The Self: Towards a Method for Queering Death

(An Identity Testament)

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ABSTRACT

“The Self: Towards A Method for Queering death” is an identity testament, a speculative method for designing the space of your own funeral before you die. It is a format to create a fair memorial of a person’s identity that does not feel welcome or fits in the current formats of burial ceremonies we have in Sweden today, usually connected to Christianity or other religious traditions. Even the secular burial traditions of Sweden today have a very clear traditional format and aesthetic that can be intimidating to a lot of members of society. “The Self” is also a method to relegate the power of narrative to whom it belongs. “The Self” is executed through this thesis, a sacred document, a spatial installation and a film, showing a possible scenario of a burial ceremony as a result of the method of the identity testament.

This thesis demonstrates and problematizes the secular burial traditions in Sweden and how the common rituals are still based on the norms of Christianity, heteronormativity and traditional values, and why this is oppressing a lot of individuals in society. It does so by using a speculative method of an identity testament, which gives every human the right to own the narrative about their persona and who they were to the afterlife. It also problematizes the hierarchies and norms in society of what “family” means, and how consanguinity is valued by state and law. The term “queer” or “queering” is used in multiple ways, both as an adjective (being queer, a queer community, a queer sexual identity) but also as a verb or an adverb, as in the method used by the Queer Death Studies Network. The content of this thesis consists of texts, pictures, research in form of written sources and interviews, queer theory, descriptive design methods and descriptions of a sculptural exploration and spatial installation as well as a motion picture. The thesis asks and answers questions such as: How could a new type of burial ceremony - based on our secular beliefs in contemporary Sweden – look, feel and be arranged to be more connected to what we can relate as religion today? Is it possible to create an organized system to collect information about a person’s identity to be used as a formal ground to create a fair burial ceremony after the person’s death?

The analysis focuses upon speculative ideas about what could happen if every person had a right to state a will for their intangible possessions and assets as well as their physical ones. The thesis also goes through multiple examples of cases of queer deaths where there have been strong needs to arrange an alternative funeral to feel safe and comfortable. Finally, the thesis reflects upon how this method could be used and if it really could be applied to society, and if so, who would be able to use it?

Keyterms: Speculative, Method, Design, Master Project, Death, Burial, Ceremonies, Sculpture, Scenery, Film, Wax, Moulding, Testament.
1. INTRODUCTION

In my previous work as a designer, I have been investigating the subject of spirituality in different forms, very continuously through different projects. From working with the idea of reincarnation (Nate cabinet, 2012) to examine the unconscious through spiritual readings (Unknown Obvious, 2013).

For my MFA degree project, I am working around the subject of death, dying and mourning, especially the burial ceremony and the artefacts that surrounds it. I am doing this from a critical perspective, studying the social norms of mourning loved ones and how they usually speak to a heteronormative and very narrow way of dealing with life and death, usually connected to religious traditions. I have chosen to specify my project about the Swedish burial traditions of today. In my previous work, both during my BFA and in my practice as a professional designer, I always had an interest for studying spirituality and existentiality through different perspectives, and the questions about death and dying is sort of the essence of the subject.

My intention with the project and this paper is to question the format and the ceremonial traditions of the funeral and investigate how these traditions affects us emotionally in different ways. Both the person that the ceremony is supposed to honor, but also the people mourning and saying goodbye. Is the space of the funeral hostile in anyway? Does it make everyone feel welcome and comfortable to say their goodbyes? What feelings does the traditional artefacts of the funeral trigger inside the mourning, and what story do they tell about the dead person? What happens to your identity when you die? who´s perception of it will live on and tell the story about who you were? What happens at our funeral that is supposed to tell the story about our lives and who we were when we ourselves have lost the narrative about who we are? What story will be told? And for who?

These reflections started to lead me up to a couple of research questions:

How could a new type of burial ceremony - based on our secular beliefs in contemporary Sweden – look, feel and be arranged to be more connected to what we can relate as religion today?

Is it possible to create an organized system to collect information about a person´s identity to be used as a formal ground to create a fair burial ceremony after the person’s death?
1. BACKGROUND

The aesthetics of tombstones, graveyards and chapels has sparked my interest my whole life, walking around looking at the different stones and monuments, why they were alike, why they were different. Why did some people have big memorial monuments surrounded by chains and fences, while others just had a small stone on the ground? Who were all these people? What were their stories? How was their life? In Sweden, the tombstones usually give out very little information about the person it stands for. A name and two dates, the birthday and the day of death, is usually the information we get. The rest is up to us to imagine and fantasies about. All these reflections have led me up to think about how we as a society narrates the story of a person’s life that are no longer with us to tell it themselves. There is one day in every person’s life that will come to represent your life and who you were, and that day you won’t be there. Your funeral, the day that will sum up your time on this planet. The credits of the movie of your life. Is it not important to not forget anyone’s name? To have it all there?

Reflecting upon the burial ceremony and how the setting of it reflects upon us as who we were in life is the starting point of my MFA thesis. In a written piece called “Queer Widowhood” from 2016 by Norwegian writer Nina Lykke,¹ I found two quotes very inspiring and suitable for my project through her thoughts regarding finding a suitable burial ceremony for her wife for 35 years. She describes it as a “search for queer feminist materialistic and philosophic alternatives to the ontologies of life and death developed by Christianity and dualistic traditions in western philosophy” and that she wants to “resist neoliberal, health-normative and individualist culture, which fetishizes personal happiness and requires that we ignore vulnerability, unhappiness and loss”. These quotes really spoke to me and sort of sparked my interest in how an alternative burial ceremony could be designed. And what would happen if the norms and traditions we have in Sweden wouldn’t steer the ceremonies as much as they do today. I immediately come to think about a personal experience from 2017, when I close friend of mine passed away in a tragic accident. I knew her for about 7 years and were close to her and her girlfriend and partner for all those years. But after her passing and at her memorial ceremony, an old boyfriend if hers that she dated for a year a decade earlier was allowed to sit in the front row together with her family. It was like her whole queer identity for 10 years was erased the moment she died. It was not something anyone spoke of or mentioned in the ceremony but we all knew that a huge part, if not all, of her identity died with her and that the narrative about who she was also changed in that moment. This is what I will continue to work with in this project.

