90 Minutes
with the Machine

by
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Author’s Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.
Abstract

Cremation, or the incineration of human remains, unites two fundamental elements of human existence: fire and death. This unity is today facilitated by the cremator, a machine that burns bodies as efficiently as engineering allows. In the cremator, an average corpse takes only 90 minutes to transform into ash and bone fragments.

However, as the machine hums away, we come to realize that we are forced to reckon with a ninety-minute void. We are forced to wait – to experience time that is unwanted. Waiting brings discomfort in a variety of forms, from grief to irritation to fidgeting, but it also invites honesty. The vulnerability and expectation of waiting allow us to simply be, even if we are seated in a drab witnessing room waiting for the ashes of a loved one. We face time, and, in turn, face ourselves.

This thesis, through a series of essays in a range of media, explores what it’s like to spend 90 minutes with the machine.
Acknowledgments

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To my family—James, Mei, Victor, Neur—for being there. To Ying, for our nebula. To Alex, for everything.
To 姨婆
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And grief still feels like fear. Perhaps, more strictly, like suspense. Or like waiting; just hanging about waiting for something to happen. It gives life a permanently provisional feeling. It doesn’t seem worth starting anything. I can’t settle down. I yawn, I fidget, I smoke too much. Up till this I always had too little time. Now there is nothing but time. Almost pure time, empty successiveness.

—C.S. Lewis, A Grief Observed
90 minutes is how long it takes for the average human body to fully combust in a modern cremator.
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On Waiting

Waiting is a fundamental human experience. Every day, we wait. We wait for our leftovers to heat up, we wait for the bus, we wait for the fruit to ripen, we wait for the doctor’s prognosis. Over the course of a lifetime, in between one’s birth and death, in that precious sliver of time privileged to one’s earthly existence, one waits.

Although waiting seems to be universally ingrained in our modern existence, its origins are of an altogether different one. The word “wait” comes from the 13th century Anglo-French and Old North French waitier, meaning to “watch”, and which itself was borne of the Old French gaitier, meaning to “defend, watch out, be on one’s guard”1. Waiting was the name given to the activity of being on guard for hostile forces. Back in the 13th century, such forces were frequent and ubiquitous, from enemies to storms to fire, rendering life quite volatile and waiting a necessary fact of life.

Nowadays, our lives are thankfully much cushier. The hostile forces that threatened Medieval life are all

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but diminished. As a result, the bounds of waiting are no longer restricted to imminent danger—we now wait for any and everything. But whether we expect ambush attacks or our turn at the cash desk, waiting disrupts, or threatens to disrupt, life. At the very least, it is uncomfortable, whether we await the uncomfortable (an approaching enemy) or the wait itself is uncomfortable (reading tabloid magazine headlines to avoid making eye contact with other shoppers).

This discomfort arises from the way we process time. Waiting is not merely passing time as we might casually describe it. While technically true (in that all modes of existing in time are “passing” time), this diminution of terminology belies an important distinction. When we pass time riding a bicycle, working creatively, or playing with grandchildren, life simply flows. We are immersed within duration, the seamless succession of life. Time becomes invisible, disappearing from consciousness.

When we wait, on the other hand, life does not proceed as we intend it to. Time starts to emerge to the forefront of consciousness. It is no longer an invisible current but a thick river of molasses moving against us. We get tripped up in all scales and manners: the traffic jam, the delayed bus, the granddaughter’s temper tantrum. It feels as if everyone else is living life, experiencing duration, and we are momentarily forced out of syncopation. Waiting is not the frictionless passage of time, it is the experience of time. And experiencing time is difficult.

When we wait, we are forced to be attentive to that which we usually ignore. Torn from that which we await, our senses are brought to time and the omissions of life. Elizabeth Bishop describes this in her poem In the Waiting Room:
In Worcester, Massachusetts,  
I went with Aunt Consuelo  
to keep her dentist’s appointment  
and sat and waited for her  
in the dentist’s waiting room.  
It was winter. It got dark  
early. The waiting room  
was full of grown-up people,  
arctics and overcoats,  
lamps and magazines.  
My aunt was inside  
what seemed like a long time  
and while I waited I read  
the National Geographic  
(I could read) and carefully  
studied the photographs:  
the inside of a volcano,  
black, and full of ashes;  
then it was spilling over  
in rivulets of fire.  
Osa and Martin Johnson  
dressed in riding breeches,  
laced boots, and pith helmets.  
A dead man slung on a pole  
--“Long Pig,” the caption said.  
Babies with pointed heads  
wound round and round with string;  
black, naked women with necks  
wound round and round with wire  
like the necks of light bulbs.  
Their breasts were horrifying.  
I read it right straight through.  
I was too shy to stop.²

This unease in waiting arises not from the length of the wait, but the incongruous way in which we conceive of time. Thanks to capitalism, the absolutism of Newtonian time is the law. We linearize time into quantifiable chunks - seconds, days, months, years - and organize our lives around them. Time is money, and the less we spend, the better. If capitalism had its way, every bit of time would be used efficiently: goods and services would be delivered instantaneously, and profits would soar.

In this system, waiting is a glitch of unwanted time: we are presented with time that we have no option but to face. The narrator is unable to turn away from the barrage of triviality, the sheer gratuitousness of the images in a National Geographic magazine. Correspondingly, she, residing amongst these trivialities, is rendered gratuitous. She becomes unsettlingly antithetical to productivity, to society, to herself. The projections of ourselves that shield us and allow us to reconcile with capitalist time crumble away, and we are forced not only to reckon with time or that for which we wait, but also with ourselves.

Siegfried Kracauer notes this existential emptiness in his 1922 essay *Those Who Wait*. He notes that, as a byproduct of the rapid cultural shifts of the early twentieth century, individuals are trapped in a “metaphysical suffering from the lack of a higher meaning” where they “forget their actual inner being in the din of the hustle bustle”. They are no longer grounded in a historical or spiritual absolute, instead subsumed in modernity for its own sake. Indeed, the Latin root of

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Fig. 11: We wait in all manner of spaces for all manner of occasions. The crematorium witnessing room allows the family to view or “witness” the cremator as they wait the course of a cremation.
“modern” is “modo”, meaning “just now.”

Kracauer posits that the “hesitant openness” of waiting allows us to reattune ourselves to reality, that waiting is the antithesis of the “just now” that we have come to demand. Simone Weil elaborates on this:

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object. … Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it.

Waiting forces us to open ourselves to time, and to make ourselves vulnerable. It is the self-inflicted tax for all our trivial temporal trifling. C.S. Lewis poses rhetorically in *A Grief Observed*, “there is nothing we can do with suffering except to suffer it?” Indeed, there is nothing we can do with waiting but to wait.

