

## Giubbotto di salvataggio o di morte

### The Jacket of Life or Death

Le recenti installazioni dell'artista cinese Ai Weiwei hanno attirato molta attenzione. Costituite principalmente da migliaia di giubbotti di salvataggio indossati dai rifugiati che arrivano in Europa dopo un pericoloso viaggio che attraversa il Mar Mediterraneo, le installazioni artistiche di Weiwei si sono concentrate sulla morte e la scomparsa di migliaia di rifugiati. Questo articolo discute il simbolismo del giubbotto di salvataggio, visto sia come un'ancora mortale, sia come un salvagente. Analizzando l'opera *Soleil Levant*, sosterrò che l'arte di Weiwei è un'opera sul lutto e sta offrendo uno spazio temporaneo nella città contemporanea per negoziare le complessità, le ambivalenze del lutto e l'impossibile compito di mantenere in vita i defunti. Come un simbolo che si libra tra la vita e la morte, il giubbotto di salvataggio è quindi un'immagine emblematica del lutto.

The recent art installations by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei have attracted a lot of attention. Consisting primarily of thousands of life jackets worn by refugees arriving in Europe after a dangerous voyage crossing the Mediterranean Sea, Weiwei's art installations have drawn focus on the deaths and disappearances of thousands of refugees. This paper discusses the symbolism of the life jacket, both seen as a fatal anchor and a life preserver. Analysing the art piece *Soleil Levant*, I will argue that Weiwei's art is a work of mourning and is offering a temporary space in the contemporary city for negotiating the complexities and ambivalences of mourning and the impossible task of keeping the dead alive. As a symbol hovering between life and death, the life jacket is thus an emblematic illustration of mourning.



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On a sunny September afternoon I took a walk in Copenhagen. The city was peaceful. People were in the streets, relaxing, drinking coffee, playing with their kids and enjoying themselves. Relishing the peaceful and happy atmosphere and strolling through the city, I arrived at Nyhavn, a cosy street at the harbourside full of restaurants, cafés, and souvenir shops and often described as one of the most charming spots in Copenhagen.

On this day something was different in Nyhavn. I noticed an interrupting discrepancy. A foreign element disturbing the scenery. A spectacular sight: All the windows in the art gallery Charlottenborg were barricaded with life jackets. But why?

On the United Nations International Day of Refugees, 20<sup>th</sup> of June 2017, Charlottenborg introduced the art piece, *Soleil Levant*, by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. An art installation designed especially for Charlottenborg and for Nyhavn (fig. 1).

Weiwei travelled to the Greek island of Lesbos where he collected 3,500 life jackets worn by refugees arriving there after a dangerous voyage crossing the Mediterranean Sea. The life jackets subsequently became the main component in Weiwei's art installation at Charlottenborg exhibited from June 2017 until 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2017.

Charlottenborg promoted the installation as a commentary on the refugee crisis in Europe, citing numbers from United Nations Refugee Agency that 1.377.349 people came to Europe seeking refuge in 2015 and 2016. In the same period 8000 people died or disappeared after completing the journey to Europe.<sup>1</sup> Some art critics brushed the installation aside as being a flimsy political protest. Former professor at the

Copenhagen Art Academy Jesper Christiansen called it "populist" and "in my opinion almost parasitical in its desire to eat into all the world's disasters and problems."<sup>2</sup>

In her review of *Soleil Levant* Pernille Matzen questioned Weiwei's artistic mode of expression: "It is as if, no matter what political topic, Ai Weiwei can turn it into a spectacular Instagram-worthy work of contemporary art. The question is whether this monumental mode of expression is the most suitable if you want to focus on the boat refugees and the refugee politics in Europe?"<sup>3</sup>

But, as I will explain in this paper, there are more dimensions in Weiwei's installation worth exploring. Rather than focusing on the refugee crisis, I think Ai Weiwei's art should be interpreted as a work of mourning. A *memento mori*. A locus of grief – a temporary space in the contemporary city for mourning. Not only do Weiwei's art installations communicate to us a special kind of grief, the symbolism of the life jacket is also very important, even though it has hitherto escaped critical academic attention. Thus the life jacket as a symbol between life and death will be explored in this paper.

