



Title

On the alive side

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On the alive side

by Kathryn Lloyd • 24.03.2022

At the beginning of the film *One Big Bag* (2021) by the American artist and writer Every Ocean Hughes (FKA Emily Roysdon; b.1977), the protagonist recounts a story. When she was fifteen years old, she went on holiday with a friend and their family. 'Mysteriously' unable to sleep, she spent the night lying on the bathroom floor feeling confused and nauseous. A week later, she learned that this was the night that her best friend died in a car accident. She wonders now, in adulthood, whether this 'dispossession' was connected – whether it was her experience of her friend dying as it occurred. In the aftermath of the event, silence and concealment became modes of protection; the funeral and various necessities that death spawns were closely guarded by adults. Divisions were drawn and chasms were instigated: between the 'alive side' and the dead, before the event and after, between child and adult.¹ As a result, another followed: between an intellectual comprehension and a physical one rooted in the sensorial. 'My body needed to understand, instead of my adolescent mind getting trapped'.

'Now', she continues, 'I'm a guide'. Over the course of Hughes's forty-minute film, the protagonist, portrayed by the actor Lindsay Rico, delivers a monologue about her work as a 'millennial death doula'. More traditionally associated with the process of birth, a doula is a trained, non-medical adviser or companion. Although the death industry is typically confined to events that are staged once life ends – funerals, cremations, burials, memorials – a death doula is present throughout the transition from one state to the other. Rico addresses the audience directly, adopting a pragmatic tone to detail the practices and tools of end-of-life and corpse care. Around her pieces of string are hung at varying heights, each one carrying a different object **FIG. 1**. One by one she holds them in her hands and explains their usage **FIG. 2**. Although they are recognisable – latex gloves, tampons, soap, bells, super glue, painkillers – she gives each a new, unfamiliar purpose. The gloves are filled with salt or sand to make 'eye pillows' to weigh down the eyelids; scarves are used to tie the mouth closed as it inevitably begins to gape in death; super glue repairs wounds and autopsy incisions; and tampons are plugs for 'use in the non-traditional hole'.

The film is the centrepiece of the installation *One Big Bag* at Studio Voltaire, London, where it is shown on a large video screen, surrounded by the same objects, which are suspended from the former chapel's vaulted ceiling **FIG. 3** **FIG. 4**. Each item is hand-labelled and hung at the height it would be used on the body. These are the components of the doula's 'mobile corpse kit' – one big bag – each afforded its hallowed status through a process of trial and error. In this uncanny, almost compulsive, show-and-tell format, the protagonist's advice ranges from the profound to the wholly practical. She labours over the glue most suited to the fluctuating texture of skin after death ('Loctite Super Glue Ultra Gel Control'), recommends that you press down on the abdomen to release urine before washing the body (a 'pro tip'), and emphasises the necessity of bringing food and drink for the living, who often forget to look after themselves. As she talks us through the applications of her selected tools, their counterparts slowly revolve on their strings in the gallery and a cardboard coffin stands upright in the corner **FIG. 5**. Mortal confrontation is not confined to the realm of the screen, but also resides here, reminding us of our own inevitable, leaky decline.

The script for *One Big Bag* is a composite of lived realities, derived from professional doula accounts and the artist's personal experiences and losses. After Hughes cared for her grandmother Enid at the end of her life, she undertook training as a death doula; the aforementioned best friend was one she lost as a teenager, a tragedy that followed another – the death of a different, even younger childhood friend, aged nine.² Hughes has stated that *One Big Bag* is the second in an ongoing trilogy of works that analyse end-of-life practices and develop her ideas of 'queer death'.³ The first, *Help the Dead* (2019), is an hour-long performance staged in the round, which examines the sociopolitical conditions of death and its industries, specifically in reference to the AIDS crisis.⁴ Within this framework, Hughes considers death as a 'complex social choice', part of a spectrum rather than a binary, and probes methods of self-determination and mutual aid. While *One Big Bag* continues such an analysis, it is structured primarily around the physicality and materiality of death – both in reference to the process of dying and the process of grieving. Attention often returns to the senses and their role in rejecting the chasms that traditional death practices enforce: 'grief comes through the hands. Touching the dead is a barrier and once it's broken, [one begins...] feeling that loss'.