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To uncover the varying natures of time, I took one photo every minute for ninety minutes of various phenomena.
We are seeking only the precise meaning that our consciousness gives to this word ‘exist’ and we find that for a conscious being, to exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly.

— Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*¹

Fig. 12: The Clock (frames collapsed)
When I spotted it, I knew that the clock in the lecture hall was waiting for me to pluck it from the wall. Lucky me: there was no class going on, making it easy to do so. It was the archetypal clock, as unornamented as you could possibly imagine. Plain face, plain frame, plain numbers, plain hands. It wasn’t a clock you hung to make a statement, unless the statement was merely the time.

I laid the clock at one end of the photo studio table, setting my tripod above it and my laptop adjacent to it. I needed to write a 200-word statement for the end of the day, and 90 minutes seemed like a good amount of time to crank it out.

I let the camera timer go and turned right away to work on my laptop. I made a conscious effort to close the usual distracting tabs and write. Before long, I was indeed writing, immersed in figuring out the perfect combination of words. Incidentally I was writing about my thesis, about photography and time. The coffee I had earlier and the backless stool kept me wired.
I was cognizant of the fact that the alternative to working on my laptop was looking at the clock. Well, that was stupid - why was I even considering looking at the clock as an alternative? There was literally no point. Killing time by watching it tick away was the epitome of an oxymoron. I came to forget about the clock anyway - the light cast a glare on the face so I couldn’t look at it even if I wanted to. I merely had to be careful not to make any sudden movements lest I shift its position.

The ninety minutes passed by, but I still needed to work with the statement a little and I had booked the studio for two hours, and what was the harm in taking a couple more photos. It took only another 14 minutes to get my writing to a good point, so I saved my document, packed everything up, and put the clock back on the wall where it would continue telling the time.
Fig. 13: The Clock (frames)
Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne’er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

— William Wordsworth, *Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802*¹

Fig. 14: Liyang’s Plant
(frames collapsed)
During the winter and summer terms, Liyang, Joanne, Alex, and I sat together in the corner of 3014. We regularly came to school, the four of us keeping each other’s quiet company during those long days working in studio.

Liyang sat by the window behind me and kept a few plants at her desk. They were all very cute and delicate: a succulent in a tiny pot, a few sprouts in a handmade ceramic vessel. The largest and most interesting was her shamrock plant. Earlier, it sat within a round crimped pot, but was taken out and adorned with a small hand-knit yarn square.

Every evening its clusters of three leaves would slowly close like an umbrella (the leaves would also open back up in the morning, but I was never around early enough to observe this). Wikipedia says that this movement is an example of photonasty, or response to light. If no one was around, I’d turn around from time to time to look at it. The leaves denoted whether it was early or late, afternoon or evening, snack time or dinner time, time to work or time to go home.
I was particularly unproductive one sunny afternoon later in the term, so I asked Liyang if I could re-photograph her plant (the first attempt was not very successful). Joanne had moved out of her desk next to mine, so I set up the plant and my camera there.

In spite of my familiarity with the biological process soon to occur, I couldn’t help but turn from the computer screen and glance over at the plant every few minutes. It did look extra pretty in the golden hour light. As the sun dipped below the horizon and the room slowly darkened, I decided to keep the lights off. It was as if the leaves had gently closed on the sun itself - it was a cozy darkness, a gentle stillness. Later that evening, I sent a screencap of the results to Liyang, who reacted with delight.

A few days later, we had to move out of 3014. Liyang, Joanne, and Alex moved to 3002 and I moved to the desk precisely one floor below. I’m still by the window and surrounded by people and plants that I like, but they are different.
Fig. 15: Liyang’s Plant (frames)
Time is the substance of which I am made. Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire.

— Jorge Luis Borges, *A New Refutation of Time*¹

Fig. 16: Sand Mound
(frames collapsed)
It took about two hours, using a combination of bus, subway, and streetcar, to get from my parents’ house in North York to Woodbine Beach. Hauling a large black backpack and a tripod, I felt out of place amongst all the beachgoers on this clear summer day.

It was immediately obvious that the pickings for a good spot would be slim. The beach was filled with kids splashing about, half- or nearly-naked sunbathers, rocky patches, algae lapping at the surface. My neck was starting to get sore from peering down along the beachfront when I stumbled upon the perfect spot: no people, rocks, or algae.

As I pulled out the two plastic containers I had brought from my backpack, I was struck with the outlandish realization that I had never built a sandcastle before. What was the perfect sand-to-water ratio? What kind of a shape would I build? I had one round and one rectangular container, so I attempted the archetypal sandcastle form, a rectangular base with four towers. But, given the fast-setting sun and my apparent
sandcastle crafting incompetence, I settled for a simple mound. After being disappointed by attempts that were too sturdy or too quickly dashed by the waves, I decided to put my faith in the current mound, which was about a foot in diameter and six inches tall. I hurriedly set up the camera and tripod, jabbed the shutter button, and stepped back. I was at the beach - there was nothing left to do but enjoy the beach.

This proved to be a lot more difficult than I had anticipated. Because of the breeze coming in from the lake, my hair was blowing constantly in my face. The sun was right overhead which made looking at my phone difficult and battery-prohibitive. Being a beach, there was sand, which invariably ended up everywhere and made everything irritatingly sandy to the touch. I folded out my camping stool, positioning myself facing both the wind and the sand mound, and pulled out my book. I had to switch between holding the book in my lap (which strained my neck) and holding the book in front of me (which strained my arm), all while keeping an eye on the mound. It was difficult to get immersed - I couldn’t read more than a few sentences at a time.

As the sun steadily sank, I became increasingly anxious that if this mound failed, I wouldn’t have time to build another one. I contemplated building another mound, but the beach was packed. I gave up trying to read.

The mound started to disintegrate faster and faster, to my great despair. Dreading the result, I checked the results on the camera. Miraculously, I had captured exactly ninety photos.
We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them.

— Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*¹

Fig. 18: Sunset (frames collapsed)
Alex lived with Liyang and Emmeily at the 170 Water Street condo building, and had kindly given me access to their apartment to shoot. They were on the tenth floor and their balcony offered an amazing panoramic view of the river to the northwest. Every other attempt at shooting the setting sun didn’t quite turn out how I wanted, so I figured altitude was what I needed.

As determined as I was to get it right, I was off to a bad start running late to their place. I hastily threw open the sliding door and was greeted by an unpleasant blast of wind. I threw the tripod and cell phone into position as quickly as possible, tapped the shutter release, and headed back into the apartment. Phew.