2. CONTEXTUALIZATION

Death has always been something that us humans have spent tremendous amount of time to reflect and conspire about, since it is sort of the most certain and definite phenomenon in our lives, but also something very abstract. The question of what happens after we die must be one of the most reflected upon question of humanity in time. And there are countless amounts of theories and thoughts on death written from the beginning of mankind up on till today. And still, it is a stigmatized subject were words rarely suffice enough to describe our thoughts around it. I believe that the need in society to talk about death, grief and loss is increasing, and that we need methods to do so in a more honest way. On Friday march 22\textsuperscript{nd}, I listen to P3 the Swedish national radio where they have invited British actress Cariad Lloyd, the creator of the podcast “Griefcast”.\textsuperscript{2} The concept of the podcast is that she invites different guests, usually British comedians, to talk about death and grief, usually in a quite relaxed and humorous way but without “joking it off”. It is a very honest conversation about serious feelings of sorrow and hopelessness, but with the ability to laugh at the absurdity and abstraction that death brings. My thoughts on how the need to talk about death in society is growing was confirmed when I met with art curator and nowadays officiant Pia Kristoffersson, originator of “Liv och död Kulturbegravningar”. She arranges bourgeois burial ceremonies and works a lot with music, poetry and stories and how to present them in a different way than we are used to. According to Kristoffersson the need to talk about death and grief is increasing, and because of that she arranged three open seminars called “Döden I Kapellet” (The Death in the Chapel). The seminars are divided in to three themes around the funeral: the room, the time and the story. The first seminar was about the room, discussing the traditions of placements both regarding the artefacts and the people in the room\textsuperscript{3}.

There is something very morbid, naturally, about the coffin traditionally being the central artefact in the room of the burial ceremony. When I see a closed coffin, I can’t help but to think about the dead body inside and imagine how it looks like. For me at least, the dead body is almost even more present when the coffin is closed. The shape of it, being the same length as a grown person, it does not bring me feelings of piece but instead it makes me uncomfortable. It really makes me focus on the dead body rather than who the person was when they were alive, and my memories with them. I want to create a space that is warm, that makes the mourning to think of the person, both bodily and mentally, in a living sort of way. Remind them of the body but not the dead body.

https://sverigesradio.se/sida/avsnitt/12729067?programid=4378

When listening to a talk between Pia Kristofferson and Emilie Karlsmo, the author of the book “Rum för avsked” at the seminar “Döden I Kapellet – Rummet” (The room) they talk about different examples of where people have tried alternative settings in the burial ceremony, particularly how the mourning were placed in the room. According to Karlsmo, she finds it that people often find comfort in traditions, leaning on something that “is how it always has been” while going through a tough time like losing a loved one. While dealing with grief and loss, it is understandable that you might not have the energy to be creative and arrange a funeral in a new, alternative way to break norms and question traditions. In one example that Karlsmo and Kristofferson spoke of, they arranged for the mourning to sit around the coffin in a circle instead of behind each other in rows, to try and break the feeling of hierarchy that the benches create. In western tradition, it is always the family by blood that sits on the front rows, closest to the coffin. Behind the immediate family comes other relatives, and behind them the more distant relatives. In the back, friends and other people related to the dead person, although not by blood, are allowed to sit. This can create the feeling for the mourning people that are not related by blood, that they did not play an important part in the dead person’s life. Or that their grief is not as important as the ones of the family by blood. I find this very interesting and problematic in many ways, because it implicates that family by blood is automatically the people that were closest to the person that passed while in fact, that often is not the case. In queer communities, we often speak of “the chosen family”. The chosen family is the people that are closest to you and refers to people that you have chosen to be close to you to be your family in terms of partners and friends, in contrast to family by blood that you are born into and can’t choose. Why I think this is a term often used in queer communities is because I find it common that LGBTQ-people get outcast by their families that don’t accept their identities and therefore must find other people to feel safe and secure with that will care for them.

The setting with the circle or people around the coffin sounds like a very good example of letting everyone, regardless of relationship to the dead person, to mourn together as one group where everyone’s grief is as important and personal as the next. Although, in this example it turned out that a lot of participants of the funeral felt very uncomfortable. Sitting in this way, everyone facing each other, made people feel watched which caused thoughts like “am I mourning in an appropriate way?” Could this be avoided by letting the participants of the funeral visit the ceremony one by one?

Breaking the hierarchies of the mourning feels very important in my project, and this also comes down to the importance to own the narrative about who you are. Who were really the most important people in your

5 Queer Queries. *Queer families - Chosen family*. https://complicatingqueertheory.wordpress.com/queer-families/chosen-family/ (found 2019-03-20)
life? For instance, the situation with the blood family versus the chosen family could be avoided if the dead person stated beforehand how much their friends played very important parts in their life, and how that needs to be reflected in the ceremony that will honor their life.

