

TOUCHING MEMORY

Marianne Hirsch

Editions Esprit | « [Esprit](#) »

2017/10 October | pages 42 - 61

ISSN 0014-0759

ISBN 9782372340267

This document is the English version of:

Marianne Hirsch, « Ce qui touche à la mémoire », *Esprit* 2017/10 (October), p. 42-61.

Available online at :

https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_ESPRI_1710_0042--.htm

How to cite this article :

Marianne Hirsch, « Ce qui touche à la mémoire », *Esprit* 2017/10 (October), p. 42-61.

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Touching memory

Marianne Hirsch

In recent years, I've thought a great deal about how we inherit the memories of painful and violent pasts. I was therefore quite intrigued when a popular American television series engaged this very question in quite sophisticated ways. *Transparent* follows the male-to-female transition of the 70-year old father in a Los Angeles Jewish family. In the second season, Mort/Maura's daughter Ali makes some urgent inquiries into the family's history. She and her girlfriend go to visit Grandma Rose in the old age home. It's a non-meeting—failing to recognize Ali, Rose calls her Gershon. The show had featured some unexplained flashbacks to Weimar Germany earlier, but we don't yet know who Gershon is, though we have heard about Tante Gittel, who turns out to be Grandma Rose's brother Gershon after his male-to-female transition in the 1930s. The scene of failed recognition with her grandmother prompts Ali to embark on a research project that might enable her to connect what she calls “the woman thing and the Jewish thing.” The connection is trauma, inscribed on the body and transmitted across generations in the form of psychological dysfunction and gender dysphoria. It turns out that Mortie/Maura's transition repeats her/his uncle/aunt Gershon's, just as Ali reincarnates Gershon/Gittel in the eyes of Grandma Rose. The show's casting echoes these repetitions, making the generational interconnections palpable for the viewer. After leaving the old age home, Ali takes her research to the library, where she finds the science of epigenetic inheritance. She reads about the cherry blossom experiment in which the grandchildren of rabbits that were exposed to electric shock after smelling cherry blossoms became averse to the smell though they never knew of their ancestors' traumatic exposure.¹ This episode—and its determinative role in the

1 - Ewen Callaway, “Fearful Memories Passed Down to Mouse Descendants,” *Nature* (Dec. 1, 2013).

plot of this daring and popular show—is but one instance of the recent popularity of epigenetics.

In what follows, I'd like to explore the implications of the paradigm of epigenetics when thinking about the temporality of inherited trauma by looking at the connections between historical trauma, its intergenerational transmission and the arts.

Briefly, epigenetics is the study in the field of genetics of cellular or trait variations caused by external, environmental factors that mark not the DNA sequence itself but gene expression, the lining of the cells: “epi” means on, over, around, near, after, in addition. Epi-genetic tags occasioned by environmental factors, it is now believed, are not erased between generations but heritable and transmitted along with DNA sequences themselves. In one widely reported recent study at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York, researcher Rachel Yehuda established correlations between parental trauma suffered pre-conception and the epigenetic make-up of the trauma survivors' children.² Significantly, Yehuda based her study on 38 children of Holocaust survivors. The study controlled for traumatic experiences that the children themselves might have had, and controlled against demographically comparable subjects. Yehuda found that the epigenetic tags of the children of Holocaust survivors exhibited stress hormone profiles that showed a greater predisposition to PTSD and other stress disorders than those of peers in the control group.

The increasing interest in epigenetics and the widespread press Yehuda's study has received seems to me a symptom of a larger trend—the tendency to locate the legacies of violent histories within the narrow circle of the biological nuclear family and its linear determinative temporality. While Yehuda's study attempts to control for contemporary traumatic experiences that might have introduced epigenetic tags in her subjects directly, she cannot control for other generational, cultural, environmental factors that mark us in more indirect ways.

2 - Rachel Yehuda, James Schmeidler, Milton Wainberg, Karen Binder-Brynes, Tamar Duvdevani, Vulnerability to posttraumatic stress disorder in adult offspring of Holocaust survivors, *American Journal of Psychiatry* 155, 9 (1163-1171).

