

## **Rogue Memories: Reflections on Trauma, Art, and Technology**

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“I am happy when I paint – art makes me human,” Salam Ahmat says as he shows us his paintings, laying them out in front of us, one by one. Ahmat is a Kurd from Syria and had lived with his family in Switzerland for a little over a year when we visited him in the summer of 2015. His journey to a Swiss village near Olten was long and circuitous: formerly an art teacher at the Institute for Applied Art in Aleppo and a restorer at the Museum for Contemporary Art in Aleppo, he first escaped to a refugee camp in Turkey on his own in 2013 after being arrested and tortured. He then returned to Aleppo to get his family, his wife and two small children, out of Syria as well; together they then made the journey via Turkey to Switzerland. The work he shows us is all of recent date, his entire Syrian *oeuvre* was destroyed when he left his home in Aleppo. His present work consists of large and small-scale paintings, which predominantly engage with the female human figure. The larger works are acrylic on canvas and the smaller ones are in a mixed technique of acrylic and Chinese ink on paper.

Ahmad is largely an autodidact. He experimented with painting from an early age on and his desire was to attend the art school in Damascus. He did not know the right people in the regime, however, and was denied entry. He then studied philosophy and pursued art in his own manner, working as a painter and a poet. Ahmad says that the fact that he did not attend the official art school has been liberating for him; because he does not have to respect certain rules, he can be free of any canon. While working in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Aleppo, he was responsible for documenting Islamic weapons, mostly shields, which were decorated with battle scenes. These objects were full of human figures and the project proved influential in his development, giving him formal training in the approach to the human figure.



**Figure 1**  
Salam Ahmad  
Untitled (2015)  
Acrylic and Chinese ink on paper  
Image courtesy of Johanna Fassl



**Figure 2**  
Salam Ahmad  
Untitled (2015)  
Acrylic and Chinese ink on paper  
Image courtesy of Johanna Fassl

There are a few works on paper that show flowers or fantastical animals. It is the female body that dominates all paintings. In the smaller works Ahmad always starts with acrylic when painting the figure and the background is in Chinese ink. He also draws with ink, sometimes there are tiny, tremulous scribbles animating individual areas (figure 1); in other instances, strong, overriding lines dissect parts of the entire surface (figure 2). The combination of acrylic and Chinese ink give the works on paper a particular quality: the opaqueness of the acrylic and the transparency of the Chinese ink set up a tension, where the acrylic holds your attention at the human figure and the background in ink opens the space, giving it depth. The viewer's eyes and thoughts travel between human figure and unbound space, setting up a dreamlike dimension.

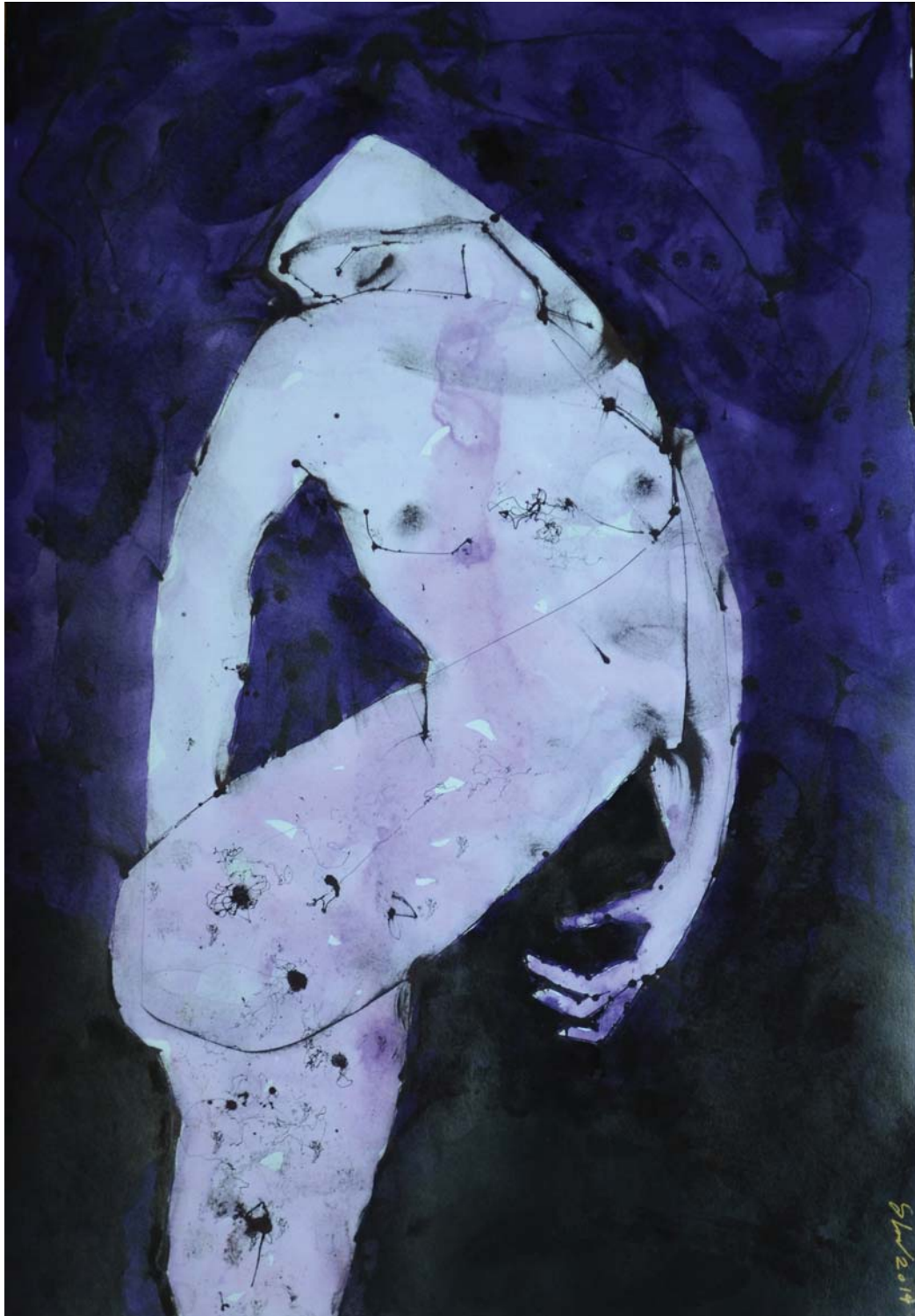
Beauty and sadness is what came to our mind and Ahmad did not deny the importance of both and their connection in his works.

We asked whether his creativity was linked to sadness, whether it needed sadness and where beauty ranges within sadness? Ahmad affirmed that even if the thought at the conception of the work is not beautiful, the work has to be beautiful. When painting the female nude, he is concentrated on the soul of the person he is painting, he tries to go inside the body to the soul, and the soul is beautiful and indestructible. Touching on these themes, our conversation was somewhat disconnected – a monologue interspersed with long minutes of silence from Ahmad but also from us. Ahmad does not use the language of trauma nor does he claim that painting – an act of creativity – has the capacity to heal him. But he says that making art is the only tool to remain human after having lived certain experiences. Creativity for him is a process of warding off evil and of protecting himself from succumbing to desperation – a tool to survive. In making art, he wants to render visible the soul of people, the soul of events even, but he demands nothing further of the act of painting. In this sense, his perception of his own creativity goes against much of the literature on trauma that sees artistic articulation as a way to overcome trauma, to disperse it by making traumatic experiences articulateable, and hence to access and retrieve them in a way that renders them part of a knowable life narrative.

When we visited Ahmad, ISIL had just launched an attack on the northern Syrian city of Kobanî, which until then had been reclaimed by the Kurdish forces. ISIL fighters were wearing Kurdish and Free Syrian Army uniforms when they set off a car bomb that killed at least a dozen citizens. Being a Syrian Kurd, Ahmad was deeply disturbed by the event, and, when talking about bringing out the soul of an event, he told us that he is planning a painting, or a series of works, centered on Kobanî. When we asked him about the creative process when it comes to works that have traumatic events at their root, he responded that he has to wait for the right moment in order to start. He has no control over beginning or end, as the workflow, or what shape the work takes, is by no means linear or clear. He prefers to work on several projects at the same time, each one informing the other. Waiting for the inspiration to work on Kobanî is complicated. When thinking about what happened during the attack, he is filled with disappointment, horrifying sadness, and extreme fear, emotions that are difficult to translate into art. Ahmad's preoccupation is that art will never do justice to the actual tragedy – ever.

What makes Ahmad's art congruent with many works that build on traumatic experiences is the absence of a precise depiction of an actual event – and yet, you can sense that there is another dimension to representation. This is what makes abstraction such a fascinating issue when it comes to discussing trauma, even if the debate cannot ever be conclusive. When going through both works on paper and the large canvases, what struck us most were the ellipses present in Ahmad's works, the use of fragments of the body, for instance, to imply the whole. It is strongly present in figure 2, where the woman's right arm is missing, or in figure 3, where the viewer is startled by the woman's pose, questioning the absence of the right leg. The body is disjointed, broken into pieces, disintegrated. You try to feel yourself into the woman's body and are constantly denied a sense of wholeness, the feeling of an intact body. The partially obscured face enhances this unsettling sensation; the image communicates fragmentation, mutilation, and surrender.

The quest for investigation, which inevitably animates the viewer when looking at works with powerful ellipses, is even stronger in the large work on canvas (figure 4). Here, we asked Ahmad directly about the representation, the meaning of the lack of arms and the obscuring of the woman's face. He told us that women in Syria are a weaker part of society. Using your arms and hands, you can fight or defend yourself but an arm-less body literally is a weak body. Given the situation of the raging conflict in Syria, we could not escape drawing the connection between arms and weapons and what it means to be utterly defenseless when un-armed in the middle of a war. The woman's appearance actually has nothing to do with religion and the often-discussed, weak position of women in Islam. Although not spelled out, in this work, the arm-less woman appears to be a direct allusion to the military conflict and the suffering of the Syrian people.



**Figure 3**  
Salam Ahmad, Untitled (2015), Acrylic and Chinese ink on paper  
Image courtesy of Johanna Fassel

During our studio visit, we went through a large body of Ahmad's work but not a single one of his paintings has a title. He told us that he does not assign individual titles to his paintings or his poems, but that they are all part of the larger scope of his entire oeuvre, dedicated to "the pain of the Syrian people." Each work is signed but not titled. At some point a British friend of his named his works but that did not convince him. Assigning a title would mean to come to



terms with, to understand, to calibrate, to label; leaving a painting untitled thwarts such conclusion and opens a world of possibilities for both artist and viewer. It also creates a space for trauma to reside without pinning it down in a narrative. Titling a work would mean to literally “come to terms” with a subject, which, for Ahmad is impossible, given the scope of his project.



**Figure 3**  
Salam Ahmad, Untitled (2015), Acrylic and Chinese ink on paper  
Image courtesy of Johanna Fassl

There is no immediate end or resolution to the pain of the Syrian people. The lack of titles mirrors the absence of holistic bodies and both are powerful forms of abstraction. Absence is forcefully eloquent when it comes to expression, regardless of context. When calibrated within the scenario of trauma, absence is doubly powerful, as it is associated with mutilation, death, and destruction. In Ahmad's thinking there is another powerful void: the absence of an audience that can understand the terrible sadness of the events he depicts. Because of this perceived inability to understand, he feels that his immediate audience is not able to appreciate his work – this is a form of abstraction of his fear. Ahmad then is doubly caught in a mode of indeterminacy: both the lack of titles denote his internal resistance to being pinned down and to forging a narrative that might help to overcome trauma; and his living conditions in a country in whose narratives and cultural history Ahmad does not see himself mirrored pose a very real obstacle to coming to terms with his past.

Our conversation with Ahmad touched upon the key issues that we defined when we first thought about this volume: trauma, abstraction, and creativity. Asking ourselves the question of what we might contribute to the field, we decided to trace the way in which the language of trauma manifests itself in individual cases of cultural production, ranging from drawing to painting, and photography to television series. We wanted to specifically focus on the role of abstraction in the context of creative processes informed by trauma. How is trauma uncovered in the human mind and body during creative processes? What forms does it take in a work? What defines the relationship between traumatized artists and their audiences? What is the relationship between the historical context and the specific sites of trauma to more essential conceptions of a psyche subjected to trauma? What are the various (and curious) forms of transmissibility of trauma?

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After we left Ahmad and boarded the train, we were strangely discontent. We felt that we had invaded somebody's privacy and did not get much further in our investigation of trauma and creativity. After some time had passed, it became clear that this was not a matter of the questions we asked or answers we received; it is the nature of trauma. It is and remains a 'complex beast' – individual, elusive, and impossible to articulate decisively. As Roger Luckhurst argues in his overview of the field of trauma studies, the history of trauma theory and its dissemination, development, and contemporary importance in fields as disparate as medicine, legal studies, literature, art, and neuroscience, resist any facile claims to comprehensive knowledge.<sup>1</sup> And yet, despite the fact that many of the more sophisticated strains of thought remain elusive, the basic concepts associated with trauma, such as flashbacks, nightmares, repressed memory, depression, and the compulsive repetition of experiences have saturated popular representations in literature, film, television series, and newscasts. Typically, they accompany the commentary on any major cultural catastrophe, including events as dissimilar as wars, public court cases, natural disasters, sexual abuse, and mass shootings. We all understand the language of trauma and tend to use and receive it as shorthand to capture and comprehend the more horrific events offered up daily. And yet, the common language and interpretation of trauma does not fully go to the heart of the matter. Trauma has been and will remain a challenging topic of study, due to its indefinability, fragmentary manifestation, and persisting (cultural) taboos in its discussion. One can have lived through a catastrophic event and not develop the classic symptoms associated with trauma; one can also have lived a disturbance that is not officially recognized as a disaster and show all the symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder; and one can be traumatized without knowing it. When it comes to the articulation of trauma, in itself so difficult to pinpoint in works of literature, art, or popular culture, the vexing question of whether trauma is representable at all recurs throughout the history of all disciplines associated with trauma studies.

In many ways the history of trauma studies in the twentieth century is a history of a struggle to understand the porous relationship between mind and body, to render tangible the invisible wounds of the psyche, and to conceptualize the dynamics between the wounded individuals and their surroundings. Its major insights in the late nineteenth and twentieth

centuries coalesced around, and were driven by the need to come to terms with historical events and developments – such as the industrialization in the late nineteenth century, the aftermaths of the two world wars, Vietnam, and the cold war – each shattering a collective's self-understanding in its own specific way.

In literary and visual culture studies one concern took central stage: the question of the 'articulability' of trauma. Can it be fully said, seen, narrated – in short represented – at all? Within this context, the 80's and 90's of the twentieth century saw the formation of two camps around these questions. Cathy Caruth, following in the footsteps of Sigmund Freud and Walter Benjamin, diagnosed a central paradox in trauma. According to Caruth, because of the belated nature of experiencing trauma, it is fully evident only in connection with another historical context and geographical location.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, she points out that it is not only the reality of the trauma that repeatedly returns to haunt the victim, but also the lack of complete access to and full knowledge of the trauma. Trauma then in this school of thought only ever offered up the possibility of incomplete, nonlinear knowledge of an experience forever belated, fractured, and in disjuncture with the time in which it is felt. The belief that a trauma narrative enables an effective working through the painful events remains impossible.

This view was rooted in the deconstructivist stance rehearsed at the same time in intellectual debates over the cold war. Considering the possibility of total destruction in the nuclear age and the fear of potentially obliterating a world archive, the symbol for the repository of human knowledge and history, the importance of both word and image received prime attention. Semiotics, and with it the discussion of the connection of signifier to signified, entered the disciplines of literature and art and changed the way texts, both written and visual, were read. Questioning traditional assumptions about certainty, identity, and truth, deconstructionism claimed that also 'trauma resides beyond the limits of representation.' Jacques Derrida, in "No Apocalypse, Not Now," takes up the speed of nuclear armament and the possibility of total war beyond earth and brings up the notion of "dissociation" (division and dislocation) in order to reflect upon the essence of knowledge and *techné*.<sup>3</sup> He held the imagination of nuclear war responsible for the blurring of the dividing line between *doxa* (opinion) and *épistémè* (knowledge), noting that nuclear war is something so spectacular, a science-driven fable, that it obliterates the line between belief and science: "Among the acts of observing, revealing, knowing [...] the limits have never been so precarious, so undecidable."<sup>4</sup>

Judith Herman opposes this view of trauma narrative as aporetic, essentially incapable of healing because of its incompleteness.<sup>5</sup> Rather, to her mind narratives are powerful therapeutic tools, capable of enabling trauma victims to work through their experiences and eventually find resolution. The space opened up by Herman whose background is in the treatment of incest victims, and children and women who have experienced sexual violence and situations of captivity, is not between work and viewer, but rather between therapist and patient. As Irene Visser remarks in an essay on the nexus of postcolonial studies and trauma theory, Hermans' stance holds out "a more sustainable perspective for a postcolonial trauma theory, not only because it entails an openness to the structuring of narrativization, but also because it allows a historically and culturally specific approach to trauma narratives."<sup>6</sup>

Seen from a twenty-first century perspective, the deconstructionist claim that "there is no such thing as an absolutely legitimizable competence for a phenomenon" shuts down the certainty that the visual world can be fully grasped and explained. What you see is *not* what you get, as the world residing behind and in visual phenomena can be manifold and without apparent connection to the phenomenon's outward appearance. At the same time, this claim curiously opens the possibility for trauma's figuration. Assuming that 'trauma resides beyond the limits of representation' detaches meaning from symbol: it liberates word, sentence, and paragraph from semantic whole; it frees the mark on the canvas and the stroke on paper from an immediate referential system; it does away with the assumption that a photograph must be 'of' the scene that marks its content. Art history and visual culture embrace uncertainty at the root of representation. Abstraction no longer means 'without subject matter' and thus necessarily is a

transcendental engagement with pure form. Abstraction can be located in void and absence, deformation and distortion, fragmentation and dispersal, but also in excess and hyperbole, hyperreality and hypervisibility. Granting abstraction the potential of representation shifts the discussion from surface to viewer where both become the ‘producers’ of the work. It also opens the transitional space between work and viewer as a possible site in which trauma finds a place to reside.

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As we assembled this volume, we encountered old foes and new friends in the discussion of trauma. Inevitably, all of the articles we selected center on war and/or national conflicts, discussing both old and new struggles. Thomas Röske’s essay innovatively sexualizes World War II; Klitsa Antoniou and Antonis Danos discuss abstraction in painting in artists working in the wake of the Turkish military invasion on the island of Cyprus; Harun Farocki, Michaela Wünsch, Johanna Fassl, and Atyaf Rasheed’s texts have the war on terror in Iraq at their basis; and this introduction features an artist who fled from the war in Syria. Although not dealing with declared wars, the contributions by Gabriel Gee and Kathleen McQueen and Liz Park are about national conflicts. In Gee’s conversation with Northern Irish artist Conor McFeely “The Troubles” are implied; and in McQueen and Park’s essay the legacy of Hugo Chavez’ oppressive regime is the source of trauma. This tells us that wars are at the forefront of discussion in the second decade of the twenty-first century; it also confirms that trauma remains a valid and important angle with which to come to terms with this history. The common denominator for all processing of conflict in the artists’ minds discussed in these articles is the phrase with which we opened our introduction, Salam Ahmad’s statement that “art makes me human.” Although creativity does not have ultimate healing powers, it is a way of getting in touch with the inner workings of mind and body, and, at least in fragments, to confront the ‘complex beast’ called trauma.

Our initial interest in the operation of trauma in the human mind and body during creative processes finds a new point of discussion in technology. Harun Farocki, Michaela Wünsch, and Johanna Fassl exhibit and examine the role of technology in the surfacing and recognition of traumatic memory. Farocki’s video installations in his *Serious Games* series document how computer-generated game technology is used on military bases during therapy for battle-scarred soldiers. Wünsch looks at how trauma and its aftermath are represented in *Hatufim* and *Homeland*, specifically how television’s temporality, that is the sequencing of episodes and the structure of flashbacks, reflect the nature of traumatic memory. And Fassl explores high-dynamic-range photography, digital software processing, and Kathryn Bigelow’s high-speed Phantom HD camera in her discussion of how war is actually seen, encoded in the brain, and recalled from memory. Without wanting to glorify technology, we see great potential for the unveiling and understanding of the nature of traumatic memory in yet-to-be-developed machines, apparatuses, and software applications. Walter Benjamin in 1931 was already aware of the potential of the camera, stating that the machine captures a different ‘reality’ from the one the eye sees. Instead of a consciously framed nature, it is “a space held together unconsciously” and photography makes the knowledge of that space possible.<sup>7</sup> New technologies that have the potential to release information from bound spaces will stimulate mental processes in the recovering of traumatic memory and its assimilation.

The volume opens with the essay “Thoughts and Trauma – Theory and Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder from a Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy Perspective” by **Julia König**, introducing the topic from the point of view of the cognitive psychologist and therapist. The term “trauma” is firmly defined by official organs, outlining a set of symptoms for conditions, such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). But the issue is more complex than a set of undisputed signs and the term “trauma,” often so casually thrown into a conversation, should be used with great care. PTSD is not an exclusive reaction to a personal or collective catastrophe, not everybody living a traumatic event develops mental health problems, some people recover all by themselves. The article posits the exteriority of trauma to a person’s self and addresses two ways how individuals try to integrate it into their lives: people either strive to keep



their cognitive schemas intact or they alter their schemas to comply with reality. “Assimilation” describes the cognitive process when the traumatic event is interpreted in a way that it fits into the existing schema; and “accommodation” is the process when the schema is changed so that new information can be incorporated. König gives a case study, where she demonstrates how important it is to recognize “assimilation” and “accommodation” processes in the model known as Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT). The model aims at changing these dysfunctional beliefs. A particularly important point of discussion is brought up in the so-called “stuck-points,” problematic cognitions that hinder the processing and integration of traumatic events into a person’s life.

**Cathy Caruth’s** essay “Parting Words: Trauma, Silence and Survival,” engages with Freud’s ideas of trauma, which have served as a theoretical underpinning to some essays in this volume. It suggests that Freud’s insights into trauma are to be understood as a juxtaposition of the well-known fort-da game in which a child enacts the mother’s departure, with the dreams of soldiers returned from the World War I battlefields which brought them back repeatedly to the horrors they had experienced. Departing from this initial juxtaposition in Freud’s thinking, she locates her own insight into the nexus of the death drive and the life drive in the compelling story of a group in Atlanta that was established to help children who had felt trauma and loss. In her analysis of interviews she conducted with friends of a boy who had been killed, Caruth notes how the bereaved are sent into life with the help of an abstraction of sorts: a memento, or materialized object of memory. She sees this as a release, which shows that the language of theory “articulates the very notion of the trauma and the death drive as a creative act of parting.” Abstraction and creativity, then are paired here as passageways that turns trauma into memory.

The third contribution comes from **Klitsa Antoniou and Antonis Danos** and is titled “Writing Trauma: Giving a Voice to a Wound that Seems to Defy Representation in Contemporary Greek Cypriot Art.” It discusses Greek Cypriot art following the Turkish military invasion on the island of Cyprus in 1974, which is responsible for the division of the island until today. While König’s article explains the processing of trauma in cognitive-behavioral psychology and Caruth gives us the perspective from a literary criticism point of view, Antoniou and Danos propose a valid model in the analysis of art engaging with Cypriot history. Switching from a text-image based theory to a model that addresses the ‘event of picturing,’ they direct their investigation to the expressivity of the surface and the sensations provoked in the viewer. It is a performative model, putting the viewer response at its center, which challenges the notion of the unrepresentability of trauma. Trauma, they contend, can be represented and recognized as such. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, they investigate abstract painting and a theory where the ‘figural’ replaces the ‘figurative,’ thus opening a possibility of understanding the nature of the artists’ abstractions. Deformations are interpreted as ‘catastrophes’ that disrupt the figural, leading to a ‘violence of sensation’ in the nervous system of the viewer. Distortion does not result in the variation of degree of a symbol, it is not the bolding of an existing mark. Rather, this abstraction is speaks of a difference in kind, where distortion creates a violence to the eye, provoking a sensation of forces in the viewer. These deformations show up in the guise of stretching and smearing over figures and landscapes; in marks and lines that literally ‘wound’ the surface; in a-signifying lines and formless forces; in thick layered material; and in installations with empty frames and spaces.

In “Dots and Dashes, Crumbs and Ashes” by **Kathleen MacQueen and Liz Park**, artistic abstractions take shape in the uncanny spaces left over by catastrophes. In their discussion of the works by Gwenessa Lam and María Elena Álvarez, and their conversations with the artists, they show two inverse modes of making meaning of these spaces of catastrophe, of ‘deploying abstraction as a silent resistance to the inscrutable nature of trauma.’ While Lam fills the voids with ghosts and shadows of lives lived there, evoking memories of loss, Álvarez uses the empty spaces as places of refuge, which she layers and re-populates with remnants and scraps and detritus of life in Venezuela in the aftermath of Hugo Chavez’ death in 2013. MacQueen’s reading of Álvarez’ work focuses on trauma as a disturbance in the ability of engagement with

this world turned upside down, and the creative process as a means to stay on the right side of the dual processes of acting out and working through trauma. If, as MacQueen argues, Álvarez ultimately creates spaces of hope and permeability in a praxis that draws from her immediate politicized context, Park understands Lam's spaces as closed, angst-ridden, and inward-looking, pressed together by unfathomable violence in the world beyond. What remains in the closed spaces are remnants of violent history and destruction: blinded windows, the outlines of Chinese vases blasted in a ray of light, floating, mangled objects, and the fragments of dialog, houses built by Chinese coolies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Lam's response then is not to a personal trauma, but rather to a shared culture of violence. By filling the spaces she visualizes with the detritus of this trauma, she re-invests them with the possibility of reconstruction.

**Thomas Röske** in his own way reacts to a shared culture of violence in his essay "Sexualized Suffering: On Some Lithographs by Richard Grune." Grune was arrested at the end of 1934 for his homosexuality and subsequently spent eight years in and out of different concentration camps until he was able to flee during the death march from the camp Flossenbürg. The lithographs depict the torture and murder of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. Röske's inspiration for this piece came from what he terms a fundamental "irritation" he felt when he first saw them exhibited in the former camp Neuengamme. This irritation is based on a tension he perceived between Grune's declared intention to make visible the horrors prisoners experienced at the hands of their torturers and to remember them. At the same time, he perceived the unintentional revelation of a homoerotic fascination with both perpetrators and victims. Röske interprets the gap between the overt and covert meanings of the images as a manifestation of the trauma Grune experienced as a homosexual in Germany not only during, but also after National Socialist rule. For the notorious paragraph 175 that criminalized homosexuality in Germany remained in effect until 1994, preventing gay survivors of the regime from claiming victim status or from receiving reparations after the war. Hence, as Röske argues, Grune's publication in 1945 of his lithographs was meant to show that he was as much a victim as anyone else and certainly not to reveal homoerotic tendencies. The culture of violence, which in the case of homosexuals persisted long after 1945, influenced the very act of representation and reception of Grune's work: only a temporal distance to that time has allowed for the detection of the sadomasochistic elements in Grune's work, which can be understood as the trace of traumatic experiences that were hardly ever acknowledged and certainly never resolved.

A blend of overt and covert meanings are also fundamental to the work of Northern Irish artist Conor Mac Feely whose conversation art historian **Gabriel Gee** curls around five objects that form part of discreet pieces of art. It becomes clear that each piece offers a range of interpretive possibilities, often containing hidden elements that function as the existential roots of each piece. These roots, in the form of aesthetic elements, in turn might be understood as symptoms of submerged pasts and places, and traces of experiences too traumatic to remember. The notion of partiality – of incompleteness – is central to Mac Feely's art: it implies at once a search for the lost or hidden or veiled part, and a vexed relationship to parts that can take the form of desire, for instance, or of fixation.

Whereas the contributions by Antoniou and Danos, McQueen and Park, Röske, and Gee discuss trauma predominantly within cultural contexts, the second set of articles concentrate on technology as a means of unearthing trauma from the depths of the human mind. **Michaela Wunsch's** article "Temporalities of Trauma in *Hatufim* and *Homeland*" focuses on two television series, the Israeli *Hatufim* and its American spin-off *Homeland*, to trace televisual representation of trauma and its aftermath. Departing from the position that trauma cannot be represented as such, she is interested in the nexus of temporality and television and argues that trauma in her two case studies is expressed in three different modes of temporality: suddenness, belatedness, and repetition. These three modes pick up where we left the public imaginary of trauma. Indeed Wunsch asks at the end of her article whether using these worn tropes of trauma are really an attempt at authenticity on the part of the directors, and not, more importantly, simply "simply a

subjects relation under the dispositive of television in regard to a memory which is necessarily traumatic.”

The piece by the late **Harun Farocki** originally accompanied four video installations of his series titled *Serious Games*. Farocki filmed a drill at the Marine Corps Base 29 Palms in California that used computer-generated game technology to simulate ‘real-life’ war situations in the conflicts in the Middle-East to both prepare recruits before being deployed to Afghanistan and to treat returning soldiers from Iraq, to use Farocki’s words: “Never has war been so transparent, so tangible, so efficient or so virtual.” He describes how the technology represents a going back to the beginning. Not only is it employed on both ends of the war experience, upon departure and after termination of a tour; it is a technology that initially was developed by the military, then further developed by game designers, and now being sold back to the same military apparatus where it originated. In *Serious Games IV* Farocki concludes with a startling observation: “This chapter considers the fact that the pictures with which preparations were made for war are so very similar to the pictures with which war was evaluated afterward. But there is a difference: The program for commemorating traumatic experiences is somewhat cheaper. Nothing and no-one casts a shadow here.”

In “We Photograph Things To Drive Them Out of Our Minds’: War, Vision, and the Decoding of Memory in the Photography of Iraq Veteran Russell Chapman,” **Johanna Fassl** discusses how a soldier physically sees war, how that information is encoded in the brain and what forms it takes when recalled from memory. Fassl starts by describing how memory of traumatic events surfaced during digital manipulation of photographs in both high-dynamic-range (HDR) and Lightroom applications by Scottish born photographer Russell Chapman. Processes of abstraction turned seemingly ‘benign’ pictures into evidence of lived situations. In experiments conducted in the classroom, the traumatic content of abstract photographs is recognized even when the viewer has no idea about the context or creative process of an image. In her analysis of vision that takes place under emotional stress, Fassl refers to explosion scenes in Kathryn Bigelow’s academy award winning film *The Hurt Locker*. The blasts were filmed with extraordinary technology that captures the most minute details, giving the viewer sharp images of small pebbles rising from the ground and fine particles of rust detaching from cars, all in super slow motion. Referring to recent studies in neuropsychology that demonstrate the alteration of both consciousness and vision under emotional stress, Fassl confirms that emotional arousal prioritizes detail-focused vision. Seeing war is a visually acute process and recalling war happens in a similar manner, where the details that received precedence during the event return from the depths of the human mind with equal precision and without narrative context. Together with the contributions by Wünsch and Farocki, Fassl’s paper explores how recent technologies advance the understanding of how traumatic content is processed in the brain.

The volume concludes with the play *The Sign* by **Atyaf Rasheed**, which originally was published in the Iraqi Pavillion’s exhibition catalogue at the 56<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia. Having opened our introduction to this volume with the work by the Syrian painter Salam Ahmad, we wanted to conclude in similar fashion, this time turning to creative piece by a women living in Baghdad. *The Sign* features three characters, all without name or gender. At the center of the plot is a mystery surrounding a little girl (again anonymous) and her fate after an explosion. The First Character claims to have seen her and describes the state of being while searching the girl: “As if it were a nightmare in a long night that does not want to end, I ran in every direction where corpses fell like emaciated birds, and the eyes of those saved were like balls of timbers, red.” Upon further probing by the Second Character if the First Character actually found the girl, the latter responds “No. Something strong and sharp hit my head – I do not know, I was screaming – I held my head and then...” After that the play blurs all lines between reality and fiction, the reader has no idea what actually happened. Rasheed’s piece of poetic theater is a brilliant metaphor for the state of being of a traumatized individual. When it comes to analyzing trauma in creative expressions, the sign (on the surface) is non-referential, as outlined in Danos and Antoniou’s essay: again, what you see is *not* what you get. Just as we

thought we had cracked another shell in the understanding of trauma, Rasheed helps us to return to a state of confusion and bewilderment, lost in a sea of rogue memories.

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<sup>2</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)," *Diacritics* 14/2 "Nuclear Criticism" (1984), 24.

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, "No Apocalypse, No Now," 25.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: Pandora, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Irene Visser, "Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47/3 (2011), 273.

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# **Thoughts and Trauma – Theory and Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder from a Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy Perspective**

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When talking about trauma from the perspective of a psychologist and psychotherapist, a few issues frequently emerge where concepts differ from those used in other fields. I will briefly go into these issues and then move on to an example of a successful cognitive-behavioral treatment of a patient suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While “trauma” is a term that can have different meanings depending on the context it is used in, PTSD is a mental disorder with clearly defined symptoms that may occur after a traumatic event has been experienced. And this is the first issue where terms need to be defined: what is a trauma and who do we work with in therapy? From a clinical psychology perspective, what constitutes a traumatic event is defined in the diagnostic classifications. The most important ones are the World Health Organization’s (WHO) *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD; WHO, 2005) and the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), which is currently in its fifth edition (DSM-5; APA, 2005). Both classifications are the result of collaborative efforts from professionals from different fields and (especially in the case of the ICD) countries and cultures. The DSM-5 defines trauma as “exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violation” (APA, 2015) and continues to specify:

The exposure must result from one or more of the following scenarios, in which the individual:

- directly experiences the traumatic event
- witnesses the traumatic event in person
- learns that the traumatic event occurred to a close family member or close friend (with the actual or threatened death being either violent or accidental), or
- experiences first-hand repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event (not through media, pictures, television or movies unless work-related) (APA, 2015)

However, having experienced a traumatic event does not mean that a person develops mental health problems. On the contrary, depending on the type of traumatic event, the majority of survivors will experience distress in the aftermath, but eventually recover. This is one of the reasons why PTSD can only be diagnosed four weeks after the event at the earliest. Different types of events cause PTSD at different rates: sexual violence, for example, leads to PTSD more frequently than accidents (Kelley, Weathers, McDevitt-Murphy, Eakin, & Flood, 2009). Other important factors influencing the development of symptoms include the social support after the event and one’s initial reaction during the trauma (Brewin, Andrews, & Valentine, 2000; Ozer, Best, Lipsey, & Weiss, 2003).

The symptoms that frequently develop after a trauma are grouped into four categories in the DSM-5. Survivors frequently experience intrusive memories of the event in the form of thoughts, pictures, dreams, or flashbacks. They also tend to try to avoid reminders of the experience, both in the external world (places, people, or activities) and in the internal (thinking or talking about the event). Frequently, trauma survivors have very negatively distorted thoughts about themselves, others, and the world, blame themselves or others, have trouble remembering the whole of the trauma, and feel alienated from others. Also there is a change in reactivity; many PTSD sufferers report exaggerated startle reactions, heightened vigilance, irritability and trouble concentrating, to name a few. To fulfill DSM-5 criteria, a specified number of symptoms in each category have to be present.

PTSD is one of the very few mental disorders where an external event is necessary for the diagnosis. At the same time, having experienced a traumatic event does not equal PTSD – some people recover all by themselves, while others develop other mental health problems. So there are two important differences between clinical psychology and general language: “trauma” has a more narrow definition, with some challenging and difficult events (such as a difficult divorce or losing a loved one after a long illness) not being regarded as traumatic. PTSD is a disorder that people often develop after being exposed to a traumatic event, but does not reflect the possible range of adjustment and non-adjustment post-trauma.

When working with PTSD patients, society and its views come into play maybe more than with other disorders. This can be in the shape of lawsuits and the accompanying stress of testifying, it can be in the shape of insurance companies trying to ascertain whether symptoms stem from the event or some previous vulnerability. Social support is one of the strongest predictors of recovery after a trauma, and social support depends on the existence and quality of personal relationships, the resources in the social network (some traumatic events affect whole families or communities), and the culture and subculture to which an individual belongs. For example, a rape victim will face very different responses depending on whether she lives in a culture where victims are routinely blamed or believed.

In the following paragraphs, I will give a brief overview of a cognitive model of PTSD and the therapy built on this model: Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT; Resick, Monson, & Chard, 2007). There are other theoretical models and other treatments, some very similar and some very different. CPT has a strong focus on cognitive work, that is, changing dysfunctional beliefs about oneself, others, and the world. It relies on a socio-cognitive model, which focuses on the ways a traumatic experience is processed within the context of existing beliefs. On the one hand, people strive to keep their cognitive schemas intact, and, on the other, they aim for their schemas to be congruent with reality. There are two ways to integrate schema-discrepant information: either the event can be interpreted in such a way that it fits into the schema (assimilation) or the schema can be changed so the new information can be incorporated (accommodation). Both mechanisms can be functional: if a good friend says something unkind, it can be sensible to assimilate, that is to interpret the comment in a way that still fits with our positive view of the person and the relationship (“my friend is just stressed, she did not mean that”). This way the positive belief can be kept and the relationship is not damaged. However, if someone is repeatedly or excessively unkind or untrustworthy, it would be more functional to accommodate, that is to change one’s belief (“this person frequently hurts me with her remarks, I no longer want to be close to her”). That way, one could spend more time and energy on other relationships.

A traumatic event is schema-discrepant, and so much so that assimilation would only be possible by severely distorting reality. Assimilation of traumatic events often shows in self-blame or mental undoing and hinders processing of the event. Self-blame (“I should have known”, “it’s my fault”) often has the function to protect beliefs about one’s safety (“I can protect myself from harm”, “if you’re careful enough, nothing bad will happen”). Giving up these beliefs, even if they have been proven wrong, can be very scary. At the same time, the feelings of guilt and shame associated with assimilation are very distressing. This happens in many contexts, such as sexual violence, where sometimes society focuses more on whether the victim did all they could to protect themselves than on the fact that the perpetrator committed a crime. Also other people may try to protect their own safety beliefs by telling a victim it was her own fault. According to Patricia Resick, who developed CPT, assimilation is also very frequent in traumatized soldiers because they are trained with the belief that if everybody does their job right everybody gets out alive. This is not a realistic view in combat areas and will often lead to the conclusion that someone must be blamed after traumatic events.

The “just world belief” also plays a major role in assimilation. When prompted, most people will say “I know that the world is not fair”, while simultaneously entertaining situations in which they think “why did this happen to me?” or “why that person?” This is an indication of a just world belief because it expresses that some people *should* not experience bad (or good) things. The “just world belief” often leads victims to blame themselves, because “if bad things happen to bad people and this horrible thing happened to me, I must have done something to deserve it.”

Assimilation can also appear in a mental undoing of the event. If people try to mentally undo, their thinking often circles around the “how could this happen” and “this should not have happened, therefore it cannot have happened”. This makes processing trauma and its

consequences impossible because the reality of the event is not accepted. Assimilated thoughts usually concern the past, that is, the traumatic event(s).

After a traumatic event, accommodation would be the adaptive mechanism. However, PTSD patients often change their beliefs too much and over-accommodate. This leads to the development of extremely negative beliefs and expectations. Examples include statements such as “now I know that nobody can be trusted”, “I’m worthless”, or “it is not safe to leave the house”. Such extreme beliefs lead to anxiety, over-vigilance, and distrust. These over-accommodated thoughts usually deal with the present or future and thus can severely impact both interpersonal relationships and daily life.

Problematic cognitions that hinder processing of the traumatic event, such as assimilation or accommodation, are called “stuck points” in CPT. The cognitive work is a very important part of the therapy; of course emotions are also important. Patients are taught early on that it can be helpful to differentiate between “natural” and “manufactured” emotions. Natural emotions are those directly caused by the traumatic event, such as sadness from a loss, fear of a threat, or anger at a perpetrator. Natural emotions can be very intense and painful, but if they are allowed to run their course, they will subside with time. Manufactured emotions result from interpretations and appraisals of the traumatic event, that is, from cognitions. Compared to natural emotions, they are much more stable and don’t necessarily decrease when fully felt. Some feelings, such as guilt, are usually manufactured, but the differentiation is not between types of emotion. Anger is a good example: it is completely normal to be angry with the guilty party in a traffic accident. If this anger (as all other natural emotions) is really felt, it will subside with time. If patients, however, think “something like this must not happen” or “this injustice must not be”, they can stay angry for years. Then the anger would be considered a manufactured emotion. The difference is important for therapy because it is believed that natural emotions cannot and should not be changed but have to be felt and allowed to take their course. Manufactured emotions, on the other hand, are based on thoughts and can be changed via cognitive work. In the remainder of this article, I will draw on a case example to illustrate the most important steps of CPT. Some personal information has been changed so as to make the patient unrecognizable.

Mrs. A. came to seek help at the university outpatient clinic where I was working at the time. She was 24 and had been raped five years previously. She came in because she had decided that her life could “not go on like this” and she wanted to make a change. Eighteen months after the rape she had been in a psychiatric hospital for ten weeks and had been given benzodiazepines and antipsychotic medication which caused her to have amnesic episodes and feel like she wasn’t really there. Two years after the rape she married an acquaintance who had once helped her in a confrontation with the rapist (she had not reported the incident to the police and they both lived in the same town), but who had beaten her during the marriage and forced her to have sexual intercourse. At the time she started therapy, she was divorced and living with her parents, but her ex-husband was still trying to get in touch with her. At intake, she suffered from difficulty falling asleep and sleeping through the night; she was irritable, prone to be verbally aggressive; she had intrusive memories of the rape and also the marriage; and avoided contact with other people, especially men. She felt alienated from her friends and had withdrawn from most of them; she did not participate in any leisure activities. As she was working from home when starting therapy, she hardly had contact with people outside her family.

After spending one session getting to know the patient and the most important facts about her background (the formal diagnostics had been done by someone else because the therapy was part of a study), the first “real” CPT session was given to psychoeducation. It is very important for patients to understand why every step of the therapy is done and one of the most important parts is to “avoid avoidance”. In this first phase of therapy, the ground for cognitive work is laid with “ABC-sheets”, which help patients learn to differentiate between thoughts and feelings and to become aware of their own internal dialogue.



Avoiding any reminders connected with the traumatic event, from activities to natural emotions, is among the core symptoms of PTSD. Avoidance is what sustains the disorder because patients never experience that they can deal with their memories and whatever else they fear. In the second session, I asked Mrs. A. to write an “Impact Statement”, an essay about why she thought the traumatic event had happened and what changes it had caused in her thinking and feelings regarding safety, trust, power/control, esteem, and intimacy. When reading this essay back to me in the next session, it became apparent to both of us how deeply all areas of her life had been affected by the event.

In the fifth session, I asked Mrs. A. to write an account of the traumatic event, from the time she knew something was going to happen to the time she felt halfway safe again. Ideally, patients should write the account soon after the therapy session and read it to themselves every day until the next session, when they are asked to read it aloud to the therapist. Mrs. A. did write an account, but it read very much like a police statement, very matter-of-fact with no emotions or details. After her first statement, she reported not being able to write the story anymore, so I asked her tell it to me during the session, taped it, and had her listen to the tape every day<sup>1</sup>. The whole exposure part of therapy took several weeks because Mrs. A. only gradually dared to approach the memory. Her accounts became more and more detailed and emotional. In the beginning, she avoided confronting the event by digressing from the story or by rushing through the difficult parts; however, week by week she could face her emotions more and more, especially the disgust she had felt during and after the event. When Mrs. A. remembered this, she started experiencing strong disgust again and scratched her arms. The technique of stimulus discrimination, that is, concentrating on similarities and differences between the here and now and the trauma, and therefore learning to differentiate between now and then, was very helpful in this context. After six sessions of talking about the traumatic event (in contrast to two in the original manual), Mrs. A. did not find remembering the rape difficult anymore; the natural emotions had dissipated and she could remember it as something that had happened, but not with very much current affect. During this time, symptom scores declined. After spending some time talking about the events during the marriage (which had been less distressing to her than the rape) she talked about her fears about accidentally meeting the rapist in town. We considered things she could do and she indeed had some chance encounters with him, which did not lead to a physical stress reaction. This really strengthened Mrs. A.’s belief in herself and her ability to protect herself.

