

In Conversation:
Homi K. Bhabha and Taryn Simon

Homi K. Bhabha: It's a great pleasure to be here with you, Taryn—as a tribute to the work and to the work of mourning, because these are professional mourners after all, and mourning is, psychically, as Freud said, a form of *work*. Mourning is a work that you do on yourself, privately, but you also do publicly and institutionally: there is private, public, and civic death. And I think one of the important things about *An Occupation of Loss*, which is in part sonic and in part oral, in part visual, in part structural, architectural, poetic, is the fact that another context is being made for these professional mourners.

One should not think about it as a kind of ethnographic exercise in comparative mourning. That's not what it is, in my view, and that's not where its power lies. The work is powerful because it is specifically sited *here and now* in the US. Through the incidents of war, through the deaths of kids on the street, through Black Lives Matter, through the dire loss of civility, probity, and veracity that has grabbed democratic discourse by the throat—things that are happening in this country, at this time, make us think about death and mourning here. Citizenly death, as well as phenomenological death, ethical death, these are strong symbolic presences of this work. After all, a lot of American foreign policy in recent years has been executed through the instrument of war, and war brings with it mourning and desolation. And this is true even if war is waged in the name of democracy or security.

So, I think that the multiple voices that you've put together speak to me in that way about this country, at this time. How did the idea come to you originally?

Taryn Simon: I was introduced to the practice of professional mourning in accounts of the Battle of Karbala and the ongoing mourning that occurred thereafter. Also by a work of fiction in which a leading character's emotional state and tears were generated by payment—both led me to think about the performance of what appears to be our deepest emotions.

My research into the performance of grief happened to align with a time in which it felt as though there was a marked increase in the public broadcasting of tragedy. I started thinking about how we mourn, individually, nationally, globally—how organized religion, government, or civic leadership guides and shapes mourning and how citizens are organized in those moments of loss.

Presidential responsibilities include leading the nation through events and difficulties like the ones you mention—a terrorist attack, extrajudicial killings, mass tragedies. In recent memory, the one that always stands out in people's minds is President Obama's eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney, a victim of the mass shooting at Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina, where he broke out into "Amazing Grace." It became indelible because it felt genuine and real and it registered as spontaneous emotion. Professional mourners skate that line between performance and authenticity, between ceremony and spontaneity. And in that

third space that opens up—a space that is neither reality nor fiction, a space that is maybe both at the same time—they are shaping those around them.

Professional mourners are committed to generating emotion. Their practice reflects a similar impulse in political and private behavior. I was thinking about the power that is established through the creation of that emotional space, but also the contradictions, and why the generation of emotion is seemingly required to punctuate these moments.

Bhabba: The contradiction of being a professional mourner? Is that the contradiction or duality you're referring to?

Simon: Yes—being authentic and scripted simultaneously, being of the past and the future simultaneously, being with the living and the dead simultaneously, and shaping and inhabiting emotion. The literal exhibition of tears stands somewhere between reality and performance. Yet loss yields an emotional space and vulnerability in which individuals seem to operate without artifice—an unspeakable state in which it appears we access a true, individual self. I wanted to look at the potential of this space and question the mechanics of it—the way it can be programmed and performed.

The ambiguity is disarming for an audience who observes real tears during an act of mourning and then, twenty minutes later, sees the professional mourner walking out of the performance in a completely different spirit. The audience learns, only retroactively, that most of the performers regularly mourn at funerals and sometimes on larger stages. For them, it is a profession.

Bhabba: I want to pursue this issue a little bit. When they . . . they're actors, as you say, or they're professional mourners, they're not exactly actors, but they're professional mourners . . .

Simon: Yes, it's vague, it's confusing . . . it's a position that's hard to actually clarify.

Bhabba: Actors shed elephant tears, they take on other people's lives, they play out the sense of loss both in language and gesture, and they live, as it were, on the cusp of life and death because they are playing people who are absent, whether they're fictional or otherwise. Let me say that as somebody whose central practice includes photography, the photograph is philosophically, if you think about it, something very similar—it's always on the cusp of life and death because the image brings something to life, the image gives you a picture of life of one kind or another, even if it's an abstract image, but in a way to get that image, the original—and of course with virtual work or digital work the notion of the original becomes problematic—there is always another object that is being represented. Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, when they talk about the fact that death haunts the photograph they're not only talking about the fact that people often had photographs made on occasions that they knew would pass . . . There is always this notion with a photograph, and indeed with death itself, that it is a complete erasure, it is a stoppage of time, and therefore you need ways of continuing and need ways in the future of making the memory or the history hold those things together. Coincidentally, I am working on a concept that I call *camera mortis*, in a generally figurative sense, which plays off Barthes's *camera lucida* . . .

Simon: Making the invisibility of loss visible.

