

**COVER YOUR EYES:
CONSIDERING EMPATHETIC RESPONSE IN REVIEWING
VISUAL ART CONVEYING TRAUMA**

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HONORS THESIS

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by

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1. Abstract

It is no longer enough for the artist to rely on pain to [inspire compassion or] simulate art... An audience is necessary with the purpose of engaging spectators in the entire process of suffering along with the artist. —Dana Milstein

In the process of considering art, especially images of pain and trauma, the audience serves an important role, as their reaction is an integral part of the experience. Milstein recognizes this relationship as part of the process of art making. Artists may overtly or covertly attempt to manipulate the reaction of the audience, to guide the empathetic response of the viewer. As both a visual artist and a critical thinker, I am interested in the effect of this empathetic response and the complex relationship that exists between the artist, the viewer and the artwork. In this paper I will be taking into account recent neurological research into Mirror Neuron Systems (MNS) in the brain, sociological studies on empathy in relation to trauma and pain, and psychological theories, specifically abject theory as explained by French feminist theorist Julia Kristeva, to synthesize a holistic understanding of the viewer's response to pain and trauma in art. I will engage the work of recognized artists, such as Marina Abramovic and Yoko Ono, interpreting their performative iterations of pain and trauma through this understanding of the mechanics of empathetic response. For example, the experience of a viewer watching as a young man aggressively approaches Ono and removes large portions of her clothing in the performance of *Cut* (1965). The value of understanding the empathetic process will be immediately applicable to my creative process. The paper ends with a brief explanation of my own work, which seeks to convey the trauma of living within a gendered body that is constrained by society.

Keywords: Neuroaesthetics, Trauma, Contemporary Art

2. Body of Paper

2.1. Introduction:

“Pain is an integral and inescapable fact of human life.”¹

In her essay “Pain is a Preposition,” Dana Milstein follows the cycle of pain as a human experience that is a common starting point in many works of literature. From Shakespeare’s plays to the *Bhagavad Gita*, in war epics and tragedies, comedies and love poetry as well as in modern films and music, pain is often the impetus of the story. She states, “The paradox of human life is that we rely primarily on pain to produce art and yet it is the one thing that we are unable to self-produce.”² She is speaking of self-produce in the sense that most people cannot imagine or create pain without outside stimulation; it is a temporary and illusory sensation that quickly fades from an initial intensity to a vague memory. As an artist who is interested in creating art that explores questions of pain, trauma and the female body, I find the assertion that pain is an inescapable human condition an intriguing notion.

While Milstein focuses on literature and film, the same use of pain is found in visual art. Performance artists of the 60s and 70s often used pain in their performances as a way to “underline the literal pain at the heart of female embodiment.”³ These performance works are sometimes called ordeal art because of the length of time the artists performed repetitive tasks or allowed themselves to be subjected to difficult situations. Artists such as Yoko Ono, Marina Abramovic, Ana Mendieta, and Gina Pane put their bodies through physical hardships as part of their artistic performance. These performances are important to art history and feminism and I became curious how the graphic nature of the work affected the viewer. It seems that the sensational aspect of

much of the art, while enabling dialogue on the merits of such art and debates as to the actual meaning of the pieces, might have acted to obscure the dialogue between the art work and the viewer. Knowing that pain is such an integral part of the human experience, and specifically, of the female experience, I became curious how the viewer understood these performances that called upon the visceral experience of pain.

To understand how the viewer experiences this type of art, I needed to go outside the context of art and art history to explore how other fields understand how pain and trauma are interpreted by the mind and body. I choose to explore three fields, neuroscience, sociology and psychology, to attempt to understand the complex ways that the viewer internalizes and interprets art. Within the world of neuroscience, there have been interesting discoveries on how the brain processes visual stimuli and the neurological underpinnings of viewing violent actions. By exploring the way that the brain seeks to comprehend new experiences, I hope to understand how a viewer internalizes performance art that incorporates pain in the process. The brain does not operate in a vacuum and so it is also important to understand how violent imagery is viewed within our society. For this I turn to Susan Sontag's book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, to understand how a viewer processes violent images, specifically photographs from war correspondents, and how repeated exposure to violence can affect empathetic response. I also examine the psychological theories of the French critical theorist, Julia Kristeva, pertaining to the concept of the abject, which is the subconscious reaction to subject matter that reminds one of their mortality. I would like to make a connection between viewing violent imagery and abject theory, exploring the idea that the repulsive is actually alluring. By combining these three perspectives, neurological function of the

brain, sociological understandings of the empathetic response, and psychological repercussions of abject theory, I hope to develop a language that understands how the depiction of violent action or imagery in works of art and performance can affect the audience in a meaningful and lasting way.

