

**prime-time**

**Sophie + Edna  
Bachelor Thesis  
Interaction Design  
Zurich University  
of the Arts**

**prime-time**

# Abstract

Death has become more and more accepted in a social context during the past few years. The Covid-19 pandemic, emerging pop culture genres as well as growing disinterest in religion might be reasons for it. Therefore the taboo is breaking slowly. One's own death however is still intangible as it will happen sometimes in the future and so far we only know it vicariously. Thanks to intense desk and field research, experiments and iterations this bachelor thesis documents the process of creating an experience that transfers a feeling of non-existence to visitors and enables them to empathize with a world in which they physically do not exist anymore. An experience that invites visitors to come to terms with their own finiteness and death.

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# Table of Contents

|     |  |    |
|-----|--|----|
| I   | Abstract   | 5  |
| II  | Acknowledgements   | 7  |
| III | Table of Contents  | 8  |
| IV  | Introduction   | 12 |
| V   | Background and Context                                   | 14 |
| 1   | Definitions  | 17 |
| 1.1 | About Birth and Death                                    | 17 |
| 1.2 | Social Changes   | 17 |
| 1.3 | Death of the Individual                                  | 18 |
| 1.4 | Experiencing the Moment of Dying                         | 19 |
| 1.5 | Nonexistence   | 20 |
| 2   | Research Questions – Hypothesis                          | 21 |
| 3   | Methodology  | 24 |
| 3.1 | Desk Research  | 24 |
| 3.2 | Interview  | 24 |
| 3.3 | Self-Experiments   | 25 |
| 3.4 | Cultural Probes  | 25 |
| 3.5 | Reflection and Analysis                                  | 25 |
| 4   | Motivation and Intended Contribution                     | 26 |
| VI  | Research and Concept                                     | 28 |
| 1   | Related Projects   | 31 |
| 1.1 | Arrivals + Departures                                    | 31 |
| 1.2 | The Departure Lounge                                     | 32 |
| 1.3 | Death Over Dinner  | 32 |
| 1.4 | Euthanasia Coaster                                       | 32 |
| 1.5 | Second Chance  | 32 |
| 1.6 | Your Fading Self/Other                                   | 33 |
| 1.7 | Hypnotic Show Reflecting Room dOCUMENTA                  | 33 |
| 1.8 | Svizzera 240: House Tour, Swiss Pavilion Venice Biennale | 33 |
| 1.9 | Perceptual Cells   | 34 |
| 2   | Field Research   | 44 |
| 2.1 | Interventions  | 44 |
|     | Instagram Account  | 44 |
|     | Language of Death  | 45 |
|     | The Good Death Talk                                      | 46 |
| 2.2 | Inspirations   | 48 |
|     | Museum für Gestaltung                                    | 48 |
|     | Friedhof Forum   | 48 |
| 2.3 | Talks  | 49 |
|     | Interview, Ab unter die Erde                             | 49 |
|     | S/lash sterbesettings.ch                                 | 49 |
| 2.4 | Experiments  | 50 |
|     | When Will You Die Quizzes                                | 50 |
|     | Floating   | 51 |
| 2.5 | Prototypes   | 52 |
|     | Near Death Experience                                    | 52 |
|     | Schweizer Bünzli*  | 52 |
| 2.6 | Brainstorming  | 53 |
|     | Going Down the Speculative Way                           | 53 |

|             |   |            |
|-------------|---|------------|
| III         | Table of Contents                         |            |
| 3           | Narrowing Down                            | 82         |
|             | 3.1 Preliminary Concept                   | 82         |
|             | Discourse                                 | 82         |
|             | Making The Moment of Dying Experienceable | 83         |
|             | Experienceable Phenomena of Being Dead    | 83         |
| 4           | Proof of Concept                          | 84         |
|             | 4.1 Observing a Public Scenario 1         | 84         |
|             | 4.2 Observing a Public Scenario 2         | 85         |
| 5           | Concept                                   | 94         |
| <b>VII</b>  | <b>Project Development</b>                | <b>98</b>  |
| 1           | Groundwork for Project Development        | 101        |
|             | 1.1 Project Concept                       | 101        |
|             | 1.2 Visitor Journey                       | 102        |
| 2           | Production and Implementation             | 103        |
|             | 2.1 Form and Function                     | 103        |
|             | 2.2 Components                            | 104        |
|             | Narration                                 | 104        |
|             | Audio Setup                               | 105        |
|             | Introduction Text                         | 105        |
|             | Periscope                                 | 105        |
|             | Receipt and Thermal Printer               | 108        |
| 3           | Exhibition Concept                        | 143        |
| <b>VIII</b> | <b>Conclusion</b>                         | <b>144</b> |
| 1           | Conclusion                                | 147        |
| 2           | Next Steps and Further Development        | 149        |
| <b>IX</b>   | <b>Bibliography</b>                       | <b>151</b> |

# Introduction

Everybody is eventually going to die. But it will happen somewhen in the future and is therefore intangible, hard to imagine and fictional for the individual. Yet it is real and we suppress it until humankind's terminality becomes the eventual own reality. In our bachelor thesis we wanted to find out if we, in our Western society, only address the matter of death if it concerns us through an event in our social environment or if we ourselves are severely sick or had a bad accident. We believe that by dealing with our own death before it concerns us, ultimately connects us with our fellow human beings and helps us understand our own existence better. In our opinion, we prepare for everything but not for the eventually most important happening in life, death. Why is that and how can we as interaction designers make a contribution in that field?

We are both attracted by the fundamental questions of what the meaning of life is and why we have the pleasure to be alive. Death itself is such a mystery and philosophers have debated and meandered about it since the beginning of time that we too cannot escape this fascination. While philosophizing and discussing the subject with each other but also friends, family or strangers, we realized how diverse and also controversial it is. All have and also want to say something about the topic of death. This insight strengthened our decision to deal with the topic of one's own death in our bachelor thesis.

Through research, testing and implementation of different directions and fields of our topic one's own death we eventually developed and realized our bachelor project *prime-time*. In the background research we declared five distinct fields of interest and definitions. The fields are About Birth and Death, Social Changes, Death of the Individual, Experiencing the Moment of Dying and Nonexistence. Thus, we were able to channel the many different possible directions of the topic of one's own death and find out the most interesting and important inquiries. Based on the desk research we developed our two research questions and furthermore defined the methods we were going to use.

- How might we stimulate the conversation and exchange around one's own death?
- How might we create an experience that invites the interested public to think about their own death?

By diving into existing projects we found out how big the community is and how many already done work on the topic is out there. The many artists, collectives and researchers we

stumbled over, inspired us for the next steps of developing our concept. We have broadened our horizon through different approaches and project types as we did not only look into work that relates death but also art and design which we simply liked the method or medium about.

In order to combine and break down the desk research and the gained inspiration into a final project we developed and performed different interventions, did interviews and went to see exhibitions. We heavily based the field research on our defined methods and ended up having several interventions and prototypes. The very different ways and approaches we tried and went down did not all prove themselves to be successful or useful but all of them were crucial to our end project prime-time. We always made sure to evaluate the outcomes, findings and challenges properly and elaborated in many brainstorming sessions how to proceed further which led us eventually to our final work.

These narrowing down sessions made us realize that in order to collect all our findings, ideas and thoughts into a concept we needed to dig a little deeper and make sure that it fits. To do so, we developed three preliminary concepts: Discourse, Making the Moment of Dying Experienceable and Experienceable Phenoma of Being Dead. Out of which we composed our final concept. The concept talks strongly about the topic of one's own death and where we as interaction designers can contribute with a project. With the aim of translating the theoretical concept into a working project we defined a project concept which served us as groundwork for the project development.

We have defined a cycle for the project as the following:

**Current Condition → Experience →  
Reflection → Exchange**

One's own death is intangible. It happens in the future and so far we only know it vicariously. Our experience called prime-time triggers a feeling of non-existence in visitors and enables them to empathize with a world in which one is dead. From a dark room, participants individually observe and eavesdrop on a public situation in which they are not physically present. An additional voice confronts visitors with fundamental questions about their own existence and finiteness. Finally, a certificate of the experience can be printed out, which encourages further discussion and exchange.

The name prime-time is a reference to TV shows that run at the best time of the evening. We believe that death is the most important happening in one's lifetime and therefore is the prime-time for one's existence. In addition to prime means to prepare and therefore we also see it as a fitting name and description for our project.

Our final project is a public, walk-in installation that consists of a human size space, a written introduction for priming the visitors, a periscope that enables participants to observe a situation outside of the space, an audio component that has the layer of a narration and the situation live audio and a thermal printer that hands out a certificate to the people that went through the experience. These components manifest our concept of letting people experience their eventual non-existence which we treat as equivalent with death. An immersive space for confronting one's own death.

# Background and Context

## 1 Definitions

### About Birth and Death

“Everybody’s gotta live. And everybody’s gonna die.” These are the words guitarist and singer Arthur Lee sang during a live performance in 1990 – a year where we, Sophie and Edna have not been born yet. Nevertheless even 31 years later his words are inspiring us for our bachelor thesis in the sense that besides birth, death affects all human beings and eventually is not avoidable. Even if it is not very obvious at first hand, birth and death have one more big aspect in common. Both of them are physiological processes for which nature has made provisions so that they run as smoothly as possible. And they actually work best if nature can do the job herself (Borasio, 2019). From a natural perspective, birth as well as death are equally relevant and important.

Meanwhile in Western society and culture, birth and death are regarded as totally different happenings – one being connotated with positive and happy feelings, the other with sadness and fear. This may be explained by the fact that birth means welcoming a new human being on earth and death is the departure of that person. While there is a lot of cultural and scientific knowledge concerning preparation for birth and birth itself – publications, books, birth preparation courses and baby shower parties in Western culture – death is mostly thought about when we are facing a loss of another life in our surrounding or in a philosophical context where the meaning of life is explored (Borasio, 2019).

### Social Changes

There seems to be some kind of shift in society about death and a sort of detaboosation is taking place. Through recent happenings such as the Covid-19 pandemic, death has gotten a lot of attention in popular media. A rise in interest in the topic of death can be observed through newly emerging movies, TV Shows, articles in newspapers and online magazines. Furthermore, terminally ill people talk about their experience on blogs and YouTube channels like Empirische Jenseitsforschung and communities of people dealing with death on social media emerge. Death in general has gotten to the point that it is talked about in a public setting.

The declining interest and believability in religion by society and the traditional forms of death with its rituals, artefacts and former

meaning, may also take a part in the growing interest in death (Streeck, 2019)(Pallister, 2019). We think that the aspect of rising non-believability in religion regarding the societal understanding of death will eventually dissolve misconceptions about it and redeem us from our cultural biases which may be outdated.

According to Ariane Gigon on swissinfo.ch traditional burial practices in Switzerland lose ground. Funeral rites have become increasingly diverse and people move away from tradition and get warm to new practices of spirituality. Ranked in European relation, Switzerland allows a large amount of freedom to families after a death. “This freedom of expression perhaps explains the relative benevolence of Switzerland as regards non-traditional spiritual rites”, (Gigon, 2012).

So we figured, there is already a basis for conversations around death rituals and beliefs in Switzerland. It is in no sense our intention to disrespect traditions nor religious practices that are important for people or help them deal with death but we believe that there is more potential out there that should be explored. We want to show people possibilities for their actual moment of death and what could happen to them postmortem.

## Death of the Individual

We notice a growing interest in the end of life, dying and death in design and in cultural matters (sterbesettings.ch, 2021). Therefore, we argue that death in general is more and more socially present and accepted, while the death of the individual mostly is not, because it does not get important unless we are faced with it directly. In contrast, most people live in an infinite way. “Der Tod ist nach wie vor doch individuell ein Missgeschick, das erst einmal die anderen betrifft und die Ungewissheit der Todesstunde lässt uns eben bis heute noch in der Illusion verharren, irdischer Unsterblichkeit” (Death is still an individual mishap that first affects others, and the uncertainty of the hour of death still keeps us in the illusion of earthly immortality), (Wetz, 2020). Individuals tend to displace their own death, because it can only be observed in others and they tend to think that death is still far away as it is not foreseeable and not imaginable. “Death has no subjective meaning at all. It will come to other people, but never to me. Of course, I know that I am going to die. Death means the end of my future. However, as long

as I am alive, I will be living toward that future possibility of no longer having possibilities”, (Mason, 2015). What Mason means is that since we will not go through our own death while we are living, it is intangible as a result and it also represents one’s own terminability, which can be terrifying. How can we use something that is not yet tackled by the individual and turn it into something they feel safe to engage with, learn about and experience? Just like Caitin Doughty, an American writer and mortician, says, it is an exciting time to be dealing with death because there are opportunities now to design for a better death (Freakonomics Radio, 2021). Since, like mentioned above, death of the individual still is intangible and unimaginable, we see a chance as designers to engage with it. “If well-designed technologies can help improve our every living moment, why should it desert us in death? [...] Analysing the strengths and weaknesses of present systems and rituals with an open mind, and applying grace, foresight, rigour, sensitivity and imagination to envisaging better outcomes could help us to die more humanely”, (Pallister, 2019).

But what does dying “more humanely” mean? And is there something like a “good death”? According to Doughty, the good death is making the whole business of death more intimate and less expensive. There is nothing like the universal good death. It is more of an overall notion of death positivity and that we do not fear the end of life but face it with all our means. So the point is that death should be more individualized than commercialized and it should be completely detached from contemporary cultural and societal ideals (Freakonomics Radio, 2021). An example for such a cultural and societal ideal is the wish for a soil or fire burial in Western cultures, even though there are several emerging technologies which might seem more fitting, if we only knew about them.

The process of dying was quite different for a long time since the existence of humanity. It was only in the early 20th century where the medicalisation of death came up in Western society and people more and more started to die in a hospital context. Before that, people usually wanted to die at home surrounded by their loved ones that took good care of them. Suddenly a certain stigmatization of death took place and one’s own death was seen as a burden for others. Therefore people started to die in “[...] a place where the dying would undergo the indignities of death without offending the sensibilities of the living”, (Freakonomics Radio, 2021). Even until now 81 percent of the Swiss population die in elderly homes or hospitals (Obsan Bulletin, 2019).

The international, Australian based or-

ganisation Exit International released the project The Sarco, a 3D-printed capsule using liquid nitrogen to allow people to have a peaceful death. What stroke out most to us is that this coffin is portable and allows suicide-wishing people to die wherever they want, at home, at a lake or on top of a mountain. The Sarco was made public in 2018 and was planned to be used for the first peaceful death in Switzerland in late 2020 although that had to be postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Exit International, 2018).

## Experiencing the Moment of Dying

Since the beginning of our thesis research, we have been interested in Near Death Experiences, so called NDEs, as they might help us understand what is happening when someone is dying. For our research we focused on two studies. The first one gives a detailed insight about what a Near Death Experience is and that discusses the correlation between the effects of NDEs and Dimethyltryptamine (DMT), a psychedelic drug. We gathered the most interesting findings below.

People who experienced NDEs feel:

- greater concern for others
- reductions in distress associated with the prospect of dying
- increased appreciation for nature
- reduced interest in social status and possessions, as well as increased self-worth

People who experienced DMT feel:

- reduced death anxiety
- pro-ecological behavior
- significant clinical improvements in depressed patients

There are further so called NDE items that seem relevant to understand how death or the moment of dying might feel like. They correlate with the experience of a DMT trip. The most significant difference between NDEs and a DMT experience is the item “Did you come to a border or point of no return?” which was scored higher by the NDE group compared to the DMT condition. Therefore even with the influence of psychedel-

ic drugs it is difficult to achieve a sense of what a NDE feels like (Timmermann et al., 2018). Even though NDEs give an insight into what it might feel like to die, it is difficult to say whether we will have a similar experience when dying, because people who suffered an NDE never really died.

In the second study, participants are embodied (through VR) in alternate bodies on a beautiful island along with two companions. The mechanism of embodiment produces strong illusions of ownership over their life-sized virtual bodies. For example, they see their reflection in mirrors or when they look down they recognise their own bodies. Over time each participant witnesses the death of the two companions and then even their own death – which includes the reported features of a NDE. Each participant starts as a child, then gradually maturing and eventually ageing and dying.

Virtual reality is suitable for this research for two major reasons: first, it can lead to the illusion of participants being in a different place other than where they really are, and second it can lead to their illusion of having a different body. Participants were tracked by a Microsoft Kinect so that they could act in real time in VR. This may enhance embodiment.

Main goals of the study:

- how would the experience influence their death anxiety?
- experiencing a NDE how would they change their attitude to life?

The study uses different methods to simulate death in VR. The research team describes it as follows:

- visions becoming blurred through three flashes
- hear the beat of one’s own heart
- one cry of pain
- viewpoint was slowly moved above her immortile body
- the participant was transported to a dark room where she would see a life review of her virtual life
- distant light at the end of a tunnel
- reaching the light, everything faded to intense white

As this study works with VR, embodiment and body ownership may be difficult to create. Therefore the team conducted a total of six sessions so that body ownership could work. Proband should think “This is my body, I died in that body, I experienced the NDE, but I am

still alive in this (physical) world”, (Barberia et al., 2018). Hence the duration and the amount of sessions was really crucial to simulate the whole thing plausible.

The goal was to deliver three fundamental illusions: Place Illusion (the illusion of being in the virtual place), plausibility (the illusion that the events are really occurring) and body ownership (the illusion of ownership over their virtual body). The first person perspective and multisensory integration, and especially visuo-motor synchrony between body movements and movements of the virtual body all contribute to the illusion of body ownership (Barberia et al., 2018).

## Nonexistence

Per definition of Merriam-Webster the word nonexistence describes the absence of existence and the negation of being. Synonyms are inexistence, nonbeing, nothingness, absence, or unreality (merriam-webster.com, 2021). This unrealty and feeling of non-existence is what we try to work towards in our bachelor project. We believe that after one’s own death we do not exist anymore in the form we do now. As we do not want to create stereotypes or pre-definitions on death and how dying is going to be, because simply no one knows how it is going to be like and the ones that are experiencing it have a fatal incident, we decided to go with the way of trying to create the feeling of nonexistence. The Near Death Experience case studies give us good insight and reassurance on why we basically dealt with the topic of death in the first place but we are not sure if dying and being dead is like these experiences. Still are experience reports on NDEs valuable for us in our process.

In philosophy, philosophers from various times and various currents are not in agreement on how to handle the study of nothing. Still, in western philosophy most say it is foolish to study nothingness and nonexistence but existentialists make the distinction between simply brute existing like a tree for example and existing with consciousness. The prominent figure Jean-Paul Satre says that the second kind of being is “nothing” since consciousness cannot be an object of consciousness and can possess no essence (Solomon, 1989). “Nothingness is a philosophical term for the general state of nonexistence, sometimes reified as a domain or dimension into which things pass when they cease to exist or out of which they may come to exist”, (Wikipedia, 2021).

