

On Grief and Grieving

Morgan Quaintance asks whether, in what will come to be seen as a post-pandemic world, it is time to start counting the emotional cost of so much loss and isolation and, facing up to his own sense of grief and fragility, how might artists begin to address the aftermath beyond the tired rhetoric of 'care'.

During a three-month visit to Japan in 2018, I spent a significant amount of time at Irregular Rhythm Asylum (IRA), an anarchist infoshop deep in Tokyo's Shinjuku ward. The usual countercultural stock of independent books, T-shirts, zines and political pamphlets meant IRA shared a similar, every-inch-in-insurrection ambience to other independent political bookshops, like Het fort Van Sjako in Rotterdam and Freedom in London, but there was something else that was familiar, too. On a small window in the corner of the space was the sentence, spelled out in large capital letters, 'DON'T MOURN, ORGANISE'; a line encouraging activists to fight through, and not be emotionally overwhelmed by setbacks and the inevitable crushing blows of state power. The maxim's provenance dates back to 1915 and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a gender-inclusive multicultural and multinational workers' union originating in the US. That year, IWW labour activist and songwriter Joe Hill was executed by firing squad having been convicted of murder on dubious evidence, but prior to execution he sent a telegram to the union's leader Bill Heywood: 'Goodbye, Bill, I die like a true rebel,' he wrote. 'Don't waste any time mourning, organise!'

Today, abridged and abstracted across time, the utility of Hill's much reproduced statement still has purchase for anyone combating fatigue and burnout from agitation in the pursuit of producing a more just and equal society. But, by encouraging suppression of grief, the Hill edict requires a form of stoicism that may prove as harmful to the individual as political inertia can be collectively catastrophic. In the midst of what still seems to be the art sector's maintenance of an ethical regime (a system in which the value of activity in the field is ostensibly judged according to its perceived moral rectitude and political efficacy within a limited, largely self-serving interpretative frame of what constitutes the just), where artistic work increasingly resembles a form of progressive political agitation, this is a danger artists and arts professionals may now also be susceptible too. Sigmund Freud warned against the consciousness-usurping powers of sublimation and repression, and, for all the dated, phalocentricity of Freudian psychoanalysis, recent publications from Hungarian-Canadian physician Gabor Maté (*When the Body Says No*) and Dutch psychiatrist Bessel A van der Kolk (*The Body Keeps the Score*), have explored the negative effects, including chronic

and terminal illnesses, that stress - and its suppression - can have on the body. Is there a case for exploring psychological states and emotions like grief in what will increasingly be labelled a post-pandemic world? If turning away from stress produces such harmful psychological and physiological effects, can paying attention to loss, sadness and other depressive or melancholic states allow for greater insight into the human condition and form a stronger basis for empathic understanding and intercommunication?

'Dualism,' writes Maté, 'colours all our beliefs on health and illness. We attempt to understand the body in isolation from the mind.' While this sentence from *When the Body Says No* is specifically referencing a medical orthodoxy that places emphasis on chemical cures, it is striking how much currency the conception of a mind-body split still carries in the perception and treatment of mental distress. Such thinking treats depressive moods largely as chemical problems, or a matter of simply regulating or restricting the flow of neurotransmitters using selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and other medications.