My heart sank as I opened my laptop. Alex had sent me the apartment’s WiFi password over Facebook, but I couldn’t check it on my now occupied phone. Stupid me - if I weren’t in such a rush, I would’ve had the forethought to check the WiFi password. So I was stuck without Internet for an hour and a half. No problem, I thought. I could live. Besides, I had plenty of tasks to do that didn’t require internet.
That initial gust of wind turned out not to be anomalous. Being on the tenth floor, I should have expected it to be super windy. Sheets of plastic taped over two cracked glass panels were blowing around wildly, their loud flapping sounds instilling an inexorable anxiety. I feared that at any second, the wind would topple the tripod and my phone would take a ten-storey tumble, along with my thesis. I knew logically that there was no way for that to happen, but that didn’t stop me from getting up from my chair every two minutes to check. Work was evidently not getting done, so I shut my computer.

The sunsets I had captured in my earlier attempts were nothing compared to this one. A panorama of colours emerged and melted across the uninterrupted horizon: a pink glow at the east creeping up, golden light filling the west, the sky in between gradually darkening. It always amazed me how quickly the spectacle unfolded. While my eyes still compulsively lowered to the tripod, I did feel enough at ease to take a break from watching and heat up my dinner.

Before I knew it, it was dark; the lights along Hespeler had become brighter than the sky. I was really tired and sore from having gotten up and sat down so many times, and found myself hesitating to get up. I waited for the absolute last shred of light to leave the sky before I folded up the tripod—which, of course, had not budged at all.
Fig. 19: Sunset
(frames)
Fig. 20: A plastic bag (standard crematorium issue in absence of a designated vessel) of "cremains"
Fig. 20 (previous): A plastic bag of “cremains”. A plastic bag in a simple aluminum vessel is standard crematorium issue in absence of a designated vessel.
The spontaneous combustion of a cadaver is a solemn moment, grandiose, something sacred. It always produces in me sadness and ecstasy. A moral prostration seizes one.

—Ludovico Brunetti

Cremation, the practice of incinerating the human corpse, has been widely practiced throughout human history. Forming the basis of a larger death ritual, cremation brings the corpse to its final resting state, conveys the memory of the deceased, and allows the bereaved to mourn.

The distinguishing force of cremation from other methods of disposition is fire. Unlike the passive decomposition of ground burial, fire is an active agent that transforms the corpse from flesh and bone to inorganic ash, smoke, and calcified remnants over a rela-
tively short period of time. Thanks to its visceral immediacy, fire holds ritual significance in many cultures and expresses beliefs about life and death - for example, in Hindu rites, the cremation fire of death is the parallel to the maternal heat of birth\(^2\), and in medieval Europe, fire reinforced the exile of the treasonous\(^3\).

The unity of fire and death, two fundamental elements of human existence, accords cremation a universality in the human consciousness. The origins of cremation can be traced to the Stone Age (8000 to 10,000 years ago) in China, where small pots containing bone ashes have been uncovered.\(^4\) Prior to modern cremation, the practice was universally performed on pyres\(^5\); there was no difference in how Greeks of antiquity and medieval Hindus burned corpses.

Cremation spread and became common throughout the Ancient world. In Ancient Greece, it was preferred over burial for sanitary reasons and for preventing the desecration of corpses by enemies in foreign lands\(^6\). Despite the many practical reasons for cremation, it did not supplant burial; rather, it was a supplementary practice, suggesting that the different physical treatments of the dead were connected to different metaphysical treatments of the deceased.

The Ancient Romans adopted cremation from the Greeks, and it was the standard method of disposition
throughout the Western Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{7} Jewish peoples, by contrast, did not employ cremation: burial was the traditional method of disposition. Earth burial offered the possibility of resurrection whereas the atomization of the body via cremation did not.\textsuperscript{8} Corpse burning was thus reserved for criminals or enemies.

At the outset of Christianity, early followers adopted local customs and those in Jewish communities employed burial; there wasn’t a defined practice for disposition. However, as the religion spread, the traditional Jewish emphasis on burial and resurrection became reinforced by the newfound sanctification of Jesus’ interment in a tomb. Christians, reacting to what they perceived as pagan practices, denounced cremation as mistreatment of the body. The Bible expresses a hallowing for the body through burial: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” (Gen 3.19.)

The conversion of Roman emperor Constantine to Christianity and his prohibition of cremation marked Western civilization’s long break with the practice. With the predominance of Christianity, cremation was actively resisted and stamped out - Charlemagne proclaimed cremation to be punishable by death in 789.\textsuperscript{9} Instances of cremation were few and far in between—it was reserved for the execution of heretics, or events of mass death such as plagues or major battles when there were too many bodies to bury.\textsuperscript{10}

Regardless of Western religious censure of cremation:

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{7} Davies and Mates, \textit{Encyclopedia of Cremation}, 457.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid, 284.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid, xviii.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid, 402.
\end{flushleft}
Fig. 21: Hellenic bronze container of cremated human remains, complete with votive offering.
tion, the practice itself was logistically problematic. Each cremation was a very time- and resource-consuming event, requiring the community to construct a pyre anew out of vast quantities of wood: 600kg for a single cremation\textsuperscript{11}. Furthermore, because combustion was often carried out open-air (and thus subject to wind and other environmental factors), temperatures generated were low and the process was slow; it would take up to 8 hours\textsuperscript{12} for one cremation. As a result, combustion was often incomplete, leaving recognizable bone fragments. The technical faults of pyre cremation would be addressed with the advent of modern cremation many centuries later.

Unlike its decline, the return of cremation into the consciousness of Western civilization after a thousand-year hiatus was not a gradual process. In the wake of the intellectual and cultural shifts of the Enlightenment, cremation emerged as a topic of interest in philosophical and medical circles in the second half of the nineteenth century. This renewed interest in the ancient practice naturally came with a desire to develop a new method of cremation.

Cremation was seen as a major opportunity to express Enlightenment-era ideals; unlike the inherent fortuity of burial, human combustion provided ample opportunity to be studied and optimized. Through the application of science and logic, one method of disposition could become objectively better than the other: faster, more complete, more economical. Reclaiming the Western death tradition meant reclaiming universal processes that were long held hostage by religious doctrines. It was the ultimate triumph of reason.

\textsuperscript{11} Caitlin Doughty and Landis Blair, \textit{From Here To Eternity} (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), 31

\textsuperscript{12} Douglas and Mates, \textit{Encyclopedia of Cremation}, 368
This movement to reclaim cremation sprung up in Italy. Ferdinando Coletti, head of the Department of Pharmacy of the University of Padova, was the first to suggest cremation as an alternative to burial in 1857. Coletti’s landmark reading of a memoir on cremation that year paved the way for other intellectuals to advocate for cremation on the legal and medical fronts.

