

CROSSING

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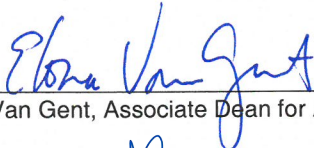
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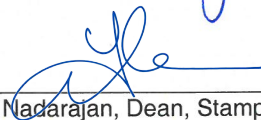
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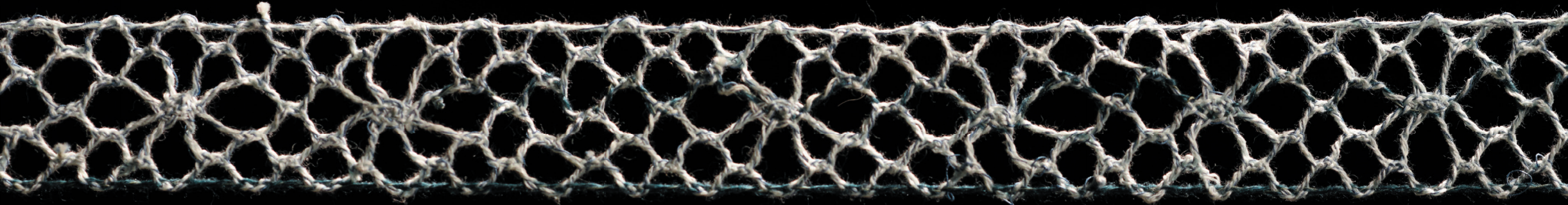


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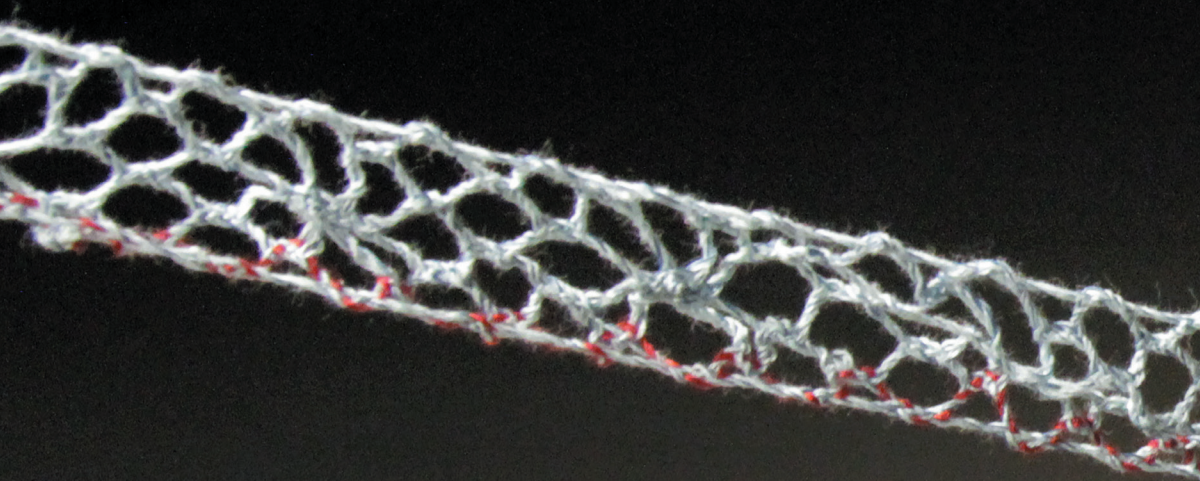
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Abstract

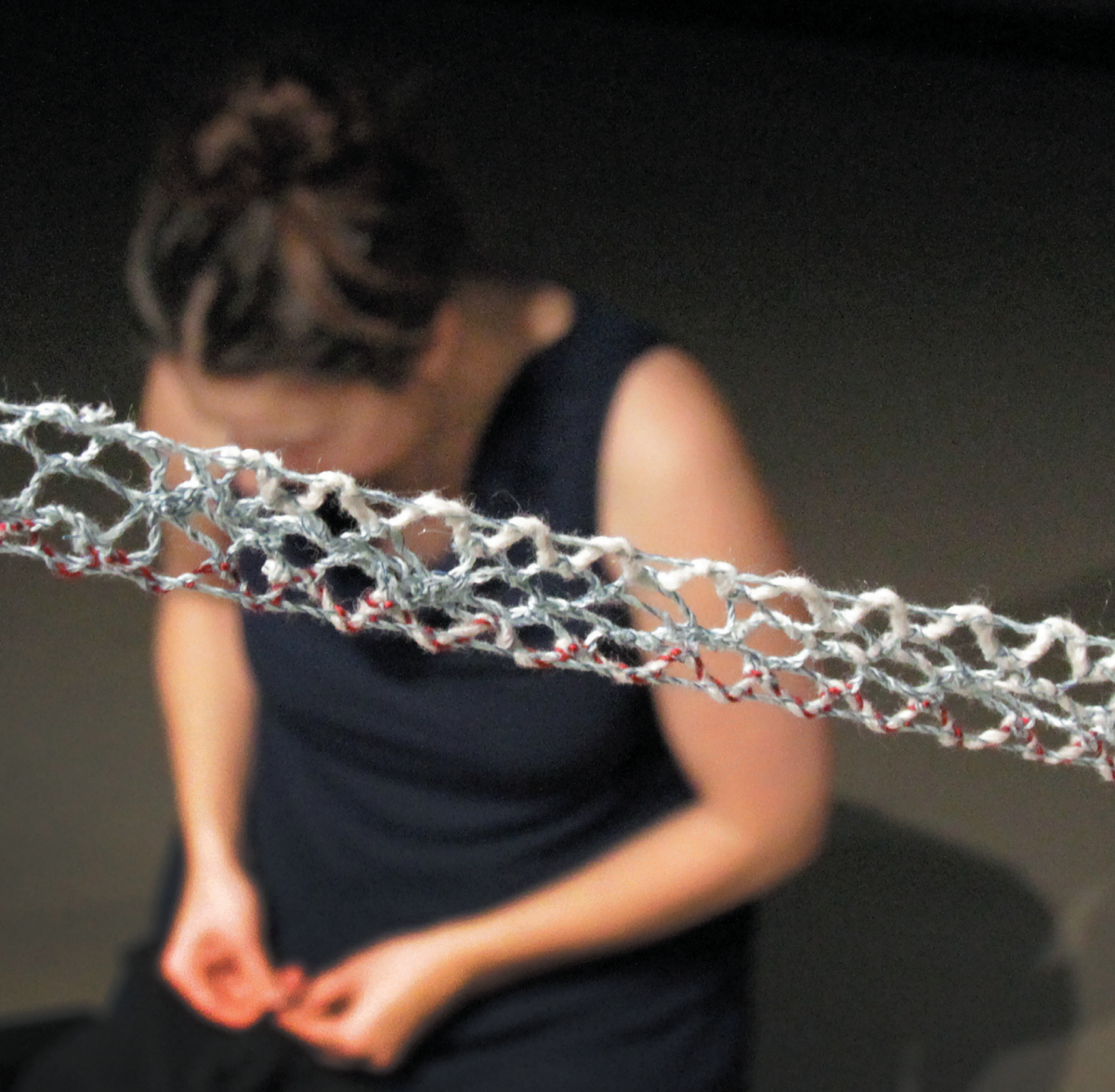
Exploring the process of grief and the chasing of elusive, tenuous connections to the dead, the work in *Crossing* centers on the repetitive and laborious construction of handmade lace using threads harvested from the clothing of a close friend who recently passed away. Through sculpture, installation, video, and long-duration performance, I ask how grief can be embodied in the physical labor of making, and encourage the viewer to fully embrace experiences of loss — to sit with them, make something, and discover the myriad, often surprising revelations they have to offer. Research for this project includes various topics from grief theory, the history of lace-making, ritual theory and history, the practice of memorialization, Victorian-era mourning culture, therapeutic benefits associated with the act of making, contemporary art inspired by death, grief, and loss, and more. By exploring the intersection of private grief and public mourning in my work, I strive to do my part in pushing our collective understanding of grief and mourning away from a place of fear and avoidance towards one of acceptance and understanding.

Keywords

Grief, mourning, lace, lace-making, lace bobbins, embodied knowledge, ritual, labor, cloth, clothing, clothing of the deceased, art therapy, therapeutic benefits of making, memorials, memorialization, Victorian Era mourning culture, Continuing Bonds, Grief Work, long-duration performance, performance, installation, video, sculpture.



PROLOGUE



Just a few weeks after beginning my graduate program, I learned that my closest friend, Ana, was given two months left to live. She had been battling a brain tumor for almost five years, and despite initial progress, her third and most recent surgery had not been a success. The tumor was growing too fast. On November 16, 2016, I was preparing yarn for my loom in the fibers studio when the text message from her father arrived: “Ana peacefully passed away at 7:45 am.” After stepping out of the room for a brief moment, I continued on with my yarn.

When I was first told about Ana's prognosis and realized that I would be losing her, I was filled with the need to make something. Anything. I needed my hands to be busy and moving — I needed something tactile, something to touch and manipulate and form into something else, something new. In the months leading up to her death and after she eventually passed away, this impulse was ever-present. I couldn't explain it, nor did I feel the need. It somehow seemed inextricably linked to my newfound grief, a kind of reflex. To grieve was to make, to make was to grieve. I trusted my body to show me how grief works.

I spent hours over the loom weaving Ana a 100-foot burial shroud, periodically interlacing hair from my own head. I built her a memorial tower, repeatedly ripping and repairing its cloth surface with thread made from my hair. I ripped apart clothing and wove strips of it into a symbolic grave. Rather than minimize or ignore, I chose to embrace my experience of loss — one thread at a time — through the labor and process of making.

Eventually, I found my way to lace, as Ana herself was an artist and burgeoning lace-maker. In the last years of her life, she inherited a large collection of lace samples made by her grandmother and great aunts, which inspired her to take her own lace-making lessons. She began experimenting with how she might incorporate these techniques in her art, and was planning an ambitious exhibition of her work alongside her family's historic lace samples. Tragically, she passed away before she was able to realize this vision. I inherited her lace pillow with a piece of lace that she was making left incomplete.

She was working on the *grain d'orge* pattern — one that I learned myself when I took my own lace-making lessons after Ana died. It's a complicated pattern for a beginner, and I struggled with it at first. My instructor demonstrated, separating the wooden bobbins into three groups: "It's like two friends crossing a river," she explained as her fingers moved along the lace pillow. "First one crosses, then the other follows."

This poignant metaphor resonated with me deeply, and continues to as I grieve for Ana and contemplate our separation. She has “crossed over” and I am left here searching for a way to follow. As I’ve worked more and more over my lace pillow, particularly on the *grain d’orge* pattern, it seems that lace-making has become my way of attempting to follow her. For when I make lace, I can feel Ana’s presence in my life again. I have conversations with her in my mind about complicated patterns, I complain to her when I have to undo several minutes’ work and need to back-track, and we laugh together at my unsightly errors. My fingers move amongst the bobbins, my mind clears, and for brief moments we stand on the same side of the river.



INTRODUCTION



Inspired by my process of grieving for and connecting with Ana through the labor of lace-making, my visual thesis work centers around the repetitive and laborious construction of handmade lace using threads harvested from her clothing. Several works have emerged from this process for my thesis exhibition, most prominently, a large-scale installation in which a continuous piece of handmade lace is attached to a lace-making pillow on a table and stretched between the table and two chairs (one next to the table, the other several feet away on the

opposite side of the room). The lace hovers above the table and ground, ascends gradually towards the ceiling as it crosses the room until it is virtually out of sight, and then falls abruptly back down to earth, piling into the empty chair.

Periodically throughout the exhibition, I present a long-duration live performance piece (ranging from 1 to 5 hours) in which I harvest threads from Ana's clothing and use them to make lace within the installation space. When I am not performing, a video piece depicting the actions of my performance is projected on a wall opposite the installation. In addition to these works, there is a small sculpture made using Ana's own unfinished lace and her wooden lace-making bobbins that have been engraved with a short "poem" inspired by my lace-making instructor's words about the "two friends going over a river."

These works are the result of my experience of grieving for Ana, of course, but that alone does not entirely explain their origin. They are also the outcome of a pondering and a kind of problem solving. As Ana's passing was my first major experience of loss due to death, I have become increasingly aware of the many problematic ways in which we view death-related grief in Western culture. These views are greatly characterized by fear and avoidance, as grief is a largely taboo topic that is relegated almost exclusively to the realm of the private, its public expression highly circumscribed by social mores and conventions. It seems to be thought of as kind of "sickness" that we dread. Because of this pervasive perception, the prevailing cultural ethos in Western society is to encourage the notion of "moving on" from our connections with the deceased and finding the "end" of our grief by progressing through a set of prescribed stages — a series of checkmarks down a list until finished, "chores" that we dislike and assign little value.

Though the fields of grief theory and therapy have done much to debunk such ideas (for decades now), these myths remain in our culture at large. And even within the highly developed canon of grief theory, there are still gaps in its knowledge — topics that are largely unstudied

and undiscussed in the pursuit of understanding grief and its potential value to us. One such gap is the neglect of the body in grief theory — not how the body is affected by grief in terms of medical symptomology, but rather how the body *itself* grieves. Much thought is dedicated to mind-centered, psychological approaches to understanding grief, and in recent years there has even been an increasing focus on spiritual aspects of the grieving process as well, but the potential for experiencing some form of *embodied* knowledge of grief — a way of “knowing” how to grieve which lives in/comes from the body — is still largely unexplored.

My intuitive need to make something — to engage in physical labor in the face of my grief — seemed to come from such a place of embodied knowledge, and thus I set out to attempt to learn more about this process through my own creative research. This inquiry was largely driven by the following questions: What does the physical labor of making bring to the experience of grief? Does the body “know” something about grieving that the conscious mind does not? Can such labor be a means for creating and maintaining continuing bonds with a deceased loved one? Does engaging in the grief process through such physical means, which more fully incorporates the body, lead to a more fulfilling or enlightening experience of grief? How do I, as a contemporary artist, explore these ideas and experiences specifically through *art*-making, and what are the implications of sharing such a private process with the public, both for myself and for my viewers? Other contemporary artists address processes of grief and mourning in many ways, which I have both drawn inspiration from and resisted in my work, as we will see. In my own artistic practice, I focus on the process of grief through the lens of its embodiment in the labor of making and in the act of public performance.



CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION



About This Contextual Discussion

This chapter is divided into two main sections, each with its own sub-sections. The first section will contextualize the three primary elements found in my visual thesis work: cloth (specifically clothing of the deceased), lace, and physical labor. The second section will contextualize various themes and concepts that emerge from the combination of these three primary elements, namely the process of grief, the ther-

apeutic benefits of making, ritual, and memorialization. The work of contemporary artists will be incorporated throughout the chapter as they relate to the concepts and ideas brought forth.

Terminology

To begin, we must first clarify some simple yet important terminology. As these terms and concepts are often used interchangeably and/or in a broad scope of contexts, their precise meanings are not always evident. With that in mind, the terms *grief*, *mourning*, *bereavement* and “*Western culture*” will be defined for the reader here, so as to avoid confusion and create a base from which to proceed with the argument of this thesis.

One can find several slightly different definitions for the term *grief* in psychological grief theory, but for the purposes of this thesis, the following definition will be used: Grief is a response to loss that is a “dynamic, pervasive, highly individualized process” that is experienced emotionally, cognitively, behaviorally, physically and spiritually.¹ The term *mourning* will be used to refer to the public expression of this individualized grief process. It is important to note that whether such expressions are genuine or performative, because they are publicly shared, mourning practices are heavily influenced by cultural norms and taboos, and can both reflect and contradict how a grieving person is feeling.² *Bereavement* refers explicitly to loss resulting from the death of a loved one,³ and lastly, references to “*Western culture*” or the “*Western world*” are meant to describe the predominantly European and Anglo cultures of the heavily industrialized nations of Western Europe and North America (such as the United States and England, for example), and do not refer to the entire Western hemisphere. Most of the contexts and examples included in this thesis come from Western culture, as I have just defined it, and are examined through its lens.

Section One: Cloth, Lace, and Labor

Cloth and the Clothing of the Deceased

The materiality of cloth conveys several meaningful associations, particularly with the body, death, and memory. In *Conceptual Textiles: Material Meanings*, curator Alison Ferris quotes art historian, Ewa Kuryluk: “The rich symbolism of thread and fabric resonate in everyone because of textiles’ omnipresence in swaddling clothes, garments, bed sheets, towels, blankets, (bridal) veils, (burial) shrouds... and other textiles that provide us with comfort and pleasure.”⁴ In his essay about cloth and clothing, Ian Were also notes, “From our child-play, to our eating, to our spiritual lives and onto our working, love-making, dancing, aging and dying, there are particular clothes and fabrics associated with, steeped in or suffused by, each time, place and event that we’ve been part of.”⁵ Simply put, the integral role of cloth in our lives makes it an especially significant and intimately understood material.

This ubiquity, familiarity, and daily physical contact with cloth make it particularly connected to our bodies, both physically and metaphorically. Not only are the physical characteristics of cloth similar to that of the body (tactility, pliability and absorbency),⁶ but as Peter Stallybrass puts it in his essay, *Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things*, “The magic of cloth...is that it receives...our smells, our sweat, our shape even... the human imprint.”⁷ Through constant physical contact, cloth is formed by the body in many ways.

Anne Wilson’s *Mourning Cloth* series, in which she incorporates human hair into cloth, is a poignant example of this cloth/body connection (see Figure 1). By literally melding the body with cloth in this work, Wilson asks the viewer to consider the relationship between the two, specifically in the context of death and grief as indicated by the series’ title. When viewing this work, we can imagine the hair left behind by a lost loved one, clinging to their towel in the bathroom and laying on their pillow in the bed. In this way, the trace of the body found in Wil-



Figure 1.1. Mourning Cloth (drape) by Anne Wilson, 1992–1993.



Figure 1.2. *Mourning Cloth (sham)* by Anne Wilson, 1992–1993.

son's cloth sculptures becomes a powerful signifier of absence, possibly summoning ideas of loss and grief in the mind of the viewer.

As we experience this connection between cloth and our bodies over our entire lives — swaddled at birth, covered by clothing, and shrouded upon death — textiles poignantly embody our life cycle. Writer Jessica Hemmings conveys this sentiment when she writes, "... the lifespan of textiles is not dissimilar to that of our own bodies: newness, gradually replaced by wear and tear until worn out."⁸ This shared lifespan along with the intimate relationship between cloth and the human body can make cloth itself a metaphor for death — the impermanence of our existence in material form. Cloth also signifies concepts of death and loss because of the many roles cloth and clothing play in both formal and informal funerary and grieving rituals. From burial shrouds, to pallcloths used to cover caskets, to various types of mourning dress, to religious rituals involving cloth (such as the Jewish practice of *keriah* in which a mourner's clothing is ripped, for example). Just as our bodies are intimately bound to cloth in life, so they are in death.

We can see cloth acting as a metaphor for death in Tessa Windt's piece, *Abandon*, in which a large amount of black fabric lies on the ground in a bulging mass, densely folded in some parts and more casually draped in others. Referencing both an oversized shroud and the pleated fabric

lining of modern-day caskets, the emotional weight of death and loss is embodied in the physical properties of this cloth sculpture (see Figure 2). Windt writes, “This piece of cloth allows me to find a conversation between the need for a tangible response to loss and the necessity of acknowledging the disappearance at its center.”⁹

As we have seen that cloth has intimate associations with both our living and dead bodies, it easily follows that they can allude to the concept of memory as well. Stallybrass points out that “cloth is a kind of memory” because “when a person is absent or dies, cloth can absorb his or her absent presence.”¹⁰ Artist Merrill Mason’s series of shroud “portraits” speak to this idea of memory and cloth in the context of death by highlighting the trace of the body (and ultimately its absence) in and on linen shrouds, manifested by worn-out areas, bite marks, stains from tears, saliva, and perspiration, as well as other body-made markings (see Figure 3). This work illustrates that our bodies quite naturally become intimately entangled with cloth on a daily basis, and thus by extension, so do our memories, both in remembering and being remembered.



Figure 2. *Abandon* by Tessa Windt, 2005.

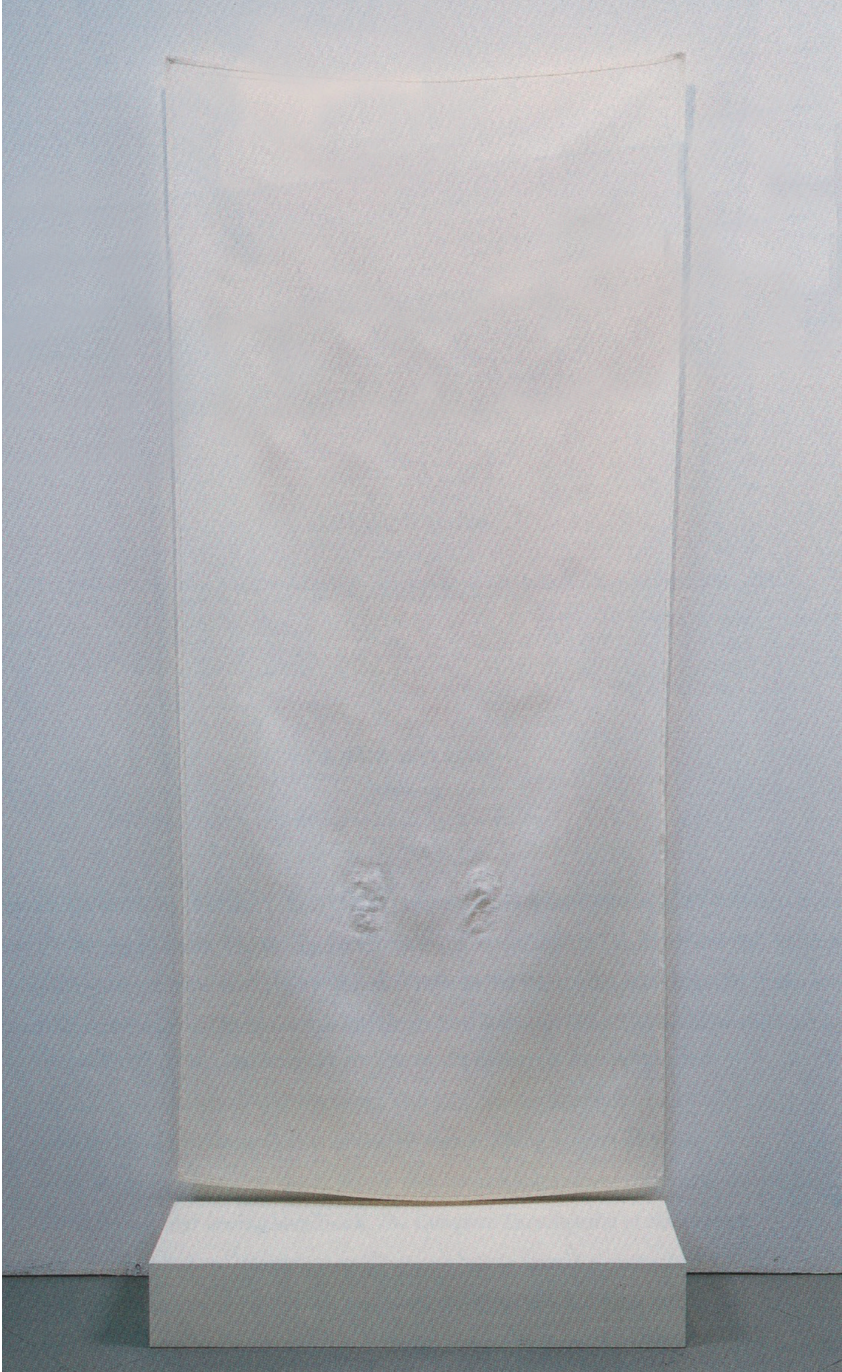


Figure 3. 5'8", 140 lbs. by Merrill Mason, 1994.



