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What happens to a person's Facebook posts after they die? One artist is using them to build digital memorials

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Artist Gabriel Barcia-Colombo has created digital memorials that include this virtual reality experience featuring imagery of his deceased grandfather.
(Gabriel Barcia-Colombo)

On Sunday, I attended my funeral. It was a short ceremony, held in a small auditorium at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The pastor who led it made note of my professional accomplishments. He also cited my habit of eating straight out of the bulk bins at Sprouts. The ceremony ended with a video that featured a somewhat uncanny 3-D rendering of me walking into a peaceable, cloud-filled afterlife.

My “funeral” wasn’t a real service. (The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.) Instead, it was part of a yearlong multimedia project by New York-based artist Gabriel Barcia-Colombo. Titled the “Hereafter Institute,” the project examines the ways in which we memorialize our dead in the digital age and what happens to our data when we die.



A digital monument by Gabriel Barcia-Colombo use a record player to project a deceased person's Facebook status updates.
(Duncan Cheng / Gabriel Barcia-Colombo)

The artist says he was inspired by the ways death is handled online.

"I keep seeing when people pass away on social media, of people commenting, but there is no formal ritual about it," explains Barcia-Colombo. "And there are strange things about it — like people's birthdays being marked for celebration even after they die."

The "Hereafter Institute" was supported by a grant from LACMA's Art + Technology Lab and was on view at the museum for two days last weekend.

The show consisted, in part, of a series of physical objects used to commemorate death in futuristic ways. A digital locket, inspired by Victorian keepsakes, displayed video of a loved one on a loop. While a set of virtual reality goggles allowed the user to step into a rendering of a garden, where the artist's deceased grandfather plucked away at a typewriter and recited poetry.

One of the more unusual pieces consisted of a sleek, black tower rigged with a record player that displayed all of an individual's Facebook status updates on a screen. Clusters of words translated into sonic elements that served as an improvised score.

The idea, says Barcia-Colombo, was to render the intangibles of the Internet into something real. "It's making it physical," he says. "Literally, a physical record."

It's a record that is a bit disconcerting — since so much of what resides on Facebook is so banal. (When I die will I be remembered for Juan Gabriel memes, unicorn GIFs and photos of my dog?)



"Hereafter Institute's" 3-D scan of my image was used to create a fictional marketing video about my digital afterlife.
(Gabriel Barcia-Colombo)

Joel Ferree of the Art + Technology Lab says he had been intrigued by Barcia-Colombo's proposal because of the timeliness of the topic it covered: "He was posing a very interesting question that we are only beginning to answer: How is technology reshaping our relationship to death?"

The artist answered this question via his sculptures — as well as an elaborate performance, staged with the aid of theater director Benita De Wit, that was as humorous as it was funereal.

To see Barcia-Colombo's Facebook record player and other sculptures, visitors had to book a "consultation appointment" with the fictional Hereafter Institute in order "visualize their digital afterlife."

The consultation consisted of an invented sales pitch for the artist's various digital monuments. And the process included handing over my Facebook username, agreeing to a 3-D scan of my body and signing various forms. (The contemplation of death cannot go un-bureaucratized.)

I was then led on a sales tour by a lab-coated Hereafter consultant (in my case, theater and film actress Jessica Perlman), who struck just the right funeral home tone when discussing my "options."

Adjunct curator Amy Heibel, founder of LACMA's Art + Technology Lab, says this issue of commodification in Barcia-Colombo's work was something that had appealed to her. (Two years ago, the artist created a vending machine that dispensed human DNA as a way of exploring issues of privacy and ownership in biotechnology.)

"We were drawn to the aspect of his work that mimics commercialization because marketing, advertising, and so-called messaging are such a significant part of how advances in science and technology are understood, discussed and disseminated," she said via email.

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At the end of my “consultation,” my Hereafter rep deposited me in a small theater on the ground level of the Bing Center, where I expected to watch some faux marketing film.

That is when my funeral began.

A pastor (played by Andy Phillips) strode onstage and welcomed everyone to my memorial service and proceeded to recite my biography — down to my inappropriate supermarket eating habits. The 3-D body scan I’d had at the start of the piece was used to create the animated rendering that showed me walking off into a dreamy horizon.

I was both rattled and tantalized by the whole experience.

There was the thrill of being a voyeur at the one major life event you can’t be around to experience. But there was also the fact that a man I’d never met was talking about me as if he knew me, all based on information he’d gleaned from social media.

“There are reams of data that you create,” says Barcia-Colombo. “I’m thinking of solutions to store this data in different ways.”

It turns out that when we die in the 21st century, our mundane experiences don’t die with us. They live on in the algorithm.

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-barcia-colombo-lacma-art-tech-20160830-snap-story.html>