

## **PANEL 1: Individual abstracts**

*Harmandeep Gill: Coming to terms with impermanence. The pursuit for moral transformations among elderly Tibetans in Dharamsala*

When the first Tibetans escaped into exile in 1959, they hoped to return to Tibet within a few years. However, today they find themselves growing old in exile. Elderly Tibetans lead lives often characterized by uncertainty, partly due to their status as 'refugees' but particularly due to the large on-migration in recent years of exile-Tibetan youth to Western nations. This has left many elderly alone in the last phase of their lives. As a result, Tibetan old age homes have become the last resort for many. Spending the last phase of life in an old age home or dying alone without the presence of children and close kin is regarded as something unwanted and even shameful among many Tibetans. My project explores how this current situation affects the elderly Tibetans. At stake is not only their wellbeing in the last phase of their lives, but also, in the context of their Buddhist faith, their next life. Inspired by Joel Robbins' call for an anthropology of the good (2013), in this paper, I explore the ways elderly Tibetans strive to create the good within the Tibetan-exile context pervaded by uncertainty of old age, death, rebirth and the absence of children.

*Tove Nyholm: Enlarge, simplify, sensualize and deepen: From lived life to aesthetic expression*

My take on radical uncertainty and the search for the good old life is to transform lived life into aesthetic expression. For this presentation I have chosen to explore the life of my mother, Janet. She is 91 years old, has dementia, and is living in a small, sheltered institution. My mother emigrated from USA when she was 25, and married my Danish father. For 65 years she has lived in the same house in the woods, next to a stream, in intimate contact with both: house and nature. Arriving to Denmark she became pregnant overnight, and gave birth to five children in the following years. Letting go of her Mother tongue was a lifelong grief; she wanted to become a writer. She never left the feeling of being a stranger, in both countries. Today, she is becoming a stranger to herself, in her mind; her body is still strong. Only the sociality of company, talking, singing, going for a walk, enlivens her, and brings forward her strong lively spirit. My mother has left behind a lot of written material, she has slowly worn down the furniture, the doorsteps, the kitchen and garden utensils. Most of this is still in her house, where my sister is now living. In my presentation, I will discuss the process of transforming the life and material testimonies of my mother into a communicating aesthetic installation. Examples will be given of how to enlarge, simplify, but also sensualize and deepen this manifold life of hers.

*Janelle S. Taylor: "Between Abuse and Abandonment: Friendship and Dementia at the Margins of Social Personhood"*

What does a "good old life" look like from the perspective of a worst-case scenario? Beginning from the premise that personhood and relationality of individuals with dementia are socially enacted, this paper considers how (or whether) this happens for people with dementia who are without family. What happens when kin are not available to "hold someone in personhood" in situations where cognitive losses render claims to personhood and care fragile? Drawing on interview-based research in the U.S. on the topic of friendship and dementia, I consider complexities that arise at the frayed edges of the welfare state, when sometimes tenuous friendships formed by older adults living with dementia who lack family are haunted by the specters of abuse on the one hand, and abandonment on the other. This paper also considers friendships in relation to other relationships beyond the family (neighbors, service workers in the public and private sectors, guardians) that may come to figure as significant in the lives of older adults with dementia who lack strong family connections. Their situation calls out for attention, not only as an urgent human predicament, but also for the light that it sheds on little-recognized undersides and outsides of narrowly individualistic visions of the "good old life."

*Helle Wentzer: Aging as a Human Condition. The Aporias and Art of Practicing a Good (Old) Life*

Arendt in "The Human Condition" discerns three principal modes of activity, which sustain and cultivate a good life. "Labor" is related to biological and cyclic conditions of the body, and daily activities of eating, washing, dressing etc. "Work" relates to the mortality of man, as artifacts are created, that objectify human lives, and testify that we have lived. "Action" concerns the indeterminacy of the future and interdependency of humans on each other, thus to natality, the gift of being able to start something new. In this presentation I explore how labor, work, and action unfold from radical changes in the body and relations to intimate others. Special attention is drawn to the role of narratives in order to identify how "aporias" (Ricoeur 1988) that disrupt how "lived time" is experienced are reconfigured into meaningful "human time". Thus I explore the role of creativity and imagination (Ricoeur 1984, 1992) in the good old life, i.e. mimetic processes of poetic interpretation in which experiences of aging are textualized and materialized into everyday narrations or actions and works of art, both with the potential to reconfigure cultural understandings of old age.

