

Lamentations rituelles

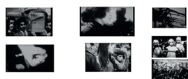
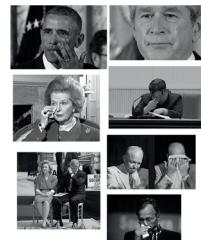
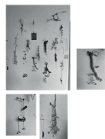
ritual lamentations

research diary

Benjamin Husson



Niccolò dell'Arca, *Lamentation on the dead Christ*, between 1463-1490



*(...) Once, ritual mourners would have been procured—
women whose job was weeping, who were paid
to howl the whole night through, when all is silent.
That's why you had to come: to claim the mourning
which we omitted. Can you hear me mourn? (...)*

extract from Rainer Maria Rilke's « Requiem for a friend », a text written in memory of the German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker, translated in English by Stephen Mitchell.

I will present, in this booklet, an overview of my journey through the question of the management of mourning through lamentation, which I now see as a repertoire of emotions, tools, forms and ideas when approaching subjects that may seem far from the funeral field at first glance. It has to be considered as a compilation of comments, research, historical analyses and very personal thoughts.

I may be wrong, but I have the feeling that this research has given me some insight into the state of individual and collective stupefaction that many of us are experiencing at the moment.

Is this daze when confronted with ecological, social and geopolitical events that are becoming more chaotic and frightening by the day, comparable to the feeling you get when you lose someone close to you?

Aren't these extreme feelings symptoms of an unconscious mourning?

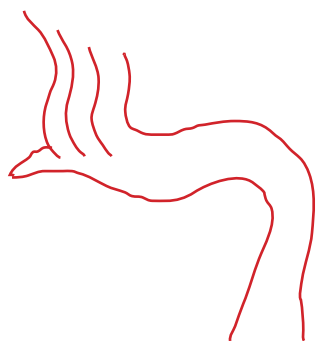
By taking an interest in the funeral rituals and traditions that have structured human history, and by observing the «survival» («Nachleben» A. Warburg) of some of them in the 21st century, I asked myself the question of their transposability to other subjects that seem to me equally haunted by the notion of loss and abandonment.

I don't have enough distance to measure the real effect this research has on my anxiety level, but I can see that it organizes my feelings, places them in a common historical perspective, makes them more banal, more sharable.

This research therefore has an influence on my art practice and on my life in general, sometimes in visible and recognizable elements, sometimes in more allegorical or more unconscious phenomena. There's probably something to be compared with the emancipatory role of "Memento Mori" for the Stoics, a reference to death that paradoxically enables us to refocus on life.

I'm going to present a few documents that I've collected and made (also in this move of emancipation) as part of a research project that doesn't really have a clear goal, and which was highlighted by 2 first projects realized in China and Georgia.

It will often be a question of movements; movements of inner transformation in the face of death, movement from the individual to the universal created by the ritual, the movements of the sarcophagus sculptures when illuminated by torchlight, to movements in the very definition of mourning and what may be lost.



The story of my encounter with a Chinese mourner.

video: archive of my encounter with a chinese «kusangren»

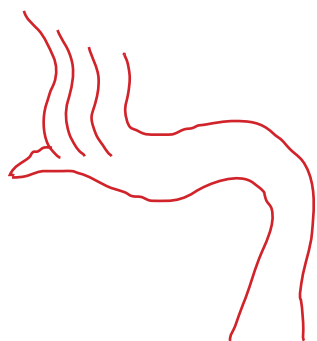
At the time, I was interested in the question of the survival of the status of professional mourners in the context of a globalized and uberized world, a paradox in which the erasure of cultural specificities clashed with the growing need to delegate the most intimate layers of our lives to professionals. I imagined a world in which mourners guaranteed their survival in the 21st century by positioning themselves in the panel of solutions created in response to our growing demand related to the end-of-life care. A kind of gentle alternative to the de-socialization of death.

It was obviously difficult to meet a professional mourner. There was first a language issue, and secondly, the translation of “Kusangren” is literally “crying woman”, so wouldn’t you be surprised if a tourist came to talk to you because he was looking for meeting a crying woman?

The limits due to my shyness, too, when it came to wandering around the cemeteries of all the towns I visited, looking for people to talk to.

Funeral professionals were understandably cautious, as mourners in China don’t seem to be officially recognized/legal and traditional funerals contradict the 100% cremation target set for China’s major cities. They are therefore only tolerated, because they are protected by a section of the population still very attached to traditional practices. It’s a very fragile status, as the State increasingly legislates on funerals, for reasons of space, public health (cremation) and ethics (prohibition of stripteases or other aggressive filling strategies during funerals).

When I finally found suitable intermediaries in my search, I had to be transferred several times until I arrived in the most discreet part of a public park. After a moment’s waiting, my intermediary announced me that she might not be coming because she wasn’t ready (in her role as intermediary with souls/death).



First surprise: the mourner finally arrived - her appearance immediately deconstructed certain clichés I'd been sorry to carry. She's a woman around my age I would say, smiling and dressed in a black and white outfit that could be described as "sportswear", with large prints/lettering on it. She was accompanied by her smiling child, who, after further discussion, seemed to follow her to every performance. Her son was holding a typical European Halloween toy, a sort of luminous plastic sword with a pumpkin skull on the hilt.

