

# the urn is dead! long live the urn!

by Cecilia Casabona

**Designing death** ♦ By designing, humans tirelessly redesign themselves - especially when it comes to matters related to death. Designing for death - to deploy technological and cultural resources in rituals and artefacts that celebrate and honour the dead - can be reasonably argued to be a uniquely human trait. Over the last two centuries, a rich collection of material culture has been exhumed and studied to learn more about the human tendency to produce symbolic objects that define their presence and meaning in history. This anthropological investigation has made me question the role that humans play in the world. By rethinking our relationship with death through objects, is it possible to imagine a way of redesigning human life while designing for the dead?

*“To be human means above all to bury”.*<sup>1</sup>

To this day, archaeologists interpret the life of ancient civilisations - their social, political, and cultural structures - through the examination of burial sites, the practices and rituals for the dead, and the objects accompanying them. Indeed, funerals usually involve rituals through which the deceased receives their final disposition. Depending on the culture or religion, these may involve either the destruction of the body (e.g. by cremation or sky burial) or its preservation (e.g. by mummification or burial). In nearly all of these scenarios, the funerary designed objects seem to almost play the role of protagonists, acting as spokespeople and witnesses of entire populations. The design of death is constantly evolving, from the nomadic hunter-gatherers who devised burials and funerary objects 100,000 years ago to the contemporary material designer who develops coffins that turn corpses into mushrooms with the highly-designed intention to make any human trace disappear - each era has its own historical awareness and priorities.

Throughout the course of human history, although this isn't a strictly human characteristic, the dead have always influenced the manners of the living and exercised a certain control over their remembrance, starting with the symbolic and/or functional objects that become mediators in a far from silent dialogue. These artefacts and monuments, that stand as marks and extensions of the bodies, are informed with “biographies” and acquire forms of agency:

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<sup>1</sup> R. P. Harrison, *The Dominion of the Death*, 2005.

*“the dead body can be conceptualised as a node in a nexus of social relationships, objects and exchanges through which personhood and remembrance are distributed and constituted.”*<sup>2</sup>

The dead body, in fact, exercises agency through the rituality of its final disposition - burial, cremation, or exposure - to the extent of it acting both as “a technology of enchantment” and “a technology of remembrance”.<sup>3</sup>

Today, one might think that traditional burial is the most common and historical method of disposition; however, cremation actually has an even more ancient history. Cremation dates back at least 17,000 years with the Mungo Lady, the remains of a partially cremated body found at Lake Mungo, Australia. However, scholars seem to agree that cremation became widespread during the early Stone Age, most likely in Europe and the Near East. Cremation consists in the burning of the human body until all of its soft parts are destroyed by fire. The skeletal remains and ash residue often become the object of religious rites and are stored inside vessels or vases, also known as cinerary urns, that throughout history have acquired different shapes and meanings according to the cultures that designed them. A collective understanding of the urn’s history and symbolic value lies embedded subliminally in our history as humans beyond the human. Furthermore, the investigation of the traditional urn encourages and prompts our acceptance of new designs, not only when it comes to new symbolic artefacts but also the idea of “new” humans.

**A brief ancient history of urns** ♦ To address the history of urns as a whole is an undertaking that goes beyond the ambition of this text. This research intends to pinpoint specific examples of cinerary urns as artistic references in order to contextualise contemporary attempts to re-interpret the urn and its functions, both symbolic and functional. Specifically case studies settled in Europe were chosen, within a mostly occidental tradition, in order to follow the traces of a Western conception of death. Such development has led today to the design of new artefacts that see different priorities of functionality and artistic value, often well situated within the ecological transformation taking place on our planet and the awareness that artists and designers are establishing with it.

Let us therefore begin our history in the Late Bronze Age with the Urnfield Culture in central Europe (1300 BC–750 BC). This culture takes its name from the huge cemeteries of urn burials. Cremated remains were in fact buried in large necropolises, consisting of numerous individual shaft tombs. In the early stages of the Urnfield Culture, pit graves were dug, sometimes with a

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<sup>2</sup> H. Williams, *Death warmed up. The Agency of Bodies and Bones in Early Anglo-Saxon Cremation Rites*, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> *ivi*, 2004

stone floor, in which only the ashes of the deceased were placed. Only later did burial in urns become prevalent, suggesting a major shift in the beliefs of these populations about life after death. In the funeral ritual the deceased was placed on a funeral pyre, covered with personal jewellery, and sometimes together with food offerings. The cremated bones and ashes were then deposited in the grave. When the remains were placed in an urn, this was often covered by a stone or a larger ceramic vessel turned upside down.

