What Remains
Ritual Spaces for the Contemporary Mourner

An Artistic Thesis

by

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Abstract

My scholarship interrogates and critiques the theoretical, philosophical, and psychological underpinnings and literature concerning Western European and North American approaches to grief, mourning, and death. In the course of conducting my research, I discovered that my personal experiences with loss reflect a greater systemic deficit that is symptomatic of contemporary society in the United States. In response, my artistic work, a multimedia immersive installation, entitled *What Remains*, advocates for the value of adequate and appropriate ritual spaces, by providing a holistic model for processing the universal human experience of loss. In a death-adverse and grief-repressed culture, my artistic inquiry proposes a ritual environment, in which contemporary mourners are offered an opportunity to engage with and experience their grief with full intentionality.

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Dedication

To Papa, my *Charming Soldier*, my inspiration, my rock, you are in my heart always.
To Joyce Cutler-Shaw, my adopted grandmother and artistic spirit guide.
To Grandma & Jeepers, may you dance in the clouds together for eternity.
To Ken Cro-Ken, may your light and legacy pave the way to multiple oneness.

And to all who have experienced loss.

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You would know the secret of death.
But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life?
. . . For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one.
Kahlil Gibran, *On Death* (excerpt)

Death is the root system that holds the unconscious psyche together
and illuminates this island that is life.
Bill Viola

Preface

When I was 14 years old, my father began acting strangely. He was the absent-minded professor type – always getting distracted by things or mixing up seemingly simple tasks. But something about his behavior had become stranger than usual. We noticed him holding the car keys in his hand while doing the dishes or stumbling over basic sentences while speaking. When we anecdotally brought up these quirks to our radiologist cousin, he told us we should take my father in for an MRI. They found a brain tumor. Eight months later he was dead.

September 2007. I returned to school the day after my father's death. I didn't know what else to do. At first, my friends and my teachers were sympathetic, but it didn't take them long to forget. A few weeks later, I was struggling to complete a homework assignment for a class. I talked to the teacher about it. She said, "Life goes on," as if to say that the murkiness in my head caused by my grief was merely laziness in disguise.

"I haven't seen you cry. Did you even have a close relationship with your dad?" Questions like this one made it hard for me to acknowledge my grief and to give it the weight it was due. Instead, I repressed it. No one seemed to care or understand. If I wasn't grieving the way that others saw fit, I must have not been close with my father. And if I was still grieving after a few months after his death – I must have been broken. The world seemed to be screaming, "Hurry up and move on! There's no time to grieve." And thus, began my lifelong journey of grief.

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In the 13 years following my father's death, I experienced five additional significant losses: my grandfather, Jeepers, my close high school friend, John-Michael, my adopted grandmother, artistic mentor and long-time family friend, Joyce Cutler-Shaw, my maternal grandmother, Ellen Josephine Phelan, and very recently (July 30, 2020), a dear family friend and phenomenal artist,
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Ken Cro-Ken. Each death has occurred under different circumstances – some have come after a long illness, others happened suddenly, at some, I was physically present, at others, I received the news from afar. And strangely, every one of these losses occurred during a different developmental stage of my life – the beginning of high school, the beginning of college, in my post-graduate professional years, at the beginning of my graduate education, and during the final weeks of my thesis completion. Each loss impacted me differently, and each grief journey has been unique in its unfolding. However, after experiencing six consecutive significant losses, I have come to recognize some common features of the grief process. At the personal level, I have become familiar with the sudden rises and falls of emotion, the nonlinearity, the unpredictability, and the cyclical and ongoing nature of the journey. I have also become increasingly aware of the societal and cultural reactions and expectations of most people, and I am repeatedly frustrated, disappointed, and saddened by their consistent lack of compassion and understanding. While community often gathers to support the bereaved in the wake of a loss, this is usually only for a short period of time – what I like to call "emotional casserole season" – and then the support system vanishes, leaving the bereaved isolated in their pain. When grief steps in, time stops, but the world keeps moving and drags you along with it, expecting you to 'succeed,' 'move on,' 'get over it,' and 'find your bliss.' The deep pains of grief can be transformed into blossoming beauty, and resilience makes us stronger, but why does it have to happen alone and in secret?

After each of these shattering personal losses, I turned to my artistic practice as a way to cope, process, and share my experiences. My artistry has been shaped and informed by my grief journey. I choreographed my first dance while my father was in the hospital, and performed it for him in the hospital courtyard. When he died, I choreographed my second work – a balletic quartet for his memorial service. In the following year, I found solace in my performance practice. I danced in José Limón's *Missa Brevis*, a magnificent and powerful work that celebrates humanity's capacity for resilience in the face of destruction, trauma, and loss. I found great comfort in the collective support of the performing cast, and in the emotional resonance of the choreography. I also co-created a full-length, original theater production, *Moments of Truth*, for the San Diego Hospice Center for Grief Care and Education, in which a troupe of ten teenagers, each of whom had lost a parent, performed skits, monologues, and dances that demonstrated the emotional ravages of grief experienced at an early age. This production was presented in a wide variety of social contexts, functioning as a powerful outreach in grief education for the greater community.

Living in a culture that largely misunderstands, ignores, and marginalizes the grief experience, I turned increasingly to my creative practice for consolation. Life became art, and my art became my life – the only way I knew to cope and heal. Preeminent video artist Bill Viola reflects on a similar process that occurred after the death of his mother in 1991:

> *[That] was the moment when the barrier between life and art disappeared. In a way it wasn't even a barrier because I didn't know it existed. The borderline between life and death is not a brick wall that you battle your way through, it is fragile and porous, like a soap bubble. This is a profound thing, and it gives us this urgent need in life to touch the infinite.* (Guzman 2009)

Over the years, as I continued to face significant losses, I engaged in creative writing, dance, choreography, and theater, in order to express and process my experiences -both explicitly and implicitly – at memorial services, public performances, and in my private artistic practice. However, I always wondered – was I alone in these feelings of alienation? How did others cope with their grief? Where did they turn for comfort, when they faced significant loss? Was the lack of compassion, patience, time, and presence that I experienced unique, or was it rooted in a larger systemic reality? Could my own artistic practice help to console others' grief?

After over a decade of wrestling with my own grief process, I decided to expand upon my undergraduate psychology expertise, to uncover the cultural, societal, and philosophical mores and attitudes underpinning the treatment of death and grief in the contemporary U.S.. My graduate research confirmed that my personal experiences were, in fact, endemic. Death and loss are fundamental to the human experience, and yet, contemporary society offers little room for grief. The bereaved individual often feels isolated and alone, alienated from the world, despite being surrounded by others who have also experienced loss. Death and grief, which once held a central place in the fabric of society, have become feared and essentially invisible.

My research findings motivated me to undertake the creation of an artistic work that could begin to bridge the gap between lived experience and societal engagement. Through my artistic practice, I sought to investigate the ways in which embodied performance practices and immersive arts can create a safe and effective space for people to process grief and loss.

A few contextual notes:

I, Beatrice Antonie Martino, am a white, able-bodied, cis-gendered woman, and the writing that follows comes from this privileged lens. Drawing upon my personal lived experience

and cultural heritage, my research and analysis are centered on Western European perspectives, and focus specifically on the development of contemporary views in the United States. This thesis by no means encapsulates the full story, nor is it a comprehensive representation of every contemporary mourner's experience in the United States. The focus on Western European and U.S./American traditions is not intended to diminish or exclude other cultural traditions. Rather, I have chosen this vantage point to highlight the shortcomings of the contemporary Euro-centric approach. A thorough analysis of the wide range of cultural practices around death and mortality in the U.S. and around the globe is well beyond the scope of this thesis. It is important to note that non-Western belief systems and rituals continue to be practiced in some communities in the United States, many of which deeply value and honor an intimate relationship with grief, death, and mortality. These practices are largely hidden from the mainstream view, however, because of the valorization of Euro-centric, colonial, individualistic, capitalistic, and hetero-patriarchal contexts, leading to the disenfranchisement of death and bereavement in the contemporary United States. While death and grief are marginalized in general, there is an even more disturbing and deeply rooted systemic disenfranchisement and inequity, when it comes to matters of health, well-being, life, and death for BIPOC and societally and culturally marginalized groups, including the LGBTQIA+ community and the Disability community. This systemic marginalization calls for further study and deeper scrutiny. My scholarship merely scratches the surface of the contemporary lived experience in the United States, and is a limited window into a much larger discourse. As I move beyond this work, I will continue to learn and act as an ally and activist for all who are marginalized in end-of-life and grief spaces. I believe that this work is imperative for the growth, health, and well-being of the contemporary society at large. In a time of increased global consciousness and awareness, it is critical that we scrutinize our own traditions, expectations, and relationships in the larger context of the human condition.

As I write these words against the backdrop of COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement, my conviction grows even stronger. We are facing an unprecedented time of collective death, grief, and activism on a global scale. The body of my thesis does not address the current state of affairs, because most of my research took place prior to the onset of the pandemic. Nevertheless, the profound relevance of my topic at this time of history gives me the hope that this work can serve both as a fundamental stepping stone for future in-depth research, and a powerful critique of our contemporary engagement with death, especially as we find ourselves in a world in which breath, and life itself, are in peril. The current coronavirus

pandemic threatens the respiratory system, rapid climate change continues to deplete the oxygen in our atmosphere, and the breath and life force of Black people continue to be extinguished by systemic racism. *I can't breathe* rings in our ears.

Research Essay

Introduction[1]

Current terms in the field, such as the 'good death,' and the common interpretation of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' Five Stages of Grief, suggest an impulse to make death and grief neatly packaged, digestible, and deliverable entities, when in fact, the real experiences of dying and grieving are much more nuanced, and cannot be so easily quantified or categorized.

Although these explanatory frameworks may be well-intentioned – with the aim to make death and grief more manageable – they put pressure on the dying and bereaved to *succeed* in coping with these fundamental and complex aspects of the human condition. Psychologist Lawrence R. Samuel suggests that the U.S./American perception of dying well or achieving a 'good death' reflects an underlying cultural attitude that "death, like life, is something to master" (8). In experiencing the dying process and/or in the throes of grief, one searches for grounding, for a belief system to hold onto, for things to make sense in a world that is seemingly falling apart. Indeed, a sense of structure and grounding is important when navigating emotionally tumultuous waters, but these hegemonic ideals give a false sense of stability in fundamentally unstable circumstances. On the Five Stages of Grief, Kübler-Ross' colleague and research partner, David Kessler, states:

> *The stages have evolved since their introduction and have been very misunderstood over the past four decades. They were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss as there is no typical loss.* (Grief.com)

What Kessler is referring to is a common misconception that still circulates today: that the five stages are chronological and a standardized example of the grief experience.[2] This misconception results in a societal expectation and belief that grief is neat, predictable, and has a definitive end point. Yet, the experience of grief is often the complete opposite – messy, unpredictable, iterative

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[1]A note on language: I will be using the terms *grief*, *mourning*, and *bereavement*/*bereaved* interchangeably throughout this essay. However, it is important to note that these terms carry specific meanings and connotations, when parsed. *Grief* is defined as an internal state, characterized by feelings of sorrow. It is the emotional response to loss. It manifests as a reaction to the ending of that which is familiar, and the adaptation to a new and unfamiliar reality. *Mourning* is defined as the external act of expressing grief, and is culturally determined. It is how grief manifests, through expected rituals and subjective normalcy, based on what is deemed culturally appropriate.

[2]Although grief and mourning arise from the experience of any kind of loss (i.e., any change that shifts our reality from the familiar to the unfamiliar), the particular focus of my research is death and dying.

and ongoing. This leads to cognitive dissonance for the bereaved, as they try to reconcile their lived experience with the expectations of the surrounding culture. Our expectations and beliefs about the grieving process – how it ought to look and feel – are based upon our attitudes toward death and mortality. Thus, in order to understand our relationship to the grief process, it is necessary to scrutinize our cultural perspective toward death.

I believe that U.S./American culture falls tragically short on this front, not only in its misconceptions about the grief process, but also in its attitudes towards death. It seeks to separate these two inextricably intertwined experiences and provides little room for mourning. These problematic attitudes make it very difficult for bereaved individuals to process and integrate their losses effectively into their lives. Rather than being allowed to navigate the grief journey authentically, with gentleness and time on their side, they are forced to 'move on' too quickly and process their feelings in solitude, disconnected from the community at large. My scholarship begins to uncover some of the cultural trends that have led to these dominant belief systems, and seeks to dismantle current attitudes and practices, in favor of those that re-focus on healing, mindful presence and whole-personhood.

I would like to propose that, instead of emphasizing a 'good' and 'successful' death as the goal of end-of-life, we learn to accept and embrace death as a whole, in all of its forms, without judgment or expectations. Rather than aiming to tidy up, over-structuralize, or organize the death and grief experience, its messiness needs to be normalized and exposed.

A Brief History of Western European Perspectives on Death

In a historical overview of Western European perspectives on death and mortality, French medievalist Philippe Ariès outlines the evolution of cultural attitudes on these topics. According to Ariès, over the course of the centuries, our perception of death transformed from a familiar and "tamed" collective destiny, to a private, hidden experience and unmentionable subject of modern society. This progression in the relationship with death was also a progression in the perception of its context, shifting the view of death from a shared collective destiny, to a concern for personal mortality, to a deeper concern for the death of the 'other.'

In the Middle Ages, death was an expected part of life. Those approaching death were often keenly aware of this fact and did not try to resist this reality. Furthermore, grounded in the belief of a shared collective destiny, death occurred surrounded by community. Individuals were expected to die in their homes, surrounded by friends, family, and the community at large (including children of all ages). Death was not meant to happen alone, and any death that occurred differently was seen as the exception, not the norm. Typically, the death scene was that of vibrant activity – family members and villagers would congregate around the dying individual and socialize or play games. People came and went, and the whole endeavor happened in a communal context. It was a comfortable space.

The act of death itself was not feared, but rather, seen as an expected rite of passage to the afterlife. It was a familiar entity, and the rituals and practices around the deathbed were codified – prayers, gestures, and appropriate activities and dialogues were known by all. The dying individual was given pride of place, and great importance was placed on the transmission of information, possessions, and stories from one generation to the next. It was understood that a person's death would impact the community as a whole, and rituals and customs were in place to ensure a smooth transition for all involved. This comfortable social engagement continued, even after a death occurred, as burial grounds and graveyards were the sites of festivals, parties, and other communal gatherings. Death and life were inextricably connected. This intimacy with death and grief continued well into the 18th century.

As Western society continued to develop, however, and the focus shifted to celebrate individuality over the collective, attitudes towards death gradually transformed. By the 19th century, the dying individual relinquished control to medical professionals and/or family members. Large communities were no longer present at the deathbed, and death and grief were no longer seen as a holistically connected transition for both the dying and the bereaved, but

rather, as separate entities. Furthermore, the fear of death itself became a foundational principle of the Western cultural outlook.

In her stunningly interdisciplinary book, Death's Door, Sandra Gilbert identifies three key contributors to the dramatic changes from the Middle Ages to the Modern era: (1) a societal shift away from religion, (2) the development of mass-murder technology for global warfare, and (3) the medicalization of the dying process.

The First Catalyst: A Departure from Religion

In medieval times, the church played a crucial role in the development of cultural beliefs and perspectives. It was universally accepted that death was an escape from the pains of life on Earth, to a transformative and redemptive afterlife. There was no reason to fear death, because it was seen as an inevitable and positive outcome. However, as religion became less integrated in Western culture, the relationship between death and an afterlife became more ambiguous. Gilbert calls this paradigm shift the "disintegration of redemptive faith."

In present-day U.S./American society, despite the dominant logics of Judeo-Christian beliefs, there is no singular cultural belief system concerning life after death. Individuals often come up with their own beliefs or see death as an ending. Gilbert identifies this as a shift from death as *expiration,* to death as *termination*.

The etymology of *expire* includes roots in the Latin word *spiritus*, which means *breath*, and from which concept of spirit/soul is dervied. Death as *expiration* implies the transitioning of the soul into the next world. Death as *termination*, on the other hand, is not a transition or an escape, but rather, a final end point.[3] Because of this view of death as an absolute ending, the fear of death itself is much more pervasive. There is no redemption; one merely becomes nothingness. Speaking on the distinction between *expiration* and *termination*, Gilbert writes:

> *Where, for example, the great elegists of the English language trusted for centuries in the radiant reality of a transcendent realm into which the souls of those they mourned might expire, most poets mourning 'modern' deaths have sought to cope with the intransigent blankness of terminations that lead nowhere and promise nothing.* (109)

From this vantage point, modern death is an active and final experience, after which there is only darkness and emptiness. Whereas only the physical act of dying was feared in the Middle Ages

[3]Definitions of *expiration* and *termination* are paraphrased from Gilbert, with the help of the Online Etymology Dictionary (www.etymonline.com).

and Renaissance, in the modern era, death *itself* is feared – death without an afterlife; death as *termination*. In centuries past, religion served as a source of hope, but in modern society, it is often seen as 'tricking' us into believing that we never die – creating a false sense of security. Instead of trusting religion, we cling to modern philosophy and science for truth. From this perspective, we are nothing but a series of accidents. Gilbert quotes Bertrand Russell on this subject:

> *Man is a product of causes which had no prevision . . . his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms. . . . [T]he temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of the universe in ruins.* (120)

She continues by quoting Jacques Choron, who writes: "'Nihilism has become the heritage of modern man.'" (Gilbert 121) This bleak and fear-filled attitude towards death makes it difficult to have a healthy relationship with grief and mourning. If death is so abrupt and final, why dwell on it? It is much easier simply to avoid the topic altogether. By denying our mortality, we deny our destiny.

The Second Catalyst: The Impact of Global Warfare

The introduction of mass warfare technologies during WWI and WWII significantly contributed to our shifting understanding of what it means to die in the modern era. Although countless wars and battles had been fought in previous eras, and mass death occurred due to natural disasters, the sheer magnitude and scale of mass death escalated exponentially with the introduction of chemical and atomic warfare technology. Gilbert calls this the "technology of extermination," which she posits, was the 20th-century innovation that "sealed the transformation of what had for most been a hopeful vision of death-as-expiration into what was now more likely to be a nihilistic view of death-as-termination." (136) The trenches of WWI and the mass graves of WWII reflect the overwhelming efficiency of destruction caused by the "fusion of death and technology."

This shifted the focus of death from the personal and communal to the national, making it a politicized entity. Not only did this politicization of death lead to desensitization of the emotional impact of death, but it also led to a disintegration of the experience of grief. Death occurred at a distance, and the bereaved individual was forced to cope with the loss in private. The great horrors of global warfare, which demonstrated the power to extinguish many lives in a

mere instant, transformed death into something gruesome and fearful. It was better to deny it, than to face it. Gilbert writes: "When the heaven of expiration transformed into the hell of extermination, victims and witnesses inevitably experienced death as little more than the cessation of an already horrifying material existence." (157) This dehumanization and the dismantling of empathy and proximity marks a major shift in our engagement with life as a whole. This desensitization extends even to our perception of human dignity and life, as can be seen in our country's handling of 'the war on drugs' and mass incarceration, for example.

The Third Catalyst: Medical Advancement and the Displacement of the Site of Death

Ariès marks the mid-20th century as a moment of acceleration in the (de)evolution of Western thought and engagement with death, grief, and mourning. A significant catalyst for this cultural shift was the displacement of the site of death. Ariès writes: "One no longer died at home in the bosom of one's family, but in the hospital, alone." (87) Hospitals, which were once safe havens for care, and places where one worked to stave off death, became a place to facilitate it. Hospitals served (and continue to serve) as a site to 'sequester' terminal patients, to hide them away, because we do not know how to care for them, and the reality of bodily decay and disintegration is too much to bear. Ariès calls this the "dirty death." As illness and death became dominated by technology rather than theology, hospitals and nursing homes become "death-and-dying factories." These sterile, institutionalized environments dehumanize and strip away the dignity, autonomy, control, and power of the dying individual, by emphasizing fragility and the discomfort of physical decay. The shifting of the physical site of death also shifted the perception, regard, and expectations of the death scene, and even the meaning of death itself. Ariès continues:

> *Death in the hospital is no longer the occasion of a ritual ceremony, over which the dying person presides amidst his assembled relatives and friends. Death is a technical phenomenon . . . Death has been dissected, cut to bits by a series of little steps, which finally makes it impossible to know which step was the real death, the one in which consciousness was lost, or the one in which breathing stopped. All these little deaths have replaced and erased the great dramatic act of death, and no one any longer has the strength or patience to wait over a period of weeks for a moment which has lost a part of its meaning.* (88-89)

Not only is there a disconnection of intimacy from the death scene, but family members and medical professionals are faced with a challenging decision-making process that is unique to the contemporary era: the planning and administering of death itself (by removing life support). As

Gilbert puts it, modern society has developed "nuanced modes of termination" (167).

The paradox of medical technology is that it simultaneously enhances expectations for survival and causes tremendous physical harm and psychological trauma. Most life-support and life-prolonging machines and treatments are painful, highly uncomfortable, and even toxic. Advancements in medical technology have placed increasing strain and pressure on medical professionals and family members, making the death experience much more complicated and challenging for everyone involved.

Furthermore, the transfer of the death scene to the medical realm led to the association of death with *failure*, rather than an inevitable and natural human process. Death was perceived as the direct result of a healing professional's failure. The unstated purpose of science and medicine is to 'solve the problem' of dying. This results in further alienation in the individual and cultural relationship with death. It is no longer an intimate and community-driven experience, but rather an institutionalized and sterilized experience, both literally and metaphorically.

Censoring the Grief Experience

The aforementioned shifts in the cultural views, as well as the lived experience of the dying process, have greatly impacted the perception of the grief experience and expectations of appropriate mourning. Ariès describes the tendency in 20th century culture to view sorrow as a sign of mental instability or bad manners, and mourning as something that is shameful, that should only be expressed in solitude, hidden away from society. The stigmatization of grief is still pervasive in our culture today. It presents a stark contrast to the ritualized grieving that occurred in the 18th century, and the "hysterical" and dramatic public expressions of mourning that occurred in the 19th century. Ariès asserts that the shift away from public mourning is in part due to a sense of societal obligation to maintain collective happiness. He writes:

> *. . . the disturbance and the overly strong and unbearable emotion caused by the ugliness of dying and by the very presence of death in the midst of a happy life, for it is henceforth given that life is always happy or should always seem to be so.* (87)

This censoring of the mourning process remains evident in current U.S./American society. Bereaved individuals are expected to jump back into the flow of daily life almost immediately after the death of a loved one. In *A Body Undone*, Christina Crosby describes the contemporary experience of grieving like this:

> *Grieving undoes you and casts you off, far from the workaday world uninflected by loss.*

> *That's why you're told to move through grief, to transform it into a quieter and more tractable sorrow, and get on with life. Loosen your attachments to whatever is gone. Recognized that influence of what you've lost is still with you, and will remain incorporated into your life. Reengage in the present, and orient yourself to the future. These dictates make sense, but trouble me because my grief is multifaceted and its objects incommensurate….* (11)

In this passage, Crosby is referring to the losses she has experienced as a result of a physically paralyzing accident. However, her observations apply equally to grief experienced by loss through death.

She mentions the emotional dissonance between her experience and the outside world around her, "uninflected by loss." This is the same sentiment that is expressed by Joan Didion and Meghan O'Rourke in their memoirs of personal loss experiences. A sense of alienation and inherent loneliness accompany the modern experience of grief and loss. Even those within the inner circle of the bereaved, who arguably have experienced the same loss, are unaware and insensitive to the nuances of individual grief. Each individual uniquely experiences a sense of being alone and alienated and this awareness of isolation increases as time progresses.

After an arbitrary, culturally prescribed mourning period (usually a few weeks), the bereaved person is expected to be okay, normal – dare I say happy? And yet, if a person 'moves on' too quickly (e.g., by remarrying), society reacts with disgust and judgment. This strange dichotomy of grief rejection and acceptance aligns with Ariès' assertion that the U.S. has a uniquely conflicted approach to death. He describes contemporary views in the U.S. as a "compromise between trends which are pulling in two nearly opposite directions" (95) – a desire to hide death and grief, while at the same time embracing it and transforming it (i.e., embalming, cremation, etc.).

Mortician and author Caitlin Doughty states "due to the corporatization and commercialization of deathcare, we have fallen behind the rest of the world when it comes to proximity, intimacy, and ritual around death" (15). How can we regain proximity and intimacy to these fundamental human experiences? Perhaps we should turn to language for an answer.

The 'Good' and 'Successful' Death

In current grief and bereavement literature, it is a well-known phenomenon that the way in which a death occurs greatly impacts the bereaved in their grieving process. Sudden, dramatic, or trauma-ridden deaths and ambiguous losses can be extremely challenging for survivors to

process, and can lead to more complicated and stilted grief processes. Although advancements in medicine have made it possible for us to have a certain amount of control over the dying process, death remains unpredictable. Caregivers and the dying cannot protect themselves against all possible processes or outcomes. And yet, the terms 'good' and 'successful' are often used to describe the dying experience, as a desired outcome.

According to an Institute of Medicine[4] report published over two decades ago, a 'good death' is defined as "free from avoidable distress and suffering for patient, family, and caregivers, in general accord with the patient's and family's wishes, and reasonably consistent with clinical, cultural, and ethical standards" (4). This definition is still widely used in the medical profession today, and it includes three contributing stakeholder perspectives: that of the dying patient, their family, and their caregivers or clinicians, who are often Health Care Professionals (HCPs).[5]

Yet the term 'good death' is inherently problematic. The conditional term *good* naturally implies, that if the perceived requirements of a 'good death' are not fulfilled, the death experience is therefore bad. This attitude puts pressure on the dying and bereaved to 'succeed,' and it can dramatically impair the emotional well-being and needs of the family members and caregivers. It creates the potential for survivors to have feelings of guilt, what-ifs, and a traumatic revisiting of the circumstances at the moment of death, instead of focusing on emotional healing and recovery from the loss.

Many complications arise when one is faced with the task of defining and implementing the concept of the 'good death.' Definitions to date are extremely ambiguous and encompass a variety of disparate factors, while neglecting other vital components, such as the consequences of the death circumstances for the grief experience of those left behind.

In a literature review of key qualitative and quantitative psychology studies conducted with dying individuals and their family members (two of the three stakeholder perspectives) between 1996 and 2015, Meier, *et al.* identified eleven common themes that arise when defining a 'good death.' These themes reveal specific preferences for the dying process itself. The most common priorities are pain-free status and emotional well-being. Additional themes include the death scene (how, who, where and when), preparation for death (i.e., advance directives and

[4]The National Academy of Medicine (NAM), formerly known as the Institute of Medicine (IoM), provides national and international advice on issues relating to health, medicine, health policy, and biomedical science. It aims to provide unbiased, evidence-based, and authoritative information and advice concerning health and science policy to policymakers, professionals, leaders in every sector of society, and the public at large.

[5]These three stakeholder groups are assumed to have equal or at least equitable parts in this conversation, but it is often quite unbalanced, marginalizing the dying individual, in favor of more easily managed outcomes.

funeral arrangements), a focus on life completion, treatment preferences, personal dignity and family involvement. In some of these studies, the phrase 'good death' is used interchangeably with 'peaceful' or 'successful' death, providing clues as to the term's definition.

The concerns of Health Care Professionals (the third stakeholder group) regarding a 'good death' were congruent with the themes listed above, prioritizing preferences around the dying process and pain-free status. However, a closer analysis of their responses reveals a preference for non-disruptive and non-intrusive deaths. HCPs indicated that they preferred deaths that occurred quietly and did not disturb other patients, deaths that occurred at a time with sufficient staff on duty, and not having used excessive or futile treatments. While this seems to imply a lack of compassion on the part of the physicians, as HCPs appear to be more focused on their own comfort than that of the dying patient or their family members, I believe it reflects the greater systemic structure of our healthcare and end-of-life institutions, and our overall attitude towards death. With so many deaths occurring in one place, naturally there is a preference for a minimum of complications. Hospitals have indeed become "death-and-dying factories"[6] and, as with any factory, one seeks the greatest efficiency possible. But why must death be seen as 'disruptive' or 'intrusive?' How do these perceptions influence the way we view the dignity of life, and respect the needs, wants, and desires of the dying individual?

Meier, *et al.* also identify crucial components that appear to be missing in end-of-life care: an acknowledgment of the spiritual and psychosocial concerns of the patient (not merely the physical), and increased dialogue between the stakeholders involved in the death experience (the dying patient, their family members, and HCPs). The authors implore readers to find out what people need and want, so that they can have a 'good death' – reaching their full potential with dignity and whole-person well-being. The sick and aging have priorities beyond safety, longevity, and freedom from pain. They deserve to be seen from a lens of whole-personhood, and to be surrounded by love and respect in their final moments of life.

Although the review by Meier, *et al.* provides an in-depth analysis of the current medical definitions of a 'good death,' it is limited in the conclusions it can draw, because there are no codified or common parameters for measuring a *good* death. Each study varied in its approach to the topic. Furthermore, the definition of a 'good death' is largely dependent upon the cultural attitudes and individual beliefs of the dying person and their family or community. Although the

[6]A phrase taken from Ariès.

awareness and discussion of personal preferences is vital in the health care system, in order to facilitate death scenes and preparation in alignment with the patient's and their family's wishes, the concept of the 'good death' can curtail a healthy grieving process for those left behind.

Modern death essentially has become associated with success, and therefore failure is a problem which needs to be addressed. Most of the academic discussion of 'good death' is limited to articles by health and end-of-life care professionals, who face the reality of death on a daily basis. These conversations need to be expanded to include the dying, family and caregivers. Individual belief systems and preferences must be respected and acknowledged, while finding a common language for the details of death. In this death-averse culture, where death has become an unmentionable subject, the conversation addressing what constitutes a 'good' death is potentially a place to begin a cultural dialogue.

Scrutinizing the Language of Death, Grief, and Mourning

When I was first starting my graduate program at Gallatin, people would ask me: "What are you studying?" I would respond, "Death," and pause for dramatic effect. I was curt and vague, partially because I did not know the details of my research topic yet, and partially because I wanted to be provocative. The responses that followed were fascinating. I know that, in part, people were responding to the shock factor – caught off guard – but also, I believe their reactions were indicative of current views on death in our society.

Most were avoidant, fearful, or repelled. One individual physically backed away from me, without uttering a word. Another immediately changed the subject. Yet another laughed nervously and said, "But really, what *are* you studying?" And many responded with sarcasm: "What an uplifting topic!" Some immediately launched into their personal stories of death or grief – an uncontrollable outpouring. The desperation – to be heard, understood, comforted, cared for – was striking. But the most positive responses came from people who physically leaned in, eyes a-glow, and said: "Really?? That's fascinating! Tell me more. . ." Yet these people – the ones that embraced death, and were eager to engage in conversation, not out of desperation, but out of true interest – were few and far between.

