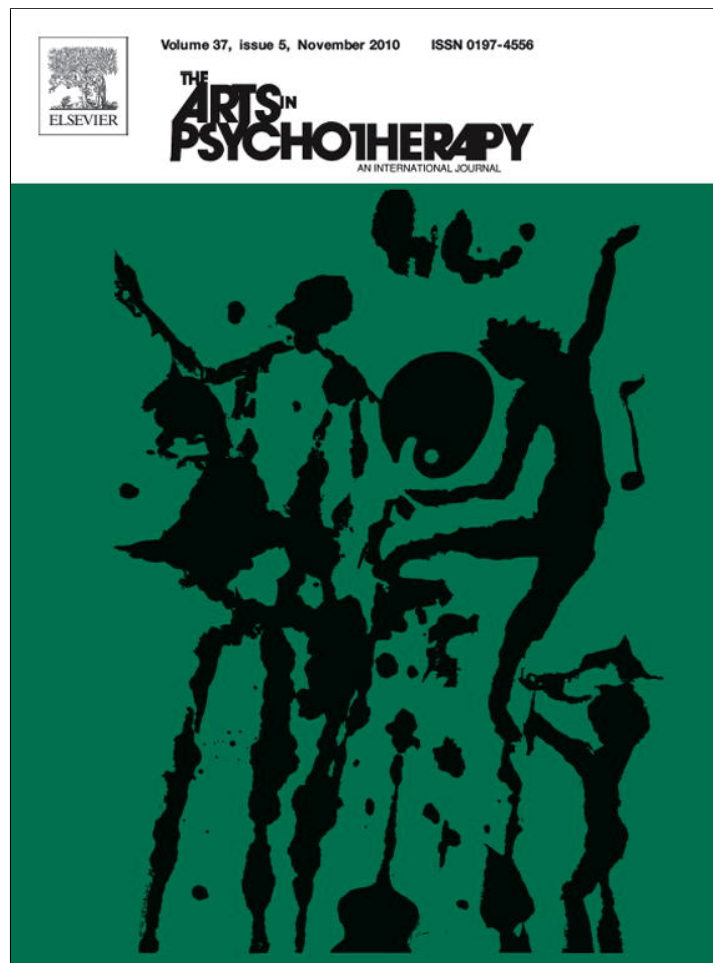


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## The Arts in Psychotherapy



## Pain and knowledge: Artistic expression and the transformation of pain

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the work of certain female artists in terms of the expression of pain and suffering, and sets out an argument for the transformative aspect of art within the context of art therapy. The artworks of six contemporary artists of different nationalities are analyzed under the aspects of pain, embodiment, commitment, and transformation. Furthermore, the comprehension of pain through art is explained by hermeneutic theory, stressing the symbolic and atemporal character of art. Art can open the horizon for transcending the individual and present aspects of pain, as well as providing insights into both spectator and author. These aspects are of significant importance in art therapy, and the healing facility of art is given in examples of art therapy practice in various settings.

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## Introduction

Over the centuries, pain and suffering have always been expressed in art: among others, by female contemporary or modern artists. In some cases these artworks express the artist's pain ascribable to diseases and terminal illness, or mental health problems that might stem from childhood traumas.

The artists and artworks mentioned here are complex and go far beyond the concept of "feminist arts"; put in plural, since feminist arts and feminist art critique comprise different currents that cannot be reduced to a single categorization. On a formal level, the heterogeneity of the representation of pain will be demonstrated in this paper. The criteria, here, is the rule-breaking aspects of the arts and its formal sophistication, without attempting to examine all those modern and contemporary artists who have worked in this vein.

The artworks described here can neither be reduced to the experience of pain, nor can the artists be constitutionally or biographically simplified to any particular denominator in the psychopathology of mental health. Yet, they can help us to understand pain, since art is a symbolic language, which due to its atemporal character condenses the intensity of pain in the present, the possible explanations for it in the past, and the potential transformation for the future. Gadamer (1997a,b,c) has already stated the condensation of different tenses in one artwork.

Thus art can open the horizon for transcending the individual and present aspects of pain, as well as providing insights into both spectator and author.

These aspects are of importance in art therapy and art psychotherapy, where patients, beyond verbalization, can express themselves through art materials, in a special, safe environment determined by the infrastructure and the training of the art therapist.

Due to its symbolic character, for some people, artistic expression makes easier the transmission of certain aspects of pain and trauma that cannot as easily be expressed in words. For the psychoanalyst Klein (1927, 1955/1975), the symbolic expression is indirect, causing less anxiety and thus providing more security than verbal communication. She gained this knowledge working psychoanalytically with psychotic children, developing her play technique for younger patients in which she had them play and use art materials in a non-directive way (her technique consisted mainly of playing, drawing being secondary), equating these forms of expression with the free verbal association of adult psychoanalysis. Her discovery provided the ground for clinical art therapy (Marxen, 2004).

## Different forms of pain and knowledge in artistic expression

Jo Spence (England, 1934–1992) used photographic practice as a personal form of therapy, demonstrating in many of her artworks the impact of her cancer.

Starting from the "postmodern photographic activity" movement that opposed the hyper-aesthetic photography of the seventies, Spence considered her photographic activity to be a political, deconstructive strategy in denaturalizing photographic

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realism and redefining artistic and social practice. In this sense, the representation was a space of conflict and social struggle (Ribalta, 2005, p. 8). She aimed to reactivate photography as a popular culture in opposition to the fetishization of photography within official institutions of art and culture, such as museums and galleries.

Spence aspired to use photography as a means of regaining control of her own image. In this sense, she privileged autorepresentation, declining to photograph others, since the relationship of photographer/photographed is never democratic: there is always an imbalance of power.

