



**How Many Tears  
Are Enough?**

**An Installation  
by June Ahrens**

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**UConn Stamford Art Gallery  
Stamford, Connecticut**



On April 20, 1999, the Columbine massacre happened. I was not yet thirty years old, and working in New York. The news felt removed, disembodied from reality. What I felt was an amalgam: shock, horror, dread, confusion, anger, disgust. I questioned: Who? How? Why? How many? How did we let this happen? Why didn't we stop them? How could we not know?

We say, think, and feel the same things today, twenty years later. But back then I remember feeling something distinctly different from what I feel now—that this was an aberration, a random act so horrible that it could not possibly happen again. I am sure others felt the same way; but how wrong we were. What we think today is not, "How could this have happened?" but, "When will it happen again?"

I spoke to a friend recently. She has a daughter in high school, and she told me that when the Parkland shooting happened, her daughter's class erupted with cell phones dinging and buzzing. Why? The students all have news alerts set for "school shooting." My own daughters in elementary school tell me they do the "exercise" in school, where they close and lock the door and shut the blinds and hide, because they are children living in America in the twenty-first century and this is reality, the new American way.

I do not mean this to be a political statement, but more a statement about our humanity: who we are, what we deem right and wrong, what kind of lives we want to live, what we have come to accept as

normal versus not. Mass shootings are an abomination, and yet they occur at a rate and with a volume of casualties that America seems to have accepted. Have we been anesthetized not only to gun violence, but to the idea of mass shootings as an inherent risk in our way of life? Terrible things happen, but they don't happen to us, and we are thankful. We have learned to accept such dark ideals, or else how can we overcome the paralysis of fear and be able to go on.

It is hard to say these things out loud—as a father, as a professor, as a professional responsible for the environment and well-being of a university campus. To admit that we have, in many ways, waved a flag of surrender to the darkness and adopted luck as a strategy, pains me as it should pain us all.

As of this writing, El Paso and Dayton are the sites of the most recent mass shootings in America: And before this was Thousand Oaks, and before that was Pittsburgh; before that Parkland; and before that Las Vegas; Orlando; Sandy Hook; Aurora; Fort Hood; Virginia Tech; and so many others. I dare say, with sad certainty, that by the time you read this, another mass shooting will have happened, and probably another. As ordinary Americans and civilians without power or persuasion of any grand magnitude, we will hope that our friends and loved ones are not next, and we will live our lives.

The work of June Ahrens is important because it is not about gun violence—it is about life. Recognizing life,

celebrating life, mourning life, saving life. In life there is pain, there is tragedy—but ultimately there is beauty and hope, because there must be. *How Many Tears Are Enough?* is a work full of all these things, crystallizing the sharp pain and dark threat of tragedy, while evoking the fluidity and tranquility of life that transcends, because to not do so would mean accepting defeat.

We are proud to host this exhibition at UConn Stamford, because we believe it will inspire discourse and dialogue on the difficult subject of gun violence in America. It will shine light on the lives that have been lost in this epidemic, and it will shine light on the value of life worth fighting for and saving. Politicians will fight the political battles—laws will be upheld, or created, or torn down, and pieced together again. Such tides and landscapes change, and as a people we find a way to move forward, regardless. Along the way, we should strive to continue to educate, to question, to wear our woes and fears and dreams and hopes on our sleeves. To do that, we must know, and we must ask. We must talk and be open, and we must learn.

*How Many Tears Are Enough?* is a work that will help us in this process, and provide moments of pause and silence and consideration. It is not a statement or an endgame or an answer to anything. It is simply—like all of us—an important part of the journey.

—Terrence Cheng  
UConn Stamford Campus Director



## How Many Tears are Enough?

*Against the ruin of the world, there is only one defense—  
the creative act.*

—Kenneth Rexroth

*How Many Tears are Enough?* is a site-dependent art installation motivated by the horrific mass shootings in 2018 in Parkland, Florida; Squirrel Hill, Pennsylvania; and other recent incidents of gun violence in the United States. Each one of these tragic events reminds me of the unimaginable 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut—my home state.

As an artist, I feel the need to use my visual voice to express my outrage about these cumulative disasters and honor the victims and those left with empty hearts. Through my work, I contemplate our experience of loss and mourn the potential contributions of lost generations, while recognizing that memories can sustain us.

Rejecting the perhaps-expected shapes of guns and bullets to create this installation, I have chosen to use the forms of flowers and vines with thorns and knots, joined in a symbolic garden. Thorns and knotted vines express the pain that so many have experienced when losing a loved one, while flowers represent hopefulness and life. I have created the essence of flowers with a variety of wires, which are long lasting and virtually indestructible. The flowerlike shapes hang from the ceiling, allowing viewers to experience their individual uniqueness, like the victims they represent.

