

List Projects 33: Every Ocean Hughes

September 18 – December 14, 2025, Bakalar Gallery



MIT List Visual
Arts Center

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So says the death doula in Every Ocean Hughes's recent video installation, *One Big Bag* (2021). The work—alongside the performances *Help the Dead* (2019) and *River* (2023)—is part of a trilogy that considers the intimate process of dying. In *One Big Bag*, Hughes stages a monologue with a millennial death doula played by Lindsay Rico with choreography by Miguel Gutierrez. Surrounded by the objects of her mobile "corpse kit," the doula assuredly explains her tools: tampons for absorbing fluid, scissors for cutting "corpse hair," washing basins, ceremonial bells. In her address, the practical matters of dealing with a corpse (and an estate) are balanced with an unencumbered spirit of care for the dead and those around them. Refusing the fictions of euphemism or recourse to nuclear family, *One Big Bag* insists on alternative forms of kinship and communion that are made in and around death when it is confronted as a brute and beautiful fact. As the performer says in the film, "Death has to be understood with the senses. The mind doesn't get it."

Hughes's List Center exhibition features the installation version of *One Big Bag*, which comprises the video and the suspended objects that appear in it. She also presents *How to not be afraid (Still Life)* (2025), a new photograph that continues her exploration of the materiality of care for the dead. On the occasion of the exhibition, we spoke to Hughes about the choreography, objects, and ideas that animate this body of work.

–Natalie Bell and Zach Ngin

Zach Ngin: Before 2019 or so, a lot of your work dealt with liveness and what you call “alive time.” Can you say a little about how you began working with death? What threads carry through your practice, and what new directions does this project represent?

questions, anecdotes, and poetic language that accumulated into a portrait of alive time. Following this project, I moved into thinking about transitions, thresholds, loss, and legacy. I have found that there are many connections between alive time and the time of dying and death.

Every Ocean Hughes: I have very long threads in my practice, all the way back to my earliest works that are about death. Death and I have been close since I was a child. I lost friends early and often in my young life, and grief has been my greatest teacher. I also work in long, multiyear series. My prior project was based around a text I wrote called *Uncounted* (2013–17). *Uncounted* is a twenty-three-part text that engages a vocabulary of movement, margins, and trespass. It is about what is “unseen in time,” “uncounted experience,” “beyond the will to measure,” and the politics of transitions. It posed questions like, “What is a transition that is not a solution?”—abstract

ZN: You have used the term “queer death” in relation to this body of work. What does this mean, or what’s queer about death?

EOH: Queer death is meant to be spacious. It's about doing death differently. When I first started on this path, it was personal. I grew up visiting dying people in their homes because my mom and her best friend, my second mom, were hospice volunteers. Then in 2018, we helped my grandmother die. With her death, it was finally time for me to attend to the grief that had shaped my life. I attended my first death doula training not as an artist, but as a person wanting to be of service, a person



How to not be afraid (Still Life), 2025. Giclée print, 45 × 52 1/2 in. (114.3 × 133.4 cm). Courtesy the artist

Front cover:
One Big Bag, 2019 (still). Video with sound; 40:20 min. Courtesy the artist



Every Ocean Hughes, *Help the Dead*, 2019. Performance: Whitney Museum of American Art, 60 min. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Maria Baranova

who could turn toward death, instead of away from it. In doing this work, I wanted a way to talk about it, a modifier, something to bring it closer to things I loved, so I called it “queer death.”

It also comes from history and is about inheritance. My early interests and influences as an artist were related to queer art and activism. When I first began researching in the end-of-life and palliative care field—beyond thinking through my personal experience—I turned toward the history of the Zen Hospice Project in San Francisco, the first AIDS hospice. Queer death is tethered to those histories of loss, art, activism, community, and mutual aid modeled by prior generations.

ZN: *One Big Bag* forms a trilogy with two live performances, *Help the Dead* and *River*. How does it relate to these other works, and why did you choose the medium of video for this piece?

