Chapter 8
Ephemeral Art: The Art of Being Lost

Mary O'Neill

> The very act of thinking objectively about distress places us at one remove from the distress. But if dissociation is a necessary part of clear thinking it may also be a defence against thinking.
>
> (Bowlby 1988, 11)

I have divided this chapter into two sections; both cover the same ground but are written differently, to demonstrate the possibility of thinking in different modes. The dual texts also respond to the difficulty raised by John Bowlby of thinking objectively about distress and the risk that the detachment this requires may result in an avoidance of thinking about the subject at all. This is particularly significant when faced with works of art that ask us not only to think about distressing subjects, but to feel the distress they embody. The first section explores a group of ephemeral artworks related to grief through the lens of the academic literature on grief and mourning, revisiting some of the age old questions about the nature of art, the nature of its effect on viewers and about the existence of universal human experiences underlying different cultural manifestations. The second section explores grief and mourning in the form of a personal narrative.

I did not set out to research mourning. The main focus of my research is ephemeral art practice; that is, art that disappears over time, where the disappearance or decay of the work is intrinsic to how the work communicates with its audience.[1] At the outset, I thought that this subject was primarily internal to the art world and the art market, and was concerned with the dematerialization and decommodification of the art object. I assumed that the loss to the art world of precious, durable objects would raise issues of documentation and legacy. However, as my research developed I became aware that there were far broader and more complex issues involved. As opposed to being merely temporary or transient, there are ephemeral works of art that engage directly with issues of mortality, and in a quite specific way. They are not about death in general, nor are they *memento mori*, reminders of our own mortality. What they have in common is that they address experiences of death that are arguably more difficult to deal with even than the normal sequence of the generations, as for example the pain of watching someone we love die slowly before us, or the shock brought on by violent death or the death of the young. From places as diverse as Indonesia, Thailand and Australia, I found a

1 For a lengthier elaboration of this definition, see (O'Neill 2008).

number of artworks which decay as part of their communication of the extreme grief associated with untimely death.[2]

This realization meant a significant shift in my research from a theoretical study of contemporary art to one of mourning. I began a wide ranging interdisciplinary study of mourning, in an attempt to understand how these works expressed, communicated and evoked feelings related to mourning – but without avoiding the emotional engagement through analytical detachment. My study came to embrace how not just ephemeral art but even discussion of it, can provide an opportunity whereby those present are given permission to tell their narratives of grief, when culturally we are all too often encouraged to remain silent. At every conference at which I have discussed ephemeral grief works I have been offered life experience by members of the audience who recognized this quality in the work and explicitly confirmed my suspicion that these works facilitate discussion of bereavement.[3] The association between narrative and grief is well known. Indeed, it is the basis of many forms of therapy (Neimeyer and Mahony 1995; Crawford, Brown and Crawford 2004). The experiences individuals offer in response to my research provide an insight into the possibility that ephemeral art can facilitate these narratives, even in an arena that normally inhibits such forms of engagement – the academic forum. These unsolicited stories exist only in memory and testify, in the moment of telling, to the secret nature of the bereaved and to the power of art to elicit their stories. These stories are not recorded or presented here as documentary evidence as they were offered as a spontaneous gift in response to my presentation; the process of recording or reproducing would be inappropriate and would change the nature of my relationship with the audience.[4]

Storytelling plays an important role in my research and operates on several levels: stories told by the artworks, which are interpreted by the audience, members of which bring their stories to the work; stories by the artists, offered in texts set alongside the art; stories I offer to exemplify the experience of viewing; and stories told to me in response to my discussion of the works. Like ephemeral art, stories exist in the moment of telling and require an engagement from the viewer/

2 In the narrative section of this chapter I will focus on parental bereavement which is described as the 'most grievous of losses' (Braun and Berg 1994, 105) and is characterized by a sense of failure.

3 Ephemeral works are not alone in this capacity to facilitate a discussion of one's experience of loss. In his essay *Bearing Witness to Apartheid: J.M. Coetzee's Inconsolable works of Mourning*, Samuel Durrant explores the capacity of literature to provide a way of working through a collective grief (1999, 430).