As we have seen in the brief analysis of *expiration*, *termination*, the *good death*, and the personal reactions to my field of study, our use of language is revealing of greater cultural norms and beliefs. It is important to be aware of the underlying connotations of the words we use to describe certain phenomena. In her article "Better Words for Better Deaths," Anna DeForest

argues that language shapes the way we think, and the specific words we choose to use tend to influence where we focus our attention. This often happens unconsciously, but it can seriously impact our actions and perceptions. DeForest uses the phrase "withdrawal of care" as an example of this phenomenon. This phrase, commonly used when a decision is being made to remove life support systems for terminal patients, is implicitly pointing towards neglect of the patient's and family's needs. DeForest argues that engaging in "withdrawal of care" can often result in a lack of attention to the patient's symptom burden at the end of life, and an actual withdrawal of care. She concludes that changing the language that we use to describe end-of-life issues could have a significant impact on the way in which care is administered, approached, and experienced.

I believe that this is true for the grief experience as well. In the immediate wake of a loss, the conversations and language that are used to engage with the bereaved are often centered around the experience of the comforter, rather than the bereaved. Questions like "How old was he?" "What were the conditions?" "Were you close?" seek to gather information, so that the inquirer can grasp the *significance* of the loss. This fact-centered, interrogative process leaves little room for the bereaved individual to express the emotion and turmoil of their grief, and often forces them to repeat the litany of answers over and over again. I am particularly disturbed by the question, "Were you close?" While different levels of relationship lead to different grief experiences, this question implicitly applies value to different kinds of losses, and places them in a hierarchical organization – the loss of a close relationship trumps the loss of a distanced one. In reality, grief is not simply a reflection of the depth of relationship – it is a complex and interconnected web of emotions, memories, and projections of the future. It would be an impossible task to attempt to quantify the depth of grief based on perceived 'closeness' of the relationship. Death can trigger a cataclysmic emotional reaction even at a distance. For example, when a public figure such as Martin Luther King died, the loss was felt deeply across countless communities and individuals – even by those who never had a personal connection with him. Furthermore, grief caused by death is not simply a response to the loss of a person's physical presence; it is also a reaction to the many secondary and tertiary losses that accompany the person's death, including the logistical and emotional roles that they played in different avenues of their lives, and their future plans and projects. . One must acknowledge the biopsychosocial[7] impacts of each individual. A person's life is more than mere physical presence – it is a collection

[7]The biopsychosocial model views the individual in the intersections of their biological, psychological, and socio-environmental contexts.

of threads in the vast, interconnected tapestry of life, and our language should reflect this truth.

In our contemporary culture, there are no guidelines of how to support someone who has experienced loss. We do not know what our role is. We try to make sense of how and why death could be possible – was the person sick, old, in an accident? Death is only permitted to exist within a limited framework, and even then, we question its validity and circumstances. Acting from a place of fear and discomfort, we turn to clichés and fact-centered questions, in a well-meaning attempt to connect with the bereaved person. What if our conversations were centered around the unique experience of the bereaved individual? What if, instead of interrogating and searching for facts, we asked open-ended questions, that left room for the full range of emotions, and allowed the freedom for the bereaved person's way of processing the loss? What if we saw this as an opportunity to better get to know the individual, and place value on the exchange of stories and experiences? Questions like: "What's going through your mind or heart right now?" or "Tell me more about him?" or "What are you craving in this moment?" Questions like these give the bereaved the opportunity to steer the direction of the conversation, share what they most need to share in that moment, and be held and sustained in a space of support and love.

Alternatives to the 'Norm' / Normalizing the Messiness

If we seek to regain proximity and intimacy with death and grief, we must first obtain a deeper and more accurate understanding of these natural processes. The contemporary cultural push to codify the language of grief and death, to impose a timeline on the healing process, and to neatly organize the stages of the 'normal' grief experience (thereby pathologizing 'abnormal' grief), are all counterproductive. The only way that we can begin to reimagine a culture that creates space for authentic processing and healing is to normalize the reality of the nuanced and multi-faceted experiences of death and grief, and the life-long timeline of recovery and integration.

Grief as Adaptation, not Illness

In Living with Dying: A Handbook for End-of-Life Healthcare, social worker and bereavement expert, Dr. Phyllis Silverman writes:

> *Loss is not simply something that happens to us. Loss is something that we must make sense out of, give meaning to, and respond to. When grief may seem to engulf us, we may feel that we have no control over what is happening. Grief is, in fact, something we live*

through and learn to deal with. (262)[8]

Silverman positions relationality and social contexts centrally in this adaptation process:

> *People who are mourning learn to cope not only with extreme feelings stirred in response to the absence of the deceased but also with a changed social context. When the deceased is no longer a living presence, we learn to construct another type of relationship with the deceased, as well as a new relationship with ourselves and the world. Each aspect of this process influences the others. Thus, when a person is grieving, change is a constant companion as well. Mourning does not end, we do not 'recover.' Rather, we adapt, accommodate, change.* (262-263)

This continual process of change exists outside of the confines of a specified timeline, as it defines the grief experience as a process of negotiation and renegotiation over the course of a lifetime, of the mourner's relationship with themselves, the deceased, and the greater world around them. Furthermore, Silverman argues for the acceptance of grief as a normal and natural process, that simply requires the support of the community. It is not an illness that requires treatment or confinement.

> *Strong and extreme feelings and reactions after a loss are appropriate. They should not be judged and labeled as problematic or symptomatic of an illness. . . . Mourners need support and assistance from others, and they need to learn that they will not be 'cured' of this 'malady.'* (268-269)

Community acceptance and engagement are crucial here. If the mourner feels judged or stigmatized because of their emotional reactions to a loss, they will be less likely to process them effectively, and more likely to succumb to societal pressures, and 'move on' with their life. This is an unhealthy approach to grief and leads to the disintegration of the loss experience.

> *Letting go of the deceased, putting the past behind, has often been recommended as the preferred way to resolve grief in order to be able to invest in new relationships. In fact, this is a paradoxical situation. We cannot live in the past, and we cannot live as before, as if the deceased is still part of our life. . . . while death takes away the possibility of a living relationship with the deceased, both children and adults seem to find ways of constructing connections that are both comforting and sustaining.* (271)

The construction of a relationship to the deceased is best achieved through an interactive process

[8]Silverman posits that grief ought to be viewed as an adaptive and ever-changing process. It is not something that is mastered, or from which one recovers, but rather, something that we learn to integrate into our lives.

with other mourners in the community; the shared memories and support of the communal whole help to give shape and direction to the forming of the new relationship. Through collective mourning, the individual can develop a unique sense of identity.

> *As part of their identity shifts, the bereaved can look in on themselves in different ways and relate to others from a different place. They find voices they did not have before, and are involved in relationships that give them a different sense of mutuality and exchange. A new self evolves. Mourners can recognize that this emerging self is an ongoing process that has altered the fabric of their lives in the present and will continue to do so in the future.* (275)

This positions grief as not only a normal and natural process, but also as an ever-changing landscape of relationality and understanding of the world.

The Power of the Nuanced Narrative

Another approach to normalizing the realities of the dying and grieving process is to have a more nuanced understanding of narrative construction and meaning-making. In an analysis of the ways in which the ill and dying speak about their illness trajectories, medical sociologist Arthur W. Frank identifies three categories of narrative: restitution, chaos, and quest. The restitution narrative tells the story of the ill person, who miraculously recovers and returns to their previous state of health, due to the wonders of medicine. It positions the illness as an interruption to an otherwise happy/successful life story. This is the narrative that is most commonly accepted and understood. The quest narrative tells a different story – one of a hero on a journey. It bears witness to all of the pains and struggles and may or may not actually lead to wellness or recovery, but it shares the journey of growth, discovery, and the wisdom gained along the way. It unapologetically relates the suffering, and although it is a story that may not have a definitive ending in sight, it concludes with a 'take away' message for the audience. The chaos narrative, by contrast, exists outside of temporality and coherence. It is the story that has no beginning or end, no "take home message,"[9] no miraculous recovery. It is the story of emotional twists and turns. It is the raw processing of a complex experience.

Our society favors the restitution narrative, in both illness stories, and stories of loss. The idea that one should 'get over it' or 'move on,' especially with regard to a timeline, is a typical example of this thinking. However, the narrative forms best suited to the actual grief experience, are quest and chaos. These are, perhaps, harder to follow, but they reflect the true experience of

[9] A phrase coined by my grandmother.

loss much more closely. Grief and loss are not linear; they have many twists and turns, and are ongoing experiences. Storytelling that favors these modes presents the most accurate depiction of the mourner's experience.

Literary Ruminations

Popular grief memoirs provide a revealing window into the lived experience of the contemporary mourner. I want to examine two works: Joan Didion's The Year of Magical Thinking, and Meghan O'Rourke's The Long Goodbye. Each of these memoirs discusses a distinctly different kind of loss (i.e., the sudden death of a spouse, and the expected death of a parent after a long illness), and present the experience of the grieving process exactly how it is, with no 'bells and whistles,' no need to over-organize, and no sugar-coating. In both of these works, grief is exposed in its multi-dimensionality. Contemporary discourse on grief often prioritizes organized categorizations and meaning-making procedures as modes for healing. While these methods are useful in providing the bereaved with the tools to make sense of the world after catastrophic change or loss, the normalization of chaotic narratives should be afforded the same degree of attention and importance. The authentic personal reflections of these two grief memoirs powerfully evoke the visceral feelings associated with loss, shedding light on some of the common dilemmas confronted by a bereaved person in contemporary U.S./American culture.

The Year of Magical Thinking (2005)

In her autobiographical reflection on the year after her husband's death, Didion never formally defines what she means by "Magical Thinking," but she demonstrates it in the structure of her writing. Her writing is scattered – her memories are presented in non-chronological order, with frequent breaks between ideas, and long-winded tangents that depart from the line of narrative. If this were any other book on any other subject, one might argue that it is disorganized, incoherent, and nearly unreadable. But, *precisely* because she is speaking about her grief, the disorder works in her favor: the structure of the book itself palpably illustrates the experience of the bereaved. In the editing of this book, Didion could have made the choice to tidy up the information, re-order the memories and experiences chronologically, and eliminate the seemingly irrelevant and lengthy tangents that she takes throughout the book. Instead, she chose to keep the structure as it is – chaotic and disjointed – inviting the reader to enter into the grief

experience with her. Grief is unpredictable and illogical, and it does not adhere to normal rules of time or memory. Didion's re-telling of her experience could be categorized as, what author and sociologist, Arthur Frank, defines as a "chaotic narrative."

Didion describes her experience of trying desperately to navigate the tumultuous experience of grief, and to make sense of the world, after the catastrophic and sudden loss of her partner. One way that she attempts to find order in the chaos, is to turn to literature and the academic analysis of grief.

U.S./American cultural pressures tell us that, we need to have control over our lives, our emotions, our well-being, and, ultimately, our destiny. Didion's inculturation of these values, compounded by her literary and academic background, led her to seek solace and definitive answers from facts and critical analysis. But ultimately, she discovered that, in this particular case, the notion that "knowledge is control" is not sufficient. The experience of grief is visceral and distorts normal cognition. An attempt to grasp the gravity of the situation, based upon knowledge alone, will not provide the grounding it promises. However, it is not completely inadequate. The analytical processing of Didion's grief experience resulted in the curation of new terminology, and arguably allowed for the writing of this memoir. At the early stages of her grief, she described herself as catching herself on the "incorrect track" of thinking. She defines the "incorrect track" as the moments when she is no longer focused on going forward, but gets caught up in the re-invention of past memories. The "incorrect track" is getting lost in the past or trying to substitute the events of the story with an alternate version of reality. If certain things had occurred differently or not occurred at all, would the outcome have been the same?

Didion describes another cognitive phenomenon that she experienced in the early stages of her grieving process. She recounts how challenging it was for her to focus on the present moment – how a specific place or sound or interaction would trigger her and cause the "vortex effect." She explains this effect as the experience of spiraling into a series of thoughts and memories about her husband John or daughter Quintana (who at the time was in the ICU, fighting for her life). The "vortex effect" sucked her out of reality and into a black hole of regrets, doubts, and deep emotional pain. She tried to avoid this "vortex effect" by avoiding any places or activities that might be associated with events of the past. The coping mechanism of avoidance was effective to a point, but, occasionally, unexpected small details would still trigger a spiral. Later in the book, as she outlines the development of her grief, she describes how seemingly "safe" locations and events no longer existed – memories and thought spirals would start unexpectedly

and without triggers.

Didion documents the significant transitions in her loss journey, including the decisive shift from grief to mourning, which she defines as a move from passively experiencing life after a loss, to an active engagement that requires direct attention. From her perspective, mourning is where the work is done – it is the act of processing. While Didion's definitions of grief and mourning differ from the official terms in the field, they highlight the need for active engagement with the depth and breadth of the emotions of loss, and expose the problematic nature of "passive" grieving – which is so prevalent in the U.S. today. In Didion's definition of mourning, there is a feeling of fragility and instability. After the shock of the loss wears off, one begins to feel exposed and raw. Didion states, "I couldn't trust myself to present a coherent face to the world."

Another transition that Didion notes, is the shift from focusing on meaning-making through the reinventing of the sequence of events, to the accurate reconstruction of them. She also observes that with time, the bereaved person transitions from desperately holding on to the memory of the dead person, to a gradual process of letting go. "In order to live ourselves . . . we must relinquish the dead." However, in this process of letting go, there coexists a deep sense of nostalgia for the time closest to the death. Within the first year after the person dies, the memories are still fresh, and the loved one still feels present in many ways. As time moves forward, things become more obscured, and the person slips away more and more. In some sense, the bereaved engages in grieving the experience of grief itself. At the end of the book, Didion states her reluctance to conclude the narrative of the first year, because ending this first year meant having to begin a new year – one that was even further away from John.

The Long Goodbye (2017)

Compared to Didion, O'Rourke is much more organized in her presentation of her grief and experience with illness and loss. By dividing the book into three sections, she provides 'anchors' for the reader. Although her writing sometimes fits into the "chaotic narrative" style in nonlinear presentation of the narrative, her thoughts are never random or unrelated. She enters into each section from the present day, regardless of the chronological timeline. Then, in 'stream-of-consciousness' fashion, she digresses into other memories or stories related to the current situation. Once she has fully completed that train of thought, she returns to the t timeline and continues the narrative.

The first section of the book recounts her mother's last year of life, interspersed with

stories from other time periods, dating all the way back to childhood). The second section outlines the first 11 months of Meghan's grief after her mother's death, and the third and final section, which is the shortest, is a brief description of the subsequent years, highlighting major milestones and anniversaries.

The first section comes closest to the "chaotic narrative." Although it is mostly in chronological order, ending with the final decline and death of O'Rourke's mother, memories and stories from the past that are relevant to the emotions of the current situation highlight the prevalence of non-linearity in the grief experience.

> *When we are learning the world, we know things we cannot say how we know. When we are relearning the world in the aftermath of a loss, we feel things we had almost forgotten, old things, beneath the seat of reason.* (4)

Grief ignites something deep within us. We turn so often to intellectual understanding and reason to make sense of the grief experience, but ultimately our primal memory and embodied understanding characterize the true language of grief.

Nevertheless, O'Rourke still attempts to find meaning in the chaos through the pursuit of knowledge. The second section dissects her grief experience, delving into critical theory. Like Didion, when O'Rourke feels lost, she turns to the scholarly literature, to understand her experiences.es Yet once again, no amount of knowledge is adequate for capturing the lived experience of the bereaved individual, and ultimately, O'Rourke is left feeling untethered, lost, drifting, and completely unprepared for the loss:

> *Nothing prepared me for the loss of my mother. Even knowing that she would die did not prepare me. . . . Waking up in a world without her is like waking up in a world without sky: unimaginable.* (10)

O'Rourke connects this lack of grounding and the feeling of being untethered to the cultural norms of death, grief, and the lack of sufficient mourning rituals:

> *In this culture of display, the sadness of death is largely silent. After my mother's death, I felt the lack of rituals to shape and support my loss. I was not prepared for how hard I would find it to reenter the slipstream of contemporary life, the sphere of constant connectivity, a world ill-suited to reflection and daydreaming. I found myself envying my Jewish friends the practice of saying Kaddish, with its ceremonious designation of time each day devoted to remembering the lost person. As I drifted through the hours, I wondered: What does it mean to grieve when we have so few rituals for observing and externalizing loss? . . . I am writing*

> *here about my grief, of course. I don't pretend that it is universal. Nor do I write about it because I think it was more extreme, more unusual, more special than anyone else's. On the contrary: I believe that my grief was an everyday one* (13-14)

O'Rourke concludes her memoir with a narrative re-telling of the first anniversary of her mother's death, and two separate ash-spreading ceremonies (one with the immediate family, and one with O'Rourke's grandmother and aunts), followed by a description of her experiences one year after her mother's death. As she looks ahead to her life after loss, she frames it as starting anew. She has gone through the cycle of seasons once: she has had her series of 'firsts' – the first Christmas, the first birthday, the first anniversary, etc. Life with grief has not become more predictable, but it *has* become more familiar, and she is finding her bearings in this new world without her mother. She has transitioned from chaotic narrative to restitution narrative, and is able to describe the experience of loss as one of growth and a hopeful future. However, she acknowledges that the journey is far from ended:

> *There is nothing 'fixed' about my grief. I don't have the same sense that I'm sinking into the ground with every step I take. But there aren't any 'conclusions' I can come to, other than personal ones. The irony is, my restored calm is itself the delusion. I'm more at peace because that old false sense of the continuity of life has returned.* (291)

Ultimately, the reader is left with the visceral sense of an eternal and inconsolable longing that will remain with O'Rourke for the rest of her life:

> *In the beginning there was the wind, the wind made by breath, the word of the wind, and in our hearts we kept telling the story over and over of how we loved her and were there, there, there, once we were all there, and she took a breath like a gasp and her eyes opened and she took us in, all of us there, and then she breathed once more, the last breath, and we were there and she was not, and even now I think, Come on, Mom, stay another night, stay the night – Stay the night.* (297)

Concluding Thoughts: Diagnosis & Prognosis

The contemporary grief experience – 'everyday' grief – is an experience of being adrift. The modern mourner is left to navigate the tumultuous seas of emotion without as much as a life raft. This is an age-old ocean, and many travelers have taught themselves how to swim through the storm. The lighthouse in the distance shines dimly, and rarely is there a rescue ship in sight. We are left to navigate these waters alone.

In U.S. culture today, the dying, grieving, and mourning processes are seldom discussed beyond academic, professional, and literary settings, and, within these settings, there is a hyper-emphasis on managing, organizing, and defining them. When these issues are addressed in interpersonal engagements, they are often broached in a roundabout and unhelpful manner, or avoided altogether. There is little-to-no space for mourning, beyond the customary services held after a death, and the bereaved individual is often left feeling alienated, alone, and uncertain how to proceed. Grief is often pathologized, and the bereaved is rushed through a linear timeline that does not in any way support or reflect the internal emotions being processed. We are far too preoccupied with our fear of death to acknowledge its inevitability and intertwined relationship with life. What would it look like to engage intentionally with these topics? Could offerings of embodied ritual spaces for grief help us to come to terms with our mortality? Can artistic work bridge the gap between our fears and our need to process loss? What would it feel like, to be truly held, supported, and guided through the storm of grief?

Artistic Aims

To send light into the darkness of men's hearts – such is the duty of the artist.
Robert Schumann

The contemporary artist can do no less than to dedicate the power of his spirit and the flame of his art to bring light to the dark places.
José Limón

Introduction

My scholarship interrogates and critiques the theoretical, philosophical, and psychological underpinnings and literature concerning Western approaches to grief and death. In the course of conducting my research, I discovered that my own personal experiences with loss reflect a greater systemic deficit that is symptomatic of contemporary culture in the United States. In response, my artistic work advocates for the value of adequate and appropriate ritual spaces by providing a holistic model for processing the universal human experience of loss.

In this death-adverse and grief-repressed society, my artistic inquiry proposes a ritual environment, in which contemporary mourners are offered an opportunity to engage with and experience their grief with full intentionality. In A Director Prepares, Anne Bogart writes: ". . . the task of every artist and scientist is to re-describe our inherited assumptions and invented fictions in order to create new paradigms for the future." (28). As an artist-scholar, I view my task as a re-envisioning of contemporary U.S./American treatment of death, grief and loss. I propose alternative spaces for individual and collective mourning in order "to bring light to the dark places," as expressed by the choreographer José Limón. To this end, I created *What Remains*, an immersive multimedia installation, that explores the emotional experience of loss and the ephemeral traces we leave behind, through video art, projection, sound, sculpture, and performance. The installation raises questions such as: What memories, objects, and legacies of a lived life are left behind when someone dies? How do these traces live on in the bereaved? What is the experience of reconstructing one's life after a shattering loss? How can we feel less alone in these experiences?

In an increasingly secular society, we have forgotten the importance of ritual commemoration in community. But death, grief, and mourning are universal human experiences,

regardless of race, color, or creed. The processing of loss through ritual and remembrance is necessary for our health, well-being, and recovery. In a society where death and grief are marginalized, I believe that we need to make more concerted efforts to create communal spaces in which people can process these experiences through ritual. *What Remains* is an attempt to achieve this objective.

What Remains was originally scheduled for March 12 – 21, 2020, at the Gallatin Galleries in New York City, but it closed prematurely on March 13, 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, I was able to document it thoroughly for archival purposes, and I received valuable feedback from those who were able to view it before it closed.[10]

[10]Refer to Appendix for detailed walkthrough description and link to archival documentation footage.

Overall Goals, Prototypes, and Process

As I began my creative work on this project, my driving question was: How can artistic practice and performance experiences create cathartic and healing spaces for people to contemplate their own mortality and process their grief?

From the outset, my primary aim was to create an immersive experience and interactive space, in which audience members would be offered the opportunity to engage, both individually and collectively, with their grief stories. Whether the final piece was a performance or an installation, my intention was to break down the conventional relationship between performer/artist and spectator/audience, departing from the tradition of the proscenium and other customary means of artistic display. Ultimately, I aimed to create a piece that would encourage audience members to reflect actively and intentionally upon their own personal histories of loss and their relationship with their own mortality. The structure of the work would enable audiences to feel more emphatically connected to the people and greater world around them.

At first, I envisioned accomplishing this goal primarily through performance with an interactive component. I explored this idea in three forms. The first prototype remained in the proposal stage, and I never had the opportunity to execute it fully. However, its structural and thematic framework was influential in the development of subsequent prototypes. It began by pondering the end of life experience, and what it means to be alive in the first place. What are the essential elements of life? How do we know that someone is alive? What are the most notable markers of no longer being alive? On the most basic level, two essential biological functions came to mind: pulse and breath.

Throughout our lives, our heartbeat and our breath are constants. They are automatic and essential to our existence, providing a steady rhythm and backdrop to the experience of being human – the 'soundtrack' of life itself. Breath and pulse are also akin to dynamic markings in music; they indicate the intensity of our experiences, ranging from the delicate *pianissimo* moments of our lives, to cataclysmic events that can be described as nothing less than *fortissimo*. Breath and pulse tend to remain relatively consistent from day to day, at a steady *mezzo forte*. They alter from this 'resting' state during the highest and lowest points of our emotions and experiences. For example, your heart may race when you are excited to see a dear friend or lover after a long time of separation, or your breath may become erratic when you anxiously await medical test results in the doctor's office. Moments of extreme joy and extreme fear are mirrored

by the changing of your heart rate and breathing patterns – physiological and emotional responses are deeply intertwined. The controlling, calming, and slowing down of one's breath often leads to a feeling of deep peace. Fundamentally, breath and pulse act as the barometers of our emotional experiences.

In my proposed performance piece, I planned to create an environment in which the audience members would become keenly aware of their own breath and pulse, and thereby their 'aliveness.' I also planned to work collaboratively with a sound designer to create a soundscape composed of the real-time heart beats and breathing patterns of the performers. I envisioned the soundscape beginning with one individual's pulse and breath, and gradually accumulating as audience members and performers engaged with the space, until it became a symphony of rhythms. The *crescendi* and *decrescendi* of rhythm would mirror the dynamic changes of the performers, as they portrayed landmarks in a person's life, from birth to death. I was also interested in overlaying music and text into the soundscape, including live vocalizations of melodic passages, and spoken word pieces sourced from the performers' personal thoughts on vitality and mortality. At the end of the piece, as the performers arrived at their 'end of life' sequences, the soundscape of heartbeats and breaths would become slower, more erratic, and unpredictable, gradually fading into silence – mimicking the actual biological process of dying.

Although this performance piece never came to fruition, many of the elements found their way into *What Remains*, including the use of sound to create a visceral engagement with themes of life, death, and grief, and the use of breath to ground the experience.

The second prototype was a piece entitled *A Ritual of Remembrance*, created for the "Creativity, Challenge, and Change" Gallatin Proseminar final showcase at the end of Fall 2019. I began this performance by inviting audience members to center themselves with a collective breath, and then bring to mind a person (or people) that they had lost and wanted to honor that evening.[11] They were then invited to write the name(s) of their loved one(s) on a piece of paper and attach it to my fluttering scarf, as I passed through the audience. I then danced with 'the scarf of loved ones' to Heitor Villa-Lobos' *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5*. At the conclusion of

[11] See Appendix for transcript/script.

my dance, I invited audience members to come forward, select a paper from the scarf, read aloud the name(s), and dissolve the paper in a bowl of water. Once all of the papers had been dissolved in the bowl, I poured the papered water into a plant – metaphorically representing the nourishment of new life through memory and ancestry. This piece also served as a creative departure point for *What Remains*, and several elements were included in the ultimate installation, such as the initial grounding collective breath, the use of dissolvable paper as a metaphoric gesture, and the collective contribution to a whole, as manifested by the paper attachments to the "Tree of Remembrance" in the final room.

The third prototype took the form of a short performance art piece I created in collaboration with Steinhardt composer Elijah Brown, entitled *Life/Death*.[12] We overlapped live performances of jazz music and spoken word with their 'dead' (recorded) counterparts. In conjunction with the performance, we invited the audience members to snap in rhythm with the music, thereby contributing their own "aliveness" to the work. The script of the spoken word portion of this piece was created by compiling various poems, philosophical musings, and personal journal entries pondering the meaning of mortality.

These three experiments, both in their successes and failures, allowed me to critically analyze various ways in which audiences could be included in the experience, and determine the ultimate goals of my final creation. They led me to realize that mere audience interaction in a performance was not enough to achieve my goals of participation, ritual-creation, and the invitation for personal introspection and grief processing. The first proposal, in which breath and the heartbeat were the thematic foundation, was ultimately closest to what I wanted to create, as it departed from the tradition of the proscenium setting and invited the audience to explore multiple facets of the experience. While the other two prototypes included audience participation, this interactivity existed within the framework of a typical performance experience, in which the audience passively absorbed the content. The audience participation in these prototype performances, while engaging, did not activate the level of interaction that I had hoped for, as the primary attention was on me – the performer – rather than on the experience of loss.

[12]See Appendix for script and recording link.

Certainly, performers can act as conduits for the audience, enabling the transference of emotions, but there are limitations. While I acknowledged that performance can have great impact, by making space for grief processing and emotional connection, I knew that I needed to explore other avenues of engaging with my audience. I began to explore the ways in which space and objects could act as a site of transference, and performance could become a way to activate the space, rather than the primary mode of communication.

I considered the embodied experience of grief, and the importance of setting aside a sacred space for ritual, and realized that I needed to create something more spatially oriented. This would engage the audience members more actively and physically, by encouraging them to move through a space, rather than passively view the content. Ultimately, my goal was to center the experience on the bereaved, rather than on the art. I considered immersive theater as a possible way to achieve this. While immersive theater certainly tips the balance in favor of the participants' emotional engagement, I feel that it, too, tends to prioritize performative display over personal discovery. Live performance and physical presence tend to take precedence in spectatorship, and l did not want to dilute the potency of participatory action. Instead, I opted to create an environment that audience members could fully inhabit, and through which they could forge their own pathways and meander freely – a tangible structure and atmosphere that invites action rather than presenting it. Within this self-contained environment, however, I considered adding a layer of performance for occasional activation of the space.

By the end of the 2019 Spring semester, I had decided to create an installation consisting of multiple stations and environments, in which audience members could individually and collectively engage with their grief. I envisioned these stations as alcoves or curtained-off areas, creating private and intimate experiences for each viewer, with a culminating communal performance. My plan was to divide the work structurally into two parts (gallery and performance space), in order to highlight the two ways in which grief and mourning are processed: by the individual, and by the community. This would afford audience members the opportunity to engage with their grief in both domains.

I planned for some of the interactive stations to be meditative in nature, creating space for audience members simply to rest, reflect, and heal, while other stations would be more participatory, inviting active interaction with the various elements of the space. I further planned for the gallery stations to be set up in such a way that they could be experienced in any order or for any length of time, allowing for autonomy and freedom in the individual grief journeys. These

were the initial plans for what ultimately became *What Remains*.

In the subsequent year, I developed several versions of the gallery installation's spatial arrangement,[13] but several key goals remained pertinent throughout: there would be spaces for both individual and communal grief rituals, interactivity and immersion would be critical components of the space, and audience members would be afforded the opportunity to receive and contribute to the experience. While these goals propelled the creative process, the materiality and precise execution shifted and developed over the course of the year. In reflecting upon the ways in which I would fulfill my objectives, I considered the following questions: Would the immersive space include performers or not? Would there be many rooms, or would everything be presented in one big space? Would the audience members be invited to receive something physical, experiential, or conceptual? Would their contribution be through speech, written text, or participation in a ritual? All these questions remained open as I developed the work.

By the time I built the final installation in Spring 2020, I had formalized my goals to be the following:

1. To start as an individual experience.
2. To culminate in opportunities for community connection and the witnessing of others' grief.
3. To have a sense of meandering and wandering – an invitation for audience members to choose their own paths.
4. To exist outside of time – audience members are invited to linger, slow down, and stay in any room or area as long as they like.
5. To hold space for those who have experienced loss.
6. To be gentle and soothing: a space for healing, reflection, remembrance, meditation, and connection.
7. To invite audience members to contribute memories and personal experiences.
8. To give audience members something to take with them.

