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To cite this article: Beata Batorowicz & Jane Palmer (2024) 'Empathic unsettlement': trauma as spectre in contemporary textile art, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 16:1, 2432686, DOI: 10.1080/20004214.2024.2432686

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004214.2024.2432686>



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Published online: 24 Nov 2024.



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‘Empathic unsettlement’: trauma as spectre in contemporary textile art

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ABSTRACT

Autobiographical trauma art is a way to connect its viewers with the artist and her experience, and with the history in which this experience occurred. We argue that when autobiographical trauma art involves craft practices, such as working with textiles, the relationships between history, the artist, the artwork, and the viewer become particularly strong. The interplay between the present and past, viewer and artist, through fabrication and encounter constitute, we suggest, a series of hauntings that draw attention to something broader—structural violence, selective forgetting, or wilful ignorance—in which trauma was, and remains, situated. We use examples of textile artwork by Beata Batorowicz to explore autobiographical trauma art as a tactile, embodied response to the intergenerational trauma arising from her family’s experiences in Poland during World War II. A line of hauntings, traceable from the artist via the artwork to the viewer, parallels the flowing effects of intergenerational trauma, but the intervention of the artist, in creatively addressing her own ghosts, offers the viewer and a wider public the opportunity to experience her truth-telling in the form of “empathic unsettlement” (LaCapra 2014 (2001), 41) and a new comprehension of a past that has fallen by the wayside of history.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 October 2023
Accepted 18 November 2024

KEYWORDS

Aesthetics; autobiographical trauma art; empathic unsettlement; textiles; spectre

Introduction

So much happens in a touch: an infinity of others—other beings, other spaces, other times—are aroused. (Barad 2012, 206)

Trauma = wound (from Greek)

Craft = strength (from Old High German “kraft”)

Autobiographical trauma art is a way to connect its viewers with the artist and her experience, and with the history in which this experience occurred. It does so through the authenticity of the artist and her connection to a traumatic past (first-hand or intergenerational), her commitment “truthfully to convey some aspect of [the past]” (Wyschogrod 1998, 4), and her skill and imagination that enables the visitor to connect with it in the present. We argue that when autobiographical trauma art involves craft practices, such as working with textiles, the relationships between history, the artist, the artwork, and the viewer can become particularly strong, a strength that can be traced back to the origins and meaning of craft itself. Strength lies in the historicity of craft as a site of political contestation (Wood 2021), and the slow and painstaking work of piecing, stitching, weaving, or knitting that make manifest the traces of the artist and the imprint of embodied trauma in the artwork. In contemporary textile art that uses old, preloved materials, or materials with symbolic

significance, history too is sewn into the very fibres of the work. Finally, the sensuous qualities of textile art—its tactility and touchability—strengthen its connection, akin to a transference, from traumatic past to the viewer in the present.

However, this is not a direct or potentially traumatising transference to the viewer. We propose that autobiographical trauma appears instead in spectral form in the artworks we discuss below; rather than a “telling,” it is an allusive reminder of something unsayable or unsaid that aims to destabilise viewer perceptions and assumptions. The interplay between the present and past, viewer and artist, through fabrication and encounter (Owen 2011) constitute, we suggest, a series of hauntings that draw attention to something broader—structural violence, selective forgetting, or wilful ignorance—in which trauma was, and continues to be, situated. Such art is an intervention by the artist in the present: a reminder and call to acknowledge past trauma, without (re)traumatising. When autobiographical trauma art has power, the artist, artwork, viewer, the present and the future are all haunted, and the hauntings flow on until the viewer in the end is haunted by a hidden history, unacknowledged trauma, the artist, and her art. This “agglutination” of the spectral, like the “dynamic agglutination” Bourriaud attributes to art objects,

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links us to thoughts, memories, sensations, histories, and relationships rather than being an end in itself (Owen 2011, 84 with reference to Nicolas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics).

In the following sections, we draw together threads of theory from aesthetics (the perennial "art versus craft" debate) and from writings on hauntology, to show how the processes of fabrication and encounter in textile art make it peculiarly suited to carrying a difficult and silenced past through artist and artwork to the viewer. The artworks of one of the authors, Batorowicz, serve as a touchstone for the reflections of both Batorowicz and Palmer, an oral historian and ethnographer specialising in trauma narrative (see Palmer, Walsh, and Batorowicz 2022, for our discussion of oral histories, hauntings and truth-telling).

Introducing Tales Within Historical Spaces and Dark Rituals, Magical Relics

Beata Batorowicz is an artist of Polish origin, whose recent visual art projects *Tales Within Historical Spaces* (TWHS) (2012–13) and *Dark Rituals, Magical Relics* (DRMR) (2018–19) include two touring exhibitions and accompanying artist books—collections of essays about the artist and her artwork, with illustrations by the artist. The TWHS works emerged from the artist's homecoming and reunion with her paternal family living in Wrocław, Poland. They were focussed on collecting her family's untold stories of their World War II experience, particularly her paternal grandmother's story of capture by the Nazis, which was revealed to the family for the first time (Batorowicz 2012). A hand-printed palladium photograph of Batorowicz's grandmother (see Figure 1) was included in the TWHS exhibition, alongside family war documents and the artist's textile sculptures influenced by childhood memories of Polish fairy tales read by her family, their animal motif illustrations by Jan Marcin Szancer particularly capturing the artist's imagination. The artist's visit to Poland was a critical (if not the last) opportunity for gathering such stories of first-hand experience. It also provided opportunities, such as a visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, to gain insights into the broader historical experience in Poland. The artist's visit was also prompted by the Museum's publication at this time of *Fairy Tales from Auschwitz* (2010), a historical compilation of children's stories and illustrations secretly produced by Auschwitz concentration camp prisoners as a means of concealed messaging in the form of cautionary tales to their children and family members beyond the concentration camp; the stories often symbolised freedom found in one's own creative expression, individual and collective resistance, as well as

personal legacy-making, given the grim unlikelihood of the prisoner's survival (Gildersleeve and Batorowicz 2018). This historical document's capacity to capture the power of fictional approaches in the telling of a traumatic past provided a useful tool and affirmation in the artist's own personal storytelling of her family history and intergenerational trauma in TWHS.