Spence converted photography into an instrument of rebellion and therapy for the pathologies caused by the symbolic violence of normalized lifestyles reproduced by the dominant images of the cultural sphere. She invariably emphasized the educational dimension of her practice. In this sense, Spence was not working primarily for an official artistic public or context. The role of “subaltern counterpublics” – for example unions, students, therapy groups, feminist groups, photography workshops, and community centers – is crucial here, on account of their potential for social transformation in contrast to mere reproduction or consumerism (Ribalta, 2005, p. 10).

After 1982, the year her breast cancer was first diagnosed, for the most part her work addressed the representation of health, regarding stereotypes of gender and class. Her series *Pictures of Health* (1982–86) documents her experience of disease and critiques the process of infantilization, victimization, and depersonalization that she herself experienced as a patient. It also documents the day-to-day realities of living with the disease and her research into new life patterns and alternative therapies. The camera becomes a tool for raising questions, rather than affirmations and confirmations (Roberts, 2005).

In 1984, she commenced her own phototherapy, through which she intended to establish the political and therapeutic potential of life stories and the restaging of traumatic family experiences, such as her relationship with her mother or the imposition of stereotyped behavioral patterns concerning gender and class. She conceived innovative photographic techniques, with the use of dramatization inspired by the Epic Theatre of Brecht and Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed – for example in *Libido Uprising* (1989) – with the aim of actively deconstructing asphyxiating conditions and structures, which are themselves unleashed and maintained by images. In this work, Spence considered herself a photographer-educator (Roberts, 2005). These ideas followed her previous research into the family album, which aimed to go beyond the official family discourse, usually represented by pictures of births, baptisms, weddings, birthdays, holidays, houses, schools, etc. Working on her family story, she revisited the past, recovering “disallowed” images, such as divorces, insults, arguments: in short, conflicts. She also pursued this work with her patients, with the aim of using phototherapy as a “visual map of your psychological processes” (Roberts, 2005, p. 99). If such conflictive images were not available, they were restaged, clients becoming active subjects who were able to rewrite their “supposedly” given story.

The advantage of photography lies in its approachability as a technique for ordinary people. Using this advantage, Spence acted as a photographer-educator and phototherapist beyond all norms of certified and licensed psychotherapy or clinical psychology practice, but from the position of both a skilled photographer and one with an embodied political knowledge. In this context, therapy is embedded in a political context, considering it in a way that is able to deconstruct institutionalized models and points of view. New ways of inhabiting the world are then offered (Longoni, 2011). The possibility of change through agency should be transmitted. In Spence's own words: “Through the political knowledge of yourself you can advance and go beyond the perfect image” (Ribalta, 2005,

p. 14). The art-practice of going “beyond the perfect image” to which she was aspiring resists the risk of permanent stasis. In this sense, Spence always stressed that the process of experimentation and learning should never stop with the finished artwork. It continues afterwards giving space for further reflection, insights, knowledge, agency, modifications, and change.

For her, as for all the artists in this paper, art was a vital process, although for Spence it was also to be collocated in a socialist context (Roberts, 2005). She aspired to a global sphere, starting from her own or her clients' personal situation and aiming to reach a wider political sphere, connecting the individual image and story to a broader institutional and political context (Spence, 2005). She strove to reunite social and personal identities, politicizing personal narratives and personalizing politics (Grover, 2005).

The artwork of **Eva Hesse** (1936–1970) reveals in part her childhood traumas of exile, family tragedies during the Holocaust, and the later pain caused by her terminal illness. Born in Hamburg to a Jewish family, she managed to escape the Holocaust with her parents and her sister; however, her extended family could not. In 1938, her father sent her and her sister to Holland, where, the following year, their parents joined them and all four fled first to London and then to New York. However, the Nazis had confiscated the family fortune and her father had to step down from a law professorship in Hamburg, becoming an insurance broker in America. Unable to cope with these tragedies and humiliations, her mother committed suicide, leaving Eva with a terrible sense of abandonment. In psychoanalysis most of her life, she was in a permanent process of self-discussion and insight seeking, as her diaries and artworks reveal (Corby, 2006; Lippard, 1976/1992).

Suffering from anxiety and extreme insecurity, she considered that the aspects of her psyche would be better externalized, in her drawings and sculptures, than inside her. According to Hesse, her work is close to ideas of the soul and introspection, “to inner feelings. [...] They are indoor things” (Lippard, 1976/1992, p. 200). She always maintained that art was essential to life, like breathing: a necessity rather than a joyful activity, which undid the boundaries between art and life. For Hesse, art was an essence, “coming from the inside of a person” (Lippard, 1976/1992, pp. 110, 205). Even in the lowest depth of despair, she could “relieve some of the pressure by intelligent, if agonizing, verbalization of her predicament, and then return to her studio and transform all those feelings, doubts, and burdens into fine abstract sculpture” (Lippard, 1976/1992, p. 78). Her intense internal feelings of inadequacy drove her to an equally extreme need for outside recognition, finding it unbearable when people would not give her credit as an artist.

Her art developed into the third dimension (sculpture), although she continued to draw throughout her life, her drawings and paintings embracing the sculptural concept of space, especially when she added materials like cord, plaster, *papier mâché*, cloth, and wire, creating reliefs such as *Ringaround Arosie* (1965), *An Ear in a Pond* (1965), and *Oomamaboomba* (1965). This shift to the third dimension came in 1964–65 when she joined her husband, the sculptor Tom Doyle, in Germany, where an art collector had provided studio space in one of his empty factories, including all its industrial materials. For Hesse this stay was professionally fruitful, a formal breakthrough, although the return to Germany implied terrible nightmares.

