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*If Alive*  
Manuel Saiz

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*If Alive* was an art show exhibited at the Museu de l'Empordà, Gerona, in the spring of 2003, while Anna Capella was director of the museum. It had as its main subject the beginning of preparations, twenty-three years in advance, for a birthday party scheduled to happen at the museum's facilities on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January, 2026. Manuel Saiz, the author of this book will, *if alive*, be sixty-five that day.

*If Alive* (Si sóc viu) Del 20 de juny al 14 de setembre de 2003

Coordinació: Eva Blanch i Anna Capella

Maquillatge: Eva Quilez

Fotografia: Jordi Puig

Vídeo camera: Juande Jarillo

Treball en ferro: Roberto Pajares

Disseny catàleg: bis]

*If Alive*

2003

The 10<sup>th</sup> of January, 2006, twenty years before *If Alive*, a pre-anniversary / birthday party took place at the living quarters of the author on Hawes Street in London. Eva Bensasson, Marko Daniel, Jaime Gili, Bárbara Gutiérrez, Chloe Lambourne, Dominic Latham-Koenig, Saki Satom and Kate White attended the event. Most of the conversation focused on speculations about how we will be twenty years later.

*Twenty Years Later*

2006

*Manuel muerto vendo Vespa barata (Manuel Dead Cheap Scooter for Sale)* was a lecture, pre-anniversary and birthday party held at the Museu de l'Empordà, Gerona, on the 10th of January 2011, fifteen years before *If Alive*. Among others, Anna Capella, still the director of the institution, Joan Armangué Ribas, who was mayor of Figueres at the time of the 2003 show, Jaume Sabater i Garau, Jorge Bravo, Juande Jarillo, Julia Montilla, Luis Bisbe, Jordi Puig and Rosa Pera attended the event. The notes from that lecture are the origins of this book.

*Manuel Dead Cheap Scooter for Sale*

2011

At the moment of writing these lines, the event *Por mí, por todos mis compañeros y por mí el primero* (For Me, for All My Friends, and for Me First of All)\* is still in the future. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2016, ten years to the author's sixty-fifth birthday party, this book will be launched at the opening of a show at the Galería Trinta in Santiago de Compostela, Spain. All this is said with the reserve that the future tense has in the frame of this project.

\* The title in Spanish refers to a version of the children's game Hide and Seek in which a player who reaches a certain spot and repeats this phrase is safe and also saves all of the other players.

*For Me,  
for All My Friends  
and for Me First of All*

2016

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Although many people contribute to make my aging, even if relentless, pleasant and fruitful, as far as this project is concerned I am especially indebted to Anna Capella.

I would like to dedicate this book to my father, who died a few months after turning sixty-five, and to my mother, who will be ninety-one some days after the launch.





The fifteenth pre-anniversary of *If Alive*, a kind of lecture/performance/birthday party called *Manuel muerto vendo Vespa barata* (*Manuel Dead – Cheap Scooter for Sale*), took place at the Museu de l'Empordà, in Figueres (Catalonia), on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2011, the day I became fifty years old. The event started with a thirty-minute countdown to 20:00. It is assumed that the *If Alive* party will be held on the same spot exactly fifteen years after that moment.

When it was ten minutes to 20:00, many friends and acquaintances I was expecting still hadn't arrived. The auditorium of the museum was rather empty. I decided to stop the countdown and start the event ten minutes later, as a courtesy. It was, then, a c. t. (*cum tempore*) instead of a s. t. (*sine tempore*) event. But I felt that the mechanical precision of the project, the expectations about when and how the party will happen, were not compromised: probably the actual event on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2026 will start ten minutes late as well.

<img 1>

Twenty-five seconds before the start of the performance a scene from the 1960 film *Ocean's Eleven* was projected on the screen of the auditorium. The scene is also a countdown, in this case of the last seconds of the year in which the story is set, and occurs simultaneously at several casinos in Las Vegas. In the film's plot, the counting also serves the main characters as a signal to set in motion the plan to rob those very casinos.

I selected this clip for the cheerful count-down, the colourful decorations in different tones in each location, and the feeling of the relevance of a precise moment in time, of the sense of anticipation and of simultaneity it exudes. When I was documenting it I made a small discovery: the film was released in the USA in September 1960, but it didn't reach Europe until 1961. In Sweden it was released on 2<sup>nd</sup> of January and in Italy on 18<sup>th</sup> of January. So it might well be that the release in Spain happened on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 1961, Tuesday, the day I was born. The countdown for the premiere might have been simultaneous to the one made by my parents.

At the auditorium in which I was giving the talk, once the countdown reached zero in the film, instead of the hullabaloo, the shouting, or the engines' ignition that usually follows a countdown, there was only silence, because nothing extraordinary was going to happen this time, just a lousy artist's talk. No party will be held until 2026. And then only *if alive*.

A big blinking caption was displayed, in the style of the computer screens portrayed in Sci-Fi films of the past.

TCDT, Terminal Countdown Demonstration Test

This was just a simulacrum, a test of what will happen, a reminder that a foreseen event is set, and that time is passing fast.

<img 2>

The Terminal Countdown Demonstration Test is a rehearsal exercise that NASA stages whenever manned rockets are going to be sent to space. All steps of the launching procedure are followed as if they were real, up to the moment the button that ignites the fuel is pressed. The launching is aborted right before that moment.

The TCDT is normally the first time that astronauts see the equipment and the launching area. This test is done a few days before the launching.

In the case of *Manuel muerto*, the event (a Terminal Countdown Demonstration Test for the *If Alive* Party) was happening fifteen years before the actual party.

Most of the people who attended that celebration, *Manuel muerto*, were already familiar with the origin of *If Alive*. Many of them were at this very auditorium in 2003, eight years earlier, when an art show initiated the project. I thought it was appropriate, anyway, to show at the beginning of the event some reminders of those days, fragments of the video and photographs of how the show looked and of the process of producing it and, thus, to dive straight into the subject.

*If Alive* got its start when Anna Capella, director of the Museu de l'Empordà in Figueres (Catalonia), invited me to prepare a show for the museum's temporary exhibition galleries. I replied with a proposal for a show that would have the conditional title of *If Alive* and that consisted basically of starting with the preparations for my sixty-fifth birthday party, twenty-three years in advance. All the works in the show would refer to the requirements for the party to take place. This involved tasks like securing a venue, starting to invite people, thinking about the menu...: a lot of practical operations that seemed ridiculous to organise so far in advance. The show's main interest for me, though, was to invite thinking about death, about the permanence of the private and the public, and about the future. It was also about many other minor things I plan to write about in this text.

The show took place at the same spot where this talk was held. It is also the same place where it will finish on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2026, if the project fulfils the condition contained in its title (if alive), when I will turn sixty-five and my birthday will be celebrated with a thoroughly well-prepared party.

&lt;img 3&gt;

One of the main features of the show was that I was made to look like a sixty-five-year old man by way of make-up, an operation performed by Eva Quílez, a professional FX artist, in order to shoot some pictures and a video, which were shown at the gallery. The logical assumption was that looking sixty-five would help me become more aware of how the idea of such a celebration might mature, and what the needs for the party would be, for me and for the guests. It also would help my prospective guests to picture me as a host, and to start thinking about their own preparations.

I travelled to Figueres several times to prepare the show. On one of the trips, after a long session of make-up, we shot three pictures at locations near the museum portraying possible outcomes of the project. The images represent various situations and states I might find myself in 2026. All the situations fulfil the condition of being alive on that day. On that future 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2026 I might be:

&lt;img 4&gt;

- 1) in the main hospital of the area,
- 2) begging at the door of the museum where the party is supposed to be taking place,
- 3) playing some golf to relax before receiving my guests.

These idealised expectations were not built out of scientific research or logical deduction, but merely by projecting common inner clichés of hopes and fears.

Besides the photographs, the show contained some other documents: two letters, one in which I was requesting the use of the space of the museum

for my party in 2026 and the other in which the board of the museum replied, granting the use of the museum as a venue, and setting some interesting conditions for the event to happen.

<img 5>

A sign “We Love Parties” written in gothic letters, more threatening than reassuring, and a collection of invitation cards I started to distribute at that time completed the show.

Some friends came from far away to attend the talk I gave eight years later, fifteen years before the party. They knew the uniqueness of the occasion for me, mixing autobiography and art. Among others, those present included Joan Armangué Ribas, the former mayor of the city, who signed the agreement eight years before; Anna Capella, the director of the museum at the time of the show and still so at the time of the talk; and Jordi Puig, the photographer who took the portraits.

I thanked the museum for its support of my ageing and deterioration. The museum is witnessing me grow old, while the institution remains in good shape.

I asked the audience to forgive me in case I made some mistakes during the performance, or if the structure of the event didn't feel consistent enough: as a man who needs twenty-three years to prepare a birthday party, I am not very confident about giving an artist talk for which I have had only eight years to prepare.

Over the eight years since the show was staged, *If Alive* had given me many interesting moments.

*If Alive* entails a recurrent disquieting climax/anti-climax moment that occurs when I explain to somebody the project and hand him/her an invitation card to attend the party. Most of the time the first reaction is laughter, given the absurdity of the proposal. Then the recipients picture themselves in that future state, fifteen, twenty years later, in which they might attend the party, trying to imagine if they will be walking with a stick, or if their health conditions will allow them to

drink. After that, normally, they think about the possibility of their not being alive by then. The timings and solemnity of these reactions are marked by the age of the potential guest.

The fact of handing out this card represents quite an imposition. Many people do not like to talk about death, and this invitation presents death in a very sudden and imaginative way. Because one is not used to being invited to a prosaic event fifteen years in advance, it is easy to get caught by surprise.

Good conversations often arise after the handing out of a card. People then like to talk about the future, about the social healthcare system, about electronic gadgets and sci-fi movies of all sorts. Some couples ask for two cards, because they prefer not to assume that they will be together for so long.

On one occasion I gave a presentation of my work at the Winchester School of Art and I talked about *If Alive*. At the end of the talk a person from the audience came up to me and offered to perform as a DJ for the party. He suggested playing a selection of music that will include big hits from the sixty-five years of my life. He committed himself to staying alert over the next twenty years to complete the selection.

Of course, over the years of developing the project I often ask myself if I will make it to that date. Thoughts about the project, new ideas about how to realise it, lead me to think about the date of my death, while thoughts of dying in turn make me recall the party and the possibility of it not being realised. It is a perverted relationship of both realms, because I divert in this way the idea of death in my mind to a much more practical objective. One of the main characteristics of thoughts about dying is that they quickly become a routine, they are disarmed as soon as one gets used to them. Then a higher dose of death-thought is needed, which normally can only be obtained by surprise.

There have been three especially significant moments regarding the way I have perceived the project in connection with my death, three moments in which the dose was topped up significantly and caught me unaware.

The first one was after the shooting of the pictures, the day I spent looking like a sixty-five-year old Manuel. That was a quite tiring day, starting with a time-consuming make-up session. I had to sit for a very long time in a chair while every inch of my face was worked over as the make-up was applied. It was a particularly intriguing situation to be looking at the employees of the museum, or occasional visitors, who passed by and glanced at my face in astonishment over the changes that were being made, which I couldn't see. At the end of the session I went to the mirror and I myself was astonished.

While I was visually sixty-five years old we went to three different locations to shoot the pictures. To get the maximum benefit out of the effort put into the make-up, we tried to shoot as many variables as possible. However weird it was to see myself in the mirror looking sixty-five years old, by the end of the day I was kind of used to it. When we finished the shooting I went to the bathroom and removed the makeup. The most difficult bit was the film of latex that was glued to my skin to make it wrinkle. Very tired, young again, I went to sleep.

The scary moment came the next day, when I woke up and, still half asleep, I looked in the mirror and discovered that the wrinkles were still there. I didn't know that the skin has some kind of slow shape memory and it needs time to return to its original texture. I didn't look sixty-five, but perhaps something like fifty-eight, far, at any rate, from the forty-two that I was at the moment.

I imagined the possibility, as may have happened in a sitcom, of the makeup artist being a witch who used incantations only to cover up her lack of skills as a makeup artist. Happily, a few hours later my skin smoothed out again and I was just one day

older than before the shooting, which was an ageing pace I was already resigned to.

The second scary occasion happened when I was with Juande Jarillo preparing Jordi's photographs to be included in the catalogue. At one point, as Juande was adjusting with Photoshop the colour balance of my image at the hospital – a close-up of my face with an oxygen mask with my head lying on a pillow – he moved the green bar of the colour filter slightly too far. For a moment my face looked like one of the morgue portraits by Andrés Serrano, and I saw myself as a corpse. It is an effect of objectification, of seeing oneself out of oneself, that is a component of many artistic experiences.

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The third relevant moment that has happened so far occurred in 2007, when I went to Haro to visit the facilities of López de Heredia, a prestigious wine producer, in the Spanish region of La Rioja.

As is well known, alcohol is a substance that has a long tradition of being generously offered to people over eighteen in western countries on the occasion of birthday parties. At polite, sophisticated gatherings, alcohol is served in the form of wine. Given that one of the most appreciated characteristics of wine is the improvement in taste and value it experiments with ageing, it was only natural to start looking for the provider of the wine for my future party. López de Heredia is a winery whose old wines are much appreciated due to the fact that the traditional delicate process they pass through allows them to resist ageing well and improve with time.

The director of the company, María José López de Heredia, and I have some friends in common, so I went to the winery to explain the project and see what the possibilities were for getting some sponsorship for the wine.

The meeting was very enjoyable and her way of speaking about wine was interesting, as was the explanation she gave me of the very special characteristics that a wine for that occasion should have. She decided to help me with six hundred bottles of wine,

nineteen years old, to be delivered the day before the party, the 9<sup>th</sup> of January 2026, at the premises of the museum.

On the occasion of the talk at the museum in 2011 María José sent an email explaining the process the wine has to follow:

In January 2007, Manuel explained his project to us and we thought it was a very interesting idea. The philosophy of our bodega is to produce wines with a *vocation for aging*. One could speak at length about this quality, given that many examples in literature and science exist that show that the great wines, those from great estates and exceptional grapes, are capable of ageing while remaining young.

That same month we chose two consignments of white and red wine from our Viña Tondonia estate, from the 2006 vintage, a very good year, in two casks. Over these past four years, both wines have evolved favourably and they have been racked, both the white and the red, nine times, as the first year we racked them three times. The casks are bordalesa barrels of North American oak with a capacity of 225 litres and were made at our own cooperage.