4 There is a parallel between the re-presentation of narratives and ephemeral art. Both are dynamics forms of communication and are fluid in their retelling. This has significant consequences when they are captured within the confines of more permanent media, such as video or text. My telling of the story of live performances here is not meant to be a definitive account of that piece but a description of my experience of the work on that particular day. For an overview of the arguments relating to the documentation of performance see Phelan (1993) and Auslander (1999).

listener to come fully into being. These witness records presented in different forms contribute to a broad landscape of mourning from which we can learn not only about an aspect of contemporary art but also about what it is to lose others, and to be lost.

William Worden (1991) states that grief has four dimensions: feelings, physical sensations, cognitions and behaviours. The cognitions and behaviours are particularly significant in relation to my research for it is through these that the two other dimensions, feelings and physical sensations, are made manifest. Of the cognition and behaviour manifestations described by Worden those which I will focus on are: a sense of the presence and hallucinations of the loved one; and searching for and calling out to the loved one. In his description of the universal aspects of the cognitive behaviour of searching he states: 'Whatever the society studied in whatever part of the world, there is an almost universal attempt to regain the lost loved object, and/or there is a belief in an afterlife where one can rejoin the loved one' (Worden 1991, 9). He also highlights that mourning is not a state but a process and emphasizes that it is a task, which, like all tasks, involves work. A mourner must complete this task for a successful resolution of mourning. In grief there is an element of irrationality, and this can be seen in both the sense of presence and hallucinations and the searching and calling out. The bereaved person often feels as though death could not possibility have happened and attempts to deny its reality. This denial can lead to the belief that the dead person will return – hence the use of the term 'lost' rather than 'gone'. In loss there is a possibility of being found. Some who are bereaved may wish not to 'get over' their bereavement but continue to mourn as a form of fidelity. To recover from mourning would mean the complete loss of their loved one.

> Although we know that after such a loss the acute stage of mourning will subside, we also know that we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else (Freud 1961, 386).

On the basis of the insights offered by a number of psychological and psychoanalytical theories of mourning I will discuss the work of Dadang Christanto and Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, suggesting that the task of grieving represented in their ephemeral works offers the possibility of moving beyond the abject, understood in Julia Kristeva's sense of that which 'cannot be assimilated' (1982, 1). I will also discuss the web-based work *1001 Nights* by Barbara Campbell. Like the works of Christanto and Rasdjarmrearnsook, this piece can be read as a form of searching for and speaking to the dead. All three works are ephemeral and accompanied by a narrative of bereavement. In the spirit of these works, the second section of this chapter is in the form of a narrative that will, I hope, illuminate some of the theories discussed.

The relationship between the longing for permanence of art and the desire for immortality is a truism, and I will not dwell on it here other than to note the link

between the creation and accumulation of durable objects as a form of denying mortality and the significant role that the ideals of permanence, stability and order play in the Western worldview.[5] Why would an artist make ephemeral art when there is considerable cultural and economic pressure to make permanent art? I suggest that the answer to this question does not lie solely in the art world or in rebellions against the art market, but involves a crisis of meaning and a resulting value shift experienced as a consequence of bereavement, in particular to mourning untimely or violent death.

In the works of Christanto and Rasdjarmrearnsook, we are confronted with a performance that re-enacts or re-experiences loss. This is distinct from death as a representation, which Kristeva tells us is comprehensible: 'In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react, or accept.. corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live' (1982, 3). Through the tenderness of these ephemeral works we are able to witness without repulsion. They allow us to work through abjection, which is a process not unlike grief. In these works the abject is performative; if we open ourselves to them, they do not leave us unchanged. But rather than causing us to vomit, to expel the knowledge or, alternatively, filling us with disgust, they can be cathartic and ameliorative. There is a close relationship between these works and purification rituals which are traditionally employed as a defence against the abject. Here, however, the abject is assimilated rather than dispelled. To understand how these works perform this function I will explore the necessity of speaking to the dead, and the role of ephemeral art as a form of grieving.