With the transition to the Iron Age, differences in tomb construction, furnishings and wealth displayed in tombs increased, which was evidence of a growing social complexity. Bodies, their display and storage became the focus of funerary practices, whether through inhumation or cremation. Witnesses to this arrangement are the house urns of the Lusatian culture (Germany) and the various findings of face urns from the Pomeranian culture (North Poland). The former are urns in the shape of model houses that offer illustrative hints on the actual architecture of the living creating a clear bridge between these two dimensions. These urns are made of red-brown clay or natural stone and come in the form of round and square huts with different roof shapes. Often, representations of people or animals were present above the entrance, generally designed with lockable doors in the abdomen of the vessel. Face urns, on the other hand, were constructed with a face-like decoration on the body of the vessel. The bodies of the urns were bulbous or bottle-shaped clay vessels of various sizes with a raised conical neck on which the eyes, eyebrows, and nose were carved. Sometimes, although more rarely, the lines of the mouth were engraved, so that a human face was visible. Despite the simplicity of the design, the faces appear considerably expressive, sometimes smiling, other times more serious. However, although there appears to be a certain individuality in each facial representation, it has been ruled out that such depictions were intended to portray individuals; instead, the faces are more likely to have been apotropaic ornamentations, to ward off evil spirits and forces.

An example of representation of the personhood was found instead in the Etruscan production of cinerary urns, initially with the urns from the Villanovan period and later with the urns known as "Canopi", produced in northern Etruria. The most common urn from the Villanovan period was a single-handled urn with an inverted bowl on top. These first biconical urns were characterised by typical ornaments and textiles to anthropomorphise the dead and display a sense of belonging to a common identity for the living. Later, urns began to display more obvious signs of social status, such as the use of crested-helmets as lids, signalling the emergence of an aristocracy. Power and wealth were thus displayed through the helmets and decorative carvings on the body of the urn. Although such urn embellishments did indicate a higher social rank, they still maintained the same

biconical form as those from the lower classes, thus ensuring a sense of cohesion within the community.

During the following Orientalizing Period (8th–6th century BC), in Northern Etruria, more specifically in Chieti (Italy), a reinforcement of the aristocracy's identity to ensure power and social status is reflected in the proto-portraiture of the canopic urns. Their ovoid body tried to mimic the human form, with the head acting as a lid. The face was sometimes pierced for the attachment of a mask made in a different material, allowing for some individuality, and the body was placed on a model of a throne, to add dignity. They displayed human elements, such as arms, a head with clear facial features, clothing, and jewellery.

*“While Villanovan biconical urns are abstract in their rendering of the human form, canopi urns are a natural progression of the traditions of Villanovan urns to achieve a more definite self through proto-portraiture.”<sup>4</sup>*

Despite the high importance placed on one's individuality, these proto-portraiture also convey an idealisation of the elite's physical self by stylising their features. This shows that Northern Etruscans did not intend to accurately depict themselves, but rather wanted to assume idealised features to display dominance and inform their power. Indeed, cremation allowed for the destruction of the physical self and the creation of a new identity through the anthropomorphised urn. Acting both as objects of remembrance and of reverence, these human-like jars acted as active messengers of the elite's morality and value. Finally, the production of Etruscan urns also includes Hellenistic urns, especially those from Volterra. Particularly noteworthy are the rectangular box urns known in association with lids depicting the deceased as heroes. These representations had Greek artistic influences, especially in their tendency to maintain correct and realistic proportions for the human figures, with particular emphasis on the head of the deceased. This period also sees the emergence of a workshop tradition and a mass production of portraits, made evident by the depiction of types rather than individuals. In particular, the urns attributed to the “Guarnacci 621” workshop during the middle of the 1st century BC show a progressive adherence to the iconographic and symbolic models circulating in the Roman world, recognisable not only in the themes addressed and the decorative motifs, but also in the shapes of the cases and lids.