The racking is carried out in the most traditional way, during a waning moon, so that the sediments remain at rest and with the consideration that these wines must spend another six years in the barrel before being bottled, in which state they will spend another ten years, softening and becoming more refined so that they will be in their fullest form at the moment of the celebration, in 2026.

Wine always ages by oxidation, just as people do, but it cannot survive without oxygen. The protectors of wine are acidity, which gives it freshness, alcohol, which gives it texture, and the colouring matter or polyphenols: tannins, anthocyanin and flavones, which give it body. The dosing of oxygen, the quality of the grape, the quality of the soil and the specific climate of the zone of the Rioja Alta where our famed estate of Viña Tondonia is located, joined with the care taken by our family of winemakers, with its 134 years of experience producing wines of great refinement and the capacity for aging, is what makes, just as with people, the quality of that aging supreme. Patience and the goal of reaching 2026 with all our faculties intact is what gives meaning to our way of working.

What I realised that day was that, clearly, I would only be able to taste this wine if I were alive on that day.

My guests would be able to taste this delicious wine only if I were alive (they must be alive too, of course). For the first time I felt a very clear collateral loss to the loss of my life. If I die before the party I will also lose the use of the space (it has been ceded) and the promised fun, but I hadn't felt this as something throbbingly painful as I did when I imagined missing sipping the wine. It is not that I am a sophisticated drinker, but the uniqueness of the loss and the unexpected emotion made me feel that way.

Beside these three particular occasions in which the meaning of the project popped up by surprise, there are other important dates that are necessarily scheduled, that is to say, all my birthdays from the show until the party. The most relevant of these are the moments when the countdown gets into round figures, twenty years, fifteen years, ten years and five years.

"Twenty years to go" has already passed. "Fifteen years to go" was the day the talk *Manuel muerto*, origin of this text, took place. Ten and five are yet to happen.

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On the occasion of twenty years to go I held a small celebration at my home in London. A few friends came; we had some dinner, talked about the future and made the countdown to the twenty years to go. We counted down at 19:00, as Greenwich is one hour earlier than the official time of the party.

I have always been reluctant to celebrate my birthdays, an event that necessarily has to happen and that doesn't make me feel special in any way, because everybody has one birthday a year. The only merit of having a new birthday is that of having remained alive. I like instead to celebrate other things which are either more random or more intended. This project allows me to celebrate something other than the birthday (the approach of my art event) that completely takes over the birthday event. A birthday seems to be more like something you accumulate, rather than a countdown. By virtue of this project the relation each celebration has with

the future becomes stronger than the connection it has with the past. This makes me think of *If Alive* as a sci-fi novel, completely projected to the future. *If Alive* is projected toward the future like an artwork, always about to happen.

First, however, I should look to the past and explain what *If Alive* means to me and where the idea of the project came from.

The first memory I have of *If Alive* is from the nineties. At that time I was living in the countryside in a house with a big studio that occupied almost the whole building. It was as big as it was difficult to heat. I had two wood stoves, one Swedish, of the best design, and the other Spanish, the cheapest tin barrel type.

One day, when a friend was visiting, we went for dinner to a hermitage 10 kilometres away up in the mountains, the isolated home of a couple of friends and their little daughter. I filled up the two stoves to keep the house warm for our return, and we got into the car. As we were driving up to the hermitage I said, full of pride for my Swedish stove: “When we get back you will see that the Swedish stove will have still some embers, while the other one will be completely burned out and cold”.

I don't know why, perhaps it was due to the shame of having seen myself suddenly as a victim of a *post-purchase rationalisation*,<sup>1</sup> but a second later I pictured the moment of our arrival back home and imagined both of us standing in front of the house in flames. I felt preventively ashamed, or ashamed-just-in-case, of the pride I had expressed. How

despairing it would have been to return after a spark from the stove had leapt out onto the wooden structure of the house, setting everything on fire, and all my belongings lost! But, even more, what a horrible moment it would have been for my friend to say with a half-smile on his face: “Yes, yes, as you said, the Swedish stove still has embers, ha, ha”. I felt the need to conjure up that moment, to make sure such a possibility vanished, and so I said: “Or perhaps the whole house will be in flames when we return, ha, ha”.

Realising how my mind had worked made me reflect on how vain it was to make assumptions about the future. From there to *If Alive* was an easy leap, considering that the usual occupation of an artist nowadays is scheduling and planning exhibitions at least two years in advance.

*If Alive* works as a disclaimer, a statement that frees one from later responsibility. Every expectation of the future can be disappointed and those who ingenuously wait for something to happen could well be laughed at as fools. At funerals of ambitious individuals I feel there is always a moment of “Poor guy/girl, he/she believed he/she was going to publish that book, to inaugurate that airport, to visit Majorca for Christmas”. The *If Alive* formula prevents one from being exposed when a situation of that kind occurs. Since I have set *If Alive* in motion, I feel more confident about saying that I will have this show, that publication or this film next year, or that I will visit Majorca next Christmas. In a way, *If Alive* implies that all these other projects are also made with the awareness that I might not get there to realise them.

I have a Japanese friend who sometimes makes quite confident statements about how events are going to happen. After a couple of seconds of dramatic silence he says: “Perhaps”. I find it quite funny and cool. I recently saw *Kamome shokudō*, a 2006 Japanese comedy film, in which this device is used (多分, *tabun* in Japanese). When one main character follows a strong moral judgment with that expression, I realised it

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must be embedded in the Japanese culture of safety. I believe that a well-placed *tabun* can be very useful in any sentence with a conflictive angle. Likewise a good *if alive* can be put for safety's sake at the end of each statement about something you are going to do in the future.

In 2009 I worked on *Points of View*, a video installation consisting of two monitors with their backs against each other. One monitor shows interviews of well-known artists who explain their views on different matters related to their work. The image doesn't feel completely right; something strange is happening in the way they talk and behave. Upon seeing the other monitor, the reason for this becomes clear, because it is an image of me moving in a synchronized, similar way as the artists and saying exactly what they say on the other screen. It is also my voice that is heard over the images of the artists on the other monitor. I repeat the same phrases at the same pace, with the silences and the hesitations.

To carry out this work I needed to learn all the conversations by heart. It was a demanding task and the exercise confused me. As happens in the production of many artworks, when realising this one I needed to be so concentrated on performing actions I could not control, my mind was so busy with its task of mimicking, that I felt as though I was emptying myself. And then I was filled up by the other person. I wonder if that's how actors feel, given that I believe the Stanislavsky's method works along similar lines.

While recording these interviews I kind of understood the reasons for the artists talking in the way they did, the need for each hesitation, the choice of certain words and expressions. It could be said that, if one stops putting one's own constraints on language to let it flow according to the built-in ones in the phrases one is saying, the delivery will lead to the same results whoever is speaking. For example, I clearly understood the circumvolutions an artist made to overcome the embarrassment she felt when comparing herself to another artist she admired.

&lt;img 9&gt;

One of the interviews I re-enacted features Belgian artist David Claerbout. He talks slowly and the words he uses are meditated and precise. At the same time, I feel his discourse is constructed like a Meccano model, in which segments are assembled with little flexibility. In one of the sentences he uses the expression *without dramatising*, quite a good disclaimer. When one is saying something too strong, if one feels a bit uncertain, one can always put a *without dramatising* somewhere in the sentence. If anybody then tries to comment on your statement you can always say: “You are dramatising. Please do not dramatise. I said you should not dramatise”. It is a dirty trick which rightly could be included in Schopenhauer’s *The Art of Always Being Right*. Like some of Schopenhauer’s advice in the book, this one, as well, might involve some impudence.

&lt;img 10&gt;

<sup>1</sup> Post-purchase rationalization is a phenomenon whereby someone who purchases an expensive product or service overlooks any faults or defects in order to justify their purchase. Expensive purchases often involve a lot of careful research and deliberation, and many consumers will often refuse to admit that their decision was made in poor judgement.

It is increasingly advisable to acknowledge that one's intended activities might not happen at all. It is a fact that during my life the timeframe of my projects has expanded dramatically, since that far-off time when I used to completely finish a painting in few hours to the lengthy project planning of today's practice, in which whatever one wants to achieve needs lots of previous planning, coordination with other people's schedules, meeting sponsors' deadlines, and dealing with weather conditions or planetary alignments. The further the projects are pushed into the future, the more you need a disclaimer, a *de-dramatising* device, an *if alive* coda.

Some people might think that twenty-three years is a lot of time to prepare something as simple as a birthday party, and obviously they are right. If one prepared every birthday party with such dedication, one could carry out twenty-two party preparations simultaneously, each in a different stage of development. But, although this would make it very convenient to take advantage of economies of scale, it could bring a halt to all other activities in one's life. This makes me think about how improvised and casual my sixty-sixth birthday party will look like, if I organise a party, and if alive (+ 1).

While living in Rome, I regularly attended a Japanese tea ceremony practise over a period of eight

months, and among the many things I learnt there was one of special importance regarding *If Alive*: one can spend a good part of one's life learning how to offer or receive tea, all the while doing it well enough or bad enough so as to continue learning how to do it a bit better. Even after many years of practicing there will still be space for improvement. The more time and energy one devotes to the art, the more it gives back to one.

In my modest limited practice of the Japanese tea ceremony I also experienced, as in the making of *Points of View*, that emptiness of oneself that comes when you attempt activities that require your attention, concentration and skills to a point beyond your capacity. I guess it is something present in all Zen practices and martial arts. In my mind, this is what martial arts share with our western arts.

Indeed, the progressive expansion of projects toward the future has been a constant during all my life. As a matter of fact, artists of my generation started calling what we were doing *projects* relatively late in our practice. While we were still *young artists* we were painting, making sculptures, etc., not *projecting* paintings or sculptures. Of course, we went to the shop to buy canvases and colours for future works, and we tried out new materials with the expectation of learning techniques for the future, but these activities were disconnected from the practice of art. The artist was somehow exempted from constraints imposed by planning and calculation. And suddenly, with the appearance of the concept of a *project*, everything got articulated in a single hierarchical structure, which put artists in an uncertain situation. When working on *projects* one becomes subjected to the caprices of destiny.

One seductive aspect of the idea of *project*, and perhaps one of the reasons why it has taken over the whole spectrum of artistic creation, is the self-satisfaction that comes from taking for granted that those plans are going to be executed as intended, that, by calculating all variables, we can predict the

development and output of our actions. In some cases the project may be carried out already with the thought that it may not succeed, but even if the expectations of some projects are not fulfilled, even if the expectations are of its failure, still the fact of its being projected implies somehow a very clear positive fact: one is going to be there to see the projects fail. Any *project* is, by definition, *optimistic*.

The satisfaction implied by the fact of taking things for granted has its downturn in the appearance of vanity. Vanity is the *excessive* belief in one's own abilities or attractiveness to others. Artists are in an especially difficult position regarding vanity, as they have to be recurrently submitted to public scrutiny, and they are often praised for ridiculous deeds and achievements. Besides, an artist needs a particularly committed attitude to what he is doing, in order to overcome all the resistance that lies in the way of art projects, and this attitude makes them prone to think of themselves as being better than what they deserve.

The term *vanity* originally meant 'futility', and still retains that meaning when quoted in Latin, because, of course, every belief in one's own abilities is excessive when put in the light (or better, *the darkness*) of death. Every belief in one's own abilities is a belief that things will go as planned and that one will be there to see the result. This is perhaps why vanity developed into such an important theme in art over the course of history.

<img 12>

In *Vanitas* (c. 1671), a painting by Philippe de Champaigne, vanity is represented by the three key icons of time:

- a) a flower in its most vital representation;
- b) a skull (a person *who was*);
- c) an hourglass, which measures the pace at which things pass from being alive to being dead.

Although the hourglass makes a good conceptual pointer to death, and the image of a skull is shocking (a brute force last resort for a *vanitas*), the flower is the most effective device, given that painting flowers was a cutting-edge representation technique at the time the painting was made.

The ability of the painter to portray the delicacy and fragility of a flower, of transmitting that vital quality, was decisive in the effect that a flower that will never decay produced on the viewers of the paintings. The flower shocks the viewer by a reverse effect, in the way used by some advertising techniques (silence in commercials, for instance), since it calls attention to itself because *it should* decay but doesn't. I suppose this phenomenon marks the origin of the importance in the history of painting of rendering flesh in a more and more believable way.

And, in fact, by that time technical developments in the art of painting achieved the most realistic flowers ever seen. For viewers of that time, the flowers were there, their scent almost to be smelled.

Perhaps the reason why common objects in *still life* seem so transfigured and generally everything *painted* appears in a supernatural light is that we then no longer look at things in the flux of time and in the connection of cause and effect... On the contrary, we are snatched out of that eternal flux of all things and removed into a dead and silent eternity. In its individuality the thing itself was determined by time and by the [causal] conditions of the understanding; here we see this connection abolished and only the *Platonic Idea* is left.

The ability of artists to create representations that seem real, or, even better, that create a tension with the real because although they look real they have something that is false, has played an important role in art and technical developments throughout history. In my mind, all technical developments in art that try to portray reality in a more real way have their *raison d'être* in the shock produced by this tension between living matter and eternity, which is death *in absentia*.

In a later development, this same idea of the tension between reality and representation happened when the first films were projected in Paris. When watching on the screen the well-known Lumière Brothers' scene of the train entering the station of La Ciotat, the spectators were shocked and believed that the train might run them over.<sup>3</sup> In film, not only is the flesh very well rendered, but it also moves accordingly. The whole history of the fascination with automata takes place within the same field of emotions.

Philippe de Champaigne, whose paintings seem to clearly define what a *vanitas* is, was born in Brussels, of Flemish origins, but he spent most of his life in Paris, where he was part of the French Baroque School. The *vanitas* genre, however, reached its highest level of development in the Netherlands, and it marked the style of the Dutch Golden Age.

<img 13>

&lt;img 14&gt;

This *Vanitas* painting from 1640 by Harmen Steenwijck, a painter born in Delft circa 1612, belongs with merit to the Golden Age, and it features another element that appears frequently in the paintings of this genre: the overturned glass of wine. A spilled glass of wine is the end of enjoyment, the rupturing of a happy existence and pleasant dreams. But it is also a waste, the tragic dissipation of valuables, of life, of celebrations. If life abruptly finishes (how else can a life finish anyway?) before January 2026, if the *If Alive* glass is overturned, it will spill all the wine onto the floor, 600 bottles of Viña Tondonia.

&lt;img 15&gt;

This *Self-portrait with Vanitas Symbols*, by David Bailly, a painter from Leiden, brings together a cluster of *vanitas* paraphernalia in a comprehensive way.

Besides the skull, the hourglass, the flowers and the glass we have already seen, in this painting there is also an extinguished candle in the middle of the painting, and some soap bubbles, representing the vanishing and transience of life.

