



Continuing Bonds

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Some of the oldest surviving examples of human creativity are items connected to death rituals. As Robert Wyatt has pointed out, “art has dealt with death, dying, the threat of death, the escape from death, the contemplation of death and the preparation for death, as much, or more than any other subject” (Wyatt 2001, 34). The careful management of death acknowledges that it is the potential of loss that makes our existence meaningful. The narrative of death applies equally to us all, and yet the experience of death and mourning feels utterly unique and personal for the individual caught up in it. As Colin Murray Parkes has noted, “grief is essentially an emotion that draws us toward something or someone that is missing. It arises from awareness of a discrepancy between the world that is and the world that “should be.” This raises a problem [...] because, though it is not difficult to discover the world that is, the world that should be is an internal construct; hence each person’s experience of grief is individual and unique” (Parkes 1988, 54).

Despite the complexity of historical death rituals, the visceral sensations of grief are largely repressed or ignored in contemporary society – but where social ritual falters, art attempts to fill the gap. Artists like Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, Doris Salcedo, Christian Boltanski and Sophie Calle have powerfully dealt with the experiences of loss and mourning. Art that intensely tackles death and bereavement often walks a fine line between catharsis and neurosis, but it touches us in powerful ways because, as Mary O’Neill has pointed out, “unlike mediatized and trivialized death, [works of art] do not allow us to deny the reality that not only is death inevitable for all of us, but possibly even more painfully, death will take those we love and we will have to go on living with the consequential grief.” (O’Neill 2001, 301)

Karika Ashworth has brought together a body of work in her exhibition, *Lamentation* that explores different ways of expressing and working through bereavement, but that also celebrates the possibility of a new caring relationship with the deceased. In this task she has focused on her own experiences and the experiences of other women. Discussing the textiles workshop at the Bauhaus in 1926, Helene Nonné-Schmidt suggested that it was a woman’s aesthetic strength that she saw “the details instead of the overall picture [and that this] enables her to pick up the richness of nuances which are lost to the more comprehensive view” (Nonné-Schmidt 2002, 334). Ashworth’s integration of embroidery and sewn objects into this collection of works exploits this perceived feminine aesthetic strength.

In her work, *Epoch*, two-dimensional stretched canvases (the cotton of condemned hospital sheets¹) are reinterpreted as a series of personal calendars, mapping women’s relationships with their mothers. In *Comforters*, these relationships are given three dimensions. Small, bulging, organic forms, sewn from the fabric of hospital gowns and reminiscent of the pillows given to women undergoing breast cancer surgery, hang in mid-air, each containing a speaker and the sound recording of a woman discussing the mother they have lost. *Pillows* transfers diaristic texts onto condemned hospital pillows, as if our thoughts could be read by the fabric beneath our heads. Each of these works takes the personal details of extended maternal relationships as its departure point, and reinforces that detail in its meticulous form.

¹Once hospital linen is too stained or worn to be of use in the hospital system, it is classified as ‘condemned’ and incinerated.

The final two works included in this exhibition do something else. As expressions of grief and loss, they are cathartic and, even in their residue and documentation, they convey immediacy and action rather than minutiae. *3 hours, 20 minutes* is the outcome of Ashworth’s re-performance of her own mother’s death as artistic action. For this work, she took one hospital sheet for every year of her mother’s life and tore them into strips, forming the physical installation of hanging fabric. The soundtrack of this ripping continues for the amount of time it took her mother to die. In the video work, *Lamentation*, Ashworth performs an act of cleansing, where a strip of sheet material is lovingly washed. As a conclusion to this series of works, *Lamentation* stands as perhaps the most striking example of personal ‘griefwork’, where the mourner obsessively remembers the lost person, “to resurrect the lost other partly in an attempt to maintain a complete sense of self, which has been damaged by the loss of the reflected self on which the self-image depends” (O’Neill 2001, 303). Ashworth has described the work as a kind of apology to the fabric as the body’s proxy, but it also suggests an act of self-forgiveness and repair.

Lamentation as an exhibition takes us through the journey of loss. It draws on the details of personal experience in order to reveal the broader picture, or ‘comprehensive view’ that Nonné-Schmidt suggested was beyond the woman artist. Ashworth’s work reminds us that bereavement is just one stage of an ongoing relationship we experience with our loved ones, one that continues beyond death.

References

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Images

- inside: Karika Ashworth, *Lamentation* (video still), 2014
outside: Karika Ashworth, *Pillows* (detail), 2013