

Hungarian University of Fine Arts
Doctoral School

“We Don’t Talk About That!”
Trauma in Creative Work
Theses

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Trauma and trauma processing are examined in my DLA thesis from the perspective of art and the artist, and through theoretical questions from psychology, aesthetics and philosophy. I examine artists who use work on trauma as an artistic tool, background, driving force, inspiration and subject matter.

I see it a common experience among us, people, to be the subjects of trauma, either as victims, or as family or friends of victims. Most of us have at least once been involved in such a crucial experience which tries our resilience, yet it is not proper to talk about it. We could say that we live in a brotherhood of trauma/community of trauma, and that could serve as an overall texture for a solidary society. And yet, since trauma is still strongly tied to shame and taboos, any breakthrough is almost impossible. We culturally deflect any such experience, which makes it even harder to talk about traumatic experience. My own main concern in this respect, thus, is whether it is possible at all *for an artist* to talk about it, and if so, then how, and what could be said. Is talking about trauma necessary at all?

My thesis is also an attempt to analyse the language of trauma, where I examine the question of trauma representation with regard to creative production, through the oeuvres of four female artists, as well as through the presentation of some of my own works.

My thesis dwells on questions like: how can trauma be turned into image and language? how can the experience of a rupture be defined, and what questions does it raise in the artist? how does the artist process these experiences; how do these experiences appear in the work of the artist; and what are the artistic ways in which such an experience can be worked on, reworked or processed?

Instead of accepting an attitude of helplessness (of a viewer), the role of the victim not in control, I intended in this thesis to explore – from the point of view of the artistic “self” – the phases and process of a proactive attitude toward trauma, while shedding some light on this question through some of my own personal story of trauma. When I explore the question of transforming/rewriting the trauma through art, I simultaneously reflect on my own access to my deeper self through artworking.

My method is that of pragmatic research. I relied heavily on intuitive thinking and my knowledge based on different sources and works, just as on the processes of my own artworking experience, and thus it did not fully coincide/overlap with the research and methods known in the academic field.

1. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one mustn't be silent.

Trauma incidents are life events that cause injury changing the entire course of one's life. It so radically invades one's life and throws her out from her habitual life that one cannot help but face the new situation.

Such shattering life events are enormously hard to seal off, if at all possible. Things left unsealed, however, keep turning up repeatedly, performing themselves, until they are organised into a uniform narrative. This is how trauma, with its persistent psychological violence, fragments us, i.e., tears apart our sense of unity. It haunts us and does not let itself be disregarded. As an artist I have a special relation to the trauma experienced. On the one hand, I

am the subject of the happening, and I am an outside narrator and viewer on the other hand, who is trying to catch/get hold from outside what is happening, to give voice to what is silenced.

I have examined in my thesis the theories regarding the trauma and its mode of operation, and I have found confirmation in them to my own view that such experience needs to be handled in some way. I argue that the experience and events of trauma, though subjective and individualistic, just like the pain arisen from a radical loss or absence that cannot be expressed, shared, transmitted or represented – nevertheless, we are still able to communicate something about these experiences.

As artists who have undergone trauma, we have a choice to treat it as a private issue, deconstructing and separating its professional and personal aspects, or else we make an effort and face the difficulties of both. This is specifically difficult, as deflection often is present in the professional context: “We won’t talk about that!” My point of view in this thesis, logically, is that saying that trauma needs to be handled, and so consequently, I analyse the artistic modes of operation that result from this standpoint.

The paraphrase, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one mustn’t be silent”, made from a Ludwig Wittgenstein quote, refers to trauma, as in my opinion, trauma needs to be handled in some manner, needs to be made a topic somehow, so that it can be processed. And this can be done only by intensively and constantly dwelling on the issue, until it changes into something else, until it rewrites itself.

2. The experience of trauma is faced with the question of representability, and this is one of the theoretical topics of this paper. The singularity of the case is that the author of the paper, as an artist, would argue for the relative representability of the trauma (that it may be recalled), but as the subject of a trauma, recognises the impossibility of it.

Authors of papers on trauma often pose the question whether trauma can be represented, and if so, how. There is a certain degree of experiencing horror which cannot (be at all), or cannot be fully transposed into the symbolic world of language.

Representability, difficulty of representability and its impossibility have also been coupled after the Holocaust with a certain moral prohibition, one that was best phrased in German philosopher Theodor Adorno’s infamous maxim: “Writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”. His point of view thus seems to have been that representing reality after the Holocaust is impossible, but testimony of the suffering is inevitable/imperative.

The impossibility of representation and the imperative of bearing witness leads one to the affective dimension, which constitutes the core of the trauma experience, and thus compels you to artistic self-expression, and that is the motor of trauma-work. The artist shall thus become through her work the medium and interpreter of the experienced trauma, and the artwork in its turn shall serve as connecting interface for the receiver, through which she has a chance to take part in that experience.

