

Funeral Camp

By

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Abstract: *Funeral Camp*

Funeral Camp is an exploration of grief and humour through the media of video, performance and installation. This exhibition examines the relationships between death, humour, play and camp and how they relate to aspects of queer spirituality and to queer communities. The themes explored in this body of work include death, nature, culture, witchcraft, play, drag, sadness and glamour. *Funeral Camp* and the questions I pose are in part, a gay man's perspective on having survived the AIDS epidemic. As part of my research on these topics I question if it is possible to express humour and grief simultaneously in a body of work. Can works of art be simultaneously camp and deeply emotional at the same time?

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DEDICATED TO GAIL KATHERINE HOPE HARWOOD 1941 - 2013

Mom this one's for you.

Funeral Camp

“Every good queen should be buried in her coffin in her wig and make up.” – Lady Bunny’s live performance on drag queen funerals, *Vaseline*, The El Mocombo, Toronto, Ontario circa 2004.

Funeral Camp is an exhibition designed to explore the aesthetics of post-identity (queer), death, life, popular culture, personal musings, celebration and camp. It is an intentionally paradoxically themed series of works. *Funeral Camp* is intended to focus, in part, on my own life but also on the recent passing of my mother. This series of works also includes elements of my personal aesthetics in relation to witchcraft as is practiced by some queer people in cultural and spiritual opposition to hegemonic religious practices. Some of these world religions have for thousands of years only sought the deaths and/or the complete genocide of all queer people. One of the results of the Enlightenment allowed for spirituality to become freer and the control of Christianity began to wane in its ideological and spiritual dominance of the Western Europe.¹

Funeral Camp embodies the genres of performance, video, installation, drawing and music. This exhibition examines the relationships between death, humour, play and camp and how they relate to aspects of queer spirituality and to queer communities. These works are an extension and furtherance to my previous exhibition *Séance*, January 2012 at Platform Centre for Digital and Media Arts in Winnipeg, MB.

The presentation of *Funeral Camp* will use a coffin that will be either found, built or symbolic and five Mylar tents or fabricated niches. Each niche will feature a video

¹ Davies, Owne & de Blécourt, Wiliem, *Beyond the witch trials: Witchcraft and magic in Enlightenment Europe*, (Manchester, UK, Manchester University Press, 2004).

displayed on a monitor. The video works will include the ancient four elements –*Earth, Air, Fire* and *Water* and from the contemporary neo-pagan context, a video that features *Spirit*. Each of the niche tents will be located at the five points of a pentagram, which will be demarcated on the floor using silver tape. Some viewers may interpret this in a similar fashion to the Stations of the Cross experienced in some Roman Catholic centres of worship. The imagery for each of the videos will be culled from popular culture, using found photographs and brief video samples from films.

The elements figured prominently in the magic of the ancient Egyptians and Greeks, who ascribed to each one various attributes and characteristics. Plato divided all beings into four groups based on the elements – air/birds, water/fish, earth/pedestrians and fire/stars – all of which are interrelated. The magicians and alchemists of the Middle Ages ascribed elements to external and internal parts of the human body; various gems, minerals and metals; planets and constellations; the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse; various species of the animal and plant kingdoms; human personality traits; and geometric shapes. Roger Flud (1547-1637), alchemist and astrologer, related the elements to harmonics while another Renaissance alchemist, Sissmond Bactrom, believed that if all the elements could be harmonized and united, the result would be the Philosopher's Stone. This is represented by the fifth element, spirit, which Carl G. Jung called the *quinta essential*.²

These basic ideas are a large part of the belief system for

² Guiley, Rosemary Ellen, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft & Wicca*, Third Edition, (New York, Facts On File, Inc., 2008), Pg. 112.

contemporary witches, wiccans and neo-pagans and provide the content for the *Four Elements + Spirit series*. Inspired by the found imagery, I have created a sound track or song for each work to try and capture the essence or aura of each of the elements represented. The music is made entirely of samples and also from sounds from the computer program: *GarageBand*. I have made reference to contemporary dance music; psytrance and acid jazz from the 1990's. There are several sources of inspirations for this series of works. One is the ubiquitous funeral slide show – a commonplace feature of funerals. A maximalist digital slide show of intense flashing images and loops are formalist aesthetic strategies that I will use for these works. I am employing a maximalist aesthetic in response to reading Walter Benjamin's seminal work on film and photography *Illuminations*.

The formalist or optical aesthetics of Benjamin's "aura" are of great importance to the creation of these videos but they are also of spiritual value, although Benjamin is making an argument that mechanized works of art lack an "aura" - particularly in film. The "aura" is the image that remains in the viewer's eye after an artwork has been viewed

If, while resting a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon, or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch.³

Benjamin claims that in film the images are fluid and constant, denying that an aura is present. Yet he states the aura of cinema can be found *in between* the frames of the actual film. In the *Four Elements and Spirit* series of videos – my aim is just that – to

² Benjamin, Walter, *The Work of Art in the Age of mechanical Reproduction, Illuminations*, (Schocken Books, New York, 1969) Pg. 221.

reveal the auras of fire, water, earth, air and spirit. This series of videos also uses the popular concept of having one's "life flash before my eyes" that many people express when facing near death. I am also playing with the idea of Benjamin's "cameraman" (the person in control of the images) pointing to a wide range of popular cultural images with the specific intent of portraying the four elements. The genre of a funeral slideshow is also used as a formalistic device but sped up to keep pace with the music and also to barrage the viewer with images.

It has occurred to me trying to deconstruct the very notion of death, that none of us get to actually enjoy our own funerals. I have attended many funerals of relatives as well as dear friends and am at odds with the current Christian rituals of death and transformation. *Funeral Camp*, will challenge some of these conventions of death celebrations and rituals. Mainstream funerals in most Western cultures often rely on heavily segregated activities that keep the dead from the living; where touching the dead is a relatively taboo social activity for mourners. I experienced this at my own mother's funeral when I heard relatives gasp when I touched her hair gently a final time.

Funeral Camp is an exaggerated play upon traditional Western funerals where the chemical-laden body of the deceased is put on display for mourners to grieve. This ritual of the preservation of the dead is done both for emotional and highly aesthetic reasons. Bodies are put into boxes or burnt and placed in commemorative urns – ensuring a distance between the living and the dead. This taboo of touching the dead, in fact, fetishizes them and in some ways the deceased may become the fetish objects for mourners. Death allows for the ultimate and final human objectification of the body.

Glitter Blessing is the title of my performance. I will invite 'mourners' to coat my face and body entirely in glitter. I will use a makeup adhesive to coat my exposed skin to

adhere the glitter as a blessing. I will use an assistant to help to distribute the glitter evenly on my skin flowing through the use of a fan. Prior to the *Glitter Blessing* performance/adornment/blessing – I will circle the gallery three times to open the space for celebration. After circling I will enter the coffin and lay “in state”. This blessing will also serve as an official gilding-of-the-lily before my departure. Participants will then also be invited to lay in repose, as if in death, and receive a *Glitter Blessing* from other attendees. *Glitter Blessing* is envisioned as a way to break down some of the taboos of death through social relativist role-play. *Glitter Blessing* can also be viewed as a form of *pseudo-suicide*, a ritualized act of self-death, and is symbolic of my own mortality. The coffin will be in the centre of the silver floor pentagram where the *Glitter Blessing* performance takes place.

Funeral Camp is also intended to be an institutional critique. This exhibition is a direct critique of and a response to the architecture of the newly built School of Art and its gallery at the University of Manitoba. This space feels like a space age tomb - a hermetically sealed space where art goes to die a quiet death. The automatic sliding door makes me feel as though I am entering an imaginary hands-free morgue on an episode of the 1960's *Star Trek*. Art galleries and museums can also be viewed as the permanent interment of dead artists' works.

Our culture is obsessed with immortality. I am not only referring to Christian notions of eternal spiritual rest in heaven but immortality through vampirism, zombification and more recent technological developments of personal eternity online. One of the major ironies of contemporary life is that we are immersed in a culture that is obsessed with immortality yet we deny, every day, all day, the fact that we are all going

to die. If we deny death then do we desire immortality? In this perpetual state of denial we forget to celebrate our own existence.

There is a cultural fascination with all things zombie and or vampire – the eternal. Does this reflect the death anxiety of the Baby Boom generation? This will be the largest group of people to ever die in the history of the world. Their vast holdings of money, belongings and real estate will be passed on in the next two decades. Perhaps this generation will want to stick around and feast on their children and grandchildren's brains or to live forever through a supernatural virus?

There are so many potential ways to live forever that are not just science fiction but are becoming possible through advances in science, specifically in genetics and also through the current mapping of the human genome. Genetic mapping, in our era, may be considered the ultimate form of identity. A simple smart phone application can generate information about deceased individuals indefinitely. We live in a technologically complex era. The boundaries of death and life have become blurred via the possibility of cloning and infinite information generating technologies. The program of video works for *Funeral Camp* is a response to these technologically complex ideas. It seems as though no one really truly dies anymore.

Why do we not prepare in the ways that the ancients did for death? We cannot even remotely compare the care and respect that the ancient Egyptians, Chinese, pre-modern Christian cultures devoted to the preparation of the dead for the afterlife. Modernity requires that we prepare for death in an industrialized perhaps even more minimalistic conservative way. Compared to ancient royalty and the wealthy, our funerary standards are uninspiring. *Funeral Camp* is a subversion of this modernist idea of the minimalist death – a maximalist approach to the “end”.

How do we grieve collectively and or individually? And how do technology, science and individual faith come into play?

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross was perhaps the most acclaimed researcher, guru, pop psychologist and philosopher concerning human death in our era. She is responsible for pioneering research and, in particular, the now commonly known *Five Stages of Grief*. Prior to her death in August 2004 she was recorded in a profound documentary, *Facing Death* by Stephan Haupt aired on TV Ontario in 2005. In *Facing Death*, Kübler-Ross, who had suffered a series of debilitating strokes, recanted most of what she had written and synthesized about death. This documentary made me wonder about her role as a keen student and expert on all things death and dying. Kübler-Ross' theories seem to have been supplanted by her own less than delightful experiences with it. One of her more enchanting, if not campy, statements on death is such a positive sentiment it seems at odds with her own sad experiences of pain, disability and wasting away portrayed in *Facing Death*.

Watching a peaceful death of a human being reminds us of a falling star; one of a million lights in a vast sky that flares up for a brief moment only to disappear into the endless night forever.⁴

Kübler-Ross' own passing is so at odds with her own loving, kindly and perhaps over-positive research and observations; I am both struck by the sadness of her experience and also champion the sheer humanity of her very real death. The irony and

⁴ Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, *On Death and Dying*, (Scriber, 1969), Pg. 276.

paradox of her final days are part inspiration for this exhibition, as this film still resonates with me.

Funerary art has pretty much gone the way of the Victorians with their fetishization of almost every event and activity of life. Photographing the dead – unless it is for journalism - is considered a taboo by contemporary society. Perhaps we view this activity as being tacky or even disrespectful. The Victorians and Edwardians had little problem with remembering loved-ones with objects, paintings, drawings, jewelry (a dead person's hair was often plaited into memento mori broaches or sewn into samplers sometimes depicting the dead person or a prayer). Queen Victoria, herself, lived in a perpetual state of *Funeral Camp* after the loss of her beloved Prince Albert. Her mourning clothes became the fashion for all women in the British Empire and the rest of the world during her grieving reign.⁵ Even Claude Monet, who painted some of the most beautiful artworks in our collective history, made a portrait of his beloved wife Camille on her deathbed; interestingly enough this touching portrait is not very well known nor anywhere as valuable as his other works despite the fact that he lived with her deathbed portrait for his entire life.⁶

In sharp contrast to the Victorians we have developed a very different perspective on life, death and art.

