

VIGIL Death and the Afterlife

Words by Curator Isabella Greenwood

"To be vigilant is to be immersed in the texture of time, a corporeal way of grasping the present through the very decay of presence."

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, (1968)

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘vigil’ as a period of wakefulness, typically observed between death and burial when people watch over the sick or mourn the deceased. To keep vigil is to engage in an embodied confrontation with mortality, asserting the very precarity of one’s own existence in the face of another’s passing. Derived from the Latin *vigilia*, meaning ‘wakefulness’ or ‘watch,’ the act of keeping vigil is paradoxically marked by depletion: in keeping watch, or staying awake, we become increasingly dissociated. Keeping vigil, and other post-mortem practices articulate cultural values: destigmatising decay while affirming identity and symbolic continuity.

If wakefulness has the potential to be inherently depleting, then, how do we actively keep *vigil* in our own lives, both figuratively and literally. What does it mean to closely, and attentively, observe all aspects of transmutation and where does our inherent fear of staying ‘awake’ and observing death arise from? The concept of death bears both literal and symbolic resonance, though in both forms, the meaning is the same— something is discarded, metamorphosed, creating something new. Despite historical and religious injunctions that have long framed death as an ultimate passage, whether to an afterlife or oblivion, contemplation of what happens after death is either approached with curiosity, fear or avoided altogether.

Achille Mbembe notes in *Necropolitics*, that death has been relegated to the margins of civic space, stripped of its ritual potency, and subordinated to a biopolitical logic that seeks to manage and obscure mortality¹. The Western aversion to death becomes a symptom of our

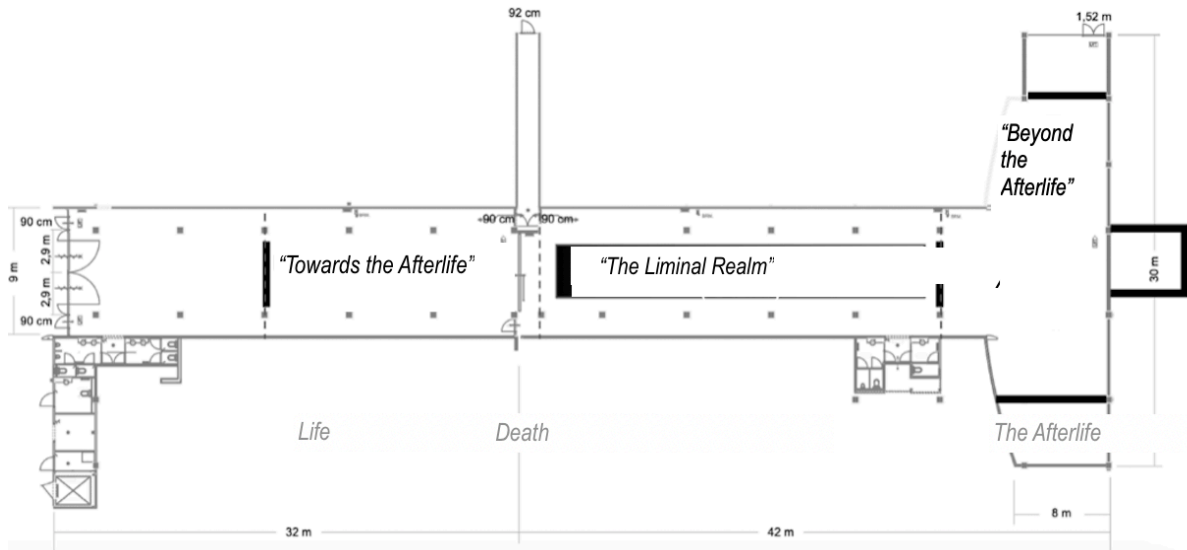
¹ Mbembe, A. (2019). *Necropolitics*. Durham: Duke University Press.

attempts to regulate meaning through life's predictable cycles in fear that death might render obsolete the assurances through which we orient our lives. By evading the spectre of death and its accompanying abstractions, we elude the very essence of the vigil itself, and thus, to keep vigil, is a radical interruption—a refusal to let the symbolic order quietly assimilate death into the banal structures of modernity. It is of course, easier to live as though dying were an abstract form, when in reality, to live with the awareness of our inevitable death, and hopeful lives thereafter, is deeply life-affirming.