Her practice finally led to the fourth dimension—the inclusion of time—since she used unstable materials like latex, rope, twine, plaster, cloth, fiberglass, as for example in *Sans II* (1968), *Aught* (1968), and *Contingent* (1969). Conscious of the short life of these materials, she was overtly aware that they would change their consistency rather than deteriorate completely (Johns & Rowley, 2006). With the help of professionals and craftsmen, she sought to find technical solutions to prevent these perishable materials from completely falling apart. It is as if the frailty of her materials mirrored her own

fragility,<sup>1</sup> alongside the desire to contain this vulnerability, while always being conscious of its impermanence. Nowadays, the delicacy of the latex in some of her sculptures, e.g. *Contingent*, restricts its public exposure.

Furthermore, her work never leaves the spectator indifferent. Both highly sophisticated and highly abstract, at one and the same time it maintains its structure through repetition, yet achieves an element of surprise through slight inserted irregularities, as well as irony and absurdity. It displays chaos ordered as non-chaos (Lippard, 1976/1992).

On a formal level, she attempted to show the absurdity of life through repeating it by series, as in her ink wash *Circle Drawings*, all untitled (1966–68), the *Window or Frame* series, which she also left untitled (1968–70), the *Magnet Boards* (1967), the painted wood-wire boards *Metronomic Irregularity I–III* (1966), the sculpture series *Vinculum I and II* (1969), *Sans I–III* (1967–69), *Repetition Nineteen I–III* (1967–68), and *Accession I–V* (1967–68). She also favored repetition in single artworks such as *Contingent*, *Accretion* (1968), *Aught* (1968), and *Addendum* (1967), although always with slight irregularities, little outlets and interruptions of compulsion.

Repetition can free one's mind and organize one's thoughts (see also below, Sophie Calle). It can contain anger, protect against vulnerability and fragmentation. In clinical art therapy, for instance, some psychotic patients choose to repeat the same motif or the same materials. This can be considered an act of autocuring, rather than a lack of creativity, since they intuit that sheer repetition can soothe an overflowing mind.

Hesse's work is often unpredictable, avoiding easy comprehension and stimulating complex emotions, rather posing questions than answers. As a spectator you might feel the need to soothe and smooth the sculptures "down and reassure them that they will not really disintegrate entirely" (Perreault in Lippard, 1976/1992, p. 132). Due to the fourth dimension of time, her sculptures retain an ongoing process and reveal the unknown from which – and to where – their creator wants to go. "The strangely flawed images seem to strive for a suggested perfection which they are destined not to meet. [...] She used perfection and imperfection to reconcile opposites" (Lippard, 1976/1992, pp. 188, 206).

As opposed to Tracey Emin or Sophie Calle (both discussed below), or Jo Spence, Eva Hesse does not reveal pain and trauma directly. Hesse's practice was to transform it by abstraction. In her work "the removal of self-reference" is striking. Especially in her later works, "the bodily reference has been abstracted, or precipitated out, and charged with a comic weirdness" (Norden in Pollock, 2006, p. 34). Most particularly through the use of geometric forms like circles and frames, she was able to achieve an abstract structuring of loss and trauma, without referring to herself in any concrete form.

She was really breaking the rules of her time, both on an artistic and a lifestyle level. Though she had to struggle through phases of total uncertainty, she finally intuited that anything was possible, "that vision or concept will come through total risk, freedom, discipline. I will do it" (Hesse in Lippard, 1976/1992, p. 165). She noted correctly that rules in art are always temporary, so she broke them, which initially was not at all well received. Today, however, her work is considered blue chip. Fortunately, she was able to glimpse her future success before dying. *Contingent* made it to the front cover of *Art Forum*, and her sister brought the magazine to her in hospital as she was dying of a malignant brain tumor, aged just 34.

Due to her family tragedies, her early death, her mental health problems, and her difficult relationships with men, Hesse has often been stereotyped as the tragic, suffering artist. The tragic facts of her

life have been overemphasized with statements like "poor young woman" and "tortured and talented". Whereas her strong will, discipline, and persistence have been minimized, as has her capacity to recover from bereavements. Instead she has been naturalized as a suffering woman:

By implication, any woman who carries her art to heights that subordinate her personal life is bound to die tragically, [...]. It's a punishing sort of recognition, carrying with it the suggestion that without super-suffering the art couldn't have happened; that no woman artist can be truly great in a public sense unless she has so mucked up her personal life that she can't possibly be getting any satisfaction out of it.

(Linville in Lippard, 1976/1992, p. 182)

Besides being labeled tragic, she has also been framed in different currents of feminist criticism that started to emerge during the last decade of her life. In this sense, both the individual and her art were analyzed through cultural ethnography (Nemser, 1975), as well as through a formal analysis, including a gendered morphology with supposedly "feminine" forms (Lippard, 1976/1992), until "freeing" her work from any gender reference.<sup>2</sup>

Hesse was always aware – and very angry – of the disadvantages of being a woman in a male-dominated art world. Envy her faster-succeeding male counterparts, and especially her latterly hated husband Tom Doyle, who barely supported her career, she felt overloaded with the need to combine her desire for art and career with her household duties.

Things might have changed a little, at least. After her death, women's and feminist movements acquired more influence in academic institutions and in the art world. Female artists like Nancy Spero (see below), Adrian Piper, Louise Bourgeois, Yoko Ono, Martha Rosler, or the art critic Lucy Lippard have tried to level the way with their art and activism.

