

Mourning Exercise

BY QU CHANG

ISAAC CHONG WAI

Portrait of ISAAC CHONG WAI
at the 60th Venice Biennale,
2024. Photo by Rachel Jiam.



QU CHANG

March, 2024

This essay takes the form of diary entries and excerpts of texts by Judith Butler and Roland Barthes as a means of signaling the multiple lives and intersubjectivity that mourning evokes, similar to what Isaac Chong Wai has explored in his performances since the mid-2010s. Mourning constantly requests the indication of time for those lost in the struggle between “bringing memory to the past” and “bringing past to memory” (David L. Eng and David Kazanjian). Accordingly, instead of organizing these disjointed entries in chronological order, I have pieced together the mourning of different people in disparate times and places, narrating the stories of loss as a connecting and communal event. A single assault, moments of civil unrest, and the collective falling and rising in Isaac’s body of work come together with other accounts of grievances, suggesting the fragmentary yet reoccurring experiences of loss that are both historical and present, personal and shared. Mourning as a politically engaged activity, like Isaac suggests through his practice, entails a series of physical actions that are at once sorrowful, persistent, vulnerable, and vigorous.

ROLAND BARTHES

Mourning Diary | November, 1977

“Mourning: not a crushing oppression, a jamming (which would suppose a ‘refill’), but a painful availability: I am vigilant, expectant, awaiting the onset of a ‘sense of life’.”

ISAAC CHONG WAI

November, 2015

At the time, I was working at Maxim Gorky Theatre [in Berlin]. As I was heading home one evening I found myself on Unter den Linden, a famous tourist street. I was walking toward the bus stop when someone started to shout: “*nihao, konnichiwa*.” I was offended, stepped back, and shouted: “What do you want from me!” I don’t have a particularly aggressive look, so I tried being more assertive. My reaction changed the power dynamic and all of a sudden they seemed threatened by me. Just then one of them took a glass bottle and used it to hit me over the head. I fell to the ground and couldn’t feel the left side of my face. Neither could I hear anything out of my left ear. I had been attacked by two men, and after the assault they walked away, still carrying the glass bottle. A few people came over and asked me if I needed an ambulance. I told them I did as I couldn’t hear anything. Luckily, the bottle didn’t smash. I was taken to hospital and then I spoke to the police. They took a photo of my injured face—it wasn’t pretty. Later, I spoke to a friend about the assault. He said I was easy prey, then he told me: “The world is not your friend.”

JUDITH BUTLER

“Violence, Mourning, Politics” | 2002

“One mourns when one accepts the fact that the loss one undergoes will be one which changes you, changes you possibly forever, and that mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation the full result of which you cannot know in advance . . . You find yourself fallen. You’re exhausted, and you don’t know why. Something is larger than your own deliberate plan, your own project, your own knowing. Something takes hold of you, and what sense does this make?”

QU CHANG

March, 2024

When we are mourning, we experience a partial death. Trauma and loss often take away our will to act and to be active. They summon a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability. In a series of performance-based works produced since his horrific attack in 2015, bodily movements and entanglements have become, for Isaac, forms of rehabilitation that seek to bring the act(s) of mourning back to life. And like any mourning ritual, he asks, with a hint of melancholy, how we might move toward the future with memories not only of trauma but also of hope, with fragility as well as courage. Between 2015 and 2016, Isaac invited hundreds of participants to gather in public squares connected to significant political or cultural sites in Germany, South Korea, Hong Kong, and mainland China, to share their stories of the past and their plans for the future. The resulting works were *One Sound of the Histories* (2015), and *One Sound of the Futures* (2016). The process of mourning, it seems, almost always involves dimensions of time and a collective body.

QU CHANG

November, 2023

If mourning means being stuck in the past, not being able to accept the disappearance of someone we have loved, and refusing to move forward without them, what does this mean for how we operate in the present? And considering that public monuments and memorials





ISAAC CHONG WAI, *One Sound of the Histories*, 2015, performance, HD video with subtitles: 15 min 43 sec, Weimarplatz, Weimar, Germany. Photo by Iva Kivora.