Throughout the paper, I will reference the work of performance artists, including the work of Ono, Abramovic, Mendieta and Pane, among others, to apply the information from these other disciplines and perhaps broaden the reading of their performances. I am also interested in the application of these ideas to my own art making process (addressed in Appendix 1). Understanding the reactions of the viewer is an important aspect of communicating ideas with the knowledge of the potential affects of the work on the audience. I believe this consideration becomes more important if you are creating work with the purpose of engaging the viewer with the intent to convey emotions or experiences via the medium of art.

2.2. Psychological Studies:

“...the eye is connected with the brain; the brain with the nervous system. That system sends its messages in a flash through every past memory and present feeling.”⁴

The field of neuroscience has recently recognized a branch of research that studies the neural basis of the aesthetic experience. Aided by new discoveries in brain function, new equipment that allows for detailed studying of neurological functions and innovative neuroscientists willing to experiment has become a vibrant field of study.

Neuroaesthetics explores the actions within the brain when different people view the

same visual imagery. Understanding how the brain processes artistic imagery also may lead to an understanding of how the brain processes abstract ideas and emotions.

“During the last decade neurosciences have gained substantial advances in understanding components and principles of the sensory modalities involved, which for the visual aesthetic, have been related to shape, symmetry, and complexity, proportions of the object, triggering subjective cognitive and emotional components.”⁵ By understanding how the brain interprets abstract images in art, the neuroscientist is able to understand how different mechanisms in the brain work.

To explore some of these ideas, I looked at two articles dealing with different aspects of the brain’s response to art. The first was an article by a group of neuroscientists from Italy that explored the way that paintings rated good, bad or neutral by the viewer affected the pain threshold of the viewer. The second dealt with the mirroring of physical action and emotional response when looking at a visual image.

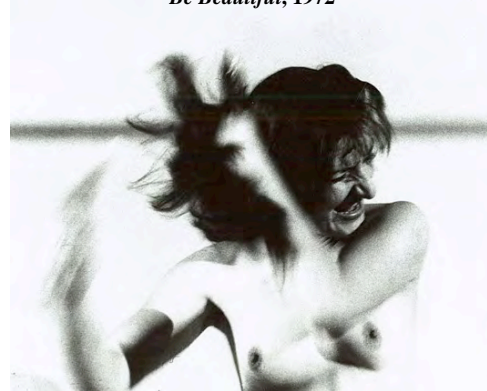
The first article published in 2008 by Maria de Tommaso, looks at the use of distraction to mediate pain, and was the first to study “the effects of aesthetic perception on pain.”⁶ While the introduction of science to the understanding of aesthetics might give some pause, especially in the quantification of “beauty,” this study attempted to mitigate the subjective nature of aesthetics by utilizing the participants’ own understanding of aesthetics in the experiment. The purpose of the study was to see if looking at art judged pleasing by the subject lessens their perception of pain.

“The manipulation of attention has been used as a therapeutic approach to pain for generations”⁷ and, through distraction, the subject’s brain is activated away from thinking about pain. This lessens the perception of pain. The article explores the ability of

distraction to alter the pain threshold by looking at the effect that particular qualities of distractions, in the form of paintings, had on lowering the pain threshold. The subjects of the study were shown 300 paintings and rated the images as beautiful, neutral or ugly based on their own independent, subjective interpretation. They were then shown the images they had chosen, as well as a white panel that acted as the control, while laser heat was applied to the skin of their left hands and asked to rate the pain using a visual analogue scale. The researchers compared the pain response that the subjects experienced while viewing the paintings and found that “the vision of beautiful images seems to have the maximum distractive effect from pain.”⁸ These findings suggest that looking at a painting that the subject has selected as being aesthetically pleasing can lessen the sensation of pain.

This concept, that “beautiful” images can actually reduce pain, speaks to the power of visual imagery and might support what many individuals already believe, that art has the power to heal and soothe. Marina Abramovic speaks of this aspect of art in an interview with Germano Celant: “There are many people who believe in art as a cure, something that heals. Previously it was something spiritual, and now it’s also physical and mental. I think that a work of art really produces an effect of the psyche.”⁹ However, if “beautiful” images lessen the pain you feel, then what happens when observing painful, violent or distressful images? In the same interview, Marina states that at the time of her ground breaking performance pieces, such