Coletti’s colleague and professor of anatomical pathology, Ludovico Brunetti, set “the task of burning a whole body” upon himself not long after. Brunetti developed a number of experimental furnaces for human combustion which he exhibited, along with a number of cinerary urns, at the 1873 Vienna World Exposition. His experiments garnered great public attention—there had never before been such scientific interest in the processing of the dead body.

Among those who had attended the Exposition and seen Brunetti’s experimental furnaces was Sir Henry Thompson, prominent English surgeon. English cemeteries at the time were infamous for their poor conditions; shallow, overcrowded, and polluted, they presented a growing threat to public health. Thompson clearly saw cremation as the future of disposition, and in 1874, he founded the Cremation Society of England with the following credo:

We disapprove the present custom of burying the dead, and desire to substitute some mode which shall rapidly resolve the body into its component elements by a process which cannot offend the living, and shall render the remains absolutely innocuous. Until some better method is devised, we desire to

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14 Laqueur, The Work of The Dead, 496
adopt that usually known as cremation.\textsuperscript{15}

Death was no longer purely in the hands of religious leaders – it was newly seen as a technological problem. The cremator, a sophisticated piece of machinery owing to the recent development of mass-produced steel\textsuperscript{16}, was the singular, purpose-built solution. Compared to the pyre, it required a fraction of the time, manpower, and resources. A continuous feed of gas produced higher and more consistent temperatures and could completely combust a corpse within two hours. It was a singular innovation that embodied the modern ideals of cleanliness and efficiency.

One heralded achievement of the cremator was its capability for complete combustion. Mourners could rest assured that the deceased would become a non-descript, tidy pile of ash. This drive toward utter material destruction of the dead hinted at the broader cultural rejection of the idea of an afterlife.\textsuperscript{17} Pyre cremation offered opportunities for the soul to live on, whether rising to the heavens as smoke or imbued within bone fragments, and machine cremation eliminated them, seeing them as inefficiencies. The containment of human combustion demystified death and delineated it within the walls of the machine, and the dead had become mobilized to serve the progressive agenda of the living.

There was a consensus among intellectual circles that the cremator was a vehicle not just for health but also social welfare. Modern cremation provided clear and major advantages in health and city planning over

\textsuperscript{15} Irion, \textit{Cremation}, 20

\textsuperscript{16} Laqueur, \textit{The Work of The Dead}, 491

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 493
the predominant practice of burial, which led cremation to spread throughout the Western world in the 1870s. However, as expected, there was hesitation toward the practice. The Catholic Church was quick to condemn cremation from the get-go in 1886; the 1908 Catholic Encyclopedia suggested that it was “a public profession of irreligion and materialism” and associated it with freemasonry. The practice was only deemed acceptable by the Church in 1963 when Pope Paul VI declared that “the burning of the body, after all, has no effect on the soul, nor does it inhibit Almighty God from re-establishing the body again.” Nevertheless, the Church continues to favour burial to this day.

Elsewhere, for the most part, the undeniable advantages of space and time offered by modern cremation led funerary practices around the world to integrate and adapt to the cremator. In the United States, many groups—German rationalist communities, Protestant communities, and, of course, the medical community—shared the same concerns for sanitation and social good and spearheaded the movement for cremation. Dr. Julius Lemoyne, a distinguished physician in Washington, PA, constructed the first crematorium in the

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19 Ibid, 107

20 Davies and Mates, Encyclopedia of Cremation, 113

United States in 1876. By 1884, the second crematory opened in Lancaster, PA, and crematories in other cities—Buffalo, New York, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Detroit and Los Angeles—followed shortly. The local cremation societies in these cities amalgamated in 1913 to form the Cremation Society of America, later the Cremation Association of North America or CANA.

Canadians took to cremation more hesitantly than their American counterparts. Montreal’s Mount Royal Cemetery Company became home to Canada’s first crematorium in 1901. The cemetery’s burial grounds had become full in the 1880s, but it was only after a long period of research into American and British cremation and financing from Montreal entrepreneur and cremation enthusiast Sir William Christopher Macdonald that the crematorium was built. It took twelve years for the second Canadian crematorium to be built in Vancouver in 1913, and another twenty for the third in Toronto.

The relatively slow uptake of cremation in Canada was seen as a matter of concern by CANA. Consisting largely of crematory operators, CANA was at the forefront of shaping the perception of cremation in the public psyche. As Jessica Mitford laments in *The American Way of Death*, the drastically changing tastes of the twentieth century had seen the creation of a death industry; the early humanitarian advocates for cremation had become supplanted by profit-driven crematory

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22 Ibid, 404
24 Irion, *Cremation*, 24
operators\textsuperscript{26}. 

The marketing of cremation, as any business did in the modern era, was highly instrumental in its spread across North America. Given the emotionally fragile state of its clientele, the rhetoric of advertisements was carefully crafted to simultaneously downplay the potentially distressing elements of fire and burning, and promote cremation’s emotional and intellectual value\textsuperscript{27}. Furthermore, arguments were made on the basis of rational and ethical reasons. According to a 2005 survey by the Wirthlin Group, the top three reasons for which respondents chose cremation were saving money, saving land, and simplicity\textsuperscript{28}.

Sure enough, CANA’s efforts to quell prejudices, along with the Catholic church’s change of heart and the development of better cremator technology, saw the astronomical rise of cremation in North America towards the end of the twentieth century. In 2017, the rates of cremation in Canada and the United States were 70.5\% and 51.6\% respectively, and are due to reach 75.1\% and 57.8\% in 2020\textsuperscript{29}. Around the world, there is no doubt that cremation has rapidly become one of the foremost methods of disposition. Japan took to cremation particularly strongly – in spite of an initial ban of the practice in 1873 (which was repealed two years later), Japan would go on to cremate 87\% of


\textsuperscript{27} Davies and Mates, \textit{Encyclopedia of Cremation}, 3

\textsuperscript{28} Michael R Leming and George E Dickinson, \textit{Understanding Dying, Death, And Bereavement} (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2011), 349

its citizens by 1976\textsuperscript{30}. Currently, it boasts the highest rate of cremation in the world at 99.9\%\textsuperscript{31}.

However, despite the broad acceptance of cremation on rational grounds, there remains a distinct disconnect on liturgical grounds. For all the high-level extolling of modern cremation’s humanitarian virtues and operator professionalism, the low-level emotional and liturgical experience of the mourner has been completely overlooked – efficiency and customer service have been sold to the public, who lack expectation for a deeper ritual experience of the event itself. This is evident in the framework of the contemporary North American death ritual, which does not allow for meaningful participation from the bereaved.