**These events happened
in the past, but their effects continue
into the present.**

In my own work on postmemory, I've argued that the intergenerational transmission of trauma transcends the bounds of the individual and the family, relying on complex and multiple embodied, affective as well as symbolic scenes of transfer.³ Postmemory, as I have defined it, describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma or transformation of those who came before—to events or historical periods that they "remember" only by means of the stories, images and behaviors among which they grew up. But these events were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recollection but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by fragments that can defy narrative and comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present.

But, in my understanding, the family is not the exclusive site of this powerful form of transmission. Even within the intimate and embodied space of the family, transmission is mediated by broadly available cultural texts and inflected by familiar cultural tropes. It is thus surprising that, in a show like *Transparent*, premised on the possibility of bodily transformation across sex and gender through clothes, hormones and surgery—in a show where fathers can become Moppas, brothers become sisters, and uncles become aunts—the nuclear family per se should remain such a dominant site of transmission, and the lines of inheritance should remain so linear. Why, as the family loses its gender composition, does it not also lose its dominance and, indeed, its transience, as a site of dysphoria and traumatic repetition?

3 - Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

The focus on epigenetics has been one recent and, I believe, promising development in the study of individual and collective memory and postmemory, corroborating testimonial and experiential accounts of the effects of inheriting trauma across generations. But epigenetics as a popularized paradigm also raises some concerns. In the popular imagination, at least, the findings promised by genetic and epigenetic research have a truth-value that other paradigms do not. This is of concern as they risk exacerbating the unforgiving temporality of trauma and catastrophe. They reinforce a sense of inexorable repetition of the past in the present and the future—a repetition in which injury cannot be healed or repaired, but lives on, shattering bodies, minds and worlds in its wake. Scientific discussions themselves are, of course, much more complex. The work of Eva Yablonka, for example, sees epigenetics as one of four interacting dimensions of inheritance and evolution: the others are genetic, behavioral and symbolic. As Yablonka and Marion J. Lamb write: “Information is transferred from one generation to the next by many inter-acting inheritance systems.”⁴ Importantly, these researchers show not only how acquired characteristics can eventually result in genetic variations, but also how “behaviors transmitted between generations are tied up with cellular epigenetics.”⁵ By suggesting that environmental factors and behavioral and symbolic means of transfer can impact biological systems of evolution, and vice versa, they leave open the possibility of change, transformation and transmutation, and thus for more erratic temporal possibilities. Much of this research is still in its beginning phases and much of it is still dependent on animal subjects. It is not yet established how biological evolutionary theories and cultural and historical legacies interact, but it is definitely more complicated than the popular version we get in shows like *Transparent*. In my own work, I have looked at *aesthetic* rather than epigenetic accounts of historical violence and its intergenerational transmission. Recognizing that the effects of trauma are necessarily embodied, I look at how bodily acts of transmission circulate within the family, to be sure, but also how they transcend the family and its predetermined roles. Thus, my goal has been to think about how the retrospective

4 - Eva Yablonka and Marion J. Lamb, *Evolution in four Dimensions: Genetic, Epigenetic, Behavioral, and Symbolic Variation in the History of Life* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), p. 317.

5 - Ibid, p. 421.

glance of trauma might be expanded and redirected to open alternate temporalities that might be more porous, more present and future-oriented, and that also might galvanize a sense of urgency about the need for change, and the means of activating it. In fact, I've been especially interested in the aesthetic itself as a space of transmission that is more open-ended, surprising and erratic.

I believe that our acts of reading, looking and listening are encounters relevant to this discussion, as they foster receptivity and responsiveness. As we practice openness, interconnection, and imagination, as we acknowledge our own implication in the works we read and watch and listen to, we necessarily allow ourselves to be open and vulnerable, to be moved in ways that are not easily determined or predictable. I believe that through aesthetic encounters, we can learn to practice attunement and solidarity with victims of violence, whether past or contemporary. This shared vulnerability might orient us not to the repetition of past wounding, but to a reclamation of past hopes and futures. It might thus help us to envision possibilities of transformation and repair and thus to a more open-ended present and future.

