

Laura Taler: THREE SONGS



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Curated by Heather Anderson



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Heather Anderson

“The sense of a past, lost but still present, is very familiar to me and, I imagine, to any immigrant that lives separated from the place and people left behind.”¹

–Laura Taler

In the trio of video installations comprising *THREE SONGS*, Laura Taler braids singing, gesture and the language of filmmaking in an immersive, non-narrative approach to storytelling. *THREE SONGS* is rooted in Taler’s personal history of leaving Romania as a child and eventually settling in Canada. It explores such themes as familial ties, loss and displacement, and experiences of duality—of being caught between places—that are familiar to those creating new lives in different countries.

Producing *Song #1*, *Song #2* and *Song #3* sequentially over six years, Taler learned to sing in languages other than English and performed as a series of doppelgängers—fictional characters that look like her—for the camera. These quasi-portraits or “containers,” as she views them, provide Taler with a measure of distance to explore difficult emotions. Interweaving her vocal performances with cinematic attention to the surrounding site and contemplation of how gesture can express the histories and experiences the body carries, *THREE SONGS* contains both joyful tribute and elegy.

In editing the video for each song, Taler identified stillness and pacing as key to establishing emotional registers for memory, displacement,

loss, grief and joy. The looping structure of each of the videos and their spatial arrangement within the gallery invite extended engagement. By creating space to slow down, Taler offers openings for visitors' embodied responses.

In *Song #1*, we encounter Taler's doppelgänger in a sunlit German forest, alone among tall pines near the Baltic Sea and singing *Uite asa as vrea sa mor* (This is how I'd like to die), a Romanian drinking song. Her performance of the song alone *in* nature creates a dislocation with where and when this song might typically be sung—at a boisterous party or in a bar—and shifts the register of the song's lyrics, which call for a celebration, music and drink. In long pauses between verses, Taler's gestures and rhythmic finger snapping commune with the forest's rhythms—its play of sun and shadow, bird calls and gentle sounds and movement of wind. The camera's shift to focus on her eyes and surroundings emphasizes her desire to be in nature and the struggle to reconcile being fully present, in the moment, with the pressures of time and its fleeting character.

Song #2 transports viewers to Taler's late grandmother's small farm in the Romanian countryside. Village neighbours and Taler's mother are assembled in the courtyard, audience to Taler's performance of *El adiós* (The Goodbye). Taler chose this beloved Argentinian song, trusting its sentiment would cross language barriers. Her choice to sing in Spanish, a language she learned as an adult, highlights the gulf separating her from her mother tongue, from Romania and from the people she left behind. Inside the farmhouse, dressed in a wig and peasant clothes, Taler's doppelgänger contemplatively performs quotidian activities interspersed with dance steps and moments of stillness. Drone footage offers a bird's-eye view of the farmyard, and of Taler's character walking into the nearby field. Through these acts, Taler attempts to channel a connection with her long-dead

grandmother, her quiet and careful gestures evoking the processes and labour of mourning.

The side-by-side videos comprising *Song #3* are set in Berlin, in the Gipsformerei, the world's largest plaster cast replica workshop, and the Theater im Delphi, a beautiful, century-old silent film theatre. Scenes of Taler, dressed in coveralls and working among plaster cast figures, the camera lingering on characterful, broken faces and limbs, are intercut with footage of her on stage, sharply dressed in a suit and rehearsing a song and dance. Motifs of doubling and mirroring in the camerawork and editing are echoed by Taler's doppelgänger in the workshop, who refines a plaster Janus-head in her likeness. On stage, her performance of *Romania Romania*, a Yiddish song celebrating the flourishing of Jewish and Romanian culture between WW I and WW II, at once embodies joy, nostalgia and mourning. Taler's tribute to this golden past, also gestures toward the destructive forces that transformed Romania and led many to leave the country.

The plaster Janus-head sculpture Taler crafts in *Song #3* references the Roman god Janus, deity of beginnings, transitions, duality, passages and endings. Perpetually looking backward and forward, the Janus-head expresses a feeling of doubling—or being split in two—that Taler describes as intrinsic to her experience as an immigrant. Duality and untranslatability are woven through *THREE SONGS* in Taler's performances and meditative cinematography, which reflect on the dislocations and relocations of immigration, and on how movement blurs endings and beginnings.

Pandemic closures delayed the public debut of *THREE SONGS* for over two years, during which refugee crises have continued to unfold around the world. While *THREE SONGS* arose from Taler's experiences, the multiple layers, emotions and meanings this body of work carries,

and the strands from which it is woven, invite connection with others' experiences of migration. Taler's work provokes us to consider the acts, the meanings and the impacts of leaving one's home to seek another, the loss of the familiar and particularly of those left behind, and the struggle to create a new identity and life in a different place, all the while carrying the weight of the past.

1. Laura Taler, cited in Guy Cools, *Performing Mourning: Laments in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2021), 136.



Aboubakar Sanogo

Laura Taler's Three Songs: An Art Of Movement

The work of Laura Taler may be best understood as an art of movement, movement in its multitude of forms. Indeed, the ways in which she presents herself, as a Romanian-born Canadian, already situate her biography as an outcome of movement, of the productive nature and tensions of movement, bringing together cultures and histories of Eastern Europe / Romania and North America / Canada. Movement is also at the center of her practice, as she ambulates between various artistic forms ranging from dance, music and song to sculpture and film. Each of these artistic forms is itself animated by movement, that of bodies (dance), of sound (music), of words (song, speech), of images (film), of its stoppage (sculpture). Movement is also at the heart of the *décalage* principle / principle of dissonance that animates her work, in particular the three songs being presented here. Indeed, *décalage* / dissonance is an epistemological gap that constitutes the very experience of exile, migration and diaspora, between the home and the host country, home and the world, as Satyajit Ray would say.