But first, let us have a closer look at *Soleil Levant*. Witnessing the installation, my attention was first focused on the life jackets, which, by the way, are defined as a "sleeveless buoyant or inflatable jacket for keeping a person afloat in water" according to the Oxford Dictionary.<sup>4</sup>

I examined them from a close distance, seeing each individual life jacket, their materiality, the fabrics, the colours, and the straps hanging down. Most of them were orange, and a few of them blue and red. Because



fig. 1 Ai Weiwei: *Soleil Levant*, Kunsthal Charlottenborg, 2017.  
Photo: Charlottenborg



fig. 2 Ai Weiwei: Soleil Levant, Kunsthall Charlottenborg, 2017. Photo: Charlottenborg

the installation was facing a street, as a beholder you had to look out and find a position in front of the installation where you were not in danger of being run over by a car or a bicycle. Furthermore, if you would walk too far back, you would risk falling into the water and thereby being in need of a life jacket yourself.

The first impression was very unsettling, almost unheimlich<sup>5</sup> and disturbing the tranquil Nyhavn atmosphere. However, the second impression was different. When I walked to the other side of the water, I could see *Soleil Levant* from a distance. I could see the bigger picture, as it were (fig. 2).

In this respect the reference to Claude Monet's painting, "*Impression: Soleil Levant*" opens the art piece to new interpretations (fig. 3). When comparing the two pictures, you see a quiet harbour setting, a few boats and a distinct orange colour. The comparison to Monet's impressionist painting, antedating the abstract-expressionist painting, is important. I could no longer see the life jackets in their accumulated individualities.<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, I saw a smooth and flat image assimilating itself into the scenery. A large canvas with impressionist orange dots. So the life jackets, the ready-mades<sup>7</sup>, are at first a reminder of a brutal reality. But then you look at *Soleil Levant* from a distance, and you see the abstract sun rising in the East. Life melting into art.<sup>8, 9</sup>

As a piece of installation art it can be characterized as both monumental and ephemeral.<sup>10</sup> The word *install* means, according to the Oxford Dictionary, establishing something or someone in a new place or condition, in a place of authority or in a position ready for use.<sup>11</sup> The life jackets are installed in a new place, in the art gallery, thus transforming them into

