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To cite this article: Sophie Anne Oliver (2010) Trauma, bodies, and performance art: Towards an embodied ethics of seeing, Continuum, 24:1, 119-129, DOI: 10.1080/10304310903362775

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310903362775

Published online: 28 Jan 2010.

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Trauma, bodies, and performance art: Towards an embodied ethics of seeing

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The question of how to be an ethical witness to the suffering of distant others is one that has long been a preoccupation of trauma studies scholars. This paper addresses the problem of (un)ethical spectatorship of the traumatized body by engaging with the theory and practice of contemporary performance art. Rejecting the fantasy of the ideal moral witness, the author turns to models of embodied spectatorship suggested by performance-body art to propose ways of seeing that acknowledge and accept the necessary ambivalence of the distant spectatorship of suffering, while at the same time promoting a sense of ‘response-ability’ and self-reflection.

Introduction

In The Town Beyond the Wall, Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel is cutting in his condemnation of those who, as bystanders to Nazi atrocities, were ‘permanently and merely spectators’ and, who, in Wiesel’s words, ‘observed us [the victims], without emotion, while we became objects’ (1982, 148). Decades later, the proliferation of visual and other representations of atrocity and human suffering has forced us all to question our role as spectators to the other’s pain. This article explores the possibility of imagining ethical ways of seeing the suffering of others, working from a focus upon the traumatized body, by which I mean to refer both to the traumatized bodies of atrocity victims that we see represented in visual and other media and, more abstractly, to the corporeal as the conceptual site upon which trauma and its discourses are negotiated. From voyeurism and the ‘eroticisation of atrocity’ (Jacobs 2008) to the objectification and appropriation of the other’s experience, viewing the traumatized bodies of atrocity is an exercise strewn with pitfalls, and yet it is one to which we are all regularly exposed not only through news and media coverage of war and genocide but also in humanitarian campaigns, memorial projects and in artistic representations of suffering and traumatic memory. The question then becomes: how might we be responsive and, to use Kelly Oliver’s term, response-able to the traumatized body (Oliver 2001)? How are we to move from voyeuristic spectating of the traumatized body as object, to an ethical witnessing of that body as part of the other’s, and our own, humanity? In response to such questions, this paper draws on a field of study so far largely unexplored within trauma studies, that of performance art theory.

The scant attention paid to performance art by trauma scholars is surprising when we consider that not only are many contemporary performance artists directly addressing through their work questions of personal and/or collective trauma but also that the very foundations of performance art speak to, of and from the dynamics of power, oppression
and the traumatized body. Since the early ‘Happenings’ and feminist body-art of the 1960s and 1970s, performance art has achieved historical status as negotiator of a new relationship between art and politics (Wark 2006); its repeated engagement with the body as a mode of experience as well as a means of expression has forced audiences both within and outside of the art world to pay attention to embodiment as a cultural and political force. From its earliest manifestations, performance art has sought to redefine discourses of the traumatized body in ways that I suggest may provide the first step towards a model for ethical spectatorship.

The central proposition of this paper is that trauma theorists, in particular those concerned with the visual representation of trauma, would find it useful to consider some of the theoretical insights about experience, embodiment and spectatorship developed in the field of performance art. By its very form and nature performance art suggests the possibility of an apparently unique mode of spectatorship that it is argued can and should be transposed onto other contexts in which we are asked to see the suffering of others. What is potentially ‘ethical’ about this way of seeing is not only its call for a sense of response-ability towards the corporeal subject being viewed (that is, a sense of ‘infinite encounter with otherness’ as conditional to our own subjectivity [Oliver 2001]), but also, and crucially, the demand for the spectator’s own self-conscious relation to the (re)presentation, and the acknowledgement of his or her own embodiment as a performative presence in the moment of witnessing the other’s trauma, even in cases of distant or mediated viewing. In this sense, then, performance art may have more to tell us about the spectating body of the viewer than about the spectated body of the viewed. Indeed, it is important to note that this essay seeks only to bring into dialogue the theories of spectatorship developed within trauma and performance studies; it does not seek to suggest a slippage between the figure of the victim of trauma and the performance artist engaged in self-inflicted pain or mutilation.