The Romans practised both cremation and burial. However, during the imperial period, cremation became the preferred method. In fact, it is during this period that we find the famous highly decorated and engraved marble urns in the shape of altars, or the bowl-shaped urns made in

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<sup>4</sup> S. Kennedy, *The Proto-Portraiture of North Etruscan Cinerary Urns and the Philosophy of Elite Self-Worth*, 2020.

alabaster or blown-glass. Generally, urns were produced in a range of different sizes and materials (terracotta, glass, alabaster and granite) and shapes (altars, chests, and vases) and were used by all strata of society in Rome, from slaves to the emperor. While terracotta urns were the most widely adopted by the common people, marble became the medium of choice for many important individuals in the city. Marble urns, in fact, became emblematic of the elite due to their ability to display the different aesthetic strategies required by those people who could afford this type of workmanship.

When referring to Roman cinerary urns, one can often speak of cases of mass production or production to stock. Obviously, nowadays these terms refer to a type of large-scale production that cannot be compared to the production in the Roman metropolis. However, the development of workshops and the adoption of iconic ornaments in the decoration of these containers give us an insight into an early complex system of production consisting of clients, stone workers, materials, processes and means of working, and serial artistic elements of expression – which were highly customisable. Nevertheless, these factors should not reduce the artistic value of these funerary objects. In fact, cinerary urns belong to the category of functional art and therefore fall under both the category of craft and of work of art. Considering the historical context in which these objects were produced, the scenes depicted, familiar within Roman culture, acted as agents of communication. Thus, such images were necessarily recognisable through consistency of form, symbolising values and motifs shared by the community. We can therefore consider all Roman cinerary urns as intentional creations embodying the values and attitudes of both the artists and the Roman patrons.

Cremation was widely practised in the ancient Western world until 395 AD. From 400 AD, as a result of Constantine's Christianisation of the Roman Empire, ground burial replaced cremation for the next 1,500 years throughout Europe and its colonies. Indeed, Christians regarded cremation as pagan. However, in different forms and frequencies, traces of cremation practices could be found alongside inhumation tombs in large parts of the former Roman Empire and beyond. Cremation thus remains an important and diverse archaeological component in the investigation of death throughout history. Funerary practices and their designed objects represent technologies of remembrance and are of particular significance when interpreting the rapidly changing mortuary traditions and value of pre-modern civilisations. Following the demise of the Western Roman Empire (476 AD), there was a period of socio-economic and ideological reorientation and identity creation, with the formation of new kingdoms, the religious conversion and the consequent adoption of new rituals.

Urns are usually solemn ornaments of reverence and refinement and possess the ability to bring to light stories of personalities or entire civilisations. For thousands of years they have been the first access to ancient worlds and have formed the basis on which Western culture has shaped the idea of the afterlife. They stand as testament of the human propensity to want to decipher and redesign the notion of human beyond the human.

**Fashionable urns** ♦ Throughout history, the urn appears to have been an object charged with great artistic and cultural relevance. The emblematic design of the urn as a funerary vase originated in Ancient Greece and was later inherited by the Romans before vanishing during the Middle Ages. Urns were then reintroduced in Europe during the Renaissance during which architects, designers and artists reinterpreted the classic design of the urn transforming it into a decorative ornament that could also be used in architecture, interiors, and gardens.

The period of greatest relevance and rediscovery of this object is testified by the rich English material culture of the late 18th century. Indeed, during the Neoclassical period, urns became prevalent once again, but this time with a more decorative function than a funerary one. Although the urn remained, in some cases, a memorial object – used to commemorate a person or an event – it was now mostly used as an architectural and interior ornamental element. Going beyond its physical presence, the urn was even used as a central motif on wallpapers, decorative plaster mouldings, and carpets. Great examples of this period are the architects Adams, Hepplewhite and Sheraton and their respective urns, essential in their design yet of the finest manufacturing. In the late 18th century, in fact, following the excavation of Pompeii and Ercolano in Southern Italy, the discoveries of classical antiquity, including those of cinerary urns, transformed popular taste, prompting designs that focused on the simplicity and symmetry typically associated with ancient cultures. These were crucial times for the establishment of a material culture as we experience today. During this period architects introduced the practice of decorating interiors in a unified style, as they had the responsibility of shaping popular taste. The formal order evoked by classical antiquity had set a new standard of social value and an appreciation for it was deemed essential if one wanted to be considered fashionable.

