EMPATHIC VISION
Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art

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STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA
For my three inspirations:
Luc, Lita, and the memory of my father
On the Subject of Trauma

Trauma Art

I don't think it's an ontology we need, but a desmology—in Greek desmos means connection, or link... What interests me is not so much the state of things but the relations between them. I've concerned myself with nothing but relations for my whole life.

—Michel Serres

Some years ago, I co-curated an exhibition of art relating to the topic of trauma and memory. In planning that project, it seemed viable and productive to identify a thematic category, especially since my co-curator and I were aware of a number of interesting artworks that emerged from an engagement with traumatic memory but weren't immediately recognizable as such. These works had eluded classification as trauma works largely because they in some way evoked the processes of post-traumatic memory without declaring themselves to be about trauma; and, indeed, in many cases, they would appear to be about something else. The trauma, it often seemed, was not evinced in the narrative component or in the ostensible meaning, but in a certain affective dynamic internal to the work.

The artworks concerned, then, were not usually identified prima facie by their testimonial function; they did not clearly communicate an account of a trauma experienced by a particular individual, as the testimonies of Holocaust survivors in Claude Lanzmann's nine-and-a-half-hour film Shoah (1985) do, for example. Nor, in most cases, did they even manifest a
Trauma has now had its moment, however. In 2001 a British exhibition of prominent international artists, simply titled "Trauma," was accompanied by a catalogue affirming that "trauma—both individual and collective—has given rise to some of the most compelling art of recent years." Explicitly distancing the show from "art as therapy or exorcism," the curators emphasized that few of the artists involved drew on personal experience. But still there remain a number of theoretical implications to framing such an exhibition—or, indeed, a monograph—in terms of this subject matter, which have led me to focus this inquiry, not on trauma itself, but on the affective operations of art and on the ways in which these situate art in a certain relation to trauma and to the kind of conflict that may engender trauma.

To identify any art as "about" trauma and conflict potentially opens up new readings, but it also reduces work to a singular defining subject matter in a fashion that is often anathema to artists, who construe the operations of their work as exceeding any single signifying function. Although this refusal of meaning embodies a more general challenge to art historical methods that define art principally in terms of its representational or signifying function, it seems to me that there are particularly compelling reasons to question those methods in the case of trauma. This is partly because trauma itself is classically defined as beyond the scope of language and representation; hence, an imagery of trauma might not readily conform to the logic of representation. But it also has to do with the interests of the primary subjects of trauma. If art purports to register the true experience of violence or devastating loss—to be about a particular event—then it lays claim to an experience that is fundamentally owned by someone. Moreover, it invites a wider audience to partake of this experience in some way.

There is a certain hesitancy in colonizing such experience—and particularly, as Leo Bersani argues in *The Culture of Redemption*, in art's claim to *salvage* damaged experience and thereby redeem life. But what is at issue here—even more than the moral aspirations of a redemptive art—are the *realist* underpinnings of this kind of claim. A form of philosophical realism grounds the notion that art can capture and transmit real experience. This realism sits uneasily with a politics of testimony. I want to propose that such a politics requires of art not a faithful translation of testimony, rather, it calls upon art to exploit its own unique capacities to contribute actively to this politics.

In perhaps the most sustained theoretical argument to date for art's contribution to trauma politics, and to Holocaust studies, in particular,
reduce trauma or painful experience to a mere aesthetic concern. The best-known sustained analysis of the emergence of trauma within the domain of contemporary visual art is Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real*. Foster's conceptualization of the relationship between trauma and art turns on the brilliantly aphoristic notion that trauma discourse continues the poststructuralist critique of the subject by other means. Satisfying two contradictory imperatives—to guarantee identity, on the one hand, and to deconstruct its foundation, on the other—trauma discourse, Foster argues, presents the subject as simultaneously "evacuated and elevated." The experience of trauma paradigmatically encapsulates both direct, unmediated affective experience and an absence of affect, insofar as it is resistant to cognitive processing and induces "psychic numbing." Thus, Foster suggests, it serves as a kind of trope or descriptor for a certain artistic posture: "many artists [today] seem driven to inhabit a place of total affect and to be drained of affect altogether..." This oscillation suggests the dynamic of psychic shock (of trauma). Pure affect, no affect: *It hurts, I can't feel anything.*

This focus on the *allure* of trauma discourse is echoed in other branches of cultural studies. Andreas Huyssen argues that the current fascination with trauma is symptomatic of a widespread cultural obsession with memory; Mark Selzer identifies the emergence of a "wound culture," of which the emergency room drama is a symptom; John Mowit, in a twist on Foster's analysis of the seductive appeal of the extreme experience of trauma, talks of the phenomenon of "trauma envy"—and Ghassan Hage provides a motive for this in his account of how postcolonial societies have elevated the figure of the victim to a position of moral superiority.

Foster's analysis thus reflects a more general anxiety engendered by postcoloniality; as he notes, the "abjected" becomes attractive at the moment when the "abjector" is vilified and when it is assumed that "in order not to be counted among sexists and racists one must become the phobic object of such subjects." But his is a diagnostic analysis conducted from within the discipline of art theory, providing an explanation for the way in which the figure of trauma is troped or borrowed to describe a condition that already pertains within the art world.

Unlike the proponents of trauma studies, who manifest an overarching concern with the primary experience of trauma and with the politics of testimony, Foster is not concerned to track the ways in which visual artists have dealt with trauma as a means of expanding an understanding of the nature and experience of traumatic memory. For him there is no impera-
tive to deal with trauma, except insofar as it has become emblematic of a contemporary cultural sensibility. In this dematerialized and radically sublimated conception, trauma is reduced to a set of psychic functions—it becomes a chimera of the real. It is not conceived of as an event that might occur or have an impact within the domain of art; it is not part of the experience of the artist, except in an abstract or figurative sense, but neither is it firmly located elsewhere.

Trauma studies, on the other hand—notwithstanding its roots in poststructuralist literary theory—treats the “real event” as a force that necessarily impacts upon art, literature, and film. The fact that we live in a post-Holocaust world is understood to compel us to deal with Holocaust memory, and to account for the ways in which the Holocaust has touched us either directly or indirectly. Yet if Foster, like others concerned with “trauma culture,” describes an aesthetic—rather than political—impulse, and implicitly affirms the separation of art from the traumatic event, trauma studies presumes to place itself at the heart of events that are, in fact, fairly removed from the lived reality of many of its proponents. Writers from Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman to Antjie Krog have, in fact, been accused of usurping the position of trauma victim—of appropriating testimony and treating trauma as an available or “unclaimed” experience (to use Caruth’s phrase) when, in fact, its ownership is deeply contested. Such writers often make a point of foregrounding self-reflexivity: Krog details the impact on journalists of testimonies delivered to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and Felman analyses responses to testimonial texts among a class of her own students. But this foregrounding does not always in itself allay the charge of appropriation, insofar as it seems to reassert the testimony of another in terms of a drama to which the reader or listener is central.

How, then, might contemporary art engage trauma in a way that respects and contributes to its politics? If trauma enters the representational arena as an expression of personal experience, it is always vulnerable to appropriation, to reduction, and to mimicry. Is it possible, then, to conceive of the art of trauma and conflict as something other than the deposit of primary experience (which remains “owned” and unsharable even once it is communicated)?

What is required here is a framework that challenges the nexus between art and experience and a realist aesthetics: a framework that distinguishes the kind of inquiry that art might instantiate from the idea that art is a vehicle for the interpersonal transmission of experience. Narrative film lends itself to a realist interpretation by virtue of characterization—we see a character suffer, and we feel an emotional response—but most contemporary art does not. Even where work proceeds from an endeavor to register lived experience, it rarely configures this experience in terms of characters with whom we can readily identify. Nor does a good deal of contemporary art read easily as the expression of the artist’s experience. Thus, the kinds of “transcriptions” of experience one encounters in art do not usually invite us to extrapolate a subject, a persona, from them. Under these conditions, the affective responses engendered by artworks are not born of emotional identification or sympathy; rather, they emerge from a direct engagement with sensation as it is registered in the work.

In this regard, trauma-related art is best understood as transactive rather than communicative. It often touches us, but it does not necessarily communicate the “secret” of personal experience. To understand its transactive nature, we need to examine how affect is produced within and through a work, and how it might be experienced by an audience coming to the work. But if this affective transaction does not in and of itself convey the “meaning” of trauma, we must also pursue the question of how it might lead us toward a conceptual engagement.

One of the principal theoretical concerns of this book is thus to establish the nexus between art and thought as this is evinced within art practice. In this regard, I take a cue from Deleuze. In his early work Proust and Signs, Deleuze coins the term encountered sign to describe the sign that is felt, rather than recognized or perceived through cognition. Deleuze’s argument is not simply, however, that sensation is an end in itself, but that feeling is a catalyst for critical inquiry or deep thought; we assume, he says, that the best philosophy is motivated by a love of wisdom, but this is not, in fact, the case, since there is nothing that compels rational inquiry. For Deleuze, affect or emotion is a more effective trigger for profound thought because of the way in which it grasps us, forcing us to engage involuntarily: “More important than thought there is what leads to thought . . . impressions which force us to look, encounters which force us to interpret, expressions which force us to think.” He quotes Proust directly on this: “The truths which intelligence grasps directly in the open light of day have something less profound, less necessary about them than those which life has communicated to us in spite of ourselves in an impression, a material impression because it has reached us through our senses.”
If art is akin to the sensory impression here, then it might 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; the "intelligence," as Deleuze puts it, "comes after," not before. Art is thus not driven by or enslaved by any particular understanding; it is always productive of ideas. But to say that art is not conceptual in this limited sense does not imply that it is only accidentally linked to thought, and I intend to demonstrate that this question of how affect leads us somewhere is carefully addressed within the structure of artworks.