## 2 Research Questions – Hypothesis

Given the background and context we developed research questions that seem fitting to us. Our two research questions go hand-in-hand together. We believe that for bringing one’s own death closer to people we need to create an experience where they are faced with questions about their own death in order to then think and reflect and finally exchange about it. The difficulty of getting people engaged to think about death is that in our Western culture and society death and the individual’s death is viewed rather negatively. Therefore we try to create an experience that is sort of fun and engaging, as well as enlightening. It should show different possibilities of how to view and consider one’s own death.

**How might we stimulate the conversation and exchange around one's own death?**

**How might we create an experience that invites the interested public to think about their own death?**

## 3 Methodology

It is important to point out that we are no experts in the field of dying. But who really is? We would like to explore the topic, learn more and start an exchange. For us, qualitative research methods such as participative field research, casual conversations, expert interviews, cultural probes and interventions are fundamental methods that we would like to use for our bachelor thesis (Final Studio, 2020). Through knowledge gained out of this qualitative research we would like to refine and iterate on our prototype and hypothesis. Next to that, the evaluation of our methods and hypotheses should be reflected and analyzed by us and developed accordingly.

### Desk Research

Especially in the early phase of our thesis, gaining new insights and knowledge in the field of death is crucial. That is why in the first part of our research we see desk research, such as literature, statistics, documentary films, news articles and existing projects, as an important method to gain knowledge and build a fundamental understanding of death in a philosophical, cultural and medical sense. We have to challenge ourselves to be open-minded and to let ourselves in for other opinions and views.

### Interview

Besides all the desk research we believe it is important to talk to people who deal with death on a regular basis. Those people involved in the field of death already have a lot of experience and knowledge that we want to make use of. We as designers might ask the interviewed people challenging questions out of the design perspective and may combine our knowledge together with theirs.

Next to talking to experienced persons, having informal conversations with family members, friends or strangers helps us to exchange about the topic of death and get a glimpse of what the people surrounding us think about the end of life, death and dying. It is a valuable way to enrich our view and feel anxiety, wishes or comfort from other people. Next to conversations we could also imagine conducting online surveys that address a larger amount of people, less qualitatively more quantitative.

## Self-Experiments

During the concept and early prototype phase we are conducting self-experiments and test out our ideas and prototypes on ourselves, because we believe that death is a very personal and intimate topic and we as designers should not leave out ourselves but should rather start with our own experience. We have to be cautious though, as in general we see ourselves as an ethical measurement for the comfort of an experience. As one's own death is a sensitive topic and we want to be careful of the fact that some people might react differently to experiences that leave one's own comfort zone. We have to keep in mind that people who go through our experience have different backgrounds. We want to record and document the self-experiment meticulously and adjust and compare the outcome with other methods we are going to use like the interventions or prototypes.

We want to create a project that will be presented in public and inspires people to think about their own death. Therefore working together with people is a crucial part of our installation. We understand the active shaping of our project as well as interacting with the end result as participation.

### Cultural Probes

Seeing participation as a crucial tool we want to conduct cultural probes to gain qualitative data on a wide range of people. From the knowledge we gain out of the cultural probes we are making interventions and prototypes that we can put in a public context to testify and gain experience in how the audience will interact and participate with us. Furthermore we believe that ideas are more graspable and the concept can be better explained by going through an experience.

### Reflection and Analysis

Reflecting and analysing our field research is really important for us. Therefore we think it is helpful to come up with a valuation system of our interventions and prototypes so that we can find out what worked well and what did

not. Which learnings we should carry further and which ideas and attempts we should drop. In addition we try to reflect on our motivation and action as much as possible. To do so we are using the Approach & Achieve method developed by Sabine Harbeke who is a lecturer in the Performing Arts section at Zurich University of the Arts.

## 4 Motivation and Intended Contribution

At a young age already, we both were fascinated by the fundamental questions of what the meaning of life is and why we have the pleasure to be living. Julian Barnes says that death is the one appalling fact which defines life. We see it the same way and are convinced that in order to understand what life is about, we need to investigate the happening that actually defines it (Barnes, 2017). Therefore, we see one's own death as the most important thing happening in a lifetime and do not understand why in Western communities it is so rarely talked about.

Due to the fact that both of us have traumatizing personal stories with death in our families we have a very subjective motivation towards our bachelor topic as well. Sophie's Hungarian grandfather was surprisingly hospitalized during the Covid-19 pandemic and unfortunately died in the hospital totally isolated. Caitlin Doughty would probably say that he suffered a bad death as he always said he never wanted to die at a hospital. Edna's personal relation with the topic of death is that her mother died of the consequences of cancer when she was eight years old. Since then, she ponders every now and then on why her mother had to die rather early in her life, what death means in general and what death means to herself.

If Sophie's grandfather for example would have had communicated his individualized wish of how he wanted to die more clearly, or more importantly, his individualized wish of dying would have been more respected; he probably would have had a more pleasant way to die. Therefore, we think it is crucial to talk about death as early as possible and if everyone would reflect on their own mortality more, we as a society would be able to create more good deaths.

The amazing connections and understanding that occur out of conversations with friends, family and lecturers about the subject show us another reason why we believe that the topic of death and especially one's own death is the right one and give us motivation to create a bachelor project in this field. It also shows us that everyone has the urge to talk about death and exchange on the topic. We recognise a shift in our society where death gets more and more talked about. Not particularly one's own death but especially thus, we think it is a great time to deal with one's own finiteness.

As mentioned in the Background and Context chapter we believe that death in general is not that much of a taboo anymore as it is kind of accepted in our society due to recent happenings. Yet the individual's death and the individual's non-existence in most cases is not that present in people's minds, as it is difficult to grasp. Furthermore it is a futuristic scenario that we

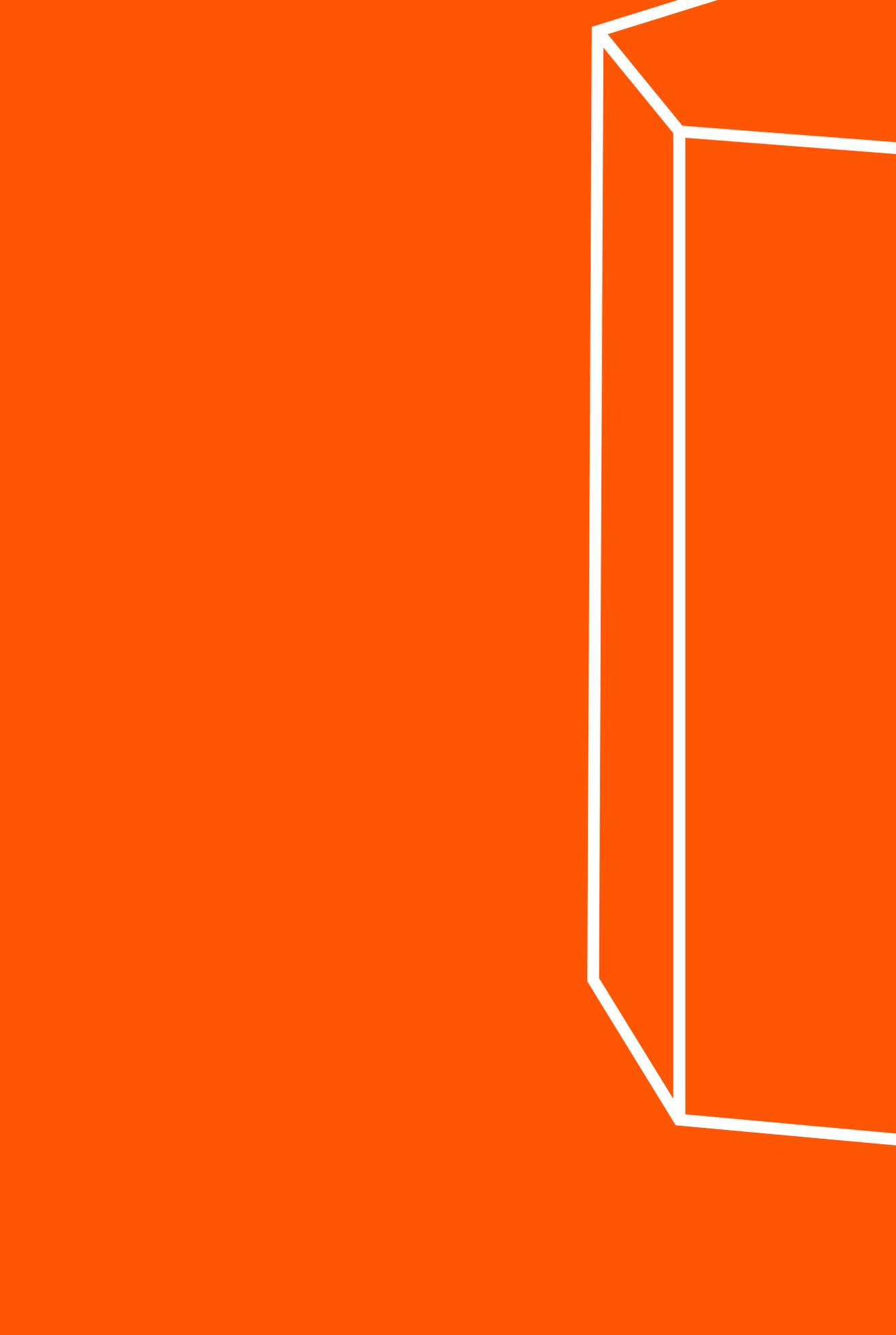
cannot classify that easily. If none knows what is happening when we are dead, there is a lot of playground to experiment with and to think of a way to make it tangible. And this is where we can contribute as designers. As interaction designers we have a wide method background and a design approach that goes beyond one directional communication. With our project – in the form of a public installation – we want to give people a platform to experience, reflect and exchange about one's own death in the sense of non-existence. So what we are trying to create is an experience which is eye-opening and raises questions so that an inner reflection about one's own death and non-existence can take action.

We are really interested in what people think about their own death and therefore also see the experience as an ethnographic research through an installation. Talking to people who went through the experience and exchanging opinions, views and accepting critique is a way we as designers want to engage with the project and its participants. In that sense we want to also focus on the exchange. The exchange also manifests itself in an artefact to take home which will help start discussions about the individual's death.

We want our project to be exhibited in a public scenario, where many visitors can experience it. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic there will not be a public exhibition at ZHdK. Nevertheless we exhibit prime-time in the entrance hall, where students, university staff, Museum für Gestaltung visitors and the interested public can try it out.

We have the wish to set up the installation in further public spaces where it can be experienced in workshops or in smaller contexts.

# Research and Concept



## 1 Related Projects

This section describes related projects that have inspired us along the way of our process. Some of the works deal explicitly with the topic of death and one's own death. Others embody the concept of non-existence and confusion. Nevertheless most of the related projects' intentions are around exchange and making one's own death more visible, tangible and talked about. The wide range of media used in the works inspired us to go in many different directions with our field research.

### Arrivals + Departures

*YARA + DAVINA*

Arrivals + Departures by the social practice, London based duo YARA + DAVINA is a work about birth, the arrival and death, the departure. This project is striking to us as it works with the analogy of birth and death as we, in the beginning of our process, figured to do as well. Both events happen only once in a life and are therefore fatal incidents.

The installation was presented in a public space in front of Somerset House in London. It contained two travel inspired screens, displaying the names of people like arrival and departures of trains or planes. The visitors and other interested people, the public could submit names to be displayed on the boards through the related website. They could suggest names either to the arrivals, births or to the departures, dead people. The designers afterwards curated the names to make sure no swearing or other inappropriate words were shown. The whole Arrivals + Departures installation was accompanied by public events like drawing classes about death or grieving workshops. The plan of the design duo is now to tour with their installation to different cities.

At the core of YARA + DAVINA's work stands their ambition to make playful public artworks that respond to the site, the context and the audience. The context of the Arrivals + Departures installation at Somersets House is that historically the House was the place where all births, marriages and deaths had administratively to be registered. We think to have a context where the project fits in and has for example either a historical, current or future background but is still public, is very interesting and we want to take this approach away for our own thesis project (YARA + DAVINA, 2020).

## The Departure Lounge

*The Liminal Space*

The project The Departure Lounge uses the analogy of death being a journey as well. The installation was situated in London in 2019. The Liminal Space, a UK based design consultancy that is mission-led, wanted to empower people, especially researchers to create a positive impact. The Departure Lounge was a commission by the Academy of Medical Science, an UK independent committee representing diverse medical science.

Visitors could experience death from different angels in the public installation in a shopping center. The parallels to traveling were drawn that if you are well prepared for a journey around the world for example you are going to have a good experience and if you are not well prepared the experience is going to be worse. The same thing counts for death.

At the installation suitcases were filled with people's end of life experiences, luggage tags revealed how medical science has changed the way we die, an interactive departure board explored what it means to have a good death and departure gates gave visitors the chance to speak to a range of experts (Gore, 2019).

## Death Over Dinner

*Michael Heeb and Scott Macklin*

Death over Dinner started as a university course at University of Washington and later grew into a website. It is an interactive story, a customizable tool to help families and friends address the topic of death over a casual dinner. It asks a few simple questions to personalize the experience and provides background information to read by participants beforehand. The organizer gets a handbook to guide through the evening with their loved ones.

What we like especially about this project is that there are different versions for different cultural backgrounds. So the dinner guides are adapted to a specific culture like for example there is a Jewish Death Over Dinner version (Heeb et al., 2012).

## Euthanasia Coaster

*Julijonas Urbonas*

Euthanasia Coaster is a social science fiction project by Julijonas Urbonas, a Lithuanian artist and designer. "The coaster is a hypothetical death machine in the form of a roller coaster, engineered to humanely – with elegance and euphoria – take the life of a human being", (Urbonas, 2010). When sitting on the roller coaster the g force will be so high that the blood oxygen level will sink and the consciousness will be troubled. Shortly before the user will get unconscious, he or she will feel high and euphoria will take place. Therefore the soon to be dead person will end his or her life in a good state. Urbonas claims that his coaster is not only good for the user but also for the people watching the user die, as they will not feel too bad about him or her.

We think that this project may not appear like a design-solution, but it rather is food for thought about how a society deals with one's own death. It is provocative and highly fictional because it is not necessarily pragmatic. But fictional design "[...] is an effective technique not just for speculating on the future, but also for shaping it, and for empowering decision making", (Urbonas, 2010). We really like the project for it is a speculative and fun approach as well as the really nice video and prototype that come with it. His storytelling is really strong.

## Second Chance

*Shigeoka, Sohadade and Lauw*

Second Chance is a two-hour immersive and participatory performance about facing one's own death. Inspired by reports about near death experiences, "[...] the show utilizes elements like virtual reality, lighting design, acrobats, and live music as a means of allowing participants to experience death and, as a hopeful result, to live life more fully", (Ruskin, 2018). What stands out of this performance is the personification, guidance and setting, which is well accompanied. People who want to join the performance have to fill out a survey beforehand, so that the experience fits the individual person. During the performance the users are guided through the ceremony and after attendees have the chance to talk to a counselor or a death doula. What seems tempting about the project is that it is not about a bad experience or to scare people

off, it is more about facing one's own death and taking fear away as well as answering questions after (Lauw et al., 2018).

## Your Fading Self/ Other

*Olafur Eliasson*

Your Fading Self (down, up, west etc.) and Your Fading Other is a series by Olafur Eliasson where he works with mirrors that do not work how users would expect them to. The mirrors are augmented in the sense that the observing person first sees their reflection in them. When they walk around or change the viewing angle, they disappear and cannot find their reflection anymore. The spectator fades itself away and loses the feeling of existence. Meanwhile the mirrors gain transparency so that part of the room is displayed. Sophie experienced a Your Fading Self piece by Olafur Eliasson at the Symbiotic Seeing exhibition taking place at Kunsthaus Zurich in early 2020 and was fascinated by the technology of this mirror (Eliasson, 2013).

## Hypnotic Show Reflecting Room dOCUMENTA

*Marcos Lutyens*

The Hypnotic Show is a performance by Marco Lutyens that he developed and created together, in collaboration with Raimundas Malašauskas. Various versions of the performance were shown at dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel, Germany. The shows were held in a cabin, the Reflecting Room, specifically designed by Lutyens for the Hypnotic Show.

"Hypnotic Show is not exactly a therapeutic procedure – it is more like a porous space between sleep and consciousness, to be shared by a small group of people while amnesia and language embrace. Or, as a former participant put it, this is an intimate space of perceptual doubt, where 'imagination becomes so dense that it literally morphs

into things imagined'", (Lutyens, 2012).

The cabin consisted of two spaces that were nearly an exact replica of each other, it seemed that the floor of the upper room was covered in a mirror but the second room was an upside down mimicry of the upright space. Even when visitors entered the room and realized that the bottom floor of the cabin was not a mirror, their minds still saw it as such. This setup helped to put visitors and performance audiences into the right mindset for the Hypnotic Show. This shift of reality or what seems to be the reality in people's minds is very interesting and we are inspired for our own project by that phenomenon.

## Svizzera 240: House Tour, Swiss Pavilion Venice Biennale

*Bosshard, Tavor, van der Ploeg and Vihervaara*

The Project Svizzera 240 is an apartment that was shown as the Swiss Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2018. The project title aims with the fact that the standard height of swiss apartments is 240cm and the appartement they built for the Biennale appears at first glance perfectly normal and boring but after giving the whole thing a more precise look the visitors see that proportions are out of sorts.

Edna visited the Venice Biennale in 2018 and realized after a few minutes walking through the rooms of the appartement that something was up with scale; one door was tiny, another one was huge, the kitchen rack was on a totally wrong height and smaller shifts in ratio were made that were not noticeable right away but made everything look not quite right. These little shifts in realities and practices that we humans are not used to, help come people out of their minds. We believe that if things, rooms and proportions are just a little out of being right or bringing illusionary aspects into a space makes users start to lose the sense of self; which we want to achieve in our bachelor thesis project (Pro Helvetia, 2017)(Bosshard et al., 2018).

# Perceptual Cells

*James Turrell*

Perceptual Cells is a series by American artist James Turrell. Based on Turrell's research in perception of the human mind, he developed rooms where one participant at a time experiences a shift in perception. For this perception shift he uses a change of frequencies, colours and intensity of light. Sometimes the participants can adjust these parameters themselves. Like that Turrell achieves a different perception of the space, even though the physicality of the space such as structure and temperature are not changing. He does it all with light. "Turrell analyses the relation of light, darkness and space and makes these parameters experienceable through physical encounters and emotions", (Helfert, 2003).

This related work might be the most important for us, as one part of our project also contains some kind of perceptual-change space (Turrell, 1991).



