

Still (A) Life and Craving for Immortality

Denise Hirtenfelder. June 19, 2020. Rotterdam.

In some religions and spirituality life is meant to be forever. Even if our time on earth and in our physical bodies ends, a life after death in a fantasized paradise is destined for us. Already in ancient history China's first emperor ordered his subjects to search for the elixir of life in quest for immortality. In the 16th century French nobles drank gold to extend their life spans. In humanity's earliest epic poem, the Sumerian king Gilgamesh found a magic herb to live forever, but a snake came in front of his way and ate it. But the obsession with immortality has neither ended in history and tales, nor in the present. In 2015, a woman on the MTV series True Life claimed to take baths in pig's blood to stay young (Gabbatt, 23.2.2019).

The first time when scientists tried to research how to make the human body immortal occurred in the 17th century, when the Dutch anatomist and botanist Frederik Ruysch found a special liquid to preserve body parts for years. He would be surprised that his groundbreaking methods of anatomical preservation and the creation of his carefully arranged scenes incorporating human body parts have survived more than three centuries. As a kind of "artist of the death" he made remarkable still lives that display blurred boundaries between the demonstrative element of scientific preservation and the symbolic element of vanitas art. Ruysch knew that the human body was not meant to be living forever, but through his method his specimen of limbs, fetuses and small animals in glasses that were showcased in cabinets of curiosities endured for a really long time. His macabre content of art was leading to further research in medicine and was revolutionary for the anatomist knowledge of today (The Public Domain Review, n.d.).

Through reflecting from a Fine-Arts perspective on Ruysch's theory of human body preservations, I created the artwork "Still (A) Life" and linked it to the history of the "Narrenturm" (Fool's Tower) in Vienna. Once constructed by Isidore Canevale under Emperor Joseph II as the first clinic for the mentally ill population in continental Europe, it is known as the Federal Pathologic-Anatomical Museum of the city of Vienna now (Vienna Direct, n.d.).

In the story of "Still (A)Life" Petrus is a fictional creature of a three-hundred-year-old fetus preserved in a glass jar by Frederik Ruysch. Back in the days when he was still meant to be growing to become a functioning human being, his parents expected him to be full of life and full of big plans for humanity. Instead of making their dreams come true, Petrus died in his mother's womb as a fetus and later on became a part of the pathologic-anatomical collection in the Fool's Tower. Decades later Veronica has recently started working in the Fool's Tower as a museum supervisor. She herself is an outsider of society and is just doing "her job" at the museum, which entails opening and closing the doors for visitors in the morning and at night. What nobody knows - Veronica is haunted by voices when she takes her lonely nocturnal routine walk before closing the museum. In her translucent dreams the human body part preservations come to life again and start having a party. In the course of working in her new job Veronica establishes a particular fascination with Petrus - the three-hundred-year-old fetus. Inside the rooms of madness Veronica develops a fervid delusion of the whole cabinet of curiosity and of Petrus the fetus. She feels unbearable emotions of passion, desire and lust for the dead little body that speaks to her like a celestial adult man sent by Jesus as his disciple. Every night she

is sucked in into a merry-go-round inside the specimen's jar, just to be released from it at dawn.

On the one hand, "Still (A)Life" portrays of course a fictional story of the conceptual creature Petrus the Fetus, and Veronica who is in a Freud inspired state of trance. On the other hand, Petrus transmits to Veronica the feeling of an everlasting life and a craving of immortality. Human beings have lusted for immortality as long as they have been alive. So far, the quest has been unsuccessful and there does not exist someone who came back into an afterlife. Modern-day medicine makes it possible to live longer than ever. Mostly in science, but often also apart from science and gerontology, people are searching for methods to extend their life span. Private clinics and online pharmacies promise getting us closer to immortality than ever.