While reflecting and researching examples on funerals with a more descriptive take on a person’s identity, I find that in Nigeria and Ghana, there is a special culture around the creation and craft of the coffin, highly reflective on the life and identity of the dead person. The very figurative coffins of everyday objects, is supposed to mirror the person’s identity in life. Usually connected to occupation, the objects can be anything from a fish to a shoe to a coca cola bottle. Funerals in Ghana and Nigeria are often uplifting occasions, where it is “widely believed that death is the beginning of the afterlife and the deceased should receive a rapturous sendoff”. To me this is a perfect example of celebrating the events in the life, and identity of a person in their burial ceremony rather than thinking about the dead body, even though they also use coffins. It is something about the playfulness of the designs that does not send a morbid message.

Image removed due to copyright

**Example of a coffin made in Ghana shaped like an Ice cream. Picture from Daily Mail UK.**

Going back to the Swedish burial traditions of today, I looked up on what different options of ceremonies society has to offer, and the first and most common option is the traditional Christian ceremony. On the website of The Swedish Church, you can find images and explanations of how the ceremony works and

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how it looks like.⁸ The closed white coffin marks the center of the ceremony. Around it stands 6 big candles on grand candlesticks, framing the coffin. Around the coffin and the altar are different flower arrangements with white big ribbons, covered in words of goodbye from loved ones. The coffin has quite a traditional geometric shape as seen in western tradition for centuries, sort of a stretched-out hexagon. In our secular society of Sweden today, I imagine this environment can be unfamiliar and hostile to a lot of people that have no connection to Christianity in their everyday life.

Image removed due to copyright

Example of a setting of a Swedish traditional Christian burial ceremony. Picture from Svenska Kyrkan.

Since almost 60 000 people have left the Swedish church every year since the last ten years⁹, there has to be lots of other options. “Humanisterna” is an organization and society of atheists that among other things arrange ceremonies for different life events. According to their website, they “care for and protect the secular society and the distinction between religion and politics. We strive to ensure that human rights are superior religious dogmas, norms and values”¹⁰. This description of the burial from their website speaks as if the burial ceremonies of the atheist community would look distinctly different than the traditional Christian one. Although, looking at the picture of their ceremony, the differences are surprisingly small if there are any differences at all. The only difference I can tell is that the ceremony is held at the chapel and not inside the church. The coffin is placed in the same way. The candles, the flower arrangements – everything seems to stem from the same traditions.

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The lack of open public spaces dedicated to reflection, soul searching and spirituality in the western secular society must be a reason for this. Somehow, the secular society has failed in terms of creating its own way of dealing with life’s existential issues. Instead it just reproduces the religious traditions of Christianity but without calling it religion. In the highly individualistic society of post-internet where we lack a sense of community and common belief’s, we don’t really have a space to talk about issues such as death and grief. Instead we keep our thoughts and anxieties to ourselves, and the cases of depression in Sweden has increased with almost 300 percent in the last 15 years. In the year 2000, an attempt to create a spiritual room was initiated by Stockholm’s University together with Akademiska Hus, a property company working with learning environments, on campus where students and employees at the university could find a moment in peace and use the space for contemplation. The designers of this space, Fredrika Linder and Carina von Matérn, explains the importance of the fact that the room needs to have a neutral value so that everyone can feel welcome to use it. The room has white walls and a white floor. What looks like a big window covered in some type of sheer curtain on one wall fills the room with a soft and warm light. A big purple carpet with a huge red dot in the middle covers most of the floor. The only furniture in the room are two tables, shaped like the letter L with wooden legs and black table tops. The room consists only of simple geometrical shapes, and is quite minimalistic. Despite this it really contains a lot of spiritual value, which makes me reflect on how the simplicity of the form language can create that.

11 Akademiska Hus. Om oss. https://www.akademiskahus.se/om-oss-var-verksamhet/ (found 2019-03-26)
I find the design and the values of the spiritual room at Stockholm University inspiring to have in mind when I start my design process of the burial space. As mentioned in the background chapter of this essay, the text “Queer Widowhood” written by Nina Lykke have been a starting point for me in this project to really understand how suppressive traditional ceremonial spaces can be to people that don’t fit in those the norms from which its format originates. Again, I go back to the following quote from the text: 13 “I want to resist neoliberal, health-normative and individualist culture, which fetishizes personal happiness and requires that we ignore vulnerability, unhappiness and loss and instead look for a bright future with ever-new accomplishments. When a close companion or relative dies, you are expected after some time to ‘move on’, ‘forget’, ‘make a new start’, etc. But even though a year has passed since my beloved died, I am not happy, and I do not feel any urge to ‘forget’”. She also states that “I do think that ‘resting in sadness’ as well as creating queer spaces for the public sharing such negative feelings, are also important when it comes to queer widowhood and mourning the death of a beloved. Against the background of my wish to resist the culture of happiness and to create a public space for resting in sadness”, The rest of the text explains the process Lykke went through to give her passed wife the memorial ceremony she felt that she needed to have. A ceremony that spoke about who she was, in everything from the burial ceremony to the act of spreading her ashes in the sea, since she loved the ocean, and how they covered her coffin in oyster shells instead of flowers. And how they refused to use any candles since she hated candles while living due to the pollution they emit in the air.

