

Petra Černe Oven, Barbara Predan

IDEATH

IN DESIGN

Ljubljana 2020

Petra Černe Oven, Barbara Predan
Death in Design

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Yowza! Yowza! Yowza! — Sprint to the last breath (four workshops)

University of Ljubljana, Academy of Fine Arts and Design, Department of Industrial Design and Applied Arts and Department of Visual Communication Design, Ljubljana, Slovenia
24–25 October and 9 November 2016

A fact of life: Man doesn't know how to be mortal (lecture)

Let's go. — Sprint to the last breath (workshop)

University of Applied Sciences, FH Joanneum, Graz, Austria
14 November 2016

Man reckons with immortality, and forgets to reckon with death (lecture)

That, or anything else. — Sprint to the last breath (workshop)

ZGRAF 12, International Exhibition of Graphic Design and Visual Communications,
Lauba People and Art House, Lauba, Zagreb, Croatia
12 January 2017

Thinking toward a university of new ideas: Confronting everything that is (lecture)

Alice: Somebody screamed. Rocky: That was you, Alice. — Sprint to the last breath (workshop)

University of Bihač, Faculty of Technical Sciences, Department of Textiles, Bihač,
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**A world better or worse?
Best we just stick our necks out...**



(1) *That, or anything else* workshop, Zagreb, Croatia, 12 January 2017.

There's no point beating around the bush.

This is a book about **DEATH**.

About death and design, in fact. We used design as an aid in tackling some questions about death. The key word is *some*—the book does not attempt to deal with every important question that could be posed about death; only those that particularly interested us and that, we hope, are important.

Even though we're still among the living, we decided to discuss death, keenly aware that we lack that crucial experience—death itself. But design is all about exploring connections, as well as the ability to perceive the world through the eyes of others; this is how we establish an empathic understanding of the world and the individuals around us. Death is no exception in this respect.

We felt a childlike curiosity about an individual who, in the manner of a diligent pupil, thickly underlined a segment in a library's copy of the book *Spremljanje umirajočih* [*Accompanying the Dying*]: "Even though dying is an integral part of life that none of us will be able to avoid, we're still novices whenever we find ourselves in the company of someone who is dying" (Klevišar, 1994: 9). Our interest then shifted to the second law of thermodynamics, which introduces the concept of entropy as the measure of the degree of disorder in a system, with everything in nature said to be tending towards decay. The latter notion is made even more apparent by the fact that people die all the time, so we are constantly in contact with death and decay. We were interested in the philosophical, psychoanalytical, medical, quotidian and spiritual attitudes towards death. Last but not least, we wanted to understand the

(2)

better

Einstein would live! And Mozart.
Or Falco.

No! Cause u would
see the same people
every single day
for eternity

IS IT BAD THAT PEOPLE DIE?
WELL, IS TRUMP A GOOD GUY?
IT'S THE SAME QUESTION
WITH THE SAME ANSWER.

NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO

→ No many people on earth

↓ I think you can't enjoy life the same way as now

It would be horrible.
I'd like to die, if nobody could.
The world would be overpopulated.

scientific, academic take on this topic, called thanatology. This is the “study of death and dying and the psychological mechanisms of dealing with them” (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

At the same time, we weren’t interested in death in the context of how it is approached in design practice—from the services involved in preparing for death, to the actual event of death and the funeral arrangements, including the material elements accompanying these steps. Instead, we decided to design a different set of glasses for death. We decided to at least partially measure it—to the extent that this is possible in our finite, measurable world, as death itself is boundless and therefore impossible to measure. This was probably the only possible way for us to react to the loss of our fathers; it is only once you’ve lost someone who’s as close to you as a father that you really begin to grasp the finality, the irreversibility of such an event. It is also the first time you feel the pain of utter powerlessness and the sense of permanent loss.

It is when you lose a loved one that you truly realise how futile and irritating the clichéd expressions that society downright *forces* upon one on such occasions really are. It is understandable, of course, that since everyone finds the situation very unpleasant and wishes to escape it as quickly as possible, a diverse set of handy clichés, as well as situations to employ them, emerged to facilitate that. Wishing to understand how deeply these clichés have become ingrained in us—both in the sense of uncomfortable reactions and the denial of the obvious—we resolved in 2016 to empirically verify our hypotheses. We decided on measuring and interpreting the results and experiences that we would obtain through lectures and workshops. We performed eight 4–6-hour workshops over eight months in Ljubljana (Slovenia), Graz (Austria), Zagreb (Croatia) and Bihać (Bosnia and Herzegovina).

In order to get the most clichéd reactions to death, the population we selected for examination was university students.¹ Why so?

[2] Warm-up task: A world better or worse?, Let’s go workshop, Graz, Austria, 14 November 2016.