After exposure, we moved on to the cognitive work. CPT makes use of several cognitive worksheets designed to help patients challenge and change their stuck points. For Mrs. A., the most important stuck point was “all men are bad”. She had a difficult relationship with her father, who had also sexually abused her older sister (but not her), then she had been raped, and then she had been treated badly by her husband, so in her opinion she had ample proof for this belief. However, both the therapy and the experiences she made in her increasing social life lead to the change of very negative beliefs. Other important, over-accommodated stuck points were about her own feelings (“I can’t handle remembering the event fully”), which showed in the very long exposure phase and worries about being changed forever by the event (“will I ever be able to have sex again?”). Mrs. A. mostly blamed the perpetrator for the rape, but there was some self-blame along the lines of “I should have known”, “I shouldn’t have made it possible for him to do what he did” and “I’m a person that gets treated badly by others”. CPT helps patients challenge stuck points by asking “Challenging Questions” first (which is also the title of a worksheet). There are ten questions that deal with the evidence for and against a stuck point and whether the patient uses words that are exaggerated (“always”, “never”, “all”). In the next session, patients are asked to assess whether they use “Problematic Thinking Patterns,” such as over-generalizing from one event to “always” or from one person to a whole group, all-or-none-thinking, or mind-reading. The last and most complex cognitive worksheet, “Challenging Beliefs”, combines all previous worksheets and adds the possibility to add an alternative to the

stuck point challenged. For Mrs. A., the assimilated stuck points changed rather quickly, as if daring to really think about her role in what happened made it clear that it was not her fault. Also in CPT assimilated stuck points are targeted first, as only an event that is accepted as having happened can be processed. The over-accommodated stuck points took longer and some took several worksheets to gradually change. Toward the end of therapy, five issues are discussed in more detail: safety, trust, power/control, esteem, and intimacy. Each of these issues is considered from the view of the patient (e.g. self-esteem), as well as with respect to others (e.g. esteeming others). Many trauma survivors have stuck points in one or more of these areas. For Mrs. A., the esteem and intimacy sessions were especially important. Even though it was not part of the protocol, she wrote essays on these topics, linking self-worth and esteem of others to her religious beliefs. We could successfully terminate therapy after 25 sessions (the standard duration of short term cognitive-behavioral therapy in the framework of German compulsory health insurance). At the follow-up measurement six months after the end of therapy, Mrs. A. was in a relationship, getting ready to start a new job and doing well overall. She reported having “ground beneath her feet” again and did not suffer from PTSD symptoms.

This short case example was designed to offer a little insight into one way of treating people suffering from PTSD. While the efficacy of CPT has been established in many studies (Watts et al., 2013), it is by no means “the best” or “the only” treatment.

## EPILOGUE

How does this clinical psychology perspective fit into a volume concerned with abstraction and creativity? Doesn't a manualized therapy take creativity out of the process, and isn't the writing of a trauma narrative an exercise in concretization rather than abstraction? To the latter question my tentative answer would be, that depends on the definition of “abstraction”. There is a whole body of literature (Pennebaker, 1997) that shows that writing about adverse experiences benefits mentally healthy people in a variety of ways. This effect cannot be explained by having expressed one's feelings, but seems to have something to do with putting the experience into words. But is this really a way of rendering it “unabstract”, as one reviewer of this paper put it? Traumatic memories tend to be very concrete and connected to the senses – the sound of a siren, the look of a bedroom wall from a certain angle, the smell of a perpetrator's perfume. In writing the trauma narrative, these details become part of a story, embedded in a person's autobiographical memory, and, therefore, the person gains more control over the memory. In a way, this process could probably be viewed as an abstraction, even though the re-telling and re-listening seem like a very concrete exercise on the surface. I had one patient tell me that writing the trauma narrative was difficult, but also a relief: “Now that it's written down, I feel like I don't have to have it in my head all the time.” Is this a concretization, putting recurring thoughts and images on a piece of paper that can be touched and stored away? Or is it an abstraction? By changing role from victim to author, is telling a story in words (most often, written words) a way of distancing oneself from the event?

The question of creativity is also not so easy to answer. As a psychotherapist my job is to help people with mental disorders get better. I believe that this means that I should, while working, place my patients' expected benefit higher than my own gratification in “being creative”. There is a whole discussion in the field about the use of therapy manuals, one of the concerns being that they impede therapists' creativity. At the same time, if one keeps an open mind (something that *is* possible when conducting a manualized therapy), creativity will often seep in. Patients and therapists will find new metaphors and images to reframe and convey meanings new and old. I have one patient who is a very creative dreamer – the dreams she reports in session are perfect allegories of the issues she finds most difficult at the moment. A certain type of creativity, of flexibility and inventiveness will also be needed if problems arise.

But maybe the work I do has to be done especially in cases when the challenge is too big and human ability to deal creatively with challenges not sufficient enough. Not everybody develops PTSD after a traumatic experience, so maybe therapy is more a way of helping people get back to their lively, creative selves rather than a creative endeavor in itself.

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<sup>i</sup> This is very similar to the process employed in another, very well-established therapy for PTSD, prolonged exposure, developed by Edna B. Foa Rauch, S. & Foa, E. B., "Emotional processing theory (EPT) and exposure therapy for PTSD," *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy* 36 (2006): 61-65.

# Parting Words: Trauma, Silence, and Survival

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## INTRODUCTION

Freud begins his groundbreaking work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, with his astonished encounter with the veterans of World War I, whose dreams of the battlefield bring them back, repeatedly, to the horrifying scenes of death that they have witnessed. Like the victims of accident neuroses, these dreams seem to bring the soldiers back to a moment of fright or surprise that constituted their original encounter with death:

Now dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright. This astonishes people far too little. (Freud, *Beyond* 13)<sup>2</sup>

The repetition of battlefield horrors in the dreams astonishes Freud, because dreams, in psychoanalytic theory, had always served the function of fulfilling wishes: of allowing the unconscious, conflictual desires of childhood to find expression through the symbolic world of the dream. In the dreams of the returning veterans, however, encounter with death and horror cannot be assimilated to the fulfillment of desire: rather than turning death into a symbol or vehicle of psychic meaning, these traumatic dreams seem to turn the psyche itself into the vehicle for expressing the terrifying literality of a history it does not completely own. But the peculiarity of this returning, literal history also strikes Freud because it does not only bring back the reality of death, but the fright or unpreparedness for it: the dreams not only show the scenes of battle but wake the dreamer up in another fright. Freud's surprised encounter with the repetitive dreams of the war – the beginning of the theory of trauma, and of history, that has become so central to our contemporary thinking about history and memory – thus raises the urgent and unavoidable questions: *What does it mean for the reality of war to appear in the fiction of the dream? What does it mean for life to bear witness to death? And what is the surprise that is encountered in this witness?*

Immediately after discussing the disturbing dreams of the war, however, Freud proposes to “leave the dark and dismal subject of the traumatic neurosis” and to pass on to the “normal” activity of child's play. Freud embarks here upon a story of his encounter with another repetitive behavior, the “puzzling activity” of a “good little boy” of one and a half, just beginning to speak. Freud says he observed the strange game of this child who repeatedly threw a wooden spool on a string into his cot, uttering the sound “o-o-o-o,” then retrieved it, uttering “a-a-a-a.” With the help of the mother, Freud first interprets these sounds as meaning *fort*, gone, and *da*, here, and ultimately suggests that the child is reenacting the departure and return of his mother, which he had just recently been forced to confront. The repetitive game, as a story, thus seems to represent the inner symbolic world of the child: as a story of departure and return, the game seems not only symbolically to fulfill a wish by telling the story of the mother's departure as the story of her return, but also to substitute, for the pain of loss, the very pleasure of creation itself.<sup>3</sup> But Freud himself unexpectedly proceeds to challenge his own first interpretation:

Our interest is directed to another point. The child cannot possibly have felt his mother's departure as something agreeable or even indifferent [...] It may perhaps be said in reply that her departure had to be enacted as a necessary preliminary to her joyful return, and that it was in the latter that lay the true purpose of the game. But against this must be counted the observed fact that the first act, that of departure, was staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety, with its pleasurable ending. (*Beyond* 15-16)

The creative activity of the child's game, Freud recognizes with surprise, does not ultimately involve a symbolic representation of the mother's pleasurable return, but repeats, in a kind of stammer that interrupts its story, the painful memory of her departure. Like the soldiers' dreams, the game thus reenacts the very memory of a painful reality. What is most surprising in the child's game, however, is that this reenactment of reality in the game places repetition at the very

heart of childhood, and links the repetition to a creative act of invention. In the introduction of the child's game Freud's original question- *how does life bear witness to death?* – is linked to another question: *What kind of witness is a creative act?*

I will propose in what follows that Freud's insight into trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, its new understanding of personal act and of collective history in the face of war, lies precisely in the striking and enigmatic leap that juxtaposes the nightmares of war to the child's game. This juxtaposition is not ordinarily taken into account in the critical reception of Freud's text- the study of trauma in contemporary fields tends to focus on a theory of history and memory derived ultimately from the example of the nightmare and the theory that grows out of it, and the writing on the child game is not part of the tradition of trauma theory<sup>4</sup> -but it is crucial, I will suggest, for understanding the insight of Freud. My own understanding of this insight did not emerge, however, simply through a reading of Freud's text but began, in fact, in my encounter with a real child in Atlanta, a child whose best friend was murdered in the street and who is interviewed by the friend's mother. By reading together the language of the nightmare and the language of the child in Freud's text – two very distinct kinds of language whose intertwining strands are at the heart of Freud's theory – and in then understanding how Freud's text and the language of the real child shed light upon each other, we can begin to understand Freud's enigmatic move in the theory of trauma from the drive for death to the drive for life, from the reformulating of life around the witness to death, to the possibility of witnessing and making history in creative acts of life.

## DEATH AND AWAKENING

Freud's analysis of repetition compulsion in the origins of consciousness indeed attempts to explain the significance and surprise of the traumatic encounter with death in terms of a new relation between consciousness and life.<sup>5</sup> Consciousness first arose, Freud speculates, as an attempt to protect the life of the organism from the imposing stimuli of a hostile world, by bringing to its attention the nature and direction of external stimuli. The protective function of consciousness as taken in bits of the world, however, was less important, Freud suggests, than its more profound function of keeping the world out, a function it accomplished by placing stimuli in an ordered experience of time. What causes trauma, then, is an encounter that is not directly perceived as a threat to the life of the organism but that occurs, rather, as a break in the mind's experience of time:

We may, I think, tentatively venture to regard the common traumatic neurosis as a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli [...] We still attribute importance to the element of fright. It is caused by lack of any preparedness for anxiety. (31)

The breach in the mind – the psyche's awareness of the threat to life – is not caused by a direct threat or injury, but by fright, the lack of preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes too quickly. It is not the direct perception of danger, that is, that constitutes the threat for the psyche, but the fact that the danger is recognized as such one moment too late. It is this lack of direct experience that thus becomes the basis of the repetition of the traumatic nightmare: “These dreams are endeavoring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis” (32). The return of the traumatic experience is not the direct witness to a threat to life but rather the attempt to overcome the fact that it was not direct, to master what was never fully grasped in the first place. And since consciousness cannot bear witness to death, the life of the survivor becomes the repetition of the reality that consciousness cannot grasp. In the traumatic encounter with death, life itself attempts to serve as the witness that consciousness cannot provide.

The repetition exemplified by the nightmare, indeed, does not only concern the repetition of the image in the dream, but the repetition of waking from it (Caruth 64): “Dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright” (Freud, *Beyond* 13). If “fright” is the term by which Freud defines the traumatic effect of not having been prepared in time, then the trauma of the nightmare does not simply consist in the experience within the dream, but in the experience of waking from it. It is the surprise of waking that repeats the unexpectedness of the trauma. And as such the trauma is not only the repetition of the missed encounter with death, but the missed encounter with one’s own survival. It is the incomprehensible act of surviving—waking into life—that repeats and bears witness to what remains un-grasped within the encounter with death. The repetition of trauma therefore, is not only an attempt of an imperative to know what cannot be grasped that is repeated unconsciously in the survivor’s life: it is also an imperative to life that still remains not fully understood. And it is this incomprehensible imperative to life that Freud ultimately places at the very origin of life, when he suggests that life itself began as the drive to death:

The attributes of life were at some time awoken in inanimate matter by the action of a force of whose nature we can form no conception [. . .] The tension which then arose in what had hitherto been an inanimate substance endeavored to cancel itself out. In this way the first drive came into being: the drive to return to the inanimate state. (38, translation modified)

Life itself originates, Freud suggests here, as an awakening from ‘death’ for which there was no preparation. Life itself, that is, is an imperative to awaken that precedes any understanding or consciousness and any possible desire or wish.<sup>6</sup> The witness of survival itself – the awakening that constitutes life – lies not only in the incomprehensible repetition of the past, that is, but in the incomprehensibility of a future that is not yet owned. Freud’s central question raised by the war nightmare, *what does it mean for life to bear witness to death?* thus ultimately leads to another, more urgent and enigmatic question: *in what way is the experience of trauma also the experience of an imperative to live? What is the nature of a life that continues beyond trauma?*

## THE CHILD’S GAME

It might appear that with this analysis Freud had replaced the notion of the child, and its central place in psychoanalytic theory, with the theory of trauma. The child’s repetition of its mother’s departure could be explained as the unknowing reliving of its mother’s (anticipated) death, and the child’s life as the unconscious reliving of what is not yet grasped within the mother’s departure. From the perspective of Freud’s rethinking of life around its traumatic significance, the child’s game thus peculiarly re-enacts the incomprehensible moment of the mother’s act of leaving and reshapes the very life of the child as the unconscious witness to the death he has survived. Repeating the *fort* that is not his own, but his mother’s act of leaving, the child’s own life story – his departure into life – becomes inextricable from his mother’s silent departure into death. In this incomprehensible departure, the child’s life – like the origin of the drive – thus silently enacts a larger history he does not completely own.<sup>7</sup>

Freud’s analysis indeed suggests that the encounter with traumatic repetition requires a rethinking of psychoanalysis itself, which had previously focused its model of the mind on the notion of childhood as the site of the pleasure principle. By modelling the mind on the encounter with war trauma, Freud thus appears to shift the center of psychoanalytic thinking from the individual struggle with internal Oedipal conflicts of childhood to the external, collective activities of history, and to make of childhood itself a reflection of a more obscure painful encounter. Thus Robert Jay Lifton writes that the reversal of adult and child trauma as a model for the human mind was at the center of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and produced the

“image-model of the human being as a perpetual survivor” (164). The questions raised by war trauma concerning the nature of life thus require a new model for psychoanalytic thinking and, in particular, for the relation between psychoanalysis and history.

## BEGINNING AGAIN

Yet the game of the child playing *fort* and *da*, there and here, with his spool, seems to become not less, but more enigmatic when it is understood in relation to traumatic repetition. If the child's re-enactment of his mother's departure repeats, ultimately, her loss and her death, the game remains, still, an act of creation that, unlike the dream of the war veterans, does not simply compulsively repeat a history it doesn't own but creates, in its repetition, something new.<sup>8</sup> This very movement from the example of traumatic repetition in the war nightmare to the example of the child will, moreover, reappear surprisingly in Freud's text, and will reappear precisely at the moment that Freud has explained the notion of trauma in the very origins of life. For shortly after introducing the origin of life as an awakening out of death, Freud pauses abruptly and starts again:

But let us pause for a moment and reflect. It cannot be so. The sexual instincts, to which the theory of the neuroses gives a quite special place, appear under a very different aspect [...] The whole path of development to natural death is not trodden by all the elementary entities which compose the complicated body of one of the higher organisms. Some of them, the germ cells, probably retain the original structure of living matter and, after a certain time [...] separate themselves from the organism as a whole. Under favourable conditions, they begin to develop — that is, to repeat the performance [*das Spiel wiederholen*] to which they owe their existence; and in the end once again one portion of their substance pursues its development to a finish, while another portion harks back once again as a fresh residual germ to the beginning of the process of development [...] They are the true life drives. (39-40, translation modified)

The origin of life as the death drive — as the beginning of the repetition compulsion, and as an awakening — is itself repeated, Freud audaciously suggests, and is repeated, moreover, precisely in the form of a game (*Spiel*). After disappearing for most of his text since his original introduction of the child — and disappearing in particular from the theory of trauma, which is entirely governed by the language of consciousness and awakening<sup>9</sup> — the language of the game reappears, and reappears to describe a different form of repetition: a repeating of the origin of life in another kind of beginning.<sup>10</sup> This repetition brings back, moreover, for the very first time, the explicit language of the child's game, the language Freud uses at the moment he recognizes the game as a game of departure:

But against this must be counted the observed fact that the first act, that of departure, was staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety, with its pleasurable ending [*daß der erste Akt, das Fortgehen, für sich allein als Spiel inszeniert wurde, und zwar ungleich häufiger als das zum lustvollen Ende fortgeführte Ganze*]. (16)

This game and the event of departure that it re-enacts is now repeated as the very action of the life drive:

Under favourable conditions, they begin to develop — that is, to repeat the performance to which they owe their existence; and in the end once again one portion of their substance pursues its development to a finish [*Unter günstige Bedingungen gebracht, beginnen sie sich zu entwickeln, daß berst das Spiel, dem sie ihre Entstehung verdanken, zu wiederholen, und dies endet mit, daß wieder am Anted ihrer Substanz die Entwicklung bis zum Ende fortfährt*]. (40)

Freud thus reintroduces the language of departure not as the origin of the death drive, but as the way it repeats itself, differently, as the drive for life.<sup>11</sup> The departure into life is not simply the



awakening that repeats an original death, but an act of parting that distinguishes, precisely, between death and life.<sup>12</sup> The repetition of this game, then, as an origin, is the beginning of life as a surprising repetition that both bears witness to and breaks from the death drive, that bears witness and repeats by precisely breaking away. It is a language of departure, that is, that does not repeat the unconscious origin of life as death, but creates a history by precisely departing toward survival.

This creative act takes place, moreover, not only in the child's game, but in Freud's own text, as well, through the very transformation undergone by the language of trauma: from the departure – the *fort* – that appears to be the repetition of the mother's anticipated death in the child's game, to the *fortführen* of the drive that is the pressure toward life.<sup>13</sup> This transformation also differentiates or parts the traumatized subject, the soldiers of war repeating death, from the individual testimony of Freud's own text, the creative act of language that becomes not only the story of departures but also the language of play, a language that would, in fact, become a new language for psychoanalysis in the future. In the life drive, then, life itself, and the language of creativity, begin as an act that bears witness to the past even by turning from it that bears witness to death by bearing witness to the possibility of origination in life. History, here, is reclaimed and generated not in reliving unconsciously the death of the past but by an act that bears witness by parting from it. The language of the life drive does not simply point backward, that is, but bears witness to the past by pointing to the future. The return of the child's language in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* thus transforms the original questions of trauma – *what does it mean for life to bear witness to death? and what is the nature of a life that continues beyond trauma?* – into an ultimately more fundamental and elusive concern: *what is the language of the life drive?*

## MEMENTOS

The significance of this question arose, for me, not from within Freud's theoretical text, nor in the history of World War I, but in my own encounter with a child in Atlanta, within the contemporary history of urban violence in North America. I encountered this child shortly after leaving New Haven and arriving in Atlanta, when I became familiar with a group established in Atlanta to help traumatized children who had witnessed violence, a group called “Kids Alive and Loved”. This group was established by a woman named Bernadette Leite, whose oldest son, Khalil, was shot in the back one night when he was out with friends, shortly before graduating from high school. The impulse for the group came specifically, as she tells us, not only from witnessing the symptoms of anger and the violent re-enactment of trauma in the kids' responses to the death at the funeral and afterward, but when the mother of the dead boy, Bernadette, overheard the peculiar language of children:

After his death I noticed that his friends were coming over every afternoon and hanging out in his room. And I began to listen, and I heard them speaking to him. They would come over every afternoon and hang out in his room and speak to him. And I realized that they needed someone to talk to.<sup>14</sup>

Hearing the language of the children addressed only to her dead son, Bernadette recognized the unresolved trauma of many of his friends in their inability to speak about their feelings to the living. She thus decided to found a group to allow the children to talk about their feelings to each other concerning the violence they had experienced, in weekly Wednesday night meetings and through video-taped interviews she has made for the 'Kids Alive and Loved' Oral History Archive. Giving the group the name 'Kids Alive and Loved', whose initials – KAL – reproduce the initials of her child, Khalil Aseem Leite, Bernadette hoped to make the group not only a way of both helping the living children to get over their trauma by talking about Khalil (as well as other murders they had experienced), but also of providing a kind of living memorial to her dead son through the living children's words and lives.

The complexity of this process was most movingly portrayed for me, however, through the words of a single child, in the recorded interview of Bernadette with Gregory, Khalil's best friend. Gregory was 17 at the time of his friend's death. He had received a call from Khalil that morning to go out that evening, but argued about being called so early, and then was not at home when he was called again.<sup>15</sup> Gregory speaks, throughout the interview, in a language that tries to convey the difficulty of grasping Khalil's death: when asked to say something about Khalil's life he answers, 'He lived for everything. He died for nothing'. This inability to grasp the meaning of his friend's death resonates in his own difficulty in extricating a description of Khalil's life from his own survival of Khalil's death:

B: What do you want people to know about his life?

G: He had a good heart.

B: What does [the experience of Khalil's death] feel like?

G: It's like when somebody is actually pulling your heart out, or just repeatedly stabbing it.

The dead Khalil's life and Greg's survival of it are tied around a heart that they share and that has now been removed. Greg's heart, it would appear, being removed and stabbed, tells the story of Khalil's death. In the exchange between Bernadette and Greg, we see Bernadette's attempt to help Greg memorialize Khalil in a kind of language of memory, and we witness Greg's own transformation of her language of memory into a parting that allows for both a memorialization of his friend and a recognition of his own life.

## PARTING WORDS

This possibility opens up, strikingly, in a moment of surprise, in a remarkable moment of his interview with her, just at the place, moreover, *when* the interview turns to the topic of memorialization. Bernadette has been asking about Gregory's feelings concerning Khalil's death, and the interview has become very sombre and at times filled with sorrow. Then Greg makes the interview take a sudden turn:

B: Do you have any mementos of Khalil?

G: Let's see.

B: Do you have personal belongings of his?

G: (suddenly smiling): He has something of mine!

B (laughing): I know he has something of yours ... a couple of things!

G: He had... That's what also made me feel good, because he was buried in my shirt that I loved, and my watch. At first that shirt bothered me because I loved that shirt -

B: And I didn't know at the time ... Mark picked it out and I only found out later. It's too bad - I wanted to get him a Tommy Hilfiger shirt he'd seen downtown but I didn't have time to get it and get to the funeral parlor. It's too bad - but then maybe he wouldn't have been buried in your favorite shirt.

G: That's O.K., because it was my favorite shirt and my favorite friend.

Greg's first response to Bernadette's question – “do you have any personal belongings of his?” – comes as a surprise because it reverses the order by which the living Greg would memorialize his dead friend and suggests that it is the dead friend that is keeping mementos of him: “He has something of mine!” Greg says. This is also, in its irony and humor, a kind of maintenance of the playful relationship that Greg had with the living Khalil: the implicit joke that Khalil got away with his favorite shirt seems to recreate the very humorous relationship they had when Khalil was alive. Greg thus, in effect, says “gone!” to his shirt and, in so doing, establishes a relationship with Khalil that recognizes, even within the fiction of personification, the ineradicable difference between his life and Khalil's death.

Bernadette's response, likewise, turns both to the dead and to the living at once, although in a somewhat different fashion. On the one hand she tells, very movingly, of a mother who wants to get one last gift for her dead son, to buy him the shirt that he had seen and wanted. But the telling of this story is simultaneously, and equally movingly, a kind of playful mothering of the living boy in front of her, because she empathises with him that it is too bad that he could not have had his favorite shirt back. To Gregory's "*fort!*" or "gone!" Bernadette thus says, in effect, "*da!*" or "here!" and, in this way, makes her act of mothering the living boy a continuation of her mothering of the dead one, and makes of Greg the living memory of the dead Khalil.

It is thus particularly striking that Greg's final words, which are the true climax of the exchange for me, once again give up the shirt to Khalil: "That's O.K. It was my favorite shirt and my favorite friend". If his first response brought Khalil to life as a youthful friend - and reanimated Greg too as he was before he had the horrible knowledge of Khalil's death - this final response, in giving the gift to Khalil, gives up that former innocence and recreates Greg through his ability to give to and thus memorialize his dead friend. By once again saying 'gone!', Greg indeed departs from his former self and turns the memento - and the language of the memento - into an act, not of a symbolic return or wish for possession, but of an ability to give to the dead something that can never, now, be returned.

This double act is repeated, a few minutes later, in the next exchange, an exchange that now, significantly, concerns a game:

B: So it made you feel good that your favorite friend was buried in your favorite shirt and your watch.

G: (smiling again): And he has my — it's not really a hat, it's a cap. It's a little like a stocking cap, that colorful thing on his wall. Yeah, him and me and Maurice would play this game, 'left hand,' where you call out what's in the person's left hand and you get to keep it. And he called that and he got it.

B: I should give that back to you, you could take it with you as a memento.

G: Uhuh, I would feel better if it would stay in his household. Because it's a memento of him but it's a memento of me too.

The game with his friend, Greg tells us, had been a game of naming and possessing; by calling out the other's clothing it could become yours, just as the friendship was perhaps a kind of reciprocal possession of each boy by the other. But when Bernadette offers, once again, to give the possession back – "I should give it back to you, you could take it with you as a memento" – Greg once again repeats his *fort*: "I would feel better if it would stay in his household. Because it is a memento of him but it's a memento of me too". Naming the cap as a memento not only of Khalil but of himself, Greg not only gives up the part of himself that existed before Khalil's death, he also ties his life with Khalil's death: the cap is not only a memento of him for me, he says, but of me for him. This bond, however, does not confuse the living child with the dead one, nor does it symbolize the dead one in the living one, but precisely separates Greg, whose younger self is buried in the coffin, from the dead child who will not grow past this moment. Indeed, this refusal of Bernadette's offer to give the cap back is also (as my own mother pointed out to me), a way of saying "I will not be your dead child." In giving up the language of memorialization offered by Bernadette, however, he creatively transforms the language of the memento and achieves another language and another memorialization: a memorialization that takes place precisely through his separation and his own act of creation.<sup>16</sup> It is in this reclaiming of the meaning of the memento, even while giving it up, that Greg's *fort*, I would suggest, does not simply re-enact his friend's departure or attempt to return to his life, but bears witness, creatively, in the very act of parting from his dead friend.

This language, I would suggest, is the language of the life drive. It is this drive for life that is at work in Greg's description of how the death of his friend is also motivating him to achieve goals in his life, achievements that will also incorporate Khalil's name:

B: How has his death changed your life?

G: I am more determined to make it in the music business somehow and I know it will be because of him. We used to talk about it all the time. He did rap... [W]e were to go to Clark Atlanta, him for business management and me for communication, music, and combine our talents. But now he can't do that ... But that's O.K., because when I do it I'll bring all the people jobs, Mike, Maurice ... When we get that studio [Khalil's] name is going to be the name of it. And I have to have a son and his name will be in there.

In this language we can see the drive for life, a language of parting that itself moves the speaker forward to a life that is not simply possessed, but given, in some sense, and received, as a gift from the dead. In the memento, as Greg teaches us, the two children take leave from each other: as Greg gives Khalil back to death, Khalil, in a sense, gives Greg back to life. This is a creative act, an act that bears witness to the dead precisely in the process of turning away. It is indeed a new language of departure, parting words<sup>17</sup> that bind the living child to the dead one even as he takes leave from him, binds him to his dead friend even in the very act of letting go.

## FREUD'S GAME

In Greg's words, we see the insight of Freud's text as it touches on and resonates with our contemporary crises and with the actual struggles of children in contemporary culture. But Greg's words also shed light on the way in which the language of the child itself re-emerges at the very heart of Freud's own theoretical writing.<sup>18</sup> For Freud's elaborate staging of the game of the *fort/ da* can be understood not only as a description of the puzzling game of the child staging the departure and return of the mother, but as Freud's own oscillation in his understanding of the child's game. This oscillation takes the form, moreover, of the alternation between a *fort* and a *da*:

I eventually realized that it was a game and that the only use he made of any of his toys was to play 'gone' with them. (15)

This, then, was the complete game - disappearance and return. As a rule one witnessed only its first act, which was repeated untiringly as a game in itself, though there is no doubt that the greater pleasure was attached to the second act. (15)

It may perhaps be said ... that [the mother's] departure had to be enacted as a necessary preliminary to her joyful return, and that it was in the latter that lay the true purpose of the game. But against this must be counted the observed fact that the first act, that of departure, was staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety, with its pleasurable ending. (15-16)

As Freud's interpretation passes from the *fort* to the narrative of *fort and da*, and back again to the *fort*, Freud shows himself as struggling in the face of a child whose language, in its shifting meaning for Freud, first brings him nearer and then distances him in Freud's understanding.<sup>19</sup> What is striking in Freud's example is not simply the child's struggle and re-enactment of the distance of its mother, but Freud's struggle with and re-enactment of the distance of the child. Freud's text, it would appear, repeats the story of the child he has encountered, and does so, moreover, in the very act of distancing. Paradoxically, then, it will be in his repetition of the child's distance, in his own distancing of the child at the moment of his failed comprehension of the game, that Freud's own text will connect with, and transmit, the story the child cannot quite tell. Freud's text thus itself repeats the child's traumatized *fort* – the stammering word that marks the very loss of the child's own story – but does so as the very creation of its own new language,

a language that does not return to the pleasurable compensations of the narrative but speaks, precisely, from *beyond the story*. It is not necessarily on the level of the child's own game, but on the level of Freud's repetition of it that the creative act of the game, the new conceptual language of the life drive, will take place.<sup>20</sup>

We could, moreover, understand the entire theory of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* not simply as an explanation of trauma from the distance of theoretical speculation, but as the very passage of the story of the child in a theoretical act of transformation.<sup>21</sup> For what is the story of the mind's attempt to master the event retrospectively if not the story of a failed return: the attempt, and failure, of the mind to return to the moment of the event? The theory of repetition compulsion as the unexpected encounter with an event that the mind misses and then repeatedly attempts to grasp is the story of a failure of the mind to return to an experience it has never quite grasped, the repetition of an originary departure from the moment that constitutes the very experience of trauma. And this story appears again as the beginning of life in the death drive, as life's attempt to return to inanimate matter that ultimately fails and departs into a human history!<sup>22</sup> Freud's own theory, then, does not simply describe the death drive and its enigmatic move to the drive for life, but enacts this drive for life as the very language of the child that encounters, and attempts to grasp, the catastrophes of a traumatic history.

## A FINAL PARTING

The most striking appearance of Freud's own speaking as the child will occur, however, not within the theoretical language of the text, but in a footnote that refers, in fact, to the entrance of a real death into the life of the child as well as into his own life: "When this child was five and three-quarters, his mother died. Now that she was really 'gone' ('o-o-o-o'), the child showed no signs of grief." In noting the real death of the child's mother, Freud first explicitly links the child to himself, since the child's mother was also, in reality, Freud's daughter Sophie, who died toward the end of the writing of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. But whereas the (already traumatized) child shows no signs of grief, Freud himself begins to repeat, not simply the language of the *fort*, but the inarticulate sounds of the "o-o-o-o" that constituted the very origin of the game (and the only moment in which the living mother had appeared in the example, when she agreed with Freud as to the meaning of the "o-o-o-o" as indicating the word *fort*). By reintroducing the lost "o-o-o-o" of the original child's game in his words, and in this footnote that announces his daughter's and the mother's real death, Freud implicitly connects the origin of the child's game with the very significance of his own theoretical text, a significance that now, in its very inarticulate stammer, serves as a kind of memory of and parting from Freud's own dead child.<sup>23</sup> The language of the theory, much like the child's stammering language, articulates the very notions of the trauma and of the death drive as a creative act of parting: a parting from the real child, and a parting from the psychoanalytic child – or from the mere psychoanalysis of childhood – toward an analysis of the collective catastrophes of death encountered in war, and toward the pressing cultural imperative for a new kind of survival.<sup>24</sup>

I would propose that it is through the child's words – through this literary, not fully articulated language of theory – that Freud's text speaks, moreover, most powerfully, in its full historical relevance, to us. For it is through the child's own stammer – the stammer of Freud as he faces the encounter with World War I, the reduction of the theoretical mind to the stammering struggle of the child – that Freud will first tell us about the necessity of witnessing the effects of death in the century of trauma. But it is also through the creative transformation of this stammer into a new language of psychoanalysis – not only the language of departure, which will be his language of history in *Moses and Monotheism*, but the very future language of psychoanalysis itself, in the rethinking of psychoanalysis, for example, around the individual's capacity for play – that the possibilities of Freud's not yet articulated insight are handed over to



us.<sup>25</sup> I would suggest that it is only in listening to this second and literarily creative element in Freud's own writing, that the theory of trauma, now so prevalent in numerous disciplines, can extend itself beyond the theory of repetition and catastrophe, beyond the insight of the death drive, into the insight enigmatically passed on in the new notion of the drive to life. As such the theory of trauma does not limit itself to a theoretical formulation of the centrality of death in culture, but constitutes – in Freud's, and our own, historical experience of modernity – an act of parting that itself creates and passes on a different history of survival.

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<sup>1</sup> My mother was a psychoanalyst who worked for many years with children and adolescents and later with adults. She had discussed an earlier version of this text with me a number of times before her death in March 1998.

<sup>2</sup> German quotations will be from *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (Studienausgabe, vol. 3).

<sup>3</sup> Freud describes the game as the child's "first great cultural achievement," and suggests that the child rewarded himself for not expressing his distress by creating a game instead. Thus the game not only represents the mother's wished-for return, but by substituting itself for the mother the game becomes, itself, a kind of symbolic return.

<sup>4</sup> The game has been read, for instance, as a game of mourning. Within the literary critical tradition see for example Santner, 1990. The received understanding of the game is that it represents a form of mastery and is thus, not strictly speaking, purely traumatic repetition – unless traumatic repetition is understood as already itself a form of mastering. Freud does suggest at one point in his analysis that the game may express a principle of mastery 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' but the peculiarity of such repetition is rarely explored within traditional analyses. Exceptions to this line of thought can be found in Derrida, 1987. Jacques Lacan, (1978) analyzes the game in the context of a reading of traumatic repetition. See also Gasché, 1997. On the crucial structure of the game in relation to the speculative structure of Beyond the Pleasure Principle see Weber, The Legend of Freud, and his Return to Freud.

<sup>5</sup> For related analysis of this aspect of Freud's text with a slightly different emphasis see my *Unclaimed Experience*.

<sup>6</sup> Life is thereby separated from the desire to live; survival is no longer linked to the wish to live but to another imperative that appears to have ethical force (thus the survivor mission to tell) as well as a relation to knowing or witnessing (as an "awakening").

<sup>7</sup> Thus the theory of individual trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* will lead to the theory of historical (and collective) trauma in *Moses and Monotheism*. I have analyzed this in terms of the story of departure in *Unclaimed Experiences*, chs. 1 and 3. The notion of an attempt to return that becomes a departure is a pattern that originates in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in the description of individual trauma and ultimately the foundation of life; in *Moses and Monotheism*, Jewish history is itself structured by a trauma that turns Moses's attempt to return the Hebrews to Canaan into an endless departure into a Jewish history of survival.

<sup>8</sup> Freud emphasizes the creative element of the game by remarking that it is the "first self-inverted game" of the child (das erste selbst-erschaffene Spiel), an emphasis we see again in his letter to Wilhelm Zweig concerning his insight behind *Moses and Monotheism*, that "Moses created the Jews," which uses a related although slightly different verb form (hat geschaffen). Freud's use of the word "create" in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which I am echoing in my own use of the word "creative," thus has a specific, foundational meaning and is also, in both *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*, ultimately linked to a traumatic history. The creative element in the *fort/da* game appears, moreover, to be associated specifically with the origins of language; Freud notes that the game begins when the child is just beginning to make articulate sounds. Jacques Lacan thus suggests that this game represents the origin of symbolic language as such in the differentiation of the phonemes *o* and *a* ("Function and Field"). The game is not, that is, about symbolizing the literal but about moving from silence to speech. The foundational nature of the game- or of the scene as Freud presents it- points toward its link to the foundational moment that traumatic repetition repeats, which is the ultimate concern of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

<sup>9</sup> One line of theoretical (or in Freud's terms, 'speculative') elaboration of the notion of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* begins in Chapter II with the example of the nightmares of battle — which are compared to the nightmares of an accident that wake the patient up from his sleep — continues with the explanation of trauma in Chapter IV, which speculates on the origins of consciousness and proposes that trauma is a break in the stimulus barrier that consciousness provides for the living organism, and culminates in Chapter V, in which Freud suggests that life itself was an awakening from inanimate matter for which there was no preparation. This line of speculation appears to have an independent logic and does not completely align itself with the language of play that accompanies it in an

apparently separate line of argument. The *Spiel* appears first in the example of the child, is repeated in Chapter III in regard to the re-enactment behavior in transference, and thenceforth is mentioned only in regard to children's play and theater, until the introduction of the notion of the life drive. (Interestingly, the discussion of analysis in Chapter III suggests that the entire theory of the Oedipal origins of unconscious conflict in childhood needs to be rethought after the encounter with trauma; at this point in his argument, then, Freud appears to be incorporating the earlier theory of neurosis into a larger speculation concerning traumatic neurosis.) It is notable that the distinction between terminology of the nightmare- a terminology of seeing and awakening- and the terminology of the game- a language of play and speech- also appears in contemporary discussions of the problem of traumatic imagery as opposed to the resolution of trauma in (symbolic) language. See for example can der Kolk.

<sup>10</sup> The movement from the death drive to the life drive seems, in fact, to carry out a possibility contained in Freud's double denomination of trauma in Chapter II, as both fright (*Schreck*) and surprise (*Überraschung*): "Dass das Hauptgewicht der Verursachung auf das Moment der Überraschung, auf den Schreck, zu fallen schien, 'Schreck aber benannt den Zustand, in den man gerät, wenn man in Gefahr kommt, ohne auf sie vorbereitet zu sein, betont das Moment der Überraschung.'"

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, it is not until the introduction of the life drive that the *fort* makes its appearance again literally in the language of Freud's text. Here we might see a possibility of bringing together Laplanche's insight into the shared single energy of the life drive and death drive and Bloom's insistence, in "Freud's Concept of Defense and the Poetic Will" (*Agon* 119-44) that Freud is a dualist.

<sup>12</sup> The repetition of the origin as the new beginning of the life drive thus distinguishes itself from the confusion between death and life enacted in the death drive. One might say that the event of the trauma is repeated, in the moment of parting in the life drive, as the act of survival, an act that, in a sense, fulfills the imperative to live that begins life, but fulfills it differently (the imperative and its fulfillment are not continuous). This is not just an act; since it repeats the "awakening" of the life drive, it is inextricable from questions of witnessing of knowing that govern traumatic repetition (which is life and is also awakening) and thus can be understood as a different form of witnessing. To this extent, the question of creativity- as a creativity arising in the context of trauma- is bound up with the question of truth. Rather than providing an affective response to trauma, the life drive can be understood as providing another means of bearing witness. In other words, the life drive (unlike, say, the pleasure principle) cannot be understood within the economy of pleasure (which is also the economy of symbolization, as we see in the *fort/da* game) but must engage the problems of truth and knowing introduced by the trauma.

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that the passage from Chapter two is already fairly complex and appears to be somewhat playful in its own use of *fort* and *da*, in naming the never- achieved pleasurable end of the game (the hoped-for *da*) as "*das zum lustvollen Ende fortgeführte Ganze*" – i.e., in naming the longed- for *da* by means of a *fort*. The question of departure could also be thought as a meditation on the nature of the return (Derrida suggest something of the sort in "To Speculate- on Freud"); here it would be interesting to examine the shift from the *da* of the child- seen as the marker of the pleasure principle- to the *zurück* of the drives beyond the pleasure principle. The new meaning of *fortführen*, moreover, brings out a remarkable reversal that occurs in the movement from Chapters II and IV (where trauma is an exception to ordinary experience, an encounter with death that disturbs consciousness) to Chapter V (where the traumatic delay defines the very origin of life itself, and ultimately, in its repetition in the life drive, the possibility of a new beginning). For whereas consciousness was understood, originally, to protect life against death (Chapter IV), we can see (from Chapter V) that, since trauma ultimately reenacts an origin not from death but from life- or more accurately, from the surprise of new beginnings.

<sup>14</sup> Bernadette Leite, personal communication. She has spoken of this (and reiterated the importance of speaking) in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (7/ 24/99, 8/15/99, among other dates) and is honored in the November 1999 edition of *Redbook*. She worked for several years in association with the Minority Health Institute at the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University.

<sup>15</sup> As Greg says, "He called early, like 10 or 11 [...] But again, that was the night I went to my cousin's home, he called again, but I wasn't there". It should be noted that the use of the word 'child' to describe Greg is based on my sense that Greg "grows up" in the encounter with Bernadette, in the moments of the interview in which he takes leave of his friend and of his former self. In this sense his encounter with Bernadette and the child's game in Freud's text circle around the beginning of a new identity founded in the confrontation with loss.

<sup>16</sup> The tone of Greg's language here might be understood as being achieved through a giving up a certain kind of pathos, although, even in its humor, it attains a different pathos, perhaps the pathos of giving up pathos. I would like to thank Elizabeth Rottenberg for her insights into questions of humor and tone in the exchange between Greg and Bernadette Leite.

<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that the question of departure and parting arises at the end of the interview between Bernadette Leite and Greg: "B: Any parting words? G: Departing words? B: Parting words [...] Words to say to others" (KAL Oral History Archive).

<sup>18</sup> Thus the future of Freud's text could be understood as "beyond" in the strict sense, both inside and outside of Freud's text in the language of a child both inside (in the game) and outside (in the experience of the real child), already there but not yet there, just as, perhaps, the life drive is beyond the death drive.

<sup>19</sup> On the self-reflexive dimension of the scene see for example Derrida; on the self-reflexivity of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* see Bloom, "Freud and the Sublime" (Agon 91-118), where he suggests that Freud's citation of Tasso in Chapter Three is "an allegory of Freud's own passage into the Sublime," (106) and Meisel. Freud's argument, as we have outlined, thus first appears to replace the notion of childhood Oedipal conflict with a kind of trauma modelled on the adult (war trauma), but the self-reflexive level of Freud's writing re-introduces the child's centrality or priority not as a concept but as a kind of language. Likewise, the notion of beginning wrapped up in the awakening at the origin of life becomes associated with a kind of origination in language.

<sup>20</sup> Thus Freud's own creative act could be said to arise (as in the interview of Greg and Bernadette) out of an encounter: his encounter with the child. The shift from death drive to life drive, which remains fairly enigmatic in its original speculative introduction in Chapter V - Freud just stops with the description of the death drive and starts again with the life drive - could be said to take place on the level of the encounter rather than as something that could simply be an object of speculation or knowledge within the theory. In other words, if one were to ask, pragmatically or clinically, what would make possible the move from death drive to life drive in an individual- what makes possible, for example, the language of the life drive for Greg- the answer would have to be found, in the particular text by Freud, on the level of the encounter, that is, as taking place in the context of another encounter.

<sup>21</sup> Not the distance of theoretical knowing, then, but the distance of the child's game.

<sup>22</sup> On the *fort* at the origin see Weber (*Legend*) and my *Unclaimed Experience*

<sup>23</sup> As Freud insists in his own letters, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* was mostly written before the death of Sophie and thus does not (in the strictest sense) refer directly to her death; by introducing her death in a footnote, however, Freud allows the resonances to take place and also sets up another parallel with the child, for whom the mother died after the game just as Sophie died after the writing of Freud's text. On the death of Sophie, see for example Derrida and Bronfen. Anne Whitehead also remarks on the important contribution of Luce Irigaray to the unread position of the mother in the *fort/ da* game.

<sup>24</sup> The interweaving of language and history, once again, emerges in Freud's peculiar association of the death drive with something 'unobtrusive' and, in later texts, 'dumb,' and the life drive with noise or 'clamour'. This distinction occurs first in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and is reiterated in *The Ego and the Id* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Reading the death drive in terms of its historical shape in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*, we could say that what the language of the life drive bears witness to is, perhaps, the silence of history (or, in the child's game, the silence of the mother's departure).