Renowned and pioneer lesbian filmmaker Barbara Hammer that just recently passed away (march 16th 2019) after a long-time illness in lung cancer, did an interview in the New Yorker called “Barbara Hammers Exit-Interview” written by Masha Gessen and published February 24th, just before she passed. In the interview, she and her wife for 30 years talks about her death and explains their ideas on how she wants to die. Since she has been in palliative care for a while when the interview is taking place, they both seem to have a great need to be able to plan her moment of passing. They explain how they have been looking

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for opportunities to get medical aid in dying, but since it is not legal in New York state they have to go somewhere else to get it. It seems like she really wants to plan and have control over her passing. She asks, "How could I die in a way that would alleviate pain and allow me to say goodbye to people that I want to, and make sure all my artifacts are in order?" She also explains how "A couple of years ago, I wanted to die in a gallery. And I started researching and I found a woman that would allow me to die in the gallery. I’d have all my materials there for people who might want to talk to me. They would have my journals and they would pull them out, from 1975 or something, read something, and then I would tell stories. Florrie objected to that. It would have been O.K. for a while, but probably by about this point, no. Then it becomes more of a poetic, personal experience with your lover and the nurses who are watching over you. We could have done it earlier and stopped".14

Reading both Lykkes “Queer Widowhood” and the exit interview with Barbara Hammer, I can tell that there is a big desire and need in both cases to find a burial ceremony or act of death in a space that differs a lot from the norm. And it is not a coincidence that both women that passed were queer women. If they spend a lifetime fighting for their right to exist as who they were in a society that does not fit their right of existing, why would they try and fit in to the norm after their death? In a doctoral thesis written by Ingeborg Svensson 2007 at Stockholm University, she writes about these issues in connection to the death of a large number of gay men due to HIV and AIDS in the 1990s:

“The thesis asks and answers questions such as: What happens when death, as a cultural construction, is confronted with ideas surrounding male homosexuality? What are the overarching norms made visible at the funerals? And how do funerals act to question or subvert these norms? My analysis focuses upon normative ideas about how life ought to be lived, what human relations matter and their implications for ideas and understandings surrounding loss and grief. The thesis shows that in a heteronormative culture a dead gay man does not count as a loss. Neither do same sex-relationships pass as real relationships. Consequently, gay lovers are not recognized as true mourners. Against this background of stigmatized homosexuality and its signification as non-life, non-relationship, non-family, and non-love, I analyze the funerals of open, self-identified gay men as strategies of re-signification. Three different struggles for recognition are identified: strategies of pride, shame, and normality, which are analyzed in relation to three different identity-constituting emotions: shame, love and melancholy."15 It is interesting to see how Svensson thinks of the funerals of open and self-identified gay men as a strategy for acceptance and

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https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/barbara-hammers-exit-interview (Found 2019-03-18)

acknowledgment. This is the reason why I want to leave traditional artefacts of the burial ceremony such as the coffin or the urn absent in my designs. To create a new format were these people and others that don’t feel comfortable or welcome by the norm can create their own terms to fit in. In this state of my research I am searching for ways to take control of your own burial ceremony that already exists in the Swedish society today. Are there any legally binding ways to state how you want to leave this earth?

The need to investigate alternative ways to bury our bodies within the design field, through a sustainable environmental perspective also seems quite relevant. In the latest decade, Italian designers Anna Citelli and Raoul Bretzel have created a project they call “Capsula Mundi”, which is an egg-shaped pod for the deceased to be placed in a foetal position inside the container made of biodegradable material. After the container is buried in the ground, the relatives (or the deceased prior to death) then get do decide on a type of tree to be planted on top of the container. With this method, a tree will grow on the burial site as a memorial object as of a tombstone, and instead of cutting down trees to make a coffin only for one occasion, a new tree is planted transforming the cemetery to a memorial forest. New York-based designer Shaina Garfield recently made a similar project in 2018, where she designed an alternative coffin made out of rope laced with fungal spores to multiply the body’s decomposition while absorbing its toxins, so that only natural byproducts such as oxygen and nitrogen goes into the soil. After a year, the soil is in perfect condition to plant a tree above, as a memorial artefact for the loved ones. These projects inspire me a lot, but it seems like most of the projects related to death and burial in the contemporary design field is focused upon the ecological aspect and lacking the social aspect, which is why I want to place my project in that context.

Fonus - Sweden’s most established undertaker, has developed something they call “The White Archive” (Vita Arkivet). The White Archive is a form that anyone can fill in on Fonus’s website. It consists of a couple of specific questions regarding your own burial ceremony, as well as useful information for your loved ones if you were to die such as passwords, PIN-codes and access to accounts to make all the practical issues - that we rarely talk about comes with somebody’s death - much easier. The White Archive starts with questions about which person you would like to be responsible of arranging your funeral, and contacts to those people. After that, it follows with questions about the ceremony. Where, what music would be played and by who, what coffin and even what clothes you would like to wear while lying inside the coffin. After that you answer more practical questions regarding personal belongings and the administrative information. I find this inspiring and useful as a method to take control over your own death. Although, the white archive is also very much affected by the norms and surrounding death.

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18 Fonus. Vita Arkivet. https://www.fonus.se/vita-arkivet/ (found 2019-02-01)
both heteronomy and the norms of the Christian traditions of Sweden. There are still questions formulated as “which coffin would you like” instead of “would you like to have a coffin?”. However, this is also a product of the Swedish law. 

During my research in the beginning of this project, I came over something called the “Queer Death Studies Network”. A study network that describes themselves like the following on their website: “The Queer Death Studies Network (QDSN) was officially launched in November 2016 at the G16: Swedish National Gender Research Conference in Linköping and has been vividly developing since then. The network constitutes a space for researchers, students, artists, activists and other practitioners who critically and (self)-reflexive investigate and challenge conventional normativity’s, assumptions, expectations and regimes of truth that are brought to life and made evident by death, dying and mourning. This quote really encapsulates my ideas and my aim with the project, and I contact the network to see how I can get in touch with them and hear more on their ideas and thoughts on the matter of death.

Marietta Radomska, one of the founders of the network, is a post-graduate feminist philosopher and interdisciplinary gender researcher focusing her work in post humanity studies, feminist theory, philosophy, bio and eco arts, feminist technology science, death studies and queer theory. Another founder of the network is before mentioned Nina Lykke, author of “Queer Widowhood” referred to earlier in this text.

