

THE WORK OF MOURNING: SILVIA KOLBOWSKI'S *AFTER HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR*
Luiza Nader

(Catalogue essay, *After Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 2009.)

I cannot muster the “we” except by finding the way by which
I am tied to you, by trying to translate but finding that my own
language must break up and yield if I am to know you.
You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss.

– Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics”

Silvia Kolbowski's most recent work, *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* (2005–08), is a twenty-two-minute video that recreates Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras's video masterpiece, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959).¹ Kolbowski's recreation, however, is hardly a mere reconstruction. It could be called a repetition, or more precisely, an iteration – a repetition based not on similarity but on difference.² In the case of *After Hiroshima Mon Amour*, such iteration could also be interpreted in Freudian terms as a form of *Nachträglichkeit*: the belated recognition of a message that has previously been missed, a radical reading of a past experience that could not have been integrated into the life of the psyche at the moment of its occurrence and yet is decisive for the psychical, historical and political landscape of the present. Kolbowski's video is also a work of translation, as Walter Benjamin understood it: the original work is broken into pieces and reassembled so that the repetition is based not on resemblance but on alterity.³ And it is there, in the very heart of alterity, that the recognition of the “now” begins through the repetition of the past.⁴ The repetition in *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* is staged in the present tense. In temporal terms, the video comes “after” the original, and this situates it within a contemporary political frame, although

¹ In *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), a thirty-year-old actress comes to Hiroshima in 1957 to act in a film about peace. She meets a Japanese man of the same age and they have a twenty-four-hour affair. The Frenchwoman tells the Japanese man, who had himself been a soldier, the story of her love affair with a German soldier during the war. On the day of the allies' victory, her German lover was shot and the Frenchwoman, whom the local community condemned as a collaborator, went mad. This is the first time the woman has ever told her story, thus breaking the silence around her wounded attachment to the traumatic event.

In *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* (2008), Silvia Kolbowski constructs a new story on the basis of the one in the film. She plays with visual, aural, and textual material, fragmenting and reassembling the film's synopsis and script, and including a remixed score and sound design. Ten actors of often ambiguous ethnicity and race re-enact scenes involving the allegorical couple of the 1959 film, while material found on the Internet is incorporated into the video to parallel Resnais's use of documentary footage.

² J. Derrida, “Signature Event Context”, in *Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 326.

³ W. Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator”, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913–1926, ed. M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings (Cambridge Mass. and London: Belknap Press 2002), 260.

⁴ H. Bhabha, remarks from an unpublished seminar, School of Criticism and Theory, Cornell University, July 2008.

Hiroshima and the general lack of shame or mourning in American society over this tragic event remain a focus of the work. Kolbowski's video contains scenes of other "disproportionate bombings" that could be interpreted, as Christopher Bedford has pointed out, as after-effects of 9/11: the ideology of American militarism abroad (such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq) and the insolence of governmental inaction at home (such as the abandonment of the poorest residents of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina).⁵ At the same time, the work is constructed "after" not only in its recreation of scenes from the Resnais/Duras film, but primarily in its faithfulness to the transgressive imagination, structural logic and ideological focus of the French production. Thus the relation between Kolbowski's video and the Resnais/Duras film arises out of a combination of strangeness and intimacy, the work of displacement and condensation, allegorical transpositions and repetition.

A subtle process of iteration and translation takes place on several overlapping levels.

Repetition shapes the overall structure of Kolbowski's video. Kolbowski repeats scenes (allways in black and white) that take place between the two protagonists in the Resnais/Duras film: a French woman and a Japanese man who meet in Japan twelve years after the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima and begin a one-day affair. They are an allegorical couple, standing for two different actors in the war – France (Nevers) and Japan (Hiroshima) – evoking challenging questions about disobedience, ethics and desire in a time of military conflict. In Kolbowski's video, the love scenes are re-enacted by ten actors and actresses whose ethnicities and races are not always clear. Also, gender relations and "couplings" are far from stable in the video. In *After Hiroshima Mon Amour*, a subjectivity defined by race, sexuality, gender and the relation to otherness is gradually displaced through the video. Alterity – in relation to what is usually conceived as a distant otherness (male, female, East, West) – becomes uncannily elusive and "close" as the video progresses, creating anxiety for the spectator. This is a type of alterity that brings subjectivity and community together and at the same time tears them apart. Kolbowski's recreation of the Resnais/Duras love scenes is contrasted and montaged with found video material that depicts either violence, brutality and militarism – often from the point of view of insolent power and authority – or visual distance. Some of this found video material parallels material used by Resnais. Like the tracking shots in Resnais's film, so the tracking shots Kolbowski uses in *After Hiroshima Mon Amour*, in which a devastated New Orleans is seen from the perspective of a moving car, problematise the positions of the film maker and the observer/viewer. The spectator who sees things from the camera's point of view in the hospital scene in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and the spectator of the video material in *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* in which a street, presumably in a Middle Eastern city, is viewed from the angle of a speeding Humvee driver are both placed on the uncomfortable side of those who watch the sufferings of others. As observers in another borrowed scene in Kolbowski's video, we burst into a private apartment along with shouting American soldiers and see a man forced to cower and hear an old woman on a bed scream out as they are suddenly confronted with machine guns. Such scenes in Kolbowski's video are

⁵ C. Bedford, "After and Before", *Frieze*, no. 119 (November/December 2008), 181.

often layered with colours that intensify the affective qualities of the shot. Colours also appear on their own, as active backgrounds for textual narration.

