In memory of trauma

Amber Johnston

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In Memory of Trauma

By

Amber Johnston

THESIS

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Dan Larkin, Committee Chair

Suzanne Szucs, Committee Advisor

Jessica Lieberman, Committee Advisor
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Abstract

This thesis delves into the psyche of a survivor of sexual molestation, exploring defense mechanisms, PTSD, and elusive memory in an audio and visual context. Three photographic gazes appear in this work, the *dissociative gaze*, the *experiential gaze* and the *metaphoric gaze*. These gazes are shown in the series *In Memory of Trauma* which consists of ten large Photographic prints on the gallery wall. *Disarticulation* is a book of images that discuss the dissociation between mind and body happening after a traumatic experience. There is also a confrontational sound installation, *Confessional*, that speaks to denial and self-hatred. Work by artists including Tracy Emin, Sue Williams, Harriet Hosmer, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Alfredo Jaar, Joe Spence and Rosie Martin on the subject of sexual abuse and trauma in general are discussed along with the few examples in pop culture such as David Lynch’s Twin Peaks and Law and Order, SVU showing the media’s portrayal of victim hood. This thesis also addresses some early ideas of Freud and his contemporaries Jean-Martin Charcot and Pierre Janet on the psychology of trauma survivors. Other theories explored are Susan Sontag’s and Ulrich Baer’s ideas on re-witnessing and traumatic images and Dora Apel on validation and witness, as well as Janet Marstine’s views on feminism and art therapy. Finally this thesis will discuss the cycle of denial and complacency in our society and around the world.
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My fellow grad students were like a family whose support and understanding I could not have gone without. Our many critiques guided me into a thesis that I am proud of and feel that they are a part.

I would also like to thank my parents who were supportive of my work even when it publicly humiliated them. We grew together through this process, healing wounds that were so old they had been overlooked.
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Introduction

*In Memory of Trauma* is comprised of multiple works that explore an autobiographical impulse to relay my survival of sexual molestation and, by doing so, speak to universal traumatic experience. The three projects work together to describe a variety of ways in which a survivor of sexual molestation may react and defend herself from the trauma she endured at a young age. My creative process, using multiple mediums, has always been a source of therapy. Art making is an essential way to express my complex emotions. At times it has saved my life.

As an undergraduate my work functioned as art therapy. I made huge ceramic sculptures that physically represented the emotions I was feeling. The pieces were bulbous yet constricted and conveyed a feeling of being choked. In this work the making was more important than the finished product. Clay was a perfect medium for healing: when touched it moves, absorbing the impact and swallowing the emotions forced onto its surface. During this period I never talked about “meaning” in my work. I don’t think I even really knew what it was about.

Only recently has the discussion of sexual abuse been brought to the forefront in both my work and in my life. Much of my research has been self-exploration brought on by counseling sessions and conversations with my family. I have refined the art making process, drawing attention to a crime and its consequences rather than emphasizing catharsis. In this way the work transcends my own personal experience, referencing universal themes of abuse. This subject matter is an important issue in our society and
this work discusses the silence and shame felt by so many people around the world. With this work I hope to expose sexual molestation from a fine art perspective, forcing it outside of the confines of “art therapy” and onto a broader audience.

The re-witnessing of the traumatic event is what makes it real for the survivor, and the making of art serves as a placeholder for these emotions/memories. By making art I am contemplating and addressing issues of trust, sexuality, and self worth. Showing this work to an audience finishes the story; the audience bears witness to my trauma, validating the experience and my emotions. Acknowledging the existence of a trauma that was hidden in shame for so many years finally sets me free from the internal dialogue of self-hatred that has tormented my psyche.

A traumatic memory is never a solid one. When the mind dissociates from the body, often the trauma is not experienced in the moment but as a latent memory, working in similar ways to the latent image of photography. I see images in my head of the places where traumatic events occurred but not the actual events as they happened. I look in on the situations instead of participating. This is a defense mechanism created to shield myself from the horror of what was happening to my child-self. Many survivors remember their trauma in this way, as if they were a fly on the wall instead of experiencing the event in the first person. This perspective, the dissociative gaze is one of three photographic perspectives used in the series In Memory of Trauma (also the title of the show). This series documents spaces in and around my childhood home where my abuse took place. The other two views are the experiential gaze, the memory of my perspective as the abuse took place and the metaphorical gaze, images that do not represent memories, instead standing for defense mechanisms, pain and violence felt long
after the abuse ended. These are the memories and emotions that have surfaced as I reach further into my recovery process. By photographing them and mounting them, large scale, on a gallery wall, I leave behind a piece of that pain.

Images that represent these complex psychic planes are displayed in my handmade book Disarticulation. The images show the disruption of the mind and body with appropriated medical illustrations and fractured body parts juxtaposed on a dirty surface. They become surreal landscapes, representing physically and conceptually the separation of my interior mind and my exterior body.

Thoughts of self-hatred and shame that have imprisoned me for so long have become the installation sound piece Confessional. This piece is meant to confront the audience with some of the psychological symptoms of sexual molestation. A listener experiences shameful reflection and violent self-defeating words spoken to them through headphones in a dark, confined and solitary space. This puts the viewer in the place of a survivor, alone and in the dark with horrible thoughts incessantly beating them down.

The experience of the three pieces together is a journey through the psyche of a molestation survivor. On their own, the images on the wall and in the book have a peculiar quality. But one must experience the entire show to fully understand the weight that they hold. Each piece works on its own to convey a certain element of surviving sexual abuse, functioning together they become a cohesive experience that can speak for a large percentage of our population.