are concrete, physical declarations and symbols of past events, as well as of historically significant people or persons, then the question remains: how can we begin to reinvent mourning as a way of evading (or avoiding) the concreteness of history? A friend told me recently that she had been reading Roland Barthes's *Mourning Diary*, which he wrote after the death of his mother. She said it reminded her of her late grandfather, as well of last autumn when we had to witness the acts of violence that erupted during the Covid-19 pandemic, the fear we all experienced, of that shifting yet unshakable feeling of loss. We later found a passage by the Hong Kong scholar Kum Yan Ting who explained mourning and its resulting melancholy as one's attempt to reconfigure their relationship with the world: who am "I" after the disappearance of "you"? How do "I" and "we" participate in a world without "you"? Mourning, in this sense, is a series of active attempts to reshape oneself and the world. It is an effort to make sense of the "now" and an attempt to build a bridge between "me," "you," and "us."

QU CHANG

March, 2024

In 2016, Isaac staged two performances contemplating the act of falling at Meinblau Projektraum in Berlin. In the first, titled *Falling Exercise*, a group of performers fall to the ground at the same time, each body cushioning and enveloping the other. Later, the performers lying at the bottom of the pile stand up and exit one by one while the rest maintain their positions without any support. The performance ends when the last person stands up and leaves the room. Here, the vulnerability of the body is no longer simply a symbol of victimhood or passivity. It is also a protecting and buffering device, making falling an experience of shared precarity and a collective act of mutual protection. Falling, be it the fall of an individual or of a collective, can therefore become an event of world-making and relation-building in which multiple bodies are engaged and intertwined. The exercise of falling, as suggested by Isaac, is the practice of connecting, protecting, and standing up.

In *Help! Help? Help.* the same group of performers alternate between falling to the ground and helping each other to stand up until all of them are lying on the floor, hands raised, having no one to pull them up. Isaac later told me that he had in mind conventional gestures of helping and the repetitive injury (the fall) and remedy (the rise) revolving around individuals. Pulling one's partner up from the ground, then patting their shoulder and offering them verbal reassurance—these acts of kindness seem to blunt our perception of who to help, or how. To help and to react to hurt, loss, injustice, and sorrow requires a constant renewal of our roles and our obligations, and an active reinvention of our interaction with other people.





ISAAC CHONG WAI, *Rehearsal of the Futures: Is the World Your Friend?*, 2018, performance. Photo by Tobias Koenig. Courtesy ACUD Macht Neu, Berlin.

JUDITH BUTLER

"Violence, Mourning, Politics" | 2002

"Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation, but I think it has and can furnish a sense of political community of a complex order . . . it seems that what grief displays is the way in which we are in the thrall of our relations with others in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control."

KUM YAN TING

"On the June 4th Vigils: Unmournful Mourning and Vanishing Histories" | September, 2017

" . . . mourning has a melancholy side that we cannot dispel. But we can build and fortify an imagined community by sharing such mysterious experiences . . . "

QU CHANG

March, 2024

In Isaac's *Rehearsal of the Futures: Police Training Exercises* and *Rehearsal of the Futures: Is the World Your Friend?* (both 2018), performers reenact, in slow motion, gestures and movements from various street protests. By bringing together repetitive physical movements—stones being thrown, bodies being dragged, arrests being made—from sites of civil unrest across various regions, Isaac continues his exploration of ways to effectively rebuild our relationship with the world and with each other. One way he does this is in the slowness of the performers' movements. This is in stark contrast to the cinematic technique of slow motion, which often obsesses over acts of violence. In Isaac's works, the performative slowness softens the aggressive acts that erupt between demonstrators and police in situations of protest and disorder, instead eliciting loving caresses, collective embraces, and rhythmic dances. Rendered in slow motion, the preexisting boundaries between attack and resistance, aggressor and victim, become eerily ambiguous. It is this highly deliberate and choreographed slowness that brings a much-needed structural change to current social relations in which violence becomes vulnerable, and vulnerability creates unity, therein creating forces of protection and care. Perhaps this is one way that mourning might be able to function as a political act.

ISAAC CHONG WAI

2018

"When the speed of attack slowed down, it became touching."

JUDITH BUTLER

"Violence, Mourning, Politics" | 2002

"One is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel . . . I think that if I can still speak to a 'we,' or include myself within its terms, I am speaking to those of us who are living in certain ways beside ourselves, whether it is in sexual passion, or emotional grief, or political rage . . . To grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to a simple passivity or powerlessness. It is, rather, to allow oneself to extrapolate from this experience of vulnerability to those of others, others whom we may well be able to protect from violence itself."