The texts that appear as titles are in fact a collage of Duras's original script for *Hiroshima Mon Amour* – fragmented and reassembled by Kolbowski – and Duras's written synopsis of the film. The narration oscillates between the third-person voiceover of the synopsis and a fascinating dialogue between the shifters “I” and “you,” which appear in the fragments appropriated from the film's script. The image, text and sound in the video are marked by arbitrary relations. The text does not fit the image, while the sound, music, silence and use of colour are active actors, rather than mere supplements in the performance Kolbowski stages. As the Polish art historian Agata Jakubowska has suggested, it is precisely in the gap between text, sound and image, in the very asynchrony of seeing, reading, and listening, that a trans-historical or trans-geographic entrance is created for the non-American viewer/observer. Thus, *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* may be understood as creating a unique space for the ethical task of cultural translation: listening to words about Hiroshima and seeing the streets of Iraq, the spectator can project her own city or place of traumatic awakening.⁶ The asynchrony creates a space for differently structured selves, for traumatic memories rooted in multiple political and historical contexts, for foreignness and a lack of knowledge. In *After Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Hiroshima becomes a signifier for both human suffering and violence, which allows other traumatic memories and events to enter, interrupt and dislocate historical narration. Hiroshima also elicits the question: What is your Hiroshima? – i. e. What is your site of denial, your site of repressed guilt, eclipsed shame, obscured or actively forgotten responsibility? Since one cannot remain untouched by events, how are you compliant with the rules of physical and symbolic violence? And yet Hiroshima remains a space of unknowing, beyond recognition and mired in silence. Long fragments of Kolbowski's video are silent and, as the artist has pointed out, one “has to acknowledge a lack with regard to understanding Hiroshima”.⁷

Transference, exclusion, projection, the logic of desire and the repression of the psyche's blind spots – and how these unconscious processes relate to politics, history writing and memory – are leitmotifs of Kolbowski's works, such as an *inadequate history of conceptual art* (1998–99), *Like Looking Away* (2000–02) and *Proximity to Power, American Style* (2003–04).⁸ These processes also appear in the form of a question about the presumption of knowledge, lack and absence in *After Hiroshima Mon Amour*. In an exchange with the artist Walid Raad, Kolbowski reflected on forms of absence involving one's self – states of

⁶ Agata Jakubowska made this comment during a discussion at the presentation of *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, November 2008. See also “Models of Intervention: A Discussion between Michèle Thériault and Silvia Kolbowski”, in M. Thériault, ed., *Silvia Kolbowski: Nothing and Everything / Rien et Tout* (Montreal: Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, 2009), 42.

⁷ S. Kolbowski and W. Raad, *Between Artists* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 2006), 73.

⁸ For two excellent analyses of Silvia Kolbowski's works from this perspective, see R. Deutsche, “Inadequacy”, and M. Nixon, “Oral Histories: Silvia Kolbowski and the Dynamics of Transference”, both in R. Deutsche et al., *Silvia Kolbowski: inadequate... Like... Power* (Vienna: Secession, and Cologne: Walther König, 2004), 67–80, 93–102.

depersonalisation: “They are common and everyday. [...] They are truly fearsome personal states of which [we ought] to be conscious, in spite of the fact that our being in denial of their structural ubiquity precipitates global tragedies in the name of absolute knowledge and absolute unity.”⁹ *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* begins and ends with silent montaged close-ups of depersonalised, closely framed limbs. Bedford has described these “interpenetrating limbs covered in what looks like glittering ash [...] vibrating erratically” as an ambiguous spasm of erotic pleasure or the grip of death.¹⁰ These shivering and naked bodies, however, could also signify human vulnerability and exposure to violence. As Judith Butler has written, the body is both the site of desire and the site of violence “which is always an exploitation of that primary tie, that primary way in which we are, as bodies, outside ourselves and for another”.¹¹ The bodies that open and close Kolbowski’s video could be perceived in a similar way. They are exposed to each other – exposed to being touched and caressed, but also exposed to being hit or cut. And at the same time, they are truly ecstatic: beside themselves and thus in a state of depersonalisation. As Butler claims, ecstasy, the state of being beside oneself, can be understood not only in terms of sexual passion, but also in terms of political rage and emotional grief.¹² The bodies not only belong to each other, but also strangely dispossess each other of the seemingly simple concept of autonomy. Remaining separate, they melt into each other; there is no “I” without “you”: they are attached to each other and “attached to others, at risk of losing these attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure”.¹³ The equivocal status of the bodies at the beginning and end of *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* – an embrace that is both intimate and exposed to the public gaze, affected by cruelty or suspended in sexual pleasure – the uncertainty of these fragmented bodies (as in Resnais’s film), raises questions for us as spectators about whose bodies we see and what position we assume as observers of the scene. Also, the particular found video material in *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* creates anxiety and shatters the viewer’s phantasmatically disengaged position. The viewer is virtually inscribed into the video, on the side of the camera.¹⁴ One might suggest also that the viewer is clearly interpolated by the titles that appear on a yellow screen at the beginning of the video: “I meet you. I remember you. Who are you? You destroy me. You’re so good for me.” – as well as those that appear above the writhing red limbs at the end: “Listen to me, like you I know what it is to forget. Like