Marina Abramovic, *Art is Beautiful/Artist Must Be Beautiful*, 1972

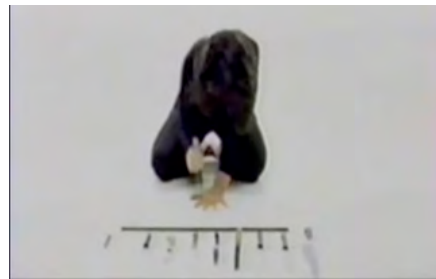


as *Art is Beautiful/Artist must be Beautiful* (1972), she believed that art should be disturbing rather than beautiful¹⁰. As I am specifically interested in looking at performance art that is not “beautiful” but has qualities that disturb and engage the audience in ways that are counter to the traditional understanding of art as aesthetically pleasing, it is interesting to note that an artist engaged in making art is aware of both the psychic affect of art and the purposeful use of her art work to disturb the viewer. Abramovic’s intuitive understanding of how art can affect the viewer was used in her performance to engage the artist in a painful and distressing act. This interesting twist on the study’s finding that beautiful art can soothe, works in reverse using the power of images to impart physical sensations in the viewer.

Dr. Semir Zeki, the father of neuroesthetics, stated: Art renders the destructive, isolating and individualizing effects of variability safe in its pages, canvasses, and scores¹¹. This might be true if you believe that art is by definition aesthetically pleasing in some way, but in many ways conceptual art, performance art and contemporary art challenge the traditional definitions of art. In Yoko

Ono’s performance *Cut* (1965), the audience is encouraged to cut away the clothes of the artist as she sits passively on stage. In Marina Abramovic’s *Rhythm 10* (1973), the artist repeatedly stabs the

Marina Abramovic, *Rhythm 10*, 1973



space between her fingers replicating each mistake until her hands are bleeding. These performances and others call into question the definition of art and alter the interaction between the viewer and the artwork. Which makes these neurological studies that much more interesting.

The second article that explores how the brain responds to visual imagery looks at two specific processes within the brain, the Mirror Neuron System (MNS) and embodied simulation and applies the discoveries of their function to the experience of viewing visual imagery. By examining the physical response of the viewer to the situations, sensations and emotions depicted in a painting, the author seeks to “propose a theory of empathetic responses to works of art that is not purely introspective, intuitive or metaphysical but has a precise and definable material basis in the brain.”¹²

The discovery of mirror neurons and the process of developing a better understanding of how they work in the human brain allowed the field of neuroscience to explore the way that humans empathize with each other through the medium of art:

Our capacity to pre-rationally make sense of the actions, emotions and sensations of others depends on embodied simulation, a functional mechanism through which the actions, emotions or sensations we see activate our own internal representations of the body states that are associated with these social stimuli as if we were engaged in a similar action or experiencing a similar emotion or sensation.¹³

The mirror neurons were first discovered studying macaques, a type of monkey. What they found was that the same neurons activate when doing an action as when observing an action. For example, if you watch someone grasp an object, either in person or in print, the neurons in your brain activate as if you were performing the same action. Even if you don't see the final stage of an action, but only the initial beginning of a task, and the rest of the action is implied. The mirror neurons are able to understand the implied action and complete the task within the brain. “It has also been shown that the

MNS in humans is directly involved in the perception of communicative facial actions, in the imitation of simple movements and in the learning of complex motor acts even when not previously practiced.”¹⁴ This reaction is even applied to tools and other static objects. When the human brain sees a manipulatable object, the neurons that would be utilized in operating the object are triggered. This study explains what we intuitively understand in watching how babies and small children imitate expressions, gestures, actions and phrases that they hear—our brains have evolved to use mimicking as a way to learn and to understand the world around us. As applied to the viewing of visual art, looking at the “feeling of physical involvement in artworks not only provoked a sense of imitating the motion seen or implied in the work but also enhanced the spectator's emotional responses to it.”¹⁵

Freedburg calls this response “empathetic engagement” and believes it is a crucial new element in understanding how humans relate to art. If, in viewing a piece of art, the audience is subconsciously mirroring the actions that they are seeing, the viewer is more intrinsically engaged with the art work than we might have previously understood. “In the case of figurative art, one might assume that it is the artist's conscious and unconscious skill in evoking an empathetic response that most directly impacts the aesthetic quotient of the work.”¹⁶ The artist, in understanding how the viewer interacts with the actions, implied or literal, the emotive expressions, and the tactile sensations contained within an artwork, is able to connect more successfully with the viewer. These findings imply that artists have an intuitive comprehension of the inner working of the human brain.