Art is traditionally considered to operate within the realm of feelings, its role has been that of an emotional purgative, an object that 'moves' the viewer to tears or some other form of demonstrative passion; this is the province of what Aristotle briefly identified in his *Poetics* as catharsis: 'tragedy employs language that has been artistically enhanced' he wrote 'and achieves, through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis [understood as the purgation] of such pitiable and fearful incidents'. Though Greenbergian formalism preached the primacy of detachedness or the disembodied spectatorial eye (perhaps by way of Immanuel Kant's emphasis on 'disinterestedness' as an essential feature of aesthetic appreciation), the dualistic gap in contemporary art was bridged by the influence of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty on American minimalists such as Robert Morris and Donald Judd. Conversely, it is in relation to encounters with Abstract Expressionism, and not the apparently cold cerebral world of cubes, columns and collections of bricks, that a kind of holistic mind-body affect is now most widely accepted. Such is the affective frame through which the impact of Mark Rothko's work, for instance, is expected to be felt by spectators who enter one of his specially prepared rooms. It is both the knowledge of the artist's suicide and the colours of the paintings that are said to compel profound shifts in mood. 'It's as if the emotional weight of these sombre works instinctively makes you sit, instantly drained by them,' opined *Guardian* hack Jonathan Jones. Jones's description is classic object-derived affect via abstraction and one that would not seem out of place in discussions of any dramatic works across the broad art historical periods, stretching from Neoclassicism up to what may have been formalism's last gasp in the 1980s with Neo-expressionism. But what does contemporary art proper (for which read work made since the later part of the 1960s) have to offer in terms of both representing and explicating grief and other depressive states? What can it offer

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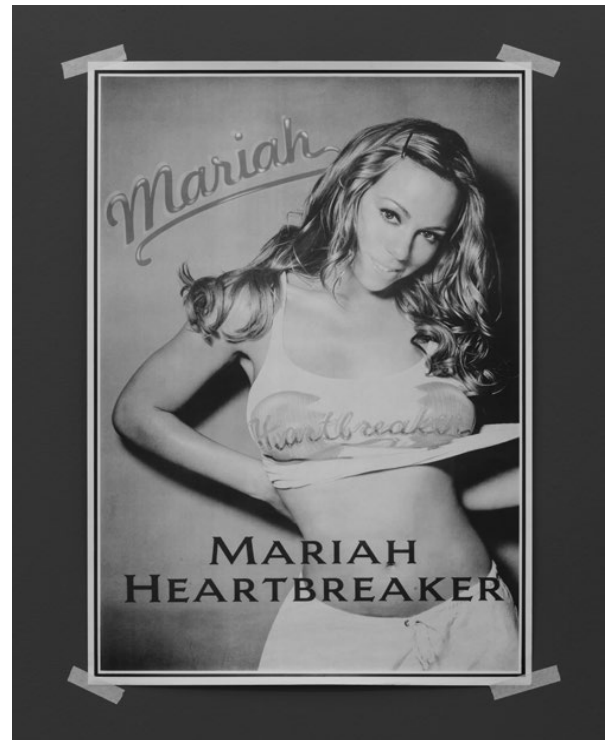


Matthew Krishanu, *Hospital Bed (Barts)*, 2021

as an antidote and corrective to the medical emphasis on bodies isolated from minds and chemicals ruling consciousness? The short answer is complexity and depth.

The benefit of operating in a field of contemporary practice that is multidisciplinary and post medium-specificity is that it allows artists the opportunity to pull in and use materials from a wide variety of expressive forms of cultural production. For example, using writing, sculpture, assemblage, photography, moving image, sound or even scent, artists are free to explore their chosen subject across media that are each capable of articulating unique parts of the whole. Rather than the all-at-once effect of a Rothko room, artists can emphasise or dampen, make clear or occlude certain aspects of their symbolic or literal texts, the statements and propositions they construct through novel combinations of materials within a gallery space, aspect ratio, book, browser or other container for the display of work. A virtuosic instance of this in practice was Adam Farah's solo exhibition at Camden Art Centre in 2021, 'What I've Learned from You and Myself (Peak Momentations/Inside My Velvet Rope Mix)' (Profile AM451). As Farah wrote in one of a collection of formally innovative and open artist statements, the exhibition was 'Ultimately [...] a call-out, for human connection - through vulnerability, reminiscing/reflecting, spiritual criticality - something like that.'