Figure 4. Untitled billboard by Felix González-Torres, 1991.

Similar ideas can also be seen in Felix González-Torres' Untitled billboard photograph of an empty bed, created after the death of his partner, Ross Laycock (see Figure 4). The physical trace of bodies can be seen in the bed, as evident in the wrinkles of the cloth and the indentation in the pillows; the shape of the cloth becomes a signifier for the body's absence. By placing this image on large billboards for public consumption, Gonzalez-Torres pushes his exploration of trace and memory embodied in cloth into an act of mourning and memorialization as well — the private becomes public.

These relationships between cloth, the body, death, and memory make the clothing of deceased loved ones a particularly powerful material. As clothing has direct physical contact with our bodies every day, it is not difficult to understand how, in the physical absence of a person, clothing itself can function as a proxy for an absent body. It becomes a signifier for a person's absence — the presence of their absence, even. We can see this sentiment expressed in the memoir, *A Season of Grief*, by Bill Valentine when he writes,

“I’m trying to get comfortable with his closet, working my way up to the day when I begin to dispose of his clothes...I put some of my own clothes on the hooks on the door... It was too sad seeing the same jeans hanging there day after day, unused. They were withering, like the stalk of a plant long since gone to seed.”¹¹

In this excerpt, we see that the absence of Valentine’s dead partner was made palpable to him by the presence of the abandoned jeans left hanging in the closet.

Many artists have used clothing of the deceased to explore this commonly shared experience of bereavement. In Reneé Zettle-Sterling’s piece, *Mortcloth / Mapcloth*, she constructs a pallcloth in the dimensions of her deceased brother’s body using his clothing, depicting a topographical map of the site of his death (see Figure 5). And in Claude Simard’s piece, *You Are the Third Person I Told*, socks that once belonged to his deceased grandfather are laboriously hand-stitched into a colorful grid that reference the beauty of modern art as well as the comfort of a domestic quilt or blanket (see Figure 6).



Figure 5.1. *Mortcloth / Mapcloth* (detail) by Reneé Zettle-Sterling, 2011.



Figure 5.2. Morthcloth / Mapcloth by Reneé Zettle-Sterling, 2011.

By transforming the clothing of lost loved ones into works of art, these artists reveal how the body, memory, and absence are inherently embedded in the clothing of the deceased, and how the use of such material can add layers of meaning to an artwork. Such pieces speak to the “unbearably intimate”¹² nature of the physical traces of lost loved ones that are “both reassuring and terrifying,”¹³ creating the potential for an emotional reaction in the viewer. In a similar way, I use a deceased loved one’s clothing—and all its inherent associations—in my own work in an effort to foster an emotive response, both for myself as I engage with the materials in making the work, as well as for my viewers as they experience the work in the gallery.



Figure 6. *You are the Third Person I Told* by Claude Simard, 1992.

Lace

The second primary element found in my visual work is lace where the deconstructed clothing of my friend, Ana, is used to create several yards of delicate handmade lace trim. Although my decision to transform her clothing in this way initially stemmed from the fact that she was a burgeoning lace-maker herself, my reasoning for this choice did not stop there. Although lace is commonly associated with ideas of royalty, femininity, and fashion, death lies just below the surface. In fact, there is a long history of lace being linked to death rituals and mourning, and in some cases, with grief itself.

In parts of Western Europe during the seventeenth, eighteenth and even nineteenth centuries, it was common to bury the dead in lace-trimmed shrouds, as Alice-May Bullock writes, "It was considered a great privilege and an honour to be buried in lace."¹⁴ Many women chose to be buried with their wedding lace (including Queen Victoria of England),¹⁵ and even when an act of the English Parliament mandated the use of wool for burial shrouds in the seventeenth century, woolen laces were created to keep with custom of being buried in lace.¹⁶ Furthermore, when European nations passed laws prohibiting the importation of foreign laces in order to protect and promote their own lace industries, elaborate smuggling schemes emerged in which lace was smuggled inside coffins alongside corpses, crossing borders to be buried and later dug up by smugglers under the cover of nightfall.¹⁷ In fact, in some cases, a body was not inside the coffin at all so there was more space for the coveted and valuable lace.¹⁸ We can see elements of this history playfully illustrated in the piece, *Mortal Being*, by Eliza Bennett (see Figure 7).

Of course, our history of lace and its associations with death, grief, and mourning would be incomplete if we did not examine the elaborate mourning culture of the Victorian era in the nineteenth century. The experience of death and mourning in this period was influenced by Queen



Figure 7. *Mortal Being (with detail)* by Eliza Bennett, 2015.

Victoria's own extended period of mourning following the death of her husband in 1861, which was characterized by her seclusion from the public and strict adherence to black mourning dress for the remainder of her life.¹⁹ The Queen's fashions and behaviors took hold in the population at large and spread throughout Western Europe and the United States, creating a material culture of mourning that was replete with various mourning-related objects, (such as black-trimmed stationery for death announcements and memorial hair wreaths and jewelry, for example), as well a highly intricate set of rules and mores concerning mourning attire, most especially for women.²⁰

Black lace was an essential component of this Victorian-era mourning dress, or "widow's weeds" as it was called for women who lost their husbands,²¹ particularly in the later stages of the official mourning period in which lace trim was permitted on black crêpe dresses and mourning handkerchiefs²² (see Figure 8). In her book, *Victorian Lace*,



Figure 8. A Victorian-era lace-trimmed mourning handkerchief from the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum.

Patricia Wardle writes, “By the end of Victoria’s reign... lace seemed to be more fashionable and used in greater quantity than ever before in its history.”²³ Queen Victoria herself amassed a collection of lace valued at £76,000 by the time of her death in 1876.²⁴

The installation at the *Lace in Translation* exhibition at Philadelphia University in 2010 by artist and designer Tord Boontje references the prevalence of lace in Victorian-era mourning dress (see Figure 9). By pairing historical Victorian-era mourning garments with his contemporary web-like lace sculpture, Boontje links the “tangled” and enveloping emotions of private grief and their public expression in cultures of mourning.



Figure 9. Installation for Lace in Translation (with detail of Victorian-era dress) by Tard Boontje, 2009.

Although lace was primarily produced in the realm of a booming lace-making industry during the Victorian era and used mostly for public mourning practices, the delicate and laborious process of constructing hand-made lace could sometimes carry emotional significance. In fact, in the years following her husband's death, Queen Victoria herself reportedly embroidered mourning handkerchiefs and became an avid practitioner of crochet (a form of needle lace), engaging in a "peaceful and relaxing activity that helped her cope with her grief,"²⁵ (see Figure 10). Wardle notes that by the end of the 1860's "lace was so much in favor that [bobbin and needle] lace-making had joined embroidery, crochet, tatting, and other varieties of fancy work"²⁶ in the repertoires of middle and upper-class Victorian women. It is not hard to imagine, then, that other widows like the Queen might have turned to lace-making as a way to cope with grief.



Figure 10. Queen Victorian working on her crochet lace in 1889.

The work of artist Carson Fox embodies this idea of lace-making being a method for coping with grief. Invoking both Victorian-era mourning hair jewelry and the use of lace in mourning attire at the time, Fox combines the materiality of the jewelry with lace-making techniques to produce her series of memorial hair-lace panels, *Hair Filigrees*, as well as a text-based piece of lace-like construction, *I Know About Your Broken Heart* (see Figure 11). Fox links lace to grief and loss by explaining that lace-making “was a medium where women expressed themselves creatively; their frustrations and potentially their unhappiness were drawn in the lines of the lace.”²⁷

This idea can also be found in my own work, in the sections of the lace where the pattern goes “off track” or is abandoned altogether; a visual manifestation of my periods of frustration, anger, and acute grief (see Figure 12, next page).



Figure 11.1. *Hair Filigree #4* by Carson Fox, 2004.

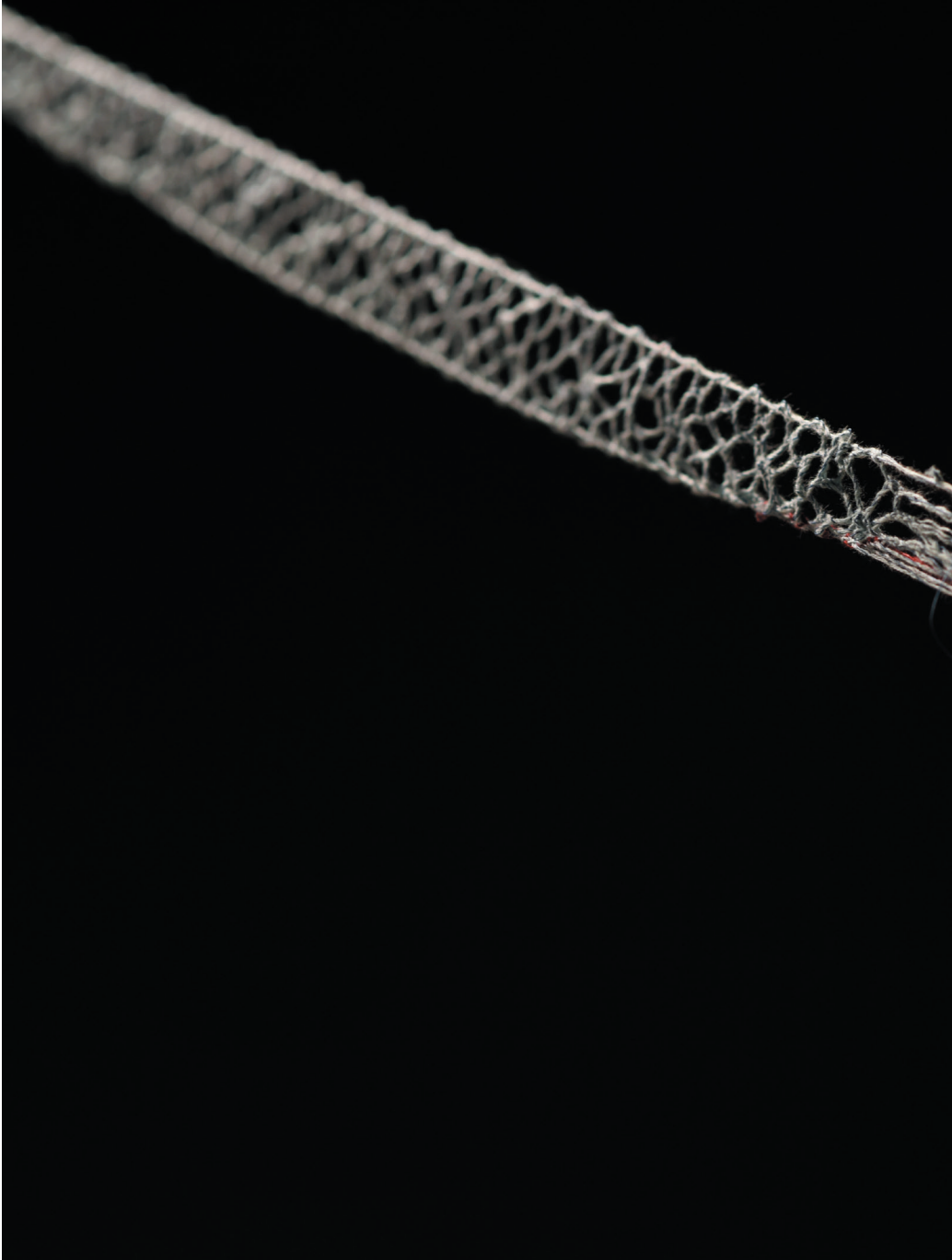


Figure 12. From Crossing I installation, thesis exhibition, 2018.



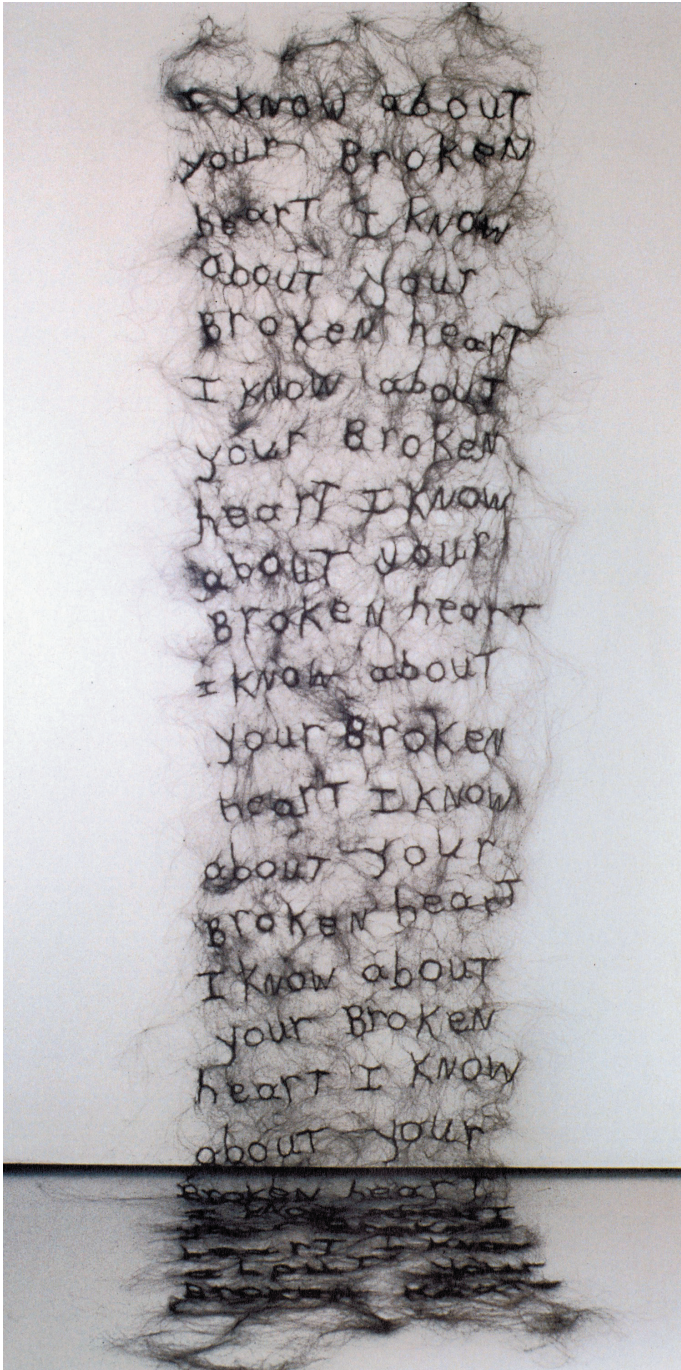


Figure 11.2. I Know About Your Broken Heart by Carson Fox, 2004.

One can find a connection between lace and death, grief, and mourning beyond how finished lace itself has been used historically by researching the process of lace-making itself, particularly the bobbin variety. Bobbin lace-making is distinct from needle lace-making in that it requires the use of a special lace pillow and several bobbins for storing and managing threads as they are twisted and crossed to create intricate patterns on the pillow, which are held in place by the insertion of pins at intersecting points. This is one of the oldest forms of lace-making and was originally called “bone lace” or “bonework,” as the early bobbins were made of animal bones, and in coastal regions, slender fish bones were used for pins.²⁸ In this way, death and dead (animal) bodies are quite literally connected to the process of lace-making.

As the craft developed over time, wooden bobbins joined those made of bone and the practice of bobbin engraving became popular. Bobbins were engraved for several reasons: for decorative gifts and the profession of love, as markers of special events like birthdays and marriages, and also to mark the deaths of loved ones²⁹ (see Figure 13). These “memorial” or “tombstone” bobbins usually included the name and dates of birth and death of a deceased family member, and were sometimes engraved on the very bone from the joint of meat traditionally served at the funeral meal.³⁰ In this way, lace-makers expressed their grief in this (semi-public) act of mourning as well as memorialized their deceased



Figure 13.
Example of an historical engraved bobbin from the Cooper & Newton Museum.

loved ones while in the very act of creating lace. This practice is directly referenced in my own visual work, in which I engrave the wooden bobbins that once belonged to my friend, Ana, with a poem about our separation (see figure 14).

Such historical connections combine with the fact that Ana was a budding lace-maker herself to make lace-making (and the resulting lace) a well-suited method (and form) for my visual work inspired by the experience of grieving for her loss.



Figure 14. Detail from *Crossing I sculpture*, thesis exhibition 2018.

Labor

The third primary element in my visual work is inherent to the materiality of lace and the lace-making process: labor. The physical labor of making both enacts and reflects the emotional labor of grief in my art — in fact, in some ways the labor of making is the labor of grief. Before proceeding further with a discussion of labor, though, it is necessary to define it more precisely, as the terms *labor* and *work* are often used interchangeably and in different contexts to some confusion. First, I will quickly clarify that, for the purposes of this thesis, when I reference “my work” or “visual work,” I use the word *work* as a synonym for artworks. Furthermore, when I use the term *labor*, I am not concerned with organized groups of working people (or laborers) in the context of commerce, manufacturing, and labor unions. Rather, I am interested in labor (as a verb) in the context of a specific set of ideas which I will outline now.

In his seminal book, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*, Lewis Hyde defines labor and work, and expounds on the difference between them. He describes work as “what we do by the hour,” something that has specific temporal limits that is (most often) performed for money as a way to make a living.³¹ “Labor, on the other hand, sets its own pace.”³² Hyde writes, “[It is] dictated by the course of life, rather than by society...[and] has its own interior rhythm, something more bound up with feeling, more interior than work,” and he cites “mourning labor” as a specific example.³³ In Hyde’s view, labor is more valuable to creativity than work, more personal, and more philosophically and existentially meaningful. In light of this definition, I will use the term *labor*, rather than *work*, in reference to my art-making processes.

Rebecca Solnit situates labor even more specifically by writing about “the labor of tending” which is mostly found in “the realm of... the private...and is marginalized with the body.”³⁴ We can see a focus on such

labor in the “Maintenance Art” of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, in which through various public performances, she proposes that the singular act of creation is not the only place in which we find art. Rather, she explores the labor involved in *maintaining* (or tending to) art and life (she considers the two to be one and the same). She says, “The creating, the originating, that’s the easy part...It’s the implementation of getting it out there, follow[ing]-through, hanging in there, deepening, not throwing up your hands and running away [that interests me].”³⁵ She is most well-known for her long-standing collaboration with the New York City Department of Sanitation and its employees, but I am



Figure 15. Detail of *Dress to Go Out/Undressing to Go In* from *Private Performances of Personal Maintenance as Art* by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, 1973.

particularly interested in her *Private Performances of Personal Maintenance as Art* series (see Figure 15). In this series, she documents herself performing the labor of maintaining her home — cooking, cleaning, changing diapers, dressing her children — with several hundred photographs that are then hung in the gallery space. By inserting such images such into the fine art context, she proclaims that “lowly” domestic maintenance labor does, indeed, have value, and that it is a form of art in and of itself. With this work, she also highlights how the “labor of tending,” of which Rebecca Solnit speaks, is often relegated to the realm of *women’s* bodies specifically.



A similar alignment of labor with the — often culturally neglected and devalued — spheres of the private and the body is found in my thesis work, as I am interested in how physical (corporeal) labor and the internal emotional (private) labor of grief inform one another. And also like Ukeles, I explore the concepts of “tending” and “maintenance” in my work, as my long-duration performance piece is intended to be a ritualized act of tending to my grief and maintaining a connection with Ana beyond her death (or at least attempting to do so).

As the labor I employ to do such “tending” is centered around the fiber-based technique of lace-making, I am particularly interested in how, at a fundamental level, the inherent materiality and construction of textiles can invoke ideas of labor. The construction of textiles by hand is laborious and time-consuming, as entirely new material is created through long and often complex processes of crossing, twisting, and weaving individual threads together. Thus, textiles become both the products of labor and innate signifiers of labor. By employing textile objects and fiber-based techniques in art-making, the concept of labor becomes intrinsic to both the form and the content of an artwork—to a great degree, the form helps create the content.

We can see this in Janine Antoni’s installation and performance piece, *Slumber*, initially performed in 1993 (see Figure 16). In this work, Antoni slept in the gallery space for several weeks under a custom-made loom, attached to an electroencephalograph, which recorded her rapid eye movement on a paper print-out. Each day, Antoni selected a section of this print-out to recreate through weaving using the several hundred spools of thread attached to her loom as well as strips ripped from her own nightgown. Laboring all day over the loom, she created the very blanket she would later sleep with at night. In this piece, Antoni highlights the constant physical labor in which our bodies are engaged, even during sleep, by making it apparent through the labor of weaving — this continuous, time-consuming, and laborious process becomes the vehicle for visually communicating the perpetual (often



Figure 16. *Slumber* installation and performance by Janine Antoni, 1993.



Figure 16.3. *Slumber* installation and performance by Janine Antoni, 1993.

invisible) physical and mental/psychological labors of the body. As Nancy Spector writes, “[This work’s] very meaning is contingent on the perpetual act of its making.”³⁶

Similarly, Doris Salcedo employs fiber-based techniques to create content in her piece, *A Flor de Piel*, in which she highlights the intersection between physical and emotional labor (see Figure 17). Created by meticulously stitching thousands of preserved rose petals together into an enormous shroud-like sculpture that lies on the floor, this work employs the technique of stitching to address the daunting labor of communal grief that results from the widespread civil and state-sponsored violence in her home country of Colombia. Mary Schneider Enriquez writes, “Without suturing it by hand, Salcedo’s rose petal textile could not have been made, and the implication of this labor-intensive process, essential to the object’s creation, lends further weight to its aesthetic and political statement.”³⁷ In this way, the textile-based process of making this work, as well as its final fabric-like form, are crucial to its intended meaning and message.



Figure 17. A *Flor de Piel* (with detail) by Doris Salcedo, 2012-13.

Through these examples, we can see how labor is made evident in artworks using textiles, textile forms, and textile-based processes, making labor (both actual and metaphorical) a central component of the work's content.

Section Two: The Process of Grief, Therapeutic Benefits of Making, Ritual, and Memorialization

The Process of Grief

Because my visual thesis work originates from an overarching sense of grief, we must turn to psychological grief theory to provide further context on this topic. What follows is not a comprehensive survey of the entire canon of grief theory, but rather selected concepts which have influenced and informed my work.