The need to mourn and the overwhelming need to have a corpse that is the focus of a mourning ritual is powerfully embodied in the work of Dadang Christanto, in particular his 2005 performance *Collecting Displaced Bones* (Romanoff and Terenzio 1998). The performance took place at the Australian National University, in the grounds of Canberra House. It was performed by Christanto and his eight-year-old daughter, the age Christanto was when his father disappeared in 1965. In this work, Christanto's daughter excavates the body of her father, echoing the relationship between Christanto and his father.

Christanto was born in Yogyakarta, Indonesia in 1957 and now lives in Darwin, Australia. His work predominately deals with issues of human rights abuses especially those that took place in Java following the 1965 coup, which brought Suharto to power. During this period, members of the PKI (Communist Party of Indonesia) and those who were considered sympathetic to their cause were systematically rounded up and massacred. Christanto had personal experience of

5 I am particularly indebted to the work of Zygmunt Bauman (1992), *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* (Cambridge: Polity); Ernest Becker (1973), *The Denial of Death* (London: Free Press); and the elaboration of Becker's work by terror management theorists J. Greenberg, T. Pyszczynski, S. Solomon, A Rosenblatt, M. Veeder, and S. Kirkland (1990), 'Evidence for terror management theory. II: The effects of mortality salience on reactions to those who threaten or bolster the cultural worldview'.

these atrocities when his father disappeared. *Collecting Displaced Bones* begins with two men wearing improvised cloth masks carrying a stretcher through a wooded area. They stop at intervals to rest and regain their strength, which is obviously flagging under the weight of the burden they are carrying. There isn't a seating area provided for the audience nor is there any indication of where they should stand, and so they follow like interlopers, unsure where they are going. The men stop in a clearing and carefully place the stretcher on the ground. On the stretcher there is a figure wrapped in cloth. Christanto's eight-year-old daughter is in the clearing; initially she circles the body slowly and rhythmically and after a while begins to untie the cloth and to excavate the body of her father, which is covered in white chalk. This work powerfully highlights the ongoing nature of mourning. In terms of his daughter's involvement it points to a group of disenfranchized mourners, those who mourn people they have never met, or who have been violently deprived of the opportunity to meet. Mourning does not stop with those who have experienced the bereavement first hand but it can be passed on through generations.

Eventually the wrapped body rises from the stretcher and envelopes the child and carries her to a tree just beyond the circle created by the audience. The performance is over. As with the beginning, the positioning, and the duration, this performance is borderless. As an audience member I am not given the usual clues but have to follow the performance bodily. This adds an extra dimension of unease to the work. Occasionally, one could hear murmuring from the audience but rather than being a distraction from the event, the others articulate questions I am also asking, 'Where are they going?' 'Should we stand here?' We are not sitting back and allowing the event to unfold, we must actually decide to follow, to risk intrusion, to bear witness. These silent performers do not acknowledge our presence but we know that they need us, for it is our role to be followers and witnesses; this is not a passive role but one we undertake by choice, and, having witnessed, we are changed. Witnessing is a central element in Christanto's work and through our witnessing we participate. Even the decision not to watch is participation; every reference to those who bear witness also refers to those who turned away, who decided to be blind to crime and injustice, to say nothing, not to get involved. As a signature on a legal document, witnessing is a form of contract; it does not leave us without obligation. Here we are asked to witness the mourning, and the pain of others.

This may be the abject as truth as described by Hal Foster in his discussion of the abject in art in *The Return of the Real*; the 'special truth [which] resides in traumatic or abject states, in diseased or damaged bodies.' These performers unearth the evidence that is the violated body and they exist as the 'important witnessing to truth, of necessary testimonials against power' (Foster 1996, 123). We witness the consequences of power relationships, the evidence of abuses, which were enacted in the dark, forcing silence upon victims. Christanto brings this evidence out into the cold sharp Australian winter sun. The absence of sound in this performance is striking and reflects Christanto's preoccupation with the silence of those who

suffer oppression. Although this refers to personally experienced events, it also addresses universal issues relating to abuses of power and the consequences for individuals who are caught up in destructive and violent political events.