\textsuperscript{30} Davies and Mates, \textit{Encyclopedia of Cremation}, 451
\textsuperscript{31} Doughty and Blair, \textit{From Here to Eternity}, 157
Fig. 22: Catafalque at Carfrae Chapel in Mount Pleasant Cre-
Fig. 22 (previous): Catafalque at Carfrae Chapel in Mount Pleasant Crematorium and Mausoleum in Toronto. It is used to lower the casket to the crematorium following the funeral ceremony.
A death ritual requires three elements: a subject, a place, and the bereaved.

This is the average contemporary North American cremation ritual.
Despite a common desire to die at home, most people will pass away in some sort of institution, whether it be a hospital or a nursing home, away from friends and family.

Death is a lonely event.
The Morgue

The corpse is whisked away by a transfer crew from site of death to the morgue. There it is stored for a few days, refrigerated at 2-4C in a well-ventilated space. Meanwhile, the family makes funeral preparations with the funeral director. The family is dissuaded from visiting the body at this stage due to a misguided conception (perpetuated by the death industry) of the unembalmed corpse as dirty, dangerous, and diseased.

Fig. 26: The Morgue (subject)

Fig. 27: The Morgue (place)

Fig. 28: The Morgue (bereaved)
Embalming

The body is prepared for the funeral by embalmers with the objective of preserving an idealized, “living” appearance. This process sets off decomposition for a few weeks, accommodating funeral preparations and visiting relatives. After the corpse is disinfected and massaged to counteract rigor mortis, embalmers conduct a series of surgical and cosmetic processes in a surgical setting. Extraordinary deaths require extra treatment. Finally, the body is placed into the coffin and straightened out again. There is no involvement on the part of the family.
Viewing

Relatives are finally allowed to view and pay respects to the deceased at the viewing. The body is moved from the morgue to a viewing room and adjusted to its final appearance. The viewing room is sparse and generic, allowing for quick ceremony turnover. It is decorated and set up according to the family’s wishes, often featuring elaborate flower displays and ornaments as physical tokens of respect.

Fig. 32: Viewing (subject)

Fig. 33: Viewing (place)

Fig. 34: Viewing (bereaved)
Procession

The casket is closed and transferred to a hearse. The hearse, driven by a professional hearse driver, leads the funeral procession to the final resting place. Mourners follow in their private vehicles. Local traffic slows, often with the assistance of police, allowing the motorcade to proceed uninterrupted.

Fig. 35: Procession (subject)

Fig. 36: Procession (place)

Fig. 37: Procession (bereaved)
Funeral

The funeral is usually conducted at the preferred locale of worship of the deceased or their immediate family; if not, it is held at the chapel of the crematorium or funeral home. Such chapels, like the viewing rooms, are designed to be as inoffensive as possible. Lighting, materials, and furnishings are generic and “familiar”.

The body is laid passively at the front of the chapel on a stage, along with the pulpit. The coffin may be closed or open during the ceremony. The family may invite clergy to lead the funeral rites in accordance with (or, commonly, in spite of a lack of) religious beliefs. Some mourners may deliver eulogies, but for the most part, mourners attend passively.

Fig. 38: Funeral (subject)

Fig. 39: Funeral (place)

Fig. 40: Funeral (bereaved)
Committal

The coffin is taken to the cremation room where it is loaded onto the charger. The body may be moved from the funerary coffin to a plain, disposable vessel. Mourners may adorn the body with flowers or other final effects before the casket is closed for the last time.

Beyond immediate family, few other mourners will attend the committal. Mourners may not be in direct contact or view of the cremator, or even in the same room, especially in crematoria with limited space. A designated family member may push a button to commence the cremation.

Fig. 41: Committal (subject)

Fig. 42: Committal (place)

Fig. 43: Committal (bereaved)
Cremation

The charger pushes the casket into the cremator, the retort of the cremator closes, and the body undergoes a full combustion process. In the meantime, the family may witness the cremation or leave the premises entirely. The witnessing room, fully separated from the cremation room, is furnished generically to create an inoffensive environment. Mourners passively wait in this room for the duration of the cremation, an average of ninety minutes. The cremation operator oversees the combustion process.

Fig. 44: Cremation (subject)

Fig. 45: Cremation (place)

Fig. 46: Cremation (bereaved)
Transfer of Ashes

The cremated remains cool for the next day after the cremation. Pieces of metal not combusted are removed and recycled, and large bone fragments are crushed in the cremulator, resulting in a fine, uniform powder. The ashes are placed into a temporary container, or the family’s urn of choice. The crematorium calls the family to pick up the ashes, finally deinstitutionalizing the deceased person.

Fig. 47: Transfer of Ashes (subject)

Fig. 48: Transfer of Ashes (place)

Fig. 49: Transfer of Ashes (bereaved)
Disposition

Cremation offers many options and flexibility for disposition. The family may choose to abandon the ashes, keep the ashes at home, store the ashes in a niche or columbarium, scatter the ashes in a garden of remembrance, scatter them elsewhere meaningful, or process them into a keepsake.
Fig. 53: One of the cremators at Mt. Pleasant Crematorium.

By Author.
Fig. 53 (previous): One of the cremator retorts at Mt. Pleasant Crematorium in Toronto. The casket is inserted here.
SEQUENCE OF OPERATION

1. Turn power on.
2. Turn fan on. (Charging door closed)
3. Turn Afterburner on. (Set to desired temperature)
4. Load casket into chamber.
5. Start ignition burner and set ignition temperature at 500 deg.F.
6. When casket is burning turn off ignition burner and make sure that air supply is off.
7. Allow casket to burn down at its own speed. You must carefully monitor the burndown - the temperature can get too high if the burner is left on too long and allow the cremator to generate excessive heat and smoke when the casket breaks open.
8. Operate until heat starts to drop in ignition chamber - at this point use hearth air only to consume remains if possible.
9. If necessary use ignition burner to complete the cremation.
10. When cremation complete - turn off burners - leave hearth and ignition burner air running until cool down.
11. Clean out cremator.
12. After charging next casket, repeat sequence.

Note:
Do not charge polished caskets at more than 400 deg.F. or it may ignite and flash back on to operator. N.B. Check TYPE OF CASKET sheets enclosed. At completion of days work, cool cremator by setting timer to length of time fan is to run.

Fig. 54: Operating instructions for the cremators at St. John's Norway Crematorium.
Fig. 55: The cremators at St. John's Norway crematorium.

By Author.
Fig. 55 (previous): The cremators at St. John’s Norway crematorium in Toronto. The machines date from 1999, when the cemetery owners saw a growing demand for cremation and constructed a crematorium addition.