An overview of grief theory quickly leads to the pervasive concept of Grief Work, which has become central to many theories and models of grief since its introduction by Sigmund Freud in his 1917 essay, *Mourning and Melancholia*.³⁸ Freud asserts that only by doing the “work of mourning” can one free the ego from its bonds with the deceased in order to move through grief without serious complication (a process he calls “decathexis”).³⁹ In emphasizing this breaking of bonds with the deceased, Freud argues that this is the proper path to resolving grief and moving on with life in a healthy manner after loss.⁴⁰ He wrote, “Mourning has a quite precise psychical task to perform: its function is to detach the survivor’s memories and hopes from the dead.”⁴¹ It is important to note here that although he uses the term *mourning* instead of *grief*, Freud is indeed referring to the internal personal process of grief and not its public expression in mourning. It is also important to distinguish that although we find the word *work* in the term Grief Work, it is actually used to mean *labor*, as defined in the previous section of this chapter.⁴²

Several years after the publication of *Mourning and Melancholia*, psychiatrist Erich Lindemann expanded on Freud’s ideas in his 1944 paper, *Symptomology and Management of Acute Grief*, in which he discusses his study with survivors and family members of the 492 people killed in a fire at Boston’s Coconut Grove nightclub in 1942.⁴³ In the paper

he coins the term “grief work” and builds on Freud’s idea of detaching from the deceased person in order to get through grief successfully.⁴⁴ Lindemann writes, “The duration of a grief reaction seems to depend upon the success with which a person does the grief work - namely, emancipation from the bondage to the deceased, readjustment to the environment in which the deceased is missing, and the formation of new relationships.”⁴⁵

The idea of Grief Work has been widely influential in the field of grief theory, and aspects of it still prevail today in popular consciousness. Richard Gross, psychologist and author of *Understanding Grief: An Introduction*, writes, “It is difficult to deny that the Grief Work Hypothesis has dominated much of our thinking about bereavement.”⁴⁶ Arguably the most famous model of grief based on the Grief Work Hypothesis is Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s “Five Stages of Dying” developed from her study of over 200 terminally ill patients in 1969.⁴⁷ In this model, she asserts that there are five major stages one must go through in the process of grief: Denial and Isolation, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance.⁴⁸ This original model was derived from research with dying people grieving their own deaths, but was later applied to the grief of bereaved individuals by Kübler-Ross herself and other researchers.⁴⁹

As with any discipline, psychological discourse includes its fair share of internal disagreement, criticism and debate, and thus the Grief Work Hypothesis, despite its influence, has been subject to much scrutiny since its development. Some of its critiques, as outlined by Wolfgang Stroebe, include an inadequately clear definition of Grief Work, questions about the validity of empirical studies that claim to support the concept, and a lack of application across cultures.⁵⁰ Wolfgang Stroebe and Henk Schut also note that the models based on the Grief Work Hypothesis appear to be structured as passive experiences — something which the bereaved are “put through,” rather than being actively engaged in.⁵¹

There have been many responses to these criticisms of the Grief Work Hypothesis, but one that I find especially intriguing and relevant to my

work is the concept of Continuing Bonds.⁵² In their seminal book on the subject from 1996, Klass, Silverman, and Nickman collect a selection of papers that counter the (then) long-held belief that one must break emotional ties with the deceased in order to successfully move on after loss. They contend that “it is normative for mourners to maintain a presence and connection with the deceased,”⁵³ which “provide[s] solace, comfort, and support, and ease[s] the transition from the past to the future.”⁵⁴ Thus, in the views of the contributors to this book, a healthy navigation of grief results in reordered and transformed relationships with the deceased which reflect the new reality of a person’s absence, rather than abandoning or letting go of the relationship entirely—the bond remains even though the nature of the relationship to the deceased continually transforms over time. Even Freud himself, the father of “decathexis” (i.e. cutting ties with the deceased), eventually experienced the desire to continue relationships with the deceased in his own life. Many years after the death of his daughter, in a letter to a grieving friend he wrote, “Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we... will never find a substitute... And actually, this is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish.”⁵⁵

We can see this desire to maintain bonds with lost loved ones expressed in the work of Motoi Yamamoto. Inspired by the death of his sister and the use of salt in funeral rituals in Japan, he creates elaborate meticulously-executed large-scale drawings and sculptural installations using millions of grains of salt⁵⁶ (see Figure 18). He writes that making these laborious and time-consuming pieces help him stay connected to his sister and achieve “a feeling of touching a precious memory.”⁵⁷

Similar to Buddhist monks who destroy their intricately constructed sand mandalas in an act of non-attachment, Yamamoto destroys his works at the close of his exhibitions and ceremoniously returns the remaining salt to the sea (see Figure 18). Through both the laborious



Figure 18. *Floating Garden* (top) by Motoi Yamamoto and *returning salt to the sea* (bottom), 2014.

creation of his pieces and the final act of their destruction, he acknowledges the delicate balance between our desire to maintain bonds with the deceased and our inability to do so in a way that truly resembles our connections as they once were. Thus, the complexity of creating and maintaining such ephemeral, temporal, and ever-shifting bonds with the deceased is movingly revealed through Yamamoto's cycle of continual creation and destruction.

The essays in Klass, Silverman, and Nickman's *Continuing Bonds* outline many other methods the bereaved use to maintain connections to their deceased loved ones. One that is especially relevant to my work is the concept of the bereaved merging their identity or self-representation with that of the deceased. Silverman and Dennis write, "The bond with the deceased may include, at either a conscious or an unconscious level, becoming like that person."⁵⁸ Although grief therapists sometimes consider this a maladaptive form of grief in some cases, it is not always thought to be unhealthy or pathological. As I adopted the practice of lace-making after the death of my friend, Ana, a burgeoning lace-maker herself, and as I wear her clothes during my performance piece, it seems some elements of this (re)identification process are manifest in my work.

Another important theme that emerges from the concept of *Continuing Bonds* is its challenge of the pervasive idea that grief has an endpoint or resolution of some kind. Rather than asserting that grief needs to be completed after a certain period of time or after a certain amount of GriefWork has been done, proponents of *Continuing Bonds* theories posit that the emphasis should be placed on the idea of transformation and change in the experience of grief and in one's relationship to the deceased over time, rather than aiming to somehow "get over it," finish with grief, and move on.⁵⁹ As Silverman and Klass write, "The process does not end, but in different ways bereavement affects the mourner for the rest of his or her life."⁶⁰ Thus from this viewpoint, grief is an ongoing process of transformation and change, not one of relinquish-

ing attachments to the deceased in a way that is complete and final. One of the more well-known operational stage/phase theories of grief that embraces this concept and the idea of Continuing Bonds is William Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning. He claims that a grieving individual must (1) accept the reality of the loss, (2) experience the pain of grief, (3) adjust to a world without the deceased (externally, internally and spiritually), and (4) find an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life.⁶¹

Grief researcher and theorist, Robert Neimeyer, suggests that one way we adjust to new realities after loss and find enduring connections with the dead is by making new meanings in our lives in the wake of the "crisis of meaning"⁶² that sometimes results from the death of a loved one. His argument is based on the assumption that because humans are aware of their own consciousness, we live in a world of "meanings" populated with "long-term memories, long-range anticipations, reflections, goals, interpretations, hopes, regrets, beliefs and metaphors," and that such meanings are often challenged when someone we love dies.⁶³ He claims that we find ways to refine and reconstruct meaning throughout the grief process, both for the stories of our lives as well as for the lives and deaths of the ones we've lost. Neimeyer writes, "In the aftermath of life-altering loss, the bereaved are commonly precipitated into a *search for meaning* at levels that range from the practical (*How did my loved one die?*) through the relational (*Who am I, now that I am no longer a spouse?*) to the spiritual or existential (*Why did God allow this to happen?*)."⁶⁴

Emerging from this observation is Neimeyer's "Narrative Approach" to grief therapy in which the bereaved are asked to tell their story of loss in a variety of ways — such as verbally, as well as through writing and image-making — in order to facilitate their own personal meaning-making after loss.⁶⁵ Such concepts are relevant to my thesis work, as it seems I have been engaged in a form of meaning-making through narrative reconstruction in my creative practice, even without the

guidance of a grief therapist. Perhaps my intuitive need to engage in the labor of making in response to loss is my way of telling the story of my grief over Ana's death; the physical labor itself a kind of (embodied) meaning-making strategy.

Vamkin D. Volkan proposed the concept of Linking Objects in the early 1970's as "controllable symbolic objects [used] to perpetuate the link with the deceased"⁶⁶ as well as for the purpose of meaning-making. He distinguishes four categories for such objects: (1) those that have been worn by the deceased, such as clothing, (2) objects that are viewed as an extension of the deceased's body, such as a camera that once belonged to them, (3) objects with realistic or symbolic resemblance to the dead, such as a photograph, and (4) objects that were present at the time of death, news of the death, or at the funeral, such as a printed funeral program.⁶⁷ Volkan's writing focuses on the role Linking Objects play in pathological (or complicated) grief, but over time, the general concept of Linking Objects has been expanded by other researchers to include non-pathological experiences of grief as well.

In this vein, Margaret Gibson refers to objects associated with the deceased in more "normative" grieving experiences as "Melancholy Objects," and writes, "In the most simple, fleeting and poignant moments, people grieve with and through objects."⁶⁸ She argues that rather than using these objects in a pathological sense to avoid doing painful Grief Work,⁶⁹ many people use them in ways that are similar to how "transitional objects," such as teddy bears and blankets, are used to mediate the process of differentiation and separation between mother and child in the early years of childhood.⁷⁰ She also makes a distinction between the function of Melancholy Objects when used during acute periods of grief and later after this intense period has passed. Claiming that these objects transition from a means for indirect contact with the deceased during acute grieving periods to less emotionally charged "memorialized objects of mourning," she sees them ultimately func-

tioning as reminders of an intense period of grief gone by, as well as the continual yet ever-changing nature of grief.⁷¹

Artist Jennifer Loeber addresses the idea of Linking and Melancholy Objects in her work. In the *Left Behind* series, she pairs archival photographs of her deceased mother with images of objects that once belonged to her: a pair of sunglasses, a ring, a tube of lipstick (see Figure 19).

In her artist statement, Loeber notes that upon the sudden passing of her mother, she was “overwhelmed by the need to keep even the most mundane of her belongings,” and that this body of work was an attempt to “focus on how to interact with these objects cathartically.”⁷² I also employ and investigate Linking and Melancholy Objects in my work, as we can see in the use of Ana’s clothing, handmade lace, and lace bobbins.

As much as I have learned from the concepts found in the canon of grief theory, what is *missing* from that canon has also been very influential to the development of my work. When I attempted to learn more about the relationship between grief and the body, particularly how the body itself grieves, I found little to satisfy my curiosity. The vast



Figure 19. Image from *Left Behind* series by Jennifer Loeber, 2014.

majority of references to the body and/or somatic experiences in grief theory are about the effects of grief *on* the body, which are generally described as symptoms (or side-effects) of the larger psychological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral experience of grief. For example, Erich Lindemann's aforementioned essay, *Symptomology and Management of Acute Grief*, provides a comprehensive overview of the most commonly reported physical sensations associated with grief, including a feeling of hollowness in the stomach, tightness in the chest and throat, oversensitivity to noise, shortness of breath, weakness in muscles, lack of energy, dry mouth, sleep disturbance, appetite disturbance, and sighing.⁷³ There have also been several studies about the increased risk of mortality among widows and widowers, which offer various explanations,⁷⁴ and a handful of grief theories have emerged that incorporate small references to bodily experience and physical health, such as Rubin's Two Track-Model of Grief in which the "Biopsychosocial Functioning Track" acknowledges "somatic concerns."⁷⁵

Artists Käthe Kollwitz and Erika DeFreitas, though working in different time periods, both address such physical effects of grief by creating drawn/printed and photographed studies (respectively) of the way grief and mourning are visibly expressed through posture and body language (see Figures 20 and 21).



Figure 20. *Woman Thinking*, 1920 (left) and *Run Over*, 1910 (right) by Käthe Kollwitz.

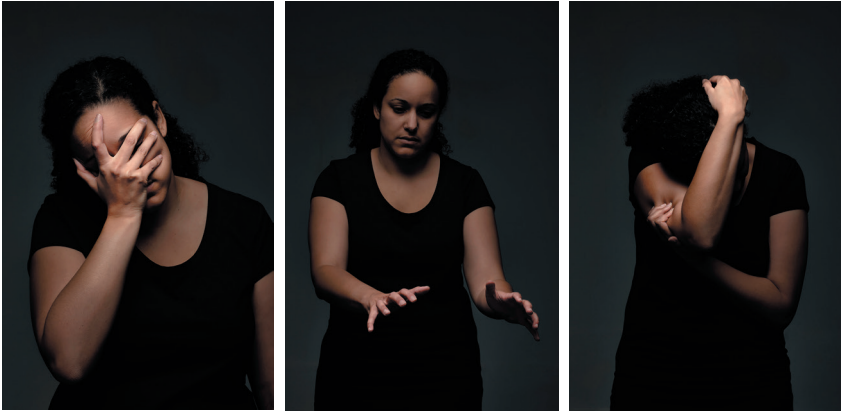


Figure 21. From *A Visual Vocabulary for Hands in Mourning* by Erika DeFreitas, 2013.

The artists' attention to how we hold our bodies in both private grief and public mourning link these emotional and psychological experiences directly to its manifestation in the body, and perhaps even begins to ask the question, as I have: how does the body itself grieve?

It seems grief theory has not yet considered this question in a cohesive way, as the realm of the body has been almost entirely relegated to the arena of medical symptomology in its canon. This oversight largely neglects the potential for understanding intuitive bodily ways of grieving (i.e. embodied knowledge of grief) as something distinct from, but ultimately connected to the emotional, cognitive, behavioral, spiritual and psychological grieving process of the mind and spirit.

So why has the body been neglected in this way? To answer this question, we might consider the foundations of Western thought. Christian theology, Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes have taught us that the mind (soul/spirit) and the body are fundamentally separate, never to be one fully united entity. When he wrote, "I think, therefore I am," Descartes not only reinforced this concept of separation, but also elevated the role of the mind and its functions to being the definitive feature of our very existence. Thus, the body became something secondary to the mind – not unimportant, of course, but clearly not of equal impor-

tance. (After all, Descartes did not write “I think and breathe, therefore I am.”) Stemming from this basis of thought, Western grief theorists have mostly employed a predominantly logical, systematic, scientific, and mind-centered approach to their field, neglecting the body and structuring grief theory around the goal of understanding it through a particular (limited) lens.

This failure to more fully factor the body into the “equation” of grief theory has begun to change, though, albeit slowly. A fully developed theory that equally considers mind, spirit, *and* body has yet to emerge, but more holistically-minded studies concerning grief and bereavement are being conducted. For example, studies about the ancient Eastern self-healing technique of Qigong as well as Healing Touch energy therapy have indicated that such physically and spiritually-oriented activities in conjunction with cognitive/emotional counseling and therapy have been beneficial for the bereaved.⁷⁶ Books in the self-help genre which directly address the relationship between grief and the body have also emerged, such as *Healing Your Grieving Body: 100 Physical Practices for Mourners*.⁷⁷ Although such books do not belong to the official canon of grief theory, their existence indicates a growing awareness and need for further research and theorizing on the topic of bodily ways of grieving.

To build on this budding trend, perhaps a more thorough investigation by grief theorists and researchers into the concept of embodied knowledge is in order. According to scholar, Shogo Tanaka, in its most simple terms, embodied knowledge is “a type of knowledge in which the body knows how to act,”⁷⁸ or in other words, “it is what we do before trying to do or what we know before trying to know.”⁷⁹ In contrast to the aforementioned Cartesian model of thought, in which mind and body are separate and the mind is the primary actor in knowledge production and acquisition, the notion of embodied knowledge asserts that the body also has a crucial role in this process. Proponents of this idea argue that body and mind actually work in concert with each other to form our understandings of the world around us, for the conscious mind

is of the body, after all. Therefore, if we are to accept this argument, we can conclude that the conscious mind is not the only thing “in the driver’s seat”—our bodies have an equally important role to play. In fact, proponents of the concept of embodied knowledge argue that we have a “lived body” from which the mind is not a separate entity.⁸⁰ If we accept these ideas to be true for how our general understanding of the world around us is constructed, why would it not also be true for the specific experience of grief? Perhaps our bodies hold some sort of knowledge about the grieving process that we, in our conscious minds, do not always recognize. I find this to be an exciting idea that I hope grief theorists and researchers will investigate in their field, as I have done in my artistic practice with my visual thesis work.

Therapeutic Benefits of Making

By engaging in the process of making, do we experience any kind of emotional, spiritual, mental, and/or physical benefit? To ponder this questions, we’ll begin with the field of art therapy, exploring its ideas about how art-making can be beneficial in a variety of ways.

In their *Handbook of Art Therapy*, Caroline Case and Tessa Dalley claim that art-making can function as a form of symbolic speech, facilitating the expression of difficult thoughts and/or emotions.⁸¹ They write, “Through the process of making an image...the client gives form to what seems inexpressible or unspeakable through the process of making.”⁸² In this way, art-making can give give us a language (that we often don’t even know we have) with which to express ourselves.

One of the pioneers of art therapy, Adrian Hill, emphasizes the act of making itself as having therapeutic benefit. He claims that art-making “engaged one totally,”⁸³ and that the value of art therapy lay in “completely engrossing the mind (as well as the fingers).”⁸⁴ In her book, *Art Therapy: An Introduction*, respected art therapist, Judith A. Ru-

bin, reaffirms Hill's views that art-making is an "intrinsically healing"⁸⁵ activity in and of itself, due to its sensory and kinesthetic properties.⁸⁶ She claims that the tactile and physical act of manipulating materials can release tension and be a source of much-needed pleasure for a struggling client.⁸⁷

Psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Anthony Storr, reminds us of the importance of keeping our hands and minds busy to stave off depression, particularly in the case of bereavement. He writes, "The creative process can be a way of protecting the individual against being overwhelmed by depression; a means of regaining a sense of mastery in those who have lost it, and to a varying extent, a way of repairing the Self damaged by bereavement."⁸⁸ In this way, Storr suggests that by creating art one can regain some sense of control in a situation otherwise characterized by feelings of powerlessness, as is usually the case with bereavement. He might also be suggesting that one can find some form of escapism in creative work — a way to focus energy and thoughts on something other than emotional pain. In addition to these benefits of art therapy for bereaved populations, a 1998 study indicated that participants were able to see themselves in a new light since the onset of their grief.⁸⁹ They were opened up to their own capabilities (and by extension, possibilities for their futures), as their creative/artistic abilities "took them by surprise" and reminded them that they could meet the challenge of encountering new experiences.⁹⁰

One can see aspects of many of these ideas in the work of Erika DeFretas. In her piece, *And every tear is from the other*, tear-stained tissues are embroidered with white thread, outlining the traces of tear drops, singling out moments when sadness and grief are physically expressed through weeping (see Figure 22). This gesture reminds the viewer that these moments — mostly private and hidden from view — are, indeed, significant moments of emotional release and are worthy of public expression. This act of repeatedly sewing thread into delicate, easily-ripped tissue paper (which is usually discarded and is the remnant

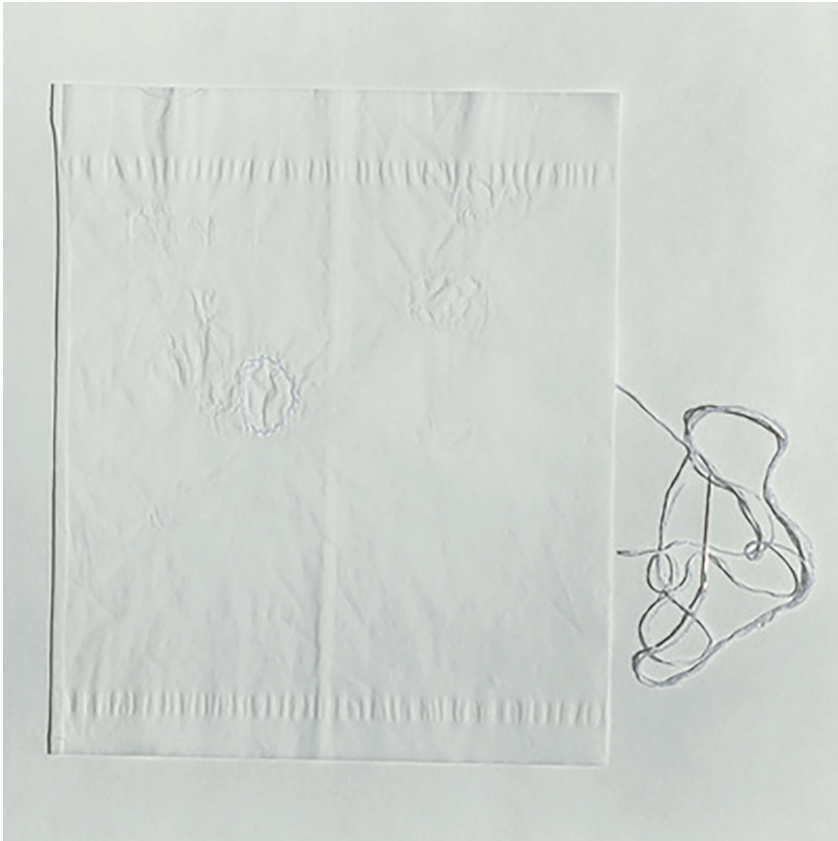


Figure 22. Detail from *And every tear is from the other* by Erika DeFreitas, 2015.

of an emotion we often try to hide) highlights DeFreitas' respect and reverence for the expression of grief. It also demonstrates the potential for gaining a sense of mastery and control that engaging in artistic processes can provide in the context of loss.

In a similar way, artist David Medalla employs the process of stitching for therapeutic effect in his piece, *A Stitch in Time*, but instead of engaging in the process himself, he provides his viewers with the opportunity to do so (see Figure 23). In this work, a piece of fabric is suspended in the exhibition space, along with spools of thread and needles. Viewers are encouraged to stitch whatever they like into the fabric through-



Figure 23. *A Stitch in Time* by David Medalla, 1972.

out the course of the exhibition, becoming instrumental in the work's continual creation and evolution. Medalla intends for this experience to have a beneficial impact on those who participate, as he says, "stitching, like all forms of needlework, has a very therapeutic value, because you have to concentrate not only in threading the needle, but in making your statement, whatever it is."⁹¹ By taking the needle out of his own hands and putting it into those of his viewers in this work, Medalla creates an opportunity for experiencing the therapeutic benefits of making firsthand, in both individual and communal contexts.

We can see evidence of the therapeutic effects of making in the creation of historical objects as well. An example of this that is particularly relevant to my research about grief is the mourning jewelry that was made with the hair of deceased loved ones during the Victorian era in the 19th century (see Figure 24). After Prince Albert's death in 1861, Queen Victoria's donning of mourning jewelry made with his hair promoted a thriving hairworks industry in Western Europe and the United States, as well as the addition of hairwork to the repertoire of middle and upper-class women's crafts that were produced inside the home.



Figure 24. Examples of 19th century Victorian-era hairwork.

Brooches, lockets, bracelets, and other pieces of jewelry were created with the hair of deceased loved ones to memorialize the dead as well as maintain a physical and spiritual connection with them, both through the jewelry's objecthood itself and through engaging in the process (and labor) of making them.

In her book, *Love Entwined: The Curious History of Hairwork in America*, Helen Sheumaker writes, "Hairwork made at home was understood to be not only of a woman's hand but of her heart,"⁹² her physical and emotional labor allowing her to "involve or entangle herself with the body of another person as well as with the work of remembrance that [hair] braiding spurred."⁹³ In this way, it seems the opportunity to sit with one's grief and take time to remember the dead while laboring over hair-braiding was considered to be of great benefit to the maker/bereaved individual. In her book, *Death in the Victorian Family*, Pat Jalland notes that such labor was "vitaly important for Victorians as therapeutic aids in the process of grieving,"⁹⁴ and so, we can argue

that — at least for some — grieving, memorialization, and even therapeutic benefit occurred during (and as a result of) the process of making mourning hair jewelry.

Contemporary artist René Zettle-Sterling creates work inspired by and in direct reference to Victorian-era mourning jewelry, particularly in her *Gone Before and Objects of Mourning* series (see Figure 25). Similarly, Nene Humphrey tackles the subjects of grief and mourning in the context of Victorian hair-braiding in a series of installation/performances entitled *Circling the Center* (see Figure 26). Developed over several years following the death of her husband in 2007, Humphrey uses performative methods, video projections, music, and sound, to



Figure 25. from *Objects of Mourning* (top), 2008, and from *Gone Before* (bottom) by René Zettle-Sterling.

create performances in which the process of Victorian hair-braiding is demonstrated and its product is displayed as an art object (although she uses red yarn instead of hair as her braiding material).⁹⁵ Humphrey pairs this process of Victorian hair-braiding with projected videos of neurological imagery that originate from brain scans of grieving people. In this way, she quite literally visualizes a relationship between the process of making Victorian-era hairworks and the psychological, emotional, cognitive, and physical (neurological) processes of grief.



Figure 26. Stills from *Circling the Center* by Nene Humphrey, 2009 – 2015.

One can also find therapeutic benefits in the process of making outside the contexts of contemporary art. Proponents of “slow” art and craft movements speak of how working with materials slowly and mindfully leads to a generally calmer state of mind and body.⁹⁶ Fibers artist and craftswoman, Roz Hawker, says her meticulously hand-stitched works hold “the possibility of stillness and the meditative and restorative quality that time holds,” which allow her to literally and metaphorically “breathe more slowly again,”⁹⁷ (see Figure 27).

