"Eine Art des Verschwindens ausdenken, die den Tod bezwingt." Elias
Canetti

Some topics will haunt you. Death and the internet is one of those for me.
Out of the five PhDs I supervised at the European Graduate School, three of
them dealt with death and digital media. As a 'anarchivist' I have sympathy
for the 'texture of memory', as James Young called it. There is a right to
forget and a presumed will to remember. Memory is a prime act of culture.
And it is one thing to become aware of the histories of death in the way
Philippe Ariès described it. But what does all this mean in the online age?
There's something tricky with internet culture. While today's communication
appears to us in digital form, its preservation is a mess. Platform societies
continue to be blind for the fact that after only a few years most of the
information has disappeared, despite popular claims that the internet
remembers everything. What's wrong with this large scale cognitive
dissonance? While the dead technically can and will be reanimated to
accompany—and entertain—us as tamed AI avatars, the cold culture of
forgetting thrives as never before.

In 1995 Bruce Sterling launched the Dead Media Project, dedicated to
vanished channels and carriers. To many of us it was clear that the internet
would one day join the ranks but we're not there yet. So far, we're dealing
with discontinued websites, deleted profiles and remains of conversations
with persons that are no longer with us. This is the topic of Tamara Kneese
called *Death Glitch* that's under discussion here I agreed to read the book
and conduct an email interview with the Bay Area author whose work I am
familiar with but never met. The book deals with memorials on social media,
networked death, disrupted inheritance and the 'haunted objects' in the
context of the smart city.

During the mid-late 1980s, at my darkest of hours, I befriended the topic.
The starting point was Jean Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death*
from 1976, which many see as his Magnum Opus. I read in it in 1984 in the
StaBi in West-Berlin, in German, overlooking the ruin landscape of
Potsdamer Platz and its scattered modernist temples. Following Bataille,
Baudrillard leaves behind the 'death control' and embraces the reversal of
the non-coded forms of disappearance—and death. In the motive of the
'death revolt' we see two, apparently contradictory forces at play: refusing
the death machine with its bureaucratic procedures while incorporating
death as a strategy, bringing it back into the game against the death denying

system and its cybernetic simulation principles. The core idea that stayed with me is that of the symbolic reversal—as obligation.

Frequently Baudrillard referred to Elias Canetti's 'death refusal' aphorisms and quotes that decades were brought together in his posthumous 1942-1994 notebook *The Book Against Death* (which New Directions will bring out in an English translation later this year). Throughout his life Canetti entitled himself 'death enemy': a personal rebellion against the cold rationality of the killing machines that defined the 20th century, from the WWI trenches to death by hunger and the extermination camps. Death should not be embraced, nor celebrated. Canetti declined to mention any of the large traumatic death waves that defined his lifetime. His resistance against death is an entirely different position when we compare it with the life extension technologies as propagated by transhumanist and extropians.

Can this gap ever be theorized, I wondered, reading Kneese's study about the never-ending stream of death start-ups claim to hit the jackpot in the ever growing market of the online deceased. Will the Californian Ideology ever die of exhaustion? When will it be washed away by larger historical forces aka catastrophies? Is there a European death wish at play here? Or an American desire for a Civil War that will put an end to the trivial regime? Long Now versus Long Nothing, Burning Man versus Berghain? The contrast between continental European radical theory and the Westcoast technological frenzy never felt bigger. Both Tamara Kneese and me have been online for the past thirty plus year and both studied internet culture intensely during that period. Time for a dialogue.

Geert Lovink: In your book you describe the rise and fall of dozens of Silicon Valley start-ups that intend to make profit with the management of death in the age of the internet. You describe well the 'glitches' in the website and apps that claim to revive the dead in our busy and crowded digital everyday life, laying bare the ideological premises of transhumanists and similar techno-believers. What's striking is the lack of progress here. Not much has changed since the early 1990s. That's a good 30 years now. For a good part of that period you have been researching this field. Technologies changed, not the naive promises and dito sales talk. None of the start-ups are here to stay. You talk about 'breakdown as method'. How did you manage to keep your motivation to research this field? Now we're in the post-covid AI phase with its living, walking, dancing and chatting replicas of lovers, ancestors and celebrities.

Tamara Kneese: Sometimes it feels like I'm experiencing deja vu because with every new technological fad, there tends to be some promise of a digital immortality application. The early wave of posthumous chatbot avatars from the early to mid aughts mirrored many of the promises we see pedaled about Generative AI chatbots today, insofar as there is a lingering fantasy that with enough data, you can fully emulate a human persona and have it either 1) fill in for you at a business meeting or data other AI on your behalf, as the founder of Bumble, the dating app, recently conjectured in an interview, as a way of increasing your efficiency and productivity or 2) continue to interact with your loved ones after you demise and keep some piece of you alive, still intervening in daily life and making your presence known. During the crypto boom and the short-lived stupidity of the metaverse, which anyone with any historical perspective recognized as a new iteration of Second Life or earlier virtual worlds, there were companies that promised to create NFT versions of you as a means of achieving some semblance of immortality. I've kept my interest in this topic and this larger field in part because of the enduring questions about what it means to be human, or what kinds of labour are valued or dismissed, and the ever present role of finitude, of breakdown. If you pay attention to these trends, these patterns, for close to 20 years, you start to understand how to spot hype as it materializes and find new ways of making sense of the power structures around us.

