

When your mouth is all dried up like a potsherd
you can count on Proxident mouth swabs.

Soothing till the end.



Welcome to the Palliative Turn

Olav Westphalen

You will die and so will I.

So much we know.

What's new is that there may be nobody around to pick up where we left off.

The steam engine was invented barely 300 years ago. If humans stopped burning coal, gas, oil today and no cow ever farted again, it would still take between 100.000 and 400.000 years for the earth's climate to cool down to pre-industrial levels. This calculation brings home the scope and time frame of our problems. More than half of the greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere have been added since the year 2000.

For about a decade, I have been facilitating a dialogue between artists and climate scientists working at the Swedish Polar Research Station. With increasing urgency, the scientists have been asking the artists how they can communicate their knowledge of the imminent catastrophe we are facing in ways that have an impact. Might there be another narrative, different from the ones we have been using, something beyond skinny polar bears, collapsing ice shelves, and the frail, blue marble, something that could mobilize populations and politicians to finally act? Art, the scientists are hoping, may be able to create the necessary effect that factual information, clearly doesn't achieve.

A recent cancer treatment forced me to consider death in concrete and personal terms. Along the way, I met health care professionals and fellow patients whose pragmatism and kindness under extreme conditions were incredible. Against this backdrop, much of contemporary art felt somewhat irrelevant. In a coincidental development, the cartoonist Marcus Weimer and I were commissioned by the German Association for Palliative Medicine to provide a 'humor concept' for the international convention they were organizing for September 2020. They had been considering how humor could benefit palliative medicine and care; not just in the form of hospital clowns, but rather as an overall shift in attitude toward death, which is not only tragic but also grotesque, and therefore potentially funny. The convention, whose title translates as 'Controversies at Life's End,' focused primarily on the contrasting strategies of assisted suicide, on the one hand, and palliative care for the dying, on the other. It was a nuanced debate well above our cartoonists' heads. What struck me most was how much of palliative thinking is about the value of life, the pleasure of being alive even on the last lap. There were stories of ingenious hospital staff deep-freezing liquor to put tiny bits of ice into a patient's mouth, allowing her to taste her favorite whisky when she was no longer able to swallow, and the Mother Superior at a Catholic hospice who, against all her beliefs, hired a prostitute to spend time with a seventeen-year-old who didn't want to die without having had sex. Palliative care is not only about mitigating suffering; it is at least as much about affirming the value of life in general, and specifically of the individual life that is about to end. It honors the richness of sensory experience until the very end.

At some point, it occurred to me that the Swedish climate scientists may have been posing the wrong question to us artists. Cultural narratives, art works, films, and books that try to mobilize and usher in change are aplenty. Many of them are smart, sensitive, beautiful. But they are generally based on the assumption that somehow—through education, information, reason, technology, or political action—we can solve our problems. What if this assumption about our capacity for fixing things were just another facet of our hubris, of the self-aggrandizing, western-style exceptionalism that got us into trouble in the first place? What if our ambition to control and manage not just our own lives but even the planetary climate's equilibrium is just the latest symptom of what has been wrong all along? And, finally, could acceptance of our predicament,

of the impending end of—at the very least—this type of civilization and learning how to die well be a first step toward learning how to live better? Living better, one would hope, might imply a less destructive presence. (This is, ironically, where hubris can sneak in again.)

Much of contemporary art up to now (and I include my own efforts here) has derived its legitimation from some, however vaguely implied, claim to making things better. It usually tries to do so by employing classic strategies of the enlightenment, such as critique, exposure of ideologies, awareness-raising etc. While art usually isn't put to direct use, it still is expected to lean towards solutions, however poetically or indirectly. Such art could thus be described as curative art, or at least as art with a curative tendency. Art that is on the right side, that does more good than bad. What if artists started from the opposite end, by first acknowledging that things, cultures, individuals will go under, and that art cannot change this? In this light, what kind of art or culture do we want to make and experience? Artists instinctively project themselves into the future and derive their significance from this self-ascribed historical agency. What if we took that future out of the equation?

Between the first and second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, a group of the palliatively curious—individuals interested in reimagining the role of art and artists in relation to collapse, finality, and death rather than to an idealist framework of history and progress—gathered in Berlin for an informal symposium.¹ Over the course of four days, participants tried to sketch out in a series of talks, experiments, and performances a general concept of what art after the palliative turn might look like, and which aspects of palliative care could be transferred to art. It was the first step in an open-ended cooperation, dedicated to the advancement and communication of the Palliative Turn.