Fig. 56: Cremator temperature over the course of combustion. The temperature inside the machine ranges from 400°C to 1100°C.
Fig. 57: Phases of fuel application over the course of combustion. Fuel is not needed when the body sustains its own combustion.
Fig. 58: Intensity of odour generated over the course of combustion.
Fig. 59: Smoke and dust generated over the course of combustion.
The first sign of human settlement and rest after the hunt, the battle, and wandering in the desert is today, as when the first men lost paradise, the setting up of the fireplace and the lighting of the reviving, warming and food preparing flame. Around the hearth the first groups assembled; around it the first alliances formed; around it the first rude religious concepts were put into the customs of a cult. Throughout all phases of society the hearth formed that sacred focus around which the whole took order and shape. It is the first and most important, the moral element of architecture.

— Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture*¹

Fig. 60: Cigarettes
(frames collapsed)
On Main Street, there is an unassuming convenience store. I had walked by it countless times throughout the years I had lived in Cambridge but had never been inside—until now.

“How can I help you?” the man at the counter asked. “I’d like to buy some cigarettes,” I said with as much coolness as I could muster. I wasn’t some high schooler; I was an adult, dammit, and I would buy cigarettes if I wanted to.

“How ones?” I could sense his bemusement shift to amusement. “Uhhhhhhh Marlboros?” I blurted out. It was the first brand I could think of from my Google search of “cigarette brands top”. He smiled. “Red or gold?” I paused, realizing that there wasn’t a non-stupid way to ask my next question. “Which one is stronger?”

Expecting to reek, I headed home to tie my hair back into a bun and change into the old clothes I had picked out to take the fall. Thanks to public health awareness, there weren’t many places to smoke a bunch of cigarettes, so I had to do it in my backyard. Luckily the fence was high enough to shield the world from my car-
cinogenic antics, starting with fashioning a precari-
ous camera rig out of a rusty metal cage.

I held a cigarette up to my BBQ lighter. The
paper ignited instantly while the tobacco charred
slowly at the tip. Cool. Examining the charred
cigarette in my fingers, I realized I was at a cross-
roads. I could very well take a drag and smoke for
the first time in the privacy of my backyard. But, I
reasoned, smoking the cigarette would be a waste,
and I couldn’t afford to waste any of them, and the
 photos wouldn’t be consistent, and smoking ten
cigarettes in a row for consistency’s sake was dumb,
and it would probably be unpleasant, and why
knowingly make my life unpleasant. So I set down
the cigarette and set the shutter off.

Well, the next ninety minutes of my life were go-
ing to be unpleasant anyway. Every whiff of breeze
would snuff the cigarette, forcing me to kneel and
re-light it, and there were lots of whiffs of breeze,
so my back and knees were killed in no time. I
couldn’t even sit down in between - all the chairs
at my apartment were upholstered, and my land-
lord had removed the patio furniture. I would lower
myself slowly onto the hard concrete pad only to
get up a moment later. I had brought my laptop, but
I was unable to tear my attention from the burn-
ing cigarette long enough to use it. And, of course,
there was the smell—the smell I had long held my
breath to that I wouldn’t be able to wash from my
fingernails for days—wafting ceaselessly from the
can. I cursed the wind for deterring my efforts and
my landlord for being so mean and the sun for beat-
ing down on me. I wanted nothing more than for
the damn cigarettes to burn, burn, burn.

I wonder if smoking the cigarettes would have
made that afternoon more pleasant after all.
Fig. 61: Cigarettes (frames)
Hence there are finally two different selves, one of which us, as it were, the external projection of the other, its spatial and, so to speak, social representation. We reach the former by deep introspection, which leads us to grasp our inner states as living things, constantly becoming, as states not amenable to measure, which permeate one another and of which the succession in duration has nothing in common with juxtaposition in homogeneous space. But the moments at which we thus grasp ourselves are rare, and that is just why we are rarely free. The greater part of the time we live outside ourselves, hardly perceiving anything of ourselves but our own ghost, a colourless shadow which pure duration projects into homogeneous space. Hence our life unfolds in space rather than in time; we live for the external world rather than for ourselves; we speak rather than think; we “are acted” rather than act ourselves.

— Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*

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Fig. 62: Torso (frames collapsed)
I glimpsed the shirt at the RPM Thrift Store and bought it without trying it on. Sure enough, like all crisp white cotton button-ups, it fit uncomfortably, which was just what I needed. The black tie I borrowed from the back of my brother’s closet. It took a few tries following an infographic to get the knot looking passable, but it hung too long on my short torso.

I told Fred that I wanted “as many lights as possible.” I could feel the heat intensify with every switch he flipped on. He jokingly assured me that the extra strong AC would keep me comfortable while I fried, as he adjusted the camera and tripod. I tried my best to sit up straight. He arrived at an angle that he seemed satisfied with, so he let the shutter go, told me to knock if I needed anything, and disappeared behind the door.

It was eerily silent, despite the AC roaring overhead. I had worked by myself in the photo studio many times before, but I’d never felt so alone. The many lights coupled with the camera pointed at me gave the odd sensation of being
watched. Discomfort was the game, but I felt like I had purposefully been dealt all the winning cards.

I pulled out the book I had brought, D.H. Lawrence’s *Apocalypse*. *Apocalypse means simply Revelation*, it begins. Nice opener. I read this to myself three more times. Five pages later, I put the book down and looked up at the clock on the opposite wall. Only ten minutes had passed. I tried meditating, sitting still, and focusing on my breathing. This worked for about eight seconds at a time before my mind and posture slipped. I stretched, yawned, swung my legs. I accepted that a strengthened core was not going to happen today, and succumbed to my usual right-leaning slouch.

The damn shirt and tie were so uncomfortable. I tugged at them constantly and fell into a rhythm of loosening and tightening my collar, not the least beckoned by the presence of the camera. I had to be sweaty before I deserved to loosen the collar, and I had to be cool before I would tighten it.

At a certain point, I felt my armpit and realized that the AC was winning and that I wasn’t sweating enough. I pulled two of the hotlights towards my head, nudging them closer and closer until the larger one was just a few inches from my head. To my satisfaction, I felt my scalp heat up and sweat form on my forehead.

Before I knew it, there were only ten minutes to go. Fred stopped by and asked how I was doing. I told him I was fine, which was the truth, and he dipped hesitantly back behind the door.
Fig. 63: Torso (frames)
The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another.

— Michel Foucault, Of Other Spaces

Fig. 64: Lap (frames collapsed)
I had what my mom would admonishingly call in Cantonese “itchy hands”. Whenever I walked into a store, I would feel compelled to pick things up. At museums, I would make a conscious effort to put my hands behind my back or in my pockets so as not to touch things. Labels would get peeled, pens clicked, papers folded. My hands were never at rest.