The combination of a portrait with a still-life makes this painting especially relevant to *If Alive*, as it also plays these two genres simultaneously in various ways.

The note about the painting at the Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden, where it is located, also reveals another layer of this artwork that overlaps with *If Alive*:

The entire collection functions as a statement about the young man on the left, whose face displays the typical features of a self-portrait. It may therefore be somewhat irritating that the artist was in fact 67 years old when he painted this picture in 1651.

However, the contradiction can be solved when we consider that his current features are shown in the small oval portrait, demonstratively held out towards the viewer - a medium which in itself already documents the transience of life. The youthful artist's face, by contrast, shows Bailly as he was at an earlier stage in his life, more than four decades previously. Thus, by changing the time references of past fiction

and present reality, the painting suggests that the young artist is anticipating his future age, which – though part of the present in 1651 – appears to belong to the past, as conveyed through the medium of the portrait. The young man, who appears to be so real within the first-degree reality of the painting, really represents a state of the past.

Unlike the repetitive, dull and often schematic topics of Dutch *vanitas* still-lives, the misleading time scale in Bailly's painting adds a new dimension to the whole subject.

The misleading time scale of *If Alive* has also on some occasions led to interesting incidents, as for instance when several people over the course of these years have asked if the picture in which I appear as a sixty-five-year old was an image of my father. As in Bailly's painting, in *If Alive* there are images of the artist in two different temporal stages.

<img 16>

A reason why a society like the one in the Netherlands in the 17<sup>th</sup> century produced the *vanitas* genre might be found in the simultaneous experiences of artistic, economic and scientific success, along with the strong presence of death.

Death was indeed part of daily life at that time, as the Thirty Year's War was fought in Central Europe from 1618 to 1648, involving most of the countries of Europe. It was one of the longest and most destructive conflicts in European history, and one of the longest continuous wars in modern history. Famine and disease significantly decreased the population of the German states and Bohemia, the Low Countries, and Italy, and most of the warring powers were bankrupted.

The war coincided with numerous advances of Dutch scientific, economic and imperial enterprises, perhaps due to the *de facto* independence from the Spanish Crown acquired by the northern territories in 1585-1609 and to the economic boom and freedom that self-determination produced.

Examples of this vigour are the first multinational corporation, the Dutch East Indian Company, in 1602, and the first stock exchange, in Amsterdam

in 1606, the invention of the telescope in 1608, of the submarine in 1620, and of the pendulum clock in 1656.

New lands were discovered at that time, given the vanity-revealing name of *Hollandia Nova* (New Holland), that comprehend what is now Australia (1606), Tasmania (1642), New Zealand (1642) and Fiji (1643).

<img 17>

This painting by Adam Bernaert (c. 1665) is devoted to this combination of death and Dutch success. The atlas is open to a map of the East Indies, source of many Dutch fortunes, and there is a city council document with an imposing seal. The other open book is a history of the early counts of Holland, whose lands were absorbed by the dukes of Burgundy in the 1400s. Even the heavens and the earth, represented by two globes, are effected by time, whose relentless passage is marked by the hourglass.

<img 18>

Searching on the Internet I found an image of a contemporary *vanitas*, which may be the result of the same combination in the contemporary USA, whose economic empire is expanding while at the same time its war machinery is constantly employed and improved.

The work appears signed by *kalicothekat*. It presents a group of American products containing this idea of the passing of time and death. A more classical approach would have shown the candles extinguished, and the cappuccino turned over and spilt on the table. Nothing beats American optimism.

<sup>2</sup> Schopenhauer, *Manuscript Remains*, vol. 1, § 80.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes refers to it in *L'obvie et l'obtus*. Recently I came across an example of a reversal effect, in which people recording snipers with their mobile phones in revolutions in Arab countries were shot dead by the very same people they were seeing on the screens of their phones aiming at them and shooting. They did not take cover because they failed to recognise the threat the images revealed.

Of course there are many *vanitas* in our times, which can offer a different reading than this one of what *contemporary* means in art. The existence of a swelling art market in the eighties, combined with the wave of death that brought AIDS to the world, and especially to the art scene, made *vanitas* a trendy genre for the decade. A considerable number of artists passed away as a result of AIDS. Here there are two names for the remembrance of so many: Pepe Espaliú and Félix González Torres. They produced several works which can be included in the *vanitas* category, as many of their colleagues at the time also did, like Robert Gober or Gabriel Orozco.

<img 19>

By portraying death, and therefore thinking and making others think about it, the artists are performing a symbolic restitution of the human debt, the one that is acquired simply by being born. There is liberation in the knee-jerk reaction that the sudden realisation of the inevitability of death triggers in the viewers of *vanitas* paintings and sculptures, similar to the one which is experienced when a long outstanding debt is cancelled. Many boundaries are trespassed in the shock of this realisation, tension is released, large amounts of energy are spent, and, by virtue of the symbolic restitution, the logic of the economy of production and necessity collapses.

Art is understood very often as a sacrifice, as a waste of earthly goods essential to survival on an activity that serves only spiritual purposes, which does not feed the body, but only the mind or the spirit. Humans are hostages to their life-support systems, and by allowing this spectacular expenditure they symbolically liberate themselves. The safer they feel, the more established, self-satisfied and comfortable life is for people, the stronger is the call for waste and destruction. Exhibiting death is another way of making that sacrificial expenditure, as everything loses its value when placed in relation to death.

The price we pay for the reality of this life, to have it as a positive value, is the ever-present phantasm of death. For us, defined as 'living beings', death is our imaginary.<sup>4</sup>

<img 20>

As societies, over history, became richer and richer, and more wealth was accumulated, the sacrifice needed to achieve the liberating restitution grew bigger.

<img 21>

The work by Damien Hirst *For the Love of God* seems to be the latest instalment in one of the branches that this logic of sacrifice (or *radical absence of logic*) has developed. It consists of a platinum cast of an 18<sup>th</sup> century human skull encrusted with 8601 flawless diamonds, including a pear-shaped pink diamond located in the forehead that is known as the *Skull Star Diamond*. It has been advertised as having cost 14 million pounds to produce.

Of course most artworks, and clearly this one, are a waste, but always on the verge of becoming a business, and they can even start off with a planned strategic view of commercial revenues. Such a perspective is candidly and explicitly discussed by the Japanese, American-based artist, Takashi Murakami:

Only those artists who have an ability in marketing can survive in the art world. Damien Hirst is a good example. Through his art, you can see the process of how an artist can survive in the

art world. First of all, distinctively situate his/her position in art history. Second, articulate what the beauty of his/her art is. Next, sexuality. Then, death. Present what he/she finds in death. If an artist aptly rotates this cycle, he/she can survive. Damien Hirst has been repeating the cycle of birth, death, love, sex and beauty.<sup>5</sup>

It escapes my understanding why Murakami's work itself does not follow these ideas so programmatically expressed, and instead completely skips death in its cycles, in favour of sex, beauty and love.

<img 22>

Other more relevant examples exist of artworks that reveal the contemporary interest in death. *Proposition for a Posthumous Portrait*, by Douglas Gordon, also makes use of different time scales, given that it is a portrait situated in the future, when the artist will have reached a situation in which his flesh is no longer on his bones. This is a *project* with much less vanity, due to the fact that the future the project is taking for granted seems to be much more plausible.

<img 23>

Gordon's work also plays nicely with a 1919 Marcel Duchamp's photograph which, by virtue of Gordon's operation, is now easy to also see as a *vanitas*.

I don't know if Duchamp had in mind (in the head, we might say), at least consciously, something of the sort. All *serious* artworks somehow have an association, however subtle, with the anxiety that the idea of death produces in the author, a connection which is not established by means of the narcotic effects that the beauty of the works might create, but more by the spark of coincidences that trigger an awareness of death. To suddenly discover this connection in a work often results in an artistic experience on its own, especially in works you have seen many times without thinking of this relationship at all.

Notably more habitual is the opposite effect, almost an inescapable principle: something that struck you strongly at one point as a *memento mori*

soon becomes commonplace, and the full extent of its value vanishes from one's consciousness. Or perhaps it might be that, by becoming too conscious, it loses its disturbing power.

It is always difficult to talk about death because, as Theodor Adorno said in his often quoted remarks about poetry and Auschwitz, "even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter". Powerful forces apply pressure to make us forget, to turn our gaze elsewhere, to turn everything into a habit, and therefore not to question the feasibility of our *projection projects*. The role of art is often one of an expanded *Verfremdungseffekt*,<sup>6</sup> a device to make viewers aware of how embedded they are in a reality that doesn't deserve such familiarity, to bring that reality to consciousness.

<img 24>

For a long time I have had this image in mind, inviting me to do something with it that has not yet crystalized. Anyway, it has value on my desk as a personal everyday *vanitas*, a second-degree *vanitas*, a meta-*vanitas*, if you like.

The idea of a police force whose task is to penalise those who forget the transient quality of their lives and the futility of their professional achievements points as well to the awareness of the inescapability of death, revealing this truth in the same way the other *vanitas* we have seen. So it is a *vanitas* in its own right. The most important and relevant unit of this *vanitas* police would be the one in charge of tackling misuses of the *vanitas* genre, a kind of an *internal affairs department*. It would persecute artists who use shocking images of death and misery just to get commercial and power advantages, not to increase awareness of the transient human condition.

The power to shock that any *vanitas* might have fades slowly in our perception of the world by way of that effect of entropic dissipation known as *idle chatter* as we pass through life. One gets accustomed to anything. Anyway, whatever

integration devices society places around us to cover up traces of death in daily life, the path of life inevitably brings death to our attention over and over again.

The unavoidability of this moment is beautifully (tragically) expressed in this poem by the Spanish poet Jaime Gil de Biedma:

<img 25>

I won't be young again

The fact that life was for real  
one starts realising  
some time later  
– like all youngsters, I arrived  
to make the best of life.

I wanted to leave my mark  
and exit amid applause.  
– ageing, dying, were only  
the dimensions of the stage.

But time has past  
and a disagreeable truth has appeared:  
ageing, dying,  
is the play's only plot.

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No volveré a ser joven

Que la vida iba en serio  
uno lo empieza a comprender más tarde  
—como todos los jóvenes, yo vine  
a llevarme la vida por delante.

Dejar huella quería  
y marcharme entre aplausos  
—envejecer, morir, eran tan solo  
las dimensiones del teatro.

Pero ha pasado el tiempo  
y la verdad desagradable asoma:  
envejecer, morir,  
es el único argumento de la obra.

Douglas Coupland has coined a term, *denarration*, which he defines as the process whereby one's life stops feeling like a story. In the light of Gil de Biedma's poem, this *denarration* is the constant, growing realisation that all aspects of one's life will be subject to

a single instant, the one in which one's life slips away, and no other scenes or acts will be of any relevance. The gradual realisation that life is not a story, but a countdown.

<sup>4</sup>Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*.

<sup>5</sup> Takashi Murakami *Journal of Contemporary Art*. Translated from the Japanese by Mako Wakasa and Naomi Ginoza. Murakami Studio, Brooklyn, NY, February 24, 2000 (available at <http://www.jca-online.com/murakami.html>).

<sup>6</sup> *Estrangement effect* (*Verfremdungseffekt* in German) is a performing arts concept coined by playwright Bertolt Brecht. Brecht first used the term in an essay on "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting", published in 1936, in which he described it as "playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play". Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious.

If there is something that shows how relentless this realisation is, if there is a perfect *memento mori*, it is birthdays. They serve as a reminder that time is passing, and the numbers you are dealing with, in comparison with those of others around you, or who used to be around you, make you reflect that this existence is not going to last forever. If we didn't count the years, if we didn't know by way of numbers how long we have been in the world, the fact of death approaching would be even more uncertain, if such a thing is possible.

But birthdays, as dangerous and threatening as they are, have been thoroughly worked out in order to be disarmed, to integrate the effect they produce, and to make them part of the symbolic exchange. From *futility reminders* they have become *neutralizers*, instruments to regulate the relationships between people of different ages and between oneself with his or her own death.

Proof of that, for example, is that the number of years is added up, and nobody says of a birthday "one less year to endure", in the countdown fashion that, as I've mentioned, is essential to the *If Alive* project. Some days ago I saw a t-shirt in the street with the sentence: "Birthdays are good for you. People who have many live longer". You might also say it's a variation of a most classical

sentence: “Every birthday wounds you. The last one kills you” (Every birthday party...).<sup>7</sup>

Three main devices have been conceived to convert birthdays into happy celebrations behind which the shadow of death is smuggled:

- 1) the song *Happy Birthday to You*,
- 2) cakes with candles,
- 3) the birthday party.

Everybody has birthdays once a year, and most people, lacking ideas for how to act as their friends load one more year on their shoulders, go for the safe, traditional option of singing *Happy Birthday* to them. Perhaps they do so in order to save their friends from feeling embarrassed about growing older, and the only thing that occurs to them is to make a fool of themselves.

Thus, according to the 1998 Guinness book of world records, *Happy Birthday to You* is the most recognized song of the English language, followed by *For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow*.

At this point in the *Manuel muerto* talk, the fifteen years-to-go event at the museum in Figueres, I decided to play the song for myself, on the occasion of my birthday.

In order to accomplish this, I showed a clip of the 2009 film *RiP: A Remix Manifesto* by Brett Gaylor.

The film, as the title may suggest, is a militant study of the legal status of copyright breaching when creating music out of existing songs, and a defence of the right to use copyrighted material.

This clip starts by saying:

The song *Happy Birthday to You* was written in 1893, but it is not yet in the public domain.

At the moment, if you sing this song you are a copyright criminal, because it is compulsory by law to pay for the rights every time you sing it. The money you would pay will not go to the sisters who wrote it, because they are already dead.

It will go to Warner/Chapell, which is apparently the largest publisher of music in the world, which makes millions out of this song, among others.

<img 27>

Then, in the film, Frank Sinatra's version is defiantly played.

So, the police could have potentially entered the room of the museum where I was giving the talk at that moment, accompanied by the relevant representative of the copyright association in Spain (SGAE) and ended the event. Fortunately that didn't happen, but I was indeed breaking the law.

It might still happen in the event that I will organize (if alive) when the countdown reaches 10 years, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2016, because the copyright of the song will expire in the European Union on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2016.

At the party in 2026 it will be perfectly safe to play the song legally.

The second device to integrate birthdays, and to remove their deathly innuendos, is the birthday cake.

At this point it is relevant to mention that the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami (Haruki, no Takashi) has his birthday on the 12<sup>th</sup> of January, two days after mine. In the year this talk was held he turned sixty-two.