The businessman James Strole, who has reached now an age of 70, established the "Coalition for Radical Life Extension", a non-profit based in Arizona in 2016. It aims to galvanise mainstream support for science that might one day significantly prolong human life. Already in his 20s Strole was touring through the US to promote the "eternal" life without being scientifically accredited. He uses inspiration from wellness as well as a strict health regime to advertise immortality. Throughout his life Strole fasted, juiced, cleansed, takes a cold dip in his pool to shock his immune system every morning, lies on electromagnetic mats and takes 70 supplements a day to extend his lifespan. Furthermore, he counts "Cognitive Pills" that promise to be good for the brain as a part of his self-directed anti-ageing process. The Coalition is organizing the annual RAADfest where visitors are able to root through all kind of Wellness 2.0 products behind cosmetics.

Serious scientologists such as Aubrey de Grey consider a different way of life extension. According to him a longer life span does not make sense if people are not staying healthy in their last decades. Gerontology is interested in people not getting sick and not suffering from diseases when they are old. Aubrey de Grey states that gerontology is responsible to develop treatments for age-related diseases. One single longevity strategy does not help to keep us healthy. He claims that humans are comparable to machines - if they are not treated well, they get rusty. We need several strategies of repair that aim for a constant fine-tuning (Moshakis, 23.6.2019).

Some of these strategies have already undergone an in-depth investigation. In the early 2000's scientists at Standford University revived a procedure used in the 1950s called "Parabiosis". For experiments they used old and young mice. They peeled back their skins and stitched together two sides, so the animals shared the same circulatory systems. A month later the first results were published: they discovered a degree of rejuvenation in the muscles and livers of old mice.

In 2016 the start-up Ambrosia in the US adopted the method of parabiosis. They started to inject young blood plasma for exceedingly high amounts of money into elderly people. But Ambrosia failed and closed due the critique of the US Food and Drug Administration for its lack of proven clinical benefit. Later, scientific start-ups tried to discover the secrets of parabiosis again and use them to tackle age-related disorders.

Alkahest's pristine laboratories use the mice study of Standford University and claim that we as human beings are not only big mice, but also other animals convinced them to enforce a deeper research on people. Last year they organized a six-month experiment with 40 patients who suffer from mild to moderate Alzheimer symptoms. They infused

their blood with “nutritious” plasma of people in their early 30s. The result was that it appeared to stop their mental decline and led to a slow progression to treat neuro-degenerative diseases.

The start-up Elevian in Silicon Valley wants to commercialize parabioses with the concept of therapies to elevate the activity of Growth Differentiation Factor 11 (GDF 11). GDF 11 is a protein that appears in small amounts in blood plasma. So far it has not been tested on humans, but parabiosis findings in mice showed that it could be used for stroke recovery. The treatment is still controversial though because there are no results for a reliable outcome yet (Corbyn, 2.2.2020).

Not focused on blood injection but on influencing our DNA, is the company Sierra Science. They investigate in treatments that can lengthen the telomeres, the so-called “caps” at the end of each strand of our DNA. Telomeres get shorter when our cells copy themselves several times throughout our lifetime. This process is the reason for us getting old. However, when the telomeres get back to their normal state, then the biological age can be reversed to 25 again. The treatment was first tried on animals. Nevertheless, Sierra Science biggest competitor BioViva’s CEO Elizabeth Parrish underwent the telomere therapy in 2015 as the first human being. In 2018 Parrish claimed that measurements showed that her telomeres had grown “younger” by roughly 30 years (Gabbatt, 23.2.2019).

But why are we actually aiming for immortality next to the treatment of neuro-degenerative diseases? What is James Strole’s wellness foundation good for? One thing is sure, if these technologies for a healthier life extension become available, they will be exceptionally expensive and just accessible for the uppermost elite who invests in Silicon Valley start-ups. Billionaires such as the Google founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page pump money into research of secretive health ventures to “solve their death” (Gabbatt, 23.2.2019). It can be also seen as building bridges for immortality to extend a certain lifestyle of the upper class. (Moshakis, 23.6.2019)

If we imagine that these extreme future scenarios take place in a fictional way to continue the story of Petrus the fetus and Veronica, where will their romance lead to? Will Petrus be able to suck out Veronica’s young blood and come to the world of the living again? Or will Veronica decide to change her role with Petrus and drink the liquid in his glass jar to stay immortal as a specimen? Imagination can lead us to many concepts related to science and even further and makes it possible to dream so far in fiction of a never-ending life.

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