The first section of the article provides a brief overview of the ways in which the (not unproblematic) notion of ‘unethical spectatorship’ has commonly been framed, and explores the proposition that the spectatorship of traumatized bodies is particularly problematic in its potential to induce objectifying and voyeuristic ways of seeing suffering. From here, it is suggested that the corporeal politics of feminist performance art may provide a first indication of how the practice and its theory might serve as a model for an ethics of seeing the traumatized body. The concept of ‘ethics’ suggested lies not in the absence of feelings of disgust, guilt or voyeuristic pleasure: these are all accepted as genuine responses to the spectacle of trauma. In this sense, performance art proposes a departure from the very concept of unethical spectatorship as it is often conceived in trauma studies. The second section focuses more conceptually on the ontology of performance, which, through its delicate negotiation of presence and absence, and its necessarily dialogic nature, suggests an alternative understanding of ‘ethical’ spectatorship that, conceptually at least, is fully amenable to trauma theory. In the final section I develop more fully this model of embodied ethical seeing through a discussion of Jill Bennett’s theory of sense memory, which, thought in relation to spectator experiences of performance art, brings the performative act of seeing into focus, thus suggesting more concretely the possibility of an embodied ethics of spectatorship.

Unethical spectatorship and the traumatized body

The spectator, Wiesel writes, ‘has nothing of the human in him: he is a stone in the street, the cadaver of an animal, a dead pile of wood’ (1982, 164). Passive, unmoved and
unmoving, the figure of the ‘unethical spectator’ is in the first instance accused of moral indifference; that is, of turning away, of pretending not to see and remaining silent in the face of injustice. Elsewhere in Wiesel’s account, the spectator of suffering is guilty not only of apathy but also of displaying a morbid fascination with the object of his gaze. Describing an episode in which a group of German workers threw scraps of bread into a freezing, open train carriage of deportees, Wiesel notes how the onlookers appeared enthralled by the sight of these unfortunates as they scrambled and fought for the crumbs turned to gold by hunger. As Wiesel describes it, the fascination with which the German workers watch the deportees is morally and ethically suspect: these bystanders behave as though they were spectators at a freak show, a circus, throwing scraps to the animals at the zoo (Wiesel and Mainac 1958, 156–7).

The image of spectators at a zoo looking on in disengaged interest at the strange animals held captive to their gaze resonates with many of the criticisms voiced today in relation to the visual representation of atrocity. As images of atrocity and traumatized bodies proliferate, it is argued, we, the receivers of these visual representations, become somehow ‘immune’ to their effect, seeing them simply as spectacle, a form of ‘infotainment’ – the enjoyment of which marks our complicity in the commodification of experience, by which we become merely consumers or voyeurs of suffering (see Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997, 1–24). Both Lyndsey French and Janet Jacobs have exposed the risks of such commercial or cultural appropriations of suffering for the spectators of photographic exhibitions displaying images of victims and their bodies (French 2002; Jacobs 2008). For French, as for Jacobs, the dangers of unethical spectatorship lie not only in the act of looking away but also, and perhaps even more so, in the act of looking on. It is the way we see victims of atrocity and their bodies that presents the greatest danger for the spectator. In her commentary on a MOMA exhibition of genocide photographs drawn from the Tuol Sleng archive in Cambodia, French suggested that by presenting images of victims in ways that remove them from the specific context of their suffering, such exhibitions reiterate a sense of the victims’ otherness in the eyes of the viewer (2002, 142). This observation is particularly relevant for thinking about visual representations of traumatized bodies, which are frequently represented as anonymous icons of atrocity, while at the same time provoking an array of visceral, distancing responses that might range from fear and disgust to, in some cases, enjoyment. On the photographic representation of female prisoners of Auschwitz, Jacobs expresses a concern that the images – often of semi-naked, starving women – may encourage ‘a sexualized reading of the visual text, an effect of atrocity remembrance that, according to Susan Sontag, may “turn an event or person into something that can be possessed”’ (Jacobs 2008, 220, citing Sontag 2003). As female concentration camp survivor Karein Goertz notes: ‘there is, after all, such a thing as concentration camp pornography. The idea of having absolute power over others arouses feelings of pleasure’ (2001, 179). The contemplation of the spectacle, that is, of the visual exhibition of the traumatized body, Jacobs suggests, places the spectator in an always already compromised position. In French’s words, when we stand before such images of suffering we occupy a position of power in relation to the absolute powerlessness of the victims; held by their gaze, ‘we stare back at them from the place of the executioner’ (2002, 135). To suggest that, as viewers of images of atrocity, we can be said to see from the position of the executioner implies that the spectator is at risk of becoming complicit in the very logic of the degrading, marginalizing, dehumanizing effect of atrocity upon the body. As Elaine Scarry’s now landmark study The Body in Pain (1985) demonstrates so strikingly, the processes of oppression, desubjectification and dehumanization at work in acts of atrocity such as torture are often, if not always, enacted...
upon the body, both physically and symbolically. Seeing the traumatized body as other or as object, as merely a spectacle to be seen, but not, in Susan Sontag’s words, as ‘someone (like us) who also sees’ (2003, 65) becomes in itself a reiteration of wrongs already committed, continuing in the symbolic rejection of the victim as a subject.