Zeki addresses the role of art in neuroscience more directly, stating that “visual art

contributes to [neurologists'] understanding of the visual brain because it explores and reveals the brain's perceptual capabilities."¹⁷ He recognized the artist as the vanguard in exploring how the viewer reacts and interacts with visual stimuli. This intuitive understanding of the neurological functioning behind the resonance an artwork might have with the viewer enables the artist to better communicate ideas, emotions and sensations. As Freedburg writes, "most spectators of works of art are familiar with feelings of empathetic engagement with what they see in the work itself"¹⁸ and this scientific understanding of how these responses are created in the functioning of the brain, give us a broader understanding of how this connection occurs.

With this understanding comes a responsibility as well. In creating artwork that is disturbing, whether showing actual violence, tools of violence or the potential of violence, the artist is usually seeking to evoke a reaction in the viewer. Understanding how connected the viewer is to the action depicted in the image, how the action is repeated in the brain and feeling the violence on a visceral level, the artist can manipulate the response more directly. Dana Milstein, in her essay "Pain is a Preposition," spoke of watching a particularly gruesome rape scene in the movie *Irreversible* and the effect it had on her:



Irreversible, Film Still, Gaspar Noe, 2002

I felt completely displaced...I had the feeling of belonging nowhere, and had no desire to do anything other than walk aimlessly around the city. In my mind the rape scene was a real event and for three weeks it haunted me in moments of solitude—on the train, during work and lying in bed—

causing me to feel nausea or break down in tears or shivers.¹⁹

In this instance, a film was incredibly effective in creating a visceral response in a viewer, to the point of causing trauma. I had a similar response when watching this film—the director exhibited a masterful skill in accessing the empathetic reaction of the audience. Milstein speaks of the movie as being an example of an “artist’s use of simulated torture to initiate a cycle of pain within the audience.”²⁰ By creating an event so real as to cause trauma in the viewer, the director underlines the findings in neuroscience that the brain translates events through mimicking the actions that are seen.

Understanding how the brain translates the visual images into actual imitation of action through the Mirror Neuron System and embodied simulation alters the way we understand the effects of the performance art I mentioned earlier. For example, in Ono’s performance of *Cut* (1965) in New York, the audience was



Yoko Ono *Cut* 1965

invited to cut her clothes off with a pair of scissors as she sat passively on the stage. While there are many interpretations of the intended meaning of the work, the audience-artist relationship was one aspect that was being explored by the artist, “testing her commitment to life as an artist.”²¹ In the process of allowing her clothing to be removed in public by strangers, Ono’s performance engaged the audience in many different ways. They were the active agents of her body being revealed publicly, by the act of cutting away her clothes. Even the act of watching became active as some audience members tested the bounds of how much they could cut. The neural pathways in the brains of

those in the audience and those watching the performance, specifically the mirror neurons, were firing away, processing the action of cutting, of holding scissors, of being stripped of clothing, of being watched, of being still, and of being vulnerable.

At the same time, they were also recognizing and simulating the emotions that Ono was experiencing and displaying as the performance progressed. When an aggressive young man approached, circled and made rude comments, and then proceeded to remove large portions of her clothes, Ono physically broke from her passive role. Fear flickered across her face, tears welled in her eyes and she covered herself as the man cut her bra straps. The poignancy of that moment was understood viscerally by some in the audience. Those that understood her vulnerability through their activated empathetic response, respond by hissing and booing at the actions of the man. The layered emotional engagement of this performance is one of the reasons that it has remained in the public conscious.

2.3. Sociological Studies:

“Beauty will be convulsive, or it will not be at all.”²²

People had different reactions to Ono’s performance, specifically, the young man who acted so brashly, pushing her into an area of vulnerability that the performance was flirting with. This highlights the unique ability of art to affect everyone in a different way. In fact, Zeki believed “art’s richness lies in the fact that its power to disturb and arouse varies between individuals.”²³ One understanding of why the young man was not reacting to the vulnerability of the artist was that he did not have the same ideas regarding

what vulnerability looked like; his empathetic response was not tuned to that situation or emotion. Susan Sontag writes of the empathetic response from a less rigorous scientific point of view. Specifically looking at the effect of photos from war journalists, she writes about the experience of the viewer looking at the graphic and shocking images of actual events as “a means of making “real (or ‘more real’) matters that the privileged and merely safe might prefer to ignore.”²⁴ By delving into the process that these privileged individuals experience in understanding these violent images, Sontag explores the empathetic response as an exercise in comprehending trauma and pain that is difficult for the uninitiated to comprehend.