In what follows, I would like to look at several works by women artists, who dramatize the contradictions between the inherently embodied nature of violence and trauma and the challenges of transmitting it across subjects and generations within and outside the biological family. What aesthetic media, genres and tropes best create the conditions for an embodied transmission that might promote the possibility of action, change and repair?

The works I would like to look at focus on skin and on touch as both matter and figure of trauma's location within the confines of the individual body. In her classic essay on trauma and gender, Roberta Culbertson wrote that "no experience is more one's own than harm to one's own skin, but none is more locked within that skin, played out within it in actions other than words, in patterns of consciousness below the everyday and the construction of language." Harm to the skin is incommunicable, outside language, Culbertson insists.⁶

6 - Roberta Culbertson, "Embodied Memory, Transcendence and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-establishing the Self," *New Literary History* 26, 1 (1995), 170.

In an earlier article and book chapter entitled “Marked by Memory,” I focused on the trope of the tattoo as a form of writing on the skin that figures trauma in its very incommunicability and untranslatability.⁷ But these questions appear different to me now, in the age of epigenetic inheritance. While I was criticizing children of victims and survivors who over-identified with their parents to the point of wanting to mimic parental trauma, to be physically marked by it just as their parents were, epigenetic science suggests that we are already tagged by our parents’ tags. If we do not want to fall prey to an unforgiving biological determinism, we need to seek more multi-dimensional tropes, figurations, and scenes of encounter with a traumatic past. “Visual art,” art historian Jill Bennett writes, “presents trauma as a *political* rather than a subjective phenomenon. It does not offer us a privileged view of the inner subject; rather by giving trauma extension in space or lived *place*, it invites an awareness of different modes of inhabitation.”⁸ Scenes of artistic encounter can stage transmission as an experience in which the tags of trauma can be shared among proximate or distant co-witnesses in non- or anti- mimetic forms of exchange at the cutaneous, affective level, provoking affective resonances and responses that are unpredictable.⁹ But what might make these resonances lead not to identification, appropriation and mourning, not to repetition or even empathy, but to solidarity and to action, leading to transformation? Materiality, and specifically skin, provides a way to think about these questions. That is because, as Jay Prosser so helpfully suggests, skin is at once a site of boundedness and a site of social connection, the space precisely of being alone and being with others.¹⁰ Skin is also the space of connection between bodies, the very site of touch, and what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls “intercorporeality.” In her essay, “The Experience of Skin in Early Object-Relations,” the psychoanalyst Esther Bick shows how infants experience the mother as an enveloping skin, helping the infant develop an integrated contained self and a

7 - *The Generation of Postmemory*, chpt. 3.

8 - Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* (Palo alto: Stanford UP, 2005), 12.

9 - On co-witnessing, see Irene Kacandes, *Talk Fiction: Literature and the Talk Explosion* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 2001)

10 - Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998).

sense of inner psychic space and boundedness.¹¹ Bick's work, as well as the psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu's notion of the skin-ego, articulate precisely this dialectical sense of producing the sense of a bounded self through relation with the other: "By 'Skin-Ego,'" Anzieu writes, "I am referring to a mental image used by a child's Ego during its early phases of development to represent itself as an Ego containing psychic contents, on the basis of its experience of the surface of the body" (43).¹² And he adds, "the skin-ego is the interface between psyche and body, self and other" (53). Bick and Anzieu both study what happens when the skin-ego is damaged or impaired, through maternal neglect or through physical injury or aggression.

Because skin records experience and retains memory, it can also transmit it through touch, and through a haptic visuality. As Giuliana Bruno argues in her book *Surface*, the surface is both container and membrane, a place of contact, projection and mediation between object and viewer.¹³

And yet, skin is also a site of social differentiation through the mark of color, poverty, illness, injury, or disability. Tellingly, and problematically, this often disappears in biological and psychoanalytic approaches, and this is where a feminist materialism sensitive to socially, economically and politically produced vulnerabilities becomes promising in analyzing skin and touch as media of memory production and exchange in non-teleological temporalities.