Rico delivers information at a relentless pace; she moves purposefully and forcefully around the space that she inhabits. She beats her body with her fists as she speaks,

generating thudding noises that are reminiscent of the violent drop of a butcher's cleaver. She sits on the ground, legs splayed, and repeatedly lifts and slams her thighs against the floor **FIG. 6**. As she does this, she details the intricacies of rigor mortis: 'most people know that a corpse stiffens, but they don't know that they then relax out again later'. 'Ice technologies' are key to countering this fluctuation, allowing them to be kept at home, to be washed and honoured – 'a note': use half the ice for a baby or child, 'I overchilled, almost kind of froze, a child in my early days'. Rico's deliberate, almost aggressive, gestures act as a counterpoint to what she describes. She moves vigorously while detailing the body's inability to move itself after death; she generates heat with the slap of skin against a hard surface while instructing the viewer how to chill a corpse. She strides around the space quickly as she advocates slowing down and spending time with a body, for the living and the dead to transform together. Her compulsive movements manifest as way of both exorcising and accepting the information she is faced with. With every stomp of her foot, she beats the information into her physicality – from the brain into the body and out again.

Although death is universal, it is not apolitical. Moreover, the universality of its inexorability does not, of course, extend to the way it occurs, and the manner in which it is commemorated. The businesses that cater for the bureaucracy of death are conversely rigid in their offerings and rife with inequalities. In the United States the average cost of a funeral is \$9,000. Although it can be an act of love, it is one that leaves many in debt. Death care practices are also rooted in the science of war – embalming, which is more common in the United States than anywhere else in the world, transitioned from a trade to a business as a result of transporting soldiers for burial during the Civil War. The environmental impacts of burial are severe and the industry still operates on racial, ethnic and religious divisions. In addition, the agency one acquires in life can be lost in death, perhaps most notably in LGBTQIA+ communities: biological families displace chosen kinships, normative ways of dying replace non-normative ways of living. As Rico surveys these inequities her professional detachment is replaced by urgency, and she implores: 'Do the paperwork. Make some decisions, have a vision, so you choose who is there and who is not there, who has rights over your body, what you want done to your body, so that your life can end with the same spirit it was lived'.

'So, the big show, the funeral, the ceremony, the homegoing'. As Rico utters these words, she begins to cut the objects from their strings **FIG. 7**. Each item falls to the

floor with a thud; she collects them and returns them to the 'one big bag'. Sitting down, she puts the bag straps over her shoulders and tries to stand up. Unable to and weighted down by its contents, the bag instead becomes a cushion on which she rests **FIG. 8**. In death, we are all subject to the tools inside it; our bodies will need to be washed and our mouths tied closed. But the structures we have implemented around dying reflect the prejudices and inequalities of the living. In exposing these, Hughes encourages ownership over how we choose to live and how we choose to be treated in death.



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Every Ocean Hughes: One Big Bag* at Studio Voltaire, London, 2022. (Photograph Francis Ware).



Fig. 8 Installation view of *Every Ocean Hughes: One Big Bag* at Studio Voltaire, London, 2022. (Photograph Francis Ware).

Exhibition details

Every Ocean Hughes: One Big Bag

Studio Voltaire, London

28th January–24th April 2022

Footnotes

- 1** The phrase 'this alive side' is repeated throughout the film, most notably in the concluding lines, which Rico sings. Hughes's solo exhibition at Moderna Museet, Stockholm (until 17th April), also adopts a similar phrase for its title: *Alive Time*.
- 2** See L. Snapes: "'You need glue, tampons and ice": artist Every Ocean Hughes on how to help the dying', *The Guardian* (25th January 2022), available at www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/jan/25/every-ocean-hughes-video-artist-interview-death-doula, accessed 23rd March 2022.
- 3** See 'Every Ocean Hughes in conversation with Catherine Wood', available at www.studiovoltaire.org/resources/every-ocean-hughes-in-conversation-with-catherine-wood, accessed 23rd March 2022.
- 4** An excerpt of this performance is available at vimeo.com/360376570, accessed 23rd March 2022.

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