⁹ Kolbowski and Raad, *Between Artists*, 42.

¹⁰ Bedford, “After and Before”, 72.

¹¹ J. Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics”, in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 27.

¹² *Ibid.*, 26.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴ When the video is shown as an installation, the spectator is almost physically incorporated into the work. At certain moments the room, which is painted in one of the colors appearing in the video, lights up around the spectators and to a degree brings them into the space of the video.

you, I have a memory, I know what it is to forget. Like you I tried with all my might not to forget. Like you, I forgot.” The viewer, in the position of bystander, is faced with identifying with the aggressor, the victim, the indifferent observer or the engaged witness, either remaining passive or assuming the task of social and political agency. No one remains untouched.

After Hiroshima Mon Amour is constantly fragmenting and displacing the stable designators “we”, “I”, “you” and “them”, familiar relations and relationalities. And yet it establishes new conditions for encountering others and offers hope for a reimagined community beyond the shared universal values that always produce as side effects political and social exclusions. The relationality constructed by Kolbowski in *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* achieves what Butler proposed in her famous essay “Violence, Mourning, Politics”. The subjects acting in the film and those viewing the film are interconnected and constantly undo each other. They are exposed as vulnerable, but this vulnerability is differently distributed depending on ethnicity, sexuality, race and gender. They are sites of lack, since lack is the core of both love and loss. We love in the beloved what the beloved does not have – the mysterious *objet petit a*, as Renata Salecl writes.¹⁵ Also, when we lose someone, we are confronted with a lack that is best embodied in the question: “What is it in the other that I have lost?”¹⁶ The subjects in *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* represent beings who are most exposed to violence. Here, however, violence is represented as vulnerability *à rebours*: war is interpreted as a denial of that primary weakness and exposure to others, a denial that takes the form of a dangerous “fantasy of institutionalised mastery”, a process of killing the spectral, phantasmatic Other, who is not subject to death and thus, even if dead, is impossible to mourn.¹⁷

And yet, in *After Hiroshima Mon Amour*, as in Butler’s project, the uneasy process of mourning becomes a social and political task – mourning the death of the beloved and mourning the dead whose lives were not considered worthy of grief. As with Hiroshima, mourning can be a call to remember an event that is beyond recognition – not to freeze memory, but to transmit it and keep it in flux. Mourning can be a way of remaining close to a part of ourselves that is absent, to something or someone we have lost. Last but not least, there is also, as Butler claims, the need for mourning as an attempt to forget and lose for good such phantasms as “nation state” or, one may add, “the Cartesian subject” and “universal truth”. In *After Hiroshima Mon Amour*, as in Butler’s project, mourning and loss become the basis on which a common “we” can be established. In this respect, just as Resnais and Duras did in the original film, Kolbowski in *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* transgresses fantasy, which is a means for teaching subjects what and how to desire.¹⁸ To put it in Butler’s terms, the community

¹⁵ R. Salecl, *On Anxiety* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 75. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the expression *objet petit a* refers to “the object of desire which we seek in the other”; see D. Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 128–29.

¹⁶ Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics”, 30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 29, 34.

¹⁸ As Slavoj Žižek claims, fantasy constitutes our desire. The challenging question is not, “What do I desire?” but, “Why do I desire this particular thing? How do I know I desire this particular thing?” See S. Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 7. Drawing on this remark, one can say that transgression exists not in fulfilling fantasy, but in transgressing the “given” desire and the fantasy itself.

imagined by *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* establishes itself on loss, on the tireless work of mourning and on the state of vulnerability and depersonalisation that each of us experiences when we grieve the loss of others.¹⁹ To grieve and to make the lives of others grievable become the social and political tasks of those who aim for a culture of resistance, a culture of those who remember and yet forgive and forget. *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* is an act of public grieving, the work of mourning that we all must go through as political and ethical beings: beings who are solitary, yet both formed and dispossessed by our relational ties to others.

¹⁹ Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics".