

Theresa Schlesinger

We are already dead.

The Art of Ending(s)

**A short encounter with artistic
approaches to Endings**

You enter a dark room, the door behind you closes, the light changes and you find yourself in a whole different world. Inside it looks and feels like nothing you've ever known before, maybe you hear a soft sound, something is buzzing beneath your feet, the smells and sounds are unfamiliar. You look around and slowly accept this new perspective. You let yourself be brave and take another step into this new world. You forget about your expectations, about your day, your worries, about your human body and the materiality of the walls around you. The premise is clear: This is an art space, a theatre maybe, and you are going to spend the next moments of your life, minutes, hours, the whole day or night, here in this room with other bodies around you, sharing this experience, not sure what will happen exactly.

But it will be over as soon as you walk out and this nearing end marks the uniqueness of this moment. The space offers the possibility of different narratives, it opens up an experience of some kind of future, that hasn't happened yet, a speculation about what's to come and what it could feel like. You fall into some kind of made up world where you leave behind your own story and your perception of reality. Maybe this world you witness here is a world without you, without humans, a world where you are only invited as a spectator. For a brief amount of time you're able to leave the present and dive into an imaginary parallel universe.

The term "Immersion" describes a state of becoming completely involved in something. Experiencing art, falling into a storyline by reading a book, visiting a play or watching a movie can transport us into these kinds of states. In being fully immersed we can also leave our thinking mind and connect more deeply to an imaginary world, a storyline, a different narrative. It offers a shift in perspective, because we are not only challenged with our thoughts, but with our whole body, emotionally and physically. We have to reorient after being destabilized. Shattered.

As anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing explains: "Stories of environmental collapse can paralyse people, but they can also open us up to the world and foster new sensibilities."

Looking at a world without us, us individuals, as well as us humans, could be a way to engage differently with what we have now. By being confronted with the scenario of a world after us, we can maybe overcome the human ego that always seems to drive us into a spiral of self optimization.

"It takes only imagination to shift destructive fashions to constructive ones."
(Minik Rosing, *Connect-ed-ness*, p.79)

On the first page of her recent book *The End of Everything*, cosmologist Katie Mack writes about the End of Planet Earth: "In about five billion years, the Sun will swell to its red giant phase, engulf the orbit of Mercury and perhaps Venus, and leave the Earth a charred, lifeless, magma-covered rock." (Katie Mack, *The End of Everything*, p.1)

Fire will be the end of everything, she explains. No traces left of human life on earth, nothing to show for, just fire and a lifeless rock. This scenario is not new, we've encountered it before in different forms, but it is still hard to grasp. Five billion years is very far away, so we could think that picturing a lifeless earth doesn't concern us at all. But as Mack explains in her book, just the thought of *The End of Everything*, can change, well, everything. In the face of the ultimate ending, we are powerless and fragile. A similar scenario is described in the book *The Ends of the world* by Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. But they take it one step back in describing what the world could look like after the extinction of the human species. The world without us will either be a golden age for non-human life or a silent and dead desert. Imagining a world after us, brings a kind of freedom and opens up new possibilities to think of different concepts of togetherness after this current state and epoch, which some call the Anthropocene. This confrontation with our own ending should not be considered as a demand for action in order to stabilize what we have now. It is not meant as a kind of Carpe

Diem but more as a wish for a change of perspective, an encounter with something that is inherent to our existence: The End.

How can we connect with this thought? In an interview for ArtReview artist Anicka Yi explains her take on reality: „Even though I may not perceive things in a certain way, I know that if I were to die, tomorrow, the sun will still come up in the morning, with or without me, and that there will be rain, there will be weather patterns with or without my experience of that reality. Another way of looking at it is really just to reposition, or maybe even de-position a certain kind of certainty.“

In this de-positioning lies the secret. Using art, using fiction and storytelling to think of new possibilities of living together, finding new ways of entanglements, could be a way to get to know the concept of ending, experience a soft encounter with our most inner fear: The fear of dying. The fear of the end. If we think about it, we are faced with endings every day. We experience it every Day when the sun goes down: The day ends, the night begins, another day will come after it. Everything that happens is already gone. Still it often seems impossible for us to think beyond ourselves, imagine a world without us, after us. In facing Ending as a process and a constant state of dissolving, we face our own end and understand it as something immanent to life. We are already dead.

Theresa Schlesinger is a dramaturge who is interested in blurring the lines between theatre and theory as well as the question of how to approach an artistic practice from a more-than-human perspective.