Since much of my research on the contemporary experience of death and grief has been a critique of the status quo, I chose to create a space that mirrors the grief experience and, at the same time, offers an alternative way to engage with it. The grief experience was metaphorically represented by the unwieldy scattering and rustling of the hanging paper sculpture, the blending and bleedthrough of overlapping video imagery on the various altars, the use of wind and mobility, the burning fire and unsettling movement projected on the wooden temple, and the soundscape in the third room, which included a harmonic build-up to a gut-wrenching cry of pain. By contrast, the quality of durational slowness, the preparatory stages of entry, the gentle welcoming

[13]See Technical Essay and Appendix for descriptions and maps of early prototypes of the space.

text and sounds at the entrance of the gallery space, provided an alternate space for mourning – one that is missing in our everyday environment. These polarities of experiential planes and coexistence of contrasting emotional qualities are present both in the minute details of individual elements, and in the overall structure of *What Remains*.

My artistic process in creating this work also mirrored the grief process. I found myself in spirals – repeating gestures and ideas, but each time from a different place. When I got to the 'end' of the process, I realized that I had, in fact, returned to my original ideas, but from a totally different vantage point. This mirroring was not just evident in the spirals, but also in emotional ups and downs, the nonlinearity of the creative process, and the constant tug-of-war between abstraction/mediation and the grit of the actual. In my desire to help others with *their* grief, I was confronted with *my own*, and the layers of my personal grief became increasingly evident, as I immersed myself deeper and deeper into the work. In true 'grief-journey' fashion, when I approached what felt like it ought to be the 'end' or 'completion' of the process, I realized that it was merely a milestone in a much longer journey. Layers were left unexplored, threads left unfollowed. There were also many micro-losses along the way – ideas that I had to relinquish, and items that never made their way into the final installation. The decision-making process of determining what elements would remain (no pun intended), was also a process of loss. In this journey, I experienced the wide range of emotions that come with grief: fear, anxiety, dread, excitement, hope, and loneliness. I simultaneously felt a drive to dig in deeper than ever and to hold on to that which cannot be preserved or captured, coexisting with a deep desire to escape and to let go. I felt a profound yearning for community, while simultaneously cherishing my solitude. I began to wonder: is every creative process an exercise in grappling with one's own mortality? Is creation, in and of itself, a process of grieving?

This mirroring of the grief experience was heightened further by the surge of COVID-19, and the resulting NYU legislation that closed *What Remains* after only one day. As my exhibition suffered a sudden death, I was forced to consider its legacy and afterlife, and I began to integrate this loss into my future relationship with the work. The documentation process became much more than a simple act of capturing footage for archival purposes. It, in and of itself, became a ritual of mourning, and a memorialization of that which never came to pass. In addition to documenting discrete elements of the installation,[14] I was able to film a walkthrough of the whole

[14]With the generous help from Jen Birge and the Gallatin Gallery staff.

experience, acting as the surrogate audience member. As I walked through the installation and interacted with the various elements of the space, I (as I hoped audience members would) engaged in my own grief process, mourning the show's premature closing.

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From the start of the creative process, one of my highest priorities was to create an experience that departed from the hustle and bustle of the world and the cultural norms that push the bereaved to 'move on' too quickly. I wanted to create a quiet, reflective environment, outside of time, into which audience members would be invited to enter, as individuals who have suffered losses. It was integral to my process that my installation and work could 'hold space'[15] for others' grief – a safe environment, in which grief could be expressed, witnessed, acknowledged, and accepted.

To this end, I wanted to set the tone of the experience from the moment of arrival. At the entrance of *What Remains*, I posted the following text:

Come in and rest awhile.
This is your journey.
Take the time that you need.

Your grief is welcomed here.

Unburden yourself of the weight of the world.
Slow down and stay awhile.

This place is for you.

It was important to me to communicate, right from the outset, that this would be a quiet, meditative, welcoming, and slow experience. Furthermore, I was mindful of the fact that in this particular space, namely the Gallatin Gallery, there would be many people that had not come to the building explicitly to view the exhibition. I wanted to let people know, that as they entered in from (or were about to exit into) the hustle and bustle of the Manhattan streets, there was a place for them to decompress, to rest, to reflect, to pause – even if that was not their original intention in coming to 1 Washington Place.

[15]The phrase 'holding space' is commonly used in the realms of meditation, psychotherapy, and other therapeutic contexts. For me, 'holding space' is an act of personally stepping aside, in order to become a vessel for another's experience – allowing for authenticity and emotional vulnerability to be fully present in an environment of non-judgment, acceptance, and empathy.
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I also wanted to create a sense of mystery, and to make the space distinctly separate and sacred. It is for this reason that I covered the transparent doors and the windows of the gallery. The visitor, upon entering the installation, is in a space that is outside of time, and separate from the outside world. Here, there is nothing that can distract or disturb. People cannot peer in quizzically; this space is protected, private, and impermeable.[16]

As the viewer continues to walk into the space, the next object encountered is a black drape dividing the room, obscuring what lies ahead. Hung on this drape is the following text:

The world is noisy and expects many things from you.
But this is a space that expects nothing.

This is a space of love.
A space of respite.
A space to remember.

This is a space to cry.
A space to be silent.
A space to connect.
A space to be still.

This text builds upon the first text, re-emphasizing the tone and intention of the journey that the viewer is about to begin. I purposefully created the space with layers and divisions. Each smaller space prepares the participant for the next. The journey is gradual and progressive, but also open to each individual's timing and experience. It is laid out in a linear fashion, but at every junction, there is the choice to go left or right, to stay longer with one item or move on to the next, to interact with the elements or simply to observe, sit, stand or move. Even the fabric on the walls represents a gradual progression – from darker, soothing tones (black, navy blue, light blue) to bright, vibrant colors (yellow, maroon). The lighting of the space is progressive as well – it shifts from darker-toned rooms into the light and color of the memorial space at the end. These layers of entry into the space allow the viewer to sink deeper and deeper into the experience. Each room, with its accompanying sounds, objects, and projections, invites viewers to deepen their engagement with their grief.

[16]I also intended to place signage on the outside of the entryway, encouraging people to turn off their cell phones and devices – thereby removing the digital distractions of the outside world.

Subsequent to encountering the above texts, the viewer would move into the first space, in which the sound of breathing resonates. This is an invitation to participate in a ritual of grounding, and the first site in which embodied engagement is at the forefront. Embodied participation was a key objective of the construction of the space, and at each of the layered points of entry, the audience member is invited to actively participate in a variety of ways – in the writing and dissolving of paper in the first room, the circular walking in the second room, in the physical engagement with the distinct objects on the altars and the papers attached to the mobile, in the rhythmic reading of the unfolding text in the notebook, and in contribution to the "Tree of Remembrance."

Every minute detail of the construction of this space was thoughtfully and purposefully included to both mirror the grief experience and invite the viewers to engage with their own grief, through rituals of mourning and embodied activation. Many elements in the space allude to a sense of ephemerality and fragmentation, while also establishing a feeling of groundedness, permanence, and being held. While I created the space to be an individual exploration and process for the viewer, I also sought to accompany them through their journey, sharing my voice, embodiment, and story at various points of the installation, reminding them that they are not alone in this experience.

That is beautiful which is produced by the inner need, which springs from the soul.
Wassily Kandinsky

Aesthetic Influences

My aesthetic influences and creative curiosity already began in childhood. I believe that artistic practice and creation arise from the innermost being of the artist, even down to the molecular level. Every work of art reflects the artist's unique life experiences and influences. These essential elements make their way into the work, both consciously and unconsciously, and often are difficult to trace. Therefore, when asked what particular aesthetics or experiences led to the creation of a specific work of art, the artist must be both reflexive and highly selective in identifying possible influences. As an artist, I absorb like a sponge, constantly soaking in my environment and the creative work around me. It is often not until the completion of a work, that I can recognize the particular threads of life experience woven into its formation.

The following artists' works were either particularly influential in the making of *What Remains,* or were brought to my attention in relation to the work after it was created.

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I was exposed to the art of Félix González-Torres at many points during my creative process for *What Remains*. His work has often been recommended to me as an example of art on the topic of death and loss. In particular, I have been drawn to his work, *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, 1991, in which a colorful pile of individually wrapped candies, totaling 175 lbs., is organized in a corner of the gallery space. Viewers are invited to take candies, if they wish. This work has sparked many conversations and reflections about its significance and impact, both in the art world at large, and in my inner circles of influence. The 175 lbs. represent the weight of González-Torres' partner, Ross, who died of AIDS. The gradual removal of candies by the viewers is a metaphor for the fragmentary disappearance of Ross. It also symbolizes the dissemination and continuation of his


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memory and presence after his death. The weight of the pile of candy remains 175 lbs., however, as it is replenished daily. Thus, the 'existence' of Ross is never terminated. His material presence has merely taken a different form, and despite the continuous dispersal of his essence, he remains. The diffusion of memory is ongoing, and the grief journey never ends. The power and emotional resonance of this work are revealed through action. Yet, its significance may be lost on viewers, unless they read the wall text or do research on the work. As a result of its subtle symbolism, only a few viewers will grasp its full emotional weight. They may experience it simply as a colorful pile of free candy, and nothing else. As Wassily Kandinsky once said: "It is never literally true that any form is meaningless and 'says nothing.' Every form in the world says something. But its message often fails to reach us, and even if it does, full understanding is often withheld from us."[17] Similarly, individuals often unknowingly participate in the grief process of others, and are indirectly affected.

In considering the creation of my own work – before its physical and technical form was apparent to me – I pondered the different artistic approaches to the topic of death and loss. I have great respect for what González-Torres' work represents and how it engages the viewer. It beautifully and effectively creates a space for audience interaction, introspection, and discovery. While addressing an extremely serious and emotional subject, his work includes qualities of playfulness and vibrancy that coexist with grief. In a culture where the hegemonic associations with death, grief, and loss are dark tones and spaces, González-Torres' choice to represent loss in vibrant colors is provocative and courageous. This deliberate decision resonates with my own view that we ought to engage with death in a multi-dimensional and multi-spectral way, acknowledging that celebration, playfulness, and color can coexist with deep sadness.

Many artistic works are overly explicit in their thematic treatment of death and grief, but González-Torres' work is implicit and indirect in its meaning. The viewer is neither manipulated nor confronted by it. Influenced by works such as *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, in creating *What Remains*, I too aimed to invite the viewer into an experience of unfolding discoveries. I also welcomed playfulness and vibrancy into my space of grief and loss, as reflected in the quality of movement in the video works, the diverse array of elements on the altars, and the overall color palette of the final space. I have always been attracted to works of vibrant color and movement, with a particular attachment to artists such as Marc Chagall, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, René

[17]Taken from *Concerning the Spiritual in Art: Part II. About painting: VI. The language of Form and Colour*.

Magritte, and Achim Freyer.

Further consideration of González-Torres' work led me to think about the impact that art can have on the audience, and what kind of space it can hold for the viewer. *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* is thought-provoking, and certainly memorable, but what does it actually accomplish? Perhaps it opens up more conversations about death and loss – but it merely demonstrates grief and loss through metaphor and does not *actively* hold space for the viewer's own experience. I have noticed that this capacity of a work of art to mediate and facilitate the processing of individual suffering is absent in today's art world. Art can provide catharsis, discourse, escapism – but does it hold space? More specifically, can art hold space for meditation, mourning, and healing?

I think of James Turrell's work – in particular, his larger-scale light installations. Turrell has a tremendous capacity for holding space for reflection and meditation – whether it is a meditation on the brightness of light, or the existence of God. While immensely beautiful and moving, I often find Turrell's invitation too abstract and non-specific. The viewer is given the sole responsibility for assigning meaning to the work and claiming the space. Abstract contemporary art can have a powerful effect on the viewer, but it does not engage all audiences. In developing my own work, I considered the contemporary U.S./American relationship with death and grief, which is already distant and abstract. To create an abstract work about these subjects seems redundant to the lived experience, and contradictory to my goal of engaging the audience in holistic and authentic grief processing. Therefore, my highest artistic priority was to be explicit in my engagement with these subjects, especially in defining the metaphorical and emotional spaces held within the physical installation. My work also seeks to exist in the intersection of therapeutic spaces of healing and artistic representation – to directly address suffering and grief, and create space for compassion, empathy, and embodied healing.

While abstract, a quality of Turrell's work that I admire greatly is its durationality – his work invites viewers to remain for as long as they wish. I, too, wanted to create a sense of

timelessness and openness in my installation. This durational quality of slowness, and the invitation to move into a deep place of reflection and meditation, has been an aesthetic interest of mine for quite some time. Although I cannot trace it back to its origin, I can recall a particular moment that awakened my curiosity. During the second month of my freshman year at the

University of California, Santa Barbara, to fulfill one of the dance department's requirements, I attended a performance of *TOBARI – As If in An Inexhaustible Flux* by the Japanese Butoh dance company, Sankai Juku. It was a masterful exercise in endurance and slowness. But my young, impatient mind was not adequately prepared for the demands that the piece made of the viewer. The 90-minute performance felt like an eternity, a never-ending sea of interminable and painfully slow, nuanced gestures. Although the mood, lighting, and overall atmosphere of the piece shifted from section to section, the pace, quality of movement, and relationship to time remained constant. By the end of the experience, I was utterly drained, and furious. I felt as if I had just been sucked into a black hole of tedium, for what felt like an eternity. I hated the piece with utter conviction. Yet in the subsequent years and months, completely against my expectations, it bubbled to the surface of my mind again and again. Even now, nearly 10 years later, its impact remains. I often wonder how I would experience the piece now, if given the opportunity. As a much more seasoned viewer of dance, would I be as infuriated by its unrelenting slowness? Would its impact be as significant? What annoyed me most about this experience was its seemingly unending durationality. I thought of it as 'boring.' However, as the years went by, and I experienced more dance performances and worked on my own choreography, I found myself yearning for that slowness. The outside world felt increasingly frantic and frenetic, and I wanted nothing more than to escape into a place of peaceful meditation and durationality. I was seeking an antidote to the noise of the world.

I am reminded time and time again of something that one of my mentors, Mira Kingsley, said to me many years ago: "Time doesn't merely exist on the horizontal plane. It is also vertical. Even as time marches forward along the horizontal plane, a *moment* in time can have lasting effects on the vertical plane." The horizontal time moves like a 'typical' timeline, from one event to the next, but the vertical dimension provides for a deepening of each individual experience. Even as we move forward on the horizontal plane, we can continue to reflect on events of the

past, making their vertical landscapes deeper and richer.

Grief, in particular, needs space in order to exist in this vertical plane. However, our culture expects grief to exist on a horizontal, linear, progressive timeline. We are charged to 'move forward' or 'move on.' Motion, of course, *is* required, and the journey through life indeed continues. Yet in this marching forward into the future, the verticality of the grief's impact increases and affects us differently. Memory is not linear; it is fragmentary, cumulative, multidimensional, and cyclical. It is possible to find moments of joy even in the depths of great sadness. Two seemingly opposed emotions can, in fact, exist simultaneously. So why is it that we desire so deeply to categorize, organize, linearize our existence? And why do we resist slowness? I believe that a slow, meditative, acknowledgement of the reality of vertical time is critical for the healthy integration of a loss experience. In Awake at the Bedside, Larry Rosenberg writes:

> *We need to develop a mind that is capable of looking at things with some steadiness, so we can stay with them long enough for the message to come through. . . Typically, our awareness is sporadic. We might be watching the evening news and hear some tragedy, and we notice a momentary pang or a real feeling of heartsickness. But something else comes on the screen or we move on to some other activity, and it's over. That's the way of the modern world. Short brief bursts of attention.* (216)

Grief, loss, caregiving, the process of natural death – all require time and presence. But so often we are tempted to run away, obscure, hasten, dust off our hands and move on. Those who work in end-of-life and death care know the importance of durationality. The power of this presence was beautifully and eloquently portrayed in the 2017 documentary film, *End of Life*, by John Bruce and Paweł Wojtasik, in which viewers were invited to share in the final years and moments of five dying individuals.

In a post-screening interview at the 2018 New York Film Festival at Lincoln Center, Bruce and Wojtasik spoke about the influence of their death doula training on the creative process. Through the inclusion of unedited sequences, defined by pauses, grunts, groans, and long silences, the filmmakers sought to engage the viewers viscerally in the actual experiences of the dying. They described this durationality as an attempt to capture the experience of moment-by-moment witnessing – "like water dripping from a faucet – uninterrupted." In the filming and editing process, they also chose to focus exclusively on the end-of-life experience through the lens of those who were actively facing death, rather than building up narratives of the world around them. Unlike typical documentarians, Bruce and Wojtasik were more interested in extracting the

essence of each person, than creating an exposé of their lives. They found it unnecessary to *explain* who each person was/is, but instead, invited the viewers to *experience* that person with a sense of presence that is uninterrupted and unfiltered.

That evening, moved and inspired by the film and subsequent conversation, I, too, decided to take the time to be present with my own thoughts and emotions. I sat atop a concrete block at Lincoln Center Plaza and wrote the following in my journal:

> *It is a beautiful thing to be invited into a space of presence, a place of being. Being here and now and with a person exactly where they are. No rush. No need to get anything done. No need to even try to communicate anything specific. Just a compassionate presence. Taking time.*
>
> *But it is also so uncomfortable to slow down like that – our lives are a constant hustle and bustle – a need to get there <u>now,</u> and accomplish this or that, and communicate with a speed, a ferocity. Or otherwise, we are tuning out the world and getting lost in a screen. <u>Immediate gratification.</u> If it takes more than half a second for something to load, we are angry, impatient. I want it NOW. I need it NOW. Why are we so uncomfortable with stillness? With silence? What are we so afraid of?*
>
> *To be present is to be vulnerable.*
>
> *To create space is to let go of control.*
>
> *To be silent is to exist fully in the moment.*
>
> *We are constantly inundated with sounds, with images, with goals and desires that we think we want and need because the world is telling us so. But where is the space to connect? Truly connect? Why are we so scared to make eye contact with a stranger? Why are we so afraid to smile at a person walking by? Why do we feel uncomfortable when we share an elevator with other people? Our phones and screens have become our safety nets. An excuse. A socially acceptable tactic for avoiding connection. Because everything we are pursuing is so <u>important</u> – there is no time for human connection. There is not time for time.*
>
> *"Stop and smell the roses," they say. And we scoff at the cliché . . .*

Once again, I was struck by the power of durationality and slowness, stillness and silence. I knew that my own work needed to create space for the same. In creating *What Remains*, I established an environment outside of time. The installation included various elements that required a commitment of time and openness on the part of the viewer. This was achieved through the inclusion of staggered and lengthy looping video works, a looping audio track, and a 20-minute

audio memoir piece in the darkened candle room at the end of the exhibition.

Another aspect of *End of Life* that impacted me greatly, was the way in which Bruce and Wojtasik explored the topic of death and loss with such proximity and intimacy – both physically and emotionally. This unfiltered vulnerability and exposure invited me into a space in which I was willing and able to consider my own mortality and my own experiences of loss. I was reminded of the power of specificity in storytelling. One can connect more profoundly to a universal narrative when it is told through a personal lens.

This is one of the reasons that the genre of the grief memoir is so popular and effective. Although I initially read Joan Didion's The Year of Magical Thinking, Meghan O'Rourke's The Long Goodbye, and Stephane Gerson's Disaster Falls, to research the contemporary grief experience, I found these works personally cathartic, and important artistic guideposts for my own creative process. They gave me insight into artistic structures for conveying a personal grief story, which I followed in writing my own memoir (presented as an audio recording in the final room of the exhibition). Additionally, these structural components of the grief memoir influenced the construction of visual and spatial elements in my installation. Although each of these grief memoirs is unique in its voice, structure, and narrative, the three authors share significant commonalities, particularly in their uncompromising proximity to the visceral experience of grief, and their deliberate choice to expose its messiness.

Reading The Year of Magical Thinking was a particularly potent experience for me. Didion described a variety of circumstances and experiences that resonated with me – moments and memories that reminded me of my own losses. I found myself paying close attention to the writing techniques she employed to relate these memories and thoughts. In particular, I was drawn to her scattered and episodic way of conveying information, and the repetition of certain phrases, dates, and times throughout the work. Before reading this book, I had already started writing my memories of my grandmother's death, and interestingly, I had made similar choices in the structure of my writing – I repeated the precise time of my grandmother's death (11:44pm), and I described events out of order, as I reconstructed the final day of her life.[18]

Like Didion, in the year that followed my grandmother's death, I felt an urgency to describe the precise events of the last day of her life: to record them and preserve them. Perhaps this was because it was the first death for which I was physically present. I was involved in every

[18]See Appendix: "18 hours"

stage – caregiving, negotiating and collaborating with the hospice nurses, and being present at the death itself. Perhaps I was afraid to forget her, fearful that the memories would become "mudgy" (a word coined by Didion's daughter, Quintana, when discussing the memories of her father). I am all too familiar with "mudgy" memories – those of my father and my grandfather have become like that, so perhaps I was trying to prevent that from happening to the memories of my grandmother. Whatever the reason, it felt urgent and necessary to me, as it did to Didion, to chronicle every detail of the death experience. This urgency was reflected in the repetitive phrases and short, choppy sentences of my own memoir writing.

For a long time during the creative process, I resisted inserting my own story and presence into the installation space. I didn't want it to be about *me*. So often, artistic work can become a playground for the artist's ego – an exercise in self-gratification. I wanted to avoid this at all costs. It was imperative that my creation would be a space for others and for *their* loss stories and grief. However, watching *End of Life*, and reading the grief memoirs, I came to realize the power of presence, and the space that is created by radical vulnerability. By sharing one's own story, one often empowers others to share their own. The artist's self-aware exposure in a work can be galvanizing, as is poignantly apparent in Marina Abramovic's *The Artist is Present*, in which audience members were invited into intimate interaction with the artist. It is for these reasons that I ultimately chose to share my story in my work and welcome the audience into the intimacy of my own losses. My personal grief stories were related through visual representation, written text, and sound: in personal altars for three of my lost loved ones, pages of the wind sculpture/mobile, and the audio recording of my memoir in the final reflection room. I also created a space for viewers to witness fragments of each other's losses in the collective creation of the "Tree of Remembrance" in the memorial room of the installation. The purpose of all of these components was to create an environment in which audience members could become part of a larger community of mourners, rather than remain isolated and alienated in their grief experience.

My emotional proximity to the topic, my personal vulnerability in intimately exposing my own experiences, and my invitation for audience members to reflect on their own personal stories of grief, can be likened to the works of Sophie Calle and Tracey Emin.

Sophie Calle's installation *Take Care of Yourself*, not only exposes a deeply private break-up letter from her former lover, but it also invites others to grieve and process emotions together with her. Calle writes:

I received an email telling me it was over.

I didn't know how to respond.

It was almost as if it hadn't been meant for me.

It ended with the words, "Take care of yourself."

And so I did.

I asked 107 women chosen for their profession or skills, to interpret this letter.

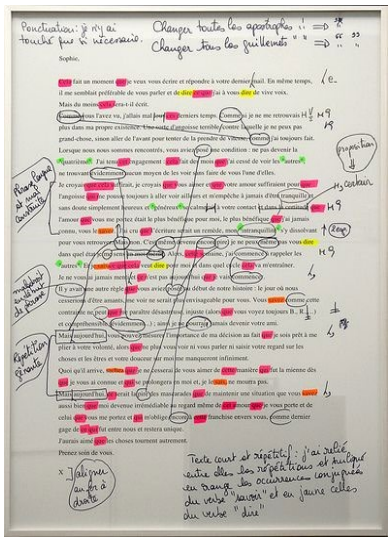
To analyze it, comment on it, dance it, sing it.

Dissect it. Exhaust it. Understand it for me.

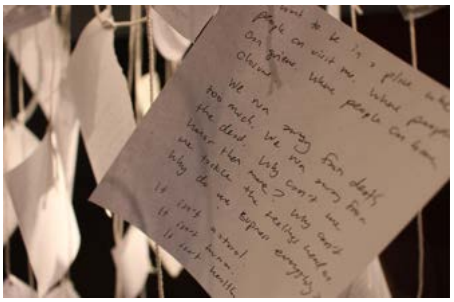
Answer for me.

It was a way of taking the time to break up.

A way of taking care of myself.[19]



In many ways, *What Remains* was as much of a space for healing for myself as it was a space for others to reflect on their grief journeys. I put my own vulnerability and experience on display while also creating privately meaningful pieces for myself. In the hanging paper sculpture, I exposed a wide variety of texts, including intellectual interpretations of the grief process, as well as my personal journal entries, in which I poured out my heart and soul in coming to terms with my own losses. This afforded viewers an opportunity to reflect upon their own losses through the lens of my vulnerability.[20]



Another place where this is evident in *What Remains* is in the three altars for my father, grandmother, and artistic mentor. While the middle altar acts as a throbbing heart on display, with the handwritten text of my grandmother's final words and the text of "I miss you," the other two altars that flank the middle are a collection of items that honor and represent my father (on the left) and my creative mentor (on the right) in seemingly abstract ways. The specific significance of each of these objects can only be fully understood by myself or close family

[19]Artist statement taken from Paula Cooper Gallery Press Release
https://www.paulacoopergallery.com/exhibitions/sophie-calle-take-care-of-yourself/press-release

[20]Selected texts and photographs included in the Appendix.

members. This is where I see an alignment of my work with the work of Tracy Emin, who is well-known for her autobiographical and confessional installations. In particular, her iconic works *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995*, and *My Bed* (1998) have similar qualities of exposing vulnerable personal experiences, while keeping the specificity of meaning somewhat obscured. *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995* simply displays the names of all of the individuals that Emin ever shared a bed with – platonically and sexually – with little or no explanation of the significance of each of these individuals, or further elaboration on each relationship, beyond the fact that at one point they shared a bed with Emin. *My Bed* exposes a private, intimate space to the public that represents a particularly painful moment in Emin's life. The bed, which resembles a crime scene, serves as the site of excess – a collage-like accumulation of a variety of seemingly disparate items, that when viewed together form the portrait of a woman, in despair, coming to terms with heartbreak. While one may not go as far as to call this work of assemblage art an *altar*, one could perhaps call it a memorial – to a specific personal period of desperation and depression.

Altars are characterized by excess and the accumulation of disparate items to create a cohesive whole. In her book Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women's Altars, Kay Turner writes:

> *The additive process results in a tendency toward excess, a creative layering of objects that simultaneously evokes many relationships, many meanings . . . Through these modes of layering, accumulation, condensation, and repetition, the aesthetic of relationship pushes towards integration. The altar is a place where union overrides distinction just as relationship overcomes separation.* (101, 103)

The altars I created for *What Remains* were also prone towards excess, with an accumulation of various tokens and insignia of memorialization. Rather than simply dedicating the entire exhibition to those whom I had personally lost, I chose to honor them directly within the space. I built these altars for three of my significant departed loved ones: my father, Konrad Oberhuber, my maternal grandmother, Ellen Josephine Phelan, and my adopted grandmother and artistic

mentor, Joyce Cutler-Shaw. These altars contain an excess of artifacts, mementos, and video projections that uniquely describe and honor my relationship with each individual. This emphasis on relationality is a foundational aesthetic of traditional altar-making. Turner writes:

> *A glance at her altar invites a woman to catalog the relationships represented there. . . . The accessibility of beloved images evokes the reality of beloved relationships. If the first aesthetic goal of an altar is to represent relationship, then the primary artistic move is to set potent images in relation to each other. Rose Wognum Fraces explains: 'Once you put an object in relation to another, it tells a story; it makes a different reality . . . . This is the beginning of all altars: to take this thing and put it in relation to that thing. . . always the relationship, the implicit relationship between things. It's the basis of the altar aesthetic. . . .'* (96)

My altars occupy distinctly separate spaces for each expression of relationality and loss. Each item on the altars has personal significance and represents a specific memory, an aspect of our relationship, or an element of the person's personality/life story. The altars also exist in conversation with each other. They are both metaphorically connected through the visual interaction and interplay of the disparate elements, and physically connected by the draping of sheer fabric across all three, and the space they collectively occupy in the room. On the backside of this triptych of altars, I built an altar to experiences of ephemerality and loss, further extending the dialogue between my personal story and stories of viewers. This altar plays with the abstraction of ephemerality through the visuals of shadows, banners fluttering in the wind, smoke rising to the sky, and people appearing and disappearing into a blank space. It sheds light on the intangible through metaphoric representation. Turner writes:

> *An altar makes visible that which is invisible and brings near that which is far away; it marks the potential for communication and exchange between different but necessarily connected worlds . . .* (7)

In my altars, I sought to establish a connection between the world of the living (present, here and now), and the world of memory, nostalgia, loss, and death. I also invited audience members to make connections between their worldview and experiences of loss, and my own, thereby building empathy and relationship.

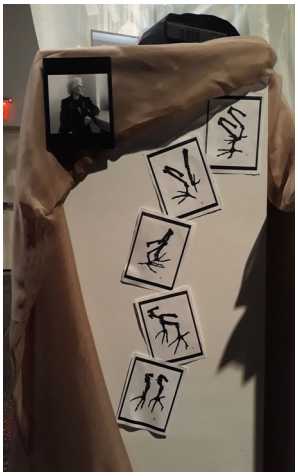
My father's altar, which is positioned on the left of the triptych, contains a photograph on a small wooden easel,[21] a black-and-white print photo of my father, three draped patterned ties, and a miniature paper cutout of a crane's silhouette positioned inside a wooden box, within which a video of pink ribbons fluttering in the wind is being projected. Atop the box is a stack of index cards with scribbled handwriting and a rolled patterned tie, and the front facade of the altar's podium is affixed with a collage of copies of handwritten pages of notes – some in English, some in German. Each item placed on this altar contains personal significance and a relational story. My father wrote incessantly – academic articles, philosophical musings, religious homilies, poems, etc. I did not curate the content of the notes that ultimately made their way into the exhibition, as I did not have time to sift through everything that was available. To me, it was more important that his handwriting was present on this altar. His handwriting is so distinctly his, and has very strong sentimental and memorial value to me. These writings placed in relation to each other provide a window into his mind, and the energy of his presence, conveyed through the shape and flow of his handwriting. His presence and energy are also represented by the silhouetted crane and meditative movement of the fluttering ribbons in the video projection. In the two years that we lived in Tokyo, Japan, we often went for strolls along the river. My father loved the peace, serenity, and grounded wisdom of the cranes that stood silently on the riverbanks. Since his death, I have occasionally seen a crane, and every time, I have a distinct sense that my father is present with me at that moment.