EOH: From the beginning, I wanted each work to have a focus: social, material, and mytho-

religious meaning-making, respectively. My work is invested in the live moment, even when it is video, photography, or writing, but I’ve also always been interested in distribution and where and how people find ideas that impact their lives. Live art is expensive, so I wanted to make sure one part of the trilogy is able to travel. I also wanted to work through the tension and dynamics between liveness, performativity, capture, and framing that happen in *One Big Bag*.

Natalie Bell: *One Big Bag* is shown as an installation here: The “corpse kit” items hang from the ceiling, as though the film’s vocabulary has spilled into the room, framing viewers with the tools of death care. Standing and moving among these objects, visitors encounter each at the height it would be used on their body. What effect do you hope this echo between film and installation has in the experience of the piece?

EOH: I hope that it punctuates the experience of the material body—it is an invitation to be embodied while watching. I like there to be

comfortable chairs spaced slightly apart so people have some room to breathe and be with it. To let it take time.

ZN: The death doula’s movements are so striking: They’re direct and forceful, but also signal an unusual capacity for stillness and lingering. Can you talk about how you developed the choreography?

EOH: The choreography addresses the intensity of the script and the direct language. I used the movement to alternately give relief to the viewer and relief to the performer as she embodied the script. Slapping her thighs and finding a rhythm to work through in the scene that speaks of a child’s corpse. Stomping her feet. Stalking around the perimeter. Crouching low and quiet.

I wrote the script for the character to embody competence. An offer for the viewer to be held and guided and to move through it with a direct affect, a direct gaze. That created momentum to keep the audience with us—momentum that felt like inclusion in the narrative and in the arc to death. Ultimately, the carrying and competence create trust with the viewer.

I invited Miguel Gutierrez to develop a set of movements that I then placed on top of certain sections of the script. Miguel led Lindsay Rico, the performer, into them, letting her find them in her own body as needed. The choreography is crucial to how the whole video works, how it conveys the language, narrative, and materiality. And how it heightens the aesthetic experience, formalizing the body and movement as Lindsay guides us through unknown territories.

NB: What role do you imagine the viewer is asked to play in this encounter—not just as a witness, but maybe also as a future participant, or even a student of care?

EOH: I want it to be an invitation to self-determination. I want it to be an invitation for mutual aid. People are invited to make their own choices from here.

ZN: *One Big Bag* was largely produced in 2020, during the strange, early days of the pandemic and a global uprising for Black life. Those events offered the fleeting promise that recognizing shared vulnerability could

reorient our practices of care and mutual aid. It feels as though we’re living amid a backlash to that moment, as our ruling class and political system continue to normalize mass death. I’m curious about whether the work was shaped by its political moment, and if so, how?

EOH: I started *One Big Bag* in 2019, pre-pandemic, just after performing *Help the Dead* the first few times. From 2018, and in *Help the Dead*, I was already committed to addressing violence, both brutal and systemic, and public deaths. More than tools for a “good death,” the framing of these projects centers front-page news, healthcare inequalities, state violence, ecocide, etc. I wrote it in lines like: *On this spectrum of alive and dead, dead is not the opposite of alive; it’s not a binary, or a simple biological fact. It’s a complex social choice. What is dead? What do we let die? Who do we let die? Who do we actively harm? What do we actively extinguish?* That’s my creative manifesto for this series. In asking these questions, I create environments and opportunities for individuals and institutions to confront things we often turn away from.

ZN: This work has been shown a few times now. What has most surprised you about how people have responded to it—what they’ve noticed, misunderstood, or held onto?

EOH: If I’ve been surprised by anything, it’s less about the content and more about the form. People can’t seem to decide if the performer is a real death doula or an actor. They feel so carried by her that they can only believe she’s as experienced as she appears. Also, many people have thought it’s one long take. So, despite all the elements of liveness/performance/theater/film that I foreground in the form, the emotion and connection make it feel seamless and continuous—much like the way people imagine life: The fantasy of continuity.

NB: What has stayed with you from those encounters, and has *One Big Bag* revealed anything new to you in return?