The resulting artworks in the TWHS exhibition symbolically echo the prominent role of family secrecy and concealment associated with World War II lived experiences. TWHS was a touring solo exhibition between Australia and Poland, on autobiographical sites where the artist was born or had once lived. The full exhibition consisted of four consecutive large gallery rooms at the Queensland University of Technology Art Museum, Australia, forming chapters of intergenerational trauma. Each space is used to cast tension between an accepted collective WW2 history and the artist's family narratives, partially revealed in photographs but also stitched into symbols of Polish fairy tales.

As the viewer moves within the TWHS gallery space (see Figure 2) to view the photographic images on the walls, within their peripheral vision appear



Figure 1. Beata Batorowicz *My grandmother* (2011–2012).

From the *Tales Within Historical Spaces*. Platinum/palladium print, 270 mm. × 423 mm With permission of the artist/hand printed by Jason Castro.

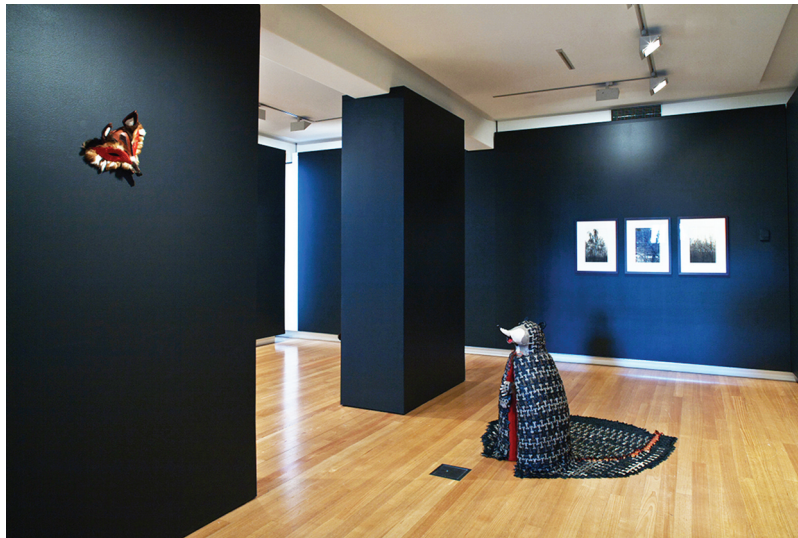


Figure 2. Beata Batorowicz *Tales within historical spaces* installation view (2012).

Gallery Room 1 out of 3, Queensland University of Technology Museum. From *Tales within Historical Stories* project (2012). Leather, wire, beads, leather thonging, felt, dimensions variable with permission of the artist.

Photo: Richard Stringer.

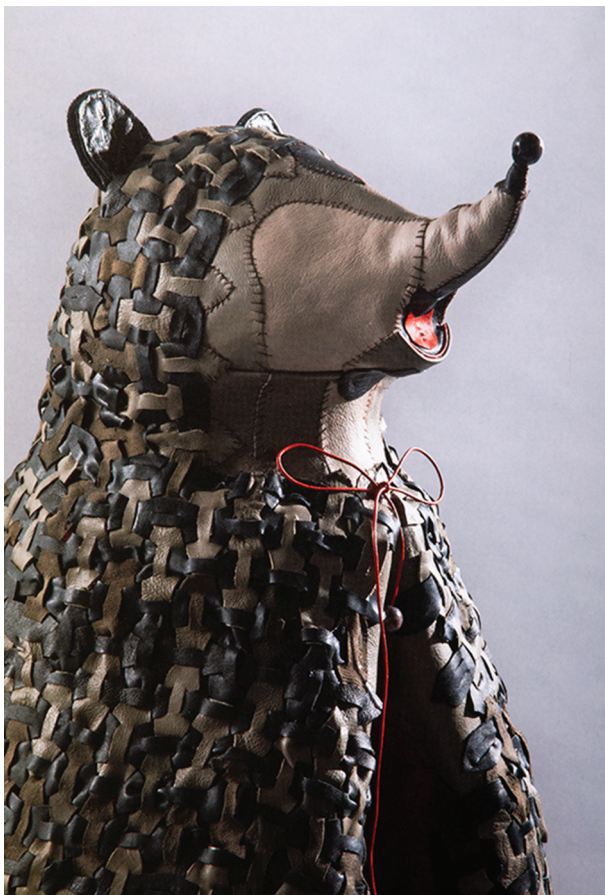


Figure 3. Beata Batorowicz *Hedgehog* (close up) (2018).

From the *Tales Within Historical Spaces*. Gallery Room 1 out of 3, Queensland University of Technology Museum, Brisbane. From *Tales within Historical Stories* project (2012). Leather, wire, beads, leather thonging, felt, dimensions variable. With permission of the artist,

Photo: Richard Stringer.



Figure 4. Beata Batorowicz *Stag mending ritual* (2018).

From the *Dark Rituals. Magical Rituals Fur*, leather, Stag antlers. 110.0 × 135.0 × 76.0 cm.

Photo: Jason Castro.

little sculptures of European forest animals. These sculptures draw from Batorowicz's Polish fairy-tale storybook read to the artist by her parents during her childhood (Doecke 2012, 86). Like childhood memories, the tiny sculptures stitched from fur and

leather haunt the gallery. When glanced at sideways, they appear to be looking at the other artworks too, or watching over the space like gallery guards; they work on the periphery of the gallery space. Some animals lean along the edge of gallery walls—and could potentially be picked up by the visitor—hovering near a totemic staff that could be used as either a support or a weapon; others hang in the corner of the gallery ceiling at the periphery of the viewer's gaze, while others only reveal their form as a shadow.

The first dark blue/grey room sets the scene: an encounter with a large hedgehog (see [Figure 3](#)) sculpted in a mix of textiles; a view through the artist's window at palladium-printed views of the snow-laden trees of Wrocław. It is a fragmented scene, blurring fact and fairytale. In peripheral view, high on one wall appears a trickster's mask.

The second and third rooms contain the artist's family documents from WWII, including her paternal grandmother's portrait. Here again, palladium photographs are interspersed with fictional/fairytale sculpture puppets and magical relics, objects of wonderment that also call for pause and offer refuge. The final room contains an enormous pair of handknitted heavily worn WWII braces covering the entire floor of the gallery and folding upwards along one end of the gallery wall: "Daddy's WWII Braces (2003) are frayed at the edges, appearing to be chewed by rats" (Doecke 2012). Visitors walk over the work, leaving their shoe imprint—an ambiguous form of witness—on history.

Dark Rituals, Magical Relics (2018) was part of a curated touring group exhibition, developed as a collaboration between the artist, the University of the Sunshine Coast Gallery, and the University of Tasmania Gallery. The exhibition showed the work of eight women artists who engage in "craft-based" practices, particularly textile/fibre arts, to address lived and intergenerational trauma, and awaken a re-enchantment with everyday lived experience. The gallery became a space for ritual and enchantment within dark walls, with significant handmade objects placed directly upon the floor or walls to create a spellbound "lair". Batorowicz's work in *DRMR* included *Stag Mending Ritual* (see [Figure 4](#)), a handstitched patchwork sculpture of a dead stag; mounted like a trophy, it cast long shadows over the gallery wall, its antler bound by red cloth as from a wounding.

The hedgehog in *TWHS* and the dead stag in *DRMR* are made from recycled remnants of fur, leather, and felt, all materials worn in Poland and brought into Australia by migrants. Like the stag, the hedgehog carries its own reminder of trauma: its fairytale body shows a red felted wounded interior body, symbolizing the historical wounding of a socio-

cultural psyche. More shockingly, it has no eyes, inviting the viewer to see beyond the visible, viscerally and emotionally, seeing with the mind's eye through memory, nostalgia, and imagination. Like other autobiographical trauma art, these works draw connections between a past that can be spoken of only indirectly and the artist's life today in a broader socio-cultural context, a haunting embodied in her handiwork and passed through to the viewer.

Underlying such art is the ethical issue of care and a socio-cultural responsibility concerning ways of representing a difficult and traumatic past; Kerner (2011, 1–2) describes this as "the consecutive doctrine of verisimilitude which demands that any representation of the Holocaust remain both solemn and accurate." *TWHS* however uses fictional representations of the experience of the Holocaust, in the form of fables or fairy tales, which have been a traditional strategy of communication with both adults and children. Fairy tales, such as those told to children in Auschwitz (Kulasza 2010) are useful for those who tell them and for those to whom they are told: the very act of narration can be both cathartic (Jones 2006, 80) and potentially transformative (Tatar 2010) in channelling anxiety, terror, and fear, as well as projecting ideas of hope, warning, and caution. The fairy tales and folklore animals in Batorowicz's artworks can be interpreted as symbolising multifaceted experiences of trauma, physical and psychological, but also reflect the human desire to create beauty as a legacy of even the darkest events. In physically disrupting the gallery space and thereby the conventions of art display (especially high art), they undo the orderliness and hierarchy of Modernism and, in the context of the traumatic history that they embody, the artworks debunk order to challenge the extreme orderliness of the Nazi regime.

Through a discussion anchored in these exhibitions and the illustrated artist books that accompany them, we will show how textile art exemplifies both Mazanti's crafted "super-object" (Mazanti 2011) that integrates life and art, and Tate's "ghostly aesthetic" where both history and the haunted artist have a spectral presence in the artwork that haunts the viewer. The "re-presenting of invisibility" (Tate 2015) depends in this case, we argue, on the special processes of fabrication and tactile encounter afforded by the use of textiles in art. The emergence of craft artworks as super-objects, transcending their traditional categorization in Modernism's art hierarchy, is traced in the following section.

Contemporary textile art as super-object

Feminist art historian Ługowska (2014) points out that in framing the marginalisation of women artists within

the historical devaluation of women's art forms, craft has become a site of political struggle (see also Tyson 2018). Greenberg's (1986 (1939)) seminal essay *Avant Garde and Kitsch* famously argued that high art is painting and low art concerns itself with more popular or banal object-based practices. This exemplified an aesthetic position that knitting, weaving, and stitching were not high art because of their traditional association with "craft" (particularly women's craft) (Groot 2006, 121) within the decorative arts (Auther 2004, 339). After World War II, the genre of "studio craft" emerged, "liberated from function" (Buszek 2011, 4). Postmodern artists, on the other hand, strove to engage more deeply with the "real world" of politics and the wider community (5). However, recent developments in the theorising of the ongoing "art versus craft" debate have drawn attention to the boundary-crossing condition of craft (Buszek et al. 2011); Mazanti (2011) have for this reason described craft works as "super-objects". Contemporary textile art—slow, careful and crafted to a high degree, tactile and approachable, emerging from the feminine backwater to which high art aesthetics so long condemned it, has a relational aesthetic (Bourriaud 2023 (1998)) that transcends boundaries between art and life, art and craft, and the theories of high art, Modernism and postmodernism.

John Dewey argued that art is a matter of "doing": the artist "does his thinking in the very qualitative media he works in, and the terms lie so close to the object that he is producing that they merge directly into it" (Dewey 1958 (1934), 16). This means that artworks, and, it could be argued, especially those where the "doing" is most painstaking, have the capacity to absorb gendered political and social wounds (see, for example, Rozsika Parker's *Subversive Stitch* (1984)) as they "fasten the concrete and the abstract into a material symbol" that can generate "activist possibilities" (Bratich and Marie Brush 2011, 246, 233). Such activist possibilities have manifested in diverse historical and contemporary waves of feminist art that aim to include, centralise, and often (re-)narrate women's autobiographical and artistic contributions omitted by the Western art canon.

The twentieth-century rise of women textile artists was a result of the European Bauhaus movement's masculinist and restrictive approach which turned women towards textiles, and the subsequent post-war emigration of distinguished textile artists, such as Anni Albers and Marli Ehrman to the United States, to join other artists such as Claire Zeisler and Lenore Tawney (Crichton-Miller 2022 (October)). Greater freedom was afforded to women textile artists in Poland and other Eastern European countries, but the work of these artists became more widely known when gallerists "spirited their work out of countries under oppressive regimes" (Crichton-

Miller 2022 (October), citing Tom Grotta and Rhonda Brown of Browngrotta Arts).

The theme of resistance runs through much of women's textile art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, from Hannah Ryggen's depiction of conflict (Dumont 2021; Paasche 2019) to the affirmation of Romani identity in Poland (Higgins 2023; Kledzik 2023; Lind 2022; Szymański and Warsza 2022). Both the medium and meaning of these artworks are a form of resistance; as Turkish-American textile artist Ekinci (2024) notes:

Through the use of domestic and textile fiber crafts, I challenge the assigned value and significance of materials and women's labor.

Sara Ahmed observes in *Living a Feminist Life* (Ahmed 2017, 21), "[f]eminism begins with sensation" and writer Elkin (2024) adds "[a]nd what is more sensuous than textile—a haptic art that calls out to be touched, that restores touch to the aesthetic? Perhaps, then, feminist art begins with weaving." For feminist artists today, as Parker (1984) notes, knitting and weaving is a medium that offers a "voice" outside of high art's normative language. Textiles, due to its "tactility and closeness to the body" resonate with memory and memorialisation as "their connection to personal and collective histories often allow us to cross space and time" (Burton 2021 (December)). This idea is engaged by Holocaust Museum displays that feature piles of Jewish clothing among other belongings, offering a visual and human-scaled connection (that which can be difficult to imagine) to the individual and collective horrors of the past: "Textiles and textile-based art is a means of preserving and accessing notions of memory and belonging that are central to human experience" (Burton 2021 (December)).

In the textile practice of Hannah Ryggen (1894–1970) her activism is expressed in her technical approach, dyeing her own yarn and spinning it in a free-form style that amplifies her "play of conformity and resistance" (Dumont 2021, 53). Ryggen's intentional use of a limited palette of yarn hue and restrained imagery "constitute an aesthetic of resistance aimed at engaging historical fact, aesthetic response, and viewer imagination and reflection" (Greaves 2021, 10). Today, we can recognize the influence of Ryggen's work on several generations of modernist and experimental textile artists, including important figures such as Małgorzata Mirga-Tas Cecilia Vicuña, Sheila Hicks, and Magdalena Abakanowicz. Mirga-Tas represented Poland in the 59th Venice Biennale, creating large collages that stitched second-hand garments, curtains, and jewellery together (Higgins 2023) as visual narratives or "micro-carriers of history" that aim to revise "macro perspectives" concerning Roma community settlements between Slovakia and Poland (Lind 2022). The artworks are a "re-

enchanting of the world as a way of recovering the idea of the Roma community” (Szymański and Warsza 2022). There are many contemporary women artists, such as Louise Bourgeois, Jana Sterbak, and Rosemary Trockel, have paved the way for textile art to critically re-narrate marginalised communities and perspectives, through innovative practices that push the boundaries of the textile genre itself.

Recently, for example, Marr (2021) describes a reclaiming of self through the interplay of traditional domestic craft techniques such as embroidery with household items, as seen in the 2017 work *Mediating the Materiality of the Duster*:

Because the duster it not usually embroidered and hung for exhibition with proclamations demanding change, this change, this uncanny use of the object, facilitates stories that help us to see things differently. The change made to the duster through craft and story can be read as a cultural shift—a shift in our understanding of the object and its purpose, one which disrupts our notions of domesticity through storytelling.

Louise Mazanti proposes that craft be defined, not by the materials used and the process of making, but “rather [by] the role that it performs in the world of objects” (Mazanti 2011, 60). This position is one that has never separated art from life (as did Modernism), or then tried to re-connect them (as did the avant-garde and postmodernism): “[craft] embodies both by its mere existence” (80), not by transforming everyday objects conceptually, but rather by adding aesthetic objects “to the everyday world of things” (79). These are “super-objects”, transcending debates about the relationship between art and the “real world.” Landi Raubenheimer (Raubenheimer 2015, 350) makes the additional point that objects that fall out of everyday use may also “become aesthetic objects with historicity; they are witness to events, ideas and so forth.” We shall see that mending, piecing and stitching together objects that have fallen into disuse, but which have a complex history, can indeed dissolve the schism between art and life—between art and the past, art and trauma, art, and the assumptions of the present—via what we describe as a series of hauntings. This is the “uncanny use of the object, [which] . . . help[s] us to see things differently” (Marr 2021).