The middle altar, built for my grandmother, is covered by a draped multicolored silk scarf upon which rest a pair of large, round, magenta glasses, several tiny seashells, and a blank, white, unlined notebook, upon which is projected of a collection of phrases, handwritten in real time, interspersed with family photos and film clips. The front facade of the altar's podium has a string of four photographs of two figures' shadows. Each of these elements contains personal resonance

[21] Image: Two men standing in a gallery space – my father, Konrad Oberhuber, and a colleague. I am sitting on my father's shoulders and reaching up to touch a sign overhead.

as well. A few days after my grandmother died, we went for a walk on the beach near her house. As we were walking, I kept noticing beautiful shells and shell pieces on the sand. I picked them up as we walked and collected a small pile in my hand. Every time I saw one that interested me, I took it. Perhaps I was trying to hold onto something – to hold on to the moment, and not let it slip away. There was nothing significant about these shells – but I *had* to pick them up. I felt an overpowering impulse to keep them, save them, protect them, and eventually schlepp them all the way across the country to NYC. They became sacred mementoes, and symbols for my grandmother. The colorful handwoven, raw silk scarf that is draped on the podium was my Christmas gift to my grandmother two years before she died. She loved it dearly and wore it often. The scarf makes an appearance in the notebook projection as well – in my dancing for her memorial service, and later, in a photograph of my grandmother.

The altar for Joyce, on the right of the triptych, includes a small wooden easel, holding a tile of an anatomical print of the inside of the skull, a miniature pair of rounded gold glasses, two fragments of a thin tree branch, two miniature specimen bottles with animal bone fragments, a small metallic pendant of a hand, a layered stack of paper flashcards of individual characters from Joyce's *The Alphabet of Bones*, three cut seashells, and small box on a podium, in which a video collage of photographs and choreography is projected. The front facade of the altar's podium has a black-and-white photo of Joyce on the top right corner, and a cascading collage of *Alphabet of Bones* flashcards spelling the letters J-O-Y-C-E. Many of the items of Joyce's altar honor and allude to her artistic work and legacy. This altar is an homage to her artistic career, a celebration of her unique perspective and legacy, and a tribute to the significant impact she had on my development as an artist and thinker.



San Diego-based intermedia artist, Joyce Cutler-Shaw, frequently explored themes of mortality and death in her artistic work. In her nearly 50-year prolific international career, she

investigated these themes in a variety of media: drawings, paintings, sculpture, artist books, poetry, and public projects. Joyce[22] documented the sudden death of her father-in-law Eddy, and

the gradual decline and eventual death of his wife, Rose, in two consecutive artistic series, *The Sudden Death of Eddy,* and *The Slow Death of Rose*. These were part of a larger series exploring the fragility, strength, and multidimensionality of the human body, entitled *The Anatomy Lesson*. These series give the audience a rare window into the experience of dying, as well as the experience of watching a loved one die. *The Sudden Death of Eddy* is a series of photographs of Eddy's corpse, bringing the harsh reality and visceral embodiment of death to the forefront. This unapologetic confrontation of the physical decay of the body is typical of Joyce's work. As the first Artist-in-Residence at the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine, Joyce documented the structure and decay of skeletons, cadavers, and body parts, through drawings, sketches, photographs, artist books, and sculptural representations. *The Slow Death of Rose* documents the last several years of Rose's life as, in Joyce's words:

> *For five years I drew portraits of her from week to week, and year to year; more than one hundred multiple image drawings in pen and ink, which serialized her decline. From a vital 91-year-old still climbing hills, she transformed to a frail 93-year-old, to a 95-year-old, self-consumed, skeletal and immobile. Even as the last few liquid drops seeped intravenously through plastic tubes to sustain her in her hospital bed, with her eyes closed, in the float between waking and sleeping, she would suddenly become conscious and alert. She opened her eyes. She lifted her head. She clenched her fist. She shook her fist. "I'll put them all away before I go," she said. She gripped my hand in her bony hand tightly, and*

[22] I refer to Joyce Cutler-Shaw as "Joyce" because of my close personal relationship with her.

more tightly. "Life is sweet," she said. "The world is so beautiful, why would I want to leave? He's coming for me, but I don't want to go."[23]

Her sketches of Rose included handwritten notes and quotes from their conversations, encapsulating their unique relationship and their confrontation with mortality, life, and the preservation of personal histories.

In the last 10 years of her life, Joyce engaged with mortality and physical bodily decay on an even more intimate level, as she faced a progressive neurological disorder that led to her eventual death. Instead of denying her illness or avoiding it, she harnessed her experience and transformed it into a departure point for new creative projects. I had the great privilege of knowing this extraordinary artist personally, and I was deeply inspired by her unapologetic, raw, and poetic engagement with death. She was a lifelong friend, artistic mentor, and is arguably the reason that I decided to pursue this degree and artistic perspective.

Much of Joyce's aesthetic involves an expression of multiplicity through the layering of various elements, including written text, collage, and shadow. Many of these elements are present in my work as well, most potently represented in my altars. This aesthetic of collage can be defined as *femmage*. According to Turner:

> Femmage *(a play on 'collage' and 'assemblage') is women's artistic process of collecting and joining seemingly disparate elements into a functional whole. . . . Femmage utilizes the potential of fragmentation as Lucy Lippard defines it: 'Fragmentation need not connote explosion, disintegration. It is also a component of networks, stratification, the interweaving of many dissimilar threads, and de-emphasis on imposed meaning in favor of multiple interpretations. . . . Fragmentation pervades women's work in all the arts on many subtle levels.'* (98-100)

This aesthetic of fragmentation and the coalescing of disparate objects appears in the construction of my wind/paper mobile, in the "Tree of Remembrance," and in the altars. There is also an intersection and interaction between found objects and relics of personal value. I considered these aesthetic choices appropriate representations and conduits for the grief journey, as they speak to co-existing and contrasting feelings of chaos, disintegration, reconstruction and meaning-making that are part of the lived experience of loss. These elements are also potently present in my artistic *oeuvre* as a whole, and I align myself with artists who fall under the

[23]Retrieved from http://www.joycecutlershaw.com/projects/the-slow-death-of-rose/

umbrella of creating *femmage*.

The term *femmage* was originally coined by Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer in their "Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into what Women Saved and Assembled--FEMMAGE," in which they make the following statement:

> *We feel that several criteria determine whether a work can be called femmage. Not all of them appear in a single object. However, the presence of at least half of them should allow the work to be appreciated as femmage.*
>
> *1. It is a work by a woman.*
>
> *2. The activities of saving and collecting are important ingredients.*
>
> *3. Scraps are essential to the process and are recycled in the work.*
>
> *4. The theme has a woman-life context.*
>
> *5. The work has elements of covert imagery.*
>
> *6. The theme of the work addresses itself to an audience of intimates.*
>
> *7. It celebrates a private or public event.*
>
> *8. A diarist's point of view is reflected in the work.*
>
> *9. There is drawing and/or handwriting sewn in the work.*
>
> *10. It contains silhouetted images which are fixed on other material.*
>
> *11. Recognizable images appear in narrative sequence.*
>
> *12. Abstract forms create a pattern.*
>
> *13. The work contains photographs or other printed matter.*
>
> *14. The work has a functional as well as an aesthetic life.*

I find that *What Remains* fulfills all of the requirements of *femmage*, both in the construction of the entire space, and in minute details of individual elements.[24]

While most of the above discourse has elaborated on the various influences and artistic goals of individual elements of *What Remains*, I also wish to address the spatial and tonal construction of the installation as a whole. A significant inspiration for my conception and development of *What Remains* as an interactive space of subdivided rituals came from two grief-related immersive experiences that I attended in San Francisco in the spring of 2018. These were presented at Reimagine End of Life, an annual, week-long, interdisciplinary festival focused on death, grief, memorialization, celebration, and issues surrounding end-of-life. The first was

[24] See Appendix for detailed list of how *What Remains* fulfills the criteria of *femmage*.

Second Chance: Face Your Death, Live More Fully created by LavaSaga Immersive Experience Group, in which audience members were invited to imagine that they had died and were

transitioning into the afterlife. In this afterlife space, guided by death doulas, audience members were afforded the opportunity to reflect on the achievements and regrets of their lives, and how they would choose to live differently, if given a second chance. The conceit and goal of the project was that the facing of our mortality would naturally lead to a newfound drive and desire to live more fully in the present. Participating in this experience was extremely powerful for me on the personal level. But it was also an enlightening and inspiring experience for me as a fellow artist. Unlike other immersive theater performances, the participants did not have the opportunity to roam around freely or follow specific performers, but rather, were intentionally guided through the space in small groups of eight to ten people.

The makers of *Second Chance* expertly crafted a layering of entry points and engagement for the participants. This began well before the date of the experience, and continued long after.[25] In conjunction with ticket reservations, participants were asked to fill out a survey, reflecting on key elements and moments of their life.[26] From the outset, participants were primed to consider their own mortality and the impacts of their life experiences. Further, as part of the invitation to the event, participants were asked to wear all black and arrive at the venue 20 minutes prior to their entry time. While immersive theater makers often ask audience members to dress in a specific uniform, or prepare for particular circumstances in order to ensure the safety, cooperation, and understanding between performers and spectators, the requested actions for *Second Chance* did much more than that. These simple actions – reflecting on one's life, changing into an intentional uniform, carving out additional time – served as preparatory rituals for experiencing one's own death.

The layers of entry continued upon arrival to the venue, as participants were invited to sit and wait quietly in a cozy alcove of pillows, or interact with two tone-setting installations. One of these interactive spaces was a simple blank notebook of prompts, to which participants could add

[25]Towards the end of the experience, participants were invited to write letters to themselves, reflecting on how they would live their life more fully, after facing the prospect of their own death. These letters were sent to the participants several months after their attendance.

[26]This information was later used for personalized obituaries that were read to the participants during the event.

their own thoughts and experiences. The second was *What If You Could Say One Last Thing*, a woven web of rope and twine, with hanging plastic placards, created by Elysa Fenenbock. Beside the woven sculpture was a panel of text[27] that invited the participants to fill out and attach their own messages, answering one of the four prompts: "I need to hear you say . . . .," "One last thing . . . ," "I wish I knew . . . ," or "I feel your presence when . . . "

After approximately 15 minutes had passed, a death doula came out to meet the assembled group, and gently invited participants into the experience, by holding space for questions, and providing vague, but comforting descriptions of what lay ahead. After this conversation, we were led to a table of tea cups, and offered the "drink of courage," before being escorted into the curtained-off space, in which the primary experience took place. The journey continued in this fashion, with multiple layers of entry, and guides to lead the way, as we moved through several spaces and floors, and faced our mortality through multimedia modes of VR, music, dance, writing, and dialogue. This experience also employed the embodied engagement of the participants, by leading them physically from space to space. In my construction of *What Remains,* I sought to emulate many of these same techniques of layered preparation and cumulative engagement with the audience. This is, in part, where I found my inspiration of the guiding texts, the partitioned sub-sections, and the interactive elements of the installation.

At the same festival, I attended the *Grief and Love Project,* curated by Morgan Brown + Elisabeth Becker, in which participants were invited to engage with multiple grief-processing stations, including art making, writing, movement, meditation, and communal reflection. Created

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[27] "*To allow ourselves to love fully, truly, and deeply is to open ourselves to loss, sadness, and grief.*

This is being human. This is heartbreak. This is beauty.

The smell of a favorite meal, the sun on our skin, the touch of a loved one, the last glimpse of the moon as it rests for the night. These awe-filled experiences are often countered by awful experiences – the loss of a relationship, of a loved one, of childhood, self. In loss, a soundtrack repeats, If I could – hear her laugh, feel his kiss, be held, be felt and understood – just one more time.

WHAT IF YOU COULD SAY ***ONE LAST THING****?*

This woven portal connects us through messages of grief and hope. Stories, threaded together, make up the fabric of our beings and interconnectedness. You are invited to use the tags to write and send as many messages to as many people as you are moved by. Your yearnings, your candor, your tears, and your laughter . . . they are all welcome in this safe container.

As you place your messages into the portal, pay particular attention to the other cards – those that grab your attention or spark your inner light. These are messages meant for you to receive. It might look like love, anger, regret, goodbye, hello. Connecting us all."

in collaboration with a number of artists, therapists, and coaches from the San Francisco area, Brown + Becker crafted an "interactive maze inviting your heart to discover a wide array of meaningful and useful practices intended to heal grief and expand love." This "Choose Your Own Ritual" format offered participants the opportunity to consciously grieve, release, and connect. The goal of the experience was for participants to "leave feeling lighter with an understanding of how to creatively heal grief and expand love, and feeling a tangible sense of peace and gratitude."[28] In contrast with *Second Chance*, the intention, and thereby construction, of this space was more therapeutic in nature, rather than artistic/aesthetic. This was not an exhibition, installation, or immersive theatrical experience, but rather, a collection of activities and rituals in which participants could engage. Participants were welcomed at the entrance of the space with a map of the various alcoves, and an invitation to add their intentions of the day to a collective wall of writing. From this point, they could meander at will through the spaces, engaging communally (e.g., in a group movement ritual) or privately and individually (e.g., calling lost loved ones on a disconnected phone in the *Conversations I Wish I Had* booth). Before exiting the space, they were invited into a facilitated ritual of release and renewal to conclude their experience.

This space, while mostly therapeutic and not artistic, influenced my creative process in the crafting of *What Remains*. In particular, I was inspired by *Grief and Love Project*'s dual focus on the individual and collective grief processes, as well as its invitation for the participants to move freely through the space in the manner that most supported their individual processing. Once again, I observed that layers of entry and the activation of embodiment contributed to the depth of the participatory experience.

Another artistic experience that had a significant impact on my creative process was the site-specific, immersive musical event on The High Line in New York City: *The Mile-Long Opera: a biography of 7 o'clock*, co-created by architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro and composer David Lang, with words and lyrics by Anne Carson and Claudia Rankine. There were several key components of this performance that caught my attention and made their way into my creation of *What Remains*, including the use of spatialized sound, and the coexisting polarities of multiplicity and unity, intimacy and anonymity. This work, too, had layers of entry, and invited the audience to choose their own pace, as they moved through the space.

In my experience of *The Mile-Long Opera*, I was particularly captivated by the way that

[28]Descriptions from https://www.griefandlove.com/

sound was used as an architectural device, creating a sonic landscape, as multiple voices, melodies, and recited text resonated in all directions – before, behind, and below. Embodied movement was motivated both by the shifting intensity of the sonic experience, and by the looping quality of each subdivided space along The High Line. Echoes and repetitions ensured that no part of the story was left unheard. However, in order to experience the totality of meaning, one had to move steadily forward, and allow the accumulation of information to reveal the narrative, which, like threads in a tapestry, unfolded over time and space. Many voices and stories created one coherent whole. In the cacophony of single voices coming together to share the experience of being a New Yorker, one could find one's own place in the narrative whole. A perfect blend of abstract metaphor and specificity of narrative allowed the participant to become part of the story.

This use of sound to activate the physical space, encourage embodied engagement, open up an intimate interior dialogue, and deepen the emotional resonance of the experience, was inspirational in creating the soundscape of *What Remains*. After collaborating with composer/performer Sam Kaseta for over a year on a variety of creative projects, I knew that they would be the ideal partner for this work. Sharing both vulnerability and deep trust, we engaged in many dialogues about the form of the work and its theoretical and emotional underpinnings. The sound design and physical construction of the installation were created in tandem with one another – ensuring emotional cohesion in support of the various elements.

Multidisciplinary collaboration has always been a priority in my work. I find that the intersectionality of different artistic media creates a richer and more profound experience for the audience. Many of the works cited thus far have been examples of effective multimodal experiences, particularly with respect to sound design. Sound is a powerful force in its ability to evoke and invoke the deepest visceral emotions of human experience. It resonates at a subliminal level, changing us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. This is why, for centuries, sound baths have been used as a source for healing. A musical score, used effectively, can determine the viewer's emotional response to a scene in a film or theatrical production. Our visceral reactions to sounds and music are innate and powerful.

In considering the ways in which a specialized soundscape could underscore the emotional resonance of an installation, I studied the works of two notable sound installation

artists: Juliane Swartz and Janet Cardiff. I was particularly drawn to Swartz's permanent installation at Mass MoCA, *In Harmonicity, The Tonal Walkway* (2016), and Cardiff's *Her Long Black Hair* (2005). These two works have particular resonance for me because of their use of the human voice, intersections of melody and spoken text, and use of sound as a tool for specialized experience and participation. They activate the participant's listening ear and embodied

relationship to the space. Swartz's *In Harmonicity*, which is installed in one of the covered bridges connecting two buildings at Mass MoCA, consists of a 20-channel sound system of speakers, hidden between posts in various nooks and crannies along the walkway. The powerfully crafted 13-minute loop of intermingling voices that is played within, creates a visceral sense of presence and relationality, despite the minimal nature of the physical installation. One feels emotionally connected to each of the voices, and this seemingly simple wooden and metal walkway is transformed into an otherworldly space of human feelings. The intersection of spoken words and sung tones alternately creates harmony and discord, movement and stillness, depending upon one's physical location and pace.

Sam and I sought to create a similar spatial and tonal experience in the middle room of *What Remains*. On opposite sides of the space, a vocal minor chord and major chord resonate through the speakers, creating a unique auditory experience, depending upon one's location. A circular, revolving projection on the floor invites visitors to move around the space, in a physical embodiment of the grief journey. Sam and I constructed the overall installation space with the deliberate intention of allowing the sound to 'bleed' from room to room, while creating distinctive emotional qualities for each ritual space.

Similarly, Cardiff's *Her Long Black Hair* includes bleedthrough of the sounds of different environments and requires embodied participation on the part of the visitor. This 35-minute audio work takes the participant on a winding journey through Central Park, integrating sounds and images of real-time and real life with historical and fictional counterparts. Cardiff ephemerally accompanies visitors, as they are invited to co-create the experience with her. Her stream-of-consciousness thoughts, and invitations to pause and observe,

transform the viewer's physical surroundings and actions into an intimate dialogue with the past – encouraging reflections on history, loss, transformation, and wonder. While participants are guided along a specific path, they are also welcomed to explore their own thoughts, experiences, and current observations. The audio tracks have remained unchanged through the decades, but each experience of them is unique and crafted, in part, by the personal history, thought processes, and worldview of the participant. Sam and I sought to evoke similar sensations in the sonic landscape and overall construction of *What Remains*.

As I set out to create the installation, I sought to craft an immersive environment, in which individuals who had suffered losses could be offered the space and time to reflect on their own grief, experience empathy with others' grief, and feel safely held in a community of mourners. Informed and inspired by my personal losses and the aforementioned art works, I used visual, experiential, spatial, and sonic strategies to achieve my objective. Unfortunately, due to the installation's premature closure, I was unable to share this work with a large audience. However, the creative process itself has been profound for my own grief journey and development as an artist, and I know that the resulting work has a powerful transformative potential to transform. I feel compelled by inner necessity to continue my work as a grief activist, by creating spaces and experiences for others' journeys of reflection, resilience, restoration, and renewal.

Technical Essay

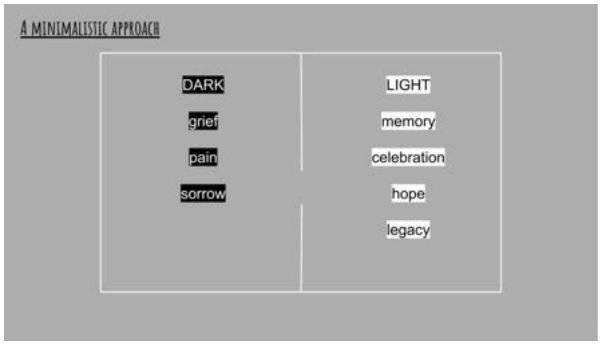
Prototyping, Development, and Space Acquisition for *What Remains*

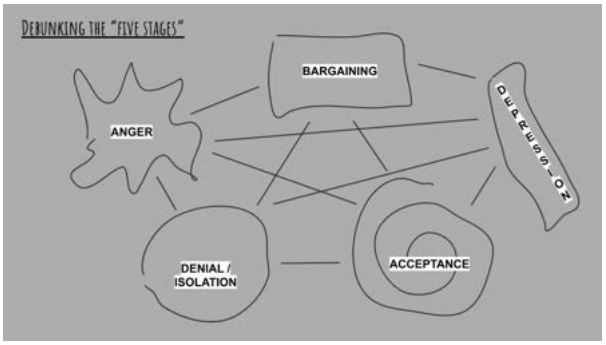
Although the creative and conceptual processes were in development for a much longer time, the practical implementation of *What Remains* began in September 2019. Through Gallatin networks I was made aware of NYU Production Lab's Creative Career Development Fellowship (CCDF), a prestigious one-semester-long program for a select number of NYU graduate students working in creative fields. After an extensive application and interview process, I was selected as one of 12 fellows in the 2019-2020 cohort. Each of us had to apply with a specific creative project in mind, and I applied with a proposal for my thesis installation. At the time, I described it as "a combination of an interactive gallery space and an immersive performance experience, focused on creating space for audience members to process their grief." During my time in the fellowship, I not only worked on honing in on the specificity of the installation components and overall purpose, but I also explored the ways in which this project could further my brand and career as an artist, post-graduation.

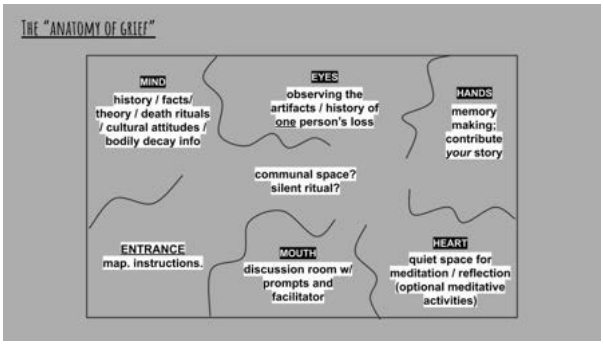
In the early stages of the implementation process of *What Remains*, my priority was on the overall atmosphere and structuring of the space, rather than the materiality of the individual objects. I was more interested in what the space and objects *did* rather than what they were made of, and my highest priority was their potential for interactivity. I discussed and developed iterative versions of the installation at the regular CCDF workshops, in one-on-one sessions with CCDF director Ro Reddick, and regular meetings with my advisor, Nina Katchadourian. In mid-November, Ro connected me to Chie Morita, creative strategist and co-founder of FORGE NYC, a boutique arts consulting firm that helps artists get to the next level with their work. In our monthly meetings, Chie and I explored a wide variety of strategies for creative ideation, and practical tools for bringing my installation to fruition.

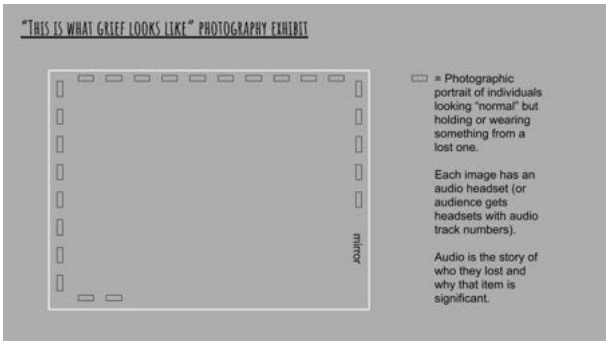
Improvisation and playful ideation have always been key elements in my process. I like to start with a lot of raw materials (visuals, music, video clips, writing excerpts, etc.), and then whittle down to the final product. In general, although I always have an end product in mind, I tend to be very process-oriented. My creative projects always take on a life of their own, and I honor this organic process. The many dialogues that arose in the CCDF workshops, and in conversation with my various mentors, led to the development of six iterations of the installation space.

This iterative process included the following five prototypes, before I arrived at the final version of the space that became *What Remains*. All of these prototypes were conceived for a hypothetical space (at the time, I had not yet booked a space for the show). First, I considered a minimalistic approach, in which the space would be divided in half – a dark space and a light space – representing grief, pain, and sorrow on the one side, and memory, celebration, hope, and legacy on the other. The second iteration was a space with five divisions, representing the commonly known Five Stages of Grief (Kübler-Ross model), with interconnecting pathways dispelling the notion of linearity in the stages). The third iteration, which I dubbed "The Anatomy of Grief," was a space loosely based on my experience of the *Grief and Love Project* at Reimagine in San Francisco. This version of the installation had five distinct areas, conceptually designated as body parts – the mind, the eyes, the hands, the heart, and the mouth, with a central communal space. The mind area would represent an intellectual investigation of death and grief, exploring cultural rituals, and theoretical frameworks. The "eyes would be a place for the observation of the artifacts and history of a specific loss. The "hands would be represented by a space in which the audience would be invited to create and contribute their own stories and artifacts. The 'heart' area would be a space for meditation and reflection; finally, the 'mouth' would be an area in which audience members would be invited to speak to a facilitator or each other about their grief and their experience of this ritual installation space. The fourth iteration of my proposed installation was an exhibition, entitled "This Is What Your Grief Looks Like." In this proposed photography show, the walls would be lined with images of bereaved individuals looking seemingly 'normal,' but holding an artifact that represented or came from a lost loved one. Each image would be connected to a pair of headphones with audio of



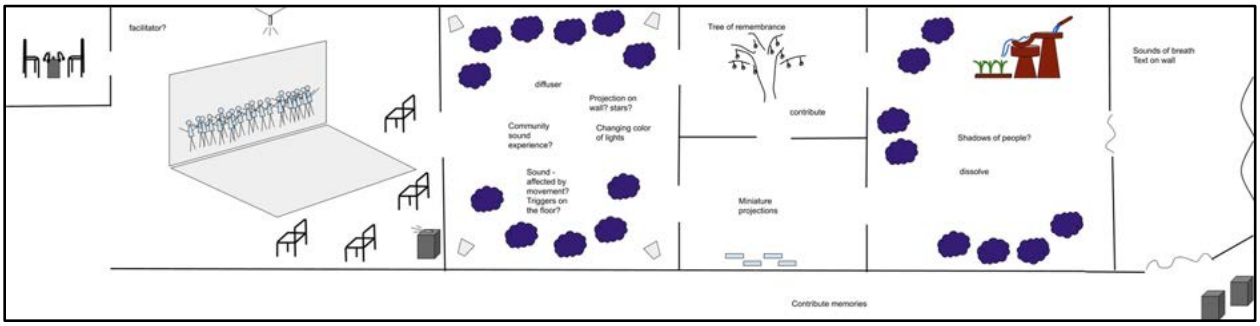






the individual speaking about the loved one that had died. The final panel in the room would be a mirror, in which the viewer would recognize the story of grief encapsulated within their own image. The fifth, and final prototype of the installation, was a meandering pathway through a number of miniature projection installations, inviting audience members to choose their own journey through a network of visual and auditory experiences of the grief process. All five of these iterations, although purely conceptual, brought me to the ultimate creation of *What Remains*. During this experimental phase, I explored a variety of potential locations for the installation through outlets such as Chasama, but I was unable to find one that was within my budget and available for the dates I had in mind (mid-February to early March).

By mid-December, I had not yet secured a space, and I was getting nervous about my timeline. I reached out to Gwynneth Malin, and asked about the possibility of getting Gallatin support for space acquisition. By early January, I had secured the Gallatin Gallery as the site for my exhibition, and I began the work of ideating an installation that would fit the space. On January 6th, I submitted an official proposal to Jen Birge and Keith Miller for my installation, entitled "Ritual Spaces for the Contemporary Mourner: An Interactive Installation."



This new iteration of the installation considered the long, narrow shape of the Gallatin Gallery, and divided the space into eight sub-spaces, including an entrance room and an exit hallway. The spaces were as follows:

An entry area with the sound of breath and text that reads:

Breathe

To pause.

To make space.

To collect your thoughts.

To remember.

This was followed by a room, entitled "Making Space, Letting Go," in which audience members would be invited to write on dissolvable paper and watch the text melt away into a running, multi-layered water sculpture. Two rooms on either side followed. The first contained the "The Tree of Remembrance," upon which audience members would be invited to attach the name of a loved one or a short memory. Over the course of time, the tree would transform from a barren winter tree, to one full of color and life – created by collective memories. The second room contained a miniature looping projection installation of ephemeral images, including silhouettes and shadows. The next space was dedicated to community interaction and reflection, with changeable lights and sounds.

A large-scale projection installation followed, entitled "We Are In This Together:" a video of a large group of people, standing, with arms open, facing the camera, and welcoming the audience into their embrace. Projected onto the floor was a video of a natural environment (perhaps the ocean tide coming in and receding). When audience members would stand in the space, they would cast their shadows onto the floor. In the last area, entitled "You are not alone, I am not alone." there would be two chairs facing each other, with a small table in between. On the table would be a set of headphones, conveying the following instructions:

> *Look into the eyes of the person sitting across from you. You may not even know this person's name or any part of their story, but this person has experienced loss, just as you have experienced a loss. Every person's story is different. Every person's grief journey is unique. But we are not alone. Allow yourself to be present with the person sitting across from you. See the loss in their eyes. And let them see yours. See the hope in their eyes. And let them see yours.*

On the edge of the installation would be a narrow hallway with lanterns, guiding the viewer. At the end of the hallway, there would be two podiums – one with a program booklet, and one with a guestbook for audience members to sign.

I created this prototype during winter break, while I was in California. At the time, I had limited knowledge of the gallery's dimensions, and no knowledge of NYU regulations pertaining

to accessibility, etc. When I returned to New York in January and finally walked into the gallery, I realized that my prototype was overly ambitious and unsuitable for the actual dimensions of the space. Further discussion with Jen Birge and Keith Miller confirmed this realization, and I began the process of re-working the prototype into more appropriate dimensions.

On January 24, I received confirmation from the Gallatin Galleries, that my installation was officially scheduled for March 12 -21, 2020, with three days set aside for installation (March 9 – 11). Now that I had the gallery officially secured, I knew that I would need an interim workspace, in which to develop and build the various elements of the installation. I searched the Listings Project newsletter for a reasonably priced art studio, and secured a sublet agreement for a small studio space in Bushwick for the months of February and March.

During the six weeks preceding the opening of *What Remains*, I went to the studio several days a week, to ideate, iterate, and create. I experimented with projection surfaces, video content, sculptural shapes, and materiality.[29]

Funding and Materials

At the conclusion of the Creative Career Design Fellowship in December, I was one of two fellows to receive an Outstanding Achievement Award, which included a $300 grant towards my project. In early February, I applied for the Gallatin Siff Performance Thesis Grant, and received an award of $1,000 to cover my thesis expenses. These two grants significantly offset the expenses for the installation, which came to $2345.77 in total (including the studio sublet).[30]
Additional materials either came from my home, were donated/borrowed, were in the pre-existing Gallatin Gallery inventory, or were provided by my sound designer and collaborator, Sam Kaseta. NYU Tisch Dance provided five miniature pico projectors, and six GoPros for time-lapse and video documentation. The additional two projectors, all of the cabling, and the majority of the sound equipment were provided by Gallatin Galleries. Sam provided additional speakers and a sound mixer.