<img 28>

Besides being one of the most successful international novel writers in recent decades, he is the editor of a collection of birthday stories in which cakes play a major role. The book contains thirteen short stories by well-known fiction writers, among them Raymond Carver, David Foster Wallace and Murakami himself.

Murakami's own story, *The Birthday Girl*, might be of literary interest, but, regarding *If Alive*, the really relevant part of the book is Murakami's introduction to the collection of stories.

If Alive

He there explains his relationship with birthdays, which is much similar to my own. He also

tells the story of one of his birthdays that was especially *strange*:

Early one birthday morning I was listening to the radio in the kitchen of my Tokyo apartment. I usually get up early to work. I wake between four and five in the morning, make myself some coffee (my wife is still sleeping), eat a slice of toast and go to my study to begin writing. While I prepare my breakfast, I usually listen to the radio news - not choice (there's not a lot worth hearing), but because there's not much else to do at such an early hour. That morning, as I waited for my water to boil, the newsreader was announcing a list of public events planned for the day, with details of when and where they were happening. For example, the Emperor was going to plant a ceremonial tree, or a large British passenger ship was due to dock in Yokohama, or events would be taking place throughout the country in honour of this being chewing gum day (I know it sounds ludicrous but I am not making it up: there really is such a day). The last item in this list of public events was an announcement of the names of famous people whose birthday fell on January 12. And there among them was my own! "Novelist Haruki Murakami today celebrates his \*\*birthday," the announcer said. I was only half listening, but, even so, at the sound my own name I almost knocked over the hot kettle. "Whoa!", I cried aloud and looked around the room in disbelief. "So", it occurred to me a few minutes later with a pang, "my birthday is not just for me any more. Now they list it as a public event".

Murakami makes then some remarkable reflections on what is public and what is private, and explains the reasons for his interest in making this compilation and the specificity of each of these particular stories.

Of course the link between the private and the public plays an important role in *If Alive*. Otherwise I wouldn't be giving public talks about my birthday and maintaining a website about it. I wouldn't be bragging publicly about how I am going to spend that day.

There are other texts in the book which are of *If Alive* interest, being the most important the short

story by Raymond Carver. It is a shorter version of his later revision called *A Small Good Thing*.

At the poetry foundation.org I read this:

The original story, "The Bath", is about a mother who orders a special cake for her eight-year-old son's birthday – but the boy is hit by a car on that day and is rushed to the hospital, where he lingers in a coma. The baker, aware only that the parents haven't picked up their expensive cake, badgers them with endless calls demanding his money. As the story ends, the boy's fate is still unknown, and the desperate parents hear the phone ring again. In *Cathedral*, the author retells this story (now titled "A Small, Good Thing") up to the final phone ring. At this point, ambiguity vanishes; Carver reveals that the boy has died, and the call is from the irate baker. But this time the parents confront the baker with the circumstances, and the apologetic man invites them over to his bakery. There he tells the parents his own sad story of loneliness and despair and feeds them fresh coffee and warm rolls, because "eating is a small, good thing in a time like this".

Carver leaves the basic plot and characters mostly unchanged in his revision. The very dissimilar emotional states in which the author must have been when he wrote the two versions (only separated by two years) might have been important in the two different approaches.

*The Bath* is a much harder piece of literature, which leaves everything open, without any payoff, any comforting ending, much more in tune, I would say, with the theme and scope of the story. There is no possible comfort after the death of a son. The final closure of the second version, in which a certain state of peace is recuperated, does a strange job in filling the void that the main event has caused. In such a case, eating doesn't help at all.

In 1993 Robert Altman directed a film based on Carver stories called *Short Cuts*. Several stories are combined in such a way that some overlapping parts of the stories create a single fabric of narratives that occur simultaneously.

For this film Altman was going to use, of course, the most reassuring and emotional version,

the one that finishes with the visit to the baker, the one that finishes.

Both when reading the story and when watching the film, there is a moment when I am always moved, surprisingly, against my will.

<img 31>

When the parents of the boy (Scotty in the film) realise that the baker has been the anonymous caller and they go to the bakery to confront him, the tension mounts to its highest point. The baker then understands how unfair he has been, even if unknowingly; he expresses his sorrow and a lot of energy is released. Justice has been achieved: everything returns to a certain *neutral* state. It is this feeling of restitution that moves me, I guess because it touches a part of me I am not aware of.

It is interesting to see how calm the parents are, somehow forgetting the loss of their son by virtue of the fact that justice has been achieved concerning the baker's calls. This is in contrast to how the baker forgets about his loss regarding the cake in front of the much bigger loss of the others. There is a strange of the volume versus the intensity of the loss. This is, of course, a *decoy* restitution, because for the characters in the film, especially the parents, no real restitution but only a symbolic one has been made.

Apart from that, the interest of the story for me is, as one might expect, the encounter between cake and death. The cake, as a most banal and mundane thing, is contrasted with something on a completely different level.

Everyone who has lost a loved one knows how painful those small details are which remain hanging (the article you clipped for her and she couldn't read, the new underground passage he would have liked to see finished), much more so than the big realisations the deceased person can now never achieve. We assume that dying is a big thing, and with death all big things are gone, but the small details catch us by surprise. The effect that leaving the

winery had on me and the sudden realisation of the possibility of not being able to enjoy the wine if I die belongs to the same category.<sup>8</sup>

The birthday party integrates the two other integrating devices. As everybody knows, the best situation in which to sing *Happy Birthday to You*, while blowing out candles on a cake, is at a purpose-planned event, at a birthday party.

<img 32>

It seems that the first person recorded as celebrating his own birthday and making history out of it was Epicurus (Samos, 341 BC – Athens, 270 BC).

According to Diskin Clay, professor of classical studies at the university of Washington, Epicurus himself established a custom of celebrating his birthday annually with common meals, befitting his stature as hero ctistes (or founding hero) of the Garden. He ordained in his will annual memorial feasts for himself on the same date (10th of Gamelion month). Epicurean communities continued this tradition.

Gamelion is a month of the Attic calendar<sup>9</sup> and it would be nice to know what the 10<sup>th</sup> of Gamelion corresponds to in our Gregorian calendar. I have found this revealing information at [atheistnexus.org](http://atheistnexus.org):

The month of Gamelion is the month of marriage (gamos), situated in the latter part of January and the early part of February. It doesn't fit exactly into our calendar because the Attic calendar in use in ancient Athens was lunar, not solar.

Modern Epicureans have two options to establish a day for celebrating Epicureanism: one would be to stick to the 10th day of Gamelion and count ten days from the January new moon, which is a bit archaic in my view and opinion.

And here comes the most interesting detail:

The more practical option is to choose either January 10<sup>th</sup> or some day in mid-January as a day for outreach and education on the legacy of Epicurus.

Yes, many epicureans celebrate Epicurus' birthday on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January, the day of the year I was born. It is a great honour to celebrate a self-referential party in synch with Epicurean traditions, given that they are a celebration of the birth of birthday parties.

At [www.historyorb.com](http://www.historyorb.com) a list can be found of the birthdays of well-known people. There are a good bunch for the 10<sup>th</sup> of January. The ones I can relate to are:

341 BC – Epicurus  
 1883 – Aleksey Tolstoy, Russian poet/writer  
 (Pjotr Peroyj)  
 1898 – Sergei M. Eisenstein, Russian film  
 director (Alexandr Nevski)

Meeting people born the same day as you always seems like an enormous coincidence, but apparently coincidences in birthdays are kind of an exact science, as the so-called *birthday paradox* shows:

In probability theory, the birthday problem or birthday paradox concerns the probability that, in a set of  $n$  randomly chosen people, some pair of them will have the same birthday. The probability reaches 100% when the number of people reaches 367 (since there are 366 possible birthdays, including February 29). However, 99% probability is reached with just 57 people, and 50% probability with 23 people. These conclusions include the assumption that each day of the year (except February 29) is equally probable for a birthday.

A couple of actors and a violin player were born the same day as me, the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 1961, people who will be celebrating turning sixty-five the same day I will be working out *If Alive*, if alive. Before the project started I only knew that Dashiell Hammett died the day I was born.

<img 33>

Richard Knight, in the BBC news of 29<sup>th</sup> of June 2012, reports that a study by Swiss researchers has generated a startling statistic – you are 14% more likely to die on your birthday than on any other day

of the year. Data regarding of two and a half million deaths were compared and revealed this fact.

Perhaps some people close to death “hang on” until their birthday, to reach another milestone? Or perhaps a significant number of people take greater risks on their birthdays, like driving home from their own parties drunk?

Scientists are still trying to understand the reason behind this.

<sup>7</sup> “Every hour wounds. The last one kills.” Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*.

<sup>8</sup> In a short text called *A Hanging*, George Orwell gives an account of a public execution in Burma he witnessed. He recalls how it was precisely the moment in which the condemned man, on his way to the gallows, jumped aside to avoid a puddle in his path that “he realised what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man”.

<sup>9</sup> The Attic calendar is the calendar that was in use in ancient Attica, the ancestral territory of the Athenian polis.

The collision between the terrible and the banal, which is a main concern of *If Alive*, plays an important role in this joke I heard when I was around fourteen years old, shortly before Franco's death:

Two civil guards in Burgos, Spain, are crossing the courtyard of a prison very early on a cold morning. Walking between them is a prisoner who will be shortly executed against the prison wall. The doomed man says: "It is quite chilly!". One of the guards replies: "It's worse for us: we have to walk back".<sup>10</sup>

<img 34>

The convicted man who inspired the joke must have been Ángel Otaegui, a member of the armed gang ETA who was killed on the 27<sup>th</sup> of September 1975 at the prison of Burgos. The militants of FRAP, a left wing group, José Humberto Baena, José Luis Sánchez Bravo and Ramón García Sanz were also killed that day with another ETA member, Juan Paredes Manot (*Txiki*), in Madrid and Barcelona.

<img 35>

Those were the last executions of Franco's regime, and they raised many protests in democratic countries around the world. I still remember as a kid watching Spanish national TV deprecating Olof Palme, the Swedish prime minister, for the gesture of distributing pamphlets against Franco in the street on the occasion of the execution.

The joke about the execution has its echo in an article written by Sigmund Freud in 1927 under the name of “On Humour”:

When, to take the crudest example, a criminal who was being led out to the gallows on a Monday remarked: “Well, the week’s beginning nicely”, he was producing the humour himself; the humorous process is completed in his own person and obviously affords him a certain sense of satisfaction. I, the non-participating listener, am affected as it were at long-range by this humorous production of the criminals; I feel, like him, perhaps, the yield of humorous pleasure.

The sense of humour here is very different from the previous joke, which is based on the straightforward practicality of the civil guard. The role of humour in this case seems to be that of liberating the tension and pain the criminal experiences as he acknowledges the fact that he is going to die. He then makes clear to everybody that he does not care, that they have no power over him, because he doesn’t pay the slightest attention to the fact that he is going to die. Once he assumes he is going to die, the best option seems to be to take advantage of the moment.

<img 36>

This is also remarked on by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* when he writes about the freedom of the person condemned to death in front of a public.

it was also to hear an individual who had nothing more to lose curse the judges, the laws, the government and religion. The public execution allowed the luxury of these momentary saturnalia, when nothing remained to prohibit or to punish. Under the protection of imminent death, the criminal could say everything and the crowd cheered.<sup>11</sup>

Once everything is lost, there are no limits, and one can even make fun of one’s destiny.

I am no longer into humour as much as I was a few years ago. Or, better to say, I only like humour which tears bodies and souls apart. As one

learns better one's place in the world, less and less things manage to tear one's soul apart, less ideas are painful, so one finds less funny stories. Humour that doesn't have this tearing effect is normally used only to water down disturbing or caustic ideas.

It is said that Marshall McLuhan took jokes quite seriously because of the insights they provide:

I am indebted to funnyman Steve Allen for the observation that all jokes are based on grievances. I ran that backward and got, where there are grievances there are jokes.

Jokes and joking were part and parcel of his persona and his research methodology. McLuhan told this joke in a speech at Johns Hopkins University:

The big Lufthansa jet was going down in the Mediterranean, a mile off shore. The captain comes on the communication system to speak to the frightened crew and passengers: "For those of you who can swim," he says, "I say swim towards the setting sun for twenty minutes and you will reach safety. For those of you who cannot swim, I say, Thank you for flying Lufthansa".

But as I said, I tend to think, as this last joke might show, that, instead of grievance, where there is a joke there is grief and pain. There is no other humour but black humour. All jokes refer ultimately to the absurdity of this existence when it is confronted with death and dying. In some cases the connection might not be evident and becomes less so the milder the joke is, but, every time laughter appears, it comes as a knee-jerk reaction to the breaking of a taboo, and the biggest recurring taboo is death. In the case, for instance, of a funny play of words, it is the breaking of the integrating capabilities of language that brings back the void that death throws us into. A joke, pretty much like an art experience, is a combination of ideas that has the power to destroy all the

securities we have acquired within the domain of language and whose collapse makes one see for one moment the absurdity of life. The disquietude this produces is often responded to nervously by laughing.

Therefore one can say that people laugh at jokes when they have *not* understood them. I don't mean in order to *pretend* that they have understood, but rather that they have not understood them to the point of finding them evident, harmless and trivial.

This is something that can also be seen in a joke told in the anonymous diary *A Woman in Berlin*, set in Berlin during the last month of the European chapter of World War II. During the winter of 1944, as both Christmas and the front were approaching, people said regarding Christmas presents:

Give him something useful, give him a coffin.

This is a joke that only can seem funny to those people terrified about the arrival of the Russian army, a kind of acknowledgement of their awareness of an approaching possible end, their own *if dead* disclaimer.

It might be that I am not *yet* liberated of the pain death implies, because I still find the joke of the execution funny (as a synonym for *distressing*, as I have explained). I heard it when I was a kid and it has stayed in my mind all these years due to its disturbing power, and due to the feeling of unsettling incompleteness (contrary to Carver's story of final relief). It must have some instruction hidden in its structure that may well have ultimately pushed me to make my own joke about the clash between death and the banal. That might be yet one more reason for *If Alive*.<sup>12</sup>

The title of the event of the fifteenth pre-anniversary, *Manuel muerto vendo Vespa barata (Manuel Dead – Cheap Scooter for Sale)*, is also from a

joke, a different one. This one is based on a grievance (thus supporting McLuhan's theory), as much as on grief.