<sup>25</sup> To the extent that the life drive moves us away from the direct line of argument that leads from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to *Moses and Monotheism*, or from individual to collective history, the imperative for survival could be understood here as taking place within acts (or within a language of the life drive) that is neither simply individual nor simply collective in the sense of those terms that preceded the death drive/life drive analysis. In a sense, the introduction of the life drive in my argument is also the reintroduction of the notion of the individual acts on the other side of the collective analysis of historical catastrophe implied in the death drive argument that leads to *Moses and Monotheism*. Here, the "individual" act (or the language of the life drive) might itself carry with it the force of a larger history. On psychoanalysis and play see Winnicott. Here we might recall the notion of living creatively. It is also interesting to note that this later thinking of play was also interested, in this context, in the notion of surprise.

# **“Writing Trauma:” Giving Voice to a Wound that Seems to Defy Representation in Contemporary Greek Cypriot Art**

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## INTRODUCTION

Cyprus was granted independence from British colonial rule in 1960. In the following years, inter-communal conflicts between Greek and Turkish Cypriots broke out. The volatile situation culminated in 1974 when a Greek Junta-led coup against President Archbishop Makarios was followed by Turkey's invasion of Cyprus. In addition to the substantial human, material, and economic costs of the war, the island has since been under a *de facto* division, whereby about 40 per cent of its territory remains under Turkish military occupation, with no jurisdiction by the legitimate authorities of the Republic of Cyprus. Some two hundred thousand Greek Cypriots were forced out of their towns and villages and were moved to the Greek Cypriot government controlled part of the island; there were also several thousand Turkish Cypriot refugees, who had to move to the north.

Along the so-called Green Line that has divided the island ever since, a buffer zone has been created, patrolled by U.N. soldiers, which has prevented the recommencement of war. The buffer zone, four miles wide in some areas but narrowing to only a few feet in others, cuts through farmlands and mountains, and divides Nicosia, the capital of the island, in two. It is lined with earthworks, barbed wire, trenches, bunkers and watchtowers, manned by troops with automatic weapons. Many of the deserted houses and shops have furniture and goods still stacked inside. Due to this division, artists – along with all other inhabitants of the island – have been forced to live between two spaces: the one they inhabit, and the other on the opposite side, which is “forbidden.” Nevertheless, the tension of the in-between space has been a determining force, firstly in the construction of their identities and secondly as an influence in their artwork.<sup>1</sup>

The dramatic events of the summer of 1974 had a shattering impact on the course of contemporary Cypriot art. From the late 1950s through the early 1970s, a number of Greek Cypriot artists<sup>2</sup> engaged in a process of modernization of local art production, as well as in its synchronization with international developments.<sup>3</sup> This came to a violent halt in 1974:

Amidst the impact of these events and the subsequent processes of reconstruction at all levels, both the country in general and its cultural production in particular followed new directions. In the arts, especially, several years would go by before the synchronization with international developments was once again put forward as a priority. Of greater urgency [...in the post-war years] was the redefinition of both collective and individual identities, through processes that were more inward-looking and private, compared to the pre-1974, post-independence years.<sup>4</sup>

In this text we concentrate on how works produced by Greek Cypriot artists after the war significantly suggest the processing of post-traumatic memory, without affirming themselves to be about trauma. The post-war works do not figuratively or literally communicate an account of a trauma experienced by a particular individual, nor in most cases do they manifest a set of symptoms that could be definitively ascribed to the artist as a survivor of traumatic episodes. Drawing from Cathy Caruth's work on trauma, we advance the argument that trauma resists representation, and we show how this resistance can be traced in Cypriot art as a move toward abstraction. We investigate how these artists bear witness to extreme experiences that challenge the limits of visual language.

Caruth emphasizes how “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on.”<sup>5</sup> For Caruth, the repeated possession of the event for the one who experiences it, is “the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits,” and this essential “truth” of traumatic experience is only experienced “belatedly.”<sup>6</sup> Caruth states: “What returns to haunt the victim [...] is not the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known.”<sup>7</sup> The crisis of a

survivor of a traumatic experience lies in the way the traumatic event causes an incision in time and in consciousness.

Stubbornly haunting its survivors, yet distinguished by the “historically ungraspable primal scene,”<sup>8</sup> we argue that trauma is essentially about losing one’s ground in the familiar space of psychic and interpersonal history. Once a person’s protective personalized space is violated due to a traumatic experience, one loses not only “the belief that one can be *oneself* in relation to others” but one “may lose the sense that [one] has any self at all.” “Trauma,” in other words, “loosens this glue, crippling psychological life” and leaves survivors “plunged into a nightmare world of self-fragmentation in which sanity, indeed the very continuity of existence, can no longer be taken for granted.”<sup>10</sup>

In the course of our investigation we have come to realize that the artists we examined not only confront the aesthetic potential of visual practice, but also address the theoretical and ethical impossibilities of such a practice. We try to show how Greek Cypriot artists enact a conception of another set of relations between representation and the ‘unrepresentable,’ where no aesthetic object will ever be right or appropriate to the historic trauma that it takes as its grounding subject.<sup>11</sup>

As the ‘unrepresentable’ is not located in narrative representation, following a Deleuzian line, we locate it in how the material passes into sensation, and in how this sensation affects the audience. Given our concerns with unacknowledged trauma, Gilles Deleuze helps us discuss the artworks not merely as visual stimuli to be received by the spectators, but as the transference of affect from the artwork to the spectator or as an experience which engages all the senses. To be more specific, we concentrate on what these pictures do (to the viewer). Our questioning is concerned with the pictures’ power and operating mechanisms, as well as their power to affect our emotions and behaviour. In order to find a response to this question we shift the locus of discussion “from the picture as object to the event of picturing.”<sup>12</sup>

In such an event, there is, according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, a summoning forth in which “invisible forces [...] of gravity, heaviness, rotation, the vortex, explosion, expansion, germination and time [...] make perceptible the imperceptible forces that populate the world [...]”<sup>13</sup> Our aim is to show how in contemporary Greek Cypriot art, the rhythms of lines, the flows and vectors, the eccentric positioning, the material interference, the animated colour, and the use of gravitational forces provoke the mind to further action, meaning to arouse a memory, an image or the awareness of a problem. Working in this frame, we have adopted the approach that art produces sensations, affects, and intensities as its mode of addressing problems.

In our negotiation of contemporary Greek Cypriot art, we became increasingly aware of the expressivity of the material, and came to the realisation that it plays a fundamental role in the uniqueness of the production of the works. This is how we turned to Deleuze to place our observations in a theoretical framework. Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of an aesthetic plane of composition is not one of the relation between content and form. It is neither produced for the sake of technique nor for the purpose of communication. In their thought, art might be concerned with expression but it is not the expression of an artist’s intention. It is the material that becomes expressive, not the artist.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, we intertwine the Deleuzian approach to art with trauma theory – drawn mainly from Caruth – in order to suggest a certain set of relationships between art’s formal properties and its capacity to speak the “unspeakable.” This functions as a frame through which to see the endeavour of Cypriot artists to find a communicable language of sensation and affect by which to register something of the experience of a traumatic memory. Cypriot artists have attempted the impossible (in the Lyotardian sense of unrepresentability within available sign systems)<sup>15</sup> by striving to bear witnesses to the loss and suffering experienced through the many catastrophes of their country.

Following Sigmund Freud, psychologists have characterised trauma as the overwhelming and normatively inconceivable nature of an event, which the person or people involved find unassimilable. The traumatic experience causes a distortion in the temporality of the survivor.<sup>16</sup> “The traumatized,” Caruth notes, “carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.”<sup>17</sup>

Following this line, we open up the question of what art itself might tell us about the lived experience and memory of trauma, and what specific artworks trigger in the viewer. Where we see resemblance (in so far as an image is conceived as a representation of the world), Deleuze and Guattari ask the viewer to consider not what it is, but what are the conditions under which it operates.

Cypriot art reveals traumatic experiences through a winding vision; it affects viewers in ways that are non-narrative and non-cognitive. The re-enactment of traumatic experiences affects the structure of the viewer’s response to the extent that the response becomes performative: it is a matter of enacting, in a participatory way. To comprehend Cypriot post-war art is to understand what it does (to the viewer), for to perceive the images is to enact their affectivity or activity of actualization. Along with the inevitable question of what pictures mean or signify, we already ask the question of what they do, and the focus of such questioning is concerned with the works’ power to affect our emotions and behaviour.<sup>18</sup>

Our approach here is one that subscribes to the opinion that art produces sensations, affects, and intensities as its mode of addressing problems. This position emphasizes that art is of affect more than representation, a system of dynamic and impacting forces rather than a system of unique images that function under the regime of signs. The system of dynamic forces is what Deleuze has discussed systematically in *Francis Bacon and the Logic of Sensation*, where he indicates the close connection of a force and a sensation. “[F]or a sensation to exist, a force must be first exerted on a body, on a point of a wave,” although he further points out that, “the sensation ‘gives’ something completely different from the forces that condition it.”<sup>19</sup> An analogous system of dynamic forces and sensation is what we try to locate in our analysis.

With reference to post-1974 Cypriot artworks, we argue that producing art is an attempt to heal wounds by means of retaining information. The artistic reinterpretations of the events in the aftermath of the violence enacted the process of post-traumatic memory without declaring themselves to be about trauma; in many cases, they would appear to be about something else. It seems, therefore, that trauma can only ever be partially told; in its fragmented nature, trauma can be articulated in literary and artistic production.

## THE “FIGURAL” REPLACES THE FIGURATIVE

Representation and trauma persist to be problematic, because trauma, as a missed encounter with the real, is elusive and impossible to grasp in a literal figuration. Contemporary Greek Cypriot artists coming face to face with a missed encounter concentrate on the ways in which bodily and emotional connections can be established. The post-war works are concerned above all with time that passes and with the virtuality that constitutes history in cultural and natural memory. In Deleuzian terms, the works are marked by a hybrid character, found in a territorializing and deterritorializing structure and process – hovering between the animal and the human, between place and territory. In the act of production, they implicate the viewer in an almost bodily way. We observe a fragmentation of the figure, provoking a creative exchange between work and viewer. In this process, the work has a performative function, by means of which the artwork actualizes itself.

It is not a direct representation of events; it is the creative process that is the actual event, the performance of the violent affectivity of the figure.

According to Jean-Francois Lyotard in *Discourse, figure*, the function of the artist is to render visible what can no longer be seen: to paint the forces of the world of sensation. But the artist must also deconstruct representation and invent “a space of the invisible, of the possible,”<sup>20</sup> and it is especially in the disclosure of such a space that Cypriot artists invest their creativity. If the latter is the case, then we could not avoid asking what this *invisible* that only painting can make visible is like, how it relates to what we normally see and how this informs the following artists’ work. Is it through a break away from representation that the invisible comes across to the viewer? How is the space of the invisible possible? Deleuze establishes that the main object of the art of painting is the action and expression of invisible “forces;” the art of painting is as much a matter of affectivity as of visibility. More precisely, the art of painting becomes a matter of perceived visible figures and felt affects that are commanded by invisible forces. Deleuze argues that these new possibilities arise only out of the manual throw of paint and thus escape the human organization of representation:

It [the diagram] is like the assurgent appearance of another world. These marks, these strokes are irrational, involuntary, accidental, free, random. They are non-representative, non-illustrative, non-narrative. But they are no longer significant or signifying; they are asignifying lines.<sup>21</sup>

The artists examined below oscillate between representation and abstraction; they adopt the “figural.” As Deleuze turns to painting in *Francis Bacon*, he makes frequent use of the concept of the “Figure,” which he relates directly to Lyotard’s notion of “the figural,” but without any of the Freudian apparatus that Lyotard brings to his argument. The “figural” is one of the most important concepts in Deleuze’s analysis of sensation in his discussion of Bacon’s work, and it clearly stands in opposition to figuration or representation.

Deleuze proposes two ways of attaining the “sensation” directly: either by moving towards abstraction, or else by moving towards what Lyotard termed the “figural.”<sup>22</sup> Several Cypriot artists have followed the “figural.” Whereas “figuration” refers to a form that is related to an object it is supposed to represent (recognition), the “figural” is the form that is connected to a sensation, and conveys the violence of this sensation directly to the nervous system (the sign). They have followed this “middle path” between the two extremes of figuration-narration and pure abstraction. The “figural” is a deterritorialization of the figure, but as such, it needs the figure as its point of departure.<sup>23</sup>

How does the “figure” attain the “sensation” in Greek Cypriot trauma-related art? The generic standards of sensation are, at the same time, the principles of composition of the work of art, and conversely, it is the organization and structure of the work of art that reveals these conditions. This then is the task faced by the artist: how can the material used by the artist attain this level of forces? How can it become capable of “bearing” the sensation?

By following a middle path, Cypriot artists explore the navigation of space – whether topographical (landscape), mnemonic or empirical – to create a gateway to a locality where new aesthetic openings were manifested. Our analysis of artworks depends on their materiality, their situation, their process of making, their composition and their function in the context of abstraction. Cypriot artists working with “the figural” aim at producing an actualization of certain virtualities, that is, the realization of possible worlds – and at the same time, a *deactualization* of a certain reality. The paintings then produce/perform a different combination, a different *extraction*, from all the possibilities. It is this that gives them their political but also their ethical and aesthetic character. It is this that makes them endlessly affirming of life and not just acts of negation.<sup>24</sup>



## GIVING VOICE TO A WOUND THAT SEEMS TO DEFY REPRESENTATION

### 1. Tassos Stephanides (1917 – 1996 )

The absence of a person and the vanished layers of earth express the state of emergency created as a consequence of war. The absence of the body can be read as an expression of political power, a political presence, which brings about an absence. It is an expression of political interference in a living space. As a paradigm, the total absence of the figure in Tassos Stephanides' post-1974 works unambiguously declares the prominence of the wounded place and the abandonment of the human presence, as seen in *Nisos tis Estin* [*There is an Island*] (1979), (fig. 1). In order to depict his wounded place, he creates a tension between figuration and abstraction, rejecting the notion that the two are antithetical.



**Figure 1**  
Tassos Stephanides, *Nisos tis Estin*, 1979,  
acrylic on canvas, 58 x 68 cm.  
Image courtesy of En Tipis  
Publications.

By eliminating the figure in his paintings, Stephanides treats the whole surface of the canvas as the body. He aims at expressing an intentional brutality. His style is thus analogous to what Deleuze calls “catastrophes” that disrupt the figurative. “It is through such catastrophes that another world opens up; it is through marks that are a-signifying that something new emerges.”<sup>25</sup> These catastrophes give the eye of the viewer a different function from that given by figurative or optically ordered passages of painting.

In *Nisos tis Estin*, by stretching, deforming, and smearing over his figures and landscapes, Stephanides moves on the edge between creation and destruction, and he renders visible agonizing affections. He modifies chaotic forces into a kind of transformative “chaosmos,” transmitting temporality and exposure. Stephanides’ vision leads the viewers to experience and respond to his



images less with their eyes than with their bodily sensations. In undoing the “good form of representation” (by exaggeration and distortion), Stephanides engages invisible forces of deformation (those of the unconscious), which never become directly visible. Drawing from Lyotard, conventional visual representation represses the anomalies of sensation, the deformations, and violations of “good form” that disturb the eye. The ground for painting is the “figure-matrix” of fantasy – the scene of the invisible pulsations of the Id. Art does, therefore, engage the phenomenal rhythms of sensation, according to Lyotard, but it also discloses the rhythms of desire and the transgressive force of the unconscious.<sup>26</sup> The “space of the invisible of the possible,” then, is an invented space traversed by unconscious forces that render visual Lyotard’s “figural.”

Stephanides escapes the symbolic and follows a formal visual strategy – the anomalies of sensation, the deformations and violations of “good form” – to expose collective trauma and loss. His forms are subjected to a number of deformations through a series of manual techniques: accidental marks, aggressive brushstrokes, smudging of paint on the canvas, lines dividing the painting, scrubbing or brushing the painting without following the contours of the shape. These techniques have a double effect: on the one hand, they undo the organic and extensive unity of the body and instead reveal what Deleuze calls its intensive and non-organic reality; on the other hand, “these marks also undo the optical organization of the painting itself, since this force is rendered in a precise sensation that does violence to the eye.”<sup>27</sup>

Looking at Stephanides’ work, the painting that is most captivating is the one with the overturned *Pentadactylos* (1979), (fig. 2). The mountain range, in the Cyprus’ occupied territory, has been turned upside down. A painting upside down might seem agonizing and disconcerting. Nevertheless, it makes a visual image more intricate: you have to do more mental work to process what you are looking at. It was also a metaphor for Stephanides’ contemporary world. Life, even painting, goes on – except that everything has been turned upside down.



**Figure 2**  
Tassos Stephanides,  
*Pentadactylos*, 1979,  
acrylic on canvas,  
appr. 100 x 130 cm.  
Image courtesy of  
En Tipsis  
Publications.

His handling and depiction were deliberately slovenly and inaccurate, but all the more richly expressive for being so. As Nicos Alexiou wrote about his work: “Violently but also whisperingly, beneath what is depicted, tormented Cyprus becomes a cloud, an explosion, mayhem. Suspended mountains, rootless, scarred by darkness and flames. Demolished houses, bright shimmering and heavy skies, overhanging, ready for dawn or for deluge.”<sup>28</sup> The very forces and energies of the earth and all that populate it are summoned up and become sensations. Stephanides conceives of the image as a sensation of forces, rather than simply as a symbol. When the artist makes the leap from representation to abstraction and “thinks in painting” the creative capacities of painting are thus revealed: the bluish, fleshy colours of *Pentadactylos* are close to those of the decaying body.

## 2. Stella Angelidou (b. 1969) and Panayiotis Michael (b. 1966)

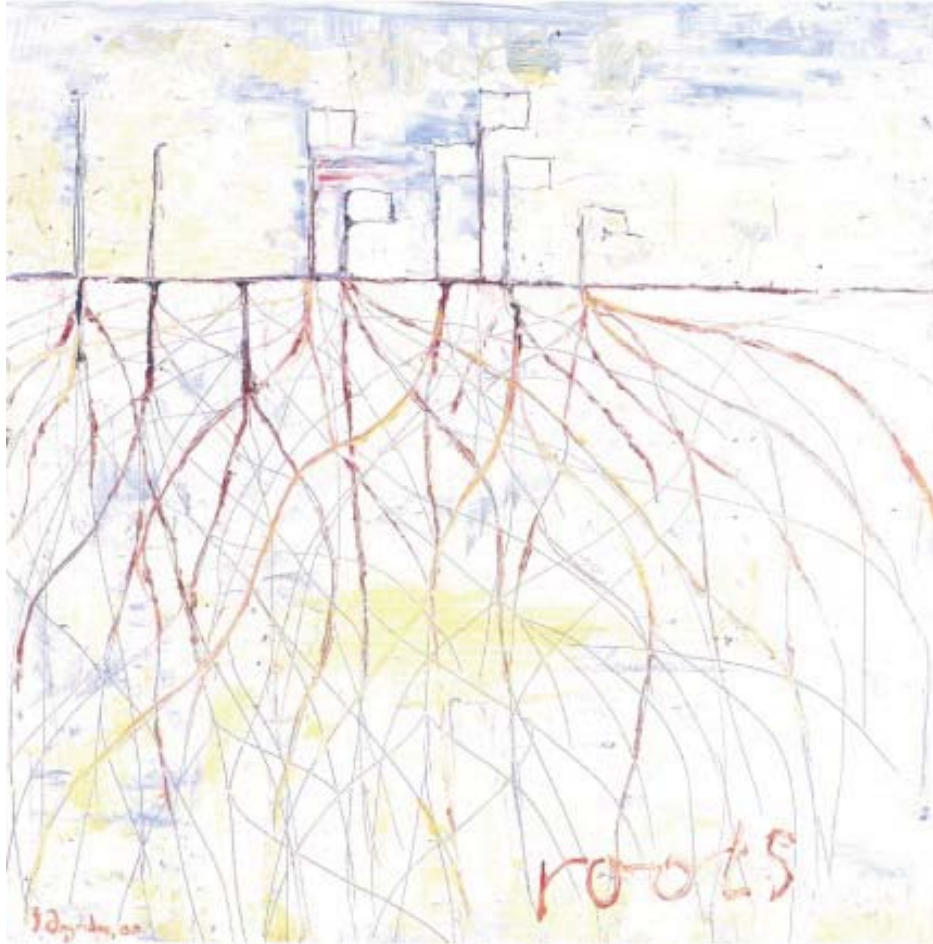
Contemporary Greek Cypriot artists grapple with the unassimilable trauma of the catastrophic losses of history, in a place which continues to be marked by experiences of separation and displacement, but which also connect the living to former and future lives. Being in the presence of a place that was important in the lives of loved ones may help individuals work through feelings of incompleteness – spectral traces that are passed through generations. This is what Stella Angelidou’s marks, dividing lines, fences and borders, and Panayiotis Michael’s wounded surfaces or injured skins are pointing to. They are references to places of pain and healing, where social networks and possible futures can be created, imagined and inhabited. These artworks constitute communal reminders of loss, and personal reserves for “constructive forgetting,” both of which are central to mourning and embodied-social memory work.<sup>29</sup>

The spectral echoes of past actions can be seen on the heavily-worked surfaces of these artists’ paintings, resulting in a unique, melancholy presence – a sense of the presence of absence. Within the spaces of absence, loss, and (dis)figuration in Angelidou’s and Michael’s works, a dialectic between meaningful forms and the grieving mind is enacted: in Steven Sacks’ terms, “fictions of consolation” are constructed and identity is recomposed.<sup>30</sup> The traces of the erased forms, lines, and marks bear witness to their erasure and the passing of time – just as the disjunctive practice of memory, its traces and asymmetrical rhythms, suggest the existence of once “being there.”

It is this connection between space and the existential dimension of humans that we emphasize here, in order to show how Angelidou’s landscapes, and Michael’s early series, *My Dearest Green Line*, can be seen as reflecting an existential space that serves as an index of the traumatic history of Cyprus. Through an extensive use of marks and lines, and natural materials (sand and sawdust), these artists reveal the natural environment but also its history, its culture, and its belief systems – as if they have looked at the countryside with such intensity that they have seen through its surface to the geological layers beneath the earth’s skin. Once more, nothing is definite on the picture surface: lines express a feeling of incompleteness, of negotiating boundaries and spaces, of tension between absences and presences, speech and silence, body and landscape – a tension that points to an open wound. This is achieved with the application of diagrams, a layering of repetitive lines, and marks that indicate the thinking and rethinking of composition. Change is not produced through a process in which one form replaces another, but through deformation: as a form becomes scrambled, something new is suggested and a number of (formless) forces, presented by the diagram,<sup>31</sup> surface in one place. We are speaking of the actualization of form on the canvas’ surface.

The marks, dividing lines, fences and borders in the work of Angelidou, act as an evidence-presence of the human body. In writing about Anselm Kiefer’s landscapes, Lisa Saltzman suggests that traumatised landscapes and ruined buildings can also be read as standing for physical wounds that may never heal; captured on the distressed surfaces, they are distilled in time, never to be resolved but also never to be forgotten. The body, which marks the soil, gives evidence of the

human power inscribed in the land. The evidence of the human body on the land – as we see happening with Angelidou's marks and lines – is exactly what functions as legitimization of one's claims on the land: the evidence of the body in the soil.



**Figure 3**  
Stella Angelidou, *Roots*,  
2000, oil on canvas, 75 x  
75 cm.  
Image courtesy of En  
Tipis Publications.

Angelidou creates abstracted landscapes that, in a sense, are impossible to move through, as one can discover in *Roots* (2000), (fig. 3), and *Fire* (2000), (fig. 4). The clear indication of frontiers, borders, and barbed wire fences gives the viewer a sense of finitude, limits and limitedness. It is impossible to move further, as it is impossible to move further the dividing Green Line. These signposts refer to the artist's life's experience, of the continuous sight of borders, or of the impact on her own identity.





**Figure 4**

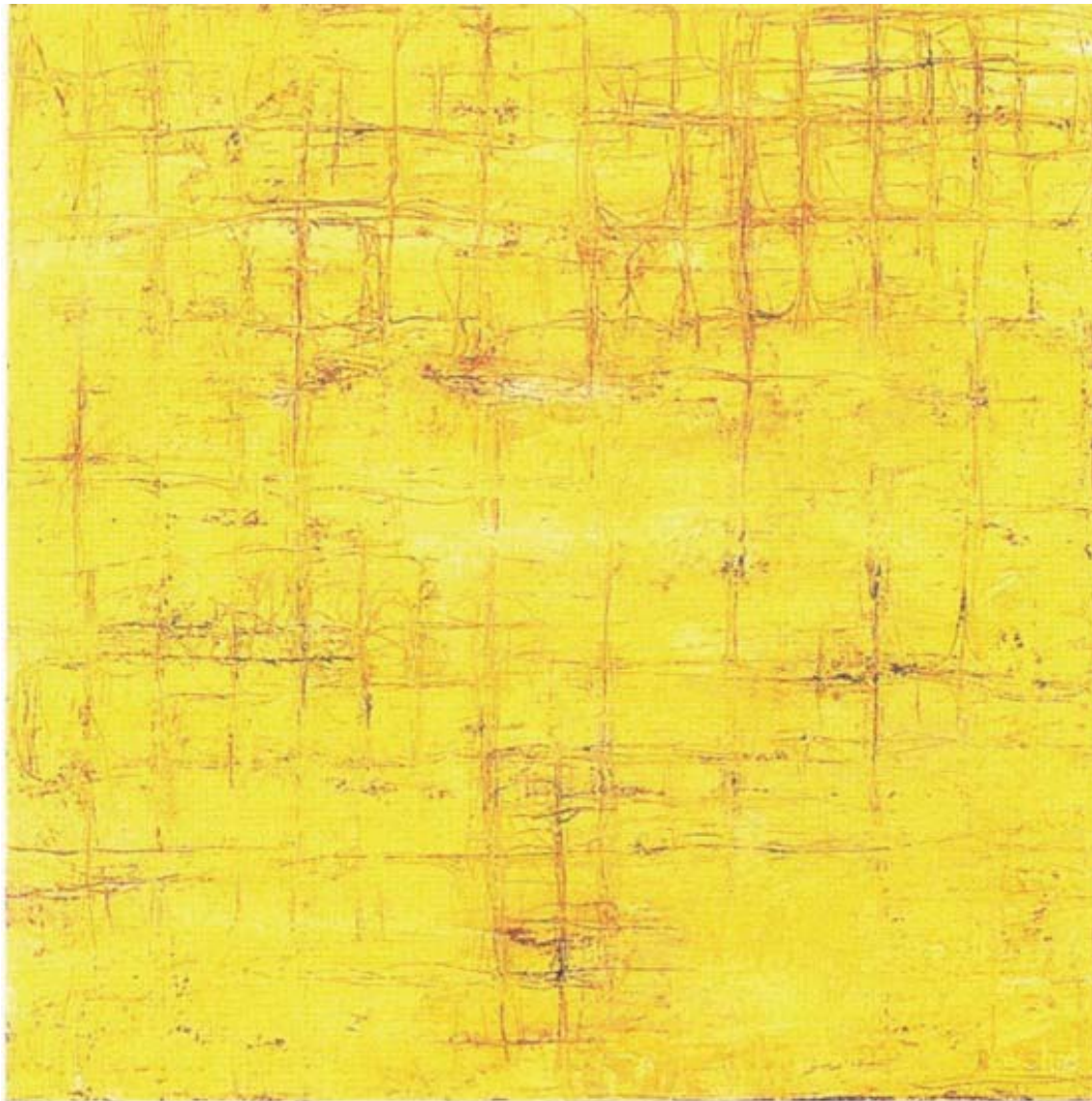
Stella Angelidou, *Fire*, 2000, oil on canvas, 90 x 120 cm.

Image courtesy of En Tipis Publications.

Whatever the signposts, they indicate that Angelidou's personal landscapes are as much inward as outward bound. Placed in the centre of fire, the small tank (fig. 4) stands as a reference to the war scenery and its traumatic aftermath. Paint is used pictorially to figure the perspective of the landscape and expressively to create a sense of violent recession, which is superimposed on a series of vertical, violently executed black lines, signifying a type of fencing or borders, often turning into abstract gestures. As suggested above, it is through such catastrophes (of paint) that another world opens up; it is through marks that are asignifying (chaotic and not representational) that something new emerges.

Angelidou places her lines in a suspending situation: lingering between a type of fencing or borders, and random marks or a-signifying lines. Most interestingly, her paintings are divided into two plateaux: the strictly limited spaces, above and below, suggest a possible future deterritorialization.

Michael's series *My Dearest Green Line* (1998 [figs. 5, 6]), a group of paintings in thick layered material (paint mixed with saw-dust and sand), full of dissections and scars, constitute either (abstract) wounded landscapes or (abstract) wounded bodies.

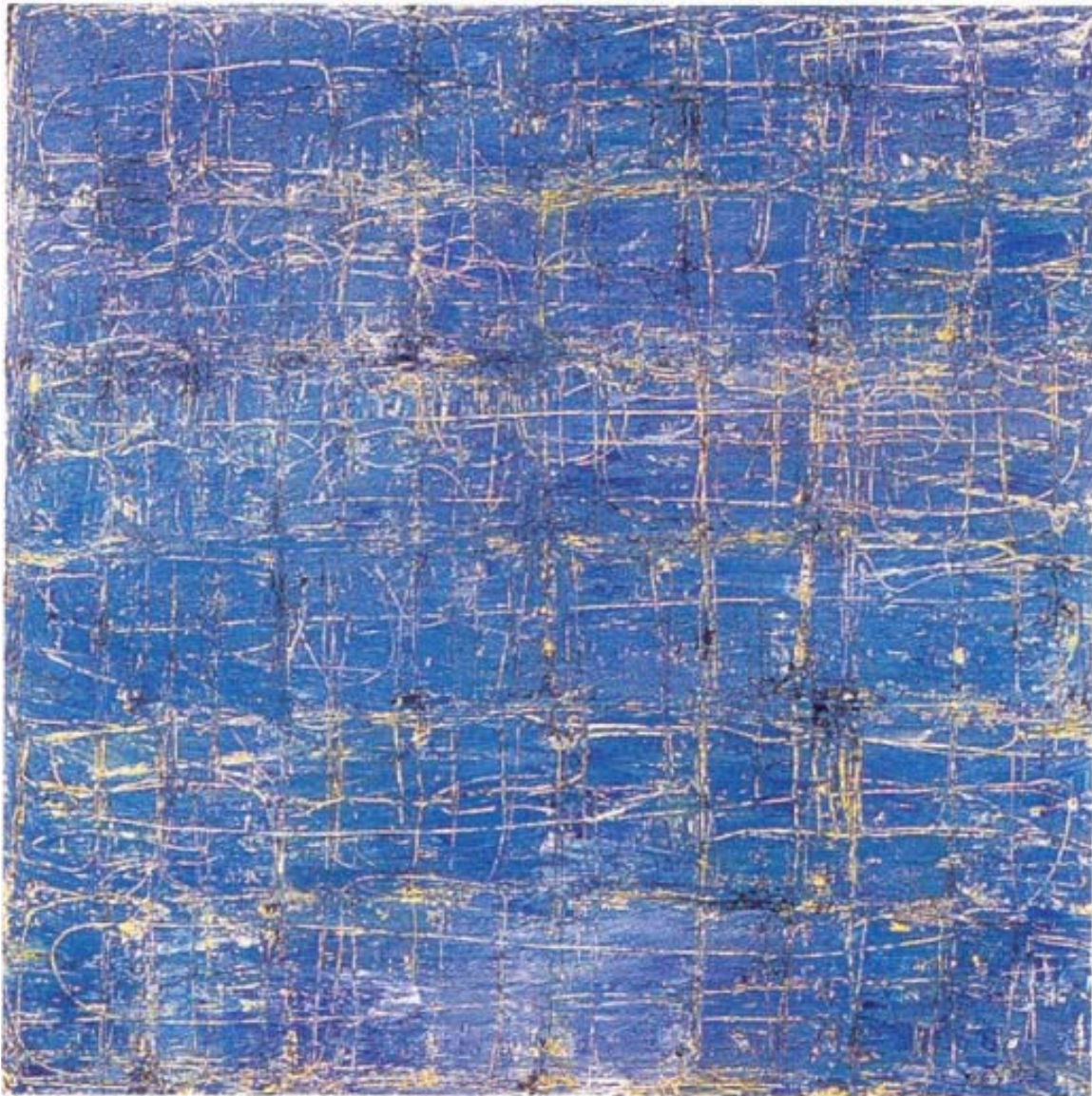


**Figure 5**

Panayiotis Michael, *My Dearest Green Line*, 1998, oil and sawdust on canvas, 120 x 120 cm.  
Image courtesy of En Tipis Publications.

Michael comprehends and approaches his place as material evidence of unspoken pain, in Caruth's words, crying wounds that demand justice and find expression in the work as if through a kind of skin.<sup>32</sup> Through silent acts of witnessing and listening, like those traced in Michael's artworks, wounded places allow individuals and groups to begin the difficult work of mourning.<sup>33</sup>





**Figure 6**

Panayiotis Michael, *My Dearest Green Line*, 1998, oil and sawdust on canvas, 120 x 120 cm.  
Image courtesy of En Tipis Publications.

Paintings are like close-ups that isolate the image of the world, or part of that image, from its space and time context. As such, Michael managed to distort the narrative frame of representational space. Here, the landscape is without focus: a composition, not a form, that acts directly on the nervous system working as a disruptive, imaginary space, “a pure, absolutely deterritorialized landscape.”<sup>34</sup>

In Michael’s work, the reference to the Green Line in his title alludes to the state of partition in Cyprus, which is, additionally, rendered formally and compositionally in the repeated lines, the boundaries between planes, the multiple axes, and the overlapping inter-planar relationships: they are markers of the tension and the negotiation of geographical and political boundaries in his home country. He formulates tropes like subtle colour shifts (he paints almost monochromatically), moments of camouflage (layering), deposits in paint where the bottom colour peers through the top

one, two edges of colour butted up to create a boundary, flawed brushwork, and a disordered/random application of material. These tricks are repeated and repurposed throughout the paintings to give the work a sense of both duration and temporality. The texture extends itself from the first layer of paint to the surface. The top surface acts as a system that parallels and competes with the first layer. It is, however, symbiotically bound to it. Both systems/layers entirely depend on each other for ‘survival’ in order to create depth.

Michael’s wounded surfaces or injured skins resemble walls that have been scuffed and marred by human intervention and the passage of time. Characterised by a skin of ochre and umber colours and by the gouge and puncture marks in the dense stratum, these walls suggest violence. They recall graffiti in public spaces, slogans and images of protest – allusions to the dividing wall in the town of Nicosia.

In Angelidou’s and Michael’s work, lines constitute a reference to their physical presence on the land, marking and defining spaces. Using a layering of repetitive lines, an application of diagrams and marks indicating the thinking and rethinking of composition, these artists have succeeded in expressing a feeling of incompleteness, while negotiating limits and confines, and while producing a tension between absences and spaces.

### 3. Klitsa Antoniou (b. 1968)

People who survive a shocking tragedy suffer tremendously from their guilt about their survival due to the “moral dimension inherent in all conflict and suffering.”<sup>35</sup> Cathy Caruth has suggested that at the heart of traumatic narrative there is “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life; between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Ernst van Alphen considers that perhaps it is only through what he calls the imaginative discourses of art and literature that certain historical functions might take place.<sup>37</sup> It is only afterwards, in repetition, that trauma becomes an experienced event.

This becomes evident in Klitsa Antoniou’s visual work. She examines matters of memory loss – in particular, the dilemma of the intentional obliteration of memory, the resistance to remember and the force of forgetting. It could be argued that through her own practice, Antoniou has re-enacted dislocation, she has recreated the experience of transportability of space and memory, and she has foregrounded the question of erasure and oblivion versus the perseverance of memory.<sup>38</sup> For example, a discomfort lingering between the terror of losing one’s personal past and an almost unmanageable need not to forget is manifested in *Tracing Homeness* (2002), (fig. 7), and *A-lethe Hydor* (2005), (fig. 8).

*Tracing Homeness* consists of a steel carriage, which is full of rolled pieces of flooring, wrapped up and stacked on top of each other like used rugs. Two of them lie flat on the floor implying a process of folding and unfolding. The surfaces are made from slightly tinted rubber and latex, which at first sight give the impression of abstract shapes and outlines. On a closer look, one observes that, layer upon layer, domestic objects or pieces of furniture are cast on the surface, impressing their fading traces, informing the actual objects’ non-existence, and ultimately forming an uncanny and eerie mosaic blueprint of a previous life. On these manipulated/scarified surfaces, we observe a move against figuration – understood as narration and illustration, as one of the key tropes of representation. We observe a deterritorialization of the figure, but, as such, we need the figure (prints of objects) as its point of departure.<sup>39</sup> Antoniou uses the Deleuzian diagram by making an intentional layering of marks to allow the “figural” to emerge from the figure.





**Figure 7**  
Klitsa Antoniou, *Tracing Homeness*, 2002, latex, rubber and metal, variable dimensions.  
Image courtesy of En Tipis Publications.

*Tracing Homeness* speaks about the practice of disruption and dislocation, and the issue of which things to take with you and what to leave behind. What is left on the surface is not the physicality of the objects but an abstraction (via an indexical relationship between objects and time), fragmented recollections and memoirs, and the accumulation of past experiences lived in these suspended spaces. This obsessively tedious layering transmits an anxious gesture of urgently and desperately trying to rescue particular objects, only to realize that one can only preserve their traces. The packaging appears futile and an irony is evoked by the eternal absence of the house. Even if one has found a place, the sense of belonging remains elsewhere: inscribed on the surface, like some indelible scar. Writing on Antoniou's work, Stephan Tiron employs the phantom limb syndrome: "In the process of moving away and of moving towards something new, strange connections bring forth lost sensations. Thus, touching parts of the face, the sensation may feel like it's coming from the missing limb."<sup>40</sup>

*A-lethe Hydor* likewise explores memory, trauma, loss, and the trace of human existence. It is an installation

that consists of four huge 'walls' made of dozens of old picture frames, hanging from a square metal structure. Facing us are the frames' backs, covered with a variety of wallpapers, like a patchwork of prints.

Familiarity – despite the overwhelming size – invites us to step into the interior space where layers of seaweeds grow out of the picture frames. A claustrophobic, enclosed space, womb-like and containing; yet, obstructing and forbidding. Familiarity and estrangement, passage and blockage, remembrance and forgetfulness co-exist and, thus, resist closure, fulfilment or arrival – we are only visiting.<sup>41</sup>

The intimate relation between a form and an anti-form, or an image and its concealment, mirrors the relationship between presence and absence, matter and emptiness. Antoniou approaches the void/emptiness/abstraction as an active agent. It is mentally difficult to imagine the void as an object constituting a negation of the existing or the visible or a negation of any representational

form. Rather, the void is precisely what makes a thing perceptible, and therefore a thing of material importance. Antoniou's empty frames can be seen as the absence of a thing: a thing, however, that in turn lends fundamental meaning to this void. A tension exists in her work, whereby the viewer experiences perceptual and cognitive ambivalence. Through formal subtleties, she captures the nature of dynamic emptiness and gives room for a new inquiry: Is the sense of the 'void' or emptiness created through an absence of the physical form, or does the emptiness, in some strange manner, constitute part of the form?



**Figure 8**

Klitsa Antoniou, *A-letbe Hydor*, 2005, installation with frames, seaweed, wallpaper prints, string, and metal frame, 350 x 250 x 250 cm.

Image by authors.



From a material perspective the empty/abstract space may be void, but it is transformed in the moment of being filled. The absent form gives rise to the emergence of the physical memory of violence. The performative nature of the site-specific installations relies on the inscriptive quality of the open space that becomes the space of “an act of memory”.<sup>42</sup> Antoniou is not presenting us a work about amnesia, but rather a performative ritual where memory can be reclaimed by opening the wound to full exposure. She gives no clues as to what has happened, no immediate references to a historical event, yet his work testifies to an in-between state of place, where insecurity and instability rule.

It is in the title that the meaning of the work is to be comprehended. *A-lethe Hydor* literally translates into Water of Truth. The word *Alithia* (truth) derives from the word ‘a’ (meaning absence) and the word ‘lethe’ (forgetting). The water of forgetting, in Greek mythology, refers to the water the dead drank to forget life on earth. Therefore, the concept of truth linguistically derived from a conscious process of remembering, and ‘truth’ becomes synonymous with the resistance to forgetting. The covered photos forming abstract shapes represent the unhealed wounds and scars of pain, preserved by those who are persistently waiting for and mourning the missing, and who are simultaneously tempted to forget and continue with their lives.

Always in reference to how the present self is perceived, one recalls and verifies these prompted memories; otherwise, memories are either invented anew, or their recollection is blocked altogether through the natural or intentional course of forgetting.

## EPILOGUE

Analysing some Greek Cypriot artists’ works, we have argued that the experience of trauma resists being turned into a “finished product.” Memories of traumatic events are often unutterably and surprisingly evoked by body language, visual images, verbal and written words, sound, or even silence. Ultimately, not only do these artists’ works throw into relief the aesthetic potential of visual practice, but they also address the theoretical and ethical “im-possibilities” of such a practice. Using materials and concepts, these artists investigate the aesthetic and ethical predicaments of their memory and re-collection after the war, where history and the belated or deferred confrontation with it happen within excruciating social, cultural and artistic processes. Thus, Cypriot post-war art, by virtue of its performative nature as “a speech-act,” contributes to the remaking of the self. “*Saying something about a traumatic memory does something to it,*” remarks Susan J. Brison.<sup>43</sup> If desymbolization and fragmentation is integral to the traumatized self, these visual and literal forms of expression can be a significant means through which the self deals with its traumatic past and tormenting memory.

Our argument has been that Greek Cypriot artists’ works, in their engagement with trauma, rely on processes of abstraction, destruction, fragmentation, territorialization, deterritorialization, sedimentation and decay. We have inscribed the possibility of representation in the Cypriot artists’ works within a Lyotardian metaphor of im-possibility, where no aesthetic object is ever right or appropriate to the historic trauma that it takes as its grounding subject. Greek Cypriot artists are faced with a history directed towards the *immemorial*, to that which cannot either be remembered (represented) or forgotten (erased), a history which evokes the figures that haunt the claims of historical representation – ‘haunt,’ in the sense that they are neither present to them nor absent from them.

As is evidenced in Cypriot artists’ projects, the awareness of this collapse of representation, or im-possibility, does not diminish the desire to try to commemorate, to strive to do the impossible. The obligation to work is also an undertow of the inwardness of the melancholic, and so



these artists continue to work and to produce and, if not to mourn, then at least to confront deferred and traumatic history.<sup>44</sup> To borrow Caruth's expression, they have difficulty "awakening to life" after "surviving their trauma without knowing it."<sup>45</sup> Greek Cypriot artists' works can be viewed as yet-to-be-completed, as resisting the intention for wholeness, conclusion, and resolution, and instead sustaining it as desire. An issue in their works is the effort to sustain the memories at the level of desire, to live out the dislocations with some impression of reflexivity, and to present a layering of im-possibilities. Art is therefore a realm that opens up the world, unfolding it towards that which we are unable to represent. In their works, the artists discussed seem to enact a conception of another set of relations between representation and the 'unrepresentable' (the "figural"), which is articulated in Deleuze's discussion of sensation, "that which is directly transmitted and which avoids the boredom of a story to be told."<sup>46</sup> As the 'unrepresentable' is not located in an image of violence, we have tried to locate it in the connection between the work and the audience. The direct action upon the nervous system constitutes part of a mode of representation, which would allow this violence of sensation to take place. It will not fit in the frame of figuration. Instead, it demands a different mode of representation to accommodate itself.

The cause of the violence, the fragmented (or fractured) sensory experience, and the unpredictable and persistent temporality of trauma and memory in contemporary Greek Cypriot art are invisible but present – they constitute a force which makes its presence known. Suffering from a burden of historical belatedness, Cypriot artists attempt the im-possible in striving to bear witnesses to the loss and suffering experienced not only through a past loss, but rather to something at once more general and more devastating: namely to the loss inscribed in the movement of temporality itself. There is an intense awareness of a traumatic past, but also an expectant openness: a void waiting to be filled by worlds yet to be born, worlds that could be equally doubtful, painful, insecure and uncertain.

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<sup>1</sup> The Green Line "scenery" comprises both an element and a backdrop of daily life, especially for the people living in Nicosia. For Greek Cypriots in particular, the humongous Turkish flag painted on Pentadactylos Mountain, is a regular yet constantly upsetting sight.