[29]See Appendix for selected process notes and documentation materials.
[30]See Appendix for itemized expenses.

Load-in and Installation – A Whirlwind

Friday, March 6. It's 1am, so technically already Saturday. I am leaving the Gallatin building, post fashion show festivities. As I walk out, I pause to look through the glass doors of the gallery space. The walls have been put up. The equipment is on the floor ready for load-out and subsequent load-in. I whisper, *in just two days, you'll be mine*.

Sunday, March 8. I stay in the studio until past midnight, gathering materials, spraying down the tree with alcohol, finishing the videos of writing Grandma's sayings into the notebook.

Monday, March 9. I get into the Lyft car with all of my things. My heart is racing. I'm nervous, I'm excited, I'm terrified. The day is here! It's finally here! I arrive at Gallatin at 10am with an extra-large suitcase, a duffle bag, and my backpack, all filled to the brim with materials – fabric, string, wooden boxes of various sizes, power cords, HDMI cables, 7 mini projectors, the notebook, papers for the wind sculpture, and the top of the wind sculpture. I walk into the gallery, and everything seems to be in chaos – but perhaps an organized chaos? It isn't clear to me who is in charge or what the order of operations is going to be. Angie says it's best practice to load-in top-down. Ok, I say. In the back of my mind, I am calculating all of the things I still need to do – build the wind sculpture, print out the papers, attach the papers, finish editing the videos – all of the videos, what about the projectors? My mind is spinning.

All of the curtains go up, the projectors go up, we finish assembling the top of the wind sculpture and attach all of the strings, and then the wind sculpture goes up. I place the podiums. The walls get covered. Cari Ann stops by and gives me some advice. Rachel says no new events. Rachel says, "art isn't that important."[31] Rachel says she'll be in touch. Sam tells me we no longer have a car to transport the tree tomorrow. The car broke down. I text Owen. His car broke down too. In the gallery, the curtains go back down. Apparently, these are the wrong curtains. Hours of work lost. Lots of problems with the sound. The frame gets hung. I stay until 8pm, working on the overhead projection for the middle room.

There's an email from Andrew Hamilton. Classes are going remote.
Things are shifting.

[31]For clarity, this statement was made in the height of an intense decision-making process in light of COVID-19 policies, and I by no means fault Rachel for saying this to me.

No word from the Gallery.

An anxious night.

I hire Mel on TaskRabbit to help with transport. Am I wasting my time? My money?

Tuesday, March 10. Mel and I arrive at 10:15 with the tree and more supplies. I put the gallery staff to work to finish building it. The large podium arrives, and the benches. We're moving forward as planned. We focus and mask the overhead projectors. I start to arrange my altars. Papers get cut for the water bowl and the tree. The vinyl text arrives, and so does the sign. The lights get set and focused. The sound still doesn't work. Everyone leaves at 6pm. I stay till 1am – making Joyce's memorial video, adding finishing touches to the altars, finishing the fire video. End of day two, still so much to do, but excited, feeling like it'll come together, feeling inspired, feeling driven. I open up my "Process Notes" document and type:

<u>Lessons learned:</u>

- ➔ Rigging things takes a lot longer than you think
- ➔ You have to install top down
- ➔ Delegate! And have a plan for the team! (Don't try to be everything! You can't wear all the hats – even if you are capable of it!) – programs, website, etc. You need a production manager!
- ➔ Make a tech rider postmortem
- ➔ Eat!
- ➔ Drink!
- ➔ Sit!
- ➔ Be a human!
- ➔ Take breaks!
- ➔ Someone needs to take care of your collaborators too – Sam is struggling too.

Wednesday, March 11. I arrive at 10am as usual. We finish running power to everything. Adding the lights to the tree. Adding the fan. Hanging the gallery sign. Fixing the lighting and the focus of the projectors. I open up the box for the tripod. It's huge and cumbersome. I attach the pico projector to it and it takes over the whole space. It's hideous. Cari Ann stops by. She agrees – there needs to be another solution. What to do? How can we make the overhead work? Glen

comes up with a brilliant plan. We take apart the tripod and he tapes the singular arm to the back of the podium. The altars get completely rearranged. Chie and Greg visit and offer suggestions. I make some changes. I add the additional hanging fabric. Move the fire temple. Paper clips get added to the tree. Rachel and Theresa pop in – no new "official events" can be added, but the building will stay open, and as long as I keep things low key and to a small number of people, I can have small, casual events. The sound comes together and starts working. All the wires get taped down. The mini projectors are masked. I go to the Evolution store and pick up a few more bits and pieces for Joyce's altar. Some bones, a feather, an anatomical drawing of a brain. Sam copies the pages for my wind sculpture. I fetch the GoPros. The GoPros are placed. Around 6pm, the staff leaves. Sam and I stay a while. Fixing up finishing touches. Chie drops by with the water bowl. Chie leaves. Sam leaves. I stay.

The night that never ends . . .

I work for hours on the notebook video – piecing it together, rotating it, getting the dimensions exactly right. I keep exporting a snippet to get it right. A process of trial and error. Same process for the overhead projection. I drape the fabric on the large podium. I charge the batteries for the GoPros. I write the text for the different spaces. I build the table for the tree, using the black stool and the catering tray, held together by gaff tape. Everything is held together by gaff tape. I cut some fabric and drape it on the newly constructed table. I add the string. I come back to the wind sculpture over and over again through the process. My sleep deprivation starts to kick in. I get a little dizzy on the ladder. I keep thinking the GoPro on the tripod is a person. Eventually, I finish the wind sculpture. I hear the janitors in the lobby. I don't emerge. Am I allowed to still be here? What if I get locked out?

I go through my list.

Papa video? Check.

Joyce video? Check.

Grandma video? Check.

Overhead video? Still not quite right.

Fire video? Check.

Snow drive ceiling projection video? Check.

Tree and water podiums? Check.

Wind sculpture? Check.

Duo video for back of altars? Not even started.

Text for the space? Still need to print out and place.

Thursday, March 12. It's 7am and I am still in the gallery video editing when the lights suddenly go out. I plug in the tree lights and increase the brightness on my computer screen. But then someone walks in. It's Hassan, the security guard.

"What are you doing here so early?"

"Early? Oh. No, more like late. I never left . . ."

"You never left?!?"

"No, I had so much work to do . . ."

"Do you need breakfast?"

"Um. Maybe? I honestly don't know."

"I'm getting you breakfast. Would you eat an egg sandwich and some coffee?"

"That's so sweet of you to offer! Yes. Thank you."

He leaves. I continue working. And then, for the first time in nearly 8 hours, I emerge from the gallery space. I fill up the water bowl with water and splash some water on my face. I look at myself in the mirror – I'm almost a ghost at this point.

When I returned to the table in the gallery, I find an egg sandwich and coffee, as promised. I take one bite and one sip, and I start to feel the life returning back to my body. I keep video editing.

I'm in the middle of editing the duo video when the fire alarm goes off. Time to exit the building. I go to Staples, in the cold. I buy another SD card for the GoPros, black pens for the water bowl, blue pens for the tree, and a guestbook for the gallery.

I return to Gallatin, head upstairs and print out the text for the various rooms, but the printer isn't doing it right. Or is it me? I don't know anymore. At this point, I've been in the Gallatin building for nearly 23 hours straight.

Angie arrives at 9am. We're supposed to open at 10am. I run around the space adding finishing touches – pinning the text up on the drapes, turning on all of the equipment, adjusting

the placement of items. Angie adds safety tape around objects and clears out all of the installation equipment (ladders, toolboxes, etc.). By 10:30am, the gallery doors are officially open.

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As is performatively demonstrated in the above writing, the installation period for *What Remains* was a stressful and fast-paced experience for me. While I had created multimedia artistic projects prior to this show, I had never created an installation of this scale and complexity. Every aspect of the experience was new for me, and I learned a tremendous amount during the whole process. First and foremost, I learned that I needed to think in a much more detailed manner about the installation of the various components. When I arrived on Monday morning, even though I had a general map of the layout of the space, I had not considered all of the points which would require power or rigging. Thankfully, the Gallatin Gallery team was able to expertly guide me with these technical logistics.

Participation and Feedback

My advisor, Nina Katchadourian, arrived for a walk-through of the space at 12 p.m. on the day of the show's opening, March 12, 2020. After walking through the space on her own, in order to properly experience it as it was intended, we walked through it together, and I recorded our conversation. We discussed the excess and decorative quality of the altars, the emotional potency and intimacy of the notebook projection, and the overall effects and affects of the installation.

My video art mentor and thesis panelist, Cari Ann Shim Sham, also attended on that day. However, she went through the space without my knowledge, and simply left a note for me in the gallery book. We had a chance to discuss the exhibition later that week, in our last in-person class of the semester, in which she conveyed to me how deeply moved she was by the installation and how she saw it as a necessary contribution to our contemporary culture.

Unfortunately, my third thesis panelist, Maria José Contreras Lorenzini, was unable to attend in person, as she was not in New York at the time. However, I sent her the archival video documentation of the exhibition, and she responded with insightful and affirming feedback.[32]

[32]See Appendix for full text.
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De-installation and Documentation

Although *What Remains* was scheduled to run for nine days (March 12-21), it was open to the public for only one day. At 10:30 p.m. on the evening of Thursday, March 12, I received the following email:

> *Beatrice-*
>
> *I've been informed that due to directives from University Administration on limiting any gatherings of people in university spaces, the Gallatin Galleries will be closed to the public until normal business resumes.*
>
> *This also includes all posted business hours for the Galleries Monday-Saturday.*
>
> *I'm so sorry to be the bearer of this news. When I left tonight just before 9:30pm, I confirmed everything was off, and everything should remain off until regular business hours resume.*
>
> *Please let me know if you have any further questions.*
>
> *Thanks-*
> *Jen*

Not yet fully aware of the magnitude of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the following few days were marked by a hopeful exchange of emails discussing possibilities for extending the run of the exhibition, and re-opening for limited audiences. However, the tide quickly shifted, as it became clear that a citywide shut down would be in effect for quite some time. We scheduled the de-installation for March 18, 2020, and Jen generously offered to assist with a thorough documentation of the space, before taking everything down. In preparation, I made a list of all of the angles and vantage points I wanted to capture for archival purposes, including technical and experiential walkthroughs of the space. During the documentation process, in order to simulate a comprehensive experience of the exhibition, I acted as a surrogate audience member. I also captured details of each individual element of the installation, including a brief performative improvisation with the wind mobile.[33]

[33]See Appendix for video links to full archival documentation, technical walkthrough, and improvisation footage.

Post-mortem: Mourning the Unachieved and Looking to the Future

There were things that I intended to do in the context of *What Remains* that never came to fruition because of its premature closure, resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

I had planned to have an opening and a closing reception (*vernissage* and *finissage*), with informal artist talks and Q&A sessions. I also planned to stage periodic performances in the space during the course of the exhibition. The sound and movement performances (solos, alternating with duos by Sam Kaseta and myself) were intended to activate the space and engage the audience in communal interaction.

I am considering ways in which *What Remains* can continue to have a life after death. It is very unlikely that I will ever be able to mount the exhibition exactly as it was. The Gallatin Gallery will not be an operational gallery for quite some time, as the space is being converted into an alternate classroom space for hybrid learning during the pandemic, and it is unlikely that I will ever have access again to as many projectors and cabling as I was privileged to obtain for this show, courtesy of NYU Tisch Dance. However, I do hope to create an iterative version of this original installation one day, when the public is permitted to assemble collectively again. In the meantime, I am considering the possible digital forms[34] that *What Remains* can take, including AR, VR, and interactive web design. I am also thinking about how I can use some of the shapes and forms of *What Remains* to create new works that set out to achieve the same goals. In view of the lasting effects of the pandemic, and the precautionary health measures that need to be taken for any activities, I am considering creating a small solo experience, using a few elements of the original installation.

[34]Beyond the archival video footage.

Conclusion

My goals as artist and scholar have been: to expose the myriad of issues associated with the contemporary U.S./American engagement of death and grief, to acknowledge the nuances and complexity of these experiences, and to provide alternative strategies for healthy processing, facilitating physical, psychological, mental, emotional, and spiritual restoration. In this time of collective loss, I believe it is imperative, now more than ever, to create intentional spaces for grief processing, and I intend to continue to forge a path forward as a "grief activist" through my research and creative work.

Epilogue: Grief in a Time of Pandemic

2020 is a crucial turning point for contemporary society, a time in which our notions of grief, mourning, healing, and holistic death practices will be transformed through the processing of collective grief. While I already felt impassioned about the importance of creating space for embodied rituals and a holistic approach to death and grief, my commitment has only been made stronger by the current global crisis. I feel an even greater urgency to encourage and facilitate open dialogues, and to create art for the purposes of healing and community connection.

In the last seven months, as the pandemic has ravaged this country and the world, I have been observing a significant shift in the way that people are engaging with the topics of death, grief, and mourning. At an interpersonal and community level, it seems that people are much more open to talk about the reality of mortality, the pains and confusion of grief, and the importance of embodied rituals of mourning. Each day, as a person goes out into the world, they must confront death head-on. The safety protocols, procedures, and precautions for COVID-19 are a constant reminder of our impermanence. A microscopic entity can destroy the human body in a matter of days, and while this has always been true, the heightened risk of exposure to a lethal virus has shocked our systems into acknowledging the reality of our mortality.

Statistically speaking, considering the sheer magnitude of deaths that have occurred to-date, it is likely that most people, if not directly connected, are only a few degrees removed from a personal connection to someone who has died from COVID. But even those who have not experienced a COVID death in their close circle are experiencing grief during this time – grief of the loss of employment, income, time spent with distant or elderly relatives, in-person interactions, significant life transitions (graduations, weddings, birthdays, etc.), live entertainment, the possibility of travel, a sense of certainty in the future, a feeling of safety and comfort – the list goes on and on. While we are certainly not all in the same boat (nor do we all have access to the same kinds of boats), we are all facing the same storm on the raging seas. The storm never seems to let up – waves of death, violence, injustice, separation, despair, and loss continue to crash upon the shores, day in and day out. In my circles of contacts, I have noticed that people are more prone to check in on each other, to ask how others are coping, to listen to the stories of personal struggles – stories of grief – and commiserate with one another. In this moment of collective trauma and grief, vulnerability and authenticity come to the fore, and there is a deeper understanding of the ongoing nature of grief. Even though we have lived through

seven months of this experience, the processing of loss, the wrestling with uncertainty, and the reintegration and restoration of personal identity and purpose are constantly shifting.

Furthermore, there is a heightened understanding of the significance of the absence of embodied mourning rituals. Many people have not been able to be with loved ones during this time, and even more poignantly, they have not been able to accompany loved ones across the threshold of death. They have not been able to say their goodbyes, or gather with family members and friends to mourn and celebrate the lives that have been lost. This increased isolation and marginalization of mourning has opened up a new dialogue – how do we mourn when we cannot come together? What is the purpose of mourning rituals in the first place? What benefit do they serve? How can we find new ways to honor the lives that have been lost and acknowledge the deep sorrows of grief? These are the kinds of questions that are being asked. Necessity has required a greater openness to the innovation of new rituals and the discussion of cultural norms around grief and mourning. I believe that this nation, and perhaps even the whole world, is at a threshold of a new relationship to death and grief.

However, accompanying new levels of empathy, compassion, understanding, and reflection, there has also been a significant shift in the opposite direction. On the national and global levels, death has become a dehumanized, abstract, statistical and political entity. While death has always been used for political power, it is more potent in this time of pandemic. Some deaths have been politicized as calls to action and reform, while others have been used to gain political traction, as can be seen in this election year. The handling of COVID-19 protocol in relation to the hundreds of thousands of deaths that are occurring nationwide has been fraught with political acrimony. The notion of 'flattening the curve" not only fails to acknowledges the human lives that have been extinguished, but reduces the deaths to a mere statistic. This further desensitizes the public, and ultimately is an act of denial.

Yet, being in denial does not mean that one goes unaffected. This is a time of deep collective trauma, and whether we acknowledge it or not, it is impacting our ability to live compassionately and authentically in the world. While the pandemic will eventually come to an end, the longer-term effects will last for years to come. The phrase, 'a return to normalcy,' is often used to describe what comes next. While it is human nature to adapt and to create a sense of 'normalcy' in any ongoing situation, I do not believe that we can 'return' to the way things were before the pandemic started. This nation has been significantly impacted economically, politically, and culturally. An unprecedented surge in the use of technology to connect across the

nation and the world (*i.a.* interpersonally, artistically, in business) will undoubtedly remain a new standard of communication, even after unrestricted in-person interaction becomes possible again. But the most significant global shift is a collective trauma that will require attention and processing. Like the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers, the 2020 pandemic will transform the political, spiritual, and cultural landscape of the United States and the world for generations to come.

On a personal level, this pandemic has been a double-edged sword for me. On the one hand, it has ignited an even deeper passion for my field of research, and opened up a myriad of opportunities for connection with likeminded artists and healers around the world. On the other hand, I have had to face my own grief in a way that I never expected. I have become more acutely aware of my own repressed trauma, and I have been forced to make space to confront my deeply buried sorrows. The pandemic has revealed to me what I cherish most in life, as well as my personal survival mechanisms and habits in times of crisis.

I am an empath and energetic sponge, and these times of heightened anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and despair have weighed down my soul. My heart bleeds for the suffering of those around me, for the injustice and violence, for the disintegration of compassion. But I am also heartened to see the surge of hope, gentleness, and support that has arisen in these times. In addition to absorbing the heaviness of this moment, I have also had to mourn significant moments in my own life, including the premature closing of my exhibition, and the cancellation of graduation. I, along with the whole class of 2020, have had to face a future of limited access and heightened uncertainty. Simultaneously, this experience has reopened old wounds.

This autumn has been defined by a return to my hometown to help organize and finalize my grandmother's estate. Only a month ago, I set foot into my grandmother's house for the first time since I lay beside her on her deathbed in January, 2019. Over the course of the past weeks, as I have re-entered her space, held her treasures, and archived her life, I have been engulfed by waves of grief that have shaken me to my core. This archeological excavation of generations of family history uncovered layers of memories from my own childhood, and reopened the wounds of my heart. These experiences have led me to reflect further on my own grief journey, and contemplate the ways in which a person's legacy and memory persist in material form after death. Objects, letters, and mementos are imbued with a person's essence, and become a physical representation of a life lived. I find myself clinging to some of my grandmother's possessions, in a futile effort to restore her to life. On one visit to my grandmother's house, as I was organizing her

clothes, tears welled up in my eyes: “I just want her back. I just want her back.”

The grief journey is unpredictable, ongoing, and a lifelong endeavor to make sense of the fundamental reality of our impermanence. It requires gentleness, compassion, vulnerability, and time to integrate our losses into our identity. Most importantly, it requires community, embodied rituals, and a safe space. Recovery is not linear, healing is not uniform, and growth is not predictable. The road to rehabilitation and restoration will be long and circuitous, but if we acknowledge the magnitude of deaths, honor the lives that were lived, face our emotions authentically, and nurture empathy and hope in our hearts, we will not only survive this pandemic, but emerge from it with a renewed sense of purpose and appreciation for life itself.

October 18, 2020
La Mesa, California

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Appendix / Portfolio

Table of Contents:

Full Walkthrough Description of *What Remains*

When you approach the space, the first text you encounter is:

What Remains

Come in and rest awhile.
This is your journey.
Take the time that you need.

Your grief is welcomed here.

Unburden yourself of the weight of the world.
Slow down and stay awhile.

This place is for you.

You walk through the doorway. This space you have entered into is distinctly separate and sacred from the outside world. The transparent doors and the windows in the gallery are covered. Ahead of you is a black drape. Your view of the room is obscured by the drape, and you faintly hear the rising and falling of the sound of breath and vocal harmonies. You feel as though you are outside of time, separated from the outside world. There is nothing that can distract you or draw you away. This space is protected, private, not porous.

You approach the black drape that divides the room and obscures what lies ahead. Hung on this drape is the following text:

The world is noisy and expects many
things from you.

But this is a space that expects nothing.

This is a space of love.
A space of respite.
A space to remember.

This is a space to cry.
A space to be silent.
A space to connect.
A space to be still.

The journey is gradual, and progressive, and allows for your own timing and experience of it. It is linearly laid out, but at every junction, you have the choice to go left or right, to stay longer with one item or move on to the next, to interact with the elements or simply observe, to sit or to stand and move. Even the fabric on the walls are a gradual progression, from darker, soothing tones (black, navy blue, light blue) to bright, vibrant colors (yellow, maroon). The lighting of the space is progressive as well – you move from darker toned rooms into the light and color of the

memorial space at the end.

You are facing the first curtain, and if you turn left, which is the slightly more lit, and intended pathway, the next thing you encounter is the large podium. The podium is draped with cloth, with a wooden bowl filled with water, a stick to stir the water, and a fanned out display of little pieces of papers and pens.

(If you turn right, you may notice the closet space, but for now, we will assume the turn to the left, and address the closet at the end of the journey.)

On the water bowl, you find this text, divided into three parts:

Breathe
To pause.
To make space. To remember.

Our breath is our sign of life.
To collect your thoughts.
Let us breathe life into this place.
Let us breathe.
To make space for the experience at hand.
To let go of the hustle and bustle of the world.

Release what you need.
Allow it to dissolve.

The podium is breathing with you. The sound of slow breaths fills your ears and you breathe with it. From this vantage point, you can start to hear the vocal tones of the spaces ahead of you. But the breath here grounds you, and you stay awhile.

In front of you is an array of small blank papers and some pens. “Release what you need. Allow it to dissolve.” You take a pen and write something on the paper. You place it into the bowl of water. And like magic, the ink separates from the paper, and it all begins to dissolve. You take the stick and stir. It dissolves into nothingness, joining the remnants of all of the other papers dissolved before yours. You breathe deeply.

When you feel ready, you walk around the second dividing curtain, into the next space. A chord of voices (created by the layering of one voice) resonates in your ears. As you move through the space, you notice that the chord changes depending on where you stand. On one side it is more minor, on the other it is more major. On the floor, there is a video projection, moving circularly. It cycles through a few different modes.

In the center, there is a kaleidoscopic warm-toned octahedron. It draws you in. Around the edge a white, translucent circle is drawn around the octahedron. It turns for a while, and then changes into text.

The layer of text reads:

If you are feeling sadness in this moment, walk with it. Let your body do the talking.
You are not alone in this experience. Your grief is welcome here.

You follow its circular pathway. Perhaps you sit on one of the benches in the room and simply watch from afar while listening to the chord.

When you are ready to move on, you look slightly beyond the dividing curtain and notice a small wooden temple built from a stack of boxes. There is a crackling bonfire projected onto it. You squat down to watch the fire shift into sparks and listen to the sound of the crackling fire. The video shifts to a moving texture – a patterned gate, perhaps? It causes the temple to appear as though it is moving. It creates a sense of disease, instability, disorientation. When it cycles back to the fire, there is a calming effect. Although even this fire reveals that the seemingly stable, steady, secure object is actually in crisis – it's burning!

You stand up and leave the burning temple to approach a collection of altars. From this vantage point you can only see three podiums, all draped in various fabrics and each with its own miniature altar display. On the middle altar there is a blank notebook open to its central pages. Along the bottom edge of the notebook is a row of broken seashells of various sizes. On the top right corner of the notebook are a pair of rounded magenta glasses. Along the front of the podium is a series of small photos of shadow figures stitched together and hanging down. Projected on the notebook is a video of hands writing a series of messages. A date is written, then the words "she said," followed by a series of sayings. At the end of writing the sayings, the hand returns to the top of the page and draws an arrow underneath the date and writes "5 days before she died" or "3 days before she died," etc. The hand is to scale, and sometimes rests on the blank side of the notebook. You place your hand on top – there is a comfort to this gesture.

Flanking the notebook are two other altars. On the right-hand side, the front of the podium is adorned with a black and white photograph of an older woman wearing a bone necklace – it is the front of a memorial service program. And there are five bone calligraphy symbols / flashcards descending down the podium. When you look carefully, you see that each has a small letter in the corner. The symbols spell J-O-Y-C-E. On the top of the podium is a small projector projecting onto a little wooden box. The video is of a dance that gets overlaid with the same symbols and with photographs. In front of the wooden box there are three spiral seashells. To the left of the box is a cream-toned tile with an anatomical drawing of a brain, resting on a miniature easel. Next to it are two tiny display bottles with miniature bones, and in front of them are two miniature sticks that resemble the bone calligraphy in shape. In front of all of this is a scattered stack of more calligraphy flashcards.

On the altar/podium on the far-left side, three patterned ties drape over a small projector that projects a video into a deep wooden box. The video is of pink and orange ribbons/banners swaying and rustling in a gentle wind. Between the projector and the back surface of the wooden box, there is a small silhouette cut out of a crane. It casts a shadow onto the back wall – appearing as though it is standing amidst the ribbons. On the sides of the box there are two photographs. One photo is on a miniature easel and is of a man with bushy hair carrying a small girl with curly blond hair on his shoulders. On the other side of the box is a black and white headshot of the same man – it is printed on a sturdy paper (another memorial service program). On top of the box there is a fanned-out stack of notecards with scrawled handwriting on them. The side of the altar

podium is covered by papers of various sizes with the same handwriting – art historical notes, spiritual musings, etc…

You glance once more at the notebook before you walk around the altars. The first thing you see as you get to the other side is a large wind sculpture mobile made of twine strings of various lengths, to which papers of various sizes are attached – some ripped and torn, some neatly cut. It rustles in a slight breeze. You approach the mobile and look at it more closely. The papers are handwritten notes, pages from a personal journal, photocopied pages out of textbooks, poems, legal documents, small shadow photographs – all relating to the subjects of death and grief. It is a tangled, fluttering mess of emotions, intellectual musings, jargon – a revealing of the *process*. You circle the mobile, pulling out different bits and pieces and reading them – trying to make coherent sense out of an incoherent explosion of ideas.

Through the tangled mess of papers, your eye catches the outline of a tree, leaning against the wall. You approach it. It is in fact a tree – but not a naturally occurring one. It is a bunch of branches cobbled together, precariously held by string and wire. On the branches golden paper clips hang from strings of various lengths. The same string/twine that the wind mobile of papers is made out of.

Next to the tree, there is a small table. Above the table, there is text on the wall. It reads:

Together we can build something.

Together our memories and experiences
create something new.

This is a place to honor your losses.

You are not alone in this experience.
Someone else here has felt the same way as you.
We don't need words to connect.
We just need to be physically present with each other.

Together we share
a memory. an experience. a memento. a token.

You write the name of a loved one or a memory or draw a picture on one or more of the little papers provided, and attach them to the tree via the hanging paper clips. You stand back and look at your addition. You look at the others on the tree – memories left behind by people who were in the space before you. Remnants of their story, their grief.

After a moment, you turn around to walk back through the space and you notice two additional video projection pieces on the backside of the altars. There is a short wooden stand with two shelves, draped in bright yellow cloth. On the bottom shelf is a small wooden treasure box filled with an array of black and white family photographs. On the top shelf is a small projector facing up. You look up, and hanging from the ceiling is a small frame with canvas fabric on it. A video of a black and white sketched/comic-looking drive through trees and snow is projected onto it. The projection spills up onto the ceiling, and you watch the shadow of the frame move in the

landscape.

Next to this is another podium/altar. It is connected to the backside of the three altars. On this altar are two small wooden boxes standing next to each other. Inside the boxes are two videos that run simultaneously. The videos are of shadows on a pavement, people appearing and disappearing into a space, smoke rising into the air – ephemera. You watch this for a few moments before walking around the altars, glancing briefly at the notebook again, and walking through the spaces towards the entrance/exit of the gallery.

Before you exit the gallery, you notice the closet space. On the curtain of the entrance of the closet space, a text is hung:

This is my story.
This is my grief.

I welcome you into my space of
reflection and remembrance.

Stay awhile.
This place is for you.
Take the time that you need.

Your grief is welcomed here too.

There is a pair of headphones hanging on the wall attached to an mp3 player. You put the headphones on, press play on the mp3 player and enter the space. It is a dark space with a bench. In the corner of the room there is a projection of a video of a flickering candle. It is calming. Through the headphones you hear the story of my process and the reconstruction of the story of my father's illness and death (full text below).

After listening to the full 20-minute audio, you sit in the closet a little longer and watch the candle in silence. You then exit, replace the headphones on the hooks, breathe with the breath audio from the first podium (perhaps you release one more thing into the bowl of water), and then exit the space, returning back to the hustle and bustle of the world.

Process Documentation / Notes

2/3
What is it about shadows, silhouettes, reflections, the fluttering of things in the wind – that have always captivated me?

The ephemera. The intangible ways that we exist. The intangible ways that we show our being, our presence.

2/5
Why do I resist documentation? Why do I resist the creation?
I keep it all at arm's length

Wanting to create a space – an impossible, lofty space – a space to heal
Wanting to replicate an experience that I had (Grief & Love Project)
And yet, knowing that that is not what I want to do
Avoiding my personal story
Why? Because it feels selfish?
I'm not allowed to make space for *my* grief – only make space for others'

Even the creation of the first version of the space was a push – I was so attached to the ideas – so vulnerable – not wanting any criticism – so married to what it should be. But once time had actually passed and I was able to take in all that people had said to me / how they had reacted – I realized – it was flimsy, watery, not at all what I wanted to make, and not at all powerful or effective in doing what I wanted to do.

But there was a reason those ideas came to me. Now I must examine the why of those ideas. Find new ways to let them live. What, for instance, is the symbolism of the water feature?

Testing –
How do images change through the light of projection
How are colors changed
What does it mean to increase or decrease scale
How can different projection surfaces change the quality of an image
The lighting/color of an image
The quality/essence/texture
How can different combinations of objects distort an image
Change the shape
What does light/illumination do to different materials
What reflects

2/6
Today I ripped up pants to get the fabric from the inner linings. These I ripped further to create a banner. The violence of cutting and ripping. Exposing the messiness, the insides. Who wore these pants? What story do they tell? What history? What person inhabited them? And now, merely a torn, fragmented, fraying remnant remains. It flutters in the wind – revealing its frayed edges. The

brokenness. The "mistakes." Seams meant to hold it together are rendered useless. Merely ghosts of a past of being put together, unified, fulfilling its purpose.