All three bodies converge as In Memory of Trauma, a thesis that explores the psychology and critical theories behind traumatic events and corrosive thoughts of their aftermath. In creating this work I hope to speak for those who have had similar
experiences and to speak out against those who fuel this cyclical trauma through denial and complacency.
Chapter 1 — My Work, My Voice

Perhaps it’s that you can’t go back in time, but you can return to scenes of love, of a crime, of happiness, and of a fatal decision: the places are what remain, are what you can possess, are what is immortal. They become the tangible landscape of memory, the places that made you, and in some way you too become them. They are what you can possess and what in the end possesses you.2

_In Memory of Trauma_

My parent’s home remains as it was 17 years ago, when traumatic events filled its rooms, a memento mori for a lost childhood. The garden in the back of the house has not been touched since the banishment of my perpetrator. Briars and weeds fill the sunken landscape. A fountain that used to nourish the pond lays on its side, buried in the decay of nearly two decades. Bare winter branches expose a sleeping bag submerged in rot, a scene of molestation only recognizable by those concerned. The garage sinks ever deeper into the earth: wood rots, holes fill the roof; it waits to be torn down. It waits to forget. The 100-year-old house is split, red brick, and white panel, forgotten and ever present. Naked ivy crawls across the paneling, filthy from the dirt yard below, like veins that no longer offer life. Inside, old doors, paint chipping from lack of care, still hide sexual betrayals, closed off to the rest of the family. The bedroom of the foster brother, the molester, is now used as a storage space. Filled with childhood toys and memories, it literally holds the baggage of a past from which no one in the family can seem to escape.

_In Memory of Trauma_ is a series of ten photographs taken in my childhood home, which document spaces where traumatic events occurred. Each of the places photographed have a significant meaning or memory behind them. Ulrich Bear posits that
“(t)rauma survivors may recall a particular place or area in great detail without being able to associate it with the actual event.” Memories of these events have woven in and out of my life but the spaces where they occurred remain as strong reminders of an unhappy history.

These images document the decay of a house and of an unforgotten past; a home and a past that is still inhabited. They work as a visual description of dissociation, the psychiatric term used to describe the “psychological defense mechanism in which specific, anxiety-provoking thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations are separated from the rest of the psyche.” The bodies placed in these images are pieces of a whole that is trying to find itself. Revisiting the places of trauma as an adult, and seeing them as mementos from the past is an integral part of the healing process, one that places the two dissociated selves back together: the self that held all the abuse, all the pain, with the self that chose to forget and live in a state of denial.

This series was photographed from three different perspectives, three gazes. The first is the dissociative gaze. This perspective is from my dissociated self who looked on as the little girl was molested; she was there to take care of my “other.” She watched so the trauma would not have to be experienced directly. Memories of these events have always been from her perspective. She dealt with all the suffering, hiding the innocent girl away, until later in life when she was more able to deal with the trauma. I have placed myself back into the spaces to represent the child that used to exist and the memory that remains present in my psyche. This is how the events are remembered, not as they happened but from a bystander’s point of view, a dissociative gaze. The second, the experiential gaze is from the perspective of a girl in her surroundings, a view of what
she saw from positions of subservience. She looks up at the ceiling after a pillow is removed from her face (Figure 1). She stares at the bathroom door, open just a crack, dreading what lies behind (Figure 2). These are the memories that have only surfaced recently. They are flashbacks to memories of the physical actions taken upon my body. These events were only experienced through my belated memory, too horrifying for my eleven-year-old self to absorb. The third is the metaphoric gaze. The images of the house, the stairs and the doll are not memories but they speak to defense mechanisms and to the narrative flow of the installation. The spray paint on the bedroom walls mark the violent and psychopathic nature of my abuser. The house represents the split in my psyche, half red brick and half white paneling.
This series shows both experiences coming together. The viewer looks into these spaces of trauma years later, seeing the girl, but never as a whole person. The back of an ambiguous head in the bathtub could be the adult, or the child (Figure 3). She stands in the corner, hiding in shame and at the same time punishing herself. These are clearly the legs of a woman yet they stand in the position of a child (Figure 4). A dismembered doll takes her place on a shelf inside his bedroom (Figure 5). Representing, again, the inability to place the self in the event. The ambiguity of age represents an emotional state of confusion between the innocent girl she once was and the woman she has become.
There is play between dark and light within all the images in this series. Dark works as a metaphor for what Jo Spence calls the “shadow” side and light stands for hope and escape.\(^5\) In Untitled 4 (*Figure 6*) the light comes through the window and points back at the door, the door is shown but not the doorknob. This light represents the ability to escape but the lack of doorknob tells us that escape seems impossible. Instead, the dark stairs lead us further into the narrative of trauma.
This house was photographed three times between 2007 and 2009. Each session was an exploration of differing emotions and motivations coinciding with the stages of my healing process. The first shoot was photographed with a cool anger showing surprising results – beautiful pictures with warm light. The message of trauma was not present. I placed a snapshot of myself as a young girl into one of these settings to symbolize an innocent, worry-free girl in contrast to a scene of shame and anger. However, a frame is placed around the face of the childhood picture to place it in the past, pre-abuse (Figure 7). This was to remind myself of that little girl who is still inside me. In subsequent shoots I placed myself in the actual location with no manipulation, this seemed more of an honest portrayal of the time and place. During the second shoot I realized that this was the work I really wanted to talk about. I was in the stage of anger toward my parents for letting the abuse happen, and wanted to show how they live, stuck in a house of memories, unable to simply paint over the mark of a boy who ruined our lives. On the third and final shoot I noticed, for the first time, the filth in which my parents live. The whole upstairs of their house was a time capsule. The dirty walls from my childhood remained; linoleum, stained and wrinkled, was the same piece that never fit
the room even when it was new. This stood out to me as a metaphor for how I felt inside; therefore I exploited in high detail the grime that covers the house.

Pain and anger have lain dormant for all these years, growing moldy along with the house, waiting for the emotional stability to acknowledge feelings of hurt and abandonment. The game of denial was a likely defense against a reality too great for a young girl to perceive. However, the halls are still walked, the door to the bedroom still bears the graffiti of a foster brother who shaped the lives of the other family members in ways they have yet to understand. His mark is still seen with every trip to the upstairs bathroom, a reminder of the role he still plays in the lives of us all.