Claire Wellesley-Smith, author of *Slow Stitch: Mindful and Contemplative Textile Art*, notes that stitching and other fiber-based techniques such as knitting, weaving, and lace-making can produce a “relaxation response,” a physiological state that produces low blood pressure, heart rate and muscle tension.⁹⁸ She also notes that practitioners of the “slow” art and craft movement often report a sense of “Flow,”⁹⁹ identified by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as a subjective state of mind and body in which one is completely engaged in an activity that is challenging, but not anxiety-producing or stressful.¹⁰⁰ This state is character-



Figure 27. Detail of embroidery work by Roz Hawker, circa 2015.

ized by a merging of physical action and mental awareness, a sense of mastery and control, and an altered sense of time. Csikszentmihalyi argues that the state of Flow is an ideal state for creative activity and has considerable therapeutic benefit.¹⁰¹

As we've seen, the process and physical labor of making can be beneficial to an artist/maker in a number of ways and contexts. It is not surprising, then, that bereaved individuals often turn to art and object making in times of grief. For me, art-making can be a meditative process that allows me to achieve a kind of transformed state in which I find a sense of calm through the repetition of actions, as well as a means for cathartic self-expression and release. My incentive to make artwork about Ana's death for my thesis project has roots in my instinct to seek out such therapeutic benefits through the process of making.

Ritual

In my thesis work, the labor of making does not only serve therapeutic purposes. It is performed repetitively, to the point of obsession, even, and thus is ritualized. Repeated actions invoke ideas of ritual, especially those that are infused with symbolic meaning. But what is ritual? Furthermore, how have the rituals associated with death, grief, and mourning in our culture changed over time and to what effect?

Diving into the theoretical, anthropological and historical research on ritual quickly leads to the conclusion that it is a very difficult concept to define precisely. In her survey on the topic, Catherine Bell writes, "...there is no clear and widely shared explanation of what constitutes ritual or how to understand it."¹⁰² According to Bell, we only have theories, opinions, and notions that are the result of the era and culture from whence they came, and thus any discussion about ritual must acknowledge that the proposed ideas are neither universal nor absolute.¹⁰³

With that in mind, I cautiously proceed with a few attempts at describing what ritual is and what it does. Bell defines ritual as “a complex sociocultural medium variously constructed of tradition, exigency, and self-expression [that is] understood to play a wide variety of roles and to communicate a rich density of... messages and attitudes.”¹⁰⁴ Another, more simple, description she provides is that rituals are “embodied acts that create links between different times and spaces.”¹⁰⁵ Much has been written about the origins of ritual and the various purposes it serves, too much to summarize here, so one may look to the work of Joseph Campbell for a concise synthesis of ideas found in several different schools of thought on ritual. Campbell claims that ritual can (1) produce a metaphysical or mystical sense of awe and reverence, (2) provide a coherent image or understanding of the cosmos/human existence, (3) integrate and maintain individuals in social communities, and/or (4) guide an individual’s internal psychological processes and development.¹⁰⁶ With this foundation of basic ideas concerning ritual in place, we can proceed to specific concepts that are particularly relevant to my work.

“Performance” theories of ritual emphasize the physical and sensory aspects of participating in ritual activity,¹⁰⁷ claiming that “ritual... operates through the body”¹⁰⁸ via “careful choreography of actions...[and] the rhythm of repetition.”¹⁰⁹ This idea is especially relevant to my work, as I focus on repetitive physical labor as a form of embodied, ritualized grieving. The physicality of the process of lace-making gives this personalized ritual its form, which we see enacted by my body itself during my live performance and in the remnants of these ritualistic actions in my installation piece and video. Without engaging in such physical actions neither this ritual nor its remnants would exist, and thus we see how ritual can be fundamentally linked to the body.

We can also see how ritual operates through the body within artist Ana Mendieta’s oeuvre. By incorporating specific materials which reference various Christian and pagan religious rituals (ash, blood, hair, colored

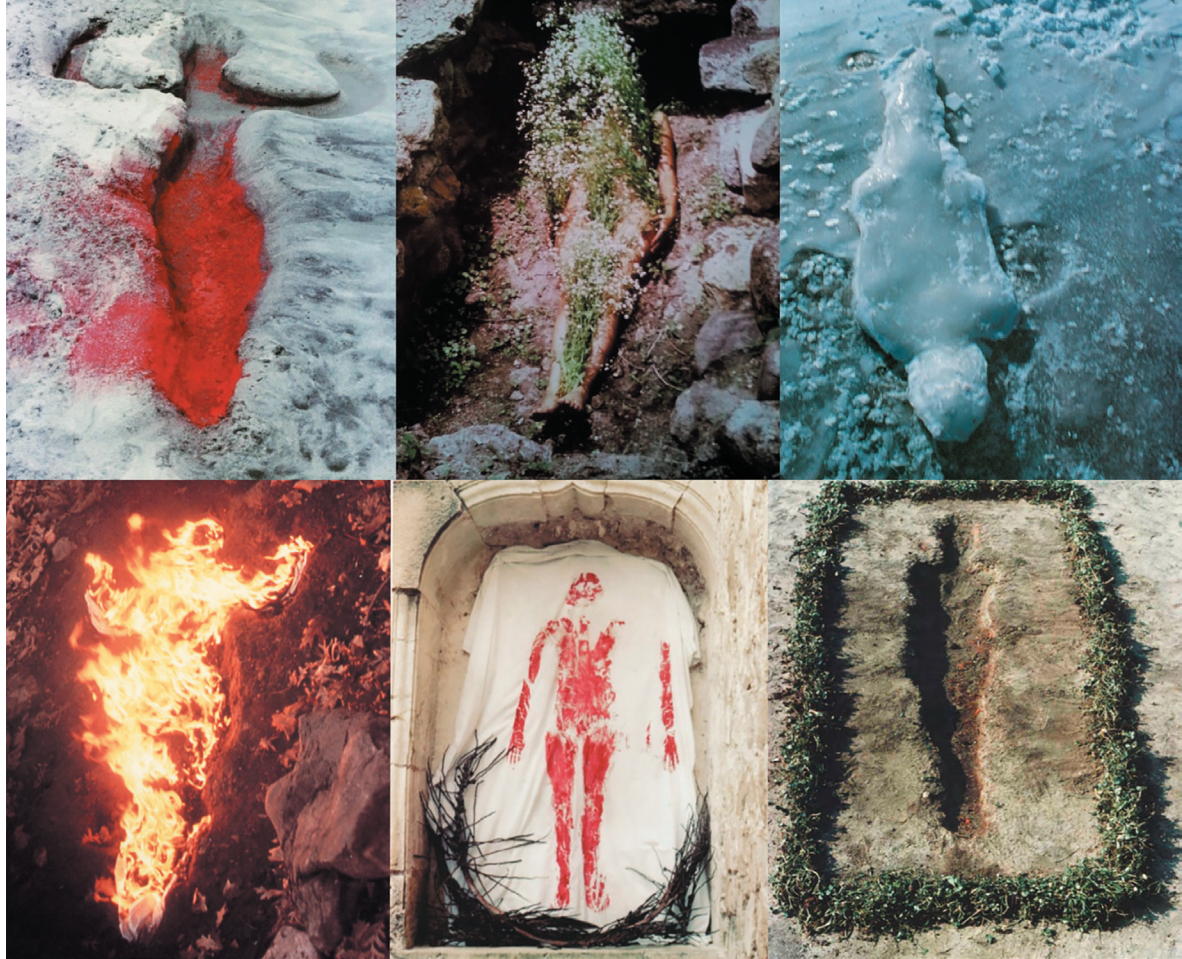


Figure 28. From the *Siluetas* series by Ana Mendieta, 1973.

pigment, fire, water, earth) with the actions of her body, she engages in her own self-created rituals in the creation/performance of her work and thus invokes overarching ideas of ritual — and its power — in the mind of the viewer. Curator and art critic Olga Gambari writes that the “composite magma of religions, cultures and beliefs, in which gods, saints, healers, priests, faith and magic all rub shoulders, springs out in all her works, expressing itself in an alphabet of signs linked to the body and nature.”¹¹⁰ For example, in her series of photographs which document live performances in remote natural locations, *Siluetas* (see Figure 28), Mendieta uses her body to create a human imprint in the earth (or in some cases, she remains in place), and then activates the scene with various materials associated with ritual, such as flowers, blood, and fire. As Gambari notes, like “a sort of priestess, a *santera*

who fulfils her own magical ritual,”¹¹¹ Mendieta repeatedly performs these actions with her body, strongly referencing rituals surrounding the practice of human burial — in method, form, and content — asking us to contemplate the earth as our point of origin and inevitable return.

In addition to these ideas about the relationship between ritual and the body, the expansion of ritual into the “every-day” is also of interest to my work. In the early years of ritual theory, the focus of scholars, philosophers, and researchers was mostly in the context of religion and ideas of the sacred. However, the work of Max Gluckman in the twentieth century broadened the scope of what might be considered a ritual by exploring how the formality and social dimensions of actions can qualify a wide range of behaviors, including those outside of religious contexts, as ritualistic.¹¹² Thus, the simple practice of shaking hands can be considered a ritual in some ways. Furthermore, his work asserts that ritual and ritual-like behaviors can be a means for organizing as well as “working and reworking... social relationships.”¹¹³ The legacy of these ideas can be seen in the book, *Death, Memory and Material Culture*, when Hallam and Hockey write, “Ritualization is not confined to clearly demarcated phases of ritual but can be seen as a feature of ‘everyday’ life, in which even the most mundane objects, such as clothing, can facilitate the work of memory.”¹¹⁴ These ideas are especially prominent in my visual thesis work, as my self-created ritual of lace-making helps to infuse the “every-day” objects of clothing with symbolic meaning, their ritualistic transformation into lace becoming both the means for and the symbol of my efforts to rebuild and maintain my bond with Ana after her death.

We can also see the exploration of ritual in the “every-day,” taken down to its most basic level of survival — or the mere state of being alive — in aspects of Marina Abramović’s 2002 performance piece, *The House with the Ocean View* (see Figure 29). For twelve days, Abramović lived in New York’s Sean Kelly Gallery, not eating, speaking, reading, writing, or engaging in any other such activity that might entertain or stimulate



Figure 29. *The House with the Ocean View* by Marina Abramović, 2002.

her mind. She moved through a series of three elevated platforms attached to the gallery wall, each slightly separated from each other, referencing domestic spaces: one with a toilet and shower, another with a chair for sitting, and the third with a long wooden platform for sleeping. Three ladders extended from each platform down to the gallery floor, each with rungs of sharp butcher's knives, making the prospect of leaving the platforms (or climbing up to them) one of danger and pain. A clicking metronome sounded through the room, marking the slow passage of time, and a telescope was placed across the room on the gallery floor so viewers could more closely inspect Abramović's actions.

In a departure from the plot or narrative that we often find in various types of performance and theater, Abramović's actions during this 12-day performance were strikingly simple: sitting in the chair, lying on the platform, drinking water, urinating, showering. In this way, by isolating every-day acts of survival and existence in the stark environment of the gallery space and repeating them at length, Abramović exposes how in the simple actions of living, we engage in a form of ritual.

But the impact of Abramović's performance did not end with this exploration of ritual within "every-day" actions. As RoseLee Goldberg writes, "[The performance's] motions were the rituals of daily life —

sleeping, drinking, showering — slowed down in time to a series of stiffly executed gestures which transformed ordinary activities into somber ceremonies.”¹¹⁵ Chrissie Iles expands on this sense of somberness invoked by Abramović’s ritualistic actions by describing the reactions of viewers: “Many became palpably emotional; some openly wept.”¹¹⁶ Iles further summarizes how Abramović herself later noted that she felt a “collective sense of trauma and grieving, as people struggling to process their feelings only a year after the catastrophic events of September 11th found an unexpected sense of release...”¹¹⁷ In this way, it seems that through the power of ritual, Abramović was inadvertently able to create a communal space for the experience and expression of grief and mourning with her performance.

This leads us to wonder, then, what role does ritual play in the specific context of death, grief, and mourning? What can it do for us in such emotionally and existentially trying times? Can ritual facilitate grief, give shape to its expression, help us cope, and/or have some sort of healing effect? Indeed, it is argued that in the context of death, grief, and mourning, rituals are vehicles through which the bereaved can meet a number of vital needs: they become a means for acknowledging (or confronting) the reality of loss in a tangible and concrete way, both to oneself and to one’s community; they provide opportunities for social support, affirming existing bonds with living friends and family members, as well as potentially creating new ones; they facilitate the evaluation and negotiation of changing relationships to the deceased; they can provide spiritual guidance, potentially altering views on life, death, and the afterlife; and they can even meet basic physical needs (which are often neglected in times of grief), such as eating at post-funeral meals or wakes, for example.¹¹⁸

Some scholars argue that ritual is “a powerful medium through which grief may be resolved,”¹¹⁹ while others focus less on the potential for any kind of lasting resolution and more on how ritual enables us to live *with* grief. Psychotherapist, Francis Weller, posits that ritual cannot

fully or finally heal the wounds of grief, but rather that ritual can be a “maintenance practice” that allows us to tend to our wounds and give ourselves repeated opportunity for cathartic release and emotional renewal.¹²⁰

Rituals that center on death, grief, and mourning, such as funerals, are considered “rites of passage,” “life-crisis,” or “life-cycle”¹²¹ rites which focus on navigating the transition from one state to another.¹²² Arnold van Gennep argued that such rituals tend to follow a three-stage sequence: (1) separation, (2) transition, and (3) incorporation.¹²³ Ritualistic actions marking separation tend to symbolically acknowledge or visualize loss, such as shaving one’s hair after the death of a family member in Hindu tradition, for example. Transition-oriented aspects of ritual are marked by the suspension of normal routines, often accompanied by a set of special rules that must be followed, such as the seven-day period of official mourning in Jewish tradition (*shiva*) in which household mirrors are covered, restrictions on bathing are imposed, and other customs are observed. Acts of incorporation come at the end of “life-crisis” rituals and signify an acceptance of one’s new reality, such as the 40th-Day memorial service in Orthodox Catholic tradition in which all ceremonial objects associated with the recent death in the family are removed from the house, marking the end of the official mourning period.

With such ideas about death-centered “life-crisis” rituals in mind, we now consider how such rituals are (or are not) widely incorporated into experiences of death, grief, and mourning in the contemporary Western world. Of course, before we proceed, we must acknowledge that the Western world, although somewhat culturally homogeneous, is still a very diverse place, especially in the United States. The legacies of colonialism and slavery as well as the history of mass immigration into the U.S. give it a particularly diverse cultural landscape, which makes it impossible to make definitive claims about culturally-based practices such as ritual. With that said, general trends, attitudes, and practices

can be identified and used to, at least partially, understand the historic and contemporary roles of ritual in the context of death, grief, and mourning in Western culture at large.

It is widely claimed that in contemporary Western culture, particularly in the United States, the subject of death is a “virtual taboo,”¹²⁴ grief is considered a private emotion that should not be displayed too vigorously (or at all) in public, and that this has resulted in the “de-ritualization”¹²⁵ of grief and mourning, with “most Americans progressively drop[ping] most of the traditional rituals associated with death, agreeing that the death of others should not significantly interfere with normal life.”¹²⁶ In short, the argument is that we live in a death-denying society that does not value the experience of grief or its public expression in ritualized acts of mourning.

In his book, *Revolutions in Sorrow: The American Experience of Death in Global Perspective*, Peter N. Stearns traces the history of death, grief, and mourning in Western cultures and explains how this state of things came to be. From the onset of agricultural societies and the resulting steep increase of contagious diseases, people regularly encountered death as a normal occurrence in life, and thus had to develop beliefs and rituals with which to explain and cope with the frequent loss of loved ones.¹²⁷ People died at home, their bodies were prepared for burial in the home, and as time passed and societies became more sophisticated, the deceased were most commonly interred in church graveyards located in the center of cities and towns.¹²⁸ Death was commonplace, unavoidable, and an integral part of life.

And so it was for hundreds of years until the 19th century, particularly during the Victorian era, when the rise of industrialism introduced swift and drastic changes, resulting in an elaborate emotionality surrounding death in a virtual celebration of grief (as mentioned in previous sections of this chapter), as well as, paradoxically, a new and clear “distaste for death.”¹²⁹ As industrial technology and culture developed, the impetus for the family unit shifted from survival and economically-based

foundations to those of romantic and familial love. Thus the loss of a family member was all the more heart-wrenching and grief became the “counterpart”¹³⁰ of love. As Stearn writes, in this new context, “Grief could soar, as love did.”¹³¹ On the other hand, as progresses were made in the fields of science and medicine, beliefs began to develop that death was increasingly preventable in many cases, and that, in fact, it *should* be preventable.¹³² However, these expectations out-paced the realities of scientific progress at the time, and death remained a frequent occurrence. Thus, the mismatch between expectation and reality engendered a growing anxiety about death.¹³³

This increased discomfort with death both spurred and was further promoted by several changes to how dead bodies were handled: the movement of burial sites out of church graveyards into garden cemeteries and eventually to lawn-style cemeteries in suburban areas outside the cities where people lived and worked¹³⁴; a renewed practice of embalming and “beautifying” corpses with cosmetics to “make the dead seem less dead;”¹³⁵ and, as embalming was increasingly promoted as a superior hygienic practice, the moving of bodies from the home to the mortuary for preparation for burial.¹³⁶ These changes physically removed death from the “every-day” as well as overly-aestheticized it, distancing it further and further from daily reality.

This growing distance was compounded and solidified by the “death revolution” in which death rates dropped drastically, particularly for infants and children, between 1880 and 1999. In this time, the infant mortality rate in the industrialized world dropped from somewhere between 20 and 25% to 1%.¹³⁷ Eventually the site of dying itself moved from the home to the hospital as vast advancements in hygiene practices and medicine made hospitals places of potential healing and recovery, rather than the cause of death itself.¹³⁸ Now, when death comes knocking, families rush their loved ones to the hospital in the hope that a remedy can be found, and doctors do their best to oblige them, seeing their job as “death-fighting...[focused on]not the management of death, but

its prevention.”¹³⁹ Of course, death cannot always be avoided, and so ironically, the hospital has become the new home of the dying.

And thus, Stearns argues, “a near-revolution in death culture”¹⁴⁰ has occurred in Western society in a relatively short period of time, making it “impossible to maintain customary attitudes and rituals”¹⁴¹ concerning death, grief, and mourning. This, it is argued, has resulted in a dearth of collective practices and rituals for the facilitation and expression of grief in Western cultures, which has generally left us at a loss for how to respond when we inevitably find ourselves in the position of the bereaved.¹⁴²

Stearns’ story is accurate in many ways, but he points out himself that the reality of the situation is more nuanced and complex than this “de-ritualization” argument, which “involves probable exaggeration.”¹⁴³ He reminds us that some subcultures within the United States maintain several practices and rituals associated with death, grief, and mourning — particularly in African-American, Jewish, and various immigrant communities — and he points to the influential critiques of the post-industrial (or “modernist”) approach to death in the fields of thanatology and grief theory, which began in the 1960’s and were spearheaded by people like Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, the creator of the aforementioned “Five Stages of Dying.”¹⁴⁴ In her book, *The Truth About Grief: The Myth of its Five Stages and the New Science of Loss*, Ruth Davis Konigsberg pushes these points even further to fully counter the idea that we are a de-ritualized society in which grief and mourning are relegated only to private spaces. She highlights the proliferation of the grief therapy industry over the past several decades (i.e. grief counseling, grief support groups, self-help books, etc.), as well as grief’s presence — and perhaps even glorification — in popular culture, as found in various television programs, movies, and grief memoirs, such as Joan Didion’s best-selling *The Year of Magical Thinking*.¹⁴⁵ For these reasons, she argues that death, grief, and mourning are becoming “increasingly visible”¹⁴⁶ and are “anything but taboo”¹⁴⁷ in contemporary Western culture.

With these two opposing arguments mind, what are we to conclude? Overall, my research indicates that extreme arguments like those of Konigsberg are outliers, and that the more-widely accepted position is that the death-denying and grief-avoidant modernist approach largely persists in contemporary Western culture today in many, albeit nuanced and complex, ways. Clearly, stances that suggest death, grief, and mourning are strictly tabooed, or, on the other hand, are not at all taboo are the extremes — as with many things in life, it seems the truth lies somewhere in the middle. At the very least, we can conclude that Western culture was “much richer in ritual” at other times in its history than it is today.¹⁴⁸

It is not difficult to see, then, how in a culture of decreased ritual surrounding death, grief, and mourning, many people find ways to create their own rituals. I have observed this myself in real-life events involving my friends. Consider the young mother of a still-born child who turned to gardening day in and day out, nurturing plants and flowers in a memorial garden for her daughter in an effort to process and cope with her grief — a ritual of growth and self-care emerging as the seasons passed; or consider the sister who lost her brother suddenly in a tragic car accident, who began jogging, first for no particular reason, but eventually as a ritualistic action in which she aimed to symbolically memorialize her brother, a jogger himself, by reaching 1,000 miles by his birthday five years after his death. Ritual theorist Arnold Van Gennep posited that ritual itself defines what is sacred,¹⁴⁹ though activities such as gardening or jogging are not generally considered ritualistic, when performed mindfully and repeatedly in the context of grief as a way to cope with emotions and memorialize the dead, they can become rituals in their own right.

We see aspects of self-created rituals in contemporary art as well. As Mary O’Neil writes in her essay, *Speaking to the Dead*, “While art has long been associated with mourning through monument and commemorative work... some contemporary works may reflect [the] wider

social need for mourning rituals.”¹⁵⁰ For example, Ann Hamilton’s installation and performance pieces often invoke a sense of ritual in general, and have addressed grief and mourning rituals explicitly. In her work, *Malediction* (see Figure 30), the viewer must pick their way through a large mass of bedsheets, previously soaked in red wine, strewn along the gallery floor before entering a second room in which clean bedsheets of the same type are piled along the wall from the floor to a horizon line near the ceiling. Facing this pile, with her back to the viewer, Hamilton sits at a long table on which there is a large narrow basket, resembling caskets used in the nineteenth century, and a large bowl filled with bread dough. A recording of a woman reading Walt Whitman’s “I Sing the Body Electric” and “Song of Myself” plays while Hamilton slowly and repeatedly tears off small balls of dough, presses them into the hollow cavity of her mouth, and then places the molded dough “wafer-like” objects into the long woven basket/casket.¹⁵¹ With its use of wine and bread dough, this work references the Christian ritual of communion and, as Joan Simon writes, is a “complex act of mourning and celebration, [and] of loss and renewal.”¹⁵² Simon continues, “Here were the ritual and practice of repetitive labor as their own redemption, and also the sense of a guardian sitting with and honoring the dead.”¹⁵³ Hamilton appropriates elements of a traditional ritual from religious practice and makes it her own in order to explore the ways in which we use ritual—both established and self-created — during periods of grief and mourning.

I, too, employ self-created ritual in my work, both in its creation “behind the scenes” and in the gallery space in the form of performance. My meticulous and careful deconstruction of my deceased friend’s clothing and the subsequent transformation of their threads into lace through repetitive physical labor — both inside the gallery and out—incorporates many aspects of ritual that we have outlined in this section, including (but not limited to) an emphasis on bodily actions and the use of “every day” materials. My actions are infused with symbolic meaning as the material transformation in my ritual of lace-making echoes my changing relationship to Ana as I try to maintain my bond with her and honor her mem-



Figure 30. From *Malediction* by Ann Hamilton, 1992.

ory after her death. As Hallam and Hockey write in their book, *Death, Memory and Material Culture*, “Memory connections are being forged in diverse, and increasingly personalized ways [through ritual]. Here, there are imaginative attempts to remember the deceased, to maintain their social presence and to reintegrate shifting memories of them into the flow of ongoing lives.”¹⁵⁴

Memorialization

This issue of memory leads us to consider memorial objects, memorial-making, and how, just as with ritual, the bereaved often take the process of memorialization into their own hands. To begin this discussion, I must first define what a memorial is in its most basic sense. According to Erika Doss, author of *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*, “Memorials are designed to recognize and preserve memories...[and] are typically understood as acts and gifts that honor particular people and historical events.”¹⁵⁵ She also claims that such objects serve as “repositories of feelings and emotions.”¹⁵⁶ In other words, the goal of memorial objects is to help us remember and honor the dead while invoking powerful emotions in the living.