In spite of her awareness, Eva Hesse still kept the suffered injustices to herself, to her diaries, or to her art.

Compared to Hesse, Tracey Emin's and also Sophie Calle's artworks seem to take a more frivolous approach to pain. Sexual abuse and the related pain and anger are frequent subjects for **Tracey Emin** (England, 1963). She empties herself to the utmost, her disclosure seems boundless. For Emin, "the only possible sin would be not to reveal oneself. She radically lives out 'un-sinning'" (Rech, 2005, p. 353).

Her boundless exertion has been compared with the protagonist of a short story by Truman Capote: "The theme of Emin's self-exploitation, and the way in which some people fear superstitiously that she might creatively dry up, might find its most poignant expression in Truman Capote's short story *Mister Misery* from 1967." After having sold her dreams for money, Silvia, the protagonist, feels miserable about being robbed of her soul. When she is persecuted by two men, she cannot even feel fear, since there is nothing more they can take away (Muir, 2002, p. 48; Rech, 2005, p. 352).

In fact, Tracey Emin's work, which fetches high prices in the art market, can be accused of being repetitive. Her artworks display a lot of anger and pain, but the question is if they go beyond that. In her work *Weird Sex* (2002) she literally says: "I'm going to get you, you Cunt you Bastard. And when I do, the whole world will know, that you destroyed my childhood. *Weird Sex*". And there are more works and installations that reveal without any concessions traumas, abortion experiences (see *After my Abortion* series, 1990), mental health problems, addictions, etc. All her art revolves around painful experiences. On the one hand she knows how to

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the art historian Délia Vékony for this insight and our fruitful discussion related to this paper at the SIPE conference, Budapest, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> For an extensive study about critical writings on Eva Hesse, see Pollock (2006).

place them successfully into the outside world. However, instead of being transformative, her entire work appears recurrent, as if there was no dissolution, but rather a predestination to permanent looping around the experience of pain.

Nevertheless, she is formally sophisticated in her play with female clichés, such as patchwork-style textiles and tapestries, which then reveal a total disclosure and transgression, often related to sexual themes. *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With, 1963–95* (1995) is a tent with patchwork and textile collage “decorations,” which allude to all the people she had slept with, in either sense of the phrase, from the year when she was born until the creation of the work (since destroyed in a warehouse fire). Also her patchwork tapestries, e.g. *Remembering, 1963* (2002), combine female cliché on a formal level with a radical outcome in respect to content.

Furthermore, she often works with neon, in an allusion to sex shops and brothels, as in *My cunt is wet with fear* (1998), where the eponymous sentence is writ large in white neon.

Her work is stylistically unbounded; there is no acceptance of authority, neither on a formal level nor regarding content.

She has stated that without art she would be dead (2003/2005). She seems to be successfully projecting her pain into her artworks. No matter if the motivation stems from real trauma or if it is staged as an art world identity, life and art are completely interconnected.

There is no single genre in the artwork of **Sophie Calle** (France, 1953), the French artist wandering between photography, installations, collage, and relational art. In common with all the artists presented here, she is unclassifiable. But if Calle's work can be summarized, it could be said to deal with intimacy, both her own and that of other people.

Some of her artworks have an exhibitionist character, such as *Strip-tease* (1979) or *La Filature* (1981), photo collages taken either from her performance in a strip-tease bar or from a private detective following her paths. In *Appointment with Sigmund Freud*, an installation from 1998, she worked with objects from her personal memory, placing them in the Freud Museum in London. Other works by Calle can be classified as relational art or as social interventions. In this vein, *Souvenirs de Berlin-Est* (1996) deals with the individual and collective memory of citizens of the former East Berlin, asking them about memories evoked by the withdrawn communistic monuments (Marxen, 2008).

Another of Calle's artworks that can be classified as a social intervention, and which has a lot in common with art therapy, is *Les Aveugles–The Blind* (1986), which addresses the visual life of people who have been blind from birth. Engaging with them in discussions about their image of beauty, she found they have very vivid images in their minds that they enjoyed talking about and sharing. The artwork itself consists of juxtapositions of a portrait of the unsighted person, their statements about beauty, and a photograph of the object they related to (Marxen, 2008).

In general, “being at once the observed as well as the observer, she handles invisible information with great care, so as not to uncover its ‘inner knowledge’” (Rech, 2005, p. 355).

In *Exquisite Pain* (2004), she finally addresses her own emotional pain following a failed relationship by asking other people about the situation in which they had suffered most. She continued these exchanges until she had recovered from her own pain, either by comparing it with that of other people or by “wearing out” her own story through sheer repetition. The method evidently proved effective and in three months she considered herself cured. Yet, while the exorcism had worked, she still feared a possible relapse, and so decided not to exploit this experiment artistically. When she finally returned to the project, 15 years had passed (Calle, 2004, pp. 202–3). *Exquisite Pain* is presented in the form of a book, the first part of which is a countdown to the end of her relationship and the second her “treatment”. In the latter, the pages on the left are texts that repeat the final moment of her love affair, always with

some small variation. The story becomes shorter and shorter and the letters fade, although always accompanied by the same photo of a hotel room with its bed and a red telephone (the place and means by which she knew that the man she was in love with had left her for another woman, and leaving her displaced in India). On the facing page are the stories people told her about their most painful moments. Calle adds to each text one photo related to their story.

To realize you are not the only person suffering might be considered a relief. The other in this sense functions as a mirror, a reflection that avoids fragmentation and isolation (see Lacan's *Mirror Stage, 1949/1999*). The repetitive aspect of this work is striking. It reaches almost a compulsive, neurotic, dimension. She herself speaks of “exorcism”, as if she overcame her pain by ritualistic procedure.