Fig. 01 Florian Holzherr. (2010). Perceptual Cells. <https://www.haeusler-contemporary.com/>



Fig. 02 YARA + DAVINA. (2021). Arrivals + Departures. <https://www.withoutwalls.uk.com/>

Fig. 03 The Liminal Space. (2019). The Departure Lounge. <https://www.the-liminal-space.com/>



How we want to die – represents the most important and costly conversation America isn't having. We have gathered dozens of medical and wellness leaders to cast an unflinching eye at end of life, and we have created an uplifting interactive adventure that transforms this seemingly difficult conversation into one of deep engagement, insight and empowerment. We invite you to gather friends and family and fill a table. Click Get Started to plan a test dinner. We call it a test dinner because trying out this process in no way commits you to follow through with an actual dinner. [Learn More.](#)

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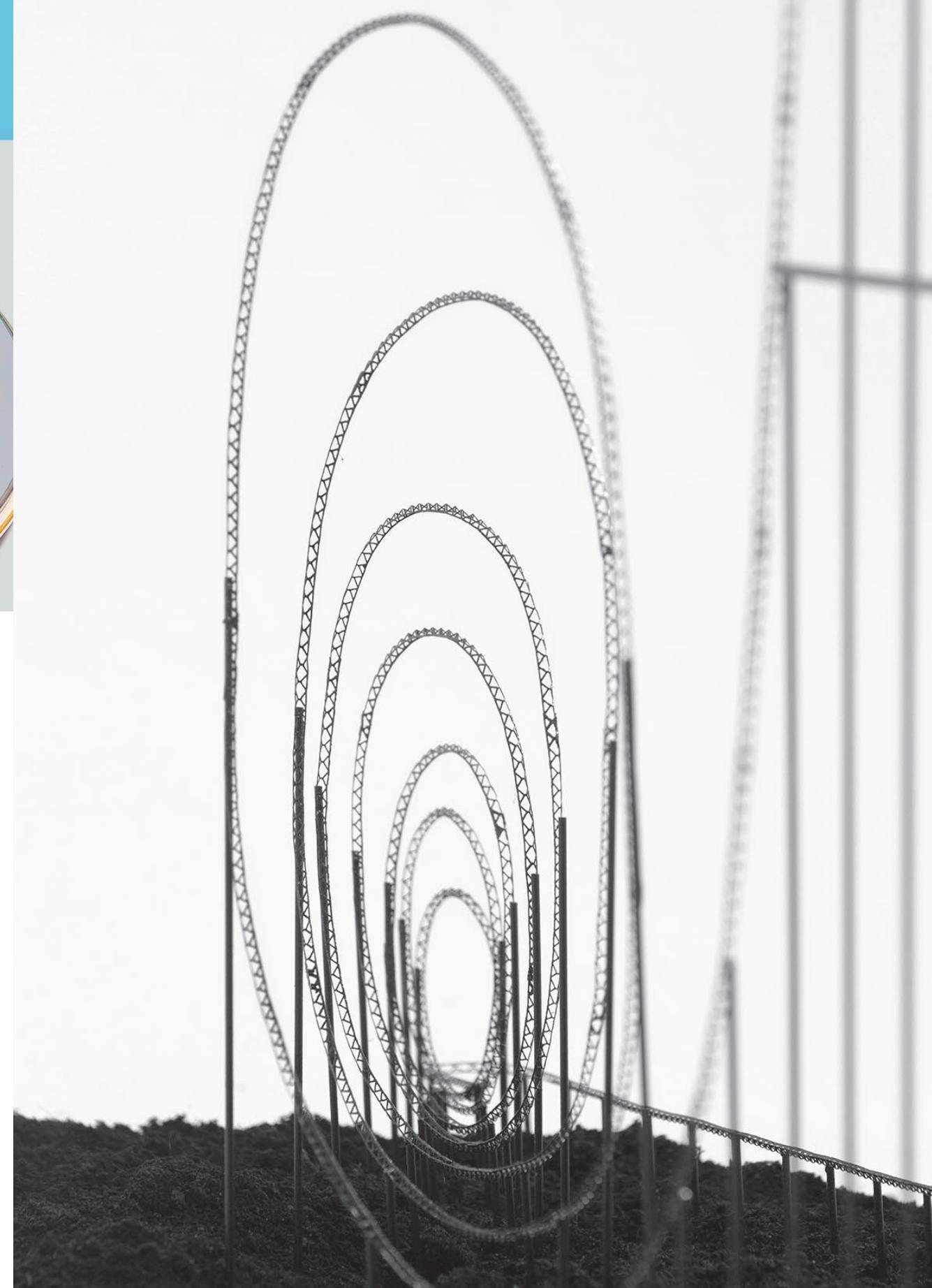


Fig. 04 deathoverdinner.org. (2021). Death Over Dinner Website. <https://deathoverdinner.org/>

Fig. 05 Julijonas Urbonas. (2010). Model of the Euthanasia Coaster. <https://popperfont.net/>



Fig. 06 ADG. (2018). Inside the Second Chance Performance. <https://www.adg.design/>



Fig. 07 Olafur Eliasson. (2013). Your Fading Self Down. <https://olafureliasson.net/>



Fig. 08 Marcos Lutyens. (2012). Hypnotic Show Reflecting Room. <https://www.lutyens.com/>

Fig. 09 Wilson Wootton. (2018). Svizzera 240: House Tour. <https://matthewvanderploeg.info/>

## 2 Field Research

# Instagram Account

### *Intervention*

We actively and consciously decided to create an Instagram channel for our bachelor thesis. There are different reasons for it:

We believe that an Instagram page is a good way to document the process of a project. By updating our Instagram channel on a regular basis we can save user inputs, analyse them and then question and comprehend our output by looking at our process in pictures. Next to the fact of self-use, it is a good way to let family, friends, classmates as well as mentors catch up with our process and give insights in what we do on a daily basis. Therefore we want to also use the account as a communication tool for user outputs of interventions.

After setting up our own Instagram profile @renaissanceofdeath we started looking for people and collectives who deal with death on social media. Instantly we realised that there is a huge existing network and community on Instagram and that it would be nice to get into that community and exchange our thoughts with other people who like to talk about death, dying, the good death, and grieving on a social medium. At first sight it seemed odd that there are death influencers who praise death positivity – an acceptive and optimistic view towards death on social media. Because before doing research, we were not familiar with this community at all as we were not actively taking part in it.

But as most communities have their own social media network, why should death not get its own as well? As death is a societal and social problem it is totally legitimate to discuss it in social spaces. We even believe that it is absolutely necessary and should not be left out. Nowadays social media spaces and public spaces have a lot in common and even merge and melt together. They are spaces where people meet, where people have fun and entertain themselves, where they can be anonymous or private, where they can speak up or just watch. Furthermore it is not uncommon to be present in both types of spaces at once when they merge. This happens for example, when we check the Instagram feed on our phone while we wait for a friend at the bus stop and see that they were getting a coffee to go while commuting to us.

In fact, social media is a way of representation and visibility of local activism as well as a cultural time spirit. We discovered that in Germany and Switzerland alone, there are several players in the death Instagram. They have built a solid network to promote each other's channels and issues and therefore become more

seen and heard in general. "In any case, social networks and other social media give a chance to retrace the way actors and social movements are associated over the territory. Individual and collective, micro and macro actions are visible in this way, showing how the world behaves at a certain time", (Corso Pereira et al., 2012).

Through the Instagram algorithm our profile gains attention from people that we do not know personally and that are not even located in Zurich nor in Switzerland. It is great because we get to know a lot of new projects and are gaining visibility of our own project as well. That is the perks of the modern world wide web. But we should not forget that filter bubbles exist and are especially pronounced on social media, supporting each other is great but we need to think about how we can reach people also outside of our personal and the already death interested bubble.

## Language of Death

### *Intervention*

We decided in an early stage of our thesis that we were going to do qualitative research, surveys, interviews and interventions over quantity so it came natural to start with an intervention that was on a very small scale. This very first intervention Language of Death came into existence rather spontaneously. We both asked about three to four friends and family members if they could fulfil three tasks for us in a cultural probe manner. We were curious what image people have of death and whether there is a common denominator in our target group. We set up a generic text so that we could send out the same information to all people. Everything was rather short notice, we asked our participants if they could fulfil the tasks until the next day at 4 PM. The reason was that we had our first progress session presentation two days later and we wanted to include the answers. We did not do so in the end because of different reasons but also mainly we decided to focus more on the birth/death notion but it was still insightful to see what people answered.

To have cultural and age diversity we tried to send out the message to different people, Sophie sent it to her parents and a few friends, one of them being from China. Edna sent it to her brother, her roommate and two friends living in the US. One of the friends living in the US is highly religious and Edna was curious if this Christian background would affect his answers.

The three different questions were intended to be easily answerable and should not interrupt our participants in their daily lives, especially because the tasks were at such short notice. We first introduced our project again although most of those people were familiar with our bachelor thesis topic and then set the tasks for the cultural probe.

We figured cultural probes are a very suitable method for our topic because our target group is not mainly different from ourselves but death is such an individual topic and we want to tackle it in particular as a distinct one; as cultural probes are meant to find unexpected answers or to trigger users on a different level than simple questionnaires or interviews (Hirsbrunner, 2018). Interesting enough, to find out our participants did not feel like they could be fully themselves or had to explain and justify their answers to us. Did we fail with the cultural probes approach, was it simply the wrong medium to ask such questions on a digital level or is it the topic of death and one's own finiteness that triggered these behaviors?

We drafted a quick text explaining again in a short manner what our project is about and why we are asking our chosen participants for help, for their opinion and answers. Followed by three tasks and questions asking them to take a photo in their surroundings, search for one on the internet and finally to send us an audio recording about death. Accompanied to each task, we asked them to send us a short description why they sent this cultural probe. We sent the message out to each three to three to four relatives and friends via messenger service of our choice.

It was clearly noticeable from all the responses we got that our participants got a little overwhelmed. Firstly by the short amount of time we gave them and secondly by the topic. Our intention was to gain a quick insight in people's opinions and not to get deeply rooted and profound explainable answers. But still almost all sent us rather long responses. On Sophie's side only her parents returned the assignment and on Edna's side two out of four friends responded in time but the other two participants, which happened to be the American friends, replied later but very detailed as well.

Sophie had the impression that the answers she got from her parents did not suit them. She felt like they had to disguise and sent her cultural probes more of what society thinks rather than what they truly believe themselves. Their answers were rather poetic and artsy as well as detailed. They also thought about the task too much and tried to make it perfect which really did not matter at this point.

The feedback from Edna's users was very in depth but she cannot tell in comparison to

Sophie's impression if they enacted something or if their responses were true nature. What she can tell is that some of the answers fitted the participants interest, such as a cyclist sent a picture of a deadly bike accident they sadly had to witness or the geologist researching about volcanos sent a picture of an erupting volcano with the following description:

"This is an image of a pyroclastic flow, the number one cause of Volcano related deaths, for humans anyway. Volcanoes were also the direct cause of one of 5 mass extinction events in earth's history, and I think they were at least partially involved in some of the other mass extinction events as well", (Saunders-Schultz, 2021).

The part people struggled most was the third task of sending an audio recording. We did not get a lot of auditory replies and only one sent an audio recording, everyone else sent a pre-recorded sound or a piece of music.

To find a pattern or coherences turned out to be rather difficult but was never our intention anyway. What we found is that we got a lot of nature related images and images of objects. And many tried to explain and sometimes even justify their answers and views on death. Is that the understanding of death in society? Or should we better say in our bubble? Do people want to die in nature or are connecting nature-things with death and feel like they need to back up their opinions on the topic of humans' finiteness? Interesting enough that our weakly supported theory got at least partly proven within our next intervention, The Good Death Talk. More on that in the next section.

What we learned so far is that we as interaction designers get trained to fulfill tasks quickly or simply send an answer to something even if we are not 100 percent sure if it is right. Cultural probes work that way as well. There is no right or wrong, so users should just send, document and reply whatever they feel like and we found out that users outside of our (interaction) design field may get overwhelmed by the approach and need more guidance or a better introduction. Still we do feel that the digital communication approach was interesting and gave us good insights into friends and families beliefs.

As we figured that talking digitally about death was working well and lets us communicate with people even if they are not physically available to talk to, we wanted to push that approach further. It is a good method in regard to the still ongoing pandemic as well. Reaching people on their mobile phone, a device they are always carrying with them works well and feels very direct and personal. Almost everyone owns

a cell phone nowadays and is able to participate easily in a cultural probe without having to carry an extra camera, notebook or sound recording device with them.

## The Good Death Talk

### Intervention

Inspired by our first low-key text messaging service prototype we came up with the idea of an autonomous chatbot where users were invited to have a conversation with our bot on Telegram. The bot raised substantial questions and invited people to think and exchange about their own death anonymously without fear of being judged. We specifically asked questions about what people think of when they read the term the good death. We purposely chose Telegram as a platform, as we recognised that social media might transform to be the new public space where interventions can be done. Telegram especially is an open, yet private chat platform, where users find themselves in random chats from a community as well as private chats with their family and friends.

There were two main reasons why we chose a chatbot as our bridge to people: Firstly, in the beginning we wanted to make a wizard-of-oz chatbot where we conduct a fake conversation and manage the conversation ourselves. We then realised it might be too much of an effort if we get a lot of answers and we would need to keep track of our phones at all times. After a short research on how to program a chatbot, we decided to go with the platform sendpulse and build our own bot there. The website was really suitable as it includes a back end platform where one can program the bot and where the conversations are saved. So there is a one-time big effort in setting up the bot, but later it ran more or less autonomously. We had the overview of all the chats and could extract data like images or string variables with answers right out of the platform. We gathered the collected data in a Google table to gain an overview.

Secondly, a lot of chatbots are used for entertainment and helping purposes. One of the first chatbots ELIZA was created in the 60's by Joseph Weizenbaum. ELIZA uses the English language and takes up the user inputs given and then reacts to them individually by imitating a certain expression. Initially it was mainly used for psychiatric treatment. (Wikipedia, 2021) Later it became the "[...] inspiration for many modern chatbots which aim mainly to fool

users that they are talking to another human as applied in the 'imitation game'", (Abu Shawar, et al., 2007). Our The Good Death Talk Chatbot should embody these characteristics of being human-like, entertaining for the audience and give something back as well as help users in the way of asking questions that hopefully lead to more questions and then eventually a discour about one's own death.

Other than ELIZA, our bot did not react to the content of the inputs given. It went through a flow of questions and waited for participant's answers, then continued the flow independently of the things users wrote.

Nevertheless our bot did not have the outside facade of a machine – it appeared human like. We decided to give our bot a persona to make it a more realistic encounter for users. We let the bot answer with a personal photo and story about its own good death. In addition, a lot of chatbots are used in digital services and therefore help people to solve a problem that happens in their life. Our chatbot should tackle questions about the good death and therefore help the user to approach the topic of one's own death. Exaggerated, we could say, it was a machinal pastoral care. It did not judge the outcome but rather accepted it and answered with its own inputs.

The name of the chatbot The Good Death Talk worked on three levels: The bot represented a good and positive image of death, it invited users to think about the term good death and last but not least a good talk happened between user and bot.

After deciding on the concept and medium of the bot, we developed a Telegram bot that users could chat with about what the good death was for them. We divided the bot in two parts. The first part dealt with the understanding of the term the good death. The opening question "Do you believe that there is something like a good death?" should provoke people to first get the terms good and death together – as death is still negatively connotated – but also enlighten us about whether the user could imagine something out of the term. To keep the conversation rather real, the bot explained its own understanding of a good death: "I, myself believe in a good death. And for me it is good, when I die how I wish and planned for it, you know? I want to die at home surrounded by my plants and cats for example and if it happens like that in the end, then it is a good death." In addition a picture of the described location was sent. The answer of the bot explained our view on what a good death is and should inspire the users to think about the good death in this way as well.

In the second part users were asked by the bot to manifest the vibe of their own

death in a picture and send a word with it. In the end the photo was put through an AI-generator and then uploaded to our Instagram page @renaissanceofdeath. We were curious about the self-involvement of users. How could we advertise the bot? Is there a way of bringing it out of our friend's circle? We tried to focus on a public target group. Unfortunately because of the Covid-19 pandemic, we were a bit restricted in reaching a wide range of people, as restaurant restrooms were closed and mobility in general was rather low. Therefore we tried to reach people by hanging up posters in physical outdoor public spaces and in restrooms at our university, ZHdK. Furthermore we advertised it on the @renaissanceofdeath Instagram channel as well as on our personal Instagram accounts.

Our bot worked similar to a survey but was supposedly more entertaining and fun, as more than 60 people took part. We are overwhelmed by the feedback and reach of the bot. In the first phase, mostly people from our bubble took part. After some days, the bot seemed to develop a kind of randomness and suddenly people we have not heard of joined and answered the questions.

Thanks to a table sheet, we had a clear overview of all the answers and inputs we got. The individual written inputs about the good death were relevant, but hard to compare with each other. That is why we focused on the single word inputs as well as the image inputs that we got from users. We clustered the words into word groups and image groups. For a later brainstorming we also looked more closely at the long, detailed answers. More on that in the Brainstorming section.

When we analyzed the word clusters, it was interesting to see that most people answered that they wish to die in peace or in a peaceful way. This represented the usual wish of dying in society. Happily, there were some answers that were really unconventional. One person for example wrote the word pillow fight. This person seems to abstract death in a way and does not take it too seriously. Another person chose the word doula which we associated with a guided death.

When analysing the image clusters we discovered that most people wanted to die surrounded by nature or in a natural setting when they die and that they connect the good death with nature. Another key element was to have people or animals around. Some answers popped out, such as an image of a smiling lady or the image of a death doula. It seems like these people have thought about death before and had a quite differentiated image of it.

Through the uploading of the generated user input pictures on Instagram, we populated

our channel and could reach out to more and more people, gained new followers on a daily basis and therefore more reach. Some users of the bot reposted their individualised death picture, others advertised our bot on their profile. Were we death influencers already?

It was a great experience to do a Telegram chatbot as we learned a lot during the process. It was the first time we created one on our own. There was a lot of fun, excitement and interaction coming with each new subscription we got. With this intervention we gained a lot of knowledge for our process, such as keeping a certain ease and entertainment in our project.

In addition we realised that we created some kind of community and that we could use the contacts who subscribed to the bot for further interventions. Maybe even ask them to act as a test group, if they like to participate. It would have been great to talk to selected users and find out what their experience with the bot was.

## Museum für Gestaltung, Total Space

### *Inspiration*

Total Space, the current exhibition displayed at the Museum für Gestaltung at Toni Areal in Zurich covers the topic of immersive, tangible experiences. They invited five design studios and artists to create an exhibition that is experienceable in person with all of human's senses. They say, in a time where museums are expanding into the virtual digital space such exhibitions take a whole new meaning. We visited the show on recommendation from our mentors and were positively surprised by how important for our project Total Space is. (Museum für Gestaltung, 2021).