We may be familiar with institutional and/or state-sponsored memorials and monuments that honor famous leaders, war heroes, and the like, but this genre of memorials is not pertinent to this discussion. More relevant to my work are the memorials that the bereaved create for themselves with their own hands. One such example of this can be found, yet again, in the material culture of mourning of the nineteenth century. In addition to the previously described mourning jewelry created by Victorian-era mourners, memorial hair wreaths were also constructed with the hair of deceased loved ones. Although many hair wreaths were, in fact, created in the interest of genealogical records —

“family trees” of sorts — many wreaths were created after the death of a loved one as an explicit act of mourning and memorialization, and were often accompanied with text and photographs (see Figure 31, next page). Even within genealogical “family tree” wreaths, one can find small acts of memorialization, as black beads were often placed in the center of hair flowers made with the hair of deceased family members¹⁵⁷ (see Figure 32). Just as with the creation of 19th century mourning hair jewelry, it can be argued that grieving, memorialization, and emotional cathartic release likely occurred during and/or as a result of the process of making these memorial hair wreaths.



Figure 32. Black beads indicating a deceased family member in a 19th century “family tree” hair wreath at Leila’s Hair Museum.



Figure 31. Detail of a memorial hair wreath at Leila's Hair Museum, with the text: "Precious Memory of our Dear Father Deceased at Roulers, March 2, 1888."

Similar claims can be made about the process of creating the NAMES Project Foundation's AIDS Memorial Quilt a century later. During the AIDS crisis in the 1980's, activists in San Francisco conceived of a memorial project to commemorate the lives of those who had died from the disease as well as to protest the widespread discrimination and institutional neglect of people still suffering, particularly those belonging to the gay community. This project ultimately evolved into the AIDS Memorial Quilt, a collection of over 48,000 rectangular panels, each the size of a human grave plot, and each dedicated to an individual who lost their life to AIDS.¹⁵⁸ Created by the friends, lovers, and family members of the deceased, the panels include the names and photographs of the dead, as well as various representations of their hobbies, passions, and life's work. When last displayed in its entirety in 1996, the Quilt covered the entire National Mall in Washington D.C.¹⁵⁹ (see Figure 33).

Although similar in scale to many institutional and state-sponsored memorial monuments (larger even), the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt is quite different in that it was (and continues to be) created directly through the physical labor of the bereaved. In this way, its existence is intimately linked with private grief and public mourning—in fact, it could not exist without them. As Judy Elsley writes in her book, *Quilt as Text(iles): The Semiotics of Quilting*, “Love and grief are stitched and worked out in every panel. The inexpressible finds expression,” and “each [panel] embodies the love and grief of the family, friends and lovers who created it.”¹⁶⁰

Through hours of laboriously stitching the patchwork quilt panels, a memorial object emerges, but the labor of grief is also done. Whether it's the sense of control gained from engaging in a task-oriented activity, the sense of communal mourning and support that can result from collaborating with others, a continued sense of connection to the dead, or the act of remembrance and memorialization that inevitably occurs in the completion of a panel, the bereaved work their grief just as they



work their panels. Elsley writes, “The sewing itself is more means than end... the finished quilt, the material product, is of secondary importance to the process of healing and transformation it represents.”¹⁶¹

This is one of the primary reasons the Quilt is such a powerful memorial object. Each panel is personalized — each name is there to be read aloud, each life is beautifully and uniquely remembered — but it does not stop there. Because the creation of the panels is itself an act of both private grief and public mourning, the panels become more than portraits, sites for remembrance, or mere representations of the grieving/mourning experience — they *embody* grief and mourning in



Figure 33. The NAMES Project Foundation's AIDS Memorial Quilt (with detail) installed on the National Mall in 1996.

a palpable and moving way. This quality is greatly enhanced by the materiality of the quilt itself because of our intimate relationship with cloth (as outlined in the first section of this chapter), which of course differs significantly from the stone, marble, and similar materials that we find in the majority of institutional and state-sponsored memorial monuments. Contrastingly, the AIDS quilt takes us to thoughts of warmth and comfort, to the home and the bed, to the handmade and the human, which makes the staggering loss of life during the AIDS crisis all the more relatable and the grief of the survivors culminating in this public act of mourning all the more affecting.

We can see similar acts of memorialization in the contemporary artwork of Felix González-Torres, particularly in his piece *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*. In honor of his partner, Ross Laycock, who died from AIDS, González-Torres piles 175 pounds of candy wrapped in bright colors in a corner of the gallery and invites the viewer to take a piece with them when they leave (see Figure 34). The pile is periodically replenished throughout the exhibition period so that it returns to its ideal weight of 175 pounds, the weight of Ross Laycock himself. This symbolic action of Ross' metaphorical body in the form of candy being dispersed into the world, bringing (literal) sweetness and joy to others, and yet still being made whole again from time to time, is a touching statement about loss, grief, memory, legacy, and the power of memorials.

Another type of personalized (or handmade) memorials that interest me are the "temporary memorials" constructed at sites of sudden and tragic death, usually in a spontaneous manner. For example, roadside crosses at the sites of automobile accidents or massive collections of "every-day" materials such as flowers, wreaths, cards, photographs, clothing, stuffed animals, balloons, and candles left at the sites of large-scale tragedies, such as at Ground Zero in Lower Manhattan in 2001, fall into this category. Erika Doss describes them as "highly orchestrated and self-conscious acts of mourning aimed at expressing, codifying, and ultimately managing grief,"¹⁶² and argues that although



Figure 34. *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* by Felix González-Torres, 1991.

on the surface level they are assembled to honor and remember the victims of tragedy, their more salient function is to “commemorate grief.”¹⁶³ In this way, they are memorials both to deceased individuals and to the experience of grief itself.

Artist Carson Fox explores the materiality, visual decadence, and emotional power of such spontaneously-assembled memorial objects in her series of temporary memorial-inspired sculptures in which she utilizes “every-day” highly-accessible materials that can be found in common craft stores, such as artificial flowers and glitter (see Figure 35). She distills the subject of her memorial act down to a single word, which is prominently featured in these monochrome memorial wreath sculptures, evoking various concepts, ideals, and characteristics. In doing so, she asks us to consider the secondary losses that accompany the experience of the death of a loved one or large-scale tragedy. And by appropriating the form, quotidian materials, and kitsch quality of spontaneous

“temporary” memorial objects, she comments on how these pervasive acts of mourning and memorialization have the power to “memorialize beauty and its passing”¹⁶⁴ in the public sphere.

Another function of spontaneous “temporary memorials” is to maintain a sense of emotional and/or spiritual connection to the deceased.¹⁶⁵ When asked about her construction and continued maintenance of the roadside cross marking her daughter’s death, one mother said it was to “show her that I love her.”¹⁶⁶ Clearly with memorial objects such as these, there is an effort not only to memorialize lost loved ones, but also to cope with grief by maintaining emotional bonds with the deceased; and this is done through decidedly material means. In fact, “temporary memorials” are often criticized for their elaborate materiality and (supposedly) overly-dramatic displays of mourning, and are deemed vulgar, fetishistic, or simply in bad taste.¹⁶⁷ Yet, as Doss summarizes, “things matter” in the lives of people and the fact that people widely and repeatedly choose to create such materially dense memorials is evidence that spontaneous “temporary memorials” are more than a collection of mere stuff — they are “the creative products of profound personal and public feelings,”¹⁶⁸ a conflation of private grief and public mourning in material form.

As with my art, these public memorials are constructed, assembled, and maintained through the physical labor of grieving people. In this way, the power and meaning of such memorial objects comes from the conditions under which they are created and the context in which they are shared more than from the characteristics of the objects themselves. And so it seems that the labor of making — the physical labor of the body — can also embody the concept of memorialization and become a kind of memorial in its own right; to the deceased, to the experience of grief itself, and even to the territory between private grief and public mourning.



Figure 35. *Beauty* by Carson Fox, 2004.

Notes for Contextual Discussion of Work

- 1 Ginette G. Ferszt, et.al., "Transformation through Grieving: Art and the Bereaved." *Holistic Nurse Practitioners* 13, no. 1 (1998), 68.
- 2 Richard Gross, *Understanding Grief: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2016), 18.
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METHODOLOGY



Now that I have contextualized the three primary elements of my work (cloth/clothing of the deceased, lace, and labor), as well as the four major concepts that their combination can evoke (the process of grief, the therapeutic benefits of making, ritual, and memorialization), the question still remains:

How were the three primary elements initially chosen?

General Framework

Before proceeding with an attempt to answer this question, it must first be noted that making a written account of the personal and artistic journey I have undergone to make my visual thesis work is quite a challenge, as the emotional experiences, processes, insights, and decisions that were key to the creation of my work did not always occur logically or in a straightforward sequence of events. Like grief, it seems my creative process does not move in a straight line. In fact, I tend to think of it as a spiral: a circling of thoughts, emotions, actions, concepts, ideas, and insights, the scope of which slowly changes to eventually arrive at a particular point. Whether the spiral is narrowing or widening to reach that point — and whether or not it seems to be continuing on in its spiraling motion past that point — depends on one's perspective and on how the story gets told.

With that said, in retrospect it is clear that trends and patterns have emerged, manifesting in a (relatively) cyclical and chronological manner. Thus, a general framework for my methodological approach can be discerned, in which one can see that different methods are employed at various points throughout the creative process: Inspiration strikes (most often in the form of some kind of embodied knowledge) and is followed by an intuitive artistic response; analytical decisions about how to proceed are then made based on material and academic research; artworks are created and followed by periods of introspection, particularly on the process of making itself and its effects on my psyche; critical feedback from faculty and peers is collected, propelling conversations about the work further; and then new insights are ultimately gained, pushing the work forward.

To put it another way, we can think of it as a four-phase cycle that (more or less) occurs in the following sequence:

1 INTUITION / EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE:

Intuitive artistic responses to an experience of grief, particularly those

rooted in physical labor and my own embodied knowledge about the grieving process.

2 REFLECTION, RESEARCH & ANALYSIS: A period of reflection and analysis incorporating material and academic research.

3 CREATION: Artwork creation in response to both initial intuition/inspiration and the subsequent (or sometimes concurrent) period of reflection, research, and analysis.

4 INTROSPECTION & CRITICAL FEEDBACK: Introspection, particularly on the process of making's effect on my emotional/psychological state, and critical feedback from faculty and peers is considered, leading to key insights for the further development of current and future work.

Before we proceed with further description of this four-phase cycle, we must first remember the concept of embodied knowledge (as described in the previous chapter), which argues that the mind and body work together to form our understanding of the world. The associated concept of "lived bodies,"¹⁶⁹ which produce and house knowledge both in the mind and the body, highlights the (often unacknowledged) ways in which our bodies impact our experiences and perceptions. Thus, we are reminded that the dualistic separation between mind and body so pervasive in Western culture is ultimately a faulty premise which we must abandon.

With these thoughts in mind, I argue that the impetus for my visual thesis work — my intense inexplicable need to make something, to labor, and keep my hands busy when I first encountered my grief over losing my friend — was a form of embodied knowledge. It was my *lived body's* own intuitive way of responding to my newfound grief, or rather, it was my *lived body's* method of grieving — a way of learning about or knowing something first through bodily action and experience before reaching conscious awareness. Although this was not apparent to me (or rather, to my conscious mind) initially, my eventual awareness of this fact spurred many of the questions that have driven my research

and the development of my thesis work: Why do I feel the need to make (do, construct) in response to my grief? What does such physical labor bring to my process of grief? What does my body “know” about grieving that my conscious mind does not yet know? For me, are making and grieving one and the same thing?

Thus, we begin to understand how the first phase of my four-phase methodological process functions: my own embodied knowledge about grief inspires an intuitive artistic response rooted in physical labor, which then initiates the rest of my creative methodological process, including reflection and research, creation of artworks, and engaging in introspection and critical feedback sessions. As I move through these remaining three phases of my methodological cycle, time passes and my experience of grief also inevitably changes, ebbing and flowing through different events, thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations. Thus, I repeatedly find myself in the midst of new experiences with my own embodied knowledge of grief and the associated intuitive (physically laborious) artistic responses, which then start the four-phase methodological process anew. As one colleague put it, my creative practice is one of “iterative embodiment,” in which I move back and forth between intuitive action and decision-making rooted in embodied knowledge and conscious research, reflection, and critical discourse on (or initiated by) those experiences. And so, it is a kind of cycle rather than a series of steps that begin at one point and end in another—a circle rather than a straight line, or better yet, a continuous series of circular lines that form a spiral.

Examples of My Four-Phase Methodological Cycle in Action: Previous Works

As described in the Prologue, just a few weeks into my MFA program, I received the devastating news that my best friend, Ana, had been given two months left to live. Overwhelmed with grief, I was filled with an inexplicable need to make something, to labor and work with my hands. Having experienced the actions of wrapping and rolling as a form of artistic “meditation” in the past, I intuitively found myself obsessively rolling fallen tree leaves (ever-present at that time of year) into small cylinders, one after the other. And so, in this first phase of my methodological cycle (“Intuition/Embodied Knowledge”), I embraced an intuitive response to my grief — a form of my own embodied knowledge—and took the initial steps towards creating my first piece inspired by the (then impending) loss of my dear friend.

As I moved along in this work, I entered the second phase of my methodological process (“Reflection, Research, & Analysis”) and began pondering what to do with the leaves I had rolled – how would they be presented/arranged? I also contemplated if I should be more selective with the specific type of leaf that I used – would one have more significance in the context of death and grief than another? And I questioned my use of leaves in the first place – why leaves and not some other material? These reflections and questions lead to a process of research and analysis that both justified my initial decisions and informed the further development of the piece. Through my research (reading academic sources as well as having conversations with peers, faculty, friends, and family), I concluded that my use of leaves was fitting, as a leaf’s life cycle is an easily understood and predominant metaphor for change in life (death/rebirth/renewal) in our culture. My research about the spiritual, philosophical, and scientific concepts of the “Tree of Life” and the “World Tree,” which address existential questions about the

nature of life and death using the metaphor of a tree, further justified this choice. I also conducted research into the various associations, folklores, myths, and uses of several types of trees, which ultimately led to my selection of elm tree leaves for the final installation, as the elm has historically been associated with death and the afterlife, dating back to classic Greek and Latin literature. Similar processes of reflection, research, and analysis — too numerous to recount here — guided many other decisions made about the work as I moved through this phase of my methodological cycle.

The third phase of the cycle (“Creation”) resulted in *GriefWork (Denial)*, an installation in which my obsessively rolled elm tree leaves in their various states of decay were meticulously arranged on the walls and in the windowsill of an installation space. The floor was covered with a carpet of unrolled leaves (of several varieties), and the view through the window revealed colorful autumn leaves falling from the trees outside (see Figure 36).

By rolling up the fallen elm tree leaves — these symbols of death and change — and arranging them in perfectly straight lines along the walls, I sought to communicate the lengths we sometimes go through to deny the natural process of death and the grief it causes us. Even though the leaves’ process of decay was delayed by their relocation indoors and by my small acts of “preservation” (rolling and arranging), the contrast between the rolled leaves on the walls/windowsill and the carpet of natural leaves on the floor, as well as the overwhelming smell of decaying leaves that filled the installation space, the sight of autumn leaves in their natural environment just outside the window, and the movement of sunlight across the room as time passed throughout the day were all poignant reminders that no matter how we try delay or deny death, such efforts are ultimately futile.

Once the piece was created, I entered the fourth phase of my methodological cycle, “Introspection & Critical Feedback.” I engaged in introspection about the process of making the work, asking myself: How did

it make me feel? How did it affect my grieving process? I also participated in critical discussion about what the piece was (or was not) communicating to others in group critique contexts as well as individually with peers and faculty. Through this process it became clear that the physical labor of making the work was crucial to its meaning, both for myself as the maker and for the viewers—from that point on, the idea that grief itself is a kind of process-based labor became central to my work. However, I was also left with a general sense of dissatisfac-

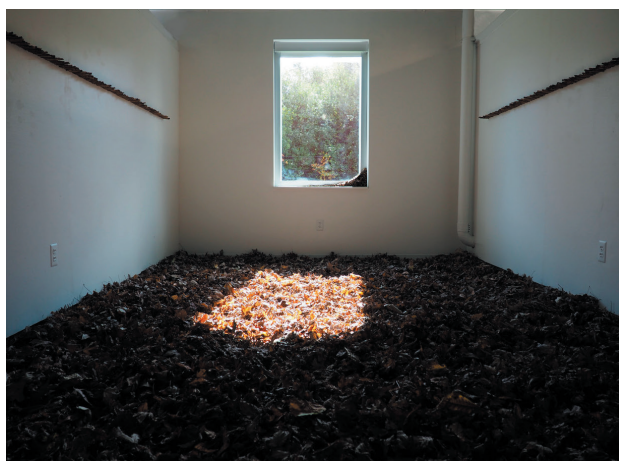


Figure 36. *Grief Work (Denial)*, 2016.

tion with the materiality and overall installation of *GriefWork (Denial)*. Though I had justified and determined my use of elm tree leaves through academic research, their inherent materiality in the contemporary art context seemed to direct conversation about the piece to the Earthworks art movement of the 1960s and 70s, and it drew direct comparisons with Walter De Maria's *Earth Room* (see Figure 37). I also found that the work was not reaching viewers on an emotional level in the way I had hoped. Most reactions I received were heavily logical and intellectual, primarily concerned with decoding metaphors and methodologies, rather than experiencing and/or interpreting a *feeling*. It seemed the piece lacked a powerful emotional presence that could resonate with others. As this was not my intended direction for the work, it became clear that a change in both materiality and installation techniques needed to be made moving forward.

Then, these key insights — namely, the importance of physical labor and the need for changes in materiality and installation techniques — combined with another embodied knowledge experience that began



Figure 37. *Earth Room* by Walter De Maria, 1977.

my four-phase methodological cycle anew. Shortly after completing *GriefWork (Denial)*, Ana passed away, and I was once again overwhelmed with the need to labor in my (transforming) grief. Only this time, heeding the lessons about materiality that I learned from creating *GriefWork (Denial)*, instead of reaching for leaves, I decided to experiment with yarn, and set out to weave an abnormally long continuous piece of cloth. Employing the plain-weave technique, one of the simplest weaving methods which requires little conscious attention from the weaver, I eliminated the possibility of being distracted by complicated patterns and calculations — with plain weave, I could simply send the shuttle back and forth across the warped yarn repeatedly; over and under, over and under.

And so yet again, I embraced my intuitive need to immerse myself in physical labor, and found myself reengaged in my four-phase methodological cycle. As before, I moved through this first phase and into the second, conducting academic research to inform my aesthetic, material, and conceptual decisions — about the materials used to create burial shrouds; about the general significance of cloth's relationship to our bodies, in both life and death, and how it can be a powerful vestige of memory; about the history of hair and its connection to death; and about various aspects of grief theory, including Freud's concept of *GriefWork*, studies about grief's effects on the body, as well as theoretical rejections of stage/phase theories of grief which promote the idea of a tidy, sequential progression through the grieving process that ultimately results in reaching an endpoint or resolution of some kind. All of this research eventually had a direct effect on how the piece developed.

Both during and after I went through this phase of research and analysis, I engaged in a prolonged period of making (phase three, "Creation"), which ultimately resulted in the piece *GriefWork (Shroud)*. A largescale sculptural installation made with natural cotton yarn and my hair, this piece was handwoven on a 30-yard warp, measuring approx-



Figure 38. Grief Work (Shroud), 2017.



Figure 38. *GriefWork (Shroud)*, detail, 2017.

imately 100 feet in length and 40 inches in width, and was installed in a large open space, hanging from a 22-foot ceiling directly under a skylight (see Figure 38).

By engaging in the laborious and time-consuming process of hand-weaving this oversized symbolic burial shroud, and by hanging it in a large empty space far above the head of the viewer under a transcendent light source, I wanted to communicate the overwhelming and monumental sense of the seemingly endless emotional and physical work I had done (and still had yet to do) in my grieving process. I intended the variations of density and linearity in the woven yarn with their random punctuation by clusters of hair to create a visual timeline of sorts, invoking the rhythms, patterns, and repetitions of the multifaceted process of grief — through good days and bad, from acute periods of pain to the peace of acceptance, and back again. In this way, I hoped that *GriefWork (Shroud)* would ask the viewer to consider the possible patterns and cycles of one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors when experiencing grief and loss, and how one's "grief work" might be manifested, expressed, and/or embodied in the physical labor of making.

The ensuing fourth phase of my methodological cycle for *GriefWork (Shroud)*, “Introspection & Critical Feedback,” left me with several key insights. First, our familiarity with cloth, its many roles in death and dying, its deep connection to the human body, and the laborious processes inherent to its creation made it the ideal material for exploring and communicating my ideas about death, grief, and the labor of making. Second, I learned that through the careful use of light, empty space, and scale, I could enhance the emotional impact of an artwork significantly, a lesson I carried with me into the creation of my final thesis project. The work’s monumental nature also inspired conversations about memorialization, which directly influenced my thinking about pieces that followed.

In the creation of the piece immediately following *GriefWork (Shroud)*, I deviated from my methodological cycle by conceiving of the piece from the point of academic research rather than an intuitive response to my own embodied knowledge of grief. Instead, with *GriefWork (Memorial)* (see Figure 39), my main source of inspiration was the Jewish practice



Figure 39. *GriefWork (Memorial)*, detail, 2017.



Figure 39. *Grief Work (Memorial)*, 2017.

of *keriah*, “the ritualized rending of a [bereaved person’s] garment in a violent display of mourning.”¹⁷⁰ This ritual is performed either immediately upon the death of a loved one or just before the funeral service, with the resulting tear being repaired using a temporary basting stitch after the passage of a prescribed period of time.

My process of introspection and gathering critical feedback after completing this piece made it clear that it was a mostly unsuccessful attempt at communicating my ideas because the nature of the labor I employed (*keriah*-inspired ripping and repairing with a basting stitch) was not particularly relevant or authentic to my own experience of grief, nor to Ana’s memory, as neither of us belong to the Jewish faith. I realized that the *type* of labor I employed in making my work needed to be authentic to my and Ana’s story, to our friendship, to her memory, and to my own experience of grieving for her. Thus, my conscious mind was made aware of something that my body already knew: my experience of my own embodied knowledge of grief must be the starting point for my creative process. By deviating from the methodological cycle I had (albeit subconsciously) established, the validity and importance of my own embodied knowledge and intuitive physical responses were illuminated. This was a very significant insight that eventually led to my use of lace-making in my final thesis work.

Similarly, although the creation of my next and final piece from my first year in the MFA program, *GriefWork (Vestiges)*, adhered more closely to my four-phase methodological cycle, it too taught me about authenticity, specifically the need for authentic materials (see Figure 40). Having just inherited several boxes of Ana’s clothing at the time, I became interested in how clothing of the deceased can become a proxy for their body and ultimately a signifier for their absence. However, feeling apprehensive at the thought of depleting the precious finite supply of her clothing in order to experiment with my idea for this piece, I purchased used clothing from a thrift store to create the beginning stages of this strip-weave sculpture.