To think further about epidermal memory and transmission, I would like to turn to the work of the Polish Jewish sculptor Alina Szapocnikow, an adolescent survivor of the Holocaust who died of cancer in 1973. After enduring multiple ghettos, concentration and death camps, including Terezín, Auschwitz, and Bergen-Belsen, with her mother who worked as a camp doctor, Szapocnikow studied and worked in Warsaw and Paris. She refused to discuss the horrific personal history that suffuses her sculptural work—work that certainly reflects, without naming, the camps as well as a number of compounding personal and

11 - Esther Bick, "The Experience of Skin in Early Object-Relations," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 49 (2) 1968, 484-6.

12 - Didier Anzieu, *Le Moi-peau* (Paris: Dunod, 1995), p. 61.

13 - Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2014).

socially and politically manufactured catastrophes—illness, infertility, finally breast and bone cancer resulting from her use of toxic resins. Her trauma resides in her body and literally destroys it.

In Szapocnikow's sculptural work, the marked body appears everywhere, communicating and transmitting what Griselda Pollock so resonantly calls trauma's "after-affects."¹⁴ Szapocnikow produces artificial skin out of resin and creates body casts that literally imprint her works with carnal memories, engaging the viewer viscerally, on the epidermal level, with a powerful affective resonance.



Alina Szapocnikow, *Tumeurs personnifiées* (1971)

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Piotr Stanislawski/Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris

Critics have seen a process of "undoing" in Szapocnikow's work: her retrospective at Museum of Modern Art in New York 2012 was entitled "Sculpture Undone," and Griselda Pollock sub-titles her important essay on the artist "Sculptural Dissolutions." Szapocnikow's work has until recently not been read in the context of Holocaust art and Pollock's essay on what she calls Szapocnikow's "traumatic encryption," makes a crucial contribution in linking it to the tropes of Holocaust

14 - Griselda Pollock, *After-affects, After-images: Trauma and the Aesthetic Transformation in the Virtual Feminist Museum* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2013).

Touching memory

representation. Careful to eschew biographical reductiveness, Pollock does argue that the artist's compounded personal trauma has not been worked through but that, encrypted and unprocessed, it continues to leak out in her sculptures, endlessly repeating the bodily wounding in different forms.



A. Szapocznikow, *Souvenir I* (1971)

© Adagp, Paris. with the kind permission of The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow/Piotr Stanislawski/
Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris. Photography by Fabrice Gousset.

Clearly, the skin the artist manufactures out of resin cannot contain the injured body parts and memories that break through and ooze out. And yet, I wonder if we could see a different trajectory at work here, not one moving uni-directionally toward dissolution, but one that performs a process of doing and undoing, solidifying and melting at the very same time. In this work, I would argue, shapes seem provisional, contingent, ephemeral and, in some cases, vulnerability seems to be cultivated and

self-consciously assumed, even as it is undercut and playfully mocked, conceived and reconceived.

To be sure, Szapocnikow's sculptures take the ominous shape of seemingly oozing personified tumors and separate body parts, of disturbing, wounding, self-portraits consisting of black lips and breasts, or body casts encased in lava-like eruptions. But they also take the humorous and playful form of chewing gum figures exhibited in photographs as "Photosculptures;" in the surreal, sometimes translucent, lips, bellies, penises and breasts transformed into lamps, omelets and "petits desserts." Testifying to perishability and precarity, these sculptures appear to be in the process of melting and morphing, forming what the artist called "objets maladroits."