In the viewing of images or artwork, the question of voyeurism and empathy are unavoidable. Sontag discusses the problem of the initial shock of an image wearing down the empathetic response and dulling the effect on the viewer. She addresses the fact that “people have a means to defend themselves against what is upsetting.”²⁵ The constant barrage of traumatic and painful images can begin to callous the empathetic response in the viewer. This response is triggered by a connection to the suffering shown by the subject of the image. Whether as a neurological response that allows us to physically or emotionally respond to the stimulus of the image or in the sociological response of igniting the compassion within us. The feeling of compassion is connected to the empathetic response, as it is a “sympathetic consciousness of others’ distress together with a desire to alleviate it.”²⁶ It is, in effect, the empathetic response supported by a call to arms.

But, as Sontag mentions, “compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action or it withers.”²⁷ The violent images depicted in visual art are a

recording of traumatic events, experiences or archetypes and are received passively by the viewer, with no way to alleviate the suffering that they are exposed to. The desire for action stimulated by the compassion response is stymied. As the viewer is exposed to more and more violent and shocking images, it becomes almost necessary to increase the threshold, to bring more violence, more shocking images to reignite the empathetic response that is the beginning of compassion.

It is especially interesting that Sontag points to a feeling of relation or connection with the image as important in how the empathy is experienced. It is one thing for a body that is understood as “other” to be suffering, but when the body is recognized as “self,” the reaction of empathy is readily engaged. Speaking again of war images, Sontag states that “safety makes one feel indifferent—the ‘other’ is suffering.”²⁸ Encouraging a connection between the image and the viewer becomes necessary to inspire empathy in the viewer. In this regard, the caption becomes important as a defining characteristic and the narrative surrounding the image becomes paramount. “Narratives help us understand. [Visual images] do something else: haunt us.”²⁹

She makes the point that if a photo of a child mutilated and killed by an act of war affects us viscerally as a human body but that the context becomes important for the viewer to internalize the image: the Israeli sees an Israeli child killed by Palestinian suicide bombers, the Palestinian sees a Palestinian child killed by an Israeli ordinance. Sontag states that “all photos wait to be explained or falsified by their captions...alter the caption and the children’s death could be used and reused.”³⁰

The need to recognize one’s self in the performance of art becomes important to the empathetic response elicited by some of the performance art mentioned earlier.

During Marina Abramovic's singular performance *Rhythm 0* (1974), she invited the audience to use a selection of 72 different objects, in any way that they wanted, with her body being the canvas as she stood passively in the museum. By the end of the performance, she had been cut, burned and her body was exposed where her clothes had been cut away. One man even put a loaded gun to her head and tried to force her to



Marina Abramovic, *Rhythm 0*, 1973

cock the trigger.³¹ The performance epitomizes the way that art affects individuals differently and how the defining of a human body as “other” frees the audience to act in ways that they would not do to a body that they recognize as “self.” “In the still photographs documenting [the performance], one can clearly see the tears and despair in Abramovic's eyes and the cold indifference of the primarily, but not exclusively, male spectators.”³² The gendered nature of the performance, a female artist passively accepting action on and against her person by a majority male audience, “invites a symbolic and collective violence that is both misogynist and sexual”³³ and reflects the social and cultural conditions of that period. The gendered divide between the performer and the audience allowed for an easy departure for the audience to define the performer as “other,” and to act accordingly. As a result, their empathetic responses were dulled and their actions became brutal.

However, when the man cocked a gun to her head, it was other spectators who intervened on Abramovic's behalf. It seems safe to assume that the individuals who stopped the violence were empathetically, and compassionately, engaged with the

performance in a different way than those individuals who were escalating the violent actions. This highlights the variability in audience responses to visual art and brings up the idea of compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatization. These concepts address the variability in the human response to empathetic engagement with traumatic situations and the ensuing reactions to external stimulus. Though they address topics broader than this paper covers, specifically the medical profession, first responders, and family members of those surviving trauma, I believe that they are an essential element in understanding the response of viewers to traumatic visual images. Specifically, that trauma, whether experienced or witnessed, can affect the mental well being of a person. The concept of vicarious traumatization, the “phenomena of the transmission of traumatic stress by observation and/or “bearing witness” to the stories of traumatic events,”³⁴ becomes especially relevant.