In other words, Taler's concern is not solely with Movement with a capital M as in the constitutive element of the dialectic, or as an element of physics, potentially devoid of its human component. It is also with movement as historical, as humanized, hence her concern with the great human journey, of which migration, diaspora and exile are at once chapters and cornerstones.

In that sense, this current piece is very much a logical outcome of Taler's three decades of artistic practice. Indeed, the three pieces presented here may well be considered her *Gesamtkunstwerk* in that they embody the majority if not the totality of her artistic concerns. For instance, there is a distinct way in which Taler chooses the spaces she invests for her practice. The cemetery and the barroom invested in prior work resonate very well with the lyrics of the songs

chosen for *Three Songs*, in particular the pieces which address death, merrymaking and memory. Indeed, in some respects, one may even think of revisitation of past concerns. For instance, her first work was entitled *the village trilogy*, yet here she also sets one of her songs in her departed grandmother's village to explore recurring thematic of "home, uprootedness and migration." (Taler)

Song #1 or Metaphysics / Human Identity

In *Song #1*, Taler uses a popular Romanian song, which she sings in a German forest, establishing the principle of *décalage* at the heart of the series of songs in this three-part artistic composition. Here, the principle of dissonance is actualized at the level of origin (Romania / Germany), of stillness / movement and indeed, in the song's lyrics, the celebration of life at the time of death, the choice of red wine over mourning, the dialectic of silence and sound.

In the film, Taler also begins her exploration of gesture as polysemic. Indeed, gesture here is not only in a one-to-one relationship with that which it supposedly represents but is turned into a concept. In effect, gesture also partakes in establishing the beat, the rhythm, the pace of the piece. It resonates with the sound of birds, indeed is an engagement with them.

At the level of the gaze there is the dissonance between the look and that which is being looked at, playing with the dialectic of on-screen and off-screen space. We always have the feeling that there is something beyond the frame, perhaps lurking danger, for a forest is not simply a place of refuge but could also be the site for the sudden appearance of the unknown. The dissonance between the look of the camera and the subject also creates a kind of ricochet, a boomerang of looks.

This is not a music video, rather it is a way of using music to meditate on the human condition. Taler invites us to absorb and learn not only to see anew, but to hear anew, to reattune ourselves to the sounds of silence and the silences of sound. Indeed, there is also a *décalage* at the level of the song, between the song as attached to / coming from the body, and the song as acousmatic / detached from the body that produces it.

Dissonance is also figured between human and nature. The setting in the forest is not anodyne. It evokes wilderness, nature and a sense of our primal identity. After having travelled the world, the migrant subject finds refuge in the forest, away from the chaos of life, as a way of regrouping, of renegotiating her identity as human. *Song #1* thus graphically foregrounds the relationship between the human subject and their environment, by showing Taler standing erect like the trees around her, creating a visual parallelism, putting the human on par with nature.

In terms of mobility, there is a certain economy of movement, a certain dialectic of stillness and movement as if to teach us again not to take movement for granted, indeed, not to take the "moving" in "moving image" for granted. There might be a certain reflexivity about the very identity of the medium used in this case. For only certain parts of the body move at a time: the eye, the finger, the arms, denying full bodily mobility. Mobility and stasis are also concepts that embody the dialectic between the home and the elsewhere. When we move, we go elsewhere, when we are static, we are home, at home, with ourselves.

Song #1 is thus in part about home. In the world of the migrant / diasporic subject, the comfort of home lies not solely in the ability to return, but also in the possibility to convoke the songs of home

that one has carried in one's memory. Indeed, as we leave home physically, we carry home everywhere in our memories, and song is often the dematerialized form of home. It is through song that African slaves and their descendants in the "New World" were able to heal themselves, to spiritually reconnect with home, after having crossed forever, for most, the "door of no return."

Gică Petrescu's classic rendition of the Romanian song *Uite așa aș vrea să mor* relates to the transience of human life (which exists between life and death), itself a journey not unlike that of the migrant. In that sense the song adds another layer to our consideration of the human condition: the journey from life to death of all humans may be put in parallel with that of the migrant's not only spatial, but also affective, spiritual, cultural and political journeys. To leave home is to die somewhat, to move elsewhere is to live somewhat, yet to also die somewhat. But it is also to refuse to let home die by imagining it, desiring it, longing for it in a dialectic of belonging and unbelonging.

Song #2, or Autobiography / Personal / Familial Identity

The opening scenes of *Song #2* almost call for a retitling of the film as "Grandma's House," (in homage to Bill Withers' classic song "Grandma's Hands"), as it figures Taler visiting Romania, the country of her birth, and the place that seems to her to represent a certain sense of rootedness, the house of her grandmother and the village in which she lived. She invites us into the intimacy of Grandma's home, in the various rooms of the house, the dining room, the bedroom, the kitchen. She reminds us that Grandma's house also existed in a country, a village, where agriculturalism and pastoralism (tending sheep) ruled, and where the landscape is a hidden piece of paradise and suggests that leaving this space may well have been, following Milton, a case of childhood "paradise lost."

We feel like voyeurs, and it is the Argentinian song that partly takes away the physical realism of the situation and allows us the necessary distance to genuinely engage with the subject and object of representation. The chosen song very much conveys the feelings that Grandma might have felt when the director left. Again, in continuing with the *décalage* mode, it is in the subjunctive mode, while the images partake both of a nostalgic past and a contemporary reinvestment of the space.