It is within this avoidance that *Vigil: Death and the Afterlife* finds its conceptual genesis. This exhibition engages in an aesthetic dialectic with mortality, alternate realities, and speculative afterlives, challenging viewers to position themselves as active witnesses. Merleau-Ponty suggests that our engagement with time, particularly through rituals like vigils, is not merely cognitive but somatic—anchored in our very corporeality². The body is therefore not a passive medium but an active participant, so when we keep vigil, our physical presence becomes an assertion of resistance against the inevitable dissolution of the self. Thus, the vigil, both within the context of the exhibition and lived experience, is less about observation ('watching over') but more about active engagement (being with). Through curated spaces that evoke mourning and metamorphosis, the audience is invited to inhabit the role of the mourner, bearing witness to existential transmutations and contemplating their own threshold of liminality. The show emerges as a site of speculative mourning, exploring the contours of a reality beyond the confines of normative temporality and spatiality. It confronts the ways we orient ourselves towards or away from the uncanny presence of death—either recoiling in fear or leaning into its spectral logic.

Within the transition of life, death and the afterlife, the show space has been curated to fit the experience of moving through these realms:

² Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.



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- Harry Hugo Little**
5YOP, 2024
Oil on wood board
18 x 16 cm
- KT Kobel**
When the absence is as voluptuous as the excess, 2024
Acrylic, resin, wood
100 x 140 x 30 cm
- Ella Fleck**
When you wish upon a star, 2022
Linen, epoxy, LED lights
110 x 80 x 15 cm
- Max Otis King**
Votive Watching, 2022
Physical Video (Livestream)
40 x 20 x 20 cm
- Jamie John Davies**
Mouth (1,3,6,7,8) 2022
Oil on Linen
25.5 x 20.5 cm
- Folkert De Jong**
Ancestor (1-5), 2023
Acrylglas box
200 x 60 x 60 cm
- Andrei Nitu**
Warm Blooded Organism, 2024
Oil on canvas
175 x 145 cm
- Andrei Nitu**
Museum Visit, 2023
Oil on canvas
120 x 100 cm
- Leon Scott Engel**
You Are Everything and Everything Is You, 2024
Oil on Tailored Linen, Foam
138cm x 68cm x 7.5 cm
- Necker Doll**
The Best Of Me (Muerte y Mantia), 2024
Painted polyurethane, rubber, acrylic, ribbon, laces, wood
40 x 45 x 18 cm
- Lily Bloom**
Barking Of A Quiet Heart, 2023
Plastic, Wax, Blood
15 x 15 x 40 cm
- Lily Bloom**
Granted, 2023
Plastic, Wax, Blood
3 x 18 x 7 cm
- Ernest Bessems**
Saw of Lust, 2024
Bronze, black patinated
60 x 22 x 7 cm
- Ernest Bessems**
Sickle of Envy, 2024
Bronze, black patinated
45 x 27 x 5 cm
- Ernest Bessems**
Sheers of Gluttony, 2024
Bronze, black patinated
38 x 12 x 5 cm
- Daddy Bears**
Lucid, 2024
Wood, mixed fabrics, hollow fiber stuffing, thread
30 x 57 x 49 cm
- Tomasz Skibicki**
AHA - ERLEBNIS III, 2018
Handcrafted punching pad made of found coffin fabrics, bleached leather, tie wraps, and dental floss
40 x 30 x 15 cm
- Szilvia Bolla**
Rivotril Flowers Fall I (Gag Reflex), 2024
Stereolithography print, calcium and argon in a glass ampule, steel 3D print
35 x 15 x 10 cm (edition of 3)
- Szilvia Bolla**
Rivotril Flowers Fall II (Serotonergic Swirl), 2024
Aluminium coated stereolithography print
25 x 15 x 10 cm (edition of 3)
- Lily Bloom**
Ask Again, 2024
Porcelain, Magic 8 Ball, Solder
11 x 10 cm + 21 x 18 cm
- Anna Lena Krause**
I Hold You Together, 2021
Resin, Blue and Yellow Ink
75 x 50 x 60 cm
- Honey Baker**
Honey, 2024
Resin
27 x 37 x 28 cm
- Bregje Sliepenbeek**
TEMENOS, 2024
Aluminium
420 x 360 x 200 cm
- Bora Akinciturk**
Release Dove, 2020
Oil on canvas
50 x 40 cm
- Kate Burling**
Study for a Pair of White Lines, 2024
Oil on Wood Panel
40 x 50 cm
- Salomé Wu**
The Wind Stood Still Silently, 2023
Oil on canvas
55 x 95 cm
- Tomasz Skibicki**
OH MY GOAT, 2018-2024
2-channel video installation, HD video, stereo, 2'22" loop, 2 x 19-inch TFT screens, 2 x media player, plaster boards, construction profiles
- Simon Chovan**
Hedgehog's Dilemma, 2024
Jesmonite, foraged iron oxide, burlap, glass fibre
Variable dimensions
- Simon Chovan**
Dear Thearlings, 2021
Silicone, foraged iron oxide, textile mesh, metal
150 x 30 x 30 cm
- Doron Beuns**
The Impossibility of Nihilism, 2021
Steel, polyurethane, PVC, water-decal print, lacquer
80 x 52 x 170 cm
- Maksud Ali Mondal**
Synthesis, 2024
Chlorophyll on glass and Light
140 cm / 110 cm (each glass)
- Nataliya Zuban**
Coexistence, 2024
Fired clay, crater glaze, pigments
30 x 67 x 71 cm
- Phoebe Evans**
Omen, 2024
Oil on linen
25 x 25 cm
- Melle Nieling**
Beneath the Markers, 2024
Various materials, video
200 x 89 x 40 cm