While victims of gun violence may be gone in an instant, memories survive and remain imprinted on our lives. Here a Mylar floor reflects the hanging flowers, thorns, and knotted vines, multiplying the opportunity—and hopefully intensifying the desire—to honor and respond. The shadows created by the flower shapes and thorns may resemble a river of flowing tears, but also symbolize renewal, nourishing our hearts and minds amid the reality of absence and loss

My hope, in sharing these emotions, is that you be drawn into an ever-deeper commitment to demand change in both gun and mental health laws.

—June Ahrens



## June Ahrens: How Many Tears Are Enough?

Barbara O'Brien

When considering *How Many Tears Are Enough?* (2019), a sculptural installation by June Ahrens, it is perhaps better to start at the end rather than at the beginning; now, rather than then; in the moment of the experience of viewing, rather than in the memory of the loss that inspired its making. For it is with the final decisions, made by the artist after months of living with the process of creation, that the vision, ideas, materials, and complex experiences of life are forged in the alchemy of the artist's studio.

*How Many Tears* is the culmination of not only a year spent working on an ambitious, immersive installation, but also a career dedicated to an artistic practice that has been a meditation on the relationship between art and life. Ahrens uses the studio as laboratory, chapel, gymnasium, research center, and bridge to the wider world. It is important, even essential, to Ahrens that she reflect and illuminate the connection between art and social conscience. That she works in abstraction and reflects the history of Post-Minimalism—gesture placed in dialogue with the grid—creates a unique position for her sculptural practice and offers a complex reading and experience for the viewer.

I have known June Ahrens for nearly two decades. I met her shortly after the terrors of 9/11, which she experienced firsthand while living in the Tribeca neighborhood in Lower Manhattan. Since then, much of her art has directly referenced that fateful day, the difficult memories and quiet intensity of putting one foot in front of the other to move through tragedy.<sup>1</sup> In *How Many Tears*, Ahrens addresses another dark chapter in US history—gun violence, especially that perpetrated against children—not by representing violence, but by powerfully evoking the pain and loss of its aftermath, creating a place of meditation without any sense of the didactic or the illustrative. Ahrens does not presume to speak for the families or the dead, to offer an answer to the violence or the unfathomable loss. She speaks in her own voice, with a finely wrought vocabulary of form and gesture, scale and materials.

Ahrens approached the creation of *How Many Tears* much in the way that a painter might approach a large-scale canvas: working in layers, building up

materials, adding both formal and symbolic depth. The installation exists in a sort of theatrical space, experienced over time. One not only views the work of art, but sees into, through, and past the light and geometry, gesture and weighted objects. What may seem surprising, given these formal concerns, is that *How Many Tears* was inspired by one of the great social problems of our time:

Sandy Hook was a large part in creating my feelings on gun violence, but I think when I heard about Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School years later, it seemed to be the final straw. We live about forty minutes away [from Sandy Hook]. As we know now, gun violence is an everyday occurrence.<sup>2</sup>

*How Many Tears* questions whether we can possibly take solace from the translation of violence and loss through the telling of stories, the playing of music, the making of art. In this work, Ahrens makes a compelling case for a statement in the affirmative. Taking the darkest experiences of life and translating them into art is a legacy as old as the Roman myths, such as with the story of the goddess Venus, who most violently lost her beloved Adonis:

As she drew near and saw from on high his lifeless body bathed in blood, she alighted and, bending over it, beat her breast and tore her hair. Reproaching the Fates, she said, "Yet theirs shall be but a partial triumph; memorials of my grief shall endure, and the spectacle of your death, my Adonis, and my lamentations shall be annually renewed. Your blood shall be changed into a flower; that consolation none can envy me."<sup>3</sup>