She dressed in a white cloth (a color associated with mourning in China) and before beginning the ritual, I realized that she was missing an essential accessory, which turned out to be a microphone, as she was used to amplify her voice in order to be heard in noisy city environments. Even though this place was rather quiet, this free hand was becoming problematic, which I totally understood.

The only item I possessed was a pen, which she immediately adopted as a substitute, taking it in her hand and placing it close to her lips.

Following my experience/observation of the ritual, I first wondered about the effect it had on me. A kind of emotional disruption, something destabilizing that I had never imagined I would feel in my "researcher" posture. I was temporarily more of a spectator than a recorder. So first I had to think about my own sensations, and about the reason for such an intense penetration of pathos from a ritual I didn't understand the language and which wasn't intended for me.

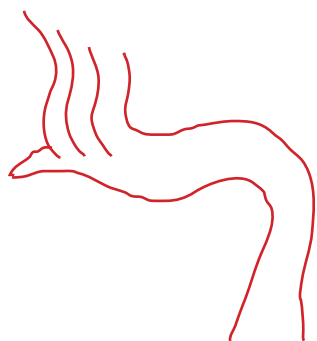
As I listened to the recordings again, I became aware of the extent to which this pathos produced images - expected images, but also images in motion, which varied according to my state.

I wondered about my own condition as a potential mourner.

Can a lamentation ritual have an effect on a non-grieving audience, or if I'm grieving, do I have to be necessarily receptive to such a ritual?

Is it possible that someone my age has never experienced mourning? Can I even be an artist if I haven't experienced mourning?

Do we talk about a classic mourning or something more abstract?



Is crying simply mechanical? Is it as easy as laughing or sneezing to provoke tears to others?

I had indeed lost my dog, a few goldfish and my mother at the time, and gone through some painful relationship break-ups, but it wasn't that kind of sadness that was stimulated either. My perception of grief had to be extended to other phenomena and questions.

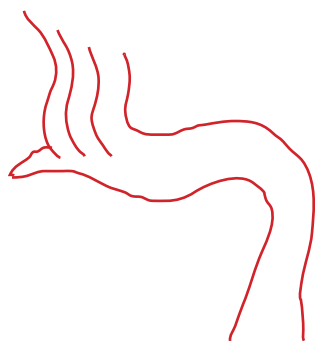
During this period, I became interested in Sigmund Freud's notion of the "mourning of abstractions" (reactions to the loss of an ideal, for example), or "anticipated mourning" (in the context of an illness or the expected and programmed disappearance of a person or an abstraction). These two extensions allowed me to extend my research to contemporary manifestations of paralysis and confusion.

From this experience, I tried to find forms and words in response to emotions that sometimes limit and restrain them. This was the beginning of the first series of sculpture-performances, which called for the public's attention through the distribution of food and alcohol.

Then, I realized that something inside me, which I couldn't explain, linked me to this woman, or rather that I, as an artist, had something in common with this mourner, who offers her services to mourning families.

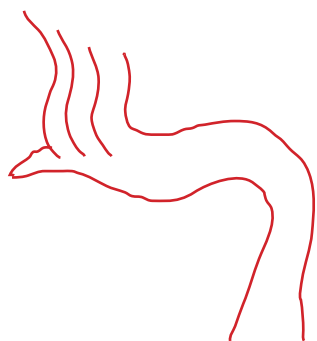
At first, I thought of very simple, rather scenic things, such as the common necessity of good management of pathos in time and space, and of her relationship with a challenging audience. I realized that she was evolving in a very fragile space that she opened up and then closed again. She used the tensions inherent in the ritual, and the tensions inherent in the context of mourning, to open up a delicate interspace in which she evolved.

These questions led me to take a closer look at the structures of the ritual, its mechanics and the patterns used in different lamentation rituals.

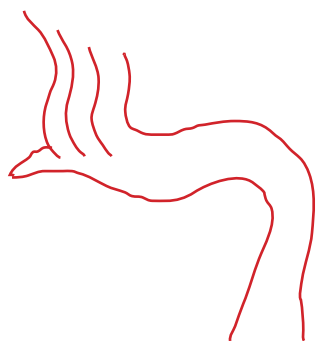


translated content of the ritual I witnessed

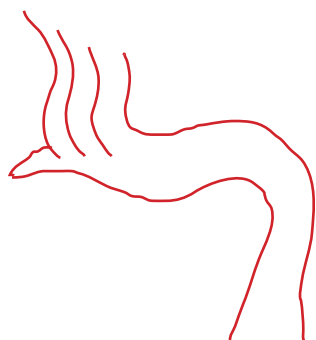
The loved one has unfortunately left for Huang Quan (underground
springs - symbolises the world of the dead)
The family's tears do not stop flowing
If we want to see his face again
It will only be in dreams
Father Ahhh
My unfortunate father Ahhh
Ahhh
In a moment
Time troubled
My dear father
You've already gone to the underground springs Ahhh
I ask the heavens but the heavens do not hear me
I call to you from the earth but the earth doesn't answer me either,
My poor father
You've gone back south
To the South Ahhh
Daddy Ahhh
My poor dad Ahhh
For many years
you have worked hard to bring up your children
You've always
sacrifice your life for your children
You eat less, you dress poorly, you live frugally
Everything you do is for the family
But now
You've gone silently
And we kneel before your coffin
We call you a thousand times



