

## “Sustained Mourning”

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I am working on a performance work titled Mourning, scheduled to premier in the fall of 2007. When a press person asked me about the title, I said that I considered mourning one of the essential components of human survival and a continuous motif for Eiko & Koma’s works since 9/11. Furthermore I consider it is possible to create art works in order to sustain mourning and share such “sustained mourning” with others so as not to forget but not to avenge. As such we have created Offering (2002) and performed it as free admission outdoor works in 40 public places. We also created and performed Death Poem (2006) after experiencing a death of a close friend.

In day-to-day conversation, the word *mourning* brings with it an interesting uneasiness because it involves seemingly contradictory references. When one is said to be (*in*) *mourning*, one can be breaking down emotionally or just following a convention. I am interested in the relationship between the emotional and the conventional and how art can be created from and function as mourning. The former, the grief of losing the loved object, is brilliantly analyzed by Sigmund Freud in his “Mourning and Melancholia,” and the latter, the convention of sorrow when mourning a death, materializes in various funeral rituals and customs.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, I have used the word *mourning* in yet another way, or perhaps in a way that synthesizes the two meanings above. This definition takes into account how art, rituals, and human thoughts are created and function as “sustained mourning.” Despite the psychoanalytic or customary references the word *mourning* carries in academia, I cannot find any other word but *mourning* to

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud in his “Mourning and Melancholia,” A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud. 124-140.

describe what goes on in my mind when I read a page of atomic bomb literature, when I hear the victims' names read in a 9/11 memorial, or when I miss a friend who has died.

Though I realize there is a logical difference in mourning for someone I have loved and mourning for victims I have not met, what is common in my mind is that what I call *mourning* is both quieter and more sustainable than the way Freud describes either mourning or melancholia.<sup>2</sup> When a close friend or a family member dies, while one can experience pathological grievance, others can create a place and time for mourning. This mourning is not necessarily a process that should be completed as soon as possible so that the ego becomes free and uninhibited.<sup>3</sup> Nor do I mean a pathological melancholia in which there is destructive withdrawal and a “fall in self-esteem.” For my friend, I miss her existence while still remaining interested in others; in this missing, she is still dying and my mourning acknowledges the process of her death as well as the passage of her life.



Photo 1 Eiko in *Offering*.

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<sup>2</sup> In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud wrote that mourning is the reaction to the loss of a loved person or to the loss of some abstraction. In mourning, a person tests the reality that “the loved object no longer exists.” Temporarily incapable to adopt any new object of love, for a period of time he/she loses interest in the outside world. When the work of mourning is completed, the “detachment of the libido from the object” is accomplished, and the ego becomes “free and uninhibited.” Melancholia is what happens when the work of mourning is not completed, and the bereaved subject cannot successfully detach the libido from the object. Instead, the object is introverted in order to prolong a psychic connection with the lost object. This, Freud describes as a “pathological disposition,” and “painful dejection,” accompanied by “inhibition of activities” and “fall in self-esteem” (125-127).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 127.

In mourning, one spends time to remember someone/something and learn about loss. I want this mourning to continue as a part of my living. This desire, for the sake of distinction, I would call “sustained mourning.” It is this “sustained mourning” I wish to honor by translating a work of atomic bomb literature as my thesis. It is with this “sustained mourning” I believe Hayashi continues to write. It is this “sustained mourning” that has also motivated my post-9/11 dance performances.

While Death Poem was a reflection on the personal process of dying, I consider the creation and presenting of the outdoor work Offering as a way of constructing a process of an artistic, secular ritual of “sustained mourning” in a public environment. Performing both works is also a process of my embodied research about how humans mourn and participate in mourning rituals from which I find the following.



photo 2. Eiko in Death Poem

Death is the ancient truth. While no other thing comes so surely and so equally to everyone as death, one can never experience one's own death. By the time one experiences a death he/she is dead. While being alive, one can only learn about death by attending the deaths of others. Mourning is attending death, in that we learn that just as birth is a process, not a point in time, death too is a process. And like decay, mourning too may occur before as well as after a death is medically determined.

According to Freud's analysis, the process of mourning tells a mourner "a loved object no longer exists" and this initiates a struggle between the need to "withdraw libido from its attachment" and man's general unwillingness to abandon a "libido-position" (127). In my mourning, since it does not present pathological conditions, I do not seek an "uninhibited" ego or completion of "detachment." I consider certain historical or personal losses/traumas too significant to become free and uninhibited. In mourning one acknowledges that "a loved object" really existed. This is a quiet protest to forgetfulness. In "sustained mourning," as in prayer and as in art, one lives while giving attention to what one has lost. The awareness of loss brings the awareness of lack of the object. This awareness of lack helps one understand that the reality of the present is connected to the past through the action of missing. I consider living with an acknowledgement of our loss an antidote for human aggression and restlessness, something art can aim to offer.

Mourning rituals give mourners who have had first-person relationships with the dead an opportunity to grieve. Others, who are further removed, are there to observe and learn. This observation/learning is an important function of mourning rituals. In gathering or sending condolences, out of you, I, and he/she, "we" emerges. What connects each participant to "us" is death. Contemplation brings the dead and the dying closer to us, the

living. Thus I look at mourning rituals as an ancient and empathetic practice on which contemporary “sustained mourning” and arts that mourn can be developed.

When many people die together, death becomes more visible in a grotesque way. Massive death and the suffering that goes with each death accumulate and can create a huge negative space, in which each death is no longer personal. Often annual memorials are offered as people recognize that it takes “sustained mourning” to regain each death as a personal process. When intentional violence takes lives, the *process* of each death becomes a tormented one. Our common reaction in the face of aggression is accusation. Without that aggression, those people did not have to die, at least not then or in that way. The *equality* of death is broken down. Unfairness is upsetting. Those killed lost not only their lives but their inherent right to die their own deaths. A mourner is often trapped in his/her hate and fear that is caused by aggression in which grief can be repressed. As a result both victim and mourner are traumatized. By performing Offering I hope that the ritual of “sustained mourning” can *civilize* the potent desire that the emotionally or physically wounded have for revenge. Extending mourning to “sustained mourning” means taking time in addressing our emotion and the existence and nonexistence of others. By taking time I hope to gain the opportunity to learn that every enemy is only another human being, and that every victim has a potential aggressor within.