Disarticulation— A Book

The book represents defense mechanisms shown as metaphoric collages. In the process of defending my “self,” mind and body were forced apart and, over the years, realigned in ways that were unnatural and destructive to my psyche. An exterior, appearing normal and sane, covered an interior self that was constantly telling my body
that she was not good enough, that she was stupid, fat and ugly and that no man could ever love her. Classic symptoms of sexual abuse were constant: low self-esteem, sexual promiscuity, eating disorders, alcoholism, drug use and the inability to foster a loving relationship. With the lack of supportive parents to provide real answers to sexual confusion, I did not understand that these actions were symptoms of anything other than the norm.

The use of my body is an important aspect of these images as it speaks to my history, however it also speaks to a greater audience: this could be any woman’s body, as deciphering features are never shown. The body is always deconstructed to represent the fragmented mind of a survivor. In the process of piecing oneself back together after a traumatic experience, it is hard to see oneself as a whole person. Once again, the two selves come into play.

This work is presented in book form to give the viewer a sense of intimacy with the images as well as to give it an object quality. These images need to be held in the hands of the viewer and experienced on a personal level. The viewer looks down at the image instead of straight ahead creating a feeling of ownership, and projecting the emotions portrayed onto the viewer. As Untitled 3 (Figure 8) is looked down upon, the hair becomes that of the viewer, placing them in the image. A feeling of confusion is created; the audience is asked to interpret the pictures through their own perspective.
My creative process displays the chaotic separation of mind and body. Appropriated medical illustrations are used as illustrative examples of normalcy. These found images are severed from their original context and combined with morphed body parts to metaphorically speak to my perceived abnormal and frenzied interior. The digitally manipulated and mirrored photographs of segmented body parts represent repetitive patterns that are destructive yet comforting to my psyche, as they have always been a constant. Watercolor on these creations gives them a visceral quality of bodily fluid as well as adding an autobiographical mark. These creations are worked into images of my body, once again in fragments, on a landscape of white studio paper. The studio is referenced as an even playing field; however, it is not used as a typical backdrop. The portions shown are of a floor that has been traversed by many, leaving dirty footprints and smudges. This represents an interior mind space that has been walked on, that is dirty and used up. My process provides a digitally collaged picture of my two selves—the exterior rational self and the irrational interior self—in conflict. The two co-exist in a surreal landscape of neither here nor there.
Confessional

The Confessional installation is a way to put the viewer in my place: not to sympathize with me but to get angry along with me, to think about how my experience would have affected them or to remind them of their own experience. Figure 11 shows the installation, two booths where sound pieces I Fucking Hate You and The Ride Home are experienced. Viewers sit alone in the dark listening through headphones to a memory of shame; the noise from the gallery can be heard faintly through the curtain (figure 12). The experience is solitary, yet surrounded by human activity. This functions in two ways: it allows the listener space to react however they need, without the scrutiny of others, and
it emphasizes how these feelings were developed, growing up in silent shame, alone with antagonizing thoughts, looking out at others, unable to connect. The experience is in the second person so the listener might feel as if they are hearing their own thoughts, bombarded by their own insecurities.

The same method of seclusion that survivors deal with is used to convey my own experience of shame and self-hatred, just a small sampling of the many thoughts that have engulfed my existence. As Nancy K. Miller writes in her essay *Memory Stains: Annie Ernaux’s Shame*, “Shame reshapes identity, becomes a way of life, becomes almost invisible, as though it had entered the body itself. The secret of shame that excludes you in your own eyes from decency operates regardless of whether others know about it.”

The Ride Home:

*You remember sitting in the car on the way home from school, just you and your mother in the silver spaceship mini van rusting at the edges. You are always embarrassed to be picked up in a car that looks like it belongs in a junkyard. You sit shotgun with your arms crossed, head down, hoping she will drive away as quickly as possible. As she drives she keeps glancing at you out of the corner of her eyes with that horrible look of pain and wondering. You can tell by the silence that she is going*
to ask you again. That question that makes you so uncomfortable and scared you can only lie and hope she is concentrating too hard on the road to notice your rigid reaction. You try to think of something to talk about so she will forget about it. But the only thing on your mind is your foster brother and how mad he would be if you accidentally told his precious mother what he does to you when no one is around. She asks the question. “Does Daniel ever touch you?” Your body tightens, you want so badly to tell her, maybe she could make him stop, would she still love you if she knew? But you are afraid. You don’t want your mother to think of you differently, you don’t want her to tell your father that you are soiled, damaged goods.

The shame is almost unbearable as you stare out the passenger window. If only you could curl up in a ball and disappear. The silence that follows helps the realization sink in that your mother does not believe you but she does not want to admit it. In your 11 year old mind you figure she loves him more than you and does not want to deal with the consequences of a different answer to her question.

Looking back you realize that this was the closest conversation you ever had with your mother about sex and your body.

The reception of these two pieces will vary from person to person. The words stumble over each other, making the audience listen closely so as to hear the whole story. Some people will stay to the end and some will exit quickly, not wanting to engage. Others will catch a glimpse of the trauma and run away, not wanting to delve into their own memories. The Ride Home is meant to put the listener in the place of an eleven-year-
old girl, too ashamed to tell her mother the truth about the pain she is suffering. By putting the listener in this position they are confronted with an issue that has too often been silenced and secreted by society. *I Fucking Hate You* is a presentation of the thoughts that plague women who suffer from the low self-esteem and self-hatred that sexual abuse can create. These are thoughts that ran through my head relentlessly for years, hindering me from loving myself and others.