Embers of a bonfire, puffs of smoke from the underground. Things that float away. Disappearing acts. Permanently captured. Burning the unburnable.

2/9
Today I made a tree. I reconstructed a tree from the broken off branches. The dead. The exiled. Bound back together to be a new entity. A place for memory. Reclaiming that which is lost. That which is dead. That which is forgotten.

I think my show is going to be called "What Remains" and it's going to be about the traces left behind by people and by nature. Traces of a life lived.

Also, I'm putting things back together again that have been broken (the tree) and revealing the places that it is bound together by wire or string. The way we have to put the pieces back together after a loss. How do the traces left behind get transformed into something new? A memory. The integration of the lost into the living. A life lived after death, after loss. The molecules never leave the earth, they simply transform.

Peering through the transparent. Revealing that which is hidden. Uncovering.

2/10
I think I have come to the point where I am tired of experimenting. I am ready to start making the final work. One step in that direction was creating a flyer for the show.

2/22
The struggle between distance and intimacy
Although I've resisted greatly, it is becoming an autoethnographic pursuit of archival research and emotional archeology

2/28
How can I not see it everywhere?
Every breath I breathe, every shadow, every glimmer, every interaction, every reflection, every smell, every movement – they are all about missing you, about losing you, about trying to desperately hold on. To hold on to something that I can never keep. Something I can never have again. I am trying to hold on so desperately, so tightly. Vigorously archiving, recording, hoarding. But it's no use. I'll never have you back. I'll never be able to keep what I've tried to capture. Like sand through my fingers, ever slipping away. This constant magnetic push and pull trying to hold on ever intimately but also pushing away as far as possible. Every part of this process, this experience, has been this tug of war. Every time I get close to the material, to the emotions, to the experience, I distance myself even more. So how on earth can I communicate? It's impossible for me to see anything outside of this. Everything is about it and distanced from it, and I have no eyes for the in-between. I cannot see with the eyes that stay present with the pain. I cannot see with the eyes that have never experienced loss. I cannot help but be magnetically, powerfully, drawn to this work – I cannot escape. I am a prisoner of my masochism and grief. I want so badly to find healing for others. But maybe I'm the one who needs to heal first.

What Remains as *Femmage*

Criteria for *Femmage:*	**What Remains fulfills the criteria in the following ways:**
1. It is a work by a woman.	1. I identify as a woman.
2. The activities of saving and collecting are important ingredients.	2. Many of the items in the installation were collected tokens.
3. Scraps are essential to the process and are recycled in the work.	3. The branches of the "Tree of Remembrance," much of the fabric, and a podium were constructed from discarded found items or recycled donations (including a wooden catering tray discarded the evening before the show opened!).
4. The theme has a woman-life context.	4. Insofar as many of the narrative components of the installation expose my loss experience, the theme is woman-life centered.
5. The work has elements of covert imagery.	5. I would argue that the use of metaphoric representation can be seen as covert imagery, as well as the intimate items on the altar, and the personalized 'leaves' of the "Tree of Remembrance."
6. The theme of the work addresses itself to an audience of intimates.	6. The whole installation is created for intimate interaction. Furthermore, only intimate family and friends (and now the readers of this thesis) would be able to identify the significance of some of the items on the altars or the pages in the mobile.
7. It celebrates a private or public event.	7. My work celebrates both the public and private experiences of death, grief, and loss.
8. A diarist's point of view is reflected in the work.	8. My diarist's point of view is evident in multiple elements of the installation, but most obviously in the literal diary entries in the mobile, and the diary on my grandmother's altar.
9. There is drawing and/or handwriting sewn in the work.	9. Depending on the one's definition of "sewn," I would argue that this is true of my work too. Handwriting and drawing are collaged, pasted, and attached.

10. It contains silhouetted images which are fixed on other material.	10. The silhouette of the crane, the shadow photographs, and the shadow videos.
11. Recognizable images appear in narrative sequence.	11. While the layering of the installation creates a sequence for the viewer, many of the elements disrupt narrative sequentially to allow the viewer maximum freedom in engaging with the material.
12. Abstract forms create a pattern.	12. There are many abstract forms in the installation, including the arrangement of found objects, layered fabric, and lighting in the space, creating recognizable patterns throughout the space.
13. The work contains photographs or other printed matter.	13. Photographs and printed matter are crucial components in the altars (including the box of miscellaneous family photos collected beneath the altar to ephemerality), as well as the predominant element of the mobile.
14. The work has a functional as well as an aesthetic life.	14. The installation is aesthetic, while also functioning as a ritual space for grief processing.

Feedback from Maria José Contreras Lorenzini

Dear Bea,

I just watched the archival documentation for your show. Wow! I'm deeply moved and inspired by your work. Even if we've spoken of parts of the show and I knew fragments of the story of your father's illness and death, it was a privilege to virtually "walk through" the multimedia installation. I'm so sorry I didn't get the chance to visit the show in person and it's such a pity that few people were able to see it before its premature closure. I also find it ironic that your show came to be at the threshold of an era full of loss and the grief of that pre-pandemic life that won't be back again soon (if ever). This archival documentation is a precious entry to your process and has allowed me to "taste" the experience of the show. The archival documentation is very well built, and it gives great access to the experience. I love the choice you made of being in-frame, experiencing the show. It creates another layer of auto-reflexivity on your creative process that is present throughout the show.

The way you articulated the myriad of traces of loss is beautiful and eloquent. So many different media interweaved together in what comes out as an honest, complex, and moving exploration of grief. This kaleidoscopic composition does not only rely on diverse media but mainly on us, as spectators, that need to discover your multiple gestures and actions in devising the show. To my view, the installation successfully presents the complexities of loss where, as you describe in the written piece, nothing appears as clear and transparent but were everything emerges as rhizomatic experiences that convene sadness, anger, guilt, hope, gratefulness, and what seems an everlasting openness.

The delegation of the agency to the spectator to "choose" how to inhabit the space is a salient characteristic. By showing your vulnerability and telling your story, you invite us to take the time we need to have our own journey. Your show is an artistic device but also accomplishes a political statement by allowing space and a time for grief. What a beautiful way to become a "grief activist". The ways you engage the spectator are subtle and effective. I can't imagine someone going through the installation without connecting with their own grief and losses.

I love how the proposed path is progressive but non-lineal leaving the spectator the choice of constructing their own trajectory at their own pace. You ask the spectator to participate in so many ways, from just being there, to walking through, to doing specific actions such as writing in a piece of paper what you need to release and then dissolving it in water (this gesture is so beautiful and both metaphorical and concrete!). The altar with the white notebook requires us to read, but your handwriting proposes a rhythm of our reading that we cannot avoid. Your hands are there as a presence murmuring your memories. So, we're not there alone, this is our journey: but you're there along the way.

The mobile is so suggestive of a past time, maybe the times of our childhood or some sort of ancestral time. Unfortunately, the video does not allow me to read the pieces of this "explosion of ideas" that nurtured the process. This auto reflective device establishes a dialogue with other parts of the installation that creates a meta-perspective that reveals something of the creative process. Examples of these meta-perspective are the ending of the written piece, the image of

your hands writing in the blank notebook, or your image in the archival documentation. As I said before, we're there but you're always there with us. Devising a way to accompany our grief, to witness our losses, and to allow us to feel what we've left behind when a loved one died.

Then, the spectator is invited to write or draw a memory and hang it in this collective tree of memories. This is the materialization of the common and yet diverse experiences of loss. The tree embraces all these memories, welcoming whatever the spectator may choose to share.
And then the story, your story. Like a signature of the installation, unveiling the origins of your gestures and at the same time questioning the foundational or ontologic status of these "origins". In the dark, in the absence of images and colors, we're at the same time cuddled and disturbed by your voice that without displaying grandiloquent emotions, gives us the time and space to connect with your/our grief.

In all, an excellent and moving multimedia participatory intervention!

Memoir Text (Audio in the final room of the installation)

The First Wound
(written May, 2019)

I don't know where to begin. The silence is deafening.

I think I'm a classic case of physician-heal-thyself. I am sacrificing blood, sweat, and tears (in the form of intellectual and emotional toil) to create work that makes space for other people to process grief. I'm becoming an activist of sorts for grief processing – fighting for the normalization and acceptance of grief in our current culture. And yet, I avoid my own grief like the plague. I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to write about it. I don't want to think about it. I don't want to hear other people's stories about it either. I am criticizing our death and grief-adverse culture, and yet, here I am, running away from it as far and as fast as I can.

In the discussion of marginalized communities and/or cultures, the term "passing" comes up frequently. When the outside world is hostile to your identity or situation, sometimes the easiest way to get by is to "pass" as something else – to "pass" for a more widely accepted identity or category. I feel that this is true of grief too. When we grieve, particularly after the "emotional casserole" season has passed, the world reveals itself to be a hostile environment for our situation. And so, we are forced to learn how to "pass" as unbereaved. The cognitive dissonance that comes with passing begins to tear us apart from the inside, bit by bit. This is the unfortunate consequence of temporary safety and comfort.

Grief does not simply vanish because we are pretending that it isn't there. If left unattended, unprocessed, untouched, grief begins to fester. Layers of wounds, scars, and scabs form on your heart, making it harder and harder to heal.

And so, as I write this, as I fight for the right of others to grieve, I am forced to look at my own damaged heart, at the layers and layers of scars and scabs that have formed in the last 12 years.

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September 12, 2007. The first wound.

I was in the car, heading to school. I had a group project in my 10th grade history class that morning and had planned to meet up with my partners before school started, in order to go over our plans for the presentation. My grandfather, "Jeepers" or "Jeeps," as I liked to call him, was driving me to the school bus stop. We got to the stop 15 minutes early. It was a cold fall morning, for San Diego standards, anyway. We were sitting in the car, heat on, waiting for the bus to arrive when my cell phone rang. It was my mother. "I think you should come. The nurse said it might be only a matter of hours."

I don't remember the rest of the conversation. I think it was short. All I know is that a decision was made – I would skip school. But I had that group project. I negotiated. A compromise was met. I would go to school early, meet my group partners, give them my portion of the project, and then head straight to Hospice.

I don't remember if I still took the bus. Did Jeepers drive me straight to school? Did he meet me there a little later? Why was I in the school quad for so long? Was he parked outside waiting for me or did he arrive in time to pick me up? Do these details even matter?

I remember going to the quad. I remember giving my presentation materials to Clarissa. I

remember Conor being there. And maybe Jessica. I remember saying "My father might be dying this morning" and crying into someone's shoulder. I remember being hugged.

Memory is strange. So much can be a blur, and yet there is a crisp clarity of certain details, details that are not even that important. Minor details that have no significance, and yet are permanently etched in my mind with crystallized precision.

I know that my father died sometime between the quad and my arrival to Hospice. I remember finding out in the car. It was sometime in the 8 o'clock hour. But I can't remember if Jeepers told me when I got in the car or if we got a phone call or a text. And I can't remember the timing. Was it 8:15 or 8:45? Somewhere in between? Was it an odd numbered minute or even? I remember memorizing the exact hour and the minute when I first found out. I remember trying to etch it into my memory forever. But what do I remember instead? I remember standing in the quad at school – the precise grey color of the sky, the temperature of the air, Conor standing next to me. I even remember the exact bench where we were standing. The slightly rusting maroon-painted bench by the dance studios. The one in the corner.

I don't remember the car ride. I think I texted some friends as soon as I found out, but I can't even be sure of that. Those 30 minutes are a blur.

I don't remember getting out of the car, or even walking through the building to the room. Did we park first? Did I go in alone? Was Jeepers with me the whole time?

But I remember the room. It was bright, and fairly large, and it had a balcony with a beautiful view. I remember thinking that my father looked peaceful. I remember a feeling of relief, lightness. His body was still warm when I got there, and he was looking Heavenward. My mother closed his eyelids. She told me that he had reached up with his arm towards Heaven right before he let out his last breath. I kissed him on the cheek and held his hand.

This is how I remember it. But as I write, I am uncertain as to whether this is actually what happened. Is this just how my brain reconstructed the day? Was he really warm when I arrived? How late was I? Were his eyes still open? Was the feeling of peace and relief immediate or did it come later? Did I cry?

****

It had been a grueling nine months. Or was it six?

My father had been acting strangely – forgetting words, washing the dishes with his car keys still in hand. These weren't his normal absent-minded-professor quirks. Something else was going on, something sinister.

My mother anecdotally told our radiologist cousin. He looked alarmed and advised that we take my father in for an MRI as soon as possible. They found a brain tumor.

He went in for surgery. We waited outside the hospital in the sun for hours. Praying, hoping, waiting. Praying, hoping, waiting. Praying, hoping, waiting. *Please don't die*.

Surgery went well. My father had to stay in the hospital for recovery and observation. Was it weeks? Months? Only days? I can't remember. I remember that I stayed with my grandparents for a while. My mother stayed with my father in the hospital. I remember her playing the violin for him. I remember visitors and flowers and cards. I remember quiet, awkward afternoons in the hospital room. I remember still going to ballet, still going to school, still doing class projects and homework, and avoiding visiting the hospital as much as possible. Eventually he was discharged.

The biopsy results came back. Benign!! Hallelujah!! The storm clouds blew away. Life was getting back to normal. Perhaps a more gentle normal, but still normal. My father went back to making breakfast in the morning, to taking care of the garden, to being his usual self. We felt lighter, happier, at ease. The joys of life had returned. A few months passed.

One morning, my father was out on our back patio. He was sweeping away some leaves. Or was he gardening? Observing the blooming irises as he so often did? He fell. The blood thinners he was on caused massive bruising and internal bleeding. He was rushed to the hospital.

While he was in the hospital, the doctors decided to do a follow up MRI a bit earlier than scheduled to see how his brain had been healing after the surgery. The tumor had grown. Somehow they ascertained that it was in fact malignant. But now it was too dangerous and too late to operate. But what about the benign biopsy results? We learned that they mistakenly took out healthy brain tissue adjacent to the tumor, instead of taking a biopsy of the actual tumor. That kind of mistake sometimes happens, although rarely, they said. It's a complicated procedure, they said.

I don't remember the timeline after this. A prognosis was given. Six months. Or was it three? It didn't matter. We weren't going to accept it. We were fighting. No surgery is possible? Fine. We'll find healing and hope elsewhere. Religious people came and prayed vigorously for healing. Friends and family members offered alternative remedies – supplements, diet changes, the power of positive thinking. We tried everything.

In and out of the hospital. On Home Health Care. Nurses, social workers, pastors, doctors, friends. People coming and going. For a brief, and horrifying evening, he was taken to a nursing home. Dirty, noisy, neglectful, altogether awful. We took him home again.

My mother worked tirelessly to care for my father. He continued to decline. We continued to fight. It got harder and harder. We were urged to switch to Hospice care. No, we said. We're not done fighting, we said. But the glioblastoma kept growing.

His eyes – that had once expertly identified Raphael paintings, that loved to devour books of all kinds, that admired the intricacies of a piece of fruit, that found artistry and beauty in all things – began to lose focus.

His words – that had educated and inspired thousands in lectures, speeches, and sermons, that had profoundly and beautifully explained theories of art, culture, God, and the world around us, that spoke of unconditional love – began to become unintelligible.

His right arm – that gestured wildly in lectures and exhibition tours, that wrote hundreds of scholarly articles and books, that wrote a poem or spiritual reflection each morning, and an account of our family's adventures each evening, that carefully and perfectly peeled an apple each morning for our oats – lost its ability to write and move with coordination.

And yet, he continued to fight. He fought for us. We fought for him. But we were fighting a losing battle. Death slowly crept its way into our lives, casting a shadow that grew longer and darker each day. We closed our eyes and pretended not to see.

****

Is it true that we die the way that we live? There is a beautiful and poetic way to see this. And then there is the cruel sick joke. My father lived a life full of compassion and humility. As he

grew more and more ill, he never complained. He took on his disease with a humble spirit and continued to open up his heart to those around him. As a professor, scholar, art historian, theologian, and writer, his whole identity and life had revolved around three things: his ability to see, his ability to speak, and his ability to write. And with one fell swoop, the glioblastoma stole all three. By the end, he could barely see right in front of him, could not even incoherently scribble a word on a whiteboard, and could only speak the word, "no." The man who embodied nothing but love, support, and acceptance for all, the man who consistently said "yes" to all that life threw at him, could no longer utter a sound other than, "no." There is the cruel sick joke.

****

I remember standing on the balcony with my mother that morning. My father's body was lying in the room behind us. I remember feeling an overwhelming sense of peace, of ease, of relief. My mother felt it too. We looked out across the trees at the sprawl of San Diego. The air was fresh, birds were singing, the battle was over.

I don't remember how long we stood there. I don't remember what we did when we went back into the room. Did we sing? Did we pray? Did we hold each other? Did we cry?

I remember standing outside the room at one point, in the living room area of the Hospice. There was a bookshelf with CDs of peaceful music. There was coffee, tea, water. I remember talking to Conor on the phone. I remember fiddling with the books on the shelf as I talked. I don't remember what I said.

I don't remember what happened next. When did they take him away? Where did we go after we left Hospice? What did we talk about? I don't know if my memory is blurred because of the intensity of the shock of the moment, or simply because of the passage of time. Regardless, there are still those moments, those images that remain crystalized, etched, embedded into my mind forever.

****

It has been 12 years, and I still struggle to write these words. It's been 12 years and I can still see my father's face. His wild black hair with tufts of grey. His bushy eyebrows. The twinkle in his eyes. It has been 12 years, and I can still see him lying dead in the bed that morning. It has been 12 years and he remains simultaneously alive and dead. Simultaneously lecturing wildly and lying still. Simultaneously full of vigor, and as still as a statue.

****

I returned to school the day after my father's death. I didn't know what else to do. At first, my friends and my teachers were sympathetic, but it didn't take them long to forget. A few weeks later, I was struggling to complete a homework assignment for a class. I talked to the teacher about it. She said, "Life goes on," as if to say that the murkiness in my head caused by my grief was merely laziness in disguise.

"I haven't seen you cry. Did you even have a close relationship with your dad?" Statements like this one made it hard for me to acknowledge my grief, to give it the weight it was due. No one seemed to care or understand. If I wasn't grieving the way that others saw fit, I must have not been close with my father. Or so the logic went…

At home, my mother's grief consumed everything. I watched her falling apart, struggling to pick up the pieces. I recoiled into myself, afraid that my sadness would destroy her. I learned to

bear my pain in silence. Perhaps if I ignored it, it would simply go away.

My eyes – that used to see the world as beautiful, welcoming, accepting – now only saw hostility and grey skies.

My words – that once spoke freely and confidently – could no longer disclose my true feelings.

My arms – that had once held my father tightly – had become empty and desperate, trying to hold on to anything or anyone that I could find.

I became desperate, dishonest, destructive, and depressed. I became a shell of myself, pretending to be normal, strong, unharmed, and okay.

****

12 years later, one might expect a restitution narrative, a heroic story of overcoming the pain to find healing and joy. 12 years later, one might expect that the pain is a distant memory, that the details of the circumstances no longer matter, that the words uttered all those years ago wouldn't sting so much anymore. But "life goes on" and "were you even close with your father?" still gut me to the core. The thought of the nursing home still makes my skin crawl. I can still see the frustration in my father's eyes as all he could utter was "no." I can still feel the sun on my face, the day we waited outside the hospital for the surgery to finish.

The truth is, 12 years later, the grief is still unpredictable, still tangible, still present. The truth is, that 12 years later, it's a mix. It's a mix of hope and pain. I would be lying if I said that this loss didn't make me grow, that it didn't form me into the woman I am today. I would be lying if I said that I am sad all the time or that I even think of my father all the time. But I would also be lying if I said that the pain has completely vanished. Or that writing this now, 12 years later, hasn't been one of the most challenging acts of my life.

You see, this particular wound never got a chance to heal fully. I ignored it, let it fester, pretended that it wasn't there. When I finally began to take care of it, when it was finally starting to heal, the next blow was delivered. June 2010. Jeepers. And then again. February 2018. John-Michael. And then again. April 2018. Joyce. And then again. January 2019. Grandma.

What happens to a heart that gets repeatedly wounded? What happens to scabs that get reopened, over and over again? How do you make sense of it all? How do you go on?

Addendum – Reflection on the Writing Process

It was challenging to start the process of writing this piece. I was feeling apprehensive and avoidant about my grief and experiences with loss. I didn't want to reopen old wounds. I didn't want to reflect. And most of all, I did not know what I wanted to write about. There were so many possible entry points – specific memories, things that trigger my grief now, reflections on the passage of time after a loss, chronological play-by-play reconstructions of particular moments of illness and/or death, etc. I wanted to write about all of it and none of it at the same time.

Eventually I decided to embrace my avoidance by starting to write about it. Instead of trying to outline or format my writing artificially, I put myself into a journaling mindset by simply starting with what I was thinking at the moment. The floodgates opened and the words flowed out of me with ease.

As I continued to write, the form became apparent. My writing is a struggle of memory – a collision of remembrance and absence, of specified chronology and distanced reflection. I noticed

a natural tendency towards repetition: “I remember” and “I don’t remember” (and variations thereof), “praying, hoping, waiting,” “they said” and “we said,” and the repeated questioning of the details and sequence of events. I also noticed a natural tendency towards using short, choppy sentences, broken phrases, and breaks in the narrative.

These structural choices mirror the experience of grief itself. In the journey of grief, as things become increasingly blurred, there is a desire to hold on to something concrete, to find a solid structure. Sometimes this structure comes in the form of specific temporal reconstructions – dates, times, hours, sequence of events. Sometimes it comes in the form of a repetition, a mantra, a determination to remember, a deep-rooted desire to make sense of the chaotic narrative. In the retelling of my father’s illness, the short choppy sentences give a sense of time moving quickly, while also remaining discombobulated. The repeated questioning of the details and sequence of events not only highlights the ambiguity and challenge of reconstructing memories, but also the chaotic experience of caretaking and grieving, that inevitably becomes a blur.

A few things surprised me in working on this piece. The first was that I did not expect to want to write about my father. The story of my father’s illness and death is one that I have told and retold over the years, and I have written about it in the past. However, I have never made the effort of recounting specific details. In light of the recent death of my grandmother, I expected to want to write about her, as those memories and experiences are still very fresh. However, it was clear that some part of me wanted to process my father’s death instead.

The second thing that was surprising to me was how emotional the process became for me. When I began to write about my father, I did not expect to have such raw emotions of anger and sadness. Although his birthday, the anniversary of his death, and significant milestones in my life are always emotional for me, I have come to believe that I am very much at peace with his passing. The writing process exposed a different story – a bleakness, sadness, anger – that I did not expect. I suspect that these emotions are largely due to the rawness of the present loss of my grandmother. The magnitude of this most recent loss seems to be uncovering deep wounds from the past.

As these emotions began to surface in my writing, I struggled to decide how to end the piece. I desperately wanted to turn it around into a more optimistic or positive ending – to highlight the growth that I have experienced in the last 12 years, the ways that I consistently choose to honor my father in my work, and the circumstances in which I feel his presence from time to time. However, it didn’t feel honest. It’s not that these things aren’t true. They just aren’t as present to me in this moment. So instead, I decided to lean into the darker emotions. I chose to write with self-awareness, exposing the process itself, instead of fabricating a perfect ending.

Memoir Text: “18 Hours” (beginning excerpt)

11:44pm.
That was the time on the tv clock. That was the only moment I looked up at the tv clock. Before and after that, time did not exist. There were moments, experiences, but all outside of time.

Really, that whole day was outside of time. A day that felt like a year. A day that vanished in an instant. A day that changed everything.

11:44pm.
I was lying on the bed next to her. Holding her. Imagining her holding me. But she was asleep. And then she was gone. And I don’t know exactly when that happened.

I remember getting up several times to check the oxygen machine, then to check her breathing, then to check the machine again. Turning the dial up. Turning the dial down. Not knowing what was her breath and what was the machine.

11:44pm.
The time was important. I was insistent on that. She died on January 5th. And the time was 11:44pm. Maybe it wasn’t. But that didn’t matter. It needed to be 11:44pm. Because that was the only time I knew. That was the only time I looked up at the clock.

The nurse came after 1am. To officially declare her. She was going to report the death as occurring on January 6. I was insistent. That was incorrect. It was wrong. She could not make that the official record. Because I was going to remember this date. I was going to honor this date. This date needed to be the real date. Officially. There could be no discrepancies. 11:44pm would be the time. She agreed.

I woke up that morning, having only slept a few hours. But I woke up with a bolt – wide awake. I picked up my phone and looked at it blankly. Two seconds later, a call was coming in, silently. “Your grandmother had a hard night,” she said. “I think it’s important for her to see someone familiar,” she said. “She kept talking about how scared she was.” “You should come in as soon as you can,” she said.

I was up like a bolt. Clothes were on in an instant. I appeared in my mother’s room. “We need to go.”

I was pacing in the kitchen. She was showering. Getting dressed. Doing her morning ablutions. “We need to go.” I said. I couldn’t stop pacing.

“I’ll just go ahead.” “No, wait for me. Let’s go together.”

I knew I needed to be there. I needed to be there *now*. No time to waste. No time for ablutions. No time to wash my face. I needed to be there *now*.

When we got there, she was sleeping. It was calm. The nurse was sitting in the corner, charting.

My mother suggested breakfast. I told the nurse to call me at the slightest change. We would be only 5 minutes away. My phone was on. "Ok." She said.

I couldn't find parking. I started panicking. "I can't do it. I don't need breakfast. I can't do it. I can't do it."

I circled. I panicked. I circled some more. I yelled at an innocent woman in a car. "My grandma is dying today! I can't listen to you!"

The waitress was kind. It felt exceptionally kind. Love and warmth that I needed so badly. Maybe she was an ordinary waitress. Maybe I needed love so badly, I saw it in the ordinary gestures. I don't know. It doesn't matter.

I thanked her for being wonderful. I told her my grandma was dying.

I couldn't focus. I couldn't eat. It all felt surreal. I was antsy. I didn't want to be at the diner. I wanted to be back at the house. I *needed* to be back at the house.

I knew. Some part of me *knew.* But how?

The nurse called me. I couldn't even hear what she said. It didn't matter. I just said, "I'm on my way" and I bolted. My mother wrapped up the pancake for me and gave it to me as I rushed out of the diner.

When I got there, she was still sleeping. There was no emergency. The nurse just called me to say that they were changing the medication routine and she wanted to fill me in. Nothing urgent.

Didn't matter. I was back at the house. Back in the room with her. I felt calm again.

Ritual of Remembrance Introduction Script and Archival Footage

This is a Ritual of Remembrance.

I invite you to join me in a centering exercise to prepare.

I invite you to close your eyes and take two deep breaths together.

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.

You may open your eyes.

Thank you for being present, here, in this moment together.

You all have someone or someones here with you today. Someone dear to you. Someone who has gone before you. And though we may not be able to see them with our eyes, we are happy to be in their company.

In a moment, you will receive a piece of paper and a pen (whichever color you prefer). On this paper, I invite you to write the name of that someone. A person that you carry with you. Someone who has gone before you. A relative, an ancestor, a mentor, a spirit. Perhaps someone close to you. Perhaps someone you never actually met, but their loss affected you.

You may write their real name or the name that you called them. And below that, I invite you to write an image that reminds you of them.

I lost my father when I was 15, and whenever I see a crane, I think of him. So I would write "a crane." Something like that. Any image or phrase that reminds you of them. Perhaps it is a color, or an animal, or something they used to always say.

In a moment, I will be passing by you. You will notice that the ends of my scarf have paper clips attached to them. When I pass by, I invite you to attach your paper to my scarf. You are welcome to come forward during the ritual to do so as well.

music begins

Performance Footage:

https://vimeo.com/449886491
PW: Ritual

Death/Life Script and Studio Footage

...ashes to ashes....
...dust to dust...

Empty-handed
I entered the world
Barefoot I leave it.
My coming, my going –

We are stardust. We are earth dust.
We decay to make new life.

We are fertilizer – in the ground,
We are fertilizer – in the hearts of those we love,
We are fertilizer – in the legacy we leave behind.

And so we die.

When death comes...
...I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

...ashes to ashes....
...dust to dust...

(source material: original writing combined with words from Mary Oliver, Kozan, and inspired in part by Emily Dickinson)

Studio Footage:

https://vimeo.com/449888909
PW: Ashes

Selected Personal Writings on Death and the Ephemeral

Handwritten versions of some of these personal writings were included in the pages of the wind mobile sculpture as part of *What Remains*.

(Written on March 30, 2018):

This is the beginning of a new chapter of ideas and creativity. A chapter in which the protagonist (me) digs deeper into her thoughts, experiences, emotions, traumas, and creates more vividly and more powerfully than ever before. It is a time of embracing the full spectrum of her emotions from pure joy to utter despair. Not running away. Not this time. For there is something to be gained – something transformative – by really pushing ***through*** and facing the feelings and thoughts head on. Examining ***all*** facets – the tangible, the intangible, the textures, the shadows, reflections, and colors.

***

So, at this present moment, what ideas are floating to the surface?

||| The fluidity of time/memory:
The vividness of a memory is not as much related to the time since the experience has passed, as it is to the significance of the experience. In other words, "long time ago" is not really very real. There is only what is important and what is less important. The moments that have touched us or changed us are the moments that remain vivid in our memory. For we rehearse them again and again, replay them, reflect on them over and over, and strengthen they synapses that hold them.

||| "Death is silence. Silence is the sound of death.
Silence leads to death. Silence follows death."

But silence is also 'golden.'
It is peaceful. But it can also be excruciatingly loud.
Silence is the absence of sound, the absence of breath, the absence of life.
It is also the absence of noise.

Silence can sting. Silence can comfort.

Silence can mean a thousand words.
Silence can express the inexpressible, inexplicable emotions of the deepest depths of the human spirt. It can comfort.

Silence can also be painful.
The absence of connection. Something or someone missing.

The deepest connection and the deepest separation can both be found in silence.

Silence – although definable as one thing – can be ***so*** multifaceted. There are so many kinds of

silences. Silence can carry weight, though weightless. Silence can encompass emotions, though inherently devoid of emotion. Silence can be deafening, though it makes no sound.

The silence that is most deafening is the silence of death.