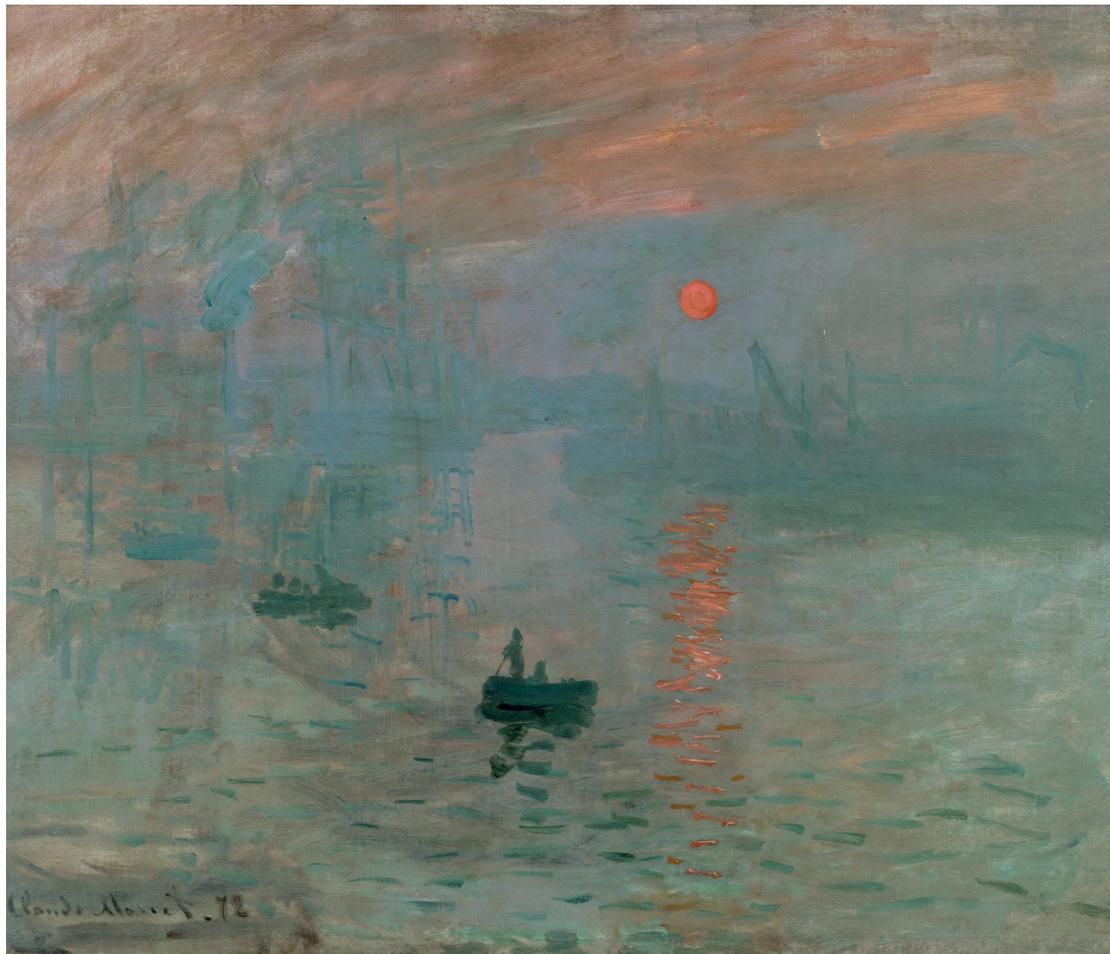


fig. 3 Claude Monet: *Impression: Soleil Levant*, 1872.  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

a piece of art. The installation is monumental in size and quantity, but the duration of the installation is short, and the installation is thus vulnerable to the process of time.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2017 Soleil Levant ceased to exist. The aura and the unique existence of the work of art withered and was substituted by a plurality of photographic copies. “A unique existence was substituted for a mass existence,” to quote the German philosopher Walter Benjamin.<sup>12</sup> And from now on it is only through technological reproduction that we can approach Soleil Levant.

### The life jacket as a symbol

In September 18th 2016, London's Parliament Square was covered with life jackets. The life jackets were installed at the square, echoing a graveyard. Campaigners from the [International Rescue Committee](#) (IRC) had laid out 2,500 used life jackets to raise awareness of the thousands of refugees who die at sea.

“650 of these life jackets were used by children, you can still see the Disney stickers on some of them,” said Sanj Srikanthan, the IRC's director of policy and practice.<sup>13</sup>

“Most of them are provided by smugglers, they are not safety checked, some of them absorb water, they become like an anchor if you fall in the water, especially for a child,” explained Srikanthan and added that it “is meant to represent the tragedy of the modern refugee.”<sup>14</sup>

The display of life jackets differs from Soleil Levant in that it is pure political protest and does not have aesthetic transformative potential. But the strong

symbolic power of the life jackets is the same.

In contrast to classical Christian imagery, such as the fish and the boat, the life jacket does not promise safe shores or a safe haven. As exemplified in Srikanthan's quote, the life jackets are no guarantee of keeping people alive. For the life jackets, indexical marks of those who were once wearing the life jackets, are now empty.

You can observe this in other art installations by Ai Weiwei, as well. In the pond in front of the Belvedere Castle in Vienna, a display of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy's splendor, Weiwei placed 1005 life jackets formed in 201 rings. Each ring of life jackets, forming the letter F, were floating like lotus blossoms in the pond (fig. 4).<sup>15</sup> Weiwei's installation, named F Lotus, can be seen as a reference to Claude Monet's iconic paintings of the water lilies, thereby once again connecting the real-life ready-mades to the fictitious realm of the painting.

Furthermore, Weiwei decorated the 6 enormous columns at the entrance of the Konzerthaus in Berlin with 14,000 orange life jackets, also collected from Lesbos. In the centre of the façade was a sign with the text: Safe passage.<sup>16</sup>

The theme of refugees and life jackets seems to be pervasive in the recent works of Ai Weiwei, yet I would propose that it is rather mourning that is the main theme of Weiwei's art. Let me illustrate it with another example of Weiwei's installations.

On May 12, 2008 there was a tremendous earthquake (8,0 on the Richter scale) in the Southern province of China, Sichuan. Weiwei sought to find details about the victims of the earthquake, but the Chinese authorities did not give out any information. Over 5,000

students in primary and secondary schools perished in the earthquake, but it was not possible to discover their names, until Weiwei took action. He gathered a hundred volunteers, and together they commenced a citizen investigation. They wanted to find out who had died and what were the circumstances.