The incessant badgering of the listener by these horrible thoughts is meant to confront the audience with a reality that is too often ignored by all societies, and to articulate the misfortunes of those who have remained silent out of shame. My voice speaks for others who have been molested/raped by those they look up to, those they are supposed to trust. It is intended to make people question the behavior of those they have encountered who were crying out for help in the unhealthiest of ways. This work also confronts those who have been molested, who have thoughts that may still be present in their minds or memories that still haunt them. They will hopefully realize that they are not alone, that they too can speak out, tell their secret and release some of the shame and guilt to which they cling.

Like Dread Scott who confronts his audience to speak of issues of African American and minority strife…. I plan to display my sound piece in an even more confrontational way in the future, without curtains for the audience to hide behind. This will change the reaction to the work in ways that have yet to be seen.

*Experiencing the Show*
Upon entering the gallery the viewer encounters large photographic images on the wall. The pictures evoke a mysterious feeling that draws the audience into them. They are considerable in size, 30 x 40, unframed and hanging from clips to create a raw appearance that is meant to overwhelm the viewer. At this point the audience will bring their own baggage to the images, their own memories of home.

To fully understand what the work is about one must experience all components of the exhibition. After viewing the photographs, the curious audience member will ideally either read the artist statement or approach the booth in the back of the gallery. One of the two will lead them to discover the meaning behind the images. The sound installation will subdue the person and make them rethink the images they have just encountered. Directly, they must walk back through the gallery, looking now with recognition of a traumatic experience. Some people will choose not to enter the confessional, therefore, there will be some that do not realize the full meaning of the work. One must labor to uncover the secrets that have been kept my whole life.

Figure 13
Because of the location of the gallery in a storefront in a working class neighborhood, many people came to see the show who were not accustomed to attending art exhibitions. Most of them, however, were able to understand the theme behind the show without reading the statement because they had had similar traumatic experiences. I had many conversations with women and men who had been molested as children. Many of them expressed deep appreciation for the declaration of my own incest. One woman explained to me through tears that her 13-year-old daughter had just been molested and had run away from home. This is the exact response I had hoped for in showing this work. Both men and women expressed to me that the work had touched them on a personal level. There were also a few people, mostly younger male friends of mine, who did not know how to react and quickly left after entering the confessionals, avoiding conversation with me. Unfortunately this fulfilled an expectation I had hoped would not pan out.

This work is not trying to represent the truth of what happened to me, it represents the emotions that I have felt in the aftermath and that are common among molestation survivors. Jane Kilby argues in her paper, *A Withdrawn Vision*, that trauma cannot be
represented because it was never experienced. Because survivors of trauma dissociate from the experience, she considers any representation of the experience to be false. Speaking to the highly detailed paintings of Jane Orleman, depicting herself as a baby being molested, Kilby writes that “trauma cannot be attributed a symbolic or metaphorical value.” Furthermore she talks about paintings that show the affect of the aftermath of the abuse as representational of the abuse but only of its dissociated memory and aftershock.

This exhibition is meant to confront the viewer and help them to understand the mindset of an eleven-year-old who has endured the pain and suffering of sexual abuse and the aftermath that continues throughout her life. *In Memory of Trauma* is meant to create a discussion among the audience that is uncomfortable and rarely happens; one that may stem from similar personal experience or the experience of a friend or family member. Everyone knows at least one person who has been sexually molested, whether they realize it or not. I hope to break the silence at least for those who see the show. If one person gets help because of this show it will be a success.
Chapter 2— Thoughts on Psychology

The elusive memory that accompanies traumatic experience is an important aspect of my work. The images of my parents’ house record memories as they are experienced in the present, not as they actually happened. Because they represent adult memories, these photographs, are the only spaces in which the traumatic events physically exist, as a represented memory. As the events took place my mind dissociated from my body and has only recently returned in the form of painful memories. As these events were repressed at the time they actually happened the only way to experience them is in the form of repeated flashbacks. Freud wrote that “the traumatic event (lay) precisely in the belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time.”

This idea is described in the Disarticulation series— these images do not exist in any real place or time, they are ever present.

Jean-Martin Charcot and Pierre Janet studied “how the mind processes memories. They recognized, on the one hand, the flexibility of the mind and, on the other, how certain memories became obstacles that kept people from going on with their lives.” By photographing a place of traumatic memories, they are more easily left behind.

Making this work has brought back the inner child— memories have resurfaced from the first person perspective, finally forcing all the pain that was denied and pushed aside by seemingly more urgent matters, to come forth. Photographing the united perspectives of memory and the present acknowledges the pain and releases it with each press of the shutter.
Acceptance is gained not only in the making of the work but in showing it as well. The telling of the traumatic story is the only way that it can historically take place. Examples of this are the stories of survivors of Hiroshima and the Holocaust. By reading these horrific narrations we validate the survivor with our knowledge. We relate to other cultures through their trauma. Every society has a traumatic history; whether experienced in recent memory or in the past. Cathy Caruth believes this may be our only form of connection with other cultures.\(^\text{10}\) It is a rare thing for a group of people to be able to confront their aggressors. Some of the South Africans who lived through Apartheid were given this opportunity. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, allowed many of these survivors to tell their story of suffering to the solders who committed the violent acts against them. The victims were allowed to decide the punishment for their aggressors. This commission gives me hope that someday, victims everywhere will have a similar opportunity. These people where given a chance to share their voice. This was part of their therapy, their experience of trauma was validated which put them in a place where they could begin to heal.