Forming part of the core of Farah's effort to connect was the affective bridge of loss: the loss or end of a romantic relationship and a reflection on the death of his mother, and the loss of her presence across periods of his life. Another key aspect, as stated by Farah, was the exploration of vulnerability, specifically masculinity and vulnerability. References to the relationship Farah has with his father, though not explored in depth, provided an entry point to this across generations through the evocation of different experiences of loss (of a partner and of a mother). Perhaps predictably, most writers and reviewers were largely dazzled by the exhibition's surface and Farah's use of old technologies and historic pop cultural materials. Nostalgia, then, became the dominant interpretative means used to explore and explain his project. Consequently, a significant aspect of the exhibition was missed. Rather than the objects and materials being displayed simply as referents to either themselves or the historical periods within which they were extant, they also functioned as



Adam Farah, *Heartbreaker*, 2021

affective primers, materials that would lead the viewer towards or prepare the way for a certain emotional response or identification. To borrow a phrase from TS Eliot, the materials in Farah's exhibition functioned as physical (rather than literary) 'object correlatives': materials that led the viewer to a certain emotional response. In this case, a meditation on loss and our various ways of dealing with it. The plastic-covered carpet placed in the centre of the arrangement of objects in the gallery is exemplary here. On the surface it was possible to view it as a straight reference to a vernacular practice prevalent among, but not necessarily limited to, working-class and immigrant families - using plastic to cover sofas and armchairs. But, through a context in which loss and grief were being explored and in which the entire show was, as Farah wrote, about 'paying homage to the processes of mourning, in all the different contexts in which we experience it in life - love and death and the different selves we journey through', it is hermeneutically richer to think more deeply about the connotative possibilities that the process of covering objects in plastic produce. What does that plastic cover ultimately do? It preserves a thing as it always was, it stops external elements from facilitating decay, it protects. These are all interrelational behaviour patterns, healthy or not, that we can recognise from the most important relationships in our lives, relationships in which change (ie decay) can sometimes be the most threatening thing. All across Farah's exhibition, objects and materials - a CD player column, wall-mounted poster dividers, a primary school cloakroom bench - had the same connotative richness there to be interpreted if viewers were willing to look past their surface to an offered associative depth.

The London-based painter Matthew Krishanu is an artist who is also interested in mining emotional depth through the mediation of complex experiences. Earlier this year, Krishanu exhibited a series of paintings

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Adam Farah, *My mum died too early to teach me about love and relationships, so I'm trying to learn something from the music I remember her listening to when I saw her crying – or at least connect to her spirit so we can share our heartache*, 2021, installation view, Camden Art Centre

under the title 'In Sickness and in Health' at the Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum in Warwickshire. The series consisted of nine paintings produced between 2007 and 2021, three of which depicted scenes of Krishanu's wife, the writer Uschi Gatward, in hospital undergoing treatment for a serious and ultimately terminal illness. 'I think of painting as coming from an interior place,' Krishanu noted in the exhibition's gallery text, 'I always have a personal connection to the subject matter.' It is this commitment to a kind of personal truth that led, perhaps inevitably, to both Krishanu and Gatward embarking on the project to depict her hospital experience, knowing that she would likely have died by the time the works were displayed. Ostensibly, Krishanu's paintings could return us to the realm of Aristotelian catharsis, but to view the works as emotional purgatives is to do them a disservice. In other words, their objective is not simply to move us to tears. What they offer is an illustration of the complexity of the human condition, of a form of endurance that does not eschew vulnerability, and a coming to terms with grief and loss that may help others to deal with similar states of affairs. It is an example that reinforced my own resolve to use my own biography, my own experience, as a possible conduit through which human connections could be brokered via the moving image.