On this crucial point, my theoretical concerns and methods both intersect with and diverge from an important strand of trauma studies that promotes a critical and self-reflexive empathy as the most appropriate form of engagement with trauma imagery. Dominick LaCapra, in his various studies of the representation of Holocaust experience, distinguishes empathy in the spectator (the third party, seeing testimony delivered) from the primary experience of trauma. To that end, he proposes the concept of empathic unsettlement to describe the aesthetic experience of simultaneously feeling for another and becoming aware of a distinction between one's own perceptions and the experience of the other.

LaCapra's arguments concerning historical method clearly invoke particular modes of historiographical practice. On the one hand, he argues against a positivistic tradition that rejects empathy as a mode of writing history; on the other, he resists an opposing tendency, characterized by overidentification with a victim position and the arrogation of survivor testimony. In respect of the latter, LaCapra advances an important critique of an "uncritical, positive transference" that he finds manifested in both Claude Lanzmann's film Shoah and Shoshana Felman's response to it. Principally, however, LaCapra's critique is shaped by issues emerging from the mediation (in quasi-documentary form) of actual witness testimony. In contrast, this book is for the most part concerned with work that is nonnarrative and nonrepresentational, although in Chapter 5, I address the question of how testimony might be negotiated within an experiential art practice. Thus, it evaluates contemporary artworks that have found ways of obviating the associated problems of identification, mimesis, and appropriation—problems that remain at issue with regard to the documentary form—and specifically Shoah—inasmuch as the presentation of "character" can be said to interpelleate witnesses into a particular kind of sympathetic relationship.

The debate around Shoah and the representation of Holocaust testimony in general has also given rise to concerns about "secondary traumatization"—or the possibility that trauma imagery may itself be traumatizing. Geoffrey Hartman has proposed that a form of "secondary trauma" is visited upon the viewer of graphic imagery who vicariously experiences a milder version of the shock experienced by the primary witness of the tragedy depicted. LaCapra has similarly suggested that art may enable a secondary witness to experience a "muted" dose of trauma (although he wavers on this point, conceding that it might be preferable to restrict the application of the term "trauma" to "limit cases" that pass a certain threshold). While there are fundamental problems with the notion that art has the capacity to transmit trauma per se, Hartman invokes the concept of secondary traumatization in a useful discussion of the empathic response, calling for a complex, psychoanalytically informed analysis of this form of trauma, which is, in effect, what Luc Boltanski calls souffrance à distance. Precisely because overidentification with a primary victim masks a fundamental lack of affinity, we must attend to the affects on which it is grounded, he argues. These may include forms of shame and guilt that may ultimately give rise to negative responses (hate, resentment) if they are not addressed. For Hartman, then, empathy is an indispensable response, but one that must be checked. Art's "truest reason," he argues, is encapsulated in the dictum "Art expands the sympathetic imagination while teaching us about the limits of sympathy." LaCapra is similarly concerned to rein in empathy, insisting that it be a "virtual, not vicarious, experience...in which emotional response comes with respect for the other and the realization that the experience of the other is not one's own." In this regard, he explicitly relates the empathic response to what Kaja Silverman terms (after Max Scheler) "heteropathic identification," a form of encounter predicated on an openness to a mode of existence of experience beyond what is known by the self. My study is premised on similar ethical foundations, inasmuch as it aligns with these critiques of an identification grounded in the effacement of difference but is not concerned with the representation of alterity per se—not with the relations between given identities (victim, witness, etc.). This is because I do not deal with what LaCapra calls the "aboutness" of art, but with its processes.

The artists I consider may each be understood to produce affective art, although affect in this context does not equate with emotion or sympathy, nor does it necessarily attach to persons or to characters in the first
instance. In many of the works discussed, affects arise in places rather than human subjects, in a way that allows us to isolate the function of affect, focusing on its mutility rather than its origins within a single subject. This, in turn, facilitates an analysis of the affective transaction in terms other than those of the identificatory relationship.

In effect, then, this study keys into a Brechtian critique of identification (echoed through the work of Hartman and LaCapra), and, specifically, of art that induces what Brecht termed "crude empathy"—a feeling for another based on the assimilation of the other's experience to the self. But rather than concentrating exclusively on the production of a Brechtian alienation effect, on the mechanisms for thwarting any form of identification, the aim of this study is to focus more sharply on affect itself, extracting the affective encounter from generalized accounts of emotional identification.

The book, thus moves away from the traps of "crude empathy" to describe art that, by virtue of its specific affective capacities, is able to exploit forms of embodied perception in order to promote forms of critical inquiry. This conjunction of affect and critical awareness may be understood to constitute the basis of an empathy grounded not in affinity (feeling for another insofar as we can imagine being that other) but on a feeling for another that entails an encounter with something irreducible and different, often inaccessible.

Empathy, in this formulation, is characterized by a distinctive combination of affective and intellectual operations, but also by a dynamic oscillation, "a constant tension of going to and fro," as Nikos Papastergiadis has put it, "of going closer to be able to see, but also never forgetting where you are coming from... empathy is about that process of surrender... but also the catch that transforms your perception." It is precisely this conception of empathy as a mode of seeing that underpins this book, which argues for the capacity of art to transform perception. Both Hartman and LaCapra invest art with similar potential, but their studies differ, ultimately, on a concern with the politics of transmission: transmission of meaning and of trauma itself. Here, I focus on art that resists the "danger that the disaster [may] take on meaning rather than body," as Maurice Blanchot puts it.

If we can in philosophical terms refute the argument that art transmits content or meaning intersubjectively, and the associated notion that the substantive condition of trauma might be retransmitted via representation, the prime task for art theory is to determine the specific nature of both the aesthetic experience of affect and to open up trauma to an audience. If art of a memory that is "owned" by a subject is form of memory for more than one subject it by different people. The instance by an image, viewed under control impact of trauma, or the quality of by the involuntary repetition of an expiry in the normal way. But how do to describe the malaise that Foster describes as "paralyzing." Somehow it must become embedded in a deeper, more extensive interpretation of memory—one that is not confined to a single point in time that extends temporally and spatially to engage forms of lived experience. Thus, we shall trace the ways in which post-traumatic memory is felt in the here and now, both internally and externally, as it were. If art registers the shock of trauma (the flashback that one involuntarily revisits), it maintains this in tension with an experience of the present, an encounter with an "outside." I elaborate on this tension in Chapter 2 with reference to Charlotte Delbo's conception of the relationship of traumatic memory to "ordinary" memory.

In highlighting the workings of affect, I shall address responses that subver those subject to conscious reflection—responses that are, in some sense, automatic. But this does not entail construing the affective response in narrow cause-and-effect terms, as if the image functioned simply as a mechanistic trigger or stimulus. Certain media forms (e.g., horror films) exploit affective triggers as blunt instruments to engender fear and nothing more, but I steer away here from what has been termed "traumatic realism," tracing instead the conjunction of affect and cognition. Thus, I use specific examples to show that art does not merely assault us, or, conversely, offer a corrective interpretation. When it shocks us, it is the manner of what Brian Massumi has called "a shock to thought": a jolt that does not so much reveal truth as thrust us involuntarily into a mode of critical inquiry.

Many of the works I consider—although not all—were produced by artists who are themselves primary witnesses or survivors of trauma. But their work is neither produced nor understood as expressive of a singular subjective account of trauma. In a number of instances, these artists explicitly negotiate relationships with survivors of trauma, loss, and violence.
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and also with an audience—but even where the subject matter of the work is ostensibly the trauma of a single subject, the artist is concerned less with the integrity of subjective expression than with the complex dynamic of speaking from an “inside” position to an “outside.” Trauma, I suggest, is never unproblematically “subjective”; neither “inside” nor “outside,” it is always lived and negotiated at an intersection. In this respect, the work I analyze is fundamentally relational rather than expressive in the traditional (communicative) sense of that term.31

I present a range of practices that address the fluid boundary between “insides” and “outsides,” manifesting trauma not simply as an interior condition but as a transformative process that impacts on the world as much as on bodies. Trauma, in this sense, is conceptualized as having a presence, a force. Thus, I argue that visual art 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.

Embodying this principle, the book’s trajectory runs from the local to the global, beginning in Chapter 2 with an examination of artwork addressing intimate or personal experience—experience that nevertheless resists containment within subjective or corporeal boundaries—and culminating in Chapter 6 with an examination of the dynamic by which a personal or local experience can be explored in relation to the global politics of the September 11 attacks.

Chapter 2, then, focuses on the ways in which the boundary between the inner subject and its outside is configured in contemporary artwork, at the same time advancing the central contention that the operative element of the artwork is its affective rather than its signifying capacity. Contemporary work addressing trauma is located within a longer genealogy of affective art, traced through a European and American tradition of performance art, and finding echoes in medieval devotional imagery and practice. Through such precedents, we are able to conceptualize the manner in which sensation might be understood to engender forms of knowing.

Chapter 3 traces the way in which trauma is given extension in the material world in work by artists from Colombia and Northern Ireland, conceived as a response to political violence and murder. Such work is implicitly concerned with audience response—but rather than using the affective trigger to induce a momentary shock, the artists address what might be understood as a mode of “traumatic time.” They focus on the duration—rather than the instantaneous—of post-traumatic memory, so as to produce an affective encounter within a temporal framework quite different from that implied by “traumatic realism.” Doris Salcedo constructs spaces in which loss is evoked as an embodied experience, yet in contrast to a number of her compatriots, dealing with political violence in Colombia, she avoids showing the faces or bodies of victims or describing the “cause” of trauma and loss. The Belfast artist Sandra Johnston is concerned with the tenuous nature of the relationship between image and affect. Her work points to the failure of graphic imagery or documentary photography to promote enduring empathy, even as it induces an emotive—or visceral—response. But emotions and feelings are not simply manipulated or redirected in the works of these artists; affect is revealed to flow through bodies and spaces, rather than residing within a single subject.

Art’s capacity to evoke the extrasubjective aspect of trauma is further explored in Chapter 4. Focusing on the lived experience of place in the aftermath of violence and death in both Southern Africa and Northern Ireland, this chapter draws on the work of the philosopher of place Edward Casey. Utilizing Casey’s concept of the “chorographic,” it describes the practices of artists dealing with an embodied experience of place as it unfolds in time or in memory. A series of “journeys in place” are examined in order to detail the operations of the bodily metaphor in visual imagery, and the ways in which corporeal perception “takes us into” a particular image of place. In this way, the analysis of place extends the broader inquiry into the function of affect, demonstrating how metaphor may promote an examination of conditions of perception, and of the ways in which these are shaped by the social and political forces that structure the body’s relationship to place.

Chapter 5 deals with work emerging as a response to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, focusing in particular on the play _Ubu and the Truth Commission_, written by Jane Taylor and directed by the artist William Kentridge, whose animated films are incorporated into the stage production. The play might be seen as a metacritique of the way in which mediation of trauma—in this case in the form of testimony offered in public hearings—induces a form of sentimental identification or “crude empathy.” In a Brechtian vein, _Ubu_ deploys strategies of estrangement that thwart audience identification, but what is significant about this piece is the way in which these same devices work simultaneously to engender affect. The effect of the spectacle of _Ubu_ is thus dependent not on
in didactic message but on the creation of an intensity of affect that flows across and between bodies, and that refuses to settle within an ostensive subject. This, in turn, facilitates not identification but an encounter of an expropriative kind in which one feels into rather than simply mimics the condition of another.

Chapter 6 draws out the distinction between the expropriative encounter and the a-propiative act, looking at the painting of Gordon Bennett—work that is often characterized in a postmodern context as appropriative in its modus operandi. Bennett exemplifies a new form of political work that operates through empathic—and also expropriative—encounter, addressing his Australian background (which is both indigenous and Euro-Australian) and audience via the work of the late New York City African-American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. A certain empathic relationship is internal to the work itself, inasmuch as Bennett finds resonances in Basquiat’s life—and in Basquiat’s experience of the politics of race in the United States—with his own life in Australia. But the works in question also purport to deal with New York City on September 11, 2001. In this regard, they raise interesting questions about ways in which distinct and different traumatic experiences might be linked. Is this work “about” 9/11 or about the politics of race in Australia; if it is “about” trauma, whose trauma—and what is the nature of the metaphorical relationships that link these loci? Again, this discussion moves beyond an analysis of signification to ask how a set of empathic connections that promote a form of transnational politics can be established through the formal language of painting.

Running through these chapters, then, there is a certain notion of the political. And, indeed, many of the artists discussed would describe their work as political even before foregrounding an interest in trauma. Whereas artists are often reluctant to pin down meaning—and hence to concede that a given work is about trauma—to identify the way a work operates within a political field is to make a different kind of interpretative claim. Such a claim emphasizes a dynamic process of intervention: a specific mode of engagement, to which the form of the work is integral.

Art, Ethics, Politics

Within trauma studies, the question of trauma’s inherent unrepresentability, and consequent “unrepresentability,” has itself become something of a trope. Derived from clinical and psychoanalytic accounts of trauma, the configuration of a realm of traumatic memory outside the normal cognitive process is, as Ruth Leys demonstrates, a discursive organization with its own genealogy. But it is a modeling that allies trauma with avant-garde projects in the arts. That which is categorically “beyond representation” may find expression within experimental formal languages. But the umbrella of the avant-garde potentially provides more than a framework for the development of a distinct language of trauma. The avant-garde, as an “outside” with a clearly defined critical relationship to current “insider” practices and conventions, offers a rubric for a dialogue with the world of representation and conventional language and, hence, for the politicization of “trauma art.”

Hal Foster has asked of the abject whether something that is “opposed to culture” can be “exposed in culture”—and whether, in fact, “abject art [can] ever escape an instrumental, indeed moralistic, use of the abject?” Yet it is the encounter with the limit case that defines and extends the avant-garde or politically progressive art practice. Such art seeks out the unrepresentable; thus, in a now famous elaboration of his statement to the effect that one could not write poetry after Auschwitz, Theodor Adorno was able to assert that art was compelled to “resist the verdict” that the Holocaust was inimical to art. Whatever is outside of itself—unrepresented, unthought—is what transforms the language of art. It is, then, the political imperative—to confront the Holocaust, to confront AIDS, to confront taboos—that forces art to transform itself and in the process to transform thought. But does this reduce to an instrumental or moral use of art?

In Deleuze’s terms, it is precisely what distinguishes ethical from moral art. An ethics is enabled and invigorated by the capacity for transformation; that is, precisely by not assuming that there is a given outside to thinking. A morality on the other hand, operates within the bounds of a given set of conventions, within which social and political problems must be resolved. Thus, as Clare Colebrook argues, politically affirmative Hollywood movies such as Jonathan Demme’s Philadelphia (1993), which is critical of anti-gay prejudice, use standard narrative devices to engender sympathy and manufacture an image of the “moral individual.” Homosexuality is thereby effectively recouped by mainstream morality as compassion wins out over fear and homophobic attitudes are overcome by sympathetic interpersonal relationships. This, of course, leaves intact the larger political formations that engender fear and prejudice. A similar critique may be leveled against two of the films I discuss in distinction to more radical art practice: Aline Isser-
mann's Shadow of Doubt—a film about child sexual abuse, and the documentary of the South African Truth and Reconciliation hearings. Long Night's Journey into Day, both of which turn on the resolution of conflict through interpersonal relationships.)

Many theorists, from Brecht and Adorno on, have argued for nonaffirmative forms of art to counter this kind of moralism and middlebrow humanism—and the current study is in part located in relation to this tradition. I draw frequently on Deleuze in this and other respects. Yet this is neither ultimately to provide an orthodox Deleuzian reading of trauma in art nor to outline a uniformly Deleuzian art historical methodology. Rather, I use select images and concepts from Deleuze's work—interwoven with references to Delbo, Casey, Brecht, Venna Das, Gayatri Spivak, Arjun Appadurai, Edouard Claperede, José Gil, and others—to suggest a certain set of relationships between art's formal properties and its ethico-political functions. To this end, I look principally to Deleuze's works on aesthetics for a theorization of art and sensation to underpin my analysis of affect in contemporary art. But there is another strand of Deleuze's thought that has some resonance with this study: the theorization of the political, to which the concept of affect is also central.

The effective isolation of affect from character in Deleuze's work finds material extension in the practices of many of the artists I discuss. We see this, in particular, in Chapter 4 in the work of the Belfast artist Willie Doherty, whose video installation The Only Good One Is a Dead One evokes a notional "character" who plans an ambush from the security of a surveillance vehicle. Yet this character repeatedly succumbs to fantasies of his own capture and death. Conscience—or empathy—is here revealed as essentially unwilled, arising from a body that is sympathetic in spite of itself. Envisioning the mechanics of death as it will unfold in a particular location has a dramatic effect on the perpetrator's own relationship to space: his surveillance vehicle, the street become threatening to him. But even as it remains clear that he is instigating the single act of violence that induces his fear and discomfort, there is an inevitable, self-perpetuating momentum to this scenario as the video loop repeats. Space itself makes over its inhabitants—and this is the political trope of the work.

Here, characters are not agents precipitating action but are revealed as constituted within affective flows. These flows converge in the present to sustain a kind of web of subjectivities in which the identities of "victims," "perpetrators," and "bystanders" are defined. In this way, the cycle of violence that engenders certain psychological effects is revealed or studied as a political phenomenon. As a means to this end, Doherty locates us within a compressed space of the present. Thus, there is an intensification in his work that is quite at odds with the feel and pace of Doris Salcedo's installations, for example. But at the same time, there are resonances with Salcedo both in terms of this play on the bodily perception of space, and the way that subjectivity is politicized. Although Salcedo's work is produced out of a long-standing engagement with the victims of political violence, it is—as we shall see—less an exploration of the impact of violence on individuals than a more expansive and political description of a world shaped by violence, and of the kind of constraints that operate within such a world.

It is always easy for art and for audiences of art to take the moral line—to feel sympathy and compassion, to use art to confirm us in our humanitarian role. But artists like Salcedo and Doherty are often more concerned to remind us that identifications are not always the result of moral choices. And more than this, that there is an ethical imperative to think beyond the moral role, because as Nietzsche puts it: "[People] confound themselves with their role; they become victims of their own 'good performance'; they themselves have forgotten how much accidents, moods, and caprice disposed of them when the question of their 'vocation' was decided—and how many other roles they might have been able to play; for now it is too late..." 29

Hence, Doherty presents character poised on a knife-edge. From a single affective base, he effects a pull toward the two apparently opposing poles of killer and victim, so that the polarity collapses. In the process, affect becomes the object of analysis, effectively prized away from character or identity.

Whereas a didactic or moral image might tell us whether a character was bad or good, exploiting character identification to align us with the moral viewpoint, here we are aligned neither with good nor bad. Our propensity for affective investment or bodily identification allows us to oscillate between good and evil, so that we feel different possibilities, we see how a role might become character. The register of political analysis is not the act itself but the larger flows within which investments are made, and subjectivities are forged. To put a kind of Deleuzian gloss on this—the politics of such work lies in its understanding of affective investments. We are not looking at already formed subjects and the relations between them—that is, between perpetrators and victims within a given sociopolitical...
frame or moral law—but at the way in which politics and morality operate via the coding of affective intensities and the production of identity grounded in affect.

Salcedo has said of her most recent work—inspired by events in Colombia in the 1980s—that it is an attempt to explore the ways in which perpetrators, victims, and bystanders are all compromised by a cycle of violence. Politics for her cannot be reduced to the intersubjective—to an analysis of the relationships that pertain between already formed characters. And in this respect, she believes her work to be generalizable; because it is about the mechanisms of constraint, it is as much about the constraints of the refugee, for example, as of the Colombian victim of terror. In this sense, we realize that the work does not turn on its capacity to signify or to represent, or to embody the trace of the individual subject or event. It is rather the sensation arising in space that is the operative element: its capacity to sustain sensation (to quote Deleuze’s definition of art) rather than to communicate meaning.

By figuring memory in “trauma art” as lived and felt in relation to a whole series of interconnected events and political forces, rather than as embodied in an atomized subject, we are able to move trauma into a distinctive political framework. Instead of seeing trauma as a condition we might mimic or appropriate from an aesthetic standpoint, or analyzing the appeal of traumatic subjectivity (in the manner of Foster and others), we might now begin to plot this mode of subjectivity on a larger global picture. This picture needs to be textured with the kind of analysis provided by postcolonial theory—so that any formal analysis proceeds in conjunction with a reading of global and micropolitics: that is, a sense of our connectedness to global events and the precise nature of our relationship to others.

... since 2001

In the late 1990s, trauma studies was identified by certain commentators as a fin de siècle phenomenon, yet it has flourished rather than waned in the 2000s. No doubt the attacks of September 11 and the ensuing “War on Terror” have been an important factor in this regard. Writers like Foster and Hage suggest that identification with the victim of oppression or traumatized subject is a function of a kind of postcolonial anxiety—a social conscience afflicting privileged First World subjects, for whom trauma is characteristically of the other. But on 9/11 such trauma was definitively visited on the “center,” and the West continues to live under the threat of terrorism, reminded through events such as the Bali bombings that no corner of the globe is unreachable. Terrorism now touches us all—to a greater or lesser extent—through what Mike Davis has called the “globalization of fear.”

On one level, this suggests that art produced in the context of political violence in, for example, Colombia or Northern Ireland, might be received with a greater sensitivity in the United States in the wake of 9/11; in other words, that global politics have themselves engendered the conditions for greater empathy. But, on the other hand, we might question whether the globalization of trauma does not in itself efface the specificity of experience. New Yorkers or Australians might be more touched by the plight of Colombians these days, but are we any more willing and able to understand their situation insofar as this entails an acknowledgment of an alterity, irreducible to our own experience?

Hage’s comments on the extension of victimology are all the more pertinent in the post-9/11 context, particularly as they identify a form of cultural investment that works to occlude both difference and political responsibility. Hage argues that the mobilization of binaries that fix the victim in opposition to the oppressor produces an illegitimate extrapolation by which the victim is ipso facto equated with “good.” The victim thus acquires a kind of protected status, as if the fact that a victim of oppression or violence was bad might mitigate the crimes of the oppressor. This polarization pits passivity against agency; if we are all victims, none of us are any longer implicated in outcomes.

