



DEATH: AN ESSAY

Presenting Death Through Art



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Module 503

Death: An Essay

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By Bethany Thomas

The “Greatest question we ask ourselves: What happens when we die?” (‘Beyond Death’ 2016, The Story Of God With Morgan Freeman). This question has intrigued us and weighed on our minds for centuries. Death informs life, fear of life ending is what motivates us as well as what holds us back, “(I’m) Afraid of not having done enough... of not living enough. I would say this drives me as much as anything. A fear of not living” (Clark, 2017). Death is medically defined as, “The permanent cessation of all vital bodily functions” (MedicineNet). Is this all we can define death as? The ending of life? Surely there must be more than that? Death appears over and over again in literature, theatre and every form of art imaginable, it is the thing that unites every living being in our universe, and it is the only thing we can be sure of. Though we know nothing about it, we attempt to portray death and personify death in an attempt to humanize it, to try to get rid of our innate fear of dying we try make it seem safe and familiar, and we even joke about it. As Woody Allen once said, “I am not afraid of death, I just don’t want to be there when it happens,” (Kington, 2002). I am going to look into a series of works that seem to imply or show death; to see how artists interpret death and it is confronted in their practices. Is death even something that can be shown or represented in a true way? In a way, is life a constant work of performance art that climaxes in our demise? After all, don’t we all fear presenting ourselves to the world without wearing some form of mask?

“Fear” is a one-man show performed and written by Gareth Clark (Blonska dir, 2017), and directed by Agnieszka Blonska. I went to see this performance in Falmouth earlier this year. This show presents one man’s fears throughout his life. While this work is not strictly about death, it is discussed. After all as Alexander the Great apparently said, “I’ve come to believe the fear of death drives all men Hephaestion” (Alexander, 2004). The fears Clark talks about are universal and recognized by everyone in the crowd -

they unite us and Clark, “When I was a child I was afraid of the dark” (Clark, 2017). This involvement places us in his shoes, we become part of the performance through shared experience.



Figure 1 – (Gareth Clark During Performance, 2017)

The performance starts with Gareth Clark in a crocodile mask, slithering around the back of the stage behind the word ‘fear’. The mask is removed. I love the imagery of the mask, he seems to remove it when he is presenting himself openly and without a façade. Clark takes on a child’s persona to tell us about his boyhood fears. We hear about how “everything was dangerous”, and how “puppies and sweets were traps” (Clark, 2017). While as a child he wouldn’t understand the concept of death (children don’t grasp the reality and permanence of death until age 7 – Phenomena, 2013), looking back at his childhood the fear of things that can kill you are evident. Parents instil a fear of men in vans to a fear of getting lost, they do this to protect us. He interacts with the crowd, making us laugh and sitting with us. However we are not essential. While we are involved and can emphasise with him, this is a confessional piece.

He now acts older - in his teens – and we start to see him talk about more realized fears. We hear about war, and for the first-time, death. “What are you going to do with your life?” (Clark, 2017) his father asks him. In other words how are you going to spend your short time on this earth? Clark shrugs. In 1982, he sees footage of the Falkland wars on television, and thinks, “is this my future... fuck that I’m not doing that.” (Clark, 2017). He is driven by fear of not having a choice in his life, and consequent death.

In the last and longest section Clark is portraying an adult, and life is “all about money.” He laments about mortgages, and terrible jobs. He references being scared of Russia, and being told to “think about his future, while being reminded that he probably won’t have one.” He talks about murder and terrorist attacks. “We hammered the nails into the hands of Christ... I’m going to hell”. Death is all around us, “my soul is in danger!” and “time is running out.” “I’ve just got started” - He’s scared of getting old, of wasting life, of not doing everything he is capable of. He’s also scared of erectile dysfunction: “how disabled would I be if I couldn’t fuck!”. At the end, Clark puts the crocodile mask back on, hiding himself from us, so he doesn’t have to face us when he reveals his last fear. With his voice muffled, he addresses the audience for the last time. “I haven’t got any children, it’s too late now, I sometimes feel that this makes me selfish because I don’t really love anyone or anything unconditionally, it ... removes me from the cycle of love and hope. Well it's best not to dwell on it really.” I emailed him this quote and asked him to elaborate, this is part of the response I received:

“As a childless man, I wonder if I am detached from the renewable cycle of life...I feel that new life brings new hope... a positive ratification that we will replace the old with the new and that can bring hope... hope for a better world, for a better future. That's what I was referring to and that through the decisions I had made... well... that I had regrets. Regrets of not being a father... regrets of not feeling unconditionally invested in another soul” (Clark, 2017).