QU CHANG

November, 2023

Individual and collective encounters with 21st-century traumas are not so different from those of the last century: "among others, revolution, war, genocide, slavery, decolonization, exile, migration, reunification, globalization, and AIDS." (David L. Eng and David Kazanjian)

ISAAC CHONG WAI

Rehearsal of the Futures: Police Training Exercises | 2018

"No one is safe."

ROLAND BARTHES

Mourning Diary | November, 1977

"A trip from Paris to Tunis. A series of airplane breakdowns. Endless sojourns in airports among crowds of Tunisians coming home for Aïd Kebir. Why does the ominous effect of this day of breakdowns suit mourning so well?"



ISAAC CHONG WAI, *Help! Help? Help.*, 2016, performance, HD loop: 1 min 53 sec, at Faith and Terror – Performance Art Festival, Berlin. Photo by Viktoria Nowicky. Courtesy the artist.



ISAAC CHONG WAI, *Rehearsal of the Futures: Police Training Exercises*, 2018, performance and video, commissioned by M+ Museum for "M+ Live Art: Audience as Performer," at Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong, 2018. Photo and video by CPAK Studio.

QU CHANG

March, 2024

The 2020s have been a decade in which multiple breakdowns of our self-destructing world have become visible and inevitable—from the global pandemic to the many wars, crimes, and environmental catastrophes. As a result, our experience of loss has become increasingly complex, overlapping the personal and the communal, the societal and the epochal. Facing conditions of instability, Isaac brought together a group of performers in *Falling Reverse* (2021/24), to practice different ways to (not) fall: each performer guides the other, who is falling gently, slowly to the floor; one holds and leans onto the other to create an intricate balance; they collectively enfold each other onto the ground, then stand up by collective effort. Although Isaac wrote in the work's description that the piece is a reflection of the racist attacks against Asian communities both during the Covid-19 crisis in particular as well as throughout the long history of white supremacy, the performance recalls an extensive list of sites and events where the mourning for lives and the actions to recreate lost communities are desperately needed. The act of falling is the beginning of the formation of new bodies, which is made possible through touching, holding, dragging, pulling, pushing, and grabbing. Learning to fall is learning how to stand up. And learning to mourn is learning how to care and to re-world.

DAVID L. ENG & DAVID KAZANJIAN

"Mourning Remains" | 2003

"Indeed, the politics of mourning might be described as that creative process mediating a hopeful or hopeless relationship between loss and history."

QU CHANG

March, 2024

I am writing and assembling these passages while listening to the singing in *Die Mütter* (2022). Echoing German printmaker Käthe Kollwitz's eponymous woodcut piece, Isaac's work presents ten performers dressed in black, embracing each other in a circle, turning clockwise slowly, collectively. While turning, the performers hum lullabies and dirges from myriad cultures in multipart harmonies. Slowly, the performers pull out of the embrace and leave the space one after the other. Those who remain maintain their gesture of embrace, their empty arms reiterating the sense of loss and mournfulness. This is perhaps the first time Isaac addressed the subject of "mourning" this directly in his performance work. In its ritualistic expression of grief and love, loss and hope, everything is in motion, however slowly. The mourners embrace, sing, and move. Their songs utter the continuous transition between life and death, loss and return. And mourning is what moves in between them, channeling hope into despair, melancholia into celebration, slowness into acceleration.

ISAAC CHONG WAI

(in an interview with Radio Television Hong Kong) | 2021

"What if a piece of snow fell onto a monument and covered it? I want to question the relationship between presence and absence."



Installation view of **ISAAC CHONG WAI**'s *Falling Reverse*, 2021/24, at the 60th Venice Biennale, 2024. Photo by Riccardo Banfi. Courtesy Blindspot Gallery and Zilberman, Istanbul/Berlin/Miami Beach.



Isaac Chong Wai, an artist working between Berlin and Hong Kong, participated in the 60th Venice Biennale. His work transforms the emotions, tensions, and memories found in human interactions into performative materiality and immersive experiences.

Qu Chang is a curator and writer based in Shenzhen and Hong Kong. Her writings have appeared in *Artforum*, *Ocula*, and *Spike*. She is currently a PhD candidate in the cultural studies department at Lingnan University in Hong Kong. Previously, she served as a curator at Para Site art space in Hong Kong.