“Fabriculture” (Bratich and Marie Brush 2011), already charged with a complex politics and history, makes textile artwork the ideal super-object for integrating art with the real world of wounds and trauma. Here, we return to Dewey’s emphasis on art as a process. The super-object is, according to Mazanti, “super” in that it always already integrates life and art. While the artwork in the gallery or museum may bear the “handprint” of the artist, this is an insufficient marker to distinguish craft from art or craft

from the work of a carpenter, dressmaker, or welder (Fariello 2011, 38–40). The “slowness” and “care” manifest in the making process is one way in which the textile artwork enacts Mazanti’s integration by drawing attention to the artist, her purposefulness, and the history she brings to the work. Art made with slow craft provides the time and space to consider, for example, the source of old fibres and the history they embody. Like other “slow” practices in art, writing, and research (Kuus 2015, 839; Mountz et al. 2015, 1247; Rose 2013, 6), the slow work of art is an intervention that opens up the possibility of “new relationships” (Pottinger 2023) or “proximities” (Rose 2013, 9) with the past and with others in the present.

Tales Within Historical Spaces and *Dark Rituals, Magical Relics* are the artist’s embodiment of this aesthetic position, extending Batorowicz’s critical practice beyond the self of the artist and her art to a form of affective truth-telling and historical challenge. Significant in the understanding of these works as super-objects, is the tactility of the sculptures (in the processes both of fabrication and encounter), and their location and stance within the gallery. Some of the sculptures take on the roles of both viewer and viewed, and the art disturbingly, tactilely, bodily, shares the “real life” world of the visitors. This is art that works with the indirect and destabilizing *modus operandi* of the spectre. In the following section, we examine the idea of the spectre, its role as a form of the artist’s embodiment in her artwork, and finally, the imbrication in autobiographical trauma art, particularly textile art, of embodiment, the spectral, and the past in the present.

The spectral in trauma art

We take the spectre to be an active presence that alerts us to unacknowledged pasts that live on the present: “histories that have not gone” (Ahmed 2010, 50). There are (at least) two dimensions of the spectral that matter for the processes of fabrication and encounter in trauma art: the spectre is an *alert* rather than a telling or describing so that the thing it alerts us to remains just outside our direct field of vision or comprehension; and the thing it alerts us to is something that we hitherto have been unable to, or have chosen not to, directly confront. These two aspects of the spectral give rise to the pain of the artist who is haunted by an unacknowledged history only gestured at in the silences engendered by trauma, and the power of the artwork that alerts the viewer to these hidden or suppressed histories; the spectre raises the possibility that the present we have constructed upon the past might “betray us” (Jameson 1999, 39).

In destabilising the present (Lewis 1999, 140) the spectre does not operate didactically in the manner

of allegories but ‘draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition (Gordon and Radway 2008, 8). The spectre’s alerts are, in Pallesen’s (2023, 799) words, “slippery”:

[A]s soon as you turn toward them, with light, with analytical frameworks, with rigorous designs, they fade away, seeming to have been “nothing” really. Yet, they take hold of you, leave you on slippery ground, questioned, less secure.

Bennett (2005, 7) notes that “trauma-related art is best understood as *transactive* rather than *communicative*. It often touches us, but it does not necessarily communicate, or aim to ‘represent’ the ‘secret’ of personal experience”. Haunting, alerting, and warning are not direct claims about the world; they point instead to Judith Butler’s “remainder of ‘life’ – suspended and spectral—that limns and haunts every normative instance of life” (Butler 2010, 7); in Jane Lydon’s (Lydon 2018, 411) terms, they gesture at a “blind spot”—an unacknowledged, or troubling subconscious knowledge. The spectre in the form of trauma art can show us “the living effects, seething and lingering, of what seems over and done with, the endings that are not over” (Gordon and Radway 2008, 196).

The spectre suggests there is a truth that is just out of sight, but it is not open to direct interrogation. The maker and viewer of trauma art must use other means—affective, exploratory, experiential—to express, transmit, and become aware of such truths.

The secret is not unspeakable because it is taboo, but because it cannot (yet) be articulated in the languages available to us. The ghost pushes at the boundaries of language and thought. (Davis 2005, 378–379)

The artist herself is strongly present in works fabricated using traditional craft methods. This presence connects the body of the artist to the work, although the role of the artist’s body and of embodied cognition within the process of knowledge creation in art, is under-explored. As Groth and Mäkelä note, it is only sometimes, for example, “when listening to a specific sound, tasting wine or threading a needle . . . [that] we can understand our whole body as a thinking thing” (Groth and Mäkelä 2016, 4). Laura Magnusson has said of her multi-media autobiographical trauma art which included her extended submersion in water without breathing: “No one method or material was allowing me to get at the crux of what . . . I’m still trying to figure out” (Magnusson et al. 2023, 206). She asks: “How do you share something of an embodied experience with someone else?” (209). For Magnusson, her art’s authenticity relies on her body actually being submerged, rather

than creating a simulation: “It was no longer a metaphor, there was something else at stake” (211).

