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WHAT HAPPENS TO YOUR ONLINE LIFE AFTER YOU DIE? THE HEREAFTER INSTITUTE HELPS PLAN "SECOND DEATH"

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"Today we die twice," is the Hereafter Institute's tagline.

First we die physically, and then digitally. The Institute, the invention of L.A.-born, New York-based artist Gabriel Barcia-Colombo, exists to help people plan for their second death. Barcia-Colombo, currently a fellow in LACMA's Art and Technology lab, has been developing his institute with the help of the lab's resources and, this past weekend, offered the first official consultations to members of the public. Those of us who arrived for consultations would, we were told, learn about our options for a digital afterlife.

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Barcia-Colombo is not alone in thinking about where data goes after death. Designers John Romano and Evan Carroll in 2010 wrote a book, *Your Digital Afterlife*, in which they explained to readers what a digital afterlife even was and how to prepare their accounts for death. Digital estate planning firms already exist but, as art, the Hereafter Institute can afford to be a bit sexier in its mood than existing firms, more about the futuristic potentials of virtual afterlife than the nitty-gritty details.

This past weekend, the lobby of LACMA's Bing Auditorium served as the Hereafter Institute's lobby. A desk in the back corner featured its logo, a bold, blue letter H with a gradient infinity sign snaking around its posts. Two women with white lab coats greeted me when I arrived, telling me that Alex would be my consultant. The consultants, all L.A. actors, worked half-day shifts, three of them taking appointments at a time. Cheerful and blond, Alex led me to the Japanese Pavilion, where we would start our session in the minimal conference room, with its drab sofas and big windows. Julia Irwin, a technician, sat at a desk in the corner; a big screen angled across the opposite corner. Alex explained, while referring to images on that screen, that I had three general afterlife options: Continuation, in which my digital presence continues after I die; Deletion, in which I hire the Institute to wipe away my digital remains; and Memorialization, in which I create some sort of memorial to my data.

In 2014, a guy named Nathan took to Reddit to complain that his dead girlfriend had continued to tag herself in photos and send him Facebook messages. The internet ate his story up, perhaps because it was a new kind of nightmare — the social media accounts of the dead taking on lives of their own. But Alex suggested to me that the Hereafter Institute could, potentially, help people create an avatar to message loved ones posthumously. It would be well-planned rather than creepy. To get started on the continuation path, Alex guided me through setting up a “legacy contact” for my Facebook account in case something happens to me, a feature Facebook already provides. Later, I would stand on a slowly spinning white disk in the middle of the room while Julia, the technician, scanned my body so that my digital likeness could possibly be preserved for posterity. We never got into how this avatar would function, nor how you could actually delete or partially delete your online presence, which is what I, as a potential client, wanted to know. I also wanted to know how much it might cost but, again, the Hereafter Institute is in the business of possibilities over logistics.

Two necklaces displayed against the back wall were memorial options, Alex explained. They looked like oversized keyless car remotes, screens at the center playing soundless home videos. The videos play randomly, and the necklaces store about an hour of footage each. An older man and a kid appeared on one screen, a young guy talking to the camera on the other. I tried to picture someone wearing this clunky, techy jewelry. What kind of conversations would start?

“Hey, what’s that you’re wearing?”

“It’s just, well, my brother died last month, and he left this behind for us. There are tons of videos of him on here.”

“What’s playing now?”

“Oh, looks like he’s saying stuff in mom’s kitchen.”

“What’s he saying?”

"No idea. These things don't come with sound."

Alex assured me another memorialization option did incorporate sound, and she soon led me from the Japanese Pavilion down past Alexander Calder's fountain to the Art and Tech Lab. There, she showed me a tall, sleek black record player, perfect for some corporate guy with an aversion to a vintage aesthetic. The player's base functioned as a screen, playing a deceased person's Facebook timeline, one post at a time. Posts from a woman named Stormy, who had a sense of humor, were playing when we arrived.

The sounds coming from the player are based on an algorithm and meant to correspond with the text — melancholic sounds for melancholic status updates, upbeat ones for upbeat updates. "Interesting how homogenous it sounds," I commented. "It's peaceful," Alex corrected. I also wondered about the aesthetic. Were there other memorial models, or did everyone have to go with corporate sleekness? Barcia-Colombo, the Institute's artist-founder, was there in the lab to answer this. He explained that this prototype was meant more as a public memorial, not a personal one. He had put out a call on Facebook, and people had volunteered their deceased family members' profiles, so the updates I was seeing were from real individuals. This was about opening up conversations about death, Barcia-Colombo said, since we often avoid the issue.

Then I was putting on virtual reality headgear to briefly visit a virtual, marble lobby that looked like a mausoleum. An elevator door would open, briefly giving me a glimpse into a deceased person's life. Barcia-Colombo's grandfather, Spanish poet Jose Rubia Barcia, was one of the individuals, shown from the back seated at a desk. Clearly, the grandfather had no hand in this, and Barcia-Colombo acknowledged he had crafted this virtual space for the sake of his own remembering. But, hypothetically, you could do it for yourself, too; it would be the VR equivalent of a memoir. Or perhaps, eventually, you could go further. Neuroscientist Michael Graziano wrote recently in *The Atlantic* about the possibility of living after death in a simulated video-game universe. He suggested that brain scan technology probably could, a ways down the road, be used to preserve someone's consciousness digitally, though we currently have no scanning equipment capable of capturing all the connections between the billions of neurons in human brains.

There is, then, the question of why you would want to keep living indefinitely as a digital simulacrum. Alex had surveyed me at the beginning of our session, asking if it mattered to me that my politics, creativity and personality be remembered. Those seemed like concerns that happily ended with death, when there was no further need to wonder how I came across or whether people liked me. Who would benefit if I kept dictating how I was perceived after dying?

My consultation ended in LACMA's Brown Auditorium, where I sat alone in the front row and experienced a condensed version of my own funeral. "Catherine was beloved," said a youngish emcee in a suit. He was at the podium, a screen behind him playing quotes from my social media platforms, thankfully almost all of them work-related. "Catherine loved art and culture, but people were most important to her," said the emcee, an observation he backed up by reading my "favorite quote," a line from my Facebook profile about how much better friends are than success. Then the screen went glitchy and the emcee slid across the stage, giving a panicked half-minute monologue about lack of privacy ("everything we do leaves a trace"). When the glitches cleared up, I saw a clunky, 3-D modeled version of myself awkwardly frolicking down a white plank that led into clouds. Quickly, Alex ushered me out the back door and thanked me for coming.

I imagined what I would say if I wrote a Yelp review: “The Hereafter Institute has some good ideas, but they don’t seem to be clear yet on what they’re actually offering clients. Are the record-player memorials just for public display or can they be individualized? How can I make my own virtual reality memoir? Also, the guy at the end seemed really freaked out about digital culture. Did he go off message, or does the Hereafter Institute think nervous clients will be more likely to enlist its services? I left feeling confused.”

Of course, disconnects and messiness are more compelling in performance art than in the service industry. As an art project, Barcia-Colombo’s Hereafter Institute seems mostly to underscore how little we actually know about how our data persists posthumously and how we should feel about it. Should we be concerned? Should we take control? Should we get off Facebook before someone bases a eulogy on our timelines? The latter option is tempting.

The Hereafter Institute is still in its early stages. Future consultations or services will likely be announced on its website.

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