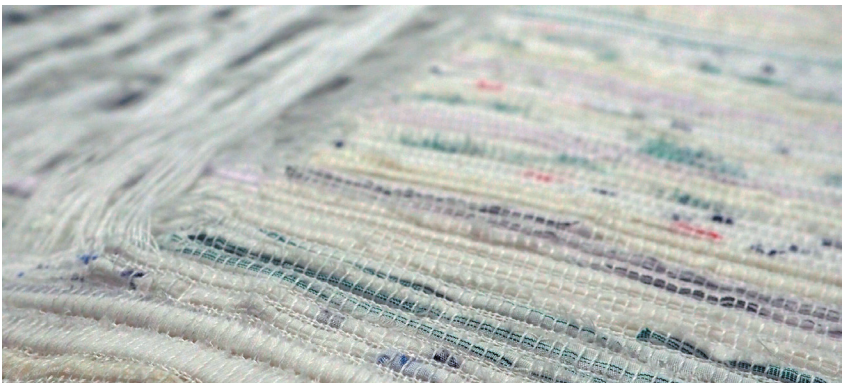
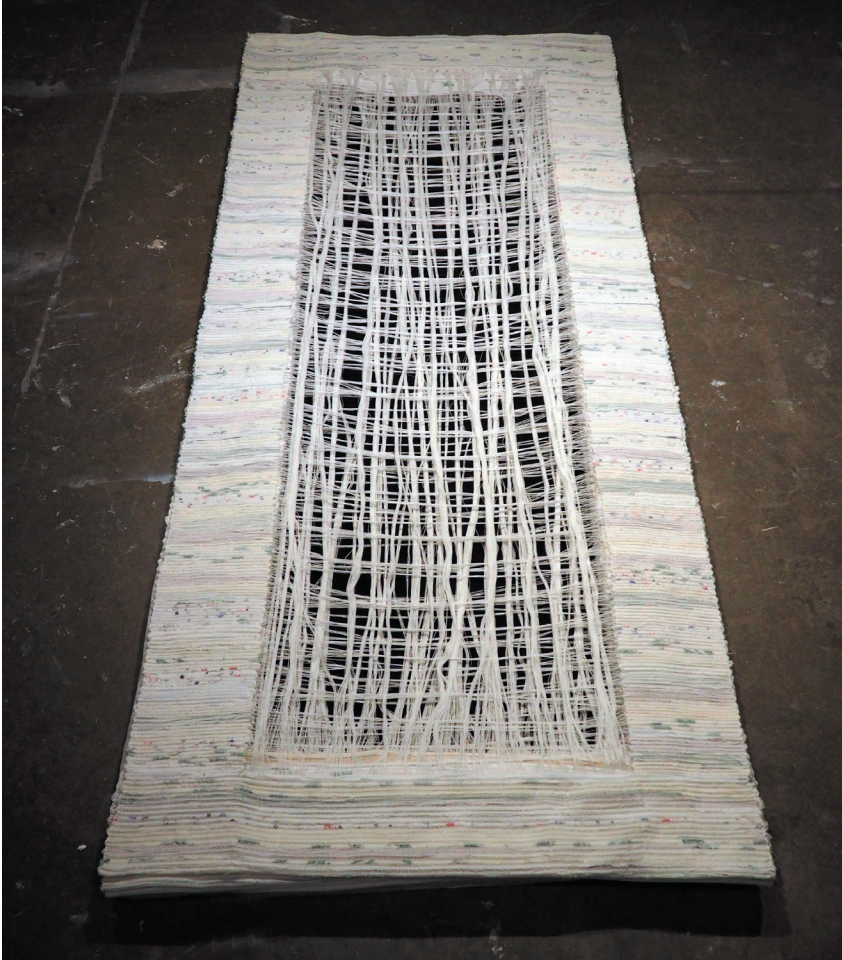


Figure 40. GriefWork (Vestige), 2017.

The use of such an anonymous material turned out to be an additional misstep on the path to developing my thesis work, which ultimately resulted in another key insight. During my period of introspection and gathering critical feedback after making this piece, I realized that I did not feel as emotionally connected to the process of making as I had been during the creation of my previous works. And despite the fact that a viewer would not necessarily know if the clothes actually belonged to Ana or not, my sense of disconnect with the material somehow seemed to be subtly communicated to the viewer, leaving the piece feeling unresolved and perhaps to some, even a bit insincere. Consequently, I concluded that, although the use of clothing in my work was a strong decision (its function as a proxy for the deceased's body giving it the potential to be an even more poignant material than raw cloth), moving forward I would need to use *Ana's* clothes in order to actually experience my grief within the physical labor of making. It was becoming essential that I connect both with the physical process of making itself *and* the materials used in that process. Again, the significance of my own embodied knowledge of grief was made evident.

Thus, by repeatedly cycling through my four-phase methodological process during the first year of my MFA program, I reached several key decisions and insights that set me on a direct path towards creating my final thesis work. I determined that my intuitive need to labor within my grief — to embrace my own embodied knowledge of grief through physical processes of making — was central to the work I wanted to create. I also found my way to cloth as my primary material, particularly clothing, because of its ability to function as a proxy for the body of the deceased. I observed how installation strategies could heighten the emotional impact of a piece, especially with the use of light, empty space, and scale. I also learned about the importance of engaging in a type of labor that is relevant to Ana and my personal experience of grieving for her, as well as the significance of utilizing authentic materials for my labors, such as Ana's clothing.

I also realized that unique aspects about Ana and my own grief need to be made more explicit in my work; that I might more effectively conjure shared feelings or experiences of grief through our specific story. In the wake of this insight, I embarked on my summer International Experience after my first year in the MFA program, traveling to France to learn how to make bobbin lace. As Ana herself was a burgeoning lace-maker and we discussed our shared love of lace often while she was alive, engaging in the laborious process of lace-making intuitively felt “right” to me — it was an authentic labor that spoke to Ana’s life, our story, and my own body’s need to labor extensively and make something in my grief. While learning to make lace, with the labor of my body leading the way, I felt connected to Ana in a way that I had not yet been able to experience since her death. And thus, the third of the three primary elements for the basis of my thesis work was determined; it became clear that labor, cloth/clothing of the deceased, and *lace* would play prominent roles in the creation of my final thesis work. The question then was: how would these elements be employed and to what effect?

Notes for Methodology

169 Tanaka, “The Notion of Embodied Knowledge and Its Range,” *Encyclopaideia*, 48.

170 Samuel C. Heilman, *When a Jew Dies: The Ethnography of a Bereaved Son*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 80.



CREATIVE WORK



My visual thesis work, entitled *Crossing*, is comprised of four main components: (1) a “memorial” sculpture made with Ana’s unfinished lace and the wooden lace bobbins she once used in her lace-making; (2) a large-scale installation including a lace pillow, a table, two chairs, a trunk, and a continuous piece of handmade lace trim, several-yards long, created with threads harvested from Ana’s clothing; (3) a live performance periodically enacted within the installation, in which I deconstruct Ana’s clothing and make lace with the threads at

the table, slowly dragging it backwards across the room as I work; and (4) a 10-minute single-channel video (displayed in the absence of live performance) depicting the actions of my performance, as well as a kind of “origin story” for the installation, showing the table’s progression across the room from its original starting point to the location in which the viewers find it in the gallery space. In this section, each main component of my visual thesis work will be described in detail, along with a discussion about my creative decisions and intentions and how they relate to my research. It will end with a reflection based on critical feedback I have received thus far, as well as my own introspection on the process of making, and particularly *performing*, this work.

Sculpture – Crossing I

In my thesis exhibition, the first work viewers are meant to encounter is a sculpture standing alone, encircled in a halo of light in the otherwise darkened space. A tall thin plinth painted black, measuring 22.5” x 12” x 44”, sits quietly with something indistinguishable lying on its top surface. As the viewer moves closer, the objects begin to take shape: on a black cushion lies a piece of white unfinished lace, its loose threads tangled, each attached to its own wooden bobbin which together form a large pile (see Figure 41).

Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the bobbins are all engraved with different words and phrases, repeating in no particular order (see Figure 42). A kind of poem may emerge, pieced together in the mind of the viewer, and perhaps they will decipher my lace instructor’s poetic explanation about the *grain d’orge* pattern (which is found in the white lace lying on the cushion): “It’s like two friends going over a river. First one crosses, then the other follows.”

The didactic text accompanying this piece notes that it is a posthumous collaboration between Ana and myself, crediting us both as the

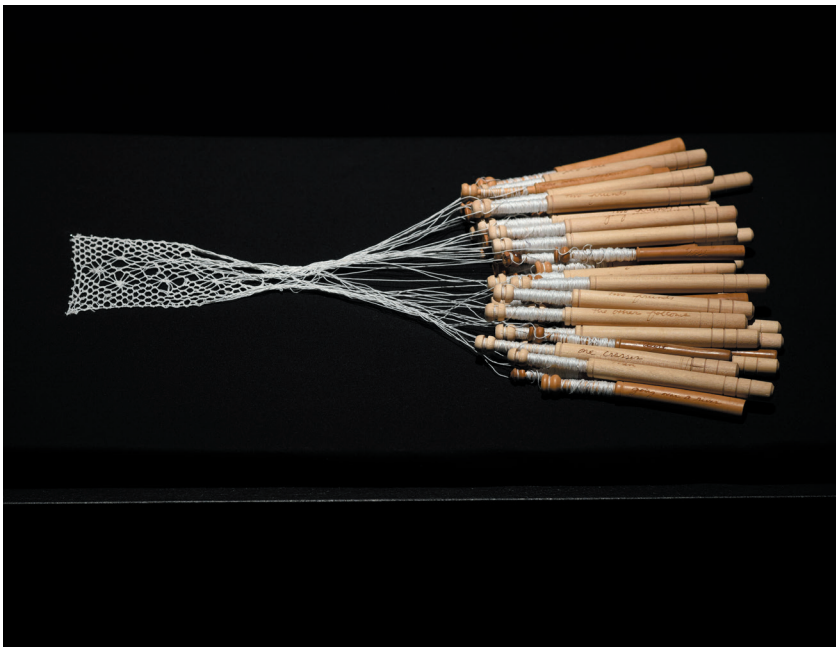


Figure 41. *Crossing I*, thesis exhibition 2018.



Figure 42. *Crossing I* (detail), thesis exhibition 2018.

creators. It also includes a materials list which indicates that the white lace was made by Ana (left unfinished after her death) and that the wooden bobbins also once belonged to her.

My decision to lay these Linking/Melancholy objects¹⁷¹ atop a tall rectangular black plinth was twofold, as I wanted to reference both Ana's death itself — the moment of her “crossing over” — as well as the practice of memorialization. By laying the unfinished lace and bobbins out on a black cushion (the color generally associated with death and mourning in Western culture), they become still, passive, and without agency, much like the bodies of the deceased. In this way, the idea of death is subtly suggested to the viewer, particularly the practice of laying out a body for viewing. My decision to locate this “laying out” atop a tall black plinth was based in my desire to reference the visual and architectural language of cemeteries and memorial monuments: towers,

rectangular granite slabs, tombstones, and the like. By utilizing aspects of these familiar forms, I illustrate the idea that this piece is not only a sculpture but also a kind of memorial to a person who has died.

I also placed Ana's lace and bobbins — these symbols of her life and death — atop the plinth so that I could put them on a metaphorical "pedestal" of sorts to emphasize the significance of her passing. After all, putting objects on a pedestal is a commonly used method for calling attention to something; it signifies an importance and preciousness which I feel about Ana's passing and want to convey to the viewer. The height of the pedestal was also intentionally chosen to bring the lace and bobbins close to the face of the viewer, as I aim to create an intimate moment in which the viewer can encounter (confront and/or contemplate) both death and the practice of memorialization while looking at this piece (see Figure 43).



Figure 43. Viewer studying *Crossing I*, thesis exhibition 2018.



Figure 44. *Crossing I (detail)*, thesis exhibition 2018.

While doing so, the viewer might observe that the loose threads of Ana's unfinished lace are tangled in a tight mass of knots, an indication that her work has stopped and will not continue — a signifier of the tragic disruption caused by her death (see Figure 44). Alternatively (or perhaps simultaneously?), this tangle of threads is representative of my grief for Ana, an overwhelming jumble of thoughts, behaviors, and emotions in which coherent order and control seem to break down; the poem engraved on the bobbins¹⁷² then becoming symbolic of my attempts to understand or “make meaning”¹⁷³ from that grief and find a way to continue my bond with Ana.

Like moving through grief, deciphering the poem from the repeated and randomly sequenced words and phrases is not straightforward or explicit, ambiguity and uncertainty overshadow the process.

Installation – *Crossing II*

Just beyond the memorial sculpture, an installation piece spanning a distance of approximately 30 feet is assembled and sparsely lit in the darkened gallery space. On one end, a gray wooden chair is tucked into a matching table, where a lace pillow sits with lace trim (approximately 1-inch in width) secured to it with small silver pins. Next to the pillow, a mysterious indentation in the tabletop holds a mass of small pieces of multi-colored discarded thread (see Figure 45).

The lace extends out from the pillow and hovers above the table top, stretching across the table's length and beyond into empty space, passing by a small gray trunk sitting on the floor (its lid closed), gradually ascending upwards towards the sky, as if pulled by some sort of magical force. The lace shifts in color — with shades of blue, purple, black, white, and brown and hints of red — and the didactic text accompanying the work indicates that the lace is made using threads harvested from Ana's clothing. Its pattern — the same *grain d'orge* found in Ana's unfinished lace from the sculpture — displays moments of deviation from its repeated flower-like shape, and in some cases, a complete abandonment of the pattern altogether (see Figure 46).



Figure 46. *Crossing II* (detail), thesis exhibition, 2018.



Figure 45. Crossing II installation, thesis exhibition 2018.



The lace's ascent continues to a point at the opposite side of the room where it abruptly plummets back down to earth, piling into an empty chair which matches the other table and chair in style, size, material and color (see Figure 47).



Figure 47 (opposite) and detail (above). *Crossing II*, thesis exhibition 2018.



In this installation, the viewer is presented with the remnants of an immense amount of physical labor—the intricacy of the lace’s construction combines with its extraordinary length to emphasize this impression. The mysterious indentation in the tabletop which holds the discarded pieces of thread that result from the lace-making process also emphasizes this point, as one can imagine that it has been worn into the table by the weight of the pile as the immense labor of producing this lace was performed (see Figure 48). In this way, the idea of grief as a kind of labor — a process requiring physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual “work” on the part of the bereaved¹⁷⁴ — is intended to be summoned in the mind of the viewer.

Aspects of the experience (and labor) of grief are highlighted in the properties of the aesthetic and structural properties of the lace, particularly the transformative and cyclical nature of the grieving process. For example, the color of the lace continually shifts, in an effort to emphasize how the experience of grief is not static — it continually



Figure 48. *Crossing II (detail)*, thesis exhibition 2018.

changes, through good days, bad days, and everything in between (see Figure 49). Similarly, at particular moments in the lace, the *grain d'orge* pattern is interrupted with abrupt periods of deviation from the pattern, and sometimes by a complete disregard for the pattern altogether in which the threads are left loose and free, rendering the pattern obsolete. With these sections of the lace, I reference the especially difficult moments in grief — the frustration, anger, despair, and exhaustion — when continuing on in the “patterns” of living with grief feels particularly taxing or even impossible. Like the continually transforming color of the thread, the repetition of moments like this at random intervals throughout the lace suggests that all of the various thoughts, emotions, and behaviors we experience in grief are both constantly changing and somehow cyclical. We don't simply progress through various stages or phases to reach some kind of endpoint — we move through many different experiences only to cycle back to them later (albeit in various forms) as the experience of grief transforms over time.

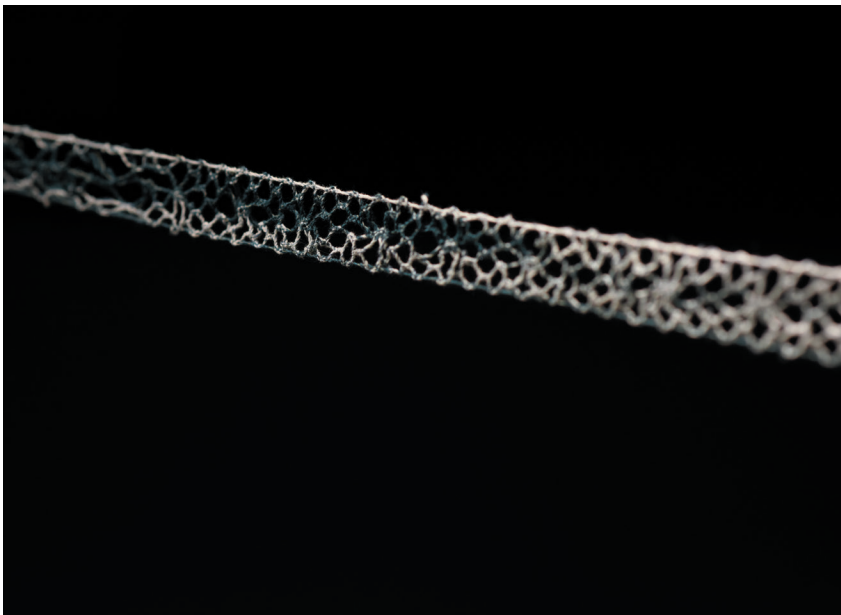


Figure 49. *Crossing II (detail)*, thesis exhibition 2018.

In addition to such ideas about the grieving process, the possibility of staying connected to the deceased is also meant to be summoned by the lace, particularly in the way it physically links the two chairs in the installation together. I intend this to suggest that by embracing the physical intuitive labor of making in grief (i.e. by tapping into my own embodied knowledge of grief), it might be possible to create and navigate the continual transformations of my “continuing bonds”¹⁷⁵ with Ana. However, this idea is purposefully complicated in the installation by the fact that the two chairs (symbolically representing Ana at the far end and myself at the end with the table/lace pillow) are separated by a great distance, and, as the viewer learns from the video piece and/or performance (description forthcoming), the distance between them continually grows as time passes, despite — and even in direct result of — the labors of grief.

The proposition that engaging in physical labor can help facilitate continuing bonds with the dead is also complicated in the installation by the manner in which the lace occupies the space. It hovers, never touching the table or the ground (see Figure 50), and then ascends virtually out of sight — as if through some kind of magic or act of faith it will somehow reach Ana — only to fall abruptly back to earth again

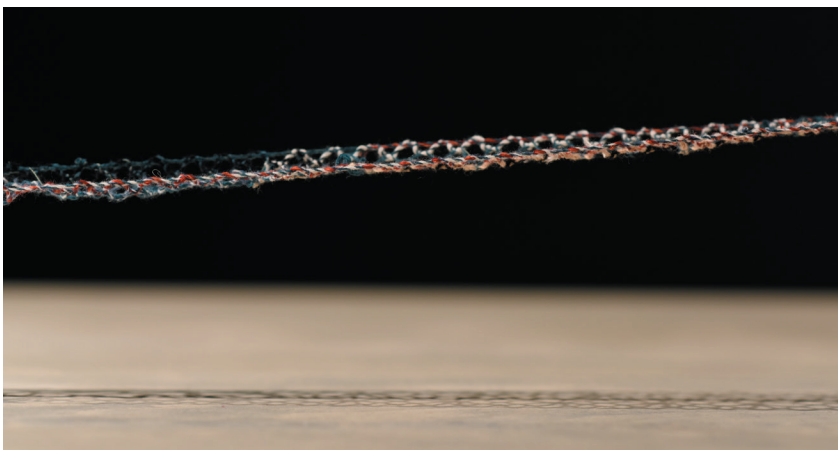


Figure 50. *Crossing II (detail)*, thesis exhibition 2018.

and land in her empty chair. A “reality check” of sorts, a large portion of the lace — once defying the laws of gravity — ultimately sits limp and inactive in the chair, a painful reminder of Ana’s absence and a suggestion that she can never truly be reached.

Thus, these complicating factors in the installation suggest that embracing one’s own embodied knowledge of grief through physical labor might actually *not* be enough to feel fully connected to a lost loved one. Time continues to pass and the distance grows; a connection of sorts is maintained (the lace does reach both chairs after all), but it isn’t as direct or simple as we might hope. Or rather, it’s a process that can leave one feeling unsatisfied and, despite their labors of grief, continually stung by the challenges of maintaining bonds with a person who is simply no longer there. Like grief itself, the installation is full of complications and contradictions.

Performance – Crossing II

On two separate occasions during the run of my thesis exhibition, I presented a live performance within the installation: once for close to an hour during the opening reception and then again for five hours on the last day of the exhibition. Here, I will describe the sequence of actions taken (repeated several times over the long durations of each performance), as well as my intentions for those actions. I will also address several materials choices that were made for the installation with this performance piece specifically in mind. A description and reflection on my *experiences* of performing (both iterations, the one-hour and the five-hour) will follow in a separate section.

The beginning of the performance is signaled by the introduction of sound in the quiet gallery space. An arrhythmic, yet vaguely musical noise slowly grows louder — a recording of clicking wooden bobbins, the slight thump and rub of my fingers on the lace pillow, moving quickly,



Figure 51. Crossing II performance, thesis exhibition 2018.

then slowly, and then stopping for short periods of time before restarting again. I enter the room wearing a brown dress and black cardigan from behind a closed door near Ana's empty chair. I approach the chair, touching its back and looking at the pile of lace on its seat and up towards the ceiling, to the point from which the lace is falling — a greeting of sorts (see Figure 51). I turn and walk back towards the door, stopping short near an inconspicuous hook in the wall, where I proceed to change out of my dress and cardigan, down to a black slip and tights, and hang my clothes on the hook — the hook seems to be there just for this purpose. I walk again towards Ana's chair, this time passing it with a slight touch on its back — as one would touch the shoulder of a friend when walking by to quickly say hello — and head towards the small trunk sitting on the floor.

I open it and a tray running its length is revealed, holding a dark blue dress, unfolded and laid out, referencing the way a body is laid out for viewing after death. I lift the dress carefully out of the trunk, gently shake it out and look at it briefly before putting it on, struggling to pull it over my breasts and hips — it's a bit too small (see Figure 52). A black



Figure 52. *Crossing II* performance, thesis exhibition 2018.

cardigan remains in the tray, folded neatly and resting where the neck of the dress was laying, a kind of pillow like those we might find in a casket. I unbutton it and put it on as well — it is also slightly small for me, the sleeves are a bit too short. I reach back into the trunk to grab a tool (a pair of thread scissors), and then walk over to the table at the far end of the gallery, lay the scissors down on its surface, and take my seat.

I put my hands on the lace pillow, feeling the wooden bobbins beneath them, and take a deep breath while gazing out at Ana's chair, bracing myself for the labor ahead. I begin, crossing the bobbins one over the other, twisting the threads, adding pins to secure the fresh lace to the pillow, looking up at Ana's chair periodically (see Figure 53). As time passes, I shift my weight in my chair, my feet and legs move into different positions, my posture slumps and straightens, I sigh occasionally — I am slightly uncomfortable, restless, and tired. My facial expressions change subtly, communicating a range of emotions to the close observer: melancholy, stoicism, frustration, irritation, boredom, exhaustion, quiet contentment, and sometimes even wistful nostalgia.

As I work, one of the wooden bobbins eventually runs out of thread, interrupting my progress. I stop, place the empty bobbin on the table near the pile of discarded threads, and push my chair back as I stand up. As the chair legs scrape across the floor, a loud disruptive screeching noise erupts throughout the room, momentarily drowning out the soft tinkling of the recorded wooden bobbins. I walk over to the trunk, remove the tray and place it on the floor nearby. Ana's clothes are revealed there, neatly folded, her Spanish flag pin still attached to her green sweater. I kneel down on the ground, my hands lingering over the pin for a brief moment, before I begin searching through the piles of folded clothes to find the garment I'm looking for, handling each piece of clothing with great care — these items are precious to me.