<sup>2</sup> The *de facto* geographical and population partition of the island has greatly limited access to Turkish Cypriot artworks for research south of the Green Line, while the few bibliographical overviews of twentieth-century Cypriot art contain practically no worthwhile analysis of works by Turkish Cypriot artists. Inevitably, our research has focused on the work of Greek Cypriot artists, and our analysis concerns the Greek Cypriot experience in general.

<sup>3</sup> The achievement of independence in 1960, following decades of British colonial rule, resulted in a feeling of optimism and the strong desire for modernization (of the hitherto largely agrarian society), especially within the cultural scene, including the visual arts.

<sup>4</sup> Antonis Danos, "Twentieth-Century Greek Cypriot Art: An 'Other' Modernism on the Periphery," *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 32.2 (October 2014), 25.

<sup>5</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Cathy Caruth, ed. and intro. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Shoshana Felman, "The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*," *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, eds. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 224.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 86.

<sup>10</sup> Doris Brothers, *Falling Backwards: An Exploration of Trust and Self-Experience* (New York: Norton, 1995), 56.

<sup>11</sup> Such strategies by Greek Cypriot artists – which constitute their negotiation of trauma as 'response' to the 1974 events – do not seem to differentiate in terms of generational variances.

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Bolt, "Unimaginable Happenings: Material Movements in a Plane of Composition," *Deleuze and Contemporary Art*, ed. Stephen Zepke and Simon O'Sullivan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 266.

<sup>13</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press 1994), 181-2.

<sup>14</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 196.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard compared Auschwitz to an earthquake that destroyed all seismographic devices and therefore cannot be measured and represented within the applicable sign systems, and only leaves powerful yet imprecise traces of its magnitude. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 56. Lyotard contends that if one is to represent the Holocaust as part of history then it becomes just one more atrocity among others in the long history of man's inhumanity to man. In a similar manner to Theodor Adorno, he believes that in order to respect the impossibility of atonement, of coming to terms with horror by representing it, one must write a history that will testify to the 'unrepresentable' horror without representing it. This amounts to the deconstruction of the binary opposition between voice and silence, history and the unhistorical, remembering and forgetting. See Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Arts and Politics* (London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 1991), 62.

<sup>16</sup> Caruth's crucial idea of belatedness draws on two interrelated Freudian concepts: *Nachträglichkeit* ("deferred action", "afterward-ness") and latency. The idea of latency is partly based on PTSD symptomatology.

<sup>17</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations In Memory*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Pictures* (2006), quoted in Bolt, "Unimaginable Happenings: Material Movements in a Plane of Composition," 266.

<sup>19</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logic of Sensation*, trans. D. W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2004), 56.

<sup>20</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, trans. Mary Lydon (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), 237.

<sup>21</sup> Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 71.

<sup>22</sup> Simon O'Sullivan points out that this is, however, not all without its dangers: "Indeed, for Deleuze-Bacon there are two 'wrong' positions as it were, which the middle way of the "figural" must avoid. Figuration [...], but also the *absolute* deterritorialization of the figure (the move to total abstraction). We might call these the twin dangers of moving *too* slow – of remaining within representation – but also of moving too fast and ultimately following a line of abolition. [...] The "figural" involves a not-too-fast but also a not-too-slow deterritorialization of the figure – a rupturing of the latter so as to allow something else to appear, or to be heard 'behind' the figure as it were." "From Stuttering and Stammering to the Diagram: Deleuze, Bacon and Contemporary Art Practice," *Deleuze Studies* 3 (2009), 256.

<sup>23</sup> Simon O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 59.

<sup>24</sup> O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation*, 130.

<sup>25</sup> David Burrows, "An Art Scene as Big as the Ritz: The Logic of the Scenes," *Deleuze and Contemporary Art*, 160.

<sup>26</sup> Ronald Bogue, "Gilles Deleuze: the aesthetic of Force," *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, ed. Paul Patton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 260.

<sup>27</sup> David Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon* (23); quoted in Daniel W. Smith, "Deleuze's Theory of Sensation: Overcoming the Kantian Duality," *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, 44.

<sup>28</sup> From a 1981 article [in Greek], quoted in Antonis Danos, "Tassos Stephanides," *Cypriot Artists: The Second Generation*, vol. 1 (Nicosia: The Marfin Laiki Bank Cultural Centre, 2009), 11.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> Igrid de Kok, "Cracked Heirlooms: Memory on Exhibition," *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, eds. Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 56-71.

<sup>31</sup> For Deleuze, the diagram is the operative set of a-signifying lines, and the rhizome is a network of lines and zones which is not final but suggestive of something, of new relations of forms. When it comes to painting, he argues that the diagram is not sufficient on its own as successful painting: the diagrammatic marks must be utilised in some way to disrupt figuration. In this, Deleuze argues for the diagram in painting as a localization of random traits and events. Burrows, "An Art Scene as Big as the Ritz," 160.

<sup>32</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 4.

<sup>33</sup> See Karen E. Till, *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 108.

<sup>34</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987), 301.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 172. See also Bruno Bettelheim, *Surviving and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), especially, the essay, "Surviving."

<sup>36</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Ernst van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature and Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 36-38.

<sup>38</sup> One of the pitfalls that Antoniou wanted to avoid in creating these works was the fetishization of the subject matter. She wishes to work on an affective level, which does not in any way directly reference those events, but deals with them tangentially and in an indirect reference to the war trauma.

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<sup>39</sup> O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation*, 59.

<sup>40</sup> Stefan Tiron, "Phantom Limbs in a Cart: The Tracings of Klitsa Antoniou," *Klitsa Antoniou: Tracing Homeness, Venice Open 2002* (Nicosia: Ministry of Culture 2002), 9.

<sup>41</sup> Antonis Danos, "Preface: Siting an Exhibition," *Somatópia: Mapping Sites, Siting Bodies* (Nicosia: Ministry of Education and Culture, 2005), 9.

<sup>42</sup> Lars Bang Larsen and Suely Rolnik, "A conversation on Lygia Clark's Structuring the self," *Afterall Magazine* 16 (Autumn/Winter 2007). What is crucial here is the introduction of a term that the Brazilian psychoanalyst and curator Suely Rolnik has loosely identified as the state of "invisible memory:" a state experienced by many Brazilian artists whose creative force was stifled by the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964 – 1985).

<sup>43</sup> Susan J. Brison, "Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self," *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crew, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 38-39; Susan J. Brison, "Outliving Oneself: Trauma, Memory, and Personal Identity," *Feminists Rethink the Self*, ed. Diana Tjetjens Meyers (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997), 25.

<sup>44</sup> Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (London: Vintage Press, 1996), 126.

<sup>45</sup> Cathy Caruth, "Traumatic Departures: Survival and History in Freud," *Trauma and Self*, eds. Charles B. Strozier and Michael Flynn (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996), 34.

<sup>46</sup> Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 18.



## **Dots and Dashes, Crumbs and Ashes: Traces of Trauma's Abstractions**

**Kathleen MacQueen**  
**GCAS Institute of Critical Philosophy**

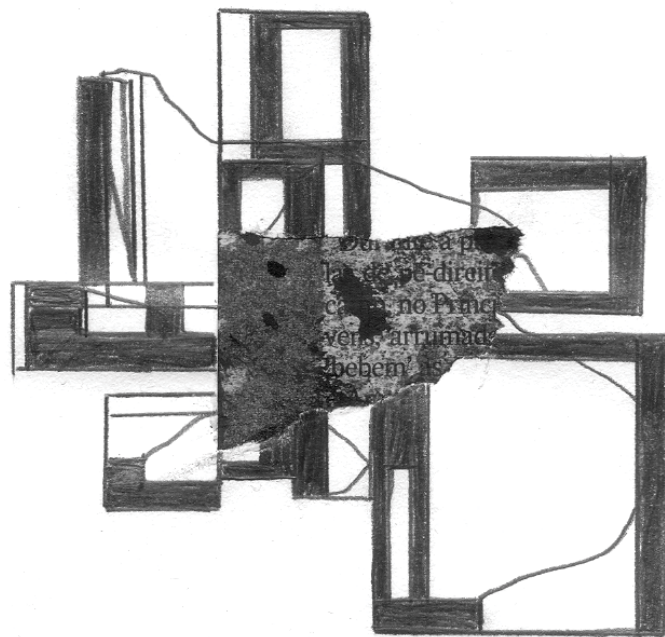
**Liz Park**  
**Curator and Writer**

## INTRODUCTION

After a catastrophe, our surroundings become *unheimlich* and unnavigable. They are no longer ours and yet often we remain there among the ruins in search of a connection. Shadowy images of the past play out their parts in familiar spaces made strange in the works of two artists who are the focus of this text. In her paintings, Gwenessa Lam (b. 1978, Vancouver) references the real, affixing shadows as the remaining afterimage of lives – and also of heritage – lost in transit. Her sight is focused, from a distance, on natural disasters and communal trauma that may have very personal consequences. For María Elena Álvarez (b. 1964, Caracas), however, it is the inverse: her experience is private, triggered by immediate socio-political unrest. She begins, not with memory evoking loss, but instead within the void itself, inhabiting its emptiness. Slowly she draws into it – “deposits” as she says – unrecognizable elements, organizing space in layers. Álvarez creates a refuge within canvas and dry point plates while Lam fills her paintings with ghostly remnants in a state of restless haunting. Co-authored by Kathleen MacQueen and Liz Park in a process of exchange with the artists, this paper offers insight into the distinct ways by which the artists deploy abstraction as a silent resistance to the inscrutable nature of trauma. First as an exploratory unfolding of the messages coded into Álvarez’s work as narrated by MacQueen, then second as a visual analysis and a journey through Lam’s paintings by Park, the text will arrive at a point where the two artists’ works intersect in a meditation of physical and metaphysical space.

## PART I. THE CONSEQUENCE OF WORDS: MARÍA ELENA ÁLVAREZ’S HIDDEN POCKETS OF UNDERSTANDING

In the subdued light of a late afternoon in November, I study a small drawing of about three inches square on a sheet of paper of approximately 7  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 5  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches (15 x 19 cm).<sup>1</sup> Drawn with pencil, some of the lines make use of a straight edge, while others are free form. The drawing abounds in right angles. Lines are doubled and filled in with strokes of graphite, thickening their form, laying emphasis first here, then there. Overall, one senses reflections in a prism; frames split, then merge in an overlapping spatial array of foreground, mid-ground, and background. Loosely drawn connectors highlight this fractured placement, appearing alternately as circuits or cracks. Overlaying the center and seemingly transparent is a torn shred of newspaper (a rare introduction of an element from the material world) – one edge cut clean to line up with a tall vertical frame, the other two edges roughly torn – cutting across and masking the center of the drawing. With dots to the left and letters forming lines to the right, it has the appearance of a flag flapping in the wind. Text is visible only as letters, words themselves illegible aside from the fragment: “no Prin.” In the cold glow of on-coming winter, I read it as “no Prince.”



**Figure 1**

Maria Elena Álvarez, *Untitled*, 2014, mixed media on paper, 15x19cm  
Image courtesy of the artist.

No hero, no authority, no savior. Only a suggestion of space. Perhaps the cracks of ruins. While Gwenessa Lam's work travels from the factual to the void, María Elena Álvarez's begins there, depositing elements into it as lines and layouts, and organizing space into "multi-layered camps of emptiness."<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson might have asked: What kind of image is capable of "serving as a conductor of psychic energy"?<sup>3</sup> The scrap of newspaper is merely detritus of a transitory relevance, both the technology and content quickly obsolete. For Álvarez, it is not so much the subject or the surface of an image that holds traumatic content, but its construction, which resonates from its effect. She speaks of her work as avoiding visual references – though it is difficult to describe art without falling back onto the kind of imagery a reader might grasp in recognition. Giving us hints as a guide not to look "at" an object but to look "through" space across thresholds and into passageways, Álvarez begins with the invisible: "silence, music, [...] the consequence of words and phrases I hear."

Rather than depart from visual references, her work begins – much like resuming a relationship – with "a question, a no/sound time."<sup>4</sup> For Edmond Jabès, the question is the place to pick up again, philosophy's return to the beginning:

Then, the question.

The question means that, for the time of its formulation, we do not belong. We do not belong with belonging; we are unbound within bonds. Detached, in order to become more fully attached and then again detached. It means we forever turn the *inside out*, set it free, revel in its freedom, and die of it.

Cruel calling and recalling into question. Double responsibility.

I am. I become. I write. I write only in order to become. I am only the man [woman?] I become who, in turn, stops being to become the other [s]he has potentially always been. I am all the others I will be. I will not be. They will be me who cannot be.

The question leaves a blank: the page.<sup>5</sup>

This small drawing, *Untitled* (2014), has been sitting on my desk since April when I exchanged a packet of art materials for a packet of prints and drawings through a friend of the artist who was traveling on business. The art was a far greater gift than the supplies I sent to an artist stifled by restrictions in an economically and politically unstable Venezuela. It would serve in lieu of an international exhibition for providing an experience of her work. But various factors inhibited my research and it was only now in November that I unpacked once again the other prints only to discover an additional packet of writing hidden in what I had assumed was the protective padding of the wrapper. Written in graphite, 41 small sheets of paper were taped together into a hidden pocket of understanding that I now unfolded slowly in order to listen to her tale, for I almost *heard* her voice reaching out to assuage a separation of time, place, and experience.

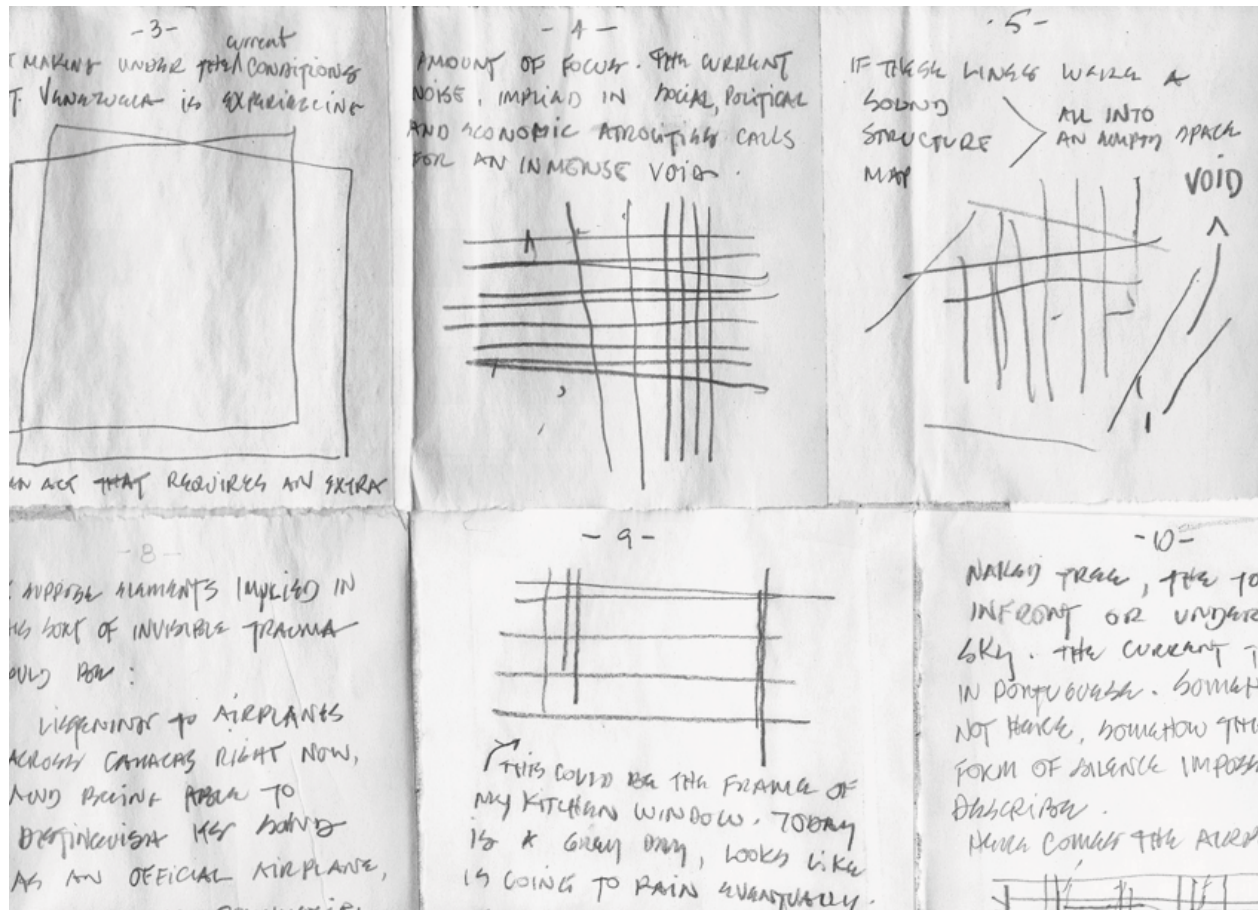
If these lines were a sound / structure / map > all into an empty space \_VOID\_ what would be the resurging trauma of living in a country divided in 2, 3, 4 layers of minds convinced of 4 different realities—what would be the trauma of being and trying to open [oneself] to listening to 2 or 3 arguments of each part?

I suppose elements implied in this sort of invisible trauma could be: listening to airplanes across Caracas right now, and being able to distinguish 147 Boeing [jet] as an official airplane and not a commercial small plane.<sup>6</sup>

A few months earlier, we resumed a conversation interrupted by the course of events, both political and personal, for more than a decade; when the Skype image appeared on my screen, I told María Elena that the view out her window resembled the structure of her recent paintings.<sup>7</sup> Later, she wrote next to a small drawing on the pages she sent to me:

This could be the frame of my kitchen window. Today is a grey day, looks like [it's] going to rain eventually. I am listening to the soundtrack of Wim Wender's *Pina*. I see through the window a naked tree, the top of it in

front or under a white sky. The current track is in Portuguese. Somehow I'm not here, somehow this is a form of silence impossible to describe.  
Here comes the airplane again.



**Figure 2**

Maria Elena Álvarez, pages from correspondence with the author, Kathleen MacQueen, April 2014  
Image courtesy of the artist and the author.

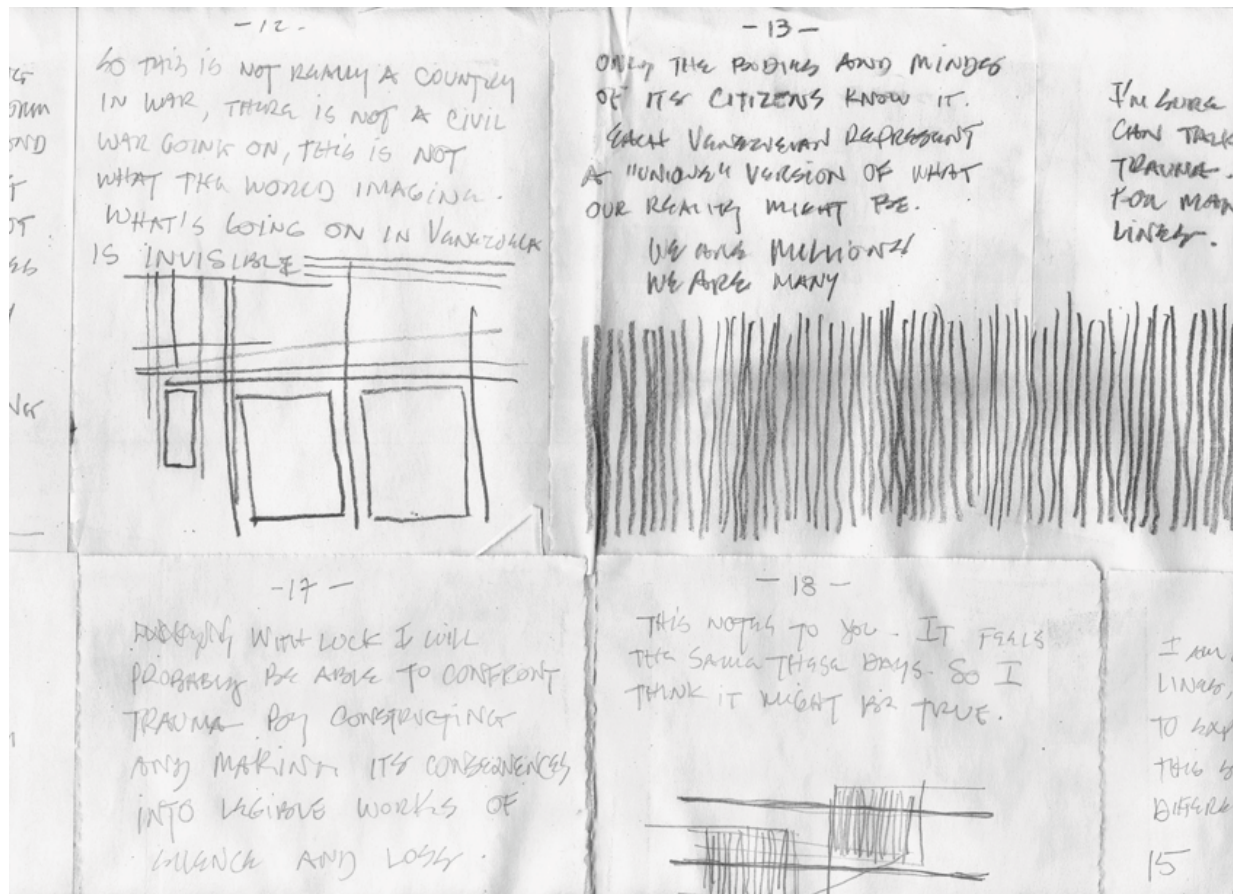
She reveals an experience of drift – slipping in and out of awareness of her environment – movement to an imaginative space empty of the touchstones of perception: sight, sound, touch, or taste. Moments lost, then reconnected through attention to detail. Each set of text lines is accompanied by drawn lines revealing the manner by which she uses line as a stabilizing structure to translate to paper her determined obstinacy in the face of instability. Here she has drawn many vertical lines across several sheets.

Each Venezuelan represents a “unique” version of what our reality might be. We are millions. We are many. I’m sure plenty of them can talk about their trauma. I’m waiting for many lines, more lines. As the lines come, I guess by the end of all this situation / invisible / ungraspable I’m going to have a whole body of work [...] that is coming out of silence and emptiness.

Lines then, for Álvarez, are the lowest common denominator; like writing, if left with nothing, there is *a blank, the page*. If silenced by fear and the threat of reprisal, she will build a language out of the most basic glyph that exists: the line. On the emptiness of a page – double for the body – the lines represent the losses entering the body, or, perhaps, not the losses themselves,



but the structure necessary to sustain them. It is interesting that losses enter rather than leave – absence as presence – inarticulate remnants within a body that bears (witness to) them.



**Figure 3**

Maria Elena Álvarez, pages from correspondence with the author, Kathleen MacQueen, April 2014

Image courtesy of the artist and the author.

As a child, I collected things in my pinafore's pockets so that, before washing, my mother would carefully empty them of stones, sticks, miniature toys, and the remains of a dinner I did not like, or did not have the courage, to eat. I would save all this for later, secreted away, whether as treasures or shame I could not say. Repression is a secreting away for tomorrow the kinds of experiences one cannot speak or even comprehend when they first occur. Without language there is no understanding. Without narrative, can an experience or a human being claim to exist (the proverbial tree in the forest)? How many threats have silenced narratives that try so desperately to escape their confines? Whose circumstances deserve the community's or the world's attention? What warrants circumspection as trauma? What renders sufferers visible?

Trauma is usually considered physical or psychological damage caused by an event that overwhelms the individual or a collective set of people. Trauma can be personal or historical, singular or repetitive, physical or psychological or any complex combination of these various frames. According to Freud, psychological trauma can result from fear of or loss of the loved one, fear of or bodily harm, and fear of annihilation. Situational trauma is easily traced to specific historical events (plane crash, genocide, catastrophe) but childhood trauma remains elusive since evidence (of a wide range of potential abuses) is often belated in the form of neurotic symptoms. Significantly, trauma is

defined by failure: the failure to respond adequately to an unknown and unforeseen situation and its consequent long-lasting impact. As Jean Laplanche synthesized Freud's view: Trauma is "an event in the subject's life, defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization."<sup>8</sup> The psyche being, by definition, hidden from direct knowledge, but revealed indirectly through symptoms and fears, dreams and desires.

The unfolding of Álvarez's missive is an unfolding of experiences secreted away. Pages alternate between the density of writing and the opacity of erasure. Yet they also ask to be held up to the window so that they too can become a transparent passage to the world at large, both an entrance and exit, open for exchange.

This situation [in my country] represents a huge [dis]respect to any human soul. As I write this, I know there are out there many arms open, in claims, in prayers, in self-defense, ready to clap, ready to hug, ready to throw back a stone or a bomb. This is true, so is the small bird that just landed through the kitchen window and is eating a few crumbs of bread from the floor.

There's food for birds in my kitchen.

There's freedom in my kitchen.

The artist also sent a photograph of endless drawings of chairs, which she erased and painted over in acrylic. Before obscuring the image, however, she framed each with four quick lines, marking its centrality, holding together the picture that is not a picture. *This is not a chair. This is no longer a picture of a chair. This is an act of erasure. The seat is gone. Place has disappeared. There is no/place.* Ironically, the etymological root of the word *utopia* is "not" or "no" and "place" – a place that doesn't exist – a place of the imagination or of speculation. Its English homophone *eutopia* comes from the Greek roots for "good" and "place," giving rise to euphoric notions of ideal communities. Each is the opposite of the other; each complicates the desire for something good to come of nothing, forging potential even when hope is silent.

In writing that she is "waiting for many lines, more lines," the artist simultaneously expresses the fear of crisis spreading ever wider and deeper among Venezuelans, but also the furtive hope of collectively facing the circumstances that have precipitated such instability. Although Venezuela avoided the state terrorism and violence of the 1970s and 80s that infiltrated much of Central and South America, its dependency on a volatile oil economy has led to massive government corruption both before and subsequent to the leftist social movement of Hugo Chavez. Since Chavez's death in 2013, an economic collapse due to falling oil prices has triggered two years of public demonstrations over government corruption, criminal violence, inflation, and chronic shortages of basic food and household supplies. Though its middle class is hardly affluent (per capita GDP is 1/3 that of the US) and the nation is 95% literate, there is an enormous class division between the middle class and the working poor who make up more than 50% of the population, while the small percentage of wealthy elite back the opposition leaders. Still far from witnessing the same degree of mass violence as Mexico, Venezuela is thought to be one of the most violent countries in the world with a rate of one murder every 21 minutes.<sup>9</sup> This conflict, uncertainty, and fear are the context, though not the content, of Álvarez's work.



**Figure 4**  
Maria Elena Álvarez, *Chairs*  
(work in progress), 2014,  
mixed media on paper  
Image courtesy of the artist.

Instead of documentation, the artist devises an abstraction comprised of layered meanings that is inclusive of its own silent repression and expressive of a will to continue. On the one hand, without the referent it cannot *speak* in the literal sense of the term. On the other hand, as an action of vertical lines (the human axis) on a horizontal playing field (the earth's surface), these works represent a faith in human resolve and a reliance on the communicability of intimacy: *There's freedom in my kitchen*. A secular sacrality. The erased chair, however, from an art historical point of view, can

also be considered an ironic dismissal of Joseph Kosuth's circular system of signs, *One and Three Chairs* (1965), which equalizes the relation between the object, its representation, and its definition. Within the experience and the consequences of trauma, the signified (as meaning) is troubled territory and any reference to the signifier (as archetype) becomes suspect. The individual who suffers trauma often has difficulty distinguishing between very real fears of reprisal and paranoid interpretations of events and environment. While others often assume the sufferer portrays the pathological obsession of a diseased mind, the individual is likely exhibiting the acute anxiety that has become a tool of self-preservation.<sup>10</sup> There are few safety zones in the experience of trauma's repetitions.

Indeed, the complexity in working through trauma is its inherent feature of *latency* and displacement. As Cathy Caruth points out in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), an originary trauma "is not experienced as it occurs, [but] is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time."<sup>11</sup> The "evidence" of trauma is inadequately represented by the dislocated repetition of traumatic occurrences (external to the individual) or neurotic symptoms (internal to the individual) that never fully duplicate the trauma itself, thereby indefinitely postponing insight and resolution. Those who suffer often seek a utopian reconciliation within memory of a time when their life was once whole – an idealized centering – that cannot take place...that has *no/place*. If not a void, what they experience is often a fractured or fragmented condition that is perpetually undetermined and unsettling.

We cannot resolve what we cannot know and so it becomes necessary to make a claim for uncertainty. For Jabès, the unknowable is sacred:

Here is distress, the despair of love within love, infinite pain within pain, delirium blazing within delirium. Here is passivity rent in its deep sovereignty. Here, like a bottomless cliff, like the dark of all nights.

How far does our responsibility go? The void is forged by our hands.<sup>12</sup>

Individual responsibility is the task of a broader engagement; Jabès's faith is countered by Dominique La Capra's caution. As a historian, he describes the responsibility of representing trauma by warning of the complexity of engagement:

One's relation to every other – instead of involving a tense, at times paradoxical, interaction of proximity and distance, solidarity and criticism, trust and wariness—may be figured on the model of one's anxiety-ridden 'relation without relation' to a radically transcendent (now perhaps recognized as absent) divinity who is totally other.<sup>13</sup>

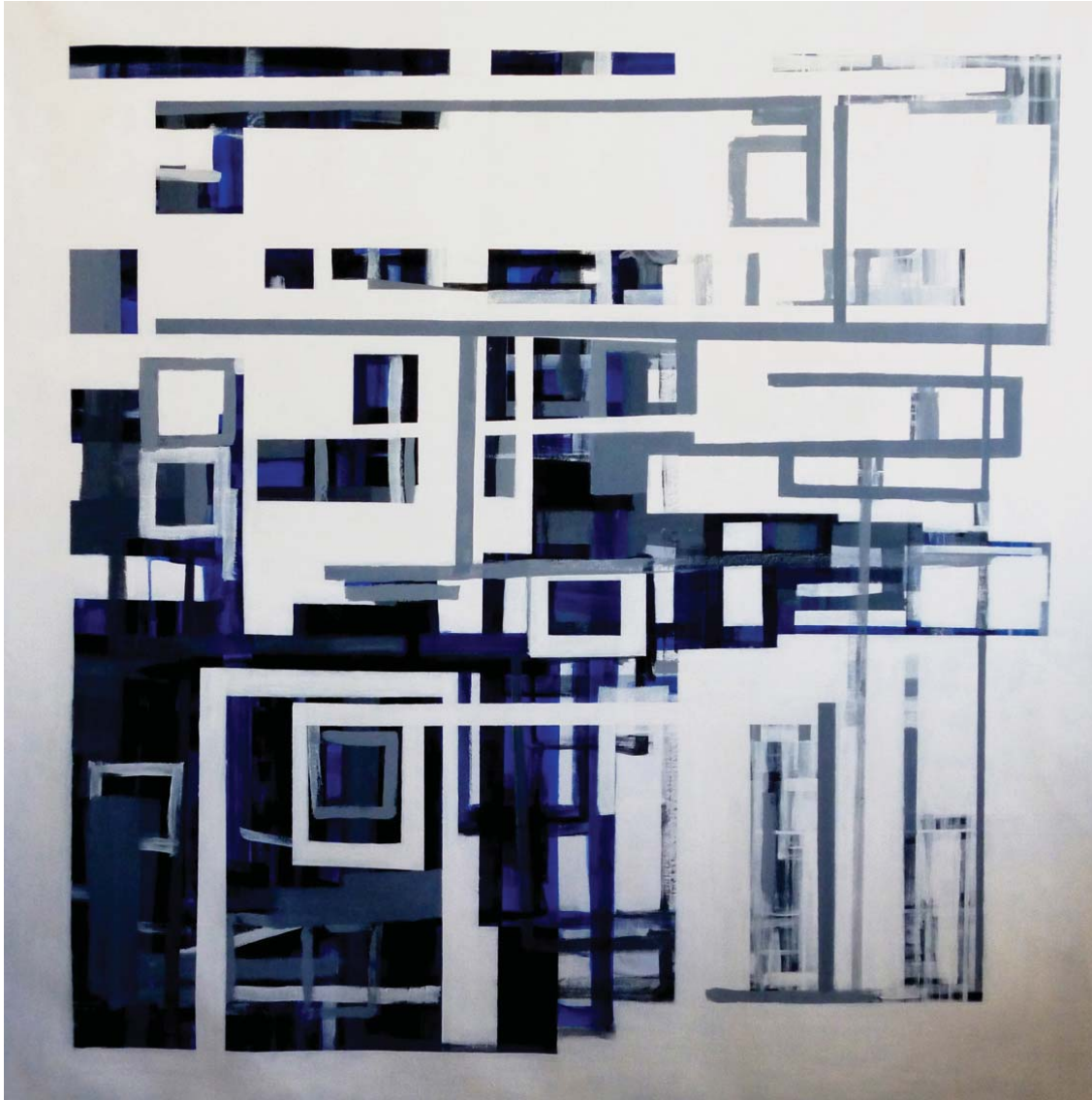
For divinity, we might substitute "mentor," "hero," "authority figure," or "utopian ideal." When caught in the experiential abyss of trauma, our relation to others suffers to the same extent as our relation to our own past self: a '*relation without relation*' recognized as *absent*. No Prince. Disconnected from the past, in a perpetual *unbelonging* – existence holds the persistence of exile. And while Jabès reconciles loss with fullness as evidence of the divine, for others trauma descends upon them like the ruins of catastrophe. Those who can, rebuild.

In *Reconstrucción* from 2014, Álvarez uses the coloration of the sky as it appears on gray, overcast days, from piercing blue reflections on the sea to the white light of hot midday, all the way into the deepest impenetrability of a night in childhood far from the ubiquitous glow of today's urban sprawl. The blank canvas remains in evidence across the top and down the right third, even into the center of the square space while density is built up in scattered quadrants, particularly in the lower left corner where layers hold the square in a cool but thick blanket of control. We could be looking at the floor plan of architectural blueprints, layers of construction crowding the urban



landscape, but also, and always, windows, passageways, and doors. The space is penetrable. A bird enters the window in order to clean the floor of crumbs, removing the traces of the daily ritual of breaking bread, its trajectory an invisible pattern across the floor.

Hanging in my small, New York City studio is an early photograph by the artist of a New England ice cream parlor whose façade is entirely veiled by curtains waving in a light breeze. Produced in 1999 when her practice was largely photographic, it is prescient to the permeability of



**Figure 5**

Maria Elena Alvarez, *Reconstrucción*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 150x150cm

Image courtesy of the artist.

boundaries and the passage across internal psychological and external physical realms that would later dominate her work. In late 2000, when living in Brooklyn, she built a fabric house that hung from the ceiling – its walls transparent scrim. She lived in it for two months and then exhibited it at the Latin Collector in New York City in 2001.<sup>14</sup> In the meantime, she had returned to Caracas where she built another (fabric) house within a house. She lived in this one for a year. The room eventually

became her studio but had originally been her parents' bedroom – a room of procreation. A space of creativity and reconstruction.

As an artist, Álvarez began by floating from one medium to the next, making use of visual languages according to the conditions of communicability. But representation, in a figurative sense, gradually folded into abstraction. This coincided not only with a return home but the protective layering of a home within a home. A home built on and from vulnerability. A zone of play and secrecy descendent from (descendant of) the make-believe of childhood. How does one emerge from hiding? One cultivates the internal resilience necessary to maintain an open and permeable relation to the outside world. These are the makings of an *inner architecture*, a guiding structure of internal resolve – interstitial – occupying the spaces in between belonging and *unbelonging*; a turning of the *inside out*, internalizing the structural strength of building, externalizing memory.

What consequence of words augurs the silence of abstraction? Álvarez's trauma is personal rather than historical, her symptoms neurotic related to the home and subject formation, but how absolute are these distinctions of severity or significance? The public trauma of September 11<sup>th</sup> triggered for some the resurgence of long repressed personal traumas. The untenable economic and political crisis in Venezuela renders precarious all layers of existence from the day-to-day to aspirations for the future.<sup>15</sup> Through the disappointment of ideals vanquished, heroes degraded, and expectations crushed, there remains the visibility – indeed, the viability – of lines: *arms open, in claims, in prayers, in self-defense*.<sup>16</sup> Lines, words, and the vision of a bird entering the home in a secular scene of annunciation. These are the saving graces of creativity: a means to explore the complexity of – indeed the proximity between – *acting out* and *working through* trauma.<sup>17</sup> La Capra's "interaction of proximity and distance, solidarity and criticism, trust and wariness" is reminiscent of D.W. Winnicott's assessment of the seemingly contradictory nature of the mature being:

The Truly responsible people of the world [are] those who accept the fact of their own hate, nastiness, cruelty, things which co-exist with their capacity to love and to construct.<sup>18</sup>

To *accept* but also to take responsibility for... In holding a nation accountable for this same transparency, Álvarez claims the imaginative space of reconstruction. In 2013, she offered a painting to her brother who is an architect from which he was to devise a house. They called the project *Casa Relato* (*Story House*). If we understand this as the viability of psychic experience, then we might see



**Figure 6**

Maria Elena Álvarez, *Untitled (Ice Cream Parlor)*, 1999, gelatin silver print framed

Photo by Kathleen MacQueen, courtesy of the artist.

*Reconstrucción* as a proposal for the rebuilding of a nation. Together they represent the inside and outside of experience. This for Jabès is the other side of the question: *It means we forever turn the inside out, set it free, revel in its freedom, and die of it.* We also discover the resolve not to make things right, or even whole, but to fashion an open window out of a wall of silence.<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 7**

Maria Elena Álvarez and Lorenzo Álvarez, *Casa Relato*, 2013

Photo by Carolina Toro, courtesy of the artists

## **PART II. IN AND OUT OF HISTORY HOUSE: GWENESSA LAM'S LOOKING DEVICES**

The Álvarez siblings referred to their project as *Story House* and sought an imaginative space of reconstruction within it. Another pair of siblings, fraternal twins Rahel and Esthappen, in fictionalized post-Independence India in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), had a project of their own at a place they called *History House*. The two additional letters change entirely the significance of what the house could hold for them in its deep recesses and small crevices. For the twins, *History House* was a chosen place of refuge, the place they promised to meet after taking flight from their home. But the forces of history that haunt the abandoned house, which had at one point been occupied by an Englishman who supposedly went mad and became “native,” as though in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, eventually swallowed them whole. In *History House*, they were forced to witness history's cruel vindication – state-sanctioned police violence on society's weakest.

Prior to the twins' flight, there was a poetic moment of confusion in the story when their uncle, not knowing the twins' escape plan, spoke metaphorically of *History House*, the imagined space that has already determined each one of their places within and without it. The English

colonialists, the upper-caste Anglophile Indians, and the unspoken but certainly implied presence of Untouchables.

But we can't go in... because we've been locked out. And when we look in through the windows, all we see are shadows. And when we try and listen, all we hear is a whispering. And we cannot understand the whispering because our minds have been invaded by a war. A war that we have won and lost... A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them.<sup>20</sup>

A war that they won, through independence of India in 1947, but also lost – lost in that they dream re-captured dreams. Roy spins a tale of colonial violence and trauma in this oneiric state to address specifically the deeply entrenched problems of the caste system – Love Laws, as she calls them, that define who can love whom, who can touch whom. In the novel, the loss of the loved one is real. The twins and their mother must face the murder of a man they loved, an Untouchable house-servant, bright-eyed and clear-headed communist, for the precise reason that they loved him too much. The promise of communism, an imported ideal, is broken, as the state punitive and justice system previously buttressed by the colonial administration acts only to reinforce the existent social hierarchy. The trauma is personal but it is also part of a larger historical narrative that gets re-lived and re-narrated through multiple generations. The characters struggle in the places they are assigned by history, and in their struggle, end up burrowing themselves deep within.

Psychologically charged spaces of interiority, as well as history of colonial violence and its ruinous remnants, are often the subject of artist Gwenessa Lam's work. In place of Roy's artistry in story-telling, Lam paints spaces that evoke ungraspable and indescribable angst, spaces that appear hermetically sealed and give the viewers the illusion of being locked within them. Her earliest series of paintings *Windows* marks the beginning of a decade-long art practice through which she explores intensely inward and meditative state of mind but with a look at an unknown horizon faraway. The paintings that comprise the series *Windows* depict just that: front and center on the canvas, the window is painted lavishly in oil as though it is a camera's aperture in an otherwise completely dark chamber. While the window is a recurring motif in art history that signals the world beyond, Lam's windows decidedly reveal nothing. It is an opening through which to look out onto something unknown, a pure bank of light.

Lam's rendering of the windows is realistic, unlike the suggestive but firmly drawn lines that evoke thresholds in Álvarez's



**Figure 8**  
Gwenessa Lam, *Window no. 9*, 2009, oil on canvas,  
54x36in, 137x91cm  
Image courtesy of the artist.



drawings and paintings. They are so tightly rendered and sharply in focus that they instead draw our eyes to the luscious black of the room. Whereas Álvarez directs our attention to the overall structure created by the intersecting lines, Lam's canvas leaves us with two options – either stare out the window and wonder what exists outside, or indulge in the darkness of the room. In this way, Lam paints a looking device, a camera obscura, a dark chamber through which the world outside is abstracted into a reductive sampling of the visible.

Through pockets of words, Álvarez elaborates her process of visualization and reconstruction. Lam does not offer us such words, so we follow the trajectory of the works that came after *Windows* to glean clues that tell us what she has been looking at through the painted aperture. Lam's chambers are like the box with a hole that the pilot draws in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's novel *The Little Prince*. The reader will never fully know the perfect sheep the Little Prince demanded the pilot to draw. Instead, we have a small window into a field and an idea of what it is that the Little Prince sought. We never see the shape and the details of the sheep, but we go along with the prince on his journey. So we follow Lam to her next series, *Shadows*.

In an inverse of the dark chambers of *Windows*, this series is comprised of white canvases disturbed only by gray shadows of chairs. The chairs themselves are not visible, and their shadows

remain as ghostly apparitions. It is as though the intense light that is casting the shadows has burnt away the objects themselves. *What violence was done to obliterate the material form of the objects? Did the light burn away the chair itself in the process of casting the long shadow? Upon entering this space, will I, as a viewer/participant be subject to the same violence? There are only shadowy traces in the quiet of the room, and no firm grasp on that destructive force haunting the space that Lam has created.*<sup>21</sup> Uncertain of how one can enter and leave, this room – like History House – is filled with a vague sense of threat.

In between the blinding light of *Shadows* and the total darkness of *Windows*, there's an acknowledgement of both creative and destructive forces at play. This inverse relationship to light and darkness is stretched to an atomic proportion in *Flash Burn*, a series of painted white silhouettes representing historic Chinese vases. We know that the silhouettes are Qing, Ming, and Song dynasty vases only because the title of individual paintings denotes the subject matter. What we see on the canvas are museum alcoves, a holding place reserved for an object taken from another culture, through conquest and pillage. They are artifacts held captive, stored far away in time and place, whispering their inaudible tales as though in a dream. But rather than represent these objects as admirable



**Figure 9**  
Gwenessa Lam, *Chair Shadow no. 2*, 2010, oil on canvas,  
30x20in, 76x51cm  
Image courtesy of the artist.

examples of cultures of the temporal and geographic other, Lam offers us a white impression of their former whole. It is as though they are eradicated by a bomb so powerful that in a flash they have become mere outlines in the alcoves. In this way, the hazy white marks are like the shadows of absent chairs in Lam's previous series. We are left wondering about the violent force that eliminated the vases, and the chairs. But here, we begin to have more specific references and clues: the term flash burn is used to describe the effects of atomic bombs, and Qing, Ming, and Song dynasties give



**Figure 10**

Gwenessa Lam, *Flash Burn* series, 2012, installation view, oil on canvas

Image courtesy of the artist.

us geographic and temporal coordinates. Thus, the violence of the world outside of the window begins to take rough shape.