The participatory element in Christanto's work takes a more sinister turn in the performance Litsus. This piece, part of an exhibition titled *Text Me, An Exploration of Body Language* was performed in 2005 at the Sherman Gallery, Sydney. In this work, Christanto and his son sit shrouded in black cloth while the audience flings flour-filled 'bombs' at them. Considering both this work and Collecting Displaced Bones together, a disturbing question arises: What is our role in witnessing and are we complicit in the acts of violence? In this work both Christanto and his son, and the performers that are the audience, become abject. The abjection of the self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundation of its own being (Kristeva 1982, 5).

Christanto is aware of the possibility of his work performing the task of accommodating mourning, and the ability of art to have a healing effect both on the individual and on society (Gray 2006). While the works reference specific horrors both historical and ongoing, he is conscious that the viewer brings their own experience of tragedy to the works and reads the works through these experiences. He is equally aware that an encounter with his work can be painful for viewers and carries the possibility of reopening old wounds. In his gallery based work – *For those: Who are poor, Who are suffer(ing), Who are oppressed, Who are voiceless, Who are powerless, Who are burdened, Who are victims of violence, Who are victims of a dupe, Who are victims of injustice, (1993)* and *They Give Evidence* (1996–1997) – Christanto provides an opportunity for the participation in the work to ameliorate these consequences. The element of gift-giving in response to works is particularly evident in the audience participation in Christanto's *For those: Who are poor* and *They Give Evidence*. The text that accompanies the work invites the audience to participate:

> To overcome the immediate pain and potential conflict of this encounter, Christanto offers the audience an opportunity to enter the work by making an act of remembrance and consolation; to offer acknowledgement within the architecture of the artwork. Though undeniably a memorial to the victims of human violence, this installation also offers that essential space for a redemptive personal gesture (McDougall 2006).

It is through this interaction between offering, invitation, and gift giving that the viewer is given an opportunity to work through their grief in response to these works. Without this generosity and sensitivity on the part of the artist and the exhibition gallery this work might just reawaken memories of pain and trauma, of the abject, and leave the viewer there, lost without resolution. This work is not displayed permanently but is exhibited regularly. Each time the objects, flowers and letters left by the public are disposed of, allowing the work to begin again

each time it is exhibited like the retelling of a story. In response to my enquiries the curator Ruth McDougall wrote:

> The Queensland Art Gallery retains close contact with Dadang regarding the documentation of his work and in consultation with him; the ephemera left by visitors to the installation is not kept. The personal act of giving, not collecting is felt to be the focus of the work and as such the work invites visitors to respond anew, each time it is exhibited (McDougall 2006).

While Christanto's work powerfully enacts the searching associated with mourning, the works of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook address the sense of presence and calling-out. In June 2005, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsnook represented Thailand at the Venice Biennale alongside the posthumous exhibition of work by Montien Boonma. The exhibition, entitled *Those Dying Wishing to Stay, Those Living Preparing to Leave* (curated by Luckana Kunavichayanont, Sutee Kunavichayanont, and Panya Vijinthanasarn) is an exemplar of one of the main arguments of this chapter: works made in response to untimely death and ambiguous loss are substantially different to works made in response to mortality awareness and, in particular, work made with the knowledge of the certainty of, or immanent death. It is not surprising that the choice of these two artists concerned with grief should come after the devastation of the Asian tsunami, and this exhibition contrasts with the joyful celebratory spectacle that the Thai contingent offered in 2003. Their works incorporate very specific Thai references – architecture and literature, but the responses are universal.[6] In a radio interview the novelist Israeli Amos Oz, referring to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict said 'our dreams are all the same'. Not only are our dreams the same but so too are our fears, those horrors that haunt our waking. From the mother in the refugee camp who cuts up her identity photo and pins it to aid workers' shirts in the hope her lost children will recognize the fragment and eventually locate her, to the child survivor of the Beslan massacre who draws detailed and elaborate pictures of her captors in order to ritually tear them up and burn them in an attempt to exorcise her horrors, there is a universal vocabulary of pain (MacLoed 2005).[7]

6 For a discussion of cultural differences and responses to the dead see Klass and Roberts 1999.

7 In a *Guardian* article written by Donald MacLeod Wednesday August 3 2005, 'Academic finds Beslan still traumatized by school siege', MacLeod discusses the work of Dr. Cerwyn Moore, a lecturer from Nottingham Trent University, U.K. who had spent in Beslan as part of his research on the motivation of suicide Bombers. Moore stated 'For the survivors of the siege, especially the children, the trauma continues and there has been little in the way of psychological help ... Many adults showed clear signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and other conditions. The vast majority of people we spoke to had not come to terms with it psychologically'.