Polanyi’s (1965) “tacit knowledge” is embodied experience that cannot always be verbally or textually explained, where “our knowledge is *in* our action” (1965, 29). As a form of tacit knowledge, artistic perception involves a “dynamic multimodal thinking process” that constitutes “expressive thinking” (Marinkovic 2021). The actions of creating do not always come with a logical rationale but with more intuitive intent (Oliver 2010) or what Mäkelä (2007) refers to as a “knowing through making”, and Polanyi describes as “creative intuition” (1965, 15–16). Knowing through making, to embody and express trauma in tactile form, is a recurring theme of textile artists such as the Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz. Abakanowicz’s textile sculptures are a fusion of the personal and the collective. She was only nine years old when World War II broke out, followed by the revolution brought about by Russia (Abakanowicz n.d.). Her works such as *Abakan Yellow* 1970 revolutionised the textile art genre; her heavily woven fibres, along with large rope, hang from the gallery ceiling echoing the weight of a difficult historical past. The humble and raw everyday materials such as rope or burlap connect the work with broader humanity. Her repetitive, headless, and fragmented bodies, for example, in the *Backs* series (1976–1980) (Bigos 2023) point to a loss of community identity, and to human debris, decay, and death; looking at these works is like witnessing the aftermath of a traumatic event.

Maggie Tate discusses artist Rebecca Belmore’s embodied public performance artwork that expressed grief and anger about the disappearance of 65 First Nations women in Canada. She describes the art as “productive of a haunting”, using Avery Gordon’s definition of haunting as “an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known” (Tate 2015, 21). This refers to the haunting of Belmore’s audience, and potentially the wider community, where the performance acts as spectre. However, Tate also refers throughout to the artist herself as haunted by the disappearance of the women:

Animating a haunting through the situated use of her body, the artist who is haunted by disappeared women alerts her audience to a phenomenon of social inequality. (24)

Contemporary textile art’s ability to slow the sensibilities of the viewer, through a heightened awareness of (women’s) labour and materiality, can also be seen in Belmore’s art:

The artist who is haunted by disappeared women gently removes a pair of red gloves from their plastic wrapper, puts them on, gets on her hands and knees

and begins to scrub soapy water around the street and sidewalk that will become the space of her performance ... This act of cleaning the performance space makes the ground available for a hospitable reception for the ghosts of the disappeared women. It also raises working-class women's labour of domestic cleaning into the realm of art, undoing the opposition between public and private and collapsing the distinction between the productive body that works and the productive body that creates poetic acts. (Tate 2015, 26)

Marina Abramović's retrospective exhibition *The Artist Is Present* (Museum of Modern Art 2010) included a (re)engagement with one early work originally performed with her (ex)partner Ulay, titled *Nightsea Crossing* where they both sat at the opposite sides of the table while looking at each other intensely, achieving an "empty, timeless stare" that demonstrates a sense of "consciousness, a consciousness similar to that of the observer" (Biesenbach 2010, 14). This ritualised exchange is "the art", more recently involving Abramović sitting at a table and awaiting (or not) a member of the public to sit opposite:

Durational sitting is the core of *The Artist is Present*, which calls for Abramović to sit all day at a table in the MoMA atrium, at times alone ... An empty chair opposite her will invite visitors to sit and engage her for as long as they like. (14)

Her performances can be unsettling and disturbing as she pushes the boundaries between "admissible conduct and bodily endurance" (Danto 2010, 29) while developing an intense but silent relationship with the viewer/participant.

Batorowicz reflects on her own art as emerging from her embodied subjective experience, and the way this opens up spaces for viewer engagement outside grand historical, including art-historical, narratives. The subjective nature of this space also, as in Abramović's work "awaits the viewer" but through the direct encounter of art objects rather than the artist's physical form. However, the works carry the residue of the artist in the imprint of her labour on the tactile processes of making. This is a sensory and metaphysical presence of the artist affiliated with the spectral. This subjective space potentially enables the viewer to freely contemplate their own associations in an indirect encounter with a traumatic past through a creative modality that places importance on embodied, relational, and experiential means of recollection:

My emphasis on subjectivity is not merely an act of subverting grand narratives within history, particularly Western art history. Rather, it is about seeing subjectivity as a creative fluid space that co-exists between the lines of these grand histories ... Subjectivity gives agency to individual creativity, which is just as important as the factual accuracy of collectivity. (quoted in Doecke 2012, 73)

In *Tales Within Historical Spaces*, the works serve as "a residue of history", a spectre that reveals "the very constructed nature of history itself" (Batorowicz 2012, 25) and the things it leaves out, experiences that are invisible or avoided as too difficult to confront. Batorowicz's urgent need to gather her family's stories and make the resulting artworks reflects the continuing presence of those war experiences in her own life. For Batorowicz, the process of fabrication is a "doing" (Mazanti 2011, 60), the transference of embodied trauma via artworks that carry, in spectral form, something unsayable or unsaid expressed/embodied in every stitch.¹

In the art of Batorowicz, Abakanowicz, and Belmore, the artist is always present, either through the painstaking "doing" that gives her a presence in the artworks or through "the situated use of her body" (Tate 2015, 24). Each offers a warning about the consequences of silence and the capacity of the past to rise up and confront us. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz noted of traumatic history: "The crocodile is quick to sink, but slow to come up" (Geertz 1973, 324, quoting an Indonesian saying).

Creativity can be a matter of psychological survival as well as a signifier of psychological freedom within traumatic circumstances. However, the artist with a critical practice that arises from their own trauma also aims to connect with, and act upon, a broader social consciousness, both reflecting and reflexive: provoking questions that challenge or subvert accepted histories and convenient forgettings, and the socio-cultural worlds that depend upon them (Bennett 2005). Such art—as Mazanti's 'super-object—integrates art and the real world while avoiding claims to be a "representation":

A form of philosophical realism grounds the notion that art can capture and transmit real experience. This sits uneasily with the politics of testimony. I want to propose that such a politics requires of art is *not* a faithful translation of testimony; rather, it calls upon art to exploit its own unique capacities to contribute actively to this politics. (Bennett 2005, 3)

Artmaking may also be a healing process. Shirm (2023), 4, 5, 6, citing Jensen 2016), using the case of autofiction writing, suggests that structural trauma, where "the narrator is unable to name the wounds and many of the events are not events that the narrator directly encountered" can be addressed using metaphor and symbolism in order to "serve the needs of the survivor/writer who is not searching for the facts of the past but for *a way to live in the future*" (emphasis added): "Metaphor, imagination and the symbolic are needed most where the significance of experience is least clear."