*Windows, passageways, and doors. The space is penetrable.* What is said of Álvarez's work can also be said of Lam's, except that in Lam's case, we see the disintegrated material remnants of the cultural other. Whereas Álvarez's passageways lead us to a Venezuelan sky disrupted by the sounds of jets and protesters, Lam's windows lead us out onto a winding path from a light filled room, to museum alcoves, to architectural ruins of *diaolou* in Guongdong, China in a series titled *Mongrel Histories*. Built mostly in the first few decades of the nineteenth century by Chinese emigrants who returned or sent money home from working as coolies in North America, *diaolou* buildings were hybrids that combined elements of western architecture (such as minarets and Greek columns) with more vernacular ones, such as pagodas. They dotted the Guongdong region like watchtowers at a time when banditry was rampant. Mostly abandoned now in post-Cultural Revolution Communist China, these buildings stand as bearers of different family history, and local lore, often weaving in stories of war, robbery, and other violent intrusions against which the *diaolou* were supposed to stand en guard.<sup>22</sup>

**Figure 11**

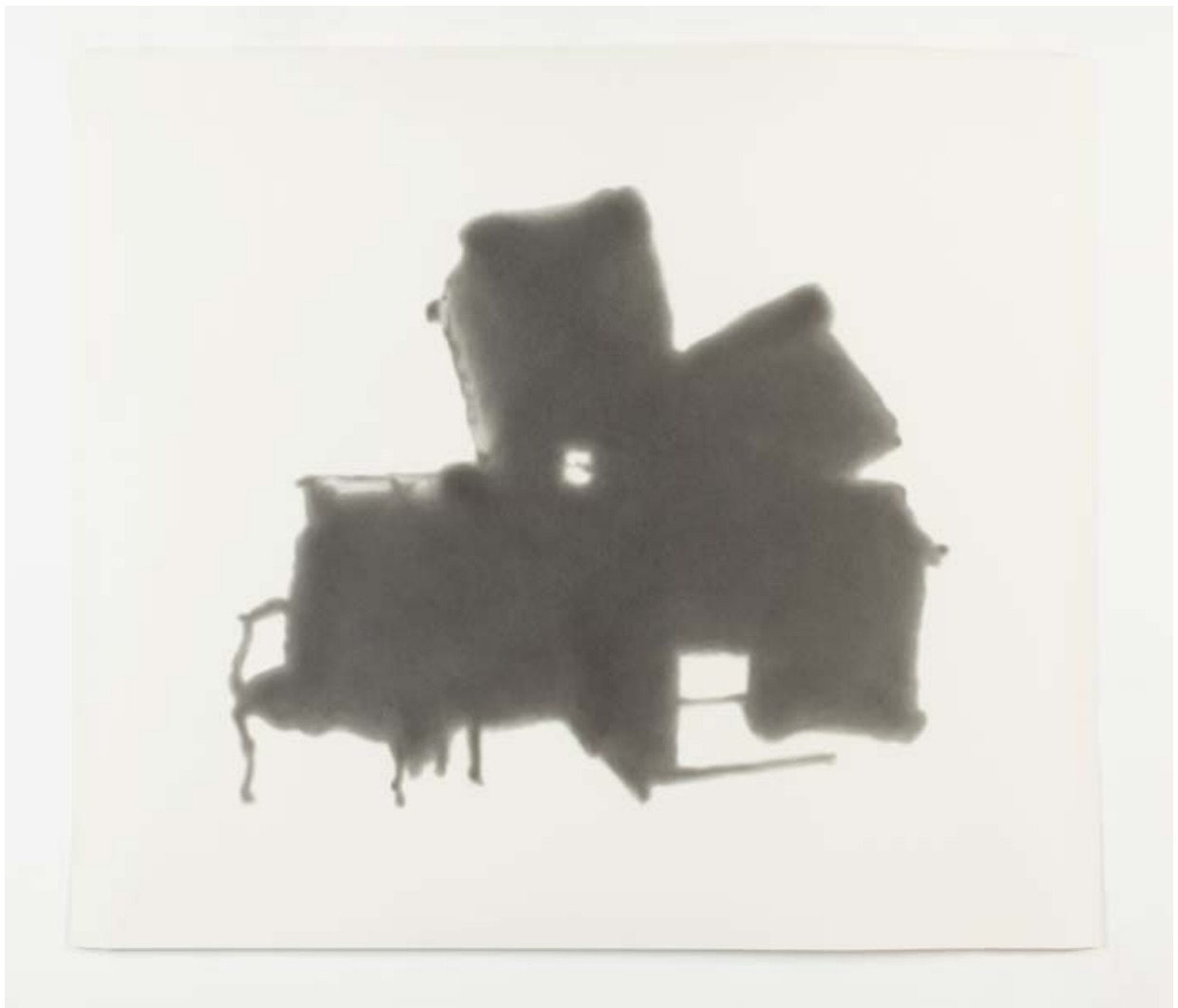
Gwenessa Lam, *Falling Tower*,  
2013, graphite on paper, 37  
3/4x27 1/2in, 96x70cm  
Image courtesy of the artist.

Lam's diaolous are rendered in fragments – tops toppling over, towers invaded by a dust cloud, domed minarets coupled together upside down and right side up. They float in an empty space and their fragmentation signifies almost a century of time that did damage to these buildings. There is a sense of placelessness to Lam's diaolou. Originally, a diaolou was a hope-filled space, an idealized home for generations, constructed with the hard earned cash of Chinese coolies. It is utopian both in its intention and in its function as an island of refuge in a landscape riddled with violence.

*Within the experience and the consequences of trauma, the signified (as meaning) is troubled territory and any reference to the signifier (as archetype) becomes suspect.* The signifiers in diaolou are jumbled to begin with. Architectural vocabulary of various origins is used helter-skelter to create a mongrel no-place space.

Developed concurrently with the series *Mongrel Histories* is yet another body of work in which Lam charts an *unheimlich* space filled with various shadowy shapes – suspect signifiers.

In a series titled *Landfall*, she depicts the shadows of ordinary objects that she culled from various news images of destroyed homes and buildings. Closely cropped, the objects float in an empty space. Her titles indicate that these objects are survivors, however mangled and mutated, of various man-made and natural disasters: *Blockade (Alexandria, Egypt)*; *Chairs (Syrian Embassy, Cairo)*; and *Mound (Katrina)*. A tipping sofa, a twisted bedframe, what was once a fence or a railing splayed out like the rib cage of a rotting carcass on a field. The details are unnecessary as Lam presents mere outlines of shadows traced with much finesse onto the white ground. As though in Plato's cave, the objects beg identification through the shadows they cast.



**Figure 12**

Gwenessa Lam, *Blockade (Alexandria, Egypt)*, 2013, graphite on paper, 36x42in, 91x107cm  
Image courtesy of the artist.



They are still life paintings in the truest sense of the term. Nature-morte, stilled life. Absent from the paintings are the whirlwind of activities associated with such detritus – a violent storm or a heated political riot. Taken from the frozen moment captured in a photograph, the subject is extracted from its environment and distilled down to its singular object status. They become abstracted in form and are painted using graphite powder, applied directly on either paper or dry wall, as was the case with *Mongrel Histories*. The fussy, loose, and hard-to-control graphite powder that has to be patted down repeatedly to create various densities of black also adds to the resonant strength of the silence and the stillness of the images. Holding our breath, the closer we get to the paintings, the more we see of the million fine grains that sit still to form these images in front of our eyes: various precarious arrangements of furniture somehow held together in tension, but perpetually on the verge of collapse. Unlike Alvarez's resolute lines that ground her and her practice in the politically turbulent Venezuela, Lam finds another way to navigate the violence of the world that she encounters second-hand, mediated by a screen – a television, a computer, a hand-held device. She recognizes that there is a great distance between her as the creator of the image and the subject of her paintings, ever so out of immediate grasp.

Perhaps that is why Lam depicts fleeting shadows of these destroyed objects in the moment of their fall – stretched and angled, rotated and transformed in their shape. She creates an empty volume; what is inside is filled by us, the viewers who pore through the darkness. The paintings are visually compelling in their sheer emptiness. Whether it be on canvas, paper, or on the wall, she represents the abstracted trace of the still life that she meditates on, and in turn, invites others to meditate. In the process of selecting and distilling the images of violence and tragedy from daily news, she slows down her image-consumption, and gives them due time for reflection as she laboriously paints with graphite powder. She extends the encounter with images that would normally flash up on television and computers screens for seconds, with information that demands equally quick absorption. Bombing in Syria. Hurricane in New Orleans. The news channels offer a miserly allowance of time devoted to understanding the political circumstances of any given tragedy.

In a post 9/11 image world, the question of how we deal with other people's trauma and the events we experience second-hand takes on an urgency to which Lam responds. Her painted shadows beg identification, and their corresponding objects bring up questions about their user. Who sat on this chair? Who laid on the bed? Who lived in the house? Short of taking on an anthropomorphic resonance, the objects that the shadows index allude to the bodies that once used and cared for them, and in their destroyed state, bear the mark of violence that tore through their living space. Lam's paintings are personal responses to catastrophic events in the context of a larger, shared, cultural condition of violence. As is often the case with the most traumatic of events, the abyssal incongruity between the event and its representation must be acknowledged. It is here that we can give shape, volume, and words to the trauma (the fear of or actual loss), the full impact of which is often belated and has the effect of haunting.

For Jacques Derrida, writing in *Memoirs of the Blind*, he likens drawing to a story of memory. Using the multiple meanings of the French word '*trait*' deftly, going from a "trace" to a "line" to a "trait." He writes:

Even if drawing is ... reproductive, figurative, representative,... the trait must proceed in the night. It escapes the field of vision. Not only because it is not yet visible, but because it does not belong to the realm of the spectacle, of spectacular objectivity.<sup>23</sup>



**Figure 13**

Gwenessa Lam, *Jianming Tower (Study)*, 2014, graphite on paper, 31x45in, 79x114cm  
Image courtesy of the artist.

For the French deconstructionist, the term spectacle is effective in retaining its ghostly root. According to Derrida, spectral image, the image that haunts the draft person's memory, forms the base of the tracing. This is certainly the case for Lam, who embraces the haunting as she spends hours turning the seared memory into a visual depiction. Left unsaid in Derrida's statement, however, is that this memory itself undergoes changes. It is vulnerable and mutable, particularly in extraordinary circumstances such as in times of disasters and in the fading memories of once inhabited spaces like the diaolou in Guongdong.

Derrida then adds, "The heterogeneity between the thing drawn and the drawing trait remain abyssal... The night of this abyss can be interpreted in two ways, either as the eve or the memory of the day, that is, as a reserve of visibility... or else as radically and definitively foreign to the phenomenality of the day. This heterogeneity of the invisible to the visible can haunt the visible at its very possibility."<sup>24</sup> This rumination on the relationship between the ghostly image in one's mind and the actual image rendered on paper provides useful access points to reading Lam's work.

Lam is an avid looker, interested in the process of looking itself. Rather than engage in the immediate commerce of instantaneous image circulation in our hyper-visual twenty-first century, she wants to look at things askew rather than squarely. Her approach resonates with the sidelong glance described in Socrates's *Phaedo*, in which he writes:



**Figure 14**  
 Gwenessa Lam, *Cluster no. 6 (Shaoxian)*, 2014, graphite on paper, 24x18in, 61x46cm  
 Image courtesy of the artist.

...since I had given up investigating the things that are, I decided that I must be careful not to suffer the misfortune that happens to people who look at the sun and watch it during an eclipse. For some of them ruin their eyes unless they look at its image in water or something of the sort. I thought of that danger, and I was afraid my soul would be blinded if I looked at things with my eyes and tried to grasp them with any of my senses. So I thought I must have recourse to *logoi* and examine in them the truth of the things that are.<sup>25</sup>

The sidelong glance described above moves us from the question of how we visualize that which is difficult to see to its counter-question, how do we see that which is difficult to visualize, and from which we want to avert our gaze? We may see these images of tragedy to the point of intoxication. Yet, there must be an acknowledgement that we do not have equal access to the experience of these

tragedies. We must look at the reflections, and reflect on the reflections. It is like standing at a place assigned to us by history. Only some of us can enter History House.

### PART III. LINES AND DOTS: FOR WHEN TRAUMA RETURNS

Today there is a general tendency to redefine experience, individual and historical, in terms of trauma: a *lingua trauma* is spoken in popular culture, academic discourse, and art and literary world. Many contemporary novelists... conceive experience in this paradoxical modality: experience that is *not* experienced, at least not punctually, that comes too early or too late, that must be acted out compulsively or reconstructed after the fact, almost analytically.<sup>26</sup>

So writes art historian Hal Foster in "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," in which he suggests "the real, repressed in poststructuralist postmodernism, had returned as traumatic."<sup>27</sup> The return of the repressed real as trauma places the postmodern subject in a paradoxical position: "the subject is evacuated and elevated at once"<sup>28</sup> – La Capra's *radically transcendent other*. Both emptied out, and upheld, present and absent. It is a sort of spectrality, one that lingers in the haunting spaces created by cultural producers today – those distant from but connected to trauma and those living through it. But Hal Foster's fin-de-siècle "despair about the persistent AIDS crisis, invasive disease and death, systemic poverty and crime, a destroyed welfare state, indeed a broken social contract,"<sup>29</sup> while not absolved, has given way to a post-9/11 emphasis on the erasure of place, the dislocation and eradication of entire populations and obliterated civilizations. The subject lost to the scorched earth, left homeless and adrift. The body a mere inference on the page.

This is the no/place of Lam's diolou and museum alcoves and Álvarez's passageways. More precisely, Lam's subject matter is the destruction of the materials that once occupied the spaces she visualizes – vanished chairs, atomized vases, collapsing buildings. Through this implied destruction, she metaphorically creates clearings in troubled territory, where she re-imbues suspect signifiers with a possibility of reconstruction. Lam makes sense of the chaos of destruction by attempting to fix the fleeting forms of shadows using fine grains of graphite powder. She makes use of the same elemental material, carbon that is found on scorched earth, in sites of trauma. Álvarez, on the other hand, finds clearings for the purpose of reconstruction. She draws vertical lines intersecting the horizon as though they were surveyor stakes driven into the ground, charting an empty lot. Or perhaps they are the scaffolding that creates and embraces an empty volume that gradually gets filled in. *Lines as the lowest common denominator; like writing, if left with nothing, there is a blank, the page... On the emptiness of a page – double for the body – the lines representative of the losses entering the body, or, perhaps, not the losses themselves, but the structure necessary to sustain them.* Also, dots stand in for the ashes on the ground, ready to be scattered by an intentional gust, so that they make room for the lines.

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<sup>1</sup> The first person pronoun refers to the author, Kathleen MacQueen, who knew the artist in the 1990s and has resumed contact after loosing contact with her for about fifteen years.

<sup>2</sup> María Elena Álvarez, email correspondence with the author, Kathleen MacQueen, January 10, 2014. I am indebted to this correspondence for stimulating my thoughts on abstraction.

<sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 105, quoted in Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 144. Jameson, in reference to the products of post-industrial capitalism, suggests that “their plastic content is totally incapable of serving as a conductor of psychic energy.”

<sup>4</sup> María Elena Álvarez, email correspondence with the author, March 31, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Margins*, trans. Rosemarie Waldrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 165.

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the block quotes are from the artist’s letter drawing of April 3, 2014. I have corrected spelling and occasionally added a word in brackets for clarification.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Bélgica Rodríguez, “María Elena Álvarez: Galería 39” in *ArtNexus* 92 (March-May 2014), 77.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1967), 465-9.

<sup>9</sup> For information on Venezuela’s recent instability see Sibylla Brodzinsky, “Street protests loom as shortages, inflation and oil slump hit Venezuela,” *The Guardian*, 16 January 2015, as well as The Associated Press, Caracas, “Venezuela divisions deepen as protest over food shortages is halted,” *The Guardian*, 8 March 2014, and Anatoly Kurmanaev and Corina Rodríguez Pons, “Venezuela Inflation Hits 16-Year High as Shortages Rise,” *BloombergBusiness*, November 7, 2013. For data on Venezuela’s literacy, corruption, and crime rates, see Transparency International, [www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org) (last accessed March 14, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> See A. E. Hotchner, “Hemingway, Hounded by the Feds,” *The New York Times*, July 1, 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/02/opinion>>. Anne P. DePrince and Jennifer J. Freyd discuss the importance in recognizing the entire context of traumatic response and not just fear internalized by the individual in “The Harm of Trauma: Pathological Fear, Shattered Assumptions, or Betrayal?” 71-82. For the difficulty in separating reality from paranoid ideation, see Sandra L. Bloom, “Beyond the Beveled Mirror: Mourning and Recovery from Childhood Maltreatment,” 146, both in J. Kauffman, ed. *Loss of the Assumptive World: A Theory of Traumatic Loss* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996), 17.

<sup>12</sup> Jabès, 165.

<sup>13</sup> Dominique La Capra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 23-4.

<sup>14</sup> This pre-dates Do Ho Suh’s *The Perfect Home* (2003).

<sup>15</sup> Greg Grandin adds an alternate perspective to the usual neo-liberal, anti-Chavista bias prominent in Western media with a report from a panel of nine experts in “What is happening in Venezuela?” *The Nation*, 2 March 2015. They insist that the barrios have not abandoned the state capitalism of the Bolivarian project and that the wealthy class is supporting the opposition. Such a scenario squeezes the middle class between two polarized forces. It’s not a catastrophe such as Syria and Mexico represent today but it is a volatile crisis.

<sup>16</sup> According to the “shattered assumptions” theory introduced in the mid-90s by Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, extreme disillusionment that results in upsetting a familiar worldview and leads to confusion and uncertainty can result in trauma;

this sense of betrayal can be on the part of an individual or an institution on which the individual depended for survival. See A.P. DePrince and J.J. Freyd, "The Harm of Trauma," 71-82.

<sup>17</sup> Primary to the notion of "acting out" and "working through" trauma is D.W. Winnicott's theory of play and the transitional object, which serves to displace anxiety until the child (or later the adult individual suffering from trauma) has retrieved his/her capacity for maintaining a true self. See Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1971 and 2005).

<sup>18</sup> D.W. Winnicott, (1965, *The Family and Individual Development*) quoted in Davis, Madeleine and David Wallbridge. *Boundary and Space: An Introduction to the Work of D.W. Winnicott* (New York: Brunner/Mazel Publishers, 1981), 154.

<sup>19</sup> María Elena Álvarez's *Reconstrucción*, 2014 (acrylic on canvas, 150x150cm) was awarded the Armando Reverón Prize at this year's Bienal Salón Arturo Michelena, the oldest and most prestigious cultural event in Venezuela. According to an email message from the artist (dated November 11, 2014) the award holds special significance for her because of Reverón's own struggle with mental illness.

<sup>20</sup> Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 53.

<sup>21</sup> This discussion of the work is quoted from the author's previous text on the work of Gwenessa Lam, written for the artist's exhibition catalogue. Liz Park, "Unfixed Images," *Gwenessa Lam: 2004-2014* (Vancouver: Republic Gallery, 2014), 6.

<sup>22</sup> The history of the *diaolou* is discussed in the context of *Mongrel Histories* in a previous text on the work of Gwenessa Lam, written for the artist's exhibition catalogue. Kathleen MacQueen, "Upturned Archives: Gwenessa Lam's *Mongrel Histories*," in *Gwenessa Lam: 2004-2014* (Vancouver: Republic Gallery, 2014), 11-12.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and other Ruins* [1990], trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 45.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> As quoted by Derrida in footnote 7, in *Memoirs of the Blind*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> Hal Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," *October* 78 (1996), 123.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 122.

# **Sexualized Suffering On Some Lithographs by Richard Grune**

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## INTRODUCTION

The artist Richard Grune (1903-1983) from Kiel, Germany has been long forgotten.<sup>1</sup> His lithographs, depicting the suffering and murder of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps, have only been exhibited and re-published as part of projects on the subject since the beginning of this millennium. Here, they rightly take a prominent place. They stand out in relation to comparable works not only in their differentiated, sensitive representation, but also because they were the first works on this topic to be exhibited in 1945, and published in 1947 in two portfolios: *Passion des XX. Jahrhunderts* (Passion of the 20th Century), and *Die Ausgestoßenen* (The Outcasts).<sup>2</sup> When I write here about an irritation that can be triggered by some of these images, I am not questioning their cultural and historical value. Rather, I would like to point out that Grune involuntarily allows us additional insights into his personal suffering.

Some of his lithographs are more acute documents of the effects of trauma than others, I argue. Against his own intention, they reveal his struggle to cope with his experiences, the torture he had to go through and the horrible scenes he had to witness, as much as the fact that he survived this horrible experience. Unlike the strategies used by a lot of fellow prisoners, Grune's conscious artistic strategy in this attempt at coping is abstraction. With allusions to Christian iconography and formal features of hyperrealism, he lifts the depicted events onto another level. But at the same time the second form of abstraction results in a "distortion to recognisability" in that the depictions now seem to foreshadow gay sadomasochistic drawings of the last decades. This, by no means, is meant to doubt the suffering of homosexuals in concentration camps though. Instead, I would like to suggest an explanation of the uncanny phenomenon with a well-known psychological mechanism, the identification with the perpetrator, sometimes called Stockholm syndrome.

## AN IRRITATION

In 1995, in the newly curated permanent exhibition at the Neuengamme concentration camp memorial (near Hamburg, Germany), I encountered a copy of the lithograph »Bock« *Prügelstrafe im KZ* ("Trestle" *Corporal Punishment in the Concentration Camp*) by Richard Grune, from 1945 (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1**

Richard Grune, »Bock« Prügelstrafe im KZ, 1945, lithograph, 42,5 x 30,9 cm, Gedenkstätte Neuengamme

Visitors learned little about the artist; mostly that he had been imprisoned in German concentration camps from 1937 to 1945 because of his homosexuality. The print disturbed me. Four henchmen are about to abuse a man, who is bound face down to a small wooden structure. One holds his head, two stand on either side of him with canes (probably bullwhips), a fourth has raised his cane above his head, ready to whip the restrained man's naked buttocks. The background is filled with a dimly visible, but tightly packed group of men watching the act of violence. Not only is the abuse itself worrying; one is also concerned about the particular presence of the perpetrators and their relationship to the victim.

The abusing men fill the foreground completely, at some points their contours overlap even the delineated image borders. Dark shades are unevenly distributed on their bodies. Although the light is otherwise coming from the left, the perpetrators' bodies and limbs are largely freely modeled with light and dark shadows. Unusually muscular thighs, arms and buttocks seem to gleam with light. The clothing supports this accentuation. The fabric, which seems to be amazingly soft rests smoothly on the highlighted areas, while it plays around the moving body parts. The men's bodies are tense; repetitions of the contours at several points create the impression of vibration. Thus, an intense excitement seems to dominate the group. Furthermore, the accentuation of two of the men's



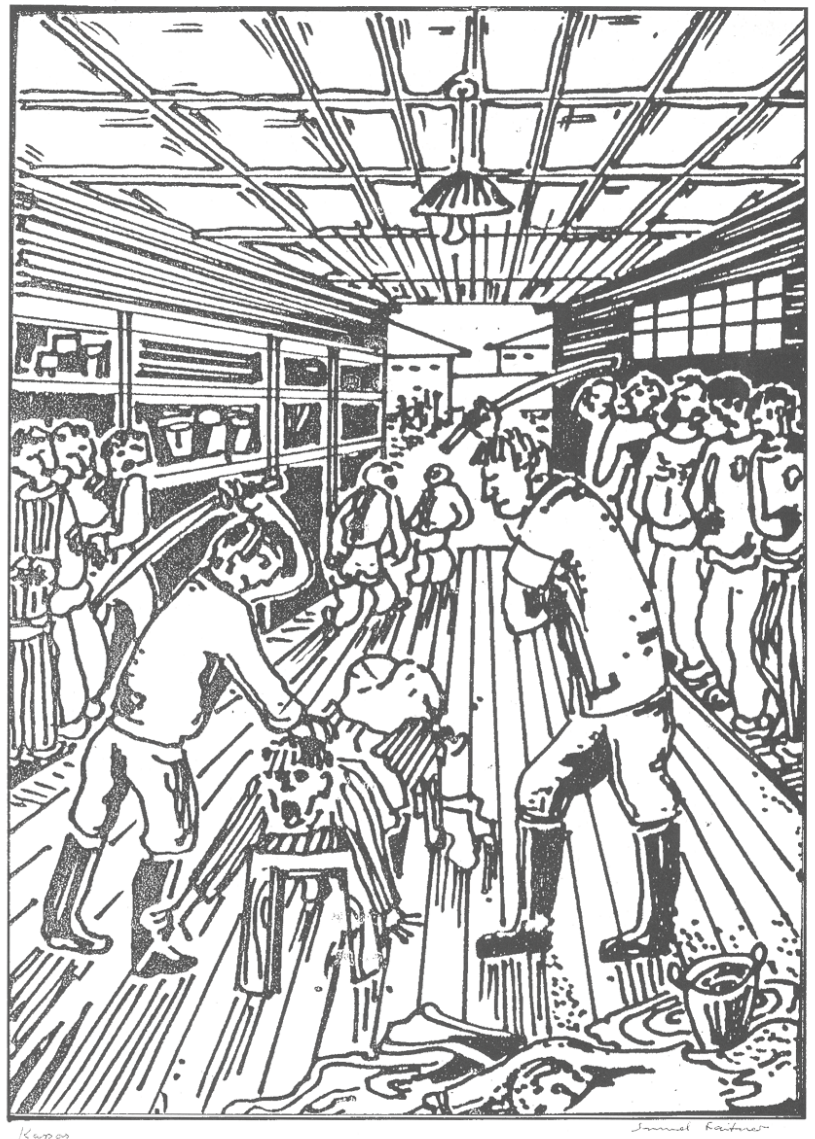
genital areas with dark triangles triggers thoughts of sexual arousal in the viewer. The disturbing effect of the representation is not only based on the moment before the first strike (the buttocks of the victim are still unharmed), but also on the articulation of sadistic pleasure.

## IMAGES OF OTHER VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE

These characteristics stand out even more clearly when we compare Grune's print to depictions of similar scenes by other witnesses of fascist violence. The Israeli artist Szmuel Laitner (b. 1925), for example, drew a cycle of 29 images published in 2000, which are based on his experiences in the Bavarian concentration camp in Groß-Rosen.<sup>3</sup>

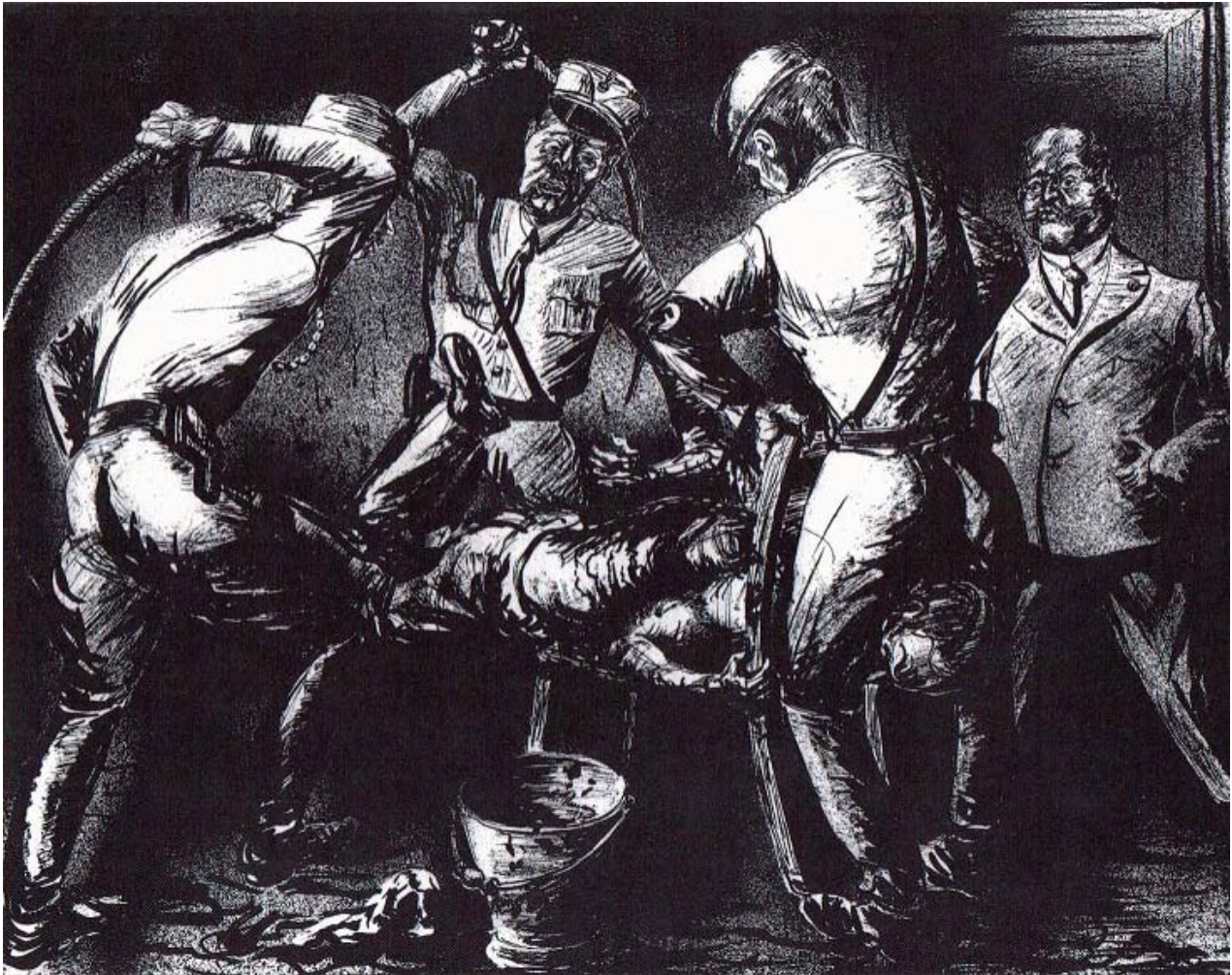
The drawing *Kapos* (Fig. 2), which depicts a similar scene to Grune's *Prügelstrafe* (Fig. 1), illustrates horror mainly through the rigidity and silent scream of the (still unharmed) victim on the "trestle;" through the visible fear of the onlookers and the lifeless body lying in the foreground. The power of the perpetrators over their victim is emphasised by their size and by the firm footing in their black boots. Because the raised hands holding the canes are depicted at the vanishing point of the image; everything is focused on the anticipated blows.

As early as 1935/1936, Karl Schwesig (1898-1955) documented the terrible events that took place during his three-day "interrogation" in the Düsseldorf National Socialist Assault Division (SA) quarters in 1933, which were the basis for a series of drawings entitled *Schlegelkeller*, made while he was exiled in Antwerp.<sup>4</sup> After the Reichstag fire, Schwesig participated in the production and distribution of communist leaflets and hid fugitive worker deputies in his studio. The eighth drawing in the series, *Das Verhör* (The Interrogation) (Fig. 3), shows the artist in a dark narrow space together with three tormentors in uniform and a man in civilian clothes. Here, brutality is evident in



**Figure 2**  
Szmuel Laitner, *Kapos*, undated, pen and ink.

the bloody bare back and helpless twitching of the victim's arms and legs. The bodies of the torturers look powerful but plump; with the backswing of the whip on the left, as well as with the grasping of the chair back on the right, they are anatomically exaggerated. The two visible faces are ugly and distorted.



**Figure 3**

Karl Schwesig, *Erste Nacht: 2. Verhör* (First Night: 2. Interrogation), pen and ink, No. 8 of the series *Schlegelkeller*, 1935/36 (original lost)

Witnesses often reported the sadistic erotic pleasure Nazi perpetrators took from torturing others.<sup>5</sup> Laitner's expressive power depicts the pleasure of the perpetrators, but not sadistic arousal. Schwesig's drawing indicates arousal through the "erect" weapon of one of the perpetrators. But this indication is not only more minimized than it is in Grune's image. While Schwesig clearly uses it to emphasize the negative characteristics of the perpetrators, Grune's position on the zealotry of the tormentors is not clear. For the virile excited bodies he depicts are not ugly, but seem to be idealized, and thus can be read as erotically attractive.





**Figure 4**  
Tom of Finland, untitled, 1965, pencil, private collection

## HOMOEROTIC FASCINATION

When I encountered them unprepared, Grune's lithograph reminded me spontaneously of images from a completely different context. In his rich production of drawings for American and European gay magazines under the pseudonym "Tom of Finland" that began in the 1950s, the Finnish artist Touko Laaksonen (1920-1991) repeatedly depicted violent scenes between men (Fig. 4). They were inspired by sexual encounters with German soldiers in Helsinki during the war.<sup>6</sup>

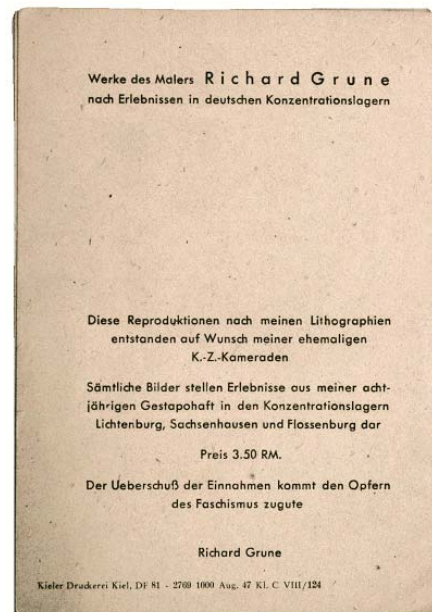
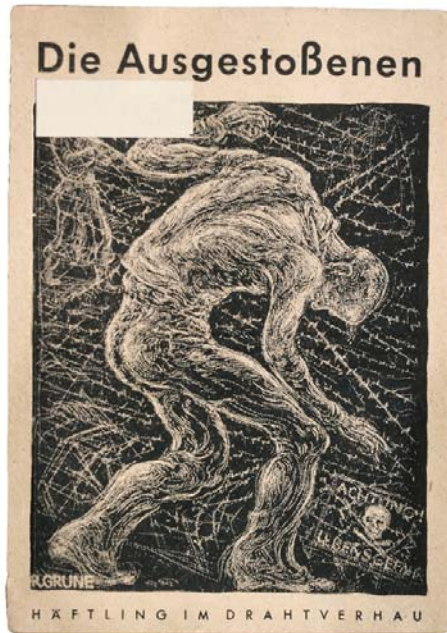
Like Grune, Laaksonen emphasizes the presence and engagement of the perpetrators' bodies through tension and *chiaroscuro* effects. However, his figures are more idealized and consistently exaggerated in their bulging contours. Here, it is not only the attractiveness-ideal of comprehensively muscled and trained male bodies that is heightened to an almost grotesque degree. With Tom of Finland, muscle strength also becomes a sign of a corporeality completely dedicated to sexual encounters, usually the erotic subjugation of one to the phallus of the other(s). Sadomasochistic scenes in which group or individual

physical force is always focused on a single individual drive these encounters to the extreme. With Laaksonen, the masochist's enjoyment seems to result from experiencing the sadists' violence as a concentration of their total physical energy onto him as an extreme focus of attention, resulting eventually in sexual satisfaction on both sides. The popularity of Tom of Finland's pornographic work long after his death proves that many gay men identify with this depiction of man-on-man sexuality.

But what about Grune's depiction? When I saw it in Neuengamme in 1995, I was bothered by the associations it gave me, especially in this context. I wrote to the Memorial administration and received the following reply: "When we exhibited the drawing, we were aware of the ambiguity it discloses; on one hand it is an image of violence against prisoners in a concentration camp, and on the other it transmits a sense of homoerotic fascination. After a long discussion, we decided to show the drawing, because initial responses to this work were more of horror, and because it is the document of an inmate whose ambiguous perspective must be accepted".<sup>7</sup>

## OTHER LITHOGRAPHS

Thus a “homoeerotic fascination” in the image is also noticed by others today. However, this is in contrast to Grune’s representational intentions. The artist staged exhibitions based on concentration camp experiences that included this and other prints and drawings in Nuremberg, Kiel, Frankfurt and Dachau in the years after the Second World War, in order to draw attention to the horrors of what had happened.<sup>8</sup> The context of Grune’s first publication of the *Prügelstrafe* lithograph also proves that it was intended to denounce brutal injustice and to commemorate its victims.



**Figure 5**  
Richard Grune, *Die Ausgestoßenen*, Cover of the portfolio with the image *Häftling im Drahtverbau*, Kiel 1947

**Figure 6**  
Richard Grune, *Die Ausgestoßenen*, Back of the portfolio, Kiel 1947

A small-scale reproduction of the lithograph appeared along with six others in A6 format under the title *Die Ausgestoßenen* (The Outcasts) in Kiel (Fig. 5).<sup>9</sup> The text on the back of the portfolio (Fig. 6) confirms the authenticity of the underlying experience and the seriousness of the concern: “works by the painter Richard Grune based on experiences in German concentration camps. These reproductions of my lithographs were created at the request of my former concentration camp comrades. All images represent experiences of my eight-year custody by the Gestapo in the Lichtenburg, Sachsenhausen and Flossenbürg concentration camps [...] Any profit to benefit of the victims of fascism.” In fact, in most prints the impression of suffering is overwhelming, for example in *SS foltert einen Häftling* (SS Tortures a Prisoner) or *Häftling im Drahtverbau* (Detainee in Barbed Wire) (Fig. 5).



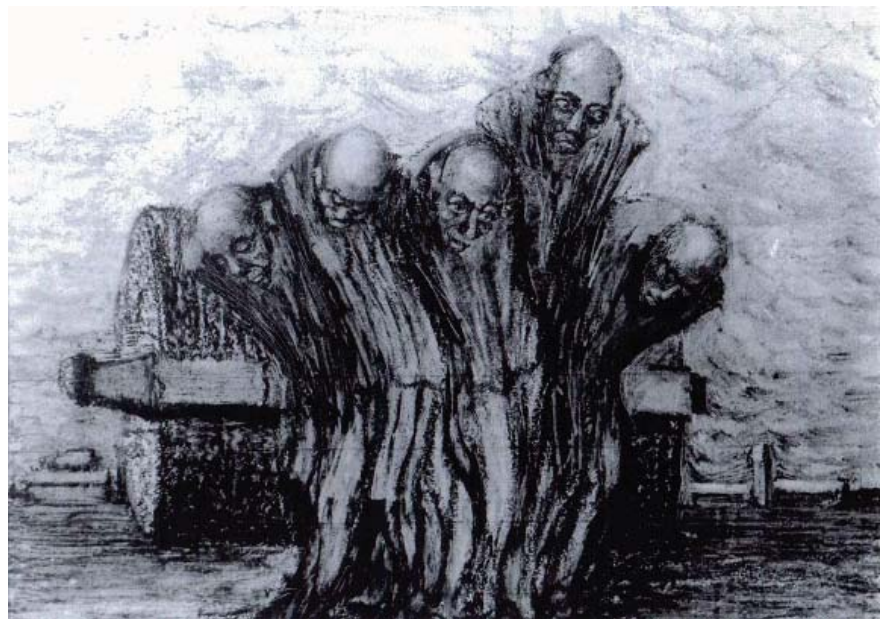


S K L A V E N A R B E I T I M K Z

**Figure 7**

Richard Grune, *Skavenarbeit im KZ*, 1945, lithograph from the portfolio *Die Ausgestoßenen*, Kiel 1947.

Meanwhile the print entitled *Skavenarbeit im KZ* (Slave Labor in the Concentration Camp) (Fig. 7), which depicts a group of six inmates forced by the blows of two uniformed men to pull a heavy stone roller, looks strangely ambivalent – especially because of the amazingly muscular bodies of the victims, who in spite of their subjection are undoubtedly superior in strength to their ‘masters’. One almost gets the impression that what has been depicted is not an asymmetrical power relationship, but only the role play of one.



**Figure 8**

Maurycy Bromberg, *Fünf Juden vor eine Walze geschirrt*, ca. 1945-1948, wax crayons, 27,9 x 38,1 cm, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny w Polsce

A counter-example of how to depict this scene is the wax crayon drawing by Maurycy Bromberg (1920-1982) *Fünf Juden vor eine Walze geschirrt* (Five Jews Harnessed in Front of a Roller) (Fig. 8), which must have been made in the early postwar years.<sup>10</sup> Here, the faces and bodies of the five concentration camp inmates, who in their elongation and blurred outlines are stylized into ciphers of suffering, speak of horror, agony and exhaustion. However, here too parallels can be found in later homoerotic sado-masochistic fantasy worlds, as with the Japanese artist Gengoroh Tagame (\* 1964) who trained himself on Tom of Finland's work.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 9**  
Gengoroh Tagame, untitled, undated

Similar to Grune's forced labourers, in one of Tagame's images (Fig. 9), the naked body of a man forced to move a heavy millstone is idealized, pristine and unharmed, his musculature exaggeratedly tight because of his forward-thrusting forced labour. The man standing behind him is his double, apart from his hairstyle, and displays a comparably high muscle tone, although he stands waiting, holding the end of a lash, which he will probably use on his prisoner. In the logic of the image, the lash highlights the guard's genitals as it passes in front of them. As he is watching the back of the prisoner at the same time, the image inevitably triggers a pornographic fantasy of penetration *a tergo* (at least for a gay viewer). In the bodies on Grune's lithograph, excessive energy seems to be accumulated in a similar manner, pressing for release. Here too, a violent sexual act between the men seems to be a possible outlet.

Immediately after the Nazi era, probably no one perceived the two lithographs »Bock« *Prügelstrafe im KZ* and *Sklavenarbeit im KZ* in this way – which does not contradict the mentioned



view. After all, the impact of the recent past would then have been too powerful to react to anything other than the main content marker of suffering and brutality. Furthermore, homosexuality was still largely ignored by society, let alone its sado-masochistic variants. Only people who have at least not consciously experienced the period before 1945, and can at the same time take deviations from heteronormativity unconstrainedly into consideration, would thus be able to begin to perceive and problematize the erotic component in some of these images.

## DESIGN AND MEANING

But this can only partly explain why the artist himself was apparently blind to his own representations. His self-distancing from the erotic content in his images was also facilitated by his focus on a certain form of abstraction, a kind of hyperreal, dynamizing design. Born in 1903 in Kiel, Germany Richard Grune, after five terms of studying graphic design at The Kiel School of Applied Arts, was a conditional student at the Bauhaus in Weimar for two terms in 1922/1923 (and was then not admitted).<sup>12</sup> He studied in Johannes Itten's preliminary course, where – inspired by Futurism – the graphic 'dynamization' of objects was taught as a form of intensive appropriation. Itten aimed for a holistic education for his students, and integrated explicitly physical aspects into artistic design work. Some of Itten's figure drawings show elaborated bodies and clothes similar to the *Prügelstrafe* lithograph, only omitting the erotic aspect (Fig. 10). Similarly, the men pulling the roller in the print *Sklavenarbeit* could be compared to Umberto Boccioni's well-known futurist sculpture *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* from 1913, which is also about the visualization of bodily strength and kinetic energy (Fig. 11). Are the highlighted features of the bodies in Grune's lithographs therefore the result of the artist's attempt to give them the utmost presence and dynamic form, in the sense of Futurism and Itten's preliminary course? Have specific design intentions unconsciously taken precedence here and thereby undermined Grune's real representational intentions?