*DISCUSSANT: Lawrence Cohen*

## PANEL 2: Individual abstracts

### *Lone Grøn: Ontological Breakdown, Institutional Aging and the Good Life in Denmark*

In contemporary Denmark growing old is strongly associated with decreasing physical and mental ability and increasing need of institutional care - to the extent that you will not be seen as old, if you are able to uphold an active life. Also a general societal discourse of healthy aging and transformations of institutional care toward reablement lead to a double vulnerability for those who do find themselves - at various chronological ages - thrown into 'the institutional aging process': living on with increasingly frail bodies and minds and doing this within a general ethos of dismissal of old age, sickness and death. I ask what the good old life might amount to, when through devastating physical sickness or dementia, all that life used to be about has broken down. Not only your home, but also your everyday relations and routines, your body and mind, have changed completely. Drawing on two ethnographic cases, Vagn, whose entire body is paralyzed and Thea, who is suffering from dementia, I argue that in the absence of any real possibility of recovery, the good life at life's end emerges as a responsive and relational one: a hope of being able – even if only for short time intervals – to be included among the living, to be a human being among others.

### *Maria Speyer: The Shared Body. Figural Drawing and the Specificity and Universality of Aging*

I present ongoing work on a series of large-scale figural drawings in which I use the line in a phenomenological exploration of the body and intimate others in aging processes.

My practice is entirely drawing based. Drawing to me is the most immediate means of artistic inquiry because there is no pretense that a line will ever render anything with optical correctness. Drawing stays in the realm of investigation, because the function of the line, almost as if the charcoal were a finger pointing, is to register what I try to understand. With the line I try to grasp, almost by touch, what baffles me: the most familiar and yet the strangest of things, the figure.

As an artistic motif the figure is privileged because it is object and subject of both artist and spectator and as such demands a particular engagement from both. This engagement is inevitable, because if we recognize something as a figure, we recognize it as being of us. Accordingly, an artistic exploration of the figural has the potential to engage the individual spectator on a universal, or shared, level. On one hand, there is nothing more specific than one's own body. Yet when we meet others we are swept up in a process of recognition that brings our specificity into question. Through recognition we vacillate between specificity and universality and find ourselves in a common field of experience. It is this common field of experience and its role in old age that the drawings explore.

*Susan Reynolds Whyte: 'Still here': shifting constellations of care in eastern Uganda*

'How are the bones?' is a common greeting to older people in rural Bunyole, for which the standard answer is: 'They're still here.' The owners of the bones are 'still here' too, having lived through shifting constellations of household and family to find themselves in the current contingencies of grandchildren, failed marriages, scarce money, and frail bodies. During their lifetimes, new diseases, medical technologies, and health discourses have appeared, but gendered and generational familial care remains primary. It is not a given, but a matter of uncertainty in that it must be arranged and rearranged. This study examines moral reflections surrounding caring for and caring about, and the difficult obligation to share unequal resources in order to manage sickness and debility. Drawing upon the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz, the approach is pronominal; it considers interactions in the first, second, and third persons, singular and plural. The appreciation of positions and relations is necessary where values and virtues are shaped and recognized between people. In an attempt to bring a deeper ethnographic temporality into play, the work engages primarily with families I have known well for 48 years—people with whom I myself have aged. Drawing on earlier and recent participant observation, I show how patterns of interdependence and appreciation have changed in the experiences of different actors including myself. 'Still here', I engage(d) interlocutors as 'you' and together 'we' talk(ed) about 'her' or 'them', considering the moral obligation to care for old bodies and the changing conditions for doing so.

*Rasmus Dyring: Ethics and Aging: On the Existential Vicissitudes of Ethical Striving*

If the quest for a good old life is somehow distinct from simply the quest for a good life, how is "old age" qua phase-of-life implicated in the configuration of ethical demands and ethical striving? This theoretical paper pursues the notion of "phase-of-life" as a fundamental concept in a philosophical anthropological gerontology. With special attention to ethnographic depictions of "old age" and building on the anthropological critiques of the notion of life phase, the paper pursues the hypothesis that human life phases are always "not yet settled," but continuously delimited culturally and existentially. The paper explores (i) the concrete dynamics by which the lived time of human life courses "settles" into specific life phases and (ii) the consequences for ethical life of such temporal configurations of lived experience. To these ends, special attention must be granted to the limit experiences that circumscribe those reconfigurations of social relationships that occur in such events as births and deaths, love, illness, marriages, divorces etc. The temporal and ethico-teleological restructuring of the aging experience that announces itself in such limit experiences is too easily missed in critical gerontology with its emphasis on political economic structures, but also in traditional philosophical phenomenology with its emphasis on a "generic" temporality of an ageless human form-of-life.

*DISCUSSANT: JOEL ROBBINS*