[Image, layout of Gallery, courtesy of Gallery]

I. Towards the Afterlife: Corporeal Decay

The first chapter, *Towards the Afterlife*, invites the viewer to confront the initial stages of departure from earthly life, focusing on bodily decay. The works compel contemplation on the *pre-mortem* state—a liminal realm that is neither fully human nor yet spirit, where one exists in a condition of partial withdrawal from the mortal sphere while not yet subsumed by what lies beyond.

Traditionally, the immediate aftermath of death has been a locus of both physical decomposition and profound metaphysical transformation, where the body begins its irreversible descent into rot, as the spirit is believed to commence its journey into the unknown. Though flesh is taxonomically human, in death, flesh belongs to the realm of the carcass or the corpse, its discursive cultural signification, inseparable from its former vitality.

The show has been curated to mimic the process of flesh, to decay, that proceeds corporeal transcendence with works from being confronted with Harry Hugo Little's work of an x-rayed blue man, framed at the centre of the shows opening curtains, alongside KT Kobel's fallen woman, who collapses above a ledge of lost trinkets: a key (which bares the inscription: 'when the absence is as voluptuous as presence'), an oyster, gloves and a pack of cigarettes. Continuing through the exhibition, Ella Fleck's breathing sheet holds the outline of a sleeping body, Max Otis King's *Votive Watching* plays the least streamed funeral processions on YouTube live near Folkert De Jong's scattered open casket neon tombs, Jamie John Davies' rotting death. Leon Scott-Engel's flesh inscribed mattresses are situated between chrome calcified organs, and a loop streamed funerary processions. The exhibition underscores the paradox inherent in this state: a simultaneous unravelling of the flesh and elevation of the spirit.

The corpse, bearing a referential relationship to an absent subject, is taken up into a variety of assemblages that produce the effect of memory, legacy and inheritance. In this sense the corpse is a fleshy relics or archives: one that lives perceptible traces, that we seek to follow. Visitors are invited to position themselves as psychopomps—those who navigate the deceased—walking in parallel with these mythic beings as they move through a space that collapses the boundary between the corporeal and the incorporeal. *Towards the Afterlife*,

situates the viewer as both witness and participant in this transition, preparing them for the subsequent immersion into deeper and more unsettling visions of the afterlife.

II. The Liminal Realm

The second chapter, *The Liminal Realm*, centres on the moment of death and the mythic waiting period that follows—From Drawing on the iconographies of classical mythology, Christian eschatology, and ancient Egyptian beliefs, the works in this chapter portray bodies and objects in a state of *inter mundia*—suspended between worlds as they wait deliberation past the gates of heaven. In religious contexts, such as Dante’s *Divine Comedy* or Christian purgatory, this phase is understood as a testing ground where souls are cleansed, tormented, or redeemed, awaiting their final judgement.

Bodies, suspended, must begin their travel Bregje Sliepenbeek’s large chrome gates. As their bodies break down ahead of the descent, skin boils and fragmented, as limbs disintegrate into pearly violet matter becoming otherworldly topographies. The body transcends its fleshy chamber, leaving behind remnants of its former self: emptied flesh encasements, bones and a black hat. Angels, spirits and ghouls greet the traveller on their journey, offering equal amounts of equal terror and delight.

Not only exploring the journey towards the afterlife, this chapter also seeks to engage more broadly with our cultural fascination with the *liminoid*—spaces which are simultaneously real and imagined, where normal structures of meaning are suspended, allowing for temporary and transformative experiences. These imagined realms: gates of heaven, purgatory and liminal realms, astral bodies, reflect our own persistent need to categorise and control the unknowable, suggesting that liminality is not merely an interstitial state but an entire spectrum of possible experiences.

The section includes works from: Kate Burling, Daddy Bears’s satin bed, Anna-Lena Krause’ astral body ascending out of itself, Lily Bloom’s chrome-thorned deer, Ernest bessum’s unwound ram, alongside Andrei Nitu’s bronze bracelet, a circlette to new realms, alongside Honey Baker’s suspended resin orchid. Through a curation that moves the viewer from shadowy, labyrinthine paths to open, radiant spaces, the exhibition evokes not only the journey of decent, or moral reckoning, but the existential call of what lies behind the chrome gates, and the disintegration of our own physical bodies.

Bora Akinciturk's *Release Dove* leaps towards unknown lands, while Kate Burling's *Study for a Pair of White Lines*, featuring a pastel, disembodied split legs marks the way towards Salome Wu's *The Wind Stood Silently*, revealing an astral body, extending towards an unknowable sun.