The late sculptures titled "Souvenirs," photographic imprints on polyurethane, are certainly some of the most traumatic of her work. There is really nothing playful here. "Souvenir I" is exhibited both hanging on a wall and standing, and it embeds two photographic images: On the vertical plane, a pre-war photograph of the artist as a smiling young girl in a bathing suit cropped from an image in which she is sitting on her father's shoulders on the beach. But here the father has been cropped out and, instead, on the bottom horizontal plane, there is an image of an emaciated dead female Holocaust victim, her mouth open as though in a silent cry. Childhood and the future it signals encounter a devastating death that morphs and multiplies. The artist connects a personal "souvenir" of a world before the catastrophe to a public memory of genocide, but the two cannot be integrated as the father who holds her up as a child before the catastrophe becomes a maternal figure who is killed, and who has the power to kill.

"The photograph tells me death in the future," Roland Barthes writes in *La chambre claire*.¹⁵ Indeed, by depriving the smiling child of her paternal support and by seemingly encasing her inside the skin of the genocidal death toward which she was looking as she faced the camera, Szapocnikow gives indexical substance to that future death. But she also shows that photos can be changed, recombined, and reframed. In their sculptural form, imprinted on contorted skin-like polyester resin, they lose their sharpness, becoming blurred and hard to read. They

15 - Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), p. 150.

can resist the finality of the photographic take. The sculptural shapes themselves appear provisional: we can imagine remaking them, and rewriting the stories they tell. If we focus primarily on Szapocnikow's late sculptures, we can miss the distinctive humor and playfulness in her work that operate alongside the "after-affects" of trauma. We risk missing, as well, the sense of contingency and provisionality that her sculptures convey, their appearance of always being in the process of melting, morphing, and reconstituting themselves. This performance of always being in process can be seen as a form of resistance, however small to determinative reenactments of trauma oriented backwards, toward the past.

To perceive these multiple and surprising possibilities of response opened by Szapocnikow's sculptures, we have to be open to sharing the epidermal touch of trauma while also imagining continuity, reformulation and symbolic repair. In the textures of even her darkest works, and particularly in the combination of photography and sculpture, Szapocnikow is able to create a distancing space of potentiality in which we can practice humor and play and thus look beyond the inevitability of repetition and annihilation.

**Alina Szapocnikow's sculptures
can suggest how one might evade traumatic
reenactment and retraumatization**

If Alina Szapocnikow's sculptures can suggest how one might evade traumatic reenactment and retraumatization, it is because of the gap they open between mimetic repetition and aesthetic encounter. The surfaces of her sculptures might evoke skin, but they are not skin. Even as they draw us in, they interrupt and repel identificatory impulses by shifting from indexical to iconic structures of representation and reenactment. And they convey a range of affects and experiences, personal and historical, that elicit contradictory responses from us as viewers.

The work of touch in contemporary commemorative art can further be traced by looking at the use of fabric and clothing as a second layer of skin to evoke past violence and to respond to its "after-affects." Some of the clothing actually carries literal, indexical, traces of violence,

-serving as evidence. In other cases, the clothing works symbolically to evoke the violence and to transmit it to proximate and distant co-witnesses.

Let me turn now to the installation “Shrine for Girls” shown at the 2015 Venice Biennale by Brooklyn artist Patricia Cronin, and “Thinking of You,” the 2015 participatory art work and activist memory project installed in the Pristina, Kosovo football stadium to commemorate systematic rapes perpetrated by Serb soldiers against Kosovar women. Both specifically call attention to the insidious effects and “after-affects” of gender-based violence in different parts of the world, and both aim to move their audiences, through the transactive power of art, to work, actively, for recognition and change. Using fabric and clothing as their media, both mobilize the exchange of texture and the affects of touch in their projects. But they also reveal some of the problems that such epi-memories carry, especially if they are connected to violence against women—at this point a global cause around which activists, NGO’s, and international governmental agencies have been able to rally—as some feminists have claimed, perhaps too readily.



Patricia Cronin, *Shrine for Girls*.

Photography by Mark Blower.