The network also explains how they think about the usage of the word “queer” and what that means to them. They explain how they use the word in this context with the following quote: “The Queer Death Studies Network serves as a site for “queering” traditional ways of approaching death both as a subject of study and philosophical reflection, and as a phenomenon to articulate in artistic work or practices of mourning. Here, the notion of “queer” conveys many meanings. It refers to researching and narrating death, dying and mourning in the context of queer bonds and communities, where the subjects involved/studied/interviewed and the relations they are involved in are recognized as “queer”. Simultaneously, the term “queer” can also function as an adverb and a verb, referring thus to the process

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20 Radomska, Marietta. PhD Linköping University. Post Humanity studies, feminist Philosophy, queer death studies and bio art. marietta.radomska@liu.se, e-mail conversation, 2019-01-09.
21 Radomska, Marietta. PhD Linköping University. Post Humanity studies, feminist Philosophy, queer death studies and bio art. marietta.radomska@liu.se, e-mail conversation, 2019-01-09.
of going beyond and unsettling (subverting, exceeding) binaries and given norms, normativity’s and constraining conventions. In other words, “queer” becomes both process and a methodology that is applicable and exceeds the focus on gender and sexuality as its exclusive concerns.

This way of using the word “queer” as an adverb, “queering”, is something that I will apply on my work. I find the term very suitable to use to explain how I work with the burial ceremony, death and mourning. My aim with this project will be to *queer the traditional burial ceremony in Sweden today*.

3. **METHOD**

To translate the research of this project into form, the starting point was to look into what I call “ritual artefacts”. Objects that are used or presented in a sacred context, religiously, culturally as well as in fiction and fairytales. Memorial objects, such as monuments or tombstones, gravestones and symbols. Here I look into the whole spectrum of different cultures and/or religions to see if there are any common characteristics. What makes an object feel sacred only by its pure form? Through a workshop in clay with other students of Konstfack, I investigated this by giving the participants one task:

"Use the clay to create a shape that you think of as sacred and holy. Create one shape each and try to be as abstract as possible, try to think beyond classic historical or religious symbols and norms connected to society today. Be intuitive and have fun with it!"

This workshop gave me some starting points to my own formative process. I will get back to this later in this chapter. After working intuitively with form and holy aesthetics for a while, I have come to understand that I need a method to work with, a format that can be used in order to create ideas for queering the aesthetics of the Swedish traditional funeral.

In order to create a way of imagining an alternative burial ceremony, I have created what I call “The Self”. This is a method inspired by the White Archive mentioned in the “Contextualization” chapter but without limitations of norms, traditions or current laws.

“The Self” is an identity testament, a speculative method for designing the space of your own funeral before you die. It is a format to create a fair memorial of a person’s identity that does not feel welcome or fits in the current formats of burial ceremonies we have in Sweden today, usually connected to Christianity.

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or other religious traditions. Even the secular burial traditions of Sweden today have a very clear traditional format and aesthetic that can be intimidating to a lot of members of society.

“The Self” consists of 8 questions that a person can answer to create the testament that will be the foundation of how the person’s burial ceremony should be executed by the friends and family. To reach these questions and understand which are important in order to frame a person’s identity, I have looked into the definition of the term “identity” and what that is. According to Nationalencyklopedin the definition of identity is “self-image and an awareness of themselves as a unique individual”. It also says that “Identity consists primarily of awareness of the self” and “to decide on their thoughts and actions themselves”. I find the last quote very interesting, that identity is defined by a person’s decisions on their own thoughts and actions, and not how others perceive the person. This is what the identity testament is about, to care for and pass on. The definition of the term identity is at second hand also “awareness of one's own personality, i.e. about the content of all the experiences of life that gradually shaped the personality”23.

So how do I translate identity into a physical space? Which questions would turn this definition of identity into something tangible that can be used to create a memorial room? I want the testament to preserve characteristics or a part of the personality that the individual would like to leave behind and pass on after their death. I also need information about the person that can be useful when creating a physical space, working with the room and the atmosphere in it. I decided that the first question would leave room for a more open reflection for the person about what part of their identity they would like to pass on to their loved ones, while the following questions would perhaps give more abstract answers that can be used to create the physical space. On the following page, “The Self” filled in by myself is presented.

23 Ottosson, Jan-Otto
What part of your identity (your actions, thoughts, values and/or characteristics) would you like to leave for your loved ones after you die?

My ability to be honest and direct.

Which people in your life would you consider family and/or your closest loved ones?

My chosen family - Iki, Fimpen, Amanda, Agnes, Soja, Navid, Andreas, Farin, Linnea, Dani

What colors would there be in a space that would represent you as a person?


What textures would there be in a space that would represent you as a person?

Soft ones. Textures that you would want to touch and examine.

What smells would there be in a space that would represent you as a person?

The forest. Pine trees and the smell of daaläven. The smell of birch wood.

What sounds would there be in a space that would represent you as a person?

A soundtrack of a fantasy or anime series. Justin Bieber, Frank ocean, Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé.

What images would there be in a space that would represent you as a person?

No images. It takes away imagination.

What shapes would there be in a space that would represent you as a person?

Abstract ones with colors.

What Climate would there be in a space that would represent you as a person?

Warm but not too warm. Precisely as we mean to.

What would the visitors of your memorial space do? Would they visit it one by one or in groups? How would they interact with the space?

They would visit with who ever they consider family.
To sum up the result of this testament, written by myself, I would say that the memorial room of Lisa Berkert Wallard would be a queer room filled with humor and honesty. It would be a room in pastel colors, that smelled like different essences of nature. It would sometimes take our senses to an urban environment, but then take us further in to a world of imagination and fantasy. It would be filled with soft and abstract objects, that we wouldn’t be afraid to touch. In fact, we would want to touch them. That is how we would remember Lisa. We would never feel cold, neither too warm. We would feel precisely as we mean to.