Father
Please come back
Father
Please come back
Ahhh
When I saw you at the funeral parlour (??)
My tears don't stop flowing
My dear father,
Locked up in that funeral parlour
Your daughter feels like she's in a dream
I call you one more time
My dear dad, I can't believe it
Suddenly I've lost my father
Father Ahhh
Our dear father Ahhh
We'll never forget your kindness
Everything is like a dream
Daddy Ahhh
The dear father of her children
The kind grandfather to his grandchildren
Your children bury you
Could we meet again?
Your children kneel before your coffin
How can you leave without regret?
We weep kneeling before your coffin
But where are you father?
I call you father
Please come back
Our dear father, we remember that you cared for us,
We don't forget that,
But it's like a dream
When we think of your kindness
To think of it makes you want to cry
Ahhh
Dad Ahhh, the saddest thing,
Is to lose my dear dad, Ahhh
It was you who gave me life and brought me up
You taught me to walk
It was you who took me to school
It's all thanks to you!



You gave me a new life, but now,
You can no longer speak to us
Without leaving a message, you leave without warning,
You leave for another world
A space in which the living have no place
My dear dad
Ahhh, where have you gone
Ahhh
Father tomorrow you're leaving, Ahhh
My heart aches so much
I cry out 'Father'!
I try to dry my tears, I call you 'dad' once again
My tears are still flowing
Dad Ahhh, You were worried about your children
You suffered from fatigue and deprivation
You tasted the sweetness and bitterness of life Ah!
We'll be relieved to see you again
But
If we want to see you later, It will only be in our dreams
Ahhh
Dad
Farewell



History

Depictions of mourners can be found in frescoes/sculptures dating from around 1330 BC in Egypt and the Mycenaean civilization.

The ritual of lamentation seems to have originated in a need to deal with the dangers that the mourning crisis (the direct effect of death) can have on individuals. Dangers to the physical and psychological integrity of the mourners.

In fact, different levels of crisis can be observed: the grieving person, in complete stupefaction, absents himself from reality and becomes immobilized in a sort of cadaverous rigidity, or bursts into a storm of uncontrolled, destructive and self-destructive gestures (self-mutilation/suicide). Antique representations often testify to these 2 effects.

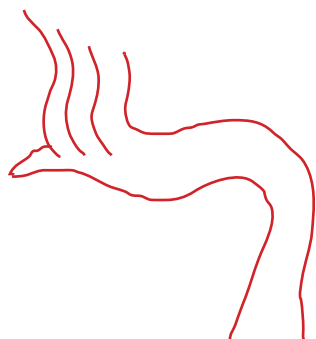
The mourning crisis would therefore lead us towards death, and the funeral rite or tradition steps in to interrupt this slide; without erasing the crisis, it gives it a framework to facilitate its passage.

The codified gestural and verbal expressions of the rite, mirror the alienated and destructive behaviors of the mourning crisis, by submitting them to the cultural discipline of the myth.

Antique representations of mourning are therefore historically identified by their postures: women with loose hair beating their chests and foreheads, tearing their clothes.

This reflects the ritual's desire to use repetition to produce a movement from the personal to the collective, a movement from disintegration to reintegration of the mourners into the ordinary, well-ordered world.

Like panel 42 of Warburg's *mnemosyns*, feelings about death undergo processes of transformation, oscillating between rage and despair, powerlessness and destruction. All this within the framework of representations of death, its theater. We find these feelings expressed in the codified narration of ritual.



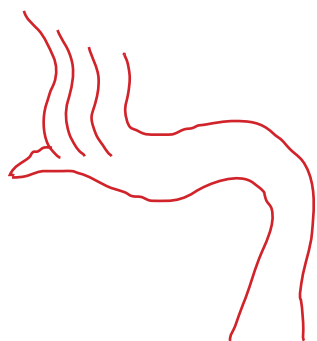
Tearing out one's hair and clothes is used to show others the intensity of one's pain, as a tool to intensify collective emotion among the Greeks, to temporarily "de-civilize" oneself and demonstrate a rupture with the normal order of the world among the Egyptians, to create textile and external scars which reflect inner scars among the Jews, etc.

By dramatizing them, ritual imposes limits on the intensity of feelings (they must not go too far) and their duration (not too long, to avoid altering the social order).

This is also evident in the text sung and shouted by the Chinese mourner: the back-and-forth between the personal, the ordinary and the mythological has a structural value for the suffering audience...

Such rituals structured and supported European funerals until the period in between the two world wars in France, and a little later in Italy and Greece. They are still actively practiced in Eastern Europe, but are in significant decline.

