

# Hot Tears

## Why It Is So Hard to Make Artwork About Crying

*Coming to the weeping itself, cover the face decorously, using both hands, palms inward. Children are to cry with the sleeve of the dress or shirt pressed against the face, preferably in a corner of the room. Average duration of the cry, three minutes.*

—Julio Cortázar, *Instructions on How to Cry, Historias de Cronopios y de Famas*

On October 3rd, 2013 something terrible happened to me. A few days later it got much worse. I wept like weeping was keeping me alive and I wept like it was the end of my life. It was the kind of crying that you do when your world is changed suddenly and irreparably in a way that is out of your control, not your fault, and you didn't see coming. I cried more than I didn't for the many months that followed, siphoning a seemingly bottomless reservoir, often waking myself up in the middle of the night with tight cheeks and a warm, wet shirt collar. It's hard to imagine feelings like this ever ebbing, though of course everything does. My mother says: If it's not over, it's not the end.

I became interested in crying as a subject for art. How could I not? It absorbed the majority of my time and energy well into the following year. I avoided it as an "idea" at first, feeling that to "create something" of the experience would be a predictable flattening out, a making-cute of my own desperate and desperately

private situation. I feared turning my pain into a metaphor for my pain. Roland Barthes pondered a similar aversion in the journal he kept after the death of his beloved mother, Henriette: "I don't want to talk about it, for fear of making literature out of it—or without being sure of not doing so—although as a matter of fact literature originates with these truths."

*Although as a matter of fact literature originates with these truths...*

I relented. I began to think about how we cry in the face of art, and vice versa. A few notes down in my own journal from this time, faithfully re-recorded here:

Crying: as ends or a means in A—R—T?

Can tears be harnessed as *material*?  
Can crying be an action rather than a symbol? (Kiki Smith's emissions)

Notable: emotions are called "feelings"/ internal touch

ABJECTing...exuding liquid uncontrollably from body (satisfying, gross, entire).

Can WOMEN make work about crying?

Tear, rhythms with near & tear, rhythms with bear. Something here?

The correct unit of 'relatable' sadness when making work is \_\_\_\_\_.  
Things we shed: tears, light, blood (partially buried woodshed)

Why not make work about it?????

The experimental filmmaker Roger Beebe—whose 2014 film

Carmen Winant (b. 1983, San Francisco) is a writer, artist, and Assistant Professor of Critical Studies at the Columbus College of Art and Design in Columbus, OH.



1

*Cry Baby*. Dir. John Waters.  
Perf. Johnny Depp (1990).

*Historia Calamitatum (The Story of My Misfortunes), Part 2: The Crying Game*  
I would encounter a year and a half after scribbling that list—recently wrote me in an email as a part of a larger exchange. He said, “I had a crying session in 1999 that was euphoric; I decided then I wanted to stop shutting down those pleasures. The film was a desire to address and overcome the pathologization of tears. WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO CATHARSIS?” Beebe’s film charts, in bright text on a black screen, all of the things that made him cry in a single year: “More sports-related tears this morning, although it was only a welling-up this time around;

Three hours post tears I’ve already forgotten the exact cause; Real crying today; Cried When Bonnie left after our dinner hangout; Cried when telling my mom about our breakup; Cried (more than a few tears) this morning during breakfast while watching Cindy Sheehan get into a shoving match with an old veteran in uniform...” The artist’s own body is noticeably absent, while emotional clips from *A League of Their Own* or various athletes tearing up at ESPN press conferences periodically flash across the screen instead.

And so the most obvious place to start my search was in film, that great stockpile of tears-for-art.

I began studying actors and actresses crying on camera. It turns out there is crying in almost every movie; it's hard to win an Oscar without doing it. I looked to performers for tips on how to cry.<sup>1</sup> What strategies do they use to draw "real" tears forth (thinking about dead dads, menthol under the eyes)? Wistful, caged whimpering and all-out collapse are the methods of choice in Hollywood; Reese Witherspoon is a master at both. I feel appreciative for Reese's willing demonstration of vulnerability and also resentful that it's voluntary. She chooses to emote on the basis of her "craft." Control is King. I imagine her practicing in the mirror. I imagine her director's swift praise.

Seeking out visual art that pictures crying is not as easy a task. The most prominent example is, of course, Bas Jan Ader's *I'm Too Sad To Tell You* (1972). The black and white, three-minute film pictures the twenty-nine year old artist inaudibly weeping, swaying in and out of the sorrow spell. Ader simultaneously performs for the camera and refuses to acknowledge it; the device is there to bear witness and nothing more. It's a stark and moving act, in part because it comes from a man, in part because the source of the sadness is less important than the feeling itself, and in part because we know Ader will be dead within the next three years (a result of this same melancholic inquiry). It's still the consummate example of an artwork that is about, or at least evidences, the act of crying. Other notable works that fit in this grouping: Jesper Just's video, *No Man is an Island II* (2004), in which he filmed professional opera singers in a dimly-lit strip club, each belting out Roy Orbison's song *Crying* (one of the singers does), and Laurel Nakadate's project, *365 Days: A Catalogue of Tears* (2010), in which the artist photographed herself shedding tears

each day (or, as PS1 stated in their catalog of her exhibition, "taking part in the sadness each day"). It's hard to compete with *I'm Too Sad* but of the three examples, Nakadate's feels like the weakest creative inquest, more intent on performing sadness than inhabiting it. Then again, maybe I'm predisposed to find male crying more "interesting" or uniquely vulnerable? My judgment is suspect. I have a hard time coming up with other examples.