At the highest ranks of society, the decorative urn was becoming increasingly popular and its demand was high. The ceramicist Josiah Wedgwood welcomed this commercial opportunity by adopting ancient imagery and designs to his ceramic production. The Wedgwood factory popularised the decorative urn by making the vase affordable and thus accessible to the general public. Excited by the newfound popularity of antiquity, Wedgwood utilised the shape of the classical vase, reproducing it as a household object. He offered a rich showroom which had on display hundreds of different vases. Each piece of the Wedgwood collection accurately emulated

the original artefacts. They contained, for example, references from the ancient Greek red-figure potteries, influences from ancient mythology and fine decorative relief patterns and subtle colour tones typical of Pompeian interior design. This allowed Wedgwood to offer his customers ornamental products that could help them align their décor with the current fashion trends. At the same time, it also meant that any person, by purchasing one of his ceramics, could develop and proclaim their own cultural awareness and sense of style, by following the current trends and thus increasing their sense of cultural, social, and even political belonging.

*“Ornaments reward their owners with immunity to such rigours, their visual presence constant and reliable. They imply immortality in a mortal world.”<sup>5</sup>*

If the cinerary urn, containing ashes, represented a measure of immortality for individuals, or even entire civilisations and cultures, the ornamental and decorative urn also offered a form of immortality, this time starting during one’s lifetime, that also guaranteed the recognition of one’s social position and power. Although the urn has taken on different shapes, symbols, and functions throughout history, it remains an object imbued with memory, with both an identity and value for its community, and with a strong cultural heritage. All of which is echoed in its design.

**The urn is reborn** ♦ Along with every other aspect of life, death in Europe was once again radically transformed with the onset of industrial modernity. Led by the new technological advances and influenced by a new wave of Western colonialism in Asia, cremation was slowly reintroduced as a viable method for body disposal in the early 1870s. Indeed, it is probably the encounter of Western colonialists with such cultures - in Asia cremation has been maintained almost unchanged for millennia - that laid the foundations for the modern understanding of this practice. Moreover, the possibility of alternatives to burial was welcomed by free thinkers and radicals as an opportunity to rebel against the church’s grip on public life. This process of rediscovery finds its final design manifestation in the crematorium. The first crematorium of the Western world opened in Milan in 1876. Just a few years before, in 1873, Professor Paolo Gorini and Professor Ludovico Brunetti’s model of a cremating apparatus was exhibited at the Vienna Exposition. From the urn to the furnace, different design and architectural approaches were practised to display the renewed social values and shifting political inclinations. For example, the crematoria of Northern Italy, including the one in Milan, were initially built as anti-clerical statements, which is why their architecture resembles that of classical temples.

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<sup>5</sup> G. Plumptre, *Garden ornament*, 1989.

Although the concept of cremation has nothing intrinsically modern in itself, the resulting technological innovations, political drives, and aesthetic transformations marked a new turn in the history of urns. On the one hand, there was the industry and the development of a mass-production of urns aimed to fulfil the increasing popular demand. On the other hand, the traditional shape of the urn and its meanings were reinterpreted, often re-contextualised, by artists, designers and, in some interesting cases, their collaborations with ambitious manufacturers. Since it never really escaped the realm of art and design, the urn, once again, embodied society and its cultural transformations.

In the post-war years, an interesting case of urn production on the edge between art and craft was the collaboration between Picasso and the Madoura workshop in Vallauris, a village on the French Riviera. The artist worked with Madoura's owners, Suzanne and Georges Ramié, from 1946 to 1971, to produce a large series of vases and urns. Picasso was inspired – both in the forms and subject matters represented – by human and animal shaped recipients, woman-shaped vases, and Etruscan cinerary urns, especially the Canopi portraying female heads. Although these vessels were not designed to be functional urns, once again a metamorphosis takes place when fire meets the soil. Picasso was fascinated by the meeting of different elements and by the way ceramic objects were able to combine sculpture and painting. If one does consider these vessel-urns as memorials, the works echo the solemnity of their historical and cultural heritage. While clearly showing all their modernity, they also reveal a profound connection with the millenary tradition of this craft: from the classical Greek vases with red and black figures, to the Etruscan buccheri and urns, from the pre-Hispanic cultures' terracotta to the Spanish and French folk ceramics.