From different exhibits we gained inspirations and ideas for the next steps on our own project. The Chicago based design duo Luftwerk created an immersive color changing room. “[...] a landscape made of light and color [...]”, (Museum für Gestaltung, 2021). Through color alternating lights the color of the walls changed and the perspectives achieved through how the color stripes were painted onto the walls resulted in an immersive and also a little trippy experience. We spent quite some time in the room and tried out the Ganzfeld effect. We spent a lot of

time in the part of the exhibition by the German artist group Sucuk Und Bratwurst. They created a room filled with oversized stuffed animals, it mimicked a children's room with a colorful carpet and a star mobile. Firstly, the stuffed animals were very cozy to lay on and think about our bachelor thesis and secondly, we experienced the oversized character and shift of proportion that confused us; like in *Svizzera 240*. The core of the exhibition holds a space from where visitors can explore the different rooms and work of the different artists. It is held completely in one color, a light blue one called serenity. In a video exhibited at the museum as well, the curators talk about their decisions for the show and how the color reappears. Since our inspirations and ideas imply a strong color concept as well, it was interesting to hear why they chose this paint. Serenity means calmness, quietness, hush, peace, and restfulness. With our project of losing one's own sense of existence we want to achieve quite the opposite of serenity.

## Friedhof Forum, Asche Exhibition

### *Inspiration*

The Friedhof Forum is located at the Friedhof Sihlfeld, a public cemetery in Zurich and serves as a public exchange and information platform for death related topics. It targets people who want to deal with their own death as well as the death of others and enables encounters in a museum space or discussion rounds in weekly mourning regular tables. We visited the current exhibition *Asche* where the artist Tina Ruisinger shows her photography pieces about what people leave behind after they are cremated (Friedhof Forum – Stadt Zürich, 2021). The exhibition was touching and we learned a lot about cremation in Switzerland. We were fascinated about the fact that cremations only became accepted in the Catholic church in the 1960's and that today more than 80 percent of Swiss people get cremated after they die (Zemp, 2017).

Next to the insightful exhibition, we talked to the manager of the Friedhof Forum, Reto Bühler. He explained to us the process of cremation in big detail, gave us a lot of literature resources and talked about the «Hallo Tod!» festival, which he also curates at the Friedhof Forum. During the conversation we realised once more that the death community of Zurich is very much linked together and that they deal

with the topic of death in a very rational and personal way. Nevertheless it was amazing to visit the Friedhof Forum and to know that we can always go back to Reto if we have a question concerning death.

## Interview, Ab unter die Erde

### *Talk*

Ab unter die Erde is an unusual and young burial company from Berlin founded by Maria Kauffman and Robert Freitag. They both question traditional forms of burial and came up with a business idea to promote more fun and crazy deaths and funerals. On their website they propose packages for eight personas, from Nerd to Romantic, that might inspire customers to do something crazy for their funeral. “[...] die Leute wissen gar nicht, was sie denn alles überhaupt wollen können. Wir wollen, dass sie sich trauen darüber nachzudenken, was alles möglich wäre und für die da so ein paar Angebote und Vorschläge zu machen, ist die Idee dahinter” (People do not know what the options of a burial are. We want to encourage them to think about all the possibilities that are out there and give them some offers. That is the idea behind our project), (Freitag, 2021). They offer new ways of burial that might seem a bit weird at first, like your ashes being put in a vinyl record that your friends and family can listen to after you have died. They have the purpose to provoke people and let them think about how they might want to be buried.

We stumbled upon Ab unter die Erde on Instagram during the networking phase. Since we like their ironic and provocative approach with the topic of one's own death we thought it would be interesting to talk to them in person. We had the chance to talk to Maria and Robert, the founders of Ab unter die Erde, via Zoom on a cosy Wednesday night. We were a bit nervous beforehand. But in the minute they appeared on the screen, they were super talkative, entertaining and they seemed to be in a good mood. We gained the following new insights as well as confirmations to our research so far: They told us that a main reason why they founded Ab unter die Erde was the unconventional wish of an acquaintance who wanted his friends and family to dance on his grave during the funeral. Since this is illegal in Germany, they could not fulfill this wish. In addition, atypical and crazy

ways of burial are not that known and viewed as rather bizarre. Nevertheless Robert and Maria saw a chance to refresh the existing burial system and in addition make a business out of it. They think that people still feel restricted in all of the options that would be out there and most of them do not even know what is possible. With *Ab unter die Erde* they want to give people the absolute freedom of thinking about their deep wishes and plan their own death in an individualised way. An effect they hope emerges out of this is that people start to see death with some kind of lightness.

Both of them told us great stories about how to experience an unconventional death and burial. These stories range from a grief-clown over a cat-human ashes mix to a fund for homeless people to plan their individual funeral. Those projects are inspiring for us. Since they are morticians themselves, they have gained some experience with facing death. It was interesting to hear them talk about the phases after death, for example that the body temperature will sink, the body gets pale, muscles and bones will be stiff and hair will continue to grow. They also said that it would be helpful to have a guide for the bereaved when they see the corpse again as the body will change and people might be terrified after seeing it so differently. It would also be helpful to just talk about what happens with the body when it dies and prime people.

They created the eight personas, as mentioned above, because they wanted to give customers some kind of framework for their own imagination so that they could break the boundaries of their cultural and traditional biases. One thing we realised was that they seem to be great death enthusiasts, but they appear to be even greater business people. They discovered this business opportunity in the summer of 2020 and just wanted to try out whether they could be successful. Apart from this commercialisation of death aspect, we think they are in this with all their heart and that they really want to have an impact and make a change (Kauffmann, 2021) (Freitag, 2021).

## S/ash sterbesettings.ch

### *Talk*

Slash / sterbesettings.ch was a one day online conference that united professionals, researchers and interested public who deal with the end

of life and death viewed from different perspectives such as (palliative-)care work, language, design and religion. Due to a shortage of time and appointment clashes we unfortunately could only attend two talks and one breakout room session:

- 1 (Re)Designing the End of Life Experience, by Developing 'Death Literacy' by Prof. Dr. Marieke Sonneveld. Sonneveld is an assistant professor of Industrial Design Engineering at Delft University of Technology and has been working in palliative care for 10 years. Together with her students at the End of Life Lab she designs possible end of life scenarios that make the process of dying more personal and comfortable. She tackled the term 'Death Literacy' so that people start to talk about and understand death better. We could identify with her talk a lot, as overall, she wants the end of life to be discussed and planned the same as the beginning of life.
- 2 Das Design des zweiten Körpers. Aspekte der Transzendenz in institutionalisierten Sterbekontexten by Dr. Thorsten Benkel und Matthias Meitzler. The two men are sociologists that deal with pictures and images of death. The essence of their talk was that they think that we humans have two bodies. The first one being the flesh that the consciousness inhabits and the other one being the representation of that flesh on photographs and videos. A third meta-body could be added when we think about that after we die the body might go to heaven or hell and continue to live there.

After these two talks we were invited to join a breakout room where we talked to two strangers who attended the conference. We were really lucky, because we were together in a room with Andrea Germann from the University of Heidelberg and Ruth Schweikert. Ruth Schweikert is a popular Swiss author who was diagnosed with breast cancer but eventually defeated the illness. She was invited by the organizers to read out of her book about her experience with her illness at the conference.

We were happy to introduce the two women to our bachelor thesis topic. After some minutes of talking, Ruth offered us to read one of her poems that she wrote the day before about a friend who was going to die soon. We were touched by her trust and openness towards us. Unfortunately we could not listen to the whole poem, as the breakout room was closing up.

Nevertheless it was such a nice moment with these two women that now do not seem to be that strangers anymore.

## When Will You Die Quizzes

### Experiment

As we always wanted to design for one's individual death, customizing our outcome somehow was important from the beginning on. The initial idea of a decision tree stuck with us over the last few weeks and was seen as a first try out in our second intervention The Good Death Talk, where the users had to decide between simple YES or NO questions and were led down a certain path afterwards. Back in our teen years we both loved to fill out so-called psycho tests to find out whether we are that kind of bread lover or if we maybe prefer pizza over ice cream and which animal represents our soul; after filling out a perceived two hour test – you know what we are talking about. But the decision tree reminded us of those quizzes and we thought about if such an approach could be the right one for our project. Where the users are given different choices to pick from and get a personalized solution of their good death back after. To find out if it was perhaps a suitable way to go, we decided to try out some quizzes ourselves.

First we did some research about what was out there. We found different tests on all kinds of different sites and resources about one's own death. While video chatting over Zoom we tried out a few quizzes simultaneously and it was surprisingly fun. We were once again reminded how privileged we are to be living in Switzerland, because the tests telling you when you are going to die were all based on statistical data. We had to answer a few simple questions like where we live, how old we are, our gender, whether we are smoking cigarettes and if so, how often and the same questions on alcohol consumption. Based on all those inputs it told us how long we were going to live still. It felt surreal because for Edna for example it said she still had 91 years to live and that is somehow just too far away but at the same time we were eager to find out what the tool was saying and secretly were hoping for an answer that said: "You've got still sooo many years to live!".

Other quizzes were less explicit on their outcome. From "You are that or this type of person and you are going to die like

that" to "Here is a spider diagram of all types of death causes" was everything among.

Interesting to see was that a lot of the test description and result explanations mentioned over and over again that it was all ironic or should not be taken seriously. Some were also a little morbid which we think is actually nicer because what we want to achieve with this thesis is to lose the stiffness around death and it definitely feels rigid to be 100 percent sure no one understands you wrong when talking about death. What was mentioned a little already is that of course these quizzes are kind of rubbish but they still make you a little uncomfortable and you wish for a good result. Some of our test outcomes were ridiculous, some were just straight bullshit but all helped shape and enhance our discussion around our own death again, which is quasi our goal too. The funnier and more interesting ideas also helped us discuss the options and creativity around one's own death and the way we are going to die further.

We did not continue to follow the psycho test path further but we were inspired by the customized answers of death and the randomness that let us fantasize about our own finiteness. We still strongly believe that every death is distinct and especially the good death is unique to each and every individual person.

## Floating

### Experiment

Curious about what it might feel like to have a feeling of non-existence and sensory deprivation Sophie had the chance to go to a floating center in Zurich. We approached the float-schweiz center by sending them an email that we are doing our bachelor thesis in the field of tricking one's senses and asked them for a price reduction, as floating sessions can cost up to 140 Swiss Francs. We were more than happy to get the answer that one of us can go to a session for free. When floating, the user is in a tank filled with highly concentrated salt water. The water keeps the body on the surface of the water just like in the dead sea. The main idea is that the user can relax fully and forget about time and space when they are in the pitch black tank. It is used for muscle and mental relaxation but it is also used for psychotherapies that deal with anxiety (float Schweiz, 2021).

Sophie's experience:

"When I arrived at the spa in Zurich on a sunny Sunday afternoon, a young man in swim shorts and flip-flops welcomed me. He gave me an iPad on which I should watch a video about what the capsule was and how I should proceed. When I finished watching the video, he took me up to the floating room and explained the whole process in more detail. Floating seems ritualic, as I had to take a shower before so that all the natural body oil is washed away. After finishing the session I would have to shower again, to wash all the salt off my body. The instructor then left me alone for my experience. I took a shower and was a bit nervous about what was going to happen. Would I lose the sense of self? Would I drift in another world? Will there be hallucinations taking part? Since it was my first time in a floating capsule, I was first amazed by the weightlessness in the water and tried out different positions on how my body would float best. Since everything was new to me I tried different stages of the closeness of the lid's tank. To approach my floating experience softly and to avoid claustrophobia I left a gap when closing the lid. I have to admit, it was a great setting to relax and forget about all the challenges I had in my life. By changing arm positions – behind the head, next to my waist or in a ninety degree angle next to my upper body – I was just floating. After I felt comfortable that I would not drown, I closed the lid fully and found myself in a pitch dark void. It is totally normal to get colourful hallucinations when the eyes are opened and one looks into a dark space. In my case these hallucinations had the color of blue and seemed to be like waves. There were some moments of hypnagogia which I really loved. Hypnagogia describes the moment of falling asleep or rather the transition from wakefulness to sleep (Wikipedia, 2021). At some point in our project development we also thought about this transition as a simulation for dying. I am amazed by the fact that this floating tank creates these experiences so easily. Most of the 60 minute floating session I did not think too much but at other times I got pulled back to my non-floating Sophie and was really conscious about myself. At the end of the session I put some meditational music on and this even brought me to totally fall asleep on the water. When it was time to leave the capsule I got woken up by a buzzing light and the lid that opened up. I thought that when I left the capsule that my body would be heavy because of the weightlessness but this was not the case. I just felt really relaxed and calm about the experience I just had and was happy when the sunshine touched my skin as I left the building. It felt like I sensed colors and

noise on the street more strongly but this might also just be placebo.”

Main impressions:

- Losing the sense of self during hypnagogia and going to second-sleep was such an intense experience, as in bed I usually just fall asleep once and then only wake up in the morning.
- Guidance and explanation is important for priming.
- I never felt unsafe during the experience and was not challenged as much as I hoped.
- If I did it more often I could develop my own methods on how to lose myself.
- The technological and spacy aesthetic was inspiring.
- Floating has big potential to become the newest wellness-trend.

## Near Death Experience

### Prototype

Ever since we knew that for our bachelor thesis we wanted to work with the topic of death, we were fascinated with near death experiences (NDEs), as they come closest to the experience of dying. During the concept seminar that took place in January 2021 we developed a lo-fi NDE prototype where the user was faced with a change in perception and an out of body experience. Through the prototype we wanted to find out if users who were going through something like a NDE would be encouraged to think about their own death more and would develop wishes for their moment of dying. Therefore the focus was not mainly on the execution and realness of a NDE, it was more about getting to know what a near death experience was and let users deal with their own death.

With keeping the features mentioned above in mind, we created a very simple prototype. The user, lying on a carriage, got pushed into a dark space illuminated with blue LED lights. After they were pushed inside, the blue light would switch off to pitch black and after some seconds strobo light interfered which caused disorientation. The whole time users could observe themselves through a bird-eye view, which represented the out of body experience.

For the setup of the dark space of our prototype we borrowed black curtains and LED strips from the Farb Licht Labor at ZHdK. Furthermore we installed a GoPro in the corner of the space and an iPhone at the ceiling which sent a live video stream to an iPad lying on the carriage that the user looked at. The bird eye view irritated the users and gave them the sense of being out of their body.

Even though we created a simple prototype, the set-up itself was rather complicated and we had to manage several different tasks at the same time. Since it was not autonomous, it was mostly a wizard-of-oz prototype where we had to simulate the different phases of the NDE ourselves, such as making the strobe light effect with construction site lamps.

Nonetheless we were pretty happy with our first prototype and were able to test it out with people from our class. They told us that the out of body experience aspect was rather fascinating. One user even said that after experiencing something like a NDE they could imagine wanting a coke for the moment of dying which would make the process more pleasant. On the other hand, the box was perceived and associated with Western Christian burial symbols such as lying in a coffin. That obviously was not our intention.

We had to present the prototype to our classmates and lecturers at the end of the concept seminar. As they could not try the prototype themselves, we got feedback from non-users. One feedback that we think is important was that we should keep in mind that there is a need for guidance and priming. Since then it was clear to us that we need to pay attention to the setting and how the user is guided through the experience, such as having an introduction session with the topic or whatsoever.

## Schweizer Bünzli\*

### Prototype

At the end of the interview with Ab unter die Erde, Maria and Robert gave us the task to come up with an additional persona for their website. At the beginning we were struggling with the task a bit because we think it is problematic to build packages with such obvious stereotypes that we actually do not like. Nevertheless since we think that they are well aware of their stereotypical packages and that they use these packages mainly to provoke the imagination of their customers, we decided to play along and

contribute. In the interview they made a lot of jokes about the differences between Germany and Switzerland – even though our cultures are not that far apart. Therefore we decided to go with a Swiss edition and tried to have fun and get crazy around the topic. We see this task as a prototype but also a challenge for ourselves.

We were happy to see that one day after we sent our Schweizer Bünzli\* package to Ab unter die Erde, they implemented it on their website and published an Instagram post with an introduction of us and of our bachelor thesis. It was such a nice experience to bring the topic out and exchange with others!

DE Beim gemütlichen Fondueplausch in einer auserwählten Bergbeiz in den Schweizer Alpen werden dich deine Liebstes bei Jodel und Jass in schönen Erinnerungen gedenken. Als Nachtsch gibt es einen Bänkelsang – eine Zusammenstellung kurzer rhythmischen Verse der dein Leben humorvoll für die Anwesenden revue passiert. Das magische Bouquet zum Schluss.

Nachdem die Teilnehmenden den Sonnenuntergang mit Kräuterschnaps bestaunt haben, gehts erst richtig ab. Da in der Schweiz Luftbestattungen erlaubt sind, wird deine Asche in drei 1. August\* Raketen zum Himmel gefeuert und beendet den Abend mit einem farbenfrohen Höhepunkt, der sicherlich niemandem vergessen geht!

\*Schweizer Nationalfeiertag

EN At a cozy fondue party in a select mountain inn in the Swiss Alps, your loved ones will reminisce over yodeling and jass. For dessert, there will be a Bänkelsang – a compilation of short rhythmic verses – that humorously reviews your life for those present. The magical bouquet at the end.

After the participants have marveled at the sunset with herbal schnapps, things really take off. Since aerial burials are allowed in Switzerland, your ashes are fired into the sky in three August 1\* rockets, ending the evening with a colorful highlight that is sure to be remembered by no one!

\*Swiss National Day

## Going Down the Speculative Way

### Brainstorming

After a lot of discussions about where we should go with our project, we did some further research. We stumbled over the Interaction Design bachelor thesis project Amt für Kleinstdelikte translated as Office of Minor Crimes from 2017 by Martin Dušek and Jannic Mascello. The project deals with a speculative future of how the police and society should live and work together. Their scenario plays out in Zurich and asks the questions of “If we want to live in a society where even small transgressions are punished?” and on the other hand “Who should be doing the policing?”. The main take-aways we took from their project are the speculative, alternative, social fiction future scenarios, and their toolkit approach. (Dušek et al., 2017) Since we got a little stuck, we decided to take a new path and figured a toolkit might be the right approach for us as well.

Since we have not used the answers from our second intervention The Good Death Talk further than posting the users AI-altered images to our Instagram channel, we decided to look more into the replies we got. We took the clusters we created with the user-sent photos, the singular image describing words, and the longer, more detailed answers and decided to quickly prototype a toolkit based on them. We split up, Sophie developed some ideas on her own and Edna worked individually as well, because we did not want to specify at this stage if it was going to be a singular item or a collection of things. Not sure yet, if the toolkit was based on the act of dying or one on what happens after someone died.

The objects should have had the potential to ask questions like, “What if this?” or “What if that?”. We wanted to raise queries, start controversial discussions and provoke think-discourses about one’s own death. How do we really want to be buried? How do we want to die exactly? And based on previous intervention, what is my good death?