In the map of the Spanish state each nation is assigned its own idiosyncratic, popular myth, and for Catalans the primary feature in this regard is that they are very careful about how they spend their money. So there is a Catalan gentleman whose wife, Montserrat, has just passed away. *Montserrat* is a classical Catalan female name which is nicknamed to *Montse*. This gentleman wants to inform acquaintances of the sad news and so calls the local newspaper to place an ad in words. He says he would like to publish an ad saying: "Montse muerta" ('Montse dead'). The newspaper employee advises him to put three words more, as five is the minimum they charge for, and it is a pity to waste the chance of using those three words. He comes up then with "Montse muerta vendo Vespa barata" ('Montse dead - cheap scooter for sale'), using the maximum efficiency of the space.

In the context of the heavy loss implied by one's wife passing away, that waste seems extremely banal, to miss the opportunity of using those three words. From it derives the absurdity of the degree of financial concern the main character of the story shows.

Some people, perhaps trying to make sense of this absurdity, read the title of the event as if there was a connection between the two different parts of the phrase: *Manuel has passed away*, therefore *his scooter is available and we want it to sell it*.

*Manuel muerto vendo Vespa barata*, the artist talk, happened in Figueres, which is in Girona, one of the Catalan provinces, and much of the public was Catalan, which gives a special flavour to the telling.

Both in *Montse muerta* or in *Manuel muerto*, there is an interesting sound to the alliteration in Spanish, a beating rhythm. The political incorrectness of the joke in respect to prejudices of greed would have perhaps been still worse if another name

was used, also with alliteration: *Moisés muerto* ('Moses dead').

The title on the invitation card to the event is in the style of a line from a telegram. This makes it urgent news, something that has just happened, and that the person receiving it is especially concerned about. In the case of *If Alive* it might mean that, due to the fact that Manuel has passed away, his sixty-fifth year party has been cancelled: *sorry; no food, no wine, no music*. The scooter part goes completely unexplained, just serving as a *vehicle* connoting the absurd contrast.

A straight version, non-connoted, would have read something like *Manuel Dead – Sad Due to the Loss*, or *Manuel Dead – Immediately Inform Family*. A more twisted version, but still with a clear explanation, would be *Manuel Dead – Big Celebration Party Tomorrow*.

In 2011, at the time of *Manuel muerto*, these last versions of the telegram would have been *pre-mature obituaries*,<sup>13</sup> which is again a sudden clash of the public and the private, in the same vein as Murakami's birthday experience. One's death is private until one passes away. Then it can be published in the newspaper. A newspaper publishing one's death before it happens is seen as a clear lack of rigour, and it should be publicly corrected, but for the person *obituary-ed* one can imagine it must feel like quite a breach of privacy.

Many people have been declared dead that weren't. There is even a case recorded in which the very obituary was the cause of the death, as a reversion of the cause and effect relationship common in these cases. A new example of this *performative character of language* would have occurred if the fact of having issued this telegram had ended my life. I don't know how this might have happened, and the possible explanations I have come up with are too far-fetched.

Wikipedia lists several reasons for premature obituaries, such as an accidental publication, a

strategy for fraud, a result of a soldier missing in action, a misidentification of a body, a hoax, a name confusion, a fake suicide, etc. The article, however, doesn't consider the reason for the telegram I talked about earlier: a premature obituary as an artwork. I am aware of having seen an artist writing his or her own obituary beforehand, so perhaps this is already a category worthy of consideration by Wikipedia, given that *If Alive* is not an exceptional case.

Returning to the telegram, there is another straight version to take into account, and which conflicts with the urgent character implied by the fact of being a telegram. It would be a message like *Manuel alive*, which sounds (for the moment) banal. *Manuel alive* is a telegram one can only imagine receiving if there were a plane crash in which some Manuel was involved, and he has survived, or a surgical operation some Manuel has successfully passed through (it would be similar to publishing an ad along the lines of "The scooter is not for sale").

However, sending a telegram of this kind should not be considered so absurd, because the fact that, each day, each of us is alive one more day is, of course, something astonishing and worthy of celebrating. The celebration of birthdays has a hint of this amazement, and perhaps the only difference is that it is of a higher frequency, as justified or as random as celebrating the passing of the years. One could celebrate each new day at one's *birthhour*. At your birthhour your friends would phone you to sing *Happy Birthhour to You*, a necessarily shorter song than *Happy Birthday to You*, and you would eat just a cupcake (given the numbers needed, the use candles would be exempted).

<img 38>

The Japanese New York-based artist On Kawara might have been thinking something similar, given that he has been sending telegrams stating his permanence among the living for many years. The MoMA website says this about his telegrams:

In 1970, Japanese artist On Kawara sent a series of telegrams to his Dutch gallerist that proclaimed, “I am still alive”. The simplicity of the message, coupled with the austerity of the medium, creates the ambivalent impression of a profound truth expressed in almost immaterial form.

There is also this text at the DIA Art Foundation website:

Once a medium of urgent news, the telegram has become almost obsolete as a means of communication. Normally it announces timely or memorable events, such as unexpected deaths, but Kawara’s messages invert these customary practices: given that everyone is assumed to be alive until the contrary is announced, Kawara’s reassurance that he is still living seems gratuitous – absurd. Moreover, even though it was true at the moment it was sent, it may not be so by the time it is received. Imbued in equal measure with humor and pathos, these terse missives nonetheless offer testimony to a fundamental state: consciousness, a precondition to all other forms of being.

<img 39>

French artist Matthieu Laurette has carried out a more contemporary version of this series in which the sentence “I am still alive” is sent by SMS, a mobile phone text message. The main advantage, if we take in consideration the DIA Art Foundation website’s concerns, is the shortening of the span of time between when the message is sent and received, given that, the longer the span is, the greater the uncertainty of the veracity of the message. When a text message is received from Laurette it is usually safe to say he was alive some (mili)seconds ago.

I might also start sending messages of this kind, given that people who have been invited to the party might be interested in knowing if I am, or not, still alive. My text message might read something like “Party still on”, which, for people in the know, equals “I am still alive”.

<sup>10</sup> It was just very recently, after the first draft of this book was finished, that I came across the original of this joke in a short text by Heinrich von Kleist of 1810.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Spectacle of the Scaffold: Discipline and Punish*, 1977.

<sup>12</sup> The meeting of death and the banal is found in many other jokes, but being this one from Freud's *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* and, in my understanding (or lack of it), funny, I cannot but include it as an example. It tells that a cat-owner on holiday is phoned by his neighbour back home with the sad news that his cat has fallen to its death from the roof of the house. The cat-owner reprimands the neighbour for breaking the news so abruptly. "What else could I have done?", demands the neighbour. "Well", says the cat-owner, "you could have led up to it gradually. One day you could have phoned to say you had seen the cat poking around on the roof among the chimneys. Then you could say it was straying near the edge, and so on". A week passed. Then the neighbour phoned again. "Hi, it's me. I'm phoning to say I've seen your mother poking around on the roof among the chimneys".

<sup>13</sup> A premature obituary is an obituary published whose subject is not actually deceased at the time of publication.

There is no possibility to countdown to birth or death because the dates for these are always approximate. A countdown to such moments can only be established retroactively (as in biographies, for instance, when it is stated that “such and such a person already said fifteen years before his death that...”). The fact of having a faraway event in the future helps me to mentally organize big parts of my life, and the idea of having a countdown overrides very much the emotion of having a *countup*, i.e., the adding of one year with each birthday. This makes *If Alive* a reality that is happening in the future, from the vantage of which one can examine the present. One might say that by way of this project I am *throwing* a party into the future.

I have organized chunks of my life around *If Alive*, chronologically defining each event in relation to its distance in time from my sixty-fifth birthday party. This is similar to how, during nine months, I organized space in relation to the Roman Coliseum, in a project I carried out while I was a resident at the Spanish Academy in Rome in 2009.

The project consisted of experiencing the situations resulting from the decision I had made before arriving in Rome of not seeing the Coliseum during my stay in the city. The Coliseum is a very

prominent building, physically, urbanistically, and psychologically. Avoiding the building resulted in a lot of productive inconveniences, in thorough research about the city, the history of the monument, the Roman Empire, as well as generating a peculiar interaction with my colleagues at the academy and with Romans and tourists. However, the most interesting thing that happened to me after I started (proactively) not-seeing the Coliseum was the fact that the whole world was organized spatially in my mind in relationship to my distance and orientation in respect to the building.

This condition became clear when I started drawing a map of Rome noting the streets that were safe to walk without the danger of bumping into the Coliseum. Many times during those days, the volume of the building was very present in my mind beyond some group of houses in front of me which blocked my view, or around a corner I couldn't turn without seeing it. But also when I left Rome I still had a constant unconscious sense of the direction in which the building lay. Pursuing the aims of the project became an obsession from which I was unable to free myself even when I happened to visit Paris for a few days during the months of my residency in Rome. While in Paris I could indicate at any moment the direction toward Rome. I also felt a surprising sense of excited alarm every time I entered and went up a building, as if the Coliseum could be seen from the tallest Paris buildings.

<img 41>

I visited the building blindfolded several times, on one occasion for the Danish artist Fie Tanderup to take my picture for a series of portraits she was doing of people with strong bonds to particular places.

There is already a tradition of people portraying themselves in front of the Coliseum, as you might guess, given that it's one of the world's monuments most visited by trigger-happy tourists/photographers.

I am sure that many of the millions of people who have been portrayed beside the Coliseum over the course of history were artists (how many have done so without seeing the building first?). There is at least one artist who portrayed himself in front of the building who is relevant to *If Alive*.

<img 42>

In this painting from 1553, *Self-portrait, with the Coliseum behind*, by Maarten van Heemskerck (1498–1574), the artist portrayed himself twice, once in the front of the picture as a mature artist, and once in the background, as a young man who went to the Coliseum to paint it.

This explanation of the painting is found at the website of the New York newspaper *The Sun*:

It's a self-portrait in front of a painting of a bearded, cloaked man drawing the Colosseum. That man is van Heemskerck himself, and I was told by curator Peter van der Coelen that the drawing on his board has been positively identified as one in the Berlin portfolio. A trompe l'oeil piece of paper bearing the artist's signature has been tacked to the grass, letting us know that van Heemskerck is in front of a painting, not a landscape. Dr. Van der Coelen suggests that this may be the first time that someone has commemorated a tour by recording their portrait in front of a famous destination. Given all the tourists that have ever had their picture snapped in front of a landmark, this painting arguably contains the most influential pictorial innovation of all time, measured quantitatively.

The painting portrays two moments in the life of the artist, as we have previously seen in the work of David Bailly. It also portrays the Coliseum, a remarkable feature of which is that it has been around *almost* forever. With this painting in mind we can see that the Coliseum has the capacity of organizing not only space, but also time. Indeed, since having carried out this project, I instinctively refer to the Coliseum in my mind each time I hear of any historical event. Given that the building has been there since the year 80, whenever I am thinking of the Thirty Year's War (as above), or

Moctezuma's troubles with his Spanish guests, or the invasion of Iraq, or the breaking of Japanese isolation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I cannot avoid asking myself what the Coliseum was like at that time. Everything that happened before the construction of the building could be marked as *BC* (before Coliseum). As my project on the Coliseum proceeded, time and space came together in a very especial manner when I finally saw it, a couple of days before leaving Rome.

I had already had a striking experience of the meeting of time and space a couple of years earlier one morning in summer around noon, when I was taking a walk near my home in London and I arrived at this Highbury and Islington roundabout.

<img 43>

Although I had passed this spot many times, recent garden renovations led me to see this sign, which had always been on the wall but hadn't attracted my attention before.

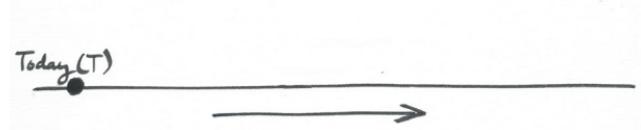
The coincidence of the time of day perhaps contributed to allowing me to see in a very clear and immediate way the situation after the bomb hit the spot. Actually I was in the place *after the bomb hit the spot*, and the sixty-two years that had passed were dramatically compressed in my experiencing of the moment. The reading of the sign at this place at that particular time made me understand the situation in London during the war in a more emotionally direct way than on any other previous occasion

The amount of time remaining in the life of any human being, the vast space of time ahead of me (vast not because of its size but because of the lack of certainty regarding its final date), can be tamed by fixing a date in the future. If before having started *If Alive* I was bound to die at any moment from here to eternity, the possibilities are now trickily reduced to two: I might die either before the party or after it, before the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2026 or after the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2026. Admittedly, every birthday can serve this purpose, and every sixty-fifth birthday could be used to divide most people's life, in this

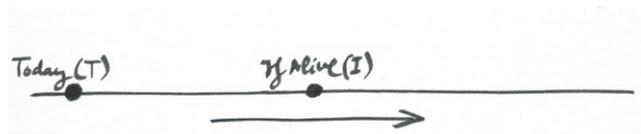
privileged area of the world, into two parts, before and after retirement. What makes these two parts become relevant in *If Alive* is the insistence on creating expectations, of asking repeatedly if I will or won't reach that reference point.

But saying that *If Alive* sets a *before* and an *after* is clearly insufficient. It sets at least *two before*s and *two after*s.

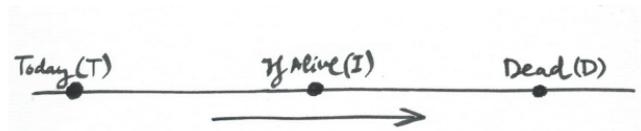
Let's view this on a graph.



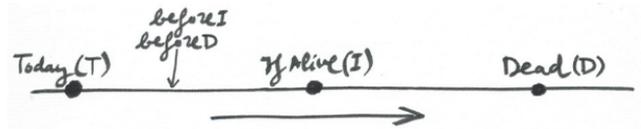
This is a time line in which an arrow shows the direction in which the events occur. *Today* is at the left and the time runs toward the right, as in the good old Western tradition.



In this graph we can put a point to the right of today which will be the point in time in which *If Alive* will take place.

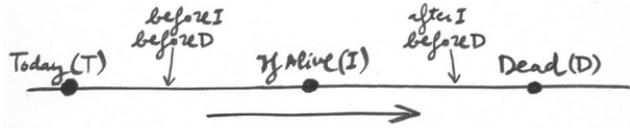


Hopefully the point where death should be placed will be to the right of *If Alive*, so then I will be able to hold the party and offer my friends the best.

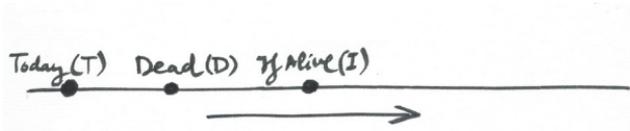


As this graph shows, and it is commonly said (originally by Dederich's drug rehab group Synanon), today is the first day of the rest of our lives.