“In reaction to the government's lack of transparency, a citizen's investigation was initiated to find out their names and details about their schools and families”<sup>17</sup> it says on the Ai Weiwei website. “As of September 2, 2009, there were 4,851 confirmed.”<sup>18</sup>

Weiwei did not want the victims to be forgotten. He published their victims names' on his blog on the internet. The Chinese government tried to shut it down several times, but Weiwei kept posting details about the victims. So out of the ruins in Sichuan he created a reservoir of names, identities and stories.<sup>19</sup>

This becomes very manifest in Weiwei's exhibition in Haus der Kunst in Munich in Germany in 2009. On the façade of the museum he created the installation “Remembering.” The installation consists of 9,000 backpacks from the Sichuan earthquake in five different colours that create the sentence “For seven years she lived happily on this earth” in Chinese lettering – a sentence uttered by a mother commemorating her daughter who was killed in the earthquake (fig. 5).<sup>20</sup>

If Weiwei's art is a protest it is a protest against silence and forgetting. Even though the aura and the physical presence of the refugees and the school children are missing, the art works try to extract them from the void, recreating and installing them temporarily in a new elevated space. A space of impossible mourning.



fig. 4 Ai Weiwei: F Lotus, 2017. Photo: Schloss Belvedere



fig. 5 Ai Weiwei: Remembering, Photo: Haus der Kunst/Jens Weber, 2009

## Derrida and the impossible mourning

In his book, “The work of mourning,” French philosopher Jacques Derrida mourns the loss of many of his friends, such as Paul de Man, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Sarah Kofman and Roland Barthes. The act of mourning is full of ambiguity, and Derrida finds it very difficult to address his friends who are gone and live in the alterity. He finds himself in an aporia, experiencing that it is neither possible to speak or stay silent. If he addresses his deceased friends who is he in fact addressing? Since they are not there to receive his words, is he then addressing them or himself?

“Whom is one addressing at such a moment? And in whose name would one allow oneself to do so? Often those who come forward to speak publicly, thereby interrupting the animated whispering, the secret or intimate exchange that always links one, deep inside, to a dead friend or master, those who make themselves heard in a cemetery, end up addressing *directly, straight on*, the one who, as we say, is no longer, is no longer living, no longer there, who will no longer respond [...] It is rather so as to traverse speech at the very moment where words fail us, since all language that would return to the self, to us, would seem indecent, a reflexive discourse that would end up coming back to the stricken community, to its consolation or its mourning.”<sup>21</sup>

Derrida writes that his friends live on inside him and that in mourning the persons, lacking any material physical presence, somehow become reduced to images.<sup>22</sup> That is all that is left.

Furthermore, Derrida states that a representation is an attempt at making present again, re-presenting, those whose are lost. An attempt in vain at reanimating

the dead.<sup>23</sup> Mourning is always a failed attempt. Paradoxically, in order to succeed in mourning the endeavour to bring back the dead has to fail.<sup>24</sup>

“There shall be no mourning.”

Derrida tries to understand this phrase coined by his dear friend, French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard, whom he is mourning, but admits: “Today, I do not know any better, I still do not know how to read this phrase, which I nevertheless cannot set aside.”<sup>25</sup> Should “There shall be no mourning”, or in French: “Il n’y aura pas de deuil”, be read as a prescription, a command, a prohibition, a wish or a testamentary phrase? Perhaps, Lyotard warns against an institutionalization of mourning. As Derrida proposes: “For wouldn’t the institution of mourning run the risk of securing the forgetting? Of protecting against memory instead of keeping it?”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, this “drifting aphorism”<sup>27</sup> epitomizes the ambivalence, or impossibility, of mourning.

Derrida discusses mourning in relation to the ideal of the beautiful death, exemplified in Pericles’ funerary oration, a speech given at the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC) as a part of an annual public commemoration of those who died in battle.

“For the whole earth is the tomb of famous men; not only are they commemorated by columns and inscriptions in their own country, but in foreign lands there dwells also an unwritten memorial of them, graven not on stone but in the hearts of men”<sup>28</sup>

The bearers of the life jackets’ possible deaths cannot be sublated in fulfilment and glory of the beautiful death. There are no columns or memories of them engraved in hearts of men. There shall be no

mourning for the children perished in Sichuan or the disappearing refugees.

As Michael Naas notes, discussing Plato’s thoughts on mourning: “the banner under which the well-regulated individual and polis must live is always: ‘There shall be no mourning.’”<sup>29</sup> Here, the phrase is interpreted as a prohibition and a regulation.