The healing process involves discussion and acceptance of what happened. By showing and writing about the experiences, they become validated. Unfortunately, in our society, this is hard to come by. Survivors of sexual molestation are told by their abuser never to tell a soul, if she were to tell, she would be shamed. This lays all the blame on the child who does not know any better. The secret eats away at the victim slowly over many years, not unlike the decay of an old house, until it finally collapses. In her book \textit{Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror}, Judith Herman posits that:
The survivor is left with fundamental problems in basic trust, autonomy, and initiative. She approaches the tasks of early adulthood—establishing independence and intimacy—burdened by major impairments in self-care, in cognition and memory, in identity, and in the capacity to form stable relationships. She is still a prisoner of her childhood; attempting to create a new life, she reencounters the trauma.\textsuperscript{11}

The side effects of denial—alcoholism, sexual deviancy, and the inability to form a stable relationship—were a constant reminder in my own life of what lay on the back burner waiting to be dealt with. Manipulations learned through sexual abuse carried over into relationships with men. Learned behavior of self-loathing and lack of self-worth brought about similar treatment by men. Without a proper male role model, aside from an absent alcoholic father, the sexualized love of a foster brother was my only example of a relationship between a man and a woman. Early sexual experiences in school lead to further shame and affirmation that no one would ever actually love me, they would only want sex. As a result, I continually sought out relationships that reenacted my abuse.

Telling my secret was not an option for my eleven-year-old self. Even now that reporting abuse is a fairly common practice in the United States it still does not occur for most victims. According to the U.S. Justice Department “Roughly 33\% of girls and 14\% of boys are molested before the age of 18. Nearly 2/3 of all sexual assaults reported involved minors and roughly 1/3 involved children under the age of 12. In most cases, however, child molestation goes unreported. Estimates are that only 35\% of sexual abuse is reported.”\textsuperscript{12}

Typically the victim is overcome with shame and also may be threatened with her life. (The feminine voice has been applied to this victim; however, many men deal with these same issues in an even more severe way as homosexuality and manhood come into
play, confusing them into secrecy and perpetuating an unbroken cycle. But being a woman compels me to tell the story of the female experience.) The captor is omniscient in the eyes of his victim and completely in control. He leads her to believe that to tell would ruin her life and that of her family. This heavy weight is placed on her shoulders, ensuring her secrecy. The victim will also defend her secret with all her ability, in many cases pretending that it never happened. It is easy to forget a trauma for years, only to remember at the most inopportune time in the form of flashbacks. A survivor creates unhealthy defense mechanisms to get through life the best way she can. She is attracted to relationships that reenact her abuse in what becomes an endless cycle. This lifestyle is all she knows and she clings to it as the only semblance of normalcy. She may see others living in peace, confused and curious as to how they are able to love each other. As an adult she is even more ashamed that she let this happen, placing all of the blame upon herself, while her victimizer is still seen as infallible. It takes many years of counseling for a victim to realize that she had no control over the situation and that she has never needed to be ashamed.

Many people believe that abuse of children is the worst kind of crime. However, this is often as far as the conversation goes. We rarely hear about how the victims of sexual abuse are dealing with their pain and whether or not they grow up to repeat the cycle by abusing their own children. When they do fall into a cycle of sexual abuse, they are treated as criminals. The story ends if and when the victimizer is put in prison. There may be theory and psychology researched and written on the subject but it is not opened up to a larger, less educated society. What about the victims? What about people who never come forward, who hide in shame? The cycle continues because most of the
victims remain victims, they are not given the therapy they need because they are holding
so tightly onto their secret. They think this is a “normal” way to be raised. Shamed into
secrecy by their molester they enter adulthood and may become victimizers themselves
because that is what they know. Until this silence is broken, the cycle will continue. My
work attempts to disrupt this silence, showing the emotional breakdown of a survivor
coming to terms with herself and her community.
Chapter 3 — Theories on Trauma

**PTSD and Sexual Molestation**

The history of sexual molestation is fundamental to the history of women. It has always been a part of our experience, in every time and in every culture. It is not, however, a topic that has held much importance to a male dominated society that was prevalent through most of the history of the world. The silence surrounding sexual molestation was broken temporarily in the late 19th century when Freud wrote his conclusions on “hysteria” in *The Aetiology of Hysteria*. He spent years listening to “hysterical” women, uncovering their secrets about being molested by powerful fathers and male friends of the family. It was the first time a doctor had given any credence to women’s stories of abuse. However, because of the implications toward men of wealth and high social standing, and because these findings promoted ideas of a budding feminist movement, Freud recanted all of his theories telling his patients that their stories were made up, that they were fantasizing about their fathers raping them. This pushed the women back into their hysterical states, subjugated once again. Instead of opening doors for victims of sexual abuse, it took another hundred years before this subject was again taken seriously. It took the traumatization of men in wartime showing signs of hysteria at that time called “shell shock” to induce the popularization of further research.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a mental disorder coined after the Vietnam War, is described by repetitions of a traumatic event in dreams or in the form of flashbacks, “along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event.”
Survivors of all kinds are now diagnosed with PTSD, including those of sexual molestation and rape. Freud wrote about a latency period, the traumatic event never actually being experienced until the mind has matured and is ready to deal with the forthcoming emotions or when they cannot be held down any longer. In the meantime victims act out with self-destructive behavior, including sexual promiscuity and an attraction to victimhood, while our society still refuses to acknowledge these as symptoms of PTSD. *In Memory of Trauma* was not only created for the artist but also as a didactic tool to help people think about and discuss the aftermath of sexual abuse, as well as the crime and its prevention.

*Witnessing and Traumatic Images*

Roland Barthes described the photograph as representing “noeme” or “that-has-been.”¹⁵ My images do this literally and conceptually. By recording my performance in front of the camera, I create the memory of what has been in the past, before the picture was ever conceived. Ulrich Baer restates this idea in his writing about the traumatic landscapes of photographers, Mikael Levin and Dirk Reinartz as:

…not a return to the real but of its first appearance: an appearance of a meaning that, as the ongoing debates about the causes and manifestations of trauma indicate, continues to defy comprehension and that, although it concerns the past, did not exist there.¹⁶

The re-witnessing of the traumatic event is what makes it real for the survivor. The making of art, in my case, unloads the story, and the audience/witness helps to validate the experience. Their acknowledgment validates my unsettled past. Repetitive memories of past events only exist in the present. The photographs represent these
memories, causing the events to become tangible. In PTSD the memory is belated, the experience of the photograph is also belated, remaining undeveloped until someone looks at it. Only then it is experienced to the full extent as an object. The image is forced from its referent the same way memory of a traumatic event is forced away from the present, not to be viewed until later. Even in digital photography there is still a separation between time and space -- a moment is created that can be re-experienced infinitely.