Death is very present with me these days.
Not my own death, not even my own mortality, but death as an idea, death in the world, deaths in my life, the emotions and consequences of death…

John-Michael

Joyce Shaw

Papa

Jeepers

"This is Us"

Holy Week / the cross

I embrace it. I seek it out. I do not run away.
Through pain there is healing. There is inspiration.
There is growth. There is artistry.

~~~~~~~~~~~

(Written on June 14, 2018):

It's not as though I have anything pressing or particular to write about – but somehow I felt like pulling out this notebook and pen. I guess somewhere underneath it all, there *is* something that wants to be expressed.

I feel many things. Among them – sadness, forlornness, exhaustion, a wee bit of anxiety/stress, apathy, sorrow…exhaustion. Not just physical exhaustion, but emotional exhaustion. A heaviness.

Death is all around. Ever present.
Maybe I'm embracing it too much.

Part of me wants to run away.

Part of me is masochistic and wants to force the pain.

Part of me is simply screaming to be released.

To grieve. To express.
~~~~~~~~~~~

Papa. Jeepers. John-Michael. Joyce. Jerry.
But also…
Rudy. Mr. Pope. Omama. Bob Wilson.
Betty Freedman. Leonard Stein. Mike.

I know there are others, but I can't remember…

I've been binging "Six Feet Under," and it isn't helping with alleviating the "death is all around" feeling – but I suppose that isn't the point. There was a scene where Nate is asked "Why do people have to die?" and he answers, "to make life meaningful." In other words, without an end, there is no living life to the fullest, it all becomes pointless.

Without dark, there can be no light.
The cycle of life. The necessity and reality of death.

Joyce embraced it. But how? How did she make peace with it? How did she accept it so gracefully, so totally?

She was sturdy. Strong.

<u>But so am I.</u>

I was about to make an argument that my depression, my scars, my traumas, make me weak, unable to accept life and death the way that Joyce did, but that is a lie.

I need to return to the lessons I learned at Reimagine. I need to remember my revelations of that time. That I am enough. That my struggle, my traumas, my history, is what makes me <u>strong</u>.

~~~~~~~~~~~~

(Written on July 11, 2018):

I just watched the episode of "Six Feet Under" when Nate dies, and they have his funeral.

[redacted]

I've been sobbing. My heart is breaking. All the losses from my life are washing over me. Most potently – John-Michael.

The pain of loss is coursing through my body.
Tingling. Draining. Consuming.

WHY?

I want to scream.
~~~~~~~~~~~~

Why did they have to die?
Torn away. Ripped. Ripped out of my heart.

"Time heals all wounds" [redacted]

Loss leaves scars. Grief leaves scars. The bigger the wound, the longer it takes to heal, the bigger the scar it leaves. The scar will not go away. Ever. The best you can hope for is that the wound won't get infected or further ripped open while it is healing, and that the scab won't be aggressively torn off – that it will heal healthily.

But no matter what,
no matter what,
that place, that scar, the place where the wound was, will always be tender.
and you'll never know if or when it could get re-opened or become sore again.

Time does not matter.

Papa – 11 years Jeepers – 7 years

Omama – 12 years Joyce & Jerry – 3 months

John-Michael – 5 months

Rudy. Betty. Davies.

Bob Williams. Leonard. Mike.

Virginia Lingren.

The Isla Vista Massacre.

I embrace the pain. I want to feel it.
It means that they meant something to me.
That there was a connection. An impact.

Death is all around.
I feel pain because I am alive. I am human.

I feel, therefore I am.

I want to visit a grave. A burial site. Especially for Papa. But there is none.
Or for Jeepers. Or John-Michael.
Why is no one buried?? It isn't right.

I want to be buried when I die.
A green death. In the ground. Natural. Somewhere in beautiful nature. By trees.
I want to be in a place where people can visit me.

Where people can grieve. Where people can have closure.

We run away from death too much. We run away from the dead.
Why can't we honor them more? Why can't we tackle the feelings head on? Why do we suppress everything?

It isn't natural.
It isn't human.
It isn't healthy.

~~~~~~~~~~~

(Written on May 14, 2018):

Behind a veil.
Reflections in a mirror.
Remembered in a sound, a smell, a taste.
Evoked in music.
Re-lived in words.
Ephemeral.
A touch is felt, but vanishes instantly.
A shadow is seen, but just a shadow.

The heart tricks you into thinking they are still here with you.
Perhaps they are.

A gust of wind.
A crane, standing perfectly still.
A painting, staring back at you.
Revealed and hidden.
Always present within you.

In the ground?
In a box of ashes?
In a photograph.
In heaven?
In purgatory?
In a new life?

Into nothingness? Or somethingness?

Everything remains constant.
Matter may shift, but the sum total remains.
Absorbed into the universe.
Absorbed into time.
We are stardust.
We are earth dust.
~~~~~~~~~~~

Decay to make new life.
We are fertilizer –
metaphorically and literally.

In the ground, in the hearts of those we love, in the legacy we leave behind.

The tide goes in,
the tide goes out.
The seasons change.
The earth revolves.

Life stops, but never stops.
Time stops, but never stops.

Death is both the end and the beginning.

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(Written on January 15, 2019):

No one should have to fight for the right to grieve. There is so much pressure from every side to do this, do that, share this, explain that, answer this, justify that – and all of it has to be NOW. I can't take it anymore! I need time. I need space. I need to be allowed to grieve. Everyone is so conspiratorial and dramatic, villainizing us at every turn. No one (or very few) is/are acknowledging that we are in pain. That our pain is real. That we deserve the space to grieve. That we have the ***right*** to grieve – in the way that we need to – not on someone else's terms. I understand now why grandma was so upset – she was tired of being told what to do. Being pushed around. Having people make assumptions or trying to take control. Now that she is gone and there is this void, all of those things are being directed at us. I'm glad that grandma can finally be free from all of this nonsense.

~~~~~~~~~~~

(Written on January 22, 2019):

I am en route. En route back to my new home – back to my old home? But it is neither old nor new, and somehow it is both. Because there is some newness that is old. Because the newness from before is from another lifetime. The world has changed. On January 5tth, the world shifted. Catechistic shifts. One catechistic shift and a thousand pieces shattered into a million more. The 'destructive character' came in and wrecked his havoc. And the world crumbled. And in the rubble, a new world was born. A world less vibrant. A world less electric. But also, a world in which the subtle pastels can be seen. The delicacy of the little flower buds are no longer invisible. There is a softness, a grace, a tender mist caressing the leaves. There is a stillness. A quiet serenity. It fills the emptiness. The great chasm created by the earthquake of January 5th. In the agony of the emptiness, new life breathes. It breathes for the first time.

How is it that one can feel so extraordinarily heavy and so deliciously light at the same time?!? It

is so strange to live in this paradox. To feel the full weight and pull of gravity – into the center, the core of the earth itself – and, at the same time, to feel light and untethered like a balloon floating into the heavens. How can one being be ***both***?

***

Grief is so disorienting. Surreal.

Tossed and turned by the tumultuous waves of emotion – all emotion – every flavor, every hue, every line along the spectrum. All happening AT ONCE. No sign of relief. A breath of fresh air – a gasp – for a fleeting second, and then wave after wave after WAVE.

Tossed and turned in a whirlpool. Like a single sock in a washing machine. No sense of up. No sense of down. Or side. Or any which way. Only the swooshing of the water all around.

Sometimes, a life raft of gratitude.

Sometimes, a life raft of humor.

Of hope. Of joy. Of love.

...and then another wave.

C R A S H -

But the thing is...
This is natural. This is normal.

It is completely disorienting and confusing and unbelievable exhausting, but it ***is*** normal.

The waves are not the problem.
The problem is the world is expecting a lake.
Or worse yet, sometimes I think they are expecting a glass of water. Or a tub or sink of water. With one drink, or with one pull of a plug, the water is gone, and the world – the container, the glass, the tub, the sink – are back to status quo. And all is "as it should be" and "life goes on."

But this is NOT the natural order of things.

The oceans exist for a reason – to serve as an example, a reminder, that crashing waves are natural. Sometimes they are small, sometimes they are HUGE. Sometimes the tide is gentle and low. And sometimes there is a tsunami. But the waves never stop. The ocean never takes a break. It is never still. It is never drained dry. It is a natural part of the world. And so are the oceans of grief.

Let the ocean be your guide.

~~~~~~~~~~~~

(Written on October 26, 2019):

You sit across the table from him.
You photograph his thoughtful gesture. Capturing the wrinkles left by years of smiling, decades of laughs, squinting to read, expressing his life.

You sit across from him and you capture him in a secret photograph.
You document your time with him.

But you sit, scrolling through Instagram filters, choosing the perfect lighting – missing your chance for connection.

He fades away in front of you.
You miss it, too caught up in finding the perfect filter.