“Shrine for Girls” was installed in the now deconsecrated Chiesa di San Gallo, the smallest church in Venice, built in 1581. On the church’s three stone altars, Patricia Cronin arranged items of girls’ clothing she collected to commemorate three specific crimes of gender based violence. The central altar displays colorful saris worn by girls in India, to call attention to the rampant acts of gang-rape and murder there. On the left altar, Cronin mounted a blue and brown pile of hijabs that represent the 276 Nigerian school girls who were kidnaped by Boko Haram in Nigeria, and some of whom were recently released. And on the right, there was a large pile of uniforms recalling the clothing worn by girls and young women without means who, until quite recently, were institutionalized as forced laborers in the Magdalene Asylums and laundries in Europe and North America. These included prostitutes, rape victims, unwed mothers, orphans or mentally or physically disabled girls. Clothing items can serve as witnesses to the scenes of the crime, as, in each case, the clothes were collected in the specific locations where these crimes occurred, lending reference, authenticity, and aura to the exhibit.

Entering the dark church to visit this “shrine,” the visitor is prepared to participate in a ritual of homage and ceremonial observance. In the dark interior and the magnificent beauty and elegance of the church with its sacral aura, the unexpected appearance of the colorful piles of fabric is unsettling. It takes a while to realize what precisely we are observing. We have to move right up close to see the small photograph sitting on each of the altars, photographs depicting each of the three scenes of violence against girls. Next to the large heap of clothes, the photograph virtually disappears: our experience is sensory more than visual. But once we walk through the space and gaze at the photos, we begin to appreciate the magnitude and reach of the violence facing girls across history and geography. As the catalogue says, the clothes have become the protagonists of the spectacle staged for us here. The clothes materialize the photographs, give them dimensionality and texture. They evoke the bodies that wore them, or might have worn them. Metonymically, though not indexically, they stand in for those bodies, recalling the crimes those bodies suffered and poignantly underscoring their absence. They are the outer layer of skin that both contains and communicates deeper wounds of violation.

“How do you deliver strong content that might change minds and unnumb viewers?” the artist wondered at a panel discussion on the legacy of rape. She sees the “architecture of spirituality” and the meditative lighting as crucial elements that would move visitors out of complacency. But what are the implications of constructing a “shrine” for the victimized girls and to locate it in a church? Cronin deliberately chose victims from three different world religions, and housed them under the same roof, highlighting connections and resonances between them. Significantly, showing the prevalence of gender violence in Christian first world, as well as Hindu and Muslim third world contexts, does help to avoid the ethnicized culturalist approaches to violence against women and the civilizing missions that address these. But at the same time, the installation risks equating and thus relativizing violence committed against women in very different settings.

More importantly, we have to ask, can sacralization and heroization move us to action and change? Is it appropriate to construct these girls as martyrs? Yes, perhaps in the original sense of the term “martyr,” that is, witness, but not, I would think, in the sense of the martyr’s singularity, of his or her deliberate religious or ideological stance, and certainly not of heroism. Cronin rightly, I believe, qualifies the girls’ martyrdom, saying: “Since the bodies weren’t treated with dignity while they were alive, and their bodies are missing or murdered, I consider the girls as martyrs and their clothing as relics. Unlike religious martyrs, however, there is no glory in their death, no otherworldly triumph.”¹⁶ Do these religious associations enable or impede the mobilization of traumatic memory for change? As we leave the church, we are invited to donate to several humanitarian organizations specifically concerned with gender-based violence, and we learn that the artist herself has donated 10% of her earnings to these organizations. As one reviewer writes, the exhibit moves us “from tears to action.” And yet, decontextualizing violence against women, the installation risks falling prey to a cause that has cast women as universalized victims of violence, gaining funding and support from an array of international agencies, at the expense of a broader and more complex understanding of the causes and effects of the many forms of gender-based violence in the world today.