Also, man now realizes that he is an accident, that he is a completely futile being, that he has to play out the game without reason. I think that even when Velasquez was painting, even when Rembrandt was painting, they were still, whatever their attitude in life, slightly conditioned by certain types of religious possibilities,

⁵ Bell, Quentin, *Victorian Artists*, (London, UK, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967).

⁶ <http://www.marcdallessio.com/art-and-death/>

which man now, you could say, has had cancelled out for him. Man can now only attempt to beguile himself, for a time, by prolonging life – by buying a kind of immortality through the doctors. You see, painting had become, all art has become, a game by which man distracts himself. And you may say it has always been like that, but now it's entirely a game. What is fascinating is that's going to be become much more difficult for the artist, because he must really deepen the game to be any good at all, so that he can make life a bit more exciting...⁷

Herschel's, now somewhat, kitschy sounding quote on art implies that painting and art itself has moved from the spiritual, inspiring a connection to the transcendent and its subsequent aura, into a modernist concept of art which is more about diversion - it's the game of art that is more important than the goal of art.

All religions try to guide us to an afterlife – heaven/hell, reincarnation or a rejoining of the earth. Death is complicated by the idea of the “soul” and the “ego”. Even the “nothingness” that many atheists hold onto as a belief for the afterlife has a certain tone of an ‘existential forever’. Can “nothing” last forever? My musing for atheists on the topic of death is “Heaven = Nothing.” Wiccans, pagans and many new-agers believe that we simply rejoin the earth and become soil; others believe that we rejoins Mother Earth, Gaia, via decomposition without a statement on exactly what happens to an individual or as some people believe their soul.

There is general agreement between Hinduism and Buddhism that no human life can be filled with a sense of meaning and efficacious action

⁷ Chipp, Herschel B., *Theories of Modern Art*, (University of California Press, 1969 & 1998), Pg. 621.

unless it is lived in full acceptance of the fact of death. He who tries to ignore death by deluding himself into believing that he, his relatives and possessions will endure forever, robs himself of the purposeful life which can come only to him who unflinchingly accepts death as an integral part of life. On the other hand, that person who faces death calmly, courageously, and confidently – desiring neither to flee it nor to rush into its grasp – will come to recognize death not as an enemy or a robber but as an ever-present companion and ultimately, as a friend. To meet death, not only as an event at the end of life but as an ever-present ingredient in the life process itself, is the final goal to be sought in both Hinduism and Buddhism.⁸

With one parent on the precipice of death, the recent death of my mother and my life entering the twilight of middle age (Elisabeth Kübler-Ross calls these periods “anticipatory grief” in her posthumous book “On Grief and Grieving”), I intellectually know that I cannot escape the last of the great universals of human existence: death. Emotionally and spiritually – I am still very unsure of this very real future experience. We seem to fill our lives so full of life that we are often in denial of the final stage(s) of our own mortality. Is this a biological strategy for all of us to keep going in spite of all of our inevitable endings? It does not seem to matter what or how we live our lives – we all die despite our efforts at avoidance. I was oddly shocked by a pie chart I found in *National Geographic*⁹ that portrayed that 100% of all human beings will die. I knew it to

⁸ Herzog, Edgar, *Psyche and Death*, (London, England, Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1966), Pg. 10

be true but to see it so boldly and simply illustrated in a humble pie chart in a popular magazine made this universal fact seem even more real.