My images show memories -- some were belated memories and some were always with me. They also speak to others who have experienced the delayed memory of trauma. PTSD causes “(p)rocesses of memory and forgetting (to be) …disrupted, as recollection of the event is replaced by compulsive re-experiencing of a latent facsimile of the event.”17 By placing my present self inside the traumatic memory I am referencing the belated memory that lives in the present as a recurring event.

Images of the holocaust and subsequent art made by survivors and their children hope to expose the horrors and to honor the plight of the victims as a way to create a conversation, so that this might never happen again. The optimism of Baer toward the future of an image and what might come from witnessing trauma that has already happened may work on some levels. Baer posits that traumatic images “call on viewers to assume a responsibility with regard to the image, and thus to become potential witness. They open up a future that is not known and, because it is unknown, might be changed.”18

Our culture is so saturated by images, traumatic or not, it is hard to justify adding more to the pile. Susan Sontag argues that images do not “lose their power to shock. But they don’t help us much to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs
do something else: they haunt us.” She claims that we have been numbed by the intake of war images on the evening news every night and that reality no longer exists, “(t)here are only representations: media.” This numbing effect on the general public has worked against the ideas of witnessing so we do not forget. All we do is witness, we have become voyeurs who are so far removed from the reality we see on TV that we no longer care what happens to other people. The wealthy half of Western nations sit on their comfortable couches and watch as “others” are traumatized. To counteract this over abundance of images, I have inserted sound booths into my exhibition. Their narratives further relinquish my trauma onto the viewer. In the dark with no images to look at, they are forced to listen to my experience and to relate it to themselves. Whereas the narrative reinvents the trauma, it is only inferred in my images rather than literally shown. Dora Apel posits in her book *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing* that

(p)erhaps even more than literature, film or theater, visual art affects viewers in ways that are nonnarrative and noncognitive, in other words, in affective and emotional ways that are unsuspected, sometimes uncomfortable, raising contradictory or unresolved feelings. This is not to suggest that meaning itself is suspended, but that it operates in less than obvious ways, is multivalent and open-ended. The surprise of the traumatic content, one not seen as often in the fine art world, will hopefully break into the psyche of the viewer and cause them to contemplate a horror that is dealt with on a large scale right under their noses. *In Memory of Trauma* as a whole is meant to break the monotony of the second hand traumatic experiences usually
experienced in front of the television. I have brought trauma into the gallery in a confrontational way with the hope of affecting the lives of the people who view it.

I do not expect the cycle of sexual abuse to stop with exposure of this work, however it is an unrealistic hope that I can’t help but cling to. Baer believes images can have the power to create change if they are seen in the right light.\textsuperscript{22} Similar to Baer, I think that in the right context images can make a difference. Not in the way the media shows us trauma, but through the eyes of an artist. Alfredo Jaar shows images of people in strife, however unlike a news photographer, he does not try to be objective. He lives in the community he images and creates his own perspective from the experience he lives. The context he creates with the assistance of words relates a story that cannot be quickly passed by in a gallery -- the viewers must stop and think about what they see. His art bears witness to trauma. He feels his work often fails to make a difference because nothing changes, life goes on and cycles repeat. For a brief moment he gives unseen people a voice, and even if he only changes a few minds or lives, it makes a difference to those people.

The mainstream media was responsible for not showing the public images of Rwanda when the genocide was taking place, and it is possible that if we had seen more images we may have demanded a stop to the violence before so many were killed. Jaar went to Rwanda and witnessed the atrocities, however, he doesn’t show us the traumatic images we expect of the media. Instead, he creates experiences using image, text and sculpture to make us realize the truth as he experienced it. The reality cannot be represented; the level of atrocity cannot be adequately shown, so there remains a gap between the real and representation.
The public sculptures of Krzysztof Wodiczko bear witness for brief periods of time in communities that are traumatized on a daily basis. His videos of women telling their stories of sexual abuse, rape and murder were projected on the wall of the Tijuana Cultural Center. Thousands of people witnessed the stories told there. It was only a brief moment in Tijuana’s history but it gave voice to people who are suffering. The piece bears witness to trauma, validating experiences and helping many people feel less alone even for just a few hours.

Feminism and Art Therapy

The feminist movement of the 1970s was rife with art depicting the struggle to remove the dominance of man from the existence of woman. Much progress was made in this period, making my current lifestyle possible. Artists like Martha Rosler and Carolee Schneeman paved the way so that my generation would have a voice, however, many in my generation do not appreciate what our mothers have given us. We take our freedom for granted and consider the label of “Feminist” to be negative.