To look upon the spectacle of the other’s suffering, particularly when that spectacle is corporeal – and as James Elkins notes, the spectacle is nearly always in some way corporeal (1999, 1) – may give rise to a number of responses in the spectator; from disgust and the desire to look away, to pity, or voyeurism, or even a repetition of dehumanizing perception. Each is problematic in its own way. And yet to talk of an ‘unethical spectator’ is, I argue, unhelpful because it too easily dismisses certain spectatorial responses as unacceptable, rather than seeing to develop a theory of witnessing that acknowledges and works from the discomfort of seeing. The model of spectatorship suggested by performance art takes as its very foundation the discomfort of the viewer, and in so doing it achieves a clear political goal. Jayne Wark (2006) points to the feminist body art of the 1960s and 1970s as key in resisting dominant oppressive discourses of the feminine body as abject, unstable, and inferior. In acts of mimetic defiance, feminist performance artists such as Carolee Schneemann and Shikage Kubota reclaimed the abjected female body in ways that sought to expose and undermine hegemonic discourses of femininity as mysterious and threatening on the one hand, and passive and powerless on the other. *Interior Scroll* (1975) by Schneemann is iconic in this regard (see Figure 1). Like Kubota’s *Vagina Painting* (1965), in which the artist, having attached a paint brush dripping with thick blood-red paint to her underwear, squatted over a large piece of paper which she proceeded to ‘paint’ as though in menstrual blood, *Interior Scroll* reclaimed the female anatomy, asserting the body’s inside – usually read as ‘a powerful sign of death’ (Elkins 1999, 109) – as a source of knowledge, creativity and power (symbolized by the written scroll that the artist appears to be pulling out of her vagina). In another piece, entitled *Meat Joy* (1964), Schneemann brought together a group of partially nude men and women in an ecstatic performance of materiality, their bodies writhing joyously amongst raw fish and meat. Schneemann described this performance as an ‘erotic rite’, designed as ‘a celebration of flesh as material’ (www.caroleeschneemann.com). These and countless other performances have been seen to enact a re-appropriation of the objectified and marginalized female body, thereby providing a space for the female subject as both embodied and active, seeing as well as seen. Such a political *coup de force* was possible precisely because the artists were able to anticipate and ‘work with’ the disgust, anxiety, or voyeuristic pleasure of their spectators.