After discussing for a while, we set a time-frame of two hours to do, each one on her own, a speed prototyping -ideation process. We picked the most interesting answers or the biggest clusters from The Good Death Talk outcome and developed them further into an object or toolkit.

Sophie worked digitally in Figma and Edna analogue with a pen and her notebook and after those two hours we met up again in Zoom and discussed our findings.

We then realized our ideas and spinnings were all mostly on the act of dying itself rather than on the “What happens after someone died” part.

Some Outcomes were:

- Fictional Death Space that simulates one’s own perfect end of life scenario
- Death Live Stream
- Pocket Version of Death Space
- Tweeting a message every time an animal nibbles on the dead body
- Spreading Ashes with a Firework
- Piñata with ashes within, party trick
- Ashes become climbing chalk
- Clock that runs faster because people expressed the wish to die fast in the Telegram chatbot
- Socks that comfort you, showing the love of people through heating function
- An audio recording that plays laughs of loved to the dying person

The diverse outcomes from a virtually created room simulating one’s perfect end of life scenario, to a clock that runs faster, to a piñata containing the cremated ashes of the dead person, over a pocket version of said virtual room, showed us that our imagination did not get lost in the process of our thesis so far. But we realized also that somehow we got lost in the process of this intervention. Our ideas were so spread that we were not able to channel where we should go with the ideas. After a discourse on other things like talking to Ab unter die Erde and creating the bundle package Schweizer Bünzli\*, we decided the following day to narrow down our concept in a classical brainstorming session once again.

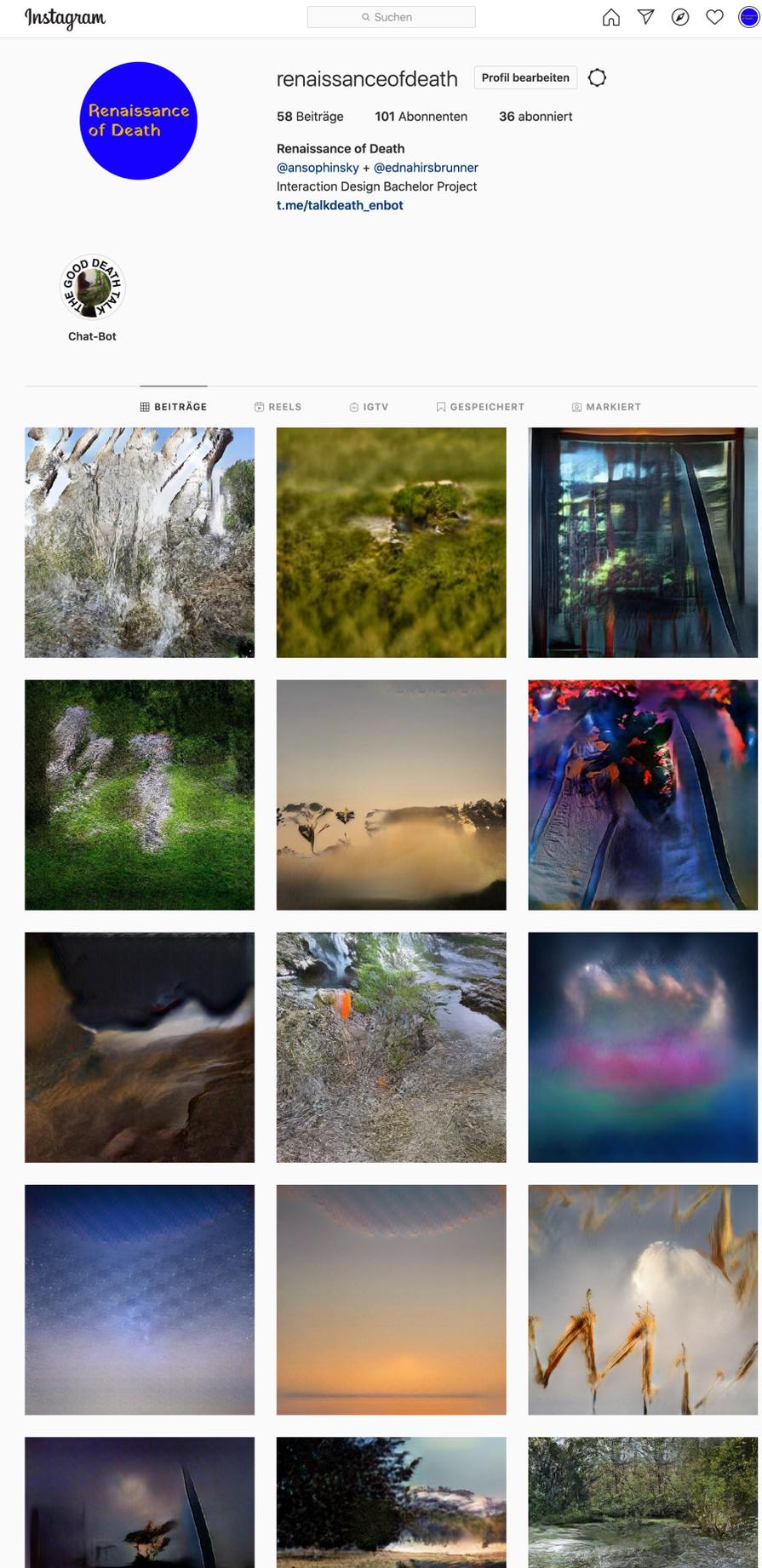


Fig. 10 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Renaissance of Death Instagram Channel.

Hello!

As you probably know, we are dealing with the topic "Your own death" in our bachelor thesis. In the thesis we ask ourselves how we can make death experienceable for the individual, so that we can deal with it more. We want to do this in collaboration with you, because death affects us all. As a first step, we will conduct a small cultural rehearsal. We ask you to solve the three "tasks" below and respond to us via Whatsapp. You can send us something at any time or collect everything first and then send it to us tomorrow Wednesday until 4pm. (CET)

Just let us know if you want to participate or not.

The "Tasks":

Visual Language of Death Part 1:

Take photo(s) in your environment (at home, on the street, at your workplace, etc.) that remind you of death (can be general or personal) and send them to us. Please include 1-2 sentences of explanation.

Visual Language of Death Part 2:

Google images that connect you to death (can also be very general or personal) and send them to us. Please give 1-2 sentences of explanation.

Auditory Language of Death:

Make audio recordings of situations you associate with death (can also be very general or personal) and send them to us. Give 1-2 sentences of explanation.

4:24 PM ✓✓

25 February

Okay :) 3:06 AM



**In Ungarn ist das Vergissmeinnicht ein typischer Grabschmuck.**



Fig. 12 Judit Anderhub. (2021). In Ungarn ist das Vergissmeinnicht ein typischer Grabschmuck.



Fig. 13 Len Hirsbrunner. (2021). Hier ist eine Junge Fahrradfahrerin durch einen Lastwagen ums Leben gekommen.



Fig. 14 Sophie Glaser. (2021). Corona Tafel im Nebel.

Turning a light switch on and off, cause death is just kinda like a light being shut off.



Fig. 15 Pablo Saunders Schulz. (2021). Death is just kinda like a light being shut off.



Fig. 16 Jason Scheuermann. (2021). Thinking about the uncertainty of death.

Fig. 17 Hubert Anderhub. (2021). Bald fällt der stolze Baum.

**Es wird irgendwie wiitergoh, trotzdem gse-  
htme keis End vom Schmerz. Wenni a min  
eigene Tod denke, isches d Ungwüssheit  
was nochher isch, ob ich no bin oder obs  
eifach verbi isch.**

**I am thinking about the uncertainty of  
death and how we don't know for sure  
what happens when we die and after.  
Which is like a bud on a plant, we have an  
idea of what will bloom but don't know for  
sure what it will be.**

| Cluster      | Numm | Name | Wort  |
|--------------|------|------|---|
| Ruhig        | 3    |      | ruhig   |
|              | 4    |      | Ruhe  |
|              | 13   |      | Ruhe  |
|              | 33   |      | ruhe  |
| (Zu)frieden  | 10   |      | /peace  |
|              | 17   |      | Frieden   |
|              | 22   |      | friedlich   |
|              | 31   |      | Zufrieden   |
|              | 37   |      | Peace.  |
|              | 46   |      | Peace   |
| Gemütlich    | 2    |      | i have no specific situation in mind. it should just be a nice feeling and a cozy and beatiful environment that excites me to die |
|              | 16   |      | Gemütlichkeit   |
|              | 18   |      | Entspantheit  |
| Fun          | 1    |      | Pillowfight   |
|              | 20   |      | Fun   |
|              | 38   |      | music sunshine love summer warm cozy comfortable  |
| Geliebt      | 6    |      | Geliebt, liebend  |
|              | 28   |      | I don't want to be alone. I want to be with the ones I love, to be held, to be happy ✨  |
|              | 35   |      | Liebend   |
| Natur        | 11   |      | Stardust  |
|              | 12   |      | (ge)schichten   |
|              | 30   |      | Morgengrauen  |
|              | 42   |      | nature  |
| Preparation  | 14   |      | awareness   |
|              | 36   |      | preparation   |
|              | 39   |      | DeathWithDoula  |
| Sudden       | 7    |      | very sudden wehn I don't expect in in full good health  |
| Glücklich    | 26   |      | Glücklich   |
| Transzendenz | 27   |      | Transzendenz  |
| Gebundenheit | 43   |      | Gebundenheit  |
| Gut          | 45   |      | Gut   |
| Undefined    | 5    |      | untitled (sent link to photo)   |

Fig. 18 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Analsys of User Inputs.

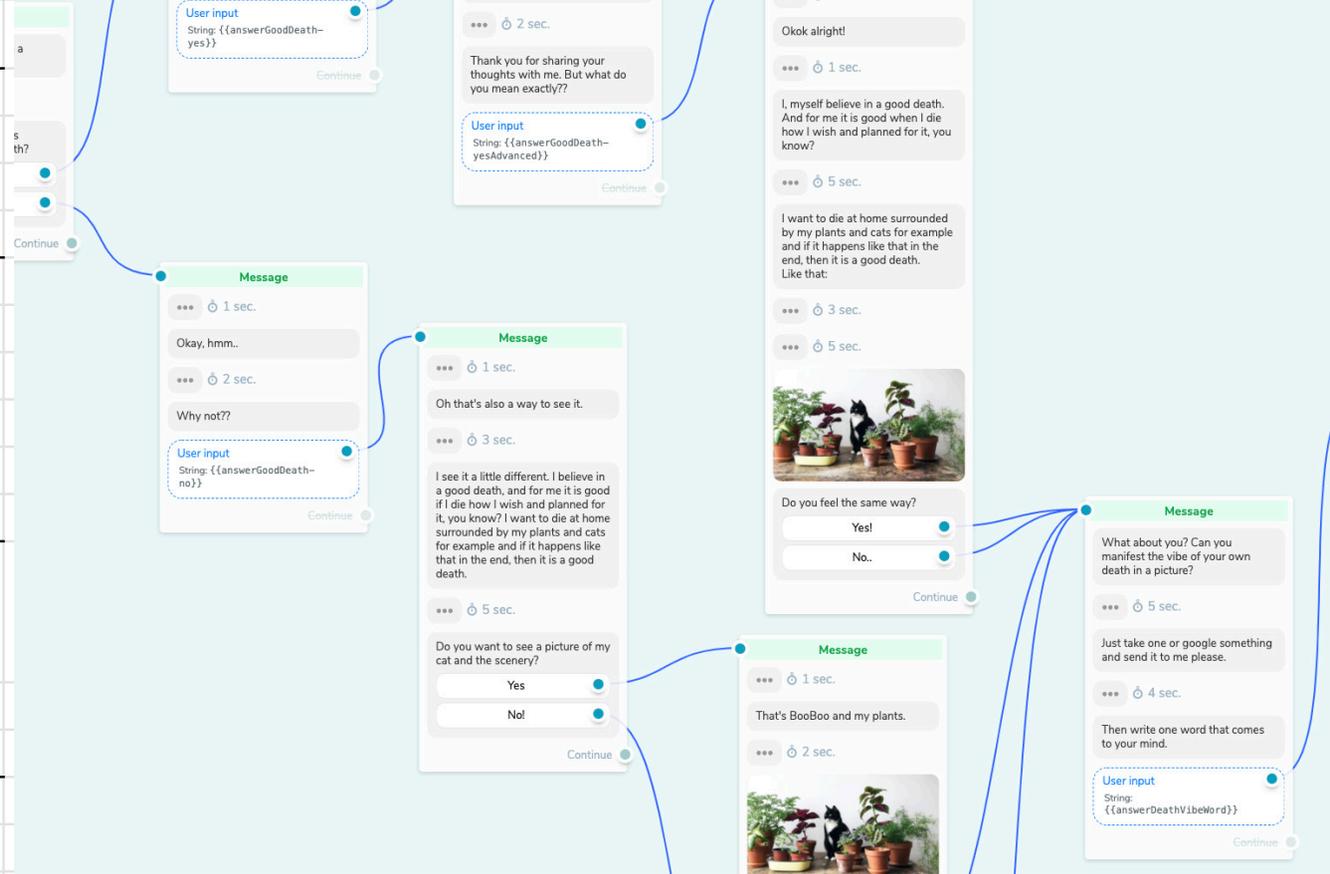


Fig. 19 Sophie + Edna. (2021). User Flow from The Good Death Talk Chat Bot.



Fig. 20-25 Sophie + Edna. (2021). AI Generated Images of User Inputs.

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n wir Mensch-



Fig. 26 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Asche Ausstellung at Friedhof Forum.



Fig. 27 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Sophie Testing the Ganzfeld Effect at Museum für Gestaltung.



Fig. 28 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Edna Testing the Ganzfeld Effect at Museum für Gestaltung.

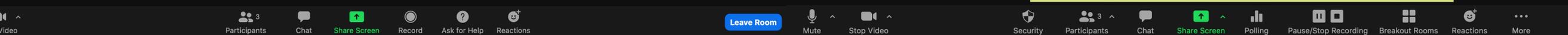


Fig. 29 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Talking to Ruth Schweikert and Andrea Germann.

Fig. 30 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Zoom Interview with Ab unter die Erde.

# SCHWEIZER BÜNZLI

Die Schweizer:innen Edition



Bei gemütlichem Fondueplausch in einer auserwählten Bergbeiz in den Schweizer Alpen werden dich deine Liebsten bei Jodel und Jass in schöne Erinnerungen gedenken. Als Nachtisch gibt es einen Bänkelsang - eine Zusammenstellung kurzer rhythmischen Verse - der dein Leben humorvoll für die Anwesenden revue passiert.

### Das magische Bouquet zum Schluss.

Nachdem die Teilnehmenden den Sonnenuntergang mit Kräuterschnaps bestaunt haben, gehts erst richtig ab. Da in der Schweiz Luftbestattungen erlaubt sind, wird deine Asche in drei 1. August\* Raketen zum Himmel gefeuert. Dies beendet den Abend mit einem farbenfrohen Höhepunkt, der sicherlich nicht vergessen geht!

\*Schweizer Nationalfeiertag



Fig. 31 Ab unter die Erde. (2021). Our Schweizer Bünzli\* Package on the Website of Ab unter die Erde.

Fig. 32 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Floating Capsule at float Center Zürich.



Fig. 33 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Monitoring the Near Death Simulator.



Fig. 34 Sophie + Edna. (2021). The Near Death Experience Simulator.

## 3 Narrowing Down

We realized that after several different discourses and new learnings we made over the last few weeks, it was time for another narrowing down session. Looking back, we were constantly learning so many new and interesting facts on death, dying, one's own death and especially the good death that it was hard to focus on a specific concept. We both found all kinds of different aspects of our topic thrilling; but had to narrow our ideas, concepts, and intentions down. To do so, we did another brainstorming, Post-It session. Writing down the core interests and core methods we stuck with since the beginning helped and we then clustered them. After gathering and analysing also all the insights we could derive from our field research, we broke down our interests into three different topic fields. The fields were: The Feeling of Death, Discours about Death with Others, and Pressure – Having the Right to Die.

We then decided to pick one of the fields each and try to come up with two more in depth concepts individually. As this worked fairly well while we did the toolkit intervention we were positive to have interesting and useful outcomes. A little pressure was involved as well of course but that never hurts nobody, right? The fields we picked were: The Feeling of Death and Discours with Others. After coming back together and discussing the results of the individual work, we finally broke down the ideas into three preliminary concepts; one on the Discourse and two on The Feeling of Death.

### Discourse

#### *Preliminary Concept*

As connection with others through the topic of death was an important value of our thesis from the very beginning, it felt natural to go back to that as one of our preliminary concepts. Many of the answers we got through our chatbot involved connecting with others, having their loved ones around or being somehow in contact with people while dying. Many are afraid to die alone but we believe, although of course ideally if one wishes for it to however have relatives nearby, we as humans in the end are dying alone. So what project could we as Interaction Designers develop to take this fear seriously and help easing it?

Inspired by the app Die with Me by the Dutch designer Dries Depoorter, we came up with the idea to connect dying people with each other during the act of dying. The app by Depoorter deals with the dying of one's own mobile phone battery, users can only use the

app if their phone battery is below 5 percent. If they are running low on power, the users can chat with others that are low on power as well and connect with them while having the same end of (mobile phone) life anxieties (Depoorter, 2018). So what if we could connect possibly strangers from all over the world in a similar manner but in real life end of life moments?

Buzzwords that came up were: Gamification, connection, remote, and exchange. Another interesting project that came to mind is Embody by the Portland based spatial interaction lab Glowbox. Embody is a VR experience on doing yoga that plays with the topic of shared realities. Globox believes that the future of virtual or augmented realities is a shared reality (Glowbox, 2019). This thinking is interesting for our concept of discourse, as we also want to enable people to share their realities of their own dying process with others; even or precisely because these others are perhaps not physically on site. Simple ideas we had were equipping people with a walkie-talkie, having a shared Zoom room where you could video chat with other dying humans or also some sort of app. Let's connect while we are dying!

### Making the Moment of Dying Experienceable

#### *Preliminary Concept*

Going back to our theoretical part about the connection of birth and death, we were interested in the transformation from consciousness to unconsciousness and vice versa. One way of how we could make the transformation tangible and imaginable was the metaphor of falling asleep. We asked ourselves, whether it was possible to capture the moment of hypnagogia. It occurs when the brain makes its clumsy transition between wakefulness and sleeping. Research even shows that there are overlapping characteristics to hypnagogia and near death experiences as in both happenings strange noises and out of body experiences occur (Paulas, 2016).

Similar to the Second Chance meditation (see Related Works) on one's own death, this preliminary concept of ours consists of a guided meditation, where participants are hypnotized into hypnagogia and guided through the process of losing consciousness while gaining awareness of what it might feel like to die on a more abstract level.