It is interesting to note that this is the film with the largest number of parts to it, as if to suggest that this is the most intimate dimension of the creative act at play here, with no less than five channels devoted to it, once again pushing further the montage philosophy at the heart of the work. Indeed, there seems to be an effort to have the spectator perform the work of unification, of creating narrative coherence by bringing together the split. Instead of doing this on a single screen, she transfers it to multiple screens, thus reflexively foregrounding montage in the apparatus of the exhibition itself, as well as making the viewer aware of the process of montage they will be engaging in while experiencing the work.

Unlike the first piece, where she primarily uses available light, here important aspects of lighting are more expressionistic, carefully choreographed to highlight darks and lights even in daytime, emphasizing the thematic dialectic of the joy of home and returning to it, and the sadness and sorrow at the heart of the split, that inhabited the space after the departure of the director-as-a-child.

It is also interesting that Taler uses mundane elements such as the curtain to foreground the obvious constructed-ness of the scene. Grandma is no more, yet Taler dons her clothes, re-enacts her gestures, becomes her in her quest to reconnect with her past, to



re-place her ambulant migrant feet on solid home ground. The curtain turns Grandma's house into a stage where the dominant artistic mode would be that of re-enactment, as a mode of conjuring her presence back, as a way of reconnecting with that which is no more. It is a highly reflexive moment in the film.

Indeed, to re-anchor herself in the Romanian soil, so to speak, she reactivates Grandma's quotidian gestures, folding linen, cleaning up, intimating that gestures also partake in the great vocabulary and dictionary of identity. Gestures have a place, a culture, a history, stories; gestures are a language; gesture can hide, conceal and display concepts. They are polysemic.

Re-enactment becomes a way of anchoring one's identity. As repetition is indispensable to identity production, re-enactment becomes one of the ways in which Taler re-produces herself also as a Romanian subject, reclaims her Romanian identity, one of the many pieces of herself. These pieces may also be found in the many rooms of Grandma's house. The motif of repetition returns through the song, which at some points has an echo effect, as if in a call and response. There is an elegiac dimension to the notion of re-enactment, a re-gesturing of Grandma's gestures, reactivating them, giving them in hindsight the meanings of comfort, of belonging, of home.

Yet as Deleuze would put it, this is a repetition with a difference. The difference lies in the fact that the returning granddaughter is also a choreographer who repossesses this space on her own terms, by bringing to bear that which she has learned in the experience of migration / exile—choreography, but also filmmaking.

Beautiful high-angle shots of Taler in the Romanian countryside, who eerily starts still and then starts moving, or the gorgeous high

angles of grazing sheep, and indeed high-angle drone shots of the village rooftops in which we see Taler walking across the frame, not only reinscribe her identity in that space but also construct a brilliant aesthetic object in excess of its thematic concerns, demonstrating that this is not mere a mimetic endeavour but a thoroughly artistic project.

In one of the concluding scenes, the only one where Taler does not appear, a group of Romanian villagers are sitting in a courtyard, in Grandma's courtyard, presumably having known her. In a beautiful deployment of the acousmatic, we hear them speak about the weather yet see them sitting in silence, further underscoring the artistic possibilities of *décalage* between sight and sound, image and voice, another paean to the medium of the moving image.

The lyrics of the Argentinian song *El adiós*, which also partake in linguistic *décalage* with Romania/n, evoke the scene of departure, of farewell, of the irreversible split, exploring the affective and psychic implications of the act of leaving for those who stay behind. Indeed, dissonance is at its fullest here: the film is about returning while the song is about leaving. It evokes the sorrows of separation, the heart-wrenching dimensions of the wounds and forced silence of having to let go that which one loves. This *décalage* produces important effects, because it centers no longer solely on the migrant / exilic / diasporic subject, but also on the people around them, what their families and loved ones experience, the holes left behind, gapingly open, their feeling that what they have to offer is "just not enough," that "home is just not enough" for those leaving. At the same time the song also evokes the doggedness of the human, the refusal to let go even in the face of inevitability, of fate, of destiny, the resistance to that, the futility of that resistance, which at the same time also constitutes that which makes us human: refusal.

Song #3 or History / Ethnic Identity

Song #3 is potentially / arguably the darkest of all three pieces. In it the operating principle is that of the Janus, the cast that Taler makes of herself in what is Berlin's Gipsformerei, known as the largest plaster cast replica workshop in the world, and which evokes the project of the film to look concomitantly at the past and the future. Indeed, if *Song #1* deals with an indistinct and undifferentiated human identity and *Song #2* with personal / familial identity, *Song #3* is about ethnic identity, in particular the question of the lives of Jewish people in Romania and the destruction that ensued in the lead-up to and wake of WW II.

Taler stages the film in the Gipsformerei, where she is able to both historicize and symbolize the replica sculptures in order to read into them an important dimension of the history of the Jewish people in the interwar years and afterward. The film has several layers. At first it positions itself in the "process film" genre (documentary or otherwise), where the various stages of the making of an object are followed from inception to conclusion. Here, it is the process of sculpting a Janus face that is emulated by the director although not all aspects of the process are shown. But this is not the director's point. In exploring process, she wishes to invite her audience to meditate on the ways in which identity is very literally molded by surroundings, the environment, the historical. Molding sculptures becomes a signifier for molding identity. The song *Romania, Romania* makes this clear.

Décalage / dissonance remain an aesthetic feature here as well: between the song's lyrics and the director / actor's rendering of them; between the lyrics and the montage of images that serves as counterpoint to them. It soon becomes clear that in some passages of the film-song, what the director has in mind is really the Holocaust,

by virtue of the succession of images of dismembered limbs, severed heads, slit throats, headless bodies and bodiless heads.