Starting in the 1950s and following in the footsteps of the pottery and visual arts traditions, American artist Betty Woodman created a radical vision of how ceramics could function in a contemporary art context. Her artistic research synthesises sculpture, painting and ceramics in an immediately recognizable formal vocabulary. The manipulation and re-appropriation of the original urn form reveal the intrinsic symbolism that this shape still conveys.

*“The container is a universal symbol – it holds and pours all fluids, stores food and contains everything from our final remains or flowers.”<sup>6</sup>*

As containers of the afterlife, the urn remains a symbol of death and mourning. With the end of the atrocities of the Second World War, different artists directed their artistic research towards themes such as death, grief, and collective memory. Two of Thomas Schutte's works, for example, adopt the urn as an emblematic design. *“Die Fremden”* (The Strangers), 1992, consists of a series of

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<sup>6</sup> A. C. Danto, J. & B. Schwabsky, *Betty Woodman, 2006*.

large figures, each accompanied by one or two sacks or urns, modelled in clay and colourfully glazed. These figures refer not only to death but also to the concept of estrangement as a fundamental characteristic of contemporary society, also alluding to the difficult conditions faced by the immigrants who flooded into Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Another work by Schutte, "*Urns (Set of 8)*", plays around with the scale of these objects: by exaggerating the dimensions of the urns, the artist almost gives them agency as if they were living bodies. In fact, just like a real family, they are intended to be grouped together.

Nowadays the design of the urn is still highly expressive yet formally recognizable, due to the secular tradition that has characterised this object. Contemporary artists still recall the urn in their work, often by reframing its original context. Visual artist Agostino Iacurci, for example, has brought the urn into a new, public context by translating it to a two-dimensional form, as a mural, while experimenting with bright and expressive colours that echo the original tones used by architecture and sculpture in the Classical Age. In one of his recent exhibitions, "*Tracing Vitruvius*", we get to witness the formal presence of such objects, while seeing them displayed in a setting with colours that are almost pop, that dare to disrupt the traditional image of death and bring it closer to an everyday ideal.

**Towards new perspectives** ♦ Rethinking our relationship with death is an urgent and relevant agenda in all spheres of our daily life, from politics to the arts. In the design world in particular, new solutions are being researched and developed every day, even though they are not quite accessible yet and are far from being fully integrated into our lives. Nonetheless, they are still able to inspire a different understanding of the afterlife, of our ways of mourning and healing and consequently offer a new way of perceiving ourselves.

A prime example is "*Capsula Mundi*", one of the most acclaimed projects of recent years exhibited during the Broken Nature exhibition for the XXII Milan Triennale in 2019. It consists of an egg-shaped container made of biodegradable material in which the dead body is placed in a foetal position. The capsule is then placed like a seed in soil. A tree, chosen by the deceased during their lifetime, is planted on top of the Capsula and then cared for by family and friends, as a symbol of legacy for later generations as well as the future of the planet. The design for death, in fact, includes numerous innovative projects that focus on the non-human, for example animals or natural habitats. Another example is the urn by cross-designer Denis Santachiara, dedicated to the world of pets. The "*Forever For Pet*" funeral urn is made using a 3D printer and CNC techniques, so that art and technology meet to establish new formal and cultural parameters.

The archetypal urn is also often overturned by the youngest minds, sometimes students, of the design world. This is the case with the portable mini urns by Lisa Merk, a student at Lund

University who exhibited her project “*Tactile Perception*” at the Stockholm Furniture Fair in 2017. Made from untreated ash, beech and walnut, the smooth urns are designed to fit in the palm of the relatives and friends' hand in order to offer comfort during the service. In this way, the participants have the option to keep the urn as an intimate memorial or return it for burial.