At the end of the meditation, users are invited to exchange their thoughts and feelings.

Like this we wanted to engage attendees to reflect over their own death and provoke some kind of calmness, as well as trigger imagination on what they would possibly want for their moment of dying.

## Experienceable Phenomena of Being Dead

#### *Preliminary Concept*

Can you imagine that you will not be around anymore in less than 100 years? What will the world look like when you are not physically present anymore? What will you leave behind? These questions should be raised, as well as answered in this concept that deals with the state of being dead and therefore not being able to connect and communicate with the world anymore. We wanted to create a space, where visitors would forget that they are existing and then experience what it might feel like if they are not there anymore.

We wanted to create an immersive space installation of an environment that would not react to the user's inputs. It should be a spacy parallel universe. If users want to interact with an object, it does not react back, if they look into the mirror, there is no reflection of themselves. A phone rings, they pick up but the person on the other end ignores them intentionally because the person does not recognise the users. There could also be an instructed actress/actor that knowingly ignores them. Users should absolutely lose the sense of self, which might be a metaphor for one's own death.

## 4 Proof of Concept

In order to conclude and prove our ideas from the three preliminary concepts, we decided it was time to test them out and therefore developed two prototypes. One was following the other, meaning we tried out an idea first and then refined it in a second prototype. After which we were ready to sum everything up in our final concept which led to our project concept and our final idea that we are realizing now but more on that in the chapter Project Development.

### Observing a Public Scenario

1

The Observing a Public Scenario 1 prototype was conducted with the basic idea of simulating the state of being dead and observing the world as it could be when the individual is dead. To achieve this feeling of being there mentally but not physically, we had two ways to go: the analog way or the digital way. When doing a digital signal transmission we would need another interface that does not project the actual, true live reality and could be easily faked so it would be harder to make participants believe it was real. Therefore, we tried to find something analog that people knew, trusted, and did not let them think that it could be hacked. We decided to use binoculars to zoom in on a public situation where users were able to observe a moment without being present there.

As a first try, we went to the Sechseläutenplatz in the center of Zurich with two pairs of binoculars. We each observed different people on the square that either sat on the chairs that were placed scattered around, chit chatted or walked by. Because we were obviously looking at them, we felt a bit uncomfortable and it felt like we were the ones being observed. One coffee and a brainstorming session later, we went back to Toni-Areal to build a setup stand for the binoculars. Since we wanted to create a standalone prototype, the binoculars should not be held by the participant. Therefore, we laser cut a box where the binoculars could be placed on. We put the whole setup on a tripod.

To test it out we brought it to the Lindenhof in Zurich. The Lindenhof is a tree-covered square on a little hill in the heart of Zurich. From there the view over the old town and the Limmat river is spectacular. It is a place that is visited mostly by tourists but there were also some locals hanging out and enjoying the calm atmosphere.

From the opposite of our target space, the Rathaus, the Lindenhof did not pop out that much as it is very busy down there. We chose a location with a higher elevation than our target space, as we believe looking down on a situation helps our concept and makes the observer less obvious; in comparison with the situation we faced on the Sechseläuteplatz. When trying out the setup, we quickly realised that our prototype has one disadvantage, the lack of rotation. The angle of the prototype did not target the Rathaus but the buildings of the old town and we could not change it since it was a tripod with a fixed head. The buildings were on the same height as the Lindenhof and we were not able to point the binoculars down to the street. Therefore we had to tilt the whole setup including the tripod which is not optimal for our final prototype.

Since the visual should be complemented with an audio element, we tried different ways to merge the two layers together such as an audio recording or a voice phone call. Once again we felt a bit intrusive as we recorded other people's conversations without them being aware of it. Especially the audio recording – even if it was not timed to what we saw through the binoculars – led to a lot of immersion and we felt like being a part of the happenings at Rathaus. In addition, we discovered that this notion of what is real and what is out of time or even fake might also be interesting for our project.

To continue the work on our prototype we needed to fix the tilting problem and figure out how the installation could be more immersive. Maybe through covering the whole head and not just the eyes.

### Observing a Public Scenario

2

Based on the findings of our first model but still with the same idea and concept in mind, we created a second prototype. The features of observing a situation from afar, as well as being able to listen to it were still key. Some adjustments needed to be made in case to make it physically more accessible for a broad range of participants. This second prototype should be more immersive and bigger. The angle of the binoculars were not adjustable in the first prototype, which was of course not ideal regarding the fact that one should be able to look down onto a situation.

While iterating, we also thought more about the whole user journey of the experience.

As the exchanging part was still key, we developed the path of thinking about the project like this: Experience followed by Reflection followed by Exchange. The experience should be the observing box and what we were focusing mainly on in this second prototype. The reflection part is about being asked questions and getting stimuli to think more about the topic of death and non-existence and reflecting on them, while still having the experience of the box in mind. And the third thing, the exchange, should happen afterwards by allowing participants to record their thoughts in some way, which other participants can then listen to, read, or experience.

It was relatively clear to us what needed to be done to achieve the outcomes and improve the findings of the first prototype. Nevertheless we had to overcome some logistical and constructional obstacles.

In order to make the experience more immersive, we decided to build a box that one could put their head in and look through the magnifier. The MDF wooden laser-cutted box was open on two sides, the bottom and the back. We painted the inside of the box black and attached a little black curtain at the back to make it as dark and immersive for the user as possible. On the front side was a hole where we stuck the field glasses through. Compared to the first prototype, we used only one lens this time. We took the binoculars from the first prototype to pieces and implemented it into this iteration. The reason for this decision was that the distance of eyes is very individual and different from person to person and to see perfectly through the binoculars the distance of the lenses needs to be very accurate; our installation should work for everybody without a lot of adjustment. To be able to tilt the angle of the monocular we used an adjustable tripod head, a ballhead to angle the whole box instead of only attaching the lens at a certain decline that would not have been adjustable. Like that we were free to use and test the box wherever we wanted as we could adapt the angle on site.

The second part of our prototype to solve was the audio element. Besides the visual layer with the monocular to observe the scene pointed at, we added, as in the first prototype, an audio layer. Initially we wanted to have the original, live sound from the observed situation but due to simplicity and prototype reasons we then recorded some sounds at the observed location; in our case the Limmatquai. We tried different things and recorded different scenes. On the day we went to record the audio, the site was very busy because it was actually a holiday, Good Friday, and very beautiful spring weather. Afterward we were concerned that this busy-

ness would be a problem as the observed situation in the end may not be as busy but it turned out to work quite well. Once we recorded only surroundings and background noise and once we recorded background noise and additionally us two, Sophie and Edna talking about death, life and philosophical questions in general. The idea behind was to subtly influence the participant in the box through them overhearing this conversation from a little further away. We ended up using the recording with only the background noise and where we were not talking.

To implement the sound, we used an mp3 player where we played the five minutes recording in an one hour loop and the participants could listen to it while observing the further away situation. The third part of our prototype consisted of questions. We printed out several philosophical, non-existence and death related thoughts on thick A4 paper and planned on including them in the installation of the observation box. Though we were not sure at the moment of creating them, on how to implement them exactly into the experience.

Examples of the questions were:

- Can you imagine ceasing to exist at some point?
- Would you want to live forever?
- To be or not to be?
- Does the thought of no longer existing frighten you?
- Are you preparing for the end of your life?
- Do you talk to your friends about finality?
- What will you remember on your deathbed?
- What do you believe in?

To test the prototype we went once again up onto the Lindenhof. The square was very busy but we quickly realized that most visitors were tourists and the first problem we faced was that we prepared the questions in German. But firstly we tried out the prototype ourselves anyway and we were positively surprised at how well it worked. After giving it some time and staying in the box for some minutes, listening to the ambience sounds over the headphones and observing the people at Limmatquai, we both experienced the loss of existence; at least a little.

As the sound was not live but a recording, it was of course not accurate nor matching with the live observed situation through the lens. For example, when one could hear a tram arrive one was waiting in the box for a tram to

come but there was in reality no vehicle in sight. Through phenomena like this, we somehow lost the sense of reality.

We then left the box on its own at the balustrade and waited for people to approach and try it out but quickly realized that this was not happening. The box blended too well into the surroundings and looked like a camera and the visitors of the square were too shy or simply did not care as they stood next to it, sometimes almost knocking it down. Still we waited longer and observed patiently what was happening and surprisingly, after a while a few people looked through the lens of the box. Almost no one listened to the sound through the headphones though. At some point we included two questions into the installation by attaching them to the curtain. This move led to more people paying attention to the box but not more listening to the sounds.

All these observations made us figure out some things, while building and testing our second prototype. One of the main findings was that the box needed to be inviting in the future and had to have the affordance of making people curious and wanting them to try it out. Due to the Covid pandemic still being a thing, we figured that the box needed to have as little touch elements as possible. We wanted to carry those learnings further as we were going to start developing our bachelor thesis.

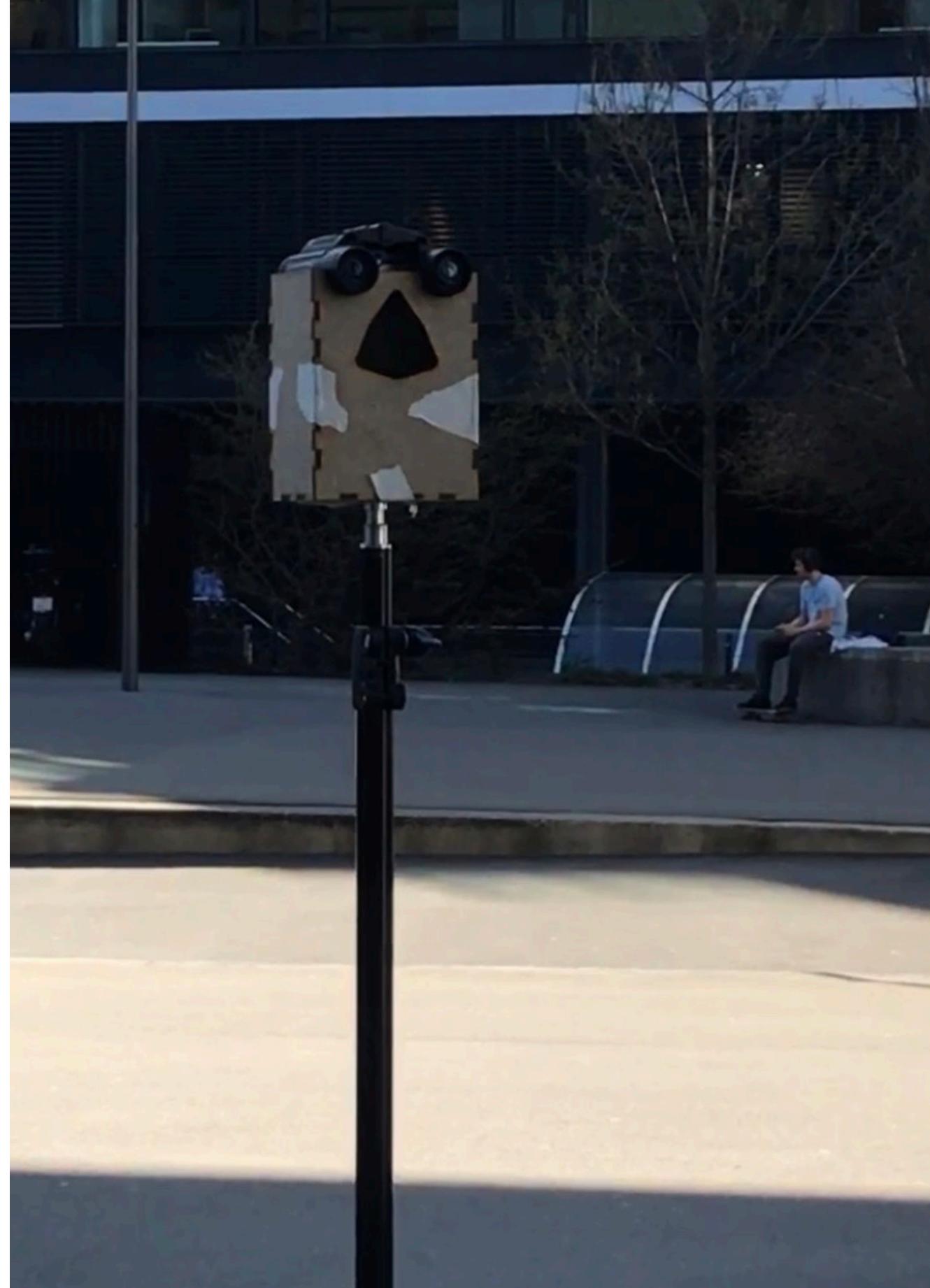


Fig. 35 Sophie + Edna. (2021). First Tryout.

**Can you imagine ceasing to exist at some point? Would you want to live forever? To be or not to be? Does the thought of no longer existing frighten you? Are you preparing for the end of your life? Do you talk to your friends about finality? What will you remember on your deathbed? What do you believe in?**



Fig. 36 Sophie + Edna. (2021). View Through the Binoculars.



Fig. 37 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Further Developed Prototype with Audio 01.



Fig. 38 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Further Developed Prototype with Audio 02.

## 5 Concept

During our field research we discovered that the topic of one's own death and death in general is very emotional and people have their very personal approach of how to deal with it. That is good. Nevertheless death itself is not an individual happening. It will – next to birth – happen to each one of us and that connects us as human beings. Every human will be at the point of not existing in physical space as we know it anymore and will not get feedback from the environment because their body is dead and gone and therefore not able to communicate anymore. This is the angle of one's own death that we want to focus on in our bachelor thesis project.

The idea of simulating one's own death has been following us since the concept seminar in January 2021. As our findings of the desk and field research have shown, one's own death is still either a taboo or attached to collective stereotypes. Similar to *Ab unter die Erde* we would like to offer an alternative view on one's own death or rather make people look at their own death and face it with an open mind and an unbiased view. We wish for people to deal with their own death by providing them a provocative experience and scenario that might change their current condition of envisioning death.

There are several projects we like that try to achieve this idea, such as the *Near Death Experience* by Frank Kolkman where the user can experience an NDE through virtual reality glasses and a camera dummy that is distancing itself from the user's body. Or *Second Chance* where users experience a guided meditation that lets them go through their own death and gives them resources that help them to deal with their death. In the concept seminar we also created a lo-fi near death simulator ourselves, where we used the simulator as a method to make people engage with their own death in the first place.

Most likely in less than 100 years we – Sophie + Edna – are going to be dead and not physically around anymore. Nevertheless, death is a fictional scenario that does not bother us until it is already there. And even then, we might not experience it with full consciousness. While some of the mentioned projects above focus on the moment of dying in regard to scientific reports, our project's focus lies on the emotional state of being dead and of no longer existing.

Thus, we want to make one's own death experienceable in our bachelor project. It is important to note that we do not want to project scientific or religious evidence of what happens after death but we want to point out the rational fact that there will come a time, where we will not have impact in the physical space of our world anymore. Our body will be dead and our consciousness might not perceive the world how it is as we know it anymore and cannot

communicate with it. Even the German author Thomas Mann said that being dead is the state where you talk, but nobody is listening. "This is the absolute lack of resonance and there's no audience", (*Sternstunde Philosophie*, 2021).

With our project we are giving visitors a frame, which manifests itself in a physical and interactive space, so that they can experience non-existence. This space should give the illusion of not existing through observation of a seemingly far away situation with people who do not react to the visitors of the installation space. Through this observative perspective, the feeling of loss of self-sense and emotions of absence should arise. We hope that through this immersion and imagination process, visitors start to reflect on their own death and exchange their thoughts with us or others; because what they experienced was touching them. Same as in *Second Chance* the surrounding and guidance seems really important in order to make self-reflection happen.

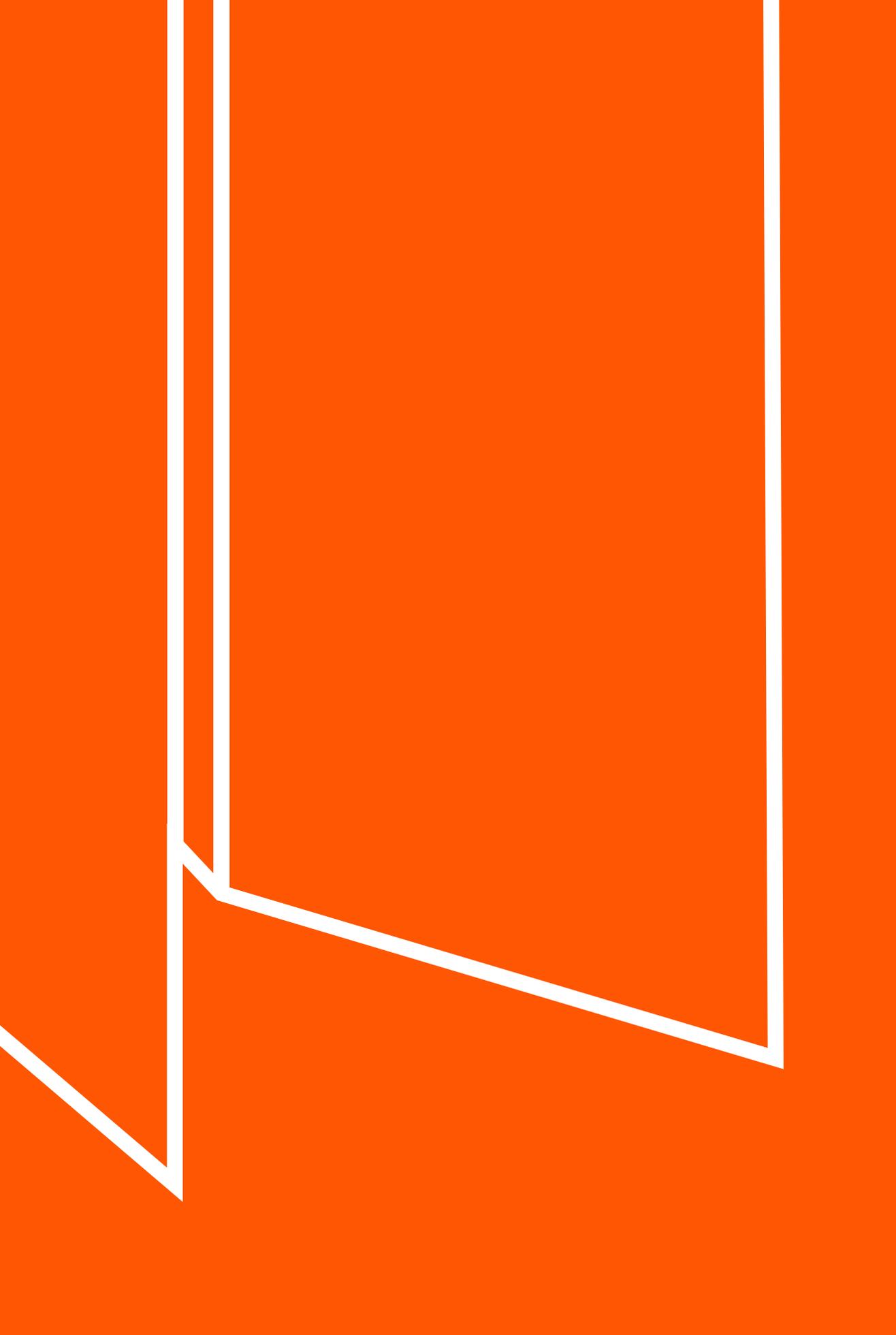
The contribution we are making is portraying death as a surreal and futuristic happening that, even if we can not imagine it, will affect us sooner or (hopefully) later. Some questions we would like to trigger from visitors after they go through the experience are: What does it mean to no longer be around? Have I ever thought about not existing anymore? How would I like to be remembered? Where should my body be buried? In addition we fertilize and moderate the exchange of emerged feelings.