2.4. Critical Theory—Abject

“In art something, and the ultimate thing, must be left over for the imagination to do.”³⁵

While the neurological and social responses to viewing traumatic visual images are helpful in understanding the response of viewers, it is necessary to look at the psychological understanding of human reaction to trauma. The repulsive nature of violent, painful images is also important to recognize, and, located within that repulsion, is something that we find attractive. Sontag speaks of the desire to observe the gruesome and the tendency of people to “yield to repulsive attractions.”³⁶ This adds another layer in understanding the appeal of visual images conveying trauma as subject matter. While

the tendency of traffic to slow at crash sites might be a response of safety or compassion, it is more likely to catch a glimpse of the possibility of gore at the sites. The desire to observe a gruesome and grotesque event is a strong motivator when looking at, looking away, and then looking back at traumatic images, because “images of the repulsive can also allure.”³⁷

The allure of the repulsive is a function of the abject. The abject is an aspect of the human psyche that is a reversion to primal desires and drives. In the development of the human psyche, the abject is active very early in life, in the first few months of existence, when reality consists only of bodily needs and desires and no concept of self has been established. In the simplest of terms the abject is the development of revulsion for things that are understood within one’s culture as being unacceptable. It is taught by the establishment of rules and language that differentiates what is acceptable and what is not. In the recognition of rules and language, the individual rejects the abject and moves toward the development of an individual self. But the abject still exists within us and there are certain points where we recognize it in the world around us. These points “are where meanings collapse...[and]...disturb identity, system, and order.”³⁸

The most recognizable form of the abject is when something exists outside of you but is also a part of you, such as bodily waste or a corpse. “Refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live...these body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There I am, at the border of my condition as a living being.”³⁹ Those things that are reminiscent of death or decay, the things that remind one of their own mortality, are abject. The abject exists on the razor edge of psychically defined propriety:

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, [and] order. What does not respect borders, positions, [and] rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.

Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law is abject.⁴⁰

The fascination with the abject is an innate desire to understand what makes a distinction between the “self” and the “other,” between animal and human. “By way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.”⁴¹ The rules and language that divide the primitive from the human are all that separate man from sinking back into an animal state. It is the extreme form of what Sontag was referencing when she speaks of the viewer separating themselves as different from the photo by defining the subject as “other.” By observing abjection, the observer can separate himself as different as that which is abject, holding himself as superior, separate and isolated from the terror of the unknown.

Artists who engage with the abject are purposefully exploring the divide between the abject and culturally accepted norms of behavior. Gina Pane, a French artist, directly engaged with abjection in her performances, using blood, maggots and engaging in violent acts against her person. Pane’s work was affected greatly by the political activities in Paris and Europe during the 1960s and 1970s, when student protests occurred in response to the war in Vietnam and the American nuclear testing at Bikini Atoll.⁴¹ In *Death Control* (1974), she lay without flinching as



Gina Pane, *Death Control*, 1974

maggots crawled over her face, attempting to burrow into the soft areas of her body. The association of maggots with death and decay is used in her work to confront the viewer with the “painful reality of the body’s ephemeral existence.”⁴² As the maggots wriggled over her living skin, trying to find the sustenance of decaying flesh, the viewer recognizes their own inevitable death and decay. And while “the photograph was merely uncomfortable to look at [and] the video [was] unbearable,”⁴³ the actual performance must have been excruciating to have witnessed.

In delving into the realm of the abject, Pane engage the audience in questions of their own mortality while fascinating them with objects of revulsion. The resonance of the work makes it difficult to dismiss as merely grotesque or gratuitously shocking. The power of Pane’s work to repulse and attract while prodding the viewer to explore deeply held cultural and psychological taboos is another way to engage the viewer in exploring the empathetic response in reviewing traumatic images in visual art.

2.5. Conclusion:

“At that time, I thought that art should be disturbing rather than beautiful.”⁴⁴

I am intrigued by the different ways that the empathetic response can be activated in the relationship between an artwork and the viewer. As an artist, the understanding of the relationship between the viewer and the work can help to convey the meaning I am interested in exploring in my own body of work. The exploration into the ways that the audience responds and engages with visual art on three different levels of understanding, neurological, sociological and psychological, enables me to develop my own approach to

creating a relationship with the audience.

My work often deals with issues of trauma and survivorship. It is a subject that almost unavoidably delves into the psychological, which can be an effective way to connect with the viewer. However, while it would be easy to explore the realm of the abject by creating art that strikes at the primal chord that resonates within each of us, I feel that this initial attraction to the repulsive and grotesque is temporary. The empathetic response dulls quickly in the face of constant exposure to shocking images with no recourse to mediate or even understand the emotion connected with pre-lingual associations. The fascination with the abject, with blood, phlegm, bodily waste and death, may be universally understood by the audience on a visceral level, but the chance to continue that engagement is fleeting. It seems that the abject is so strong that it works to obscure the intent of the work to engage with the audience beyond the initial reaction.

I believe that the abject should be used carefully and with a great deal of restraint. While Gina Pane's work was groundbreaking, its appeal lies in the extreme, almost clumsy, measures taken in the exploration of the abject. For my own work, I find the abject to be an overshadowing force that obliterates subtlety and obscures content. While the exploration of the abject is an effective tool to questions certain ideas within our society, I feel my goal as an artist is to engage the viewer in dialogue, to elucidate discrimination and injustice is ill served by evoking the immediate visceral response that the abject tends to elicit in the viewer.