Bhabba: Yes, to make it experiential. Sometimes it's visible, sometimes in

language it's much more experiential, sometimes in narratives or stories it becomes much more phenomenological, or in models it becomes embodied if you have a sculpture. So I think there is an interesting link between the concept of death and its continuity, its representations in this work, and your interest in photography. It seems to me that the notion of afterlife—not even absence and presence, but the afterlife of things—has been quite important to your work. And when you think about the afterlife, then past and present are not simply what went before and what came after; you have to recalibrate the way in which time works, and I think photography does that. I think this is very important in all of your work and really makes us think about the present and where we make our intervention.

Hearing you talk now, I was thinking about mourning or death, grief, and *spontaneity*. And on the other side, not inauthenticity, but the power of technologies of meaning, technologies of structure, architectures that creatively mediate the state of mourning. Now of course the crassest thing is what you see on television: the manipulation of people's grief into anger, frustration, xenophobia, racism. But as a photographer and, in a way, as a sculptural artist in this project, technologies are also *ethical* mediums and that is something that I want to explore with you. The aesthetic mediation of mourning is not necessarily spontaneous, just as, indeed, these professional mourners are not spontaneous. There is, however, a kind of communicational ethic about their mediation. And the artifice of mourning—whether it is embodied in photography, performance, sculpture, or poetry—intensifies the affective capability of communication because it is more than simply a subjective “expression” of an idea or an emotion: it is an act of transference, a process of translation that moves between the work and the viewer in order to elide the sovereignty or *givenness* of both in order to create a “third” space—one that emerges out of the imminent experience of being there, *face to face*, and yet is always a little displaced, at an anamorphic angle. And so the artifice of mourning or the artifice of loss is something that I find very challenging in my own work. I'm writing about it at the moment in terms of the refugee crisis, but I'm just as interested in your understanding of this very close relationship between the photograph and the whole act of death and loss.

Simon: A photograph breaks time's continuum and marks something that is gone and lost. I was thinking about that in the design of the installation. Humans have been marking loss physically since the times of the Neanderthals—making it visible. Not just death, but loss. Scale often corresponds to a certain level of grief, whether it be national, global, or individual. The concrete, modular installation has a monumental appearance but was inspired by the subterranean form of the well. I was initially drawn to their sonic properties, and by inverting their structure—literally flipping it upright—I was able to reference their invisible scale.

Bhabba: We've talked about the monumentality of the *mise-en-scène* of this installation: a work of performance, as well as a work of architectural affect. Now I want to begin to ask you about looking at the work from the perspective of the professional mourners who've been brought here from several countries and several cultures, where mourning happens in particular contexts. I have suggested that their intervention here is important because they productively unsettle the patriotic, often xenophobic, nature of self-mourning and martyrdom in powerful countries. How do the performers see what they're doing? What is their perception, what do they feel that they're doing?

Simon: Professional mourners operate within and direct the abstract space that opens up in and after loss. They describe their role as both spectator and subject. In occupying both roles, they maintain enormous agency in this space. As a result, governments and organized religion have often marginalized their practices because they threaten their authority. Populations and individuals are organized in loss through religion and governance.

Bhabba: Yes, I think that may well be so, particularly among governments that want to control the religious beliefs and the religious cultures of their populations.

Simon: These systems maintain order, as loss opens up a space in which change and disruption can occur. I was interested in the systems that shape and manage grief—ones that stand outside of systems of modern governance and religion. The origins of these mourning practices in *An Occupation of Loss* are rooted in pre-Christian and pre-Islamic eras.

Bhabba: The meditation on death makes me think that not all deaths are the same. That is one of the elusive qualities of dying—death reduces everybody to this kind of inanimate state. But what happens around the ritual of death, whether it's on the scale of the family and community, or on the scale of the nation, is the storyline that attaches to the death. It can be the death of a million people by starvation, it can be the death of 200,000 people crossing the Mediterranean in the migration crisis, it can be the death of a single boy, Alan Kurdi, found on a beach in Turkey, it can be the death of a great hero, of a great national figure. So, in a way, death in itself defies definition, and yet professional mourners of various traditions weave a narrative to keep alive in words and music and other kinds of sonic material, or sonic mediations, the presence of somebody or something. You talked to me a long time ago in remarkable and now I think visionary detail about the practice of mourning, and the importance of sound as a form of sadness and a form of managing loss.

Many of your projects are measures of how the state deals with certain problems which you then translate into a figurative form—photographic, sculptural, written, whatever. And so I'd like to talk more about your practice. It seems to me that for you the research is hugely important, the research is deeply interdisciplinary and across institutions and the interesting thing about this—and I think it's very important—is that increasingly we can't draw a clear, bright line between research and exhibition.

Simon: There were endless stops and starts and difficulties along the way. The most anxious aspect was applying for visas and awaiting responses from USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services) to allow each mourner entry into the US. We worked for years researching these practices, collaborating with each individual performer, collaborating with linguists, anthropologists, musicologists, and academics, formulating the performance, designing, and constructing this massive sculpture—without ever knowing if anyone would be granted entry in the end. The P-3 visa petition insists on piles of expert testimonials validating each performer as “culturally unique” according to government standards. In addition to a mountain of evidence and paperwork, each artist had a personal recommendation letter from a Senator and House Representative. Despite all that, we still had a number of groups that were denied entry.