GL: Throughout the book you continue to switch between your Californian, utopian mask and a radical feminist voice. It's not one or the other, you switch between your anthropological persona and your political convictions. In the book you do not seem to make a difference between the once perhaps progressive community and computing ideas of the hippie era and hard-line reactionary techno-libertarian ones of today. Ever since 2016 the right-wing techno fraction (Thiel, Musk) have become loud and hegemonic—supported by a strange bunch, from 4Chan and Andrew Tate to parts of the crypto Web3 scene such as Networked State. This is a part of the Californian approach towards death and the body you do not explicitly cover. Their cynicism is so much more nihilistic, maybe they're not at all interested in loss, memory, the afterlife. They just want to live to the max, as long as it gets—and that's it. Billions will have to die for the greater cause of Longtermism. Extermination is necessary for the greater good. They do not care at all about death care. How do you look at this?

TK: I'm so glad that you made this observation about anthropological personas, because it's something I have been grappling with in my own

political and personal life, as I start writing my next book, which is about the role of ethnographers as participant observers in tech industry environments, as individual change agents that treat their own workplaces as field sites, and how these personal observations fit into larger collective struggles or might be treated as a form of workers' inquiry.

As historians like Fred Turner have argued, the countercultural elements of the new communalists always had a libertarian and at times conservative inflection. It's not like the new communalists were great feminists or hanging out with the Black Panthers a few miles away. And the presence of longtermism is so insidious, as Timnit Gebru and Emile Torres point out in their work. The kind of legacy imagined by Stewart Brand's Long Now Foundation, which includes members like Jeff Bezos, does not make room for mourning or death care. Preservation work is more akin to survivalism, storing data and material records in the face of climate breakdown, resurrecting extinct species, and building massive steampunk monuments in mountains. The kind of life extension they are invested in is so hollow, to me, in that it is not at all about collectivity and larger ecologies. The hyper-individualist, libertarian elements colour everything, and the survivalism aspect of their work can tend towards eugenics.

GL: Why would people trust Silicon Valley startups to take care of longterm archiving of their digital presence? Someone in the book mentioned a lack of 'cathedral thinking'. That's a very European idea but I also thought of that. It may be OK to delegate the 'digital estate planning' to an online company but that's a short term service. There are experts that can sort out how to deal with digital assets of friends and family after they pass away. But that has little to do with archiving and memory. You do not talk much about the long term memories. It is all about sharing with others online in the immediate aftermath of someone passing away. Is this a useful distinction anyway?

TK: Since I published my book, I have had various companies reach out to me for advice about their business model. Some people are reading my book as a how-to, or perhaps as a "what not to do" when it comes to digital remains, which is kind of funny to me. Cloud services did at one point, around ten years ago, market themselves by promising that they would store your data forever. There seems to be more awareness now of the infrastructural and environmental limits of the cloud, that these systems cannot go on forever. I'd say that there are times in my book where longer-

term relationships with social media profiles, for instance, do appear. Facebook is 20 years old now. And some of my interlocutors have been engaged with the profiles of dead loved ones for 15 or more years now. And with Mormon Transhumanism, for example, the Mormon religious practice of archiving massive amounts of genealogical data feeds into their transhumanist practices. Family archiving and care for the dead are directly related to dreams of radical life extension and digitally-afforded immortality.

GL: The Internet Archive in the Bay Area is a private initiative. However, there are also public and national archives in the USA. Do they have a task here? As you are stressing time and again, the venture-capital backed companies are not good at upkeep. Even the bigger social media platforms have zero commitment to longterm conservation and archiving. Twitter recently deleted large chunks of its archive.

TK: The lack of long-term conservation and archiving on the part of large social media platforms is going to be a problem for future historians, if we make it far enough to have any. The Internet Archive does what it can, but a sometimes vulnerable nonprofit (in that it is sometimes sued for copyright reasons) cannot be responsible for preserving the entire web in the long term. I want to return, actually, to your work! In the book's introduction, I refer to one of my favourite quotes from your writing: "Who responds to yesterday's references? History is something to get rid of." You talk about social media as a flow, a river, in which things get lost. There is something here about the tension between data as power, for corporations, and data as liability. Although data collection helped make tech companies powerful, it's expensive and energy intensive to maintain vast stores of data for "eternity." So it is actually in companies' best interest to eventually scale down their preservation efforts, particularly when it comes to long-term storage. I do think the lack of responsibility for maintaining archives is a political problem, and I'm not sure what the solution is. But if public archives had the resources to maintain these for collective posterity, that would seem more prudent than leaving it to either platforms or startups, or even small nonprofits, to fill that role.