While the work of both artists is linked by their response to grief, the works demonstrate the different positions in relation to bereavement. Rasdjarmrearnsnook (1953-) lost her mother, father, grandfather, and half-sister. Montien Boonma died of cancer in 2000 shortly after the death of his wife from the same disease. For the purposes of this chapter I will focus on the work of Rasdjarearnsook.

The works of Rasdjarearnsook and Christanto refer to specific personal losses, however, when exhibited they often have a site specific element in that they are often linked with a local sense of loss. In 2003 Rasdjarmrearnsook exhibited *Lament* at the Tensta Art Gallery in Stockholm. On September 11th, Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh was murdered. A photo of Lindh stood in the entrance hall of the gallery, adding to the poignancy of the Rasdjarearnsook's work. One of the works exhibited was *I am Living* (2002). This video installation showed Rasdjarearnsook placing brightly coloured clothes over the body of a dead girl laid out on the floor of a morgue. This could appear like a macabre form of dressing dolls, a horrific sight which could evoke the abject. However, rather than revulsion, this work seems to offer tenderness and through this act of caring we can look.

The work of preparing the dead for their journey, like the task of nursing people into the world, is, in many cultures, the preserve of women. The clothes that the dead wear testify to the life they once had. The sterile setting of the morgue and the cruelty of death rob these bodies of individuality and any memory of the life they once were. Rather than anonymous bodies Rasdjarearnsook returns 'personality' to them. Here we see evidence of the stage beyond the abject, the promised 'rebirth against abject' introduced at the very end of Kristeva's essay to offer hope after abjection (Kristeva 1982, 31). This work by Rasdjarearnsook is evidence that a rebirth is not the only possibility, but that love, caring and tenderness can allow a passage through to acceptance. Coming from a culture (Southern Ireland) where the professionalization and commercialization of the management of death is a relatively recent phenomenon, I am not shocked by the tending of a corpse in the way that viewers coming from societies that abdicated this task to strangers and professionals might be. It is common now for most people in the Global North to have no experience of bereavement until well into their middle age and even then to have no contact with the corpse. The frankness with which Rasdjarearnsook approaches her subjects is testimony to her lack of, or at least her attempts to confront, the fear of death.

In his foreword to the programme book that accompanied *Those Dying Wishing to Stay, Those Living Preparing to Leave* Apinan Poshyananda states:

> By questioning the function and validity of art in society, some Thai artists have explored the potential of contemporary art as a healing force for mental relief. Others have created work as a space of refuge, contemplation, and communication beyond death (Poshyananda quoted in Sukhsvasti 2005).

The works of both Christanto and Rasdjarmrearnsook assert the role of art in society as a political tool, a means of drawing attention to extraordinary atrocities that cannot be spoken about in other media, or certainly not in the same way. This also involves art in addressing the universal ordinary atrocity, death, about which we avoid speaking. They offer a possibility of healing, and in the case of Christanto the possibility of forgiveness. *They Give Evidence* affords the viewer an opportunity to participate, and through this participation, not only complete the acting works, but also create their own rituals. The responses to *They Give Evidence* are not literal responses about the work but because of the work. The slowed time of ephemerality offers the time of grief and gives permission to mourn in a time when we are encouraged to 'move on'. These works do not ask us to forget or to 'get over' pain but to accept it and to find a way of living with it. In Mieke Bal's discussion of the work of Andreas Serrano she evocatively describes Serrano's ability to transform the abject body; in these works we can also see this transformation. She describes how the abject dead body becomes a powerful monument, brought to life by the '..."maternal love" – the slowed-down look that grazes the object, caresses it, and surrounds it with care...' (Bal 1999, 60). This is not death infecting life, but death as the inevitable consequence of living and the pain as the inevitable consequence of loving; this is what lies beyond abjection.