For the process of building, we still have some questions to answer and figure out: What interactions can lead people to question their existence? How can we make people let themselves in for the experience? How can we make the space serious enough, so that people can fully immerse?

The cycle of the project is the following: Current Condition → Experience → Reflection → Exchange

**Current Condition → Experience →  
Reflection → Exchange**

# Project Development



## 1 Groundwork for Project Development

### Project Concept

One's own death is intangible. It happens in the future and so far we only know it vicariously. Our experience called prime-time triggers a feeling of non-existence in visitors and enables them to empathize with a world in which one is dead. From a dark room, participants individually observe and eavesdrop on a public situation in which they are not physically present. An additional voice confronts visitors with fundamental questions about their own existence and finiteness. Finally, a certificate of the experience can be printed out, which encourages further discussion and exchange.

The name prime-time is a reference to TV shows that run at the best time of the evening. We believe that death is the most important happening in one's lifetime and therefore is the prime-time for one's existence. In addition to prime means to prepare and therefore we also see it as a fitting name and description for our project.

## Visitor Journey

- 1 A visitor approaches the box and enters the transition hallway.
- 2 On the left side of the transition hallway there's an introduction and priming text.
- 3 The visitor enters a dark space through a curtain into a human sized capsule.
- 4 The space is equipped with a periscope and speakers. Through the periscope attached to the front wall or the ceiling an observation of a public situation takes place. The visitor takes the observer's role in this situation and seems close to it due to the tunnel view on the situation as well as sound transmission from that situation through the speakers.
- 5 The capsule will encourage visitors to think about their current state of non-existence. This will happen through an audio layer by a narration voice. Questions like: Where will I be when I no longer exist? What will the world look like when I am dead?
- 6 Fundamental questions about existence, non-existence and one's own death are raised that put the visitor into the right mindset.
- 7 When the visitor is done they leave the space through the curtains into the transition hallway.
- 8 When they enter the transition hallway, there's an opportunity to print out a certificate to manifest the experience.
- 9 The certificate animates visitors to exchange with others what they have experienced in prime-time.

## 2 Production and Implementation

### Form and Function

prime-time is built out of wood, as we think this is the most lucrative material to work with. It is fairly easy to work with, not too expensive and with some additional finishing we can achieve the look we wish for and customize it to our needs. Through a meeting with the facility management of Toni-Areal some constraints were given, such as that the construction should be fireproof and spacious as it needs to meet the emergency exit measurements. Therefore we decided to work with 19mm MDF plates that are flame retardant and thick enough so that the construction is stable and will not fall apart easily.

Since we want as many people as possible to experience our installation fully, we had to make it as normalized as possible. Having a height of 210 cm allows tall women, as well as short men to experience prime-time. To place the binocular inside the installation, we decided to orientate us at the average body height of a female in Switzerland, which is at 166 centimeters (SRF 4 News, 2016).

The installation's main body has the shape of a hexagonal prism. The big advantage of this shape is that entrance as well as the opposite surface are flat. Therefore the visitor gets guided right to the periscope in front of them. This would also be the case in a rectangular shape, nevertheless a more complex shape will attract visitors more. In addition to the main body, there is a transit hallway that leads visitors inside the installation. On the transition hallway walls, an introduction and guidance text and a thermal printer is placed, that round up the experience. We will write about the components in the next section of this thesis.

Since the installation will be placed in multiple locations hopefully, it has to be transported as easily as possible. The construction will be modular so that it can be set up and taken down without too much effort. It is possible to transport the single elements by a car or a small transporter.

prime-time will be placed in a public scenario, where it should attract passers-by and stand out from the location. It is crucial to have a finishing that catches the eye and that makes the construction look futuristic, interesting and bright. For the refinement we decided to go with a flat and shiny look that has the Dieter Rams aesthetic. We do not want visitors to think that they enter a wooden box but rather that they enter this futuristic space that seems a bit alienated in the appropriate location. The colour is a huge part in the concept and serves different functions. We are going to paint the outside of the installation in clear orange so that it raises

attention. Together with the periscope on top, visitors might also associate it with a submarine. This is a metaphor we like, because we also want people to dive in their expectations, wishes and fears around their own death. The main body is the core of the installation and the space, where visitors should lose the connection to themselves as well as to their environment. To enable full immersion, the inside of the installation is dark and some sort of transit place has to be installed. Therefore we are painting the walls black and putting a curtain at the entrance to avoid any light coming in. To have a pleasant colour transition from orange to black and refer back to the Dieter Rams aesthetics, the transition hallway is covered in grey paint. It should prime visitors for the experience and also evoke a calm feeling.

## Narration

### Component

We believe that simply looking through the periscope will not make the connection to one's own death and non-existence. Therefore we need to give context, make it approachable and have a narration that lets users reflect. We will have a voice over audio layer that will guide the visitor through the experience and that suggests a certain viewing-angle which is connected to one's own death. Our project is a mixture between theatre, (video) installation and real life with the intention of giving visitors an immersive experience that enables them to reflect about their non-existence. Therefore we are not going to have a dramatic narrative, which has a particular intention and where the audience should understand the plot clearly, instead we are making use of the epic theatre concept whose father is Bertold Brecht. This form of theatre emerged in the 1920s and focuses on critical thinking instead of empathy for the characters. "Es soll den Zuschauer handlungsfähig machen, das Publikum soll erkennen, dass die politische, soziale, wirtschaftliche und kulturelle Situation, in der es sich befindet, veränderbar ist" (It is intended to empower the viewer, to make the audience realize that the political, social, economic and cultural situation in which they find themselves is changeable), (Lernhelfer, 2021).

### Epic Theater Parenthesis

The epic theater concept by Bertold Brecht has the characteristics of having

an open end and the audience should be woken up. The audience should realize that there can be other realities than the one shown. The audience is more than listeners only, they become part of the happening as well. Brecht staged this condition through court scenes where the audience became the court audience. This is interesting and important for our bachelor project as the reality and thoughts we want to provoke and are showing are not the ultimate truth but rather the opposite. We want to provide food for thought through our non-existence box about what is life, what is real, what does exist, what does not and so on and there is no right or wrong. The participants and visitors of our installation become part of the happening, they should in fact be the event, orchestrated and guided through our experience.

The "Verfremdungseffekt" translated as the "alienation effect" is one of the most significant characteristics of the epic theater. It was not invented by Brecht but made popular and coined by him. The German playwright used the term first in his essay on "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" published in 1936. He describes it as "playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious", (Brecht et al., 1961).

In our narration we confront the visitor with questions and observations which they have to digest themselves. The right context, narration and approach is "[...] an ideal catalyst for memory-work and remembering and is particularly effective when it is the audience's story creation that is the primary focus of the work, that is the viewer and what they may do with the work", (Charleson, 2011). Therefore we do not want to push a certain narrative on to the visitor, but instead open up a new way of looking at their own death and non-existence and raise new questions and uncertainties about the topic.

As text, words and spoken guidance play an important role in our experience we had to think about what language we want to provide for the visitors. As we set up our installation first in Zurich at Toni-Areal we have two main languages that are important, German and English. It would have made it way simpler to just pick one of the two to go with for our installation but

we figured since it is happening in the German speaking part of Switzerland but many Zurich citizens and Interaction Design at ZHdK especially are English-heavy we cannot get rid of any of the two. So all parts that rely on words and language are bilingual and are interchangeable. Meaning for Zurich we are using German and English but for another exhibition site we could change the German part. Like that we are able to include orally as many people as possible in our installation.

The main topics that are touched in the narration are:

- Observation
- Non-existence
- How is the world without you
- Own finiteness

We are intertwining the two different language narrations with each other for the installation but wrote them down separately.

## Audio Setup

### Component

In order to enable visitors to immerse fully into the situation they are not physically part of, an audio layer of the observed place of activity is needed. So we are complementing the visual experience with a composition of the live audio and the narration recording.

The live audio is streamed with two very narrow focussed directional microphones that we are installing in the place of the observed situation. The microphones are pointed towards the situation and enable the visitors in the prime-time space to listen to their observings. These two microphones are connected to an audio mixer that combines the live audio with the recording of the narration. The recording plays as a loop from an mp3 player that is connected to the mixer console as well. The combined layers stream to two small installation speakers inside the box. The live audio is playing continuously, while the narration pauses from time to time in order to leave room for the visitors for their own thoughts between the questions and statements of the narrator's voice.

## Introduction Text

### Component

There are three steps in order to complete the prime-time experience as a visitor. Like mentioned earlier, these three parts are Experience, Reflection and Exchange. To guide the visitor through these steps and through our installation we are installing an introduction text in the transition hallway. The introduction text displays in German and English the following:

- 1 Our own death is intangible. It happens in the future and so far we only know it from other people. prime-time triggers the feeling of non-existence and enables to empathize with a world in which one is dead. Visitors are confronted with fundamental questions about their own inexistence and finiteness.
- 2 Go through the curtain and look through the periscope. Take your time and immerse yourself into the situation as long as you like.
- 3 Print your certificate.

So firstly there is a little introduction into the topic, secondly visitors are asked to enter the dark space through the curtain and look through the periscope while immersing themselves into the situation and thirdly, after they are done observing and listening, the participants leave the dark room through the curtains again and are asked to print out their certificate of their dispute with their own non-existence.

The whole text is printed out in vinyl letters in the colors of our corporate identity and placed on the walls of the transition hallway. The first and second step is located, when entering, on the left side and the third step is, when facing the curtains, on the right side.

## Periscope

### Component

The installation's core idea is the observation of a situation that the visitor is not part of. There are different ways to achieve this feeling such as having a screen with a video or having virtual reality glasses that let you fully immerse into a situation. Nevertheless for our installation we want to use a situation that is

**Was siehst und fühlst du? Was hörst du? Bist du da? Der Raum, der Ort funktioniert auch ohne deine Existenz. Fühlt es sich so an wenn du tot bist? Tauche ein in den Raum. Du bist nur Beobachter:in; du existierst nicht in dieser Situation und in diesem Moment. Sein oder nicht sein. Das ist die Frage. In diesem Moment nimmt dich niemand wahr. Woher weißt du, dass du lebst? Was gibt dir das Gefühl von Lebendigkeit? Eines Tages wirst du tot sein. Wo wirst du sein, wenn du nicht mehr existierst? Was macht es mit dir, zu wissen, dass das tägliche Leben eines Tages ohne dich weitergehen wird?**

**What do you see and what do you feel? What do you hear? Are you there? The space functions well without your existence. Is this what it feels like to be dead? Immerse yourself into the space. You are only the observer; you do not exist in this situation and in this moment. To be or not to be. That is the question. At this moment, no one perceives you. How do you know that you are living? What gives you the feeling of being alive? One day you will be dead. Where will you be when you no longer exist? How does it make you feel to know that one day, daily life will continue without you?**

real and that is happening for someone at the moment. Therefore it should be live without a display or screen in between. This should also point out that so many interactions and situations are taking place all around the world at the exact same time but we cannot grasp them because it is simply unimaginable. Still is there in fact a different reality for anyone, anywhere on the planet at the exact same moment.

This live aspect is really important for us and our project due to the mentioned points of concurrency of events for all humans on our planet. So we had to find a medium that would enable visual communication to a space without being there physically. We decided to work with a binocular in the first place but soon realised that we do not necessarily need binoculars. Due to the distance of the observed situation in our first exhibition site at Toni-Areal we do not need enlarging lenses. In addition, the effect of the periscope will further confuse visitors as this angle of view is not familiar to them.

## Receipt and Thermal Printer

### Component

As mentioned above we want visitors to have some kind of takeaway that reminds them of the installation and that works as an exchange tool for further discussion with friends and family. To achieve this, we set up a thermal printer that will print out a certificate for visitors.

A few years ago, Sophie went to the Chocolat Frey Museum in Buchs where visitors can fill out a survey about what kind of chocolate person they are. Sophie's receipt said that she was "The Passionate". Amazed by this fact and happy about the exhibition takeaway she hung the receipt up in her room. Each time she had guests over, they would ask her about the receipt where a conversation about chocolate and passion arose. Similar to Sophie's experience, we want to trigger this reaction in visitors of prime-time. The exchange about one's own death is a big part of our concept, as in the end, we wish for a society to detabooize one's own death and for that, exchange is needed. We thought about different ways to achieve this: From a generated death type predictor to a receipt with blank space where people could note their thoughts and feelings over the transition hallway being a black board where visitors can note their comments to a radio that records spoken thoughts of participants. At the end we think

that having a simple congratulation certificate with which people deal with their own death and non-existence is the right way to go. Having printed on some further questions about one's life and death should continue the narration that visitors experienced in the exhibition. The top scenario we would love to achieve is that after one person that went through the experience reads the certificate they think about it. Then, when their friends or family members exit the experience, they can discuss together further on the topic. In addition, on the certificate the title of the installation as well as the location and date will be visible, so that visitors always remember where they dealt with their own death and when. At the end of the receipt a QR code leads to our website.

In the beginning we thought that we would use a Raspberry Pi microcontroller that has the ability to work on its own and even browse the internet. Therefore we set up our little computer and tried to connect the printer. Thankfully Raspberry Pi has a great documentation online and it was rather easy to connect the thermal printer to the microcontroller. We even managed to set up a network printer, which means that we could print out layouts made in InDesign on our personal computers through the printer.

Since our installation does not need to be connected to the internet anymore, as we will have a physical button input, we realised that we will not make use of the Raspberry Pi anymore. This saves us a lot of time of research and learning, as we were not that familiar with Raspberry Pi beforehand. We cannot take our way around programming, as for the physical buttons we will have to send some electronic signals to the thermal printer. Finally we decided that it would be much easier to use an Arduino as we already have the resources and knowledge. It is a good thing, as we can develop our knowledge further and experiment with it in our last semester of Interaction Design.

Connecting the thermal printer to an Arduino is even simpler than to a Raspberry Pi. We had to connect some electronics and download the Adafruit Thermal Printer Library (Arduino, 2021). Boom, then we were able to customize our certificate and fill it with information.



Fig. 39 Sophie + Edna. (2021). A User Printing Out the Receipt.



Fig. 40 Sophie + Edna. (2021). A User About to Print Out the Receipt.



Fig. 41 Sophie + Edna. (2021). The Transition Hallway with the Thermal Printer.



Fig. 42 Sophie + Edna. (2021). The Final Look of prime-time.

# prime-time

- 1 Der eigene Tod ist unfassbar. Er liegt in der Zukunft und wir kennen ihn nur von anderen Menschen. *prime-time* löst das Gefühl der Nichtexistenz aus und ermöglicht das Einfühlen in eine Welt, in der man tot ist. Besucher:innen werden mit fundamentalen Fragen zur eigenen Inexistenz und Endlichkeit konfrontiert.
  - 2 Geh durch den Vorhang und schaue durch das Periskop. Nimm dir Zeit und tauche so lange in die Situation ein, wie du möchtest.
  - 3 Drucke dein Zertifikat aus.
- 
- 1 *Our own death is intangible. It happens in the future and so far we only know it from other people. prime-time triggers the feeling of non-existence and enables to empathize with a world in which one is dead. Visitors are confronted with fundamental questions about their own inexistence and finiteness.*
  - 2 *Go through the curtain and look through the periscope. Take your time and immerse yourself into the situation as long as you like.*
  - 3 *Print your certificate.*

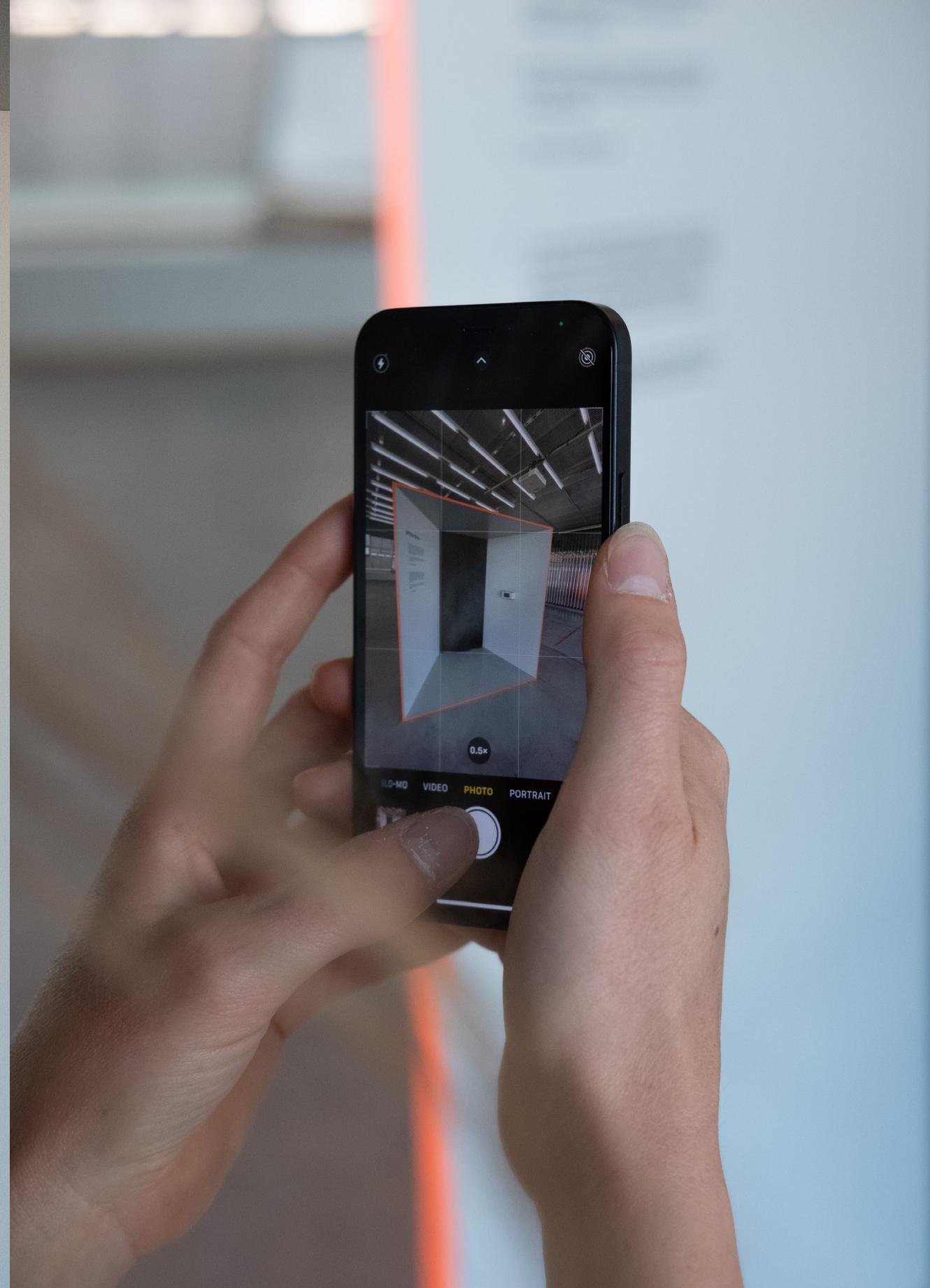


Fig. 43 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Introduction Text in the Transition Hallway.