I remove the selected garment from the trunk (careful to put the others disturbed by my search back in place), and unfold it in mid-air, reveal-

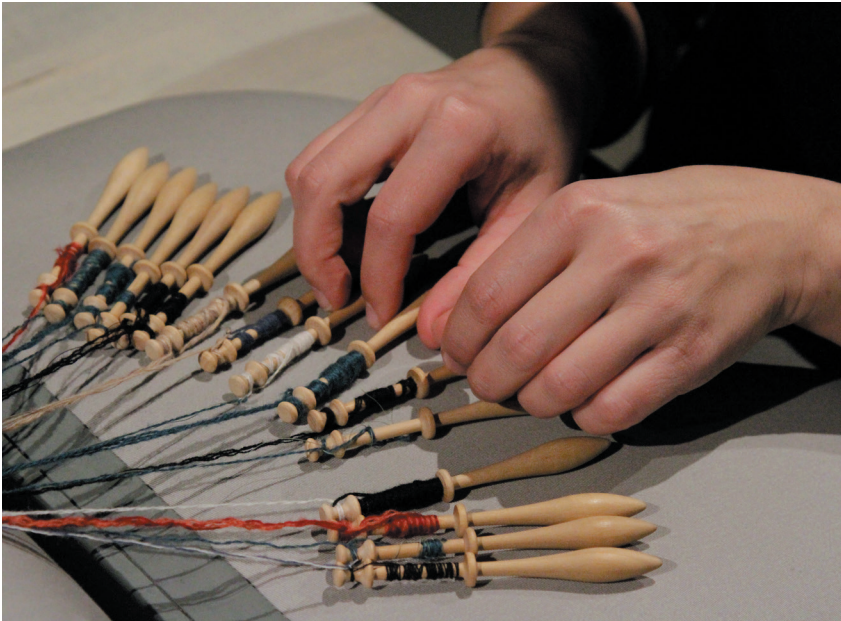


Figure 53. Crossing II performance, thesis exhibition 2018.

ing that it is no longer whole — large chunks of it are missing, loose threads dangle, inner linings are revealed, seams are undone. I place the garment partly in the trunk's tray and partly in my own lap, making sure that it does not touch the floor, as I don't want it to become soiled. I reach for another tool in the tray, a small pencil-like object with a pointed tip, which I use to meticulously remove individual threads from the garment — sometimes with ease, at other times with much effort — slowly unraveling the piece of clothing one thread at a time (see Figure 54).

Once I have collected a thread long enough with which to work, I carefully fold the garment — sometimes with great difficulty depending on its level of deconstruction — and put it back inside the trunk, gently tucking it into its place. I return to the table with the harvested thread, take my seat once again, and go about winding the thread onto the empty bobbin and reattaching it to the lace on my pillow. This process is repeated several times throughout the performance when other bobbins inevitably run out of thread as I work.



Figure 54.1. Crossing II performance, thesis exhibition 2018.

When I run out of space on the lace pillow and need to advance the cylindrical barrel to which the lace is attached, I lean outwards to the side, checking that when I turn the barrel, the lace will not touch the surface of the table. When the space between the lace and the table inevitably becomes smaller, I leave my chair to more carefully assess whether or not I have enough room for another advance of the barrel (see Figure 55). When it reaches the point that I cannot do so without the lace touching the table, I pull my chair out of the way, lift the edge of the table so that the two legs closest to me are off the ground, and slowly drag it back a few inches, another loud screeching noise disrupting the quiet contemplative air of the room as the table legs scrape across the floor (see Figure 56). I take my seat again and continue on with my work.

And so it goes, repeated at length, until the conclusion of the performance, when I rise from the table one last time, carefully tuck in my chair, and return to the trunk where I take off the black cardigan and blue dress, carefully buttoning and folding the cardigan and gen-



Figure 54.2. *Crossing II performance, thesis exhibition 2018.*



Figure 55 and 56 (opposite). *Crossing II* performance, thesis exhibition 2018.

tly laying out the dress in the trunk's tray. I then place the tray back inside the truck, close the lid, and secure it with the latch. I make my way back to Ana's chair, stopping there for a few moments — a farewell — before returning to the hook on the wall where my own dress and cardigan hang (see Figure 57). I change into them, and with one last glance back at Ana's chair, I exit the room through the door from which I initially arrived. After a few moments, the sound of the clicking bobbins slowly dims until it can no longer be heard. With this, the performance ends.

Each action in this performance is deliberately chosen to communicate specific ideas and/or emotions, some of which I will outline now. For example, I change into Ana's clothes at the beginning of the performance to signify my desire to somehow come into contact with her body as I attempt to stay connected to her by performing the labor of lace-making that she once did — through both her clothing and a specific kind of physical labor that is tied to her life and story, I try to embody *her* in some way as I process my grief. I also choose to share





Figure 57. Crossing II performance, thesis exhibition 2018.

this change of “costume” with the viewers in order to evoke a sense of ritual in the performance, as many rituals require the donning of special — sometimes sacred — garments, and my intention with this piece is partly to propose that we can (and do) create our own rituals for grieving.

I conjure this overarching idea of ritual in many other ways as well, both in my performative actions and through material choices. For example, I had a wooden table, chairs, and trunk custom-made for the installation/performance space in order to reference how we commonly form and strengthen our relationships through the ritual of sharing meals (and in the case of Ana and I, collaborating on art projects) over the kitchen table. I also had this (vaguely domestic-looking) furniture stained gray to differentiate it from the (most often brown-stained) wooden furniture that we are accustomed to seeing in our homes. By doing this, I created a distinct environment that simultaneously references the domestic realm but is also separate from it, thus generating the sense that this space exists exclusively for the purpose of perform-

ing my self-created ritual of lace-making. The hollowed out indentation in the table top can further promote the idea that the furniture has this specialized purpose, as its only function is to be a vessel for the unused threads harvested from Ana's clothing. This feature declares that even these small bits of discarded thread are precious, and that they too must be preserved and handled with care, which in turn also invokes how ritual acts can define and reinforce what is considered sacred.

Another way in which I summon the idea of ritual in my performance is through the use of sound. As many rituals include music, chanting, incantation and other sonic elements, I play the recording of the mysterious and hypnotic clicking lace bobbins to create a ritualistic atmosphere in the installation/performance space. The observant viewer will notice that the sound emits from two speakers overhead, one near the chair where I work and the other near Ana's chair in which the fallen lace piles. With even closer attention, the viewer may also notice that the sound is constructed so that it echoes itself: a sequence of wooden bobbin clicks emits from the speaker above Ana's chair and then is repeated after a short delay from the speaker near my chair. And so the sound continues to play throughout the entire duration of my performance, creating an ambient sense of ritualistic space and subtly evoking the idea that by engaging in this labor of lace-making — in this grieving ritual informed by Ana's life and work as well as my own embodied experience of grief — I have found my way of metaphorically following her, and finding ways to stay connected with her, after her death.

The ritualistic atmosphere is further emphasized by the use of dramatic lighting, in which the installation/performance space is sparsely lit in the otherwise darkened room (see Figure 58). This minimal lighting is meant to help transform the familiar gallery space into a kind of sacred space for the performance of a meaningful ritual. Of course, it is incredibly difficult to make the viewer *entirely* unaware of their surroundings (nor is this actually desired on my part), but placing the installation



Figure 58. Crossing II performance, thesis exhibition 2018.

and performance in a darkened, nearly empty space does help create a representation of the metaphoric space in which my grieving ritual takes place. This use of darkened space also summons ideas of grief and loss because of darkness' general (albeit simplistic) cultural associations with sadness and despair. Furthermore, the halo of light which encloses the installation/performance space (which could not exist without its counterpart of darkness) invokes the interior, personal, and private spaces of our minds, bodies, and spirits in which we experience grief. Such an interior emotional and psychological space is further emphasized by the fact that I do not interact or make eye contact with the viewers when I am performing.

Several such aspects of the grieving process are referenced in my performance. For example, when performing, I do not allow the lace to touch the table as I work because I want to symbolically visualize the imaginative, or faith-based, thinking we employ when we to attempt (re)build and maintain our bonds with the deceased. I ensure that the lace continues to hover above the table and ground, defying gravity (or

in another sense, defying reality), by moving the table back as I work. This process keeps me connected to Ana in some (albeit indirect) way, as seen through the ascending then plummeting trajectory of the lace, but it also ultimately results in a growing distance between the two of us. And so, my labors of grief both connect and separate us — by embracing my embodied knowledge of the grieving process and engaging in the physical labor of lace-making, I feel deeply connected to Ana and desperately far away from her at the same time. After all, I can't actually talk to her about this process of lace-making. In this way, the inherent complexity and paradox of maintaining bonds with deceased loved ones is revealed in my performance.

My use and treatment of Ana's clothing both in the installation and the performance is also a pointed gesture. The mere fact of their inclusion evokes the emotional and visceral power of a deceased person's clothing as a signifier for their body, becoming a weighty presence of absence. Their location several feet away from the table where I make lace emphasizes the growing distance between Ana and myself as time passes and I continue to labor through grief — the walk I take between my lace pillow and the trunk filled with her clothes each and every time I need to replenish a bobbin with new thread underscores this idea. My careful handling of her clothes, repeatedly and gently folding and tucking them back into their spots in the trunk (rather than leaving them out in the tray or sprawled across the table as I work) is suggestive of their preciousness to me, reflecting my desire to protect, respect, and preserve her memory in such tiny acts of memorialization. My treatment of her clothing also illustrates how I use them as "Linking Objects" to help me stay connected to her as well as navigate my own (continually shifting) transition into the new reality caused by her death.

My decision to place Ana's clothing in a closed trunk also reveals my sense of their preciousness and value, as well as my concern about potentially exploiting Ana's death and memory in my work. As I devel-



Figure 59. From first iteration of performance piece, October 2017.

oped my performance throughout the year, I experimented with several iterations, including the first one in which her clothes were laid out in a pile on the floor in front of me, exposed and vulnerable (see Figure 59).

My initial choice to present them this way was rooted in my desire to emphasize how her clothes were signifiers for her body — thus, I laid them out on the ground, forming a shape that resembled a burial mound, rather than hanging or folding them as we generally do with clothing in the course of daily life. I also wanted to impress the overwhelming emotional, psychological, mental, and physical labor that grief requires of us, and thought that by deconstructing her clothing and making lace while sitting opposite this large mound, I could imply that I would continue to perform this labor on *all* of the clothing piled there — an overwhelming and daunting task, indeed.

However, as time passed, my personal experience of grief continued to transform, and my research about grief theory and therapy encouraged me to look at my grief for Ana not only through my own eyes, but through the perspectives of others who also grieve for her. Thus, I began to think more closely about what form the grief of her parents and other friends might take and how her clothing — a material so

viscerally connected to her body — being laid out on the floor, exposed and alone in an unfamiliar and institutional gallery space, might affect them. Would it somehow be akin to walking into a gallery and seeing their friend's/daughter's body lying there? Would this be an exploitation of the power that her clothing now holds as a result of her death, and ultimately an exploitation of her memory in general?

As I was asking myself these questions, I came across the work of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, particularly her video performance piece, *I am Living*, from 2002 (see Figure 60). In this work, Rasdjarmrearnsook, films a live performance in which she arranges different pieces of clothing on top of a female corpse (a real dead body, not a living actor).

I had an immediate visceral reaction to this work which filled me with shock, disgust, and anger. How did the artist get permission to do such a thing? How did the family members of the deceased woman in this video feel about this? Would this woman have knowingly consented to this use of her remains in her lifetime? Was it ethical and/or moral for the artist to profit (professionally and perhaps economically) from



Figure 60. Still from *I am Living* by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2002.

the use of a person's body as her own artistic "material?" My reaction further intensified when, in the many articles and essays I read about this work, I could barely find mention of the pressing ethical and moral questions that this piece (and others like it from Rasdjarmrearnsook's oeuvre) bring forth. It seemed the consensus of art critics was that such exploitative behavior was somehow acceptable in the realm of contemporary art, so much so that the potential ethical/moral problems inherent to this work were not even worth mentioning.

My negative reaction to Rasdjarmrearnsook's work heightened my doubts about exposing the mound of Ana's clothing as a work of "art." It also strengthened my resolve to avoid coming anywhere close to such gross exploitation of Ana's death and body in my work, even if only through the use of her clothing rather than her actual body like in Rasdjarmrearnsook's work. Thus, my research pointed me in the direction of where I did *not* want to go, ultimately leading to my decision to present and treat Ana's clothes with the utmost care and respect in my thesis work. I have allowed them to be exposed to the public only in my presence (and under my protection) during my live performances and in their transformed state of lace, which is, of course, much less a signifier of her body as it is for my experience of grieving for her.

In addition to considering how Ana's body, or rather, the signifiers of her body are treated in my installation and performance, I also gave much thought to my original decision to commit to the medium of performance, and thus the use of my own body as material. Over the first year of my MFA program, as I moved through my four-phase methodological cycle and discovered how I continually access my own embodied knowledge of grief through the labor of making, I repeatedly questioned whether or not it was effective to present only the artifact (or remnant) of this process — as manifested in the objects I labored to create — or if it would be clearer and/or more emotionally impactful to share the process itself with viewers. After much time, I finally concluded that my process of tapping into my embodied knowledge

of grief through the labor of making was essential to the creation and content of my work, and without sharing it with my viewers, I reasoned that my ideas might not come across clearly. Thus, I determined that the central component and primary site of my making/grieving process — my body — must be included in the final form of my work. Since the medium of performance is rooted in the physical presence and action of the artist's body, it became a natural medium for me to employ. As art historian, Silvia Fok, writes, "Only through and with his/her own body can the artist address his/her experiences of the process of creation."¹⁷⁶

Once I committed to my body as material through the medium of performance, it was necessary that I pay considerable attention to how my body moves and functions during that performance. As described above, I continually shift my body weight in my chair, move through various subtle facial expressions, change the position of my legs and feet, slouch and straighten my back and shoulders, sigh and take deep breaths, and stretch my neck and shoulders from time to time. This all happens naturally, of course — this is simply how my body moves when doing this work for long durations of time — but it is consciously heightened (albeit slightly) during my performance in order to more clearly communicate the ways in which I experience grief in my body and how my own embodied knowledge of grief is accessed through the labor of making. As Silvia Fok writes, "The role of the artist's body is to inspire and draw the spectators to reflect upon the message and meaning of the performance. The more explicit the body language, the more effective the message that is conveyed..."¹⁷⁷ I agree with this idea and would augment it by saying that, at least in my case, the artist's body is also crucial to *creating* the message and meaning which is communicated to the audience through performance.

Choosing to perform for longer durations (approximately an hour or more), was both determined by the process itself and used to inform the content of the piece. Lace-making is in and of itself a slow-mov-

ing process that requires time and patience — add to that the need to deconstruct clothing in order to gather the required thread and an even more time-consuming proposition emerges. Thus, to share this process with my viewers, the duration of the performance must be long out of necessity: there simply isn't enough time within a five to fifteen-minute period — the length of a typical “short” duration performance piece — to satisfactorily experience and share my process. Like in grief, time and labor are inescapable in my performance.

More importantly, though, the content of this piece is served by performing for longer durations. As I aim to communicate the laborious, on-going, repetitive, cyclical, and transformative nature of grief in my work, engaging in this process for an extended period of time both can conjure and emphasize these ideas. When performing such “labor of tending”¹⁷⁸ for extended periods of time, I experience and share my own embodied knowledge of grief and present a more nuanced version of how grief might be experienced. As one viewer remarked, my performance evokes “the long form of grief” rather than the acute and dramatic portrayals we are accustomed to viewing in public formats (in theater, films, television, etc.). My performance traffics in subtlety and a relative stillness; it is not meant to be a spectacle for entertainment or amusement. Although manifested differently in his work, the words of performance artist, Tino Sehgal, resonate with me when he writes about his message to his audience: “You have to work too.”¹⁷⁹ I have a similar ethos concerning my performance piece. By moving slowly and deliberately — at a pace that is natural to my process — I ask my viewer to slow down as well; to be present with me through the boredom and tedium of my labor (my grief), to reflect on their own experiences of laboring through grief (and even to grieve with me if they feel so moved), and to consider the many ways grief can be experienced mentally, emotionally, psychological, behaviorally, and physically.

Video – *Crossing III*

When I am not performing, the viewer encounters a ten-minute video piece projected onto the gallery wall opposite the installation (see Figure 61). Shot in advance within the same gallery space (see Figure 62), the video depicts the actions of my performance as described above in a much shorter time-frame. In addition to this compression of time, the video differs from the live performance significantly by giving the viewer new information that cannot necessarily be gleaned from the installation and performance — by showing the table progress through a series of locations that are notably different from where the viewers find it in the gallery; by emphasizing specific actions and expressions in close-up shots; and by depicting a particular event which never takes



Figure 61. Crossing III video, projected near installation/performance space in thesis exhibition, 2018.



Figure 62. From video shoot for *Crossing III*, 2018.

place during the performance, telling a kind of “origin story” about the table’s movement across the room.

When the video opens, the sound of clicking lace bobbins fades in and we see the table not as it is in the gallery, but far to one side of the space, positioned closely to the chair with the pile of lace in its seat (Ana’s chair). The other chair (my chair) sits at the opposite end of the table, both chairs at a “normal” distance from each other, just as we would expect to encounter them in every-day life. The lace appears as it does in the installation/live performance (attached to a lace pillow hovering over the surface of the table, ascending towards the ceiling and plummeting abruptly into Ana’s chair), but because there is only a table length’s distance between the two chairs, its span is significantly shorter and its ascent is much steeper (see Figure 63).

I enter the space, greet Ana’s chair, change out of my clothing and into hers, and after working over my lace pillow for some time and

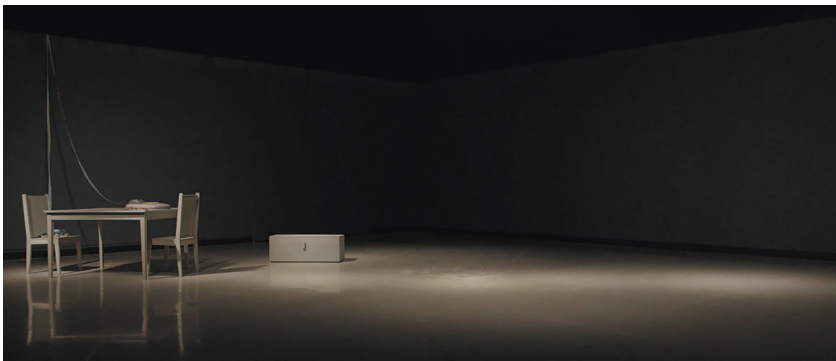


Figure 63. Still from *Crossing III* video, 2018.

harvesting thread from her clothing to replenish an empty bobbin, I advance the barrel portion of the pillow to make room for the creation of more lace, just as in my live performance. At this moment a distinct event which does *not* occur in the live performance is depicted: in a close-up shot, we see the lace come into contact with the table (see Figure 64). At the precise moment of contact, I stop my work and the clicking sound of the bobbins abruptly ceases. Looking surprised and perplexed, I get up to investigate what has just happened. In complete silence, I bend down to take a closer look at where the lace is now resting on the table, I look up to the apex of lace's ascent and then down into Ana's chair at the pile of lace sitting there. The next shot is framed closer on my face, highlighting my expression as it subtly conveys confusion, disappointment, contemplation, and eventually resignation, as I decide what to do next (see Figure 65). I return to my side of the table, and hesitantly lift the table up and drag it backwards by a few inches, causing the lace to hover over the table once again. After assessing that this new course of action has accomplished my goal, I sit back down, and after a deep sigh, continue on with my work, the sound of the clicking bobbins returning. The screen then fades to black, concluding this first act of the video.

Two more acts follow, each with the table in a different position progressively further away from Ana's chair, the trail of lace between them

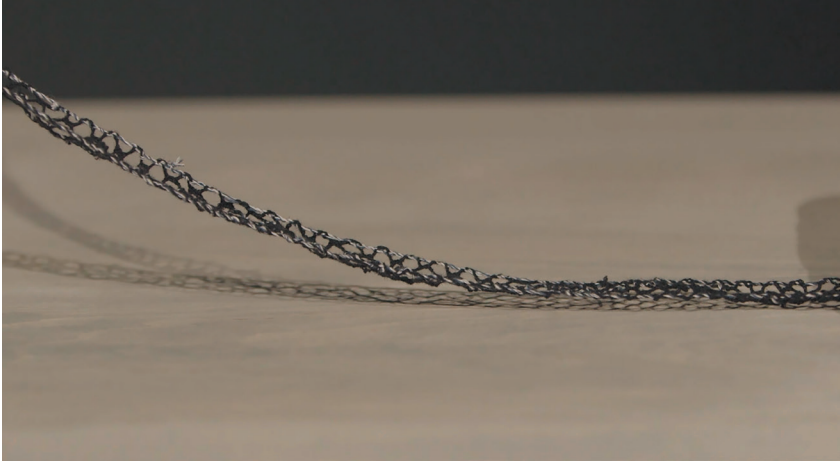


Figure 64 (top) and 65 (bottom). Stills from *Crossing III* video, 2018.

growing longer, its ascent becoming more and more gradual (see Figure 66). I cycle through the actions in these last two acts just as in my live performance — making lace, harvesting threads from Ana’s clothes to replenish empty bobbins, checking the distance between the lace and the table, dragging it backwards to prevent the lace from coming into contact with the table.

In addition to the new events of the “origin story” in the first act, the video utilizes close-up shots and various editing techniques to give the

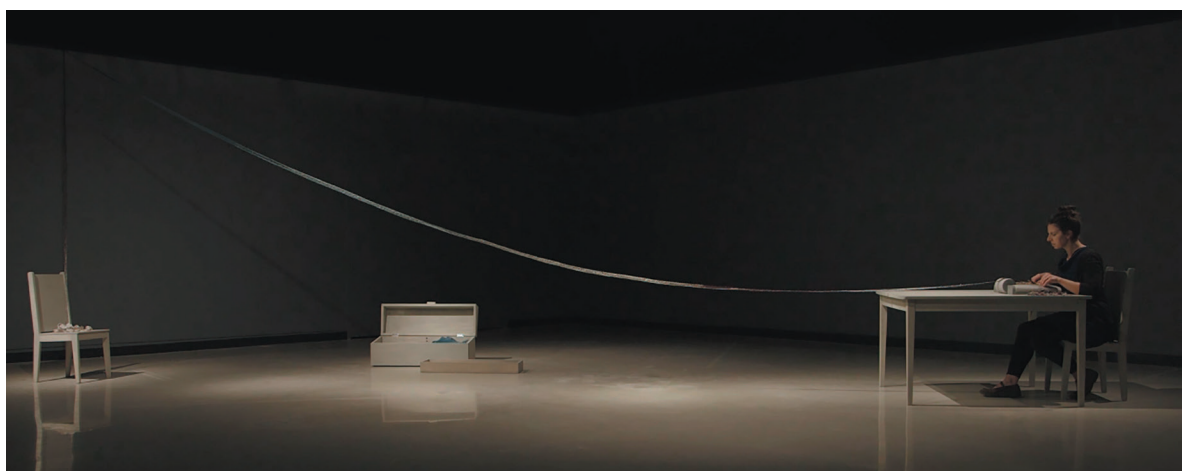


Figure 66. Stills from *Crossing III* video, 2018.

viewer information they may not necessarily notice when watching the live performance — for example, the shifting of my body weight, the intake of deep breath and sighing, glances upwards in the direction of Ana’s chair, my facial expressions, my fingers lingering over the Spanish flag pin on her green sweater are all highlighted (see Figure 67). The process of lace-making is also shown in a level of detail that viewers are likely to miss during the live performance; the creation of the *grain d’orge* pattern, in which the bobbins are separated into three groups representing two friends and a river as described by my lace instructor,

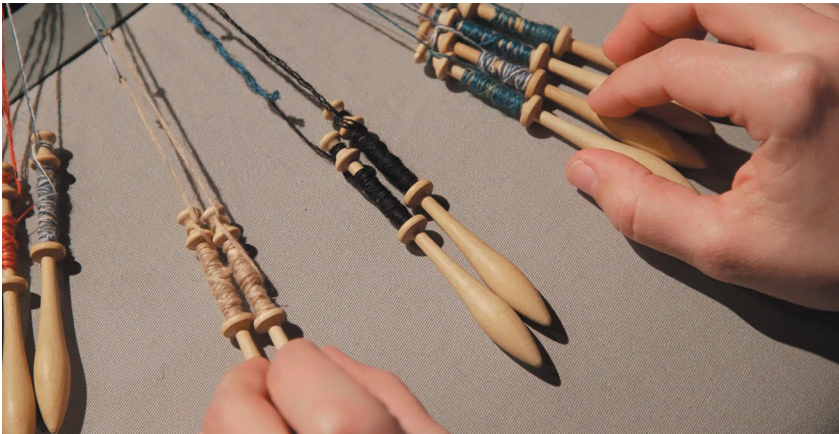


Figure 67 (top) and 68 (bottom). Stills from *Crossing III* video, 2018.

is featured prominently (see Figure 68). The viewers also get a closer look at the way in which I deconstruct her various items of clothing, some with more difficulty than others.