In no way can performance art cure us (nor does it seek to cure us) of our propensity to eroticize or objectify the people whose bodies we observe. Viewers of performance art are not inherently more ‘ethical’ than viewers of other forms of visual representation of bodily trauma; indeed, much performance or body art only functions *because* of the existence of negative, voyeuristic or turning away responses towards the abject body. What performance art can (but does not always) do, however, is openly problematize these responses. Vanessa Beecroft’s highly political performance at the 2007 Venice Biennale, entitled *vb61: Still Death – Darfur – Still Deaf?* (see Figure 2), is a piece that explicitly brings performance art into dialogue with trauma discourse. In addition to the political question posed by the piece – why do we, as media spectators, remain deaf and apathetic in the face of so much violence and suffering? – it also poses, as all of Beecroft’s work does, a set of more complex questions about the nature of voyeurism and the relationship between the viewer, the models and the context of the work, not to mention the relationship of these to the artist. There is something discomforting in the way in which
viewers of this performance observe, photograph, speak over or ignore the blood-covered bodies lying naked on the floor of the gallery space. And yet in posing the question of voyeurism Beecroft is at the same time (re)producing the conditions for that response to occur; as such, she offers to share in her spectator’s guilt. Neither she nor her audience can hide from their voyeurism; they are in it together. In acknowledging this fact, the performance suggests, they stand more chance of moving on from their negative responses.

So far, performance art has been identified as politically useful in that it exposes and resists our dehumanizing perception of the traumatized or abject body, too easily perceived, like the feminine body, as other. In the achievement of this political aim, performance art also encourages us to consider more self-consciously the role of spectator as one which is also always complicit in and with the representation, forcing us to acknowledge the unavoidable ethical ambivalence of seeing the suffering of others. In this sense, performance art encourages a revised formulation of spectatorial ethics, one that is not based only in the imposition of ideal or ‘appropriate’ responses. The following section

Figure 1. Carolee Schneemann, ‘Interior Scroll’ (1975). Performance photograph. (Photo: Anthony McCall.)
explores this theme further, beginning with an analysis of the ontology of performance, which, it is argued, speaks to trauma discourse in ways that merit more attention than they have hitherto received in trauma scholarship.

The ontology of performance: Embodying the spectator

Trauma and performance have long been linked conceptually, from the great Greek tragedies to Freud and Breuer’s clinical studies of hysterics. And yet, even if we agree that it is with Freud that the theory of trauma takes flight, two important aspects of his early clinical encounters remain overlooked, namely the significance in the Hysteria studies of the patient’s body and its symptoms as signifiers of trauma, and, even more disregarded, the equally corporeal role of the doctors as interlocutors, or embodied witnesses of their patients’ suffering. As Peggy Phelan points out in Mourning Sex, the Hysteria studies painted a picture of the body as performative – part, in these early case histories, of a physical as well as psychical connection or interaction between patient and doctor:

The fingers of Freud and Breuer press and prod the somatic utterances of their patient’s hysterical bodies [...] apply mental and/or physical pressure to the indecipherable bodily signifier, the symptom, until it joins in the conversational. (Phelan 1997, 51)

In these early clinical studies we note, following Phelan, a healing interrelation of trauma, body and performance in which the body of the ‘spectator’ – in this case the therapist – shares centre stage with that of the spectated. An analysis of Phelan’s remarks on the ‘ontology of performance’ will demonstrate the enduring significance of this interrelation within the theory and practice of performance art, and further suggest how these might usefully influence trauma theories of spectatorship.

For Phelan, the ontology of performance is such that it can never be adequately preserved, described, or documented; in this sense, it may be linked to trauma through a parallel dance of presence and absence:
Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance [...] Performance’s being [...] becomes itself through disappearance. (1993, 146)

Like trauma, performance is unrepresentable, uncontrollable. The comparison is at once crude and potentially fertile; existing only in the moment of its happening, performance is always an enactment of loss, of the impossibility of retrieving the past. Trauma theory, too, speaks of impossibilities, of the inassimilable past that forever haunts the present. It is hardly surprising, then, that so many performance artists address the subject of trauma in their work, as though the performance might provide a ‘working through’ of traumatic experience. The inevitable loss or ‘disappearance of the object’ in performance, Phelan suggests, ‘rehearses and repeats the disappearance of the subject who longs to be remembered’ (1993, 147). It is at the same time a political and ethical moment – political because it acts out a moment of rupture, ethical because it calls upon its spectators to join in the rehearsal of loss: ‘performance calls witnesses to the singularity of the individual’s death and asks the spectator to do the impossible – to share that death by rehearsing for it’ (152). In its call to the audience, the performance proposes an alternative way of seeing the other that is ethical in a radical, perhaps Levinasian, sense. The performance does not exist without its audience, thus for performance, as for Levinas, ethics precedes ontology. For Phelan, performance art is ethical in that it offers a means of making visible that which is invisible or unmarked in traditional representation; it proposes, Phelan suggests, a model for ‘another representational economy, one in which the reproduction of the Other as the same is not assured’ (3).

