

SHROUDS II (CAIRO)

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It is the freedom of a life that does not give itself to separate, differentiated forms of existence, the freedom of a people for which art is the same as religion, which is the same as politics, which is the same as ethics: a way of being together... I am referring to the more modest, almost imperceptible way in which the collections of objects, images and signs... are increasingly shifting from the logic of dissensus to the logic of the mystery, of a testimony of co-presence.[1]

Lament and The Pollution of Polis

Maps of cities are flat, yet their histories contain vertical strata of events. Where in the topography and consciousness of a city can we locate its memory?

The body of a city may be compared symbolically to our body and its memory. One of the manifestations of a city's memory is its architecture and how it is inhabited and occupied by the citizens, such as in the case of Tahrir Square. To paraphrase Saskia Sassen, cities are potential spaces of resistance to military power: they are "weak regimes." While cities cannot destroy power, they can contest it.[2]

The space of city is negotiated between unknown elements through "ethical and political relations between strange, foreign, irreducible elements of otherness in our encounters with human and even non-human events in the world." [3] Bracha Ettinger invites us to understand aspects of subjectivity as encounters occurring at shared border spaces between several partial-subjects, never entirely united nor totally lost, but sharing and processing, within difference, elements of each unknown other.

Performed and inhabited, lament responds to loss and historical trauma. Lament is both real



Monika Weiss, Shrouds II
(Cairo), 2013

and imagined, a conversation conducted through the fragile veil dividing our immanent being from its disappearance. The collapse of language in rituals of lamentation underlines their political power achieved through the public, collective, transnational, repetitive, and performative action. Ancient rituals of lamentation offer a ground for contemporary reflection, evoking the potentiality for interconnectedness through transformative acts of inscription and becoming, which erase fixed boundaries. Overcoming language, the self multiplies and dissipates as lament becomes a site of exchange, co-disappearance and co-emerging.

Shrouds II (Cairo) employs the poetic enactment of ancient rituals of lamentation combined with site-specific and performative acts of drawing and inhabiting space for long intervals of time by large groups. Mark-making becomes a poetic and political gesture of enunciation within the public domain. Marks and lines resulting from such inhabitations

are dispersed, irregular, broken, hard to execute, and impossible to control. The archive appears in the act of mark-making and the resulting traces of embodied presence, the disjunction inside the fragile membrane of the shroud. It emerges as located between the living being and the speaking being that marks its presence.

Shrouds II (Cairo) is part of an ongoing series of projects which explore the notion of public lament as a form of expression outside language: timeless expression of lament is juxtaposed with the archive of historical events. Sited within the space of historical memory and contemporary urban landscape, lament is an emotional reaction and affective response. It seems to be stigmatized by an association with the private sphere, and is thus considered inappropriate or shameful in public. The language of public and choreographed group lamentation (the embodied gesture of post-memory) could offer a possibility for expanding our awareness of coexistence and responsibility for the Other. As part of this series of public projects executed internationally, *Shrouds II (Cairo)* considers contemporary contexts of apathy, indifference, invisibility, and historical amnesia within the public forum and polis.

Lament is extreme expression in the face of loss. Ultimately, as Judith Butler wrote, “grief furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility.”[4] Group mourning is an act of political force, and not only a response to individual grief. We should ask then, whose life is or is not worthy of grief? In the context of war and revolution, loss is often about the loss of the Other, but in reality the Other is also a part of oneself. Empathy and collective mourning, including mourning the loss of others who are supposed to be our enemies, can become a powerful political tool, in opposition to heroic, masculine fantasies of conquest and power.

Public space needs to remain unresolved and fluid, continuously exposing the penetrability of its existing structures of power. It needs to be wounded, drawn upon, and rebuilt time and time again into a transparent and dialogical forum, performed and negotiated through questioning presence and absence. The question of “others” is best resolved by shifting focus from “I” to Emanuel Levinas’ notion

of “reponse-ability”. Levinas’ subjectivity is formed in and through our subjected-ness to the other. Levinas’ call for “non-indifference” is closely related to his critique of vision, where ethics is considered “an optics” but without image, “bereft of the synoptic and totalizing, objectifying virtues of vision” [5] – vision without image, signifying non-indifferent ways of seeing others. The agency of performative gestures executed in the public domain may also be considered in the context of Giorgio Agamben’s “mediality” and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s “visibility”: “The gesture is the exhibition of a mediality; it is the process of making a means visible as such. It allows the emergence of the being-in-the-medium of human beings and thus it opens the ethical dimension for them (...) the gesture is communication of communicability. It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human being as pure mediality. However, because being-in-language is not something that could be said in sentences, the gesture is essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language.”[6]