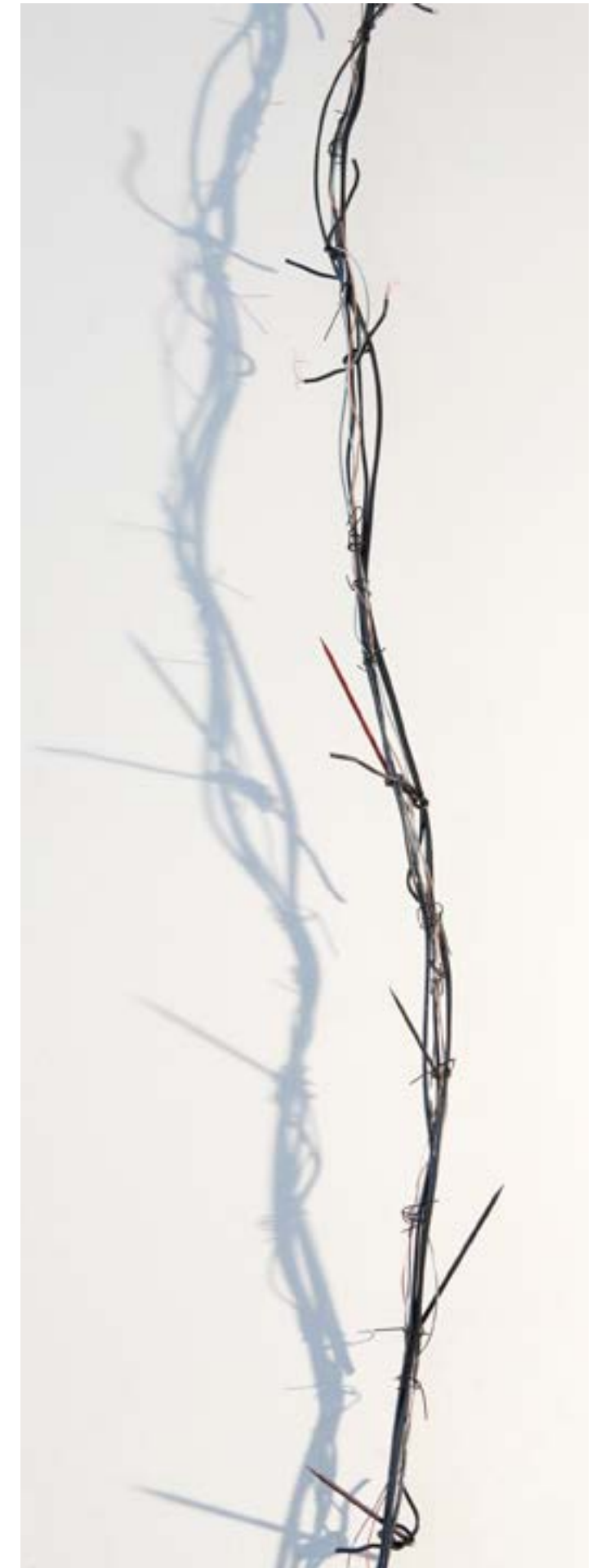
Using the language of abstraction is a long-standing part of Ahrens's artistic practice and includes suspending weighted cables from a ceiling; presenting intimately scaled forms—an aesthetic of accumulation—in large spaces; and using materials that would seem as at home in a hardware store as they do in her sculptures. *How Many Tears Are Enough?* continues the development of this formal vocabulary, as the artist describes:

*How Many Tears* started in my studio in November of 2017. I was playing with wire in the studio. A flower-like shape started to emerge. I continued to manipulate the wire and it became more and more an abstract flower, which I loved. The flower

became a symbol of hope and remembrance. As soon as I attached that meaning to them, the organic flowers became representative of healing and memory and honoring those who had died from gun violence. . . . The vines and thorns represent pain. The flowers represent healing. The vines are long-lasting and virtually indestructible. Flowers renew themselves. These are not representations of flowers, but the essence of flowers. The Mylar will reflect the flowers and multiply the images—a desire to honor more victims.<sup>4</sup>

Ahrens extends the process of exploration and creation from the studio into the gallery, where she starts from the center of the ceiling and moves outward to determine the arrangement of suspended abstracted natural forms: vines that hold flowers, which represent the victims of gun violence and the possibility of healing; and sharp wooden thorns, which represent pain. The tension between beauty and pain was present early on as part of this work. "The thorns came almost immediately. I knew that in a lot of cases flowers represent joy and make people happy. But in this instance, I wanted to bring in sadness and danger . . . along with the flowers."<sup>5</sup> Ahrens sees each flower as a portrait—"Each object has a unique energy that is formed during [its] making or creation"—but never intends them to stand in for specific people: "Sometimes I think of these [flower] forms as representing personalities. Something in them has an individual expression. Did they have curly hair? Did they use to dance and to sing? These became anthropomorphic forms. They are talking to you—if you choose to listen."<sup>6</sup>