In Barbara Campbell's web-based durational performance *1001 Nights* the narrative of bereavement and searching appears on the introductory page of her web site. It reads:

> In a faraway land a gentle man dies. His bride is bereft. She travels across continents looking for a reason to keep living. Every night at sunset she is greeted by a stranger who gives her a story to heal her heart and continue with her journey. She does so for 1001 nights (Campbell 2006).

The introduction also makes reference to keeping the 'project alive'. Each day Campbell scans the press coverage of events in the Middle East and selects a word or phrase that has 'generative potential'. She renders the phrase in watercolours and posts it on her site to act as a prompt for writers to submit stories. The same evening at sunset Campbell performs a work based on the submitted stories live on the web. This process will continue for 1,001 nights. When I first started following this work it was performed from Paris; since then, Campbell has performed from various locations around the world, which means that the viewer must follow the sunset to catch her performance. The link between the performer and Scheherazade may be obvious but it is no less powerful for this. Scheherazade told stories to save her life as the bereaved do. The telling of bereavement stories is part of the process of assimilating information that can be too difficult to believe. The narrator is not simply telling the story to others so that they may know but so that they themselves might be able to believe. The book in which Scheherazade appears is set in the East, like the news stories which give rise to Campbell's prompts. Speaking about *1001 Nights* Campbell states: 'The stories within will be set in 'the East' but you

may never venture there yourself because this East exists in the kingdom of the fantastic that is called the imaginary. It is a land formed out of words and desires' (Campbell 2007). Interestingly, this performance also takes place in another land formed out of words and desires – on the Internet. This land, like the land inhabited by the bereaved, is disconnected.

These works highlight the difficulty of confounding the requirement for permanence and the myth of immortality, even for the makers of the works themselves. In some of these works we are deprived of the dissociation which museums can offer, even in the presence of deeply emotional work. The possibility of an institutional anaesthetic facilitated by architecture, gilded frames and plinths has been removed. In relinquishing the myth of permanence and immortality, they speak a truth that may be too hard to bear and be easily dismissed as 'sentimental'. Through their ephemerality, they offer us knowledge not just of art and the role it plays in our world view, but of mourning. They 'speak' about the unspeakable which renders us mute, they speak of loving and the pain of loss and of being left behind. What is significant about these works is that they are active. In this they differ radically from death works which are static; death masks capture the frozen moment of death; ephemeral works begin with death and are alive. Their very transience creates a new life, if only the surrogate life of art. If we sacrifice our need for permanence, if we can make the shift in value orientation that transience requires, we have an opportunity to appreciate the here and now, the changing work, alive in the moment and soon to be gone. Our lives, and the lives of those we love, are chancy and short. This is the lesson of these works of art – the knowledge of what it is to be lost.

Being Lost (Part 2)

> Sometimes death does not come suddenly but is a slow process of loss. The dying gradually lose those characteristics which define us as living – speech, sight, hearing, laughter, swallowing, digestion, excretion, wakefulness – until all that is left is the slightest neurological function that maintains the heart and lungs, just barely enough of those autonomic actions to sustain life. Despite the signs of extinguishing life, we hope for a recovery and when that is no longer possible, at least for a halting of the decay that progresses slowly towards death itself. At every increment of loss we beg for respite – what more can we cope with losing, allow us to keep this much, this much will do, this much life is enough. But, it does not halt, deaf and determined, the cancer grows, overpowering yet another vital nerve, another fine string connecting the brain to those organs we had taken for granted, the spleen, the pancreas, the liver, the kidneys. The moment of death is as slight as all those other moments, just one more electrical impulse fading. Yet, that one moment was the difference between all and nothingness, between hope and hopelessness. Here the threshold is infinitely fine – life and then death. Did we even see it or is it only known to us in hindsight when we can recall and

say 'that moment there – that was the last moment of life'. And the next, was that the moment of death or had we moved into a new form of time? Time now is not measured by change, for the dead remain fixed and unchanging. Is this the meaning of eternity? Now there is no chance of a reprieve, no possibility of remission, or of the longed-for plateau in the bleak descent into the abyss of dying.