**Figure 10**  
Johannes Itten, *Man*, 1919,  
Lithographie.



**Figure 11**  
Umberto Boccioni, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913, Bronze, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

In fact, in other images based on his concentration camp experiences, Grune also distanced himself from their specific content, but with a different kind of abstraction. Significantly, they were gathered together in the second, larger portfolio of 1947, entitled *Passion des XX. Jahrhunderts* (Passion of the 20th Century).<sup>13</sup> Three of the ten prints are identical to those in the small portfolio but the two lithographs entitled *Prügelstrafe* and *Sklavenarbeit* are not included. In the portfolio preface, Richard Blunck writes: “But although the accusation emerging from these prints is so



strong, so inevitably demanding, a closer and more intimate look soon infiltrates the ‘representational’ and ‘topical’ and blends them into a wider ‘spiritual’ and ‘mental’ atmosphere, that goes beyond this representational aspect and makes other strings vibrate than the defensive and voluntary. Behind these drawings there is a deep silence and a kind of listening, that removes all hatred and all revenge from the accusation, but not weakening it in the process. They bring us into a nocturnal world, like the night He died on the Cross.”<sup>14</sup> As already suggested by the portfolio’s title, the images repeatedly allude to traditional motifs in Christian iconography. Thus, *Im Drahtverhan* (In the Barbed Wire) (Fig. 5) reminds one of Christ bearing the Cross; *Galgenabnahme* (Deposition from the Gallows) of the Deposition from the Cross, and *Solidarität. Gefangener stützt seinen erschöpften Kameraden* (Solidarity: Prisoner Supports his Exhausted Comrade) (Fig. 12) of the so-called “Mercy Seat” in which God the Father presents his dead Son; or of a Pietà group, especially the late work of Michelangelo.<sup>15</sup>

Through Blunck, we can understand this superimposing of concentration camp experiences with the Christian process of salvation from the perspective of someone for whom the “outer experience, the originating event itself has to a certain extent [...] lost its power.”<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 12**

Richard Grune, *Solidarität. Gefangener stützt seinen erschöpften Kameraden*, 1945, lithograph from the portfolio *Passion des XX. Jahrhunderts*, Hamburg 1947

## BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

We should try to imagine Grune's life situation at the time the lithographs were made and exhibited. In 1945, by joining the death march from Flossenbürg concentration camp, he escaped after eight years of imprisonment in different Nazi camps. He had been arrested in Berlin late in 1934. In the 1920s, Grune had often worked on social democratic projects; he had provided illustrations and photographs for party newspapers, and in 1927 he had taken over the artistic directorship of the Seekamp camping ground near Kiel, the first international camp for more than 2,300 workers' children, organized by the Social Democratic Reichsarbeitsgemeinschaft (National Working Community).<sup>17</sup> In 1933/4, together with friends from Kiel, he had issued two anti-Nazi newspapers. But, the reason for Grune's arrest was not his political activities, but his homosexuality. It had been revealed to the police that he had not only had sex with other men, but in 1934 had held two extravagant gay parties in his studio. At the end of May 1935, he was released from preventive custody in Berlin, but was transferred to the authorities in Flensburg. There, in September 1936, he was sentenced to one year and three months in prison in Neumünster, because of "fornication" according to Article 175. As customary at that time with male homosexuals, he was set free, but was taken again into "preventive custody."<sup>18</sup> In October 1937, he was sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp. He remained there until April 1940 when he was moved by prisoner transport to Flossenbürg on the northern edge of the Upper Palatinate, a notorious labour camp with a quarry. At that time, the camp held more than 2,500 prisoners; by the end of the war the number rose to 15,000. The prisoners were mainly "career criminals" and those considered "asocial," which at that time also included homosexuals, political and war prisoners, and from 1940 also Jews. During the war, there were more than a hundred satellite camps. From 1943, armaments were also produced in Flossenbürg, under the Messerschmidt company.<sup>19</sup>

Classified as homosexual, Grune belonged to the lowest rank in the camp system. Witnesses report relentless harassment by camp overseers (and by many fellow prisoners) against homosexuals, especially in Flossenbürg.<sup>20</sup> To survive there for years could not have been easy. How did Grune manage? He told his sister that once, seriously ill and left to die in front of the barracks in the evening, he had "kept himself alive by drawing" until morning.<sup>21</sup> From other victims of brutal captivity, we know that a creative involvement in their experience, for example in the form of written records, can contribute to psychological stabilisation.<sup>22</sup> Did artistic activity help Grune to overcome persistent torture? He died in 1983 in an old people's home in Kiel, unfortunately, without anyone being interested in his memories.

However, we know from the memoirs of longtime gay fellow inmate Josef Kohout (1917-1994), published under the pseudonym Heinz Heger and entitled *Die Männer mit dem rosa Winkel* (The Men with the Pink Triangle) that self-abasement and selling one's body were unavoidable, if you wanted to survive as a homosexual.<sup>23</sup> Through the protection and intercession of others, Heger would eventually even reach the position of Kapo and foreman in the camp's armaments production. Probably Grune was also a functionary prisoner in later years. His artistic talent could have helped to improve his position, because there were usually a variety of tasks in the camp for someone who could draw. Grune, for example, illustrated the camp songbook in Sachsenhausen. Additionally, his respected position with the political prisoners might have helped him – due to his coming from a social democratic-socialist environment in Kiel and his anti-fascist beliefs. In fact, it was mainly his friends in the Social Democratic Party in Kiel who helped him after 1945.

They supported him not least in his stubborn but futile effort to get financial compensation for his incarceration – ostensibly as a political prisoner. The postwar situation for homosexuals had in fact not changed significantly. Article 175, intensified by the Nazis, was still law after the war; the



carrying out of a prison sentence and preventive custody before 1945 was not considered wrong. And if renewed homosexual activities became known, this still led to severe penalties.<sup>24</sup> Clearly therefore, the “originating event” for the prints had certainly not “lost its power” for Grune.<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, an important reason for the publication of the two print portfolios and the organizing of exhibitions with lithographs would have been the artist’s desire to conceal, or at least downplay, his individual fate as a homosexual. *Die Ausgestoßenen* and *Passion des XX. Jahrhunderts* were to emphasize that he had been a victim among other victims, on an equal footing in accusation over suffered injustices – especially when he wrote that he had printed the small portfolio “at the request of my former concentration camp comrades.” Surely, therefore, he wouldn’t have dreamed of addressing his status as a gay man in the camp hierarchy and his own personal experiences of suffering, let alone homoerotic aspects of camp life.

## TRAUMA

Besides Grune’s conscious response to the conditions under which he was obliged to live before and after 1945, he may also, probably unconsciously, have manifested the effects of his ordeal under the Nazi regime. Especially since the situation in post-war Germany was anything but helpful in coming to terms with his experiences. One has to assume a severe trauma, “the vital experience of a discrepancy between threatening situational factors and individual coping mechanisms, which is accompanied by feelings of helplessness and unprotected exposure, thus causing a long-term disturbance in the understanding of the self and the world.”<sup>26</sup> This would not necessarily be contradicted by the fact that Grune was able to work after 1945. Occasionally, he received commissions for brochure designs,<sup>27</sup> as well as illustrations in books,<sup>28</sup> magazines and newspapers, but he had to make his living as a bricklayer. In the early 1950s, a doctor friend enabled him to go to Barcelona for ten years – probably not least because of the harsh and unchanged legislation against homosexuality in Germany.

The severe traumatization could however explain the disturbing ambiguity of the *Prügelstrafe* and *Skclavenarbeit* lithographs. The overlaying of real-life experience with moments from the Christian ritual of salvation in the *Passion des XX. Jahrhunderts* portfolio can already be connected to a process of abstraction characteristic of traumatized people. They insist on the meaningfulness of what happened, even if this sometimes means that it must be moved from reality to fantasy. Possibly also Grune’s Ego tried “to deny the real nature of his trauma in order to recover his original mastery over psychic functioning,” as Ehlert and Lemke state in their text “Psychodynamik der traumatischen Reaktion” (Psychodynamics of Traumatic Reaction).<sup>29</sup>

And in the specific hyperrealistic design of the scenes depicted in *Prügelstrafe* and *Skclavenarbeit* what these authors describe as “forced regression” probably becomes visible:<sup>30</sup> an identification with the perpetrators, or rather the introjection of the perpetrator.<sup>31</sup> In his overwhelmingly helpless relationship to those who possess and exert power, it remains a last resort for the victim to “return to the all-powerful, mainly narcissistically-charged objects of early childhood.”<sup>32</sup> The aggressors appear as “longed-for parental figures.”<sup>33</sup> The victim surrenders himself like a child to the all-powerful others, and thereby experiences “archaic fusion fantasies” that manifest themselves in the seemingly irrational emotions of love that victims can feel for their perpetrators<sup>34</sup> – Patti Hearst, who in the early 1970s identified herself with her kidnappers, is a famous example; Philipp Reemtsma writes in his report on his kidnapping in 1996 of similar impulses, even about a later occasional “longing” to go back to the place of his imprisonment, when “life seemed too difficult and, compared to the difficulties, not rewarding enough.”<sup>35</sup> It also seems important to me that, in Grune’s case, the victim



of such trauma can take over the viewpoint of the perpetrator. Thus, for example, rape victims often show a complex self-hatred.<sup>36</sup>

Envision the position of a gay man in a concentration camp who, already formerly persecuted by society and therefore with a damaged self-image, is now openly and continuously insulted for his inclinations, often severely punished and even threatened with death. His trauma may have been the reason why he, the tortured, accepted the aggressors' hatred of his sexual orientation as a precondition for the (sadistic) attention he longed for.

This constellation gains a duplicitous twist when we learn that there was a pronounced homosocial form of community bonding among the men in concentration camps – so much so that so-called “forced” homosexual activities were tolerated, but simultaneously defined homosexuality was violently repulsed. The torture of other men, but especially those who wore the pink triangle, is therefore likely to have often functioned as a way of preserving a homoerotic bonding and status quo.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, we should not merely think of the sexual stimulation of the perpetrators through their acts of violence – often reported especially for corporal punishment on the “trestle”<sup>38</sup> – as an indication of a “blind sadism.” The scene depicted by Grune was undoubtedly already objectively sado-masochistically charged, and in a complex way.

## PLAY AND REALITY

Did Richard Grune thus identify not only with the victims depicted in his lithographs *Prügelstrafe* and *Sklavenarbeit*, but also, and simultaneously with the perpetrators – as is probably always the case with those who take pleasure in Tom of Finland and Gengoroh Tagame's works? This is as impossible to clarify as the question of consciousness, on what level was the artist himself aware of the homoerotic aspects of his prints? Especially since “suddenly invading, erupting memories, thoughts, feelings and behavioral role-playing are a strong indication of the existence of trauma.”<sup>39</sup> However, the disturbingly misplaced sadomasochistic moments of these two lithographs in the larger context of Grune's portfolios and exhibitions make it clear that they cannot be reflexes of positive experiences. Undoubtedly, the scenes shown were not experienced with relish by the victims, and Grune was certainly no erotic beneficiary of his concentration camp experiences. The similarities with scenes depicted by Laaksonen and Tagame cannot blur the differences. These two draughtsmen of sadomasochistic cartoons, targeted at a contemporary homosexual audience, aim at an occasional, consensual and playful handling of violence and moments of power. In contrast, the victims of violence in the concentration camps were, without any consent whatsoever, continuously placed in real life danger, living out a mental endurance that they could only survive, if at all, as deeply traumatized human beings.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was published in German under the title “Sexualisiertes Leiden. Zu einigen Lithographien von Richard Grune,” in: *Imago. Interdisziplinäres Jahrbuch für Psychoanalyse und Ästhetik* 2 (Gießen 2013), 155–167. For discussion, I would like to thank Boris von Brauchitsch/Berlin, Lutz Garrels/Frankfurt am Main, and Tobias Loemke/Nuremberg.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Grune, *Passion des XX. Jahrhunderts*, (Hamburg: Hans A. Keune, 1947); Richard Grune, *Die Ausgestoßenen. Werke des Malers Richard Grune nach Erlebnissen in deutschen Konzentrationslagern* (Kiel: Kieler Druckerei, 1947).

<sup>3</sup> Museums-Pädagogisches Zentrum München (ed.), *Das Gedächtnis öffnen. Zeitzeugenbericht von Samuel Laitner, einem ehemaligen Häftling des Konzentrationslagers Groß-Rosen* (Munich, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> See Galerie Remmert und Barth (ed.), *Karl Schwesig – Schlegelkeller* (Düsseldorf: Frölich & Kaufmann, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> See especially Heinz Heger, *The Men with the Pink Triangle: The True Life-and-Death Story of Homosexuals in the Nazi Death Camps* (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 1994), 46 ff. The German edition was published in 1972.

<sup>6</sup> F. Valentine Hooven III, *Tom of Finland. Sein Leben – seine Kunst*, (Berlin: Bruno Gmünder, 1992, pp. 38–40. In fact, there are few images with Nazi uniforms in Laaksonen’s work. Using them as a model, he designed men’s clothes with his own emblems in the 1960’s (see there, p. 38). Cf. Micha Ramakers, *Dirty Pictures. Tom of Finland, Masculinity, and Homosexuality*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), pp. 160–169.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Herbert Hötte/KZ-Gedenkstätte Neuengamme to the author, Hamburg, 20.11.1995: “Bei der Präsentation der Zeichnung war uns die Doppeldeutigkeit in der Aussage bewußt, einerseits das Bild der Gewalt gegen Häftlinge im KZ und andererseits eine homoerotische Faszination, die die Szene ausstrahlt. Wir haben uns nach längerer Diskussion entschieden, die Zeichnung zu zeigen, weil die Reaktionen auf dieses Werk eher ein Erschrecken zeigten, und weil es das Dokument eines Häftlings ist, dessen uneindeutige Perspektive akzeptiert werden muß.”

<sup>8</sup> See Karl Rickers, “Niels Brodersen und Richard Grune. Zwei vergessene Künstler in Kiel,” in *Niels Brodersen und Richard Grune. Zwei vergessene Künstler aus Kiel*, exh.cat., Kieler Stadtmuseum Warleberger Hof (Kiel, 1987), 7–45, here p. 40, and Andreas Sternweiler, “... er habe sich zeichnend am Leben erhalten.” Der Künstler Richard Grune.“ In: *Homosexuelle Männer im KZ Sachsenhausen*, ed. Joachim Müller, Andreas Sternweiler (Berlin: rosa Winkel, 2000), 204.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. fn. 2.

<sup>10</sup> For Bromberg, see Glen Sujo, *Legacies of Silence. The Visual Arts and Holocaust Memory*, exh.cat, Imperial War Museum, London (London: Wilson, 2001), p. 79.

<sup>11</sup> For Tagame, see Wim Lunsing, “Yaoi Ronsō. Discussing Depictions of Male Homosexuality in Japanese Girls’ Comics, Gay Comics and Gay Pornography,” in: *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, Heft 12, Januar 2006 (<http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue12/lunsing.html> – accessed 3/2013); Anne Ishii, Chip Kido, Graham Kolbeins, *The Passion of Gengoroh Tagame. The Master of ›Bara‹ Manga* (Brooklyn: PictureBox, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Information from the Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin, in a telephone conversation with the author, 12.3.2013, cf. Folke Dietsch, “Die Studierenden am Bauhaus,” Dissertation Weimar, 1991. About Grune’s biography see Rickers 1987 (as fn. 8), who assumes that Grune resumed his studies in 1926, and Sternweiler, “... er habe sich zeichnend am Leben erhalten.”

<sup>13</sup> Cf. fn. 2.

<sup>14</sup> “Doch so stark, so unausweichlich fordernd die Anklage aus diesen Blättern sich erhebt, ein näheres und innigeres Anschauen dringt bald über das ›Gegenständliche‹ und ›Aktuelle‹ hinaus und bezieht sie ein in eine seelische und geistige Atmosphäre, die dies Gegenständliche übergreift und in dem Betrachter andere Saiten zum Schwingen bringt als die abwehrenden und willentlichen. Es steht hinter diesen Zeichnungen ein tiefes Schweigen und Lauschen, das der Anklage, die freilich darum nicht schwächer wird, allen Hass und alles Rächerische nimmt. Nüchtern ist die Welt, in die sie uns versetzen, wie jene Nacht, da einer am Kreuze starb.”

<sup>15</sup> Could this lithograph also be a response to the well-known relief *Kameradschaft* (Comradeship) (1940) by Arno Breker?

<sup>16</sup> “[...] das äußere Erlebnis, das Anlaß gebende Geschehen selbst, bis zu einem gewissen Grade [...] an Macht verloren hat.”

<sup>17</sup> See Andreas Gayk, *Die Rote Kinderrepublik. Ein Buch von Arbeiterkindern für Arbeiterkinder*, Illustrationen von Richard Grune. Berlin (Arbeiterjugendverlag) 1928; and Gustav Weber (ed.), *Das Weltenrad sind wir! Der 6. Deutsche Arbeiterjugendtag in Frankfurt am Main und das 2. Reichszeltlager der SAJ. auf der Rheininsel Nemedy von der Jugend geschildert*, Illustrationen von Richard Grune Kiel (Berlin: Arbeiterjugend-Verlag, 1931).

<sup>18</sup> On the situation of homosexuals in the time of national socialism, see *Homosexualität in der NS-Zeit. Dokumente einer Diskriminierung und Verfolgung*, ed. Günter Grau (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 1993).

<sup>19</sup> On Flossenbürg see *Konzentrationslager Flossenbürg 1938–1945*, ed. Christa Schikorra (ed.), exh.cat. (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2008); Thomas Muggenthaler, *“Ich lege mich hin und sterbe!” Ehemalige Häftlinge des KZ Flossenbürg berichten* (Stamsried: Ernst Vögel, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Heger, *The Men With the Pink Triangle*.

<sup>21</sup> Sternweiler, “... er habe sich zeichnend am Leben erhalten.”

<sup>22</sup> Jan Philipp Reemtsma, *Im Keller*, Reinbek (Rowohlt) 1998, reports which relief he felt to “objectify” himself with writing a diary while in custody of his kidnappers (p. 205).

<sup>23</sup> On Kohout, see Kurt Krickler, “Heinz Heger. Der Mann mit dem rosa Winkel,” in: *LAMBDA-Nachrichten. Zeitschrift der Homosexuellen Initiative* 23/June (Wien, 2001), 42–44.

<sup>24</sup> On the situation of homosexuals in West-Germany after the war, see Stefan Micheler, “... und verbleibt weiterhin in Sicherheitsverwahrung – Kontinuitäten der Verfolgung Männer begehrender Männer in Hamburg 1945–1949,” in *Ohnmacht und Aufbegehren. Homosexuelle Männer in der frühen Bundesrepublik*, ed. Andreas Pretzel and Volker Weiß (Hamburg: Männerschwarm, 2010): 62–90.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Blunck in the portfolio *Passion des XX. Jahrhunderts*, cf. fn. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Gottfried Fischer, Peter Riedesser, *Lehrbuch der Psychotraumatologie*, 4th ed. (Munich: Reinhardt, 2009) 84, quoted in Günter H. Seidler, *Psychotraumatologie. Das Lehrbuch* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2013), 33.

<sup>27</sup> See Richard Grune, *Das Kinderbuch*, ed. Hauptausschuß für Arbeiter Wohlfahrt (Hannover & Hamburg: Tessloff, 1948).

<sup>28</sup> He illustrated, for example, with some of his lithographs from the portfolio *Passion des XX. Jahrhunderts*, Walter Poller’s book *Arztsschreiber in Buchenwald. Bericht des Häftlings 996 aus Block 39* (Hamburg: Phönix-Verlag Christen & Co, 1946).

<sup>29</sup> Martin Ehlert & Beate Lorke, “Zur Psychodynamik der traumatischen Reaktion,” *Psyche* XLII (1988): 502–532, here 504.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 507.

<sup>31</sup> On the phenomenon of introjection, see Seidler, *Psychotraumatologie*, 68–73.

<sup>32</sup> Ehlert/Lorke 1988 (as fn. 29), 508. On the origins of this psychodynamic concept, see Mathias Hirsch, “Zwei Arten der Identifikation mit dem Aggressor nach Ferenczi und Anna Freud,” *Praxis der Kinderpsychologie und Kinderpsychiatrie* 45/6 (1996): 198–205.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 511.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 509.

<sup>35</sup> Reemtsma, *Im Keller*, 172–222, quote, 221. I thank Ute Sommer (Kassel) for pointing this out to me.

<sup>36</sup> Even if the effect of eight years imprisonment in a concentration camp is hardly comparable to a sexual abuse by a single perpetrator. See Freihart Regner, “Unbewußte Liebesbeziehung zum Folterer? Kritik und Alternativen zu einer



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Psychodynamik der traumatischen Reaktion“, *Zeitschrift für Politische Psychologie* 8/4 (2000), and 9/1 (2001): 429-452. I consider the onset of this psychic reaction possible, especially because of the sexual component in the violence against homosexuals.

<sup>37</sup> See Heger, *The Men With the Pink Triangle*, 46 ff.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> This is how Werner Bohleber summarizes Mardi Jon Horowitz's observations in his book *Stress response syndromes. PTSD, grief, and adjustment disorders*. 2. Aufl. Northvale (Aronson) 1997, in: *Was Psychoanalyse heute leistet. Identität und Intersubjektivität, Trauma und Therapie, Gewalt und Gesellschaft*. Stuttgart (Klett-Cotta) 2012, p. 119.

# **Conor McFeely: Partial Objects**

## **A Conversation Between Artist Conor McFeely and Art Historian Gabriel Gee**

**Gabriel Gee**  
**Franklin University Switzerland**

## INTRODUCTION

In the following conversation, the artist Conor McFeely and art historian Gabriel Gee reflect on the multiple properties and veiled meanings of five objects used by McFeely in some of his recent artworks. Conor McFeely was born in Derry, Northern Ireland, where he lives and works today. His work incorporates a wide range of processes, from the ready-made to sculpture and installation, as well as photography, video and audio. A fracturing and manipulation of "material" in the service of finding new relationships is a chief characteristic of his practice. Often conceived as multi-layered in terms of their reading, many works have been driven by ruminations on the nature of individual freewill, choice and autonomy. Contexts and source material reflect interests in a history of counter culture, literature and social contexts. Historical mindedness informs McFeely's work, with references ranging from 20<sup>th</sup> century global political history, Northern Ireland's troubled legacies and landscapes in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and scientific and epistemological histories. McFeely has exhibited both nationally and internationally.

Gabriel Gee is an Art Historian who lives and works in Switzerland. His research interests include British painting in the 20th Century, forms and discourses in the visual arts in Northern Ireland in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the interaction between aesthetics and industry in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Recent publications include "The metamorphosis of Cain: aesthetics in the transindustrial city at the turn of the century" (*Visual Resources*, 2014), "The catalogue of the Orchard Gallery: a contribution to critical and historical discourse in Northern Ireland 1978-2003" (*Journal of historiography*, 2013). His monograph on *Art in the North of England* is to be published by Ashgate in Spring 2016. He is a co-founder of the research group on Textures and experiences of trans-industriality ([www.tetigroup.org](http://www.tetigroup.org))

The discussion starts by evoking apparent layers of signification, before considering the additional inclusion of hidden meanings, and the extent to which these might function as the existential roots of the pieces. In that respect, the notion of symptom is implied, and in particular how aesthetic elements might point to denials of past, potentially traumatic experience. It is more specifically the manipulation by the artist of such possibilities, which is considered. The notion of abstraction is equally useful, in that it points to a pool of meanings, which are present, but somehow not immediately accessible and visible. The reference to 'partial objects' suggests a range of interpretative potentials. Partial is of course that which exists only in part, which is incomplete; therefore it demands an interrogation of the lacking component. Partial objects are also a staple in psychological theory, alluding to the fixation on a part mistaken for the whole, and to an ever-unattainable object of desire. Interestingly, partial objects are also used in programming, where they refer to objects that have become disconnected from significant amount of their supposedly corresponding data. The relation to the whole in this case cannot be reset, and functions as an irremediable loss. Fragments, remnants and resurgence are thus explored in five recurrent objects of Conor McFeely's practice. The selected objects were part and informed the *Weathermen* project initiated in 2012 and shown at Franklin University in 2013.<sup>1</sup>

**Gabriel Gee [GG]:** *The Elizabethan collar (figure 1): the collar gives a perspective, it offers an entry into the world, it is akin to a window open onto the world, a monade connected to the labyrinth of the city beneath it; but it also shuts out the vision, it prevents the viewer from gaining a panoramic view, it protects you from scratching your hitching bits, while condemning your vision and actions to a fragmented framework.*



**Figure 1:** Conor McFeely. *Inside his Master's Voice*. 2010. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

**Conor McFeely [CMF]:** Initial tests with the collar suggested a range of possible readings, from a type of siphon or filter allowing a conduction of sorts in both directions. I would occasionally see that clown-like dog limping along wearing one of these odd funnels and found it quite disturbing, that is the idea of this restriction and the blinkered vision imposed by it. The peripheral vision is limited and the result of that is usually a form of agitation causing the occupant to turn their head continually. The structure naturally implies a projection or movement, which, if extended outwards, suggests an ever-expanding scanner or radar. At the other end of course it shrinks back to nothing. But it was the separation caused by it that first attracted me. It almost decapitates the body and creates an acephalic. It alienates one part of the person from the other. The body is almost denied by the contraption and at the same time protected. R.D. Laing talks about the unembodied self. A sense of self that is detached from the body so that the body is felt as an object among other objects in the world rather than the core of oneself in the world. This type of experience is referred to as depersonalisation disorder. This might be a refuge of sorts, but it makes it difficult to distinguish between the inner and outer world experiences. The collars were used in work from “Inside His Masters Voice”. The book by Lem, ‘His Masters Voice’ refers to a failed scientific project to decode a neutrino signal from space. It also recalls the old record label. The addition of the word “Inside” suggested a backwards glance at history. The sound used in conjunction with the collars contains the voice of Oppenheimer.

**G.G:** *The words of J. Robert Oppenheimer (1904-1967) evoke the inception of nuclear weapons in America in the 1940s. The fragmentation of the self the collar exposes appears to be tied to an underlying cycle of creation and destruction. Behind the Elizabethan collar, there might be an impossible individual quest to grasp the fullness of the world, either at its inception through the big bang, or at its ending through the black hole. This tension between fullness and void is further emphasised by the Japanese voices in the soundtrack of the piece, which, as you pointed out to me, were extracted from the video game the Simms, and allude to the creation of a nonsensical language.*



**CMF:** I am conscious that we can observe this quest you mention being central to much art practice. It can appear to be an angst-driven attempt to establish certainty. A desire to structure some meaning and purpose, intended or accidental. This is tempered by an understanding of the absurdity of the quest. That is, there seems to be an accompanying scream (possibly of laughter) that knows this articulation is simply a new form responding to a timeless quandary. So we create new orders to make sense of this. This includes political, scientific and other experiments. In the Simms world with its laws, codes of behaviour and unintelligible language, questions of morality come into play quite quickly. How and why do we reward or punish? How does a society develop its value system? What is a transgression? The tone of Oppenheimer seems to be one of reflective regret. The bomb changed the world we live in permanently as did the political experiment in Germany that brought this about. There is an irony in the nature of the soundtracks' Japanese style voice over-laid with Oppenheimer's low apologetic delivery. The mechanics aside, visual aesthetics are a large part of the work.



**Figure 2:** Conor McFeely. *Weatherman*. 2012-13. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

**GG:** *The pint glass (figure 2): the glass and the liquid within it are a limited proposition, a small world in which to drown your thoughts; or they are an archetypal example of how worlds fold onto one another, they were brought about by demiurgic forces, and within it infinite universes are contained.*

**CMF:** The transformative power of drink cannot be underestimated. Ireland is synonymous with it. Guinness is the stuff of legend, an Irish stereotype in itself. “Guinness is good for you” was their most notable slogan. It is also a beautiful minimal contemplative sculpture. Watching the seductive action of stout poured and settling can be mesmerising. The chemical reaction caused by the nitrogen and the burnt barley creates a rising tide of particles, a transubstantiation? In Ireland it's almost a holy water or a weapon in some hands. The effect can open and close doors. The pub snug, a refuge from the weather is a HQ for planning and operations. As used in *The Weathermen* the pint represents the last object in a ritual, the final object of bodily desire. An agent in a transition ritual between one state and another.

**GG:** *The opening video of your Weathermen display at Franklin University in 2013 depicted the perfect circle of the pint's rim seen from above, in which substance was being poured with as a consequence a myriad of coloured metamorphoses taking place before the viewer. There is a touch of magic, or alchemy at play in the constitution of the beverage. Perhaps the artist's task is more closely linked to that of a brewer, than that of a distant intellectual and contemplative mind: more craftsman, than pure 'cosa mentale'?*

**CMF:** Art can be a social lubricant and Guinness does a good job at that. I think of the process as demanding a mixture of elements. It's a rounded process. It also a truism that human beings have sex, procreate, eat, defecate as well as design and analyse the world. A focus on visual appearances alone doesn't interest me but it is an aspect of practice that matters. Concepts alone can be unrewarding. So much so-called "conceptual art" can be visually poverty-stricken and intellectually lacking. Different energies come into play over the process and like the Guinness in the video these forces produce self-organised chaos, order and fluctuation. I take into account that someone might look at my work. So I have to consider how the artist engages people. Pure craft can be incredibly beautiful but some additional ingredient is needed for a more meaningful pact. There is nothing to take away from it apart from the satisfaction of seeing something well made. It seems more fitting that the exhibition begins after you leave the gallery. It is understood retrospectively. In the process of making something I hope some magic or alchemy happens that heightens my engagement and encourages a loss of self. The desire is that this moment, or something like it, is experienced by others. If there is any alchemy it is in the collision of thought and form, which might produce an antidote to this binary. Alcohol and drugs can seem like useful tools in this task.

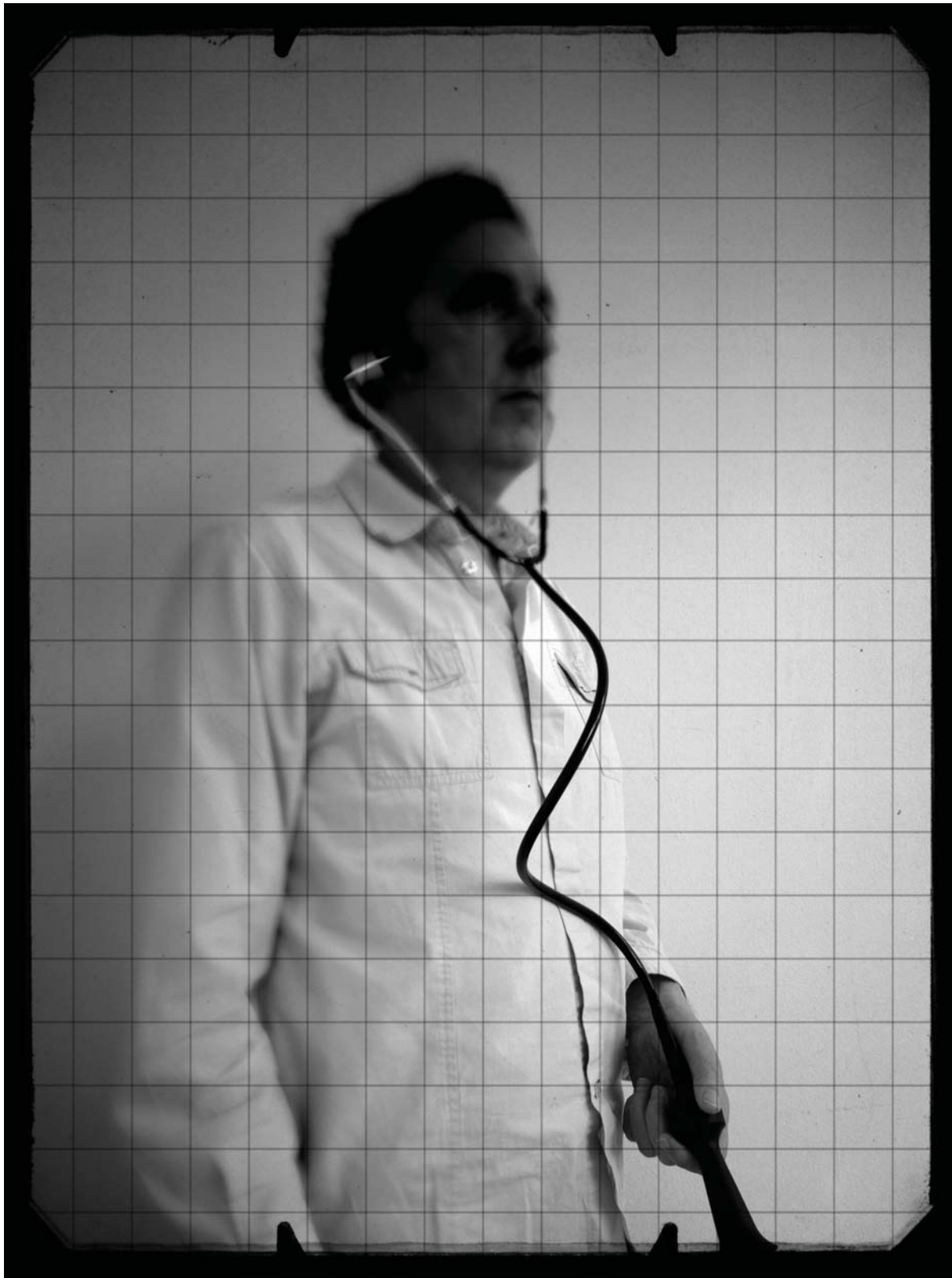
**GG:** *The stethoscope (figure 3): the languid instrument is an extension of the inquisitive bear ear? and analytical mind, a tool to assess bodies and hearts, an instrument to heal the living world; a radar onto the external environment which can plunge into the depths of secret and hidden spaces, the stethoscope can further the controlling propensity of human politics to nefarious consequences.*

**CMF:** Medicine has been used as an instrument of social control in many contexts and some earlier works most notably Disclaimer has referenced this. The cast resin capsules that reside somewhere between bomb and pill were essentially large valium. The writings of R.D Laing have been an on-going interest. His notion of an anti-psychiatry and his experiment in the Tavistock clinic which challenged conventional treatment with its desire to define "normal" held a fascination. There are paintings from many years before where I drew on my experiences of working in a psychiatric hospital as a student. I see the stethoscope as a probe that might have been used by Burroughs' Doc Benway in some casually obscene operation.

**GG:** *Here the individual is at the heart of the perusing, the object of medical scrutiny, and possible mental manipulation. Could there also be a socio-historical unconscious evoked by the blurry silhouette of a doctor framed within a grid-ordered surface?*

**CMF:** The nature of the image, its visual appearance, black and white and partly out of focus suggested a kind of faked historical document. This image is pivotal in the Weathermen Projects. It could have been found in a filing cabinet in a medical institution or some research centre. So conceptual questions about function and formal concerns, position, gesture, angle, definition and cropping arise. The image's ability to convey is determined by these factors. The style or look of the image was informed by a book I found in a supermarket. A complete photographic encyclopedia of dead Norwegian Nazi soldiers. Most of whom had been photographed killed in action with a photo portrait beside them. The presence of history in the work is metaphorical

rather than literal, but my interest in the events of WW11 extends to other ideological experiments to restructure society.



**Figure 3:** Conor McFeely. *Weatherman*. 2012-13. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

**GG:** *The duvet (figure 4): a protection against the cold and the night, a place to dream which evokes home and homeliness; striped and uniform, the duvet is a jail, a prison from which passive abandonment foment and clings its occupant to oblivion.*

**CMF:** The duvet is a photo sculpture with a pattern that is universally understood, part of our collective sub-conscious. It only works for me as a photographed image. It comes into existence through a history of documentary photography I mentioned earlier. Its reference is implied by its relationship to the ideological stethoscope and its folds are formed by the body it once wrapped. It is beaten. It's hanging is final. It is seen through the grid of a camera viewfinder and a detached but concealed inspection is offered.

**GG:** *The duvet also featured prominently in an almost stilled video of a young man in bed, seemingly procrastinating (was is originally entitled 'How Irish is it?')*

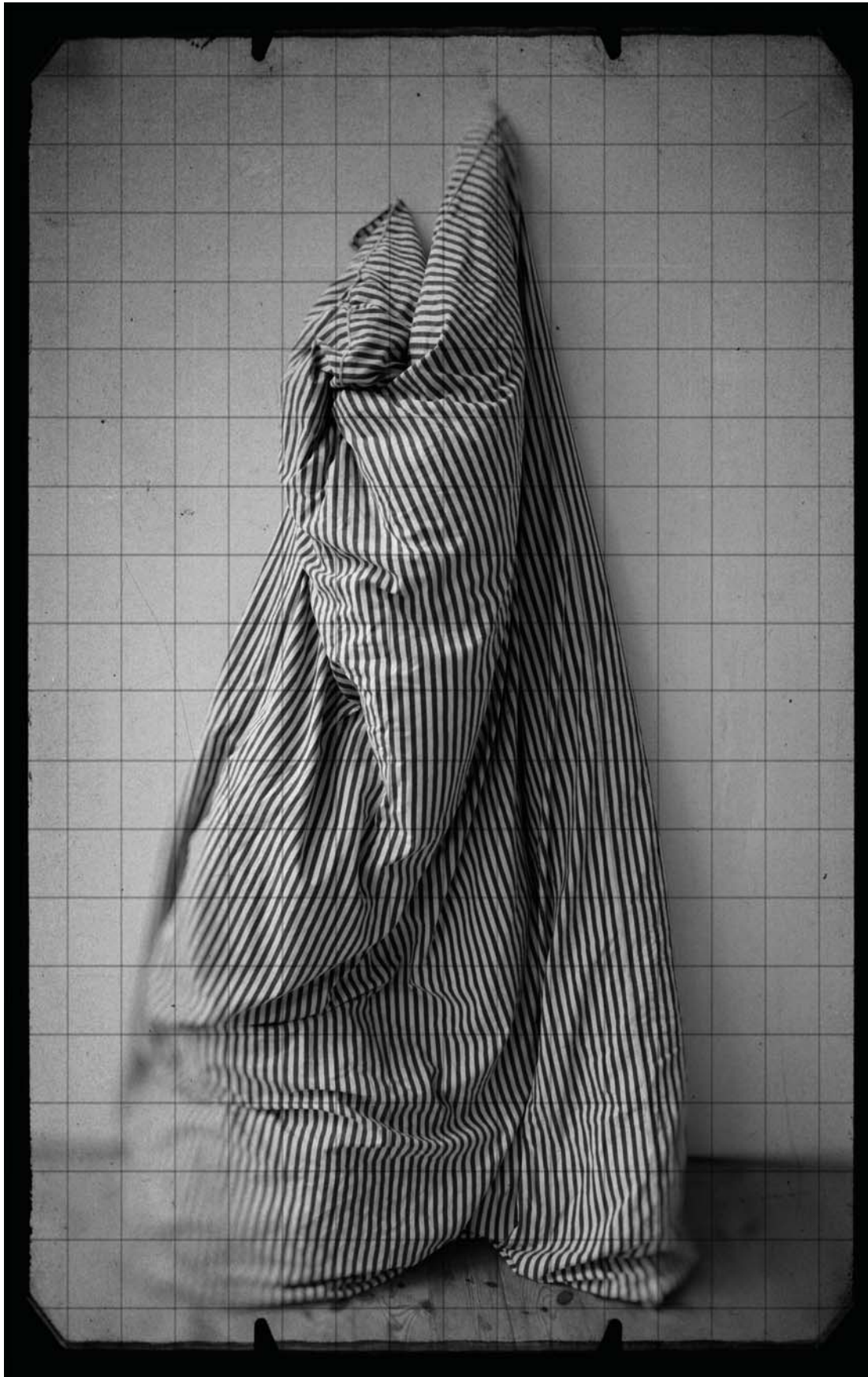
**CMF:** Yes I made a short sequence of that title for *The Case Of The Midwife Toad*. I have played with the title since then in relation to other works. The rumination on my part was on the idea of purity, racial purity specifically. The politics of Northern Ireland revolve around cultural identity and it can seem inescapable at times. No matter how one thinks of oneself you will be categorised regardless according to birth and schooling. Mixed religion marriages and integrated education can still been viewed with suspicion. Most people still adhere to either of the dominant traditions. There is great pride taken in cultural purity. The project was informed by the research carried out by the zoologist and evolutionary scientist Paul Kammerer. The outcomes of Kammerers' research cross-breeding different types of toads over twenty years produced hybrids which challenged the established Darwinian view and offered the possibility of "acquired characteristics." The figure under the duvet is my son who at the time was dealing with his own "Irishness" in relation to others. While I was making work that was informed by the conditions of the place I live in this isn't indicated by any easy visual reference. At its heart I'd say the project was a rumination on choice and free-will. There is free-will but within certain limitations. Formally it was unresolved, but it was a contribution to the larger project and I have returned to the title as a starting point since then. The duvet/bed evokes an underworld or musing on the question that is the title, and I hope the title suggests the response "How much does it matter?"

**GG:** *The shelves: the shelves are a space on which to display worthy items whose clear function or aesthetics might be better put into the light; only archaeological remnants occupy those shelves, as encased artefacts in museums, objects have lost their agency and dust covers their loss of meaning.*

**CMF:** The language of shelving display is the language of dispassionate selection and organisation. It pretends to be neutral and purely functional in its presentation. Orders are proposed. Bakeries, bookshops and hardware stores in particular excel at display. Hardware stores, with apparatus suspended and objectified in sun protective bags like body parts. Bakeries, with food that seems to make better sculpture than food. So, what to present and how to present it? This seems to be at least 50% of the task. As Emmet Williams says in Spoerri's topography of chance "...did you ever hear about the artist who came to dinner and took the table with him when he left? Not only did he take it away, he hung it up and exhibited it as a work of art." The objects I select often reflect some aspect of the local culture and the idea of buying ready-made art from the shop next door is definitely appealing.

**GG:** *Can we then evoke an aesthetic dialogue, with Claes Oldenburg's The Store (1961) for instance, and possibly with Joseph Beuys' Working place of a scientist, artist (1961-67)?*





**Figure 4:** Conor McFeely. *Weatherman*. 2012-13. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

**CMF:** There is connection to art forms of that period and I would probably cite Paul Thek's technical reliquaries along with Beuys's displays. Thek's clinical arrangements of body parts and lumps of meat inside coloured perspex boxes predate so much art of the nineties. Thek's was a humanist response to much of the commercially finished works of Pop Art. It was a reminder that really nothing had changed, behind this American Dream we see so much of in Pop Art we are still made of the same fragile matter were always made of. Beuys is in the background of so much contemporary practice also. Oldenburg offers something of this and adds an absurdist dimension to his presentations. They can look like the dummy cakes thrown by clowns at a circus. With Thek it's always real and they invoke a very different world. There is reliquary in Drogheda Cathedral. It's the exhumed head of The Blessed Oliver Plunkett encased in a glass box and raised high for public viewing. He was the Archbishop of Armagh, executed in 1681 in England for promoting Catholicism. Thek's world like Beuys reaches back through history. The patina present in all these works plays a large part in our reception of them. I wonder how long this belief with the visceral can remain relevant. The future world of digital technology will probably render this pointless.



**Figure 5:** Conor McFeely. *Weatherman*. 2012-13. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

**GG:** *The sunglasses (figure 5): a protection from the sun, they give you a cool and relaxed vibe attuned to the surrounding ambiance; but there is no sun, in fact, you are in a basement, who knows why you are wearing sunglasses, and what you might be thinking about beneath them?*

**CMF:** Disguise and protection are all in there. The use of sunglasses in Northern Ireland is well documented and in the same way that baseball bats here weren't used for playing baseball sunglasses were not always about protecting eyes from the sun. In the mind of the person wearing them I think they make the wearer invisible. It's a form of self-delusion really. In a development of this I have recently started making some works that include the use of Ganzfeld goggles. The work addresses the idea of deprivation (partly sensory). These fit right over the eyeball to block all vision and light.

**GG:** *In the series of works made for Weatherman, the indecipherable figure with the sunglasses alludes to the 1960s revolutionary American groupuscule, which in turn dialogue with the historical situation in Northern Ireland in the late twentieth century. More broadly, it suggests a plot, some plot, being devised.*

**CMF:** They suggest plot and conspiracy. Glasses of course are a laughably inefficient means of disguise but they used to be very popular in Northern Ireland whether they were used during paramilitary funerals or displays. The Weathermen in my mind are a conflation. They are a fusion of hard drinking, pub philosophising conspirators who want to transform society through revolution. The nature of Pub culture in Ireland can be seen as a reaction to the weather, an escape from the rain and the half-light and a social centre with essential lubrication. The Weathermen in America of course were a radical left organisation pledged to overthrow the government. The work's title is a pointer to this as well as to a weatherman, someone whose job it is to examine patterns and predict the future. The implication in the work being that the Weatherman wearing the stethoscope is diagnosing conditions. These conditions are non-specific in terms of location. Our protagonist wearing the glasses and the shamrock on his forehead invokes for me the possibility of a suicide bomber with his last pint served up to him. The bogus "Ash Wednesday" mark on the forehead is a symbolic mark of faith and commitment. Dylan refers to the Weathermen in Subterranean Homesick Blues: "you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows."