After getting to know the figure of the professional mourner and speculating on the existence of rituals inherited from ancient Egypt in the 21st century, I logically researched the history of lamentation, which is described in parallel with the art history. I attempted to put into historical context the gestures of the mourner I had met, to try and analyze my experience of the ritual. It was therefore quite natural that the names of Ernesto De Martino (ethnologist/historian of religion 1908-1965) and Aby Warburg (1866-1929) emerged from this research. I began to compare my first images with historical representations.



Comparison between images of rituals I have witnessed and historical representations

image: Niccolò dell'Arca, Lamentation on the dead Christ, between 1463-1490

There are few descriptions of the Romans, crying their own tears.

image: The Sacrifice of Iphigenia, Pompeii, 1st century AD

It's an aspect that has long been ignored, unlike Greek society for example. But today we understand that tears were an essential part of private, public, social and political Roman life. The Romans are rightly remembered as a merciless and conquering people. This should not hide their mastery and methodical use of emotions.

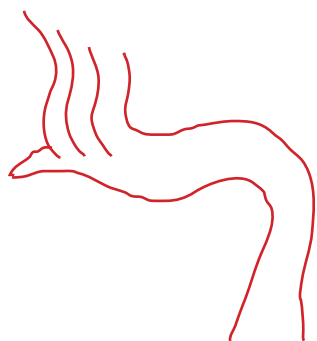
One explanation of the lack of visual representation is that only wealthy families had the resources to be represented, so they selected other topics to highlight their social success rather than their grief.

Tears were used, for example, by politicians (a rhetorical technique known as *miseratio*) to affect the audience and accompany a speech with pathos

images: google research about politician crying (Dwight D. Eisenhower, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Georges W. Bush, Barrack Obama)

Tears even entered into Roman law, for example, legislation is established on the minimum mandatory mourning period that a widow must observe before getting remarried. A maximum period is also established, ensuring that the social order does not become disrupted.

At funerals, the level of authenticity of a husband or wife's tears was also measured; it was necessary neither to cry too much (dishonest) nor too little (insensitive). Compassion had to be shown without compromising one's social status.



Religious art then gradually imposed representations that excluded the markers of extreme emotions; it was necessary to behave in the image of God, who shows his superiority through serenity in the face of death.

images: representations of religious serenity in classical paintings

Funeral sarcophagi and sculpture

Contrary to popular belief, there are relatively few depictions of death on sarcophagi, which tend to feature other narrative elements related to the life of the deceased and mythological scenes.

When we talk about lamentation and the grieving process, we often talk about the movement from the static stupefaction to extreme gestures. This phenomenon is amplified if we imagine ourselves in a necropolis, torch in hand, the vibration of the flame animating the mythological and individual stories carved on the sarcophagi.

This effect has even been referred to as proto-cinema.

images: 1-Roman sarcophagi decorated with scenes from the myth of Meleager, 180 AD

2-Giuliano da Sangallo, Tomb of Francesco Sassetti, 1485

3-Jacques Louis David, The Sorrow and Regrets of Andromache over the Body of Hector her Husband, 1783

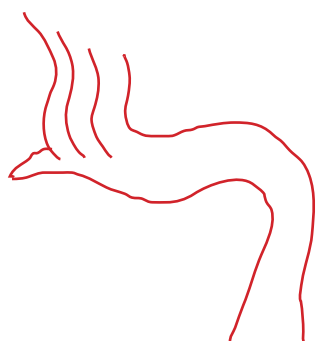
comparison of 3 artworks showing similarities in terms of composition

We first see the depiction at the center of a scene of authentic mourning in the time of imperial Rome, with the body of the deceased laid out for several days in his house surrounded by his family.

We see the mother on the left, the lover Atalanta sitting in a static position of stupefaction, then the sisters and the nurse acting as professional mourners behind the body of Meleager, the only ones with their hair loose and performing the most extreme gestures of the scene, the antique positions of lamentation.

We clearly identify analogies between Egyptian and Roman representations (hair, mourners, gestures, etc.).

Then, their influence on the Italian Renaissance and Neoclassicism.



The myth of Medea or the extension of personal mourning to abstract and universal mourning, Freud and the mourning of abstractions

Medea is a recurrent figure when it comes to embodying mourning in all its diversity. She represents the consequences of emotional excess, the unbalanced Apollonian-Dionysian relationship. She shows us that the pain caused by the mourning crisis (mourning her identity, her future, her family, her homeland, her relationship with Jason, etc.) can turn into destructive madness if it flourishes outside of all rules.

This is the normative function of the myth.

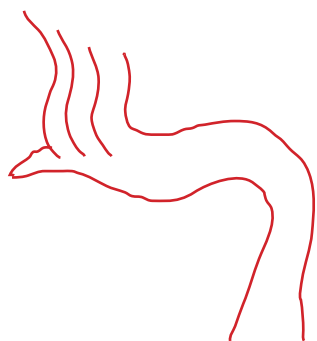
images: 3 representations of sarcophagus depicting the myth of Medea

We see the recurrence of patterns and compositions, with some slight variations in style. Her body, in motion, contrasts with the terror, the paralysis felt by her victims around her.