Taler makes great use of depth of field, walking across the frame and opening the door. The notion of opening the door, of transitioning from one space to another, is also very much linked to the figure of Janus, intimating that behind every door, there are stories, and perhaps ghosts stories, ghosts of stories, stories of ghosts of the past still haunting the present and indeed the future.

One of the most remarkable dimensions of the piece is the split-screen aesthetics she brings to bear, one in which actions of the left screen sometimes occur in a relationship of simultaneity, consecution, conflict or even conversation with those on the right screen. For instance, the moment at minute 8, which is clearly one of consecution, is presented cinematically, by virtue of the means of montage, as simultaneous. There is a very interesting play with temporality that becomes the cinematic illustration of a famous philosophical principle enunciated by Auguste Comte (as part of his attempt to account for the subject / object split), according to which one cannot be on a balcony and see oneself walking down the street. Here, Taler uses the means of the cinema to go against Auguste Comte and clearly show that in and through cinematic language, it is possible to be on a balcony and see oneself walking down the street. In so doing, she in effect cinematically enunciates her own (and no doubt that of others as well) philosophical principle, that is, the notion that subjectivity and objectivity are always co-present, that there is no subjectivity without some form of objectivity and no objectivity without subjectivity. This is one of the clearest demonstrations that it is possible to philosophize with the medium of cinema, that cinema can itself within its own specificity generate and disseminate philosophical thought.



Taler is also invested in exploring the question of molding as mimesis and she could hardly have made a better choice than the Gipsformerei workshop. Indeed, the space allows her to stage, to visually convey the feeling of a poetics through a figuration of the very act of (art) making, and to even push the envelope by re-gendering the notion of “homo faber” as “femina faber” (or woman-as-maker). In the process, she casts the cinema as a poetics of the image, choreography as a poetics of gesture and movement, sculpture as a poetics of resemblance / mimesis. In that sense the choice of the Gipsformerei allows Taler to use means through which she could meditate on the very poetics of representation, of figuration, so that performing these gestures becomes analogous to performing the cinematic gesture, the choreographic gesture, the sculpting gesture, the act of creating forms, of giving life to them, as a formidable capacity of the human in front of which we must remain humble, in relation to which we must always be mindful of our responsibility. She reminds us here that to create, to represent, is in effect a demiurgic act and gesture. It is the act of giving life, even and precisely through the simulacrum. Mimesis is a simulacrum of life, repetition with a difference.

The rendition of the Yiddish song *Romania, Romania*, if it evokes feelings of “happiness, malgré tout,” speaks to a certain double entendre whereby the trauma and destruction wrought upon the Jewish people during WW II is surreptitiously evoked / invoked not through the lyrics themselves, but via modulations of voice and onomatopoeia, as if words were not enough, as if the suffering had to be suggested more than asserted.

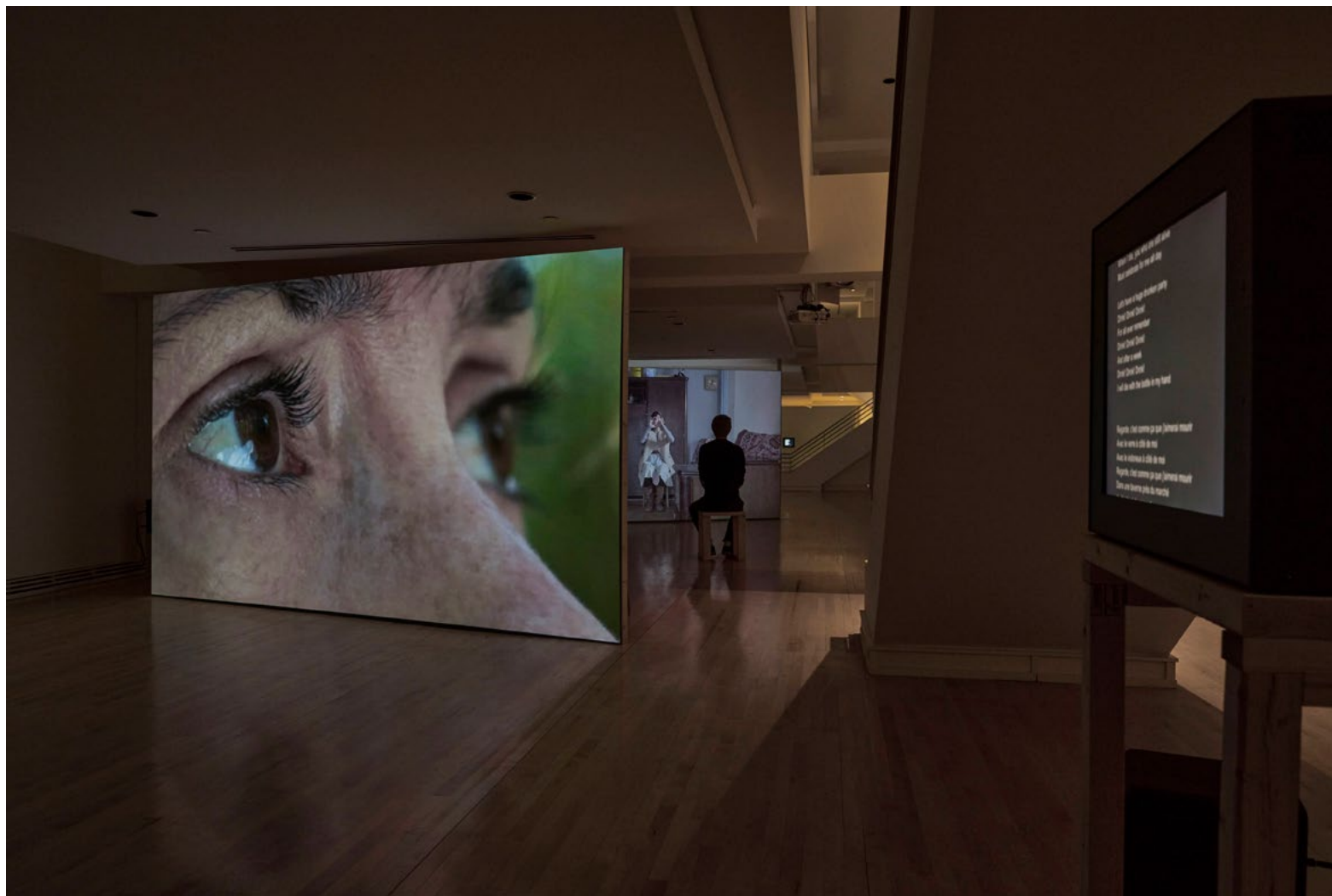
Finally, the choreography of the Yiddish song evokes the cabaret tradition itself prominent in the period where the song is set, the Interwar years, where life for Jews in Romania was experienced as joyful and plentiful, prior to the advent of fascism and Romania’s