One of the ways women are still subjugated is through sexual molestation and rape. These topics are not talked about in social settings such as school or church. It is a way that men can still take away our self-esteem. Many kinds of abuse are used to keep women under control. Once we escape the abuse of childhood we are left holding our own noose, many women could easily escape physically from violent adult relationships but are psychologically stuck repeating the violence that was shown to them as children, unable to escape the weight of guilt and shame.
The art world faces a similar dilemma. Work that discusses aspects of the female experience is often demeaned by the label “feminist art,” and therefore in the eyes of some, inferior to and outside the intellectual realm of “high art.” Art Therapy is also pushed into “low art” categories, as Janet Marstine puts it:

As evidenced by its outsider status within art and art history departments, art therapy is commonly marginalized as being intuitive rather than intellectual, personal rather than political, uncontrolled rather than deliberate—in short, feminine rather than masculine. Even feminists committed to challenging binary constructions show resistance to relinquishing the concept of art therapy as the "other"; the unspoken fear is that admitting a congruence between art and work produced in art therapy disempowers and denies agency to the professional artist who presumably universalizes emotions and experience by maintaining a critical distance from them.23

This Thesis has been a form of therapy, the act of taking the pictures in my parent’s home was cathartic, however, the end result is not only art therapy. It is an intellectual look at the life of a survivor through metaphor of house as psyche, memory as photograph and body as mind. The house is unique, yet it speaks to all who have a psyche rotting away from lack of nurturing. The book uses the physical interior to represent consciousness. This work shows a process of self-destruction that is universal to all survivors of an all too frequent traumatic experience. It hopes to converge art and art therapy. I have distanced myself from the work enough to speak to a universal audience. I confront the viewer with words that I no longer hear in my head but so many others still do. This is not meant to soothe my emotions; in fact every time I listen to the recordings I have to talk myself back out of that old mindset. This work is meant to speak to the politics of sexual trauma, to place an unsuspecting audience in the place of a suffering adolescent. The memory may be mine but it is not strictly personal as it is a subject that effects everyone whether directly or indirectly, sometimes unbeknownst to them. Sexual
abuse is everywhere and should be acknowledged as a valid social condition in great need of an artistic voice.

Men are a large part of this subject matter, mostly as the assailant but also many times over as the victim. I do not want to narrow my audience with a label. Until we recognize these issues as relevant to both sexes they will not be heard by a large part of the population. Labeling work as “Feminist Art” puts it into a category that not everyone agrees on, it is a slippery word in this century.
Forms of expression about sexual molestation and abuse in the art world are mostly literary. The recent popularization of the memoir has created an outpouring of stories of personal tragedies that in the recent past have not been deemed as appropriate literature. People want to hear true stories of hardship to make their miserable lives seem more bearable. “(T)he singular ‘me’ evolves into a plural ‘us’ and writing that bears witness to the extreme experiences of solitary individuals can sometimes begin to repair the tears in the collective social fabric.”

Augustin Burroughs has profited greatly from telling the world about his horrendous childhood in *Running with Scissors* and many subsequent memoirs. The specific topic of molestation is prevalent in books like Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina* and *Wounds of Passion* by bell hooks, who writes with extreme and brutal honesty. But these books do not exist in the mainstream.

Popular culture does occasionally take on these issues, for example the film *Doubt* by director John Patrick Shanley and *A Thousand Acres* by director Jocelyn Moorhouse, based on the novel by Jane Smiley. The issue is dealt with as well in the music of singer/songwriter Tori Amos, and the television series *Law and Order, SVU (special victims unit)*, which accurately displays cases of sexual abuse in New York City. The current obsession with reality television is a perfect example of society’s growing need to relate. On the other hand, looking at images of trauma helps the public stay removed from the incident. Instead they remain voyeurs, reminded of their own safety, apart from these horrible situations. Talk shows that tell the stories of individual traumatic experiences have become formulaic and essentially entertainment. It is
questionable as to whether these forms of media help educate our society about personal trauma or if they just exploit the victims.

David Lynch’s *Fire Walk With Me*, a prequel to the hit 1990’s CBS series, *Twin Peaks*, portrays the life of a teenager, Laura Palmer, who is sexually abused by her father. Because of the trauma she has suffered, Laura’s mind has misconstrued the face of her father/lover, into that of a mysterious man from another planet, Bob. Lynch deceptively tricked his audience into an addictive frenzy of “who killed Laura Palmer?” in the television series. When the answer turns out to reveal the taboo of incest, the audience is already so involved with the story they cannot discount the vile truth. Showing Laura’s abuser as a stranger, not only adds to the mystery but alludes to the fact that her father, Leland, was abused by the same man when he was a child. He recognizes the police sketch of his daughter’s abuser as a man who used to flick matches at him as a child. “Leland, through his identification with his abuser, both becomes Bob and represses his memory of his own abuse, so that, in a sense, when Laura sees her incestuous father, she sees *his* abuser. And the nature of the abuse, signified by the fire metaphor, is passed along intact.” Learning the truth behind who killed Laura Palmer forced “a mirror up to the American family” as Randi Davenport points out in her critical essay on David Lynch. “*Twin Peaks* is thus unsettling because it disruptively implicates its audience in the family violence that it simultaneously suggests is a customary, even banal, feature of the average, middle-class American family.”

The story is a simple, yet twisted reality of an incestuous home. The mother is the typical absent alcoholic who knows what is going on but cannot admit it to herself. Laura is sexually active at a young age, using drugs and even prostituting herself. The movie version of the life of Laura Palmer was far too grotesque to pass the television censors. In
the T.V. series, Lynch used metaphor that much of his audience did not perceive. However in the movie the metaphors fall away, leaving only defense mechanisms created by the victim and her father so they could continue living in denial. It represents a reality that, minus the murder, happens all the time.

This film has resonated with me over the last few years. I was in my early 20s when introduced to Twin Peaks. It was the first depiction of sexual abuse I had ever seen and it finally validated my own experience. In every book I read or movie I watched I always suspected that the girl with problems had my problem but I was always disappointed. Laura Palmer’s character responds to her abuse in similar ways to my own reaction when I was her age. The methodology Lynch used to hook his audience with the television show is also similar to that of my installation.

The visual art world addresses many kinds of trauma as has been described, but it is lacking a strong voice on personal trauma resulting from abuse. Perhaps this is because art of such a personal nature is often labeled as “art therapy” and “Feminist Art” therefore is generally ignored by the mainstream art world. There are a few however, who have managed to break free from the labels to find acceptance in the fine art world, they include Joe Spence and Rosy Martin, Harriet Hosmer, Tracy Emin, and Sue Williams.