In contradistinction to Tracey Emin, she finds herself a way out of her pain and exorcises it. Although she felt too vulnerable to undertake an artistic translation for 15 years, it is by means of this symbolic elaboration that she was finally able to conclude the story.

In general, for Calle life and art are interwoven. And in both fields – which is in actuality only one – the rejection of authority is striking.

**Nancy Spero** (USA, 1926–2009) has been considered – and considered herself – a feminist artist, both in regard to her artwork and also her struggle alone or with other women in a male-dominated art world.

Although some of her works reveal the abuse, torture, suffering, and pain of women in war, she strives to turn the situation around, to rewrite male dominated and male written history and to present women as powerful subjects rather than objects. She often shows women in movement. They are depicted as free as men, enjoying their bodies as protagonists on the stage. In this sense she considers her art as a kind of exorcism, shifting women from passive to active, from victims to activators, giving them agency, showing them a sense of possibilities (Golub & Spero, 2004).

*Torture of Women* (1976) is a collage of texts about the torture of different women in Latin-American military dictatorships and the images of moving women who escape from their torturers. One woman is tied up and thus immobile, but another is moving, stepping aside inside her. For Spero, “torture is an institution of the State largely controlled by men” (2009, p. 43). Women should be conscientious about it and then act against it.

With the *Black Paintings* of the 1960s, her artwork was mainly autobiographical. She saw herself in charge of her three children, enclosed at home, while her husband, the painter Leon Golub, was outwardly the more successful. She only had time to paint at night, when the children were asleep. The paintings besides being black like night show an enormous fatigue and anger, as in *Merde* (Shit) from 1960, which seems to spill out her feelings. Nevertheless, in contrast to Eva Hesse, Spero claimed her marriage to be enriching and supportive, both on an emotional and professional level.

Struggling to be recognized in a male dominated art world, she complained, for example, to the Whitney Museum about how few women they had in their collection (Spero, 2009). She was so agitated about her situation (i.e. taking second place to her husband in a shared studio, where collectors and art critics hardly registered her presence) that she let all her anger out in a series of anti-Vietnam War paintings, which were first recognized by the anti-war movements. These works are dominated by sexual images, such as phallic motifs. She stated that during 1966–72 she needed to voice her frustration and anger about her art being silenced (Golub & Spero, 2004), and that the intensity of her personal feelings overlapped with the anger of the Vietnam War opponents. Besides phallic and anal motifs such as in *Bomb Farting* (1966), *Bomb Shitting* (1966), *Male Bomb–Rape* (1968), and *Male Bomb Swastika* (1968), she again shows the pain war causes women.

Yet in *Fleeing Vietnamese Women Totem* (1987) women are moving and not statically or stoically enduring their sufferings.

The anger at not being sufficiently recognized as a serious artist is repeatedly represented in the tongue motifs of her *Artaud* series, for example in *Mange la langue* (1970): her tongue, her voice, is silenced and so was her place in art. According to her husband (Golub & Spero, 2004) she had been able to channel her discomfort into her *anti-Vietnam* and *Artaud* series. Instead of blaming him, or anybody else directly, she could express and symbolize her feelings. She converted them into an art that was at the same time connected to political subjects that would transcend her individual situation and thus gain a social sphere.

In this vein, she was politically active and gathered around her more isolated female artists in New York. Their aim was to address how the art world functions. Joining with her colleagues, Spero launched the first women's gallery in New York: A.I.R. (Golub & Spero, 2004). She has always considered herself a political artist, whether engaged in anti-war movements or in her efforts to involve other women in the struggle for their arts, in considering themselves as activists and in showing them the possibilities of rewriting male dominated history. Women in movement is a recurrent motif, see for example *Hunt* (1999) or *Phalanx* (1995). There is a way out, a possibility of transcending pain, suffering and anger. Instead of victimization, agency is on stage.

In her final phase, from 1976 until her death, the Brazilian artist **Lygia Clark**<sup>3</sup> (Brazil, 1920–1988) developed her own therapeutic method, called *The Structuring of the Self*, in which she conceived an art practice that was therapeutic and which fused the boundaries of art and therapy. This clinical art consisted mainly of a treatment focused on the client's body. She treated her clients individually, over a determined amount of time. Recumbent on a special mattress, Clark as the artist-therapist would touch them with the help of the "relational objects", which were all of a "surprising formal simplicity" (Wanderley, 2002, p. 35). Among them were light and heavy pillows, objects made with panty hose, seed objects, objects made of stone and air, wrapped in a net, little stones, plastic bags filled with water, air, or sand, shells, and tubes (Clark, 1998; Wanderley, 2002).

The "relational object" does not present analogies with the human body but rather creates relations with the body through its texture, weight, size, temperature, sound, and movement. It does not have any specific nature itself. As its very name indicates, it is the relationship established with the fantasy of the subject that is important. Clark's idea was to exorcize through the body the "phantasmatic," which she located there. She called phantasmatic the consequences of traumatic experiences that block the creative potential of the human being. It has to be relieved, treated, and transformed in the space of the body, with the help of the relational objects or by means of the direct touch of the artist-therapist's hands. The relational objects stimulate and mobilize the affective memory because of their texture and the way Clark manipulated and handled them. The physical sensations of these objects were the starting point for a further elaboration of the phantasmatic. People regained their health when they connected with their *cuero vibrátil* (vibratile body), which is the (re-)connection with their creative power and energy (Rolnik, 1998, 2005, 2006). According to Clark, "the process becomes therapeutic through the regularity of the sessions, which allows the progressive elaboration of the phantasmatic provoked by the potentialities of the relational objects" (Clark, 1998, p. 320).