One day, years from now, you will find this photo. How will you remember this night? How will you remember him? What will this captured gesture, that perfect filter – what will it reveal about him? Will you remember ignoring him? Will you remember the food? The cold crisp air? *What remains?*

~~~~~~~~~~~~

(Written on January 22, 2019):

When do we return to real life?
How quickly?
The minute the end titles start?

How long do you choose to resist?
How long do you remain in the dream?
in the world of emotion?

How long do you stand in the theater, the empty, quiet theater, before you open the doors to the real world? How long do you let the laughter and conversation fade?

Standing in the doorway,
I want to stay in the silence.

It's a choice. It's a frame of mind.
I can remain in the dream.
I can remain in the silence.
I can remain *slowed*.

And yet, still interact with people – do the normal things.

Except – there is a difference.
I am unattached. I observe the details. *All* the details.
The isolated grey hairs on that woman's head.
The singular red dots of light that construct the words "Jay St…"

Hand

Sketching

-- blank --

Hands sketching

-- blank --

Faces faces faces

No, FACE, FACE, FACE

Turbulent seas.
Breath. Effort. Realness.

Composition.
Detail. Detail. Detail. Close up. Extreme.

Slowness.
Watch a singular face through the entire first movement of *The Storm* by Vivaldi.

The silence.

The swell of voices.

The eyes.

The mirrors.

Image 1: Final Gallery Map

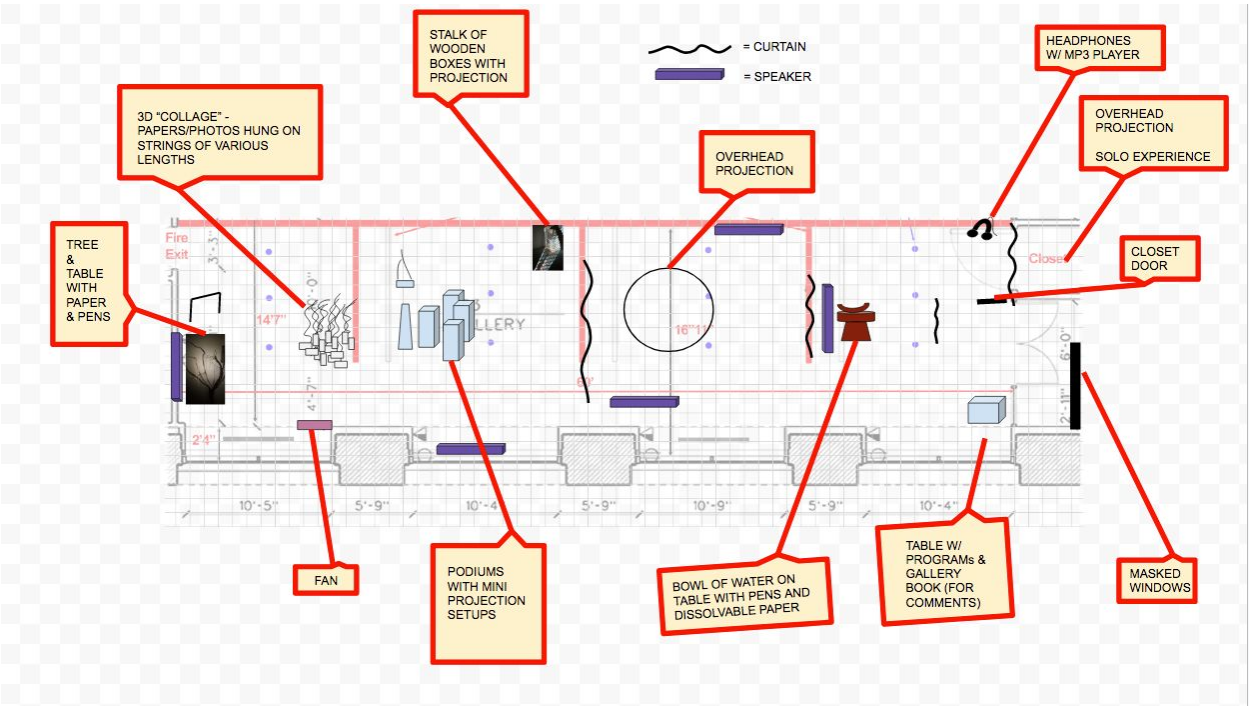
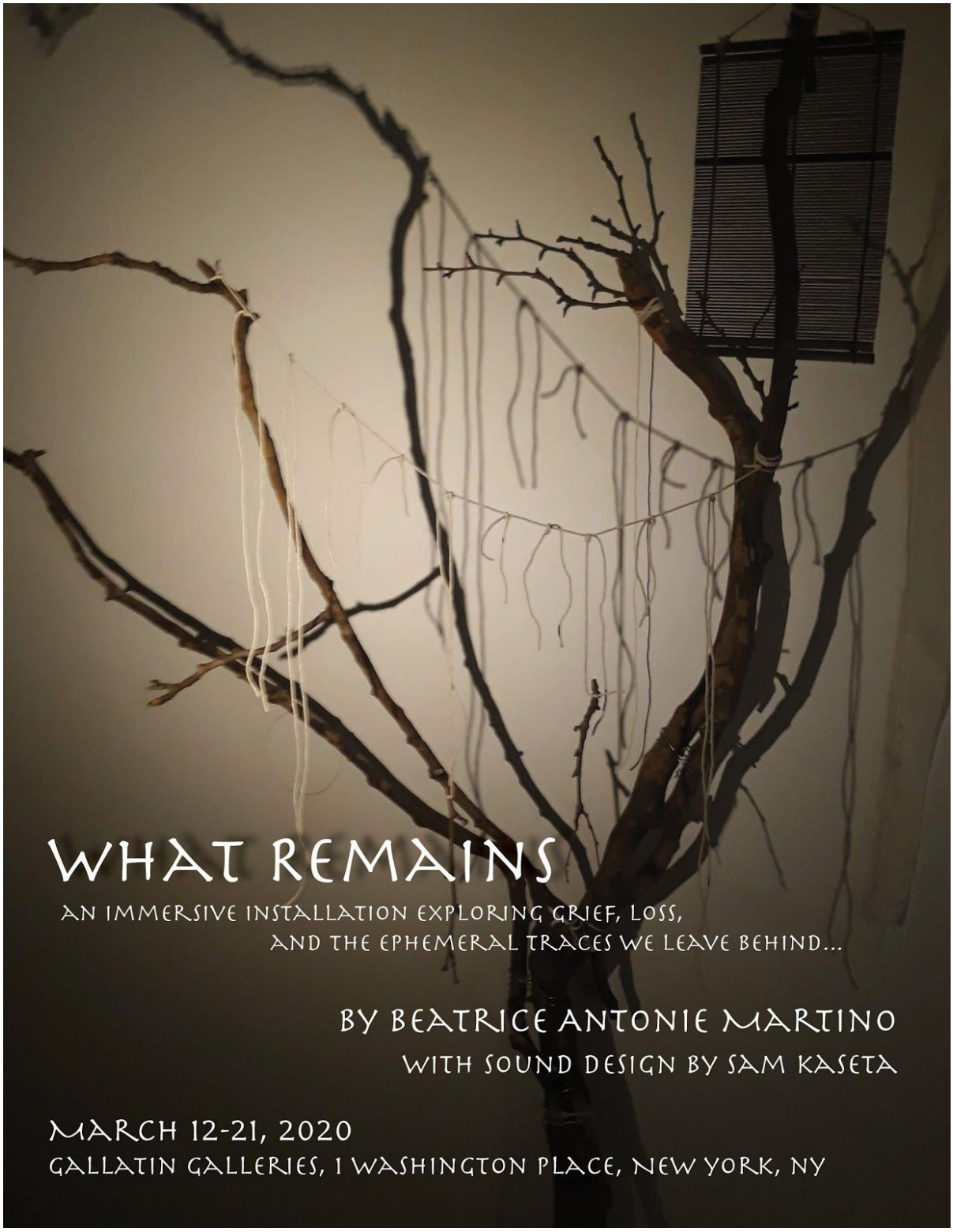
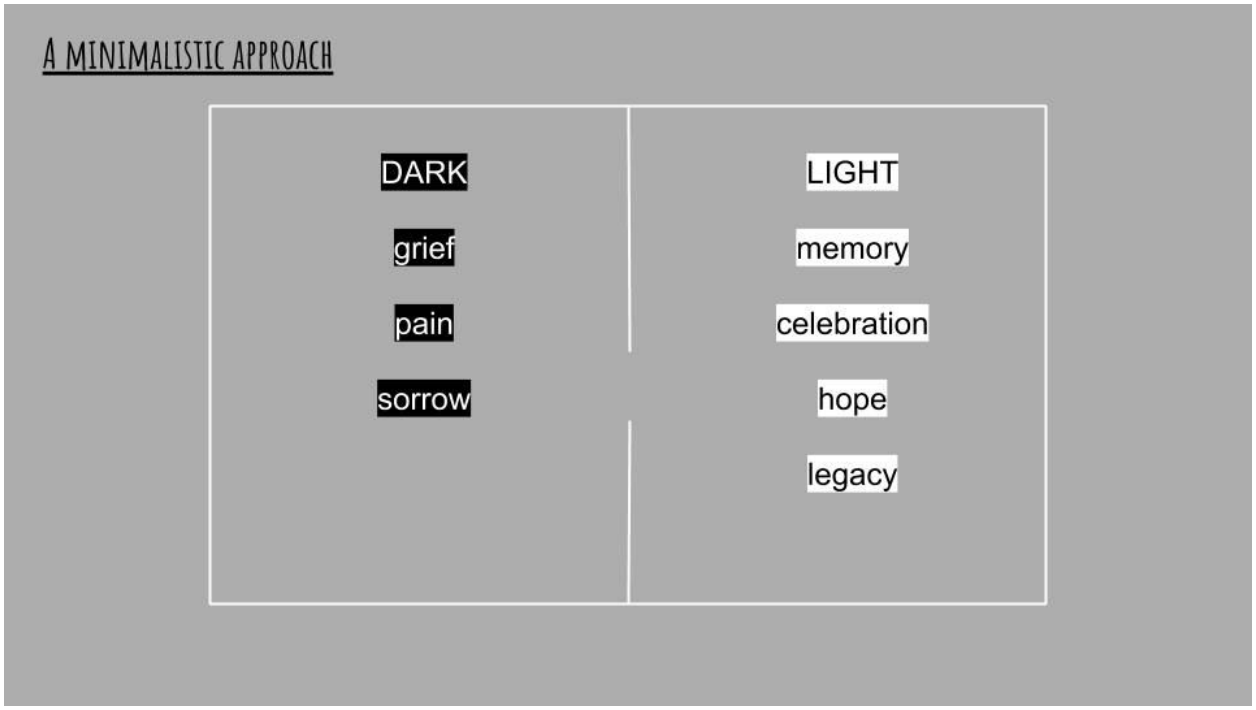
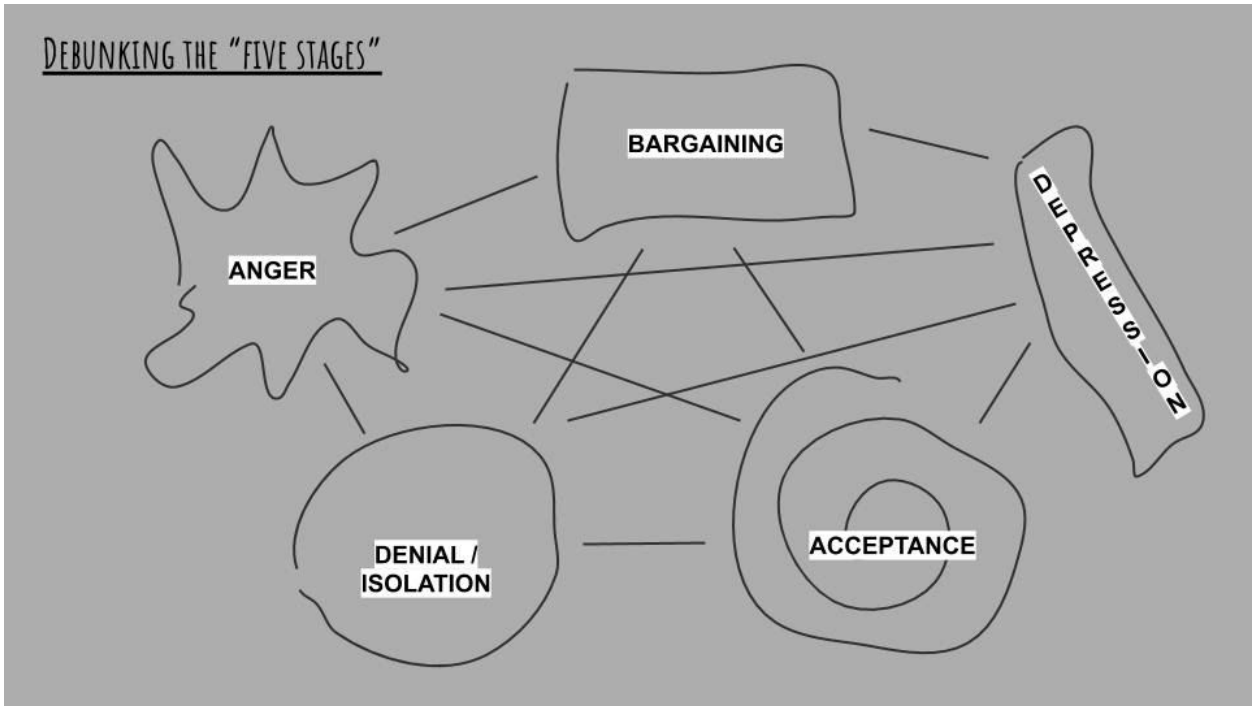


Image 2: Exhibition Flyer

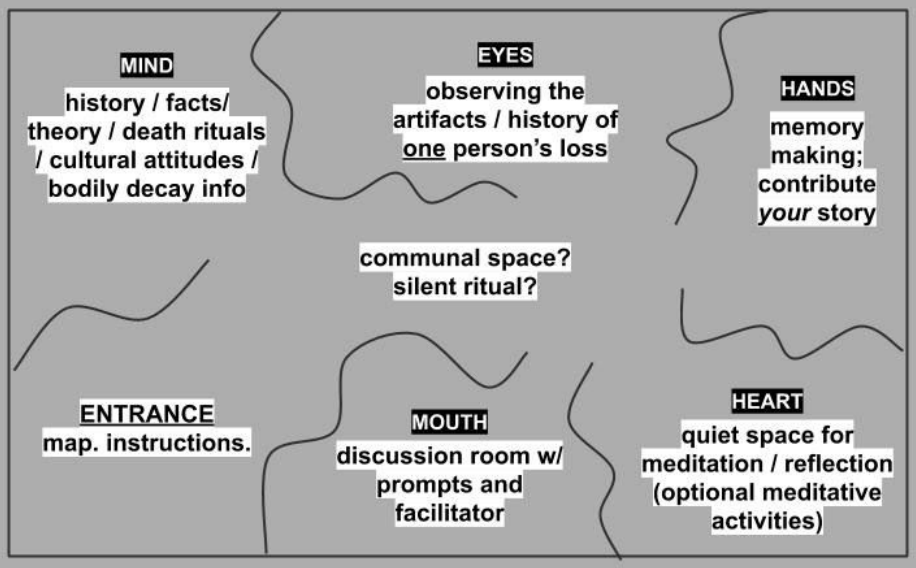


Images 3-8: Gallery Layout Prototypes





The "Anatomy of Grief"

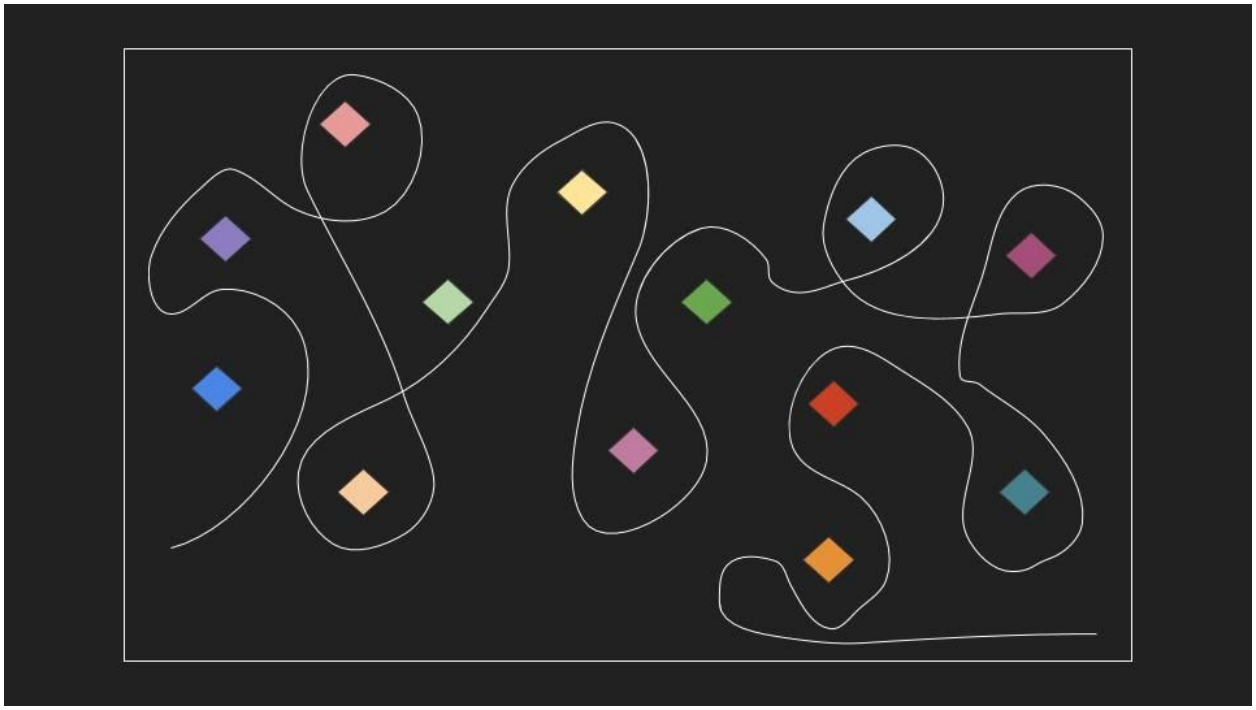


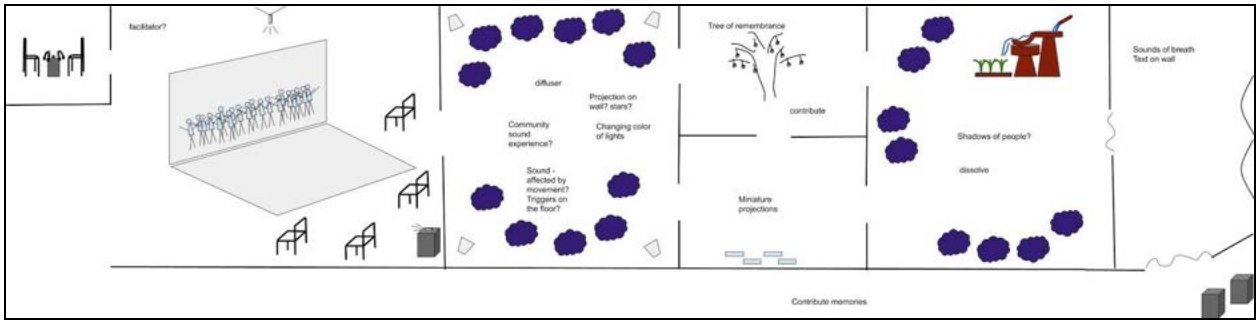
"This is what grief looks like" photography exhibit

▭ = Photographic portrait of individuals looking "normal" but holding or wearing something from a lost one.

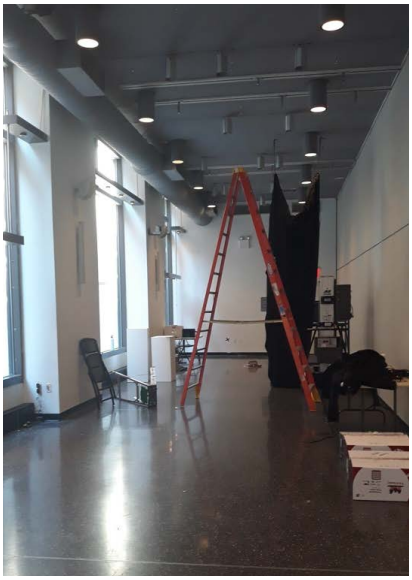
Each image has an audio headset (or audience gets headsets with audio track numbers).

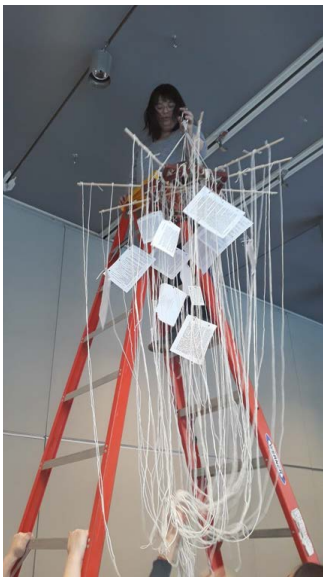
Audio is the story of who they lost and why that item is significant.

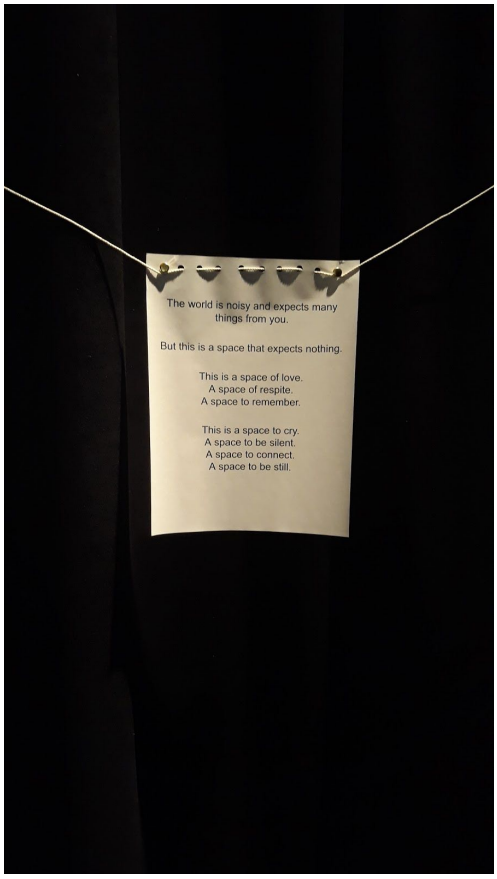



facilitator?
diffuser
Projection on wall? stars?
Community sound experience?
Changing color of lights
Sound - affected by movement? Triggers on the floor?
Tree of remembrance
contribute
Miniature projections
Shadows of people?
dissolve
Sounds of breath
Text on wall
Contribute memories

Selected Images from *What Remains*






The world is noisy and expects many things from you.
But this is a space that expects nothing.
This is a space of love.
A space of respite.
A space to remember.
This is a space to cry.
A space to be silent.
A space to connect.
A space to be still.


Breathe
To pause.
To make space.
To collect your thoughts.
To remember.
Our breath is our sign of life.
Let us breathe life into this place.
Let us breathe.
To make space for the experience at hand.
To let go of the hustle and bustle of the world.


Our breath is our sign of life.
Let us breathe life into this place.
Let us breathe.
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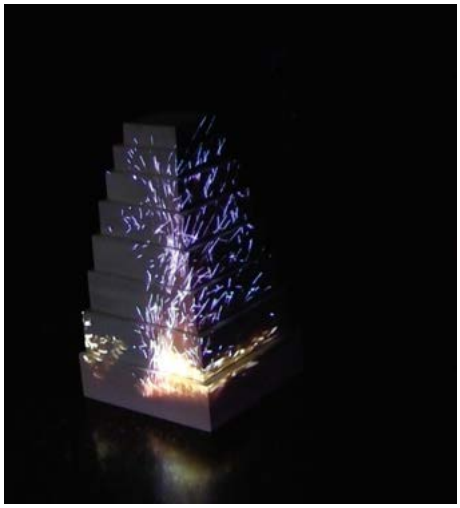
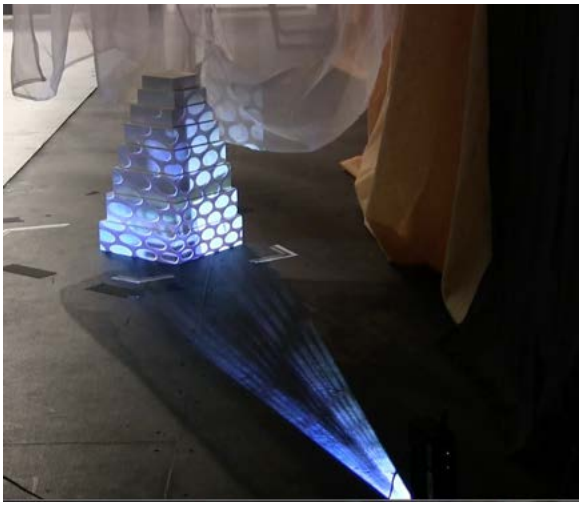
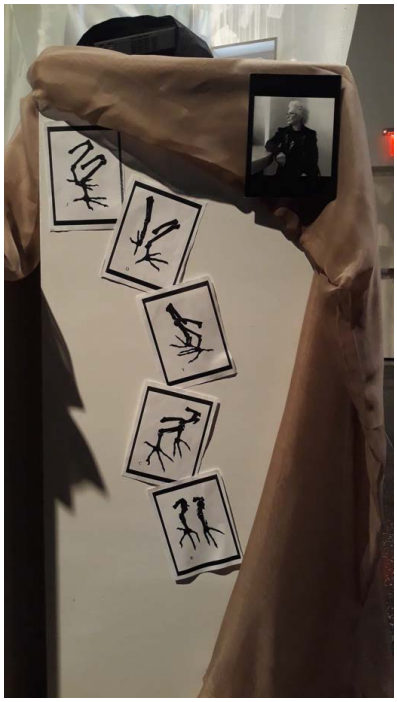
Our breath is our sign of life.
Let us breathe life into this place.
Let us breathe.
To make space for the experience at hand.
To let go of the hustle and bustle of the world.

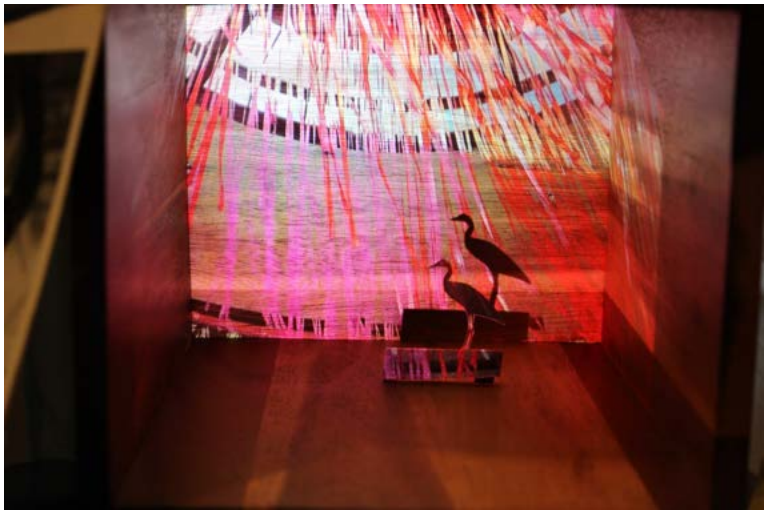

your grief is welcome here.
If you feel saddest in

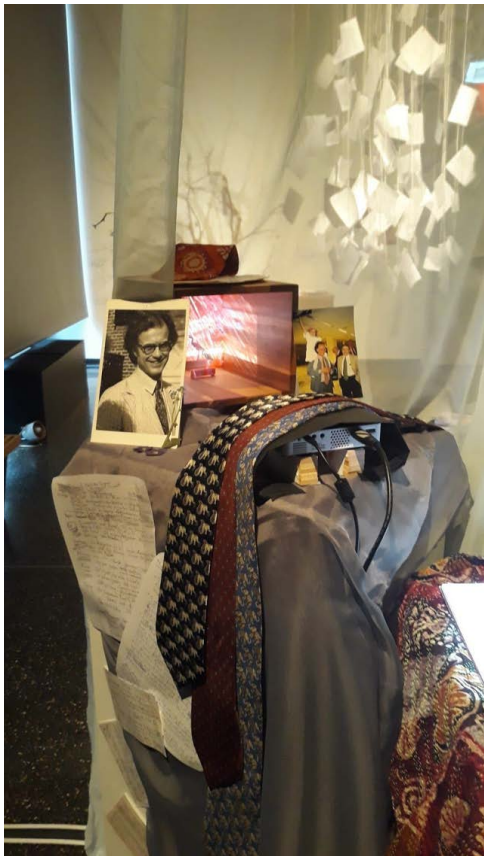


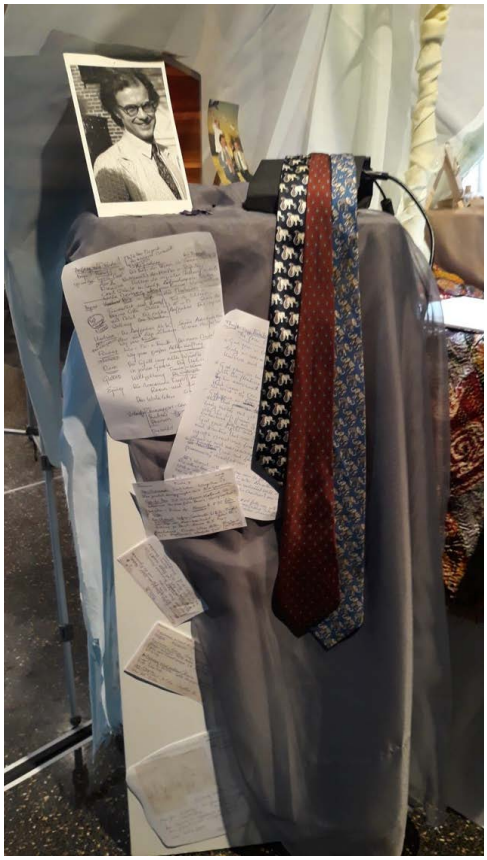


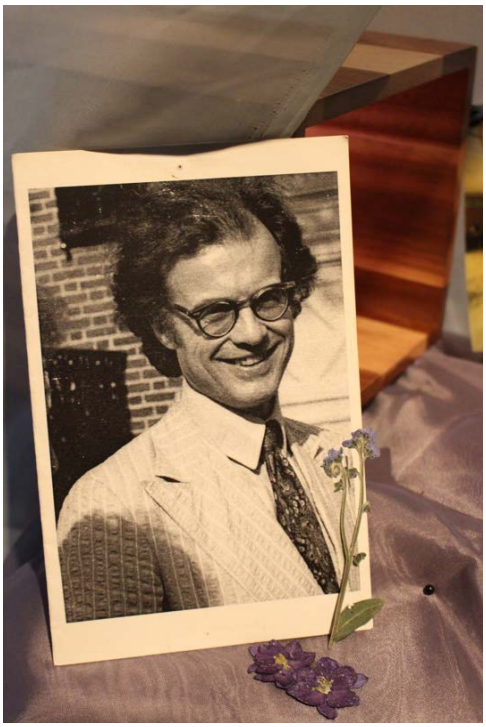


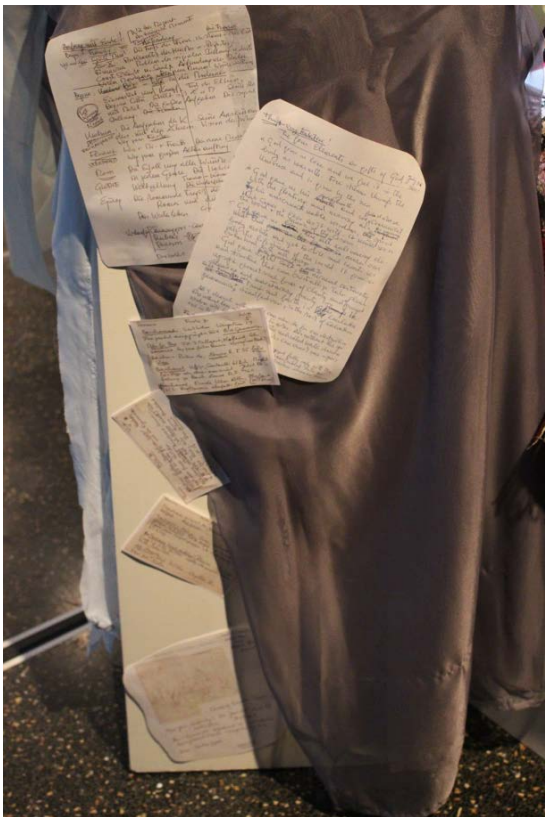


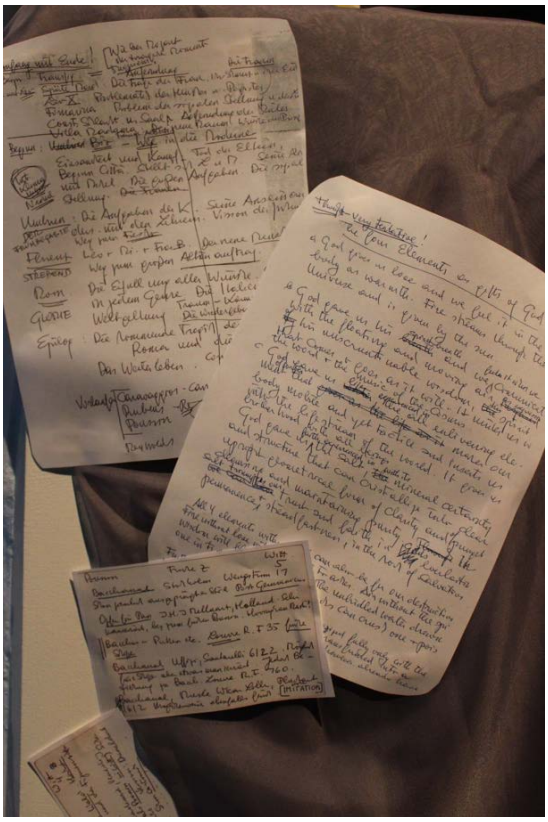



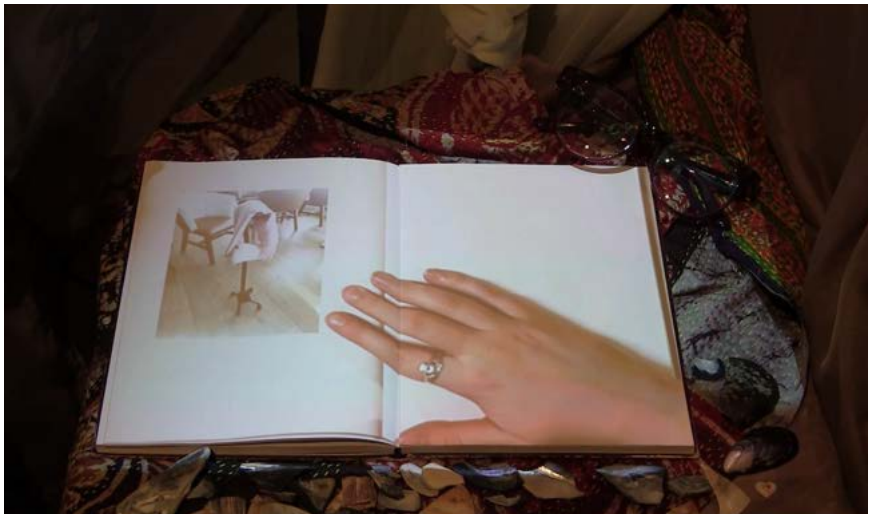


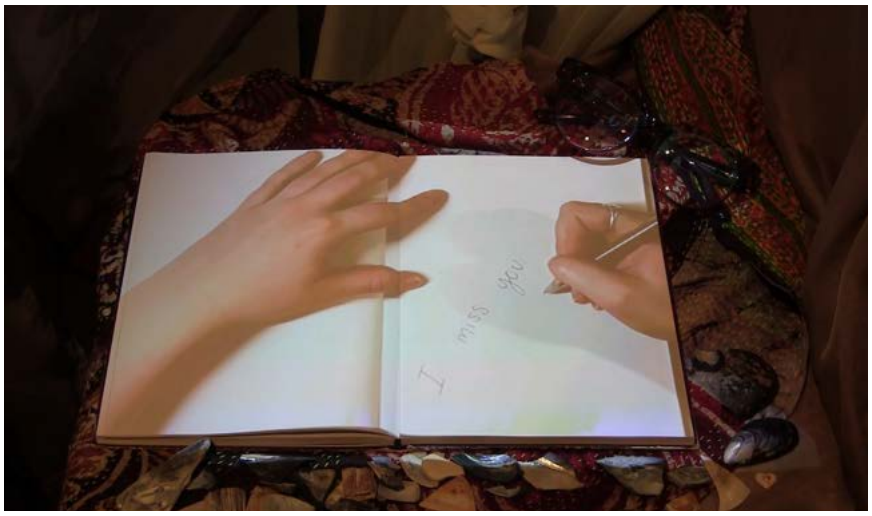


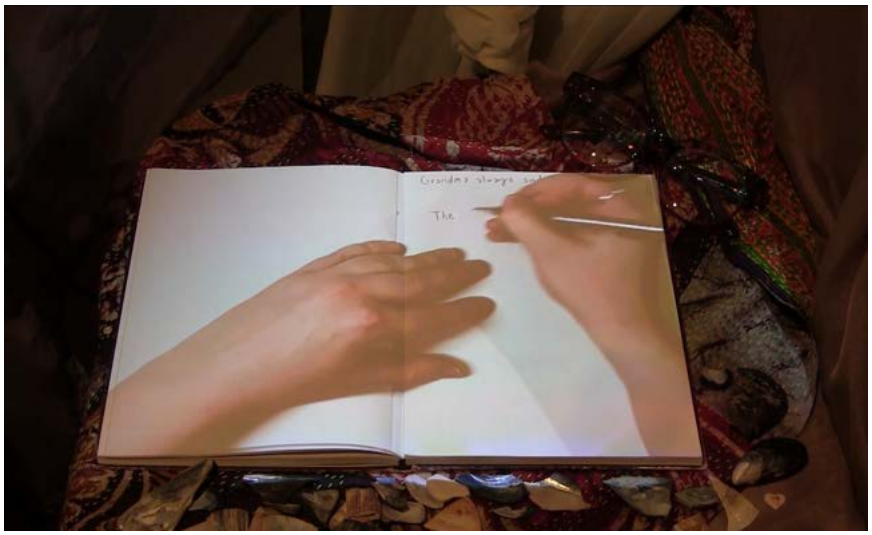


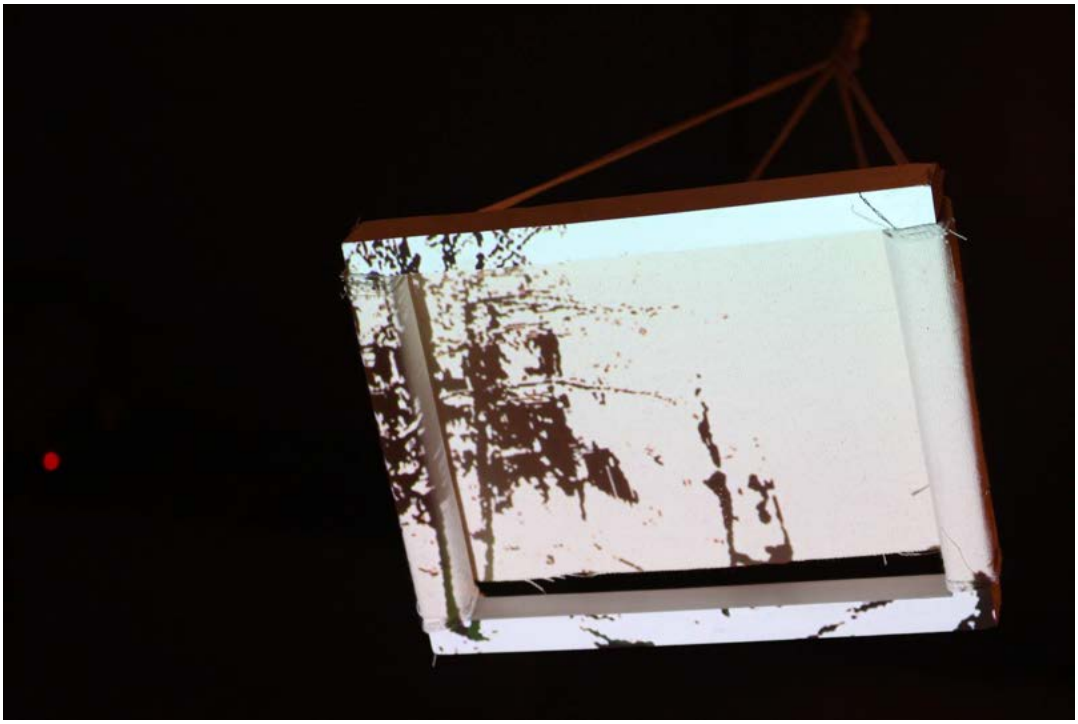




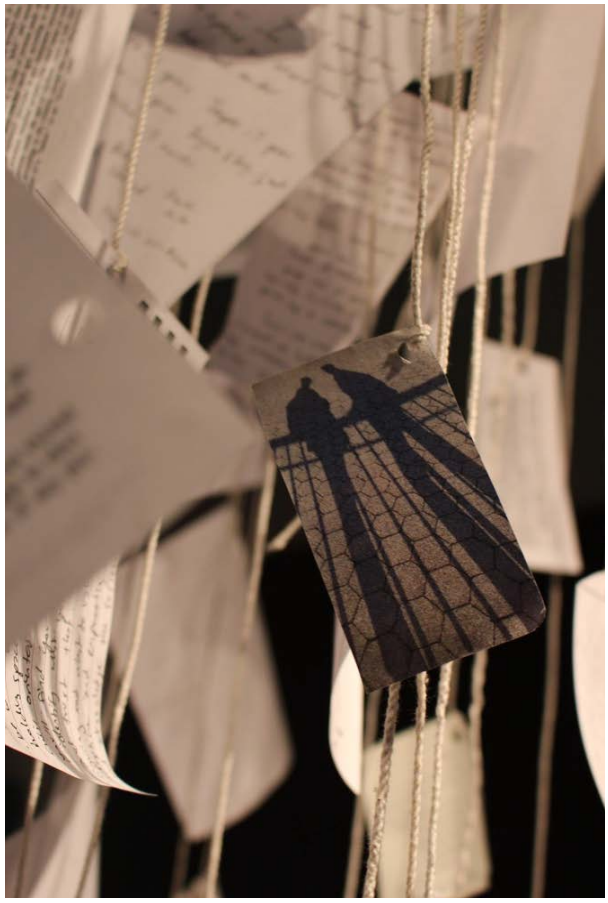
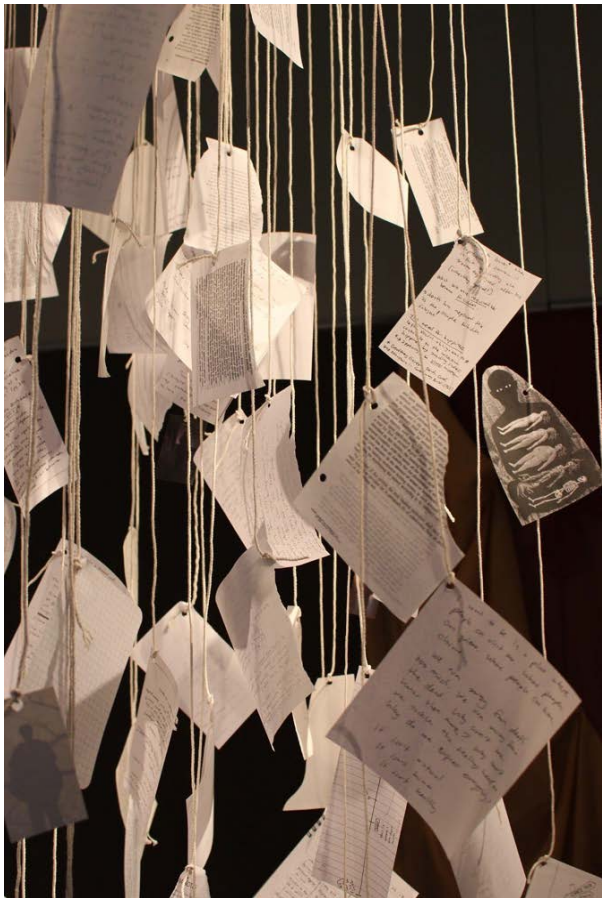


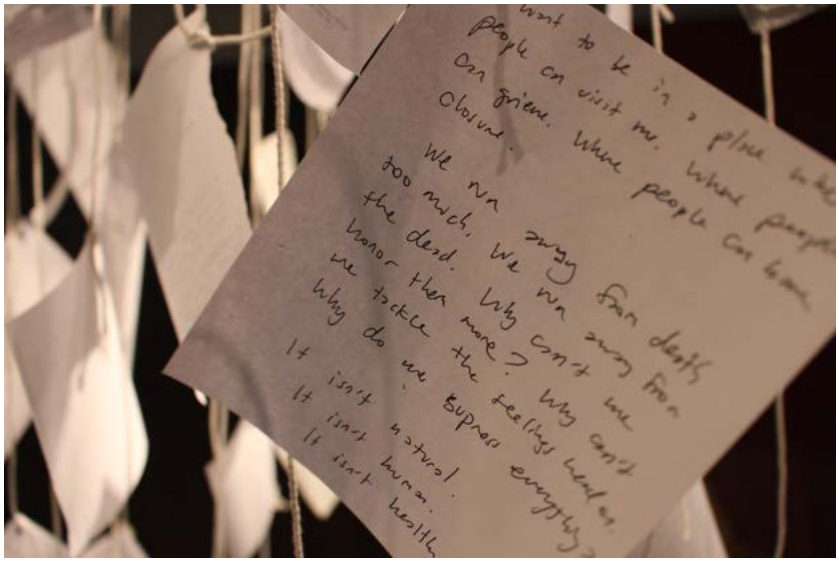
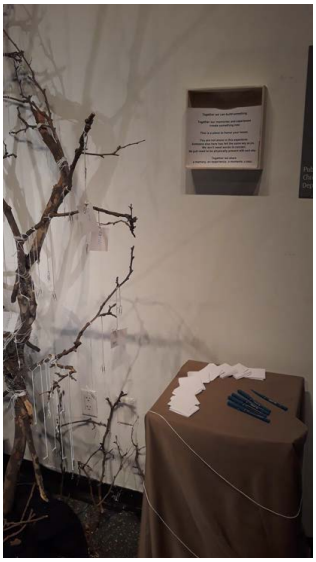
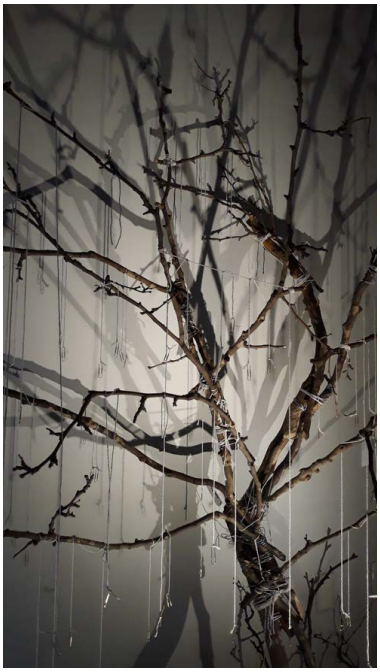

I miss you

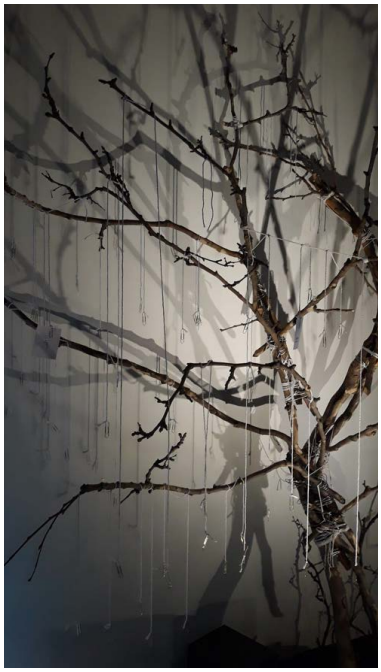

The

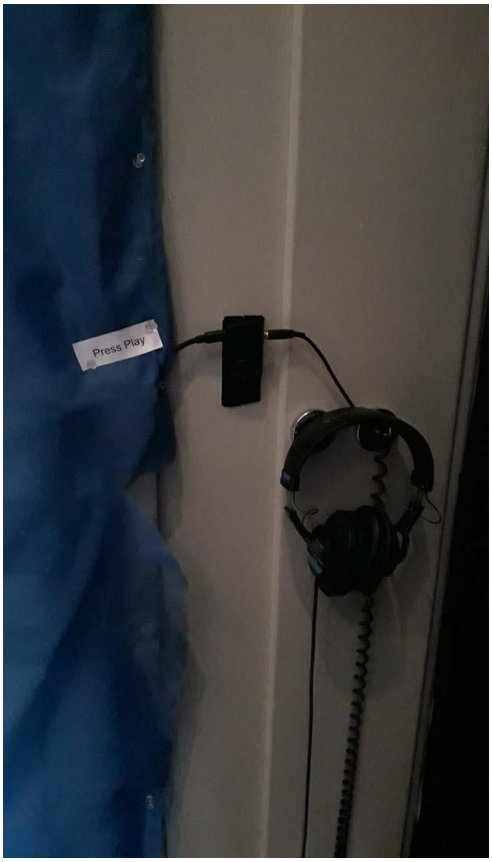





want to be in a place where
people can visit me. Where people can
can grieve. Where people can be
Closure.
We run away from death
too much. We run away from
the dead. Why can't we
honor them more? Why can't
we tackle the feelings head on.
Why do we bypass everything
It isn't natural.
It isn't human.
It isn't






Press Play


This is my story.
This is my grief.
I welcome you into my space of reflection and remembrance.
Stay awhile.
This place is for you.
Take the time that you need.
Your grief is welcomed here too.

Studio Prototyping, Archival Footage of *What Remains,* and Other Video Links

Studio Prototyping Documentation:
https://photos.app.goo.gl/GJZH9LDfFrLj6Bwj6

What Remains archival footage:
https://vimeo.com/444425078

What Remains technical walkthrough:
https://vimeo.com/449408428
PW: Technical

Wind Mobile Performance Improvisation in *What Remains* Gallery Space:
https://vimeo.com/449871827
PW: Wind

Ojiichan : A short video art piece exploring memory, loss, and ephemerality:
https://vimeo.com/424161629

The Alphabet of Bones in Motion, commissioned by Joyce Cutler-Shaw:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfMCbLE1s7g

What Remains Expenses

Vendor	Items	Expense	Total
Amazon	Fabric x2 (grey & beige)	30.46	**2345.77**
Amazon	Dissolving Paper	13.03	
Amazon	Pico Projector & Fabric (taupe)	65.31	
Amazon	Dried Flowers & Fan	54.4	
Amazon	Tripod for Projector	77.29	
Amazon	Flexible Phone Tripod	19.59	
Amazon	Tension Rod	54.43	
Amazon	Plant Stand for Projector	30.44	
Amazon	Fabric (black), LED Lights, Tension Rod	102.32	
Amazon	HDMI Dongle	10.88	
Staples	Supplies for Studio (including SD cards for videos)	75.69	
Evolution Store	Items for sculptures	40.28	
ACE Hardware	Supplies for Studio (wood, velcro holds, paintbrush, etc)	33.63	
ACE Hardware	Supplies for Studio (alcohol spray for tree, hole puncher, mini stands)	19.58	
ACE Hardware	Supplies for Studio (wire-working gear)	23.12	
Oriental Lumber	Supplies for Studio (extension cords, measuring tape)	42.21	
Swallow	Display boxes for video sculptures	154.6	
Swallow	Boxes and stands for video sculptures	172.02	
Swallow	Hanging display	54.43	
Yesterday's News	Vintage photographs (x64)	15.24	
Mira Alibek	Studio Rental (February)	600	
Mira Alibek	Studio Rental (March)	600	
Task Rabbit	Transporting tree sculpture from studio to Gallatin	56.82	

*donated items, additional supplies purchased in 2019, and transportation costs not included.