The mode of seeing suggested by performance art is also, as we shall see, thoroughly embodied, adding the last link to the chain suggested by Phelan’s reading of Freud. The spectator – situated, a body in space – encounters the other in what performance artist and scholar Anna Fenemore has described as a ‘dialogic’ mode of vision, experienced as ‘a multiplicity of intersubjective relations and intercorporeal perceptions, both of which are marked by a reversibility of trajectory [...] That which is looked upon also acts upon what does the looking’ (2008, 7). In dialogic modes of vision we can no longer talk of the ‘passive’ spectator, acted upon by the text; the spectator of performance art is one who also performs and acts upon the representation. Expanding on her argument, Fenemore draws our attention to a piece by Martin Jay, entitled ‘Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and the search for a new ontology of sight’. Jay distinguishes between two opposing modes of vision, one epistemological and one ontological. The former is characterized by spectatorial distance and objectification, and corresponds to a ‘staring gaze’, which, Jay suggests, is not only aggressive but also ‘rigid, ego-logical and exclusionary’ (1993, 148). This corresponds to the gaze of the so-called ‘unethical spectator’ outlined above. The latter ontological mode, on the other hand, is embedded; the viewer is situated within the visual field, not outside it, and ‘his relationship to the context in which he is embedded is nurturant, not controlling’. It is an aletheic gaze: ‘multiple, aware of its context, inclusionary, horizontal and caring’ (148). It is this embedded, embodied mode of seeing that Fenemore claims is characteristic of audience experiences of many performance art pieces. In this sense, viewing performance, as an embodied experience of the soon-to-be-lost present, entails something other than an appropriation or objectification of that which is seen; performance mirrors and (re-)enacts the dynamic of loss experienced in trauma and its memory, and in so doing it returns the gaze of the spectator, calling him in, demanding that he, too, perform.

One of the clearest examples of this call to spectatorial performance is evident in the work of Serbian-born artist Marina Abramović, whose performances have repeatedly
sought to interrogate the emotional and ethical relationship of the audience to the work and to the performer. Her 1974 performance *Rhythm 0* tested this relationship to its limits. Here, the audience was instructed to act: given the choice of an array of over 70 different objects they were told to use these objects upon Abramović’s body as they saw fit. By the end of the six-hour performance, Abramović had been ‘stripped, painted, cut, crowned with thorns, and had the muzzle of a loaded gun thrust against her head’ (McEvilley 1999, 186). Once again, the possibility that audiences of performance art might act unethically was exposed, although somewhat paradoxically. Abramović’s piece still suggests a thoroughly ethical mode of spectatorship because, precisely, it engaged her audience in an intersubjective, dialogic way of seeing that emphasized their own performance.

**Re-reading the squirm: Sense memory and the empathic body**

In *The Lips of Thomas*, originally staged in 1975 but re-performed in 1993 and 2005, Abramović consumed a kilo of honey and drank a litre of wine before engaging in a series of progressively violent acts upon her own body, including self-flagellation and self mutilation, and lying for lengthy intervals upon a block of ice. The performance culminated in the now iconic image of the five-pointed star, which she cut into her stomach with a razor blade. Many were visibly disturbed by her 2005 re-performance, with one spectator exclaiming as Abramović brought the blade to her stomach: ‘you don’t have to do that again!’ (Carlson 2005). The earlier performance of this piece had ended with the artist being physically carried off the ice block by the audience, who were, apparently, unable to take anymore. These performances were so important because, as one commentary posted on the Netherlands Media Art Institute website notes:

Abramović is not only threatening the integrity of her body and, thus, destabilizing the binary opposition between inside and outside, but is also questioning the distinction between public and performer. In the end, the members of the audience can no longer hide behind their passive status as observers, but are forced to take the decision to perform an action of their own. (Netherlands Media Art Institute)