The woman infanticide has always been seen as a monster, it was even considered since antiquity as the most abject crime that exists. The Romans called it a “nefas”, meaning an inhuman crime, and literally translated as the negation (“ne”) of what is established (“fas”). Nefas is beyond the question of good and evil; the person who commits it loses their humanity, they transgress the laws of men, but also of the gods and of nature. By killing her children, the woman is guilty of a double crime, that of being a murderous woman and mother.

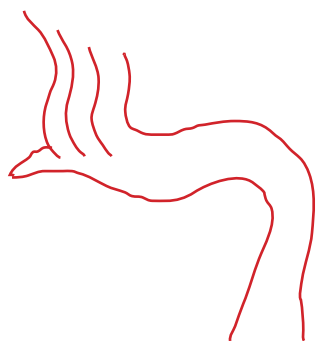
As we can see from the myth of Medea, female criminality has always had a very special status.

This is still the case today. Through my partner Céline, I/we regularly work in the women’s section of Haren prison in Belgium, a recent “mega-prison”. You meet Medeas in this environment, women with bloody stories of abuse, injustice and violence. Instead of escaping on flying chariots to an unknown destination at the end of the story, they disappear, but only from our sight.



Prison is the flying chariot of our societies. These women are entrusted to a de-socializing institution for the tranquility of the people. In this sense, prison is not so different from a retirement home and its role of managing the pathos of the end of life, far from people's eyes.

In the myth, Medea acts as the opposite of the passive and silent female figure, so it is also the story of a gender mutiny/rebellion.



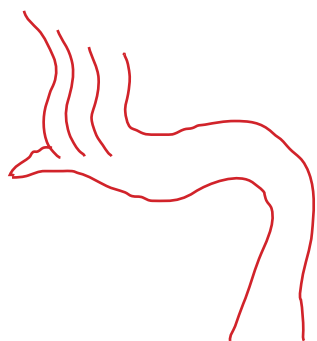
Mourning and lamentation as vectors of collective emancipation

I would like to emphasise a parallel between the mutiny of Medea and the movement “passivity->action // personal stupefaction->collective action” —which is a definition of the process of mourning— proposed by Georges Didi-Huberman in his book “Peuples en larmes, peuples en armes” (Peoples in tears, peoples in arms). He takes as an example the mutiny on the Battleship Potemkin depicted in the film directed by Eisenstein (1925). Didi-Huberman analyzes the revolutionary tipping point of a defeated and humiliated People, in a progression that begins with mourning, tears after the death of a man that turn into anger, collective singing and then rebellion.

images: screenshots from the opening scene of Sergei Eisenstein's film 'Battleship Potemkin', 1925

This idea emerges in the montage created by Chris Marker for the film “Le fond de l'air est rouge” (1977), where these images taken from the battleship Potemkin and this narrative evolution introduce the film and blend with images of the protest movements of the 1960s and the Vietnam War. In a way, he places Eisenstein, the mutiny on the Potemkin and the mourning of the People at the root of a century of revolt and insubordination.

images: screenshots from Chris Marker's film 'le fond de l'air est rouge', 1977



As proof of the possible influence of lamentation on people, we can listen to an unusual archive, a recording used as a psychological weapon by the American army during the Vietnam War:

sound: «ghost tape 10» recording

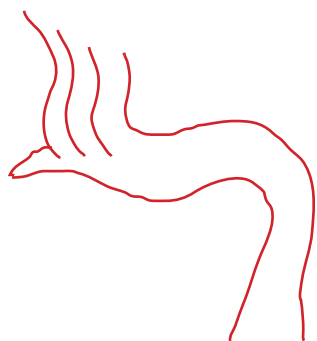
Loudspeakers positioned in the forest play the supposed lamentations of a Viet Cong soldier who died in the battle, asking his comrades to leave the forest before being killed like he was.

The American army staged lamentations and voices supposedly representing the wandering souls of dead soldiers imploring the living to stop fighting. This strategy aimed to take advantage of traditional Vietnamese beliefs concerning spirits and the afterlife to weaken the morale of enemy troops.

These ideas have nourished my understanding of the transformations that occur from the crisis of mourning towards more political and societal levels. A transformation of the object of pain, from the physical body to the political body.

In the same period, a few years before Eisenstein's film, Sigmund Freud addressed the question of grief in his text "Mourning and Melancholia" in 1917: "Mourning is usually the reaction to the loss of a loved one or an abstraction that has come to take his place, such as homeland, freedom, an ideal".

In this context, I conceived artworks in which the question of loss and deliberate abandonment were mixed with more political, performative elements in a direct link with the audience. I made connections between the social role of the mourner in her community and the role of the artwork in its exhibition context, I explored the issue of agrochemicals and highly processed food as a metaphor for death, I motorized artworks to make them move according to the audience's experience, and so on.