16- Patricia Cronin, *Shrine for Girls*, Catalogue for the Venice Biennale (Silvana Editoriale, 2015), p. 39. [<http://shrineforgirls.org/>]

Yet, as we turn back to look at the altars one more time, we realize that there may be a larger invitation here opened by the messy provisional arrangement of the clothing and the seemingly random selection of the three sites that are observed. We can imagine taking this exhibit to other sites, or using similar strategies to observe and call attention to other victims and other crimes. These impulses themselves might lead us to wonder whether art can dislodge trauma and mobilize political or legal strategies of repair, and whether it can do so from the outside. What avenues of political action and accountability might be opened by aesthetic encounters in the present economic and political climate? By inviting us into its dark space of contemplation and bringing together histories of violence across the globe, “Shrine for Girls” mobilizes individual, familial and cultural memories and post-memories of gender-based violence, moving them across borders in a moving call to action.



Alketa Xhafa-Mripa, *Thinking of You [Mendoy për Ty]*.

Photography by Jetmir Idrizi.

“Thinking of You” address the embodied archive of the survivors of rape and gender violence committed in times of war and genocide. The project of Alketa Xhafa Mripa, a Kosovo-born artist residing in London, produced in collaboration with Anna di Lellio, a New

York-based sociologist and Kosovo-specialist. On a much smaller and fleeting scale, this activist participatory memory project offers a counter-memory to Kosovar history, aiming to erase silence, to counter denial and enable visibility. The project aims to bring recognition to longstanding history of ethnic warfare in part carried out on the bodies of women. Specifically, it calls attention to the estimated 20,000 Albanian women (6% of the female population) who were systematically incarcerated, humiliated and raped, often in front of their families, by Serb paramilitary during the Albanian separatist war against the Milosovic regime. “I started questioning the silence, how we could not hear their voices during and after the war and thought about how to portray the women in contemporary art,”¹⁷ the artist said. The installation was part of an awareness raising campaign planned by the then-President Atifete Jahjaga. Attempting to compensate for the legal impunity of the perpetrators, the absence, until recently, of rape as a crime of war from the ICC, and the post-war silence of the victims, the artist found a medium that would involve broad-based participation across the country, thus creating a broad-based network of participants. She traveled through Kosovo to collect 5000 dresses and skirts donated by survivors and by other women. With the help of women’s rights organizations and dozens of volunteers, she then hung these on clothes-lines in the Pristina football stadium on the anniversary of Pristina’s liberation by NATO forces after a three-months bombing campaign by the Serbs. In an interview in London, the artist explained her choice of medium: “‘Air dirty laundry in public’ is a way of saying ‘Talk about your private issues in public’, but in this case the laundry is washed, clean, like the women survivors who are clean, pure—they carry no stain.”¹⁸ 45 clothes-lines with colorful dresses and skirts across a football stadium, the symbol of masculine competition and sociality, are striking and beautiful, powerfully resignifying the space.

And yet, the anniversary event itself was only a small part of this durational art-work. The donation and collection of dresses throughout the summer, the moments of embodied exchange of clothing and

17 - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/11/kosovo-sexual-violence-survivors-art-dresses>

18 - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/11/kosovo-sexual-violence-survivors-art-dresses>

stories, the networks created, all worked to combat silence even more effectively than the installation itself, I would venture. Bringing communities of women together to exchange the gift of a dress or skirt, to speak openly about their own or their relatives' abuse, to hug and offer one another support in remembrance, is a large-scale act of repair through the medium of touch. The film "The Making of Thinking of You" that Anna di Lellio created to document the process shows women and men gathering in numerous public locations across the country to exchange the clothes, hold them, fold and care for them, while listening to each other and becoming attuned to the stories the dresses themselves, as material remnants and witnesses, are able to tell. Many participants came forward to emphasize that they are donating their favorite dress, or one directly associated with the crimes. Mothers and daughters traveled together to donate, embodying acts of transmission. The artist received many of the items herself, and she visibly performed the affects evoked by the donations—on screen, she cries in sympathy, hugs, and holds the people coming forward and their stories. She found a haptic medium through which to reverse silence and injustice, to create visibility and voice.

To give their efforts maximum prestige, the artists invited celebrities to donate. The film features President Atifete Jahjaga, ambassadors, as well as actors, first ladies, and many ordinary women discussing what the project means to them. A running theme in these comments is the President who says she participated to say to the survivors: "You are not alone in this, we are all together."¹⁹ This line is repeated and, equally often, the victims are referred to as martyrs who sacrificed "for our country" and who deserve, as participants say, over and over, empathy, solidarity, an acknowledgment long overdue.