Clark also refers to Winnicott's "good enough mother" and to the importance of therapeutic holding. The British pediatrician

and psychoanalyst had observed the requirements of a fruitful mother–baby relationship, especially in terms of holding (in order to favor self integration), handling (to provide physical touch), and object presentation (providing contact with reality). Then he transferred these needs to the therapist–patient relation, particularly in terms of the abstract holding that can only be achieved by a determined therapeutic setting, regularity, and empathy, as well as the psychoanalytical training of the therapist (Winnicott, 1971).

Empathy is described by Bion in terms of *rêverie*. Also he draws parallels with the parent–child relationship. The main caregiver has to be responsive to the child's necessities, to capture them, and to return them to him/her with a new sense, which makes suffering for the child more understandable. Therapists have to fulfill the same function with their patients, obviously within the restricted time of the therapeutic session. Both parents and therapists have to be able to distinguish their necessities from those of the child or patient. If this process cannot take place, the child – or patient in therapy – suffers the "terror without name" (Tous, 2006, pp. 9, 13). For Clark, this therapeutic responding has to take place by means of contact with the body and not by classical analytical interpretation. She calls this process a "massive maternalization" (Clark, 1998, p. 322). Her own experience of undergoing psychoanalysis and her psychoanalytical studies were fundamental for the development of her method. In particularly, her setting reminds us of psychoanalysis: a strict time planning in the sense of regularity, the keeping of anonymous patient records, predetermined payment, and the consulting room (Clark, 1998). However, her focus is on the pre-verbal images arising from the use of relational objects, which are then elaborated through the body rather than words.

Moreover, the political meaning of her work was extremely important, since she herself had witnessed firsthand – and also through her patients' suffering – the terrible effects of dictatorship and censorship. This terror imposed on the population's creative potential, limiting their expression and capacity for symbolization, with the obvious detrimental consequences for mental health. In Winnicott's terms (1971), in a dictatorship there is no potential space for cultural and creative experience on a macro level. Clark acted as an artist-therapist on the threshold between dictatorship and neo-liberalism in Brazil. The military dictatorships of various Latin-American countries had damaged the potential and creative space. Afterwards the neo-liberal dynamics tried to reanimate artistic activities and expression, but using them as an ideological and commercial instrument. Clark had already foreseen a development that, in recent years, has gained significantly in sophistication: the instrumentalization of art through capitalistic dynamics, concretely manifest in the form of the non-profit foundations of multinational companies, which, through the sponsoring of art, culture, social work, etc., accumulate symbolic capital that mainly serves to obscure non-popular capitalistic activities (Bourdieu & Haacke, 1994).

Some of Clark's patients had suffered psychotic attacks attributable to censorship and torture. Usually, these episodes did not occur due to the psychotic structure of the patient but rather as a reaction to the annulations of creativity as the result of life-threatening acts committed by the military. In her sessions, Clark would try to make the patients reconnect with their vibratile bodies, showing them that the land of creativity was not lost, in spite of the ferocities of the dictatorship (Rolnik, 2005). In this sense, her work can be described as a treatment of political pain.

Clark's artworks can be considered simultaneously as artistic, political, and clinical. She neither wanted to abandon art nor to swap it for clinical practice, "but rather to inhabit the tension of their edges. By placing itself on this borderline, her work virtually has the strength of 'treating' both art and clinical practice" (Rolnik, 1998, pp. 347, 348). In the same way that she never hid her preference for borderline patients, she also "created this hybrid

<sup>3</sup> A part of this paragraph has previously been published in Marxen (2008).

on the borderline between the two fields,” art and clinical work, in order to undo forms in favor of the new compositions of fluxus which the vibratile-body experiences throughout time. Clark’s art-clinical hybrid proves the transversality between the two fields (Rolnik, 1998, pp. 345, 346, 347). For this form of art-clinical practice, her notion of form is of course crucial. Rejecting a perception of art limited to the object-form, she chose to realize artworks *in* the receiver’s body, so that a person would develop from passive spectator to active participant (Marxen, 2008).

She searched for an intense relation between art and person, and art and life. As she describes it, her work had always been inseparable from her life experience, especially her personal crisis. Life itself should be an act of art that treats directly social, psychological, political, and corporal spheres (Rolnik, 2005; Wanderley, 2002).

### Commitment, embodiment, and rejection of authority

All the above artists have treated pain on very different formal and material levels. Jo Spence considered her artwork as a form of personal therapy, which then transcends the individual sphere, achieving an educational meaning. Sophie Calle used or abused others for her pain treatment. Lygia Clark developed a form of therapy as an artwork in which she treated other people’s pain. Eva Hesse’s artwork was partly inspired by her personal suffering, stemming from her past and later from her terminal illness, achieving a highly sophisticated abstraction of pain. Nancy Spero accused torture and injustice committed against women, and the pain and anger caused, offering a kind of exorcism that leads to more agency. Tracey Emin simply expressed her personal pain in the face of any taboos.

However, they share in common a disrespect and disregard for authority in a highly constructive way. They overcome formal classifications to create new forms that themselves prove unclassifiable. None of these artists is committed to any one particular aesthetic, neither – in both their art and lives – do they accept authorities that would impose styles or conventions.

Their art could be said to go hand in glove with their personalities, raising the impossibility of separating their artwork from their lives. It seems that, for women, being a professional artist required, and might still require, an unconditional life commitment, a complete dedication, at least more so than for their male counterparts: see Spero’s (2009; Golub & Spero, 2004) and Hesse’s (Corby, 2006; Lippard, 1976/1992) autobiographic statements, and also the work by the Gorilla Girls, an all-female artist group whose primary, if sometimes ironic, focus was to highlight the disadvantages women encounter in the art world (Gorilla Girls, 1998, 2003). It is self-evident that this same commitment is also embodied in the images of the artists mentioned above.

