

Trauma and fragilisation: Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's artistic ethics, cultural memory, and post-apartheid South Africa

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I argue that a consideration of South African art should have an ethical dimension, which takes into account the trauma of apartheid and the country's deep-lying legacy of race hate and discrimination. An example of how this can be achieved is provided by the work of artist, theorist and psychoanalyst, Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger. In both her artistic output and her psychoanalytic theory, Ettinger offers a model of ethically engaging with traumatic cultural memory through an encounter between artist, artwork and viewer. I use the recent example of vitriolic popular response to Brett Murray's artwork *The Spear* (2012) to illustrate the necessity of an ethical response to trauma in South Africa's case.

Keywords: ethics, trauma, Bracha Ettinger, Brett Murray, psychoanalysis, art, the other.

South Africa is a complex place. It is a country beset by seemingly more than its fair share of trauma, both symbolic and brutally real. Its identity is fluid and multi-layered. The process of shaping and establishing that identity, or its identities, is often acrimonious and violent. In artwork that is produced in South Africa the process seems little different. The most prominent recent example is the allegorical work of politicised art, *The Spear* (2012), by white male artist Brett Murray. The work – a pointedly satirical portrait of South African President Jacob Zuma, with a crude depiction of a penis daubed onto the original work, which itself is a parodic reference to a Soviet propaganda poster – caused public outcry and much media attention, especially amongst the President's largely black supporters in his party,

the African National Congress (ANC). This outcry often took the form of accusations of ongoing racism by the white artist against the President. Yet often these headline debates obscure a more ongoing and deep-seated issue with artistic practice and the racial and cultural displacement that went hand-in-hand with colonialism and apartheid.

I return later in this discussion to the issues raised by Murray's painting, but the debates and acrimony around art, historical trauma and race, in fact, go far beyond taking offence at the work. For post-apartheid South African art, these debates pose a crucial set of questions. There is perhaps a naiveté and an arrogance in the notion that one's art history should be remade in a new image, outside of the reach of an acquisitive colonial and disfiguring apartheid history. There is a deep-rooted and typical post-colonial anxiety in this idea. But it is not only an anxiety of influence – it is a central post-colonial response to a perceived ongoing cultural imperialism that has replaced the obvious manifestations of occupation and subjugation. There are various ways in which a putatively “authentic”, usually preceding, cultural structure replaces this type of ideologically loaded, and more diffuse, subtle form of imperialism. These were amply demonstrated by the *Picasso and Africa* exhibition mounted at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg and at the Iziko National Gallery in Cape Town in 2006. Officially sanctioned by the two respective heads of state at the time, Thabo Mbeki and Jacques Chirac, the exhibition was designed to indicate the influence of African art and cultural artefacts on the work of the Spanish artist. Mbeki thus explicitly tied the exhibition to the idea of an African cultural Renaissance. Implicit in the exhibition was the redress of the long history of colonial expropriation of African art and culture, and the exoticisation of its art objects. If Picasso could be shown to be heavily influenced by African art, then the epistemological rupture represented and achieved by the European avant-garde could be recontextualised in the case of African art. This is not even to broach the problematic status of the category “African art” in the first place, as if that were ever recoverable and as if it could stand as an historical category in a world characterised by, and organised around, nation-states. This reaction was an attempt to redress the perceived injustice of the failure to acknowledge the influence of African art on Picasso, and by extension, on the European avant-garde. A key aspect of this injustice involved the turning of important ritual artefacts of African culture, such as masks, into art objects. What is clear in all of this is the sense of a traumatic cultural displacement.

The debate about the qualitative and categorical differences between fine art and “craft” or ritual objects is well-worn. There has been something of a restoration of processes like beadwork, embroidering, stitching, weaving and lacing generally,

from a somewhat marginalised and craft-oriented position in art practice, to a position of some intellectual weight. This commences partly, in western philosophy at least, from Jacques Derrida's (2009 [1978]) discussion in the essay "Restitutions of the truth in pointing (*Pointure*)". Derrida's primary discussion is around the significance of the trope of "pointing" – in the archaic sense of puncturing in order to admit laces or strings for weaving and binding – or, in the case used in the essay, holes in the cobbler's shoes to admit shoelaces, specifically the shoes represented in several paintings by Vincent van Gogh in the 1880s. Behind the trope is an argument about puncturing a surface – a representational surface like a painting or a text – with meaning, especially aesthetic meaning. In this sense, part of the meaning of artworks is to be found in the ways in which the medium of the artwork or the language of the text act as types of suture. These representational gestures therefore introduce a necessary puncture or point to the medium in order to tie it together with meaning. In the course of his discussion, Derrida (2009:437) pointedly problematises the status of the "work" and the "product" that is the work of art. He also draws on a fundamental distinction involved in the weaving/lacing process – that between absence and presence – which is key to the formation of the subject:

We shall articulate this *strophe* of the lace: in its rewinding passing and repassing through the eyelet of the thing [the shoe] ... it remains the "same" right through, between right and left, shows itself and disappears (*fort/da*) in its regular traversing of the eyelet, it makes the thing sure of its gathering, the underneath tied up on top, the inside bound on the outside, by a law of stricture. Hard and flexible at the same time.

Derrida uses the metaphor of Van Gogh's paintings of shoes, or more particularly, Martin Heidegger's (1998 [1950, 1957, 1960]) discussion of these, to distinguish between an outside and an inside to the subject, a subject that is 'stricted', yet the sense of which is made flexible by the work of art. The adducing of Sigmund Freud's famous "*fort/da*" game points to this oscillation as also being about the relationship between the "work" (of art and of lacing) and the subject.

As I have alluded to, in the context of practices of weaving, binding and lacing and so forth in South Africa, there is also a set of less recondite considerations for such work. Here, practices such as beadwork and weaving have practical, economic, social and ritual meanings that run parallel to any aesthetic contextualisations such practices and objects might have. As such, they become areas of cultural and political contestation, linked to the propensity of various colonial appropriations of these practices and objects to consider them as simply aesthetic. In South Africa, as with most post-colonies, there are socio-political issues of redress at stake, as

well as those of definition and privilege. These questions are wide-ranging and, in South Africa's case at least, central to the restoration of certain cultural processes to a position of public prominence as forms of (often state-supported) public art. Particularly in the case of work with fabric, and its weaving, lacing, embroidering and stitching, there is a set of cultural practices with practical outcomes, but whose elevation to the status of art – and the concomitant valorisation of work that was traditionally “feminine” – marks a shifting set of aesthetic and hermeneutic parameters.

One artist and thinker has done more than most to bring the theoretical questions raised by the tropes of weaving, binding and interlinking in this kind of work to the fore. Perhaps even more importantly, she has foregrounded the questions of subjectivity, gender and trauma raised by her art in this context. This is celebrated Israeli-born artist Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger. In collaboration with the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre, University of Johannesburg, she recently showed a body of work at NIROXprojects, Arts on Main, Johannesburg (13-29 August), titled *Lichtenberg Flower and Medusa* (2012).

Ettinger is renowned for breaking down the artificial barriers between theoretical thought and artistic practice in her *oeuvre*. As a trained psychoanalyst, she focuses her work on the nature of the relationship between the subject and its Others, developing a critical and an aesthetic approach in the same space in order to do so. Crucially, that focus is a feminist one, in that her work deals in a series of plangently tangential ways with the nature of a (feminine) aesthetic subjectivity in relation to its Others – a relation the artist herself terms variously a ‘transjectivity’, or a relation taking place within a ‘matrixial borderspace’ (see Ettinger 2005b). This liminal notion of a ‘borderspace’ is an unconscious non-place within which Ettinger suggests a different way of understanding the idea, common in psychoanalytic discourse, of a phallic lack in every subject, organised around the desire of the Other. While they are not equivalent, the idea of a ‘matrixial’ experience of subjectivity, organised around the womb-like psychic space of the matrix, enables an inter-subjective relation that recontextualises the terms of traumatic lack installed by the figure of the phallus, and replaces it with a ‘transjectivity’ in which an ethico-aesthetic relation, as well as a willing psychic ‘fragilisation’ is essential for the relationship between the self and its others (Ettinger 2005b). This same fragilisation is necessary for the engagement between artist, viewer and artwork. As Ettinger (2005a:705-706) puts it:

A matrixial borderspace is a mutating copoietic net where co-creativity might occur. A matrixial co-emergence has a healing power, but because of the transgression of individual boundaries that it initiates and entails, and because of the self-relinquishment and fragilisation it

calls forward, it is also potentially traumatizing. Therefore, to become artistic or generate healing, the aesthetical transgression of individual borderlines ... calls for the awakening of a specific ethical attention and erotic extension: an artistic generosity.