One moment in the otherwise perhaps overly celebratory film, introduces another note of skepticism about the efficacy of the project through the voice of an elderly women's rights activist, Sevdije Ahmeti. "I'm giving this for the women and girls who were assaulted by a certain weapon, rape. ... [Through the campaign], society has been made aware and victims have been given a voice. ... However the problem remains that they don't know the perpetrators. In order to

19 - "The Making of Thinking of You."

identify the perpetrators, there should be political action, political and diplomatic pressure for Serbia to uncover its police, military and state records, so that we know where their military bases were located. ... [thus] we could convene trials and seek social justice.”²⁰

The acts of exchange open up that past itself.

What do activist participatory memory projects like “Thinking of You” accomplish, as opposed to memorial museums and other official institutions? They can neither substitute for legal redress or economic reparation, nor compensate for the lack of it, even if it might *appear* as though they are doing similar work. This project, however, was intended as a concrete intervention. As Anna di Lellio states in an email to me: “The project intended to break the stigma and the isolation of survivors, so they would come forward and apply to get the pension that the law accords to them in Kosovo as a special category of civilian victims of the recent war.”

I would suggest that beyond the celebrity photos and the assertions about empathy and solidarity, something important is being exchanged as Kosovo citizens come together in the acts of epidermal touch and connection staged in this project. Transmission of a traumatic history occurs across class, gender and generation, across space and time. As dresses are moved from the closet to the football stadium, trauma is dislodged from the confines of individual bodies and families. A painful past is brought into the present socially through gesture, touch and affect, and also through the digital acts of transfer on YouTube. And with this greater acknowledgement and dissemination something is profoundly transformed.

It seems to me that the acts of exchange do more than acknowledge a past crime—they also open up that past itself. They invite us to allow the women who might have worn these dresses, or might have had them torn off in violent acts of rape, a time before the violation, a

20 - “The Making of Thinking of You.”

future they envisioned and that was taken from them, a future that those who were able to survive, might have reclaimed?

In sending us back to these past presents and their own ideas of a future, rather than backshadowing with the catastrophes that we, in our own present, know all too well, the installation is performing an act of repair, made urgent by the long neglect of local or national recognition on site. We are invited to imagine alternative, or, in Ariella Azoulay's terms, "potential histories."²¹ Inspired by Walter Benjamin's idea of "incomplete history," "potential history" is a sense not just of what was, but of what might have been. The act of encountering history in this way is, actively, in Ariella Azoulay's terms, to "potentialize" it—to revisit it so it yields different, perhaps incongruent, "unrealized possibilities,"—eventualities that resonate across time and space. To potentialize history is to see what was from a different angle, through different eyes. An openness to different potential instead of one single linear history would mean the ability to accommodate conflicting truths that could lead to alternate futures, and, counter-intuitively perhaps, to alternate pasts as well.

It is here that it is helpful to consider these three postmemory projects together. Looking back from Alina Szapocnikov's enactment of bodily trauma in her sculpture, to "Shrine for Girls" and "Thinking of You," we can see different forms of gender violence at work in different historical and political contexts. But we can also see different artistic media and performances claiming and resignifying trauma for viewers of the future. Participating in the transmission of affect in acts of touching across multiple temporalities, we can ensure that the epigenetic reinscription and perpetuation of violence and its devastating after-effects no longer seem inevitable.

Marianne Hirsch is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and Professor in the Institute for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality. Hirsch's recent books include *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (Columbia University Press, 2012), *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory*, co-authored with Leo Spitzer (University of California Press, 2010).

21 - Ariella Azoulay, "Potential History: Thinking Through Violence." *Critical Inquiry* 39, 3 (2013), 548-574

Abstract

The transmission of violent histories is not limited to the familial sphere: it can be cultural, imaginative and projective. Art helps one experience the past differently.