Often, this ongoing struggle is accompanied by uncertainty and, in Eva Hesse’s case, extreme feelings of inadequacy. The positive side is the fact that these artists kept their willingness to go on learning, their eyes open, aware that complacency inevitably leads to mediocrity.

What they also share is the feeling of needing art as a vehicle to express, treat, and perhaps even transcend pain, by placing it outside, into artistic creation. Moreover, all of them engage in ritualistic dynamics in their pain related artworks. Calle repeats again and again her story of pain in order to free herself from it, a method seeming to stem from obsessive compulsion, while the fantasy behind it consists of banishing evil by ritualistic repetition (see Freud, 1909/1973). For Emin the recurrence of pain might be structurally determined. As distinct from the other artists considered here, there is no development that could lead to the transcendence of pain. Her personal solution consists in artistic expression of pain, without the pretension of offering a solution, and as we have seen above this has led some observers to view her work as repetitive.

According to Clark, her own art-clinical practice proves effective, among other reasons, due to the regularity of the sessions. Although one therapeutic session is never the same as another, the client repeats the act of going to therapy, with the same therapist, in a stable setting, using the same techniques for the predetermined length of the session. Thus, the outer conditions are given for an internal work. This outer repetitive framework of therapy provides the ground for interior change, which can take the form of understanding or even transcending pain. As we have seen above, in her own view this exorcises the traumatic experiences of her clients’ bodies, thus alluding to ritualistic aspects. Spero also determined her art be like an exorcism. Through her images, most of them depictions of figures in movement, she projected women as achievers of active, self-confident positions. Through her photographic dramatizations, Spence aimed to gain insight into her different role models, which in turn can reach and enrich the public sphere. In her phototherapeutic work, she consciously chooses ritualistic repetition and restaging in order to overcome her health and depression problems, within the safe frame of routine. “Repeating the same thing again and again allows us to examine its components in order to deconstruct and to understand it” (Spence, 2005, p. 345). Again as we have seen above, Hesse chooses the most abstract way in which to encounter ritualistic expression. Rituals and exorcisms are not explicit in her work, however she uses series and serials in order to express through repetition the absurdity of life, which also gives a personal sense of protection against vulnerability and fragmentation.

Certain artworks can transform pain. Images can always move the spectator if allowed to do so and if those images contain sufficient material such that the spectators feel something new has entered their lives. Gadamer stresses the condensation of different time levels in one artwork, just as contemporary hermeneutics stresses the contemporaneity that exists between the artwork and its spectator. In spite of a historical consciousness, absolute contemporaneity remains in the art, disallowing us to limit it to its historical context (Gadamer, 1997a). Thus the artwork is permanently open to new interpretation whenever it confronts the spectator, helping the individual to reveal something that leads to *Betroffenheit* (consternation, affectivity) (Gadamer, 1997a, p. 117). In this vein, the contemplation of an artwork signifies an encounter with the self, an experience.<sup>4</sup> It enters in the autocomprehension of the spectator, who extracts from the artwork what s/he finds there, and furthermore this can differ with each new encounter. The symbolic does not remit to the signified, but rather represents it. Thus, what takes place is not mere revelation, but an event, an experience, since something new enters the *Dasein* of the spectator (Gadamer, 1990, p. 108), providing new insights into pain: new interpretations of it in the past and new forms of transcending it in the present or future. Naturally, serious contemplation and absorption is required. In the trinity of hermeneutic studies, which considers interpretations as a revealing of *intentio auctoris*, *intentio operis*, and *intentio lectoris* (Eco, 1992, p. 29), for Gadamer the axis *operis-lectoris* is definitely the most decisive. The essence of the message is transmitted by images, allowing us to break with the verbal covenant (Gadamer, 1997c; Marxen, 2009).

It should be noted, however, that Sontag (2003) critiques the superabundance of images that has led to a situation of complete saturation, and hence to the impossibility of moving the spectator. Here she elects for an ecology of images, since the sheer flow excludes the privileged image. She favors reserved spaces for serious reflection. In short, Sontag reminds us that it is important how images in general are disseminated and how they are perceived. A

<sup>4</sup> This idea coincides with Sontag’s (2001) reasoning in favor of aesthetic experience as opposed to the “scientific” analysis in art.

pain-transforming artwork, however, should be considered a special case, requiring not only sufficient material in and of itself, but also a situation conducive to the process of serious and absorbing contemplation. Both conditions need to be fulfilled before it can offer insights.

### Pain and knowledge in art therapy

In art therapy, pain is externalized through artistic creation, while the transforming potential of art is also utilized. This takes place both in a determined setting and in the presence of a trained art therapist. For the therapist, it is a given that art can be a medium for the expression of pain. However, what therapists can learn from the artists discussed above is the largely untapped heterogeneity of formal possibilities allowing for that transformation. Moreover, this is achievable without the patient having to be a skilled artist, since the objective in clinical art therapy should never be to create prominent artworks for public exhibition. The art therapist neither judges nor evaluates the aesthetic form, for the result depends solely on the individuality of the patient. The therapist's role is "simply" to accompany and support patients such that they can find their own form of personal expression, according to their own possibilities, capacities, and unique biographies (Fiorini, 1995). This can only happen in a safe setting, when the conditions of Winnicott's potential space (1971) are fulfilled. It is only here that patients feel secure enough to choose their own forms of artistic expression through which to eternalize their experience of pain. Even so, frequently it is not sufficient to place the pain outside, i.e. in the artwork, and the expression of pain has to be contained by a skilled therapist. It is at this point that the pain can be elaborated, either on a symbolical and/or verbal level. It should be noted that while certain patients respond better to the indirect, symbolic approach, others respond more positively to direct, verbal discussion. However, both approaches can lead to the transformation of pain, making use of the atemporal character of art which allows seeing explanation of pain in the past or present and at the same time showing future solutions and change (see Gadamer, above). No matter what the patient's social class or educational level it is possible to achieve insight and self-knowledge from their encounter with pain.

