https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/16/opinion/art-in-a-time-of-atrocity.html

The Stone **The New York Times** **Art in a Time of Atrocity**

Image

Eurydice n.5, 1992-1994. Credit Bracha L. Ettinger

Dec. 16, 2016 Art in a Time of Atrocity By Brad Evans and Bracha L. Ettinger

This is the ninth in a series of dialogues with philosophers and critical theorists on the question of violence. This conversation is with Bracha L. Ettinger, a visual artist, philosopher and psychoanalyst. Her most recent publication is "And My Heart Wound-Space," published on the occasion of the 14th Istanbul Biennial.

Brad Evans: You have consistently brought together in your works the often-disparate fields of art, psychoanalysis and critical theory. How can this approach address violence?

Bracha L. Ettinger: I begin with art. We are connected through art even if we are, as individuals, retreating from one another and from the world. Each of my paintings starts from the traces of images of human figures — mothers, women and children — abandoned, naked and facing their death. The figure's wound is her own, but as we witness it, we realize traces of her wound are in me and in you.

Painting for me is an occasion to transform the obscure traces of a violent and traumatic past. Residues and traces of violence continue to circulate throughout our societies. Art works toward an ethical space where we are allowed to encounter traces of the pain of others through forms that inspire in our heart's mind feeling and knowledge. It adds an ethical quality to the act of witnessing.

Painting leads to thought and then leaves it behind. The space of painting is a passageway. By trusting the painting as true you become a witness to the effects of events that you didn't experience directly, you become aware of the effects of the violence done to others, now and in history — a witness to an event in which you didn't participate, and a proximity to those you have never met. The coming together of art, psychoanalysis and critical theory allows me to approach images of devastation, praying I can cure in viewers a blindness to violence and persecution that continues to lead to the dehumanization of others and of ourselves.

B.E.: Theodor Adorno and others have questioned the relevance of art in response to realities of extreme violence. How do you respond to this so-called unrepresentability of human atrocity?

B.L.E.: Painting pains me. And it will pain you. We join in sorrow so that silenced violence will find its echo in our spirit, not by imagination but by artistic vision. After an earth-shattering catastrophe, must I not allow the traces of the horrifying to interfere with my artwork? Why should this be any different to psychoanalytical and critical interventions?

The question "*What* is art?" is certainly not a question of aesthetics, styles and technique alone. Art proceeds by trusting in the human capacity to contain and convey its rage and its pain, and to transform residuals of violence into ethical relations via new forms of mediation that give birth to their own beauty and define them. It is to trust that we will be able to bear in compassion the unbearable, the horrible and the inhuman *in the human*. Critique is not lost in this artistic entrustment. Rather, critique becomes participatory in it.

The purpose of art is not to represent reality or to aestheticize it. Art invents images and spaces. Art works like a maternal healing when it solicits against all the odds the human capacity to wonder, to feel awe, to feel compassion, to care, to trust and to carry the weight of the world. What you see doesn't reflect reality or your own self; the image is not a mirror. When violence kills trust, art is the space where a trust in the other, and by extension of one's being in the world, can re-emerge.

Like psychoanalysis, painting in this regard is a form of healing when it discerns the space of what I have called the "subreality" — a net of strings of aesthetic and human connections — and makes of this space its subject. It creates connections of "co-emergence": "I feel in you," "you think in me," "I know in you," and so on, in which subjective existence is articulated through one another. Art alone can achieve such an encounter. Its figures appear when both light and darkness are *in light*.

B.E.: Your art deals with some of the most difficult and challenging aspects of the Holocaust. Why have you been particularly compelled to focus on the symbolic violence against women?

B.L.E.: I draw upon a recurrent image of the woman with shaven head. My mother's sister Etka was deported to Auschwitz at the age of 18 with her sisters Hella and Sara. How could she adequately symbolize the private meaning of the violence she endured? Having returned from Auschwitz, she used to repeat: "I have no memories except this one: My head had been shaved, and when I passed in front of the windows of the barracks I couldn't recognize myself. I didn't know, out of all these women, which one was me. That's my only memory." One day, a second memory emerged, an image: the hair clip another girl from our family, shaven-headed too, refused to be separated from.

She lost her intimacy, what marked her out as unique. Alain Resnais' masterful "Hiroshima Mon Amour" aside, very few artists have tried to deal with the burdens of a similar symbolic act of shaming. My aim is not to construct or deconstruct memory. Aesthetics today is *the* ethical challenge. When the witnesses disappear and only witnesses to those first-generation witnesses can speak, art's role is to create a humanizing space. While art evokes memory, it invents a memory *for* the future. Crucially, the subject that emerges in the painting doesn't simply correspond with the subject of a violated identity that will turn into an object of gaze. Nonviolent encounters with transformed traces of violence are humanizing. Take Goya for example, or Resnais, Marguerite Duras or Paul Celan.