The hundred or so vines are created from various thicknesses of Spline, a vinyl cording used to secure screens into windows. Each strand that punctuates the 16-by-20-foot expanse is suspended from a hook in the gallery ceiling. More than fifty flower forms, each created from wire and impacted by the warmth and power of the artist's hands, are attached along the strands. The flowers are formed from wire in a variety of gauges, from thick to very fine, that vary the sculptural weight and density of both the individual objects and the overall composition. The various wires expand the palette of the sculpture with a range of tonalities: warm copper and brass, cool stainless steel and aluminum, matte black steel. The small sculptural forms suggesting flowers, thorns, and nests





offer an expressive gesture against the vertical geometry of the suspended monofilament strands. This use of abstraction to address a complex, societal challenge is a daring one that Ahrens explains this way: “I purposely didn’t want to use gun parts because no one has addressed the ‘after’ of the gun violence. What do you do with those feelings and emotions in the aftermath?”<sup>7</sup> Black cording was the final element added by the artist to *How Many Tears*. Ahrens reflected on this process in January 2019:

I have felt for a number of months that something was missing in the installation. As well as seeing the actual piece in the studio, I keep photos around me to get some distance from the work. About a month ago, I literally woke up one morning and felt the black knotted cords would add the depth and structure the piece needed. I already had the cord in the studio from an earlier work, and just started making the strands. I knew almost immediately that this was the missing element the piece needed. The black was not a deliberate choice but what I had on hand. However, as I continued to use it, I realized the implications it provided for me: black being a symbol for death, and knots representing the range of feelings one experience in grief. So, in the end it represents both the formal and the symbolic.<sup>8</sup>

The thickness and assertiveness of the sometimes four-foot-long, sometimes ceiling-to-floor thick black cords creates a visual depth, adding a strong overall compositional element to the installation. “The knots are made with intuition and a response to the material. The size of the knots comes through working with the material and letting it lead me. After the cords are made, I can step back and contemplate where they have led me and why. The emotions they trigger for me become echoes of grief and angst.”<sup>9</sup>

The floor of the gallery is covered in Mylar, which reflects and multiplies the images, becoming an extension of the suspended shapes and forms. The Mylar also throws light and shadows onto the gallery walls, emphasizing the Minimalist tradition of relating the architectural space to the form of the art. For Ahrens, the formal qualities of the Mylar are also conceptually powerful and make a direct connection to the title of the installation, reflecting the flowers and multiplying the images. “The Mylar resembles a river of flowing tears, but also renewal.”<sup>10</sup>

The palette of *How Many Tears* is primarily black, grey, and pewter. However, there are vivid counterpoints of color crafted from jeweler’s wire nested throughout: a snatch of cobalt blue, a touch of summer green, a shimmer of sapphire pink. These pulse points of brighter color move the eye across the expanse of the space, unifying the composition, slowing down the experience of looking, allowing the viewer to discover more. These imbedded forms also create a cluster of denser sculptural form that is in counterpoint to the fragile lines that suggest a drawing in space; a space defined by the architecture of the gallery.

Ahrens’s awareness of connecting the work of art to the architecture in which it is viewed and the way in which the viewer moves into and through the space are elements that connect *How Many Tears* to the Minimalist tradition, as does her long history of utilizing unconventional materials. Minimalism championed the use of industrial or fabricated materials that were not generally associated with the fine arts; metal wire, plastic cording, monofilament, and Mylar are put into artistic service in *How Many Tears Are Enough?*.

Hannah Israel, Assistant Professor and Director of the Illges Gallery at Columbus State University, explains:

The term Post-Minimalism was first used in 1971 by the art critic Robert Pincus-Witten, who distinguished between the prefabricated looking Minimalist works and those works that, while honoring the purity and simplicity of form in Minimalism, revealed the presence of the human hand in the subtle manipulation of materials. Furthermore, the Post-Minimalist artworks contained a sense of metaphor and pointed to meaning beyond themselves. For a number of artists, the meaning involved an experience of transcendence or spiritual feeling.<sup>11</sup>

“How many tears are enough?” is a question unanswered even as we leave the gallery. The reflected light on the gallery walls, which for the artist is the “river of tears,” implies that the experience of the sculptural installation doesn’t stop at the edge of the floor, the perimeter of suspended forms, or even the doors of the space. The movement of light onto and into the architecture of the gallery creates a visual echo. The suspended flowers, thorns, and knots create an echo of another sort—a memory and meditation

experienced in real time—that we will carry with us as we leave the exhibition space and reenter the wider world to face the challenges of both the everyday and the extraordinary, experiences planned and unexpected. The memory of art offers possible solace against the forces that hold not to decency, beauty, or goodness. Through art, June Ahrens has created an object of great formal beauty and complexity that offers an experience of reflection, meditation, and healing.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Even prior to 9/11, June Ahrens channeled both her own life experiences—including the nontraditional path she took in becoming an artist—and an awareness of and concern regarding social ills into a powerful body of sculptural, video, and performative art. She reflected in an email to the author, March 24, 2019:

I grew up about 40 minutes from NYC. Art was not a viable choice for me after high school. I became a nurse in a large NYC hospital and was exposed to tragedy, heartbreak, and numerous social injustices. Those collective encounters made a large impact on me. . . . My need and desire to build a career in the arts continued to surface and I knew it was time to return to school at age 48 for a BFA. . . . Since then I have had several studios located in urban areas. I’ve encountered the homeless and disenfranchised in many of those environments. I became involved with numerous organizations serving this segment of society and in response I’ve created numerous installations, videos, and workshops.