In the end, the final work was in many ways curated—unbeknownst to them—by the US government, because the absence and presence of performers was determined by their permission.



P-3 Visa Petition (“Artist or Entertainer Coming to Be Part of a Culturally Unique Program”) submitted to U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS), *An Occupation of Loss*, 2016

Bhabha: I think that your work is important not simply for the final product, but for all of the processes that go into the work: the bureaucratic processes, the conceptual processes, the journalistic processes, the archival processes, the conversations with anthropologists, the conversations with legal scholars. All of that archive may not be immediately visible to the viewer, but it is very much part of the internal structure of the work, because death in a way is about the loss of all time. After death, there is no time, except the time of memory or the time of history, which tries to hold on to the individual or the event as it has passed. But the concept of dying is a much slower, much less sudden concept. What you make us think about is the long process, the legal process, the bureaucratic process, the protracted process of delays, and different kinds of temporality, different kinds of time that eventually lead to the performers to be able to do their work and for you to be able to construct the *mise-en-scène* for the work. In a strange way the work is always dying to be born . . .

So, I'd like to put it to you that in all of your work, the whole process of production is as important as what you see on the gallery wall or on the evening of a performance. I think that's one of the most interesting things about the work. The choices you make in bringing all of these different knowledges to bear on an image or in an installation—that's really what fascinates me because it is not a traditional art practice. And I refuse to treat those processes as somehow outside of the work; these are not just things you have to do to make your work, these things are part of the work itself.

Simon: The projects would never take the final form they do without those

processes. They are the element that is hidden, and sometimes out of control; they stand in for the accident, the mess—I'm thinking of the empty portraits in *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*, formed by institutional and individual rejections and absences. But in *An Occupation of Loss*, for the first time, I explicitly revealed a step-by-step of bureaucratic processes through the public documentation of the visa process, the movement of bodies across borders, and the hierarchies in art and culture. But the audience only receives this contextualizing data after experiencing the performance. This data is presented in a booklet that includes the visa petitions of each mourner alongside descriptions of each mourning practice written by individuals that the government has accepted as "experts."

The unspeakable, intangible, sonic properties of the act of mourning—beyond text, without language—led me away from a photograph or text, and instead to performance. The use of speech, instrument, and sound in radical ways transcends text and standard forms of comprehension.

Bhabba: The project, then, is about the problem of migration in the largest sense, not even in the most immediate one . . .

Simon: The process makes you think again about authority. Who can be an academic? Who is a voice that can attest to somebody's value and practice and define it? And how does the government actually organize that and create answers? There are a lot of seemingly arbitrary rejections within our visa applications. It's hard to find a mathematics in it all.

Bhabba: With all the support and all the privilege of institution, one begins to think that when people in need—refugees or migrants—make these applications, how nakedly they stand before the justice or injustice of the state. That really came across to me very, very strongly. I am writing about the migration crisis at the moment, about how urgent and poignant the very act of walking is: how human walking constitutes the space and time of walking just in order to make a life, to find security, to build a viable home, to achieve the care of the neighbor. All the walking and the waiting is pregnant with this anxiety: "Am I going to be let in? Am I going to be caught? Am I not going to be? How do I present myself?" So I think there's a great tension around this work. Some of it is within it; some of it is without, in the moment that surrounds it and gives it birth while it encounters death. Your work deals with the gray zones—but not only with the gray zones between truth and lie, text and image, realism and abstraction, but also with social and political gray zones.

Simon: Yes, and explicitly in loss—the vulnerable, unspeakable gray zone opened up by loss, death, or displacement, where individuals, populations, and even history can be transformed.

Bhabba: You know, there is a great irony in my talking to you. I grew up in Mumbai as a Parsi, a small minority. In the eighth century the Parsis came to India from Persia and slowly evolved over the centuries into a professional and civic-minded community with a bent towards philanthropy. They occupied a place between the British and other Indian communities. You could call them "vernacular cosmopolitans" and they had a way of placing themselves in what we today describe as an intercultural space: a space beyond the polarization of cultures, a space of cultural translation and intersection.

Our burial grounds are called the Towers of Silence—a series of towers where priests lay the dead bodies and traditionally vultures consume them. I

say this because the notion of the Towers of Silence is so different from your towers of song and wailing and mourning and music. I think there's quite a nice little contrast.

And now, since the angel of timekeeping has appeared, I think I'm going to end by simply reading a few verses from a great, very wonderful, poem by Dylan Thomas, titled "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London," and these words reverberate with the mourning sounds and wailing songs of *An Occupation of Loss*.

Never until the mankind making
Bird beast and flower
Fathering and all humbling darkness
Tells with silence the last light breaking
And the still hour
Is come of the sea tumbling in harness

And I must enter again the round
Zion of the water bead
And the synagogue of the ear of corn
Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound
Or sow my salt seed
In the least valley of sackcloth to mourn.

Thank you very much, Taryn.

Simon: Thank you.