GL: Unlike letters, diaries, photos, jewellery and the occasional painting, the communicative traces online are extremely volatile. Don't you think it is a better strategy to store significant digital information on a stable hardware carrier offline? I am aware that USB sticks are not, and neither are many hard drives. There is overwhelming evidence that most of the digital online

information disappears. Your book is packed with examples of this. As you have been engaged in this topic for so long, what long-term solutions do you see that work? When I think of friends and artists, activists and colleagues I worked with that were close to me, I am occasionally moved when I find some traces about them online but most of these are random. Not at all something I was looking for or wanted to see. I strongly believe none of the 'social media' profiles that are still around will no longer be present in the coming decade.

TK: I agree, I think many of these communicative traces are destined to disappear because I think we will see the end of major platforms. People used to laugh at me when I said that Facebook wouldn't be around forever, which is ironic because they also laughed at me when I started researching Facebook in 2006, telling me that it was a passing fad. I think Paul Lindner's interview at the start of the book helps us think about the need for personal, physical forms of digital recordkeeping. But not everyone is going to maintain their own Linux server. Hard drives, USB sticks, and other hardware also decay, but they are more reliable than the web.

GL: I still have memories (and material) about my grandparents, mostly the ones on my mothers side. Both of them were born in 1900. I have vague information about their parents, where they lived and what they did, but that's it. What strikes me is their involvement in the Dutch colonial system, the Boer war in South-Africa, captain on the Holland-America Line but also their resistance against the Nazis—the dominant stories I grew up with when they were passed on to me in the 1960s. A lot of these memories are related to places (where things happened), in combination with pictures. How is this for you? Obviously I have detailed memories of my both parents, who died in 2016 and 2022. But how about their ancestors, those that were around in, let's say, 1870? Or even before? How do you see this being played out, later on in the 21st Century?

TK: One of the fantasies of AI seems to be that we can know our ancestors on a visceral level and ask them questions about their lives. I never met my father's parents and all I know of them is through my father's stories and a handful of photographs. Recently, my mother discovered some family history about her side of the family that came as a shock. We didn't know that her grandfather's father was a playwright, or that my great-grandfather was not recognized by the family because he was considered illegitimate and not fully Jewish. We discovered that there were Yiddish plays in an archive near

NYU, written by my great-great grandparents. There are also a couple of photographs of these ancestors, even though we know hardly anything about their lives aside from what we can glean through the plays that persist in this archive. It's odd because AI promises to resurrect ancestors or long-dead historical figures and make them interactive, but in the future, much of the data that existed in physical form won't be around. For instance, how would my future descendents trace my life if most of the websites and platforms my "legacy" is attached to cease to exist? What photographs or physical archives will they have to work with? Even Ray Kurzweil's chatbot version of his dead father, who passed away in 1970, is based on a collection of physical archives, including letters, photographs, and other documents.

GL: A strong chapter deals with 'smart homes', not just the extractivist-surveillance but its disaster by design aspect after the house owner died. In that context you also describe the rise and fall of a Transhuman Dream House.

TK: Yes, that is my favourite chapter by far. So much about the ideal smart home, and the magic of feminized virtual assistants like Siri and Alexa, is that they can be hyper personalized to your own specifications. But that ignores the household that is often living with the AI, and the repercussions for those who inherit smart systems. Death, that of individuals and of systems, is not acknowledged, which can create some awkward moments for the living. A kind of haunting.

GL: "The bodies, those of both the living and the dead, are always behind the screen." With this sentence you close the book. Can you explain to us your take on this? Is it the feminist critique of the (male) desire of transhumanists to leave the body behind, get rid of women by building artificial wombs, delegating power to virtual authorities aka AI? How does this play out in the politics and design of the afterlife? Why can't (specific) tech-males embrace mortality and why do you call for death care to be embraced as a human right?

TK: That line was a nod to Sarah T. Roberts's work on content moderators. During the height of the pandemic, Facebook had a disclaimer that there would be longer wait times than usual because of mass death and labour shortages; there was no one there to deal with memorialization requests. Managing the dead on platforms is about bureaucratic processes and their relationship to labour, including content moderation, and social norms. I do see my work as a feminist intervention in that the production and

maintenance of digital objects rely on networks of labour, on a kind of collectivism and embodiment that is often erased by techno-optimist narratives. With Sam Altman creating an AI virtual assistant that mimics the OS from the film Her, you see how many of these tech bros misread the film. The fight for death care on the part of gig workers, especially during the pandemic, is something that I find inspiring. We see so many GoFundMe campaigns out there to support the families of people who die while working for gig platforms because their employers do not offer insurance benefits or protections. And death care is an extension of health care, it is a way of maintaining responsibility for future generations as well as respecting the sanctity of the individual human life that was lost.

Tamara Kneese, Death Glitch, How Techno-Solutionism Fails Us in this Life and Beyond, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2023, 257 p.