Turning towards rather than away from what might be termed depressive or melancholic psychophysiological conditions – which, after all, are what moods and emotions are when the dualist schism is mended – may offer artists and arts professionals a more personal way to connect and communicate with audiences who could well have been traumatised by nearly two years of isolation, sickness and death. Trauma is certainly what almost everyone in my immediate circle is dealing with, either at first hand or at a close remove, and now, what is the world that we have seemingly arrived at? In politics: war; in culture, society and economics:

neoliberalism; in the art world: a new conservatism, scant resources, endless competition and the continued ascendancy of the private sphere; in our daily lives: precarity. Speaking for myself, the initial novelty of the world interrupted and a period of relatively comfortable introspection during the first lockdown quickly gave way to one of the most gut-wrenching and profoundly unsettling periods of sustained loss and psychophysiological pain that I have experienced in my lifetime. The disintegration of an 11-year relationship and marriage produced a sense of complete isolation in me that was gradually deepened, over weeks and months, by the realisation that years of self-imposed isolation through research and writing had preceded it, and for what existential reward? Isolation is, of course, the writer's lot, and anonymity is in some ways the critics' best friend, but after a decade of the former, endured in the pursuit of crafting a robust style of investigative arts journalism that by its bridge-burning nature produced a deeper form of solitude, I knew that I couldn't repeat it.

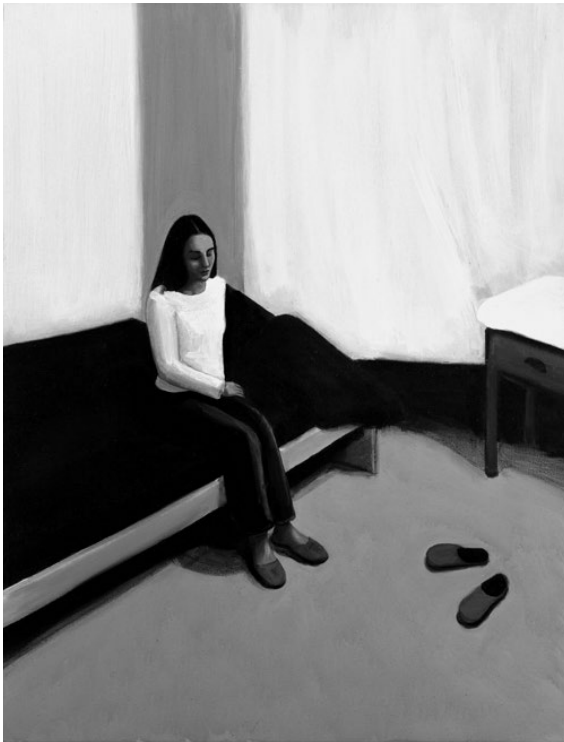
The decision to explore my own interiority, then, was made soon after I found myself living alone and grappling with the above thoughts daily. After time, following the advice of Joe Hill, of trying not to mourn but to organise by applying for open commissions and emergency funding, writing articles, securing a permanent paid job and doing yet more research, the effort to actualise productivity and to project strength felt like the psychophysiological equivalent of doing jumping jacks in quicksand. From that point on I decided to be open about my own vulnerability and my own experience of living through and struggling with a type of loss-induced grief. My moving-image works became directly biographical and, in the rounds of online public talks, lectures and workshops that followed their circulation, I spoke directly to my experience and also about the stresses and positive existential insights that had come through living with the chronic illness of multiple sclerosis, a diagnosis I received in 2015. It is an approach that has remained outside of my writing practice until now. My decision to transgress the tacit rules of criticism here (by centring the self, writing in the first person and referring to my own creative work), has not been made in order to platform an indulgent and narcissistic form of pontification while shielding behind personal identity, disability and disadvantage. I have written myself into this text in an attempt to bridge what might be termed the academic gap. The techniques of tightly constructed socio-political analysis, institutional critique and aesthetic interpretation are perfectly suited for individual artworks and sector-wide appraisal, but they are inadequate when it comes to writing beyond a surface of professionalism in order to facilitate potentially meaningful personal connections, either in the flesh or projected through the syntax of the written word. By placing my own fragility at the centre of this text, and by risking discomfort and embarrassment in the process, I am