I feel like this work portrays death in life, through his regrets and childhood fears we see that fear of not doing things while he can drives him through life. While the work creates emotions, it is obviously more about fear than about death. Though it is about life and loss, and what is death if not loss?

Looking at other portrayals of death in performance media we come to 'Edge'. 'Edge' is a performance piece, created by Marilyn Arsem for 'Near Death 2013' Boston (Edge, 2013). The 'Near Death' show was built around the concept that, "life is as much a part of near death as death itself", and that "near death is a moment of absolute existence, where one receives life and death equally" (SevenPonds Blog, n.d.). 'Edge' was a seven-hour piece in which viewers watched as Arsem moved two glasses of water from one end of a table to the other, until they both inevitably fall. Life and death are portrayed as companions, rather than as separate entities. The movements of the glasses are imperceptible, but constant, mirroring the progression



Figure 2 – (Marilyn Arsem Performing Edge, 2013)

of life to its end. A very metaphorical view of death is shown. “On a long enough time line, the survival rate for everyone drops to zero,” (Palahniuk, 1999) literally in this case. It visualises death well but without context may seem trivial.

‘The Imitation of Christ’ by Roberto Cuoghi is an artwork that incorporates an active participation in viewing death. I saw this work recently in Venice at the Biennale (Viva Arte Viva, 2017). At the start of the installation is a factory set up which produces devotional statues inspired by the *De Imitatione Christi* (a medieval text describing the path to aesthetic perfection), the viewer then walks through a plastic tunnel with a series of rooms on each side. In each room is one of the statues in increasingly damaged states. The bodies look burnt and shrivelled like they are actually decomposing. Finally the remains of the figures are re composed on a long dark wall at the end of the gallery, the bodies look twisted and wrong (LUSIARDI, 2017). The bodies show a very graphic view of death. At first I thought I was seeing actual decomposing bodies, they smelt real, they looked real and they intrigued me. The corridor seems sterile and medical, it



Figure 3 - (The Imitation Of Christ By Roberto Cuoghi, 2017)

acts as a pathway to the other side – could be seen as the path through life. The factory at the start where the bodies are created and perfection strived for, the corridor showing the bodies decomposing gradually and finally at the end the process is finished the bodies are beyond life. The figures waiting behind each room in the corridor remind us that "it is the unknown we fear when we look upon death and darkness." (Rowling, 2010) we don't know what each room will bring and what awaits on the other side of the tunnel we just have to wait and see.

I believe artwork must have an interactive or immersive level to it in order to present death to an audience. The work has to draw the audience in and allow them to have the level of engagement needed to think about death without the work seeming flat and devoid of meaning. It is all too easy to look at a work and simply walk on without considering the meaning. 'The Ambassadors' by Hans Holbien (1533) is a 2D painting of two ambassadors. It has a lot of deeper meanings and imagery. For example, at the bottom of the painting



is a long blur which when viewed from a certain angle looks like a skull. The long blur makes you stop, it makes you think there is something wrong with the painting so you stop and study it, and so the skull is revealed because you have stopped and looked for it. I would argue that this is an interactive piece that calls the viewer to find death. The blur is seen, it interrupts the painting,

Figure 4 – (The Ambassadors by Hans Holbien, 1533)

yet unless you strive to find and view it from the correct angle, the skull is not revealed. It is a reminder of mortality (*memento mori*). Jean De Dinteville who commissioned the painting had the motto, “remember thou shalt die”, which is fairly ominous in and of itself. This confronts death in a complex way however there is a simpler way to do so.