deadly pact with Hitler. Here, Taler concludes her identity quest by positioning herself within a collective struggle of resilience and triumph over adversity.

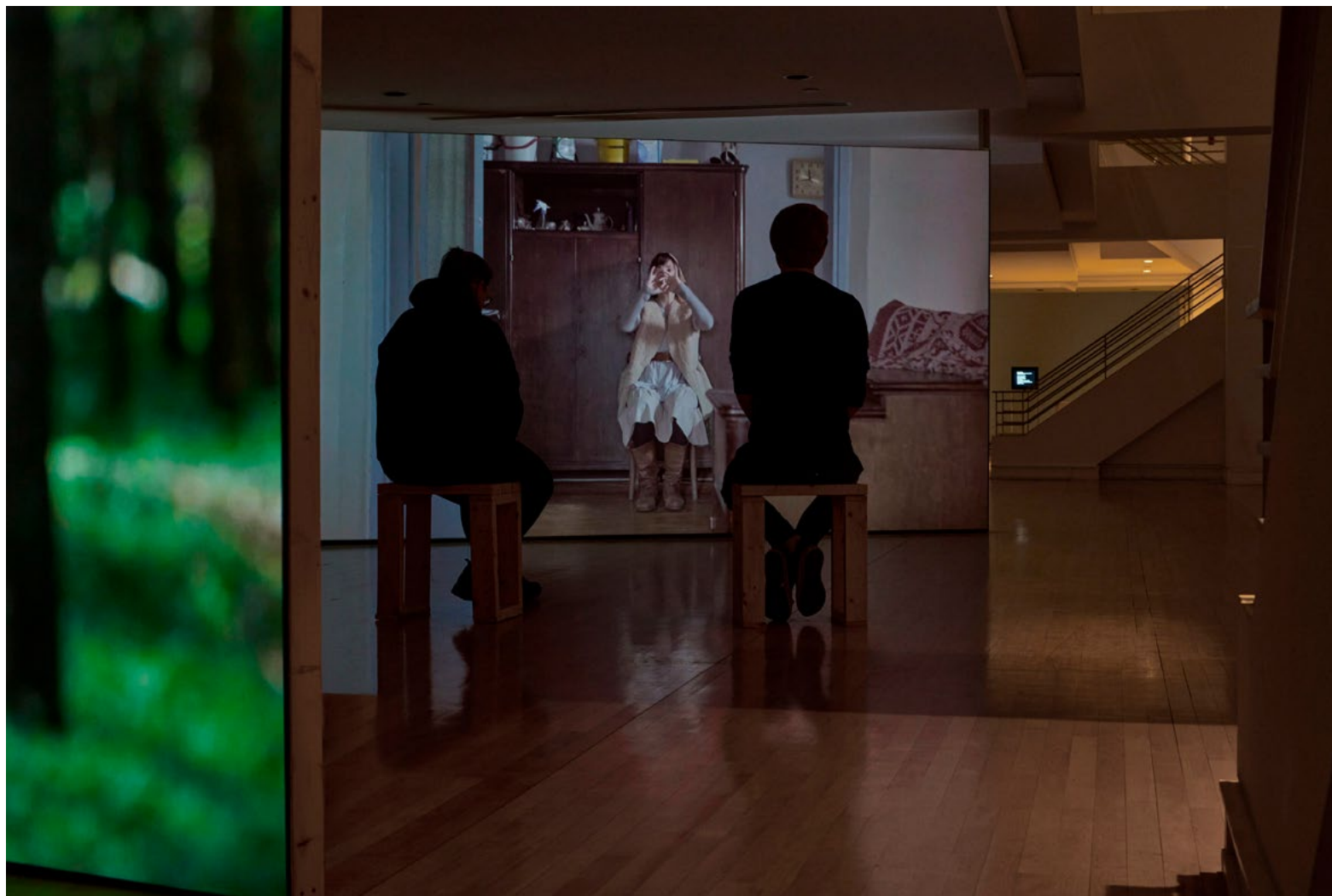


Installation views





Song #1 (detail)



Song #2 (detail)



Song #2 (detail)





Song #2 (detail)





Song #2 (detail)



Song #2 (detail)



Song #3 (detail)



Song #3 (detail)



Song #3 (detail)



Song #3 (detail)



Song #3 (detail)



Song #3 (detail)

Song lyrics

SONG #1

Look, this is how I'd like to die
With the glass beside me
With the fiddler beside me
Look, this is how I'd like to die
In a tavern near the market
I will decide when it's time
To write my testament with red wine
Look, this is how I'd like to die

Let's have a huge drunken party
Drink! Drink! Drink!
For all to remember
Drink! Drink! Drink!
And after a week
Drink! Drink! Drink!
I will die with the bottle in my hand

I don't want laments and wailing
During the procession I want
A fiddler playing
And singing instead of the undertaker
I don't want miserable blubbering faces
Holding their noses in handkerchiefs
When I die, you who are still alive
Must celebrate for me all day

Let's have a huge drunken party
Drink! Drink! Drink!
For all ever remember
Drink! Drink! Drink!

