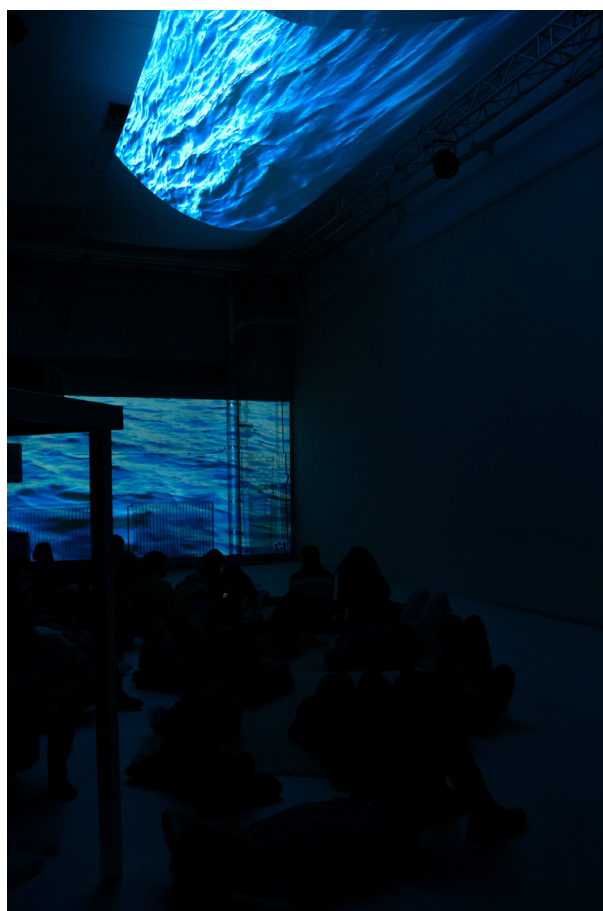


# a body watching itself depart

***River II** by Jasna L. Vinovrški / Public in Private sits on the edge between the worlds of life and death. Writer Parvathi Ramanathan was invited to sit on this dispersing edge to reflect through her words on the experience of witnessing a departure. The performance-installation was presented by Tanzfabrik Berlin in the curatorial rubric of 'NewWorks#2' fold in February 2023.*

My grandmother died the same night as I returned from watching *River II*. I saw her lifeless body via the video call with my mother in India. They had placed her on the floor – to be closest to the earth. My brother had held my grandmother's head in the process of moving her. I was miles away in Berlin, and wasn't physically present there to stay with the body, touch it, watch it, cry and laugh around it – at this eventuality – alone and together with other loved ones. But for thirteen days after her passing, my grandmother stayed in my mouth in the form of an ulcer. My fleshy tongue involuntarily prodded and caressed this mouth sore, trying to grasp my grandmother's departure.



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*River II* is an attempt to grasp the experience of this departure, from the perspective of the departing and that of the ones witnessing it. It sits on the edge between the worlds of life and death. Here the edge is not sharp, but a fragmented dispersal.

Framed as a performance-installation by Jasna L. Vinovrški / Public in Private, *River II* moves the audience through three spaces. Each site – a private living room, a public space in a morgue and an elemental space created using a video projection – is held by the quality of quiet dispersal. The voice of a disembodied narrator guides the audience's actions, attentions and body within each space. She seems to be tossing a thought around in her mind (if mind is what we may still call it), looking at it this way and that. We look at it with her – a body watching itself depart.

The voice invites the audience to regard a living room space from a close distance, and then enter it. We are allowed to observe someone's personal space, and the remains of their life in objects arranged in altars across the room. Her wondering voice floats asking "What does it feel like to be inanimate?" Held firmly within our living breathing bodies, the answer to this question feels inaccessible. The objects in the space too seem to quip that there isn't an easy answer. Are they so inanimate after all? The chandelier flickers. The pillow cushion I lean on yields into my back. This personal space somehow begins to feel sacrosanct. The next invitation then, to move an object and alter one aspect in this stranger's room ever so slightly, feels like an act to be tremendously considered. Before this moment of transition can completely slip into another realm, the voice ushers the audience into another room.



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The second setup of the morgue room presents us with a human body upon a table, covered with a white cloth. Everything here feels cold and sterile. We are invited to observe the body up close and also from a distance. The voice continues to twitter, fascinated by its own emulation of death. Indeed, it is fascinating to watch the performer who is a fully alive body in its most activated state of being 'on stage', but is attempting to feel the exact opposite of it. This also creates interesting dynamics for the viewing self. Are we audience members or mourners? More questions hover among the gathering. Does being bereft of life make one bereft of presence? Does being inanimate make one bereft of wishes? Receiving the impressions of the narrator through the disembodied voice allows us to receive the perspective of the pretend-dead body, and also be tuned to one's own position of witnessing a passing. How does one look at a dead person or a loved one who has passed?

My own mind floats to the moment I sat watching my late grandfather in his time, laid on the floor of our home. I touched his familiar skin with love, grief, shock and wonder. This was him but it was also not like him – already a body transforming.



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During a conversation a month after the premiere of *River II*, Vinovrški shares that this is rare in the European context today. She finds that the theme of death largely remains a taboo in Europe. Families don't tend to have access to the deceased bodies of their loved ones and most Europeans may have never even seen a dead body. *River II* is then a possible way to witness and comprehend the event of death, that is an eventual part of life. For Vinovrški, the performance becomes a way of accessing her grief.



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The performance also juxtaposes the emotional exploration with the practicalities of dealing with death – embodied by the morgue-keepers. In some moments, this even presents an element of subtle humour. In cleaning and dressing the performing-dead body, the morgue-keepers display a cold execution of choices. It brings up further questions for me: Is it necessary to put on underwear for a dead body before cremation? Would you dress them in their Sunday-best, in their most expensive party clothes or something that goes with their skin tone? The skin tone of a body that has passed is already changing every minute.

*River II* benefits from the passage of time. Simply spending longer in this shared condition of observing a performance of a wake, creates a shared ethos. It generates a shared sense of duty towards the dead individual in this highly bureaucratic room. We yield to fulfil their departing wishes by creating rituals – placing favourite flowers and lighting candles around the performer's still body. When we are ready to move on, the video installation in the final room attempts to transmit what the body could disperse into without its clunky constraints. The visual frame suggests a liberated dimension to space and movement – one I found to be quite appealing for my earth-bound body!



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I step out of the venue of *River II* and catch sight of the performer who had been lying on the morgue stretcher. She is joking with someone, laughing and living. Perhaps at that very moment, my grandmother too was also still living, but already heading towards a quiet dispersal...