III. Beyond the Afterlife

The concluding chapter, *Beyond the Afterlife*, shifts the focus from human-centric conceptions of the afterlife to speculative imaginations of a post-human future. Drawing inspiration from contemporary post-human theory, the artworks in this section envision landscapes where biological life has been overtaken by hybrid entities—synthetic nature, and bioengineered organisms that might rise from the ruins of a world abandoned by humans. The aesthetics of these works often mirror the stark, desolate beauty of post-apocalyptic realm where the remnants of civilisation are interwoven with emergent non-human ecologies. By presenting death not as an endpoint but as a catalyst for transformation and regeneration, the works speak to the broader reimagining of life beyond anthropocentrism, and on thinkers like Donna Haraway, whose posthuman *Cyborg Manifesto* proposes new forms of existence that defy traditional binaries between life and death, organic and synthetic³. Our era is marked by the necessity to rethink existence itself in an age of ecological crisis and technological evolution⁴.

In the final chapter, the exhibition gestures towards the radical possibility that life and death might be reconceived as fluctuating patterns of energy, process, and emergence. The speculative, sometimes unsettling works in this section do not offer closure but rather open a space for audiences to confront the profound uncertainties and potentials of a world that could continue without us. In a world where digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and ecological collapse increasingly challenge our anthropocentric worldview, this chapter asks what lies beyond the human experience of death.

The final work that completes the passage, Melle Nieleng's door shrine, a video of a face lies at the Post-human structures, strands of wires, and leaking mirrors, spill out of their flesh

³ Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge.

⁴ Braidotti, R. (2013). *The Posthuman*. Polity Press.

encasement, pointing towards the configuration of perhaps a new life or body— though it is for the viewer to discern what will become. Tomasz Skibici's *OH MY GOAT* features a duplicate panel of looping videos, a jagged first-person-perspective into stacked coffins, a glaring red screen. Simon Chovin presents ochre pigmented relics of an undiscovered world, fossils post an unknown apocalypse, while Maksud Ali Mondal's sheets of naturally multiplying bacteria triple into organic patterns over the course of the show. Doron Beuns displays *The Impossibility of Nihilism*— an overflowing liquid made up of the shreds of the artists' self portrait— stands alongside Natalya Zuban's *coexistence*, a dystopian coral reef. Who we are, and who we might become, remain in meaty conflict: rich with carnivorous charge, blood, bones and displaced relics of our former selves. Phoebe Evans' *Omen*, a neat stack of candles, is positioned to the left of Melle Nieling's *Beneath the Makers*: a shrine featuring artificially generated choir singers, deceased photograph and a door shrouded in candles. The future is presented as jarringly intertwined with artificial possibilities: who we mourn for, hangs in suspension, futures unknown, awaiting judgement, resurrection or honey-shrined rebirth, as Simon Chovin's suspended chrysalis suggests.

Performances from Charlie Jimenez, a london-based performance artist, see the artist birth themselves from a plaster mould of their own body, alongside Elif Satanya Özbey, who performed a spoken word. Death, decay and transmutation are explored somatically, where the process of vigilance extends beyond the gallery walls. Viewers are implicated in an immersive relational experience, bearing witness to cycles of decay and renewal as they unfold in real-time. This interactivity reflects a collective ecology, where both artist and viewer partake in the creation of meaning, embodying Bourriaud's vision of art as a space for encounter and social exchange.

Vigil is not simply about death, but about the lived experience of being with death—of suspending the linear narratives that guide our temporal and spatial sensibilities, offering a space for both contemplation and confrontation, where the viewer becomes an active participant in the choreography of mortality, speculation, and transcendence. Through the repetitive, and embodied act, of bearing witness, we lean into the paradox of vigilance itself: confronting what is fundamentally unknowable, and, in doing so, inhabiting a state of suspended tension where meaning is not resolved but instead endlessly deferred, must like the continual state of the travelling body. To hold *Vigil* is not merely an act of observation but an active participation in the *performance of liminality*, where the boundaries between observer

and the observed collapse, invoking what Georges Didi-Huberman might term the “*melancholy of ruins*”—a melancholia that arises not from mourning an irretrievable past but from dwelling in the ruinous instability of what is neither fully gone nor entirely present⁵.

Death is not the end, but rather an ever-shifting multiplicity. The act of keeping vigil, then, becomes an entry into this rhizomatic structure, where the boundaries between life and death blur, proliferating into a series of alternate subjectivities⁶. This framework disrupts traditional linear narratives of mourning and calls for deeper engagement meetings that defy our expectations and force us to grapple with ungraspable entities, be they memories, spectres, or future potentialities.

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⁵ Didi-Huberman, G. (2018) *The Survival of the Fireflies*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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