The performance of the artist gives way, finally, to that of the audience. Horror in this case invokes the action of the spectator, whose intervention is born also of disgust, guilt and ambivalence. This ability of performance art to accommodate spectatorial ambivalence is key to the contribution it may be able to make to developing a model of ethical spectatorship of the traumatized body. Art historian Jill Bennett draws attention to the potential creativity of spectatorial ambivalence, which she understands as part of the viewer’s embodied response to the visual (re)presentation of trauma. Considering spectators’ reactions to Dennis Del Favero and Justin Kramer’s photomedia installations on sexual child abuse, and to the self-mutilating performances of Abramović described above, Bennett describes the importance of ‘the squirm’ – the physical manifestation of the viewer’s disgust and unease at the sight of the mutilated or suffering flesh of the other/performer’s body. A visceral response that alerts us to Kristeva’s abject, the squirm, Bennett suggests, nonetheless signals an engagement with the artwork that is itself an embodied performance:

Although the squirm is a recoil, a moment of regrouping the self, it is also the condition of continued participation, the sensation that works with and against the deeper level response, which on its own is ‘unbearable’. The squirm lets us feel the image, but also maintain tension between self and image. It is a part of a loop in which the image incites mimetic contagion acted out in the body of the spectator, which must continue to separate itself from the body of the other. (Bennett 2005, 37)
By this description, the visceral response-performance of the spectator to the traumatized body echoes the structure of the empathic response that is apparently so key to ethical concern and altruism; in this case, it is an empathy in and of the body that, as in the psychological definition of the term, suggests the capacity to put oneself in the place of the other while always returning to the self.

In his article ‘Feeling Performance, Remembering Trauma’, Patrick Duggan gives an account of his attendance at Kira O’Reilly’s 2007 performance of self-mutilation in Untitled (Syncope). He refers to a similar spectatorial response to that described by Bennett, which he calls ‘kinaesthetic empathy’ – the process by which ‘an embodied and experiential experience of performance can give the effect of the trauma’s presence’ (Duggan 2007, 56). This is not a claim to vicarious trauma; empathy here should be understood as a return to self through the lived encounter with the memory of the other’s trauma (individual or collective), not as an appropriation or ingestion of the performer/other’s suffering. Duggan describes his experience as one of contradictions, inducing both excitement and guilt, suggesting both proximity and distance:

The experience of watching someone willingly slice into their flesh connected on a bodily level in the anticipation of pain I expected to feel, a sensation that was undeniably shared by others in the audience as they variously winced, gasped, tensed muscles, or looked away holding hands to mouths. I felt strangely culpable, as though I should have stopped her. I became, as Hand and Wilson put it in their examination of the theatre of Grand-Guignol, a ‘willing witness.’ (53–4)

Duggan’s ‘gut’ reactions to the spectacle of pain before him, of which he felt both uncomfortably a part and guiltily separate, indicate not only a corporal or kinaesthetic empathy towards O’Reilly in her physical suffering but also give rise to a deeper, individual sense of traumatic memory:

The connection I felt to Kira O’Reilly’s body kept drawing me to make associations in my memory, it put me in a space where I began to reconnect with past moments of traumatic experience – my first memory of pain, the image of watching a friend’s forehead split open on a curb, and the sickening experience of guilt and helplessness when a loved one tried to commit suicide. I did not want to remember. The performance placed me in a position of remembering and re-experiencing my own personal traumas. (56)

In psychoanalytic terms, this visceral reaction of the body of the spectator may constitute a repetition not of the other’s trauma but of the spectating subject’s own early mourning process – their sense of, as Phelan puts it, an ‘evisceration at birth’ that in no way corresponds to the spectated trauma but nonetheless provides a means of comprehending or ‘feeling’ that trauma.