Luckily for me, the library wasn’t very busy that day - no one would observe or judge me. I had brought with me my laptop, headphones, a TTC subway transfer, a gum wrapper, and my phone - all prime stuff for fidgeting. It took a few minutes to get the tripod and camera into position, and another few to unpack all my stuff. I sat down on the couch. It was time to act natural, to do what I did best.

Immediately, this proved much more difficult than I had anticipated. Whenever my attention shifted to my hands, they would be faked out - if they were in motion, they stopped; if they were still, I was compelled to move them. Even though no one was around, I felt like I was
being watched - as if my own attention burned as hot as a thousand strangers’. My own hands, so deftly handling camera equipment just a few moments ago, felt detached and foreign.

I figured what I needed was a good distraction, so I fired up a comedy show on Netflix. The relatively low level of intellectual engagement was just what my hands needed to slip back to their normal fidgetiness. By the end of the episode, I was pleased to find that I had made a complete folded mess of the transfer and gum wrapper. I watched the next episode, and was about to put on a third, but decided I’d had enough and shut my computer.

Time to go on my phone. Well, there was nothing new to look at there, so I put it down and looked out the window. But there was also nothing to look at outside, so I picked up my phone again. I felt like such a millenial, the paragon of what old cranky people lamented. I decided to try focus my attention outside; after all, the library did have amazing views. The sky was bright but filled with clouds, the sun poking out occasionally. It was as if it couldn’t decide whether to be sunny or overcast.

In my peripheral vision I caught the student librarian approaching to warn me that the library was closing soon. I checked my watch and surveyed my belongings, which I needed to pack. Those last few minutes could not have gone by any slower. As soon as I heard the shutter for the 90th photo, I hurriedly got out of the chair, packed up, and ran out of there, looking apologetically at the librarian.
Fig. 65: Lap (frames)
We get our sharpest taste of the present when we are frightened, harried, or baffled; for then present time seems to lock us physically into itself and away from the continuum.

In general we are surprised by events not so much because they refute our expectations as because we have no coherent expectations at all.

—Robert Grudin, *Time and the Art of Living*¹

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Fig. 66: Feet (frames collapsed)
When I was eleven, I sprained my right ankle running down a steep hill, much to the chagrin of my mom, who had to prop me up on the long subway ride home, and my friends, who relied on me, the fastest runner in the class, to claim the baseball diamond at recess. In spite of what felt like a slow recovery, I would go on to participate in gym class like everyone else and even sprint on the track and field team. Aside from the occasional jeers from my siblings, the event fell into the past.

My sure-footed self would go on to sprain the same ankle twelve years later in 2016, thanks to the winning combination of being distracted by my phone and climbing a long flight of stairs in the Shanghai metro. I knew what had happened before I even hit the ground. After a few phone calls to the travel insurance people and a taxi ride to a nearby private hospital, I was patched up with a brace, a crutch, and some topical cream. I recall triumphantly limping out of the hospital at near walking pace with my new crutch, ready to take on Shanghai once more.
After a few days, we travelled back to Shenzhen, where most of my relatives lived. My mom's elderly cousin, swearing on the medicinal properties of her beloved aloe plant, gave me a small offshoot to bring back to Canada. My mom was concerned about border security and the rough conditions of transit in cargo, but I convinced her to stuff the plant (which was potted!) into an empty gift box anyway.

Over the course of the 14 hour flight, I could feel my leg slowly swelling and going numb. I wasn't in pain, but I didn't move for fear of aggravating the injury. All the progress I had made in healing was being undone.

Back at home, I couldn't fidget my legs or wrap my feet around my blanket or sit cross-legged like I usually would. I stagnated physically and soon also stagnated emotionally. My mom checked on me every few hours, alternately reapplying a Chinese herbal concoction and the hospital-issued cream. I convinced myself that laying on the couch playing games on my phone all day was the only way to live.

Three weeks in, my best friend timidly asked if I wanted to go out for burritos and I found myself saying yes, even though I still couldn't really walk and I had come to resent what I saw as pity. But sure enough, I was able to get off the crutch only a week later.

I now carry a funky right ankle - my foot tenses and rolls inward whenever I am stressed out, as if in bitter protest. But I also carry love with me - love in the form of trips to Fat Bastard Burritos, of incessant and gratuitous worry over my walking technique, of an aloe plant steadily growing by my bedroom window.
Fig. 67: Feet (frames)
The whitening is an incineration. The burning, however, is at the same time a reanimation through fire. The substances in themselves burn each other and bring themselves back to life through fire and they impregnate each other, making each other pregnant and bringing forth the life being sought after by the philosophers.

— Marcellin Berthelot, *La Chimie au Moyen Âge* \(^1\)

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Fig. 68: Candle
(frames collapsed)
I confess to you, Lord, that even today I am still ignorant of what time is; but I praise you, Lord, for the fact that I know I am making this avowal within time, and for my realization that within time I am talking about time at such length, and that I know this “length” itself is long only because time has been passing all the while. But how can I know that, when I do not know what time is? Or perhaps I simply do not know how to articulate what I know! Woe is me, for I do not even know what I do not know!

Behold me here before you, O my God; see that I do not lie. As I speak, this is the true state of my heart. You, You alone, will light my lamp, O Lord; O my God, you will illumine my darkness.

—St. Augustine, *The Confessions*¹

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Fig. 69: Rene Magritte, *L'Oracle*, 1931.
Fig. 70: Candle (frames)
Postface

A person’s life consists of a collection of events, the last of which could also change the meaning of the whole, not because it counts more than the previous ones but because once they are included in a life, events are arranged in an order that is not chronological but, rather, corresponds to an inner architecture. ... Each individual is made up of what he has lived and the way he lived it, and no one can take this away from him.

—Italo Calino, Mr. Palomar

Kwei Ching Cheung was the name on her ID cards. I never quite understood why she used a fake name, despite repeated explanations from my parents. Her real name was Chan Sau Ping. To me and my siblings anyway, she was Yee Po. Yee Po lived the last two quarters of her life

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at 1700 Finch Avenue East in North York. She lived the first quarter of her life in China and the second quarter in Jamaica. Her Jamaican accent came through her broken English. Otherwise, she spoke Hakka, the dialect of my dad’s side of the family. She was my grandmother’s cousin.

Her apartment block is located right behind Sky-mark Place. This plaza has everything: a No Frills, a dim sum restaurant, two banks, a Pizza Hut, a gas station, a Pharma Plus, a sushi restaurant, a Service Ontario. Just try not to drive here—the parking situation is always miserable, as my parents have complained many times. If you’re lucky enough to live nearby, which Yee Po was, then it is far better to walk, which she did, nearly every day.