Spectral encounters in autobiographical trauma art

In an autobiographical trauma artwork, the visual artist's act of fabrication is, firstly, a process of self-revelation, a means for the artist to make meaning of trauma experience without a re-telling that can re-traumatise, while moving "beyond the silencing meted out by trauma" (Shirm 2023, 5, citing; Gilmore 2001); secondly, it points the audience towards a bigger history that remains unspoken. Nonetheless, a non-textual artwork embodying past and lived trauma is not always easily understood as an expression (a *communication*) of the artist's experience, "making it ambiguous and difficult to codify" (Marinkovic 2021; Orr and Shreeve 2018). When the artwork is seen as spectre, however, it can instead be understood as "a dot on the line" of a set of practices and phenomena that reach back in time through history and memory, and act in the present as "a catalyst for any number of unpredictable effects" (Owen 2011, 84 and citing Nicolas Bourriaud). Maggie Tate notes that Rebecca Belmore's performance and the subsequent videos make visible the ghosts of the past and have "the potential to momentarily disrupt an affirmative notion of Canadian nationhood" (Tate 2015, 22). Both the past that haunts the artist and the trauma artwork that disturbs the present are brought into a relationship with the audience (and the present/future more broadly) in the form of a haunting.

The act of encounter—visiting and viewing an artwork—is a form of commitment: to be open to a new comprehension, to bearing witness in the sense of something that "must be felt, and felt deeply" (Frichot 2022, 116, citing; Rose and van Dooren 2017). Such works require of the viewer what Bennett (2005, 8) refers to as "empathic vision": a critical and self-reflexive empathy in engaging with trauma imagery. She suggests, however (2005, 58), after historian Dominick LaCapra, that "artists and historiographers find a way to make history bear its mark, albeit stopping short of abetting a straightforward retransmission of trauma."

In describing the viewer's interaction with art as akin to all experience, Dewey (19) notes that experience itself is "heightened vitality":

Instead of signifying being shut up within one's own private feelings and sensations, it signifies active and alert commerce with the world; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events.

This vitality in interaction with art is affective; crafted objects are "sticky with affect." In this respect, textile art forms part of what Sara Ahmed refers to (after Husserl) as the "near sphere": 'things I can reach with my kinesthesia and which I can experience in an

optimal form through seeing, touching etc (Ahmed 2010, 31–32, citing Husserl). Exposure to those things that are sticky with unhappy affects "gives us an alternative set of imaginings" (Ahmed 2010, 50). Through the processes of textile work, the artwork, affectively charged in every fibre, is never entirely dissociated from its maker or their stories. Artworks, as Maihoub (2015), 1, 7) explains, are "live social beings"; autobiographical trauma artworks are "active social and emotional agents" that, once exhibited or engaged with more broadly, become an "address directed towards the living by the voices of the past" (Davis 2005, 379).

Creating a bridge between the artist's own past and a broader history requires the artist to work authentically² from their own positioning, experience and socio-cultural context (Kessler-Harris 2009), in order to effectively critique and reveal hidden truths about the past. Like good (literary) autobiographies, an autobiographical artwork can speak as much about a time or place or others as it does about the self (Aurell and Davis 2019, and the entire special issue). However, autobiographical art, like autobiography, "challenges the historian because it serves as a reminder that there are other ways of understanding and narrating the past" (Popkin 2005, 4). While autobiographers and oral historians assert their methods and approaches are committed to "truth-telling" (de Bres 2021, 61), whether it be in the private or public sphere (Holdstein and Bleich 2001), Desai, Hamlin, and Mattson (2010, 60) note that in such works "fact and fiction cannot always be clearly delineated because memory is subjective and often fallible." Yet it is within this positioning that many personal narratives have been located to "introduce marginalized voices into record" (Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008, 6); researchers engage in personal narrative analysis to make arguments based on feminist epistemologies that provide new insights into "past oppressions that have been suppressed or unrecognised". In her discussion of deixis as a mode of calling upon listeners to act as (second-hand) witnesses to trauma, Julia Creet notes that the use of terms such as "you" and "this" "is an aesthetic action that points to the place of memory in its 'peculiar position between history (the factual, external, and past) and subjectivity (the personal and internal present)'" (Creet 2009, 2, citing; Sundholm 2005).

For artists (and potentially more so for women artists), it is the tension between, on the one hand, the blurred boundaries of fact and fiction, and on the other, the desire to engage in truth telling that becomes a source of inspiration and exploration in works that elicit emotion, shift perspective, and provoke reflection. In utilising autobiography, contemporary artists are able to critique the very idea of authoritative narration and remind us that "[f]act

and fiction are inextricably woven together” (Steiner and Yang 2004, 27).

Bennett (2005, 7) notes that responses to an artist’s autobiographical work “are not born of emotional identification or sympathy; rather, they emerge from an affective engagement with the work” that does not rely on representation of a specific event or situation. She notes (2005, 8) that when art is referred to as a sensory impression it can be understood, “not merely as illustrating or embodying a proposition but as engendering a manner of thinking. On this account, art is not conceptual in itself but rather an embodiment of sensation that stimulates thought”. For the audience, this is a different way of knowing, a response to what Benstock (1988, 11) refers to as the artist’s own “becoming of a self-knowledge.” In the case of autobiographical trauma art, this self-knowledge may remain in a tacit or unworded form, and the artist replaces a direct transmission of trauma with its spectre. Here the spectre acts as a form of deixis, pointing to past trauma, calling upon the viewer as witness, but without conveying the details of the artist’s and her ancestors’ trauma: “we can be hailed into the position of the moral witness, in particular, by the strength of the deictic address, but not necessarily called to recount the details of a particular atrocity” (Creet 2009, 7). In Batorowicz’s *Tales within Historical Spaces*, the peripheral experience of folk tale animals—uncannily used (Marr 2021) as both viewer and viewed, crossing the boundary between fiction/art, and the real world of the visitor—is a counterpoint to the photographs of people whose account of war was too traumatic to confront, or pass on in a direct or explicit way.

