Project title: **THE ATLAS OF THE IMPOSSIBLE**

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My current research interest draws from and aims at expanding the frame of my PhD project titled *Casting a Shadow. On Disappearance, Emptiness and the Haunting Power of Absence,* which examined absence as a result of political violence and aggression.

By adopting a multifocal perspective, I developed three individual yet interconnected directions that respectively interrogated: the use of architectural structures as tools for segregation and enforced separation, the unfathomable-ness of violence (either experienced or witnessed), and lastly, its reverberation and assimilation through the work of mourning. Absence was therefore explored through the lens of a physical removal, always inflicted; of a verbal defectiveness, either imposed or spontaneous; and of an affective suspension, primarily resulting from a deep internalisation of grief.

While the research on separation walls and architectures of confinement sought to address the political dimension of absence as the outcome of deliberate acts, resulting in the negation of the existence of the "other;" the language-based works investigated the potential for alternative, de-centralised strategies of knowledge-sharing. The opening towards a physical exploration of loss became crucial to the works that consider and examine the universal nature of mourning, which constitutes my current focus and interest.

Informed by Adriana Cavarero's philosophical reading into 'rectitude,' I present the initial and preliminary results of my ongoing research on the representation of the 'Lamentation,' a traditional theme always actualised.

As an extension of my investigation into political violence[1], the figure of the mother has resurfaced as an emblem of a 'second-level victim,' so-to-speak, since the wound is inflicted on her through an interposed body.

Focussing on the representation of the mother in European painting –typically confined to either a blissful figure in adoration of the infant, or a grieving one mourning her dead son– I started a textile series based on classical depictions of the lamentation[2], in which the mother holds her

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[1] Primary sources for the research on the political use of imprisonment are the letters written by Gramsci during his incarceration: Gramsci, *Lettere dal carcere,* and the collection of letters written by political prisoners of the resistance against Italian fascism, who were sentenced to death: Piero Malvezzi and Giovanni Pirelli eds., *Lettere di condannati a morte della Resistenza italiana (8 settembre 1943 – 25 aprile 1945*, (Einaudi 1952).

[2] *The Material Thickness of Time*, 2024. Hand knitted wool, 171x138 cm.

son's lifeless body on her lap, her torso inclined tenderly towards him. In my monochromatic rendering, the figures of this representation are translated into outlines. As the silhouettes preclude the portrayal of facial expressions, the desolation due to an irreparable loss is conveyed solely through the relational positioning of the bodies. In this extreme abstraction from the initial reference, my intention to dissociate the representation from the context of a religious affiliation becomes explicit. Working with multiple layers –and often with a superimposition of several of them– I have gathered visual documentation from online sources. These images, from recent and current conflicts, depict the strikingly similar gesture of mothers mourning their grown children, holding their bodies for the last time, in a nearly perfect postural overlap with the painterly figurations.

This same silhouette is reproduced in a small diptych, repeated once in relief and then as a debossed contour[3]. In its hollowness, the latter becomes a literal embodiment of the trace, the shadow and the spectre of the corresponding positive canvas. Or inversely, the positive appears to be extracted from a mould, subsequently left void, like a cast shadow.

Choreographing the work of mourning

The Atlas of the Impossible, a dance- and performance-based video where the body is offered as the lieu where the process of healing could potentially initiate -while also contemplating the role of re-enactment in addressing omissions and erasures in prevailing versions of history, was inspired by Isadora Duncan's choreography titled "Mother," which originates from the tragic death of her two young children[4].

Choreography is supposed to be repeatedly performed by different dancers, and interpreted in the process, through repetition, as an always individualised act. The question central to the work is: How to reconcile the significance of reiteration and the uniqueness of an individual experience while engaging with the work of mourning?

One possible direction lies in the concept of natality, as articulated by Hannah Arendt. Natality marks a unique event that nonetheless partakes in a collective structure—every birth is singular, yet bound within the universal fact of human beginning. Grief, of course, can be understood as the inverse of natality. And yet, if we move away from the image of biologic birth, a parallel between natality and grief becomes apparent, as both can be described as a form of "disjunctive temporality," one that opens the gap between a before and an after[5]. Both are punctuations that suspend ordinary time and establish new relational or existential coordinates—suggesting that the tension between reiteration and uniqueness might, in fact, be inherent to both.

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3   *The Material Thickness of Time*, 2024. Hand embroidery on canvas, diptych, 26,5x28 each.
4   *Mother* is an original choreography by Isadora Duncan, created in 1921 to Scriabin's "Etude, Op. 2, No. 1." The piece, categorised as a dramatic dance, is part of a trilogy of dances, and was premiered in 1923. It was revived by Irma Duncan in 1927, and restaged by Julia Levien in 1978."
5   Diprose and Plowoska Ziarek, *Arendt, Natality and Biopolitics*.

By adopting a transdisciplinary approach, *The Atlas of the Impossible* ventures into the intensity of embodiment and emotional participation[6]. The newly devised choreographic sequences were collaboratively conceived with dancer and choreographer Andrew Champlin[7], and are accompanied by an original musical score by Jumairy[8]. In a further attempt to bridge disciplinary gaps, the piece translates, into a non-verbal language, segments of my dramaturgic script *The Material Thickness of Time*[9], also investigating questions surrounding grief and loss.

The choreography is offered as a potential tool for expressing and manifesting emotions through performative strategies, without aiming to activate a therapeutic process. While refraining from the consolation of a cathartic perspective, the work rather aspires to explore the representability of grief within a shareable space[10].

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6 This segment of my research constitutes a novel direction, as it opens up an exploration of the interconnectedness of visual arts, architecture, literature, and anthropology. In fact, the approach I am taking, while addressing what I have coined as "motherly orphanage," or *paidorphanage* (the Arabic language has a word to describe a mother who has lost her child, "thakla," loosely translating as bereaved)*,* involves the ongoing collection and codification of a representative number of characterisations and renderings of grief and mourning in classical, modern and contemporary art history and theatre (from Antigone to Wajdi Moawad, including the revered Ann Carson and Louise Glück, among others).

7 Andrew Champlin is an American dancer and choreographer based in Berlin (andrewchamplin.com).

8 Jumairy is a multimedia artist born and living in Dubai (jumairy.com).

9 Cristiana de Marchi, *The Material Thickness of Time*, Research Catalogue (https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2738062/2738063)

10 With reference to the research on rendering emotions tangible, see J. F. Christensen, L. Bruhn, E. M. Schmidt, N. Bahmanian, S. H. N. Yazdi, F. Farahi, L. Sancho-Escanero, W. Menninghaus, "A 5-emotions stimuli set for emotion perception research with full-body dance movements," *Sci Rep.* 2023 May. Here the attempt to systematise dance movement for emotional interpretation echoes the Laban's notations adopted to transcribe movement into a written language and further supports an interdisciplinary discourse around the creation of intuitive and codified vocabularies.