1 At the Zagreb workshop the group of participants was extended to include (mostly) young professionals in the field of design.

The reason is that most students would not yet have directly experienced the loss of a loved one and the concept of their own death would still have been abstract and alien to most of them. Consequently, we expected their responses to the assignments to be learned; that is, that they would respond in a way they felt society would have expected them to, especially since we deliberately allotted them a very short time for each of the assignments (3–15 minutes), denying them the ability to research or think over their answers. On the other hand, by choosing design students specifically, we intentionally introduced the possibility of departures from the norm with respect to their attitudes towards societal clichés. As we put it in the workshop descriptions: we aimed to test the highly desirable, even essential, ability of the designer to respond like a chameleon—to be always ready to not only perceive but also to generate and reflect on changes. We challenged the participants to reflect on their mortality, death *per se*, as well as what all this has to do with design.

In the *warm-up* assignment, titled “A world better or worse?” we encouraged the participants to formulate a short argument about whether the world would be better or worse without death. Knowing the difficult nature of this question—even if we aren’t truly aware of the entropy that surrounds us in everyday life, death continues to define us, as it defines the environment and life around us—this was already the first test with the potential to produce clichéd responses. Even though designers work for tomorrow and are fundamentally defined by their ability to envision the unimaginable, a question like that flips everything on its head; everything we currently know and, if not understand, at least accept. It’s interesting to note that, despite living in a world where the media constantly entices us with promises of eternal youth and extreme longevity, the majority (121) of the participants concluded that a world without death would be worse; only eight of them felt such a world would be better.

Arguments in favour of the existence of death derived from the “familiar” perspective—one’s own experience of life. The majority associated the existence of death with progress, arguing that it

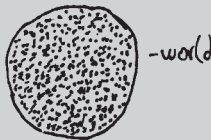
Without death, the world would be

(3)

WORSE.

- Arguments:
- 1.) Overpopulation
 - 2.) No motivation or pressure to do anything
 - 3.) Everything becomes meaningless
 - 4.) No need for rules or laws anymore
 - 5.) No technical or medical progress
 - 6.) No need to think about anything

It would be worse, because the world would be overcrowded, and impossible to control.



- It would not be better - life without death. The only way to give value to life is to make time an expendable resource. So to experience death, in any form or way, is also the greatest valorization of life. Life without death goes against the very principals of nature → energy and matter flow and cycle, making them static would disprove itself.

is precisely our awareness of own mortality that motivates us to research and work towards progress. By giving us a time limit, death becomes the engine of progress. Many felt that lacking an awareness of our own mortality, we would stagnate. We would cease to value life, they asserted, for it is the impermanence of our existence that enables the existence of any values at all. Some participants foresaw the end of evolution in terms of population control. The third group recognised the possibility that, in the absence of death, religions would disappear, along with our need for faith. These arguments form an interesting basis for reflection in the context of our current rapid destruction of the planet: if we were to live forever, would we continue to act so irresponsibly towards our own environment, or would we realise that Earth is the paradise that some have been hoping to attain in the afterlife?

The few individuals who saw the absence of death as a benefit would be delighted at their own immortality and the absence of suffering, as well as that Einstein, Mozart and Falco would be still alive. One of the participants recognised that the new order of things would provide business opportunities that our current mortal state does not facilitate and, in contrast to the majority opinion, felt that immortality would spur “drastic technological progress”.

The rest of the book presents the five aspects that we used to reflect on our attitude towards death: detecting, depicting, explaining, killing and surviving death. Five paths encouraging the reader to reject, ponder, abhor, delight and reminisce. All responses are correct; as we would often point out at the workshops, all reasoning is good reasoning. Even that which ends up as a crumpled piece of paper in the trash.

Warm-up task:

A world better or worse?

The task was carried out in eight workshops.

The results of the task were submitted by: 162 participants.

Would the world without death be better or worse?

(medium: a supported answer in word and/or drawing)

The world would be worse	The world would be partly better and partly worse	No answer (not one or the other)	The world would be better
120	20	14	8

Arguments for a worse world – without death*:

The planet would be overpopulated	57
No-one would appreciate life; there would be no sense in life	27
There would be no progress; development would stagnate	27
Clichéd argument (life is a journey, each end is a new beginning)	15
There would be a loss of values	10

* We are listing the arguments that were repeated at least 10 times. Individual arguments addressed several areas.

Arguments for a better world – without death*:

There would be rapid (technological) progress (also in response to population growth)	3
We would live forever; we would be immortal; we would not know old age (important geniuses and artists would still be living)	3
There would be changes in the field of ethics and morality (attitude to euthanasia)	2
We would no longer know the pain and sadness of losing someone we love	2
We would no longer need energy (we would stop killing animals)	2

* We are listing the arguments that were repeated at least 2 times. Individual arguments addressed several areas.