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Matthew Krishanu, *Girl with Slippers*, 2012

attempting to offer details of the personal so that they may be identified with or at least empathically related to. The hazard of drawing on your own emotional reserves for the purposes of cultural production, aside from the real risk of self-indulgence, is that you may end up cultivating your pain or, worse, relying on it: two conditions that lead down the dark road of what could be termed auto co-dependency. These psychophysiological pitfalls and snares are worth braving, however. This is because when such dangers are successfully avoided, the results of affective identification through, but definitely not limited to, depressive or melancholic emotional states could bring us – that is artists, arts professionals and audiences – closer together as a group, one that is interested in the seldom explored aspects of human experience, endeavour, invention and history. Disregarding the much parroted and, so far, demonstrably hollow rhetoric of ‘care’, this action of affective connection is a role that contemporary art can now potentially play in a society dazed and alienated by two years of isolation, and harried by more than a decade’s worth of austerity, gentrification, precarity, privatisation, conservative politics, neoliberalism and the singular use of some 21st century ‘culture war’ as the great socio-political smokescreen obscuring it all.

In the final act of the classic 1962 Japanese film *Harakiri*, the central protagonist, a ragged ronin in the process of killing himself while also seeking revenge against the Iyi Clan in their compound, fights off dozens of men, kills four, wounds eight, and trashes the interior of the clan’s house, tearing down the antique suit of armour that is the symbolic representation of the clan’s supposedly noble history, before finally disembowelling himself. Shamed that a single man – ‘a half starved ronin’ – had laid waste to the Iyi Clan, and terrified that news of this will bring them dishonour, a senior member orders that

all evidence be erased, that all deaths be explained by illness, and that a story of quiet and official assisted suicide (the titular *harakiri*) be propagated in place of the facts. Known as a politicised filmmaker who produced films critical of state power and hierarchical institutions, director Masaki Kobayashi’s masterful film can be understood as a universal allegory about the rottenness of both. It is a course of events that, though dramatised in historical narrative, will be familiar in essence to anyone who has engaged in any forms of sustained activism. Those instances of institutional crisis, which follow from successful acts of agitation or public criticism, are all-too brief. In no time at all, those institutions (temporarily bloodied by the activists’ volley) quickly regroup and reset, averting the crisis by acting as if nothing took place.

A similar process of erasure and revision is happening following the pandemic. There is a pressure to return to the clock-driven normality that preceded it, the perpetual rounds of consumption and production, work and leisure that can be seen, heard and felt. Surely, one of the most dejecting scenes in this regard is the morning or evening rush-hour commute. The train carriages stuffed with workers of all stripes, staring down into the glowing screens of their smartphones and scanning recipes, memes, eBay, fashion retail, Instagram and dating apps or streaming, texting, sexting or posting details of their lives on the dozens of freemium platforms that have convinced us they are essential facilities for self-actualisation rather than behaviour-mapping corporate tools. We are back to the grindstone, but we are not where we were before. If we miss this opportunity to make sense of what happened to us, both the traumas and the joys, then we could be open to rebounding forces of psychophysiological distress that affect us in ways we cannot anticipate. A few weeks before writing this piece, I spoke with artist Emma Edmondson, founder of The Other MA (TOMA), an alternative post-graduate education scheme in Southend. We talked about the weird and teary emotional shifts we were going through post-pandemic, and she told me the TOMA group were also having to leave their temporary space in Southend’s Royals Shopping Centre. The precarity of independent artist-run spaces continues (see Emma Edmondson and Warren Harper’s report ‘Collaboration over Competition’ in *AM443*), compounded by psyches burdened with two years of pain and disorientation directly or indirectly experienced.

Perhaps it is not a binary choice between mourning and organising, as the shortened Hill aphorism would suggest. Perhaps it is now a question of at least giving equal weight to both. While the fight for a more just and equal society and sector continues, the interstitial promise of contemporary art and its facilities can also still offer us the opportunity to explore and make sense of the emotional terrain we mapped over this sustained period of conditioned socialising and straightened interrelations. It can, via an affective bridge, still produce a zone between the rhythms of daily life that could allow us to connect to each other again in new and deeper ways. Rather than resigning ourselves to returning to a dysfunctional past, we should be pursuing a more progressive and generous future.

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