In the Platonic ideal state there must be a hierarchy of mourning favouring certain citizens (kings, presidents, generals and soldiers) and relegating others to oblivion and silence.

Discussing the geopolitics of mourning, Nuri Gana warns against normalizing the “discrimination between ‘mournable’ and ‘unmournable’ —and, subsequently, ‘disposable’— subjects.”<sup>30, 31</sup>

Weiwei defies the Platonic prohibition and the political distinction between those meriting celebration and commemoration and the “unmournable and disposable subjects”. The prohibition on mourning and thus the demarcation line of the polis is defied by the displays of life jackets and school bags, destabilizing the dichotomy between centre and periphery.

Gana advocates for a focus on shared rather than contesting vulnerabilities.<sup>32</sup> Weiwei seems to be of a comparable conviction, creating an aesthetic representation, a locus for mourning and an installation commemorating people otherwise unmourned.

So does Weiwei defy Lyotard’s phrase: “There shall be no mourning?” with his artistic interventions in the poleis of Vienna, Berlin and Copenhagen? I think, following Derrida’s reflections on mourning, that Weiwei’s art, is grappling with Lyotard’s phrase.

For what do the life jackets communicate to us? The “reflexive discourse” of Weiwei’s installations are globalised commemorations honouring refugees and Chinese school children, but is there not also a risk, to quote Derrida once more, that the installations “end up coming back to the stricken community, to its consolation or its mourning” in its failed attempt to “traverse speech”?<sup>33</sup>

As the negative reviews of *Soleil Levant* indicate, Weiwei’s installation does not console us. On the contrary, it rather accentuates the inconsolability inherent in mourning. And that is precisely the point. I think the ephemeral monument of *Soleil Levant* is a negotiation of the aporia of mourning; a work of impossible mourning that oscillates in a passage between too far and too close, between the materiality of the life jackets and the abstract mosaic of the rising sun, between being forgotten in the whirlpool of mass existence and recapturing the uniqueness of every existence, between drifting away with the tide into the unknown and keeping the bodies (and the memories of them) afloat and alive, between an accumulation of meaningless disasters and a sublation into a beautiful image.

Weiwei’s art installations, whether depicting life jackets or school bags, are aesthetic representations, transient monuments, aspiring a position in the Pantheon of art, a place where the deceased can be immortalized. A place beyond mourning, a place beyond the horizon where there will be no more mourning.<sup>34</sup>

#### Notes

1. Kunsthal Charlottenborg website: <https://kunsthalcharlottenborg.dk/da/udstillinger/ai-weiwei-soleil-levant/> As seen 19 November 2017.
2. Ivar Carstensen: “Flygtninge-kunstværk af Ai Weiwei får hård kritik: Ren populisme”, IN: *Berlingske Tidende*, 19. juni 2017 <https://www.b.dk/kultur/flygtninge-kunstvaerk-af-ai-weiwei-faar-haard-kritik-ren-populisme> (My translation). As seen 19th November 2017.
3. Pernille Matzen: “Ai Weiwei holder sit facadeværk af redningsveste op over for Nyhavns glansbillede”, IN: *Information*, 16. juni 2017. Link: <https://www.information.dk/kultur/anmeldelse/2017/06/ai-weiwei-holder-facadevaerk-redningsveste-nyhavns-glansbillede>. As seen on 19th November 2017. (My translation). Matzen refers to the social media app Instagram, where everyone can upload pictures. Used by many companies and celebrities, the most iconic and eye-catching pictures attract the attention of a multitude of Instagram followers.
4. Oxford Dictionary, [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/life\\_jacket](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/life_jacket), as seen November 19th 2017.
5. It is possible to read *Soleil Levant* through Hal Foster’s Freud and Lacan-inspired view of art as a traumatic realism. See Hal Foster: *Return of the Real*, MIT Press, London, 1996 pp. 127-168.
6. Repetition is traumatising, Hal Foster writes in his analysis of Andy Warhol’s disaster series. The accumulation of life jackets can also be seen as a repetition of a traumatic event. See Foster p. 136 f.
7. Ai Weiwei is obviously inspired by the tradition of the readymade and artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol. See Monica Tan: “Ai Weiwei interview: ‘In human history, there’s never been a moment like this’”, IN: *The Guardian*, 10 December 2015, Link: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/dec/10/ai-weiwei-interview-in-human-history-theres-never-been-a-moment-like-this> as seen on November 19th 2017.
8. In her book about a poetics of narrative mourning, Nouri Gana advocates for “vigilant acts of critical distance and close reading— or what I call critical distance at close range”. Nouri Gana: *Signifying Loss : Toward a Poetics of Narrative Mourning*, Bucknell University Press, 2011 p 149.
9. The motif of the sun in *Soleil Levant* can also be read as a reference to the myth of Icarus who flew too close to the sun. Especially when read through the poem of William Carlos Williams, “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus:” “.... insignificantly/ off the coast/ there was / a splash quite unnoticed / this was/ Icarus drowning.” From William Carlos Williams: *Collected Poems: 1939-1962*, Volume II, New Directions Publishing Corp, 1962.