I am not sure how I survived the AIDS epidemic. I have had too many personal experiences with death. I felt death surrounded me most of the time as a gay man in the 80's and 90' and specifically in the 90's when almost an entire generation of gay men were wiped out. In a way I am very lucky, yet I feel a kind of residue of those lives still around me – in a similar way to the ghosts of the slaves portrayed in Toni Morrison's 1987 epic novel, *Beloved*. Contrary to the spirits in her book I don't believe the spiritual energy of the people who passed from AIDS or HIV is malevolent. Maybe I have a tinge of survivor's guilt. Why am I still alive? I did not expect to live to the age of forty. *Funeral Camp* and the questions I pose are in part, gay man's perspective on having survived the AIDS epidemic.

I was initially introduced to the notions of queer spiritualities through the Radical Faeries in the 1990's, a loosely knit group of gay men who got together to talk about all types of spirituality without judgment. Some of the goals of this group were to experiment with the ideas that spirituality could be essential gendered, sexually oriented and, yes, radical and even totally individual. The Radical Faeries were started by gay rights activist Harry Hay, founder of the first American organized queer rights movement, the Mattachine Society, established in 1948-50 and the Society organized demonstrations for queer rights until the 1960's. Hay also founded the Radical Faeries in 1978 based on his notion that it was not enough for gay men and queers to be present and active in the world but that we also had a calling that should go beyond the physical and include the metaphysical.⁹

⁹ www.nationalgeographic.com

Hay's response was to reinvent gay politics all over again: in 1979, he founded the Radical Faeries. The spiritual core of the Radical Faeries was the same as the one Hay had envisioned for his original Mattachine Society: the conviction that gay men were spiritually different from other people. They were more in touch with nature, bodily pleasure, and the true essence of human nature, which embraced both male and female. Hay's spiritual radicalism had its roots in 17th-century British dissenting religious groups, such as the Diggers, Ranters, Quakers, and Levelers, who sought to refashion the world after their egalitarian, socialist, non-hierarchical, utopian views. Unlike his dissenting predecessors, however, it wasn't millennial Christianity that drove Hay, but a belief that all sexuality was sacred. And a belief that queer sexuality had an essential outsider quality that made the outcast homosexual the perfect prophet for a heterosexual world lost in strict gender roles, enforced reproductive sexuality, and numbingly straitjacketed social personae. The Radical Faeries were something of a cross between born-again queers and in-your-face frontline shock troops practicing gender-fuck drag.¹⁰

Christopher Penczak describes why some queer people may be attracted to witchcraft and neo-paganism in his book, *Gay Witchcraft*.

I never believed in the Christian devil, the source of evil. Contrary to popular belief, witches do not worship the devil. They believe it to be a construct of

¹⁰ Bronski, Michael, *The real Harry Hay*, radfae.org/harry-john

various organizations to control other people, a target, a blame, and a scapegoat. Witches believe in self-responsibility, since all you do comes back to you. Many authors of the neo-witchcraft movement cite a greater acceptance of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people because of our ancient ties. Several ancient cultures honored such people – my people – for their unique energies and perspective.¹¹

I am profoundly indebted to the work of the artist duo Fastwürms, especially in their use of video, using found materials to cull new meanings out of the existing detritus of popular culture. This formalistic device exposes the spiritual or ritual value of science and popular fiction films that might be lost on an audience but when visually remixed into a new video becomes clearer to the viewer. Their video aesthetic is partially synesthetic and incorporates high and low art forms. I became a witch as result of collaborating on many projects with them. I was mentored by Fastwürms as an artist and later became a witch of my own accord. I am reminded of Susan Sontag's famous treatise on camp when I view Fastwürms works, and specifically Sontag's item number 36 where she states,

But there are other creative sensibilities besides the seriousness (both tragic and comic) of high culture and the high style of evaluating people. And one cheats oneself, as a human being, if one has *respect* only for the style of high culture, whatever else one may do or feel on the sly.