As part of the exhibition’s educational programming, several exhibition tours were conducted by the curator and, where feasible, by the artist as well. Batorowicz reported that during one tour, two visitors wept when viewing the photographs of family documents that reflected their own family’s recollections of WWII; in speaking with her afterwards, they stressed the importance of ongoing visibility and discussion of such history, as people had not learned all of its lessons yet. At the end of the exhibition, curator Megan Williams handed Batorowicz a message that had been left by international visitors from Poland. Written in Polish, it stated that they happened to be visiting Australia and were pleased and surprised to see so a topic so close to their own homeland being addressed. This highlights the global impacts or “ripple effects” that such art can have on mobile and transient audiences. *TWHS*, developed in a partnership between Australian and Polish art institutions, had a total audience attendance of 4,517. *DRMR*, when exhibited at the University of Tasmania Gallery, was attended by 12,000 visitors.

In *TWHS* workshops and tours for children, facilitated by the curator, the children questioned the artist’s intention in making animal motifs with obvious “errors”. In particular, they questioned why the hedgehog had no eyes, and why the wolf who was wearing a red riding hood’s cap had been turned into a patchworked flying mat. In pointing out such “errors”, they also showed an inquisitive desire to understand what the artist was intending through such “inaccurate” representations, their unsettlement constituting a different form of engagement. It suggests that fragmentation, gaps, and “errors” can also provoke ways of thinking about past.

In his essay on *TWHS*, Doecke (2012, 86) notes that for the visitor,

... engaging with Batorowicz’s works opens layer upon layer of meaning and raises a multitude of questions. She examines the role of the crafts (“little art”) and critiques what she calls “Big Daddy Art” – a reference to the male-dominated history of western art; and provides personal insights into war, hope, resistance, family and identity. The nature of this exploration is very much like her stitching, thickly woven from many different materials. It takes time to unpick the stitches of this sneaky trickster, and get to know her ways. Although she is elusive and cunning, it is clear that this little fox is on a brave mission. In *Tales within Historical Spaces* Beata Batorowicz speaks with a compelling voice that traps all audiences in its curious web.

Batorowicz’s pre-used textiles are themselves “mediums of microhistories”, that “incorporate peripheral or marginal events, figures, and communities into the historical picture” (Kledzik 2023, 114). These textiles, and the creatures that they form – within the gallery spaces where they watch and are watched—are all spectral, emerging from and alluding indirectly to an unsayable past and the ongoing impact of inter-generational trauma in the present. Together they constitute a strategy for a wider audience to become aware of historical denial, personal, and collective.

Conclusion

We have seen the potential for a crafted artwork to embody a traumatic history that haunts the artist, through the physical and affective transference of this history into the object. The object carries this spectral imprint of the artist to the viewer, raising, rather than representing, unsettling possibilities. Trauma artworks are not ‘identified prima facie by their testimonial function; but rather by “the endeavour to find a communicable language of sensation and affect with which to register something of the experience of traumatic memory” (Bennett 2005, 1, 2). In the artworks by Batorowicz, we see the special qualities of textile art in this regard—the slow and intense materiality

of the making process that makes evident the artist's embodiment in the work and invites the visitor to a slower, more thoughtful engagement, but also disturbing and always pointing to something outside of itself.

This line of hauntings, traceable from the artist via the artwork to the viewer, can perhaps be summed up in the image of Tim Ingold's "ghostly line" (Ingold 2007, 47–48). The line is not the silenced history that is woven into the processes of fabrication and encounter, but rather a direction of flow from suppressed history to an awakening within the artist and then the viewer, who encounters works that provoke an affective and cognitive disorientation.

The line of hauntings parallels the flowing effects of intergenerational trauma, but the intervention of the artist, in creatively addressing her own ghosts, also offers the viewer and a wider public the opportunity to experience her truth-telling in the form of "empathic unsettlement" (Bennett 2005, 8, 9, citing LaCapra 2014 (2001)), a willingness to be open to a new comprehension of a past that has fallen by the wayside of history. As Creet (2009, 3) notes, to be hailed as a witness is to be asked, not to experience second-hand trauma but to exercise our capacity for ethical action in the present and the future.

Notes

1. The use of autobiographical writing to explore issues of secrecy and intergenerational trauma in the descendants of those held in Polish concentration camps can be seen in Betty O'Neill's *The Other Side of Absence* (O'Neill 2020).
2. We use "authentic" here in Laura Di Summa-Knoop's sense where "[a]n authentic statement might not be objectively true, but it can ... be subjectively true and significant (Di Summa-Knoop 2017, 11).

Acknowledgments

We thank the three anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments that assisted us greatly in revising the paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Tales Within Historical Spaces was funded through an Arts Queensland Project Development grant (2011–2012), in partnership with QUT Art Museum, Brisbane, Wrocław Art Academy Poland, and University of Southern Queensland. Dark Rituals, Magical Relics was funded by an Australia Council for the Arts (Creative Australia) grant (2018), in partnership with University of the

Sunshine Coast, Academy of the Arts Gallery, Inveresk, Launceston, University of Tasmania, and University of Southern Queensland.

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