The «lamentable» series, mourning and transformation processes

images: sculptures I've made that are linked to performances based on processes of lamentations

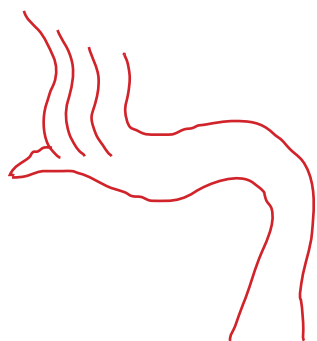
The reference to gastronomy came into my work quite quickly, when I was looking for other areas in which to apply the mechanics of the ritual I had observed, with which to associate mourning, in a way that was perhaps more allegorical but with the same concern for exploring elements related to loss and separation.

Gastronomy is defined as “the study of and interactions between a culture and food. (...) This means that natural sciences, social sciences and even fine arts are involved in the understanding of the ways in which human beings feed themselves. Therefore, it is necessary to understand that food is fundamentally linked to the culture, traditions, geography and history of a community or a people.”

I found this definition in a very interesting book that links gastronomy and anarchism, specifically the importance of controlling the food system for emancipation movements from the 20th century to the present day, in a dynamic of social change.

Rather than being too direct in the approach to a process of transformation linked to the loss of an individual (mourning), I wanted to use gastronomy to address the need to abandon certain processes of transformation which, instead of improving life, make us slide in the opposite direction. The management of food—a primary need essential to life—is haunted by the possibility of its absence, that is to say, death.

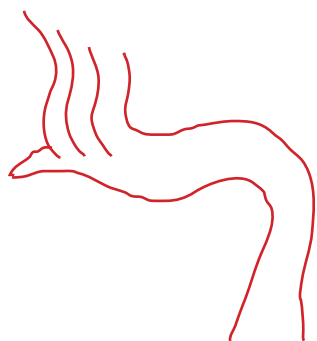
The question of the relationship of service, provided by the mourner in the funeral ritual, was to be replaced by the work itself. The exhibition was intended to emphasize the communal, public and performative necessity of the event. The distribution of food and drink through the work was intended to produce a relationship with the public by appealing to their primary needs.



The public had a direct interest in hanging around the artwork. By using certain mechanisms borrowed from funeral rituals, I aimed to restore a sense of the living to collective experiences of consumption, whether they concern art or gastronomy.

The dinner became an ephemeral, convivial and experimental way of exhibiting my work, in which references to industry dominated the reading of the artwork

In addition to these performative sculptures, I have made and continue to make sculptures that interact with more personal, biographical elements.



Frozen industrial lasagna

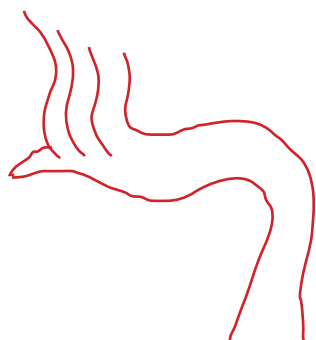
image: comparison between an ancient sarcophagus and an industrial lasagna

I have started to develop a kind of obsession for what could be one of the most emblematic objects of the mourning-gastronomy dialogue. I see in this object the need for a collective mourning, the mourning of deadly practices inherited from the industrial era.

Industrial frozen Lasagna, or its cousin the frozen moussaka, is a dish that has been simplified to meet the standards of ultra-processing and industrial production, an inert chemically assembled object, produced in layers with an extremely low production cost, a simplification of taste to fat, sweet and salty (no more aromatic bitterness and complexity etc.). Its formal proximity to the sarcophagus emphasizes its purpose as a kind of funeral vehicle due to its composition and its effect on the body.

Today, I enjoy using the term “frozen lasagne” to describe certain objects or creations that I feel correspond to the description above.

When we eat industrial lasagna, we mourn the living by accepting all the industrial and agrochemical processes that created it. It means delegating our basic survival needs to an intermediary who prioritizes profit. I am not suggesting that we should produce everything ourselves, but that we should ask ourselves whether the intermediary is on the side of life or death. The professional mourner with her ritual built in successive and repetitive layers seems to me to be a lasagna that carries much more life.



Georgia

I focused on Georgia after a postponed project in the DRC

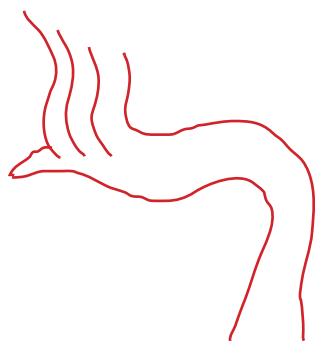
I developed an interest in it after reading a few documents here and there about Georgian funeral traditions and how they are related to their culinary practices through the “supras” organized during funerals; they are a kind of large banquet featuring unlimited toasts, a convivial moment of oral expression centered on the deceased.

According to mythology, Medea is originally from the Caucasus (I actually met a woman called Medea during my trip, and she was going through a series of mourning periods).

Rather than rituals based on crying or gestures, in Georgia there is a culture of polyphonic funeral singing. You’ll listen now different recordings I’ve done in November 2024.

image: archived pictures of georgian funeral feast

The following pages contain the description of the recordings made in Georgia.