Just as the artists discussed here all show heterogeneity, on both a formal and material level, concerning their own individual transformations of pain, so patients can be similarly heterogeneous with regards to their own personal expression, elaboration, and transformation. Such expressions can be highly abstracted (Eva Hesse), consist of sheer repetition (Sophie Calle), or reflect a political consciousness of institutionalized patterns concerning gender and social class (Nancy Spero and Jo Spence). Tracey Emin, too, may make some contribution here, although it should be said that the recurrent and never ending looping of the pain experience that typifies her work is undoubtedly the less satisfactory option. In all cases, art therapy should facilitate the (re)connection with the patient's vibratile body, which means their own bodily energy and creative potential, as with Lygia Clark.

As these professional artists have shown, the transformation of pain requires discipline and commitment. Again, in the therapeutic context, it is the art therapist acting as facilitator who is able to contain the patient's uncertainty and possible anxiety during the creative process until such point that the subject has discovered his or her own personal way of transformation.

The transforming potential of art therapy can be especially intense during the creation of an embodied image as opposed to a diagrammatic one (Schaverien, 2000). According to the distinction of these two kinds of pictures, the latter is considered to be an alternative to verbal communication and the "diagrammatic message"

easy to translate. Indeed, it is often produced with the therapist in mind, in order to "say" something. The former, however, transmits an emotional state difficult to express verbally. It often impacts upon both therapist and client, because it touches the field of desire from which transformation is reachable. Typically, the author will become absorbed during the creative process.

For neurotic patients, especially obsessive ones, developing from strictly diagrammatic images to embodied ones can represent progress, while the reverse applies for psychotic persons who might start – although generalizations should be avoided – with the embodied and work towards diagrammatic images to help order their overflowed minds (Schaverien, 1997). In both cases, art therapists have to be very aware of their own aesthetic countertransference: in other words, their own feelings and reactions towards the artwork. These should never be repressed, but (auto-)analyzed in such a way that they are not acted out in front of the patient.

Let us consider some examples drawn from clinical art therapy practice. In an art therapy group in a day clinic for mentally ill adolescents, one suicidal patient drew her own funeral. Some weeks later she drew a girl throwing herself from a cliff. After a longer period of time, she made an abstract painting that she explained contained death, blood, a grave, and the wind. The latter was blowing away the grave. As a summary, and without engaging either in her psychopathology or in the dynamics of this art therapy group, the first picture gave her a certain relief in the moment of externalizing her problem through the artwork, instead of supporting it inside her. The second gave her and other group members, with the help of the verbalization of the therapist, the opportunity to discuss the reasons for the suicide of the girl in the picture and how to find alternative solutions. Talking in the third person about the problem, the suicidal patient and her group were indirectly talking about themselves, but in a safer, more symbolic way than would have been possible to achieve through a direct verbal approach to their problems. Finally, when she had largely recovered from her suicidal tendencies – thanks to the different psychiatric, psychological, and art therapeutic treatments – she was able to manifest her improvement through the final artwork.

Another patient, a senior citizen with no artistic skills and a low educational level, drew a picture of dissolving yellow, brown, and light blue colors, claiming that the brown showed the dissolving lines that lead to the hereafter. His picture was reminiscent of the penultimate and ultimate pictures of the *Windows* series by Eva Hesse, although it is extremely unlikely he had ever seen her works.

Working with adolescents at social risk and with severe behavioral problems, the art therapist is frequently confronted with the patients' preference for perverted images, often selected from newspapers and magazines in order to make collages. Some of these collages could remind us of the work of Tracey Emin. As a therapist one should always bear in mind that these young people might be using these perversions as a projective mechanism in order to externalize their suffering. Once the pain is relocated in the outside world, the experience of suffering lessens, as does the individual's level of excitement. In this context, the transformation of pain can only be reached by providing a long period of containment and therapeutic holding, which could finally compensate for the absence of holding experienced in their mainly dysfunctional families.

In art therapy there is always the triangular relationship of patient, artwork, and therapist. The professional artist, however, is engaged more in the relationship between the self and the artwork, while always having the outer world as inspiration or a later audience in mind (see Fig. 1).

In both cases, and also for the spectator of a professional artwork, to know is to recognize; you get to know something through the artwork because you recognize it (Sontag, 2007). This implies that it was already there, forgotten, repressed, or just



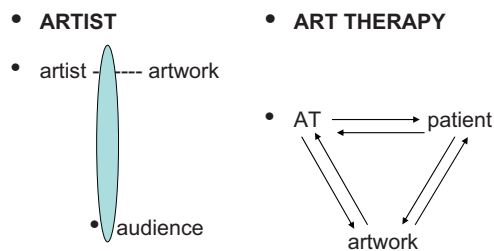


Fig. 1. The triangular relationship in art and art therapy.

underdeveloped. We get knowledge from artworks that can somehow connect with us, sometimes with apparently unknown aspects of ourselves, allowing us to be in touch with our inner selves again.

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