Here, to the right of today's point we have then a space that could be called *before I (If Alive) – before M (Death)*.

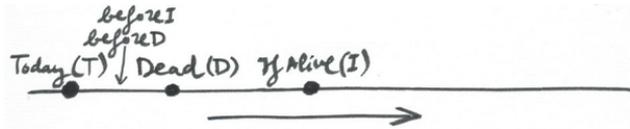


Next to this one, further to the right after *If Alive*, there is a section which could be called *after I – before M*.

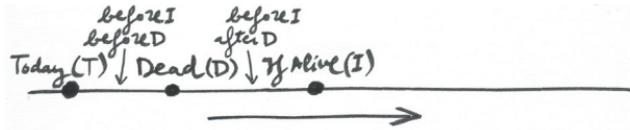


The space on the far right would be the future: *after I – after M*.

Now, the second possibility is for death to occur between *today* and *If Alive*.

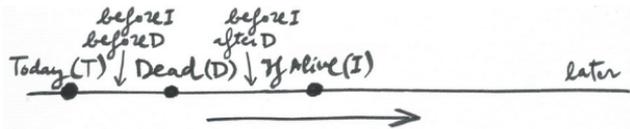


In such a case, *today* would still be the first day of the rest of our lives, and the next space to the right would still be *before I – before M*.



But the little space next to it on the right has become *after M – before I*.

The space on the right end is still *after*, or *the future*.



The main reason for creating this graph is to confuse in my mind the notions of success and failure. By studying and interpreting this graph I can come to the belief that, if I manage to be alive

*after I – before M* (after the party), I will have achieved something. This is the same kind of achievement that in Carver's story the parents of Scotty have when they get the baker to confess he made the phone calls, or at least the relief the readers might feel in this scene. It is also a win-win situation, because if I live *after I – before M* I will have achieved such a thing (being alive after the party), and if I die *before – before* (right now, for instance) I wouldn't be able to see that I haven't achieved anything, so the result is somehow the same.

This is the epicurean way of thinking about death, in which death is nothing:

Death does not concern us, because, as long as we exist, death is not here. And when it does come we no longer exist.

<img 44>

That's the same approach one perceives in Marcel Duchamp's tombstone epitaph.

Most humans fear death, and most of their actions are marked by this very fact. By virtue of this epicurean way of putting it, however, they shouldn't have any reason to fear it. Even so, it would still be legit to fear the fact that one is going to be afraid, besides fearing the pain that often comes with death (physically and psychically, for you and the people around you).

<img 45>

Epicurus also has a view on this, in the words of Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy*:

It was through the problem of avoiding fear that Epicurus was led into theoretical philosophy. He held that two of the greatest sources of fear were religion and the dread of death, which were connected, since religion encouraged the view that the dead are unhappy. He therefore sought a metaphysic which would prove that the gods do not interfere in human affairs, and that the soul perishes with the body. Most modern people think of religion as a consolation, but to Epicurus it was the opposite. Supernatural interference with the course of nature seemed to him a source of terror, and immortality fatal to the hope

of release from pain. Accordingly he constructed an elaborate doctrine designed to cure men of the beliefs that inspire fear.

Of course, churches of all religious stripes worldwide over the course of history have been very aware of the benefits of managing fear, and of the possibilities that this effect of diverting attention from *naked death* to *integrated death* offers. For instance, if there is no heaven, no eternal life, no right side of God, then one is not in a good situation to complain after death, to claim back the effort invested in order to get there. It seems that the benefits of religion should be considered taking into account only what they are while we are alive, if they make life easier, if they calm people or they help provide advantages to princes in order to govern their realms (as Machiavelli claimed). It is not about living eternally, or about acting in a certain way in order to have a comfortable eternal life, but about how to survive more or less decently, without questioning the veracity of this logic of cause-effect; actually, without questioning the idea of *logic* at all. The same thing can be stated about science and all of its by-products, although I don't feel overly confident about arguing this point right now.

<img 46>

In *Essenza del nichilismo* Emanuele Severino uses a good metaphor to talk about the tendency of civilization to divert thinking from the main problem.

On a sinking ship there may well be concern over sharing supplies evenly, resolving problems among the crew members and for life on board to be bearable for everyone. But the main concern is to find the leak.

For Severino, the leak in our boat of techno-scientific civilization is time, the condition of things *being in time* and thus susceptible of passing from *being* to *nothing*. This is the actual problem that has to be tackled, but humans busy themselves

with other, more logistical problems, which are more manageable and which they can solve. Somehow.

As an artist, one is always urged to look for the leak, even at the cost of one's life.<sup>14</sup> The artist might believe sometimes he has found the leak, and often also that he has fixed it. But this is only to discover that this ship he just saved from sinking is floating on the puddle of the leak of a bigger boat which is sinking on its own. So the artist is also busy working out some kinds of logistical problems. The only difference is that the focus of all his activity as an artist is to attempt to truly find the ultimate, real leak.

Because we are immersed in time and we look for the solution to the problem of time from within time itself, we are only able to reach new fractal levels of error, and no certainty of any kind. I guess the very fact of *looking for certainty* might hold the key to the problem.

<sup>14</sup>“The artist is someone who, in the desire to see death, even at the price of his own death, lends it the upper hand over the desire to produce” (Jean-François Lyotard, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*).

By a very accidental series of circumstances, in 1995 I was invited by the US government to visit the country within the International Visitor program. The visit would give me the opportunity to meet people and institutions in the USA – as many as I could during the month-long programme – that were of interest to me at that time. The main topic I was concerned with then was the concept of *interface*, the relationship between what we see and interact with, and what it is hidden behind. The US was at the time the right place to visit all kinds of virtual reality spaces and to meet artificial intelligence experts. I had a very geeky trip, full of computing, blurred reality and a corporate sense of estrangement that required travelling several times from coast to coast.

The end of the tour brought me to Niagara, where I was artist in residence at a local contemporary art museum for an extra month. In one of Buffalo's cemeteries I took this virtual-reality like, virtual-reality themed, 360-degree picture.

The image of the guy is repeated several times across the picture, as if representing different moments in time that here become simultaneous. At first sight one assumes that he is living a fascinating virtual-reality experience, while *in reality* he is surrounded by death, he is living among

<img 47>



In the search for beauty, for truth or for reality, we manage to peel off certain layers, but we always have to stop at a *reasonable* distance from the core.

Indeed humans have to be optimistic to a certain degree in order to go on with their daily errands. Even when we want to be clear about reality, to have our logical mind always sharp and a balanced and stable impartial view of the world, we need a bit of over-optimism, to overlook certain facts of our environment and to favour always in our imagination the most amiable possible outcomes of our projects, to keep a reasonable distance from the naked truth. The fact of not overlooking some of this evidence of doom doesn't lead towards hyperawareness, but just to blunt depression.

As it was written on the cover of the catalogue of the 2003 show, only if we assume that we are going to live a little longer can we bear daily life. You can tell that to Gorito, the absent character from the Xaudaró cartoon.

All social, political and economic systems are based on the idea that things will be more or less the same in the near future. Especially at the personal level, one carries out most of one's daily activities regardless of the possibility of an imminent death, because otherwise the structure that maintains these activities would collapse.

Statistics are some of the tools society uses to reinforce this idea of normality, to mislead expectations according to contemporary needs, a task that seems religion cannot fulfil anymore. Statistics support the fictional impression that, even in the most extreme circumstances, things are conforming to a plan, or, in the case of failure, such a possibility was also contemplated when the master plan was drawn up.

*The Onion* has this revealing fictional comment about the matter:

WASHINGTON – Following last week's deadly crash of United Airlines flight 9753, which claimed the lives of 137 passengers and five crew members,

the National Transportation Safety Board announced Wednesday that the victims were actually far likelier to have perished in an automobile accident. “Although these individuals died tragically, it’s important to remember that their flight was 80 times less likely to kill them than if they had driven to their destination,” said NTSB chairperson Deborah Hersman, adding that their horrific deaths were “almost a statistical impossibility” when compared to highway travel. Hersman concluded by reaching out to the victims’ families, stating that she sincerely wished they would have been able to see 24 of their loved ones eventually die of violent heart attacks, 20 waste away from cancer, and one or two commit suicide, as would be expected of a random 142-person sample.

Statistics enjoy a lot of credibility because they share legitimation with science, and have an enormous potential in the task of confusing and capturing people’s minds. The first reason is because it is difficult to grasp what they refer to.

I got this data from a quick search on the Internet in different news pages. They say that in 2010 in Spain:

- 80 people died because their tractor flipped over on them,
- 40 000 people died of sudden death,
- 12 000 people died of sepsis,
- 400 died of work accidents,
- 53 000 died due to tobacco,
- 4000 more died due to chemicals,
- 18 000 died due to obesity,
- and 16 000 died due to pollution.

But, even so, suicide remains the first external cause of death in Spain.

Many of those deaths may certainly overlap (like somebody dying suddenly by becoming obese while eating chemicals preservatives as part of his work, for instance; and perhaps his tractor flipped over due to the weight of his body), but it is not for the reader to decide which ones. The parameters that define each item of data are vague enough as to prevent that.

The second reason statistics can trick people is that they take distance from the object of their research. They are unattached to any emotions. It

is the same kind of distant relationship that institutions, such as the Museu de l'Empordà, where the party is due to take place, have in relation to the death of individuals interacting with them. That's why a letter granting the use of the museum's facilities in 2026 can be issued. We might die, but the museum will be there. And if the museum it isn't there, because of an atomic holocaust, because of further budget reductions, because of the final triumph of culture over art, it doesn't matter because the museum doesn't care; it isn't concerned with its own disappearance, it doesn't have any emotional tie to existence.

Statistics work well in creating and maintaining distance. Let's take, as an example, the amount of deaths in each generation. There is always space to believe your chances are good:

— In the first years of life, up to the age of five, the mortality rate is quite high. If a child reaches six, he has already accomplished something. And, anyway, before five he doesn't really care that much about it.

— Then, from five to forty the percentage of people who die is small. One can seek refuge in the percentages here.

— Little by little the percentage increases. Every day one is closer to success, to celebrating the party, but the mortality rate keeps rising. This is the most difficult part to endure.

— And then, at a certain point, maybe after seventy, less and less individuals from that generation die. What good news. Don't look at percentages anymore. Now just look at the absolute number of people from your generation who pass away each year.

— It could happen that, when for instance you reach one hundred, a few years go by in which none of your generational pals die. As if people of your generation have become immortal. Of course, when the last person from the generation dies, the percentage of deaths in the generation is 100%.

If one looks at the statistics one might say of the last survivor of each generation that, when the death rate of his generation is about to be abolished, about to fully reach zero-mortality, then, at the very last moment, he dies.

Statistics, institutions and death are subjects that draw one's attention to the realm of the insurance business.

Further speculation on this idea of the progressive reduction of living individuals from each generation was made by Lorenzo De Tonti, a banker from Naples who invented in 1653 one of the first systems of insurance. He called it *tontine*.

A tontine is an investment plan for raising capital, devised in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and relatively widespread in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>. It combines features of a group annuity and a lottery. Each subscriber pays an agreed sum into the fund, and thereafter receives an annuity. As members die, their shares devolve to the other participants, and so the value of each annuity increases. On the death of the last member, the scheme is wound up. In a variant, which has provided the plot device for most fictional versions, on the death of the penultimate member the capital passes to the last survivor.

The Wikipedia article from which I copied this paragraph also says that, after being rejected by the French government as an official insurance system, the first true tontine was therefore organised in the city of Kampen, in the Netherlands, in 1670. This fits well with the picture of the Dutch Golden Age I've given earlier.

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The tontine system forms the basis for the plot of an episode of *The Wild Wild West*, a popular American TV series from the second half of the 1960s. The general idea is that, in the wild American west, the fact of setting a tontine invites people to take part in the scheme to kill other members in order to inherit the money right away.

At the time of the *Manuel muerto* talk in 2011 I proposed to the public the hypothesis of creating a tontine. If we were, let's say, seventy people attending,

we could have put up 5000 euros each and have a pot of 350 000 euros. When deposited in a bank it would already start giving some yearly returns for the participants. The money could be shared by those who survive to the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2026.

This would bind us together until that day. But in a way *If Alive* can already be seen as a partial tontine, especially if we consider that, the more guests who die from now until the day of the event, the more generous the ration of wine, for example, will be for any of the survivors. As long as the artist himself survives.

There are some aspects of the relationship between death and the increase of value that concern art. When an artist dies the production of his artworks stops, and if there is still demand, the existing works become immediately pricier. Besides, his passing away might open many new commercial possibilities if the heirs are less fastidious than the artist in matters such as where to sell the works, how to break up collections, or how many prints to make of each edition.

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In the 1990 film *Catchfire*, a contract killer (Dennis Hopper) has to find and murder a contemporary artist (Jodie Foster) who has witnessed a crime. Although she has a different name in the fiction, all the details are as if the character she is playing is a portrait of Jenny Holzer. The killer breaks into her studio and follows her trail to the gallery that represents her. At that moment her work is being shown at the gallery and the killer buys one of her pieces, an electronic display with one of Holzer's sentences. One of the killer's henchmen is amazed that his boss can spend such an absurd amount of money on an electronic display, on a work of art. The other henchman, more aware of the relations between value, mortality and art economy, explains to him that the price of this work will increase enormously once that the artist has been taken care of.

There is also an episode of the 1970's TV series *Barney Miller* that deals with the particularities of the tontine. In this case the story is about two relatives, the last survivors of a tontine scheme. Instead of waiting for one of them to die, they decide to play a chess match to see who will get the money.

But for the tontine money to be released it is not enough for the loser of the chess match to renounce his part of the money, because the terms of the contract clearly specify that only one person of those who signed should be alive at that moment. So the loser of the match has to commit suicide.

The difficulties of the loser to carry out his part of the deal and the paradoxical situations that the tontine scheme produces are the basis for the comedy conditions the series requires.

Being a form of insurance between a reduced number of people, the tontine contract and all related procedures are normally held by a firm of lawyers. They have custody of the money, they invest and manage the dividends and, most importantly, they keep track of the members who remain alive. In later times, when insurance became part of the state service in many countries, covering most of the population, the task of maintaining an accurate list of existing insured people became more complicated, allowing many irregularities and creating room for swindles.

BBC reports that in summer 2013 4000 retirees in Jersey received a document titled "The Certificate of Existence" to confirm that they were still alive. The letter was to insure the government was not paying out pensions to the accounts of the deceased. There were many complaints about the lack of tact. The head of the pension fund, Ron Amy, admitted they should have been more sensitive, but also called the audit necessary. He told the BBC: "Pensions schemes really have to do these exercises because we do not always get told when somebody dies".

The person winning a tontine might think for a while that he has overcome death, but he has only overcome the death of the others (*toujours les autres*).

It is another diversion tactic. Actually the tontine is a situation in which it's easy to see time and death as synonyms. The French physicist Étienne Klein writes in his 2003 book *Les tactiques de Chronos*:

Time would be, then, nothing else but another way to name death, a term less distressing, more neutral, an ultimate trick we use to reduce the emotional power that the word *death* has over us.

Conversely, it could also be said that *death* is another term we have to name *time*, because time is often scarier than *death*, due to the fact that it is perceived every moment, while death, Epicurus *dix-it*, is always in the future or is not at all. Human beings have been as busy devising strategies to dress up time as they have been disguising death. Time seems at first less dangerous, so it catches us more easily by surprise.

<sup>15</sup> In the seventies, my father worked in Spain with a Dutch engineer who used to tell him that in his view every problem in Spain was solved with “alambros y cuerdos” (‘wires and strings’). This then would be the “alambros y cuerdos” version of the Silicon Graphics Infinite Reality, that was the cutting-edge equipment of the time.

<sup>16</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*.

The meaning of If Alive (of a tontine, of every insurance system, actually of every project) lies in the idea of anticipation. It is bringing a picture of a future moment to our present time. We have projections because we can see there is a future ahead, whatever the future. The paradigm of this operation within the realm of cultural products is science fiction, and thus If Alive can be seen in many respects as if it were science fiction.

I am, personally, very future oriented. For many years I was concerned about the state of permanent expectation in which I was living, which forced me to execute my daily operations only to achieve something in the future, and prevented any enjoyment of the present. I thought this attitude snatched life away from me, especially if compared with my schoolmates and friends, who were much more unconcerned about the future. In that sense I always felt close to Andy Warhol, who wrote in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (from A to B and Back Again)*:

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I really do live for the future, because when I'm eating a box of candy, I can't wait to taste the last piece. I don't even taste any of the other pieces, I just want to finish and throw the box away and not have to have it on my mind any more.

Now, it could be said I've gotten used to it. I believe I've learnt to enjoy the present of my anticipation, to perceive my images of the future as an interface with the here and now.

I would rather either have it now or know I'll never have it, so I don't have to think about it.

When I set my *If Alive* future milestone I was submitting myself to a situation of high expectation, as if the project was inviting me to fast forward to that day in order to see how it would be, in order to check if I have made it until then, but mostly in order to get rid of the project all together, to close the folder and not think about it anymore. Even if it appears like a matter of reaching that age in order to be able to celebrate, an expression of a desire to survive, even if it seems to be the other way round, it can be said that there is a suicide innuendo in this project.

Yes. The bigger the party offered, the older the wine and the more generously it is served, the better the food and entertainment, the darker and more threatening the aspect of the title of the project, *If Alive*, becomes. As if everything were an invitation to finish it all due to the fear of not being able to fulfil the expectations.

What the future will bring is a recurrent speculation in all fields. The ability to foresee what will happen is very much appreciated in our society, and not only in relation with the lottery and horse racing. The machinery of production is always trying to assess risks and outcomes, and a huge industry of prediction supports the entire system of contemporary initiatives. Statistics, of course, are used to calculate what is going to happen. And, the more data we collect from the past and the better our algorithms become, the stronger the *déjà vu* feeling we have of things happening before our eyes, in our present. The future is no longer a vast empty space for speculation, because whatever will happen is likely to have been

already told in one of the accounts we have of the future, in fiction, in project planning, or in scientific simulations.

The problem of our time is that the future is no longer what it used to be. (Paul Valéry)

Over the course of all these years I have been systematically exploring, through many sleepless nights, the possible outcomes of the project, and I try to picture myself there, not only in the three *If Alive expectations* presented by the photographs, but also by examining in detail any eventuality that might happen. In the cases of speculation about the future in which very good project management is put into practice, one can see clearly what the needs of that future day will be. The question is “what am I going to need that day?”. And to answer it one has to make an effort to see oneself attending to the guests, providing enough hotel rooms at a good price, transportation for prospective drunk drivers, etc. As computer scientist Alan Kay said,

the best way to predict the future is to invent it.

The idea of time capsules presents an interesting side concern to thinking of how the future and its people will be. A time capsule implies the fact of imagining how people of the future will think about us. It’s a special way of being worried about the future and about the present at the same time: the vanity that involves being anxious about giving a bad image to the people in the future of who we are is very much a current matter.

A very good example of the problems faced in creating an accurate portrait of the present for those seeing us from the future, of the way this civilization wants to be considered from the future, is found at the Crypt of Civilization.

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area. The crypt was closed in 1931 and it consists of preserved artefacts scheduled to be opened in the year AD 8113.

It has around a hundred items of materials in daily use at the time that the capsule was sealed. A sample of everything, to recreate 1930 whenever it's needed and to see how *everything started*.

Am I going to remember how we were, how I was, when *If Alive* started? What were my expectations and desires when I thought about this project for the first time? This text is also a kind of time capsule of the project. Within this book, the pictures of *If Alive expectations* play the same role that a film or a scientific study about the year 8113 would represent among the objects inside the Crypt: a vision of the future, to be seen by people from the future, and for them to understand what people from the past expected from them.

Some years ago I thought about a project that I haven't yet had the occasion to realise (and that I'm probably preventing myself from realising by writing about it here and in other texts). It is called *Nanotime*, and it consists of burying a time capsule, at the beginning of an art exhibition, thoroughly following the entire ritual: the presence of a public and of authorities, a carved stone at the top, and the use of all known technical means of preservation of the content, prepared to be unspoiled for a thousand years. The intention, however, would be just to unbury it two weeks later, at the end of the show, with the same pomp and circumstance, and check how things have changed since the day the capsule was buried.

The project seems to be an extrapolation ad absurdum of two contemporary trends resulting from the desire of people to experience everything that exists and will exist: on the one hand by preserving those things that are transient, on the other hand by compressing to a manageable fraction of time things that are eternal. To make the investment and have the profits at the same

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time, to be at the burial and at the unearthing, and still be able to perceive the change.

Probably after two weeks the attendees will remember pretty well how things were when the capsule was buried, and it is very unlikely that relevant differences would exist, apart from the logical deterioration corresponding to fourteen days, mainly the obsolescence of newspapers. But just imagine for one moment that the burial of the time capsule for this work was scheduled to happen on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 2001 in Battery Park in New York, and its unearthing, two weeks later. The work would have been kind of visionary, and the artist would have become world famous. The capsule would have been preserved later as a treasure.<sup>17</sup>

For superstitious people this act of burying a capsule may feel like a provocation for an event of such a nature to happen, an earthquake, a plague, a nuclear disaster. It is like calling for an accident that would prevent getting back there after two weeks, and would cause the capsule to be forgotten, only to be opened by chance a thousand years later. The ritualization of the moment of burial puts emphasis on the fragility of the certainties that things are going to happen as they were planned.

An icon of tragedy in history that strongly supports the superstition that over-confident statements attract misfortune is the sinking of the Titanic; it's also the kind of tragedy that would make a project like *Nanotime* have the kind of relevance I was talking about.

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As anyone who can access Wikipedia knows, the RMS Titanic was a British passenger liner that sank in the North Atlantic Ocean in 1912 after colliding with an iceberg during her maiden voyage from Southampton, UK, to New York City, USA. The sinking of the Titanic caused the deaths of more than 1500 people in one of the deadliest peacetime maritime disasters in modern history.

If Alive

The ship was a technical achievement for its time and lots of proud claims were made before the

accident about its safety, robustness, comfort, etc., greatly exaggerated, I suppose, in order to boost ticket sales.

The Titanic sank on 15<sup>th</sup> of April. A postcard exists that was sent from the ship the day before, which states:

Dear Friend,  
Just a line to show that I am alive & kicking and  
going grand. It's a treat.

It's signed with the almost-indecipherable initials of one William John Rogers. The day before he died he wrote this postcard to a friend from the boat with the highest expectations for the future.

The story of this postcard is reported by Carl Sagan in what is possibly the last text he wrote, in which he gives an account of how he first noticed and then observed the evolution of the illness that led to his death. The framed postcard used to be in Sagan's bathroom, where he spotted for the first time the signs of the cancer that killed him.

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Carl Sagan is, among many other things, responsible for the Pioneer 10 and Pioneer 11 space probes carrying 152 by 229 millimetres (6.0 by 9.0 inches) gold-anodized aluminium plaques in case either spacecraft is ever found by intelligent life-forms from another planetary system. The plaques feature the nude figures of a human male and female along with several symbols that are designed to provide information about the origin of the spacecraft.

They are indefinitely moving time capsules.

<sup>17</sup> Considering the time scales of this book, and this section in particular, and taking into account how vain it is even to expect this book to still exist by 2026, it might be appropriate to note here that the day after that date, the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001, a terrorist attack was executed against the World Trade Center, a landmark twin tower building in New York, which was reduced to ruins as a result.

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*Train Time Zeit Zug* is a project that consumed a big part of my 2010 and 2011 and is also about time.

It consists of a documentary and a book on a hypothetical art installation a hypothetical artist wants to create. The project follows the problems the artist would have if he wants to bring this installation to life. The two main features of this herculean enterprise are

- a) to be full of vanity,
- b) to be bound to fail.

This installation is a circular, 2400 kilometres high-speed train track to be located in the centre of Europe. A train circulating at 200 kilometres per hour around this track would act as an enormous clock.

People inside the train, in a certain way, would be travelling *in time*. This sentence, which sounds quite metaphorical and poetical, can also be taken literally now that we believe in the theory of relativity.

By the effect called *time dilation* some physical parameters, like velocity and gravity, can distort what we used to understand as the regular, universal, pace of time. Time on a moving vehicle passes

slower that at stationary locations. The difference grows as the speed of the vehicle increases.

But *Train Time*, as a time machine, would not serve any *If Alive* purpose. The train is too slow for that. However, in a train that moved at the right speed, those travelling would be much younger than those who remained at the station. Let's say that, if I spend two days in a train moving at a speed near to the speed of light, I might get off the train and find all my guests at the door of the museum, already fifteen years older, waiting to enter the party. This trip of mine would increase the possibilities of the party happening (if the danger entailed by travelling in a train moving at such speed is ignored).

In sci-fi novels these trips are done very simply by a device in which you can travel to the future and back. On some occasions one doesn't even need to move, so the time machine can stay in the same place for eternity. A machine that made it possible to travel in few minutes to the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2026 to celebrate the party and come back safely to our times would be good to relativize the *if* of the *If Alive* project.

Something of the kind is described in the 1895 H. G. Wells sci-fi novel *The Time Machine*.

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This story is generally credited with the popularisation of the concept of time travel using a vehicle that allows an operator to travel purposefully and selectively. The term time machine, coined by Wells, is now universally used to refer to such a vehicle. This work is an early example of the Dying Earth subgenre.

The classic film version of the book is from 1960.

There are other methods envisioned by science fiction writers that would be useful to make sure that I make it. One way to reach the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2026 would be the use of hibernation techniques, also called *cryonics*. This would involve being frozen to the temperature at which liquid nitrogen boils. The subject, myself or the guests, would remain in this timeless status, without deterioration, to be unfrozen

some days before the event. I say *some days before* just in case one wants to stretch one's legs or buy some appropriate clothes for the fashion of the time.

Woody Allen's film *Sleeper* deals with this subject.

*Sleeper* is a 1973 futuristic science fiction comedy film, written by Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman, and directed by Allen. The plot involves the adventures of the owner (played by Woody Allen) of a health food store who is cryogenically frozen in 1973 and defrosted two hundred years later in a country with an inept totalitarian state. The film contains many elements which parody notable works of science fiction.

Apparently, facilities already exist around the world where the first part of the process can be carried out. A person can be frozen and stored, although the means to bring someone back to life are still not operational. So these facilities can only work with dead bodies because, at this precise moment, freezing somebody who is alive would be tantamount to killing them and the doctor/perpetrator would end up in jail accused of murder. However, the people in charge of these facilities might still decide to freeze somebody who is alive in the belief that, if they are prosecuted, they might be able to appeal sentences long enough for science to find a way to bring people back to life, and thus they would be absolved.

The desire to put your life on hold implies an idea of life, of a lifetime, in which you possess a certain amount of it which has been given to you, and that you can administer as your wish. The trouble at present is that no good banks exist yet where you can keep your *saved* time for a future moment in which you might need it badly.

This idea recalls a credo of yoga masters by which humans have a certain number of breaths allotted to be used during their lives. Once a person has used all his breaths, he dies. The process of hibernating is like saving breaths for future times when they can be spent in a more enjoyable way.

To breathe slower (using fakir techniques) may be a middle way between two extremes, a hyperventilated *Koyaanisqatsi* life (a crazy life) and a frozen one (hibernating) with no respiration at all.

To a certain extent, the act of being frozen from now until the party would take away any interest in the project, just as would have been the case if I had locked myself in the studio for the whole time I was involved with the Coliseum project. If there is no uncertainty, no risk of things going wrong, no tension, there is no art experience.

Besides, if I were frozen, I wouldn't have as much time to prepare the party and to think about every detail as such patient guests deserve.

A more contemporary version of the hibernation solution, something that can be imagined now that we are immersed into a data processing life, is the idea of a *digital hibernation*. Regarding *If Alive* it doesn't represent much difference from traditional hibernation, but the concept is more contemporary and I guess could become a trending technology in the future, cheaper than hibernation and with all the benefits that digital solutions already bring to our analogic bodily existence.

Digital hibernation is based on an idea similar to that of a fax machine. A device would read the position of each of the electrons of one's body at the moment of *digital freezing*, with the purpose of rebuilding the same disposition with other electrons in a different time and place. This technique has been tested many times in science fiction novels, with excellent results, but mainly as a means for transportation, with the name of *teleportation*: the data of one's body could travel (be transmitted) faster than the actual body. Digital hibernation uses the same technology as teleportation with the purpose of changing the time of the body instead of its place.

The consumer use of digital hibernation can be marketed under the commercial name of *iBerno*.

Digital *bioscanners* and *bioprinters*, devices that respectively read and record the positions of all elec-

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trons, and that place other electrons into the same arrangement, might come with a sample file of a half-eaten, frozen apple the user can rebuild as many times as he wants. Unfortunately, such technology will arrive too late to offer in the sample the very same apple that Steve Jobs half-ate before he passed away.