10. Barbara Ferriani; Marina Pugliese: *Ephemeral Monuments: History and Conservation of Installation Art*, Getty Publications, Los Angeles, 2013, pp 15-16.
11. Oxford Dictionary <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/install>
12. Walter Benjamin: “The work of Art in the Mechanical Age of Reproduction”, IN: *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Norton, London, 2001, p. 1169.
13. Lucy Pasha-Robinson: “Thousands of life jackets appear outside Parliament to remind MPs they are failing drowning refugees,” IN: *The Independent*, 19 september 2016. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/life-jackets-parliament-square-london-graveyard-refugee-deaths-sea-life-jacketlondon-international-a7316096.html>. As seen 19th November 2017.
14. Ibid.
15. The website of the Belvedere museum [https://www.belvedere.at/be/en/exhibition/ai\\_weiwei](https://www.belvedere.at/be/en/exhibition/ai_weiwei) as seen November 19th 2017
16. Anthony Faiola: “In Europe, the refugee crisis as art: 14,000 bright orange life jackets”, IN: *Washington post*, 15 feb 2016. Link: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-europe-the-refugee-crisis-as-art-14000-bright-orange-life-jackets/2016/02/15/d6d23c50-d3f5-11e5-a65b-587e721fb231\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.f92c3174c53e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-europe-the-refugee-crisis-as-art-14000-bright-orange-life-jackets/2016/02/15/d6d23c50-d3f5-11e5-a65b-587e721fb231_story.html?utm_term=.f92c3174c53e) as seen November 19th 2017
17. Ai Weiwei’s website> <http://aiweiwei.com/projects/5-12-citizens-investigation/name-list-investigation/index.html> as seen November 19th 2017
18. Ibid.
19. Rosalind Krauss proposes in *Under Blue Cup* that „The medium is the memory” and that the specificity of the medium has the power to “hold the efforts of a specific genre in reserve for the present. Forgetting this reserve is the antagonist of memory,” writes Krauss and thus places the aesthetic medium in a paradigm of memory versus forgetting. See Rosalind Krauss: *Under Blue Cup*, MIT Press, London, 2011, p. 127 f.
20. Haus der Kunst in Munich website [http://www.hausderkunst.de/en/research/documentation/exhibition-documentation/detail/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=367](http://www.hausderkunst.de/en/research/documentation/exhibition-documentation/detail/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=367) as seen November 19th 2017
21. Jacques Derrida: *The work of mourning*, University of Chicago Press, London, 2001, p. 200
22. Derrida p. 159
23. Derrida p. 149
24. Derrida p. 144
25. Derrida p. 220
26. Derrida p. 218
27. Derrida p. 217

28. Thucydides: Pericles' Funeral Oration, Human Rights Library, University of Minnesota, online version <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/education/thucydides.html> as seen November 18th 2017.

29. Michael Naas: History's remains: Of memory, mourning, and the event, IN: Research in Phenomenology, Brill, 2003, Vol.33, p. 82.

30. Gana p. 150.

31. Naas p. 82. "For both political and philosophical reasons, the city and its citizens must be convinced or taught to get over death and, thus, get over mourning. This will be done not by prohibiting rites of mourning altogether but by controlling, converting, or transforming these rites, or, since Derrida uses the word in his analysis of Lyotard, sublimating them into the beautiful death, or, indeed, into a philosophical death"

32. Nouri Gana: Signifying Loss : Toward a Poetics of Narrative Mourning, Bucknell University Press, 2011.

33. Derrida p. 200.

34. Derrida refers (p. 218 f) to The Book of Revelation chapter 21, verse 4: "He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared."

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