An important part of Ettinger's view of art here is that the relationship between artist, artwork and viewer involves both a willing 'self-relinquishment' and an 'aesthetical transgression of individual borderlines' (Ettinger 2005a). This libidinal investment is not entirely erotic, however. The relationship of artistic generosity entails an ethical dimension. This ethical relationship is tied to a bond; it is one in which the belief in the artwork is shared between artist and viewer, and therefore entails a breaking down of individual subjectivities; an opening up of intersubjective experience, or what Ettinger (2005b) calls 'transjectivity'. While she acknowledges that this opening up of intersubjective experience can be traumatising, the ethical dimension of the work of, and in, art renders this potentially traumatic fragilisation instead a fulfilling experience.

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These theoretical frames form part of a creative world in which Ettinger produces works that are an aesthetic meditation on the ideas and experiences of trauma, loss, reconnection, ethics and the layering and relaying of experience and subjectivity. Since the 1980s, her work has largely taken two forms: paintings and artist's notebooks. The paintings adopt a particular technique, that of repeatedly repainting and working over an original photocopied

or digitally scanned image or set of images – sometimes maps, sometimes aerial or family photographs, sometimes found images, all of which recede as a spectral residue beneath layers of reworked and reapplied paint, additional scans and copies, photocopier dust and other detritus or dendritic materials and images. To gesture to the psychoanalytic *oeuvre* which informs the artist's work, these images might be considered as truly "palimpsestuous". The notebooks, which proliferate in every aspect of Ettinger's creative and personal life, as sketchbooks, journals, memoirs, visual experiments, accompany and provide a different kind of framing for her exhibitions. Her artist's notebooks are both a supplement, and an aesthetic and psychological 'accursed share', to use Georges Bataille's (1946) term; a necessary and yet inassimilable excess which forms a bridge between the more formal structures of canvas and paint on one hand, and the language of the psyche, on the other. The notebooks take time to sink in. Visually cryptic, even idiosyncratic, they contain traces of an entire aesthetic life. Sketches of memory, text, snatches of quotation, drifting

thoughts, suggestions of visual imagery, splashes of colour, all are here, in various shapes, sizes and states of repair. They resemble fetish objects, recalling the faith Freud put into such recordings in notebooks as a “true” and “faithful” rendition by the analyst of the analysand’s inner life.

Nicolas Bourriaud (2012:[sp]) suggests that it is in these two forms – the painting and the notebook– that Ettinger responds in depth to what he terms the contemporary ‘crisis of inscription’:

If there’s a notion that finds itself in crisis today, it is indeed that of inscription. How do we inscribe something? And where? In what manner? Here is what doesn’t seem obvious anymore in the era of the touch screen. ... [A]n entire scriptural economy has been insidiously calling itself into question. The whole gamut of the traceable and its modes of reception find themselves, in turn, affected: the pages of a book, the canvas on its mount ...

In discussing Ettinger’s constantly reworked, repainted and palimpsestuous reprographic images, Bourriaud (2012:[sp]) makes the point that her working process allows for the reinscription of an auratic quality to the paintings, in which the experience of trauma is deeply embedded. In Ettinger’s early works, the holocaust is referenced in the spectral presence of survivors of the camps. Some of these are from her own family – figures whose visual identities have faded as layers of scanning, colour and the detritus of the creative process has withdrawn them from the gaze. They sink into a matrixial space within the canvas. Similarly, in the long series of iterations of paintings, notebooks and installations around the mythological figure of Eurydice, some of which were on the exhibition *Lichtenberg Flower and Medusa*, the artist recalls how the trauma of an irrecoverable loss is compensated for only by love and by art, in the form of Orpheus’s music. It is no accident that Eurydice is recalled from the underworld by love and by art; for any artist as familiar with psychoanalysis as Ettinger, the metaphor must be resonant indeed. And yet, says Bourriaud (2012:[sp]),

Ettinger’s art does not address the holocaust, or the past, but rather the living traumatism that it has engendered, which is, as such, always present: its subject is the expungement of memory in “figurative” dimension and the persistence of the symptom, in its brisk living state ... [H]er work arises out of a ... general study of the shock, by means of active remembrance.