To investigate how this method works, I have to try them out on a couple of people in my vicinity. I let my father, my brother, my professor, my tutor, my co-worker and my friends fill in the testament to see how the questions reflect upon their identity as I view them. The results were 10 very different and very personal testaments that all could result in very personal and beautiful memorial ceremonies. Some very poetic, some very humorous, some very political.

Going back to my own testament, now my mission as a designer is to interpret this testament in to a physical space and memorial room to be used in the farewell-ceremony in honor of Lisa Berkert Wallard. I am reflecting a lot around the body and materiality which brings me back to my thoughts around the coffin and the dead body. I am reflecting on how I can work with the body in the room in a more alive way to create memories of a person without making it too morbid, but instead making it warm and present. I have always been fascinated of storytelling and inspired by grand tales often seen in fiction such as fantasy or sci-fi. In these genres of film making, a lot of very detailed and refined crafts are produced in forms of props and costumes to create these imaginary worlds. Wax is a material that have been used for centuries to make replicas of the human body, as well as prostates for body parts in costume design, usually seen in these movies.

I decided to work with the wax in order to interpret the identity testament of myself. After experimenting with the material, I found that working with the surface and textures rather than shape and form was more fruitful for the design process. In contrast to the research I did in the beginning of the project on holy artefacts and shapes where more traditional sculptural objects were my focus, I found that working with the cube and go deep on structure and color was the right way to go to make my interpretation of the room


and the body. The very simplistic and archetypal form of the cube can be thought of as basic and ordinary, but because of its simplicity also in many cases read as sacred (especially in fiction).

Images removed due to copyright

To the right: The memorial monument to the murdered Jews in Europe, Berlin.

I decided to divide my designs into four different categories to translate the identity testament into form: structure, temperature, scent and identification. Structure to create the feeling of the person’s skin, temperature to make the body feel more present in contrast to cold and dead, scent because smell usually is very personal and evokes the memory and last, identification to state the human uniqueness. There are a few things in and on the human body, that can prove the identity of a person. One is the DNA, that exists in all of the fragments of the body. Another is the fingerprints, an old and established method to identify a person since every one’s fingerprint is unique. As mentioned in the top of this chapter, the form giving workshop gave me some ideas to translate this in to form. One of the participants in the workshop used the fingerprint in their interpretation of a holy object. This became an inspiration for the category “Identification”, to cover every surface of the wax cube in fingerprints of Lisa Berkert Wallard. Another idea is to use hair or blood and mix it with the wax, to sort of make the DNA a part of the material.

For the category “Structure”, my aim is to create a tactile experience for the visitor in the memorial space. A surface that the visitor feels intrigued to touch, and while doing so experience a familiar bodily feeling. The skin is the biggest organ of the human body, and a familiar structure when touching another human being. It is a soft and elastic surface, naturally covered in small hairs. My aim for this design is to create a tactile experience reminiscent to the feeling of human skin, but in a more abstract way. It is important for the project that the design of the artefacts in the room creates a feeling if bodily presence, without making it morbid. After contacting Marietta Radomska, the founder of the Queer Death Studies network, I attended her Post-Humanities Hub Seminar, January 22nd 2019 at KTH Royal Institute of technology. She there spoke of Australian artist Svenja Kratz, working in bio art, and her piece “The Abscense of Alice” (2008-2011). It is a series of art works working in the area of cell and tissue culture where she used a cancer cell-line from an 11-year old girl called Alice in 1973. Radomska explains how Kratz used genetic
The category “Temperature” is important because it highly connected to life and death in the sense that a cold body is the equivalent to a dead body. Since 37 degrees Celsius is the temperature of a healthy human body, it feels necessary to bring that temperature into the space. For the last category, “Scent”, I have chosen to interpret the smells mentioned in the identity testament into one of the designs. Smell is a sense that highlights memories very well, and can take the memory back to places much quicker than our other senses (källa). Hopefully the smells stated in the identity testament will bring the people in the room back to memories and sense the persons, in this case Lisa Berkert Wallard, life in scents.

From the left: The identity sculpture, The scent-sculpture and the temperature-sculpture.

Radomska, Marietta. Post-Humanities Hub Seminar, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, 2019-01-22
After designing the memorial artefacts and the space, I decided to invite my loved ones to take part in my funeral and to document this on film together with documentary film photographer and director Linnea.
Schröder. It felt important to see how people I love would interact with a space created in my memory, so I invited and encouraged all of the participants of the film to bring what clothes, objects and actions they felt would honor my memory. In 2018, British artist Grayson Perry made a TV-series called “Rites of Passage”\(^\text{27}\) where he investigated the rituals of birth, marriage and death around the world. In “Death, episode 1” Perry meets with Roche who has motor neuron disease which he will die from within the year. Since he is counting down his last time alive, he decides to arrange his own funeral before he dies. A ritual where all his loved ones gather to say goodbye, and where he speaks all his thoughts about leaving this world and express his happiness to see all the people in the room. It is a very touching moment where he expresses his thankfulness to all the people in his life. Perry created a big urn that is placed in the middle of Roches ceremony instead of a coffin. In this urn, all guests were encouraged to bring and put in a memorial object of Roche as a gift to honor his life. It is very inspiring to see the gathering of people saying their goodbyes while the person is present and alive in the room, and how the burial ritual suddenly changed in dynamics and atmosphere.