Indeed, as happens in many teleportation stories, the data stored on those devices could produce as many apples as one wishes, or, for that matter, human bodies. It would just be a need of printing some new guests if some of those invited didn't make the date. I might have some more copies of myself printed to help with serving the tables or receiving guests, or even to choreograph some entertainment.

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Sci-fi 1992 film *Freejack*, presents a situation in which an early version of digital hibernation is used. The technology of that time is already able to read the data of the brain of a person and can store it for a certain period of time to be retrieved later. But the right technology to recreate a body hasn't been developed yet, so it is necessary to utilize *previously owned* bodies. The plot of the film is based on Vacendak (Mick Jagger) hunting down a good body for the brain of McCandless (Anthony Hopkins) who, meanwhile, dwells inside a hard drive.

I suppose the research into this procedure hits a ceiling which cannot be overcome, and is defined by the fact that such techniques are based on the recording of memories, or the recording of brain waves, the precision of which has its limits. It would be wiser to invest all resources in nanotechnology, which is the branch of techno-science focused on reading the charge and position of electrons.

The idea that the entire personality, mind and memories are stored in the physical configuration of the body is a radical development of the concept that underlies modern forensics (also called *scientific policing*): the body is a container of information which can be accurately read.

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If Alive

According to the notion of *forensic science* portrayed in popular TV series, there is only one way

that all the elements in a crime scene can become arranged as they are at the time the police enter the place. To solve the case, the police first has to get the clearest and most detailed picture of the scene, and then play the sequence back in reverse, to understand what happened there. The process shares some similarities to that of unfreezing a body, or printing back the data of a model of digital hibernation.

So, taking it to the point of radical development I mentioned earlier, if the forensic brigade were able to read and record all the elements of the crime scene at a subatomic level, perhaps they would be able to *unscramble the egg* of the murdered person's brain, to imagine back the trajectory of each of the electrons in that brain, and then play back what that person was thinking, seeing and listening when he was killed (perhaps just to discover that he died of natural causes, after all).

Going even further, the police agents would be able to recover the mind of the victim as it was before the crime and thus, in a way, repair the damage done by the criminal.

These are dreams of overriding the power of time, of putting time under one's control.

In popular imagination, the idea of stopping time is often understood as the possibility somebody has of operating a device that stops everybody else, while he can still move around. It is the same logic as the time machine, but with a childish touch of power over the world, a magical ability to move around people who stand like statues, and to be able to get all the candy one fancies at the grocery shop while time doesn't pass for the man at the register, who doesn't move at all and so cannot stop you. The adult, although still childish, daydream version of this is predominantly male and involves fitting rooms with naked women.

When this frozen effect happens in films no time passes in any respect, so, for instance, you can see a helicopter stopped in mid-air, with the law of gravity and the movement of the planets also suspended. This leaves birthdays in an uncertain situation, and it seems their validity can only be fixed by agreement, and not in an absolute form.

What would happen to birthdays if we froze everything in the world for fifteen years, except a clock which would be kept ticking during all that time?

These kinds of problems with the nature of time, of course, have been debated since the origins of civilization, being the subject of one of the most recurring questions in philosophy. The focus of the discussions has traditionally been to determine whether change is needed in order for time to exist: if time is an empty container in which things happen, or if instead it consists of those very happenings.

In 1999 I made a video, inspired by an observation by Pedro Pertejo, in which the self-portrait Rembrandt painted in 1640 morphs quickly but seamlessly into his self-portrait of 1669. One sees Rembrandt's face getting old in quick succession. This effect in real people would be like recreating the possibilities of the technology of the time machine, or could be seen as the operation of a hypothetical aging machine, a sort of microwave oven for time, which just makes you get older very quick.

It is highly unlikely that such a machine will ever be built, because its practical uses are very limited. Who wants to become old without having enjoyed even a few years of health and strength? The only application I can imagine has romantic connotations: it could be useful for couples who want to age together but who are too impatient, or who do not trust their love will last long enough. The potentials of this technology in relation to wine have not been studied yet.

A different kind of aging technique was applied to my pictures in the show in which I looked sixty-five back in 2003. This fake ageing is mainly used in fiction films, when directors want to use the same actor to portray different moments of the life of one character.

I first got the idea of making myself look sixty-five after seeing this picture of Sigourney Weaver, created for the promotion of the 1997 film *Snow White: A Tale of Terror*. I think it must have marked a milestone in the FX specialists' field.

<img 62>

<img 63>

&lt;img 64&gt;

A very compelling more recent example of this technique can be found in *Synecdoche, New York*, a 2008 gloomy film that portrays the life of a character played by Philip Seymour Hoffman. Over the course of the story, the actor plays a full range of ages, many of which he hadn't yet reached in real life.<sup>18</sup> Cutting edge techniques were used to make him look young in the film as well as to make him look old. Secondary characters also age, making the film very much an icon for prosthetics and make up aficionados.

Apart from film or art, a few other cases also exist in which people might like to look older. One can think of examples from literature or real life where somebody resorts to artificially aging to win more respect, which may occasionally be convenient for a doctor or a politician.

Another reason with which I have more affinity is the one Warhol expresses in the same book *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (from A to B and Back Again)*:

That's why some days I wish I were very very old-looking so I wouldn't have to think about getting old-looking.

Indeed, one advantage of getting old all at once is not having to see oneself grow older day by day.

&lt;img 65&gt;

*The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde, offers yet another perspective of the difficulties of ageing. The story tells how Dorian Gray made a mysterious pact by which he would remain young and handsome, while his portrait would receive the effects of his dreadful acts and his ageing. The painting deteriorates over the years, but Dorian's youthful, handsome appearance amazes Victorian society. When the painting is destroyed at the end of the story, all ageing and ugliness return to Dorian at once. The issue regarding time here is *flexibility*: time passes the same for everyone, but some people can stretch certain good parts of life to last longer by compressing the bad ones. This sentence

by William Gibson might apply to Dorian Gray's relationship to his contemporaries:

The future is here. It's just not widely distributed yet.

As if time were produced in a factory that is unable to keep up with demand and serves some people earlier than others.

The pace of ageing, however, doesn't change the fact of needing to be alive in order to attend the party. It might be nicer to look younger, but it isn't essential to the outcome of the project.

In *Kubrick: A Life in Pictures*, a thorough 2002 documentary about the life and works of Stanley Kubrick, Jack Nicholson recalls a conversation with Kubrick regarding *The Shining*. For Kubrick, *The Shining* was an overall optimistic story because "anything that says there's anything after death is ultimately an optimistic story."

This might be the reason why people like some horror movies, the ultimate pay-off: to experience the feeling that, however horrible, there is still something afterwards, the possibility such films provide of playing with that idea. Works of fiction have been always keen on speculating about methods of delaying or avoiding death, techniques to reach an existence after it, portraying immortality in all fashions.

A straight example, of special quality precisely due to its straightness, is Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*. The subject of delaying death is plainly expressed in order to reveal the power of the idea rather than hide its consequences, as occurs in most film productions.

In the *The Seventh Seal* the main character, a knight of the Middle Ages, confronts a personification of Death and manages to make a deal with Death that delays their final encounter by challenging him (a man, Bengt Ekerot, plays the part of Death) to a match of chess. Even if his chances of winning are slight, the knight is confident he can

<img 66>

<img 67>

extend the match long enough to complete a good deed he feels his life lacks.

<img 68>

Some time ago I considered the possibility of a sequel to this movie which would be set in the present. The knight would now be the CEO of a large company, or a high ranking officer in the military. He is not a religious person and has no scruples. When Death approaches him he also challenges him to a chess match. But in this case Death doesn't realise that his adversary has an intercom by which he receives instructions from Deep Blue, the IBM computer that won a match against Kasparov, and he thus manages to beat Death in chess and live forever.

<img 69>

The story can be seen as an allegory of technology's ultimate aim, whether consciously or unconsciously so. Machines that resemble humans have fascinated people for as long as such machines have existed in human history, precisely because of this promise of final liberation from death by way of the machine.

The game of chess is present in many *vanitas* and in many artworks related to death. I don't clearly see any relationship other than the one from which I have extrapolated my sequel of *The Seventh Seal*: intelligence and strategic thinking are human features that have evolved in order to conquer death, and chess is a good symbol of them. For the time being, death still plays better than humans.

We have seen that both scientific and sci-fi possibilities exist to make sure that my guests and I make it to the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2026. And that pure fiction may offer some interesting, inspiring suggestions. But there are also many other possibilities of achieving *time dilation*, by means of mystical, religious, or supernatural practices and beliefs.

Indeed, I am an optimistic person in practice, according to Kubrick's definition (although more of a pessimist in theory) and I think that if I die before the party it should still take place just in the case I can attend it as a ghost – not that I believe there is

much chance of this. The budget might then contemplate the purchase or production of some Ouija boards.

Somebody, however, might object that ghosts and the spirits of the dead do not comply with the condition stated in the title: if alive. So, perhaps even if my spirit could be present at the event, I should call the party off if I die anyway, out of conceptual rigour.

Alright, but what about attending as the living dead? I am not talking about being *resurrected*, a proper resurrection by the book, a man risen from the dead, which I am certain wouldn't present any conceptual problem: after one is resurrected one is fully alive, thus such a case would fulfil the title's condition.

No. I refer to the state of being a zombie, in which the body is animated (solely *in motion*), but without a soul. If this condition is accepted and I am able to attend as half alive and half dead, then the party might turn into a zombie party, so trendy in recent times. In the logic of zombie fiction, those attending who are not yet zombies would become so during the event.

And being really *optimistic*, this also opens the possibility of attending both as a zombie and as a ghost at the same time, body and soul separated in two different entities. As can be read at [www.ironicsans.com](http://www.ironicsans.com),

Has there ever been a story about a ghost and zombie of the same person before? Does that violate the rules of undead characters in fiction?

*Undead*<sup>19</sup> is indeed an unusual choice of words. Bram Stoker considered using the title *The Un-Dead* for his novel *Dracula* (1897), and the use of the term in the novel is mostly responsible for the modern sense of the word.

Here is one last possibility (or should I call it *hope*?) within the realm of pop culture supernatural beliefs to ensure my presence at the party,

<img 70>

<img 71>

the one offered by the quality of immortality attained by vampires.

According to the series of legends that gave rise to the figure of the vampire as it now exists in the popular imagination, there are various ways to generate vampires, although, of these, having one's blood sucked by someone who has already acquired that status has become the most common.

<img 72>

*The Addiction*, by Abel Ferrara, is a 1989 black and white film about the blood junkie life of people caught in vampirism. The main character is a young female student who is drafted into vampirism in a small New York alley at the beginning of the film. The dreadful scenes of her first hours as a vampire greatly encourage me to try all other options to attend the party before trying this one. At the end of the film, already quite skilled at blood sucking, she organizes a graduation party that becomes an orgy of blood and vampire recruiting.

The party on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2026, if a vampire party, must contain the same elements as the one in *The Addiction*, a well-balanced number of vampires and non-vampires, because that's the only way one can be sure vampires (including myself in such a scenario) will have fun.

<sup>18</sup> Philip Seymour Hoffman died unexpectedly in February 2014, so he reached an older age in fiction than in reality. There will be no picture of him at ninety to compare with the work of the make-up artists.

<sup>19</sup> An undead is a being in mythology, legend or fiction that is deceased yet behaves as if alive.

Something is clearly revealed by this listing of desperate attempts to attend to the party: such an effort to resist, to live at all cost, would be embarrassing if it weren't for this alibi of the art project.

It is suspicious that I might accept any and all kinds of deals with death, evil, medical science, cryogenics merchants or spiritual gurus just to attend a party. It might well be that the reason for this is just that I want to live, no matter what or why.

*If Alive* puts this effort to stay alive as long as possible in an ironic perspective. "I have to be alive at least for the party to take place. It wouldn't be polite to my guests if I died before then". Although it might sound a bit weak, the idea that the only power death has over me is my desire to stay alive for my art project could well be a genuine claim. Then, after the party, I would have no reason to continue living. More or less.

In case I should kill myself the day after, it wouldn't be to prove that I was not so attached to life as to accept all those humiliations, nor would it be a celebration of life, and nor even a way to challenge beliefs and social uses, but rather a way to unequivocally state that the art project deserved the effort made to survive, that all the effort was made for the party's success.

Many artists in history have committed suicide. The rate is probably higher among artists than among people who have other interests and occupations. This might be due to a range of socioeconomic or psychological causes. But, besides the risk that art involves, which can be explained by Lyotard's previously quoted statement,<sup>20</sup> there is something in the enormous waste, the fabulous expenditure and symbolic challenge that suicide represents that is in tune with all of art's other uses and procedures. For those looking for truth, excess is always compulsory:

You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.<sup>21</sup>

<img 73>

In thinking about an example of a spectacular expenditure, an extraordinary party that entails a great deal of preparation, the 1987 film *Babette's Feast* by Gabriel Axel, based on the Isak Dinesen's book, comes to mind.

The story is set at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and concerns Babette, a cook who has to leave France, allegedly due to political reasons, and who settles down in a very puritan village on the coast of Denmark. The film starts as she is living in this village at the home of two strict pious ladies and she receives news that she has won the biggest prize of the French lottery. She decides to use the money to create the most amazing luxurious dinner she can manage for her two hosts and a select group of the ladies' friends. The rest of the film is the story of the arrival of sophisticated goods from faraway producers, the lengthy preparation of the courses, and the event of the dinner itself, executed with enormous dedication, to the amazement of the two ladies. The event is sophisticated on a level that they will never be able to understand or appreciate.

Unexpectedly, one of the guests at the dinner happens to have once dined at the restaurant in France where Babette was employed as a cook. He recognizes some of the qualities of the food, which compensates to a certain extent the waste that is

taking place. This represents in the film something very similar to the compensation Scotty's parents receive with the baker in *Short Cuts*. The artist is not completely alone in the knowledge of what is happening there. This detail, in my opinion, makes the film a bit shallower.

The culmination of the dinner, and of the film, comes when, after all the guests have left and the dirty cutlery and dishes still remain on the table, Babette confesses that she has spent all of the prize money on the dinner, so now life will return to normal, and says that the life of artists is simply that way.

This seems to be a good place to leave the account of the implications of the project, just after a well-prepared dinner. I have written this book to be presented on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2016, with ten years still to go until the party.

<sup>20</sup> "The artist is someone who, in the desire to see death, even at the price of his own death, lends it the upper hand over the desire to produce" (Jean-François Lyotard, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*).

<sup>21</sup> William Blake, *Proverbs from Hell*.

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