Jill Bennett also relates the notion of embodied spectatorship to a theory of traumatic memory. Drawing on Holocaust survivor and poet Charlotte Delbo’s formulation, she proposes that we think embodied spectatorship in terms of ‘sense memory’, a mode of remembering that registers ‘the physical imprint’ of trauma rather than its facts. For Delbo, sense memory provides something that ordinary or ‘common’ memory cannot; the aspects of traumatic experience that elude historical memory are, she claims, registered in the experience of sense memory in and of the body, producing an alternative mode of knowledge which breaks from the epistemic in a similar way to the aletheic gaze to which Martin Jay refers. As Bennett writes:

Sense memory operates through the body to produce a kind of ‘seeing truth’ rather than a ‘thinking truth’, registering the pain of memory as it is directly experienced, and communicating a level of bodily affect. (Bennet 2005, 29)
While Delbo’s account focuses on the experience of sense memory for survivors of trauma, Bennett considers the address made by art to the spectator’s bodily memory, conceiving of art as ‘registering and producing affect’ in the spectator as well as the artist (Bennett 2005, 32). The reader’s metaphorical gaze is thus turned towards the spectator; it is she who experiences, remembers, performs her own bodily sense as she views the fragmented and pained body or bodies exhibited before her. In acknowledging this embodied aspect of vision, the spectator is also made aware of her own ambivalent position as viewer of the visual representation of suffering. As Bennett notes:

> Sense memory doesn’t just present the horrific scene, the graphic spectacle of violence, but the physical imprint of the ordeal of violence: a (compromised and compromising) position to see from. (34)

According to Bennett, ‘bodily response precedes the inscription of narrative, of moral emotion or empathy’ (32). By this view, the corporeal (inter)actions of the spectator — however problematic — form a necessary stage in establishing the conditions for actual ethical engagement. Through the present, embodied experience of viewing the traumatized body the spectator comes him or herself to perform, a way of seeing which is by no means liberated of the ambivalence or complicity of so-called ‘unethical spectatorship’ but that is nonetheless ethical in a more fundamental sense and, by allowing for the self-conscious acknowledgement of one’s own guilt or discomfort, may create a space for ethical action in the more common sense to emerge.

**Conclusion**

This aim of this article has been to explore and demonstrate the ways in which the practice and theory of performance art might prove useful to trauma studies, in particular in relation to those issues associated with the (un)ethical spectatorship of the traumatized body. At the very least, the examples discussed have established that this mode of enquiry is worth pursuing. The theory of spectatorship proposed by performance art is useful for thinking about the ways in which we see traumatized bodies of atrocity through other forms of visual representation in three core ways. Firstly, it reinterprets the notion of ‘ethical spectatorship’ to focus not on the absence of negative responses but on the performative act of seeing, which is understood as dialogic and intersubjective, and thus as responsive and response-able to the other of representation. Secondly, performance art rejects the distinction between active artist and passive spectator and forces us as viewers to acknowledge our own role in the performance of representation; by becoming conscious of the presence of our own bodies in the act of spectatorship we may be better equipped to resist the temptation to turn away from the traumatized body of the victim; instead, we are called upon to accept this body, along with our own, as part of what it is to be human. Thirdly, performance art challenges us to view the traumatized body in new terms, opposing our preconceptions of the body as object, alien, other and asserting the significance of the corporeal as a site of resistance and expression in the face of trauma.

Performance art offers an ontological and structural model through which the concept of embodied ethical spectatorship might begin to be imagined; our ambivalence as spectators of suffering is accepted as part of the embodied vision that allows us, in the end, to bear witness in a fundamental ethical sense. If there is reluctance among trauma studies scholars to engage with performance art, it may be less a criticism of the mode of (re)presentation at work in the genre and more a reflection of our unease and unwillingness to face our own ambivalent performance as spectators and commentators of the other’s suffering. The model of embodied witnessing proposed in this reading of performance art
practice and theory does not overcome the challenge of ethical (in)action. It offers no fixed or fixing solutions for trauma theory; what it may do, however, is provide alternative ways of framing the problems.

Acknowledgement
This paper was written as part of a PhD funded by an Arts and Humanities Research Council Grant.

Notes on contributor
Sophie Anne Oliver is a final-year PhD student at Birkbeck College, University of London. Her research addresses the ethics of secondary witnessing, in particular in relation to embodiment and cultural memory of atrocity.

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