This realisation of the presentness, and, in a symptomatic way, of traumatic memory, is dealt with in Ettinger’s art not as a wound or as a lack, but as an encounter

between the viewer and the artwork, in which both are intertwined as subjects and objects in a palimpsestuous and matrixial space. Bourriaud (2012:[sp]) calls the domain of this encounter the “*hors*”, the ‘out-off’, or the work of art as the signifier of an ‘outside’ to any encounter with the Other, recalling Bataille’s theory of heterology.

For Christine Buci-Glucksmann (2011:229), Ettinger’s work on trauma and melancholy has evinced an unexpected progression, prefigured by the Eurydice metaphor:

... Bracha Ettinger’s work has made the transition from a melancholic ephemeral – that of the photocopy, of the annulled and unwitnessed gaze of the images of absence, of a grey, neutral world that has almost been plunged into a mourning intensified by the power of words – to an affirmative ephemeral that will sweep her into a coloured abstraction haunted by the white shadows of Eurydice. It is as though painting had succeeded in re-opening time, in emerging from the crypt of a historical survival, and in creating a dynamics of the gaze by using an other gaze that no longer exists.

This alternative understanding of the gaze, usually a function of the compact between artist, viewer and artwork, but also the defining function in the separation of self and other and the power relations between them, brings to the painting a sense of what Ettinger (2012) calls a ‘proto-ethics’: ‘Affective knowledge is proto-ethical. The passage to ethics demands a decision from the subject about affective arousal, but a proto-ethical stance is prior to such arousal. In the encounter with the work of art, such an ethics and the aesthetic sense are not the same’.

The coupling of the ethical potential of the subjective encounter with the artwork is not easily achieved; it depends on an openness characteristic of the artist’s theory of the encounter of the subject and its others in the matrixial borderspace – the transjective encounter, which is a counter to the will to master. In bending the forces of colour and light in her paintings to the service of this proto-ethical encounter, Ettinger situates the work, as Bourriaud indicates, in the space of the outside, the *hors*. This liminal, threshold space is one where the fragility, and fragilisation, of the encounter with the artwork can be maintained and explored. Ettinger (2005a:797-808) herself locates this encounter as located between the aesthetic act and an interlinked – woven – process of the healing of trauma through a kind of ‘ethical openness’:

The artist who is working through the cross-inscribed traces and is worked through by virtual, phantasmatic or traumatic real strings practices her art – art that is an aesthetic-in-action – as a healing, healing that is an ethics-in-action. Such is the co-response-ability of artworking and of healing in copoiesis.

In this 'aesthetic-in-action', an ethical gesture is performed in the inclusion and constant reworking and renegotiation of traumatic elements in the artwork itself. This is a bond which works on the artist, the artwork, and the viewer in an unspoken skein of aesthetic practice, in which, counter-intuitively to the usual aesthetic or interpretive response to an artwork, an ethical dimension is crucial. Ettinger (2005a:709) elaborates on the psychological characteristics of this bonding relationship with art:

The matrixial exposure of the becoming-m/Other is an openness to the uncognized world and to unknown but intimate others by a compassionate Eros that is not a sexual libido in the usual sense. Compassionate Eros and sexual libido are different psychic instances. They might intermix, but they nurture different kinds of love. Where sexual libido takes the lead, Thanatos – death drive – is there too, never too far. In that case, the potentiality for compassionate erotic hospitality is often deformed. By compassionate Eros a non-aggressive thanatos is revealed. Not death, but the *non-life as the not yet emerged*, the *not yet becoming alive*, is accessed and intended.

This subtle reworking of a crucial distinction in psychoanalytic theory, that between Eros and Thanatos, libido and death drive, proposes a remarkable possibility: that art, far more than representing a sublimated death drive in society, as Freud (2002) alludes to in the essay "Civilisation and its discontents", enables a different psychological phenomenon to emerge – a kind of proto-being which is both open to the Other and intimate in its relation to Eros (rendering it compassionate) and Thanatos (rendering it non-aggressive).

Brian Massumi and Erin Manning (2011:223) explain it thus:

The threshold shifts. It vibrates. It is not figure or form. Not this history, this or that memory. It resonates with all it touches. But it cannot quite be seen. For Ettinger, painting is not about seeing. It is felt, it touches, it moves, it resonates. To paint the outside is about a feeling-with, a thinking-feeling that occurs in a relational field, across works in the making ... The outside is intercessor. It is felt more than seen. Thought in the feeling. 'Painting's thoughts are not the gaze's thoughts' says Ettinger. It is force before it is form, participant, enabler, disturbance before it is figure.