For instance, there is a kind of seriousness whose trademark is anguish, cruelty, derangement. Here we do accept a disparity between

¹¹ Penczak, Christopher, *Gay Witchcraft*, (Boston, MA, Weiser Books, 2003) Pg. xiii.

intention and result. I am speaking, obviously, of style or personal existence as well as of a style in art; but the examples had best come from art. Think Bosch, Sade, Rimbaud, Jarry, Kafka, Artaud, think of most of the important works of art of the twentieth century, that is, art whose goal is not that of creating harmonies but of over-straining the medium and introducing more and more violent, and unresolvable subject matter. This sensibility also insists on the principle that an *oeuvre* in the old sense (again, in art, but also in life) is not possible. Only “fragments” are possible ... Clearly, different standards apply here than to traditional high culture. Something is good not because it is achieved but because another kind of truth about the human situation, another experience of what it is to be human or in short, another valid sensibility – is being revealed.

And third among the great sensibilities is Camp: the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience. Camp refuses both the harmonies of traditional seriousness and the risks of fully identifying with extreme states of feeling.¹²

Sontag’s writing on camp reminds me of Fastwurm’s oeuvre, in that there are elements of presenting works that are at play with her idea of “over-straining the medium”, the emphasis on camp and kitsch as highly relatable content for general audiences (read non-art audiences). It’s Sontag’s thought on the ‘theatricalization of experience’ that resonates in both Fastwürms and my own works. *Funeral Camp*, challenges Sontag’s

¹² Sontag, Susan, *A Susan Sontag Reader, Introduction by Elizabeth Hardwick*, (New York, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982,) Pg. 115.

assertion by asking, “Can works of art be simultaneously camp and deeply emotional at the same time?”

AA Bronson and General Idea have had a great deal of influence on my work. Bronson’s recent publication *Queer Spirits* through Plug In Institute for Contemporary art has been a key document in what is a burgeoning area of study, belief and philosophy. As a former member of General Idea, Bronson bravely faced the incalculable loss of collective members Jorge Zontal and Felix Partz to AIDS and HIV. His collaboration with writer Peter Hobbs is a great source of inspiration for *Funeral Camp*.

LESSON 36. , History is a sleeping poet and a wooden ship full of tulips and bamboo.

On the early morning hours of July 25th 1966, the American poet Frank O’Hara falls asleep on the beach at the foot of Crown Walk in Fire Island Pines. During the night, a truck patrolling the beach runs over him. At O’Hara’s funeral, Allen Ginsberg eulogizes that his friend was a “curator of funny emotions,” and that he had “a common ear for deep gossip.”

I am lying naked on the beach under the stars, composing a poem about talking to the sun. The only sound is the waves hitting the shore. When I awake from my deep sleep I am no longer Frank O’Hara. I am now a seagull feeding on the eggs of the horseshoe crab. A wooden ship can be seen drifting in the distance¹³

¹³ Bronson, AA & Hobbs, Peter, *Queer Spirits*, (Winnipeg, MB, Creative Time & Plug In Editions, 2011), Pg. 166,

The research and creation of Funeral Camp has led me to some personal revelations. My death and burial will have nothing to do with a Christian concept of resurrection. I ultimately do not want to be buried in a coffin with my body full of chemicals. I will bravely try to accept whatever type of death the universe deems to be 'right' for me. When I am free from my body I have decided to be cremated with my wig and make up on (I hope it does not spoil the soil). Prior to my fiery physical ending, I will buy one of those kits that will turn my ashes into soil for a sapling. Returning to soil and becoming a tree is my goal in death. Heaven is a tree.

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<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/death-arts-final-taboo-812189.html> (Gregor Schneider)

Film related to research:

**Stephan Haupt, *Facing Death*, film, colour, 57 minutes, Icarus Films, Brooklyn, USA,
2004 (Elisabeth Kübler-Ross)**

<http://icarusfilms.com/new2003/death.html>