In the insanity that follows there is no point in checking that there may have been a mistake, no need to look for a pulse, death is too final, completely sure of itself, it leaves no room for doubt. The old myths of redemption, of resurrection, provide no comfort and we must create another. Now we must find other stories to tell ourselves, new possibilities to hold on to. In the face of the confidence of death we attempt to create doubt, to create possibilities no matter how ludicrous. We press our lips to the stones in the graveyard but it is hard and cold. We curl up on the grave to be near them but it does not accommodate us. Instead, we find consolation in the sea. We become obsessed with the ocean and those who have been lost at sea. We envy their mourners, they have possibilities, they have a dreamland of sunny islands and shipwrecks. This we know is not real but it will do. It is no more unreal than our hope of a cure and so it provides a focus, a way of communicating with the dead, a means of keeping them alive and of preparing for their return. We do not look at photographs because that would be about the past and memorializing. We want a future for the dead, with us, so we dream awake of their survival on a distant shore. For months we make images of objects to send to those lost at sea – the things they may have neglected to take, not knowing that their journey was going to be a long one. We are mothers, we have responsibilities, we must remind people to wash their teeth, to eat well, to keep warm, to take their gloves and button up their coats. They will need fresh fruit, a hot water bottle, maps and directions. We think of all the things we forgot to teach them. They will need to know about the planets and how to navigate by the stars, they will need to learn to tie knots, make string, and make bricks to build houses. They will need to know about us, our culture, the things we have produced that exhibit those qualities of humans of which we are proud, lest they forget all this on that island where they have washed ashore. We will keep a place for them here for their return, we will talk about them so they know we haven't forgotten them, we will remind ourselves what they look like so that we will not fail to recognize them when we open the door and they are there, wet and tired from their journey.

Others tell us 'We are sorry for your loss', and we are relieved that they are colluding with us that our loved ones may be found again. We have all agreed this is the best way to proceed, to delude ourselves with the help of kindness, which does not confront us with the truth. No one says 'don't you remember the funeral? the coffin? the headstone?' those landlocked solid reminders of the truth. But we arranged those things for others, to comfort them, to trick them

into believing we would survive, to show we could perform the dignified rituals our culture demands, without shouting or raising our fist to the air and screaming 'give them back', 'they are ours', 'we need them, you do not'. We protested with art, we read poems that said those things for us, which discreetly refuse to be dignified, to be accepting. For the poet can object passionately and then others can enjoy the transformed grief, the beauty of the language. But beauty was not what we intended – we wanted to give voice to our pain, our ugly untransformed grief. These poems are our language because they speak a truth that is too hard even to say and so we become mute except for rhymes, like Alzheimer's sufferers who can remember only things learnt by heart. We too only had our learnt by heart information but in the end it is of little use.

We know there is a limit to our comforting fantasy of loss and learn to keep it secret. After a time people start to speak of our lost ones in the past tense, they no longer write their names on Christmas cards, in phone calls they do not send their love, they do not send birthday cards or invitations to parties. The others know they are not coming back and hope that we do too. But we do not give up, we stand on the shore and hear the water rushing over the pebbles, clinking the little stones together before rushing out again and we wait and watch. Sometimes we swim far out to sea to be near then. We stay in the water too long until we are exhausted.

It is not the dead who are lost, who are on a distant island, it is we who are lost, it is we who have drowned and been washed up on the shore of a strange country. We do not recognize this land and we feel numb. When we walk in cities we hold hands because we are afraid that we will become more terribly lost. We are nervous crossing streets because the world has become unreliable and strange, we do not know where we are going. The dead have no need of knowing where they are but we are alive and adrift in a landscape of death where we feel marked. We have been infected with death and the knowledge of fragility it has taught is. In other places, they know this about us and are afraid of those who have witnessed death, who have had it in their home, and they send them away until it has left them. We do not need to be sent away for we have already left and we do not know if we will ever find our way back. We do not know if we want to go back for there is a comfort in being lost. Being lost now is our form of fidelity – without our dead ones we are lost and if we return to the world we may lose them again, lose the possibility that being lost gives us, we may find them gone forever. When you are lost you have a task, you leave breadcrumbs for others who may come this way, like others have done for you. We remember having seen these signs but did not understand them. We start to recognize others who are also in this world, their clothes are not torn, they do not wear a sign openly but you can spot them and you nod to each other. You gesture 'I know you', 'you are here too'. It may be years before we speak, before we share our stories of being lost at sea and washed up on this shore. We are surprised how the stories

