



## The Hereafter Institute: An Art Project That Takes Care of Digital Remains

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A VR experience where you can visit those that have passed in a virtual afterlife.  
Image courtesy the artist and LACMA Art + Technology Lab. All other photos by the author, unless otherwise noted.

After you die, will you want people to still be reminded that it's your anniversary on Facebook, or to be able to endorse your obsolete skills on LinkedIn? What about all your decaying online dating profiles, or all the remnants of your financial information stored on e-commerce sites? And if you do want to be remembered online once you die, then how: music, words, images, or all of the above? Inspired by these thoroughly 21st century questions, artist Gabriel Barcia-Colombo has created the *Hereafter Institute* at LACMA's Art + Technology Lab, an immersive, personalized art installation designed to get people to consider what's going to happen to their digital remains.



Consultants greeting clients at the *Hereafter Institute*

Themes across Barcia-Colombo's entire practice include memorialization and digital legacies. The New York-based artist once gave a TED talk called "Capturing Memories in Video Art," followed by another called "My DNA Vending Machine." He just founded the art-and-technology pop-up gallery Bunker.nyc and is currently on the faculty of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts in the Interactive Telecommunications Program, where he teaches classes on how to produce an immersive haunted house as well as how to develop empathy through virtual reality filmmaking. With the *Hereafter Institute*, he actually does both.

With the *Hereafter Institute*, Barcia-Colombo enlisted a cast of highly convincing white-cloaked "consultants" to walk museumgoers, a.k.a., "clients," through various memorialization options and foster a dialog about what happens to one's online presence after death. The consultants start out by laying out three alternatives, beginning with "continuation," in which one's data stays exactly the same as while alive. For this, the institute claims to offer "virtual bot software" that analyzes individual social-media styles and replicates them with new status updates. So for example, if someone writes on a dead person's wall "RIP, miss u," the bot will respond "smh I miss food," or any other response using the deceased's language patterns, thus maintaining the appearance of presence. Deletion is the second option, but the third and most popular category at the *Hereafter Institute* is memorialization, in which the ersatz institute uses personal data to pay tribute to someone after they're gone. This involves 3D body scanning, VR-facilitated memory reconstruction, digital records, and memorial data services.



A view of the locket with video footage. Courtesy The Artist And Lacma Art + Technology Lab

With 3D body scanning and motion capture, the client stands with feet shoulder-distance apart and arms slightly outstretched, revolving slowly on a turntable while a technician scans the body. After the person dies, the *Hereafter Institute* can then ostensibly take these images and make the client appear to engage in activities he or she enjoyed in life, such as cooking, reading, writing, or having sex.

After 3D body scanning is complete, the consultant then takes museumgoers/clients/audiences on a tour of different kinds of digital memorials. These include a tech-enabled version of Victorian mourning jewelry, only with video encoded into a locket instead of hair. "That way, with the flick of a switch, a digital memory of the deceased appears," *Hereafter Institute* consultant "Jessica" tells The Creators Project. "This piece of jewelry is designed specifically to encourage public discussion of death. It can also provide an introduction in what otherwise might be a very difficult conversation for some people."

The *Hereafter Institute* offers other ways to preserve digital remains. One involves custom-made vinyl records that convert a dead person's social-media timeline into audio tones using frequency-shift keying, with text versions of updates appearing on a platform beneath the record player. "This digital record is then decoded by the *Hereafter Monument*, which serves as a translator, or if you will, a beacon for remembering the lives of those we have lost," Jessica explains. "The sound that's coming out of the record is actually associated with the tone of the post: so if it's a happier post, it's a lighter sound."

Another memorialization option offered by the institute is the *Hereafter Life*, which consultants describe as a "participatory virtual-reality installation in which we invite guests to step into an ever-expanding world where they can revisit the dead, commune with the living, and even plan for their very own afterlife."



3d body scanning technician at the *Hereafter Institute*

For this, audiences use a Vive VR headset and headphones to enter a virtual mausoleum with memorials to three different people: a writer, an art collector, and a musician. Each scenario is its own kind of tomb, only transformed into an environment that the deceased enjoyed while he/she was alive, set to a voiceover of a different loved one recount memories. For instance, the musician hangs out the beach, while the art collector paces a rooftop terrace in San Francisco, and the writer clacks away at his typewriter in his sun-drenched backyard.

"Now in this final section of the tour, we'd like to show you how we use technology we've created together with some of the more traditional rituals of memorialization. This last section of the tour can be distressing for some of our clients," Jessica warns. She then leads the client to a small, dark, empty theater in which a formally-dressed man is standing at a podium next to a screen and a pair of impressive sympathy bouquets. This facilitates the rare chance for someone to attend their own memorial service.

The man begins by eulogizing the client based on information that was gathered previously online. Then, the client's own Facebook status updates flicker rapidly across the screen until a disruptive glitch takes over and suddenly, in a scene of supposed serenity, an image of the client from the 3D body scan conducted earlier wanders onto the screen, turns away slowly, and hobbles off into the hereafter.

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/nz4xek/hereafter-institute-digital-remains-death-online-art-project>