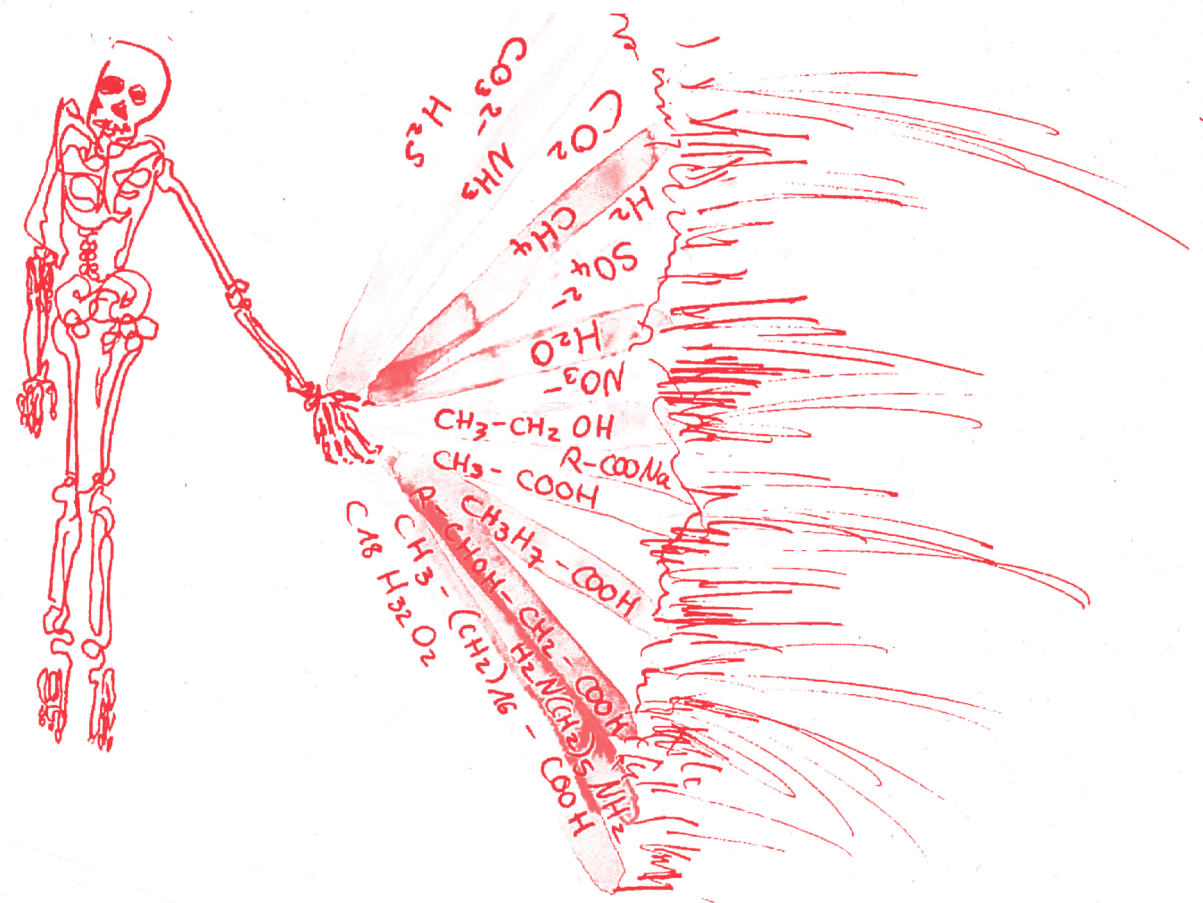
In a subsequent step, the participants became the founding members of *ATG*, the Association for the Palliative Turn, which is now exploring a range of possible activities, including the development of a rating and certification system for Palliativity in Art (how palliative is it?); Palliative Turn Counseling for artists, cultural institutions, dealers, collectors, and others; and the cultivation of Palliative Comedy. Palliative care has some useful models to offer. The 'total pain' concept, for example, looks at pain from all aspects of life: physical, psychological, social, and spiritual. Social and spiritual death often precede physical death but are easily overlooked.

Another interesting tool is a model that distinguishes between anticipatory grief, the grief of dying, and survivors' grief. Anticipatory grief occurs before death (or another great loss), and in contrast to conventional, or survivors' grief, it is experienced jointly by the dying, their families and friends, and even the care staff. In addition to sadness about the impending death, anticipatory grief has many other aspects, including anguish over the loss of companionship, changing roles in the family, financial upheaval, and the demise of unrealized dreams. *ATG* operates from the understanding that humanity has collectively entered this phase of anticipatory grief. As we face the end of civilization as we know it, each of us is patient and caretaker and soon-to-be bereaved at the same time.

In the case of the frustrations expressed by the Swedish climate researchers, a first and admittedly modest contribution by *ATG* could be the application of the concepts

of anticipatory grief and total pain to debates around climate change. It might allow us a collective understanding of the layers of pain and the types of death we are all experiencing. In this way, we can begin to see even climate change deniers and profiteers not as greedy cynics or as scientifically ignorant dunces, but instead as patient-care-takers, or family members who are entering that confusing, frightening period before the end. A period that, as palliative care shows, can be a time of insight, growth, and deep enjoyment of everything that still is. *ATG* proposes that we not waste this time on nail biting, name calling, and holy hatred, but rather use it for a blossoming of culture and compassion, a time of authentic bliss and laughter flanked by sincere sadness—a time that would be remembered as golden and wise, should anyone still be around to remember it.

This essay was commissioned in April 2021 for the final printed issue of *Cabinet Magazine* titled *The End*, which is still pending publication.



Jana Ghiesl, Soil and Green 2021.

¹ The participants in *AFASIOGLOPIA (A Foundational and Speculative Invocation of the Palliative Turn in Art)* included artists Simon Blanck, Kasia Fudakowski, Nina Katchadourian, Dafna Daimon, Olav Westphalen; comedian John Luke Roberts; kinesiologist Annemarie Goldschmidt; and art critic and philosopher Lars-Erik Hjertström Lappalainen. External input, both before and during the symposium, came from climate scientist Keith Larson; palliative care expert Lydia Röder; Pia Kristoffersson, a former curator of contemporary art, now a mortician; funeral director Stephan Hadrachek; and various members of the German Association for Palliative Medicine. Since then, *ATG* has grown. There are now around 30 artists and other professionals, who are somehow engaged in the association.