Image removed due to copyright

*Grayson Perry: Rites of passage. Picture from Channel 4.*

In the Netflix series “Black Mirror” from 2017, the first episode of season 2, “Be Right Back” explains a futuristic scenario of a service that collects data of a person’s identity during their life, and then creates a bot, or an artificial intelligence in form of a replica of the person after their death. In the episode, a woman that just lost her partner in a tragic accident uses the service as a way to process the grief\(^\text{28}\). Russian lifestyle reporter Eugenia Kuyda reportedly saw this episode of Black Mirror and took it to reality in form of an app called Replika\(^\text{29}\). In the app the user can create a personal AI “to help you express and witness yourself by offering a helpful conversation. A space where you can safely share your thoughts, feelings, belief’s, experiences, memories, dreams – your ‘private perceptual world’.” I find this very interesting and


\(^{29}\) Replika. *Our Story.* https://replika.ai/about/story (found 2019-05-07)
relatable to my project in terms of collecting information about a person’s identity and create something to represent it, only my project is in the context of a funeral and not for artificial intelligence.

These two references became very inspirational for the process of shooting the film and burial ceremony in the designed space from my own identity testament. With both steady cam and hand held camera, Linnea filmed the different loved ones scheduled throughout one day to visit the memorial space. We decided to let the visitors choose however they wanted directions on what to do in the space or if they wanted to improvise. I was mentally prepared to have to direct a lot of them on how to interact with the artefacts and the room, but most of the visitors really surprised me with how naturally they handled the process and their performance on camera. Many of them had prepared rituals and costumes themselves that sort of steered the feeling of the documentation. The idea of the documentation from the start was to stage a scenery of an alternative burial ceremony, but after shooting the film I could state that the documentation consisted more of actual documentary footage material rather than a directed staged scenario. And this because all my visitors really interacted with the room with their own intuition and feelings that seemed very real. Maybe the space worked as some sort of spiritual safe space to contemplate, even though they were there to “perform” for my film.

Outtake from the film collaboration with Linnea Schröder, that is also presented in the exhibition at Konstfack. A possible scenario of an alternative Burial ceremony with the identity testament as a foundation. Photo by Linnea Schröder.

Finally, one of the most crucial parts of my master project is of course the document, the identity testament. To communicate this document in the best possible way, graphic designer Alexey Layfurov
helped me give form to my holy document. To get him started, I sent him a moodboard of pictures that I relate to as religions, symbols, rituals and god-figures of today's secular society. From that, he created a design consisting of different fonts, patterns and symbols inspired by those pictures and what they represent.

Image removed due to copyright

*Graphic Design inspiration.*

The font of the title, “The Self” is the same font Beyoncé used for her latest release, the concert movie “Homecoming” On Netflix. Beyoncé herself often refers to ancient gods and icons from different African cultures in lots of her performances such as Cleopatra, Oshun and Mami Wata. Beyoncé is in many ways an example of a goddess in the western secular society. She has millions of people worshipping her, gathering to hear her sing and gain strength and inspiration from her. “Bench-watching” series on streaming apps such as Netflix and HBO can almost be seen as a modern secular ritual gathering. Every spring since 2011, the multi-million-dollar budget show “Game of Thrones” has released a new season on streaming app HBO. The show is the single most popular show of this latest decade, and has millions of fans all over the world. The internet literally explodes with theories, recaps, trailers and discussions after every episode has aired, it even has its own Wikipedia site with information of every character and family clans of the show to keep the fans on track. I find many connections between how people gather around the show “Game of Thrones” in 2019 and how people in history have gathered around traditional religions and rituals.

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https://www.netflix.com/search?q=homecoming&jbv=81013626&jbp=0&jbr=0


https://se.hbonordic.com/series/game-of-thrones/
The result of the graphic design by Alexey really speaks to my project, and to give the papers a contemporary reference to old ways of printing. We printed all the documents using a risograph, a printer that uses screen silk printing technique, which gives the paper and print a quite handmade look. Every print is a little different, sometimes the color does not bleed all the way out on all letters and the text and colors comes “alive” more in my opinion. It is a perfect interpretation of the secular society’s religions on a contemporary holy document. I will use this document in my spatial installation, showing different peoples testaments to ornament the room and the walls. I will also give away copies of the document for all the visitors of my memorial room.

4. DISCUSSION

Would this method ever be used? Who would use the method? Who has the privilege to even ask of this from their loved ones? Would a queer person that is oppressed by a homophobic family even dare to fill in this form? Even if they knew that it would only be read after their death? Would an atheist person oppressed by their religious family demand of them to put their beliefs aside and do their funeral their way just to feel justified? Would a mourning family even have the energy to question the format of the burial ceremony and organize something different because of this testament? Would it bring justice to a dead person to know that their identity will be rightfully spoken of after they died, if they never got justice in life?

Somehow, I understand that the method of “The Self” is completely naïve. I guess the method would have a better chance at working in a society that did not have the traditions of norms that exists in Sweden today. Maybe it exists in an imaginary society that are not affected by traditions, laws and bureaucracy that I find to be the obstacles for the method to work in practice. As mentioned in the “contextualization” chapter of this paper, the main reason why funerals have a hard time developing in format in Sweden is because griftefridslagen, the “peace of the grave” is very strong and has such high value, and that for arguable reasons (to protect every individuals right to a dignified funeral even if no relatives or friends are involved). The obstacle though is that the law also states that a dead body is only allowed to be transported in a format of a coffin, which restrains the format of the ceremony to the Christian traditional format.