Many of the ideas touched on in the sociological studies seem more relevant to my approach to my work. Susan Sontag's exploration of extreme violence in imagery and the empathetic response in the viewer seems appropriate to apply to my body of

work. It is important for me to develop an association between the viewer and the subject of my work by engaging the empathetic response. The immediacy of violent imagery, while memorable in the sense of searing an image into the brain, fails in the engagement of discourse. Being aware of this helps to know how far to explore the idea of violence in my work. The importance of the recognition of one's self in the subject of a work of art, as opposed to regulating the subject as "other" and therefore less relevant, is an important connection I would like to develop in my work. This involves being aware of the tendency people have to separate themselves from unpleasant contexts and violence. This knowledge can help an artist dealing with sensitive subject matter navigate the border between engaging with a viewer versus having the viewer withdraw from the intensity of the image.

The research that I found most interesting and relevant to my work was the neurological studies understanding how the physical processes of the brain respond to the stimulus of visual art. Especially intriguing is that the neural processes mimic the actions depicted in a work of visual art and experience the work in a mentally tactile. Although the concepts of abjection and violence are still relevant to the neurological findings as the viewers are processing the work by inserting themselves into the frame of the work, I find the concepts of embodied simulation and empathetic engagement easier to digest and manipulate in my work. In some ways, it makes sense that my connection to the direct relation of a physical connection with the audience has more resonance in my creative process, as I am interested in engaging the viewer in my direct experience through the artwork.

I believe that the audience is an integral part of the creative process and rather

than haunt their imagination with terrors of possibilities my goal is to engage them empathetically. My purpose is to invite them to experience the work and allow them to develop their own meaningful connections with the visual imagery. In creating art that deals with issues of trauma and survivorship, there is no way to refrain from engaging the psychological or sociological reaction in the audience as that is part of the process of interpreting art. However, I think it is more effective for my purposes to invite the viewer into an environment where they can physically place themselves within the artwork and allow them to develop their own deeper understanding of the work. Understanding the neurological processes of interpreting visual imagery will be helpful in engaging with the viewer effectively.

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Appendix 1

The field of art offers a unique position as a voyeur into many disparate fields of study. It is not unusual that an interest in Performance Art from the 1970's might lead the researcher on a meandering path through neuroscience, sociology and abject theory, as it did for me. The 1970's was fraught with instability and violence, and this was reflected in the art work created under the specter of the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement and the Feminist Movement. Reviewing the Performance Art from that particular period of time brings up many questions. Did the artist's consider the viewer in creating the pieces? Did they attach political significance to their work, perhaps by intending to send

a message or express hope for change, or were they expressing their personal rage? This period in feminist history was a time of anger and radicalism, a tirade against the injustices of centuries being acted out by a few rebellious voices. Looking at the extremes that these artists reached in their performances, I wondered, how they felt looking at the feminist landscape now. While it is clear that they broke many barriers and established a new conversation, many of the injustices they were railing against are still prevalent forty years later. As an artist interested in some of the same issues that they brought up, I began to question their approach to art making. The extreme postures that were taken in their performances were appropriate in their time, but now might seem like hollow imitations of a rage that has dissipated, even if the circumstances continue to be difficult. Perhaps self mutilation, self abasement and public exposure were not the way to discuss the same issues; perhaps a different approach needed to be explored.

This is how I came to wonder how art is interpreted by the viewer of the art work. If the artist is using art to discuss social issues that are problematic, what is the best way to communicate with the intended audience? In the world of advertising, finding the target demographic and psychologically analyzing every nuance of their desires, insecurities and grievances is a science, but in art, it is less a function of the artist communicating with the audience as the audience being asked to understand the art. In fact, it seems that in art, the audience is sometimes an afterthought; at times, confounding the audience is seen to be a sign of great art, as the intellectual and emotional complexity of the art gives it a certain cache.

My goal is to create art that has a meaning outside of myself. The dilemma of women living in the confines of a gendered body, the constraints put on them by society, and the

illusion of equality that is held up as an attainable goal informs my thinking and my work. While my anger and frustration help me understand the extremes of the artists in the 1970's in channeling their experiences to create and participate in performance art, I believe that the shock of their actions overpowered the content of the art. My interest in understanding how artwork is interpreted by the viewer stems from my desire to communicate difficult emotions and sensations without alienating the audience. My goal is to create work that enables the viewer to empathize with the concept that I am trying to analyze without pushing them into a realm of disbelief, disgust or disinterest.