And after a week
Drink! Drink! Drink!
I will die with the bottle in my hand

SONG #2

In the afternoon dying in shadows
Very nicely we said farewell
You didn't notice my deep sadness
And as you left we both smiled

The desolation from watching you go
Broke with emotion my poor voice...
The happiest dream died in that goodbye
And for me, the sky became dark

In vain the soul
With veiled voice
Poured in the night the sorrow...
Only a silence
Deep and heavy
Cried in my heart

As time has passed you've lived inside me always
And these fields that saw us
Smiling together
Ask me if forgetfulness
Has cured me of you

And among the winds
My complaints travel

Dying in echoes
Searching for you...
While far away
Other arms and other kisses
Imprison you and tell me
You will never return

When the luminance of spring returns
And the fields paint themselves with colour
Again the pain and memories
Will fill with nostalgia my heart

Trilling birds will populate the place
And the sky will be overrun with clarity...
But my heart will live in shadows
And the wing of pain will call you

In vain the soul
Tells the moon
With veiled voice, the sorrow...
And opens a silence
Deep and serious
Crying in my heart

SONG #3

Romania, Romania, Romania ...
Once there was a land, sweet and lovely

Romania, Romania, Romania ...
Once there was a land, sweet and fine

To live there is a pleasure
What your heart desires you can get

Ah little cornbread, ah little pastrami, ah little karnatzl,
And a little glass of wine...

In Romania it's so good
No one knows of care
Everywhere they're drinking wine
with a bite of cheese

In Romania it's so good
No one knows of worry
Drinking wine until late
with a bite of pickle

Help me I'm going crazy!
I care only for cheese and cornbread
I dance and jump up to the ceiling
When I eat that eggplant salad

What a pleasure! What could be better!
Oh, such a pleasure is only Romanian wine
The Romanians drink wine
And eat cornbread
And he who kisses his own wife
Ach that one is crazy

Romania, Romania, Romania....

Romania, Bucharest, Brasov, Transylvania,
Cluj, and Iași, and Sighișoara,
Botoșani, and Timișoara,
Rebricea, Târgoviște,
Ieud, Bran, Maramureș,
Constanța, Târgu Mureș, and then go back to Bucharest
Romania, Romania, Romania....

Guy Cools

“Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot not know in advance.”¹

–Judith Butler

I met Laura Taler in a workshop I gave in 2017 for the interdisciplinary research group *Studies in Migration* at the University in Ottawa. In the workshop I use the living tradition of the Greek *moiroloi* (laments) as a template to guide participants in creating their own laments. I discovered the tradition of the Greek laments when I was invited in 2000 by the National Theatre of Greece to curate a workshop for their first Summer University, which was held in Zagori, the mountain range in Northern Greece (Epirus) on the border with Albania. The workshop involved local *moiroloyistras*, mostly elderly women who sing and cry at funerals. I was deeply impressed and fascinated by the masterful performances and craft of these women, who, although never professionally trained, could access and trigger deep emotions within themselves and their audience.

Laura Taler’s video triptych *THREE SONGS* shares many characteristics with the *moiroloi*. First and foremost, the Greek laments are used to dialogue with and give a voice to those who are absent. They are not only used at funerals but also at weddings, where the bride traditionally leaves her home and family to live with her husband’s, or to correspond with those who have migrated or had to go in exile (*xenitia*). “Why did you leave me?” would be a typical

question of such a lament and the absent person would answer back, “I had to, but the place I am now is also a good place.” The experience of the migrant resembles the transformative process of mourning, in which one has to relive and remember one’s past memories of places, people and languages in order to start anew.

The Greek laments are always strongly embedded in a particular landscape. They use elements from the local landscape as a metaphorical language: for instance, a lemon tree for a woman or a cypress tree for a man. In *Song #2*, Laura revisits the landscape and house of her grandmother’s farm in Romania, and temporarily embodies her. But this dressing up is an act of artifice, which is revealed halfway through the video (channel one), when she takes off her wig.

In his book *The New Black: Mourning, Melancholia and Depression* (2008), Darian Leader discusses how “mourning thus involves a certain making artificial,” which in many cultures is expressed by the mourning rituals reversing established conventions or roles to highlight the liminal state in which the mourner dwells. My understanding of the *moiroloi* is that the artifice is also necessary in order to “perform the mourning:” that is, the emotions of grief have to be relived with a proper balance of control and loss of control, of distance and proximity, for them to become integrated and resolved.

A similar artifice is obtained by mixing language and non-language like stylized cries and sobs, the latter often supporting the affect of vocalizations. In one of her earlier video works, *cry* (2009), Laura slows down footage of a baby crying, while on the soundtrack you hear the sobs of a grown man. The discrepancy between image and sound is both comic and disturbing. In *THREE SONGS*, Laura deliberately decides to sing songs in languages she doesn’t master

perfectly, such as the Argentinian tango song, *El adiós* (The Goodbye) of which some of the lyrics read: “As time has passed, you always live in me, and these fields that saw us smiling together, ask me if forgetfulness has cured me of you” (channel five). In her personal notes on the creation process of *Song #2*, Laura writes: “The sense of a past, lost but still present, is very familiar to me and, I imagine, to any immigrant that lives separated from the place and people left behind. (...) The experience of foreignness and, more importantly, of how one gives oneself permission to embody that which is foreign forms the central crux of my exploration in this recent body of work.”