<sup>2</sup> Ahrens, email to the author, March 15, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Bullfinch, *Bullfinch’s Mythology* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 61.

<sup>4</sup> Ahrens, studio interview with the author, October 19, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Ahrens, studio interview with the author, November 28, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Ahrens, studio interviews with the author, October 19 and November 28, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Ahrens, studio interview with the author, October 19, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Ahrens, email to the author, January 30, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Ahrens, email to the author, February 1, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Ahrens, studio interview with the author, October 19, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Hannah Israel, “Introduction,” *Beyond the Grid/Into the Sublime*, exh. cat. (Columbus, Georgia: The Columbus Museum, Columbus State University, 2014), 9.





**#UNLOAD** is very pleased to partner with UCONN Stamford on this important June Ahrens exhibition.

**#UNLOAD** is an arts-based initiative that seeks to reduce the amount of gun violence in our country. Too many men, women, and children are killed or grievously wounded by firearms. Mass shootings occur with frightening regularity. Suicides are on the rise. Children with access to unsecured weapons accidentally shoot family members. A nation divided, it appears that we mistrust one another and hold divergent beliefs about how to interpret the Second Amendment. We disagree fundamentally about the root causes of gun violence and therefore can't agree on the solutions to reduce this epidemic. And yet, the reality is that all Americans want this to end. The politics around this issue are so toxic and polarized that finding a solution seems impossible. We need to adopt a new approach.

**#UNLOAD** turns to the arts to grow the community of people committed to reducing gun violence in this country. We believe in the power of the arts—visual arts such as painting, sculpture, photography, and installation, as well as performing arts, including theater, film, dance and spoken word—to bring diverse people together to create a movement for social change. Today the political realm is too polarized and paralyzed to generate lasting solutions. Thankfully, in our visual, viral world, the arts are primed to assume that role. To see Bill Hudson's icon-

ic photograph, *Police Dog Attack, Birmingham, Alabama* (1963), or experience Lin-Manuel Miranda's play, *Hamilton*, is to know the power of art to startle our emotions, persuade us to embrace a paradigm shift in our thinking, inspire us to unite in common purpose.

**#UNLOAD's** mission is to encourage more Americans to join our conversation and feel empowered to speak up, especially those who have been on the sidelines until now: gun owners, physicians, students, and veterans. We believe that there is strong consensus about how to reduce gun violence; we just need to find ways to catalyze this new, broad coalition of citizens. My hope is that by bringing the conversation into the realm of the arts, we are providing a more welcoming space, less for debate than for listening and understanding. We have partnered with many organizations that share our concern: Fairfield University and the Fairfield University Museum of Art's Walsh Gallery; Quick Center for the Arts; the nationally recognized Movement Art Is; Artspace New Haven; Ely Center of Contemporary Art; Westport Country Playhouse; Samuel Owen Gallery; Neighborhood Studios; Connect-Us; Artists Collective of Westport; Saint Francis Hospital; Connecticut Children's Medical Center; the Fairfield, Hartford, and Westport Police Departments; and now, UConn Stamford.

Mary Himes  
Co-Founder, Executive Director **#UNLOAD**





June Ahrens graduated from Purchase College, New York, with a BFA (Summa Cum Laude). She attended the Advanced Seminars at Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

Ahrens has participated in numerous one-person shows, group exhibitions, and collaborative installations. Her work has received awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Duracell and Polaroid Foundations, and was nominated for a Joan Mitchell Foundation grant. She was granted the Distinguished Advocate for the Arts Award by the Connecticut Commission on the Arts, which also awarded her an Individual Artists grant.

An installation by Ahrens was acquired by the Kemper Museum, Kansas City, Missouri, for their permanent collection, and her work is in the collections of the Trustman Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts; the Housatonic Museum and the Contemporary Gallery of Art, Sacred Heart University, both Connecticut; and numerous private collections.

For further information, visit [juneahrens.com](http://juneahrens.com)

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