B.E.: How would you respond to those who would argue that art has no place in any serious political critique, as it is limited when it comes to resisting oppressive systems and transforming violent and catastrophic conditions?

B.L.E.: Painting works slowly. It allows us to enter the space of the trauma of others and of our own with neither fight nor flight, and to dwell in its resonance. Painting is about bringing into visibility that which is not ordinarily visible, including the forms that violence takes. Painting produces a suspension in time. It not only makes us confront the atrocities of the past, but provokes how we see and feel about the present moment.

Art as a primary ethical form of compassion might be one of the only realms left from which we can open channels towards the humane. When I touch the canvas to reopen a wound whose "memory" is not necessarily mine I instantly resist the counterdesire to ignore it. Beauty is not pre-given by an image but is the result of the process of working the abstract space.

Art in this regard, like love, appears as a form of fragile communication in which complete strangers can understand one another by resonance, both inside and outside one's close "community." One then realizes that humans are part of fragile and shared systems.

If a transformation in the traces of violence is possible through painting, a slow and indirect working through of a special kind of Eros, a nonsexual love, emanating from a sense of the vulnerable other accessed by our fragility, occurs. Painting activates a deep capacity to join in love and in suffering, in sorrow and joy, in compassion.

B.E.: Can you elaborate more on your conception of beauty, as it directly challenges some well-established criticisms of the aesthetics of violence, which are precisely concerned with how it can be dangerous by rendering it pleasing for public consumption?

B.L.E.: What I refer to as beauty, the source of which is the experience of trauma and pain as well as, without contradiction, of joy, signals an encounter with the horrible that we are trying to avoid, to paraphrase Rilke, as well as with the other's desire for another life to a wretched existence and longing for light. Art that denies violence abandons its victims as if they are irrelevant to human life. In the painting, the subject matter is not simply a representation. It should work like a passageway, through which a blurred idea — as it is breathing its new form through color, line and light — elicits an affective response in the viewer that paves the sense of personal responsibility.

However, most cultural representations of violence do indeed produce objects ready for consumption. Painters, poets and filmmakers who address the catastrophes of the last century and still reach beauty and the sublime in the sense I am speaking of are very rare.

Think of Paul Celan's poetry, for me a source of inspiration. It forms the frontier of death in life, where life glimpses at death as if from death's side, to paraphrase Jacques Lacan. But beyond this, I would like both the figurative and the abstract form to evoke its own humanized *passage* from nonlife to life. There is no real beauty without compassion; art humanizes the shock and transforms trauma as you realize the *impossibility to not-share* your psychic, mental and physical space.

B.E.: What do you understand to be the political importance of the arts in the 21st century? And what ethical burden does this place on the artist as we seek to break out from the logic of violence and look towards more nonviolent futures?

B.L.E.: Art today is the site of a trust that comes *after the death of trust.* Our generation has inherited, and lives through, a colossal requiem, from the harrowing memories of the 20th century and before, to the continued violence we witness today. Our time is pregnant with the impression of loss and suffering. So the question of art, like that of the human subject it is intended to be experienced by, is always also the question of this loss and of the bringing of compassion back into life, for the future, starting from both image and from an abstract horizon.

Art has the power to re-link and invent new subjects and forms in and by light and space. Enlarging the capacity to elaborate, carry and transform traces of violence, whether private or historical, is a responsibility. This is one of art's most important functions. "To bear" and "to carry" comes from the same root in Hebrew, in German and in French. But in Hebrew it also means "subject." To make the world more bearable means to infiltrate the function of what I call "carriance" into the structure of subjectivity. It is to carry the burden of the suffering of others in the hope of a better time to come. Celan wrote, "The world is gone. I must carry you."

The move from simply experiencing art to social and political acts of caring or witnessing is not automatic. But individuals encountering art create a potential for more caring collective action. Art enters the domain of community and of the political without opposing aloneness.

But to dwell pensively with traces of violence is to tolerate anxiety, welcome the contingent and the unknown and to open yourself up as an individual to a possibility of collective love.

Art entails a potential resistance to structures based on violence. To the vulnerability of the other, known or unknown, we become more responsible There are no promises; a painting might not do its work. Yet it does give us a chance. Breaking with the violent past demands paying intimate attention to its often-erased figures. To not sacrifice yourself while not sacrificing the other — this is the challenge. And today we must take care of the other, the refugee. It doesn't matter why and where; the refugee is your sister. She could be your mother; she can one day be you.

Brad Evans, a reader in political violence at the University of Bristol in England, is the founder and director of the Histories of Violence project (@histofviolence), dedicated to critiquing the problem of violence in the 21st century. He is an author of "Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle," with Henry A. Giroux, and "Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously," with Julian Reid.