By turning to the mechanisms of internal brain functions, I found that the brain understands visual imagery in a mentally tactile way. The brain understands visual imagery by acting it out step by step in the imagination, by simulating the action that is being depicted in the artwork. Perhaps you have experienced the unconscious mimicking of a gesture in a painting or in a sculpture when you are studying a work of art: a reaching of the hand, the brushing of a lock of hair, the grip of a tool. Neuroscience has found that these unconscious urges are the result of the brain's neuron's sending signals as if you were in the place of the subject of the art work doing and experiencing whatever the subject is shown to be doing. I find this intriguing. In the case of the feminist ordeal art of Gina Pane, for example, when she is shown cutting herself with razors and bleeding, the viewer understands that by feeling the blade cut into their own skin. When Marina Abramovic brushes and combs her hair violently until her face is bruised and bloodied, the viewer understands the performance by feeling their own scalp being battered. We all know this reaction, for example, when we witness a physical impact and our reaction is to flinch, grimace and look away.

Although some artists are not concerned with the cultivation of the audience if one is trying to share an experience or connect with the audience, understanding the neurological, sociological, and psychological responses is essential.

If artwork is too uncomfortable for the viewer, they may no longer insert themselves into the artwork but separates themselves into the artwork, but separate themselves completely from the imagery. By creating distance between the subject of a photograph or any form of art, the viewer defines the subject as “other,” specifically not them. This creates a voyeuristic aspect, a detached viewing of a unconnected object or event that is no relatable to them.

For my own work, I decided to use this information to create objects that relate to the body in an unpleasant or uncomfortable way, by constraining or limiting movement. The pieces function as independent sculptural objects, using the formulas of design and art, symmetry, balance and contrasting materials, to create sculptural forms. However, since the objects are made for the body and are recognizable as such, another more poignant layer of meaning emerges as the viewer insert themselves in the object. Awareness of the objects coldness and weight and the discomfort of the piece are understood by the viewer without actually wearing the object.

The process that I used to make the objects, blacksmithing, has medieval connotations and many of the forms directly reference medieval torture devices. While these objects are not within the realm of jewelry, they reference the body in a visceral way as they were used to deconstruct or disassemble the body. Devices such as the breast ripper, the Iron Maiden, shackles, and the binding of a straitjacket informed my work as well as modern “torture devices” of femininity such as stiletto heels, brassieres and elastic

corsetry. I am interested in hybridizing these diverse range of objects to create modern iterations of these forms and question the continued relevance of these items in our society.

Extend, an object made to wear on the lower arm, the viewer sees a cage that encloses the hand. In the neural processes, the viewer imagines their hand in the piece, connects the textured surface with discomfort on their skin, the cage form as limiting their movement and the fragility of the glass as being in a dangerous location for ease of motion. The glass vials containing eyelash



applicator brush alludes to stereotypical aspects of beauty and adds to the complexity of the piece. The neurological understanding of the work inserts the viewer as the performer of the piece, mentally engaging with the surface of the material, the limitations of the design and calculating the heft of the piece.

Other pieces explore different ways the body can be constrained and engage the viewer physically to insert themselves as the performer of the piece. In *Precarious*, the elevated platform for the foot is curved to resemble the foot bed of a high-heeled shoe. The skeletal and unstable nature of the structure and the curved spikes that cradle the foot make the piece seem ethereal and unsubstantial. The non-functioning aspect of the work, recognized in the lack



of a way to fasten the structures to the feet, highlights the pedestal nature of the work. The lack of functionality and the discomfort of *Precarious*' encourage the viewer to make a connection between conflicting ideals of femininity by limiting the physical motion of the wearer, not in physically enclosing the wearer in a cage but by the lack of stability and function.

The last piece in the series, *Confine*, is a human sized enclosure where the body is held with curved stainless steel rods. The rods intersect the body at the waist, depressing the soft flesh and trapping the body. The entire piece acts as an oversized corset that limits motion outside the enclosure. This piece again causes the viewer to insert themselves into the work, tactilely understanding the variety of textures, the pressure of the material on the body and the limiting of motion of the enclosure.



In this series of work I have been vigilant in avoiding the depiction of direct scenes of actual or implied violence. This lack of reference to the abject allows the audience to approach the pieces from a tactile and contemplative route. The designs and straightforwardness of the works invite the viewer to explore the pieces in a way that, I hope, allows them to explore the concepts behind the work. Through intellectual and physiological engagement, the viewer is able to explore and experience the physical constraints that society places of the gendered form.