Prior to 9/11, Michel Serres argued that in responding to the problem of evil simply by seeking someone to accuse, we have exhausted the possibilities of accusation, exculpation, and exoneration. Thus the present dispensation may be characterized: “By this global result: evil, hate, or violence has every object but no subject. Rain, hail, and thunder fall on everyone, without there being a hand that dispenses them or controls the electrical current. Active evil is conjugated like an impersonal verb, it is freezing, it is thundering.”

The “ultimate” act of terrorism, the one that penetrated the perimeter fence of the home of First World capitalism on September 11, is emblematic in this regard. We are all “victims” of the 9/11 attacks, by some degree of association—or by the laws of globalization that ensure that the economic fallout of an event in New York City affects the lives of those on
the other side of the world—but none of us (except Osama bin Laden and a handful of al-Qaeda operatives) are understood to have been in any way implicated prior to this date. In large sectors of the U.S. media, in the aftermath of the attacks, it was easy to whisper the suggestion that U.S. foreign policy might, in some small way, have contributed to the global scenario that prompted the attacks; that anything other than the abstraction of evil produced “the Evil One” and his affiliates. The laws of global flow seemed to allow that everything was connected to everything else from this point, but not before; 9/11 was not the culmination of history but its beginning.

As I try to show through analysis of Gordon Bennett’s 9/11 paintings, it is not that we need to return to an analysis of individual agency in order to understand the interconnectedness of things; global events are all, in some sense, overdetermined (the United States didn’t cause Osama bin Laden to do what he did, although it may nevertheless have been implicated in his emergence as a terrorist force). The question is rather, in what ways are we (all) invested in, even produced out of, the “flows” or forces (political, cultural, economic, social) in motion across the globe—and how is “active evil” constituted through us? To address such questions, we need to focus not on the interpersonal negotiation but on this bigger picture.

These issues are of concern to many of the artists discussed in this book—particularly those who ask how a cycle of violence is perpetuated in their part of the world, be it in Colombia or Belfast or Johannesburg. As the South African artist William Kentridge says in a discussion of his work History of the Main Complaint, referenced in Chapter 4, “there may not be blame but there is responsibility.”

If the concept of trauma long ago entered the popular vernacular through the discourse of self-help manuals and television talk shows, it was generalized to an unprecedented degree after 9/11. The term “trauma” came to encompass a range of responses, including those that might more accurately be described as anxiety, shock, fear, sympathy, compassion, and so on. But at the same time, for many “secondary witnesses”—those affected by the tragedy, but not directly involved—the symptomology of trauma offered a means to articulate an affective response—and also to identify as a victim—even at some remove from the locus of the attacks.

What was generally lacking in the popular mediation of emotional identifications with the victims of the September 11 attacks was a conceptualization of empathy that might enable us not simply to feel for those victims but to articulate and understand our difference from them. This might be understood to echo the failure of the First World to think outside of itself—to understand its differences from other places—and to understand the ways in which post-9/11 life in New York City is still radically different from life in Bogota or Jenin.

As a political as well as an affective mode, much of the art I discuss can be seen in a critical relation to this global tendency. Its contribution to trauma studies does not reduce to a further extension of the already attenuated trauma discourse through aestheticization. It does not simply make available a condition of trauma or suffering to a wider audience. Indeed, after 9/11, it seems all the more urgent to counter the notion that trauma can be transmitted or shared through art, as well as the tendency to over-identify with the victims of trauma.

The artwork analyzed here was largely produced prior to September 2001, but its political significance comes into sharp focus in the global social context shaped by the events of 9/11. Moreover, I propose that it is this context that provides the most compelling basis for uniting a group of works that are linked not strictly by theme but by a mode of political engagement. These works often provide a way of thinking about trauma, but they are not symptomatic of a “trauma culture.” For the most part, those discussed in Chapters 3 to 6 are the product of a sustained engagement with the consequences of political violence in diverse parts of the world, although they do not offer a clear political statement in the manner of didactic works. Insofar as they warrant generic treatment, they do so because they point to a new way of doing politics in art: one that is characterized by an aesthetic of relations. This mode of politics addresses the impact of trauma on the world—although it is not precisely about the subjective—and it operates through affective connection—although it is not simply concerned with the interpersonal. Principally, it understands or enacts the political as a sphere of interconnection, in which subjectivities are forged and sustained, but within which new links might be traced between subjects and places with only limited experience in common.

What I seek to show, then, is how, by realizing a way of seeing and feeling, this art makes a particular kind of contribution to thought, and to politics specifically: how certain conjunctions of affective and critical operations might constitute the basis for something we can call empathic vision.