The power of living traditions such as the Greek *moiroloi* is that they allow for individual mourning to be “performed” in front of the larger community so that the emotions can be shared in a dramatized ethics of care. As such, the third channel of *Song #2*, in which you see Laura’s grandmother’s neighbors as an audience to her endeavour, is an integral part of the song cycle.

Laura Taler’s *THREE SONGS* is a contemporary lament in which she uses her experiences as a migrant—being a foreigner in different languages and mediums—to revisit the landscapes and memories of her past; to perform and share her mourning in order to transform.

1. Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), 21.

Melissa Bull

Song #1

Terrestrial biome: *Memory*

i.

Click

crack

light-flecked eaves

sheaf riff rustle

in the pines.

Birdcalls *pio, pio, pio.*

Spindles spines

bark

snap

sprigs creak

limbs acclivous

twin trunks mime

mnemonic calls *pio, pio, pio.*

ii.

Drink! Drink! Drink!

For all to remember.

Drink! Drink! Drink!

iii.

The new shoots can't recall their original. A recollection rite.

Afternoon light fingers through conifers and ferns. Unseen crows

caw, caw, caw. Hidden mammals cast half-remembered utterances in

the bosky undergrowth.

iv.

Drink! Drink! Drink!
For all to remember.
Drink! Drink! Drink!

Song #2

Pastoral: Echoes

i.

A dog in the distance barks. Birds call.
Sunlight.

A door ajar. A woman alone
in her kitchen. A kerchief,
sheepskin boots, sheepskin vest.
A woman alone sweeping.

A tablecloth draped
over a small table. A bare
window. A bird flits
offstage. The curtain shifts.

Is there a voice behind the curtain.
Is there a voice
behind the wall. Shadows
find new shifts. A woman makes
a bed. A woman draws a curtain.

Sheepskin boots sidestep,
sidestep. Sheepskin
boots sidestep, sidestep.

The wood stacked neat.
The rugs tacked
above the bench. A watched
pot boils. A bucket of dishes to wash.
A woman sits with her tea.

The woman removes
her hair. Red
bowl, green bowl.
The woman sits
by the stove. A china cup.
The woman *à contrejour*.
Circumscribed lines furrow
fallow land. Dormant
drab, scarce ochre.
Tendrils of wheat flick
in the wind. Creeping
sheep pasture. Wind
ruffles the woman's dress.
Sheepskin boots sidestep,
sidestep. Sheepskin
boots sidestep, sidestep.

Twenty to twelve.
Wind rushes
through the homestead.
It's all you can hear.

ii.

*My complaints fly among the winds
and die in echoes.*
Time has passed, but still, you live in me.

iii.

Stage a somatic manifesto to conjure absent memories. An appeal with cup, cloth, egg. A strike. The breath of a mother's mother tongue. A word for something in a twice-forgotten intonation. An unfamiliar word across the palate.

Time is measured in menial tasks, repeated rituals. If the gestures are re-enacted in order at the precise peal of the bell, song of the bird, baa of the sheep, can time be swept back. Or is it always forward, forward, forward. Is there a voice behind the curtain. Is there a voice behind the wall.

iv.

*My complaints fly among the winds
and die in echoes.*

Time has passed, but still, you live in me.

Song #3

Museum: Archive

i.

Plastic film sheaths plaster sarcophagi
prone limbs
still as bone, white as whitewashed
crust. Sleepers asleep.
A curator in coveralls among the ancients.

Archive or crypt.
Marrowless heroes,
epic echoes molded into memory
indifferent trophies
congregate haphazardly.

The potter sifts silt
pours water. Rolls, kneads.
Mumbles an
annunciation. Do not be afraid.
You were made of dust
and plaster wings.

ii.

*Once there was a land, sweet and fine
to live there is a pleasure.
Ay, in Romania life is so good
no one knows of care.*

iii.

Two minutes to five.
She rests
among dismembered torsos
sings to the ghosts
a new song.
She files braids. Dusts excess clay.
Scratches features out of a two-headed woman
looking forward looking back
among the copse of gods
the stores of arms and digits.

She brings a lunch.
The show will start soon.
She brings her own dishes.
She takes out her utensils.
Cracks the lid.
Unseals the thermos.
Pastrami, karnatzel, mamaliga.

Pastrami, karnatzel, mamaliga.

The show will start soon.

iv.

*Once there was a land, sweet and fine
to live there is a pleasure.*

*Ay, in Romania life is so good
no one knows of care.*

v.

Hoarding memories of memories. Our ancestors our scavenged,
catalogued relics approached with familial despair and polytheistic
adulation. Original, copy, inheritor, memento, artefact, homage,
progeny. We cannot know in whose likeness we were cast.

Film credits

Song #1 2015–19

HD video with stereo sound

Two continuous loops, 8m 45s

director choreographer performer	Laura Taler
camera	Maria Ångerman
production assistants	Dagie Brundert, Heather MacCrimmon, Dagmar Morath
edit	Laura Taler
sound mix	Jordy Bell
colour correction	Melanie Fordham
<i>Uite asa as vrea sa mor</i>	
music by	Elly Roman
lyrics by	Nicu Kanner

Filmed in July 2015 on location in northern Germany at the Nationalpark Vorpommersche Boddenlandschaft (Western Pomerania Lagoon Area National Park).