*“We live in a time where there is a great need for renewal of our burial-traditions and religious values in terms of funerals. Re-thinking, adapting and making funerals healthier for the environment is a great challenge for every product designer.”<sup>7</sup>*

On the trail of a more ecological future is also the “*Resting Reef*” project by Louise Lenborg Skajem and Aura Elena Murillo Pérez, a memorial and burial service that regenerates marine biodiversity, sequesters carbon, filters water and prevents coastal erosion. Addressing the oysters reefs extinction, this project intends to rethink death as a new source for life. Thus, starting from the design of an urn, the final goal is to change the way we live on our planet and to focus on the responsibilities we urgently need to recognise and address.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Agreed, but can we be ambitious in our death? “*I Wish To Be Rain*” is a design project by Studio PSK that takes advantage of the process of cloud seeding – an attempt to trigger precipitation from clouds – to transform your ashes into a natural phenomenon: rain. The project involves an aluminium vessel containing the remains of the deceased and a dormant aerostat. By opening a valve to a helium tank, a weather balloon is filled with floating gas and the encapsulated ashes are sent skyward. As the capsule rises and disappears from view, it becomes increasingly pressurised. At the point where it reaches the troposphere, the capsule bursts, dispersing the ash into the clouds below. Like the burning pyre, the rain transforms the body into a technology of enchantment, distancing the place of burial from the home or the cemetery, while making the dead part of a dimension beyond the humans and their ambitions.

Concluding this investigation is a project that stands out for its audacity and controversy, making us wonder to what extent we are capable of re-evaluating our time as living, and as dead. “*21 Grams*”, by designer Mark Sturkenboom, is a “memory” box containing a dildo with a compartment for storing the ashes of a deceased partner. As its author claims:

*“21 Grams is not only a way to tempt a person to revive an intimate night but is a physical affirmation of love against the unavoidable passing of life.”<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Lisa Merk, “A new concept to our burial-traditions” on Through Objects, <https://through-objects.com/blog/tactile-perception/>

<sup>8</sup> Atelier Mark Sturkenboom, official website, <https://marksturkenboom.com/Works/21-grams/>

What might seem to some to be a joke, an unethical gamble or even an insult, is nevertheless an important exercise in imagination. To what extent are we able to re-design ourselves?

**Conclusion** ♦ In the contemporary age, meditating on death means rethinking our own dimension as humans and the value we place on our existence; at the same time it also means reconsidering the role we play in the world and the responsibilities we must take on. Today, especially in Western societies, death is either kept hidden, or made spectacular. On the one hand, we live in the constant rush to embody the myth of eternal youth, for example in the daily struggle against ageing waged by cosmetic companies and fitness gyms. On the other hand, death in its brutality and violence, typical of human history, is normalised by the spectacularization of it through the internet and media. Moreover, the very places of death are kept quite separate from those of life, as are the dead.

In rethinking death and its support systems – which are often completely lacking – it is necessary not only to re-imagine new rituals and new dimensions that reintegrate, almost re-humanise, death into an everyday reality, but it is also important to create new places and safe contexts where one can be educated about death with knowledge and respect. Two works come to mind. The first one is the artist Ettore Spalletti's attempt to rethink the contemporary place of mourning and farewell, the morgue, as a place to welcome both the dead and their loved ones. Ettore Spalletti's work, "*Salle des Départs*", is an investigation into psychology through volume, space and colour, with the use of azure to recall inner silence and rest. The second work is that of the curatorial program carried out by the art centre Mediamatic in Amsterdam. Through lectures, workshops and participatory art projects, this association offers a de-mythologising of death to enable us to re-appropriate it through alternative and contemporary rituals which integrate today's new complexities (e.g. the digital dimension and the non-human).

Facing contemporary challenges, such as the climate crisis and the resulting gradual extinction of entire ecosystems, we are asked to rethink death into new parameters that do not just include humans. Besides all the new technological and design solutions that (mostly) Western cultures are developing to address and fight the current ecological crisis, we should, first and foremost, start by redesigning our concept of being human and the intrinsic consequences, by establishing new, restorative parameters in the interplay with what is beyond human. As we attempt to re-shape the current anthropocentric view of reality, which has resulted in the current systemic crisis, death plays a central role as we endeavour to redefine our meaning as actors in life.

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