Ettinger's work thus holds, in a fluid, liminal field, a different kind of encounter between viewer and work, between the aesthetic affect and the ethical decision to enter the field of the artwork, with its allusion to trauma, loss and matrixial recuperation.

The revelations about trauma which haunt her work, therefore, as well as the snatches of dream, text and affect which inhabit the notebooks as transjective

objects, should resonate strongly in South Africa. For the sake of convenience, let me institute a symbolic historical point to deal with the trauma of apartheid at a national level. This point is the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), begun in 1996 under the chairmanship of Archbishop and Nobel Laureate Desmond Tutu. If this is considered as South Africa's institutional attempt to encounter and work through this trauma, then it must be considered a failure. This seemingly peremptory judgement needs to be contextualised against the backdrop of the psychoanalytic thought underpinning Ettinger's work. In an essay on a psychoanalytic view of the civic and political reconstruction process conducted through the TRC, Mary Tjiattas (1998:68) comments:

Freud tells us that the traumatic event does not (necessarily) retain its original form in the process of retranscription. Presumably those witnessing the "abreaction" are then in a privileged position: they can influence the meaning of the trauma, by providing alternative, more realistic understandings of it, they help, by allowing for the integration of traumatic experience, to reconstruct appropriate views of the self, and in so doing break the cycle of destructive repetitions, creating the space for rational deliberation and a measure of voluntary control over present and future conduct ... But a necessary precondition for [this] is inspiring a sense of trust.

Here, Tjiattas subtly points to the problem inherent in the process of 'retranscription'. The idealised process of healing she describes is dependent on a mutual sense of trust, but also an implied commitment to the 'integration of traumatic experience' through rational and voluntary means – a kind of contract, agreed upon in the public sphere, to engage with trauma, understand it, and by so doing, 'break the cycle of destructive repetitions'. Tjiattas (1998:69) presents her own misgivings about this model for the effective working through of trauma:

... a fundamental assumption of curative practices and procedures both clinical and social [is that] there is an intrinsic connection between telling or revealing or uncovering the truth and the desired outcome – overcoming of debilitating pathology, the instatement of a just and democratic social order. It is an assumption that is clearly made by the proponents of the TRC. However, it is not clear that it is an assumption that can be adopted with impunity ... Is it not conceivably the case that there are other important human goals that trump it under certain conditions? Moreover, are not the clearest cases those where complex and intricate social problems are at issue?

In tying together the stakes attached to confessing the truth, and achieving the desired outcome, Tjiattas (1998:69) points to the difficulty both of recovering the 'whole truth', and of relating the beneficial effects of truth-telling to social problems

that are more opaque and resistant to the process. Ettinger opens a potential third way – I am reminded of Bourriaud's (2012:[sp]) view of her treatment of trauma in her art: 'Ettinger's art [addresses] living traumatism ... its subject is the expungement of memory in "figurative" dimension and the persistence of the symptom, in its brisk living state'. If Ettinger's art can open such an ethical dialogue about trauma in its transjective relation between artist, artwork and viewer, and about the ways in which trauma is buried and expunged by history, only to re-emerge as symptom, there is a need to take note of that process in a country which is in the very midst of a psychological struggle with the consequences of its own trauma.

It is exactly that struggle which is exemplified by the furore about a very different work of art, Murray's *The Spear*. The manner in which the work engendered a public discourse about South Africa's race trauma indicates that the TRC truth-telling process achieved a temporary consensus rather than the desired working through and 'instatement of a just and democratic social order' (Tjiattas 1998:69). The racialised anger which characterised much of the response to Murray's painting indicates that much work remains to be done in the political and social fields in working through apartheid trauma. What is interesting is the depth of emotion revealed in the response, not to a political or social issue or discourse, but to a work of art – whatever the aesthetic value of the work itself might be considered to be. The wild anger, death threats and obviously racially inflected pain which the response to the work elicited speaks to a sense of trauma very much not worked through, and liable still, in South Africa's case, to erupt in a violent return of the repressed. What the model of Ettinger's body of work provides is a means of creating and experiencing art in an ethico-aesthetic dimension; one which enables those engaging with the art to see the relation to trauma differently. It enables the viewer and the artist to engage on terms in which a bond of trust is assumed and an ethical relation is developed, not one in which, as with *The Spear*, old wounds are opened and battle rejoined.

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