My DLA paper presents Jill Bennett’s theory analysing the connection between affect, trauma and art, according to which the art relived, both creation and reception are affective processes.

In Bennett's view, it is the impregnation of the artworks, their reception by society, and their afterlife (rather than their historical context or meaning) that is significant. It is not the narrative, but the visualised atmosphere of the artwork, its physical effect, that is important. The creative process, the depiction of trauma can offer a new perspective, and even solace, not only to the artist, but also to the viewer.

3. The experience of trauma is reworkable (artworking/work on trauma/transformation).

The creative artists I have studied (Bracha L. Ettinger, Evelyn Nicodemus, Louise Bourgeois and Charlotte Salomon) regarded their own art as an act of lifesaving, undertaking their work – reworking, revision - of trauma. The “work on trauma” appearing in different forms and images throughout their works would mean escaping pain, the desire to transfer it to the past, in parallel with aspirations for communication as further self-defining and self-understanding possibilities, both for the artist and the viewer.

During my research journey, I have examined trauma rewritten/transformed by art. The works which mean reworking through art are created in the space between obsession over the representation of the traumatic event, and its unrepresentable nature.

Ettinger uses the term *artworking* to define the act of painting between the thin veils of trauma and its representation. This type of painting does not represent, but performs, rewrites, reworks. *Artworking* is a process of reworking, working through the traumatic experience in question through ourselves. According to Ettinger, who places the emphasis on the unfolding of the unconscious processes, encountering the artwork and the creative process itself are self-generative encounter-events.

Ettinger's term of *artworking* and the metaphor of reworking or transference would both mean that the artist re-encounters her trauma or the traumatized parts of herself, while at the same time the viewer also meets something Other: a different thing which confronts her with herself and her own traumatized past. Artistic practice, as a means of transference, a transporative station of trauma, not only helps in enduring the pain caused by loss, but it also plays an important role in regaining our own life. The externalization of thoughts, memories, and anxieties into artwork could be interpreted as a means of transformation.

4. The interpreter of personal and autobiographical artworks should always keep in mind the fiction, the construction, and the vast variety of possible aspects in connection with the self and identity.

The works created by the artists I have analysed in my thesis, in spite of their autobiographical nature, are all reflective works which set a certain distance between the author's self and the self created in the artwork. Personal pain as a private matter becomes art, or can become so, but the “self” created in the narrative as a necessary construction is not identical with the autobiographical self. These stories are not regarded as reconstructions by the self, but rather constructions, and in the long run what is left as a historical narrative could hardly be traced back to the personal reality of the artist.

We can often see (which can also be said of Charlotte Salomon's and Louise Bourgeois's oeuvres) that a biographical reading can lead an interpretation of the artists' works astray – and indirectly, their canonisation – limiting their meaning. What I found particularly exciting in this respect was that neither of these artists took the role of the victim or the martyr. Both of their life's works comprise a series of consciously assumed and created works which did not follow the well-known style requirements of their era or the medium; in other words, they were bold enough to follow their own path.

5. I would pose it that in the case of creative work, the harmonization of autobiographical, emotional and representative levels of the trauma-work is necessary in order for an artwork to be created that is comprehensible and accessible for the viewer, beyond the personal trauma of the individual. The creative process is an act of language creation, a narrative which distances the artist from her own experience. As a result, it becomes more and more structured, multi-layered and thus more easily received among a broader range of audiences.

In the case of trauma-works, the experience is the catalyst, which requires/generates its self-induced work. The trauma performs itself. The tone of language should always be a reference: what is the relationship like, the distance, the lifting towards experiences, towards reality (including the cultural/artistic context) and towards myself. And the distance pulsates between the poles of chaotic/fragmented vs. organised/synthesized, emotional vs. rational, conscious vs. unconscious, spontaneous/intuitive vs. planned, free vs. self-restrictive, personal vs. universal.

From the artist's point of view, in my opinion, the essence of work on trauma is restorative, binding the broken continuity (fragmentation) of the individual, and reconstructing the bridge between the past and the present. The terminology of this phenomenon used in the psychology and arts literature are the terms *acting out* and *working through*. *Acting out* is the response to trauma, a term which gives meaning for the narrative, and also adds value to the story. *Working through*, on the other hand, is the reworking, and in fact, the work of mourning – it is about accepting the past experiences, reflecting on them and understanding them. Through the creative process, the artist regains control, and obtains protection, which is a very important element in working through trauma. Ideally, something substantial would reveal itself during the creative process, so the artist could give it shape, channelling out an inner content she would have no other chance to show, thus transcending the original condition. Art, a practice permeated with the desire of understanding, could likewise become a field of self-knowledge, meaning attaining a higher level of awareness.

Dealing with the correlations between art and trauma simultaneously reveals the limits of representation and the continuous struggle which comes with the attempt of recognition, while the process itself, the trauma-work can transform into something different. In this, I see the task of the artist: in the transformation, shaping, extension and expansion of human consciousness.