Fig. 44 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Wide Angle Photo iPhone View.



Fig. 45 Sophie + Edna. (2021). View Through the Periscope.

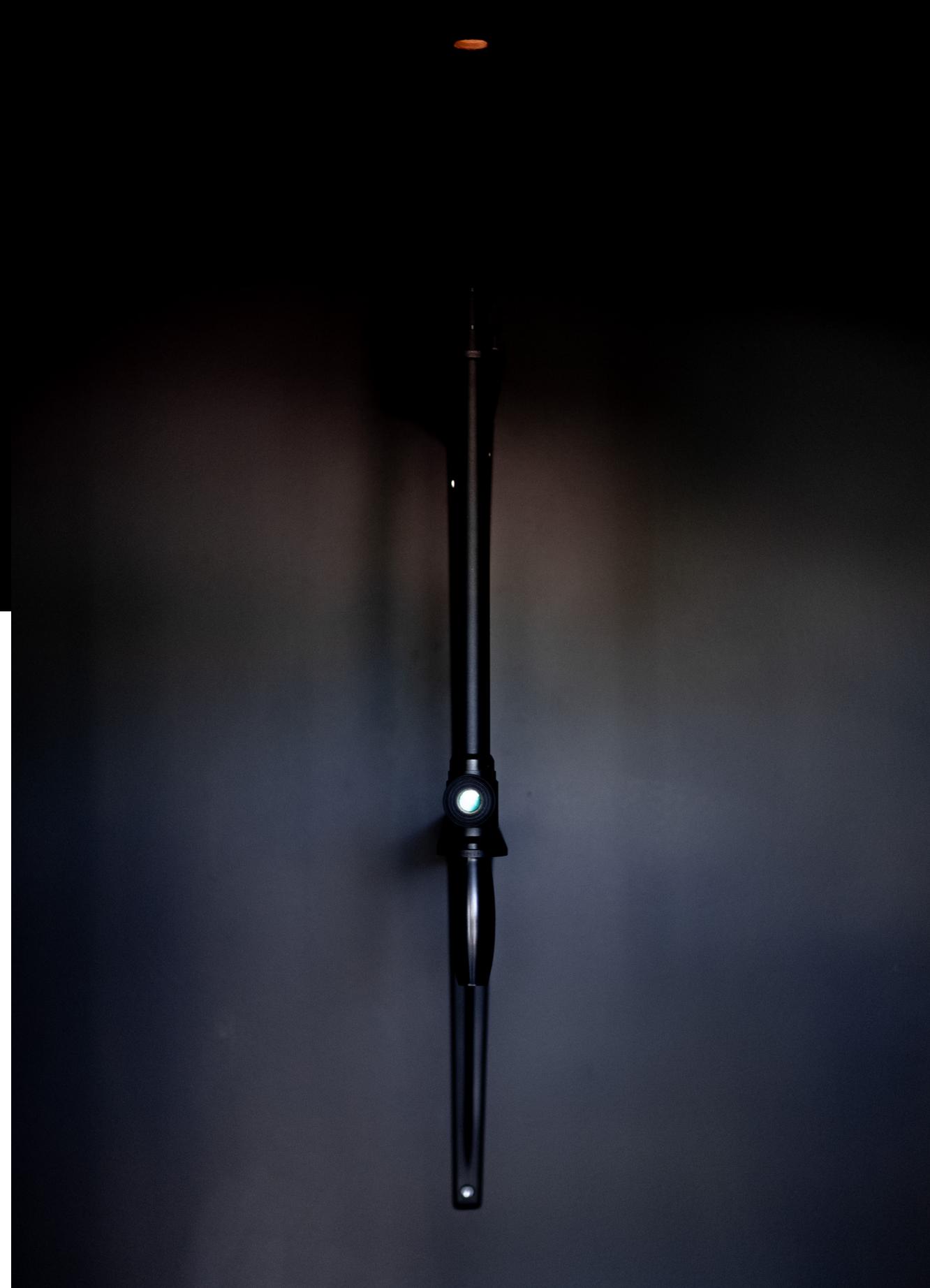


Fig. 46 Sophie + Edna. (2021). The Periscope in prime-time.



Fig. 47 Sophie + Edna. (2021). The Untouched MDF Plates in the Museums Werkstatt at ZHdK.



Fig. 48 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Some MDF Plates are Already Painted with Primer.





Fig. 50 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Edna Painting First Layer of Black.

Fig. 51 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Black Sides About to Dry 01.





Fig. 53 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Sophie Painting the Pure Orange Layer.



Fig. 54 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Painting the Outside of the Installation in Pure Orange.



Fig. 55 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Orange Sides About to Dry.



Fig. 56 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Edna Polishing the Inside of the Installation.



Fig. 57 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Edna Taking the Controlling Look





Fig. 59 Sophie + Edna. (2021). After Transporting the Single Parts to the Film Location.

Fig. 60 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Building Up the Box with Help from Moshen and Noël.



Fig. 61 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Sophie is Ready to Drill the Hole for the Periscope.



Fig. 62 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Drilling the Hole.



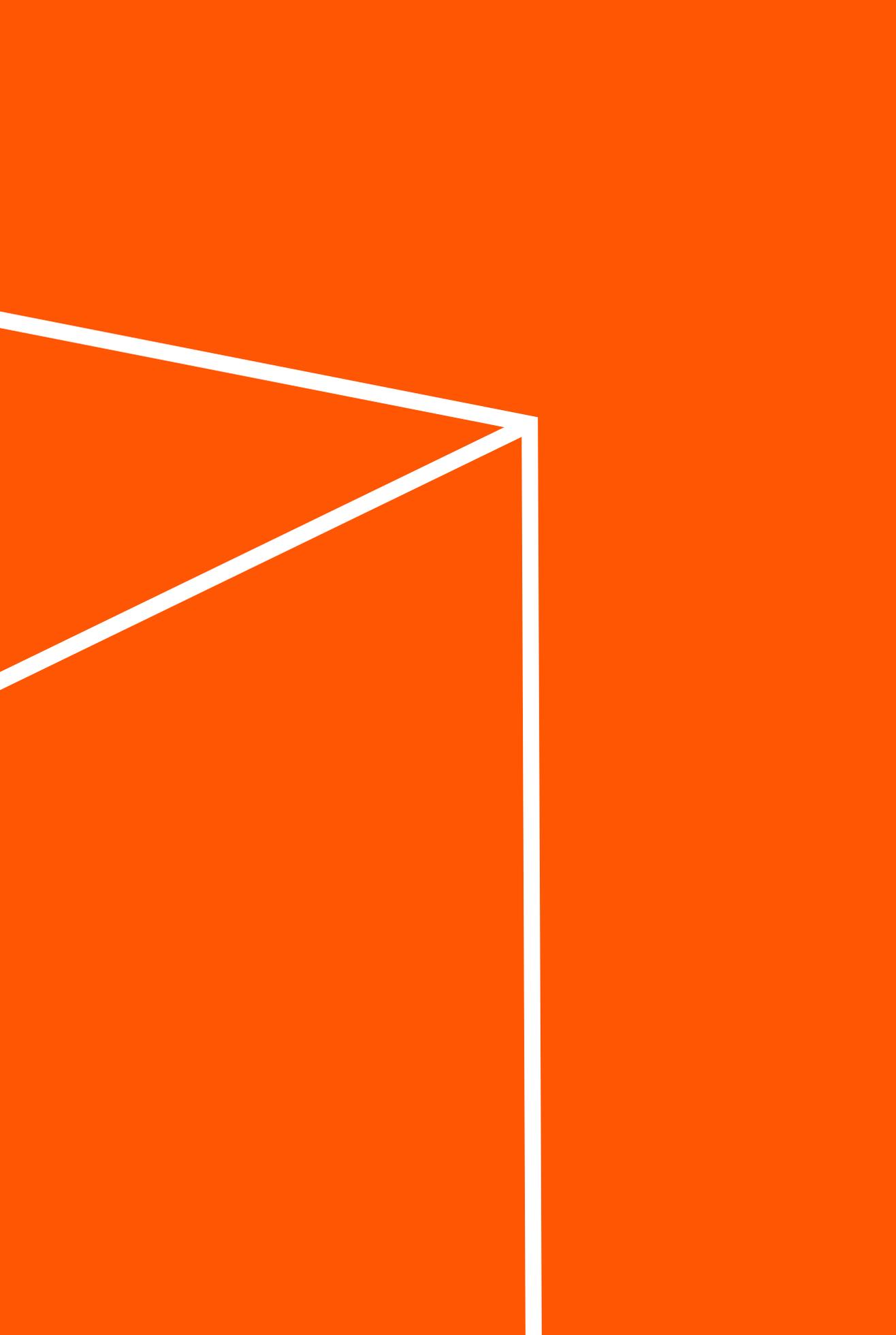
Fig. 63 Sophie + Edna. (2021). Sophie During the Setup of the Box.

### 3 Exhibition Concept

Our exhibition has two parts. The first and main part is our installation prime-time. In the beginning we were not sure whether we should place the construction in a real public space, for example outside, so that a wide range of people can try it out. Different reasons like the construction needing to be waterproof or security concerns made us realize that it is better to have it placed inside. Outside it would be nearly impossible to have an eye on the installation all the time and to make sure that some valuable electronics are not being stolen. So after several talks with the facility management and Stefan Kreysler from the event management we managed to place the installation in the entrance hall of ZHdK on the 3rd floor. We are really happy about this spot, as many people will pass there while commuting to their Toni-workplaces or to go visit the exhibition. In this case, the periscope is faced towards a table in front of the Momento Café. Students, lecturers and guests usually go there to chit-chat or have a coffee break. This means that the place is busy during the day time when the exhibition is open. During closing hours we will mark the installation as closed, so that it will not be harmed.

The second part of our exhibition is the booth that is set up at the gallery room on the 4th floor. We will have a horizontal surface like a table where an iMac will show our website that we create for our project as well as the exhibition. The website is a great communication tool as we have images of the finished installation, a project description, an about Sophie + Edna and a contact form where interested people can get in touch with us. Additionally, on the side of the table, the vertical surface we will have a screen where our project video is played in a loop. There, visitors of the exhibition can get a glimpse of what the experience might be like. Below the screen, a thermal printer is installed, where interested people can print out a map that will guide them down to the entrance hall to try out prime-time themselves.

# Conclusion



One's own death is still a taboo in Western society and therefore only little exchange about wishes, hopes and beliefs takes place. In our bachelor thesis we asked ourselves how we might stimulate the missing conversation and exchange around one's own death and how we might create an experience that invites the interested public to think about their own death. Over the course of the last months we did field research which consisted of these three stages: Experience, Reflection and Exchange. We made several interventions, talked to people who have a lot of experience with death, from researchers to company owners to curators. We gained inspiration through exhibition visits and created a public megaphone – our Instagram channel. Now it is time to conclude findings and see what we can take away from our experiences.

Since the very beginning of our field research it was clear to us that we want to focus on qualitative research. We believe that for the topic of one's own death, which is such an individual subject, it is important to gain in-depth answers and insights from people. Of course we had to be careful to not create false realities with the inputs we got and to bear in mind that these insights were only representative for a small group of people.

The field research in the Experience area was inspiring and fun as we gained many new insights and experienced and confronted ourselves and others with one's own death. Building the Near Death Experience prototype in the concept seminar was the kick-off for our bachelor thesis. Furthermore we visited exhibitions such as *Asche* in the Friedhof Forum and *Total Space* in the Museum für Gestaltung which was enriching and gave us new opportunities and inspiration to engage with.

Our two interventions *Language of Death* and *The Good Death Talk Chatbot* were a good starting point for the Reflection part of our field research. These two interventions helped us to find out what the general opinions and self-reflections about one's own death and death in general of our participants were. We could iterate the first intervention *Language of Death* that only got a limited amount of answers, to *The Good Death Talk Chatbot* where we did not approach people per se, but subtly afforded them to take part and gave them something in reward – an A.I. generated image. In addition, we did not have to manage the chatbot ourselves – unlike in the first intervention – as it worked autonomously.

The field research in the Exchange area has been great so far. The interview with *Ab Unter die Erde* as well as being part of the *s/ slash sterbesettings.ch* conference gave us the opportunity to introduce our concept and research to people who were not from our bub-

ble but still from the field of death and we got helpful feedback or just the feeling of support.

Besides the whole field research, we did not stop doing desk research, reading about theories and getting inspired by related work. We feel that we gained a lot of knowledge around the topic of death, dying and end of life subjects on a daily basis. It was not always easy to decide where to go next, because the whole field of our bachelor thesis theme was interesting to us and we were easily lost in the process.

In the end, we developed prime-time, our bachelor project. prime-time is an immersive experience where visitors are able to experience their own non-existence. This experience now manifests itself in a walk-in installation where visitors observe a live situation while they are confronted with questions about their own death, finiteness and non-existence.

The goal of our project is to create an experience that brings the topic of one's own death closer to visitors in three stages: The first one being the topic itself and the Experience. Since society does not think about their own death on a regular basis, we discovered that when confronted with it, people are enthusiastic to think and exchange about their own death and death-related issues. This manifests itself all the more when people are given an opportunity to experience this future death through non-existence. The second stage is the Reflection stage, where visitors are given the certificate and time to reflect about the experience and the asked questions. We decided early in the process that we will not go into the direction of confronting death in a rational and dry way. Therefore we leave visitors a lot of room for interpretation. After visitors receive the certificate, the third stage – the Exchange stage – takes part. There people discuss their experience in prime-time and talk about their own death and death in general with family and friends.

To conclude the findings we developed four essential takeaways:

- 1 Breaking the taboo needs confrontation. This means that the taboo of one's own death will not be broken, if people are not confronted with it intentionally. There needs to be some kind of provocative-experience that makes people reflect on one's own death. That's why we realised: Engagement happens through experience. We believe that because we gave participants a fun and rare interaction with a chatbot and generated an AI image in return, engagement happened. If we only conducted a survey we would

have reached less people and gained less thoughtful insights, as there are a lot of them out there.

- 2 No longer being around is unimaginable and mind-boggling, therefore we as humans have the illusion that we will live forever. Due to our self-experiment about one's own terminality and a philosophical discourse we realised that one's own death is fictional and will not be practiced until it is really there. Nevertheless this experience of non-existence is what fascinates us for our bachelor project and that is why we want to focus on the state of being dead and no longer being around.
- 3 In the end not all our intervention proved themselves to be helpful for our end concept but each one of them taught us something on the way and was it only how to work better together as a team on our thesis. We learned how to approach people and to be brave to engage with others, even experts are only humans and we can only learn from them. The Zoom session with Ab Unter Die Erde taught us how to conduct an interview and transcribe it afterwards (which is an agony by the way). Creating a simple chatbot for the messaging platform Telegram is not that difficult and putting up posters in public places in Zurich is forbidden but hanging them up at Toni Areal on the other hand is good practice.
- 4 There are also some aspects that we criticise about the process. Initially we focused on the term the good death and most of our field research, such as The Good Death Talk Chatbot, took place in our design and age bubble. As due to the pandemic we could not just go out and reach people in the setting of a public intervention, we had to take other measures such as hanging posters in public as well as at ZHdK and reaching out to friends but also strangers over social media. We are sure that neither our desk research nor our field research is finalized. Through the findings of our early field investigations on the good death we figured that one's own perfect death is so individual that we do not want to interfere with it. We decided to focus more on making people aware of their own death through an experience.

In conclusion, this project came with a lot of challenges. Since neither of us has ever done a project in such dimensions, we sometimes were overwhelmed by the amount of work and organisational matters. Many people were involved in our process. We were dependent on each one of them and had to manage communication, deadlines, production and conceptual issues ourselves. We are really thankful for this experience and learned so much about project development, so that we can continue making successful projects in the future. Personally, we hope that the project will influence other people's lives as well and that some visitors are encouraged to encounter the topic further, so that we can eventually detabooize one's own death.

## 2 Next Steps and Further Development

Even though our bachelor project has ended at this point, there are some further steps we would like to achieve in the near future. First of all we think that personally, the desk and field research is not finished yet. Since the topic of death is so broad and there are so many aspects to it, we would like to continue making interventions and gaining knowledge to design for death as a duo. Therefore we do not want to stop working in the field of death and aim for further possibilities to show prime-time and carry out more projects on the topic. Concerning our installation prime-time we would like to mention some features, which leave space for improvement due to the short timeframe of our bachelor work.

One of the most obvious next steps is the user testing during the exhibition, where we can prove our concept and talk to visitors first hand. During the process of our project we already learned that the need for exchange about one's own death and death in general is a topic that people like to talk about, when they are approached with it. Therefore we wish to continue these discussions and learn more about what people's hopes, wishes and fears around death are. prime-time serves us as a huge cultural probe that we would like to continue in the future. That is why we would like to test it out in different locations as well and find out if geographical or cultural factors play a role in how people perceive their own death. We would like to know whether death is viewed differently in the Swiss countryside compared to the city or even in different parts of Europe or the world for example.

Another technical aspect to improve would be a four channel audio setup, where visitors might get immersed even more into the observed situation and that the audio narration is perceived differently. Through this four channel sound system visitors should have the feeling that the narrative voice is within their head and not an outside person that talks to them.

In conclusion, there are two main further steps we want to focus on and through which we want to continue our bachelor project: One being the observation and tracking of people's thoughts around their own death. The other one being the technical improvement. Moreover we continue thinking about a medium where people can discuss, express and exchange their thoughts with other people, so that the taboo of one's own death can be broken and society gets more death positive.

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