Merleau-Ponty considered vision to be an operation of thought, where the body sees itself seeing, is visible and sensitive to itself. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty writes about the “strange adhesion” of seer and visible: “There is vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, turns back upon the whole of the visible, the whole of the tangible, of which it is a part, or when suddenly it finds itself surrounded by them, or when between it and them, and through their commerce, is formed a Visibility, a Tangible in itself, which belong properly neither to the body qua fact nor to the world qua fact - as upon two mirrors facing one another where two indefinite series of images set in one another arise which belong really to neither of the two surfaces, since each is only the rejoinder of the other, and which therefore form a couple, a couple more real than either of them.”[7]

Shrouds [Całuny]

The shroud is usually made of thin fabric such as cotton, often almost translucent. It connotes touching and veiling the body and refers to mourning its loss. In Polish “całun” (shroud) has an additional etymology in its connection to “pocalunek” (kiss). The gesture of covering someone’s corpse with sheets of canvas has an equally intimate resonance.

[1] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Continuum Publishing Group, 2006

[2] For further discussion, see Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights*, Princeton University Press, 2006

[3] Ettinger, Bracha. "Art as the Transport-Station of Trauma." In: Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger: *Artworking 1985-1999*, Ghent-Amsterdam: Ludion & Brussels: Palais des Beaux-Arts, 2000

[4] Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, 2004

[5] Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape/De l'évasion*, Stanford University Press, 2003

We assume the proximity to the body. We carefully touch its skin, wash it as part of a ritual cleansing, and cover it with the ultimate caress of a shroud. Enshrouding implies also remembering, holding onto something fragile and ephemeral.

The title *Shrouds II (Cairo)* refers to an earlier public project *Shrouds I* (2012), that took place in Zielona Góra, Poland. For *Shrouds II (Cairo)* I will collaborate with women from Cairo over a longer period of time, to enact slow silent gestures of lamentation, choreographed in sequences of time and space, in Tahrir Square. The performance will be filmed from an airplane circling above over several hours. This footage will later become a poetic film. The participants will cover Tahrir Square with hundreds of sheets of white canvas, stitching them together with white thread and placing stones to prevent them from flying away with the wind. On the day of the performance, in the early morning, groups of women dressed in black will gather in Tahrir Square. They will gradually place long sheets of white fabric on the ground. In Part I of the performance they will stitch the sheets together, enshrouding the entire square. They will proceed to lie down, one by one, at irregular intervals. With their eyes closed and using large chunks of charcoal and graphite, they will draw around their bodies (Part II). The white sheets will become darker as they are covered with layers of charcoal marks.

Flying above on a small airplane, I will film the performance. The hovering and circling airplane will be my drawing tool. The act of flying and filming will correspond to outlining Tahrir Square's vulnerable territory, its shifting histories and unknown futures. The movement of the airplane will provide a specific rhythm for the resulting cinematic image sequencing. Later, one by one, the women will gradually lift themselves up and slowly proceed to remove black scarfs from their heads, placing them on the ground (Part III). As the performers gradually leave the area, the black squares of fabric remain scattered amongst the white sheets, adding another layer of pattern to the emerging and ever-changing drawing-shroud covering the square.[10]

Drawing, because of its status as becoming (blot becoming mark, mark becoming line, line becoming border, border becoming body, body becoming sign ... the direction of this movement being always reversible), offers a continuum of sense, from one sense to the other. Yet it seems impossible to

observe or capture the precise moment or experience of transition from pre-sign to signification, image, and meaning. Through the immediacy and proximity that, more than any other medium, it appears to offer, drawing becomes an event, or as Levinas would say the dramatic event of "being immersed in being." But it is also a thing, in its materiality, the event of its happening is laid and preserved in charcoal and graphite on the white sheets of *Shrouds*. The drawing's relation to language lies not in language as a goal, but in exposing its mediality, which is the condition of language. We seem to conceive of language as not evolving, not coming to being gradually; it is there all at once, catastrophically, or not at all. Communication as exposure breaks with this ontology. Drawing as trace becomes lament.

The way we experience the repetition and accumulation of drawn marks (irrespective of what is being drawn) bears a close resemblance to the intonations, hesitations, and inflections of speech, akin to enunciation. Both seem to occur independently of sight, as generated by the mind and mediated by perception. Both fail to express yet through this attempt something occurs, other than the meaning, the true "non-meaning of the Thing." [11] Gestural acts of drawing are essentially melancholic, perhaps due to their predominant lack of color and the predominance of line over surface or the often unbounded, inconstant edge. Perhaps the act of leaving a trace is by its nature a "melancholy moment, an actual or imaginary loss of meaning." [12] Drawing retains its prehistoric qualities, is coextensive with the human. It becomes archaic in the age of mechanical reproduction and virtual reality, yet this makes contact with the tactility of the most up-to-date mediums. In an act of reclamation – of the visual – in the registration of actions something can be seen, retrieved from the depths of the mind, brought into existence and only just named.

