Interview mit den Künstler:innen

In *Tutta Notte Buia*, you bring together traditional Southern Italian mourning rituals and questions of digital identity. What inspired you to connect these two seemingly distant worlds?

> We ourselves come from two different realities: two opposite parts of Italy, north and south, that historically have been deeply divided. Many traditions and customs are not shared, and so, for us, the journey that led to the creation of *"Tutta Notte Buia"* was a process of discovery - for Martina - and of re-discovery - for Alex - of these traditions of Southern Italy.
> Regarding the implementation of the digital elements, it was a natural pipeline coming from previous artworks, mainly MAalex's *"I died on Facebook"*, an immersive VR installation that transposes Facebook's In Memoriam profiles in a digital cemetery we built into the Minecraft videogame platform, and Martina's "*(Very) Neural System"*, a digital AI-powered twin of herself, whose knowledge of her is based on her online data, which also won an honorary Mention at the Ars Electronica Campus Awards in 2024.
> As we approached our research on digital remains and online legacies, we immediately realised that, however influenced our new reality might be by technology, we are still looking for answers to very old questions. *What awaits us after we die? How does our relationship shift after someone is gone, and is there space for it to continue? How can we remember the dead?*
> The mourning rituals from Southern Italy that we researched developed as collective ways of dealing with loss and remembrance. Today, social media profiles, digital graveyards, and giref-bots have become an integral part of that process. For us, these worlds are not so distant at all, as they both embody ways of carrying memories and negotiating absence

The installation culminates in the question: *"Do you want to be forgotten?"* Which reactions, reflections, or conversations with visitors surprised or moved you the most? More generally, what role do such encounters and exchanges play in your artistic practice?

> Many visitors approaching "*Tutta Notte Buia"* were first and foremost curious about what the artwork might search and find about them, and they were somewhat disappointed when the search didn't yield the results they had hoped for.
> Regardless of the quality of their online presence and how the internet fragments and reshapes their identities, there still seems to be a form of alignment and recognition within the scattered pieces of oneself present on the World Wide Web.
> So much so that, when not previously advised, the audience is often hesitant to approve the deletion of their digital traces. This is both our desired outcome, as it holds the implications of posing our question, and what baffles us the most. The idea that for so many people their online persona is no longer a separate entity, but rather an integral part of the self that they'd grieve and mourn if lost.
> For us, as young professionals and emerging artists, direct contact and feedback from the audience are essential. Just like a painter might ask a critic what emotions a particular colour evokes, for us it is crucial to understand whether, for example, the "medium" works. Was the interface clear? Did the staging and timing give you enough time to internalise what we were asking of you? If we didn't manage to connect with the audience, what we do would be virtually useless.

St. Martin's Church is a place where people have gathered for centuries to mourn, remember, and share hope and joy. How did you experience presenting your work within this sacred space? Did the church setting perhaps open up new perspectives on the work itself? And a speculative question: If the church building could respond to your artwork, what do you think it would say – and to whom?

> The possibility of exhibiting *"Tutta Notte Buia"* in Martinskirche was extremely meaningful to us, and we're very grateful to the Linz Diözese for welcoming us to the abbey.
> Exhibiting in a sacred place meant, first and foremost, understanding how to actively renegotiate one's presence within a highly codified space, laden with meaning and with its own unique rhythm. It meant adapting to change, coexisting with the liturgies, and at the same time being guests in an exceptional place that infused the work with a completely different aura, endowing it with a mystical significance.
> Having served as a place of spirituality for hundreds of years, the Martinskirche carries a palpable aura of reverence, of calmness and knowledge, as if the years passed had informed the very stones of the building about the inevitable fate of human life, and the joy and pain that come with it.
> Presenting our project here allowed us to bring back into their native space figures and rituals that are deeply rooted in faith and spirituality, and to bring to life the connection between ancient traditions and new technologies that our work aims to achieve.
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> Gifted the chance to speak, we suspect the church would be of few words, but we're sure it would remind us that death is just another phase of life, and that the people it has seen coming and going have also left indelible parts of themselves now absorbed into its walls. Now we're there too.

Your ongoing series *Death on the Internet* explores digital remains and online legacies. Do you think our society has already developed meaningful ways of dealing with digital afterlives, or are we only at the beginning of a much larger conversation?

> Yes, and sadly no. Are we ever satisfied with our understanding of death, or with how much life has been given to us or those around us? Letting go of loved ones was, is and will always be a terribly hurtful and appalling occurrence, and dealing with it is always a matter of navigating absence and loss. In many ways, we as a society have developed tools for remembering, keeping a person alive through texts, photographs, videos, and now even virtually reconstructing the features and personality of the deceased using digital means.
> However, as much as these tools allow us to hold on to somebody's memory, their ability to support those in grief in their mourning process is still up for debate.
> During the COVID-19 pandemic, we've experienced first-hand occurrences of online funeral Masses, televised collective grieving and digital obituaries, practices that crossed over into a post-coronavirus world.
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> Unfortunately, as of today, many companies are starting to catch up to these practices, which inevitably means they have found ways of profiting from virtual funerary customs and digitised grief, stripping away the celebratory and meaningful aspects of mourning to turn it into a transactional event and a lucrative exchange.

In this context, I would also like to ask a more personal question: In an increasingly digital culture, what significance do you think will remain for the body, for touch, for tears, for caring for and accompanying those who grieve? Can art remind us that we are vulnerable, feeling beings who depend on one another's care and support?

Art certainly cannot ease us from the pain of grief, nor should it claim to do so. It can, however, open up space for people to feel vulnerable and heard, where one can reflect on what it means to die and to face someone else's death, and bring back that feeling of community that somewhat got lost in translation when our lives shifted so heavily from physical to virtual.

At the pace technological progress is advancing, it's comprehensible to fear that, soon enough, there will be nothing left of our physical selves. From the Lascaux cave paintings onward, art has always functioned as a mediator of human experience, and this role has not been interrupted by either the advent of photography or subsequent technological transformations. But, even amid the digital revolution, the body remains the primary place of experience and connection; these advancements are not substitutes for embodied life, but tools imbued with human intention. As long as intention and relationship remain at the centre, there is no real reason to worry: the question is not whether the body will disappear, but how we will continue to recognise and care for it in the midst of the changes in technical systems.

Die Künstlerinnen Alessia Fallica und Martina Pizzigoni mit Seelsorgerin Stefanie Hinterleitner, Martina Resch und Pfarrer von Linz-Mitte Martin Füreder.