The focus on my interest was artwork that pictures crying, not artwork that causes crying. However in the midst of this reconnaissance I re-read Andrea Fraser's moving 2004 essay *Why Does Fred Sandback's Work Make Me Cry?* and underlined these early lines, which lead into the titular question: "When I got to the galleries with the installations of [Sandback's] work, I started to cry. I sat down on a bench there, and I wept. Why did Fred Sandback's work make me cry?" (Fraser also recalls weeping in the Louvre in 1985, a few years later while looking at Rembrandts at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, and finally at the Alte Pinotek in Munich in 1993). Her answer of course is complex and mutable. I re-traced it, looking for clues that I might transpose into artwork itself. Among other things, Fraser reckons with her own career critiquing institutions that house such meaningful work, clarifies the distinction between crying, tearing, and weeping, which includes both crying and tearing, and considers how art of all kinds can point us toward feelings of profound loss, guilt, beauty, violence, mourning, sensitivity, pleasure, melancholy, and fleshiness. Almost a decade later Francine Prose wrote an essay about Marina Abramović's three month performance at MoMA (and the subsequent film, also titled *The Artist is Present*). Considering why dozens of viewers cried while sitting

1. Though this is the province of another essay, there is a remarkable industry built up around teaching actors how to cry on demand. There are plenty of tips on this for aspiring actors on the Internet, but I found the best instruction came from fiction. "In order to cry," wrote Julio Cortezar in his book *Cronopias y Famas*,

"steer the imagination toward yourself, and if this proves impossible owing to having contracted the habit of believing in the exterior world, think of a duck covered with ants or of those gulfs in the Strait of Magellan into which no one sails ever."

across from Abramović, Prose writes, “Alienated, unmoored, we seek our salvation, one by one, from the artist who brings us the comforting news: I see you. I weep when you weep.” I picture Ader’s camera, his singular and affirmative testifier.

I started to record my weeps. *To express with tears*, as defined by my pocket dictionary. My therapist said: “An artist’s impulse!” Some cries last up to twenty minutes, though most are shorter. I am terrified someone will catch on; a double humiliation. Once, I temporarily lost my phone and became convinced the audio tracks had been hijacked and put on the Internet, an idea that naturally made me cry more. Listening to the recording on playback felt as difficult and uncanny as you might imagine. I tried to transcribe them, to make language of pre-language, but the work goes nowhere. I attempted other strategies: drawing while I cry, collecting my tears on paper and glass, assembling images of strangers crying from the news, photographing myself while weeping. Who hasn’t tried that one? I tentatively showed those images to a former employer of mine, a very well-known photographer, who admitted she attempted the same thing years before. “Hasn’t everyone?” she asked, inadvertently affirming my fear that these attempts, however faithfully intended, are shallow and solipsistic.

Beebe followed up with another email a few days after the first one, responding this time to the question of his own non-present body. “I *did* shoot some footage of me crying, but turning the cameras and lights on always made the tears feel a little forced or it shut them down altogether. And even though at some level there’s a lot of me in the video (in voiceover, in the diary text), I wanted to be able to keep gesturing to the ways in which

this is a bigger set of questions and issues in our culture. Images of me would’ve surely tipped the balance.”

I responded, in part: “I’ve been thinking more about physical absence. In terms of the body, of course, but also the absence of tears. I suspect they have something to do with each other.”

And of course they do. To this end, Fraser ultimately concludes that Sandback’s installations engender tears through their lack. “By removing himself to the extent that he does, he makes a place for me,” she writes in the final paragraphs of her essay. *I’m Too Sad To Tell You* was originally titled *Cry Claremont*, a reference to where Ader went to school and filmed the work; did the word “cry” likewise take up too much emotionally determined real estate? If the process of creative production is an interplay between withholding and generosity, perhaps in the image of another person crying we cannot locate enough space of our own for the feeling (note that Abramović never cries, but acts rather as a mirror). More than the fear of being trite, or of turning our very real feelings into the rites of literature, we fear letting the tension go out of a creative act. Perhaps by describing crying in visual art—through actually picturing it—we deliver a work that in some ways has already resolved (or dissolved) itself, that exists in a state of post-climax. *WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO CATHARSIS?* In some real and embodied sense, crying marks the point of moving past the problem and into its release. As artists, that position does not—can not—belong to us.