Song #2 2017-19

HD video with stereo sound
Five continuous loops, 21m 24s

director | choreographer | performer
camera
sound
second camera | drone
makeup | production assistant

Laura Taler
Vlad Carp
Andrei Botnaru
George Păvăloaia
Carmen Adriana Stavarache

edit

Neven Lochhead and
Laura Taler

sound mix
colour correction
sound recording
singing coaches

Jordy Bell
Melanie Fordham
David Bignell
Kellylee Evans,
Amanda Mabro,
Megan Jerome
Carlos Boeri

Argentinian Spanish consultant

El adiós
music by
lyrics by

Maruja Pacheco Huergo
Virgilio San Clemente

Filed in October 2017 on location in Rebricea, Romania, in the house
where the artist's grandmother lived.



Song #3 2019-20

HD video with stereo sound
Three continuous loops, 21m 37s

director | choreographer | performer

camera

sound

camera assistant | second camera

grip | gaffer | second camera

theatre technician

makeup | hair

costume design

wardrobe

production manager

assistant director

stills photography

edit

sound design

trumpet

sound mix

colour correction

sound recording

singing coach

Yiddish consultants

sculpture creation

Laura Taler

Marcus Elliott

Joscha Eickel

Kleber Nascimento

Lucas Heinze

Tilman Agüeras Gäng

Caterina Veronesi

Tracey Glas

Heather MacCrimmon

Angela Stiegler

Emma Howes

Dagmar Morath

Kim Frank and Laura Taler

Phil Strong

David Buchbinder

Jordy Bell

Melanie Fordham

Jeremy Darby,

Canterbury Music

Company

Fides Krucker

Floralove Katz,

Lorin Sklamberg

Rosemary Breault-Landry,

David McDougall,

Deborah Margo,

John Ancheta,

Erin Armstrong

Romania, Romania

music and lyrics

Aaron Lebedeff

Filmed in October 2019 on location in Berlin at the Gipsformerei and the Theater im Delphi.



Stonecroft Symposium: THREE SONGS

Each year, CUAG hosts the Stonecroft Symposium, a free public event that cultivates discussions of ideas raised by the artists featured in our exhibitions.

The Stonecroft Symposium: THREE SONGS was a multi-vocal, multi-site series of in-person and virtual events, grounded in music, art and conversation.

This symposium was the fifth in a series of free annual symposia hosted by CUAG, held over the 2018–22 period. It was made possible with a generous gift from the Stonecroft Foundation for the Arts.

Turkwaz at Pique / 24 September / LabO Theatre

A performance by Turkwaz: four musicians and singers (Sophia Grigoriadis, Jayne Brown, Maryem Tollar and Brenna MacCrimmon) who are immersed in diverse musical traditions from Sufi devotional love songs to rousing Thracian dance music. Co-presented by Debaser at the fall edition of Pique.

Three Conversations about THREE SONGS / 15 October / CUAG

A unique take on an artist talk, with friends! We walked around the gallery with Laura Taler and three invited guests: translator and writer Melissa Bull, film critic Tom McSorley and poet Namitha Rathinappillai. At each song / installation, Laura fielded questions from these interlocutors, offering insights into the work's stories and questions.

**“To be split in two:” A Panel on Migration, Media and Art Galleries /
23 November / Virtual**

Malini Guha, Associate Professor of Film Studies at Carleton University, moderated a dynamic conversation between three interdisciplinary scholars — Natasha Bakht, Orly Lael Netzer and Masha Salazkina — who responded to themes and ideas raised by **THREE SONGS**.

**Songs and Sounds of Home / Mixtape in Partnership with CKCU /
released on SoundCloud**

In this digital project, Vincent Andrisani led a student-created sound piece exploring home and place. Andrisani is a musician who teaches sound studies in the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University. Co-produced with CKCU.

THANK YOU

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Artist's acknowledgements

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I am grateful for warm conversations with Guy Cools, Melissa Bull, Aboubakar Sanogo, Cornelia Principe, Megan Jerome, Katja Melzer, Sabine Sparwasser, Marc-Alexandre Reinhardt, Deborah Margo and Maura Doyle. Thank you to Minodora Taler, Laurian Taler, Xenia Taler, Nicu Spataru, Stanley Frankentaler, Charlotte Frank, Mitchell Frank and Saul Frank Taler for always standing by me.

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Biographies

Romanian-born Canadian artist **Laura Taler** began her career as a contemporary dance choreographer before turning her attention to filmmaking and visual art. Throughout her career Taler has explored the links between movement, voice, memory, and history by using cinematic and choreographic devices to articulate how the body is able to carry the past without being oppressed by it. Her work has been praised for its unique combination of emotional resonance, wit, and striking visuals. She has been a resident at the Banff Center for the Arts, Centro Cultural Recoleta (Buenos Aires), Carleton Immersive Media Studio (Ottawa) and a fellow at the Institute for Cultural Inquiry (Berlin). Awards include a Gold Hugo from the Chicago International Film Festival, the Best Experimental Documentary award from Hot Docs!, Best of the Festival from New York's Dance on Camera Festival, and the Dennis Tourbin Prize for New Performance. Her work has been featured in theatres, galleries, festivals, special screenings, and broadcast internationally.

Heather Anderson is curator at Carleton University Art Gallery.

Melissa Bull is a Montreal-based writer and editor, and a French-to-English translator of fiction, essays and plays. Her poems, translations, fiction, non-fiction and interviews have been published widely.

Guy Cools is a dance dramaturge, critic, curator and author, and Professor in the Dance Department at the University of Québec in Montréal.

Dr. Aboubakar Sanogo is Associate Professor of Film Studies at Carleton University. His multi-disciplinary work involves research, teaching, film curation, policy making and institution building.

This publication is produced in conjunction with *Laura Taler: THREE SONGS*, curated by Heather Anderson and presented at Carleton University Art Gallery from 25 September – 18 December 2022.

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