She knew all the dim sum servers (not by name) and they knew her too (not by name). We would join her on Saturday or Sunday mornings. She always ordered the same items: barbecue pork buns, deep fried squid tentacle, “Chinese pizza”, and her favourite, steamed meatball. My siblings and I largely left her to talk with our parents since we didn’t speak Hakka, but we always made a point of thanking her at the end and accompanying her back to her apartment.

As she got older, Yee Po needed more and more help with walking. Her mental facilities declined—and she was already difficult to understand. She started muttering incoherently to herself and forgetting things. She would call my mom, only to hang up or rant about people or events from her past. Her dreams were wild and she did not sleep well. She talked a lot about death. She was afraid, but she knew. We all knew.

When my mom broke the news to me, I had to ask her to repeat herself. It was May 2014. Yee Po was 86 years
old and died in her sleep. It was certainly a painless death, but less certainly a peaceful one.

Her funeral was held at St. Timothy’s Catholic Church which is not too far from her apartment block. Some relatives I knew and many others I didn’t were in attendance. The service was boring. Her open casket sat at the front of the room, casting an inexplicable aura over the room. When it came time to view the body, I thought why the hell not? So I traipsed up there with my siblings.

She was dressed up in ill-fitting clothes. I thought of the denim vest she always wore, her hat, her outdated floral shirts. Her face was weirdly made up—by God, they put lipstick on her. It was a hyperreal version of her. As I stood there, it suddenly hit me that she was dead. She was gone. She was gone in a way I came close to understanding in that moment. I hung my head.

After the service, everyone made the procession over to Holy Cross Cemetery in Richmond Hill, where she was to be interred. I saw these funerary conga lines all the time outside of my junior high school; it felt oddly gratifying to finally be a part of one. We had gained the unspeakably cool privilege of slowing down traffic.

I watched her interment with a mixture of fascination and solemnity but mostly fascination. When it was over, everyone silently stood around the grave for some minutes, then people filed away in small groups. My family was the last one left. My dad told me we were going to Mandarin for lunch buffet with the other relatives, and we did. As we pulled out of the Mandarin parking lot, I realized it was over. Yee Po’s life was over, the funeral was over. She was in the ground in Richmond Hill and that was that. We could all go back to
living our lives now.

In the ensuing weeks, dad kept bringing up that we needed to give Yee Po a proper gravestone. He felt indignant at her choice of a cheap gravestone; he felt she should have been given a “proper” one. Relatives clamoured out of the woodwork to stake their claims of what little she possessed. Meanwhile, no one made any effort to attend to her grave. Everyone danced around her but not quite with her.
Bibliography


Kracauer, Siegfried. *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. Translated and edited by Thom-


Appendix

Traces / On Death
Fig. 71: Traces
(gallery view)
Fig. 72: 90 in 90 /
The Burning Body
(installation view)
Fig. 73: 90 in 90 / The Burning Body (installation view)
Fig. 74: 90 in 90 (closeup view)
On Monday November 19 2018, I held an event entitled “On Death” at the Design at Riverside Gallery. The event, comprising a short lecture and a discussion, corresponded to my work within the group exhibition Traces, which was based on photographic thesis work by myself and five friends. On display were the nine 90-minute photo series in this thesis (as 90 in 90, an admittedly horrible title thought of in a rush), along with my illustrations of the cremation process (as The Burning Body).

I had set up my camera on a tripod and pointed it at the audience. The camera was set to take one photo every minute for ninety minutes, and the photos would automatically save to my laptop. Using TouchDesigner, a visual development platform, I had configured a network of commands to cumulatively superimpose each photo atop the ones prior, i.e. the passage of five minutes would generate five superimposed photos, and thirty minutes would generate thirty superimposed photos. This process would be shown live on the giant TV, effectively giving the audience a live reading of the passage of time.
and the multiplicity of duration. Furthermore, a lit candle would burn the whole while.

After the guests settled into their seats with their refreshments, I nervously stepped to the front to welcome them and introduce myself. I explained the camera setup and prompted Paniz to press the shutter. I then proceeded to light the candle, which was placed on a pedestal. Glancing sideways, I immediately noticed that the TV was black and not displaying the first photo. I decided to carry on nevertheless and began to read off my script. I spoke for about fifteen minutes about cremation, the work on the wall behind me, my photographic method, time and the experience of it, storytelling, architecture, being present. Before I knew it, I had come to the end of my script. I abruptly asked the audience if they had any questions; two questions about the cremation process came up.

Time to awkwardly transition into the discussion. My heart was pounding. I could picture the awkward silence followed by the shuffling of an unimpressed crowd preparing to leave. I read aloud my reflection on the death of Yee Por (the Postface of this thesis) and hesitantly lowered my script. Yee Por’s death had gotten me to think about death; did anyone else have a similar experience?

To my great surprise, the discussion was animated. Everyone was engaged. People shared their thoughts and experiences around dying and memory, or listened attentively. I couldn’t have planned for this outcome; evidently, those who showed up knew what they were up for. Occasionally there were brief moments of silence following a quip, but they were never awkward,
and someone would always chime in. The loud, regular *chhaks* of the camera shutter faded into the background. My heart, pounding at the outset, had slowed to its regular pace. An old, deep-seated part of me grew relieved, much like a chronic ache melting away at an unexpectedly pointed touch.

I had a growing feeling about where the image superposition setup had gone wrong. Sure enough, when I opened TouchDesigner after the guests dispersed, my eye fell on the node I had unwittingly disconnected prior to the event. I had painstakingly prepped for this for hours, running trial run after trial run to ensure that the setup was idiot-proof, but evidently, I was a bigger idiot than the system could account for. Even though I was both exhausted and elated from the outcome of the discussion, thoughts of regret clouded my head and I couldn’t fall asleep.

The next day, I headed to ACM to return the cables I’d borrowed. Fred sympathized with me about the “technology fail” that had occurred, and offhandedly suggested carrying the experiment out again during my defense. In that moment, it struck me that my mistake was as irrevocably in the past as mistakes I had made in the fourth grade. Just as the mistake set forth lament, it also set forth new and even greater possibilities. I practically skipped out of ACM.

The following are the results of this not-so-failed experiment. The composite images were processed after the fact, and have been seen by no one but myself.
Fig. 75: On Death (frames)
Fig. 77: On Death
(15 minutes elapsed)
Fig. 78: On Death
(30 minutes elapsed)
Fig. 80: On Death
(60 minutes elapsed)

Fig. 81 (following):
On Death
(74 minutes elapsed)