On the other hand, if the method would be used in a parallel reality without these laws and norms then the method would probably not need to exist. It is because of the norms and traditions that I have developed the method in the first place. A problem I see with my method is also that it requires that the person using it is sort of planning ahead of their own death - this may rule out people dying in accidents perhaps at a young age. Although, my aim with this project is also to normalize talking about death, you own death and the stigma around it, which could result in a scenario where filling out a paper about your funeral at a very early stage in your life feels natural.
5. CONCLUSION

After staging my alternative burial ceremony both in a film and a spatial installation, working with the testament, the artefacts in the room and the people visiting it, I reflect upon how the execution of my project helped me answer my questions in the research chapter:

How could a new type of burial ceremony - based on our secular beliefs in contemporary Sweden – look, feel and be arranged to be more connected to what we can relate as religion today? To answer this question, I get back to reflect upon the term religion and what that actually is, and especially what the equivalent of religions, gods and rituals are in a secular modern society. My conclusion of this based on the research for this paper, and by living in the post-internet western society in 2019, is that religion is something a large number of people have a common belief in that also has a power to steer the society. Could this be the Internet? A god is someone a large number of people worship and believe in, gain strength from and get inspired by. Could this be superstars like Beyoncé or Justin Beiber? Finally, a collective ritual is a gathering of people in a joint agreement to either celebrate something or spiritually connect over a common purpose with others. This could be watching the “Game of Thrones” together after longing for the next episode to air. In summary, a new type of burial ceremony based on the secular contemporary society would naturally connect to some of our modern traditions and values rather than ones based on the traditions of Christianity.

Is it possible to create an organized system to collect information about a person´s identity to be used as a formal ground to create a fair burial ceremony after the person’s death? The method of the identity testament is, as reflected upon in the previous chapter, probably unlikely to successfully apply directly onto the Swedish legal burial system of today. Because of griftefridslagen first and foremost the testament could not be applied as a format of the actual burial of the dead body. What it could work as is a foundation of information to loved ones if they would like to create an alternative ceremony after the interment of the body and create a space where everyone, regardless of relationship to the dead, could take part of what that individual would like to leave on this earth with them to think, feel, smell and see in relation to them.
6. APPENDIX

For the exhibited part of this project, a staged memorial room based on the identity testament of Lisa Berkert Wallard was presented. In the room, all the 5 different wax sculptures were presented for the visitors to interact with. Inside the room, the film was projected on one of the walls for the visitors to watch the same time as they were inside. The film worked as an inspiration on how to interact with the sculptures, and perhaps also it had a function of keeping the visitors company, since the people in the film were in the same space as them, but in another dimension. Outside of the room, a podium with copies of the testament were placed together with a pen and pins for visitors to fill in their own testament and either take it with them home, or put up on the wall outside the room together with others. I printed 200 copies of the document and all of them were either taken by visitors to go, or filled in and put up on the wall in the exhibition. This is a very interesting outcome, and it was inspiring to see how the wall of testaments grew larger during the whole exhibition. Maybe that is evidence that a lot of people find it interesting to reflect upon the questions of death and how we want to be perceived by the after world.

I could see two groups of people that appreciated the project a little bit more than others, or at least the ones that wanted to talk about the matter with me. Seniors and queer people. A lot of people from the age 60 and above wanted to tell stories and share their own experiences and thoughts around the Swedish burial ceremony. Perhaps because death is something more present in their life and approaching more than for younger and middle aged people. The other group of people that I got most feedback from was members of the LGBTQ community, that wanted to talk a lot about how they think regarding their own funeral and especially identity. How Identity is projected and how identity looks in a physical space. After the exhibition, I can see that the film helped a lot to create an understanding of my project and also to set the mood, especially the music played. I got emails from visitors asking what songs were in the film, and that they recognized some of it but could not detect it.

During the examination with Bettina Schwalm as opponent, I got a few questions. The first questions often asked while taking part om my project is “how would this work?” and other logistic questions in context of contemporary society. I realize that I need to re-frame some of my terms I use when presenting the project, such as “A method for Queering Death”. When using the word method, it is assumed that I somehow work with a service design, which is an understandable misinterpretation. My method is not developed for re-making the structures and laws on how to bury a body and how to arrange a funeral. My intention is more to spark thoughts and conversations amongst communities and families on how we could honor and remember our passed loved ones, maybe in a different way. The method of the Identity testament is more something existing in a parallel reality were laws and bureaucracy does not restrict the formalities. Therefore, a more suitable title (now corrected), would be “Towards a Method for Queering Death”.
Another question that came up during the examination was “Who is this for?”. This questions is based on the references and visual language I use both in the graphic design of the document but also the setting of the example of my memorial space. Off course, references like Beyoncé, Game of Thrones and RuPauls Drag Race speaks more to my own generation rather than to the generation that are approaching death by age as of now. The answer to that is that the method is not for everyone, but speaks more to the individuals in society whose identity state something more political and symbolical in relation to norms and oppressive structures, which needs to be visible even after their own passing. To write history of who they were and the struggles that come with. Although, I don’t think certain references necessarily excludes elderly people just because it comes from contemporary pop cultural references, I believe that is to underestimate their intellect. This was proven to me during the exhibition, since a lot of people, especially women of the age 60 + wanted to share stories and talk about my project with me.

After ending this part of my master’s project, I still feel like there is more work to be done to make the project as good as it could be. I want to continue working with it, and the first step is to make some sort of catalogue with all the Identity testaments that were filled in and given to me during the exhibition. To have all of them collected. I think that reading all of the testaments after another, could give the reader a visual idea of how different people are and how that could be applied to a ceremony for remembering an individual. To open up minds on how we could do things differently and to spark ideas. I am also planning on editing different versions of the film with a more linear dramaturgy, so that the film could stand for itself together with the publication as an example of a ceremony created with the Identity testament. This is ideas that I will continue and develop after my master education.
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