Recordings

1/9 - Giorgi's family // Tekali, Svaneti

image: Giorgi and Ioseb

Giorgi Mukbaniani and his brother Ioseb singing and playing two traditional Svan (from Svaneti, a region of Georgia) instruments, the Changi (small wooden harp) and the Chuniri (which resembles a 3-string banjo played like a cello, with a bow). Both are related to the history and specific practices of lamentations and mournings.

For example, the Changi legend-Giorgi told me-is about a mother who, while out walking, found the bent arm of her eldest son, who had been missing for years in the Georgian mountains. She created an instrument to accompany her grief, stretching her own hair between the ends of her missing son's stiff arm. Since then, the people of Svaneti have used the Changi to sing their sorrows.

This song is about 2 brothers- Vitsbil and Matsbil- fighting together for 4 years, against their «prince» Dadeshqeliani, a tyrant terrorising the Svan people.

Setting off from the airport town of Kutaisi, it took me all the efforts in the world to reach Giorgi's village in Svaneti, trying to complete the last 15 kilometers by feet in the pouring rain, carefully avoiding falling rocks and mudflows.

I met him at the step of his house, situated on the road linking Lentekhi to Upper-Svaneti. Once inside, I met his family, seated around the table as they made a toast in honour of Giorgi's birthday.

Giorgi comes from an historical and esteemed family of Georgian singers, composers and musicians. He carries on the family traditions by practicing many traditional songs, dances and instruments.

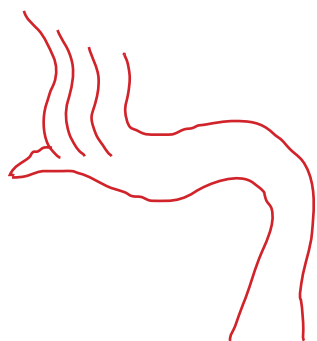


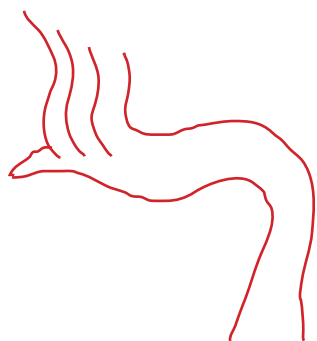
image: Levan, his daughter Marta and his niece Barbare

I've met Levan Berelize on my way to Oni, Racha region. I was waiting for him, sheltered from the torrential rain by the side of the road, drinking instant coffee. He was driving back from a teaching singing class with his daughter Marta and his niece Barbare

After a short introduction, they started rehearsing all together a song in the car (video 2), which they were going to perform that evening.

I recorded this 3-voice polyphonic song at his place a few days later. Levan is playing the Chianuri, a 2-string version of Svaneti's Chuniri, 'the instrument that always cries'. In certain configurations, this instrument is traditionally played around the body of the deceased during the funeral wake.

As the neck has no fret and as the instrument is highly sensitive to temperature/humidity variations, the notes are highly volatile and are sometimes played at the limit of the note above or below, producing a rather melancholy effect. The fact that it is played with a bow and not by plucking or percussion on the strings reinforces this effect.



3/9 - Zari // Giorgi, his dad and a family friend // Tekali, Svaneti Region

image: Giorgi, his dad and a family friend

The Zari is a very specific and unusual polyphonic funeral chant from Georgia, it shows a juxtaposition of consonant and dissonant chords, and does not include words.

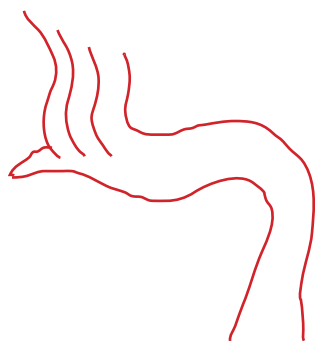
It is sung by a minimum of 3 voices.

I recorded this song in a small roadside shop not far from the family house (it is traditionally forbidden to sing in one's own home for the 6 months following the loss of a family member).

They agreed to get together to sing this Zari in front of me, as a rehearsal for a neighbor's funeral that would take place in the village in the following days.

Like many other funerary rituals, polyphonic lamentation supports the dramaturgical aspect of the situation while providing a setting for extreme and potentially dangerous emotions (threatening the physical integrity of the living) both for the singers and for the audience.

As a recorder and the only audience here, I experienced the full evocative and emotional power of this complexly structured song.

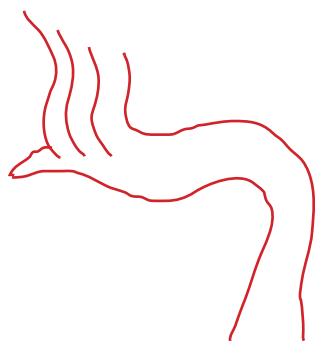


4/9- Zruni // Levan and friends // Glola, Racha Region

image: Levan and his friends

Zruni is a type of singing that originated in the Racha region of Georgia: a solo woman singer followed by polyphonic choirs and exclamations. Unlike the Zari, this lamentation chant is not sung at the funeral site, but rather at home or in places associated with the deceased. The village of Glola, where Levan took me from Oni, is one of the cradles of this tradition. This recording was made in the heart of a building under construction, in a small room equipped with a wood stove, protecting us from the snowstorm that was happening outside.