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**Conor McFeely** was born in Derry N.Ireland, where he now lives and works. He has exhibited both nationally and internationally. His exhibitions include "Disclaimer", Orchard Gallery Derry 1997, (solo). "Ink Mathematics", The Mappin Gallery, Sheffield (solo). "Headfirst", OBG Gallery Belfast 2003, (solo). The British Art Show 5, Hayward Gallery London, touring Edinburgh, Southampton, Cardiff and Birmingham 2000-2001. "Small Steps, The Elipse Gallery, Washington DC, 2001. "Something Else", Contemporary Art from Ireland, touring Turku, Helsinki, Oulu, Joensuu Finland, 2003. "Hidden Dips" MCAC Portadown 2005 (solo). "Dogs Have No Religion" Czech Museum of Fine Art Prague, 2006. He is a recipient of The Curated Visual Arts Award 2007 (curated by Mike Nelson) resulting in two major solo shows of new work called "The Case of the Midwife Toad (*the unrepeatable experiment*)" in The Douglas Hyde Gallery Dublin 2007 and at Void, Derry 2008, and "The Testing Rooms/Smashing Forms" a site specific audio and video installation at The Maze Prison 2008. In May 2010 he had a major solo exhibition at The Ormeau Baths gallery in Belfast. He also received an AIR residency at NKD, Dale Norway working on the "Weathermen" project to be shown in 2012

and 2013. His practice incorporates a wide range of processes, from the ready –made to sculpture and installation as well as photography, video and audio. A fracturing and manipulation of ”material” in the service of finding new relationships is a chief characteristic of his practice. Often conceived as multi-layered in terms of their reading, many works have been driven by ruminations on the nature of individual free-will, choice and autonomy. Contexts and source material reflect interests in a history of counter culture, literature and social contexts. He also is a member of the Void Gallery curatorial board ([www.derryvoid.com/](http://www.derryvoid.com/)) and member of the board of Directors of the Context Gallery Derry ([www.contextgallery.co.uk/](http://www.contextgallery.co.uk/)).

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the Weathermen project, see Gabriel Gee: “Liquid, measure and history: notes on Conor McFeely’s Weathermen”, *Abridge 33* (2013)  
<[http://www.artlink.ie/uploads/2/3/4/1/23414114/weathermen\\_catalogue.pdf](http://www.artlink.ie/uploads/2/3/4/1/23414114/weathermen_catalogue.pdf)>



## Temporalities of Trauma in *Hatufim* and *Homeland*

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## INTRODUCTION

A man's head is held under the dirty water of a bathtub by two men whose faces cannot be seen. When he is hauled out, a third man asks in Arabic: "What's your name?" When the captured man answers "Amiel", the man shakes his head and the drowning starts again. This scene is constantly repeated as flashbacks and nightmares of the protagonist now called Yussuf in the Israeli television series *Hatufim*. It shows how the Israeli soldier Amiel was forced to convert to Islam during his captivity through waterboarding. In the American adaptation of this series, *Homeland*, the process of "turning" is also portrayed in flashbacks experienced by the main character, Brody, and is also associated with water. But rather than being tortured, we see Brody being welcomed by the alleged terrorist Abu Nazir with a bathtub full of water, in which Brody is able to take a warm bath, and then shaved smoothly afterwards by an unseen barber.

This paper discusses how trauma and its aftermath are represented in these two contemporary television series. The article departs from the assumption, as shared by most psychologists and scholars, that trauma escapes representation, and asks what forms it takes when represented in popular television series. I will argue that trauma is translated into a televisual language, which is expressed in modes of temporality. This assumption is based on the importance of temporality for television. Richard Dienst, Nam June Paik, Mary-Ann Doane, and others agree: "the fundamental concept and major category of television is time."<sup>1</sup> In its beginnings, television was merely transmitted and received in real time. For Raymond Williams, the processes of transmission and reception were even more important than the content, which is only parasitically;<sup>2</sup> this does not mean that it is secondary but that it is programmatic. Televisual simultaneous transmission is open-ended. For this reason it has to construct temporalities of viewing, a structure of flow, segmentation and repetition. It was Williams again who developed the term "flow" as a system of interruptions perceived as continuity,<sup>3</sup> while other authors stress the fragmentation of a continuous time.<sup>4</sup> For Mary-Ann Doane, "time is television's basis, its principle of structuration as well as its persistent reference."<sup>5</sup> She differentiates between the steady and continuous flow as a mode television deals with information, while crisis involves a temporal condensation. It names an event of some duration, which is startling and momentous precisely because it demands resolution within a limited period of time.<sup>6</sup> The time proper to catastrophe is cut off from any sense of analogical continuity; it is an "unexpected discontinuity in an otherwise continuous system."<sup>7</sup>

In a very similar way Avital Ronell writes that trauma halts the teleology of time. This disruption of continuity through trauma resembles the temporality of television: "[...] television stops the chronological clock which it also parallels in a fugitive clandestine and according to two modes of temporal assignment. Television stops time by interrupting its simulated chronology in the event of an event. [...] Television also stops the chronological clock by miming its regularity and predictability around the clock, running and rerunning the familiar foreignness of traumatic repetition."<sup>8</sup>

The same way a traumatic event enters the psyche "surprisingly" and suddenly from outside, as already argued by Sigmund Freud,<sup>9</sup> an "event" usually enters television from a place of exteriority. For Ronell and for Doane the emphasis of suddenness suggests that catastrophe is of temporal order.<sup>10</sup> "In its structural emphasis upon [...] rupture, it often seems that television itself is often formed on the model of catastrophe."<sup>11</sup> Due to the similarity between the sudden experience of trauma for the subject and the suddenness of

catastrophe or event in television, I will further follow this temporal mode. Beside suddenness, I will focus on belatedness and repetition. Repetition is not only the mode which structures the program formats and daily schedules, but it is how television reacts to traumatic catastrophes – think for instance of the recurring images after 9/11. Doane points out that “if Nick Browne is correct in suggesting that, through its alignment of its own schedule with the work day and the work week, ‘television helps produce and render ‘natural’ the logic and rhythm of the social order’, then catastrophe would represent that which cannot be contained with such an ordering of temporality. It would signal the return of the repressed.”<sup>12</sup> For Freud the repressed trauma also appears again as a compulsion to repeat.<sup>13</sup> These repetitions occur most often unconsciously in dreams or flashbacks – always belatedly.

For Ronell television repeats (reruns) traumatic repetitions. For her television is already connected to trauma because of its history: television was invented during the Second World War; however, “mass invasion of television occurred after the war [...] TV is not so much a beginning of something new, but is instead the residue of an unassimilable history.”<sup>14</sup> For this reason the history of television is comparable to a traumatic memory that cannot integrate into one’s experience and cannot communicate to others. “One problem with television is that it exists in trauma, or rather trauma is on television.”<sup>15</sup> Regarding Freud’s theory, this traumatic experience of history triggers “technological mutated flashbacks, involuntarily sudden repetitions of traumatic experiences.”<sup>16</sup>

“In its most general definition,” Cathy Caruth writes, “trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.”<sup>17</sup> Real victims and witnesses of trauma sometimes compare their hallucinations or flashbacks with film clips. The memory of trauma is not only belated but can often only be remembered as images, not in the symbolic form of language. For this reason a televisual or filmic language would be adequate to ‘translate’ trauma.

Susannah Radstone asks in her introduction to a special issue of the journal *Screen* whether there is a relation between screen media and trauma and whether trauma can revise theories considering the relations between fantasy, memory, temporality, and the subject.<sup>18</sup> She indicates that the term trauma has its roots in the nineteenth century and was developed in association with modernity, industrialization and electronic media. On the one hand, there have been refigurations of space and time by contemporary electronic technologies that only ‘trauma’ can describe, on the other hand television with its obsession for repetition and a culture of confession and witnessing may be an adequate medium to depict trauma.

Dori Laub, a psychoanalyst and founder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, writes about a Holocaust survivor who compares his memory with the movie *Apocalypse Now*. Traumatized individuals often have the impression that their own memory is like a movie that they watch from a distance. Because these experiences are “stored in a part of themselves, which seem to belong to someone else,” they build “psychic containers,” which are separated from other parts of the self.<sup>19</sup> The flashbacks are produced involuntarily and I would like to stress their similarities to film technology. Maureen Turim suggests that the temporality of trauma as a series of events and the subsequent flashbacks are strongly connected to modern technology, not only because of their seriality but also because flashbacks are abrupt, fragmented, and repetitive.<sup>20</sup> She assumes that “the cinematic presentation of the flashback affects [...] how audiences remember and how we describe those memories.”<sup>21</sup>

Subsequently, the question arises if memory in the context of media technology, called “media-memory” by Thomas Elsaesser,<sup>22</sup> always follows traumatic patterns and how

this relates to the non-representability of trauma. Is the subject's relation to history and memory under the medial dispositive of television 'necessarily traumatic' as Thomas Elsaesser suggests?<sup>23</sup> Especially the hiatus and interruptions question continuity, regardless of whether they are traumatic or non-traumatic, fictional or real. According to Ronell, "one problem with television is that it exists in trauma, or rather trauma is on television."<sup>24</sup>

It's true that television is the medium of traumatic events, from the latest tsunami to terrorist attacks to airplane crashes. But does this also mean that television is able to give us a better understanding of how people deal with trauma? Even though some professionals support a therapy for traumatized people where the patient is asked to visualize the traumatic event like a movie, a method German therapists call "Bildschirmtechnik," Caruth cautions against the integration of the trauma into narrative form because of the risk of losing the incomprehensibility of trauma. She interprets trauma in a deconstructive way, which means that the incomprehensibility of trauma questions rationality and linear history. Regarding history, written as a history of trauma, she writes for instance "that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence."<sup>25</sup> Trauma also questions the relation between reference and representation, because "mechanisms of consciousness and memory are temporally destroyed."<sup>26</sup> The breakdown of a sovereign consciousness and the fragmentation of rational conceived history question rational knowledge and self-mastery. "Obsessed with nightmares and the [...] truth of the traumatic impact, this view valorizes a whole series of features in the traumatic experience: the unthinkable, lack of witnessing, numbing, the unrepresentable, absence of narrative and failures in language."<sup>27</sup>

Kaplan and Wang question this approach of the incomprehensibility of trauma in the humanities and instead interpret it as a symptom of withdrawal from the social field, which is at risk of ignoring the possibilities of working through and provoking historical change. Kaplan and Wang refer to Dominick LaCapra's examination of the distinction between acting out and working through, and believe that working through is an attempt of a breakout, "not completely freeing oneself from trauma, but in facilitating the subject's freedom by offering a measure of critical purchase on problems and responsible control which would permit a desirable change."<sup>28</sup> Their effort stems from a narrowly therapeutic framework and a focus on a cultural traumatic memory rather than an individual memory to find a place for a critical responsible agency. This effort requires the possibility of a working through and symbolization of trauma. They argue in favor of trauma as a cultural phenomenon and to re-insert history in the psyche, therefore the question "to represent or not represent" marks the allegedly opposition between a therapeutic and deconstructive point of view and a social, cultural and political point of view.<sup>29</sup> For Kaplan and Wang it is more important not to forget and erase traumatic events connected to modern history, rather than finding the most adequate representation of trauma.

Aside from the analysis that the modern and postmodern experience is necessarily traumatic, I would like to follow the suspicion raised in Kaplan and Wang not only about the links between trauma, visual media and modernity, but especially in a global and multicultural context of transnational media. "Cultural memory is subjected to relentless erasure by the transnational media driven by the logic of commodity and consumption," they write. Furthermore, "[t]he transnational media, with their soap operas, talk shows, disaster stories, glamorous geography, and historical dramas, are erasing traumatic memories of oppression, violence, and injustice in both metropolitan centers and developing countries."<sup>30</sup> In the following sections, I will examine two examples of transnational media, the Israeli television series *Hatufim* and its American adaptation *Homeland*. In this reading I am particularly interested in two processes of translation: first the translation of trauma into a television



narrative, and, second, in the temporality and the translation of a media product into another medial, cultural and national context.

## BELATEDNESS IN *HATUFIM*

*Hatufim* is quite radical insofar as it deals with the unrepresentability of trauma. It tells the story of three Israeli soldiers who were held captive by Palestinians in Lebanon for seventeen years. The creator Gideon Raff said in an interview that he was indeed deeply interested in the real-life cases of returned prisoner's of war and did research in preparation for the show and also spoke to psychologists and former prisoners. His aim was to render the problems and trauma of these people more visible for the Israeli public.<sup>31</sup>

The series starts with the release of Nimrod (Yoram Toledano) and Uri (Ishai Golan), while the third soldier, Amiel (Assi Cohen), allegedly returns in a coffin. While the returnees are publically celebrated as heroes, they have great difficulties reintegrating into their family, social, and professional lives. Uri does not work at all and lives in his father's house, in his childhood room. In his absence, his fiancée has married his brother. Nimrod receives pocket money from his wife, Talia (Yael Abecassis), who waited for him but who also has problems to integrate him into her everyday life.

Given these circumstances, their lives does not seem heroic at all and the problems associated with their captivity don't stop with their release. Immediately after their release they are detained again ostensibly to attend a rehabilitation program but in fact they are interrogated by the IDF (Israel Defense Force). In this context they are forced to undress and are searched for traces of torture. Even though one of the agents claims to be a psychologist, he is very insensitive during the procedure: he simply asks which methods of torture caused which scars. In contrast to this interviewing technique in *Hatufim*, Dori Laub states that the "interviewer must participate from the beginning [...] He must offer himself as an object and must be prepared to be entirely present and prepared to participate in the task of experiencing. The interviewer must be within the traumatic experience even before the patient, where he has to wait for him patiently. Bearing witness happens in the form of dialogue as part of an interpersonal process."<sup>32</sup> The interviews with the POWs in *Hatufim*, however, don't have a therapeutic function. The interviewer is not interested in an interpersonal process; neither does he make any effort to participate in the traumatic experience.

Throughout the episodes, Uri and Nimrod do not talk about their experiences. Their silence is not untypical for trauma victims, but in the series it also has another function. To the audience it remains unclear whether they remain silent because they prefer to keep their experiences private, they don't remember, or they are trying to hide something. On the level of visual representation, however, the audience gets to see the content of their memory. The interviews are often interrupted by flashbacks, which mainly show the life and torture in prison. These short clips interrupt the continuous flow of the narrative.

I would like to briefly summarize some insights on the 'nature' of flashbacks in real psychic life in order to ask how they are related to film and television media technology. According to Freud, an event is traumatic if it overwhelms the energetic and homeostatic balance and cannot be integrated in the psychic system. Doane's definition of crisis and catastrophe in television resembles that of Freud, positing it as a disturbance and condensation of temporality in a continuous flow;<sup>33</sup> furthermore, Ronell's diagnosis that trauma, as well as television, "point to paradoxes of temporal complexities," confirms that

definition.<sup>34</sup> Insofar the different temporalities of television – flow and disturbance of flow through condensation of time – seem to be adequate to represent the temporal and energetic experience of trauma and *Hatufim* with its aim to represent the pain of the former POW's uses exactly these temporal techniques.

After the interrogations by the IDF, the former POWs are forced to recall and restate their memories. After the IDF discovers that there are inconsistencies in the respective stories of Nimrod and Uri, the IDF agent Iris spies on Uri under the false pretense that she is in love with him. During their private encounters she asks a lot of questions, but Uri's emotional life seems to be more occupied with his former fiancée and he does not volunteer much information. Nimrod's wife Talia, who suffers from her husband's nightmares and his silence, also urges him to speak and arranges a meeting with a support group for victims of torture, POWs, and their relatives. Nimrod refuses to do any of the things suggested to him. Meanwhile, another ex-wife of a POW in the support group tells Talia that the reason for his behavior is that POWs relive captivity within the family to destroy it and to break free. Examples of these psychological explanations in the series can be found on the narrative level, specifically in the gaps of memory, and the discontinuity of the traumatic experience that is maintained when the former prisoners continue to behave as in captivity, forget what they did last night, or have several breakdowns.

On the visual level, Nimrod and Uri's 'lost memory' is represented. The series is excessive in its use of flashbacks and these flashbacks lead the audience, not the characters, to the 'truth' that the prisoners indeed try to hide. Under torture, Nimrod and Uri were forced to beat up the third prisoner Amiel and Nimrod believes that he actually killed him. Even though this event is shown several times as a subjective flashback of Nimrod, there is one scene in which the flashback is presented from a non-subjective point-of-view. Uri and Nimrod receive a tape from the widow of a Mossad agent and listen to it together in a car. Only now, in this almost last scene of the first season, the POWs and the viewers are shown what really happened: Amiel wasn't beaten to death but woke up from unconsciousness after Nimrod left. For the POWs this tape is shocking: while Nimrod always wanted to keep his secret and has strong feelings of guilt and shame, it turns out that other people knew and they knew more than them. As a result, Nimrod and Uri's trust in their own private memory is destroyed because they have been under surveillance all along not only by their capturers but also by Israeli secret agencies.

The audience, too, is in the position to know more, even though in this scene the truth is revealed belatedly both for the POWs and the audience. Although it is never revealed to the audience if the captives spoke or confessed under torture and if their torture serves its supposed purpose, the flashbacks of the torture scenes guide the audience to some 'truth' and follow a narrative of suspense: with each scene we get more information about what 'really' happened during their captivity until all is fully revealed at the end of the season. The audience always knows more than the characters, for instance when the captives are lying. When Talia asks her husband if he was sexually abused in captivity, he says no, but we see a flashback of a rape-scene.

Thus, the purpose of torture scenes, which only belatedly show what happened, seems to fulfill the audience's voyeuristic and interrogative desire to find out the truth. Julie Carlson and Elisabeth Weber write in the introduction of their book: "long-standing linkages between torture and truth have been discredited."<sup>35</sup> Despite this claim, *Hatufim* connects torture to truth on another level. Most positions, including pragmatic ones, agree that torture does not get at the 'truth' or "prosecute suspects," but that its goal is to destroy the tortured victims.<sup>36</sup> In addition to the truth-finding, suspenseful process that is connected to the

torture scenes, *Hatufim* also shows the destructive character of torture. First, the scenes are repeated almost excessively, especially that of Amiel's death. This repetition does not only seem to serve a "cinematic (or televisual) pleasure in torture that follows a sadomasochistic game of alternating sovereignty or subordination," as Shafik points out but also reveals the incomprehensibility of torture – why both characters are unable to reintegrate into society, and remain stuck in patterns of repetition.<sup>37</sup>

At the end of the first season it turns out that what Nimrod, Uri, and the audience took for the truth, is wrong. These "false memories" show the constructive character of belatedness. Already Freud discusses in relation to the famous case of the 'Wolf Man' and the primal scene that imagined 'memories,' which project later incidents to the past or never took place can have the same impact as real 'memories.' This is true for the perception of traumatic events that have been repressed and are only remembered later; here the unconscious can just as well produce 'false' memories. Furthermore, the 'truth' that surfaces belatedly in *Hatufim* is not the real truth. Amiel wasn't beaten to death; he is still alive and lives as a Muslim in Lebanon where he fights on the side of his former torturer. In the very last scene of the first season we see – while Uri and Nimrod hear – that Jamal, the leader of the group that caught the three Israeli soldiers, approaches Amiel after the beating and that Amiel asks him for help.

The second season reveals the purpose of torture, not that of truth finding but that of destruction, annihilation and disappearance. It also shows a different dimension of belatedness: the birth of a second identity, which belatedly annihilates the former identity of the prisoner. Amiel says about his life that he was born twelve years ago, before he was nothing. Carlson and Weber quote Jean Améry, a survivor of Nazi death camps, who writes, "The true purpose of torture is to drive the victim 'beyond the border of death into nothingness.'"<sup>38</sup> The encounter with death under torture is what literally happens to Amiel: he crosses the border of death, he is officially pronounced dead and "his" body is buried in Israel while he watches his own funeral on television. Interestingly, in the series he is not portrayed as a walking dead, rather he describes his former life in Israel and his history retrospectively as "nothing." We never see flashbacks of Amiel before his virtual death and "resurrection," the memory of his former life seems to be completely erased. The "traumatic interruption of his self-presence" never seems to let him regain a self-presence, the "nothingness" after his death through tortures replaces his past and his memory ends with his 'baptism,' his forced conversion to Islam, which returns in his frequent nightmares.

The flashbacks of his 'baptism' serve a similar function of representing the 'truth,' while they also show another aspect of torture: the torturer as parental figure. The CIA torture 'manual' KUBARK says about the role of the interrogator:

In some lengthy interrogations, the interrogator may, by virtue of his role as the sole supplier of satisfaction and punishment, assume the stature and importance of a parental figure in the prisoner's feeling and thinking. [...] This ambivalence is the basis for guilt reactions, and if the interrogator nourishes these feelings, the guilt may be strong enough to influence the prisoner's behaviour.<sup>39</sup>

We never see flashbacks that show Amiel before he was 'turned', or rather, we see only flashbacks of the process of his 'turning.' For instance, there are repeated clips that show how Amiel is waterboarded while his mentor Jamal asks him for his name and expects to hear 'Yussuf', his new Arab name, instead of Amiel. Stephen Eisenmann writes that the practice of waterboarding, like "most forms of torture, is not [geared toward] the extraction of truthful testimony" but rather belongs to "emotional love approach" and has a quasi

religious meaning of “forced baptism” and moral suasion.<sup>40</sup> In Amiel’s case, this forced adult baptism makes total sense: he must agree to both his new name and his new religion. On the other hand, the “forced baptism” does not make sense in this Muslim context, because there is no baptism in Islam and the question of conversion to Islam is complex, as in Islam there is the belief that everyone is Muslim at birth. A later conversion would simply be a belated return to an original religion.

We see a belated temporality in *Hatufim* in many ways, the belatedness of the traumatic memory, the belated annihilation of a former identity through the traumatizing torture and the conversion to Islam, which is a belated return to a primal identity.

We see a belated temporality in *Hatufim* in two ways, the belatedness of the traumatic memory on the one side and the belated annihilation of a former identity through the traumatizing torture. On the screen this deferred temporality is represented through repeated flashbacks. Beside the belated time structure I pointed out the form of repetition in the recurring nightmares and compulsion to repeat the behavior in captivity. The repetitive temporality is even more obvious in the American adaptation of the series, *Homeland*.

## REPETITION AND DIFFERENCE IN *HOMELAND*

While the second season of the Israeli original was still in production, *Showtime* already began broadcasting the US adaptation of *Hatufim* as *Homeland* in 2011. The co-producers included Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa, who also ran the U.S. espionage-themed television drama *24* (nine seasons running from 2001-2010). The creator of *Hatufim*, Gideon Raff, was involved in the production, too. Even though *Hatufim* and *Homeland* are based on the same script, the plot and style are significantly different. With regard to genre and narrative alone, *Homeland* is a form of repetition and difference, in the sense of Linda Hutcheon’s definition of adaptation as “a repetition, but repetition without replication.”<sup>41</sup>

The process of adaption can be described as a form of translation from one cultural context to another; and this is even more important in the case of a transnational adaptation. Robert Stam claims “adaptations are inevitably inscribed in national settings.”<sup>42</sup> The transfer of a format from one nation to another is more than just the import of an idea into another cultural context. Yuri Lotman describes this transmission as a dialogue: “Dialogic reception and transmission happens in the relationships between units at all levels from genres to national cultures.”<sup>43</sup> Albert Moran proposes to use Lotman’s semiotic theory to analyze television format adaptations:

Lotman’s theory [...] particularly his notion of dialogue, offers [...] a dynamic view of the process of cultural exchange whether the exchange be that of program trade or format adaptation. Indeed [...] format adaptation is a kind of middle stage between text import and text export where the receiving culture is busy learning the new cultural language by developing its own version of textual models from the transmitting culture.<sup>44</sup>

I would argue that in regard to the topic of terrorist threats to the ‘homeland,’ its portrayal of the CIA trying to rescue and defend the nation, rather than mirroring *Hatufim*, *Homeland* is partly a continuation of *24*. The latter tells the story of a fictitious CTU (Counter Terrorist Unit), specifically of agent Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland), and their fight against ever-new terrorist threats, drug cartel activities, and conspiracies. Each 24-episode season covers 24 hours in the life of Bauer, using the real time method of narration. The terrorist



threats produce a permanent state of urgency that forces the agents to drastic measures, especially torture of suspects. The state of urgency is superimposed by a digital clock, accompanied by a pounding sound, which evokes the sound of a heartbeat. It elapses before the commercial breaks in the most suspenseful scenes. Slavoj Žižek critiques *24* for representing torture as a possible option in the fight against terror. He takes an ethical approach to the sense of urgency created in *24*. The tremendous time pressure of the events makes the suspension of moral standards seem necessary. Agents and terrorists operate in a sphere beyond the law and do “what has to be done” by sacrificing their own bodily integrity and that of others.<sup>45</sup>

Ethical considerations are at the heart of Ronell’s text about television.<sup>46</sup> Here, it is not simply the showing of images that Ronell marks as characteristic of television but rather the gap and the disturbance. Television’s compulsion to repeat the gap has ethical implications:

Among the things that TV has insisted upon, little is more prevalent than interruption or the hiatus for which it speaks and of which it is a part. The hiatus persists in a permanent state of urgency, whence the necessity of the series. The series, or seriature, extradites television to a mode of reading in which interruption insists, even it does so as an interrupted discourse whose aim is to recapture its own rupture.<sup>47</sup>

The interruptions in *24* frequently skip the scenes in which the victims of torture suffer the most. Although torture is explicitly shown, the moment of extreme pain is omitted. Thus, the inner reaction of the victim is rendered invisible and identification, empathy, and compassion become impossible. Exceptions are made in scenes where Jack Bauer is tortured, all of which are shown at full length.

Even though *Homeland* is not an adaptation of *24*, the series have some crucial aspects in common. The plot is embedded in the war against terror as well and one could read the figure of CIA agent Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes) as a continuation of Jack Bauer’s character, who suffers from the burden of his duty while Carrie suffers from bipolar disorder. But she is confronted with a kind of doppelgänger, the POW Nicholas Brody (Damian Lewis), who is found during a Delta Force raid in a prison in Iraq where he has been kept for seven years. Carrie is warned by an informant that a POW was turned by Al-Qaeda and she suspects that this POW is Brody. It is Carrie’s bipolarity and Brody’s double face, which brings psychological aspects into the series during the first two seasons. Instead of the repetitions of gaps and interruptions in *24*, *Homeland* gives the impression of a complete coverage and 24/7 surveillance, especially when Carrie factually monitors Brody’s activities through cameras she has installed in his house. As in *24*, the focus of the plot lies in the investigator’s life, while in *Hatufim* the focus rests entirely on the former prisoners. The prisoners are also portrayed differently. Brody is celebrated as a war hero, and, in comparison to his Israeli counterparts in *Hatufim*, he is able to fulfill this role. During his first public appearance, just after he steps on ‘American soil’ – a term which is used extensively in *Homeland* – again, he wears a uniform, there is a military parade, the vice president is present, and Brody gives a speech broadcasted on television. There seem to be no signs of weakness and lack of male virility, as Brody partakes in male rituals with his former partner, and, instead of ‘failing’ to have sex with his wife as Nimrod in *Hatufim*, he almost rapes her in the first night they reunite.

On the other hand, he, too, is immediately treated as a suspect: Carrie installs surveillance cameras in his house and observes him around the clock. From the very

beginning, the flashbacks of his time in captivity prove that he lies. On the occasion of his first interrogation, during which he does not have to undress but is ‘only’ questioned, Carrie asks him about the top terrorist Abu Nazir (Navid Neghaban), and, while Brody says that he was not in contact with Nazir, the audience sees images of Nazir giving Brody water. Brody also denies that he was with his former partner Thomas Walker (Chris Chalk), while we see in a flashback that it was apparently him who beat Walker to death, as Nimrod did allegedly to Amiel. After Abu Nazir forced Brody to beat his partner, he later comforts him after he breaks down crying. Abu Nazir seems to use the same method of punishment and comforting, carrot and stick as Jamal. Later it becomes clear that Brody does not only have feelings of love for Abu Nazir but also feelings of guilt: it turns out that his decision to work for Abu Nazir and his subsequent attack on the vice president were caused by the military operations of the United States itself, among them a drone attack that killed Abu Nazir’s son, with whom Brody had a deep relationship.

The juxtaposition between captivity and torture in his prison—where it is always dark and dirty and he himself is dirty and has a long dirty beard and hair— and his ‘rescue’ by Abu Nazir—where everything is bright, clean and full of fresh fruit—is highlighted even more than in *Hatufim* and becomes less associated with violence. In addition, the washing ritual before prayer is represented widely in *Homeland*. Islam becomes associated with enlightenment, peace, privacy and purity, while Christianity is tied to a restrained and controlling community, politics, and the military (as seen, for instance, at the memorial for Tom Walker, but also on other occasions, such as church visits where everyone seems to control everyone else). However, Islam is also connected to terrorism. Not only has Brody become a Muslim, he has also turned into a terrorist. The series has been criticized for its depiction of Muslims as terrorists. But in contrast to most shows that belong to the genre that Yvonne Tasker calls “terror TV,” in which political violence is often linked to Islam and people of Middle Eastern origin, the main suspect in *Homeland* is a white male war hero, although his conversion to Islam can be read as an indication of his terrorist activities. The category “Muslim” here is also associated with the characteristics mentioned above: purity, peace and privacy.

Even though the intention of *Homeland* and *24* is to show the patriotic battle against terrorism, I would argue that they present a mix of ‘terror TV’ in Tasker’s sense and ‘trauma TV’ in Ronell’s sense. Here is Tasker’s definition of terror TV:

The characteristic narrative and thematic elements of terror TV include the figuring of the United States as a nation under threat, personal bravery on the part of men and women operating in dangerous situations, deployment of racial and ethnic stereotypes alongside an evocation of the state itself as benignly multicultural, and a drive toward a somewhat perverse reassurance that the forces of the state can be relied on. The reassurance offered seems perverse for at least two reasons: first, because the heroic individuals represented are often viewed as at odds with authority, either in the form of their own agency or with other aspects of government; second, because reassurance seems to reside in a potentially disconcerting amalgamation of surveillance, forensics, and gadgetry, all of which work to keep the agencies dedicated to preserving homeland security informed about the movements of citizens and others. That “they” are watching seems intended as a source of both pleasure and reassurance. [...] Their capacity to witness and to manage trauma is itself reassuring because, it is implied, good people are watching. Thus, “the working-through and witnessing of trauma becomes itself a drama. In an extension of this reassuring authority, the necessity and virtue of state surveillance goes unquestioned in these shows.”<sup>48</sup>

While I agree with this definition in regard to *24* and, for the most part, *Homeland*, I question whether Tasker’s interpretation applies to the capacity to witness and to manage trauma as

reassuring authority, and the unquestioned acceptance of surveillance in *Homeland*.

It is interesting to note that Ronell's argument that television exists in trauma and trauma exists on television is connected to the aspect of surveillance. For Ronell, the medium of video surveillance is the site of the conscience and self-reflection of TV. While I cannot discuss this aspect of surveillance in all shows in further detail, I want to draw attention to some aspects of the surveillance scenes in *Homeland*. In *Hatufim* surveillance takes place mostly without video. But in *Homeland* video surveillance makes reference to our own voyeurism (for instance when Carrie observes Brody's private life and sexual activities) and to the discomfort of being observed, to the fact that we are at the same time both inside and outside and that television makes the home homely and *unheimlich* (un-homely or uncanny)<sup>49</sup> at the same time. The surveillance scenes in Brody's home make his home and activities uncanny, also his most innocent activities, "because the closed-circuit of surveillance can be only experienced in the mode of estrangement."<sup>50</sup> Ronell writes: "if TV has taught us anything, it is the impossibility of staying at home. In fact, the more local it gets, the more uncanny, not-at-home it appears,"<sup>51</sup> and this not-being-at-home is reflected by the POWs and partly by the character of Carrie. Perhaps this is what Raff meant when he said, the more local TV is, the more universal it becomes.<sup>52</sup>

What all the prisoners and torture victims in *Hatufim* and *Homeland* have in common is that they have lost their Heideggerian "Being-in-the-world," which Weber describes as "fundamental trust"<sup>53</sup> in relation what is lost because of torture and Heidegger calls a mental feature.<sup>54</sup> I have described how Uri and Nimrod have become unable to return to their former homes and loved ones, and how they are excluded even after their return.

This is even more the case for the 'traitors' Amiel and Brody. Weber writes about the treatment of 'confessing' torture victims as 'traitors' and how this perpetuates their expulsion from the world of the living. It "confirms how not only their bodies but also their minds and language have been turned into weapons against them."<sup>55</sup> In Brody's case he becomes a weapon against the US. As for Amiel, we don't learn much about what he does back in Israel, since he does not appear again until the very end of the second season, when we see flashbacks of his waterboarding and conversion again.

At the end of the third season of *Homeland*, Brody says he does not have a home anymore, and that he does not want to return to the US. In this season, he is a main suspect of an attack against the CIA and is publicly announced as such on television. With Carrie's help he flees to Venezuela where he is captured and tortured again. Thus, the third season is a repetition of the past. This time, however, Carrie believes that he is innocent. He gets rescued by the CIA again and works for them on a mission in Iran. But Brody is being celebrated as a hero who betrayed the US again, so the CIA wants him dead and sends a killer. When Carrie tries to rescue him one last time, he does not want to go with her. Brody does not want to leave because he has nowhere to go – the US is not an option anymore.

Other scenes show that for him 'home' is wherever he finds a group of Muslims, for example in Caracas, where he visits a mosque and takes a shower (the association between Islam and purity again) or when he meets Abu Nazir's widow in Teheran. Whenever he creates a home, it seems to be in a Muslim community, even though some of the members of this community reject him, while others celebrate him, for instance in Iran, where he is considered a hero. Thus, Brody is stuck in a pattern of being captured and rescued, celebrated and expelled and there does not seem to be a way out of this compulsion to repeat. Compulsion to repeat is a usual symptom of trauma, especially when the traumatic incident cannot be remembered or integrated into the everyday life, as in Brody's case.

Besides the fact that this portrayal of an American war hero is quite unusual, as well

as the circumstance that he is hanged in Iran at the end of the third season while *Homeland* continues, the series shows that for some the homeland is not a comfort-home, even for those who defend it. For Brody, the repetition of captivity, torture, turning, and turning again ends in his death, while in *Hatufim* it remains unclear if Amiel still works for the Palestinians. It is the seriality of the TV media format that allows these turns and open-ends. The longer a series proceeds, the less its plot is connected to its origins, both in the sense of 'the national original' and the 'home' where the story started, because the characters are spread around the world; in *Hatufim*, the fourth season takes place in Pakistan and the fifth in Germany. As Ronell suggests, TV is "about being-not-at-home, telling you that you are chained to the deracinating grid of being-in-the-world. [...] We miss being-at-home in the world, which never happened anyway, and missing home, Lacan associates, has everything to do with being sick of *homme*."<sup>56</sup>

The question arises what the loss of 'being-in-the-world' of the traumatized POWs has to do with the homesickness and the being-not-at-home of the audience. Television which is consumed at home has the special relation to the un-homely, because it let the outside in, it is a "window to the world." With the world it also permits the horrors of the world to enter in the news of accidents, wars, terrorism, and catastrophes. Series like *Homeland* and *Hatufim* show the other side of these catastrophes, how human beings deal with them, which may remind the audience of their own hidden memories, which are already strongly connected to television, for instance everyone remembers on which television screen she/he watched the incidents on 9/11. As Elsaesser already analyzed: we can't separate a trauma from mediality, the images itself have a traumatic effect based on a gap "between the (visual, somatic) impact of an event or image and the (media's) ability to make sense of it, in order to make it enter into the order of the comprehensible and translating it into discourse."<sup>57</sup>

One can ask if the temporalities of trauma, the fragmentation, urgency, belatedness, and compulsion to repeat are less an attempt to represent trauma authentically, but rather tell us about the subject's relation under the medial dispositive of television in regard to history and memory which is 'necessarily traumatic.' For this reason the fascination with trauma on television and the compulsion of the audience to see it again and again might be an attempt to comprehend the trauma members of the audience themselves experience through television.

The question of whether television provides a true or false understanding of trauma leads in the wrong direction, because trauma also suspends the categories of true and false.<sup>58</sup> Gideon Raff explains that his intention was indeed a better understanding of the trauma of former prisoners of war and how society deals with it. It is questionable if the more action-packed series *Homeland* intended to address the issue of trauma, or means to erase traumatic memories, as Kaplan and Wang suspect. The shift from a psychodrama to a thriller is not necessarily an indication that trauma is not being taken seriously, because, as Janet Walker points out, we find ample topics that deal with trauma in the action genre: "being kidnapped, being taken hostage, terrorist attack, torture, incarceration as prisoners of war."<sup>59</sup> All these traumatic events take place in both series, but it is interesting that in *Homeland*, although it is a transnational product itself, the series conducts transnational encounters as per se traumatic, especially for US-Americans. The series implies that a contact of US-Americans with the Middle East leaves the subject unable to return to Western society. Hutcheon writes that transcultural adaptations often mean changes in racial and gender politics.<sup>60</sup> In the process of a global adaptation there does not seem to be willingness for a dialogue with the 'other' culture. Rather, this encounter is portrayed traumatic itself. This might be a symptom



of the trauma of the audience situated in a globalized technological world, but it also strengthens the assumption that this circumstance has to be traumatic.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time: Theory After Television* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1994), 159.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken, 1974), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Television: Ontology as Ideology," in *Regarding Television*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983), 15-16.

<sup>5</sup> Mary-Ann Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 222.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>8</sup> Avital Ronell, "TraumaTV: Twelve Steps Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Ueber Reader: Selected Works of Avital Ronell*, ed. Diane Davis (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 85.

<sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Stracey, Vol. XVIII, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Ronell, "TraumaTV," 85.

<sup>11</sup> Doane, "Information," 229.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>13</sup> Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 34.

<sup>14</sup> Ronell, "TraumaTV," 66.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>17</sup> Cathy Caruth, "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History," *Yale French Studies*, No. 79, Literature and the Ethical Question (1991), 181.

<sup>18</sup> Susannah Radstone, "Trauma and Screen Studies: Opening the Debate," *Screen* 42/2 (Summer 2001), 189.

<sup>19</sup> Laub, "Erzählbarwerden," 31. [my translation]

<sup>20</sup> Maureen Turim, "The Trauma of History: Flashbacks Upon Flashbacks," *Screen* 42/2 (Summer 2001), 207.

<sup>21</sup> Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 5.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, "Postmodernism as Mourning Work," *Screen* 42/2 (Summer 2001), 198.

<sup>23</sup> Elsaesser, "Postmodernism," 198.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>25</sup> Caruth, "Unclaimed Experience," 187.

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- <sup>26</sup> Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 66.
- <sup>27</sup> E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang, "Introduction: From Traumatic Paralysis to the Force Field of Modernity," in *Trauma and Cinema. Cross-Cultural Explorations*, eds. E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 4.
- <sup>28</sup> Kaplan/ Wang, "Introduction," 6.
- <sup>29</sup> This is an opposition made up by Kaplan and Wang, which I would not necessarily follow. I would argue that a deconstructive view on trauma also includes a critical aim to subvert narrative teleological patterns.
- <sup>30</sup> Kaplan/ Wang, "Introduction," 11.
- <sup>31</sup> Gideon Raff in Studio Q. <http://blip.tv/q-tv/homeland-creator-gideon-raff-in-studio-q-6718544>. (last seen: April 2 2015)
- <sup>32</sup> Dori Laub, "Das Erzählbarwerden traumatischer Erfahrungen im Prozess des Zeugnissablegens," in *Folterbilder und – narrationen: Verhältnisse zwischen Fiktion und Wirklichkeit*, eds. Julia Bee, Reinhold, Johannes Kruse, and Elke Mühlleitner (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2013), 28. [my translation].
- <sup>33</sup> Doane, "Information," 223.
- <sup>34</sup> Ronell, "TraumaTV," 82.
- <sup>35</sup> Julie A. Carlson and Elisabeth Weber, "For the Humanities," in *Speaking about Torture*, ed. Julie A. Carlson and Elisabeth Weber (New York: Fordham University Press 2012), 3.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 4.
- <sup>37</sup> Viola Shafik, "Rituals of Hegemonic Masculinity, Cinema, Torture, and the Middle East" in *Speaking about Torture*, 164.
- <sup>38</sup> Carlson and Weber, "For the Humanities," 4.
- <sup>39</sup> Stephen F. Eisenmann, "Waterboarding: Political and Sacred Torture," in *Speaking About Torture*, 133.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London and New York: Routledge 2006), 7.
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- <sup>43</sup> Yuri Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (London: I.B. Taurus 1990), 144.
- <sup>44</sup> Albert Moran, *Copycat TV - Globalization, Program Formats and Cultural Identity* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1998), 173.
- <sup>45</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "The Depraved Heroes of 24 are the Himmlers of Hollywood," *The Guardian* (January 10th 2006) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2006/jan/10/usnews.comment>. (last seen: July 3rd 2015)
- <sup>46</sup> Ronell, "TraumaTV," 63-89.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., 68.
- <sup>48</sup> Yvonne Tasker, "Television Crime Drama and Homeland Security. From *Law & Order* to Terror TV in Cinema Journal," *The Journal of the Society for Cinema & Media Studies*, Summer 2012, 51, No. 4, 47.
- <sup>49</sup> The usual translation for the German word "unheimlich" is uncanny, while "unhomely" is the literal translation.
- <sup>50</sup> Ronell, "TraumaTV," 75.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 110.
- <sup>52</sup> Gideon Raff in Studio Q.
- <sup>53</sup> Elisabeth Weber, "Torture was the essence of National Socialism: Reading Jean Améry today," in *Speaking about Torture*, 92.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., 75.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid., 92.
- <sup>56</sup> Ronell, "TraumaTV," 110.
- <sup>57</sup> Elsaesser, "Postmodernism," 197.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., 199.
- <sup>59</sup> Janet Walker, "Trauma Cinema: False Memories and True Experience," *Screen*, Summer 2001, 42.2., 214.
- <sup>60</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 147.

## *Serious Games*

**Harun Farocki**

**Film Director, Screenwriter, and Media Artist**



*Serious Games I: Watson is Down*

Photo: "Serious Games 1, Watson is Down" © Harun Farocki 2010

Image Courtesy [www.farocki-film.de](http://www.farocki-film.de)



In the autumn of 2009, we filmed a drill at the Marine Corps Base 29 Palms in California. Four Marines sitting in a class represented the crew of a tank. They had laptops in front of them on which they steered their own vehicle and watched others in the unit being driven through a Computer-Animation-Landscape. The simulated Afghan is based on geographical data out of Afghanistan. A street in the computer landscape runs exactly as it would in the real Afghanistan; the same holds for every tree, the vegetation on the ground or the mountain ranges. The instructor places explosive devices and sets insurgents out in the area. A sniper shot the tank gunner, which we documented with the camera. When the tank drives over the fallow, it kicks up a dust tail. The more vegetation there is, the less dust. On the asphalt street, no dust. Even with all this attention to detail, death in the computer game is still something different than the real one.

Harun Farocki

*Serious Games II: Three Dead*

Photo: "Serious Games 2, Three Dead" © Harun Farocki 2010

Image Courtesy [www.farocki-film.de](http://www.farocki-film.de)



Again, in *29 Palms*, we embarked on an exercise with around 300 extras who represented both the Afghan and Iraqi population. A few dozen Marines were on guard and went out on patrol. The town where the maneuver was carried out was on a slight rising in the desert and its buildings were made from containers. It looked as though we had modeled reality on a computer animation.