are the same, how we drowned and sank to the depths and were cold and numb and slept a deep sleep where eyeless fish eat our hearts in the dark and left us thin and hollow and didn't dream for fear of recalling happiness and waking to find it gone. Now we find pleasure in absence, because absence is all we have. We are not part of the world of others with their lofty towers. These are pointless and foolish; do they not know they will not save them? They think that by making them tall they will be able to see them from afar when they are lost, but they are deluded. In our country the rules have changed, it is not enduring monuments which help us find where we are. Instead we seek out the fleeting, the transient. Even among the ancient stones of the Alhambra, we know that with our feet, with our breath we are wearing it away. We fill our pockets with seeds and these give us hope. We have vomited, we have cried, we have screamed in an attempt to expel the knowledge we have learnt, but it will not leave us. Meaning has collapsed but we find new meaning in this place and the death holds no fear for us. For others the world is round but for us the world is flat and like explorers, we may fall off but we are not afraid.

Ognuno sta solo sul cuor della terra trafitto da un raggio di sole: ed è subito sera.

Each one stands alone at the heart of the earth, pierced by a ray of sunlight: and soon it is evening (Quasimodo 2004/1942, xix).

References

Auslander, P. (1999), *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge).

Bal, M. (1999), *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

Bauman, Z. (1992), *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* (Cambridge: Polity).

Becker, E. (1973), *The Denial of Death* (London: Free Press).

Bowlby, J. (1988), 'Introduction to the First Edition', in Colin Murray Parkes, *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life* (London: Penguin), 11–13.

Braun M.J. and Berg D.H. (1994), 'Meaning construction in the experience of parental bereavement', *Death Studies* 18:2, 105–129.

Cambell, B. "1001 Nights" <http://1001.net.au/> Last accessed 8 May 2006.

Durrant, S. (1999), 'Bearing Witness to Apartheid: J.M. Coetzee's Inconsolable Works of Mourning', *Contemporary Literature* 40:3, 430–463.

Foster, H. (1996), *Return of the Real: Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press).

Freud, S. (1961) *Letters of Sigmund Freud, 1873–1939*, Ernst L. Freud (ed.) (London: Hogarth Press).

Gray, A. 'Dadang Christanto: A calling to account' <http://www.realtimearts.net/rt56/gray.html> Last accessed 5 July 2006.

Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S., Rosenblatt, A., Veeder, M., Kirkland, S., and Lyon, D. (1990), 'Evidence for terror management theory: II. The effects of mortality salience reactions to those who threaten or bolster the cultural worldview', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58, 308–318.

Klass, D. and Goss, R. (1999), 'Spiritual bonds to the dead in cross-cultural and historical perspective: comparative religion and modern grief', *Death Studies* 23:6, 547–67.

Kristeva, J. (1982), *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press).

MacLeod, D. (2005), 'Academic finds Beslan still traumatized by school siege', *The Guardian* 3 August. Available online at: <http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/news/story/0,1559887,00.html> Last accessed 8 June 2008.

McDougall, R. (2006) Personal correspondence, 1 January.

O'Neill, M (2008), 'Ephemeral Art: Mourning and Loss', in J. Schachter and S. Brockman (eds.), *Impermanence: Cultures in/out of Time* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press).

Parkes, C. M. (1986), *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life* (London: Tavistock).

Phelan, P. (1993), *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge).

Romanoff, B. D., and Terenzio, M. (1998), 'Rituals and the grieving process', *Death Studies* 22, 697–711.

Sukhsvasti, U. (2005) 'Waking the Dead', *Bangkok Post*, 6 May.

Worden, W. (1991), *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (London: Routledge).

Quasimodo, S. (2004/1942), 'Ed e Subito Sera', in R.L. Payne *A Selection of Modern Italian Poetry in Translation* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press).