6	1500	0,3
0,22	0,56	11360	2,27
0,074	0,3	1628	0,33
0,05	0,19	3096	0,62
0,01	0,06	1110	0,22
0,05	0,22	295,6	0,06
0,01	0,03	40,7	0,01
0,19	0,75	1200	0,24
0,004	0,02	1056	0,121
		21,286,3	4257,26
		5	

γ	Knochenasche	0,45	1,8	3
	Lepidolith	0,45	0,45	2,2
	Ton W161	3,10	1,8	0,9

γ^{II} = γ C = Nephelinsyenit

γ^{III} = γ C = Natrium Feldspat

x25 = batch

	g	%	100 g
B5.1 Lepi	3,10	67,4	77,5
Neph	0,45	9,8	11,25
Kaolin	0,45	9,8	11,25
Tin Oxid	0,23	5	5,75
Bentonit	0,09	2	2,35
Chromoxid	0,002	0,04	0,05

% Pink: ~~one~~ Tin Oxide 5^g
 Bentonite 2
 Chromoxid 0,04

+ 77

↘ Knochen 1,8^g
 Lepi 0,45
 Ton 1,8

Test

α III 6.3 Produktion!
 gram!

Neph.	2,2	55	} 100 g
Ton	0,9	22,5	
Wollast.	0,9	22,5	
Cu Oxid	0,2	5	
Zinnoxid	0,4	10	

$\gamma 7 (+ 0,2 \text{ CuO}$
 $0,4 \text{ Zinnoxid}) \cdot 1$

$\gamma 5.1 (= + \uparrow)$

Mallnitz 2: Knochenasche 2,5 g
 Mallnitz 1 ~~g~~ g
 Strontium 0,3
 Rutil 0,3

			%
22,18g SUMO 1% 0,22	(3)	Nephelinsyenit	6 g 27,22
		Strontium	2 g 9
		Ton W161	1 g 4,54
		Quarz	12,5 g 56,8
		Titanium Dioxid	0,55 2,5
		Lithium Carbonat	0,1 0,45
		Chrom Oxid	0,03 0,14