This song is about a mother who has lost her child and expresses her pain and feelings about it.



This ensemble is one of two that I recorded in Tbilisi during my research and recording period in Georgia in October 2024. I was invited to attend one of their rehearsals. The members come from Svaneti, and there were 20 people (both men and women), with one woman leading the group. The aim of these ensembles is to preserve the traditions and folklore of Svaneti.

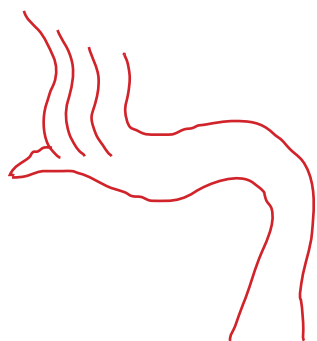
They give concerts and performances at folklore centers across the country, as well as in theatres.

During their concerts, the ensemble performs a series of songs that follow the story of a character's life, from his birth to hunting scenes, war and death.

Zari+ Tirili combination

This Zari (traditional funeral song composed of oral polyphonic laments without the use of words) originated in the village of Latali (upper Svaneti), which explains its name: Lataluri.

Tirili refers to female lamentation, the traditional cry of a single woman, heard here juxtaposed with polyphony. The Tirili is not automatically expressed during the Zari at funerals, but is readily combined with it.

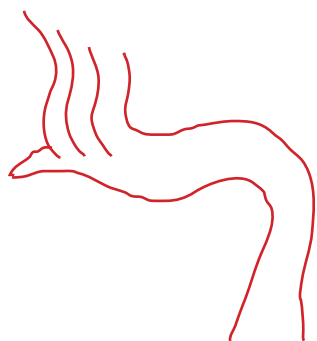


This ensemble is one of two that I recorded in Tbilisi during my research and recording period in Georgia in October 2024. I was invited to attend one of their rehearsals. The members come from Svaneti, and there were 22 people (only men), with one woman leading the group.

The aim of these ensembles is to preserve the traditions and folklore of Svaneti.

They give concerts and performances at folklore centers across the country, as well as in theatres.

This Zari (traditional funeral song composed of oral polyphonic laments without the use of words) is a Balskvemo Zari (Kvemo means «lower»), the city of Latali is the symbolic border dividing the upper and lower zaris.



The instruments of lamentation

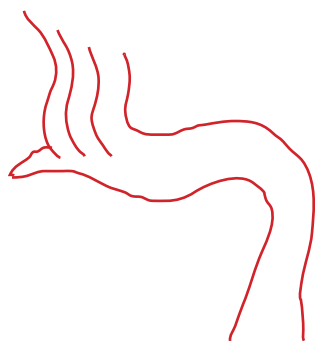
7/9 - 8/9 - The Changi (recorded alone and with Giorgi Mukbaniani's voice)

While the voice is the main instrument of lamentation, it is sometimes accompanied by traditional instruments from mythologies composed of sorrows.

The Changi is a traditional Svan (from Svaneti, a region of Georgia) instrument, and it's related to the history of lamentations and mournings. It is a small, L-shaped harp made of wood (resinous) with 2 axes at a slightly acute angle. It has 7 or 9 strings.

The ones I was able to listen to and try had 7 strings with tuning in: E-F-G-A-H-C1-D1

The Changi legend-Giorgi Mukbaniani told me-is about a mother who, while out walking, found the bent arm of her eldest son, who had been missing for years in the Georgian mountains. She created an instrument to accompany her grief, stretching her own hair between the ends of her missing son's stiff arm. Since then, the people of Svaneti have used the Changi to sing their sorrows.



The Chuniri is a traditional instrument from Svaneti and resembles a 3-string banjo played like a cello, with a bow, the instrument wedged between the feet. It is placed over the wood-stove, close to the fireplace or a radiator before use to improve the tension of the skin. It has been described to me as ‘the instrument that always cries’ or as ‘accompanying only sad stories’.

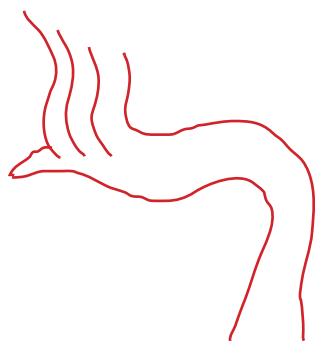
As the neck has no frets and the instrument is very sensitive to temperature/humidity variations, the notes are very volatile and are sometimes played at the limit of the note above or below, which produces a rather melancholy effect. The fact that it is played with a bow rather than by plucking or percussion on the strings reinforces this effect.

The Chianuri, a 2-string variant of the Chuniri for the Racha region, was the instrument played when I met Levan Berelidze, his daughter Marta and his niece Barare.

The tuning of the chuniri (3 strings) corresponds to :

The tuning of the chianuri (2 strings) corresponds to: As-C1

These two variations of the same instrument are traditionally played, for example, at length around the body of the deceased during the wake.



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