An artist famous for having works that invoke emotion is Mark Rothko. Rothko was found dead in his studio on 25 February 1970. He had hacked into his shoulders and arms with a paint knife (Buttrose, n.d.). I think his last works and the last works of other artists who have killed themselves show a meditation on death. Arguably there is a representation of the artist and how they see the world reflected in each of their works. If the artists were contemplating death, it follows that this too would be present in their art. As Oskar Wilde said, “Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter” (Wilde, 2014), and clearly Rothko’s works show emotion.

While he refused to be labelled as such, Rothko is viewed as an abstract expressionist painter, and a large figure in colour field painting. He would paint hundreds of layers of paint in order to find the pure colour. Focusing on his last series: ‘Untitled Black and Grey 1969/1970,’ I want to look at how death is confronted in the works of someone who is contemplating suicide. I saw this work at the Abstract Expressionism show (2016) at the Royal Academy, it is my favourite work by Rothko. Rothko’s last series was dramatically different to all his works that had come before. For medical reasons he was advised after having a mild aortic aneurysm not to paint pictures larger than a yard in size (Borchardt-Hume, Rothko and Fer, 2008), because of this he focused on smaller works. Previously, Rothko had painted large colourful and borderless works that immersed the viewer. A border creates a “zone of separation between real and pictorial space” (Borchardt-Hume, Rothko and Fer, 2008) because it cuts off the work from the world. It is lonely. The Black and Grey works have been likened to views from the moon looking out into the dark abyss of space. They make you feel alone and isolated, perhaps as Rothko himself felt. As J, Logan said in his play about Rothko, “There is only one thing I fear in life, my friend: One day, the black will swallow the red” (Logan.

J, 2013). His last works were dark and devoid of life. The blood, (the red) had been drained away, and all



Figure 5 - (Untitled: Black on Grey by Mark Rothko, 1969)

we are left with is silence. “The silence is so accurate” (Rothko, n.d). “The desolation of the canvases...drained of colour and choked by a white border...indicate that, as Rothko asserted, his paintings are about death.” (Blessing, n.d.)

Before his death, Rothko invited much of the New York art world to his studio to view his The Black on Grey works. These works were not taken very seriously. Rothko often felt that the interior world of his paintings were comprehensible to him alone. This was his chance to control how and by whom his work was seen. He could control the lighting, the atmosphere the experience... and yet still they were not seen how he wanted. “Daniel Buren...observed that ‘it is in the studio and only in the studio that it (the work) is closest to its own reality, a reality from which it will continue to distance itself...it is therefore only in the studio that the work may be said to belong’. It seems by the end of his life, Rothko too felt that there was no other place for him and his work to go” (Borchardt-Hume, Rothko and Fer, 2008).

Many artists have killed themselves, and had works about death. It is a complex and intriguing subject that is easy to get absorbed by. Many artists have died in violent ways (like Jackson Pollock in a car crash) however only a few ruminate on death because they know they are about to die. Rothko’s works are simplistic and can easily be read into. The Black on Grey series confronts the abject loneliness of dying in a better way than any of the other works I have looked at, because you feel as though you are standing on the moon looking out in to the bleakness of space. You feel defeated and in awe... and you feel empty. The works commands you.

Humans are scared, we are drawn towards death by time and curiosity. The same curiosity makes us scared, it makes us want to run away from death and cling to life. However death is enticing and intoxicating, sometimes all we can think about, it induces panic and terror. Humans portray death in so many different ways in a bid to understand it. To make us less scared, but perhaps also we like to contemplate it, the French have a word for the desire to jump when faced with an edge: ‘L’appel du vide’ (Listverse, n.d.) it literally

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means 'call of the void'. We contemplate death because we know it is the inevitable end for us all, we want to run away, but the only way we can take control is to jump. I leave you with a quote from a play by Tony Kushner that I think encapsulates how we cling to life:

"I've lived through such terrible times and there are people who live through much worse. But you see them living anyway. When they're more spirit than body, more sores than skin, when they're burned and in agony, when flies lay eggs in the corners of the eyes of their children - they live. Death usually has to take life away... I don't know if it's not braver to die, but I recognize the habit; the addiction to being alive. So we live past hope. If I can find hope anywhere, that's it, that's the best I can do. It's so much not enough. It's so inadequate. But still bless me anyway. I want more life." — (Kushner, 2017)

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