EOH: I like to watch people watch it. I’ll sit in the room, a person amongst people, and be with the work. A silent hosting. It’s hard for me to leave when I know it’s nearby. Not that I think people need hand-holding, but

making it has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life, and I make art to make these connections. Death has shaped my life since I was a young person, and transforming a lifetime of grief into a shape that touches other people has meant the world to me. I've received phone calls when an acquaintance's mother-in-law went into the hospital to die—"I got your number from a friend, what should I do?" "Breathe with them," I reply. "Let them lead you. Not knowing is the most intimate and honest thing you can do." Me, I'm sitting at home, not expecting to be invited to a stranger's death at that moment, but I'm moved by the trust offered to me and grateful for the reminder that it's always present.

ZN: For your List Projects exhibition, you're showing a new photograph that uses the objects from *One Big Bag* in the format of a still life, made during your residency at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation on Captiva Island, Florida, earlier this year. What was it like to revisit those objects in a new medium after an interval of a few years?

EOH: In *One Big Bag*, the objects are in relationship to the performer/doula's expertise. In the installation, the objects are in relationship to the audience's bodies. With the photograph, I wanted to formalize the objects in a composition to think about them aesthetically, materially, and visually. When I first had the idea for the photograph, I thought that I would annotate it either with captions or notes in the margins/frame to do some explanatory or narrative work, but when I saw them as a group, I realized they didn't need that. By being together, by being formally addressed as a group, they told their own story.

Since I first encountered a death doula's tool kit, I've been interested in the mundane materiality and objecthood of these things. How, when we use them for these intimate, death-related experiences, they transcend objecthood and become things. As a collection, they do something profound, and I wanted to honor them formally in this way.

Still lifes are memento mori, early images to remind us that the artwork might endure, but the flower will wilt, and we are going to die. And that's where the title comes in: How to not be afraid.

CREDITS

One Big Bag, 2021

Writer and Director: Every Ocean Hughes

Performer: Lindsay Rico

Producers: Every Ocean Hughes, Madeleine Molyneaux

Editor: Kersti Grunditz Brennan

Props & Costume: Montana Levi Blanco

Choreography: Miguel Gutierrez

Music: Sarah Hennies

Director of Photography: Sarah Tricker

Assistant Camera: Emilia Aghamirzai

Script Supervisor & Key PA: Gabby Preston

Coffin Builder & AD & Right-hand: JD Samson

Set Build: Dame Lewis

Sound Design: Lynne Trepanier

Re-recording Mixer: Gordon Neil Allen

Colorist: Tom Brennan, CSI

Postproduction Studio: The Flock

Subtitling & Translation: Kristofer Fredriksson, LinQ Media Group

Title Design: Bryce Wilner

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Every Ocean Hughes (b. 1977; lives and works in Stockholm and New York) is a transdisciplinary artist and writer. Her work has been shown in solo exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2023); Studio Voltaire, London (2022); Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2022); Secession, Vienna (2015); and PARTICIPANT INC., New York (2015). Collaboration has been a central part of her practice: She was editor and cofounder of the queer feminist journal and artist collective *LTTR*, has written lyrics for several bands (The Knife, Colin Self, JD Samson & MEN), and done costume design. Hughes's work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Centre national des arts plastiques, Paris; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; and Kadist, Paris/San Francisco, among others. For over ten years, Hughes has taught art in Europe and the US. Hughes also works as a coach for artists and creative producers as West Street Coaching.

List Projects 33: Every Ocean Hughes is organized by Natalie Bell, Chief Curator, and Zach Ngin, Curatorial Assistant.

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS



Every Ocean Hughes Discussion

October 27, 2025, 6:00–8:00 PM

In-person program

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FURTHER READING

Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Verso, 2009.

Crimp, Douglas. "Mourning and Militancy," *October*, vol. 51 (Winter 1989): 3–18.

Gawande, Atul. *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*. Metropolitan Books, 2014.

Ostaseski, Frank. *The Five Invitations: Discovering What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully*. Flatiron Books, 2016.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press, 2016.

Stanley, Eric A. *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable*. Duke University Press, 2021.

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