Originally intended to serve as a document of my performance that would play in the gallery when I was not available to perform live, it quickly became clear that the video is no mere document. The additional and/or highlighted information that is provided through the compression of time, the compositional framing of shots, and the editing of their sequence makes the video something else — not necessarily

an artwork that functions independently of the installation and performance, but something that is nevertheless distinct from them. It is an extension of the performance — an interpretation of it — and for this reason, the video can never be a “true” document. As artist and author Pablo Helguera notes, video documentation of art which employs live action is a “representation of the experience, and not... the experience itself.”¹⁸⁰ He explains by summarizing the thoughts of Jurgen Habermas, writing that “someone who was embedded in the action, an artist — even if acting in good faith and making efforts to be objective in representing what happened — is a subject of the action, and as such we can’t rely on his or her descriptions [to be accurate].”¹⁸¹ I argue that this would also be true of an outside documentarian — someone who is not embedded in the action of the performance — as their perspective and subjectivity would still result in a similar lack of objectivity. And so, in this way, we see that a “true” document of live actions can never exist. As Peggy Phelan notes in her book, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, live performance art is a simultaneous “enactment of invocation and disappearance” — as quickly as it invokes an experience and/or set of ideas, the experience is over, never again to be recreated exactly in the same way.¹⁸² Thus, although related, my live performance and video piece are distinct from each other and operate in different ways.

Didactic Text

Although I do not consider the didactic text that accompanies my work to be a piece of art in itself, it is very important to how the work is (or is not) made accessible to the viewer, and thus I spent much time deliberating about how it could most effectively be employed. Throughout my critiques in the MFA program, there was repeated discussion and debate over how much explanatory text is too much or too little. In the end, my goal was to give the viewer just enough background of the

story to provide them a point of entry into the work, but not so much that I was explicitly telling them its intended meaning and/or how to feel. With this in mind, I refrained from installing an artist statement on the wall, where it had the potential to confront the viewer and command their attention before they had a chance to experience the work itself. Instead, I listed only my name, the title of the exhibition (*Crossing*), and the short phrase, “In loving memory of Ana B. Hernandez,” (see Figure 69). My artist statement was included on a handheld sheet of didactic text, along with the title and medium information for the individual works in the exhibition — multiple copies sat on a shelf just below the wall text.

My reasoning for this presentation of my didactic text was twofold. First, the memorial dedication to Ana on the wall communicated the context for this work (namely, death and grief) succinctly and elegantly without giving any specific information about our story. This allowed me to provide a small hint about the work’s content without

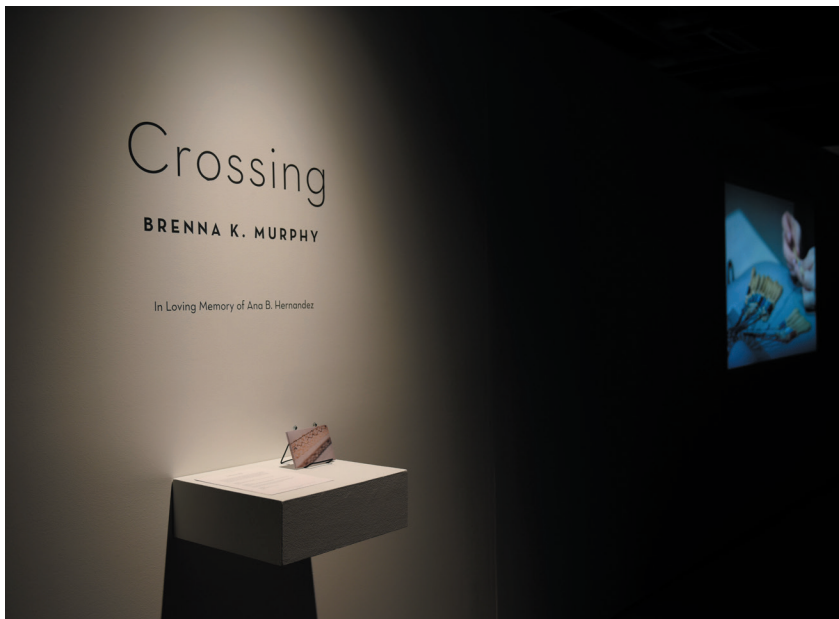


Figure 69. Wall text in thesis exhibition, 2018.

overwhelming the viewer with too much information in their first few moments in the exhibition space. Secondly, my artist statement is personal in nature and thus more fitting to the individualized and intimate experience of reading text out of one's own hands, rather than in the more public setting of reading it off the wall alongside other people.

My goals for the content of the artist statement itself were similar to my reasoning for omitting it from the wall. I aimed to give just enough information to explain why I use lace in my work because, despite facets of its history, it is not an immediate signifier for death and grief for most people. Also, in an effort use my and Ana's story as a way to get at the "universal" through the specific, I only wanted to hint at the intended meaning of my work — I wanted to avoid "giving everything away" in the text so that when experiencing my work, the viewer could (hopefully) have the opportunity for discovery and the space to reflect on their own experiences of loss and grief without being entirely overwhelmed by mine. The statement reads:

My dear friend Ana, an artist and burgeoning lace-maker, died when she was 39 years old. I inherited her clothing, lace pillow, and unfinished lacework. She was in the midst of the grain d'orge pattern, one that I struggled with when I learned to make lace myself after she passed. My teacher demonstrated, separating the wooden bobbins into three groups: "It's like two friends going over a river," she explained. "First one crosses, then the other follows." This poignant metaphor still resonates with me as I continue to grieve for Ana, laboring over my lace and searching for a way to follow.

Reflection: Introspection & Critical Feedback

At the time of this writing, I am still in the fourth phase of my methodological cycle (“Introspection and Critical Feedback”), so it is not yet clear exactly how I will proceed with the further development of this work. However, several important questions and ideas have emerged from the critical feedback I have received thus far, as well as from my own introspective process. Moving forward, I will use them as starting points for taking next steps.

One major theme in the critical feedback I have received is questioning the relationship between the video piece, the installation, and the live performance. Some have proposed that the video is a successful extension of the performance, working effectively in the exhibition space alongside the installation when I am not performing. Others felt that the projection of the video was located too near the installation, distracting from the powerful presence of the lace. (Perhaps the video could be set apart from the installation, maybe in a different room?) Another recommendation is that the video needs to be reworked so it less closely resembles the performance and becomes an even more discrete work of art in and of itself — in its current state, it has been argued, the video hovers too much between something resembling “documentation” and a work of art in its own right. (Perhaps through the addition of outside imagery that is not included in the live performance, I could achieve this?)

I have also considered dispensing of the video altogether and only performing the piece live periodically, allowing the empty, silent installation (when I am not in the gallery) to function less like a sculpture, and more as the remnant (or artifact) of my performance — this way, I might capitalize on what my complete absence could bring to the reading of the work. Or perhaps it would be best to move in the opposite direction of absence, and only present the work to the public when

I am performing live (i.e. if the gallery is open, I am there performing — the installation/performance space never being viewed without me in it). Or more still, perhaps I should perform continually throughout the course of the exhibition, eating and sleeping in the gallery, dedicating myself fully to the performance even when there is no audience.

Needless to say, the responses to the interaction between the video, installation, and performance have been mixed, which is revealing of the inherent complexity of their relationship — so many possibilities for its navigation, all valid in their own way. With that said, I am leaning towards further developing aspects of the live performance in future iterations of this work, rather than the video piece. Although the video has its merits and can provide the viewer with a perspective they may not necessarily have during the live performance, there is power and pertinence to using my body as the medium for this work. For one, my work—both its method of creation and its content—is rooted in embodied knowledge; what better medium for communicating such a concept than the body itself? In addition, it seems the immediacy of my body in the exhibition space creates a more tangible emotional presence for the viewer’s experience, and perhaps a more visceral reaction to the various emotions my performance might elicit from them (empathy, sadness, cynicism, irritation?). After all, in live performance, viewer and artist are not separated by the screen — by both time and space — as they are with video. Furthermore, they are both aware of each other’s presence during live performance, energies exchanging and feeding off each other, creating space for unexpected events, emotions, and experiences. As scholar Peggy Phelan writes, “What makes live performance a significant art form is that it opens the possibility for mutual transformation on the part of the audience and the performer/s.”¹⁸³

In retrospect, I realize that I could not have come to these conclusions without having the experience of actually performing the piece in its final form, especially in its longest duration of five hours. That experience helped me realize that I want to focus on developing my per-

formance piece further, and it also helped me articulate some of the issues that I need to consider when doing so.

Overall, my experience of performing this piece was layered and complex, producing a mix of emotions and reactions that initially left me feeling perplexed and ambivalent about the role (and value) of live performance in my thesis work. My performance of close to an hour at the opening reception of the exhibition was a blur of noise and crowds — the energy felt busy and excited rather than calm and contemplative (see Figure 70).

I generally felt nervous and hyper-aware of being watched, and grew increasingly irritated by the conversations I could hear people having very close to where I was working; about where they would eat dinner, about their class earlier that day, but not about the performance that was taking place mere feet from them at that very moment. I did not expect complete silence, it being a crowded reception, but I was somewhat shocked and upset by what I felt to be a lack of respect for both my artwork and my grief from these talkative individuals standing so close to me.

With that experience in mind, I looked forward to the five-hour performance on the last day of the exhibition, which I anticipated would be a quieter and calmer environment. I expected few people to be in the space, slowly trickling in and out, quietly and respectfully sitting with me, observing, and (hopefully) contemplating their own experiences of loss and grief. And so I began the performance thinking that I would finally, in the midst of the busy last term of my graduate program, have an opportunity to “spend the day with Ana;” communing and “talking” with her — doing the work of maintaining our bond — as I have been so accustomed to doing when engaged in the process of lace-making in private contexts. And though my expectations about a calmer environment in the gallery was more or less as I’d expected (and hoped), as the performance got underway, it quickly became clear to me that it would not be so simple as “spending the day with Ana.”



Figure 70. From one-hour live performance at opening reception of thesis exhibition, 2018.

Instead, as with my first performance, I was still quite aware of being watched, of needing to *perform* for the viewer. I tried to let go of this need to be somehow entertaining (“If I don’t do something interesting soon, they’re going to leave!”), and at moments I succeeded, but mostly, I could feel myself changing my behavior ever so slightly when I saw figures moving into the room out of the corner of my eye — my posture, the pace at which I worked, the way in which I held the muscles in my face. I also noticed a distinct uptick in my social and emotional discomfort when a viewer stood close to me, either when I was at the table making lace or kneeling on the floor deconstructing Ana’s clothes. Even though they were not having a loud conversation, like the viewers at the opening reception, their presence still felt somehow invasive — not disrespectful or hurtful, but nevertheless unwanted. Perhaps because it was often only me and one or two other people in the room in this position that it felt too intimate — I was somehow made too vulnerable by performing this private act of grief in the presence of others. This sense of unease made me question whether or not engaging in performance was the right choice for my work; “I’m not sure I like this,” I thought to myself. “If I am happiest when nobody else is in the room, maybe performance art isn’t for me.”

But then, something unexpected happened. Over half-way through the five-hour performance, perhaps because of enduring both physical and emotional discomfort for several hours at that point, I was finally able to relinquish some of my awareness of the fact that I was being watched. I began to think about Ana; about what she might think of this performance; about my memory of us laughing together at our friend Russell's impression of her; about what she would look like sitting in her chair across the room from me in that moment. After some time lingering in this bittersweet reverie, I could feel myself becoming emotional, and when I began deconstructing her sweater for yet another thread, something inside of me broke — in an instant, tears filled my eyes and began streaming down my face. Even though I was aware of the viewers in the room at the time, in that one singular moment, it didn't seem to matter. By "breaking down" in this way, I experienced my grief — my actual grief, not the performance of it — and felt a blissful sense of relief.

However, as quickly as this moment came upon me, it was gone, and I was immediately flooded with feelings of embarrassment and shame. Would the viewers think I was faking it for their sake? Would they scoff at such "melodrama?" Though I felt as if I could have gone on crying — sobbing even — for some time, I worked hard to compose myself, painfully aware of how I had violated the boundaries that we draw between private and public, especially when it comes to the experience of grief. By the time the performance was scheduled to end, I was contradictorily both incredibly relieved and extremely sad for it to be over. On one hand, I was exhausted, emotionally and physically, and ending the performance was a welcome break from my labor. On the other hand, I had also finally reached a point where, even within the public space of my performance, I was able to truly tap into my grief and spend the time with Ana that I so desired — I wanted more. I was also beginning to sense that, only after several hours of performing, the (psychological, emotional, physical) space I created with my performance was shifting from public to private, or more accurately, to something in between

the two. I could not yet articulate how, but it seemed the moment I unexpectedly cried in front of my viewers was somehow responsible for this shift.

By experiencing and later reflecting on my own discomfort throughout my performance, I've realized that I somehow embodied the problematic approach to grief and mourning that we have in our culture: I was self-conscious about being watched, I didn't want people too close to me, I was most comfortable when left alone, I was embarrassed and ashamed when I did finally allow a genuine moment of grief to come to the surface in a public setting. Despite my personal experience of and extensive research about the value of embracing the grieving process, it seems that in some ways I still embodied the deeply-rooted idea that grief is a private matter best left behind closed doors. In this way, I have truly grasped how complicated our relationship to grief is — how the fear of it (and the desire to avoid it) can be deeply ingrained in our individual psyches and ultimately in our culture at large. And it was through the medium of live performance that I achieved this realization — my experience of embodied knowledge, this time in a social context, deepened my understanding of both grief *and* mourning.

This realization has piqued my interest in the intersection of private grief and public mourning, as I have come to understand that the emotional and social power of the moment in which I cried in front of my viewers emerged, not in spite of the public setting and the viewer's presence, but *because* of it. By giving my body the time and space to lead the way through my private acts of grief and, ultimately, through its public expression in my artistic performance, I have begun to understand how there is an immense power in allowing grief and mourning to more fully overlap. By collapsing the experiences of private grief, public mourning ritual, and rehearsed performance art into a new hybrid form in my work, these seemingly contradictory phenomena can coexist, interacting and influencing each other in a myriad of ways. Through this breaking of boundaries between the private and the public — through

this ability to grieve authentically, out in the open, which I have found can arise from the embrace of embodied knowledge in the context of live performance, even if only for a fleeting moment — I believe it is possible to create a space for communal mourning, and perhaps, even communal *grieving*. I am again reminded of Peggy Phelan’s statement about the potential of “mutual transformation”¹⁸⁴ for both performer and viewer in the context of live performance. I wonder, through such shared experiences, is it possible for us to move further away from the pervasive and problematic cultural ethos that the experience of grief should be feared and avoided?

Notes for Creative Work

- 171 Items which once belonged to the deceased that are used by the bereaved to facilitate the transformation and continuation of bonds with their loved ones, as described in the Contextual Discussion.
- 172 A direct response to the historical practice of engraving memorial bobbins as described in the Contextual Discussion.
- 173 According to the theory developed by Robert Neimeyer as described in the Contextual Discussion.
- 174 An idea posited by the Grief Work Hypothesis, originally conceived by Sigmund Freud, as described in the Contextual Section.
- 175 An aspect of grief theory which suggests that rather than striving to break our bonds with the deceased in order to move through grief in a healthy way, we naturally seek ways to maintain and transform our bonds with the deceased in light of the changed reality caused by their death, as described in the Contextual Section.
- 176 Silvia Fok, *Life & Death: Art and the Body in Contemporary China*, (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2013), 7.
- 177 Ibid., 4.
- 178 Rebecca Solnit writes of the “labor of tending” as something that is relegated to the body, as described in the Contextual Discussion.
- 179 RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, 3rd ed., (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 243.
- 180 Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*, (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011), 76.
- 181 Ibid., 75.
- 182 Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, (London: Routledge, 1977), 4.
- 183 Peggy Phelan, “On Seeing the Invisible: Marina Abramović’s The House with the Ocean View,” *Marina Abramović: The House with the Ocean View*, edited by Amy Gotzler, (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2003), 173.
- 184 Phelan, “On Seeing the Invisible: Marina Abramović’s The House with the Ocean View,” 173.



CONCLUSION



Before I come to the end, I must first go back to the beginning; back to the questions that have been the driving force behind this creative inquiry. As my intuitive, bodily urge to keep my hands busy in the face of my grief was the impetus for these original questions, we will start there:

What does the physical labor of making bring to the experience of grief? Does the body "know" something about grieving that the conscious mind does not? Does engaging in the grief process through such

physical means, which more fully incorporates the body, lead to a more fulfilling or enlightening experience of grief?

Despite the gap in grief theory that I have noticed on the topic of bodily methods of grieving (as opposed to the medical symptomology of grief), my personal experience and research in the studio indicates that my body does, indeed, “know” something about grief. As I have described, when I first encountered my grief over losing Ana, I instinctively began to labor with my hands. Initially, I didn’t question this impulse, I simply listened to my body and immersed myself in the physicality of the process of making — I trusted my body to show me how grief works. Over time, I began to consciously reflect on the function and meaning of this intuitive bodily response, slowly understanding that through the labor of making, I was actually embracing my own embodied knowledge of grief; that my body knew something about grief that my conscious mind did not yet know.

Furthermore, I came to realize that if I allowed my body to lead the way through the grief process — contrary to the mind-centered Cartesian system of thought that is so deeply ingrained in our culture — I could learn from grief and ultimately uncover the profound value that is inherent within it.¹⁸⁵ My studio research has born this proposition out, as by moving through my methodological cycle throughout my time in the MFA program, I have consistently returned to embrace my own embodied knowledge to further understand my (continually transforming) experience of grief, and how I can most effectively and poignantly communicate this process (and the things I’ve learned from it) in my work.

What, then, has my body taught me about grief? I have learned (and continue to learn) many things, too numerous to list here, but one lesson that has been especially impactful to me, both personally and in relation to my visual thesis work, has emerged from pursuing the following research question:

Can the labor of making in grief be a means for creating and maintaining continuing bonds with a deceased loved one?

After having gone through the experience of feeling Ana's presence re-enter my life when I was learning to make lace, and then going through the process of developing the work that was inspired by that experience, I have concluded that engaging in the physical labor of making does, indeed, allow me to (re)create and maintain my bond with Ana after her death in some way. By iterating through my methodological process over time (i.e. recurrently embracing my embodied knowledge of grief), I discovered that the specificity of the type of labor was key to this being possible: lace-making was more effective than weaving, for example, because Ana herself was a lace-maker.

Furthermore, I also learned that creating and maintaining continuing bonds with a loved one after death is not necessarily a simple or straightforward process. As my experience of grief has continually changed over time, my ability to feel connected to Ana waxes and wanes. At times, I felt certain of my ability to bond with her through the labor of lace-making, and at others, I wonder if this feeling is based entirely in my imagination; something that I tell myself to cope with my grief, but that doesn't actually bear out in reality. Ultimately, I've concluded that I do believe it is possible to forge and maintain bonds with the deceased through the labor of making, but it is an inherently complex and sometimes counterintuitive process that is both unique to the individual and always changing.

With this discovery in mind, the final question remains:

What are the implications of sharing a private process of grief with the public, both for myself and for others?

I have already begun to answer this question in my reflection on the experience of performing in the gallery, suggesting that the intersection of private grief and public mourning can be facilitated by sharing my method of accessing embodied knowledge through the labor of

making within a public space (especially when engaging in this activity for long periods of time). I would further suggest here, that this intersection as it has manifested in my live performance, can create a space for communal contemplation of — and even engagement in — mourning and grieving. This claim is not only based in my personal experience of performing my work, but also comes from the responses of my viewers.

I have received mixed reactions to my work since the opening of the thesis exhibition, all as varied as the uniquely personal (and continually changing) ways in which we each experience grief in our lives. The responses have ranged from asserting that my work is “cold” and “emotionless” to describing it as “beautiful” and “full of emotion”—to me, this indicates that I have succeeded in creating an entry point to my ideas about loss and grief, but have not been heavy-handed in telling people how I think they “should” feel about the concepts I present. Even though the work is rooted in my personal story of losing and grieving for Ana, it also seems to be open-ended enough that people are able to contemplate their own experiences of grief when encountering it. I believe this fact can have a significant impact on a viewer’s responses to my work, for I cannot prescribe how they feel about it because my experience of grief is unique only to me, and their experience of grief is unique only to them. The amount of overlap between their experience and mine seems to dictate where their reaction to my work falls on the spectrum between “emotionless” and “full of emotion.”

Although this stark range in reactions was difficult for me to understand at first, I ultimately view this as an indicator of the work’s success in creating a space for the contemplation of our individualized experiences of grief, the communal act of mourning, and the many possibilities for the relationship between the two. One viewer, a friend who recently lost her mother, said to me, “It’s a beautiful thing to feel seen,” after seeing my performance. Another viewer described how she and a workplace acquaintance watched my performance together, sparking a conversation between the two of them about the experience

of grief in the absence of religion, a particularly intense topic for people who did not know each other well. And yet another viewer, a fellow art student, sat down on the floor near my table as I performed, drawing in their sketchbook — observing and recording the scene, a sense of solidarity forming between us in our shared experience of making in the context of grief and mourning (see Figure 71).



Figure 71. With student, D Wang Zhao, during live performance (top) and D Wang Zhao's drawing from observation (bottom), thesis exhibition 2018.



These experiences (and others like them) compel me to continue on with this work — perhaps making it more interactive between myself and the viewer in future iterations — so that I can further explore the complex personal, social, and cultural territory between the boundaries of our private experiences of grief and its public expression in acts of mourning. In this way, I aim to expand the conversation about the many ways we can experience grief and mourning in our minds, spirits, and bodies, as well as the many possible roles for grief and mourning in our society. I hope to challenge the dominant cultural myths and perceptions about grief which I find problematic — namely that grief should be kept private and that we ought to work towards reaching its “end” to avoid personal pain and making others feel uncomfortable. By confronting such ideas in my thesis work, I have begun doing my part to push our collective understanding of the grieving process away from a place of fear and avoidance towards one of acceptance and learning. After all, isn’t it through the sharing of our individual stories that we can make a collective impact, ultimately creating the change we want to see? As curator Jessica Morgan writes, “Whether or not we expect some transformative effect to take place, it is this kernel of hope — that our knowledge of the world will be enhanced by the experience of art — that continues to engage us...”¹⁸⁶ The work in *Crossing* is my first step in moving towards the change I want to see; there is much left to do.

Notes for Conclusion

185 This value is different for everyone, as grief is a paradoxically universal yet uniquely experienced phenomenon. For me, the value I have found within it is gratitude — for my life, for my friendship with Ana, and for having the profound privilege to love and be loved.

186 Jessica Morgan, "Introduction," *Pulse: Art, Healing, and Transformation*, edited by Jessica Morgan, (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003), 23.

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