Antiphonal Structures [13]

Language is a sovereign system that signifies and coincides with denotation. It maintains itself in relation to what it describes but withdraws from it into 'pure' language. In my work lament questions language. An expression that arises from speech, lament represents the moment of breaking speech and facing loss of meaning. Integrating audio recordings of the performers' voices, the archive appears in my work not as an evolution in time or as

[6] Agamben, Giorgio. *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, 2000

[7] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, Paris: Gallimard 1961.

[8] Upon my arrival its history remained largely unknown to Zielona Góra's citizens. Today the story of the site is being discussed and negotiated more and more, despite the fact that it was sold by the city to a private developer, and despite the officially and administratively supported urban and historical amnesia

[9] As I am writing this, I realize that the performance I envision is nearly impossible in today's Cairo

[10] In previous incarnations of this series of projects the canvas sheets would be gathered and placed in institutional setting. In case of Cairo I will explore other alternatives as well.

[11] Kristeva, Julia. *Black Sun. Depression and Melancholia*, Columbia University Press, 1992

[12] Kristeva, Ibid.

[13] *antiphon* Greek, "opposite" + "voice"

[14] Rutherford, Ian. *When You Go to the Meadow... The Lament of the Taptara-Women in the Hittite Sallis Wastais Ritual in "Lament: Studies in the Ancient Mediterranean and Beyond"*, ed. Ann Suter, Oxford University Press, 2008

Parts of this text have been inspired by and are related to my earlier writings and lectures, including *Performing the Drawing*, lecture at Harvard University, Boston, USA, 2012; *Anamnesis*, published in *Technoetic Arts*, Intellect, Bristol, UK, 2006; and *Sostenuto-Transforming Intervals*, published in

a depository of gradual accession and accretion, but rather as a flat, non-linear, layered surface, composed of multiple narratives, which offer the potential to overcome the structures of power. Fragmentary and non-hierarchical, the database of the archive is traversed in a search for meaning. Lament assumes a form of expression that is excluded or expelled from language – the latter understood as a system or design of meaning in relation to event. As a loss of language (leros), lament traverses the flat surface of the archive.

Monika Weiss, *Anamnesis*, 2006



In the oldest examples of lament, intercourse between the living world and the world of the dead is performed as a dialogue either between two beings, one present and one absent, on the other side, or between two antiphonal groups of mourners. The imagined dialogue between a traveller and a tomb was full of austere brevity characteristic of the archaic style, which later developed into a refrain, the choral ephymnia, incantation, repetition, and echoing. ABA – a ternary form of lament – is a recurring expressive form that has possibly influenced certain forms of European music, among others, for example the sonata with its earlier structure, allegro-adagio-allegro. In traditions of lament, the address (opening) would be followed by an appeal (intervening narrative/recollection of past events) and finally reiteration of the initial address. Epode means “after-song” but also “after-someone,” a magic incantation, designed to bring someone back, if only in imagination, in the moment of incantation, of enunciation.

The strong tendency for women to be agents of lamentation is seen by the anthropologist Maurice Bloch as part of a more general association of women with death by early tribal societies, who tended to perceive death as analogous to birth, both fundamental biological processes, and both seemingly controlled by women, who by the act of giving birth, were already “contaminated” or anointed by the “other side” while men, whose position in society was more public, “were thus left

comparatively free of death pollution.”[14]

John Cage reminds us that absence of sound is never entirely possible or complete. It is the non-hierarchical, uncompromised attention given to seemingly opposite structures of composition and chance that I take as the greatest inspiration from Cage’s work. Extending the symbolic meaning of this “impossible silence” into a political realm, I work with voices of people who were damaged by abrupt encounters with power. Focusing on the moment when language collapses in face of the loss of the ability to signify, I compose sound from testimonies, recitations, laments, and the environment.

Epilogue

The city is a place of contamination by the flesh of the body, the blood of the memory, and the affect of the empathy. It is exposed and polluted by lamentation and reveals itself as an open wound, as an ultimate state of fluidity, as finally belonging to all, a fundamentally public domain. Politically acknowledged and publicly inhabited Otherness is the very fabric of the city. Cairo today becomes fully itself through the porosity of doubt - through our questioning, arguing, voting, debating, marking, erasing, mourning, commemorating, negotiating and re-drawing.

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