Jo Spence and Rosy Martin working together in the 1980s, created a form of therapy through photographs, calling it Phototherapy. In Phototherapy the subject performs her traumatic memory in front of the camera, she plays not only herself but also others who are part of her family album, part of the traumatic memory. It is not only the performing of the image that helps the subject reconnect with memories but the viewing
of themselves in these situations that brings about new understanding. They can see objectively that the situation was not their fault, that they were not in control.28

The images made at my childhood on this level. In the acting out of one memory, the roles have been switched (figure 4). This image tells the story of a night at my bath time when my mother came looking for my abuser/foster brother. He was in the bathroom with me, hiding behind the door, my mother looked behind the door, relief filled my small body, it was finally over, no more lying, no more shame. But some how, she did not see him behind that door and the abuse continued with a new sense of dread.

In the scenario created I take the place of my perpetrator as he hid, about to be caught. I am also portraying the shame and fear that I felt in that moment.

Ulrich Baer also sees the photograph as a form of therapy. Photographs “function like therapeutic tools, providing access to the lost traumatic event and thereby providing a means of witness and further, a means of seeing history, as written, in new ways.”29

Harriet Hosmer, a neo-classical sculptor in the mid to late 1800s, was one of the first artists to take on the subject matter of sexual abuse. In the style of the classical artists she appropriated the tragic Roman story of Beatrice Cenci who was raped by her father whom she then conspired to murder, in the end being sentenced to death by public beheading. The sculpture is made of white marble with black cracks throughout to represent an innocence rippled with shame. Small icons, a rosary and an empty manacle ring help tell the story of her simultaneous imprisonment and salvation. The weight of the rosary stands in place of the chains implying an emotional weight, so heavy, there is no escape. This sculpture uses symbolic narrative to pursue an idea that was taboo at the time of its making. Her portrayal of Cenci is quiet and subdued but at the same time
extremely powerful once you realize the story being told. Hosmer expected her audience to discover the context of the piece only through its title, *Beatrice Cenci.*

This piece has influenced my work through its shielded meaning. The viewer must do research or already be familiar with the story to fully understand the context. This correlates to the many layers in my work. The installation of the show becomes a piece in itself; one enters the space and experiences the work one section at a time, only realizing what the work is about after they have already put in time and effort. The confessional is meant to raise similar ideas as Hosmer.

British artist Tracy Emin has been making work about sexual molestation for years. Her work is much more confrontational and obvious. Emin is interested in making the issue very public. Her work is also about the after-effects of abuse. *My Bed* talks about her many years of giving her body away, as does a tent with all the names of the men she has slept with stitched into the lining. She has published her journal of rants of which I have one very similar, however our approach to the subject matter is very different. Where Emin took the bombastic approach, I have chosen a more subdued way of working. The audience does not acquire my concept at first glance, but once they get to the end, the same shock occurs as when reading the transcript to a session with a therapist Emin has posted on her website.

Sue Williams is another artist who talks about sexual abuse in her work. She creates paintings illustrating domestic violence and rape. She uses words and images to tell stories of her own abuse and that of other women, sometimes using sarcasm to create an uncomfortable mood. “Her use of the ostensibly-pornographic uncovers the brutality implicit in sexual violence, a brutality which painting, like society, has traditionally
preferred to suppress and/or eroticize." She talks about a “rubber woman” who is stuck in a repetitive cycle of abusive relationships similar to the one she experienced as a child with her father. Her work is much more graphic than mine, showing direct images of abuse and mockery.

Although not dealing specifically with issues of abuse, Joel Sternfeld uses a similar tactic in his series *On This Site*. The photographs, on first glance, appear to be simple landscapes, possibly with an eerie tinge. But when the captions describing brutal murders or suicides that transpired in these places are read, the pictures are looked upon differently. Now these sites hold new meaning, they are empty of the crimes committed yet they still hold trauma, they are a part of the human experience. These spaces remain after the authorities and news cameras have gone. They are our backyards, our highways, our offices. We live in and around them as though nothing has happened. Sternfeld reminds us of these tragic events, quietly calling attention to what has been, a memorial or trace of a violent past. The images of my parents’ house function in a similar way. On first glance they are simply photographs of an old forgotten house but once one reads the artist’s statement, they discover the traumatic truth behind the images. These images now function on two levels, one of beauty and questioning and another of understanding, each viewer coming from a different perspective, placing their own emotional bias on the subject matter.
Conclusion

If we talk about it, it becomes real, if we photograph it, it has been. My work creates a space where trauma is recorded and recognized as truth. Throughout my thesis exhibition in the South Wedge neighborhood of Rochester, people who happened by the storefront came in and told me stories of their own and of their family members. The visitors were people of all colors and backgrounds. This response to my work fulfilled my greatest expectations. That so many people responded personally to the work makes me want to record the stories of others, and in so doing give them the same validation I feel from telling my story. Being heard is such an important part of the healing process but without a venue for this, their voices will never be heard. I plan to create a website dedicated to survivors of sexual abuse, a venue that digitally continues the oral tradition of story telling and provides a location for these voices to gather.

If all that comes of my show is one conversation about sexual abuse or one person relating and feeling comforted, knowing he/she is not alone then I feel the work is a success. I want people to understand why some of us are the way we are, not crazy or hysterical but abused and dealing with it in the only way we know how. My goal is to reach out to people one at a time, eventually creating change on a larger scale.
17 Ibid., 98.
18 Ibid., 105.
19 Susan Sontag, “Memory as a Freeze-Frame: Extracts from ‘Looking at War’,” *Diogenes* (2004), http://dio.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/51/1/113.
20 Ibid., 117.


26 Ibid., 256.

27 Ibid., 257.


31 Laura Cottingham, “Painted Bad,” *Frieze magazine*, Issue 5 (1992),

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