Harun Farocki

(Translation by Judith Hayward)

*Serious Games III: Immersion*

Photo: "Serious Games 3, Immersion" © Harun Farocki 2010

Image Courtesy [www.farocki-film.de](http://www.farocki-film.de)



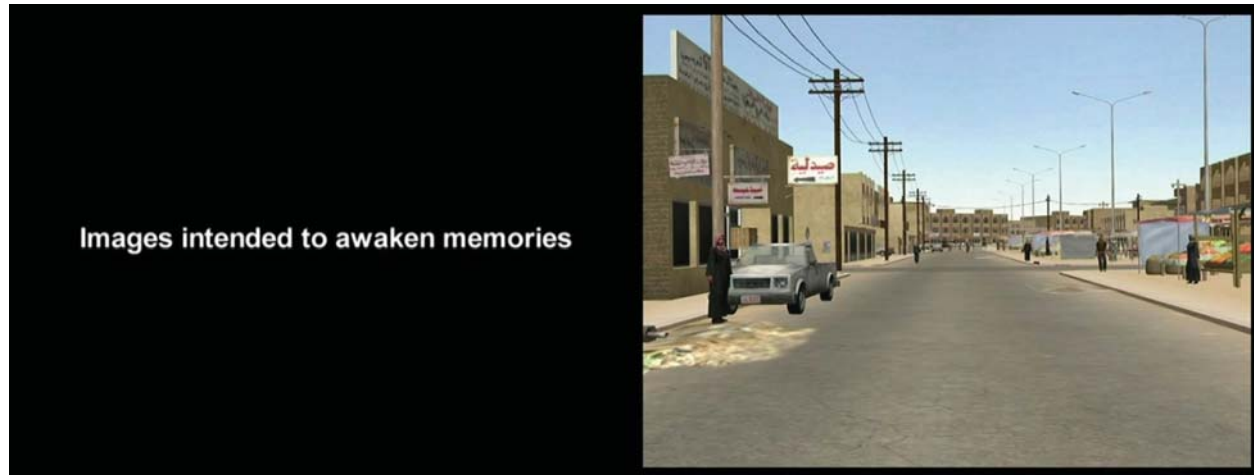
This installation puts the viewer squarely in the midst of current affairs, the war in Iraq. Eighteen years after the first Gulf War (1990/91), computer-generated game technology is not only employed on the battlefield, but also used for recruiting, training, and therapy for battle-scarred soldiers. It is the beginning, the middle, and the end of the violence of war. Never has war been so transparent, so tangible, so efficient or so virtual. Filming for *Immersion* took place at Fort Lewis, near Seattle, during a demonstration for therapists treating Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) sufferers. The event was organized by the designers of the technology now being used in Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy (VRET). The therapy consists of subjecting traumatized soldiers to the conditions of war once again, in a virtual reality. It is a kind of going back to the beginning – not only literally to the beginning of the military experience, starting with the recruiting game, but also back to the beginnings of a technology that was initially developed by the military, was subsequently taken over by game designers, and is now being sold back to the same military apparatus from which it originated. What we step into is an economic game, at the stage where the therapists seek a niche for themselves in a growing market. At the same time, *Immersion* is also a return to the role-play with which, for Farocki, it had all begun – the role play that has never been absent from his work.

Pieter van Bogaert, How to Live in a Game. *Harun Farocki's War Games*, in *Metropolis M*, <http://www.metropolism.com/magazine/2009-no5/harun-farocki-s-war-games/>.

*Serious Games IV: A Sun without Shadow*

Photo: "Serious Games 4, A Sun with no Shadow" © Harun Farocki 2010

Image Courtesy [www.farocki-film.de](http://www.farocki-film.de)



This chapter considers the fact that the pictures with which preparations were made for war are so very similar to the pictures with which war was evaluated afterward. But there is a difference: The program for commemorating traumatic experiences is somewhat cheaper. Nothing and no-one casts a shadow here.

Harun Farocki

(Translation by Judith Hayward)

### **Harun Farocki (1944-2014)**

January 9, 1944 born in Nový Jicin (Neutitschein), at that time Sudetengau, today Czech Republic. 1966 – 1968 Admission to the just opened Berlin Film Academy, DFFB. 1966 Marriage with Ursula Lefkes. 1968 Birth of the daughters Annabel Lee and Larissa Lu. 1974 – 1984 Author and editor of the magazine *Filmkritik*, Munich. 1998 – 1999 *Speaking about Godard / Von Godard sprechen*, New York / Berlin (Together with Kaja Silverman). 1993 – 1999 Visiting professor at the University of California, Berkeley. 2001 Marriage with Antje Ehmman. Since 1966 more than 100 productions for Television or Cinema: Children's TV, Documentary Films, Essay Films, Story Films. Since 1996 various solo – and group exhibitions in Museums and Galleries. 2007 with *Deep Play* participation at documenta 12. Since 2004 Visiting Professor, 2006 – 2011 full Professorship at the Academy of Art, Vienna. 2011 – 2014 longterm project *Labour in a Single Shot*, together with Antje Ehmman. July 30, 2014 died near Berlin.

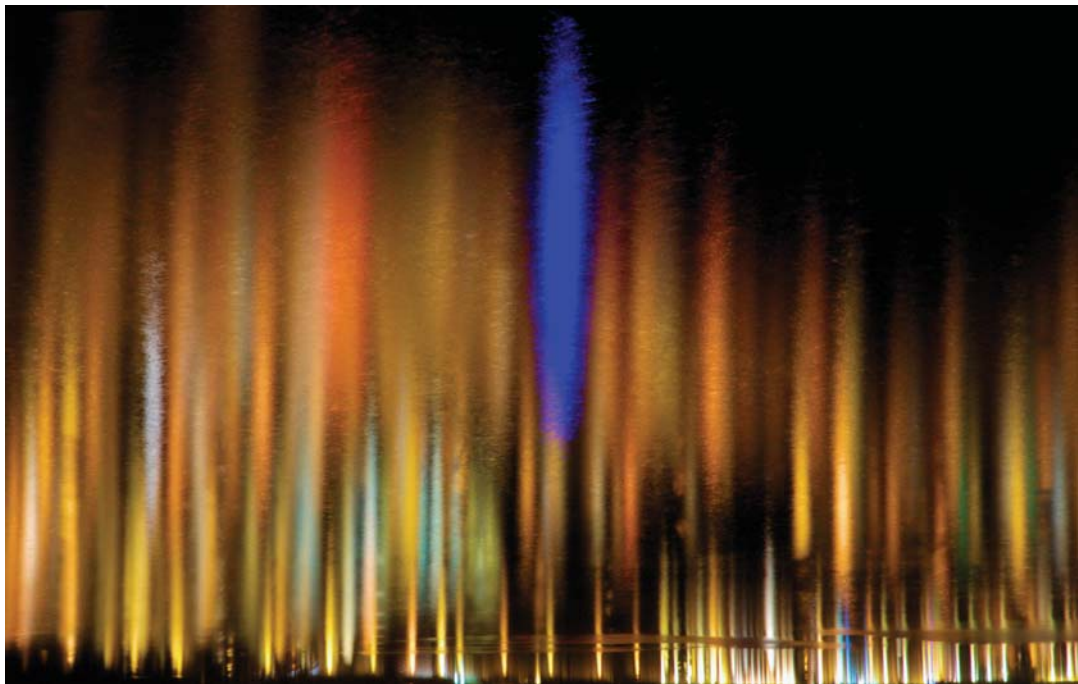
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# **'We Photograph Things To Drive Them Out of Our Minds': War, Vision, and the Decoding of Memory in the Photography of Iraq Veteran Russell Chapman**

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I am opening this article with two images without giving any details or captions. I would like you to scroll back up and take a good look at them on your screen, pause for a moment and record your stream of consciousness. This is not an exercise in visual analysis or rational examination but a moment to let yourself go in front of each image and write down the flow of words that surfaces in your mind within a minute's time – as disjointed, disassociated, or unpunctuated as this flow may be.

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The two images were taken in downtown Lugano in 2012 by the UK artist and former British soldier Russell Chapman. They are at the heart of this essay, which discusses processes of visual assimilation of traumatic encounters in photography, attempting to show the dynamics between visual intake and recollection when it comes to war. Perception during combat often is characterized by a temporal and spatial hypervision, where a soldier can spot minute details from a far distance. These details receive priority in the mental encoding of the experience and later surface in the form of disconnected flashes, which can occur in random and unexpected circumstances. Digital recording and manipulation technologies in both photography and film play a key role in the understanding of how vision functions during war and why the memory of it is so isolated. This essay departs from the sparks of memory that surfaced during processes of digital manipulation in the photography of Russell Chapman and then proceeds to consider them within the nature of combat vision. Vital examples from Kathryn Bigelow's academy-award winning film *The Hurt Locker* and stories from Phil Klay's acclaimed book *Redeployment* give further insight into the lived experience in Iraq, illustrating how war is recorded in sharp and disconnected fragments. Finally, the study draws on relevant research in neuropsychology that demonstrates the alteration of both consciousness and vision when exposed to stress. The fact that emotional arousal prioritizes object- and detail-focused vision at the expense of narrative and contextualization explains why the seeing, assimilating, and recalling of war happens in form of a visually acute, but disjointed piecemeal experience.

Russell Chapman is a Scottish-born photographer who served in the UK military in Bosnia, Africa, Afghanistan, and in Iraq. In 2013 he also embarked on a two-month documentary photography project to Syria and the refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey to record what was then still called a revolution. He has always been a photographer; he started to experiment with the camera at an early age and continued to explore the potentials of photography before and during his service in the military. He still works as a photographer.<sup>1</sup> Chapman took both pictures shown at the outset of this article in the summer of 2012, years after his service in the military had ended. Figure 1 is an image of Swiss architect Mario Botta's well-known building of the Banca del Gottardo in Lugano and Figure 2 is an abstracted detail of a high-dynamic-range (HDR) photograph that shows reflections in the water of Lake Lugano at night. Both seem 'benign:' one is a black-and-white representation of a piece of architecture and the other one an experimentation in form, color, and light. Originally, they were certainly intended as such; however, in the processes of digital manipulation of the original JPEGs that led to the abstraction of both representations, memories from the combat zone started to resurface in Chapman's mind.



Figure 1  
Russell Chapman, Untitled (Lugano 2012)  
Image courtesy of Russell Chapman



Figure 2  
Russell Chapman, Untitled (Lugano 2012)  
Image courtesy of Russell Chapman<sup>2</sup>

Returning to the stream of consciousness recording, I conducted the same exercise with a group of students in my “Visual Semiotics” course, using the two pictures. Just like you, the students had no idea about the artist, his story or when, where, how, and why these pictures were taken. When observing Banca del Gottardo (figure 1), the students wrote: “sky, empty, cold, dead, plateau, solitary, clones, concentration camp, Big Brother, deserted, unity, dismal, silence.” For the reflections (figure 2), they put down: “fireworks, light, storm, bombs, blind, disoriented, rocket, fire, warm, falling, pain, candles, singular, blur, memory, intense, passion, fighting, up, force.” Some of these terms, such as “fireworks, candles, and passion” for the reflections and “sky, cold, and solitary” for the Banca del Gottardo are to be expected; but “concentration camp” and “bomb” were startling at first.

Chapman took the shot of Banca del Gottardo (figure 1) in the early spring during the morning hours, a moment when downtown Lugano is still empty and quiet. The photograph could qualify as a portrait of modern architecture in the Southern Swiss context, however, there is an eerie quality that the viewer unconsciously picks up. The sensation is driven by the picture’s absence of life and the stark black-and-white contrast. There are no people, no cars, not even the trees have leaves. The monochrome rendition of the image enhances the feeling by forcing the play between sun and shadow and leaving little room for tonal gradations. For the spectator, there is nothing inviting or mind-easing about this photograph; it functions under the principle of exclusion, that is to not figure the precise content or references that are at the heart of conception of the work, which often is present in photography that is informed by traumatic events.<sup>3</sup> These visual dynamics explain the students’ associations of “empty, cold, dead, solitary, concentration camp.”

Chapman’s second image of the reflections of light in the water of Lake Lugano at night was taken a few months after the Banca del Gottardo. Again, our reaction goes beyond registering it as a visual experiment. Whereas the black-and-white photograph is quietly uncanny and gives us a creepy feeling, the color reflections come as an assault to the viewer – they present a threat: “storm, bombs, blind, disoriented, rocket, fire, force.” This reaction is in part provoked by a type of artificially achieved realism that the human mind is not accustomed to when looking at a photograph. As the human eye’s light sensitivity from dark to bright is about ten times superior to what a camera can capture, we are used to seeing photographs with a lower dynamic range than the way we perceive nature. Chapman’s photograph is a high-dynamic-range (HDR) photograph, which means that he put his camera on a tripod and took three identically framed shots of the same scene with three different shutter speeds. He thus obtained a bright, a medium, and a dark photo, and, in a software process on his computer, combined the three shots into a

single HDR picture. He then cropped the image, and, in a final stage, rotated it 180 degrees to turn it upside down.<sup>4</sup>

In both images the unsettling feeling that the viewer experiences does not come from their actual subject matter but is provoked by the outcome of the images' digital abstractions. What is most noteworthy is that the same is true for the photographer's perception. In conversations, Chapman revealed to me that in the shot of Banca del Gottardo, the memory from the war zone did not surface while framing or taking the picture. Only when he downloaded the JPEG and started to manipulate it digitally, turning it into a black-and-white picture and enhancing the contrast, flashes of abandoned and desolate locations in Afghanistan, where potential danger lurked behind each corner, came back. In the color photograph, the revelation is even more fascinating. Again, memory was not sparked in the process of taking the photographs; neither in the digital overlaying of the three individual shots or the cropping; this time it was in the final step, during the 180-degree rotation and thus concluding abstraction that images from the war resurfaced from the unconscious. The final image reminded him of "blood [seen] in searchlights" at night.

Long before the advent of Photoshop and digital manipulation, Walter Benjamin was aware of the potential of photography to unravel memory stored in the human optical unconscious. In his *Short History of Photography* of 1931, he comments on the potential of photography to unearth visual memory, triggered by a "spark" that initiates the unbinding of that memory:

In such a picture, that spark has, as it were, burned through the person in the image with reality, finding the indiscernible place in the condition of that long past minute, where the future is nesting, even today, so eloquently that we, looking back, can discover it. It is a different nature which speaks to the camera than [the one that] speaks to the eye: so different that in place of a space consciously woven together by a man on the spot there enters a space held together unconsciously [...] Photography makes such knowledge possible.<sup>5</sup>

I propose that the unbinding of the data that is unconsciously held together does not take place completely arbitrarily. Rather, in an unconscious, yet pressing desire to restore memory, the photographer targets a scene to put the process of unfolding into motion. Roland Barthes, in his final book *Camera Lucida*, cites a conversation on the matter between Gustav Janouch and Franz Kafka. Janouch claims that "[t]he necessary condition for an image is sight," to which Kafka smilingly replies: "We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds. My stories are a way of shutting my eyes."<sup>6</sup> Barthes brings the exchange into his discussion to stress silence as the necessary condition for a photograph to speak. He rejects "blustering photographs," such as the documentary photography of the seven years of civil war in Nicaragua that he takes up in some of the previous chapters.<sup>7</sup> He writes:

"Shutting your eyes is to make the image speak in silence. When things are spelled out clearly in detail, they lose the capacity to touch; when they are abstracted or taken out of context, they upset. The incapacity to name is a good symptom and indication of this disturbance: the effect is certain but unlocatable [...] it is acute yet muffled, it cries out in silence. Odd contradiction: a floating flash."<sup>8</sup>

I would be most curious to find out what you wrote in your stream of consciousness at the outset of reading this essay and if it has affinity to a "floating flash" that concerns memory of war. The flash provokes irritation without spelling out precisely what it is and where that disturbance comes from. It is present in a dormant state in the artist's mental space to be recorded and unbound through the camera lens; this may happen on purpose, it may also be an unconscious act. It may not receive a single figuration in the image but may result from a combination of interconnected elements.<sup>9</sup>

Chapman's photographs do not contain precise elements of the canonical iconography of 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare in the Middle East. There are no dusty checkpoints, inscrutable Arabs, humvees, hooded prisoners, or queasy torture scenes.<sup>10</sup> Their visual abstractions disturb the



viewer without being able to immediately pinpoint where that unsettling feeling comes from. The associations of “concentration camp” and “bombs, blind, disoriented” in the stream of the students’ consciousness thus are not far-fetched. They are examples of Benjamin’s “spark” and Barthes’ “floating flash,” the un-referential sign that creates a disquieting feeling without spelling out exact details. As an artist and soldier, Chapman is very aware of both the process of ‘driving out his memory’ and the power of abstraction in his photography. In another conversation, he related to me: “They come and go, my memories are not like a continuous film that runs on in my head but more like sparks in which I recognize forms that touch all of my senses. Photography does not mean to freeze what you just saw but more what you just felt when we venture into our past.”<sup>11</sup>

When Chapman returned from his documentary mission in Syria in the spring of 2013, I was interested in the things he drove out of his mind and in what happened to the floating flashes of his optical unconscious while seeing and recording war through the viewfinder of a lens. For me, the most compelling picture that came out of Syria is a black-and-white image, which Chapman subsequently titled *Silent Memorial* (figure 3); it is the only picture that received an immediate title in his Syria collection. He took the shot as he was diving out of a sniper alley and there is something incredibly powerful about the image: a pair of shoes, in the middle of a road, with nothing else around them. There are no people, no identifiable objects, not a single indication of (former) life other than a pair of abandoned boots. In its focus and lack of context, you can feel the history of the scene and you can sense the imminent danger of the situation – this is not just a pair of shoes that somebody dispensed of because they were no longer needed. The compelling absence, which results from the position of the shoes in conjunction with the desolate context, and the subsequent monochrome rendition, unsettles the viewer, similarly to the photograph of the Banca del Gottardo (figure 1). I asked Chapman about the story of the picture and why he recorded the scene: “It reminded me of my own experience, you know that somebody’s been killed, that’s why it stopped me.”



**Figure 3**  
Russell Chapman, *Silent Memorial* (Aleppo 2013)  
Image courtesy of Russell Chapman

‘Recording a scene’ in this case has a twofold implication: it is both the act of documenting a present moment with a technical device and the recalling of a past event or

emotion. For Chapman, it was a flash of combat memory that prompted him to stop in the middle of a sniper alley and to take a shot of the abandoned boots. A simple civilian would not have had the courage to pause in the middle of a sniper alley but there is more to *Silent Memorial* than pure bravery. The power that marks the image comes from the partial integration of a past flash into a present moment – it is a matter of assimilation. From the point of view of psychology, assimilation refers to one of the two ways to integrate schema-discrepant information;<sup>12</sup> in the context of photography with traumatic events at its roots, assimilation is similarly understood as an incomplete incorporation of a past moment into a present picture.

In his seminal essay on trauma and photography, Eric Rosenberg makes a claim that photography escapes the truth claim and can only be about assimilation: “If photography is about anything, it must be assimilation, and its failure [...] We photograph to assimilate; we are photographed to assimilate; others photograph or are photographed or photograph the other in order to assimilate.”<sup>13</sup> Photography is not ‘of’ something, it does not reproduce the world; it simply is a version of reality that no longer exists. Rosenberg claims that painting is painting; architecture is architecture; and film becomes a story. But photography, despite its apparent indexicality or truth claim, is not only what it presents. It is not a visual duplication of a real-time scene.<sup>14</sup> In its capacity to bind multiple dimensions that remain hidden to the eye while the shot is taken, photography offers the integration of trauma as a possibility. To the traumatized this means that the traumatic event always stands as a bound object outside of one’s state of world, and thus always is yet to be assimilated. One can also turn this around and claim that the world exists as an external object to a traumatized self. Either way, the partial integration of fragmented pieces is never complete and the spaces between stored-away memory, consciousness, and representation are never fully assembled into a semantic whole – both trauma and picture perpetually escape narrative closure.

Going back to *Silent Memorial* (figure 3), I would like to elaborate on memory as a flash and its assimilation. In addition to the power of the image and the courage of the artist, it is the precision of Chapman’s vision that is rather striking: “The boots were in good condition, still very serviceable, great boots, caterpillars, actually my size - but in a sniper alley and thus difficult to get to them,” he comments. This type of focus on the object and the gauging with respect to the boots’ size, condition, and type while being in life-threatening danger is a typical instance of a soldier’s hypervision as experienced during combat. Already in earlier conversations, the acuity of Chapman’s recollections surprised me. In the abstract photograph of the reflections (figure 2) it was “blood in searchlights at night;” in the black-and-white image of the Banca del Gottardo (figure 1) the recollection was “enemy behind the corner.”

The brevity of Chapman’s remarks – they literally are flashes – is remarkable. At first, I thought that I was not asking enough or the right questions in order to get a fuller story. But even in longer conversations there were no complete narratives or syntheses. From the literature on trauma and photography, we know that this is the nature of assimilation “and its failure” when it comes to trauma.<sup>15</sup> We know that traumatic memory and one’s world are never fully linked, that memory manifests itself in the most unexpected moments, and that its figurations do not necessarily correspond to “the hit,” the scenario of the original disturbance.<sup>16</sup> But this does not fully explain the precision of these flashes in both image and statement. Could this accuracy be linked to an actual mode of perception when it comes to seeing war from the inside?

Two brilliant examples may give further clarification of how a soldier visually records combat situations. Both Kathryn Bigelow’s academy award winning film *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and Phil Klay’s book *Redeployment* (2014) indicate a type of hypervision that is prompted by an alteration of consciousness under imminent threat. Both show a fragmentary experience of the visual world, in which the brain is completely absorbed by an individual scenario to then immediately make room for the next one. In these examples, combat is not experienced as a continuous film but more like a band of unlinked treads.

Despite its superhero aspirations and misrepresentations of the war in Iraq, *The Hurt Locker* offers an original attempt to portray what happens within a soldier's brain during combat.<sup>17</sup> It was written by Marc Boal, directed by Kathryn Bigelow, and shot in Jordan, a few miles from the Iraqi border. It captures the conditions of war in the Middle East, such as the sweltering heat, and the constant unknown whether you are facing friend or foe. It is told from the point of view of a three-man team of U.S. soldiers whose job is to find and dispose of IEDs (improvised explosive devices) in the streets of Baghdad during the blistering summer of 2004. Sergeant First Class William James, played by Jeremy Renner, is the soldier responsible for defusing the bombs, which come in the form of explosives planted in and above ground, and on and within human bodies. The film effectively takes the viewer into the combat zone, showing what it means to be exposed to constant and extreme danger.

The film received significant praise for its technology. Bigelow used extraordinary equipment to shoot the film: multiple Aaton S16mm cameras to capture multiple perspectives in documentary style, and a high-speed Phantom HD camera that can shoot 10,000 frames/second.<sup>18</sup> The latter was designed specifically to record the explosion scenes in order to convey to the audience the sense of both the blast and the over pressure, which is the expanding air that emanates from an explosion, considered as dangerous as the actual bomb. This machine makes the film not just another war movie. It records the explosions (they are real explosions, not digital simulations) in minute details; they are then given to the audience in super-slow motion, re-configuring time and spatiality in the depiction of warfare and violence. Some critics called this temporal slicing a "distancing effect," a gratuitous spectacle of grace and beauty on the stage of war that allows the director to stretch a little bit of nothing into a 131 minute movie.<sup>19</sup> I would propose that Bigelow actually captured the human side, the existential truth of seeing war from the inside.<sup>20</sup>

The much-quoted opening scene jumps right into the streets of Baghdad, where Sergeants Thompson, Sandborn, and Eldridge are attempting to disassemble a bomb.<sup>21</sup> Thompson, played by Guy Pearce, is wearing the protective bomb suit and advances towards the explosive; he picks up the device, puts it back down, and walks away. Sandborn and Eldridge stay back to keep an eye on the situation. Movement in a butcher shop about 25 meters away ticks Eldridge off; he picks up his Carbine, and, through the viewfinder, sees the butcher holding a cell phone in his hands. He alerts Sandborn and shouts at the butcher to put down the phone. The butcher signals that he just wants to make a call but Eldridge does not trust the friendly gesture and the film picks up speed. Eldridge frantically keeps on shouting at the butcher to drop the cell, Sandborn yells to clear the area, and Thompson starts to run. Both Eldridge and Sandborn then take to the butcher but he escapes their sight lines. They cannot take the shot; the butcher dials a number and sets off the bomb.

As soon as the bomb is ignited, the film switches to super slow motion. Thompson is shown in front of the explosion set off by the device, running to escape the detonation. Smoke is rising from the explosion but what is more startling is the cinematography of the effect of the over pressure. You see minute pebbles of gravel rising from the road and tiny particles of car rust detaching from an abandoned vehicle. The scenes then go back and forth between the fine gravel and rust shooting up and Thompson moving. The few seconds seem to last forever and the sequence ends – still in super slow motion – with Thompson falling lifelessly to the ground. He died in the explosion and in the film is subsequently replaced by James (Jeremy Renner).<sup>22</sup> The super slow motion allows the viewer to see the explosion in almost microscopic vision. The effect is repeated in a different scene, when Sandborn is placed as a sniper to eliminate a suspicious target from a far distance. Once he has taken the shot, we see the cartridge case ever so slowly tumble to the ground, sparking off bits of dust, to bounce back and gradually rotate up in the air.<sup>23</sup> This temporal slicing makes you hold your breath, adding suspension to the film's already tense content. Bigelow effectively underscored the temporal fragmentation with the film's music, where every touchdown of the cartridge case is marked by an individual (heart) beat.

In his acclaimed book *Redeployment*, Phil Klay, an ex-marine who served in Iraq, verbally relates the same type of overdrive recording of visual data and slow, piecemeal experience of life, which Bigelow so brilliantly captured through the Phantom camera.<sup>24</sup> Klay's stories are precise strikes to the heart, mapping the conflict in the Middle East from the point of view of emotional casualty: "Klay succeeds brilliantly, capturing on an intimate scale the ways in which the war in Iraq evoked a unique array of emotion, predicament and heartbreak. In Klay's hands, Iraq comes across not merely as a theater of war but as a laboratory for the human condition in extremis."<sup>25</sup> The first chapter is told by a soldier who just returned home from a tour. Prompted by a feeling of disconnection to the American world of shopping, his memory returns to Iraq. Thinking of both, he differentiates between three modes of color-coded existence, white, orange and red, which illustrate the mental constitution of soldiers in the combat zone: *white* is the state of "normal" human beings who just go about their daily life and casually take in the world; *orange* is a state of constant alert, marked by an overdrive recording of visual details; and *red* symbolizes collapse. He describes his own eagle-eye-sight as an outcome of the orange mode (ironically while shopping at American Eagle Outfitters):

Outside there are people walking around by the windows like it's no big deal. People who have no idea where Fallujah is, where three members of your platoon died. People who've spent their whole lives at white.

They'll never even get close to orange. You can't, until the first time you're in a firefight, or the first time an IED goes off that you missed, and you realize that everybody's life, everybody's, depends on you not fucking up. And you depend on them.

Some guys go straight to red. They stay like that for a while and then they crash, go down past white, down to whatever is lower than "I don't fucking care if I die." Most everybody else stays orange, all the time.

Here's what orange is. You don't see or hear like you used to. Your brain chemistry changes. You take in every piece of the environment, everything. I could spot a dime in the street twenty yards away. I had antennae out that stretched down the block. It's hard to even remember exactly what that felt like. I think you take in too much information to store so you just forget, free up brain space to take in everything about the next moment that might keep you alive. And then you forget that moment, too, and focus on the next. And the next. And the next. For seven months. [...] It'll be a long fucking time before you get down to white.<sup>26</sup>

"Your brain chemistry changes" is an intuitive observation with respect to the alteration of consciousness and perception when exposed to danger. It is fair to assume that sustained exposure to known and unknown peril alters a soldier's cognition, which may be related to the way war is taken in visually. Studies in neurophysiology and neuropsychology have investigated the impact of emotion on perceptual processes and found that arousal and stress definitely have an impact on visual perception.<sup>27</sup> A study by Mara Mather and Matthew R. Sutherland suggests that emotional arousal affects representation of whatever has the highest priority and impairs representations of stimuli that are of lower importance.<sup>28</sup> When it comes to the encoding and memory of prioritized stimuli, emotion can enhance memory for details of the most prominent item in a scene; in other words, what receives priority during perception, may later be remembered in greater detail. When arousal is due to negative prompts, detail memory is again enhanced at the expense of telling a complete story, as negative emotion enhances perception but inhibits narrative processing.

In the movie, Eldridge spotted the small cell phone in the butcher's hands from 25 meters away; the Iraq soldier in Klay's book relates that he could spot "a dime in the street twenty yards away;" and, in Syria, Chapman recognized the size and type of the boots while diving out of a sniper alley. This optic precision may be explained by Mather and Sutherland's research, which proposes that arousal (whether elicited by external stimuli, internal thoughts, or stress hormones) modulates the strength of competing mental representations. Mather and Sutherland call it "arousal-biased competition in perception and memory" (ABC) and their theory possibly



explains the hypervision and precise memory flashes as portrayed in these examples and further examples related by combat veterans from Iraq. ABC suggests that the combination of “top-down” factors, such as goals-specific, visual searching, as well as knowledge and expectations drive perception. Applied to warfare, it makes sense to assume that a soldier in the field is trained to prioritize his or her visual world, that is to look for suspicious cues, such as cell phones, wires, or any other elements that could make up and spark off an IED. When the kind of “top-down” looking as proposed by the ABC theory takes place under conditions of stress, the visual intake of goal-relevant information receives an even higher priority. Emotion (stress) is the key factor, as emotionally arousing stimuli themselves have high priority, even when they are not goal-relevant.<sup>29</sup>

This priority focusing may account for the eagle-eye-sight as reported by soldiers and brilliantly portrayed in Bigelow’s super-slow-motion explosions. But how are the precise, fragmented memory flashes to be explained when it comes to remembering the combat zone? Mather and Sutherland’s ABC theory posits that arousal makes it more difficult to keep track of multiple items. “Having multiple high priority representations competing with each other can lead to overall suppression [...]. ABC theory predicts that arousal increases such mutual inhibitory effects. To maintain multiple representations in working memory, one must continuously cycle through them to ensure that each one remains active.”<sup>30</sup> Seeing the world in piecemeal components is driven by the necessity to “cycle” through individual representations when under stress, as vision prioritizes the focus on single objects/items. This “cycling” is what the soldier in Klay’s book so vividly described: “I think you take in too much information to store so you just forget, free up brain space to take in everything about the next moment that might keep you alive. And then you forget that moment, too, and focus on the next. And the next. And the next.” In Bigelow’s film, the mental rotation is reproduced in the opening scene, which effectively switches back and forth between images showing pebbles rising from the ground and particles of rust detaching from the car.

The prioritizing of objects in focus and the mental cycling or targeted vision may also account for Chapman’s statement that “my memories are not like a continuous film that runs on in my head but more like sparks.” But there is more to it. Emotional arousal enhances the representation of whatever has the highest priority, and, when there is competing information, representations need to successively be replaced in a continuous sequence. Within a prioritized representation, however, there is further concentration. This is called the “weapon focus effect” and describes that the presence of a weapon reduces eyewitness identification of the perpetrator.<sup>31</sup> When under threat, memory for the central detail is increased at the cost of peripheral detail. Emotionally provocative items, as faced in high-risk situations, have high priority and amplify this effect. Due to the competition of mental resources, they are also “bound” or encoded in memory with the same, high priority. If the subject receives an emotionally charged stimulus again after the encoding of the previous scene, the memory for the already stored scene is amplified at the expense of peripheral details: “[...] postencoding arousal enhances memory for emotional items but impairs or does not affect memory for neutral items.”<sup>32</sup> When the arousal is caused by a negative emotion, there is yet another dimension to memory, which again drives its fragmentation. Positive stimuli promote narrative, as the encoding of positive items is associated with greater activation in brain regions associated with semantic or conceptual processing. Negative items, on the other hand, recruit brain regions involved in sensory processing. They slow down the semantic processing but not the perceptual processing.<sup>33</sup> In other words, perception under negative stress inhibits narrative memory but enhances visual take-in and the remembering of details.

I realize that Mather and Sutherland’s ABC theory cannot solely account for the fragmentation of memory in the wake of trauma. However, it gives the first-hand accounts from soldiers when it comes to the visual experience and recollection of war a scientific underpinning. The literature concerned with the modes of representation of traumatic content in photography

has been very much concerned with assimilation and its figures, that is the manifestations, forms, and abstractions of traumatic content. It is true that photography offers an added dimension to the understanding of such processes due to its capacity to record more than the eye can take in at the moment of capture. The image holds further, unarticulated dimensions or non-referential signs, which may be decoded in the viewing process by the photographer or simply “felt” by the external viewer of the picture. Digital manipulation technologies, such as employed by Chapman in the two pictures featured at the beginning of this essay, provide further means to access the “unconsciously bound space” of which Walter Benjamin was intuitively aware already in 1931. Putting art, philosophy, technology, and scientific psychology adjacent to each other, a ‘picture’ emerges that explains the “floating flash” as an outcome of perceptual processes and their encoding in memory.

Having gone through the cycle of explanation from photography to technology to scientific psychology, Chapman’s pictures can never be simple experimentations with digital manipulations – if that ever was possible in the first place is questionable to begin with. I was drawn to them, because of a tension resulting from representation and abstraction. Fragmentation and abstraction here do not speak of a metaphysical purification of form or a fascination with the flat surface. The images speak of what Briony Fer, based on the writings of Georges Bataille, saw as a manifestation of psychoanalytic notions, such as loss and trauma.<sup>34</sup> Once you know that the image recalls “blood in searchlights”, you can never go back to just see reflections in the water at night – maybe reflections in the water will never be seen as charming optical phenomena once your mind invested them with the knowledge of trauma memory, even if it is not your own. The abstract image is not political in the sense that seeing equals identifying.

The question remains where trauma exactly resides in the image. To the viewer, trauma resides in the transitional space between image and the knowledge of the facts, experiences, emotions, and associations that informed the conception of the image. Explanation and interpretation shape the content of representation. To the veteran artist, trauma exists in the recognition of the floating flash and the unbinding of the unconscious space – the place where perception is encoded, stored, but not (yet) given a name or reference. The stimulating aspect about research in trauma studies is that it is never finished or conclusive. Technological innovations in both art and science will make further contributions to the understanding of how vision functions, how it is bound when it comes to witnessing emotionally charged situations. But even if the flash is not deciphered and decoded, it is very much present – seen and felt.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://russellchapman.wordpress.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Russell Chapman’s photograph of the reflections has been influential for my own photography and inspired my pictures that became the masthead of *intervalla*’s website.

<sup>3</sup> Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> I have been fascinated with the photograph from the moment I saw it, to the point that I tried to re-create the experience in my own photography. The masthead photograph of the “intervalla” website is inspired by Chapman’s reflections and an acknowledgement of his work.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, “A Short History of Photography,” *Screen* 13/1 (1972): 5-26.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. R. Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 53.

<sup>7</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Chapter 9.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 55.

<sup>9</sup> By not articulating the irritation in a precise, figural representation, the encounter with the original disturbance, i.e. war, remains a “first” encounter for the viewer and thus carries the potential for a secondary “missed encounter.” See Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*, Chapter 3: “Secondary Witnessing and the Holocaust,” especially the section “An Experience Remains a “First,” 90-93.

<sup>10</sup> Regarding the iconography of warfare in the Middle East, see Robert Luckhurst, “In War Times: Fictionalizing Iraq,” *Contemporary Literature* 53/4 (Winter 2012), 717.

<sup>11</sup> For a scholarly source on the non-sequential surfacing of trauma-informed memory, see M.J. Larrabee, "The Time of Trauma: Husserl's Phenomenology and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," *Human Studies* 18/4 (October 1995): 351-366.

<sup>12</sup> See Julia König's essay in this volume.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Rosenberg, "Walker Evan's Depression and the Trauma of Photography," in *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, ed. L. Saltzman and E. Rosenberg (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), 31.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs," *Nordicom Review* 5, no.1/2 (September 2004), 41.

<sup>15</sup> "There is no reconciliation of opposites, contradictions, do not find rest in a superior synthesis. Rather they stick together in a growing tension, in a choice that is at once a choice of exclusion and a choice of contrariety." Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln, 1995), 68, quoted in Rosenberg, "Walker Evan's Depression and the Trauma of Photography," 32.

<sup>16</sup> Regarding the discussion of the "hit," the disaster that causes disruption and provokes the "missed encounter" with the actual event, see Gene Ray, *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11* (New York, 2005), Introduction: "The Hit."

<sup>17</sup> On the misrepresentations, see James Naremore, "Films of the Year, 2009," *Film Quarterly* 63/4 (Summer 2010), 18-32.

<sup>18</sup> Joshua Clover, "Allegory Bomb," *Film Quarterly* 63/2 (Winter 2009), 9.

<sup>19</sup> Nick Dager, "Shooting Hurt Locker," Digital Cinema Report (2 December 2010).

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<sup>20</sup> See also Robert Sklar, Review "The Hurt Locker," *Cinéaste* 35/1 (Winter 2009), 55-56.

<sup>21</sup> Renner, Jeremy, Ralph Fiennes, Kathryn Bigelow, Mark Boal, Nicolas Chartier, Greg Shapiro, Anthony Mackie, et al., *The Hurt Locker*. [Santa Monica, Calif.]: Distributed in Canada by Maple Pictures, 2010, at 0:07:30.

<sup>22</sup> *The Hurt Locker*, at 0:09:05.

<sup>23</sup> *The Hurt Locker*, at 1:00:38.

<sup>24</sup> Phil Klay, *Redeployment* (New York: 2014). The book won the 2014 National Book Award for Fiction, and the National Book Critics Circle's 2014 John Leonard award given for a best first book in any genre. When Klay graduated from Dartmouth College he joined the US Marine Corps and served in Iraq's Anbar Province and from 2007-2008 as a Public Affairs Officer. After being discharged, he received an MFA from Hunter College.

<sup>25</sup> Dexter Filkins, "The Long Road Home," *The New York Times*, 9 March 2014 (Sunday Book Review), BR 1. (Dexter Filkins is a former Baghdad correspondent for *The Times*)

<sup>26</sup> Phil Klay, *Redeployment*, 12-13.

<sup>27</sup> Particularly interesting studies with respect to the impact of a threatening situation on perception are the following (listed chronologically): Elizabeth A. Phelps, Sam Ling, Marisa Carrasco, "Emotion Facilitates Perception and Potentiates the Perceptual Benefits of Attention," *Psychological Science* 17/4 (April, 2006): 292-299; Mara Mather, "Emotional Arousal and Memory Binding: An Object-based Framework," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 2/1 (March 2007), 33-52; Elizabeth A. Phelps and Tali Sharot, "How (And Why) Emotion Enhances the Subjective Sense of Recollection," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 17/2, The Interface between Neuroscience and Psychological Science (April, 2008): 147-152; Bruno R. Bocanegra and René Zeelenberg, "Emotion Improves and Impairs Early Vision," *Psychological Science* 20/6 (June 2009), 707-13; Bruno R. Bocanegra and René Zeelenberg, "Emotion-Induced Trade-Offs in Spatiotemporal Vision," *Journal of Experimental Psychology General* (March 2011), 272-282; Mara Mather and Matthew R. Sutherland, "Arousal-Biased Competition in Perception and Memory," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6(2) (2011), 114-133.

<sup>28</sup> Mather and Sutherland, "Arousal-Biased Competition in Perception and Memory," 114-133.

<sup>29</sup> Mather and Sutherland, "Arousal-Biased Competition," 120.

<sup>30</sup> Mather and Sutherland, "Arousal-Biased Competition," 121.

<sup>31</sup> Mather and Sutherland, "Arousal-Biased Competition," 122.

<sup>32</sup> Mather and Sutherland, "Arousal-Biased Competition," 121.

<sup>33</sup> Mather and Sutherland, "Arousal-Biased Competition," 127. Mather and Sutherland's discussion of the ABC theory seems to be congruent with what the soldiers themselves report when returning from the combat zone. Another study by Bruno Bocanegra and René Zeelenberg, however, discusses experiments that showed that, in a threatening context, interchannel interactions between magnocellular and parvocellular channels alter perceptual phenomena. Parvocellular channels have smaller receptive fields selective for fine-grained HSF (high spatial frequency) stimuli at high luminance contrast, whereas magnocellular channels have larger receptive fields selective for coarse LSF (low spatial frequency) stimuli at low contrast. Apart from their differences in spatial receptive fields, magno- and parvocellular channels can also be differentiated in terms of their temporal response properties. Parvo cells exhibit slower and sustained responses compared with magno cells, which show fast and transient responses. Essentially, under threat perception is faster, as emotion facilitates fast temporal features that are more relevant for survival, but perception is also coarser, as speed happens at the expense of detail. Mather and Sutherland, "Arousal-Biased Competition," 128, n.1, address the research and conclude that more work is needed to clarify the issue. See



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Bruno R. Bocanegra and René Zeelenberg, “Emotion Improves and Impairs Early Vision,” *Psychological Science* 20/6 (June 2009), 707-13; Bruno R. Bocanegra and René Zeelenberg, “Emotion-Induced Trade-Offs in Spatiotemporal Vision,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology General* (March 2011), 272-282.

<sup>34</sup> Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art* (Yale, 2000).

## *The Sign*

**Atyaf Rasheed**  
**Playwright**

**CAST OF CHARACTERS**

The First

The Second

The military voice (offstage)

**TIME**

Present day

**SETTING**

The crossroads. The stage is empty except for the two characters.

**ACT ONE**

The Second: I am utterly fed up.

The First: There is no place for boredom; death besieges us.

The Second: What can we do? Run?

The First: It does not leave us. It does not leave us at all.

The Second: You said that you were running?

The First: How can I run when the space is too small to escape?

The Second: Well, it will chase you wherever you go. Death does not leave anybody.

The First: I love to be here with everything, with all people, including my enemies or even those who hate me.

The Second: Then why were you running?

The First: I was a few meters away from the car that exploded, and I did not feel anything, only that my feet were trying to follow the light before it was obscured by the smoke.

The Second: To where?

The First: When I went away from the explosion, the explosion and the smoke continued to follow me.

The Second: These were long moments.

The First: Yes, it was truly like this, moments were years full of fear and disappointments.

The Second: The years were long indeed, and I remember them. They are still long.

The First: The details are numerous and dense, heavy and bitter. They passed with all the heaviness at that moment.

The Second: The main thing is that they have passed.

The First: I did not know if I was escaping from the fire or whether I was following it as it faded in front of me.

The Second: How so?

The First: Did I want to catch something in front of me before I lost it? Were these years motivating me to escape? I felt the sun brighten suddenly, then concentrate its rays on my face and pull me toward it.

The Second: So, you were saved.

The First: Was I saved? I do not know, I was breathing with difficulty. When I was far away, I looked back. Fire was a red dome covering everything, and suddenly...

The Second: What happened?

The First: Someone emerged out of the fire and smoke.

The Second: Who?

The First: A little girl.

The Second: Did you see her?

The First: Yes, she emerged from the depth of fire and smoke.

Her face was colored with horror and ash, and her braids, without their ribbons, were loose. Her gaze penetrated me.

(The sound of army cars, sirens, and chaos. The First and the Second are motionless throughout this.)

The military voice offstage: Please, all stop for inspection. Please stop for inspection. Open the windows of the car, open the boot, turn on the internal light, come out of the car, show proof of your identity. Show respect to be respected.

The Second: Were you far away from her?

The First: Yes, I was far away and she was in the heart of an ash storm.

The Second: Is it true? How did the little girl come out alive from the explosion? Did you know her?

The First: No, but she...

The Second: What?

The First: Don't you think that she was beautiful even in that state – that her eyes radiated with waves of tenderness?

The Second: You returned to her, didn't you?

The First: Yes, I returned to her. She seemed alone and I wanted to save her. I wanted to carry her far away. I returned to her and ran toward the fire, but the closer I came, the farther she went.

The Second: Then?

The First: As if it were a nightmare in a long night that does not want to end, I ran in every direction where corpses fell like emaciated birds, and the eyes of those saved were like balls of timbers, red.

The Second: Red from the pain?

The First: What?

The Second: Red from the horror?

The First: Red from the pain, from the fear and from the horror.

And I was trembling. Every cell in my body trembled. I was cold.

The Second: How so? When the fire was raging around you?

The First: Why was I trembling and blood was gushing out of my mouth as if it were silence? Why did I not control my body as it trembled excessively?

The Second: Maybe because you were searching for her.

The First: Who?

The Second: The little girl, man. The little girl. Did you find her?

The First: The little girl.

The Second: Did you find her?

The First: No. Something strong and sharp hit my head – I do not know, I was screaming – I held my head and then...

The Second: Then what? Speak!

The First: The edge of the bedside table left a mark on my forehead while I was still in bed, turning and screaming in pain.

The Second: O man, you have terrified me. I thought you were talking about something real.

The First: But it seemed so real. Believe me.

The Second: How could the nightmare, the dream, be a real thing?

The First: When I woke up, I opened the window in the room. I saw people sweeping away the debris from an explosion from the night before with brushes and water hoses; I saw the burned cars being taken away. Some had already bandaged their hands or feet or heads, and were walking steadily to their work. And the girl... the little girl...



The Second: The little girl? You saw her?

The First: The beautiful little girl with her colored braids carrying her schoolbag on her back. She stopped and looked up.

The Second: Really?

The First: Yes, I looked at her as if she knew me. Minutes passed while she was looking at me. She glanced at me tenderly and then continued in her way toward the newly cleaned sidewalk.

The military voice: The inspection has come to an end. You can now pass. We apologize for the disturbance.

Translated by Atef Alshaer.

**Atyaf Rasheed** is an Iraqi poet and playwright. She lives and works in Baghdad.

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